

Destiny

When Earth's men will fall
On the day of evil's creation
A wall of flames will rise on the horizon
And a future they have set
By the protectors of time and space
A quest known, yet unknown to the universe
Man will change the past by the future
The temple in metal will awaken
Then a friend will trick one of death
When the first star shines blue
A time when death is thrown at heroism
The scout will kill the sneak
When creation is torn apart
The planet's cage burns
When God's Chariot falls
When end itself crumbles
He'll look upon the death of darkness
When the one sent to destroy shall do so
When the eighth dimension calls
Destiny opens its ring and kills its heart
A new dawn, unforeseen by the Gods
When living hope dies
A new universe is born
Evolution at the smile.

Translated extract from the Book of Alternity: author unknown.

Prologue: The Council Of The Brethren

Gryal Repa turned away from his stargazing to look at his desk, where a charred piece of red paper lay amongst a mess of star charts. Although he had previously memorised this message, he glanced at it once more.

To Lord Repa,

A meeting of the Brethren has been called by His Lordship Warren Marz for one o'clock your current day. Prepare your hall for all members' arrivals. This concerns the Archk.

Yours sincerely,

Lord Murner

As he picked up the letter, it disintegrated. Sighing, Gryal looked up into his mirror that stood erect at seven feet tall, a home for many a spider. Brushing the cobwebs aside, he stared back at himself, examining his features for the umpteenth time. Little light was coming through the towering ornate window, but his bright blue eyes illuminated his face in the murky gloom. His bald head hadn't changed, not since its creation. Gryal raised a bony hand to the mirror, as if to check it was a mirror, not a window with a stranger looking through. When his fingers touched the glass however, he only confirmed that it was not anyone else; this was truly how he looked. He could have sworn that there had been someone standing behind him in the reflection, but it must have been his imagination.

Oh well, it wasn't too bad. He'd just have to convince himself he wasn't too ugly. Well, he was kind of handsome, even though he happened to be dead. That wasn't to say he'd ever been alive. Being dead just meant that your energy, what makes you you, inhabits a place beyond what was generally specified as 'the universe'. His skeletal form looked much more ominous than he would have liked. He was getting too old for this. When he'd taken the post as overseer of the transfer of souls, he'd never thought he'd get *bored*. Gryal just wanted some time away from the job. He might have retired to Earth, if he could survive there...if he could taste. That was another occupational drawback. That servant who had delivered Mordrin's letter might have tasted good, he didn't know. It just tasted bland. It wasn't that he even *needed* to eat, it was simply a habit which, despite being a compulsion, had no real profits. He pulled his black robes tighter around himself.

The Entities' vessel sank gradually into the Rift. The neighbouring Tower was still crumbling in the flames around the ship, its inhabitants trapped inside, unable to escape the conflagrations. From the blackened hangar, the Chariot sped across the scene. It was nothing by the standards of the Towers, but to those of Earth, it would have been larger than any vehicle capable of flight. It comprised simply of a crescent, with a thin bridge extending from the middle of the inside arc. Having no regard for the doomed souls it was abandoning, the Chariot ripped its way through the rubble and to its next destination: Gryal's Tower.

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Gryal at this point was seemingly gliding across the floor. It was as he rounded the corner that he noticed Lord Stark Vingfamyn hurrying down the corridor towards him. Stark was a portly man, so much so that he was probably taller lying down than standing up. His rag of greasy, tomato-red hair was flying everywhere as he pelted at top speed on his equally fat legs. Stark stumbled to a halt at Gryal's feet, wiping a flood of sweat from his crimson forehead with a grimy handkerchief. Gryal inched backwards, trying to stay clean for the meeting.

Looking down at the man who only reached his torso, Gryal growled through gritted teeth, "What do you want?"

Why the Entities had made an Immortal such as this, he didn't know.

"Warren felt it necessary to send me to tell you that he's waiting in the hall."

"There's no need to use that tone about my brother," he snapped.

"He's my brother too," added Stark under his breath, his rare show of bravado evaporating rapidly at Gryal's countenance.

"Come on, I am going to the hall now."

Warren heard Gryal's footsteps a minute before he arrived. The Waters of Lution rippled at his touch, and the image evaporated. The Chariot vanished from sight, yet he knew he'd see the rider soon. His head whipped up as Stark fell onto a chair, spluttering. Rubbing his neck with a muscular arm, Warren watched Gryal take his throne at the Table of the Brethren. He enclosed the Waters in his fingers and lifted it up to its blackened shelf.

From behind him, Gryal announced, half-heartedly, “And here they are, the last of us Immortals: Lord Mordrin Murner and Lord Petti Lance. I must say, Mordrin, are the formalities in your messages entirely necessary?”

Warren returned to the table and sat with his humanoid fellows. Petti kept to the shadows however; ever since the accident he rarely showed his face in public, at least when he wasn't hunting. Warren's attention was drawn back as he noticed Gryal looking at him.

“Sorry?”

“I said,” Gryal rasped, with more than a note of impatience in his voice, “what news do you have on the Archk? I understand that's why you called this meeting?”

“Oh, um...yes, the Archk. Right, we know that since the Entities deemed it to be too vital an artefact in their quest for the meaning of our existence, it's been lost to us, correct.”

“Really? I didn't know,” chipped in Mordrin, his sarcasm enriching his words as much as he could make it.

“Very funny. Since our records were damaged the Archk has been lost to us in the void...”

“Well done, you've read a history book,” Mordrin couldn't keep the impatience from his voice now.

“I'm surprised, Gryal old friend,” said Warren incredulously, “I would have thought you would have taught our newest member when to *shut up!*”

Mordrin, who had been about to retort, caught Warren's stare, and shut his mouth in embarrassment. If he'd had blood under his thin skin he would have blushed.

“Thank you,” Warren sighed. “We have the Watch; as we know, all we have to do is tip the scales of power and we'll come out on top. We might have to reopen the Apocalypse.”

Stark found his voice at last, “Where is this going?”

“The Mancynn.”

These two words put the room in a dead silence. But it was not Warren who had spoken, it was Petti.

“Correct,” confirmed Warren.

“But what would we do with the Mancynn? Use him to attack Earth?” queried Stark.

“Of course not! Haven’t you been listening in any of our prior meetings!” cried Gryal. “Do you not remember what happened to Khaonat? When he tried to conquer Earth, we lost Atlantis! Our last beachhead!”

“Yes, that was helpful,” mused Warren.

There was no sarcasm in Warren’s voice. The others looked at him quizzically.

“I mean, if Atlantis hadn’t sunk, we wouldn’t have the advantage.”

They continued to stare at him with their mismatched eyes, a slightly shocked expression resting on their faces, some of them contemplating the validity of his words.

“Let me explain. Without Atlantis, the humans don’t know of the Postern. It is with this that we can lead the Towers to the Apocalypse.”

Stark was still not convinced, “What has that got to do with the Archk?”

“I’m saying that if we don’t find it soon, we may have to follow up on our contingency plan. I realise that up until now, quite contrary to my character, I have been against that particular strategy, but now I am prepared to go along with it. That being said, if anyone gains any further information on the whereabouts of the Archk, I urge them to come forwards.”

They all seemed satisfied, all apart from Gryal. It was something Warren had said, the tipping of the scales, it had awoken a sly, snake-like recess of his mind. Images were swimming in front of him, an experience he had not had before.

“Egypt,” he murmured.

“Pardon?” asked Warren.

“I don’t know. I just have this feeling that the Earth-country Egypt is important somehow,” he reiterated.

“There’s no evidence that Egypt has anything to do with the Archk,” uttered Warren. “Are you sure you are fit to be our leader? You have been at this for a very long time. If you need me to take over...”

“I’m fine.” He didn’t know what had got into him.

“Very well.” It was short and decisive. Warren turned to the group, “Petti, take care of Chaos. We don’t want him ruining things...again. We all know what we each have to do. We can be, and will be, victorious.”

Everyone stood to leave, and Petti crept out into the light, next to Warren’s chair.

“How can you know they won’t use the wand against us?”

“Don’t worry, brother, the weapon is securely hidden.”

Gryal still felt as if there was something else inside of him. He knew they had to go to Egypt, but he didn’t know why.

Suddenly, the doors slammed open, and a woman, tall, with short, neat, black hair, dazzling yellow eyes, fangs, and jade skin, strutted into the hall. She surveyed the room with a sharp movement of her head.

“I can take you to Egypt.” Her voice was sweet, but with a hint of someone who will look you in the eye and tell a lie without a care.

Gryal stepped forwards, “You are no longer part of this organisation. You have never been an Immortal. You have nothing of benefit, Mierdi. Get back on your Chariot.”

She laughed, “But I know the enemy. You’ll need my help defeating humanity.”

It was Warren’s turn to make a hoarse laugh, “Our goals are more complex than you think. I’m glad to see that during your last failure, you didn’t get a glimpse of our intentions. Anyway, we wouldn’t need your help, no matter how easy or hard the stratagem.”

“And do you remember what happened last time you got involved with us?” Gryal joined in. “You could barely control the Jackal.”

“You honestly don’t know, do you? They’ve destroyed an Adsindrarian!”

The shaking in Stark’s voice gave him out to be the only one of the group shocked by this news, “No they haven’t.”

“Oh yes they have, just over four thousand years from this Tower.”

Gryal grinned (well, tried to grin more; he was a skeleton, a skull is always grinning), “Then the other Adsindrarians will be angrier than usual. This can only mean that the endgame is getting nearer. Let’s go.”

The Brethren Lords walked out past her, into the inky-black corridor beyond. Gryal was the last to leave. On passing he spared a glance in Mierdi’s direction with his blue eyes. In a flash, she clasped hold of his wrist.

“You will go to Egypt,” she hissed.

Gryal felt a prickling sensation at the back of his eye sockets. He stared at her unfocusedly in a dream-like state. He wrenched his yellow eyes away from her.

“Yes mistress.”

1: The Paranormal Life Of Philip Quint

“Those exams have killed me I tell you!”

“Yeah, sure, because you know what it’s like to feel dead. Now get over it; Mr Sneak still wants to test us.”

“Well he’s certainly living up to his name. Another school project on the day our exams end! I mean, I thought they at least wanted to keep us alive.”

“A project on Egyptian culture won’t kill you. It’s easy. We know loads about Egypt.”

“I don’t.”

“Your problem is you don’t watch enough TV mate.”

“No, *your* problem is you watch too much.”

Philip Quint just couldn’t understand Tony Mantegna. It was just another fun school project. You’d think the exams were hard.

His internal grumblings were cut short however as he realised that they’d reached the bus stop, and that Tony was about to step onto a vehicle which would take him away until tomorrow.

“Wait,” Philip called, “Do you want to walk to my house for dinner?”

“You live over fifteen miles away!”

“So? My parents are going away for the summer, if you came over we could arrange for us to meet up. It will be harder once they’re gone. It’s not like you’re coming on the science trip to Switzerland.”

Tony sighed, “I’m busy.”

The bus door slammed shut and his friend was driven away. Once the bus was just a dot in the distance Philip began his own way home along the side of the dual carriageway. Cars of all shapes and sizes zoomed pass him in a blur of colour. The din was so great that it prevented any other sound from being heard. Philip could only just hear himself think of his homework. Mr Sneak had said something about either doing Egyptian lifestyle or Egyptian mythology. He wondered if he could do both. He might get more marks. But then again, Mr

Sneak might punish him for being a show-off and not doing the task properly. Oh well, the fun was worth the risk.

He had reached the bridge leading cars out of the town, the broad river running beneath it. It was an old, stone bridge, with iron railings on either side. One side was plastered in graffiti. On the dull, grey stone, the glaring, gaudy, vulgar words contrasted to such a degree that they seemed to glow. Your eyes might just water at the sight. He leaned over the side, watching the small, blue-green ripples pass. The sounds of the roaring cars seemed to melt into the background; all he could see was the river. Every so often there was some sign of a fish. Philip began to wonder if the Nile would have looked this pretty back in Ancient Egypt, with the pyramids on the horizon and clear skies above. If he'd lived back then, he would have knelt down on the sand by the Nile and watched the boats go by. The image in his mind's eye was so peaceful. He could use that in his project: 'A Day By The Nile, by Philip Quint.' It had a good ring to it. He decided to write it down when he got home.

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Philip's peripheral vision came back into focus. He stood up and got his new bearings in the woods. Philip took one step forwards and tripped over a gnarled tree root. He fell face first into a pile of fallen emerald leaves. The thick canopy let little light through, so the details of his surroundings were quite hard to distinguish. This was the complete opposite of the open sky above the bridge where he'd been just a second before. His legs felt like jelly as he clung to the crumbling bark of a nearby tree. Looking down, he saw something black on his hand. Philip pulled it off, only to recoil, dropping the slug. Rubbing his forehead, he set to work on locating his home. After a minute, he worked out that he was only a mile from his house, and began to follow the path west in the leaf-littered undergrowth. He had to congratulate himself; he'd landed further away in the past.

Once at his front door, he fumbled in his pocket for his keys. When he'd retrieved the tangle from his pocket, Philip opened the door and stepped into the peach-painted porch. He slipped his trainers off, put them onto the shoe rack and headed straight for the flight of stairs.

"Hello dear, how was your day?"

Damn it. He turned to face his mother, who was standing in the living room. She was tall, with chestnut hair which fluttered in the draft from the open window. Her loving, round eyes matched her misty top, and they were focused on him.

“Fine, mum. I’m just going to my room.”

“Okay. Dinner will be at five.”

Once he’d escaped, he ran up the stairs and onto the landing. He slowed down here, knowing he was alone. She was kind-hearted and benign, but maybe too much so. He just liked to be ignored when at home.

Now, what was that idea he’d thought of about the project?

At the end of the corridor he reached his white locked door. This time he didn’t bother with his keys, he didn’t really notice, he was too focused on his project. It had been something about the Nile hadn’t it? Not really thinking, he walked straight through his solid door, not leaving a mark.

His bedroom was relatively big, compared to those of his friends. One wall was taken up by bookcases, another by two desks. His bed took up the third. Philip swung his bag down on his bed and began taking out his many school books. There was a tinkling sound on the floor. He looked down to see his jumble of keys. It was then that he realised he hadn’t unlocked his door. Oh well, he’d been doing it subconsciously for many years now, it hadn’t killed anybody, yet. Philip skimmed through his bookcase for his atlas. He found it on the centre shelf and extracted it from its fellows. Flicking through it, he found Egypt on page 178.

At first he didn’t realise he was hearing it. It was a rustling, coming from the chair by his desk. After two minutes of Philip not noticing, the figure gave up.

“*Hello*. Skeleton sitting with his feet up on your desk eating one of your chocolate bars, goes straight through me of course, but you have to appreciate that I came all this way. Are you even paying attention to me?!”

Philip looked up to see...what numerous sources of fiction would have him believe was the Grim Reaper sitting up in his chair. Who else would a talking skeleton in a black robe be?

“Yes?” he asked after a moment of stunned silence.

The skeleton looked taken aback, “That’s it? Does this happen to you often? How many other skeletons are you acquainted with? Every other day, does a creature from some God-forsaken dimension materialise in your home? Earth’s changed since...what do you call them...medieval days. People were fun back then. But you’re so *boring*. You could have at least screamed.”

“Look, do you want something?”

More to himself than to Philip, the skeleton muttered, “I will never understand the human psyche.” Then it hit him, and he turned back to Philip, “Of course...I should have known why you’re not reacting.”

“Yeah, it’s simple. It’s evident that all my exams have sent me mad. I knew I should have been feeling more stress.”

The figure leaned the chair back onto its rear legs; the boy’s acceptance, though planned, was still unnerving, “Well, that’s not the reason I’m thinking of, but I’m sure if you were to see a psychiatrist, they’d be able to find something wrong with you.”

Philip put his book down and stared into the skeleton’s yellow eyes. They didn’t look like the eyes of a hallucination, yet what would he know?

“Let’s just for the moment say that you’re real, why did you bother coming to my house? Am I about to die?”

“No, and I’d rather you didn’t.”

Now Philip was starting to become intrigued; he may be mad, but that didn’t matter. If this was the Grim Reaper, why was he here if not to take him away?

It was as if the figure had read his mind, “I came here to give you two messages. First, concentrate on the task you’ve been given.”

Philip let out the breath he’d been holding in. It was going to be some cryptic clue that he’d have to work out. It was almost a cliché. Maybe Tony was right about him watching too much TV. He was almost disappointed with his brain for conjuring up such an unoriginal concept.

“Second, say ‘no’ at the time.”

“Why should I?”

Once he'd said this, the figure somehow looked a lot more menacing. He hadn't changed physically, but the atmosphere in the room seemed to have thickened.

“Just do it at the right time. We don't want you to get hurt. I'll be in contact, under the name of Gryal.”

This was too much for Philip's head. He had an Egyptian project to do for Mr Sneak. But before he could further analyse this mental cacophony, he had the sudden urge to not look at the figure in the chair. He couldn't understand it, but his eyes wouldn't focus on the man. It seemed to blur, go out of focus...and then it was gone. For a long time Philip stared at the spot where it had been, and at the wall beyond. It wasn't as if the paint on his wall was interesting, but it was almost as if some invisible force was keeping them there.

“Where are you, dear?”

Either his brain was trying to kill him or this was not his day.

“What, mum?”

He just heard her reply, “It's just gone five.”

He looked down at his watch and realised that he had been staring at his wall for longer than he had been under that mysterious thrall; she was right. Philip leapt for the door, hand outstretched to unlock it. He was about to close it when he glanced back at his desk. There was no sign of ‘Gryal’, apart from half a chocolate wrapper, and a slightly singed look on the chair.

By the next morning Philip was beginning to think that his visitor had been a dream. Dressed in his school uniform he sat down at the kitchen table and tucked into his breakfast: a bowl of some new kind of cereal. The spoon was nearly at his mouth when his mother sat down beside him.

“Just so you know, your father is taking you to a restaurant tonight.”

Philip replaced his spoon in his bowl. This wasn't the usual way his mother greeted him in the morning.

“Aren’t you coming?”

“No, I’m busy tonight.”

She was smiling, but her eyes portrayed a different story. They weren’t her normal loving eyes leading to a warm soul, they were deeply worried eyes. There was something she wasn’t telling him.

“What is it?”

She didn’t speak, she just waved her hand as if to brush the question aside. Not too concerned, Philip went back to his breakfast. He had to finish quickly, before it was time for school, and before his mother realised what time it was. Registration started in fifteen minutes.

Ever since Philip had left home, going that short distance away from his home before he could make the rest of the journey to school unseen, he’d been unable to think of anything but the encounter. Had it been The Grim Reaper? The thing’s messages, what had they meant? At what time was he meant to say ‘no’? And his mother’s actions, did she know something? No, it was probably a coincidence.

He stopped sharply. There was a piece of paper with his name on it that had suddenly appeared lying in the road. Looking out for cars, he ran out into the road and snatched up the paper. Once he was back on the verge, he unfolded the note.

The time is soon, but don’t miss it. And don’t fill your mind with thoughts of your mother. Concentrate on the tasks ahead of you, nothing else. I have told you the consequences. Stray too far and you will lose something you shall dearly miss and regret your actions.

Gryal

Out of anger more than anything, Philip tore the note apart and threw the fragments of paper back into the road, then realised that he had rejected a figment of his imagination. Yep, he was mad.

The spacious hall echoed the headmaster's speech in Philip's ears over and over again. He had never realised how long Mr Sneak could drone on for in an assembly before now. The head was making a speech about how well they'd done in their exams and about the importance of the Egypt project. He'd made it sound oh-so-appealing just yesterday...

"Now that your exams are over, we do not want to become one of those schools where the students forget everything as they feel they don't need to know it any more. That is why, though you may not like it, we are giving you the Egypt project. Over the last few weeks before the holidays we still want you to keep your brains active."

All this soared over Philip's head. What he did focus on however was that the headmaster couldn't seem to look any of them in the eye. His eyes were furtive, looking either side of them, and then darting around the hall, but never at the students. He wondered why that was. It seemed that everyone knew something worrying that they would not confide in him. Their excuse of course would be that there was nothing or that he wasn't 'mature' enough.

"Come on!" called Tony.

Philip saw Tony's green eyes boring into his. He could no longer hear Mr Sneak's voice reverberating around the art-covered walls. Then it hit him that the assembly had ended. They were two of the last few people in the school hall. As he usually did in such a situation, Philip strode out like nothing had happened. Tony groaned; he knew Philip had some arrogant tendencies, and used to be able to put up with them, but they were definitely getting worse. He could see Philip was already down at the common room without giving him a backwards glance.

His hair was ruffled as what felt like a wall of cold air rushed past his head. Thin fingers flexed around Tony's shoulder. He turned to the misty intruder. His heart skipped a beat and the blood drained from his face.

"No offence, but it's extremely important," it snarled.

"My allegiance is not with you, it never has been."

It laughed.

"I know."

Tony tried to rip himself from its grasp, but the smoke just tightened around him.

2: The Man In The Windows

Philip stared unfocused into the rain beyond the glass. The weather outside mirrored his mood: depressed and gloomy. He had never had a thing for being left in the dark and unknown. What was taking Tony so long?

“Ahem.”

Philip swung around on his foam chair.

“Finally, what took you so...”

But it wasn't Tony as he'd expected. It was the girl from the neighbouring classroom he'd seen occasionally around the school, the girl that he used to fancy...no, not fancy, like, just like. Her flowing, glossy brown hair was mesmerising though...no, focus, it wasn't. Oh, what was her name...Cary Cole, that was it. She swung her rucksack onto the carpet by her seat. And here came her gaggle of giggling friends: Susan Baxendale, Lucy Franks, Amy Tom and Anna Pepperdine. If only they would shut up. Their laughter dug into his skull, and rather distracted him from her.

Cary turned to them, “It's okay, go...go...**just go away!** Thank you, I want to be alone.”

Thankfully, they dispersed, yet Philip could not help noticing the murderous looks they were giving the two of them. And it wasn't only the group that was looking at him; Cary was in the seat next to him, resting her chin on her hands, as if she was expecting something. There was an awkward silence where Philip didn't know what to do.

“Um...do you want something, Carolyn?” he asked tentatively.

“I'm Cary, not Carolyn.”

He sat up straighter, still unsure as to why she had come over, “Do you want something?”

“Oh, I just saw you all alone and...”

He cut her off. He might not have known exactly what she wanted, but it certainly wasn't the spiel she would have him believe. He almost felt disappointed. And did she think he would fall for her sweet-talk?

“I asked you, what do you want?” he repeated, an edge in his voice.

Knowing this wasn't going to go the way she'd planned, she confessed, "I want help with my Egyptian project." She then saw his expression and hastily continued, "Everyone *knows* you're the best in the year at that sort of thing."

He had to admit, whilst trying to remain modest, that she was right. He knew of no one else who got marks as high as he did in the year. But it wouldn't be fair if he helped one person without giving assistance to others, no matter how beautiful he thought they were...but she wasn't just anyone, was she?

"I'm afraid not. Sorry."

He didn't see her get up. One moment Cary was in her chair, the next she was towering over him, casting an icy shadow in the warm room. She would be steaming at the ears, if it were possible. Her eyes burrowed into his own, as if searching for something to use against him.

"What?" He seemed to have taken her by surprise.

"I said no," Philip reiterated, a bit more slowly, a hint of aggravation creeping into the words.

It was disturbing, the slight cackle in her laugh, "Ha, you can't say that. I'm the most popular girl in the year."

He shrugged, "So? And do people really say that, especially about themselves?"

She threw a cushion at him. In a flash, he *phased*, and the cushion went straight through his head. Once he knew she wasn't going to throw anything else at him, he returned from static to solidity. He hadn't meant to do that, to show her; it was just instinctive. This seemed to just increase her explosive temper.

"You think you're so cool, don't you? Just 'cause you can do that doesn't mean you have to show off. It was bad enough doing it to escape being caught for breaking the library window last term."

He made a potentially concerning mental note that she hadn't seemed at all surprised by his abilities. "What are you talking about? Look, have you seen Tony?"

She looked perplexed, her anger forgotten, "Who's Tony?"

"Tony Mantegna. He's my friend," he said, blankly.

“Who’d be stupid enough to be friends with you?”

It occurred to Philip now that he probably should have found out what this girl was really like before fancying her. The worst part was that he couldn’t find a trace of guilt or acknowledgement on her pale features that she’d said something remotely insulting. Oh, the pain he endured in trying to keep his face straight and his voice calm. He failed straight away.

“*Thanks.*”

“You’re welcome,” she replied swiftly, not picking up on his sarcasm. “But really, can you help me?”

Philip stood up straight. He wasn’t going to pay attention to her pleas.

“Lessons are about to start.”

And at a brisk pace, he strode off. Cary tried to grab his sleeve as he passed, but only succeeded in tripping over her bag.

Flustered, and generally embarrassed, she called after him, “I’ll want an answer!”

It seemed that for the rest of the day Philip could not shake Cary off. Every time he left his humid classrooms, she was in the corridor waiting for him. On the second of these occasions he was forced to resort to charging into the bustling crowd of students, eager to get to lunch. Considering the thickness of the throng, she did surprisingly well to keep close to him all the way out into the cafeteria. It was here, in the dining hall, that he could finally lose her in the queue. So that she would not have time to sneak up on him again, as soon as he had obtained his meal, he sped up as fast as he could without spilling anything, moving to the table in the corner, furthest from the other pupils.

After a while, though, he thought it strange, but pleasing, that Cary had not yet got to the end of the queue. Maybe she had brought her own lunch and left it at the common room. Yes, that was probably it. Sure that today there was no strange phenomenon occurring, he dug into his rock-solid slab of pork and partially burnt peas. How do you even *burn* peas? It tasted of cardboard, but the slightly out of date juice washed it down. When he had finished his main course, which had been small, but had left him with no desire for more, Philip leant back in his plastic chair and rested his head on the wall behind him.

Feeling as close to complete Nirvana as he was going to get given the circumstances, he let his head loll sideways to look out the window. The midday sun was shining in the absence of the earlier rainclouds, the trees were in full bloom, the blackbirds were foraging for crumbs and worms in the uncut grass, and there was a man skulking in the shadow of the building. Not again! This was not his week. His mind was racing, could it be the skeleton once more? No, the skeleton had been taller. This settled his mind the slightest bit. Could it be Cary then? No, the shoulders were too broad. What was stranger still, even though the man's face was obscured by darkness, Philip had the distinct feeling that they were making eye contact, and that the man knew exactly who he was watching. This would be a great time to leave, in his opinion. As if he hadn't noticed anything out of the ordinary, he got to his feet, slid his tray onto the racks, and strolled out back to the main school buildings.

When he got there, however, he began to regret it. As soon as he opened the doors, Philip ran straight into Mrs Cage, one of his substitute teachers. Philip could tell she was angry, it was written all across her surly face.

"Where's that essay you were meant to hand in to me at break?"

Oh God, he'd completely forgotten, "Sorry, I'll hand it to you at the beginning of..."

She leered, "I'm no longer covering for Mr Parkes, but rather your Geography teacher. She's decided to start her vacation prematurely. And before you go running to Mr Parkes with your work, I've asked to collect in the stragglers before handing the whole load over to him."

"Geography, then," he answered hastily, before realising that that was next lesson.

Mrs Cage's scowl deepened, "It'd better be."

And without another word, Philip pelted down the corridor, putting as much distance between himself and the substitute teacher. Sometimes Mrs Cage and Mr Sneak were his least favourite teachers, and at these times they seemed to think on the same wavelengths. But that was just a coincidence, wasn't it?

He slowed down at this point. He was in completely the wrong side of the school. He'd be in trouble for being late anyway. Philip sighed and looked out of the window stretching the length of the corridor. The road leading into town was clearly visible from here, as well as the man in black. Not again. And once more he could have sworn the figure was looking directly at him, knowing what he was seeing. His heart began to race at an alarming rate. The man

had raised his hand in Philip's direction, and beckoned him down. Firmly, Philip shook his head and strode away, not looking back; now everyone was following him. It was as if there was a large flashing sign above his head telling people he was special and needed to be treated differently. He hoped that no one was going to find out that he was seeing things, or that an asylum was anywhere near. Suddenly, up and down the school, bells were set off, signalling a quite likely detention for Philip because of his tardiness; Mrs Cage would find a way to make that case. Quickening his pace he turned the corner and flew down the flights of stairs.

The blue and yellow walls leading to his common room passed in a whirl of colour. Of course it had to be Mrs Cage's class he was late for. Philip stumbled to a halt outside the metal doors. He'd left his rucksack against the far wall on his hurried way to the lunch hall, next to the furthest line of chairs. And there it was, surrounded by the throng of Cary's friends. Cary wasn't there herself, but that might have made it worse, as she wasn't there to control them and to tell them to go away this time. None of them were actually looking at him, which gave him some advantage. Stepping back against the wallpaper, he shut his eyes and tried to blend in with the air. The sensation of entering an out-of-body experience trickled in his veins as his ever-busy brain turned off into a meditative state. He couldn't think of anything too complex, else the illusion would have been broken. After a few painstakingly quiet seconds, he opened his *phased* eyes as a figure hidden from sight within the air. None of the girls were looking at him. Philip hastily slipped through the closed door and chairs to the group of highly annoying students. Here he stopped and took a deep breath. He had to stay calm to stay *phased*. Cautiously, he stepped through Susan, a cold air touching his non-corporeal form, and reached down for his black school bag. Adrenaline rushed through him as he reached for his goal. Nothing could stop him...until his hand went straight through it.

"You've gotta be joking!"

The mental link broken, Philip reintegrated amongst the group of girls. He stared up at them with a pained expression on his face, and swore loudly. Anna grabbed him by the ear and pulled him, quite agonizingly, to his feet. Philip wrenched himself from her steely grip and scooped up his bag. Sweating slightly he turned to each of the assembly one by one. It was starting to get on his nerves that he never showed his powers in public yet these giggling hangers-on who in his opinion possessed the combined intelligence of a new-born puppy (and even that might have been an overstatement) could have discovered, plus comprehended, his

most profound and hardest-kept secret. This day just couldn't be happening; it had to be a dream. Yep, hope was the cruellest of weapons. Now he'd thought that, it couldn't be anywhere near as good as a fantasy. Anyway, was his mind twisted enough to think up this?

It was then that his brain gave up trying and took the easiest option, shutting itself off, letting whatever happened next flow over him. He didn't hear what they said; he only pushed his way forwards and left with an exhausted trudge in his step. His brain, not focused enough for *phasing*, didn't notice them jog along behind him, trying to get his attention. Consequently he didn't see Lucy stride in front of him, resulting in their collision. Philip fell backwards onto the hard, cold floor. It was the second time in five minutes that he'd had those nuisances looking down on him. Lucy stepped forwards out of the crowd, brushing her blonde wavy hair out of her eyes, a smirk forming on her not-so-pretty features.

"Cary still wants you to help her." Her tone suggested that she expected, and probably hoped, that he wouldn't give the right answer.

His voice went into autopilot without his proper knowledge, "So?"

"She doesn't like being kept waiting," she informed him menacingly.

Philip returned to his unsteady feet. Glancing at his watch basically told him he was in for detentions until the summer holidays. As he began his walk to the classroom he concluded this reluctant conversation.

"I'll keep that in mind."

Luckily the geography department wasn't too far from the common room. But to his dismay Cary was waiting for him a little way away from the geography door. Philip noted that there wasn't anywhere to hide or a route to the door without her noting his presence. There was only one thing for it. Philip ambled over to Cary, predicting he wouldn't enjoy the next few minutes any more than the previous ten. And the moment she saw Philip, Cary ran up to him and held him by the collar of his shirt. Blinding agony throbbed in the back of his already dizzy head as she threw him backwards onto the rock-solid lockers, lifting him off the ground. Oh, if only a teacher would come out of the classroom and stop Cary before any serious injury would come to him. Even Mrs Cage would be a good sight. But she, or anyone else for that matter, failed to arrive.

“Do you actually care that much?” was the remark he wisely held back.

“Where’s my project notes!?” she demanded.

“Non-existent.”

Fuming, she slapped him around the face with a flick of the wrist.

“Smart Alec,” she muttered.

Philip waved his legs slightly, trying to reach the floor. Of course the psycho had to be taller and stronger than him. Their first substantial encounter wasn’t exactly going as he’d imagined.

“Look, could you let me down please? I’m kinda late for class.”

She let him go, but not like he’d planned. Philip hit the ground with a dull thud, his back slamming into the combination lock. For a moment Cary seemed shocked at what she had done. Stepping backwards, she looked frantically from side to side. Taking advantage of her momentary distraction, Philip climbed to his feet.

“I’m going now,” he called, bringing her out of her daze.

Philip grinned cheerily and entered, looking back just in time to see her obscene hand gesture.

Philip closed the door as quietly as he could and looked up. All the gormless, plain faces stared up at him from the symmetrically placed ordinary wooden desks. Three strips of afternoon light drew yellow lines on the dusty floor. The laminated maps that littered the four walls glistened and reflected the light onto his peers’ expressionless appearances. Twenty battered textbooks lay open before the torsos of twenty placid pupils. Philip peeked at the whiteboard. From what he gathered, they were halfway through writing notes on a long paragraph with probably no use in later life, just like most lessons. What was a certainty was that Mrs Cage sucked the life out of whatever she covered.

And his eyes drifted to Mrs Cage, the only person in the room with a discernible expression. Her mouth twitched into a sly sneer. She swaggered forward to draw level with him. Her unnatural upright stature emitted an air of superiority over Philip, and demeaned any excuses

that had formulated in the misty thoughts of his throbbing head. Mrs Cage began to tap her foot on the ground.

“Why are you late?”

“Um...would you believe I was attacked by a psychotic student intent on knocking me out?”

“No,” she said bluntly. “Master Quint, you’ve missed five minutes working on your Egypt projects for the headmaster.”

Oh, of course it was work for the headmaster, when did the two devils want different things.

“You won’t be able to catch up on the time you’ve probably wasted mucking about or whatever it is you were doing,” she continued. “I would hope that you’ve done a considerable amount on your project if you feel that you can skip an important lesson on that subject. Oh, and before I forget, where’s your essay you should have been handing to me at the start of class, which you evidently think is beneath you?”

Obligingly, Philip took off his bag and unzipped it. His hand plunged into the dark recesses of his rucksack and pulled out the two slips of paper that was the research essay for his one other essay-based, if less extensive, project. As he did so, a stapled wad of paper got caught and pulled out as well. It fell to the floor and lay there limply.

“What’s that?” she snapped at him.

Philip took a turn to smirk, “*That* is the starting notes for my project.”

Mrs Cage swished up the sheets of paper and ruffled through them, examining the complex diagrams and lengthy paragraphs on Egyptian life, the notes on the backgrounds for Egyptian religion, and hieroglyphic translations.

“You did this in one day?”

“Of course. I think Egypt is fascinating.”

Mrs Cage thrust the project into his hands. From there he carelessly shoved it back into his bag.

“For the amount you’ve done I’ll reduce your detention time to just four lunchtimes.”

“Four!” he cried in outrage.

“Well if I had my way you’d be in for six, but I’m not allowed to keep you in detention after twelve o’clock on Friday next week.”

He gave her his Latin essay, which she only half bothered to glance at, angrily. Philip turned to his small, plain chair. The screeching sound of the chair legs scraping on the floor filled the room temporarily, and then all was silent. His grimy desk didn’t seem adequate for his extensive and important work, but it had to do. You didn’t complain to Mrs Cage. So, with robotic movements he opened his textbook to the pages listed on the whiteboard. He opened his pencil case and extracted his pen and ruler. His head cranked upwards to read what the rest of the class had already studied. And predictably, it was something he already knew and was shockingly easy. But he had to do it, so he began writing down the notes that he’d already written about on a project that he was already about halfway through. Ha, they couldn’t have chosen a less informative textbook on Egyptian life. But after a few mind-numbing minutes Mrs Cage stood up once more from her cluttered metal desk in the cramped corner and walked to the front of the dreary class.

“Now class,” she began, in what was obviously a fake, over-sweet voice, “as the headmaster said in his last assembly, we, that is to say, the teachers, want you to keep your little pathetic selves mentally active over the holidays. We don’t want you forgetting everything now, do we? Now, I know some of our *newer* teachers don’t keep to the curriculum after the end-of-year exams. They have yet to learn *exactly* how to teach in this school.”

Philip thought bitterly that the word ‘school’ was incorrect. ‘Hell’ was more like it, if that old hag was teaching.

“I do not want you thinking that this time in your last week and a half at school is to *relax*. You are *supposed* to be *working*.”

If anyone was more condescending, Philip had yet to discover them or believe in their existence.

“And in this working time you should get the majority of your projects finished. At a minimum, they should include a basic introduction, eight different topics in adequate detail and a satisfactory conclusion. I know some of you will be further ahead already than others,” she glared evilly in Philip’s direction, “but I don’t want those who are a little behind to get discouraged. It’s *okay*.”

Gods, you'd think they were babies.

"It may be the faster people are not doing a good-enough job. But I digress. The headmaster will want this work handed to him at the start of next term, then, if they're *really* good, he may display them. *Won't that be nice?*"

'*And I thought I needed a long term in the local asylum,*' he thought.

"So to get to that stage you must try your hardest. If you haven't figured it out yet, the pages in your textbooks that I have selected contain fascinating information on the way the ancient Egyptians lived, slaves to Pharaohs."

Philip wondered if anyone else had realised she was repeating the same drivel over and over again (or at least that was the impression he'd got from listening to fragments of what she was saying), or if anyone had even realised she was speaking. He noted that some people had even drifted off to sleep, their heads resting peacefully on their now dribble-soaked books. He didn't blame them. A few more minutes and he'd probably be in a similar state. His head was already nestling in the palms of his hands.

Mrs Cage wasn't watching them anymore; she'd returned to her desk and was looking at something on her outdated computer. It just went to show how much the school was prepared to spend on their staff or equipment.

Philip rolled his head over to face the open window. Between the trees animals foraged in the undergrowth, skipped over the flourishing grass, and avoided the man in the black coat. He just could not get a break! The man inclined his head a little, as if to say 'what?'

"Mrs Cage," Philip called, not taking his eyes off the man, "is there some sort of construction or something going on around the school?"

"No...What does it matter?" He didn't properly understand the inflection in her voice, but knowing her it couldn't be good.

"It's just I keep seeing men out of the windows. One of them is right there."

She gave a little chuckle, like she thought him an idiot placed there for her amusement, "There's nothing there. But if you're *scared* of your imagination," the rest of the class burst into a short chorus of dry laughter, "then say 'no' in time for it to go away."

He looked at her. It didn't seem right. Not just the fact that it seemed incorrect to get her message across in that way, surely it would have been better to say "say 'no' to make it go away", but once again he got the feeling that there was something unnerving commencing around them without a soul realising. Philip turned back to the man. He was definitely there, and now he was nodding.

The rest of the school day passed without incident. For the remainder of the lesson and throughout Maths, Philip experienced nothing but boredom. He'd completely forgotten about Tony's strange disappearance. So when the ear-splitting sound of the bell signalled the end of school, he was nothing but ecstatic to be shot of the place.

Once down at the school car park, he found his father, Samuel, waiting in his shining saloon car. His father seemed older, his hair was thinner and more of it was greying. But apart from that the man in front of him was his regular father. Philip opened the door and settled inside the vehicle. His father turned in his seat to face him.

"So, how was your day at school?"

"Fine." When did he ever reply differently?

His father looked back out of the windscreen, glanced up at his mirror and reversed the car.

The car bumping along, his father turned to him again, "I thought we'd go to the 'Cloak and Scythe' for dinner tonight. Is that okay?"

It was peculiar. They had been to this restaurant many times before, but he'd never considered the name. Now all of a sudden it seemed a lot more menacing. But, that was just a coincidence. A lot of coincidences were happening to him recently, and that was only a little unnerving.

"Sure."

His father placed his foot on the accelerator and they drove off from the crossroads along the motorway and towards the sun dropping ever closer to the horizon.

The town streets were packed with people wandering in and out of the shops, illuminated by their neon signs, the roads full of evening traffic travelling home after a hard day's work. A few clouds were drawing in now, casting faint shadows over the forest of buildings. His father's car was in the midst of the throng, trying to find a parking space outside the restaurant.

The 'Cloak and Scythe' had a main window at the front with the company logo displayed on it, a scythe resting on a creased cloak, with the name encircling them. It wasn't the biggest building in the area by far, but it still dwarfed the humans below. Eventually their search for a place to park ended and they were making their way to the restaurant, Philip fast, eager and hungry, his father walking slowly, not picking his feet up. Philip was already holding the door open when his father arrived.

The inside was decorated with pictures of all the food they served. A little bit arrogant, saying 'we're the best, we can make this, this and this', and he couldn't imagine them saving the owners much money either. They didn't have to wait long for a waiter, but it took them a while to realise one was coming. It was Samuel who saw him first, a head bobbing up and down between the tall tables. Philip was startled when he saw the waiter; the man had to be wider than he was tall. Greasy red hair protruded from the company hat that all employees wore. The man stopped just short of them, panting, bent double, his hands supporting his vast upper half on his chubby legs. The waiter, when he'd got his breath back, stood up as straight as he could.

In a deep voice he croaked, "Good-afternoon sirs. Table for two? Very good. I am Stark; I will be your waiter this evening. If you would like to follow me, please."

Like every time they had come here they followed, weaving in and out of tables, only a few of which had diners, until they came to a small table by the front window. They sat down in the seats he offered and he handed them the menus. On the front of them were a skull, rather like that of the visitor in his room; it had the same yellow eyes. He didn't open the menu, he didn't have to; he always had the same. Without giving him any sort of warning, he looked up at the waiter. He could have sworn the man was, for the want of a better word, examining him. But Stark had looked away hastily if he had been. Philip continued looking around the restaurant. There was a figure sitting by himself with a hood over his head. His sleeves were bulky and his back seemed to have things sticking out of it. Philip thought he saw red hands, but then they were hidden in the man's pockets. Philip's eyes wandered once more and fell

upon a thin man at the bar. Every bone on the man's body was visible under the extra-thin skin. His mouth seemed to hold little or no lips. His cheeks just started. His teeth were never covered. Moving on from *that* freak, Philip saw a muscular waiter exiting the kitchen. He had an orange tan and muscles so big he looked like he should have been a strong man in a circus. For a second he glimpsed a flame in the man's mouth, but it was suddenly gone.

"Have you decided?" his father inquired.

Philip returned to the menu. The skull was still staring at him.

"Uh...Yeah. The usual please."

His father smiled, "I could have guessed." He turned to the waiter. "I'll have the chicken burger and he'll have the beef lasagne."

"Yes sir. Oh, by the way, the meal may take some time to prepare as we are running low on staff today," he rasped, in a manner that implied he'd rehearsed the line to many people before.

Stark waddled off and Philip looked the other way, out of the window and onto the street, where the man in black stood resolute, the crowds walking past, not really noticing him, like he was invisible. Another strange thing Philip picked up on was that only the people near the restaurant seemed to be moving. This time Philip *could* see the man was making eye contact with him. Philip just stared back. The man nodded, and pointed to a silver watch on his wrist. And Philip had hoped there would be no more cryptic messages. He broke the eye contact first and looked back at the menu. A white rectangle had appeared below the skull. It read:

He is the enemy. Don't listen to him. Say NO!

Gryal

The Gryal guy evidently wasn't going to leave him alone.

"Um...Phil?"

Philip listened to Samuel once more.

"You know how your mother and I are going to Venezuela during the summer, and that we'd have to leave you with your grandparents on the Isle of Tiree? Well, I've just had a raise at work, and we may have enough to take you with us. Your mother and I already have our

tickets and have most of our stuff packed, but we should be able to fit you in. I mean, I know that you already have a science trip arranged by the school to go to Switzerland...Do you want to come?"

This couldn't be what the message had been about, could it? Then he noticed the words on the menu had changed.

Yes. Say No.

Okay, the skeleton was bonkers to think a holiday mattered.

"Yes, I'd like that."

And the front window exploded in a ball of flames and shattered glass.

3: Lands Of Fire

Philip's eyes shot open. Most of his vision was obscured by blood. The screams of shoppers had obliterated the silence. Not much was left of the restaurant. Debris was falling at odd intervals from what remained of the ceiling. Everything was burning. Smoke choked the air around them. At the edges of his vision he saw blurred figures running about. His face, arms and clothes were scratched and torn by fragments of glass. He scrambled to his feet from under the wreckage of the table and searched wildly for his father. But there was no sign of him. Everywhere he looked there was just blackened and burning rubble. He threw dark pieces of brick out of his way in his urgent quest. Philip's lungs were yearning for oxygen, but in the smoke there was little to have. Then the coughing fits began, as he knew they would, they were his body's last attempt for air. And he saw him! Trapped under a fallen rafter, his dad was showing no signs of life. He staggered over and knelt beside him, trying to find a pulse, faint or strong. And he found it. His father was alive. But for how long would *he* be? He couldn't breathe and could hardly see. He no longer even had the sense of relief he had been feeling but moments before.

Suddenly a hand clamped onto his forearm, dragging him up.

"No! No! Get my dad! Save my dad!"

Then he saw his rescuer: the man in black.

"You!" he shrieked.

Philip struggled and punched and bit and kicked, any attempt to escape this madman stalker. But the man was much older and stronger than him with fully developed muscles. Philip was wasting his breath in vain. But to his dim surprise the man scooped up Samuel with his other arm and marched them both out of the ruined building.

"I'm sorry," confessed the man, "I guess that's not the best way to gain your trust."

"No, it damn well isn't!"

And from out of the burning embers behind them emerged the waiter Philip had imagined being a strong man in the circus. He had a resonating voice which reached them easily over the dying din of screams.

“The Brethren Lords have no need for Chaos! You know that very well. We made it quite clear last time.”

Philip’s rescuer just barked. It might have been a laugh, Philip couldn’t tell. Abruptly, he and his father fell to the hard road beneath them. He glanced at his father; Samuel was still out cold. Above them the two figures were still arguing. The next second the strong man had his hand to his stalker’s throat. The figure just smiled.

“You haven’t changed a bit, have you Marz?” The figure’s accent sounded strangely like that of an American, behind the gruff tone.

“And you’re as treacherous as ever,” Marz retorted.

All of a sudden Marz’s arm burst into flames. Philip had to roll out of the way to avoid having a cloud of ash land on top of him. He grabbed hold of his unconscious father and pulled him to a safe distance, somehow finding that he could do so without as much effort as he’d have imagined it requiring. No one was left in the street, they’d all run for their lives. He propped Samuel up against the door of an estate agents’ and gave a fleeting look at the duelling pair. Marz had been thrown backwards through the air onto the remains of the ‘Cloak and Scythe’. His adversary apparently vanquished, the stalker was facing Philip, and for the first time he got a good look at the stern, dark-haired, dark-eyed, hollow face.

“I have something to tell...”

He couldn’t finish his sentence, however, as Marz had thrown a fireball into his chest. The card shop would need to pay to fix that man-shaped hole in the wall tomorrow morning, or this evening if this didn’t last much longer.

All was quiet but for the crackling fire. Nothing was moving. Philip stood up and surveyed the damage. Stepping onto the ash-layered ground he checked for any of the freaks. There was a crunching sound. Philip froze. A shadow sped from the firelight to the shine of the afternoon. Feeling it was safe, Philip trudged forwards and stepped on something soft. Looking down he saw the checked red hood that the bulky man had hidden his face with. It was torn to pieces. But it didn’t look like the result of flying glass, more the result of a couple of large tears made as it was pulled apart. *Snip snip snip*. The sound of pincers filled Philip’s ears. *Thud thud thud*. From the sound he guessed it was the footsteps of a huge beast. *Rrrrrrrrr*. His very bones seemed to become ice. There was that blur again, closer this time.

He could hear its grinding panting loud in his ears. Mixed in with the panting was the cracking of joints. But there was no way to tell if it was the joints of the beast or a corpse. *Crash!* Remnants of building flew away from the impact site. From the new crater climbed the earthbound demon. Its front legs were bulky in the same places as the hooded man. Five horns crowned its red, scaly head. Its eyes were like that of an insect, and its skin looked as if it had been in a terrible accident involving a vat of acid. The lower jaw of the creature was slightly longer and thinner than the upper one, giving the impression that its jaw was dislocated. It sniffed the smoky air with slit-like nostrils. Webbed feet with long cracked talons clasped the separate pieces of rubble to inch its way towards Philip. It was at that point that he realised that he was covered in blood, and figured that the thing would have caught onto his scent, making it too late to just run and hide. Philip was flung onto his back as the thing propelled itself through the air at his chest. In a daze, Philip stared at the beast through blood tinged eyes. It reared onto its hind legs, standing like a man. Its head was lost in the smoke. Philip prepared himself for death. His heart pounded with abject terror as he realised the last thing he would hear would be the crackling fire. The last thing he'd feel would be the talons ripping his raw chest open. The last thing he'd taste would be his own blood. And the last thing he'd see would be the beast lunging down onto him. The beast roared, and all sound stopped.

Philip opened his eyes. The beast was gone. The only sign that it had been there were wisps of ash and smoke. Philip's stalker was running over the debris, his hand and chest sizzling.

"What do you want?" Philip coughed.

"You."

Philip fled the scene as fast as his bleeding legs would take him. He soon arrived at the estate agents' and Samuel. The problem was that the man in black was close behind him. Philip grabbed hold of his father's wrist and concentrated hard on the woods by his school. In that split second when his peripheral vision unfocused he saw the man swipe at his jumper.

*

Philip awoke first and immediately began to crawl over to Samuel. He could see the rabbits running, the birds taking flight and the insects scuttling away as quickly as they could to avoid the incoming trio, still moving even though the air had settled down, the travellers

having regained their corporeal forms. They had been separated in *transit*, so each lay a few feet away from the others.

His dad was still blacked out, and now he saw the other cuts and bruises that had been obscured in the smoke back at the restaurant. At least there didn't appear to be anything overly life-threatening. The man behind Philip groaned. Philip turned on the spot and leapt at the wakening man. The man managed to raise his fist just in time to knock Philip out of the way, sending him flying. As the undergrowth scattered around Philip the man towered over him.

"I don't want to hurt you," the man insisted, desperately.

"Funny, you have a strange way of showing it."

The man stamped on Philip's hand, breaking a few fingers. As if the rest of the day hadn't been painful enough. The conflagrations of pain that had sprung up in his nerve receptors shot up his arm, overloading his brain with agony.

"I need you for a very important mission. I'm trying to protect you from the Brethren Lords. They're the ones trying to hurt you. You have to believe me."

"Unlikely. You just want to kill me."

The man pulled Philip to his feet by his school blazer lapels. He'd been up and down all day long. The canopy above them cut out most of the sunlight, making shadows dance on his captor's face, and any movement seemed to be seen under strobe lighting. Their hair ruffled their faces in the evening breeze. After a short struggle Philip pulled himself out of the man's grasp. The man wasn't putting much into it. He was enjoying this.

"And why would I do that? Just follow me," he commanded.

Philip stepped backwards, "No."

"Fine then."

The man dodged around Philip and walked towards Samuel.

"You won't touch my father!"

He lunged for the man, who swivelled and hit Philip in the chest. In a quick bounce Philip jumped back and aimed at the man's neck with his unbroken hand. Out of nowhere, the man appeared to conjure a ball of energy in the palm of his hand and with a flick of his wrist held it out in front of him. Philip, whose reactions were too slow, ran straight into it. Electricity coursing through every molecule of his body, Philip stood there comically for a second, rocking back and forth on his heels, his hairs standing on end, prickly like a hedgehog with sparks running between them, a stunned expression on his face. Then he crumpled in a pile on the earth.

Singed slightly, Philip rolled over onto his back to face the patient man. His battered chest rose and fell rapidly as his adversary looked upon his undignified form. *Wham!* Philip's leg connected with the man's shin, making him tumble backwards like a felled tree. Knowing his luck couldn't get him much further, Philip's unbroken hand groped around in the undergrowth for anything useful. In a matter of seconds, under a grimy pile of sodden leaves, his fingers found something hard and covered in insects. With an enormous amount of effort he pulled it towards him, his one last weapon: a thick broken branch. He lifted it over his head and looked for his target. The man was on his knees, wincing as he tried to regain the higher ground. Philip swung the branch such as he'd never swung anything before. His opponent saw it coming a second before collision and, with inhuman bendiness, curved his spine backwards so the branch went above him. He then flung himself over onto his front and found his own branch from the area he was kneeling on. Philip knew that he had but a moment to act, and all he could think about was tricking this madman into going away from his father.

They lunged in the same split second. The thuds of clashing wood echoed through the trees. Neither adversary was generating a proper blow, all attempts being blocked by the other. As the swiftly slowing duel persisted, the pair were gradually rising on their injured legs. After they were as high as they could get without leaving the ground, they were free to move, jumping out of the way, weaving around each other, not very fast, seeing as both were getting weaker by the minute. Trying to move in a serpentine manner, thinking that this would make him a harder target to hit, Philip side-stepped the man, believing that he could then draw him in the opposite direction. But out of the blue, the man dived for Samuel, and Philip desperately pursued. The two of them tussled on the muddy earth, trying with all their might to be the victor.

“How about another little trip?” the man growled between his uneven yellowing teeth.

Philip instantly knew what he was going to do, and focused on the calmest place he could think of. And then he remembered the empty fields outside his grandparents’ village. It had been very peaceful there, with barely anyone around. Oh, what had it been called? The Isle of Tiree!

Both of them had been thinking of different locations when they had entered *transit* together. Subsequently, they appeared where neither had expected.

*

The air at the top balcony of St. Paul’s Cathedral rippled like a vertical liquid. A strange mixture of buzzing and crackling was growing ever louder, until...Philip pushed himself away from the barrier-protected edge and stood firmly on his feet, though he was feeling far weaker than he looked. But the man, to Philip’s dismay, was already running towards him from further up the walkway, drawing two knives from an inside pocket of his coat. Philip could just find the energy to move. His challenger pushed him against the back wall.

“Listen to me,” the man was almost pleading for some reason. “You must have wondered what you are. You must wonder why you have powers. I can tell you. My name is...”

But Philip never heard what his name was. Inside of him, a chunk of rage had finally broken loose. His fists were connecting with the man’s burned chest with such force that he’d never known he possessed. It was as if his muscles had suddenly increased in mass. The man fell back onto the barrier, the only thing stopping his fall. The man’s eyes were red with tears.

“Wait...”

But it was too late. With a primeval strength Philip’s fist hit the man right between the eyes. He swayed, then toppled over the barrier and down into the dark of the hall below. Philip looked at his hand, not noticing the sound of the man hitting the floor, or lack of. He figured that no one could have survived that fall, and perhaps if his head hadn’t been throbbing so much, he might have been disturbed at that fact. Philip flexed his fingers. Earlier he could have sworn the man had broken them. It must have just been the pain magnified. He noticed that the blood that had been swimming at the edges of his vision had disappeared. Philip shrugged, not really caring about his injuries. He was unable to focus on them, just as he was unable to comprehend the ramifications of what he’d just done. Tomorrow there would be an

inquiry about the body, but he'd be long gone. And without anything else to stay there for, he returned to his father.

*

The fire crackled behind Gryal as he inspected his skull once more in the cracked mirror. His glinting yellow eyes were the main source of light in this far corner of the living room where he stood, tucked away behind two of his antique cabinets. It was sufficient to see his reflection and that was good enough for him. He still looked the same, but he felt different, a new Immortal.

He pulled his cloak tighter around his skeletal chest. Gryal moved away from his reflection, the heat of the fire irritating his bald crown. His legs clicked and clacked as the bones scraped one another on passing. He stood imposingly to the side of his fireplace. It was decorated in ornate carvings in blackest stone. Blue, pink, purple and clear crystals were entwined in the elaborate design of the mantelpiece, which supported an array of artefacts. Gryal crouched down by the white flames and blew on them with air from non-existent lungs. The flames obediently extinguished. The darkness that inhabited the high rafters descended to the weak gas lamps hanging in brass brackets now that the tall and extremely bright flames had gone. Lord Repa liked to be old-fashioned in his lifestyle.

Gryal moved to his grand velvet armchair, with its back so tall that it overlooked even him. His feet rested on the carpet next to the talon-shaped ones of the chair that had been cast from raw time energy. The Lord leant his head back into the chair and gazed out of the window to the pulsating Rift ahead, a last reminder that the final war had begun. If he could sleep, he would have drifted away in that rare peaceful moment and dreamt of his once regal place among the Gods. But by definition, he wasn't living, so he could not be truly awake to fall into the spell of slumber, no matter how hard he desired it.

His fantasies were disrupted by the knocking at his door. Not in the best of moods, Gryal glided over to the door and touched it, turning it to cinders.

Warren Marz was not shocked or scared by the sudden combustion of the door hidden in the stretch of cliff before him. He merely stood his ground and looked blankly at his brother.

"May I enter?" he requested, calmly.

“I do not think my quarters are a good place for any discussion you wish to have with me, brother,” Gryal snapped harshly.

Warren turned around. Behind him was a cavern of flames. Blurred Braknagh workers were busy in the glaring light, some falling to the depths below. Those that didn't might have shown stress or remorse at this at the beginning, but now such accidents were but a way of life, and so they merely carried on with their work. Rickety bridges crossed the crevasses to meet solitary pillars of stone jutting out from the unseen base of the Tower. Braknaghs scampered along these suicidal walkways, occasionally being hit by a jet of steam hundreds of degrees hot so fast that reactions on their parts were impossible. The construction work that connected the cliff walls encircling the pit and the stalactite-scarred roof was rickety and badly made. Thin girders were standing in a fashion similar to a house of cards. Platforms looked as if they'd been dropped at random onto the structure wherever there was a piece of metal jutting out. The white and blue flames licked the bottom of the work stations, leaving charred marks.

All the way up at the roof enormous metal rings protruded to meet the fragile construction, getting smaller and smaller with every one, ending at the size of a small human airplane, starting with one big enough to fit a small star. Green light emanated from the top and largest ring, lighting the top half of the room, or cave, whatever you wanted to call it, where the light of the gigantic flames didn't reach.

Gryal's chambers, minuscule compared to this monstrosity, were based in the south cliff face overseeing a ledge leading over the abyss by about one hundred metres. To say that this was approximately one two-millionth of the way into the diameter of the abyss gives you an idea of how big the Tower is.

All of a sudden, the ground began to shake. Shards of rock fell from the towering ceiling into the fiery crater, melting to oblivion the microsecond they touched the dancing flames. And then the flames were out, sucked through tubes in the rim of the abyss. The employees ran for cover away from their building work into reinforced cages along the ledges on the opposite side to the on-looking pair. Yet one unlucky soul (well it would be if it had one) tripped on a bar of metal and took too long in standing back up. A pure white beam plummeted from the rings above, destroying the little demon, and escaped through the bottom of the abyss, now visible thousands of miles below. Life flickered back to the area a few minutes after the workers were doubly sure they were safe, as they all set back to their individual jobs, one

replacing their dead colleague, whose scream no one had heard in the roar of the beam. It hadn't been that important. None of them were and they knew it. The flames reignited, increasing the temperature again to beyond what a normal human could withstand. Warren turned back to face his brother.

"Would this be a better place to talk?" Marz gestured at the hive of activity behind him, or rather what was visible between him and the doorframe. "Or maybe you could pay the Furimun of this Tower to take us to the higher levels, such as the conference room near the top floor."

Gryal tried to scowl, but feature arrangements on bones are hard to change. Warren got the message anyway.

"You do realise the rest of us don't choose to live in the basement of our Towers. There are magnificent and luxurious living quarters already in place in every Tower. I personally don't see why one would want to stay here next to this flaming pit."

"I don't like the cold." Gryal ground his teeth, emphasizing every word, especially the last one. "Just get in here."

"Yes sir," Warren burred in a babyish, mocking voice.

Lord Repa led Lord Marz straight through his majestic living room via an oak door, down a musty passage and finally into an equally ostentatious study. It had everything Gryal needed in a study. In the centre was a table covered in star charts. On the far wall was a massive window reaching from floor to ceiling. A seven foot tall mirror stood against the bit of wall that wasn't shrouded by shelves nesting hundreds more artefacts he'd collected from throughout the multiverse, and over in the far corner floated the Waters of Lution next to a chair and writing desk.

Warren watched his brother's cloak of night enviously. What he wouldn't give for something like that. It didn't really do anything; it just gave off an air of panache. He didn't wear it as such. And it didn't follow him either. It became wherever he was and slid down the air to form the shape of the cloak. It never stopped moving, unless the Lord stopped. When the molecules reached the tail of the cloak, they simply ceased to exist. Gryal truly wrapped reality around him as a cloak.

They stopped at a round table just big enough to seat four people. The brothers sat facing each other.

“You came here for a reason.” It was a statement, not a question.

Warren cut the small talk he’d prepared on the way there and asked the question, “How is your side of the plan going?”

Gryal sat up a little straighter.

“Excellent,” he spoke with a manner usually related to someone full of hot air who never thought they could do wrong. “The temptation is in place, I have the spy, and the Mancynn is acting to my will.”

“Okay, now I know you’re lying through your teeth. In case you hadn’t noticed, I was at the ‘Cloak and Scythe’ when the boy joined with that filthy traitor. I was there doing my duty to the Cause, unlike you.” He ended on a dark note.

“She detained me.” Gryal put it simply; best if the underling understood in his opinion.

“All these tangents, all these distractions, your strange demeanour, anyone would think you’re human,” Warren chuckled.

Gryal burst into a fiery rage, in every sense, “ARE YOU SERIOUSLY CALLING ME, GRYAL REPA, THE SUPREME BRETHERN LORD, A HUMAN!” he boomed from his now fire-spitting jaws.

The effect of the echoes gave the impression that he was saying each word a number of times over.

“Of course not.” Warren hadn’t flinched at all. “I was merely trying to lighten this icy mood with a little joke.”

“After countless millennia you still haven’t learnt to be serious in these matters. Anyway, Mierdi *did* detain me.”

“Then that old crone will be punished. But it does not matter now. I guess the Mancynn *could* survive the trip.”

“On his own, maybe, but if we’re to be certain, we’ll have to interfere, even if we are restricted by the Rift,” concluded Gryal.

Warren got to his feet, recognising by Gryal’s posture that he wouldn’t be welcome much longer, saying, “Do you think it’s possible to interfere at such a delicate place and not get him killed?”

“Yes,” Gryal confirmed, bluntly. “Now go, unless there’s anything else.”

Gryal knew that Warren had nothing else to say, but he gave him the opportunity to speak all the same. Warren had always liked to be treated with manners, even if he didn’t treat others with them in turn. Not receiving a response, he watched the muscular Immortal leave his private dominion for another Tower.

Sighing, Gryal stood and walked to his mirror. He had one in every room; he never knew when an urge of vanity would kick in. Just as the last time he’d looked into this very mirror, he had the feeling that something was standing behind his reflection. But when he turned, he proved he was the only one in the room. Yet his reflection definitely had a shadowy figure skulking in the background. Or at least it *had* had a shadowy figure skulking in the background. But now it was gone. Instead, there was something misty behind his eyes, at the back of the sockets, growing larger and larger, until it burst forth..

He looked at himself in the mirror. Gryal figured he must have imagined it. But the edges of the mirror were a bit icier. Then again, they were probably like that before. Yes, it was his same old skull face and his same old skeleton body in his cloak of night. Really quite...cool, to use the human word. Oh Gods, his overly strong brother had been right. He was getting a bit human.

His eyes were yellow now. When he’d been younger they’d been electric blue...not that he’d heard of Immortals changing with age. His saw himself smile and stroll towards the door, a bit jerkily, like he hadn’t walked in a while. But he, Gryal, hadn’t walked anywhere. He tried to move, he couldn’t. He tried to walk forwards, but he bumped into the mirror.

What had been Gryal's reflection up until a few seconds ago learned how to walk quite quickly, having seen the old Gryal do it many times. Just as it reached its first obstacle, the door, it looked back at the mirror to see the Lord hammering at the barrier, taking his place as the prisoner of glass. But this was the new Gryal, an improvement on the last, who could do its duty to Mierdi much better. Off to war it went. It had to prepare, it had been so long since it had existed.

4: The Will Of The One

“And you’re sure you’re feeling okay, no pain anywhere?”

“I’ve told you, I’m fine,” Philip persisted, pulling his arm out of the reach of the nurse’s latex gloves.

It was true. Philip could see properly again, the pain had receded, all of the bones in his hand had mended, and there were no cuts upon his skin (yet there was a whitish mark on his wrist in the shape of a hand gripping him tightly). He had no idea how he’d got these injuries, yet when he’d got his father through the doorway of his house and into a bed late last night, all he’d had to do about himself was wash the mud off. That being said, he had been on the verge of fainting, feeling as if he had no energy left in him at all. He’d even felt quite a bit sick.

Right now Samuel was lying in a hospital bed, still out for the count. The doctors were saying that he’d received a nasty blow to the head and could be like that for several more days. All they could do was wait. The main thing Philip was concerned about was not having a vegetable for a father. But if *he* was taking it badly, his mother was distraught. Since she’d seen her husband all she’d done was try to make herself as small as possible, muttering psychotically that it was all her fault. But according to all the fancy machines, Samuel was stable, just trapped in a deep sleep.

On his laptop Philip had been able to access the day’s news along with live broadcasts, and he’d also bought every type of newspaper in the shop. Philip didn’t realise that there was nothing about a body being found outside St. Paul’s Cathedral. There was a mention of the ‘Cloak and Scythe’ though. The authorities were blaming the explosion at the restaurant on a gas leak. The memories of the night’s events were seeping away at that very moment, so he didn’t know if the information given by the news was in any way accurate.

At that moment two more nurses came sidling over to them.

“He ain’t gonna wake anytime soon,” the first informed them, her voice girly, like out of a kid’s fairy tale.

The second butted in, “That ain’t the message the boss told us to give ’em,” he bickered at her, surprisingly in an equally high voice. He turned to Philip and his mother, “Mrs Quint...”

“Beth,” she corrected him from within her sopping-wet sobs.

“Beth,” he continued, “We, that is, us nurses, feel it’s best if ya go home now, and we’ll call ya if anything changes in his condition.”

“I was getting to that part!” the first nurse complained.

“Well ya shoulda said it quicker, eh!”

Philip helped Beth to her quaking feet and started towards the door.

“Come on, before this gets ugly,” he whispered to her.

Behind them the two nurses were shouting at each other so loudly and using such language that people from many of the nearby rooms had come to investigate the commotion.

Finally out of the sickly-pink wards the mother and son slowed their pace. There was no need to hurry. The hospital’s car park was virtually empty on this bright Saturday morning. He had missed the start of the previous school day, sending Mrs Cage into a blind fury as she couldn’t give him his detention, because he had been on that cramped ambulance that had turned up at his house around seven o’clock on Friday, seeing as he’d been with his father at the ‘Cloak and Scythe’ and was thought to be injured. And while the siren had been droning into his skull, Philip had had time to think, mostly about what he speculated and what he did not know. He didn’t know of the effects on a person who travelled in *transit* while unconscious. He’d always presumed it didn’t make a difference whether you were awake or not, but yesterday he’d wondered if it might have *prolonged* Samuel’s stay in limbo. And the horrific thought had entered his head: maybe indefinitely. But these were the thoughts he’d had. Now they were all forgotten.

Once at Beth’s car Philip turned to her. Her grey eyes were still flooding with tears. He grabbed on to her shoulders firmly.

“Look, I’m not old enough to drive,” he insisted over Beth, who took a great, nasal sob and blew her nose on her ragged handkerchief, “and you can’t drive in this state.”

She looked upon her progeny with round puppy dog eyes, sniffing a little.

Philip shook her frantically, “Get a grip!”

Beth seemed to regain her senses slightly. What happened to the calm, benign, benevolent woman he'd grown up with?

"You're...you're right," she stammered, wiping her eyes.

Satisfied, Philip got into the blue car and his mother joined him. Leaving Samuel in the care of the doctors, the small vehicle drove off home.

Too angry to *phase* Philip opened his door like a regular boy and marched over to his desk and the blackened seat.

"Come on then! Where are you?!"

Gryal didn't appear. Thinking on his feet, Philip placed a chocolate bar on the desk in front of the chair. That's what it had eaten before, wasn't it? And then, after a few of the longest seconds in Philip's life, something he hadn't anticipated happened: nothing.

"What are you, lactose intolerant?!" he shouted at the ceiling, which strangely enough didn't reply.

Unable to think of anything else to attract the Reaper (short of killing something, of course), Philip began walking out of the room. There was a faint crackling sound. Philip slowly turned on the spot, looking at the ground. Only after he'd turned about did he look up. The tall figure of Gryal was once again occupying the seat that had been vacant just a second before.

Gryal picked up the chocolate bar, "What's this meant to be?"

Philip pondered Gryal. He seemed different. The rim of his eye sockets were blacker, and his yellow eyes brighter. His teeth were also slightly more pointed than the last time he'd sat in that chair. But at that moment the reason he'd called the demon entered his line of thought. Philip scowled.

"What happened to my father? Will he be okay?" Philip said this more hesitantly than he'd meant to.

He picked up on Philip's uncertain note, "You don't clearly remember what happened, do you? That'll be because I have been removing any memories that may cause you discomfort. I only want you to be happy." He sighed, "Neither I, nor any of my fellow Lords, attacked

you. It was a traitor, by the name of Chaos. He blew up the restaurant, not us. We've been trying to protect you from him. You've got to believe us."

Philip was finding it a little hard to. Those were the words the man in black had used, and he hadn't trusted him. How did he know that these people, if they were in fact people, weren't working together in some conspiracy gone mad?

Gryal gave up waiting for a response and continued, "And to answer your second question, he'll be fine and walking again in a week, don't worry."

Philip was still finding it harder than he had last time to trust this apparition. Gryal chucked the chocolate behind him onto the floor, and noticed Philip's atlas lying open on the carpet. Philip followed his gaze and realised he hadn't picked it up since his last encounter. It was still open on the page about Egypt.

"Look," started Gryal, "I know you don't exactly trust us, but we want you to stay safe. Don't go to South America. There's a chance you're going to get hurt, if not killed. We want you to stay alive."

"Why me?" Philip was now desperate to probe any information out of the strange man...thing.

"You're different," Gryal said only what Philip already knew. "Just don't go."

And his form ruptured in a flow of molten flame, Philip watching his disappearance. Philip had learned only two things from that shorter encounter: his father would be back in a week, and that Gryal was certainly not a figment of his imagination. But how had a page on Egypt reminded Gryal to warn him of South America. *Gryal* was clearly different. It would probably make sense in a psycho's head, but not Philip's.

"Phil, could I speak with you?"

With one last sweep of the room to check Gryal really had gone, he obeyed Beth and proceeded to the living room.

Whatever his mother wanted to talk about, Philip was positive that she didn't *want* to talk about it; it was probably something to do with his father. Beth was sitting on the small sofa

with her hands on her knees, waiting patiently. He was glad to see that she'd dried her eyes. Now she didn't look like a dam that was going to burst any second.

The living room was spacious. Two lights were fixed to the far wall and four windows let golden summer sunlight in from the cheery outside world. A white fireplace was set into the peach wall below a golden mirror stretching most of the length of the room. In the corner sat a TV, probably the most high-tech thing in there and it looked slightly out of place. The green carpet was soft to the touch under his feet.

Philip stepped forth into the room and joined her on the leather sofa. Close up Philip saw that her eyes were still swimming slightly, but when she saw him looking she hastily wiped the growing tears away.

"This is silly. He's going to be fine." She looked into his brown eyes and made a quivering smile. "At...at the restaurant, did he ask you...sorry. Did he ask you...?"

Mercifully he finished the sentence for her, "Did he ask me about South America? Yes."

"Good." Her voice was quiet, a bit like she was reassuring herself, "and your answer was?"

Philip knew he'd said yes at the 'Cloak and Scythe', but he'd subsequently been attacked. On the other hand, Gryal wanted him not to go, and did he really trust it? A lively debate took place in his head.

They're trying to attack me, don't get hurt.

That's exactly why I should go; I shouldn't give in to those bullies.

They could do much worse than last time; mother could get hurt, if not killed.

You should still do the right thing and stand up to them.

That'll make it worse.

He'd made up his mind.

Philip prepared himself, and after pushing the losing thoughts aside, he said, "Yes."

He screwed up his eyes and hid his face. He could feel the flames flying everywhere and the ceiling collapsing...

“Are you okay?” Beth sounded anxious.

Philip opened his eyes. Wow his imagination was strong.

“Yes, I’m fine,” he reassured her.

“Good. We were thinking of going somewhere in the area of Auyantepui.”

He looked at her vacantly.

“Angel Falls is part of it, the highest waterfall in the world. It’s in Venezuela.”

Nothing changed in his expression, except he blinked.

“It’s north of Brazil.”

He made a noise of vague comprehension.

But at his mother’s look, he added, “Yes, I know where Venezuela is.”

“And you’re okay going there with us?” she checked, cautiously.

“Of course,” he didn’t see why not.

Beth cocked her head, “You do realise you’ll have to take daily medication and have a lot of vaccinations?”

“Yes,” he persevered.

“You’re okay with this?” Philip thought she must be making her final checks by now.

“I’m good,” Philip ended the conversation with this one statement.

Beth’s smile widened, “Now we just have to wait for your father to come...”

The words choked in her throat. Philip knew a fit of tears was coming, but he resisted his urge to get out of earshot and stayed to comfort her, even if he did regret it after the first few seconds.

The last week of term and the school year held no paranormal activities, no strange encounters, and no extra-terrestrial beings materialising anywhere in the vicinity of his life.

Most of the teachers let them play games or watch films. In Science Dr Radcliffe let the class play games on the whiteboard, such as hangman. About half the class chose this option, where as others played on their phones or used the teacher's laptop to watch videos online. Dr Radcliffe didn't care; he just sat back and watched his protégés run amok.

“Oi! Miss Cole! Hangman is *not* an excuse to write rude words on the white board!”

And in English Mrs Deakin put on the latest film take on a Shakespearean play, released on DVD the previous week, which was good, but she could have chosen better.

“Now class, settle down. This is proper Shakespearean dialect,” boy was she wrong, “and this may help you next year. I have a feeling you'll be studying this play and this will help you understand the plot.”

“Whatever, Daphne,” Philip heard one of the less educated boys mutter a little further down the line of desks.

Of course in lessons such as D.T. and art he had to finish his work, but in maths, Professor Oswalt (or Billy, as he allowed them to call him) set challenges and mind games for each pupil, some individual and some team events. The majority found this the best maths lesson ever, but when faced with failure, a couple of people got into trouble.

“Miss Brennan! If I ever see you make that hand gesture in this class again...”

Philip highly doubted that that would stop Paloma.

They were taught by one teacher for French, German and Spanish, so they worked at languages until their last Spanish lesson, fifth period on Thursday. The appropriately named Miss (Summer) Adams gave out sweets and crisps, while music (foreign unfortunately) burst forth loudly from the computer speakers, and party games were set out on the desks. It didn't go well for everyone.

“Daniel Langer! I saw that, take it out of your pocket and put it back on the table.”

Latin was quiet (all the people who had been misbehaving had been sent out) in Mr A.J. Parkes' last lesson. They sat there watching a documentary about Rome.

“And for those who didn't pick up much this year, the English of what he just said is...”

History was different. Professor Crosbie (whose very name, Edith, Philip thought was historic) split the class into four teams and there was a history quiz on the topics they'd learned during the year. She was retiring at the end of the term and she knew how to go out with a bang. Philip's team won, or by Philip's point of view, Philip won, his team hadn't done anything.

"Miss Cole! Is that gum?! Didn't I send you to your head of house about that yesterday?! Well?!"

Their last fun lesson was Religious Studies. Sartaj Choudhury gave them a feast only made up of food accepted by all religions. In the background was a film, better than the one that Mrs Deakin had shown. All in all, it was a good last week, until Mrs Cage's final lesson. Fat chance getting an enjoyable lesson from her. Of course his geography teacher hadn't come back for their final lesson.

The line was moving into the classroom that, as always, gave off an odour of boredom, hatred, ignorance, and that old cheese on Mrs Cage's desk that had been there for who knows how long. Mrs Cage tapped her foot impatiently as the class sat down in their respective places. Philip, and it seemed over half the class, knew that it was too optimistic to keep their books in their bags for their final lesson. Their worn-out textbooks and mismatched projects were placed on the ancient wooden desks; the class looked up drearily in unison, to see two people at the head of the class. Mrs Cage, standing proudly as usual, and Mr Sneak, the headmaster. *'No way to escape Hell then'*, thought Philip. His least favourite teachers were instructing his last lesson of geography. From the faces of his fellows, they were dreading the same. Quiet muttering rippled through the regular silence of the classroom. Mrs Cage looked confused; she'd never heard that sort of thing in her classes before. Mr Sneak interrupted.

"If you will quieten down," it had the instant effect he wanted, "it has come to my attention that many of your tutors have slipped in their teaching duties. They have not been continuing the curriculum after your exams. Enjoyment has replaced learning. This is not the way of our school. Your parents pay for your outstanding education, not for you to laze about like you are at home. That is why a number of staff will be leaving on Friday, staff we have determined to not be strict enough when it comes to the control of their charges. **And to top that,**" he raised his voice to silence the shouts of outrage, "starting September, Mrs Cage will be supervising your study courses. And that is no way to behave in a classroom!"

Uproar and anarchy erupted from the students. One boy, Chris Murphy, began snatching up books from under unwary pupils' noses and was pelting them at the headmaster (the next time Philip saw him his hands and eyes were bright crimson) while shouting threats and words whose use broke numerous school rules in the process. Now you may think what they were doing was a major over reaction, but then again, you've never had Mrs Cage as a teacher.

And the riot didn't stop there. The headmaster was very busy for the rest of that day, sorting out detentions for all of the misbehaving children. But the thing was that some, if not most, had fled the room and run around the school, spreading the word of the school changes to all their friends as Doom Sayers. Philip didn't think Mr Sneak had caught all of them. He'd never been very competent.

Philip was still smiling a couple of days later when the car ascended the winding slope to the hospital between the grassy verges. Through the open white gates it trundled and off it went in search of a parking space. Philip and Beth stepped out from the car and as they looked up, they saw a man waving at them, resting on one of the pearly pillars that held up the small balcony over the hospital entrance. Beth clapped her hands to her mouth and ran, rather clumsily in high-heeled shoes, to her husband. Philip followed, a bit more casually, having known his father would be well, but still got caught in the embrace between his parents. Samuel released them.

"Don't be too rough now, you don't want to knock me into another coma," he laughed jocularly.

Beth, on the other hand, evidently didn't approve of that kind of attitude at this time, "Don't joke about such things dear, you gave us such a shock."

But they both beamed all the same. Philip was left slightly awkward, unsure if he should say anything to interrupt his parents' unspoken love. After a few minutes however, Philip just decided to wing it.

"Shouldn't we be going inside for our vaccinations now?"

The link between the wife and husband broke. They were still looking at each other, but there was no longer a mesmerising glint in their eyes.

Beth spoke first, "Yes dear, of course."

So the three of them walked together into the hospital as a reunited family.

As the door swung shut behind them the three Quints were strolling up to the reception desk. The atmosphere in there was a lethargic one, with a slight smell of disinfectant and air fresheners. Philip looked at the other patients sitting in the grey waiting room, some reading newspapers, others deep in conversation with their neighbour, and a couple just sitting there in silence, looking at their dirty worn-out shoes or at the plain ceiling above their heads. But the major absence in the room was happiness, or even a minor good feeling. Everyone was in a doom and gloom state. Well, Philip couldn't blame some of them. A group of patients over by the far wall had severe burns over their skin, like they'd been in the same fiery accident. A woman to Philip's right was comforting a child of about eight, whose arm looked like it had been twisted round too far. And a man in the middle of the sea of chairs looked like death warmed up; he had hollow cheeks and sunken eyes. He was constantly sneezing. He finished his sweep of the room and looked back at reception. The woman at the counter looked up from her piles of paperwork.

"Mr Quint, back so soon? What happened this time?"

"It's okay, me and my family are only here for vaccinations."

The nurse typed something into the computer database, "Yes sir, if you'd like to go through there," she pointed at a door in the left wall, "and one of our doctors will see to you as soon as possible."

"Thanks," mumbled Beth.

The three of them strode over to the door and went inside.

The room was minute with not much space to move. The family took the chairs by the wall and waited for someone to arrive. None of them spoke. Philip examined the posters opposite him about how to live a healthy lifestyle, about how important it is to visit your doctor, and on what you should and shouldn't eat. Samuel was looking at the different machines; being a

gadget collector he liked to examine a variety of electronic items. Shortly a doctor of average height entered the room and walked briskly up to his desk.

“Now,” his voice was stern and as brisk as his step, but a bit nasally also, “as I understand it, you are wishing to travel to Venezuela. Do you know what vaccinations you will need?”

Beth coughed, “Yes, we need vaccinations for Yellow Fever, Hepatitis A, Typhoid, Tetanus and Polio.”

“Correct,” he said, sharply. “All of your records show this is not your first time with vaccinations, so you should know that the procedure is quick and moderately painless. The records also state that you should not have adverse side effects, yet everybody does react differently. Shall we get on with it then, I have a busy schedule today that cannot be delayed.”

The doctor opened a cold cabinet and loaded onto a trolley three rows of five vaccinations (four liquids for injections, one tablet). Next to them on the trolley were their requisite needles. Beth just stared at the needles, and how long they were. She might have been regretting this visit.

“Whoever is first, please hold out your left arm with the sleeve rolled up. Oh, and you’ll need to bend over when I say so.”

Philip couldn’t watch. He only listened. Samuel didn’t scream in agony at his four injections, and neither did his mother, so when it came to his turn, he sat there, his eyes scrunched up as tight as they would go, his arm thrust out forwards, and waited for the first needle to penetrate his flesh.

The doctor had been right. It was quick. The moderately painless part Philip would like to disagree on very much, but it didn’t pay to insult the man controlling whether you died of a horrible disease or not.

Philip rubbed his arm on the way out, the patches where the needle had gone in still stinging like raw wounds. He wouldn’t be able to sit properly for a week (and nor did he feel he would get his dignity back). The Polio tablet hadn’t tasted that good either.

“Well that wasn’t so bad,” Beth acknowledged.

Philip didn't know what injections *she'd* had, but his certainly came under the category of 'bad'. He was glad to be leaving this hospital; and he thought that his father might have been too.

"Just so we're clear, I don't want to be going back in that place anytime within the next six months," Samuel was telling Beth.

"Where are we going now, then?" Philip asked Beth as they drove down the motorway alongside the other moving vehicles.

"We need to go to the pharmacy to get our Malarone tablets. It isn't far now."

When Beth turned the car off the main road to the left onto a back road, Philip had to shield his eyes from the sun peeking out from the puffy clouds. He'd left his sunglasses at home, a mistake that in hindsight was rather idiotic, seeing as the weatherman had said that it would be this bright. A row of electricity pylons snaked alongside the car, following the contours of the landscape. Feral animals sat on the slopes, watching the giant beasts run by on the white-striped ground, waiting for a window of opportunity in which to cross back to their dens.

A little while later buildings began to crop up before the Quint's car, not very big at first, but growing in size as their path continued into the village. It was not far from the town, and there had been no pharmacies in the immediate area of the hospital. At least, that's what Philip's parents had said. And in the distance coming ever nearer was a green cross jutting out from a building halfway up the street. Its neon lighting flashed and rippled so it was impossible for your eyes not to catch it. Beth parallel-parked in a space outside the pharmacist's, not something just anyone could do with so little space and traffic coming up behind them. When the short block of traffic had passed, the Quints stepped out into the road and sauntered onto the pavement. They were the only people standing on the path, and it seemed the only ones in the nearby area. In Philip's opinion, this was a ghost town. Yes, vehicles were passing through, but no one was stopping. The buildings around them, even from the outside, felt empty, dead. The windows were dark and some doors were swinging on rusty hinges. Wind rattled the window shutters and whistled over the chimneys.

The pharmacy itself wasn't extensively bright. A light bulb was flickering ominously above shelf after shelf of glass bottles. At the back, just visible from where Philip was standing, a

withered man stood resolutely at a counter with only a cash register for company. His head was lowered but Philip could clearly see from his hands lying on the counter that he had skin the colour of parchment, the same as his work station. From this far away glance, one could be forgiven for thinking of the man as part of the desk, like he'd fused with it, having not left its side for many years. A straggly mess of silvery hair fell as a veil across his bowed face. This was one man's legacy, a maze of chemicals in neatly labelled bottles on dusty planks of wood, locked in seclusion. That is, of course, until Samuel pushed his way through, not just the misty glass door, but a shield of cobwebs as well.

As they entered, the man at the counter did not look up, but his hands convulsed mechanically. Samuel led the way up the wooden aisles, with Philip in the middle and Beth bringing up the rear. For some reason, their progress was slow, their footsteps heavy, like they were walking through a vat of treacle. Philip observed that the contents of several bottles hadn't been used, as far as he knew, for over one hundred years. Their ingredients had either decomposed or evaporated. There were of course, the modern plastic bottles with printed shiny labels, but here and there were thick glass bottles with cork stoppers and sealed with crumbling wax, the labels on these were written in small, spidery writing. Before the door had properly closed, fresh air penetrated the walls, sending spirals of filth into the remaining stale air. It seemed that time hadn't decided what era it was inside this shop.

Their feet took them towards the counter through inch-thick grime. Samuel rapped his knuckle on the counter.

"Yes?" the man croaked, looking up.

Even when he'd stopped talking, his jaw kept swinging, as if the only reason it didn't fall off his head was the band of skin strapping the two pieces of skull together. The man looked at them in turn through his shroud of hair, his yellow eyes bulging demonically. Samuel took control.

"How much are the Malarone tablets. They're for our holiday to Angel Falls."

"I don't sell them," the man's eyes bored into Samuel's.

"But I saw some on the shelves back there," Samuel pointed behind himself at the avenues.

The man's nostrils flared, his jaw quivered, and his eyes flashed hazardously, "I said, I don't sell them!"

Samuel just wasn't getting the hint, "I'll go get them from the shelf."

He turned to get them, but froze at the man's shriek, "Halt, mortal. Braknaghs, enter!"

A six foot mirror slid aside on the wall beside the counter and two people lumbered into the scene, hands bound in chains. The first performed an inept bow in the direction of its master.

"We sorry master, but it ain't gonna budge. Nothin' works, ya see."

Its sister mimicked his pathetic grovelling, "Please master, it just won't work. It ain't possible to work, see."

The newcomers were dressed in white, just like a nurse's uniform.

"That doesn't matter," snarled the man, "Seize that man and his family."

Solemnly, they hauled their heavy legs one in front of the other towards Philip and his parents. In unison the family ran for the door. But before they were even fifteen feet away, an aged bolt slid into place, locking the only exit firmly shut. They turned to face their captor.

"You cannot leave while the Hexagon flows," the man leered. "The hour's nigh, yet we are weaker. Do not go, help open the Postern."

Philip had no idea what he was talking about, his natural curiosity wouldn't let anything this important escape his notice, oh, plus his parents were in danger. The zombie-like nurses traipsed ever closer. He had to think of something fast, a distraction.

"Why is this so important to you Gryal?!"

The man's features hardened. The illusion broken, Gryal stormed through his useless desk and headed straight for Philip. The nurses stopped, letting their master through. His parents stood back, petrified by the proceedings. Philip, the sticky sensation lifting slightly, freeing his movement, reached for bottle after bottle from the pharmacy shelves and hurled them at Gryal's chest. There was a crunching sound as the projectiles met their marks. Gryal looked down at the broken fragments of rib cage falling to the ground at his feet. It was as quick as lightning. Gryal had sent a ball of ochre flame at his young nemesis. Philip, completing his plan, sidestepped out of its smoking path. Missing everyone, the flame ball hit the door, and obliterated it. Frantically, Philip snatched up one last set of bottles and ran with his parents out of the building. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Gryal teleporting in a column of

smoke, along with his servants, who no longer resembled humans, but crimson beings with a tusk protruding from each chin and both eyes on one side of each head. There was a flash of light...

The Quints looked around. The streets were busy with everyday villagers. Houses were refurbished and new. The pharmacy was whole and undamaged. Philip looked down at his hand. In it were three bottles of Malarone tablets.

“How did we get here?” enquired Samuel.

Now that he thought about it, Philip didn't know. The last thing he remembered was travelling on the back roads about to reach the village.

“I don't know,” Philip and Beth said together.

They looked back at the shop. The building was empty and on the inside of the dusty door was a sign reading ‘out of business’.

“I've got the Malarone tablets though,” Philip held out his hand.

“Okay then,” his father said slowly. “The car's just there, shall we be going?”

*

Gryal had never before visited the hospital wing of his Tower, but then again, he'd never had to. As it was only for him, the room was not much bigger than his study. His comfortable bed sat opposite the slaves' door carved into the wall. Black drapes hung either side of him, ready to be pulled around him if necessary. Holes dug into the wall held hellish medicines for the Lord's benefit. The Braknagh slaves, here working on his broken bones, weren't any different to those of the basement, still grotesque, still unbelievably dim. Steam rose before his eyes as the cooling magma fused his ribcage back together.

The airlock entrance to the private ward opened and Warren entered from the sterilising room. His brother didn't look too pleased at this situation.

“That's what you call under control? That's your brilliant master plan for saving the Mancynn? Do you realise how much is at stake here? I was watching through the Waters of Lution, your attempt was the most dismal thing you've ever done. The transition wasn't even whole, you spliced the entire building!”

“Well I didn’t have the Watch on me at the time now, did I, or even a properly functioning Hexagon!” Gryal testified defensively. “Anyway, that wasn’t my only plan. I do have another, but it could get the Mancynn hurt.”

“Like the other one didn’t,” Warren scoffed. “It’s been a long time since you behaved so recklessly.”

“He wasn’t meant to know it was me! But this next plan could gravely injure him,” and at the look on Warren’s face he continued hastily, “it can’t kill him, but it could put him out of action for a long time, maybe too long to help us with the Archk, or the alternative as was his original purpose.”

Warren was still wary, “Are you sure it’s fool-proof, or better yet, Gryal-proof?”

Gryal pushed the slaves aside and stood, wrapping his cloak over his recently healed wounds, “You can’t talk like that about me!”

Warren flexed his red tinged muscles, “Oh, why not?”

Gryal’s thin tolerance threshold was wearing out fast, “I’m the Supreme Lord! I’m your leader!”

“You’re still my brother!”

There was a pause where the Lords stared at each other perilously, then Gryal spoke softly,

“Get out.”

“What...”

“GET OUT!”

*

They may not have remembered the incident inside the pharmacy, but the gaps in their memories had been a constant topic of conversation ever since. Now at the airport, having passed through security, they were waiting on the benches outside the shops for their flight to be called.

“It can’t be a coincidence that we all blacked out at the same time,” was the argument Samuel had been using for the past four days.

Beth moaned; she'd been sick of this discussion for a while, "It was probably a side effect of the vaccinations, that's all."

London Gatwick was extremely crowded and it had been hard enough to find three seats next to each other. Out of the high window Philip could see planes landing on the runway. It had been a dreary Friday, and now it was turning into a wet night. Clouds were forming in the dark sky. Their plane was one of the last for the day.

While Samuel had been in hospital, Philip and Beth had been preparing for the flight, booking Philip's ticket, packing his bags, and deciding what to do once they'd got to Venezuela. Since Samuel had come back, they'd had to start taking the malaria tablets. It was the rules, start taking the medication a few days before travel.

Around them the barriers were coming down over the shops, the people inside being evicted from the premises.

*

The storm grew outwards from Gryal's raised scythe. He held it proudly aloft, staring in the direction of the airport. His strike on the plane to Angel Falls originated in a field next to Stanwell Moor Road, the clearest place he could find near the airport. Thunder claps rolled in all directions within the cloud. The precipitation was flooding the streets and moving east. The Mancynn would not escape. Gryal knew he would be at London Gatwick Airport.

*

"I'm just saying, even if it was a side effect, we should complain," his father pressed on.

"Hold on." Beth was glad to have something to end the conversation with.

Over the public address system a woman's voice rang, "All passengers flying on the 22.00 flight to Venezuela please proceed to Gate 110 as your flight is now boarding."

The message repeated twice more for those who hadn't caught it all the first time. The Quints didn't need to speak; they stood as one and carried their hand luggage in the direction indicated by the tannoy.

*

The mini tsunami destroyed everything on its warpath towards the airport: trees were uprooted; cars were overturned; it getting ever nearer to the unsuspecting planes. Over the grassy ledge the water fell and swept across the runway. The planes never stood a chance, and were ripped to shreds by the oncoming force. The Gates were next.

*

The tunnel to the Gate had no windows so Philip couldn't see what was happening outside. All he knew was that they were walking towards their plane. The walkway was long, but nevertheless it wasn't very full. The clitter-clatter of wobbly wheels on metal reverberated in the confined space. No sound however could be heard from the outside world. In this section of London Gatwick Airport Philip could not hear any of the rain coming from the threatening cloud he'd seen.

*

The glass in the massive windows shattered. The entire west wall fell away at the wrath of this destructive element. Planes flew through the air, but not to their destinations; shrapnel added to the wrecking of the terminal. Numerous waves, reaching as high as the ceiling, crashed through the airport, passengers were sent off on an indoor rapid ride, desperately hanging onto their luggage and children. When the waves had passed onto another part of the airport, the waterline receded to about four and a half feet high. All was bedlam for the innocent holiday makers.

From the grey vortex of the cloud, a pillar of smoke descended onto the dripping landing strip. Even from this distance, Gryal could see his work was done. He'd made sure no one would have died. He'd softened the waves when they'd reached the humans. There was no denying that many would have been hurt, but no one would be dead. His white toe bones sank into the water before him as he began his march. He had to be sure.

He had made his way to the front of the building. He'd seen no deaths so far. At least Warren wouldn't be shouting at him. He hadn't seen the Mancynn though, but he had to be somewhere. This *was* London Gatwick Airport. His plane was due to be leaving in under a minute, and he couldn't see any planes fit for flight within the vicinity. A sign was coming up at the entrance to the airport. Gryal found his eyes drifting to the words upon it, printed in clear, fine font: Welcome to Heathrow Airport.

*

Philip's plane drove onto the runway. From here he wouldn't have been able to hear Gryal's drawn-out scream. He had the window seat, he always did. There was something about seeing the world in miniature scale passing below him that was very therapeutic. Philip shuffled in his chair, getting comfortable. It was going to be a long nine-hour flight, and sleep seemed a wise and preferable option.

*

"So much for you having this in the bag," Mordrin belittled Gryal.

From all the yelling he'd been doing recently Gryal rather felt he'd lost his voice. Despite this, he wanted to order Mordrin to look at him. Since Gryal had arrived at the Canopy, Mordrin had had his eyes fixed on the Waters of Lution. He'd never so much as risked a glance in his direction.

"I didn't see you coming to help," griped Gryal.

Mordrin still didn't look up, "You know that the Demi-Ring needs the support of as many Lords as it can get. Stark, Petti and Warren just wouldn't have been able to progress on their own."

Gryal had twitched at the mention of Warren.

"You shouldn't have argued. For us to win the war we need to work together. All I'm saying is that you need to hold in your anger," Mordrin broke gently.

Gryal didn't have a response to this. There was no point looking out of the window to avoid looking at Mordrin, for there was nothing to see. The Rift was not visible from up here, and it wasn't like there were any stars or planets out there. The space that this Tower inhabited was pitch black, lifeless.

Mordrin looked up for the first time, "I believe the boy will survive on his own. Destiny wouldn't change like that. You were one of the first to read the Book of Alternity; you know our path is the right one. Victory comes this way."

"I can't explain it," he made eye contact with Mordrin. "Destiny isn't the same as it was."

*

Turbulence bumped the plane in its dive to Earth, waking Philip. Rubbing clotted sleep from his eyes, he looked at the landscape below him. The majestic Jurassic plateaus soared below them in a picturesque scene of natural beauty. Rivers drew shining lines among the ocean of trees. In the distance lay the landing strip, their entrance to the Canaima National Park, the target for the lowering plane. The seatbelt sign had already lit up, so Philip's filling bladder had to wait. Though he was full to burst with drink, Philip was awfully hungry. He'd never really been one for airline food.

The clouds were left behind in the one o'clock light of the moon. The belly of the plane brushed over the tops of the trees as it swooped down onto the runway. Slowing, the aircraft turned towards the terminals. Once the plane had halted, holidaymakers stood in the aisle, lowering their baggage onto their now vacant seats. Preparing for the cold of the night, Philip pulled on his thick ski jacket. Though it would be unbelievably hot during the day, the temperature plummeted in the moon time. The mobile staircase levelled up with the aeroplane and the airlock released its hold on the passengers inside. Jostled in the tide of people eager to move on, Philip was swept into the South American air. Stumbling, he leant on his suitcase to stop himself falling over in front of all these people. Separating himself from the group, he stood with his suitcase, waiting for his parents to be pushed forth and suffer the same humiliating fate. But his parents descended the stairs with a little more elegance than him, even if they did stagger halfway down. Knowing that it would be a long time before they passed customs, the family marched briskly towards the airport.

Passports and entrance visas checked, they walked into the hall that connected the entrance, shops and terminals. Just as they were standing there rather sheepishly, wondering what to do, a message was blurted out over the tannoy.

“Bienvenidos al aeropuerto de Porlamar. Todos aquellos viajando al Tour del Salto del Ángel, encontrarán a su guía junto al autocar situado en la entrada. Allí dará una breve introducción sobre los eventos durante su estancia. Welcome to Porlamar Airport. All those travelling on the Angel Falls tour, please meet your guide by the coach outside the entrance. There he will give a brief introduction to the events of your stay.”

With their instructions, Philip, Samuel and Beth joined a party of eleven fellow tourists who were heading for the allocated destination. Outside, a Venezuelan man in his mid-sixties was

waiting for his new charges. The man had a light tan on his skin. On his head rested a thin layer of greying hair. He wore a green jacket and trousers with a strange red logo, probably something symbolic, Philip didn't know. When they had left the light of the hall for the cold night air of this foreign land the guide held his arms nearly as wide as his smile in joyous greeting.

“Bienvenidos! My name is Rodriguez DiMaggio; I will be your escort into the mysteries of Angel Falls for these next four days.” It was your nice, basic introduction. “Now, just so I'm clear, everyone here is British, am I right?”

The fourteen gathered and drowsy individuals nodded.

Rodriguez beamed, “Excellent, now I don't have to repeat everything in different languages like with my last group, ha ha ha.”

Rodriguez evidently was waiting for them to join in with his extremely bad joke, but none of them did, leaving their guide slightly crestfallen.

But his mood picked up again fairly quickly, “I say this with every group, but it is necessary. The message you have just been given said I would give you an introduction to what we will be doing, but I'm somewhat tired so I don't want to be talking for too long. The main things you have to know are that tomorrow, while you acclimatise, we will be exploring El Sapo Falls on foot, it will be the day after that we start our river journey to Angel Falls, returning on the third day to finishing off what we don't have time for on the first two. Make sure to bring waterproofs, the rapids down there can get pretty strong at times. On the last day we will fly over the Falls before departing for your individual homes, does that sound like a plan everybody?”

He swooped his arms up once more, as if cueing a great cheer, but none came. Muttering under his breath, Rodriguez opened the door to the coach and granted them entry. Unquestioningly they stomped into the coach and took their places. Rodriguez was the last to enter and stood at the front of the coach facing them, trying to keep a happy look on his face.

He leant to the driver, “Hit it, Alf.”

The surly driver, whose name badge identified him as Alfie Sawyer, put his foot down on the accelerator and they were off, the airport shooting away into the distance.

“We are now heading for the posada where we will be staying the remainder of the night. For those who don’t know, a posada is a small hotel. Once there I will give you your designated room keys and bid you good night. Breakfast will be served between half past seven and eight o’clock. It is then that I will inform you further on our trip into the waterfalls.”

He said this into a small walkie talkie that played his speech through speakers above their sleepy heads. As the coach trundled on the forest road many of their company fell into a light snooze, having not caught the blissful unconsciousness during their travels.

Several of them were grumbling blearily, having been woken from their slumber on the coach. Rodriguez steered them towards the posada in the dark with his torch. In the torchlight, Philip could see a building with brick red tiles covering a slanted roof, possibly with a helicopter on top. Cream painted archways made up the outer walls of the complex. Beyond these arches was a painted wall with one door and a lot of windows. A stone path led to the centre archway. Shadows danced across the surface of the hotel, caused by the angle of the torchlight, which gave the illusion of gloomy serpents climbing the posada normally unseen at this time of the night.

Rodriguez pulled a set of keys from the breast pocket of his jacket and unlocked the front door. The foyer was circular, with stairways scaling the milk-coloured walls. A mosaic of the Falls made up the middle of the floor. Doors led off in all directions. When everyone was inside, Rodriguez resealed the door and addressed the assembled tourists.

“Alright, when I call your name, I’d like you to step forward and take your room key. Rooms 1-9 are through the doors at the back of this room,” he gestured with his stubby fingers over their heads, “and rooms 10-15 are up the stairs,” again he pointed to give them a certain direction in which to go, “Okay, first I have Steve and Nala Daniels.”

A young couple that couldn’t have been over twenty-five trod on people’s toes trying to get to Rodriguez. He was holding a brass key with a big yellow label on the end. Printed boldly upon this label was a bulky number one. They took this and hurried over to their room, their heads together in conversation.

“Next,” Rodriguez continued, “I have a key for Mr Charles Acovone.”

“That’s ‘Professor’ Acovone.”

A man, whom time clearly hadn't treated well, swaggered forwards promptly and snatched the key to room two from Rodriguez and pushed the crowd aside to progress with his baggage.

"Um..." said Rodriguez, slightly stunned by this arrogant behaviour, "Mrs Poppy Devenish please."

And so the sorting continued, familiarizing the Quints with the people they would be staying with. This included a Scotsman with rosy cheeks either side of a walrus moustache and a Welsh woman whose name Philip couldn't repeat for the life of him, and it appeared Rodriguez couldn't either. As the Quints had booked their tickets last, they were the last on the register.

"And for the remaining family, room fourteen," Rodriguez concluded.

Samuel thanked him for the key and Rodriguez bid them goodnight. Up the rickety stairs they climbed and through the lavishly painted door they went. A long windowless corridor stretched before them. Every so often, in no regular pattern, light bulbs were fixed into the richly painted ceiling. Along the length of the corridor three doors held three rooms. On the left there was one door, and on the right there were two. Samuel inserted the key into the lock of the door on the left-hand side of the corridor. It swung open.

Inside was cream, like the rest of the building. Paintings of Auyantepui decorated the walls. There were two beds in the room, and a bathroom was in a side room. There was no TV for entertainment, but books could be found in cabinets by the bedsides. Curtains topped with bows draped around the beds. A sofa lined one wall, plump cushions sitting upon it. Philip found this highly inviting. But if he was to pay his best attention tomorrow he had to have a long, satisfactory kip. Philip didn't bother with his pyjamas; he jumped into the single bed and sank into the mattress, soft as puffy clouds, light enough to float him away. The smell of flowers filled his nose and mouth. This was a heavenly place, taking him to a world of peaceful dreams. But then he remembered that he was a boy, and refrained from noticing such details henceforth. Back in England, people would be up by now, but here it was the dead of night. And on that thought, the metaphorical switch in his head snapped into the off position.

Mordrin and Stark were left alone in the dome. The others had moved to different parts of the Demi-Ring. Left configuring the data, Mordrin only hoped that they didn't have to do this with every Bridge Satellite in the sector. It wasn't unheard of for him to undergo labour. He remembered a time when Warren had got him to make some modifications to some other, smaller machine of his. But that was that; with Warren you only had to do what he asked. But with Gryal, you never knew where it might end. It was tedious work, and they were still waiting for a reply from their 'ambassador'. Without his confirmation, this was a futile task. The satellite, nearly as big as a large human city, drifted towards the Tower in the vacuum of space, its full mission yet unknown. The pair also had to monitor the electrical currents holding the Demi-Ring and the Crucible together, for it was these that made up the satellite. For now, the readings were stable. Stark looked at the ever filling hourglass situated on a dais in the centre of the room.

"It's almost time. We'd better get moving," he reminded Mordrin.

Mordrin looked up from his work, "Of course, we'll just have to dock the satellite."

He laid his hand on a gel-like pad and the satellite locked into place with the Tower's protruding airlock. The hatch opened, and the two Immortals hastened from their places at the edge of the Demi-Ring and to the landing bay.

The roof of the Tower split apart revealing the void beyond. The side wings of the shuttle unfolded, the top and bottom ones extended. Its rear firing up, the ship took off into the eternal night. Inside the cabin sat the two Brethren Lords. The hyperdrive activated; they were off. From the front window the inky blackness looked much the same, besides from the distorting ripples that were a side effect of this mode of travel, as there was nothing in the vacuum to zoom past them. The shuttle on autopilot, Stark leant back and looked at Mordrin.

"We are doing the right thing, aren't we? I mean, Gryal doesn't exactly want the Mancynn to get hurt."

Mordrin returned the gaze, "He won't get hurt. As I told Gryal, when we activate the machine the boy will survive. It practically says so in the Book of Alternity."

"But didn't he say destiny was changing?"

Mordrin gave a short laugh, “Destiny can’t change. It’s impossible. Once we’re there you just stop worrying and help me lower the temple shields. I know it’s a bad design, but otherwise we can’t activate the machine. If we don’t act soon, we’ll lose any opportunity to destroy the archway for who knows how long.”

*

Outside the weather was cloudy but stiflingly hot to the British visitors at a temperature of 31°C. Inside it was not a lot better. Countless fans were blowing in their faces, but it was not enough to wash away the intense heat. Philip, as did many others, had his rucksack with him, filled with sun screen, binoculars, sun glasses, a camera, and a few provisional snacks. In the breakfast hall everyone had eaten their fill and were waiting for Rodriguez to speak.

“Ahem, today, we will be hiking to El Sapo Falls. It’s not far from here. As you may know, there are a number of waterfalls on this side of Auyantepui, and we will take in just a few of them on your visit. Tomorrow, yes, we will visit Angel Falls, what you all came here for, but today it will just be one of the minor falls.”

It was rather an abrupt ending in Philip’s mind. From what he’d seen of Rodriguez the previous night, he would have expected a joke of some sort; maybe Rodriguez had given up on those. But it was not the end, Rodriguez was pulling someone towards him, someone struggling so hard it was a wonder Rodriguez could keep hold of her with one hand. This newcomer made it quite clear that she didn’t want to be here.

“This little devil is my daughter, Eve.”

The girl was about thirteen years old, with silky midnight hair and dazzling mahogany eyes. Her glossy thin lips were curved into a snarl.

“She,” Rodriguez tried to continue while keeping Eve in his grasp, “will be accompanying us this week, whether she wants to or not,” this last part he directed at the poor girl directly out of the corner of his mouth.

Everyone began collecting their things and exiting through the door. In the vestibule they lingered while Rodriguez dragged his daughter unceremoniously from the dining hall.

“How long should this take, then,” Professor Acovone barked in a gruff voice, his glasses wobbling on the bridge of his bulbous nose.

“Oh...Eve stop pulling!... we’ll get there around twelve.” Rodriguez winced.

“Twelve!” Professor Acovone’s brow was reddening very dangerously.

“It changes depending on how fast the group walks, but yes, twelve is when we usually get there.”

Professor Acovone had begun to twitch now; everyone was standing well back, “You expect me, a qualified professor, to walk *that* far, with no car!”

“Yes, that is kind of the point of ‘walking’.”

The Daniels couple giggled at this, only making Professor Acovone fume further.

“Alright,” the Welsh woman said, stepping between the two men, “settle down now, both of you. We are here on vacation and I intend to relax. So can we please commence the tour, Mr DiMaggio?”

Rodriguez gave a gratified smile, “Alf is waiting outside, if you would like to go there now,” he instructed.

Philip hadn’t seen much of the driver last night, but now he could see Alf was a healthy, stout man with the potential of an athlete. But it seemed Alf had chosen driving over athletics. Alf took off his baseball cap as a sign of salutation.

“Hello, I’m Alf, and I’ll be guiding you to El Sapo,” he had a rich Australian accent which was unexpected after Rodriguez’s Spanish.

The Scotsman spoke up, “I thought Rodriguez was supposed to be our guide.”

“He is, but after getting three consecutive groups lost, it looked like I knew this particular route better.”

Rodriguez’s smile only lasted while Alf was looking at him, then it vanished like it had never been.

“If you would come to the right I’ll set us on route,” Alf said, his back already to them.

The group made some progress, Alf treading plants down with his powerful legs, the tourists following. Squashed together on the tight path, plants pressing in on both sides, Philip was forced next to the father of a family of five. He didn’t have much hair upon his round head,

and he plainly enjoyed food. That is not to say he was anywhere near obese, but you couldn't say he was slim. His thick eyebrows were like two hairy caterpillars that overhung his eyes.

"So what are you looking forward to here?" the man drew out his words, ending the sentence with a downwards inflection.

It took Philip a minute to realise the man was talking to him. He had no idea how to respond to this conversation starter.

"I don't know," it was a truthful answer.

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find everything wonderful. I should know. I've done this tour five times now. Say, did you like the look of that girl back there? She's about your age, isn't she?"

"Wait...what? Do I even know you?"

The man looked up at the sky apparently in deep thought, "Probably not. My names Aaron, Aaron Orth."

Out of nowhere Beth's arm grabbed his sleeve and pulled him away, "What have I told you about talking to strangers?"

"Trust me," Philip grumbled, "I wasn't trying to."

The next part of the morning passed well enough. They traipsed through the dense forest until they came to a river. Alf found a rock and sat down.

"We'll take a break here guys; we're getting near the Falls now."

The Daniels couple sat down almost at once by the riverside and continued their never-ending whispering. Professor Acovone was more reluctant, not wanting to get his clothes dirty. Samuel and Beth sat under the shade of a tree, leaning back on the coarse bark. Philip saw Eve sitting by herself, her eyes fixed on the running water before her. Philip walked up to her and sat down. Her posture didn't change, but her eyes flared momentarily. The light reflecting off the river masked her face in wavy patterns.

"Hi, my name's Philip," he introduced himself.

"So," she replied.

"Well, I saw you sitting alone and I thought you might want some company."

“I don’t.” This girl didn’t say much.

Clearly he wasn’t going to get anywhere, so Philip went over to his parents.

A short time later the end of their trek was in sight. Gushing water foamed at the base of a mountainous cliff. Alf picked his way across some loosely placed rocks on the river bank that the water had spewed out. The tree line had advanced, forcing them onto the edge. Carefully, they pressed on, one by one. When everyone was on the other side of the rocks they proceeded along a flat path to the Falls. Apart from the bird call, plus Professor Acovone’s ignored complaints about his leg aching and the heat, all was quiet. A pool of water was splashing about at the base of the waterfall. Around the edges the water was transparent all the way down, but towards the centre white froth obscured the bottom of the pool. A ledge of rock curved round the water.

“We’ll stop for lunch behind the waterfall,” Alf called back.

Behind the waterfall was just spectacular. Philip couldn’t put it into words. A sheet of water divided them from the outside world. A cave worn into the cliff was hidden here from all onlookers. In the walls of the cave tunnels spread out into who knew where. The light in there was tinted blue, giving the area an eerie feel of natural wonder. Stalactites and stalagmites extended from the rock face.

The adults took their rucksacks off and took out the food. Philip’s parents had packed pabellon from the dining hall. This was a traditional food of Venezuela that consisted of stewed meat, rice, black beans and banana. On a personal preference Philip left out the banana and black beans. On the whole, his meat and rice stew was very tasty and he helped himself to seconds.

Alf waited for everyone to finish eating before standing up.

“You have some time now to explore the caves around you. But don’t go off alone. Explore in at least groups of two. Come back when I blow my whistle.”

While everyone wandered off in exploration Philip spotted Eve going off by herself, scuffing her heels on the hard ground. He jogged up to her.

“I bet you know all the tunnels by now, seeing as you’re the guide’s daughter.”

She looked at him in a scrutinising manner, “Yes, and are you going to follow me around until we leave?”

“I think so,” he answered. “So you know that tunnel?”

He pointed to the one ahead of them.

“Yes.”

“And those?”

He pointed in sequence to several tunnels.

“And that one?” he said, questioningly.

He was pointing to a tunnel smaller than the ones surrounding it, next to a mossy boulder, with a glow emanating from within. Eve’s eyebrows furrowed. Her forehead creased.

“I...I don’t recognise that one,” she said gradually.

“Shall we explore then, Eve DiMaggio?” he invited.

Eve sighed, “You’re going to pester me until we do, so, whatever. And I use my mother’s surname: Wade.”

“Eve Wade, doesn’t sound very...Venezuelan.”

“She was Canadian.”

With Philip unsure how to respond to that, they stepped forth together into the unknown, becoming enveloped in the mysterious radiance.

5: The Empty Archway

The echo of the pebble's passage reverberated down the winding cavern. Because the toecaps of Philip's shoes weren't that thick, and because the stone had been very hard, Philip hobbled, having just kicked the blasted thing, following Eve through the tunnel. Eve had brought a torch with her and subsequently led their expedition into the mountain. He wasn't in the best condition now for this, what with having a stinging foot and a bag on his back so heavy that it was taking up most of his energy. Wary of the time, Philip checked his watch for the tenth time in so many minutes.

"So how long will Alf let us stray into the caves?" he questioned, starting to feel a bit anxious.

"Oh, we'll have a few hours, don't worry," she answered matter-of-factly.

On they went, deeper into the heart of Auyantepui, never knowing what lay ahead. Shining metals and gems, worn away by time and water, were visible in the cracks in the earthy walls. They glimmered in the light of phosphorescent fungi, and this light reflected off these ores, guiding them ever closer to their goal.

With the absence of adults and certain safety, and his macho act in front of Eve forgotten, Philip's childhood fear of the dark (for it was dark, even if light glittered off the walls) grew monstrously within his pounding torso, rearing its ugly head to send a new wave of terror through every fibre of his body. Eve felt none of this, her persistent strut marshalling Philip, who desperately did not want to be left in solitude, contained by these ancient walls. It was soon after this that both realised that the path was sloping upwards. Philip could smell fresh air replacing the putrid, stale air of the underground maze, but that didn't make the bag on his back any lighter. Golden light was growing brighter and brighter. Their path was so steep now that they were forced to climb the last stretch instead of walking it. Scrabbling on the loose handholds, their heads broke the surface of the peak and entered the outside world once more.

Beams of sunlight fell to the earth, so intense that without any cloud cover they could shine far into the tunnel. Shielding their eyes with the backs of their now grubby hands, Philip and Eve took in their surroundings. All around them trees had sprung from the earth, creating a dense forest up above the cloud line. The trees rose into the clear sky, making the teens feel like specks, insignificant. But dominating even the trees in the sky was one massive stone

pillar. Without the need to look at one another, they strode on, mindlessly compelled to find this feat of ancient architecture. Its origin was lost in the thicket of trees, but the duo twisted their way around the wide old trunks, untouched by man, blindly, guessing the direction of the alien structure. Philip didn't know why Eve was persevering, but he was driven on by his determination to get past this mental blockage and hallucination that was Gryal. Gryal couldn't exist, it was illogical, and he had to convince himself that this was so. There was no abnormal activity going on.

They tried to walk in a straight line, so as to be able to find the tunnel again easily and quickly if needs be. To Philip the forest was starting to look symmetrical, areas ahead of them looking just the same as those behind. Hope was draining from both of them. The pillar always seemed to be far away. But their arrogance of youth meant that they would not turn back. And then the trees began to thin. The gaps between them were widening so much that the adolescents no longer had to pick their way over tree roots; they could walk on flat ground again.

Philip and Eve burst out suddenly into a clearing. The canopy of the trees that surrounded the open space bent to create a dome, obscuring most of what lay in front of them from above, with only the central pillar rising above the leaves. There, filling the clearing, was the most mystic and primordial temple the world had never seen.

*

Stark nodded at Mordrin, who rotated the dial clockwise as far as it would go.

“The machine is in standby,” he read aloud from the screen before him.

*

Philip and Eve stood there gawping for a few more seconds. It was the shape of the temple that had them astounded, not to mention the unknown pictographs and the fact that they'd just discovered a lost temple in the middle of nowhere. It was on a raised platform that extended in regular steps till it reached its maximum width, and then mirrored itself, retracting in regular steps. At the points of maximum width and maximum height long slices of stone stuck out, pointing to exactly north, south, east and west, and upon each of these slices stood a great column, twice as tall as a house. Resting on the tops of these columns were interlaced beams, forming an octagonal ring. And in the centre of the raised platform was a stone

building. The size of your average home, it had been made in the shape of a cube. Protruding from the roof of this building was the solitary pillar they had seen reaching into the sky.

Carved into the structure were hieroglyphics and pictographs Philip had never seen before. It didn't look like any written language of any tribe discovered at any point in history. In some respects, they seemed inhuman, the work of another sentient race. Over the innumerable centuries it must have been there, vines had crept up its walls, spiralling up the pillars, and slithered across the base. Human curiosity not letting them leave, the two hauled themselves onto the raised platform. Here they could see an entrance in the cube-shaped building.

It was a sweltering day, with the sun still high in the sky, so Philip and Eve couldn't wait to get into the cool shade of the inner temple. The panels that made up the outer layer of the cube had a door-sized hole in them, presumably the entrance. No light entered the hole; it stopped on the threshold, blocked somehow by the inky blackness. Throwing caution to the wind, they entered.

Thankfully Eve still had her torch, so they were able to see the cobwebs misting over the extravagant and abstract drawings that were on every surface of the inner sanctum. By the light of her torch, Philip was able to make out alien scripture, an alphabet of jagged lines and triangles. Behind the writing, and dominating most of the four walls, were gigantic circular diagrams, divided up into squares by gridlines, with blue, red, white or black dots every so often. Many of these strange circles overlapped like Venn diagrams.

Growing from the walls, floor and ceiling were thick, root-like plants which weaved their way across their corresponding surfaces, all leading out of the entrance and into the open air. It was these, Philip presumed, that climbed the outer walls. They all seemed to be pulsating ominously, in the dark they could almost be mistaken for veins leading to a heart in the centre of the structure. He and Eve stepped over these plants and, with painstakingly slow steps, so as not to set off any traps like in the movies, they moved further from the threshold into the unknown. Their only guide, save Eve's weak torch, was a glow around the centre of the room.

Tripping once or twice over more roots, the pair came across a rock embedded in the stone floor, carved into a triangular prism. On the longer sides were holes down to what must be lower levels of the complex. Metal rods bent in a similar pattern to that of a spider's web covered the holes, preventing anyone falling into its bright depths. The glow, it so happened,

was emanating from here. Peering down through the mesh, Philip and Eve gazed into the caverns beyond, but not properly seeing anything, the light being so intense. Philip straightened up first.

“Do you think we should be heading back?” he wondered aloud.

Eve straightened at his side, “I don’t know. We shouldn’t stay too long.”

Philip opened his mouth, but the unmistakable sound of stone grinding across stone blocked their ears of any other sound. Turning to the back wall, they saw what each had visualised in their heads. The largest of the circles had retracted into the wall and rolled aside to reveal a second chamber.

“Maybe just one more section,” was Philip’s not-so-truthful solution.

Leaving the dusty, graffitied hall behind, and not looking at Philip falling face first into a knot of vines, Eve lurched at the lip of the cliff a few centimetres after the chamber’s threshold. She stumbled backwards, not wishing to plummet to her death, and collided with a spluttering Philip.

“Bit of advice,” Philip coughed, “don’t bite the roots.”

“I got that, thanks.” Still not really paying attention, Eve inched back away from the edge.

From what light the torch gave off, she observed that this pit was surrounded by eight walls, four of which (including the one she was standing in) had doors, the wall opposite her and the two on either side of the octagonal shape, like the points of a compass. While keeping a firm grip on the doorframe, she stared into the fissure. Now she looked more closely, she saw thin staircases spiralling down along the outer walls. There was a small gap to the left between her and the top of the nearest staircase.

“Come on Philip.”

Philip just continued to retch.

“Stop moaning. You said ‘just one more section’.”

Not waiting for a reply, she grabbed his arm and dragged him onto the lip.

“See the step? Good, jump on three. One, two, three!”

Philip flung himself into the air, giving himself to the breach. Eve, who had gone back to looking into the pit, was brought back to her senses by a dull ‘oomph’ to her left. Cocking her head to the side, she saw in the corner of her eye the silhouette of Philip spread-eagled on the flight of stairs. She hadn’t seen the floor of the pit, but with her torch Eve had seen numerous levels and platforms on the way down. A little more gracefully than Philip, Eve bounced onto the top step. As she landed Philip got shakily to his feet. By the time he was steady once again, Eve was tapping her foot on the stone step incessantly. He was mirroring her disapproving glare. Picking a dislodged piece of rock, he held it up in front of her face.

“Before you make me do that again, let’s just see how deep this place is.”

And so Philip let the rock fall from his grasp. There was an instant thud. Surprised, the two looked down. Carefully, Philip lowered his leg over the stair. It touched the ground easily.

“See,” Eve perked up at this point, “It wasn’t that hard.”

She skipped the final few stairs and landed nimbly on a hard floor. The moment she did so, torches in brackets were alight, illuminating the scene. It wasn’t a floor. It turned out that they were standing (or in Philip’s case, lying) on a bridge, leading to a circular platform in the centre of the room. Around the uneven walls were what looked like rows of seats, similar to what you find in a Victorian operating theatre.

Far below was the glow they’d seen from above. They weren’t thinking of the time any more. They had forgotten that they were supposed to be getting back. The lonely archway on the platform ahead was what filled their minds.

Shifting their weight slowly, the intrepid, or maybe pig-ignorant, duo crept towards the transfixing edifice. Though they did move tentatively across the bridge, it still cracked and groaned, small chunks falling away here and there. This area wasn’t structurally sound, but it was safe enough for them to get to the other side. Safe enough for them to get back, however, might be another matter entirely.

Now they were closer, Philip and Eve could see that the archway wasn’t anything special. There were pictographs around the edges, just like the ones on the outside of the temple, but apart from that, it was a regular, ancient, crumbling archway. It was probably big enough to fit a jeep through, but nothing larger. It stood upon a pedestal, raising it above the shiny platform, and there was a ramp connecting the two levels of ground.

A little distance to the side of the pedestal, a round table stood, as old as the archway, with a viscous gel layering its top. None, however, dripped over the edges.

It was now that Philip noticed the ominous silence, the silence you get when something is trying desperately not to make a sound. This place was eerie, if not downright terrifying. Once again, Eve stared down over the lip into the chasm.

“This is wrong,” Philip indicated.

Eve sighed, deciding to play along, “What is?”

“The architecture. It’s not like any known, or that I’ve seen at least. Do you know what this could be?”

Eve smiled, “Another attraction my father could use to get more money off tourists?”

Philip spoke fast, trying to keep up with the rapid cacophony of thought going on in his head, “No, well, probably, though I’d hope not. No, this could be evidence of a civilisation predating the Incas and Chancay, even maybe the Norte Chico.”

“Really.”

“I only say that because it does seem to be a derivation or branch of their constructs, what’s left of them anyway. Though its state of preservation challenges that,” Philip was lost in his own little world of ancient artefacts.

“I’m sure,” she said without any emotion.

Philip came out of his daze, “You’re not listening to me, are you?”

“You seem to be the expert.”

“You’re fat and ugly and have no friends.”

“You’re probably right. Hey, have you got a camera on you?” she called over her shoulder.

Philip tore his gaze from the archway.

“Uh, yes,” he confirmed.

He rolled his eyes and swung his bag off his shoulder, which was a great relief to his spine, and unzipped the front pocket. After a minute of rummaging, he produced a new camera. Gingerly, he handed it over to the girl.

“Put the strap around your wrist so you don’t drop it!” he warned her frantically. “It was a birthday present.”

“Whatever,” she said, exasperatedly.

Carefully, so as to not get an earache from the boy’s complaints, Eve pointed the lens into the void. The camera was good quality, she mused, the picture was very clear. Philip was done scrutinising the archway and came over to join her.

“I’ll have the camera back now, if you don’t mind.”

Patiently, she slipped the strap off her wrist and passed the item back to its owner.

“What a view,” were the words that escaped from Philip’s mouth.

Down below, somehow suspended, were massive rings, each getting larger as they lowered into the earth. It was unthinkable how any ancient civilisation could have achieved anything of this magnitude.

But now the magic of it had passed. There was nowhere left to explore, as far as they could see. This was the only other chamber. Both assumed that they should be getting back. And on their way back they passed the round table, which for a second glinted. Philip paused mid-stride. Eve continued for a few steps, not realising she was walking solo, and then stopped as well.

“Philip?” she asked, nervously.

“Don’t worry, it’s nothing,” Philip reassured her.

He leant over the table, one hand on either side, examining the puzzling gel. He could have sworn that the gel was deeper than the table. The bottom of the gel was shaped like the inside of a bowl; it looked as if it should have come out of the base of the table. But when Philip checked, it did not. He also saw that the gel was only a few millimetres thick. It must be an illusion, he rationalised. The gel only had the 3D *effect* of going deeper than it did. Multi-

coloured dots floated around in the liquid. Just to prove that it was an illusion, Philip stuck his fingers in, and his hand, and his forearm.

To Eve, it seemed that Philip was being sucked into the table! For his arm went in the top, but did not come out the bottom. From Philip's point of view, the gel was bending around his hand, so that he never truly touched it. Further and further he reached, until...*rumble*. Philip froze. And there is was again louder this time. And this time, the platform itself shook, cracks running down the edges.

The light at the base of the pit flared suddenly. Eve was no longer looking at Philip. She was watching in horror as the rings lit up as one, lightning crackling between them. All of a sudden, lightning burst forth from the archway. The pictographs began to glow, as if they were red hot.

Philip wrenched his hand from the gel, but that didn't stop the rumbling.

*

Mordrin was hunched over the panel, watching the data scrawling across the screen.

"Power to fifty percent," he read aloud.

"Uh-oh," Stark groaned, "What the hell does he think he's doing!"

Mordrin sprinted from his panel to Stark's on the far side of the room.

"This had better not be about the Mancynn," he panted.

"Um..."

"Get out of the way!" Mordrin shoved Stark out of the chair and sat down.

It only took him a few seconds to realise what was going on. He slammed his fist on the controls.

"Damn it! He was in the room when the portal overloaded!"

"Is...is that bad?" Stark ventured.

"Only if you don't want Gryal biting your head off because the Mancynn is dead."

"What can we do?"

“Nothing,” Mordrin said, blankly, defeated.

*

Suddenly, the rumbling stopped. Philip and Eve got up from their crouched positions and scampered towards each other. They met in front of the archway. Looking into it, they saw nothing. That is to say, they saw blackness, not even the opposite wall. The space within it was empty.

A block of stone fell from the ceiling between them and the pedestal. In unison they screamed and ran across the bridge away from the monolith of rock. Now more and more rocks were falling around them, many into the abyss.

Philip couldn't get them out of there via *transit*, he couldn't clear his mind, it was panicking too much. But maybe he didn't have to; they were nearly at the other side of the bridge. Just a few more metres, one more metre, he was there! Eve was a few steps behind him. A rock landed on the middle of the thin bridge, which shattered under the strain. Her cry was almost inaudible over the rock fall. Philip had lunged, and caught her hand. But this heroic manoeuvre wasn't going at all to plan. She was heavier than he was strong, and Philip found himself slipping over the edge with her. They would both perish in this unknown temple.

“I can't hold on,” he shouted to her.

“Help me!” she screamed, seemingly oblivious to what he had concluded.

“Eve! Can you hear me?!” She nodded, “Good. Do you see that foothold to your left? I need you to swing yourself to it. Hurry!”

Eve tried to swing herself to the left, but only succeeded in dropping slightly further.

“Come on Eve! I will not be responsible for your death!”

Tears were running down her cheeks now. Again she tried, she had to. Her foot connected with the rock, and fell away again.

“Come on Eve!” Philip was painfully aware of how far he was slipping, “This time! You'll do it this time!”

Philip could see her counting under her breath. And she swung, this time onto the foothold.

“Perfect! Now, there’s a handhold to your right. Can you reach it?”

Eve nodded and grabbed hold.

“Eve, listen closely. To get up, you’ll have to let go of my hand and climb up yourself. Can you do that?”

She shook her head, a whimper coming out through her tears.

“Eve,” his voice was starting to shake now, “you have to do it. I’m going to let go now. Are you ready? Okay: one, two, three!”

Quickly he pushed himself back, away from the edge and to safer ground. Sure enough, Eve’s arm appeared over the lip of the cliff. Hurriedly, Philip helped pull her completely over. She was quivering all over, and he couldn’t blame her. But there wasn’t much time.

“We have to move,” he told her, shaking her by the shoulders as he did.

Eve took a deep breath and kept herself still.

“You’re a good friend. Let’s go,” she agreed.

The main chamber above wasn’t as badly affected, but the ground was still treacherous. Here and there sections of the ground were falling away into the chaos that ensued underneath. The mysterious bolts of lightning were in here now, filling the air with an unholy crackling.

The pair could see the world outside through the door at the other end of the hall. It too was busy with lightning. Even so, it was a relief to be outside again, but they still had to keep moving. The entrance to the caves had been straight ahead from the clearing. All they had to do was reach it. It was then that the temple was enveloped by a ball of energy. Inside the sphere was a typhoon of green lightning and burnt rock. It sounded like a maelstrom, but when it died down, there was no damage to the trees, and the clearing was empty, no sign of the temple, save a small hole in the ground...and two small bodies.

*

They heard the click clack of his bones scraping past each other before he came through the airlock.

“What the hell were you doing?!”

“It’s okay sir. The shields are raised and there’s no sign that the boy got...” Mordrin stammered.

With a violent wave of Gryal’s hand, Mordrin was thrown against the wall, denting the console. There, he slumped on the floor. Gryal turned to Stark in a flurry of cloak and bone. The poor man shrank, or maybe Gryal grew, as the skeleton stood over him, conjuring up a fireball in each hand.

The fattest of the Brethren Lords tried to explain his actions with a burst of hasty, desperate words, “We only had a short window of opportunity to eliminate the archway before the gap in the inter-dimensional barrier sealed itself and the signal would be cut off. Who knows how long we would have had to wait before another gap opened...”

“Give me your Hexagon,” Gryal barked.

Stark dared a glance at the Supreme Lord, “What?”

“Give me your Hexagon!”

Stark obliged, withdrawing his personal Hexagon from his lapel.

“Now,” Gryal turned to the door, “You can start your penance by getting me to the Tower nearest the boy. His trust in us cannot be damaged.”

*

Round and round the rotor blades went as the rescue helicopters flew over the uncharted plateau. Rodriguez, who had been at the hotel all the while, had been quick to get to the helicopter as soon as Alf had radioed him. Canaima National Park’s own helicopter had also arrived in good time in response to Rodriguez’s phone call. For the past ten minutes, these two vehicles had been scouring the forest, with a few extra passengers of course.

“Where is he?! Where is he?!” Beth had been sobbing throughout the flight.

Her husband patted her on the shoulder comfortingly, “I’m sure he’s okay.”

The party had heard the explosion from the caves and had hastily met up behind the waterfall. It was then that everyone had realised that the two adolescences were gone. Groups of three

had searched the caves, with no success, and it was concluded (almost immediately by Beth herself) that they had been near the cause of the sound.

But because no one had seen the location of the disruption, it was extremely hard to locate anything in the dense growth of trees. The sun was getting low in the sky, and the pilots were getting restless. The one who had the misfortune of being Beth's pilot turned around in his seat.

"I have...had a...a...how you say...message from Rodriguez's heli-copter that there is...no sign of the boy." English wasn't his first language, and it was showing.

Beth clamped her hand to her mouth, "No!" she gasped.

"I'm...sorry," the pilot was struggling with words, hoping not to say the wrong thing.

The co-pilot put a hand to his earpiece, listening to the incoming message, "Wait," this man's English was better, "They've got something."

The two helicopters had begun to circle a clearing just visible through the trees. Lower and lower they went, until they were down to the grassy earth. Some feet away were the seemingly lifeless pair. But though the passengers could not see it from where they were, Philip's and Eve's chests were rising and falling gently. Rodriguez swung down from his copter, looking around in wonder.

"Do you realise," he laughed over the slowing rotors, "that these two are maybe the first people to walk on this ground. No science or exploration has ever set foot in this place."

"Enough of the chit-chat," called the co-pilot, "We have to get them to a hospital!"

Beth came running past them both, her tangled hair flying behind her, "Philip! Oh, Philip!"

The distressed mother fell to her knees by her unconscious son, where she shook him, rather pathetically. The co-pilot watched from over Beth's shoulder.

"Is he breathing?" he suggested, "Try the kiss of life."

"There's no need for that!" cried Philip as he sat bolt upright.

"Philip!" exclaimed Samuel.

Eve's eyes fluttered open, "What's with all the racket?" she complained groggily.

Rodriguez turned his gaze to Eve.

“Eve! You’re okay!” he said soppily.

“Yeah, now you notice,” she muttered, and then aloud she called over to him. “Dad, don’t talk to me like a child!”

Samuel joined his wife by Philip.

He whispered into her ear, “You can let go of him now.”

Her hands snapped off her son, like she was afraid that she was hurting him further. His body was covered in bruises and scratches. Samuel took her place at Philip’s side, staring at him intently.

“Now son, what happened?”

Everyone in the clearing was deadly silent. All wished to hear how the two teens had arrived at the top of the plateau.

Philip thought for a while, and then said, “I don’t know.”

It was the truth. He, nor Eve it turned out, had any idea of how they’d got there.

“Well, you must remember something,” his father encouraged.

Philip looked him in the eye, “The last thing I remember is walking into the tunnel by the boulder behind the waterfall.”

The adults looked at one another, and then to Alf, who said very quietly and tentatively, “Kid, there are no boulders behind the waterfall. The walls, floor and ceiling are as smooth as can be, worn down by the water. If there had been such a thing, I would have noticed by now on my various visits here.”

Nobody spoke for a while, everyone staring in different directions.

Finally, Rodriguez announced, “Sun’s going down pretty fast. We’d best be getting back to the posada. We can discuss this in further detail in the morning.”

In a mixed group they filed back into the helicopters. Philip navigated around his parents to Eve, who was just looking fixedly at a shroud of trees on the edge of the clearing.

“Do...do you remember anything,” Philip queried.

“Look, I told you back riverside, what makes you think I want to be friends with you?” She never took her eyes off those trees.

“We did just experience paranormal activity together.”

“It may only have been a coincidence that we appeared next to each other, nothing else. I hardly know you.”

And with that, Eve climbed aboard the other helicopter to him and was flown away. For all she knew, he could've set all of it up. She couldn't trust him. However much that boy wanted it, they would not be friends, not in the foreseeable future.

6: The Resolute Watcher

The trip back to the posada was uneventful, with no abnormal activity that they were aware of. For this Philip was happy. He'd had enough of the unexplainable for now. He'd also had enough of Eve's hostile attitude. The whole way from Auyantepui she'd sat with her back to him, staring out of the window, watching the sea of green undulate beneath the soaring helicopters.

In the distance, a blip on the ever-disappearing horizon, was the shrinking outline of the plateau. Behind the turning helicopters, as the sun shone brightly off their paintwork, the samauma trees swallowed the dark shape up with the curvature of the Earth. The helicopters began to bank right and descend, pointing towards the posada which had just come into view in the far-away clearing off the side of the road.

As the helicopters came in to land on top of the hotel, the leaves which had taken rest on the roof during the day were sent spiralling outwards, as water ripples in response to a falling stone. Juddering to a halt, the helicopters landed unsteadily on the helipad, and the passengers were let out onto the roof, most leaning on the side of the helicopters for support. Philip was helped down by his mother, dreading the awkward night of questioning and unwanted care that lay ahead of him.

*

"Are you sure you'll be okay? I can stay behind if you want?" Beth said for what he hoped was the final time.

Philip sighed, "I'm fine. How many times do I have to tell you? Go enjoy your holiday."

"You're sure?"

Suddenly, there were four raps on their room's door in quick succession. Without waiting for an answer, Rodriguez opened the door and stuck his head around.

"Mrs Quint, we are loading the coach now. If you are still coming, then...oh, I'm sorry, am I intruding?"

Beth stood up, "No, no, I was just leaving."

As she stood, she reached for her bag. Swinging it onto her back, she strolled out past Rodriguez, who watched her go. Once she had gone, he slipped into the room with Philip, taking her place in the seat by his bed.

“Are you going to be fine here?”

God, why was everyone asking him that?

“It’s just, in case you don’t know, Eve wasn’t as badly injured as you, so she still has to come on the trip, which means you won’t necessarily have anyone to talk to.”

“I know.”

“Okay, well just remember, you can talk with the staff if you get lonely. I know it’s not much, but...”

“I’m fine.”

“Okay. Well, just amuse yourself; explore. We won’t be back until late afternoon, so don’t expect us before then.”

With that, Rodriguez did the same as Philip’s mother and left the room.

Philip waited until the sound of Rodriguez’s footsteps had died down before creeping out of the room also, following Rodriguez down the corridor to the top of the foyer staircase, flinching slightly due to his injured leg. Keeping out of sight until everyone had gone out of the front doors, Philip made his way across the mosaic floor and over to the window. He watched as the tourists filed onto the coach, where Alf was at the wheel. He saw Rodriguez mouth the register, and the coach set off.

He didn’t panic. He just stared. He felt as if he should know the man, but he could not remember him. He couldn’t see the man’s face in the shadow cast by trees, but that didn’t bother Philip. The man dressed all in black just stood there on the opposite side of the road, facing his way. Philip blinked, and the figure was gone.

This didn’t seem to register as anything important in Philip’s brain. With the coach gone, he had no reason to look outside. He turned to face the empty foyer, with its milky walls and arcing staircases. Doors lined the walls. Which to choose? There was a door, partially hidden in the shadow cast by the stairways, which swung marginally from its frame. A hair of light

was stretching out from behind the door, the sounds of movement barely audible from the next room. Philip decided this was as good a place to start as any, and so made his way across the room and walked through the door.

The room on the other side of the door would have been spacious, if it hadn't been for what looked like a nest of old-fashioned devices and objects, consisting of damaged tables, various rusted bed frames and a rather antiquated gas cooker, amongst other things. In the corner of the room, perched on the edge of a blackened washing machine, was a woman. She looked around fifty, dressed in a long, flowing floral skirt and a blouse which was worn off the shoulders. She was talking animatedly to someone who was at the moment out of sight, down another corridor leading out the back of the room, in what he guessed was French. They were not caring to whisper, for they assumed there were few others in the building to hear them.

“Il le fera comme il le fait toujours et comme il l'a fait avec moi,” the woman was protesting.

“Je n'ai pas dit ça, ce que je veux dire c'est qu'il peut en sortir, et il en sortira, avant que cela aille trop loin.”

The other voice was of a man. Philip could tell nothing more than that. It was then that the woman, opening her mouth to yell once more, turned to face the room, and saw him. She faltered.

“Anne? Qu'est-ce que?” the man called.

But she was ignoring him now, focusing on Philip, her eyes wide and panic stricken.

“Depuis combien de temps êtes-vous là? Qu'avez-vous entendu? Désolé.”

Philip just stared blankly back, “Sorry, me no speak French.”

He knew this wasn't much of a cross-lingual bridge, but it was better than nothing.

“Désolé. Je ne parle pas Anglais,” she said back.

At that point, her associate came into the room, to see what had distracted her. Almost instantly, he too saw Philip.

Philip sighed, “Me no speak French.”

“It doesn’t sound like you speak good English either,” the man replied in his Spanish accent. “My name is Emilio Zacapa, and this,” he indicated the woman, “is Anne Bloodgood.”

“My name’s Philip.”

Emilio smiled, “Yes, we know who you are: the boy who was found on top of the plateau. We’ll be seeing a lot of you I think.”

“I doubt it,” Philip snorted, “I’ll be going home soon.”

The man and woman looked at each other.

“Right,” Emilio drew out.

There was an awkward silence where the three of them just stared at one another.

“You speak very good English,” Philip said, breaking the tension.

“Yes, thank you. I studied for a number of years at a British university. Picked up a lot of the language, but, as you can see by my job, I didn’t do so well in my chosen course.”

“Is that what you were arguing about before?”

Emilio looked Philip up and down, as if working out if he was someone to whom he could divulge a secret, “No, it wasn’t.”

“Il n’est pas au courant, vous ne pouvez rien lui dire,” Anne almost shrieked.

“Je dois le faire,” Emilio glared before turning to Philip, “Follow me.”

Philip wound his way through the maze of outdated appliances, slowly, so as to not agitate his leg, to where Emilio was, still standing in front of the back doorway. Then, out of nowhere, Anne sprang forth and spread her arms wide on the other side of the doorway, blocking their path.

“Penses a ton travail. Rodriguez est plus important.”

“Si je ne l’aide pas, il va finir comme vous,” he snapped back.

The pair stared into each other’s eyes again, as if daring the other to back down. Anne’s chest rose and fell, her breathing became deeper. But in the end, she backed away, allowing them past. Yet she couldn’t bring herself to look at Philip as he passed her.

The corridor, like the other rooms in the posada, was as cream as the outside walls. There were no pictures, but on the left-hand wall there were large rectangular holes which acted as windows, the late morning sun pouring through to illuminate the passage. Emilio led him on, down the length of the passage, and down another side corridor, this one not illuminated by sunlight, which branched off at the end of the first. At the end of *this* one, they came to a door. Upon the wood was a worm-eaten plaque, scratched into which was a message in Spanish, angrily written perhaps with malicious aforethought. Disregarding this, Emilio opened the door and pushed Philip into the room beyond.

It was something between a small room and a broom closet. In the centre of the room was a small, round table, and the walls were masked by thick, protruding bookcases. This only left a tiny space within which to move around the room. Emilio squeezed in behind Philip and pulled a cord by the door, turning on a flickering light on the ceiling. Philip shuffled around to the other side of the table to get out of the way of Emilio, who was already reaching for a book on one of the higher shelves.

He slid the dusty novel out from its fellows and dropped it onto the table, which was only just big enough to hold the weighty book. There was no inscription upon the faux leather cover, which had up until a few moments ago lain snugly under a carpet of dust, identical to all the other books in this cramped library. Emilio hooked his fingers under the cover of the book and forced it open with a faint cracking sound coming from the spine. Under the cover, there was not a mass of text from top to bottom of every page, but pictures, of different sizes and qualities, stuck onto each page by faded red photo corners. Many looked like clippings from newspapers, and there were a few dark photos which Philip couldn't quite make out in the poor light of the library. Turning back to the newspaper articles, he noticed the date on one of them: October 26, 1967.

“What do you know of an incident at Shag Harbour?”

“Never heard of it,” Philip dismissed, unsure whether he should laugh or not.

“I didn't think you would have.” Emilio took a deep breath, and as he spoke, he indicated to various pictures, “In 1967, Rodriguez was 21, and had recently moved to Nova Scotia, in French-speaking Canada, looking for work. He ended up owning a small building along with Kurt Wade, the brother of his wife-to-be, next to a place called Shag Harbour. It was both a Bed & Breakfast and a diving training centre. It was going well; he was earning enough to

live off, and he got into a relationship with his co-owner's sister. Then, in early October, the staff of an orphanage, which Miss Bloodgood called home, took a trip to Shag Harbour. It was sort of a week-long beach holiday, and they decided to stay in Rodriguez's B&B. On the second night, a large unknown object impacted the waters just off Shag Harbour. Everyone nearby came to look. And Anne was the only person to sneak a diving kit on and swim down to look at what it was. She must have been about ten, maybe just older, I don't really know. But she found something; it wasn't an airplane, it was something no one has heard about since. But in the following days, Rodriguez made a small fortune doing diving trips down to the wreck. He also became Anne's foster parent, saying he would love her as though she was his own daughter. But he exploited her, used her to gain even more money, for everyone would want to see the girl who found this wonder. But the Canadian government got involved, started investigating the scene, and forced Rodriguez, Eve's mother and Anne to leave Nova Scotia, and to never exploit people and her like that again. That was when he moved here, to Venezuela."

His story finished, Emilio closed the album shut and pushed it back onto the shelf from whence it came. Philip continued to look at the man.

"Why are you telling me this?"

"Because the same could happen to you," Emilio groaned, exasperated. "You have just found a place on top of Auyantepui where no one has gone before. And what's more, I hear there was some sort of opening in the ground, in which they could see something architectural. Rodriguez will take this opportunity to earn a fortune, and he will wring you dry for every Bolivar you're worth. Do you understand? You've seen the quality of Anne's living conditions; you don't want to end up like her. I'm not trying to be threatening; I'm just giving you advice. Don't get caught up in this potential enterprise!"

"But what am I supposed to do? I don't leave here until tomorrow evening. Plus he can't exactly take me away from my parents."

"Yeah, don't count on that," Emilio muttered, and then aloud, he continued, "Just stay away from him. That's the most you can do. Now, let's get you back where you're meant to be."

"Where is that exactly?" Philip asked as he and Emilio left the library.

A number of hours earlier, Emilio had led him back through the room where they'd met (where Anne was still avoiding eye contact with Philip) out into the foyer and into something like a lounge. There were high windows on two walls plus a little cafeteria off another, and in the seating area Philip had chosen to occupy, there was a semicircle of antique couches and chairs, centring around an old television set.

So Philip had had much of the day to flick through the poor quality channels, some in English, some Spanish and some French, plus some he neither recognised nor understood. Not paying much attention to these flickering images, he'd spent a lot of time thinking about what Emilio had said to him. Even if he'd been right about Rodriguez, how was he supposed to avoid the man for the whole of today and tomorrow? In the evenings (or at least there had been the previous evening), Rodriguez held a group meeting to talk about the next day's timetable. Rodriguez also walked around talking to people at dinner time. There was no escaping him without being noticeably missing. And if Emilio was right, Rodriguez would make a beeline for him, so there was no chance of being simply ignored.

Philip looked out at the late afternoon sky through the towering window. In the distance, he could just see the peak of Auyantepui over the treetops. They would be making their way back about now, rowing along the river from Angel Falls. He was sure his parents would make him look at all the 'interesting' pictures they'd taken.

His gaze drifted downwards, into the trees themselves, at the man dressed all in black. Philip blinked. The man had moved. He was closer this time, yet still under the shade of the trees. Not panicking, Philip walked around to the window on the other wall. There the man was again, in the same position, just under different trees. Still nonchalant, Philip strode over to the little cafeteria, went around the counter, and began the ascent of the stairwell at the back.

It was a gentle curve, going with the arc of the building's shape. Along the left hand wall were small, round holes which acted as windows. Philip kept looking out of them as he passed, every time seeing the mysterious figure.

At the top of the tiring staircase, the path levelled off onto a narrow corridor. Again, on the left hand side, were windows to the outside world. Again, the man was perfectly in the middle of his view, looking up at him. He was making no gestures, no signs of communication; he just kept on watching Philip, not even seeming to blink. At the end of the

corridor, the path branched off. Philip chose the one on the right, the one that led to his room. Though there were no windows down this corridor, he knew the man would remain close by.

At his door, Philip snatched the key from his pocket and rammed it into the door. For all his force, the key turned smoothly and without resistance. As the door swung back, he heard the unmistakable sound of the coach pulling in onto the driveway of the posada. He could hardly mistake it for anything else around here; there weren't that many things to make such a sound. Quickly, yet not running, Philip moved over to the window at the end of the room which looked over the entrance to the posada. There he could see the rear of the coach around the corner of the building. Yet he could also see the man, still looking directly at him.

Philip turned, taking a few steps back across the room. The man was in the doorway. He took up the whole of it, not leaving any room to slip by. Now up close, Philip could see that his black attire was not a smart suit as he had thought. Though the jacket, shirt and trousers may have once looked decent, they were torn and worn out in various places, looking shabby as well as old. Even the man looked very worse for wear, seeming to need all of his strength to keep upright in the doorway.

Again, Philip felt that he should know the man. Although he had lost the memory of their encounter at the 'Cloak and Scythe', he had that tingling thought at the back of his mind that there was something he should dislike or fear about this man that should make him want to avoid or attack him. But he didn't know what this was.

The man's eyes were bruised, as were other parts of his person that Philip could see. He continued to stand there, moistening his cracked lips with his tongue, holding on to the doorframe.

They heard the front doors to the building opening.

"Philip, we're back!" they could faintly hear Beth calling.

Philip looked in the direction from which the voice had come, which happened to be a wall. He looked back at the door. It was empty.

"Hello again," the man said from behind him.

Philip entered *transit*, reappearing at the top of the stairs to the foyer. His mother looked up at him from the group, which was trudging in through the double doors, dripping wet. Philip began to move down the stairs, and winced, his body still hurting.

“Are you okay?” Beth called, her voice suddenly higher through fear and concern.

“Completely fine,” he said back through clenched teeth. “I see the rapids were fun.”

He made his steady way down to the mosaic floor of the foyer and strode as best he could, not to his mother’s open arms, which confused her, but to Rodriguez. Ignoring Emilio’s advice, he had to talk to him.

“How many people were here today?”

“Just you and the staff, why?” Rodriguez looked down quizzically.

“How many wear black uniforms?”

Rodriguez smiled, he finally got to show off his knowledge, “No, black isn’t a major clothing colour in Venezuela. Traditionally, people wear bright colours such as...”

“Yeah, don’t care,” Philip moved purposefully to the window, leaving Rodriguez to lose his smile.

Through the foyer window he could see the coach, and he could see the man. He blinked. The man was gone.

7: A Sneak Victorious

Peaceful, blithe, relaxing: not words you could use to describe the first week of Hubert Sneak's summer holidays. He was no longer secure in his plush office with his cosy leather seats and alphabetised filing trays. His desk lamp, perfectly arranged at a fifty-six degree angle, was absent also, as was his rich mahogany desk, specially imported from Peru. And he could still hear the clickety clack of his ancient ceiling fan turning away, these noises keeping a steady beat, like a metronome, so it could almost be used as a timepiece. Hubert would often end up writing his reports in sync with the clicks of his ceiling fan; he remembered it being rather therapeutic. But his office was locked away like the rest of the school, and he didn't have the key.

The fresh air tasted peculiar, the open spaces made him feel vulnerable and exposed. Plus, to add to his sense of exposure, these new clothes were garish, baggy and loose on his person. He would much rather be wearing his tight suit and bow tie; you could never go wrong with such an outfit, yet when in public one occasionally had to accept and succumb to the social convention, no matter how ludicrous it was.

Then there was the matter of all these strange people. He didn't know them, yet some seemed perfectly happy to encroach into his personal space, and others even felt obliged to converse in salutations. He'd only gone to the market to acquire some cheap provisions away from the technologically overwhelming modern boutiques. He wished to buy their merchandise, not waste precious time talking with the proprietors. Very soon the panicking would start, beads of sweat already nestled in his palms. Promptly he picked up his purchases and turned to leave this hellish gathering spot.

“Gideon!”

“Hubert, how many times must I tell you not to call me that?” moaned Gideon Lesser.

Mr Sneak's eyes darted about the crowd, looking around at all the other horrible people in the market, “Looking for a client, are we Gideon?”

Gideon sighed, “Don't call...no actually. Strangely enough, I'm here to buy what's for sale, as are most, if not all, in the area.”

Mr Sneak tried to pull himself together, “Fair enough. Look, I'm glad I found you. There's a matter of great importance I wish to confide in you. I need your help.”

“For the last time, I can’t get all of the parents whose children ran amok two weeks ago sued for violation of rules and disturbing the peace of the school. Nor,” he said quickly, before the headmaster could get a word in, “can I get them sued for general misconduct.”

Mr Sneak chuckled maniacally to himself, “No, no, it’s not about that incident, not this time.” Gideon was grateful for most of that statement, though became a little concerned at the ‘this time’ part, “this is something much more pressing. I fear I’m in danger.”

He rubbed his hands together over and over again. His head swung from side to side apparently searching the marketplace. He began to draw shallow fast breaths into his body, rapidly being overtaken by a panic attack.

“Hubert, dear boy, I’m a solicitor, not a psychiatrist, but anyone with eyes can see that you are suffering from paranoia. What has a headmaster got to fear? The third form can’t be that bad! Whatever this grave matter is, it is simply a delusion.”

“Please, Gideon, this is desperate. I can’t talk to anybody who’s not already involved, besides you of course. And I’m taking a big risk just doing that.”

“And what exactly do you expect someone of my profession to do in this situation?” Gideon was partly amused by the scenario unfolding before him, partly worried about the mental condition of the person jabbering in front of him.

Gideon was no expert on body language, but he’d been in a courtroom with enough violent criminals to recognise the actions of a man who was close to the edge. Hubert’s eyes couldn’t focus on any one thing. He was constantly scanning those around him. Flinching and twitching when someone walked close by. Hubert gulped like a fish out of water. His arms flailed wildly about as he spun round to stare at something that caught his attention out of the corner of his eye.

In a moment of calm both Gideon and Hubert noticed that people were staring in their direction, their attention drawn by Hubert’s frenetic behaviour. Hubert dragged a crumpled handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed at his brow. There was an awkward silence.

Gideon finally broke it, “Let’s continue this conversation back at your house.”

Mr Sneak nodded shakily, breathing heavily, his body shuddering.

The front door slid back across the floor, closing silently. Gideon looked around at the assortment of antiques. He moved forwards down the hall, peeping his head through the open doors. He finally came to a room that looked as if it could be the living room.

“Is in here okay?”

Mr Sneak was a little slower, spending time double-checking all the new locks on his front door. He turned slightly at the question.

“Y...yes, that’s fine,” he stammered, still in the grip of his panic.

Suddenly the phone began to ring. Its awfully cheerful jingle bore into their heads, the vibration making the little tea table shake on its spindly legs. Neither went to pick it up, both just stared at the phone, waiting for the other to make a move. As nobody did, it went to the answering machine. Mrs Cage’s voice blurted out of the tiny speaker.

“Have you had any con...”

Mr Sneak had pulled the plug from the wall, the phone was dead. Gideon only pondered this action for a moment, and then put it down to another side effect of whatever mental illness the man was suffering from. He shook his head and led Mr Sneak into his own living room.

Though it was summer there was a fire burning in the hearth. Mr Sneak obviously didn’t get much company, or at least he wasn’t very well prepared for it. There were three chairs, technically. There was only one that you could sit on, it was the one nearest to the fire, its back turned to it. The other two were covered in piles of...something incomprehensible. It might have been reports or some other school-related thing, yet it might just as likely have been secret messages intercepted from MI5. Gideon proffered that seat to Mr Sneak. Hubert hurried over.

“No, no, that seat is for you.”

He dusted it off, not that there was any dust, and moved it under Gideon. Hubert then moved to shove the pile of whatever off one of the other seats. Gideon thought to himself that these chairs must only have a sentimental value, as he didn’t feel comfortable in his. It felt tighter than it had first appeared, like it didn’t want him sitting in it. He tried changing his position in the chair, but that didn’t work. Giving up on that, the lawyer took in a more detailed view of the room. Most of the walls were bare, save the wallpaper, which was a sludgy brown. There

weren't any windows in here; all of the light came from the fire and candle stubs placed here and there, wherever there was a flat surface that wouldn't go up in flames. There was one painting, the only thing on the walls. Difficult to interpret, it was probably some abstract art form, Gideon rationalised. Seeing there was nothing left to unravel, by sight at least, Gideon turned his attention once again to the quaking man sitting before him.

"So what is it you wish to tell me, Mr Sneak?"

Hubert wouldn't keep his eyes on one thing, and they were never on Gideon.

"For a while now," Hubert began, "I have been having this feeling, like someone is always watching me."

His eyes drifted to the crackling fire behind Gideon. Gideon turned to see what the man was looking at. He of course saw nothing.

"Is anything the matter?" he asked with a hint of concern.

"No, no. Well, of course, somebody's watching me. And before you say anything, it's not just me; the others are feeling it as well."

Gideon looked directly into Mr Sneak's eyes, and for once Hubert looked back, "What others? If you have evidence, then I may be able to help you. Why haven't you brought me to them already, brought them in on this discussion? If they're feeling the same way, affected in the same manner, then..."

Hubert leapt to his feet, "Never! They can't know. They'll find out!"

Hubert then seemed to realise what he had done, looked around for an excuse, and then sat down again, rather sheepishly.

"I have got myself in way over my head," Hubert said, quieter, "I have become involved in something I should not have. I've been so very stupid."

"So this is illegal?" queried Gideon, trying to understand the full extent of the problem, and if after all he could present a case for Mr Sneak that wasn't one of insanity. "What is it you've got yourself involved with? Is it drug related, or fraud, or..."

Hubert began to chuckle maniacally, "You wouldn't be able to comprehend any of it. Not the magnitude, not the risk, and certainly not those behind it."

Gideon leant forward in his chair, which as it turns out made it even more uncomfortable to sit in, "Try me."

Hubert's head whipped to the side, staring at the fire, his eyes bulging. After seeing something, Gideon couldn't tell what, Hubert began to make himself as small as possible, curling into a ball, which seemed impossible to Gideon, who still found his chair to be overly constricting. Gideon looked into the fire once more, and found the same result, nothing.

"What is it?"

There was a long silence, in which Hubert just rocked backwards and forwards, seemingly as often as he could. Through clenched teeth he muttered something too quiet to be comprehensible.

"What?"

"For God's sake get out," Hubert whispered.

It would have been better if he'd shouted. But his voice was calm, creepy. This was too much for the lawyer. Gideon took the invitation and rushed towards the front door. He might call 999, but what was the most that they could do? He might just drop this particular client; he had plenty of others to choose from.

Hubert couldn't take his eyes off of that seat. There wasn't a clock, but he knew it was almost time. It would come very soon. He just had to keep waiting. There was no point in trying to run. It never worked. Not for anyone. Not when you were dealing with these people. They would always find you in the end and they punished those who inconvenienced them.

In the background, the fire crackled, the firelight shining off the shadowy walls of his living room. He hadn't moved a muscle. You would have thought that by now he'd have run out of sweat, yet still his pores dripped, in his state of mortal terror.

It wasn't a sudden change. It started as part of the woodwork of the chair, an arrangement of the visible knots and lines. In the following minute or so the lines became more prominent, a clearer outline, until finally there was a blatant image of someone sitting in the seat, made up of the natural patterns in the wood. Following its transfiguration, the outline looked Hubert up and down, inspecting the timid man. Its fingers drummed on the arms of the seat. Eventually it spoke, which was in some ways a relief to Hubert. He had never been good at

handling tension or suspense. Yet the lines that were its mouth did not move. It was in fact the crackling of the gentle fire behind the chair that seemed to form the words.

“These chairs were provided for the select only. They won’t want others sitting in them.”

“Yes, I noticed that with Gideon,” Hubert managed to say.

Its voice filled the room. He should be used to it by now; it had been happening for long enough. But nobody could keep calm in the presence of this associate. Slowly, the figure rose from its chair with a symphony of cracks and creaks, the body tearing itself from the chair. Its face remained immobile and emotionless, swivelling upon its timber neck. The lifeless carvings of eyes took in his shabby abode.

“We will need to obtain you better accommodation for your efforts. You have done well over the course of your work with us,” the fire crackled in the grate.

Hubert bowed his head, “You are most kind.”

“Your approval is unnecessary and, as always, unwanted.”

“If I may be so bold,” Hubert’s voice trembled as he looked up at his superior, “the boy has his task, as you wished, so is not my part complete, can I not go back to my normal life?”

The fire flared, the sound of burning reverberated loudly, like cackling laughter.

The figure cocked its head and began to circle Hubert’s own seat, “You think that was your only duty to our cause?”

It stood behind the quivering man and ran its wooden fingers through his thinning hair.

“No, we have plenty more planned for your piteous group. But think yourself lucky. I’m not known for my benevolence. But then again, I’m not really known, am I?”

The feel of its fingers lingered on his scalp for a short time after it had disappeared, merging with the patchy wallpaper, where its pattern dispersed. It was a long time before Hubert Sneak got himself up from his chair and moved around once more. He wouldn’t contact Gideon, or anyone else for that matter. This was his other life, outside of the pristine workplace and ordered systems. This was his secret life; the private one, which no one else could share; the one that kept him within the grip of fear.

Gideon had proved that no one else could understand. Hubert may be a coward but he could not countenance putting anyone else at risk. He was alone, all alone.

The front door wouldn't move over the coming weeks. He had enough supplies to sustain him through this self-induced confinement. They may say he had done well, had won, been victorious in his mission, but it didn't feel like it. This was wrong, it all was. Real, well deserved, winning...it was different. He had the courage to lock himself up in this decaying prison, but not enough to confess his crimes to any judge and jury.

8: Sight and Fears

It had all flown by: Auyantepui; Venezuela; the Atlantic Ocean; the road home; but most of all, time. Before they knew it the Quint family were on their front door step, luggage in hand, Samuel forcing the key into the lock under the setting sun. The door swung away on its hinges and they trudged inside, one by one, slipping off their shoes as they went. Dumping the bags on the hallway floor by the foot of the stairs, they filed into the living room and fell down on the small sofas. They were tired. It had been a long trip.

It was the following week. His father was away at work, again, and his mother was downstairs watching the TV. Philip had confined himself to his room. Though he knew the material for his homework backwards and forwards, he knew that if he didn't knuckle down to it, his Egypt project would never get done. Therefore, a few hours ago, he had locked the door and directed all of his attention to the file of paper before him on the bed. Though he'd known he shouldn't, as it would only be procrastinating, he'd been rereading the work he'd done based upon his initial notes prior to the holidays before continuing the first main chapter.

A Day By The Nile: By Philip Quint

The Egyptians were an ancient people of which we know relatively little, but what we do know leaves us speculating about what we don't. They must have had a fascinating society and possibly one as complex as our own. They definitely had a system of higher and lower classes, as we do, that is plain, but into how much detail did these classes go? Were there shades of grey in their society too? That is what I aim to investigate by scouring records of findings and hieroglyphs, researching as much of ancient Egypt as is available.

In the following project I will be covering many aspects of the Egyptians: how did the lives of the slaves and the Pharaohs differ, what of their living conditions, what evidence is there to support this, and lastly I will look into evidence suggesting how their cities were laid out.

Owning another human being is now illegal in Britain. However, back in ancient Egypt you had to have slaves to show your wealth. The more slaves you had, the better. But where did the rich get their slaves? Most were born into it; others were forced into slavery after capture.

Whatever the cause, their lives were short and brutal (we can assume, there is limited evidence in this field). Their homes were little more than

At which point he'd stopped to go down to dinner, leaving his sentence hanging. Now he'd have to regain his train of thought. Ah yes, the homes, a subject he probably knew more about than most people knew about anything you'd care to suggest. Saying that, there is little to know about them.

And he was about to put pen to paper when he heard the distracting sound of crying coming from downstairs.

When he entered the living room, the first thing he saw was the TV on, a news report just muted on the screen. But even without sound, the images of a plateau in a large rainforest gave him all the information he needed. Opposite the TV on the sofa was Beth, her hand over her eyes to cover the tears.

"Look, mum, I'm fine. There's no need to cry," Philip sighed, starting the speech he'd said to her for the hundredth time.

His mother took her hand away from her eyes and gave a pathetic wave, as if to say she was fine, "I know. It's just..."

"Ever since that incident with Dad, you've been acting weirdly, constantly crying. What's up?"

This statement only made more tears well up in her eyes. Philip rolled his own.

"Don't start that again," he groaned.

Amongst the tears Beth managed a tentative smile, "It's not that," she faltered, "You'll think me a fool."

Philip sat down on the seat next to the sofa, "No I won't. After what I've been through, do you really think I'll see anything you say as foolish?"

"Alright then." Before continuing, Beth sat up straighter, gathering her thoughts, "Okay, if you really want to know."

Philip was really concentrating now.

“On the afternoon before your father took you to the restaurant after school, I had,” she stifled a nervous laugh, “I had what you could call a premonition. I saw you and your father at the restaurant, I saw you on the mountain top, and I saw you stumbling through a desert. At the time I thought I’d dropped off in front of the telly, but after the fire, I began to doubt myself. I could have stopped it, stopped you going. And what about what happened in Venezuela?”

By this point, she was once again overcome with tears, no longer saying anything discernible.

Philip took this opportunity of silence to get a word in, “Okay, it was probably a coincidence. And as for the desert, I’m not going near one any time soon. The only other place I’m going is Switzerland for my science trip. There are no deserts there.”

“But I keep feeling there must be something wrong with me.”

“I’m sure there’s nothing wrong with you,” he reassured her.

*

“What the hell is wrong with you?!”

Gryal had been preparing to speak to Philip anyway and hence wasted no time in responding to his summons, though he may have wished he had. Prior to re-entering his bedroom, Philip had taken the liberty of picking up one of his dad’s hammers from the tool box in the garage. This led to the circumstances of Gryal being smashed in the front of the skull by said hammer. A couple of his pointed teeth came out in the process, but they could be repaired. Philip continued by changing the angle of his attack to a sideways, scything motion, pounding the top few vertebrae of Gryal’s spine, which in this instance constituted the entirety of his neck. The arrangement of small bones twisted into an unnatural configuration, then with a grinding hiss slid back into place, his skull-head reverberating slightly. Looking up into the dark sockets, holding the yellow lights of eyes, Philip couldn’t tell if the figure before him was smug, amused, or just disappointed.

“You can’t kill me,” it said, exasperatedly, “I’m already dead.”

Philip raised the hammer again, “I can still try though.”

Gryal seemed unfazed, “It would still be a fruitless effort.”

Philip weighed the hammer in his hand for several moments before he quietly sat down on the edge of his bed. From this angle, Gryal seemed almost translucent, the light from the opposite window was both blocked out by him, making him a silhouette, and passing through him, as if he wasn't even there.

“What's wrong with my mother?” he demanded, not raising the hammer this time, but keeping it firmly in his grip.

“Why should I tell you?”

Philip sat up a little straighter, “Because I'm the one you want to trust you. It's as simple as that.”

The skeleton seemed to consider this for a moment, “It is possible that during my first apparition to your home a data burst that was sent to my Tower accompanied me and she was exposed to it, giving her what you mistake to be precognitive abilities.”

Philip wore a perplexed expression, “But that stuff she saw hadn't happened yet. How could it have been in a data burst before it occurred?”

“I can't help it if you have a clichéd view of time. You have to think of it outside of a linear perspective.”

He had never been good at explaining things to, in his opinion, underlings. People always mistook his tone for one of patronising bigheadedness.

“If I don't understand one more thing, you're going to get hit. Again.”

Gryal sighed. He was getting bored dealing with such a puny mind. This didn't help to control his exasperation, “That's not a very effective threat.”

“So?” Philip shrugged. “It doesn't have to be, it'll make me feel better,” he rationalised.

Not wanting to risk any beneficial ties that might remain, Gryal continued, this time with what could be interpreted as a level tone, “Different planes of space have different perspectives of time, their own rules, if you will. In the plain where I am from the laws of physics are more lenient than here.”

“You want to get hit, don’t you? I don’t know anything about ‘different planes of existence’, I don’t think anybody does! Not outside of TV shows at any rate!”

“I am not your enemy,” Gryal explained through a mouth of cracked and missing teeth. “We are meant to be on the same side. It was decided countless aeons ago.”

“Well, I’ve never been one for fortune telling. The future is shaped by people, it is not predetermined.”

“Considering what is happening to your relatives, that’s a rather ironic statement, don’t you think?”

“Fine then,” Philip finally let go of the hammer, “If you’re not my enemy, then who is? The man in black?”

“Chaos is just an inconvenience.” It was clear that he was getting tired of this pointless conversation, “The real enemy is one who you should not concern yourself with. As long as you’re a good little boy and do as you’re told, then they can do nothing to you.”

Philip tried to wrap his head around this new information, “So this man who keeps following me, Chaos, whatever you called him, he’s not the enemy, but I can’t accept his help? Why?”

“His goals are not as profitable as ours. Not for anyone.”

*

The sound of dripping water ceased to resound in the dank tunnel. There was silence. He breathed out. Of the few things he knew, he knew he couldn’t stay here, for a tunnel such as this would be driven through before long, as the sun rose in the sky. The light was beginning to show the curved walls in the darkness. It also showed him.

Noah Mason had spent the last few hours crouched between the road and the wall, his knees up to his chest, his arms folded, thinking. And he had come to the conclusion that whatever his next step may be, he would have to take even greater care than he had been doing for the past sixty odd years. They were on to him now; they knew what he’d been doing to remain undetected for so long. Such a strategy would never work again. But what to do instead? His last strategy had seemed the most likely to work above all others.

And there was the trouble of the other one. The new one. He was dangerous on his own; he didn't know how to do things, what the right path was. Then there was the matter of approaching him. No doubt he would either be guarded or be guarding himself. Personally he preferred the prospect of facing the former. With so much power at his disposal, who knew what the boy could do in self defence? It would no longer be as easy as walking over there. Another way had to be found, interception perhaps. And in that case: where and when? What were the chances of such an opportunity occurring?

It bounced. There was a new sound in the tunnel. Noah looked up to see the stone in question roll to a halt some ten yards down the road. Though it in itself was harmless, the man leapt to his feet and stared down into the ever-retreating darkness. Was it his imagination, or had something moved? Was it his imagination, or was something still moving? He began to edge backwards, into the open air. But as he moved carefully away, the thing in the shadows followed, keeping equal distance all the time...that is until it got to the light. It paused.

“Noah Mason, you are wanted by the Council not only for dereliction of duty but also for the genocide of your race,” though the voice was little more than a growl, he had learnt to notice the words hidden in the animalistic sounds.

“It wasn't genocide, it was mercy.”

It moved closer, allowing a talon to encroach into the light, “No matter the justification, the offence is still the same. You killed hundreds of..”

“Would you blame the axe man or the one who led them to the slaughter?” he interrupted, bravely taking a step towards his adversary.

“Such are the quarrels of law. But there it is. Regardless of those guilty, you are still here to face sentence.”

Noah smirked, “Are you prepared to try?”

There was another growl, but this time without words within. It lunged. He was gone.

*

Neither brought up Beth's claims over the next few days, especially not when Samuel came home. All was quiet, from a paranormal perspective. For Philip, it was once again a regular

summer holiday. It was a couple of weeks in now, and he was bored. Of course, he'd had his Egypt project to do, but as he knew so much, what was the point in doing it now?

So it was on a day like this, when he was spread-eagled on the sofa watching TV, that the inevitable came through the door. Philip hadn't forgotten about his science trip to Switzerland, what he had forgotten was the letter to be sent out in the holidays to make sure all those who'd paid for attendance did in fact do so. His mother was the first to pick up the letter, immediately noticing the school emblem in the corner. Even as she was calling his name, Philip was already on his feet, coming over to her, quickly seeing the emblem also. Snatching it from her hands, Philip returned to the living room, tearing the letter open. It wasn't long before he tossed it aside, deciding it held no information of value. The only thing that had concerned him was the sight of his headmaster's signature, and that had merely sent a shiver down his spine.

Beth came in, looking at him expectantly. He didn't respond.

"Anything important?" she asked, eventually.

Philip shrugged, "Not really. It just said the same as all the others. The trip will be on such and such, the fee in case you haven't paid it is blah blah blah, you must bring this, that and the other. Nothing new."

Beth sat down on the chair beside him. He continued to watch the TV, until she muted it, at which point he gave an annoyed yell.

"Oi, I was watching that!"

"Well now you're listening to me."

Philip heaved a sigh, "What is it? I said that letter was pointless."

Beth looked at him, unease written all across her face.

"Oh for God's sake," Philip let another moan escape his lips, "Again, there's nothing wrong with me going to Switzerland. I explained this last time."

"I know, but I worry for you."

"And I know that. But this is ridiculous."

“Is it ridiculous for a mother to care for her son?”

“No, what’s ridiculous is that you think I’m going to get lost in a desert, in fricking Switzerland, a country known for its *snow*.”

“I’m still not sure if I want you going,” Beth tried once more.

“Okay, think about it this way, because you’re obviously not going to listen to reason,” Philip said, running his fingers through his hair, “I doubt the school is going to refund my travel fee, and my bags are almost packed, so is there really much point in me backing out now?”

“I suppose not.”

“Trust me, it will be fine.”

At this point his mother’s eyes bored into his skull even harder, “But that’s what you said last time about Venezuela!”

Philip jumped to his feet, “No! I said Dad would be fine. I made no predictions about our holiday.”

“You really want to go on that trip, don’t you?” his mother finally conceded.

Philip smiled; relieved the argument was over, “What could possibly happen in Switzerland that would be so bad?”

9: Operative Of Chaos

The number of times the Council was gathering at this one Tower was growing all the time, which was unusual, for in the past they had never spent too long in one area. They'd never had to. But here they were, Gryal, Warren and Mordrin sitting around the table, Petti once again standing in the shadows. All were watching the panting Stark stepping into the room, one foot at a time, his hands using what he could reach of his thighs as support.

"I came...as fast as I could," he managed to say between wheezes. "The Bridge Satellite...you requested...is now orbiting...the Rift. But...couldn't you have...given me more notice...of this meeting?"

"No," Gryal said, emotionlessly. "But this way, these three got a laugh."

Looking perplexed, Stark took his place at the table. Losing interest in Stark, the company turned to Petti in the sidelines.

"Well, Petti, what news of Chaos?" Warren started the proceedings off.

"Nothing positive," he snarled. "He's masked his signal again. He found out how we were tracking him. Now he's even deeper in the matrix of the Alpha Realm."

Mordrin rolled his eyes, "Well that's what you get for not catching him earlier."

"I didn't see you trying," Gryal remarked.

"It was *his* job!"

"Never mind," Warren put his hands to his eyes. "Gryal, what news of the boy?"

The skeleton made an attempt at smiling, "All good. Not only had he not joined with Chaos, but within the week, his time of course, he will be in Switzerland. There he will finally understand that our cause is the right one."

"But what if Chaos was to try and make it so he didn't see our way?" By this time Stark had regained his breath.

"We'll make sure he doesn't," Warren answered. "I was planning to stand by at the airport and guard the Mancynn."

“Then it’s settled,” Gryal said, moving the conversation on. “Any word from the ambassador?”

“I got reports that his assignment is almost complete,” Mordrin replied resentfully; he’d never liked their ‘ambassador’. “By the boy’s time, it should be coming into CERN around now.”

*

The Jura Mountains are a sub-Alpine range separating the Rhine and the Rhone, beyond which lies the town of Saint-Genis-Pouilly, and then Meyrin, the home of CERN (the world’s largest particle physics laboratory). It is behind these mountains that, above the valley-side of trees, the military-grade transport aircraft was coming in to land, low enough now as to not be seen on the other side of the mountains. Just below the peak of the mountain range, the plane began to circle, as the co-pilot began to hail ground control.

Gaius Callis kept his finger on his headset and waited for confirmation that their approach had been recognised. After a minute or so, the radio crackled into life.

“Roger, Oscar-Golf-Tango-Hotel, can you confirm cargo is secure in the hold?”

“This is Oscar-Golf-Tango-Hotel, we can confirm the cargo has made it from the pick up to here intact. Do we have clearance for landing?”

“Clearance granted. Please commence your descent.”

The large aeroplane completed its turning circle and began its descent towards the cliff side, where many artificial trees were tipping over as the ground was opening up, creating a massive hole, allowing the craft to disappear under the earth.

*

The day had come where Philip had been double-checking his bags, just before his mother checked them once more. They had left home at nine o’clock to get to his school and the waiting coach in time. Then, under the grey sky which threatened to rain, Philip had bid Beth goodbye and boarded his second vehicle, after registering, of course.

Now he was at Luton airport, like all the other students from his year who had opted to go on the science trip. The luggage had been checked in and the group was filing one by one through security, alongside everyone else.

It came to Philip's turn to show his passport to the podgy man behind the glass. Philip couldn't help but observe the reddish hue of the man's skin, and the ends of masculine tattoos protruding from the neck of his shirt. As the man looked at him, returning the passport, he also saw the fiery light behind the eyes, and the pointy teeth in his mouth. Philip neither noticed nor cared.

*

Noah Mason felt he was in the clear. On the other hand, he was driving a bin lorry. His truck braked noisily and jerkily. Jumping out, Noah made his way to the wheelie bins standing on the driveways of the line of houses. The other bin man wouldn't come out to help; he couldn't in his unconscious state. Noah rolled the bins one by one to the truck, emptying their contents, until he came to one house in particular. At this one, he instead opened the bin and riffled through the rubbish. Here he found something which could be of use, at last. It appeared to be a letter, possibly knocked into the bin by accident. But what the letter said was more than he could have hoped for. He knew what to do. Looking at his watch, he saw there wasn't much time left.

*

There was a tap on his shoulder.

"Yes?" Philip sighed.

Philip had no idea who this boy was at all. He was shorter than Philip, with a long flat nose and drooping, round eyes. All in all Philip thought the kid looked like an overgrown baby, as if his head hadn't grown at the same rate as his body. His round cheeks shone and his small mouth was curved in an ignorant grin which added to the impression that the boy was one of the dimmest people Philip had ever met.

"Hi," the boy bounced on the balls of his feet, "I'm Jimmy. Jimmy Authors."

"I haven't seen you before," Philip pointed out slowly.

"Oh, I'm not in your year. My mum and teachers said they'd be happy for me to go," Jimmy continued, "Want to sit next to each other on the plane?"

Philip stared at him, disparagingly, "Are you sure it wasn't 'they'd be happier if you went away?'" he said trying not to sound overly malicious.

Their gate was at that moment called. Dr Radcliffe, his science teacher, led the group in the right direction, before he could answer 'Jimmy', the other teachers trailing behind at the back. Down the corridor they went, down the stairs, and on to the tarmac. The shuttle bus was slow and bumpy, as expected. It was an average airport scenario.

The shuttle bus stopped, the driver opened the doors, mopping his crimson brow as he did so. The inside of the bus was muggy from the heat of their bodies. Philip had to push his way out through the door closest to the driver. This is why he noticed the driver's overly large hands and arms, which stretched the uniform the staff were made to wear.

The plane was not too far from the shuttle, meaning the walk through the rain wasn't very long. Not that the rain bothered Philip, he could remain dry if he wanted. Everyone else wanted to get out of the weather though, so the already slippery path was made worse by the shoving students. Luckily, no one fell over. Also, he'd lost Jimmy, which was a big bonus in his opinion. Jimmy was one of those people who you knew to avoid as soon as you became acquainted with them. At the stairway into the plane, the bundle of students was forced to disperse so they could actually move any further. At the base of the stairs was a man dressed in black. Not the black of the staff uniform, just black. As Philip passed, the man brushed his shoulder.

What happened next was over so fast, Philip almost missed it. The man raised his hand slightly. There was a flash of lightning in the rain. Everyone was falling to the ground, unconscious. Philip stared at the man, who looked back, meeting his gaze.

Before Philip could ask, the man answered, "You were keeping yourself dry, the shock wouldn't jump to you."

Philip glanced at his school party.

"They're not dead," the American said. "The shock wasn't strong enough for that."

"What do you want? Who are you?"

The man groaned, "For god's sake, I don't have time for this. They're watching us. Don't go on the trip just yet."

Philip made a similar noise, not this again, "Why not this time?"

Running out of patience fast, the man's eyes were constantly on the move, watching for any sign of them, "You can't be on their side. To do so would be disastrous for everyone and everything."

Philip stepped down onto the tarmac, "But why? I don't understand what they want."

"They want you to do their bidding and fulfil your duty as a Mancynn."

"A what?" Philip stared, blankly.

"Never mind that now. They've been affecting your memories, so that you don't remember anything that could turn you against them."

"I think I would have noticed if my memory had been tampered with," Philip snorted.

"How did we meet? Tell me, how did we meet?"

"We met just now," Philip was more confused than worried about the events unfolding around him.

The man put his hand to his head, "No, that's wrong. When did we first meet?"

"Just now," he repeated.

Suddenly, out of nowhere, the man grasped Philip's head in his hands, "NO! My name is Noah Mason and when we met you tried to push me off the roof of a certain cathedral!"

Images were passing over Philip's eyes, things he didn't remember, but thought he should: massive stone walls covered in strange circular patterns; Gryal advancing on him in a pharmacist's; a restaurant exploding; a man dressed in black tumbling over the barrier at the top of St. Paul's.

He was unconscious.

"Damn it!" Noah cursed, catching Philip as he fell to the ground.

Philip's head lolled back as Noah cradled him in his arms. He raised his hand to Philip's forehead once more, and a small spark flickered between his fingers. Philip's eyes shot open, alert and bulging, he took in a deep breath, filling his lungs to maximum capacity. He jerked awkwardly to look at Noah's face.

“Listen to me,” Noah said as quickly, yet clearly, as possible, “They are trying to reset you, make you forget again. You have to hold on. Remember everything, if you want to be free of them.”

There was a pained expression growing on Philip’s dampening face. His eyes were closing again. Noah sent a shock through him, trying to keep him awake.

There was the sound of footsteps not that far behind them, a splashing in the puddles. Noah turned slowly, protecting Philip with the bulk of his body. There was the shuttle bus’ driver, as red as ever, the only other person not to have been knocked out. That is, if he was a person. For the form of the driver was beginning to change, morphing into something bigger, more muscular.

“I see Gryal couldn’t be trusted with this job. Surprise surprise,” Noah called through the torrent of rain.

“And you, Chaos, are as devious as ever,” Warren called back, getting ever closer.

With one hand still on Philip, keeping him from the brink of sleep, Noah stretched his other arm around to point at the approaching Lord. A bolt of lightning, just like the first he’d shot a minute ago, flew from his fingers, most hitting Warren square in the chest. This did little other than to make Warren stop momentarily. Noah kept glancing back at Philip, making sure he was okay. It looked to him as if the boy was indeed regaining consciousness, and keeping his memory this time. Frantic, Noah let off three more lightning bolts in quick succession. Unfortunately, something seemed to be preventing him from doing any real damage.

“Philip, do you hear me?”

Philip made an indeterminate noise.

“Do you remember them exploiting you?”

Again, Philip groaned, looking around Noah to see Warren almost upon them.

“Will you join me in fighting them, Philip?” This was the most earnest question yet.

“Yes.”

Overjoyed, Noah turned to face Warren. He sent off one bolt, as massive as he could manage, and was surprised to see a second weaker bolt joining it. Philip was sitting up, his arm

outstretched, using what little energy he had to mirror what the man was doing, what he had never done before, what seemed to come naturally to him. The double force blew Warren over. The Lord knew Philip was lost to them, and made a hasty retreat. His Hexagon had run out of power, anyway.

Noah looked down at Philip. His job was done. Philip was free. The agreement had been made.

The pair looked around at Philip's unconscious party.

"Hasn't the airport noticed they're asleep?" Philip asked, worried.

"Not yet," Noah said, standing up. "To interact with us Warren would have had to use a Hexagon. No time will have passed for anyone else."

"All the terminology you lot use," Philip sighed, also standing. "Am I going to have to carry around a dictionary?"

"Very funny," Noah wasn't looking at Philip, but smartening up his dark clothes.

All around, the teachers and students were getting to their feet, some slipping back over in the rain. Noah stepped forwards to help Dr Radcliffe stand up. Dr Radcliffe looked Noah in the face, confused.

"Who the devil are you?"

Noah put his hand to Radcliffe's head, "Dr Radcliffe, do you not remember me? I'm your new assistant, Mr Mason. I'm starting at the school in the autumn, but you said I could come along and help on this trip."

"Very well," Dr Radcliffe nodded, if somewhat uncertainly. "What happened?"

"It appears everyone slipped over in the rain, sir."

Satisfied with this, Dr Radcliffe ushered the party to continue into the plane, despite the majority being unsure as to what had just happened.

On the plane, Philip once again managed to avoid the boy Jimmy. The last of the passengers had sat down in their seats, and the pre-flight safety briefing was underway. Suddenly, the stewardess' message was cut short by an unexpected knocking at the door. A steward opened

the door cautiously to find the portable stairway back by the side of the plane, and an official-looking man standing just over the threshold. He was tall, and wearing a sharp suit, a glistening tie and an equally shiny badge. His hat was tucked under his arm. As he entered, the cabin crew stepped back. The man's thin lips drew back, revealing stained teeth.

"Follow me," Noah whispered in Philip's ear.

"Why?" he hissed back.

"Don't ask, just do."

While the man was distracted by the pilot, who had come through into the cabin to see what was going on, Noah and Philip slowly got up and began making their way towards the back of the plane.

"Who is he?" Philip refused to stop asking questions.

"I think he's one of them, Mordrin perhaps."

"How many of them are there?"

"Five," Noah hissed. "Now keep your head down."

Once at the rear of the plane, the only place to go was the restroom. Squeezing in, Noah shut the door. Philip reached to lock the door, but Noah stopped him.

"Don't. They can't know we're in here."

"Why don't we just teleport away, or even teleport to Switzerland?" Philip whispered.

"Entering *transit* leaves a residual energy signature which they can follow. That's how they've managed to follow me all these years."

"How long have they been following you?" Philip wondered aloud.

Noah breathed out, heavily, "You lose count after a while. I think it's around sixty years now."

"Sixty years!" Philip almost exclaimed, before lowering his voice again. "But you look no older than twenty-five, thirty at most."

"It's complicated. Now shush."

Outside, in the cabin, the official-looking man, Mr Lucas Asher, was making his way down the plane, closely followed by one of the stewards.

“This is simply a routine check,” the man was saying to the steward. “It was seen from the airport that the whole of the party travelling on this flight collapsed for a second on the way here. I’m just making sure everyone is okay.”

The steward was nodding blindly, not looking directly at anyone around him, agreeing with anything his superior said. It was more than his job’s worth to argue.

As he passed, Mr Asher was asking random passengers how they were and other general questions to which he didn’t care for the answer...until he came to the pair of empty seats, the seats which belonged to Noah and Philip.

“I thought your captain said this flight was fully booked. Are these seats not taken?”

“Um...it...it would appear not,” the steward stuttered, wishing it could be someone else standing in his shoes.

“Hmm...” Mr Asher didn’t look impressed.

After that, the pair moved faster, asking fewer and fewer people how they were, Mr Asher apparently eager to reach the end of the plane. Scanning the faces of everyone before him, Mr Asher wasn’t finding what he was looking for.

They were out of seats. All the passengers had been checked, so the steward thought. Which is why he was confused as to why Mr Asher would want to check the restroom.

Noah had heard Mr Asher first, and warned Philip accordingly. The moment they’d heard the man at the door, the pair *phased*, so when Mr Asher opened the door, all he saw was your standard cramped restroom. His nostrils flared, his eyes took in every detail of the room, he gritted his teeth.

The steward never understood why his boss had slammed the door of the restroom and almost stormed out of the plane, though keeping enough self control as to exit with manners, confirming everything was in order and bidding the crew farewell. Neither did he ever again see his boss with such horrible teeth or skin.

In the restroom, Noah and Philip came back into *phase*.

“And why didn’t he sense that, if he would have sensed us entering *transit*?”

“Going out of *phase* emits less of an energy signature than entering *transit*. In this state, he couldn’t exactly use all the powers available to him.” All the while Noah was saying this, he was pushing Philip back to their seats, before the eyes of the confused cabin crew.

The stewardess smiled at them, almost as if to ask ‘Is everything okay?’, before finishing the safety briefing. The plane rolled along the runway, accelerated, and took off to the south.

10: Underground

“The amount of energy you wasted in that damn airport is unbelievable,” Gryal managed to restrain the yells trying to burst forth.

“In all fairness,” Mordrin said, his head bowed, “I do not think the energy was wasted.”

“Really,” Gryal hissed, claspings Mordrin’s chin in his hand and wrenching his head up, “because the way I heard it the Mancynn is now in league with Chaos and neither of you could find him again.”

Warren took his turn at standing up to Gryal, “All of our Hexagons have limited life in them. The workers simply do not have the skill of the Entities when it comes to engineering. And their work was never energy efficient. You experienced that when you masqueraded as that damned pharmacist.”

“YET YOU HAD TIME TO LOSE!” Gryal cried, letting some of his unrelenting anger loose.

While the rage subsided, Mordrin tried again. “At least he’s still going there...as far as we know.”

“Did you actually see him on the plane?” Warren murmured in his ear.

“Well, no. But they didn’t enter *transit*, so we can only assume...”

*

The layer of clouds far behind, the short flight of just under two hours was nearly over. There had been little chance for Noah and Philip to talk further on the plane, there were too many people who could listen in on their conversation, so they’d decided to continue talking at the hotel.

The plane bumped on contact with the runway, before levelling out on all three sets of wheels, slowing to trundle over to the terminal. There was the usual wait on the tarmac before they could disembark with the other travellers and go through to passport control. Once through, the students and teachers all had to wait for everyone to find their luggage on the conveyor belt, and then they were done. No time was spared looking in the shops. The group proceeded (well, the teachers proceeded, the students were forced to follow) out of the main double doors and to a courtesy bus waiting a short distance from the entrance.

They all squeezed on until every available seat was taken, which meant their luggage was crammed onto their laps. The vehicle set off, making the quick journey to the NH Geneva Airport hotel.

After navigating their way to the reception area, Dr Radcliffe had a brief talk with the receptionist, showed her their many passports, and handed out the door keys to students.

Prior to the trip, the students going had been split into groups of three or four. Philip didn't know anyone else on the trip, and hence was billeted with strangers whom he thought he would not get on particularly well with.

Someone from his group, a tall boy with spiky blond hair, stepped forward to take their key from the science teacher. When every group had a door key, Dr Radcliffe spoke up once more over the growing noise of the pupils before him.

“Okay, everyone, you've got about forty-five minutes before we want you in the lounge just down the corridor,” he pointed somewhere to their right, trying to boom his words for all to hear. “Until then, go and find your rooms, there, up the stairway and straight ahead, unpack your bags and get settled in.”

Some ran off immediately, not necessarily in the right direction, others stood hesitantly, not certain where to go, while groups like Philip's moved towards the staircase, not hurrying, just making their way to their rooms.

Their room at the hotel looked comfortable enough, with its dark wood floor and snug-looking beds. The blond boy went straight to the TV on the desk by the opposite wall, turned it on, and a few seconds later threw the remote aside, obviously deciding there was nothing good on. Philip quickly took the bed by the door, which no one seemed interested in anyway, unpacked his suitcase as fast as he could, while at the same time keeping order amongst his possessions, and left the room again, going in search of Noah.

It was between five and ten minutes before he bumped into anyone. And this person was neither Noah nor someone he'd thought he'd meet on this trip.

“Well, hello,” were the words Cary Cole chose to greet him with.

“I didn't see you as the science type,” Philip remarked, keeping out of arm's reach of her, remembering their last encounter.

Cary shrugged, "You obviously misjudged me."

Philip just glared at her, "This doesn't have anything to do with me helping you with that project, does it? Because that is a lame, and quite frankly expensive, excuse for coming out to Switzerland."

Cary imitated shock, "Of course not," then, quieter, "There's more things than just that damn project. And all the smart people are here, so *you* don't have to..."

"Pathetic. You must be..." Philip began, before he was interrupted by Noah coming up behind him.

"Ah, Philip, I...oh, I see you're busy."

Philip turned to Noah, "No, no. Cary and I were just finishing."

Looking both confused and frustrated, Cary watched the pair walking away down the corridor.

"I assumed you'd want to take this opportunity to talk more on...well anything and everything I guess," Noah continued as they walked.

"That's what I was doing when I bumped into her."

"Who is she anyway?"

"Just a girl who can't be bothered to do her own work and relies on others to make her succeed."

Noah smiled, "Sounds like a keeper, in my opinion."

"Ha ha," Philip said, sarcastically.

At the corner of the corridor they reached a door with a brass number bolted on at eye level.

As Noah reached to open the door Philip asked, "Aren't there other teachers sharing that room? How do you know they won't be in there now?"

"This is one of the single rooms. It's all mine."

The door swung open to reveal a room not unlike Philip's, except there was only one bed, and it also appeared to be slightly bigger. Noah went straight in, and opened the room's mini

bar, taking out a beer. Philip stepped in, and moved over to the bed. Noah turned to face him, beer can open in his hand.

“So what do you want to know?”

There were thousands of questions bursting in Philip’s head, but the one that came out of his mouth was, “At the airport, you called me a...”

“Mancynn? Yes, that’s what you are.”

This wasn’t the answer he was hoping for, “And that is?”

Noah pulled a chair out from under the desk and sat down, “On the whole, you are human.”

“That much I know, yes.”

“Are you going to let me finish?” Philip nodded, “However, there is part of you which gives you your abnormal abilities. Your ability to enter *transit*, to *phase*, to fly...”

“I can fly?!” Philip exclaimed.

“Calm down, it’s more like long-distance jumping; your molecules shift around different parts of your body, so you can increase the muscle mass in your legs, allowing you to jump further, then you shift the mass forwards to add extra momentum. You’re not a superhero. Physics wouldn’t allow it to be that simple. Anyway, you can only do these things because early on in your life the Brethren Lords altered your DNA by merging what scientists now call dark matter into it. With this extra-terrestrial substance coursing through our very cores, we can manipulate reality around us...to an extent.”

For the second time in so many minutes Philip found himself staring blankly at the person before him, “And this is what makes me a...Mancynn?”

“Exactly,” Noah nodded.

Philip leant back on his hands on the bed, thinking about what to ask next. And after some consideration, he said, “If we have all these abilities which make us so powerful, have the Brethren Lords made more of us? They could have an army.”

“They did,” Noah took a swig of his beer before continuing. “Many thousands of years ago, by our perspective of time, of course, there were other Brethren Lords alongside Grial,

Warren, Stark and Petti, two more in fact. Mordrin wasn't there at that point. But the one you need to know about was called Khaonat. And during his time in power, they were raising an army of Mancynns on Earth. But Khaonat became power crazy, so they say, and tried to use them to conquer the planet. He was stopped by the Entities, but by that time the Mancynns had gone to war with each other, fighting over dominance and territory. They were wiped out by the Brethren Lords, who realised that even if they had two Mancynns, they would never settle for sharing the Earth. We're here to rule, you see, to oppress the masses and to carry out the Lords' orders and agenda. One thing that did come out of that event was that the Germanics took the word Mancynn to mean human, though they didn't remember where they got it from."

"If you have these powers," Philip said, slowly, "why didn't you try and overthrow them...or try to take over the world yourself?"

Noah grinned, "I've seen enough of conflict to not create more. And they may have made us strong, but they're still stronger. Gryal may be old, but never for one minute assume he's stupid."

Philip's head reeled with the information he'd just been told, and from the whirlwind of thought came upon a new question, something he'd said didn't make sense. "You said they would only make one Mancynn. But there are two of us now."

"Yes. And there were more not too long ago, but..." Noah's eyes darkened, "um...they were stopped. And after that point I was against them, the Lords that is. So they did have reason to make you, they couldn't use me anymore."

Noah fell silent after that, and Philip felt he should stop asking questions, even if he wanted to ask more, to answer the mysteries of his life that had been hidden from him.

"It's time to go down to the lounge," Philip started, a high-pitched alarm going off on his watch. "We don't have to go if there's more you could tell me," he pointed out, hopefully.

"No, we'd better go. It wouldn't be good for your new assistant science teacher to be late for his boss' meeting," Noah breathed, "I'll tell you more later."

They were not the last to sit down in the plush seats, but nor were they the first. A number of pupils, as well as all the teachers, had already chosen the best seats. Noah went over to sit by his 'colleagues', some of whom still looked at him strangely, despite Dr Radcliffe insisting that he was the new assistant. Philip took his place at the side of the group of students, away from most of the pupils, especially Cary and that boy Jimmy.

They had to wait a few more minutes for the last few boys and girls to run down the stairs and into the lounge. Once all were sitting, or standing, Dr Radcliffe addressed the group.

“Okay, quieten down. As I’m sure, you’re all eager to get to the Large Hadron Collider, that’s the whole point of this trip, is it not, and so tomorrow we’ll be setting off for CERN at 9:30. Teachers will be going around and waking you all up at 7:30. Breakfast will be between 8:00 and 8:30.” He paused for breath. “As I said, at 9:30 we will be getting on another minibus and making a five minute journey to CERN, where we will be given a guided tour around the facility until 12:00, when we will return here for lunch, and then we will split you up into groups and take you around Meyrin. Now you understand what we’re doing, go and enjoy what the hotel has to offer.”

He sat down, and students began to leave.

Suddenly, Professor Oswalt jumped to his feet, yelling to the students, “And stay within eyeshot of a teacher at all times.”

But maybe he was too late to tell *every* student.

Philip didn’t know what to do with himself. He couldn’t go back to talking to Noah, not just yet, he felt he’d touched a nerve with him, and there was no chance of him getting along with Cary and/or Jimmy, nor anyone else. So he just wandered, going from room to room, seeing what there was. For a hotel that cost more than a hundred and sixty francs a night, there had to be something.

*

Dr Vincent Gauthier was the General Director of the Large Hadron Collider. It was he who pulled the strings here at CERN. Unfortunately, this meant that any deadlines not met were under his jurisdiction, and he was the one to be punished. They thought he should discipline the workers more. But then again, he was in charge of the world’s largest particle accelerator,

and with that came certain...privileges. Still, he wasn't here for those (though he sometimes wished he was), he was here to see the job through, however it fitted into his Masters' plans.

He looked at his clock, and saw it was half past four, time for the routine inspection. Gauthier moved to the door of his spacious yet cluttered office and reached for the handle. But just as he was about to turn it, someone knocked three times in quick succession on the other side. He bowed his head and shut his eyes, waiting a few seconds. Then he stepped back and opened the door. The man on the other side was just about to knock again, and so he stood, almost comically, with his hand raised in a fist just before where the door had been. In a flash, realising what he was doing, he pulled his hand down to his side. Gauthier felt like putting his own hand to his head, exasperated. He didn't know who the man was, nor did he feel he needed to. He was just another drone in his artillery.

"Sir," the man said, crisply.

"You do realise anything you have to say to me could be covered during the inspection."

"Yes sir," the man's speech was slowing, becoming more hesitant, "but you did say to report any further updates on the...the inconvenience. We, I mean I, thought it best if you were informed now, rather than later."

Gauthier looked at the man, thinking over what he could do, "I cannot avoid my duties, I must oversee the Collider. If you must talk, then do so while we walk."

Pushing the man aside, Gauthier strode into the plain grey corridor, which curved away on either side of him, hissing red pipes running along the walls. He headed left, with a wide gait, the other man trotting quickly behind to keep up.

"Well, sir," the man continued, "there have been more reported sightings of the..."

"I don't care for sightings, what is there of note?"

"Well, sir," this time the man paused before going on, "it is not as positive as you may have hoped."

"You haven't caught it," Gauthier stated, rather than directly confirming what he suspected to be true; he knew where this was going.

“On the plus side, my men can confirm it is about the size of an adolescent, with wild dark fur...”

“And what good does this do us?”

“Well, sir, we can now identify it on camera.”

Gauthier stopped in his tracks. “I would have thought the men would have been able to identify such a creature from CCTV footage with the information I’d given them already.”

“Well, sir, you must understand, with all the things you bring into the facility, they can never be sure exactly which thing they are looking for.”

“They are to look for the thing that moves as if it is a hunting creature, the only thing that is out of place that is also alive.”

With that, the General Director began once again to walk with great strides, the other man quick to follow.

“And anyway,” Gauthier added as an afterthought, “it is not too much of a threat. It could be left alone.”

“But sir,” the man annoyingly reminded him, confused, “it has already taken down two guards and is loose in the facility...”

“...And has not yet shown any other signs of aggression. If it cannot be found, then let it be. Our job here should not be forgotten, not for any distraction.”

The pair had reached a large set of double doors in the inner wall of the corridor’s curve. So far, this had been the only door to interest Gauthier. For one inspecting an entire facility under his command, it was odd that he should walk past the offices of the average worker that actually required examination. Gauthier slipped a card from his pocket and swiped it through a control pad by the doorframe. A little light went green, and a panel opened up next to him. Gauthier punched in his eleven digit code into a number pad and put his eye to the retina scanner. One could never be too careful.

“This is far too important,” he stepped back from the scanner, waiting for the doors to open.

“And now we can progress to the next stage.”

There had been enough in the hotel to distract Philip over the past twenty or so hours. Either way, it couldn't possibly compare to the day ahead of him. He was eagerly awaiting the call to gather in the foyer. Surely it would come any minute now.

Noah wandered in, presumably for the same reason. He nodded in Philip's direction, and peered into the neighbouring room, where the other members of staff were convening. Philip couldn't hear what they were saying, but a moment later they were all coming out into the foyer, one teacher going into the lounge and calling the students over. This was what he'd been waiting for. He didn't even properly hear what Dr Radcliffe said to them all before leading them out to the awaiting bus.

The journey flew by, yet it couldn't have been longer for Philip. As a boy who had a passion for physics as well as ancient history, this was almost a dream come true. For many years he'd wanted to go to CERN and the Large Hadron Collider.

So his heart leapt when the spherical building emerged from over the treeline on the right-hand side of the bus. As they got closer and closer, his excitement grew and grew. And when they drove past the CERN building he saw in detail the metal slats which comprised the outer layer, and the main structure behind it. The bus continued a little further on to reach a right-hand turning. They moved up a slight incline, passing rectangular white buildings and turning right once more into a large car park off the north-west side of CERN.

Out they climbed, some hurrying like Philip, others taking their time. But before they could enter the building, Dr Radcliffe took one final register, making doubly sure everyone was here. Satisfied, the teachers called for them to split into their six predetermined groups. As Philip hadn't really been listening, he just went over to Noah, only frowning when he saw Cary and Jimmy were there as well. What were the chances?

The double doors opened, and they all pushed their way in. As he had in the hotel, Dr Radcliffe went over to the reception desk. The receptionist smiled and nodded, and three smartly dressed men sauntered over, the one in front also smiling. His white teeth were as shiny as his black hair. Another thing that was shiny about his person was the ID tag, showing the name 'Dobrowski'.

"Hello," he said it as though he was reciting a speech, which he probably was, "I am Mr Dobrowski, and I will be showing you around some of the facilities here at CERN today. Those of you not with me will be shown around by these good men here..."

The two men behind him bowed their heads in greeting.

“...who I assure you are splendid tour guides, just as good as myself,” he afforded himself a chuckle. He clapped his hands together, “So then, shall we begin?”

The teachers split the groups two per guide. As it turned out Philip and Noah’s group was assigned Mr Dobrowski. The other two men were leading their groups off to the sides, while their guide led them to a large elevator just behind the reception desk.

Down they went, down to the Collider a hundred metres beneath the surface, the lift rattling as it moved. Over the noise, Dobrowski began his long speech about the Collider.

“Right now we are near ATLAS, one of the two purpose-built detectors of the Large Hadron Collider. It is used to detect a number of phenomena in physics. Around three thousand physicists from thirty-eight different countries have worked on this project, and the detector was completed in September of 2008.”

At this point, the elevator shuddered to a halt, and the doors slid apart. The group stepped out into the grey corridor, spreading out to allow everyone some space. The corridor had a gentle curve; the Collider was so large that it was hard to tell it was arcing at all. But as soon as the lift had emptied, they were off again, straight to their next location, no time to look around.

Along the corridor was the occasional door, each with a clouded window and a small name plate. They were even surprisingly greeted by a scientist cycling by on a flash yellow bike.

Suddenly, to their left, the wall disappeared and before them lay the detector, reaching up to the high ceiling, an enormous disk of red, silver and blue.

Mr Dobrowski was obviously going off on his practiced speech once again, but uncharacteristically, Philip wasn’t listening to the physics. For as soon as he’d approached the detector, with the group spreading out on the balcony looking out onto the machine, a tingling feeling had spread throughout his body, starting at the tips of his toes, rapidly swimming up his legs to his torso, finally falling down his arms and filling his skull, making him feel lightheaded. Glancing over at Noah, he guessed he was feeling the same way.

“Now one of the instruments which detects the energy signatures of the particle collisions...”

“Excuse me, Mr Dobrowski, I...” Noah piped up.

“Please call me Johnathan,” he interrupted the interruption.

“Okay, Johnathan, is there anything here which could produce harmful radiation?”

Mr Dobrowski looked at him strangely, “I am sorry, I didn’t catch your question.”

“Could it make energy that hurts people?” Noah reiterated.

Mr Dobrowski smiled, “No, no. ATLAS is perfectly safe. The entire place has been safe since that hydrogen leak a few years ago.”

“What about through there?” Noah said, pointing to a door off the side of the detector.

Mr Dobrowski paused for a second, “No, no. Not there either. Of course I can’t tell you what’s behind there, I am only allowed to show the areas which are not classified.”

With that, he led the group on to the next area of the Collider, having seemingly forgotten the speech he’d started. But Noah and Philip held back, waiting until everybody had passed. Once the party was out of sight, the pair moved towards the door. As they’d expected, it was locked...not that that was going to be a problem. The Mancynns *phased*, walking through the wall.

On the other side was another, smaller corridor. But here, unlike the main parts of the facility, there were hissing red pipes bolted to the walls on both sides. They trod carefully, taking it one step at a time.

“What do you think they’re doing here?” Philip wondered aloud.

“Who knows?” Noah murmured, “But if Gryal is in control here, then it can’t be anything good.”

After a short distance, they came to a staircase, spiralling deeper into the Earth. Down they climbed, holding on to the cold metal railings.

They saw it almost immediately. The staircase levelled out onto an open area, no, a cavern, which seemed to spread out all under the Large Hadron Collider. Piping and cables hung down from the ceiling, trailing across the floor, spanning the gap to a massive construction. In the middle was what seemed to be one giant electric-blue dome, attached to the roof of the cavern, pulsating slightly. Coming down from the dome was an equally large column of the same intense blue, with murky green wisps of something coiling within. The base of this

column met the chalk-white net to which the pipes were attached. Sparks flew across its surface, men in uniform were working at panels every few hundred metres, and at the cavern floor an enormous crate was being moved into the centre, dragged by numerous vehicles.

Philip and Noah moved around the walkway to get a better view, stepping over the red pipes. From out of his pocket, Noah drew a beige stone, about the size of his palm, covered in red rings. Philip watched intently as he held it out before him, squeezing the sides as he did. Abruptly a bubble of red light expanded from the heart of the stone, continuing out through the walls and around the entire cavern. Philip looked hastily into the cavern, and was relieved to see no one seemed to have noticed.

The red light came back just as rapidly, but instead of disappearing into the stone, formed a complex image, a 3D map.

Before Philip could ask, Noah replied, "I'll talk more about it later. But this is an accurate representation of the whole facility around us."

He put his fingers to it and enlarged the image, as one does on a touchscreen phone.

Suddenly, they heard a scream coming from the direction in which they'd come. Turning around abruptly, they saw some men in uniform wrestling two teenagers to the wall. Another man, dressed in a sharp suit, was coming up behind them. And then Philip got a closer look at the teenagers. They were Cary and Jimmy.

11: The Parting Of The Ways

'*What the hell were they doing?*' was just one of the questions running through Philip's mind right then.

But thinking wasn't doing anything for the pair in trouble. As they watched, the smartly dressed man pushed the other men aside and pressed his face up to the pair, by the looks of it interrogating them.

*

Mr Gauthier didn't like the look of most of his workers, so his opinion of these intruders was best left unsaid. The workers of course backed away from him, they all did, which allowed him to get up close and personal with the teens. He relished in their fear which showed in their pitiful eyes. But instead of snapping and cursing, he spoke calmly and softly, which came as a surprise to all present, having seen his face growing crimson.

"Well now, I presume you two have become lost, separated from your tour group. Is that right?"

Jimmy nodded, while Cary remained resolute, glaring back at the man.

"I see. Well, why don't you scurry on back to wherever you came from, and forget this sorry event ever happened. Agreed?"

Cary's expression still remained sullen; she wasn't used to not getting her way. But then Jimmy did something which did change her expression...to something similar to an effigy of a wrathful ancient goddess.

"But our friends are down there. We only followed them," he burst out, pointing in the direction of Philip and Noah.

*

They had a split second to decide what to do, and in that second Noah whispered, "You get the henchman, I'll get the boss."

As Gauthier looked over, following Jimmy's finger, the Mancynns entered *transit*.

*

Cary almost jumped out of her skin when Philip suddenly appeared out of the rippling air, instantly knocking out the men in uniform who had forced them to the wall. Maybe under other circumstances he wouldn't have been able to, but he had the advantage of surprise and what he could only surmise as a temporary dose of supernatural strength on his side. Meanwhile, their new science assistant, Mr Mason, appeared in an equally impossible manner, and just like that he was gone again, along with their interrogator. She and Jimmy looked, stunned, at Philip, who stared back at them. No one dared break the silence. But they didn't have to, for just then Mr Mason reappeared, crumpling to the floor. Philip rushed over to him, kneeling down and supporting him. Cary and Jimmy didn't move, watching the spectacle unfold before them.

"What's wrong with him?" Cary asked Philip eventually.

"Entering *transit* even twice in quick succession can be taxing. Three times can take it all out of you," the American replied, weakly, not looking at her.

"What are you?" Jimmy whispered.

"None of your concern," Noah moaned. "Why couldn't you just keep your damn mouth shut?"

Jimmy whimpered, Cary continued watching.

*

Mr Gauthier was beside himself with anger. The Mancynn had left him in a corridor, it could be *any* corridor. Quickly, he ran to the nearest office, knocked the workman aside and luckily he found there was an intercom button.

"I want everyone near the ATLAS siphon to search for a Caucasian white adult male with three teenagers, two male and one female. If they escape, I will personally punish those responsible. Is that understood?"

*

Alerted by these words, Noah tried to get up, but collapsed once again. It took Philip's support to get him to his feet.

"Just go back to the group," Philip hissed.

“No way,” Cary laughed, but her voice was laced with fear.

“I really don’t care what you do,” Noah’s voice was weak. “You’re not my concern.”

“Oh thanks,” Cary snorted.

Tired of arguing, Philip took the stone from Noah. The map was still upon its surface. He zoomed it in further, finding their corridor.

“Here,” he pointed at the map, “there’s a room we can hide in just down the walkway. There’s a ventilation shaft leading off it that goes around the cavern to what looked like the main control centre. If anything other than searching for subatomic particles is going on in this facility, we should be able to find it out there. I suggest we head in that direction.”

Not waiting for a response, Philip turned, Noah still leaning on his shoulder. Cary and Jimmy looked at each other, still not completely certain what was going on, before hurrying along behind them.

Luckily, they ran into no one on the way to the room shown on the map, which was surprising, considering the warning over the intercom. Philip smashed down the door, and led them inside.

It was your typical, small, grey office: a cheap desk, tatty chairs and filing cabinets, furnished from an office supply catalogue. Philip sat Noah down in a chair, before moving over to the filing cabinets.

Over his shoulder, he ordered, “Cary, stand by the door. Warn us if anyone’s coming.”

Not questioning him, though still resentful for not getting to stay next to them, Cary did as she was told, moving over to the once-whole door. Looking out into the corridor, she heard Philip pushing the cabinets aside.

He found what he was looking for: an air vent leading into the heart of the complex. The one thing the map hadn’t made him realise was its size. There was no way he was fitting through there.

“Why don’t you just teleport down there?” Jimmy asked.

“The map doesn’t seem to show where the people are, God knows why. We don’t want to materialise within a person,” Philip said, keeping calm.

“I’ll explain why it doesn’t do that later, maybe. But first, who’s going down there?” Noah groaned, leaning over. “We’d need someone really short and thin.”

Philip thought for a second, and then looked at the short and thin boy beside him. Jimmy looked up at him. His round eyes widened.

“Oh...But I’m not thin...”

“You’re thinner than the rest of us,” Philip insisted.

“Here, take this,” Noah called, weakly.

Jimmy turned in time to catch the phone Noah had thrown him from the inside of his pocket.

Cary turned to see what was going on, “You realise you won’t get any signal down here.”

Noah glared at her, “After what you’ve seen so far, do you really think I’d give him something that didn’t work?”

Before Cary could retort, Jimmy spoke up again, “So what do I do with this?”

“It’s modified so that I can stay in touch with it with the other phone in my pocket. So as you go through the tunnels, we can guide you. Once you’re down there, the phone will be able to download information from the computers.”

Philip ripped the grill off of the wall, proffering the open vent to Jimmy with his other hand.

The boy shuffled back rapidly, his head shaking from side to side just as fast, “Wait...what? But...no...b’ I don’t want to.”

Philip didn’t move or change his position or expression, save his eyes, which appeared to get slightly blacker, “Look, we didn’t bring you with us, you chose to come, and now you’re here, in the same boat as the rest of us. Now pay the price for that and get in the damn vent.”

Nervous, and probably guided more by peer pressure than common sense, Jimmy got to his knees and wriggled into the vent.

Philip got the stone out, and the map of the complex was visible before him once more. Noah tapped him on the wrist, and handed him the other phone, already with Jimmy on the line.

“Okay, Jimmy, just keep going until you reach a fork in the tunnel.”

Jimmy made some sort of response, and the three of them waited for his next confirmation with growing anxiety. It surely wouldn't be long before someone walked in on them.

"I'm here," Jimmy's voice suddenly crackled through the phone.

No matter what the modifications, the quality of the line wasn't perfect.

"Okay, take the left turning and go ten metres before taking the second right."

Cary knelt down next to him, leaving her post at the door, wanting to listen in.

"Why aren't you guarding the door?" Philip mouthed.

*

And so it continued, Philip gave directions to Jimmy, he turned left and right accordingly. If it hadn't been for Philip's constant guidance, Jimmy felt he would have soon become lost in this labyrinth of twisting ventilation shafts. As it was, Jimmy was just going around the umpteenth corner when he suddenly heard through the radio...

"Not far to go now, Jimmy. Up ahead you should see a..."

...Silence.

Jimmy put the phone close to his ear, then his mouth.

"Hello, is anybody there?"

There was no reply.

"Philip..." he whimpered, his voice growing higher.

*

The phone lay in his limp hand, forgotten in that moment of confusion. Philip stared up in wonder from his crouched position by the air vent, Noah and Cary also looked up, but rather with a look of bewilderment on their faces.

"How did I know it was going to be you they were talking about on the intercom?" the figure at the door asked.

"Strange, you were the last person I'd expect to see here," Philip said, slowly.

This odd exchange of greetings was meaningless to the other two, and they only understood who the intruder was when Cary finally plucked up the courage to ask, “Who are you?”

“Her name,” Philip said, indicating the girl standing in the doorway, “is Eve. She’s is a girl I met on my holiday in Venezuela, which brings me to my question: how did you get here?”

Eve pulled up a chair, “Do you not realise what they’re doing here?”

“Not really,” Noah answered.

“Well,” Eve didn’t take her eyes off of Philip, “A few days ago I took the helicopter over to Auyantepui to check out where we were found.”

“Oh, like you could fly a helicopter,” Cary laughed.

“Actually, I can drive as well as fly. You learn a lot working for my father. Anyway, after searching the forest for a while I found a large hole which led into the mountain, surrounded by construction vehicles. Sneaking past them and climbing down, I entered a large cavern. Going down further, I came to the lip of an abyss.”

“Hello? Please say something,” Jimmy’s voice sounded faintly from the phone.

Eve continued, not hearing him, “It was then that the machines operating the rope pulleys started up and the vibrations shook the cliff, making me fall. Luckily, the thing they were lifting up broke my fall, even if it hurt. They didn’t see me, they were too busy shifting whatever it was and getting it transported. I was able to hide. And I was taken away on a large plane and have been here for the past few days. Speaking of which, do you have any food?”

No one knew how to respond to this speech. Realising no one was going to break the silence, Eve sighed.

“So how’d you get here?”

Philip raised his eyebrows, “Well, with me and Noah, it’s complicated. As for Cary and Jimmy...”

He paused, thinking for a second, before turning to Cary.

“How did you get in?” he asked her slowly.

“What?”

“How did you get into this section of the facility?”

“He has a point,” Noah realised. “We saw the door was security locked. There was no way either of you could have broken through.”

Jimmy called through the phone once again, “Hey, guys, I’m getting scared. Say something...”

“Well as it turns out we didn’t need to break through. When we went back after noticing you were gone, we saw some workmen coming out of the door, and we managed to sneak in,” she said, smartly.

“I would have thought any worker would have made sure a security door would have closed properly,” Philip wondered aloud.

“How else do you explain me getting in here?” Cary demanded, crisply.

Philip took his time replying, “I don’t know.”

“Please!” Jimmy shrieked, “Say something!”

“Just one minute,” Philip said to those around him, turning to the phone. “Jimmy, we’re fine, nothing to worry about.” He continued, talking over Jimmy’s sighs of relief, “Where are you?”

*

Jimmy quickly looked around, “I’m at the sharp right turning.”

“Wait a second...okay, you’re nearly there. All you need to do is go down to the grill. There, you have to check if anyone is in the room beyond. If it’s empty, then push the grill aside, it should be as easy as the one on this end. Have you got that?”

“Down to grill, check room, go in. Got it,” he muttered, before putting the phone in his pocket.

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Philip didn't know exactly what the sound of rustling fabric against the reciprocal phone was, but he assumed it meant the call was over. Putting his phone in his pocket, he turned to the group, then Cary.

"Go on, get back by the door."

She pulled a face and sighed, but did as she was told.

Noah looked at the newcomer, who still looked out of place in the group, "So what did you manage to learn about what they took from Venezuela? What does it look like?"

Eve's eyes drifted upwards as she tried to remember as much as she could, "Area wise, it's about half the size of the posada back home. Most of it is a flat, shallow incline, on one side there is a large, thick wheel, with smaller wheels within it, and behind that stretching along the length of the thing is an equally thick bar, which at the end bends down and spreads out to cover the top of the incline. As for what it does, I have absolutely no idea."

"Well it's not something I've ever heard of," Noah admitted.

"There is no guarantee that it will be used for good. If it is not, if it is to be used by the Brethren Lords, then we may have to destroy it. Did it look like we could do so?" Philip asked, earnestly.

A noise came from his pocket, and Philip took the phone out.

"...do from here?" was the end of Jimmy's question.

"Sorry, so the room's empty?"

"Yes."

"Are there any computers on in there?"

"Yes."

There was a pause where Jimmy didn't hear anything as Philip asked Noah what he was meant to be doing.

"Jimmy, go up to the computer," Noah heard the boy's footsteps. "Now, on the side of the phone you should be able to extract a cable. Plug that into a port in the computer terminal and press the download icon on the phone. If you hear anyone coming, press the abort download

icon, pull the cable out and get back down the vent. If no one comes, wait until the download is complete and then come back here.”

He disconnected, and finally put the phone properly aside.

Philip swivelled on the desk to face Noah, “While we’re waiting, why don’t you answer some more questions?”

Noah looked across the room at Cary before deciding it would be okay.

So happy that he could find out some more about...well, everything, Philip’s next question nearly spilled out, “So what is it with Gryal and the others? What’s their back-story? Why are they...you know...?”

Noah rubbed his neck, “You know what, I might as well just tell you everything, to save time. Okay, well, you must understand that although I was taught a lot on this subject during my time with the Lords, I don’t know every fine detail.

“To start off with I have to explain to you the basic structure of the universe. It is not, as scientists believe, infinite or indeed entirely linear. All the modern theories: quantum; relativity; that of an expanding universe, all of these require the human perspective of reality to be correct. But the thing is, the multiverse isn’t quite as we perceive it. Think of it like a living organism. Within it are millions upon millions of ‘cells’, or in this case, universes. I believe there are around 871,655,167,200,000,000,000,000,000 universes in our multiverse. And within these ‘cells’ are two planes of existence: the Alpha Realm and the Inner Region.

“I assume you know that the majority of an atom is empty space; well within these spaces are in fact other atoms, just out of phase with us, which creates the Inner Region, what you would call a parallel universe. There is in fact a third plain between these two, which consists of pure energy created by friction between the atoms fighting to exist in the same place. But I digress. The universes are not unique and individual, as humans suppose. Not in the way they think. If you were to take a universe, the one next to it would be identical, except for a few, very slight changes. Only minute, but they’re still there. And every one is absolutely motionless. This is where time comes in. You see, our consciousnesses, you could call them souls, are in fact energy pulses, which move between the universes at a rate which we cannot detect. Our perception of this movement is like a stop-motion movie. We move so fast between the still realities that we appear to be moving fluidly.

“Now people before us have realised that this model of the universe allows for time travel. For if one could move from universe to universe outside of the main soul flow, one could travel to the Tudor era, or some unknown period of the future. Though this does bring up a problem. To do such a thing would inevitably change the course of history. And theoretically this would spawn a new string of universes which would follow a logical course after the new historical event, yet keeping as close as possible to the original storyline. Think of it like a detour. You are redirected, but sooner or later you will get back onto the main road. From our point of view, nothing will have changed. In fact, for any pulse beyond the altered universe, nothing would change. They would go around the circuit of universes before coming to the new event, at which they would join the rest of the pulses in going in the new route. Once no more pulses are going through the old universes, it is thought that they would go cold and dormant.

“But that’s not all there is to the multiverse. Think back to the organism analogy. In a living thing, there are spaces outside the cells, such as the plasma in the arteries or the inside of the oesophagus. In astronomical terms, such space is called the Outer Region. Things in the Outer Region can move of their own accord, at a speed irrespective of that which we perceive in the Alpha Realm. This is where the Brethren Lords exist; this is their place of work and operation. It is also where a race of beings referred to as the Entities live. They are creatures of pure energy. You may call them Gods. However, they did not create the multiverse as such, they’re more like caretakers, making sure everything within it works properly. But for most of the multiverse’s existence they have been the dominant race, the undisputed rulers who lived in a grand city made of energy just like them, the Cortex.

“There was a time, by our perspective it would been up until about ten thousand years ago, when there was no movement between the universes. They were all silent and still. But there was always movement in the Outer Region. And after aeons out in the void, the Entities had been wanting to properly explore the Alpha Realm. For in their non-corporeal state they couldn’t exist in our plain of reality. That is why they sought out a race of beings which lived on a planet which drifted alone in the Outer Region. These aliens were forced to build the Entities solid ships in which they could exist. As great builders, they did just that, and were enslaved so that their services could be used again. As it turns out, they made robotic workers to take their own place. And soon after, they managed to create a device which accelerated the energy waves of an Entity until the point that they turn into matter, a phenomenon which has been shown in the Collider above our heads. The first six subjects of the experiment

became Gryal Repa, Warren Marz, Stark Vingfamyn, Petti Lance, Khaonat Raldisata and Upre Shun: the original Brethren Lords. They were built Towers which were situated strategically around the universes, along with a net of satellites which scanned the universes and transmitted the data back to the Towers. As the energy-to-matter technology was new, they didn't want to burst straight into the Alpha Realm. They were taking it slowly.

“They found something called the Archk of Angels, an ancient device, even older than the Entities, which caused some movement in the souls of the universes, but not in the way they move now, more drawing the weaker strands in on one point, the Archk itself. The Entities ordered the Brethren Lords to move the satellite network to intercept the soul movements, drawing them away from the Archk and towards the Towers for study. To get near the Archk, they were supplied with a new technology, which was able to generate artificial bubbles of reality in which they could exist, allowing them inside the Alpha Realm for the first time. It was simply referred to as the Watch. Reverse engineering that technology over a number of centuries, the Tower workers managed to put together something whose name translates into English as Hexagon, because it consists of six arrays situated around the person, ship or place in question. Although it could fit in your palm, it could generate a bubble of reality, like the Watch, but far weaker.

“One last thing the Entities gave the Brethren Lords was the machinery to artificially create workers for themselves. Who would expect the Immortals to do the menial work? They went through a number of designs and variations, before settling on the model they use now, the Braknaghs. This device is also used to add the dark matter into new Mancynn embryos.

“But while all this was going on, the Entities were doing a further investigation of the Beta Realm, the last surviving remnant of whatever multiverse came before this one. During their time in control of the multiverse, they had of course been around it and done preliminary observations. However, they had never before deemed it worthy of greater examination. Now they had the time, as the Brethren Lords were taking care of the multiverse, so why not take up the opportunity? Upon closer inspection, they found one lone artefact amongst the ruins of a temple covered in writing: a book written in some long-dead dialect, whose cover portrayed only a strange, cross-like shape, no sign of a title. Some of the Entities, who were close to the equivalent of scholars, managed to translate some of the book using other objects found elsewhere, and determined it was a record of great historical events,

most of which were still to occur. It was a book of prophecy, with which they could predict upcoming events and prepare accordingly. The book was later named the Book of Alternity, and moved to one of the Towers for Gryal to study. It was this book that alerted them to the existence of the Archk, leading them to where it was hidden. I probably should have mentioned this before the Archk, but oh well.

“Around about four thousand of our years ago, during their time in the Beta Realm, after their discovery of the Book of Alternity, the Entities were faced with an adversary, a race called the Vyrol who were trying to invade from another multiverse. This conflict took up all of their resources and attention, a fact Khaonat took advantage of. I have already told you about his efforts to take over Earth using an army of Mancynn and a Hexagon, and these events led to him being locked in the Casket, an elaborate ark which not only trapped him inside but shifted him into a sort of limbo, suspended between reality and the artificial world which keeps the soul energy alive within the satellite network. After a few attempts, the Entities found a populated world whose inhabitants were made to protect the Casket with their lives. Unfortunately for those people, the Casket was too tempting to be left alone, and they tried to open it. The Entities were furious and attacked the planet, causing an explosion whose force was strong enough to launch much of the surrounding land out of the thin atmosphere and into deep space.

“The Brethren Lords were now a company of five, and all but one Mancynn were slaughtered to prevent further conflict on Earth. In the Outer Region, the Entities were further exploring the possibility of travelling into and between the universes under their control. And then they noticed there was a race on one of the planets in the Alpha Realm which had a device that was capable of doing just that, which was more effective than their current Hexagons. Of course, they were motionless, and not using the technology, so the Entities figured they could go straight into the Alpha Realm using the Hexagons and take it, they wouldn't miss it. What they didn't foresee was that some of their technology, including a Hexagon, was left behind, still active, when they left the planet. This Hexagon allowed the race of beings who built the device, the Asnemwoi, to move for the first time, with basic personalities in place, and they became very angry, very quickly, for they turned out to be an overly protective people, and didn't like the fact that their greatest achievement (apparently) was taken from them without their permission. So, now able to move of their own volition, still in that one moment, they built ships, and took off from their homeworld to hunt down the Entities. They eventually broke away from the Alpha Realm and came upon the Entity fleets.

Having found the Entity machinery left on their planet, they knew what they were up against, and had prepared. The Asnemwoi easily cut down the Entity armada. They barely needed the element of surprise.

“And so the Entities were on the run, trying to find safety in numbers, trying to regroup and form a counter-strike. But the Asnemwoi didn’t let them. It came down to one final stand by one of the Towers. The end result was not a good one for the Entities. The Tower was destroyed, and in the blast a Rift was formed in the rim of the universe. They were forced through the Rift, the Asnemwoi shooting down any stragglers.

“To make matters worse, once on the other side, some cloaked ships, only a quarter the size of an Entity ship, made themselves visible once more and attacked them. It was a rebel group of the slaves, who had built these ships behind the backs of the Entities. Thinking quickly, the Entities loaded a weapon the loyal slaves had been developing, called the Adsindra device which twisted the genetic makeup of any organism into something horrific, yet harmless to the Entities. Blasting the rebel ships, they burst into large globules of genetic material. Any shuttles caught in the blast were turned into smaller globules. Not wanting to stay near the Rift and the Asnemwoi, the Entities flew away.

“Inside the Alpha Realm, the Entities relied on the Hexagons to survive. They drifted through the universe, trying to work out how to put their new device to good use. Before they found a use, however, they landed somewhere in the Andromeda galaxy. On the planet, the Entities decided it was too much of a risk to keep the rest of the slaves alive. Setting off a false alarm, all the slaves launched off in shuttle crafts, only to be shot down, not one left standing. Looking around after the bloodbath, they found this was a planet with only a small number of creatures living on it. These silicon-based lifeforms were happy to give shelter to the Entities. It was also discovered that due to the way that they had evolved, the denizens of this world could actually act as containers or puppets for the Entities. They could safely inhabit the bodies of their hosts. And with these newfound bodies they built huge cities, just as grand as the Cortex. For them, all was paradise. Yet in the backs of the Entities’ minds, they knew they had to return to the fight one day. It was too dangerous to leave the Asnemwoi in a position from where they could rewrite the multiverse to serve their own desires.

“But before any decision was made, the Entities ventured out into the galaxy, setting out Hexagons wherever they went. On the nearby arm of the galaxy they came across a

cluster of solar systems which, when animated, were willing to provide help, technological or otherwise. To celebrate their newfound alliance, a vessel was assembled, called the Chariot, built to be piloted by the Raal, the Orstoil, and maybe the Pri. I can't remember if they were in the alliance or not. However, on its maiden voyage, it was hijacked and stolen by a group called Murorviosp. They were a group of criminals comprising of creatures who originated on various planets in the alliance. It was lucky that the Entities had also found beings called the Polanzia, who acted as a sort of interplanetary police force. They were already hunting down the Murorviosp group, and once the Entities had helped them catch them, the Polanzia showed them how to disassemble the criminals' bodies into base elements, which were mixed into the nearby planets, getting rid of them forever, or so they thought. For as it happened, some managed to escape. But despite their successes in interplanetary relations, there was still some tension among the Entities.

“The Entities were divided. Some saw the importance of taking down the Asnemwoi, while others thought it would be better if they stayed in the Alpha Realm, keeping within the Hexagons, building a new life for themselves. The two factions went their separate ways. The silicon-based lifeforms were willing to lend bodies for the sake of a just cause as those Entities planning to return to the Outer Region set off in their slave-built ships. Those staying behind watched their brothers go, never to see them again. It is said that after the ships had left the atmosphere, the remaining Entities began to build ships of their own design, ones which were powered by nuclear reactions, not the energy of their native land. And they too left the aliens to seek out a world entirely for themselves, letting their hosts fall back into motionlessness.

“When the other Entities ventured back through the Rift, they were met by something they weren't expecting. For on the other side of the Rift was an enormous ship, larger even than any Entity ship. From witness accounts, we know it had a pale hull, and the main body of the ship was almost triangular, except with slightly curved sides and some sort of escape craft on the front. No piece of the hull was clear of arrays or weapons or some sort of device. Thinking it was a new Asnemwoi attack vessel, the Entities attacked it, firing any artillery they thought they could spare. A few of the Entity ships even executed a self destruct procedure, hoping the blast would damage it. It didn't do any good. The ship's shields remained fully operational. However, to their surprise, the ship did not retaliate. Instead, it simply flew away. To this day, I don't think anybody knows whose ship it was.

“Not knowing how to respond to this occurrence, the Entities moved on, not back to Cortex, but to an area of the Outer Region they knew would be empty. There, they spent a long time building a new city, of the same energy source as Cortex, but kept it under the radar, so the Asnemwoi wouldn’t notice they had returned. When the city was ready, a scout ship, carrying a bomb, was sent to Cortex. It was made of the same materials they had found when on the Asnemwoi homeworld, hoping the Asnemwoi would mistake it for one of their own. They were lucky. The Asnemwoi didn’t think anything of the scout ship, and it entered the heart of Cortex. Once in the heart, the bomb was detonated, and the energy that was Cortex was cancelled out. The Asnemwoi beachhead was destroyed.

“Their enemy vanquished, the Entities set up their new city as a replacement Cortex, and continued to rule the multiverse as before. But it wasn’t the same. The Entities couldn’t risk another attack from the Alpha Realm, and so created a plan to wipe them out for good. This went against everything that they believed in, but it had to be done.

“At the start of the loop of universes is one where everything comes into being. Humans call this the Big Bang. It is at this point that Tentortex, a mythical being said to start and end all life, supposedly came and spewed all the known stars and planets into the universe. Lords Petti and Upre were sent to annihilate the Tentortex, preventing the evolution of the Asnemwoi. You can probably see a paradox in this plan, but the Entities were desperate for peace. But obviously they failed, as we are still here today. All did not go according to plan. For some unknown reason, Upre was sucked out into space when his ship was destroyed, and Petti was horribly disfigured in the blast. The point is, we survived, and ever since the Entities have been dreading a counter-strike on the part of the Asnemwoi who remained on their homeworld.

“As for the Brethren Lords, ever since the death of Upre, they have felt less important, especially after the Entities granted them a new Immortal, Mordrin. They felt more like pawns in a game than supreme beings, like it didn’t matter if they died, they could just be replaced. Now they seek retribution, to be recognised for their worth.

“The once united multiverse is now divided. Old friends will remain parted until the end of this war. They can only wait for someone to make the next move.”

“What the hell?” Eve said after a long pause, turning to Philip. “Did that make any sense to you?”

Philip sighed, “My entire life I have been guided on a path set by the Brethren Lords. And just before we came here Noah showed me the truth. He showed me how I was slowly being manipulated. With all that I know, yes, I can accept what he just said.”

Once again, the phone in his pocket buzzed, and as he withdrew it from his pocket, Jimmy’s voice became audible, “Um, Philip, I’m kinda lost. Could you help?”

“How am I supposed to help you if you don’t know where you are?”

The answer came not from Jimmy, but Noah, “Tell him to press the button on the side of the phone, next to the cable. Then look at the map.”

Philip did so, and to his amazement a bright blue dot appeared on the image of ventilation shafts.

“That was there the whole time?” Philip asked, darkly. “Why didn’t you tell me, instead of letting me work out where he was on the way there by what he was saying?”

“You seemed to be doing well enough on your own,” Noah remarked.

Turning back to the map, Philip worked out a route for Jimmy to take.

While this went on, Noah strode over to the door and Cary.

“You’ve got your strength back then,” said Cary.

Ignoring her, he looked up and down the corridor, “Where the hell are they?!”

“What do you mean?” she asked, looking up into his face.

“You heard the intercom. People should be crawling over the building looking for us. Why has nobody come this way? Unless...unless they told them to let us make our own way, let Philip realise what they are doing...”

He trailed off. And just then, Jimmy’s head poked out of the shaft. Slowly, he squeezed himself out onto the floor, the phone limp in his hand.

“How much did you get?” Philip queried the boy, picking up the hand held device.

“I think I got most of it. But some men came and I had to run.”

“It’s okay,” Noah told him, taking the phone from Philip. “Come on, let’s get out of here.”

It was still disturbing Noah that they hadn’t run into anybody. Even now, when they were near the exit, no one was to be seen. They turned a corner, and found themselves before the cavern, the blue column in the centre still sparkling. But there was something different. The crate they had seen earlier was gone. In its place, in the dead centre of the machinery, was what he guessed the workers had taken from Venezuela. Eve hadn’t done it justice. It stood tall above the scientist down below, its surface covered in the same pictographs as Philip had seen on the temple, and some of the thick, green vines were still clinging onto the base. It looked out of place amongst all the modern technology, sticking out like a sore thumb. As they watched, the scientists were attaching equipment to the ancient machine, taking readings from small monitors. The large wheel Eve had mentioned was rotating slowly.

Suddenly, a thick bunch of the green strands plummeted down the main column, getting absorbed by the machine at the bottom. This boost of energy sent the wheels spinning like crazy, sparks flying everywhere. And then, as quickly as it began, the machine ground to a halt. The scientists had jumped back, avoiding the sparks thrown off from the device. As the men moved back, reattaching the equipment, the voice rang out into every corner of the cavern, the same voice which had spoken through the intercom before.

“Mancynn, I know you are there. As you can see, we mere humans cannot do this alone. Join the Brethren, and help us achieve their goal. Then they will let you go. They will give you anything you could possibly want. The choice is yours. But bear in mind, if you say no, you should not expect to leave the building alive.”

12: The Calm Before The Storm

As they ran down the corridor, Philip held the stone in front of him, trying as hard as he could to focus on the tiny rooms which shook with every footstep.

“What exactly am I looking for?” he managed to say between breathes, not taking his eyes off the map.

“For the last time,” Noah said, not panting as much as Philip, “look down the path your school took and see where the doors are opening and closing. It’s there that we would probably find them.”

Even on this side of the door, beyond ATLAS, they had come across no one. If the map had shown where people were, then Philip could be satisfied that they were all on the other side of the Collider. But without that knowledge, they could be anywhere, around any corner. It was nerve-wracking for him, and for the others, he assumed. He was leading them on into the unknown, trying to follow Noah’s guidance yet not really knowing himself what lay ahead.

And then, as they rounded a bend, he spotted a door opening, staying open for what appeared to be too long, and then closing. That had to be it.

“I see them!”

“Are you sure?” Noah’s head turned sharply to face him.

“It’s the only thing I can see which matches what you said to look for. Still, it might not be...”

“Just get us there!” Cary almost shrieked.

Philip and Noah stopped abruptly. The other three were a little late in reacting, and continued running down the corridor a short distance. By the time they jogged back to the two Mancynns, the pair had regained their breaths and were talking hurriedly.

“Are you strong enough to do this?” Philip was asking when they came within earshot.

“It will certainly weaken me, but not as much as before. I’ve had some time to recover.”

They didn’t say anything else, but grabbed as much of the clothes which Eve, Cary and Jimmy wore as they could, took one last glance at the stone still balanced in Philip’s hand, and went to where they hoped their group was now.

It is unbelievable that a group of five people, one adult and four teens, would materialise in a busy room and have no one notice them. Yet that is how it was.

In the room in question, Mr Dobrowski was showing the crowd of teachers and students another...interesting...detector, or rather, the feet of said detector. Gathered around were the assorted tourists, some listening to his every word, others...well, everybody's a critic.

"The Compact Muon Solenoid consists of five layers, each of which is responsible for detecting a different..."

Away from the speech, at the back of the crowd, Dr Radcliffe peered at the pale Noah through the cluster of teens.

"Is everything alright? Where did you go?"

"We didn't realise you had moved on," Philip answered, quickly. "Mr Mason is just feeling a little faint at the moment, he'll be fine."

Dr Radcliffe looked Philip up and down, "You don't look so great yourself."

"Something I ate."

"Excuse me," Mr Dobrowski called over the heads of his audience, "Is anything the matter?"

"No, no," Dr Radcliffe called back, "It's all good. Please, continue."

Mr Dobrowski stared at them quizzically for a few more seconds, before bringing the attention of the crowd back to the machine behind him.

"As I was saying, the CMS is used to detect not only the Higgs Boson, but other dimensions and dark matter."

The weary Mancynns rose to their feet, tired from *transit*, and tried to blend in with the crowd. The only thing they could do now was hide from anyone who may have seen them in the lower cavern.

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Gauthier leant back in his chair. Then he realised they were still in his office, and dismissed his supervisors with a casual flick of his hand. The door clicked shut behind them. He was alone. Sort of.

It was at times like this that they came. When people say others have met their maker, the interpretation is not a good one. But in this instance, the meaning behind him 'meeting his maker' would be a hell of a lot worse than if he were dead. Not that the prospect of dying was a bad one in Gauthier's books. In his opinion, existence was...how could he put it...hell.

The rustling papers in his filing cabinets were the first indication of his arrival. The air crackled as the flames jumped from appliance to appliance. The faint roaring sound dissolved into the back of Gauthier's mind, but didn't disappear. It never did.

He looked up into the overly deep eyes of Gryal Repa. The skeletal hand withdrew from the back of his chair as the Lord moved around the desk to face Gauthier directly.

Gauthier ran his hand over his stubbly face, "I'm sorry. I truly am."

Gryal continued to stare at the pathetic man before him.

"But I thought this was what you wanted," Gauthier wittered on, "He saw the machine, he saw what was going on. That was your plan, wasn't it?"

This last sentence was full of fear and desperation, a fact that Gryal relished. The depths of human worthlessness would never cease to confound him.

"The plan," Gryal said through grinding teeth, "was to show him our just cause, not to make him run further from it. If you had allowed him to examine the data available to him, maybe the boy would have been more compliant, realised that this work is beneficial to everyone, but no."

"In my defence, I did move my men away from where they were hiding. I did try to make up for my rash mistake."

"After putting them there in the first place. And that was the least you could have done," Gryal sighed. "We hoped that during your time in service your imagination and initiative would have grown to some satisfactory size. But evidently not."

Gauthier would have looked at his feet if his desk wasn't in the way.

“Those at the Towers have shown that, unless anyone else interferes, the boy will return to the cavern. When he does we will give you clear and easy instructions to follow. You have shown that any strategy you come up with will ultimately fail so I would advise you to stick to our orders, is that understood?”

Gauthier nodded, but it was hard to tell as he was shaking terribly, making it look like he was disagreeing at the same time.

“I do hope you succeed, Vincent,” Gryal may have sounded comforting, if he hadn’t been a demonic personification of all that is dread, fear and hate with a voice like the collapsing of a thousand stars, “It would waste so much time moulding a new General Director.”

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For Eve’s sake it was lucky that teachers don’t check to see who else is on the bus besides those on the register. They may check who’s missing, but they don’t necessarily check who’s new.

Near the back of the bus, out of the way of prying eyes, Eve had been snuck into a window seat, next to Philip. That was another thing they had to be thankful for: an empty seat. This is where she hid when the minibus pulled away from the spherical building and onto the main road. No one looked twice in her direction; most never looked once. What was one girl whom they may or may not have missed on the way there? And just as nobody watched, nobody listened to what she had to say.

“You honestly believe your friend’s story. It seems a bit too...sci-fi, don’t you think?”

“I told you,” Philip didn’t look at her, but at the seat in front of him, “Noah showed me some things which confirm his story.”

“But what does that mean?”

“Since before I was born the Brethren Lords have been imbuing my DNA with something you might call dark matter. This has given me abilities which some would explain away as magic; I’ve used them a number of times. But they’ve also been shrouding my memory. Anything that I may have read, anything that I may have heard which would turn me against them, they wiped. Just before I came here, Noah sent a shock through me which undid the

damage. Since then, my memory has been coming back, and I can see now that my entire life has been guided by them, not me.”

“So you remember everything now?”

“No. It’s all coming back in patches. I’m remembering some stuff which happened years ago, some stuff from a couple of weeks back. My brain’s all a bit of a mess right now.”

They fell back into silence, watching the world go by, or as much of the world as they could see on what remained of their five minute journey. And it was silent, until Noah walked up the length of the minibus to lean over their headrests.

“Have either of you considered where she’s going to stay for the night?”

The teens turned to one another, not knowing what to say.

“You could always stay in my room,” Noah suggested.

“Excuse me?!” Eve cried, incredulously.

A number of people on the minibus twisted in their seats to look at who was making the sound, and there was a shout from the teachers at the front to quieten down.

Philip put a hand on Eve’s shoulder, “It’s okay, he got himself a room, I’m sure he could do the same for you.”

Noah nodded in agreement, though wasn’t sure he liked being referred to as ‘he’ while he was standing right next to them.

Later, after a brief tour around Meyrin, and everyone had been sent back to their rooms until their next meeting (which was to be held just before dinner was available at the restaurant), Eve finally had her own room. She didn’t exactly have any bags to unpack, but the three of them had agreed it best if she didn’t go talking to the students.

In Noah’s room, Philip sat on the edge of the bed, the stone in his hand. Noah was just coming out of the bathroom, shaking his hands to get the last of the water off. Philip looked up at him expectantly.

“What?” Noah asked eventually.

Philip proffered the stone, "I thought you would want this back."

Noah waved away the little device, "No, no, I want you to have it. Seeing as you're the one the Brethren Lords are focusing on at the moment, I feel that you need it most. Not to frighten you of course."

Philip retracted his arm, pocketing the stone, raising an eyebrow at this last comment. Turning away, Noah drew the phone from his inner pocket, switching it on with a finger.

"So are you going to tell me what exactly we stole from their computers?" Philip attempted to peer over Noah's shoulder, but to no avail.

"Data," Noah said, matter-of-factly, not really listening to Philip in great detail, "Schematics; equations; plans. Something we can use against the Brethren Lords, I hope. For we know it's them behind this now, they gave that away when they taunted us over the intercom."

Philip jumped up from the bed and walked over to Noah's side. Looking down onto the tiny screen before him, Philip saw a vast web of numbers, diagrams and who knew what else spiralling down into the black heart of the pixels, deeper than seemed possible, shifting and contorting before his eyes. And then, just as he thought the intricate masterpiece had settled into its final prodigious design, the images themselves began increasing and decreasing in size as well as focus, one becoming the main image upon the screen before being superseded by the next. Anything which would logically be in a CERN database was there to be seen, as well as information on the strange and wonderful aspects of the world of science with hints to the twisted reality the Brethren Lords left in their wake.

"How are we meant to know which of these is going to be of any help to us?" Philip asked, his gaze remaining on the river of misbegotten information.

"This isn't random," Noah said, indicating the phone with his free hand. "I've put in a search, the phone is looking for anything which appears...not of this Earth."

And as if on cue, a schematic enlarged which did not subsequently reduce. The search had brought up something at last.

As far as he and Noah could make out, it was an in-depth blueprint of the machine which had been taken from its home in South America. The picture gave no new light onto the machine's purpose, at least not at first. It merely gave up the design of the inner workings.

How they worked together as one was something else entirely, something not labelled there before them in Noah's palm.

The trill came from further down the arm, just a little way, from the wrist which connected Noah's arm to the hand which held the thing they watched with such unrelenting interest. Rotating said wrist, Noah looked at the time which his alarm was reminding him of.

"All these meetings downstairs, we never get to complete anything," Noah both sighed and laughed.

"You know, we don't have to go."

"As your new assistant science teacher, I shouldn't tarnish my newfound reputation by being late for a meeting called by my superior. I don't think we have a choice, not while we keep up this charade."

*

The landscape lay eternal, the plains reaching to every corner of the horizon and continuing. She trod upon the baked grains of sands, which were as insignificant as this worthless planet. With her hand she scooped them up, raised them before her face, and let them drift away on what wind there was. Her eyes scanned the never-ending expanse which stretched before them. Her nostrils flared. So did its. It moved on all fours to crouch by its mistress. It bowed its head. It didn't like the light. But here it was, where it had been led, where it had to stay until it was told otherwise. It pawed the ground with the three talons of its paw.

She couldn't understand it. This was where she had to be, so where was it? A treasure trove of artefacts hidden away thousands of years ago didn't just vanish. She had never been here before, but she knew what she was looking for...and it wasn't here. After all her work, it wasn't here.

She knew they had said not to reawaken her 'pet', but what choice had she had? And what harm could it do while she was here? She'd made sure that she had total control over it this time. If she didn't, how could she be sending it out to scour the ground, smell for traces of the city? She watched it scamper off, moving swiftly from spot to spot, taking a quick sniff before continuing the search.

She had many minions from her time in power, one of which came into being just behind her.

“Gryal, how nice of you to join us,” Mierdi said flatly.

“You summoned me, mistress, therefore I came.” He too began to watch the wild animal before them, “The real Gryal does not approve of using such a creature.”

“My dear creation,” Mierdi said, looking into his yellow eyes, “you are no longer the doppelganger, *you* are the real Gryal. He is the one behind the glass, not you.”

Her Gryal didn’t respond, but continued to stare ahead. And she joined him, gazing upon the barren landscape, upon the lonely animal searching desperately for...something. Time didn’t seem to matter here. Here it was always sand and sun. No differentiation, no sense of hours or minutes.

“It should be here,” Gryal spoke at last, “Everything indicated to this spot. We must be missing something.”

“And that, Gryal, is why I brought our furry friend here,” she responded, indicating it with a flick of her green hand.

He followed the hand, and saw the creature his counterpart despised. He saw it pause.

“It’s stopped.”

Without saying a word, Mierdi began striding after it, leaving Gryal to trail behind.

The animal had stopped at a large rock with a flat top, the only one for miles around, looking odd and out of place. On the top of the rock was an engraving, the shape of a much smaller stone.

“The Contour Stone, who has it now?” Mierdi asked, strangely calm.

“As far as I know, it was last seen in the hands of Chaos.”

“No!” she screeched, twirling to face her minion, trembling. “I should never have let them have it.”

Gryal didn’t back away, or make any sign that he was afraid. He’d been in the mirror too long to remember how to fear.

“I would have thought you needed to part with it to cement your alliance with them,” is what he said instead.

Mierdi's shudders slowed slightly, "You're right." She paused, "You need to tell your men to bring the Stone to me. Do not tell them why, only that if they don't they won't live long enough to hear the end of their screams. Don't forget that without the Stone my plans will come to nothing. This will have been a meaningless venture."

"I regained my freedom," he reminded her, disgruntled.

"And if you want to keep it you'd better get your act together."

Gryal knew it wasn't best to retort, "Don't worry about the Stone; I know just what to do."

*

Noah's outburst during Dr Radcliffe's speech was far from unheard, which is why when Philip moved over to his fellow Mancynn afterwards he was facing a reddened man.

"What was all that about?" he asked, almost hysterical with mirth, still remembering his teacher's expression at the interruption.

"Yeah, that will probably cost me some points in my assistant teacher review. No, it's just that I found it, the piece of information we were looking for in the data we retrieved."

"And you had to shout about it in the middle of my science teacher's talk?" Philip said, exasperatedly.

"It just came as a shock, that's all," Noah retorted, as if that was some kind of consolation.

They paused for a moment, watching the goings on in the rest of the room. Some of the students were still giving Noah strange looks, the rest on the other hand were strolling out in groups, either to the entertainment facilities of the hotel or to their rooms.

"Doesn't it seem a bit odd, that all of a sudden the one thing we desperately need just falls into our laps?"

"Well the search was going to pick up on it eventually."

Philip still wasn't convinced, "It just seems too easy, that's all."

"Are you suggesting that we were given that information, that it's a trap?"

"I don't know, maybe."

“Well look at it this way: have you ever heard of a hero who didn’t walk into a trap?”

Philip smiled half-heartedly, “That’s no good comparison. I’m not a hero.”

“Not yet,” Noah replied, trailing off.

13: Chaos' Theory

There was an awkward moment during which Philip said thanks sarcastically and a response wasn't forthcoming from Noah. Now the silence was becoming unbearable.

"Should we adjourn to my room?" Noah asked, relieving the tension between them.

They made their way to the door, only to meet someone blocking their way.

"Isn't it rather inappropriate for a teacher to be taking a student to his room?" Cary asked, smartly.

"Yeah, hilarious," Philip replied, trying (and failing) to push past her.

She stood resolute, "You don't exactly keep quiet when talking about your secret lives. Not that anyone would understand a word you two say, English or otherwise."

"As you said, no one would understand what we were saying," Noah pointed out.

"Doesn't mean they couldn't mark you as crazy."

As the bigger person, Noah found it easier to push the girl aside, "Well we're going on our way. Was there anything you wanted to say or shall we go?"

Not waiting for an answer, Noah walked off towards the staircase. Philip made to follow, but Cary put her arm out.

"You realise you can't keep us out of it, me, Jimmy and that girl, don't you?"

Philip sighed, "And do *you* realise that I don't give a damn about you or Jimmy? You're an inconvenience, and if you get hurt, it's your fault for coming along."

Cary had never been one to give up in an argument, but since she'd met Philip, she'd not been able to do anything else.

This time they were in Eve's room. She couldn't exactly leave and wander around with the other students, and she was getting lonely. But was being bored really better than being lonely?

"So what is it?" she asked again, still not taking in what she was seeing.

Noah moved the phone nearer to her face, “It’s a record of all the machine’s preliminary tests, and their results, since they plugged it in just after we arrived. There’s also some information that could lead to its true purpose.”

“And have you come any closer to working out what that is?” Philip pressured him.

“I’ve made some headway, yes.”

“That was fast,” Eve remarked.

“Well it was all laid out for the reader in the database.”

“A lack of encryption just strengthens my point about being wary,” Philip reminded him.

Noah waved the words off with his hand, “Ah, what’s the worst they could do?”

The phone pinged, causing them all to jump.

“It seems the search didn’t stop at the file,” Noah smiled.

“Initial maximum energy output...” Philip read off the screen.

“I may only work with cars and helicopters, but that’s a hell of a lot of power,” Eve breathed.

“Enough to fuel the US power grid for a year, probably more,” Noah calculated.

The three of them looked at each other.

Noah continued, “Something that powerful can’t be used for anything good, a weapon, perhaps. Whatever it is, it’ll have to be destroyed.”

“Whoa, hang on. That machine could be used to solve the world’s power problems,” Philip exclaimed.

Noah turned back to him, “You want to save the world from a power war, fine. You have the plans on the phone. But right now, I’m trying to save the world from five biblical doom-bringers whose sole intent is to bring our world to ruin.”

“Fair do’s,” Eve shrugged.

Philip glared at Noah, but didn't take the argument further as the blueprints of the machine reopened on the screen. Noah zoomed in on the lower section of the picture, where the human and alien technologies were fused by a transformer.

"Look here," Noah indicated small cylinders running alongside the human-made pipes and around the transformer. "Those are coolant tanks. The amount of energy required to sustain that thing must be astronomical. The piping which supplies the machine with energy would surely heat to melting point, even if they don't have to give full power due to the transformer. Without the coolant, the entire operation would either shut down or explode. Whichever, we win."

"An explosion?" Philip repeated, stunned. "Won't that take out the Collider as well?"

Eve shrugged, "We'd just have to hope they've put in safety measures."

Philip went back to glaring, this time at Eve.

They spilled out into the Place des Cinq-Continents car park from the minibus they'd taken yesterday, milling around once on the level ground. Next the teachers descended from the vehicle, pulling out the registers as they joined the students on the tarmac. All were there, as they should be, so this coach-side assembly took no longer than it had to. Like in CERN, the students were split into groups, each with a respective tutor (or in one case, Noah). They had some time to explore the town centre before they had to regroup by the coach, when they would be entering the Théâtre Forum.

It would have been perfect for Noah if those in his group were Philip and Eve alone, but fate was cruel like that. And as it happened, so was Dr Radcliffe. But really, what were the chances that in his group would be that damned girl Cary?

But it looked like there were some smart teens in his care (well, they were on a science trip, they were going to be intelligent...which didn't exactly explain Cary, but when is there not an exception that proves the rule?); they could take care of themselves.

Making their way into the streets of the town, Noah handed one of the boys the tourist map, before stepping aside with Philip and Eve.

“Are you sure you can remember your way around the facility?” he checked with Eve for one last time.

“Spend a few days in the same few rooms and you get to know them. Yes, I can remember the way.”

“Do you have the plans?” Philip asked Noah.

Noah patted his pocket. They looked over at the group, and saw they were following their set path. Then there was Cary.

“Do you ever stay with the group?” Philip sighed.

“They’re boring,” was her response, nodding her head towards the huddle of students, peering momentarily at the map. “Won’t they notice you’re gone?”

“We told them we were called away to help Dr Radcliffe with something,” Eve explained. “They can follow the recommended route by themselves easily enough.”

At these words, Cary’s ears pricked up, “As you said, they can get along just fine by themselves. I can come with you.”

“All the times I explain to you that I don’t care if you get hurt, do you just hear noise and take none of the words in?” Philip moaned, burying his head in his hand.

“Obviously you didn’t hear the part where I said my coming here wasn’t solely about our damned school assignment.”

Philip turned to Noah, begging for help with his eyes. Thankfully, Noah took over.

“You’re completely sure you want to come with us?”

“Yes...” Cary pleaded.

Once again, the Mancynns looked at each other. Smiling, Noah extended his hand slightly in Cary’s direction. At the same time, Philip took a hold of Eve’s jacket and Noah’s sleeve. Eagerly, Cary made to touch Noah’s hand.

She was alone in the street with her group walking away.

She looked around, screaming, “SON OF A...”

*

Philip fell on the grass, laughing with a smile stretching from ear to ear. Noah too was smiling, but not to the same extent, more marvelling at his own split-second, if not cruel, joke. Eve gave a nervous chuckle, feeling she should join in, yet not fully understanding what was so funny.

But soon the laughter subsided. No amount of trivial humour could mask the thought of what lay ahead. No one had seemed to have heard the hysterics going on outside, so they weren't interrupted by anyone in uniform. No one saw the three disappear into thin air.

"This way," Eve whispered in their ears.

Though they were out of *phase*, she at least was unsure if they could still be heard.

She led them down a side corridor, different to the one Mr Dobrowski had taken them along the day before. But despite the difference in direction, the passageways were almost identical. Yet Eve appeared to know every twist and turn, the multiple routes evidently burned into her memory. Keeping contact with her, Philip slipped the stone from his pocket. It was useful to see a whole map of the complex, but it showed no clear route. That was where Eve came in. Then he realised something.

"If you know your way around these corridors, then you must have been here before. Why didn't you escape when you had the chance?" Philip frowned.

"I heard some of the workers talk of a teenage boy who had perhaps learnt how to work the machine. I was hoping that it was you. I had no idea where I was, what would I do once I got out? Ask for a ticket on the next flight back to Auyantepui?"

At these words Philip's heart rose slightly. She had stayed for him, when she could have fled. But then he reminded himself that when last they had met in Venezuela, she had held a deep contempt for him, and it was more likely that she waited for him because she knew him, not for any other emotional reasons.

"Your parents mentioned that you were coming here on the second day hike, after...you know," she elaborated helpfully.

They rounded a corner to find themselves on a walkway, which spanned across a myriad of machinery, different magnets, detectors and calorimeters. Peering below through the slats,

Philip could see workmen moving about on the floor, making adjustments to the complex equipment. On the wall beside them was a door and keypad, just like the one by ATLAS. Coming back into *phase*, Philip indicated the door with a slight motion of his hand. They understood, and began clambering over the metal barrier. They figured they had to be in *phase* to make their descent, but this meant they were visible to those below. If one of them were to slip, if one of the workers was to for whatever reason look up into the higher mechanisms, they would be discovered. Their secrecy depended on such events not happening, breaking the delicate balance. And it was just as this cruel reality was dawning in Eve's mind that something of the unfavourable sort occurred. As she lowered herself onto one metal pipe in particular, the skin on her hand rapidly inflamed, feeling as if it had been thrust into fire. She screamed. She let go. Noah swore. He dropped after her. With the air rushing past them, Noah grabbed a hold of Eve once more, and took a short trip into *transit*.

On the solid floor they rematerialised. To stop the girl's panting and screaming Noah clamped a hand over her mouth, though it took much self control to hold back his own pained groans. Next to the pair appeared Philip, balancing on his feet, rather than falling to the floor.

"Why in God's name was teleporting not Plan A?" Eve murmured.

Before saying anything to either of them, Noah turned to check the workers had not caught a glimpse of their momentary shift in space. But they were still staring up into the workings of the LHCb, perplexed as to what had made the mysterious noise.

Philip ushered Noah and Eve onto their feet and around the walls of the room to the door. Glancing once again in the direction of the workers, the trio *phased* out. Walking through the wall, Philip thought he noticed one solitary scientist turning in their general direction. But what did it matter, they were invisible.

On the other side, there was a circular stairway, just like the one beyond ATLAS. This was all very familiar, a continuous experience of *déjà vu*. But this time, as they reached the base of the stairway, instead of coming out onto a balcony overlooking the cavern, they walked straight onto the white pipes leading from the Collider to the ancient machine in the centre. A number of the computer terminals every few hundred metres were unmanned today, whether there was some meeting or if their mere arrival had triggered the emptying of the room, allowing them to walk into a trap, they couldn't know. But from the moment his foot touched the piping Philip was bombarded with the feeling that he was being watched.

“Is that a lift?” Eve whispered the question, though there was no one but themselves nearby to hear it.

A short distance to their right, there was indeed what looked like an elevator.

“Bloody typical,” Noah said.

Of course, the fact that many of the terminals were abandoned didn’t mean they were alone in the cavern. There were still some scientists away at work on the giant apparatus, so the trio still had to move stealthily, keeping out of *phase*. Progress could have been slower, yet they were not moving at lightning speed. The unnerved Philip was one of the reasons for their impeded speed. He was constantly looking around for the source of his discomfort. That being said, they were about to cause a lot of damage to a massive device whose full potential was yet to be completely understood, a device which was surely treasured by a being who was a hair’s breadth away from killing at least one of their party.

There were no disturbances all the way up to the machine. Up close, it was a lot more menacing. From a distance, they hadn’t felt the ominous presence it brought to the room, the dominating persona it emanated over the lower life forms, the cogs of alien material turning slowly, patiently. At the base, the intricate transformers hummed gently, their non-stop chatter boring into their skulls, growing in intensity as they crept nearer. The heat was becoming more and more noticeable as well, the pipes by which they walked heating up the air around them.

Now they were within touching distance of the machine. Its inner workings thudded away methodically, almost a timepiece in their regular beats. Noah knelt by the transformer, comparing it with the diagram on the phone. Satisfied they were of the same design, Noah put a sparking hand up to the transformer. The sound of bolts turning and locks clicking came from inside, and one of the surface panels came off, dropping into the Mancynn’s hand. Putting it down softly, he looked up at the teens.

“This shouldn’t take too long. It’s a basic energy inductive coupling, not that hard to tamper with. You two keep guard while I disconnect the coolant.”

In the dead silence of the cavern, Philip half suspected Noah’s voice to carry into every nook and cranny, no matter how quietly he spoke. He frantically checked each worker in turn, but none showed any sign that they had heard any part of the plot. He turned back to Noah, and

got a pinch from Eve, who indicated to him that he should be keeping watch. Behind them, Noah was fiddling with the coolant pipes, feeling for a weak point. Compared to the boiling air around them, the freezing fluid came as a welcome reprieve. His fingers fumbled over the slippery surface, both with anxiety and because the material itself was icy smooth. Subsequently, reaching down into the machine, he grabbed a hold of the largest of the pipes. With a sudden surge of increased strength he ripped them away from the electrical conduits, turning them back on themselves. Immediately, the conduits began burning up with the amount of energy running through them. His work done, he stood up and began pushing the teens back towards the elevator. Once again they had to be stealthy, but the other added complication now was the time element. Getting faster and faster as they neared the doors to freedom, the trio got desperate. Noah had calculated that they wouldn't have long to get out of there if they didn't want to be caught in the blast.

Too late...

The machinery erupted in a ball of writhing flames, shrapnel incinerated before it had a chance to leave the blast radius. But at that very moment, the explosion became encaged, not in anything tangible, it just stopped expanding, like it had reached an invisible wall.

But the explosion had already done its damage. The three had become separated, falling over the white pipes covering the floor. As quick as they could, they got back up, continuing their race to the door. However, Philip was drifting further and further behind. Noah and Eve were ploughing ahead, not noticing he had slowed, having twisted his leg. Not that this impeded his determination in any way. He kept moving, running one step at a time. Yet now he felt as though they were not in fact fleeing from the danger, but heading towards it, even with the CERN scientists now chasing behind them.

Noah and Eve got to the wall and straightaway began pressing the button which called the lift down. It was not long before the metal doors ground open, allowing them admittance. Once inside, they turned, staring at Philip, egging him on.

He was but a few metres away. His friends were stretching their arms out to meet him. The doors were closing. He could see them no longer.

'No matter' he thought to himself, phasing out to jump through the wall into the rising lift.

Whack. Philip was sent flying back off his feet. Breathing heavily, he looked up into the face of the immortal skeleton.

“Do you really think I would give you an ability that I myself couldn’t counteract?”

“Live in hope,” Philip glared.

And without warning he leapt to his feet, phasing in mid-jump. And once again he was flung aside like a discarded doll, his limbs twisting around him as though he had no bones. When his body finally crashed into the ground further along the wall, Philip was bruised, scraped and probably bleeding. His bones cracked terribly as they reformed. There was no sign of Gryal, he seemed to have disappeared. He twisted his head to see a pair of shiny black shoes completing their descent on the steps down which he himself had come. Up from the shoes was a pair of smooth trousers followed by the top half of a smart, trim suit. Topping this figure was a head covered in short, curly hair and pale skin.

Gauthier spoke in a condescending, patronising tone, “If I were in your position, I would not so casually squander my gift.”

“What the hell are you talking about,” Philip managed to say.

“You have been granted the right to powers which put you above the rest. You are royalty among men, a mortal god. Yet you use your gift, not to rule as you are meant to, but to rival the Immortals who blessed you with the gift of being the Mancynn out of all the regular humans. They gave you all the knowledge and power you needed. The insolence...”

During all this, Philip had been slipping the stone out of his pocket, painful though the arm movements were. Unfortunately, Gauthier noticed.

“Give me the keystone,” the man said, slowly and measuredly.

“Gryal’s asked you get it, has he? Sent you out like a dog to fetch his stuff?”

Philip continued enlarging the image on the stone, focussing on the elevator shaft. The lift was rising with increasing speed, racing out of control.

“You cannot fight us. We number many across this world, influencing countless governments. They must be found and only by him,” Gauthier’s level tone was wavering, until, “GIVE IT TO ME!”

“Yeah right.”

Gauthier lunged at thin air, his arms wrapped around nothing.

*

Obviously Philip wasn't done being smashed around, or at least that's what the elevator thought as it came up to meet him appearing in the middle of the empty shaft. The wind rushing past his face, Philip rolled onto his back, looking up at the ceiling above him. He was in a lot of pain, but occupational hazards aside, he had to prevent himself from being squashed to death. There was only one thing he could do, and it wasn't without risk, not to him or his companions in the lift under him.

Inside the small, metal box, Eve jumped back against the railing as a body came back into *phase* and landed on the floor. Recovering from the shock, Eve quickly went over to check if Philip was okay. He didn't move. He didn't think he could. The most he could do was swivel his eyes to see Noah working desperately at the lift controls.

He hadn't turned around to look at Philip, but still he said, “Good, you're here.”

He got up from the controls, throwing the wires aside.

“Well that's never going to work again. Are you up to *transit*?”

“Just do it,” were the words Philip forced through his tight lips.

“Get up then,” Noah instructed, holding out his arm for support.

Thinking of the impending crash which surely faced the mechanical box, Philip forced his limbs to move, pulling himself up on Noah's arm. Eve came in close as well, adding support to the weak Philip. Out of the corner of his eye he saw himself distorted in the partially reflective wall. Huddled in a group, the trio moved straight up, through the earth and beyond.

*

The CERN building was spherical, which meant landing squarely on the top was a difficult stunt to pull off. As it happened, it was Eve that lost her footing, only to be grabbed by Noah. Now holding both the teens upright, the Mancynn looked around at Meyrin. All was normal in the Swiss city. The occasional car drove past along the main road, the odd bird crossed the ceiling of cloud, but besides that, nothing out of the ordinary. If the group they had left

behind were keeping to the timetable, they should be somewhere to his left, among the sea of buildings which ranged in height and shape.

“Do you think you could sit yourself down?” he asked to either of the teens.

They mumbled agreements and he carefully set them down on the metal dome. He too was feeling weak, but continued to stand resolute as a look out.

Looking at Philip’s watch, Eve commented, “Shouldn’t we be getting back to the group soon?”

“If you are able to take us into *transit*, then sure, be my guest, neither of us is strong enough to do it,” Noah said blankly, as if not registering that his comment could be construed as rude.

Seeing her downhearted face, Philip quickly added, “Not that you would have known. We don’t expect you to remember every detail we tell you.”

“We’ll just have to wait until we’ve recovered,” Noah rationalised, gazing into the distance.

“And hope no one looks up,” Eve finished.

*

It was a little while later when the bored-out-of-her-skull Cary heard the rippling of air in a side alley. Slipping away from the group, something she had been wanting to do for a long time, she wandered silently over to the alley entrance where Noah, Eve and Philip were emerging, looking around for their fellows. By choice rather than by mistake Philip walked straight by Cary and up to the member of the group holding the town map, Mick Lockwood.

“Running on schedule,” Noah both asked and stated, coming up behind Philip.

“Yes Mr Mason,” Mick confirmed, “We are just on our way to the Théâtre Forum.”

“I know, that’s how we found you.” Noah looked around, “D’you get this lot to learn much?”

Mick raised an eyebrow in the direction of Cary, “Mostly, sir. But, can I ask, why is she here? She hasn’t shown any interest in anything we’ve seen.”

“I have absolutely no idea what goes on inside that girl’s brain,” Noah replied, watching her storm up and slap Philip across the face.

*

“You were a fool, Gryal, to ever think that was going to work,” Warren growled across the table.

“Had you come up with a better alternative...” Gryal began.

“Better than entrusting a human with the control of advanced alien technology?” Mordrin scoffed.

“You be silent!” Warren snapped, before turning on Gryal once again, “You have to put a stop to these ludicrous plans of yours. Without the advice of the rest of the Council, you have no idea where to stop. The more you work on your own, the more you endanger the cause.”

Gryal leant back in his throne, his fingers tips pressed together, his piercing yellow eyes drifting over the pitch black surface of the table to the red form of Warren Marz.

“Are you suggesting that my judgement is somehow...clouded? Or is it that I’m just plain weak?”

“I’m suggesting that you’re reckless,” Warren snarled. “This all started with Mierdi. I thought I told you to break ties with her?”

“You forget, since she rejoined our number...”

“Your number.”

“...I have been formulating and putting into action more stratagems than we had done in countless years previous. Yes, not all of them were successful, but there were always failsafes. I had the foresight to put plans within my plans. Many are still in place, and not even you saw them.”

“Well you are going to tell me what they are and I will take over from there.”

Gryal tilted his head back, staring into the dark sky beyond the glass roof.

“Give me control, Gryal,” Warren repeated.

14: Subliminal Messages

Separating from the party, Philip walked casually into the airport café to sit on the chair next to his dad, his luggage by his heel. As he'd suspected, his father asked him how his school trip had been, and he answered with the carefully chosen words:

“It was definitely eye-opening.”

At least the first day and a half had been. Anything that happened after taking out Gryal's facility under CERN, though informative, had not been to the same adrenaline-fuelled standard. He had read up on some of the ‘must see’ locations within Meyrin, so not all of the facts he heard on that day were big news to him. But the whole learning about the Mancynn and everything else which was apparently conspiring to plunge this world into an alien war they weren't even part of, that had put his holiday above those most people had experienced.

“Well, I'm glad you enjoyed it.”

Samuel put down his cup of tea, folded up the newspaper he'd been reading and got steadily to his feet. There was an awkward moment when his father fiddled with the extendable handle on Philip's suitcase while preventing his newspaper from slipping out from under his arm. Having finally succeeded in his not-so-extensive task, Samuel led his son out of the building and round to his car.

Philip went home.

Not much was said on the car journey. They had listened to the radio, some homage to everyday heroes, accompanied by ‘heroic’ music played intermittently between interviews. The first of his full sentences came when Beth, like his father, began interrogating him on his school excursion. Similar answers were given, but unlike with Samuel, Philip didn't get the impression that she was satisfied with what he gave her. Yet still she allowed him to go up to his room, change into cleaner clothes and freshen up for the lunch she had been preparing for his return.

Like a regular boy he opened his door by touch, rather than walking through it. Once within his familiar surroundings, he flopped down upon the bed, sinking his head in between the velvety pillows. Above him, as he looked at his ceiling, the light emitting through his open

window caused the ripples of artex to cast tiny shadows in multiple directions. From outside the house, the sound of summer birds tweeting intermittently flowed through the air. Drifting up the stairs and under his door was the succulent smell of beef stew and dumplings.

He was home.

Downstairs, when Philip had had time to gather his thoughts, the Quint family ate their meal listening to Beth's second wave of questions directed at their son, to which he answered valiantly, while lying predominantly to avoid mentioning anything out of the ordinary (basically over half of the trip). When they'd finally finished, the beef and dumplings were long gone. Philip only wished they could have come to a close any time earlier, before the meal was over, perhaps. But no, he'd had to waffle on about how he'd learnt this and that in these places they surely hadn't heard of. There was of course no mention of a teaching assistant called Noah or the fact that the young girl they'd met in Venezuela had been there also, but they were minor details.

After tea Philip moved his place of rest from his bed to the living room, where he sat in front of the TV watching the programmes he'd recorded during his time away. He hadn't been gone that long, but Philip had a number of shows to watch and if he didn't view these episodes soon, there'd be a backlog of programmes building up that he probably wouldn't be able to watch before the end of the holidays without it having an effect on the quality of his school work. As his parents were with him, he put on something they watched as a family, not something he alone was interested in.

It was in the advert break of a crime investigation show from across the pond, when Beth had gone to see to her new cat while Samuel went...to his 'office', and Philip was fast forwarding through commercials. At the greatest speed the TV would allow the adverts flew in front of his eyes. There was a white flash on the screen, something that was too short to have been an ad. He didn't know what it had been, maybe a word or two. But it probably didn't matter. He lounged back against a plumped-up cushion, the remote for the TV lolling in his hand. There it was again, a white flash with perhaps a word in the middle. Philip sighed. He paused the recording, rewound and played it at normal speed. He frowned. Upon reviewing the footage, there appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary, nothing which would have been seen as a white flash.

His parents came back into the room, and he finished flicking through to the second part of the programme.

By now he was a number of weeks into the summer holidays, he'd been away to two different countries and his Egypt project was going great, right on track. It was three o'clock in the afternoon on what was for Britain a hot Monday. Philip was sitting on his bed with a powered-up laptop by his crossed legs.

Open on his computer were the internet and the document which he was using to compile any information he was finding. The web page he was currently looking at was of a site like many others he'd viewed this holiday: full of information about ancient civilisations that he mostly knew already, but this one seemed to be hiding those last few facts he needed for his chapter on the arrangement of buildings in your average Egyptian city.

Scrolling down the page, a hyperlink caught Philip's eye. Later, he wouldn't be able to explain what it was about the button that drew him to it, but at that time it never occurred to him not to see where it led. With one swipe on the touch pad he moved the cursor over the icon and clicked on it.

He was brought to a fresh page, not that much different from the last. Looking at the title, he knew the following paragraphs were about lost Egyptian cities. It wasn't exactly the information he was after, but if he wanted those extra marks, he might as well use what he had found. After all, he hadn't done a chapter on lost cities yet.

At first glance, most of the page appeared devoted to one city in particular. On further reading, Philip learned that according to hieroglyphs found in other excavations, there was a thriving metropolis in the southwest of Egypt, which had over time become the centre of ancient Egyptian trade and religion. According to legend, when Akhenaten (Pharaoh of the eighteenth dynasty) abolished the polytheism of the time, the Gods caused the city to be lost to the sands of the desert, ridding the Egyptian people of their greatest place of worship and produce, saying it would only be returned to them once they themselves were able to return and be accepted as the almighty beings they were.

Of course, the website put it in more words than that, using facts and figures along with the occasional photo or drawing to give a back-story to these tales the hieroglyphs told.

Although Philip found the information interesting, there wasn't enough here to fill a chapter of his project. Slightly disheartened, Philip made to return to the previous page. Suddenly, out of nowhere, a series of pop-up ads flashed over his screen. They were appearing faster than his eyes could process them. He only saw snippets of what the colourful images showed before they were covered up by the next indiscernible square: there were blue shapes; red shapes; faces of numerous men and women he didn't know, one which looked a lot like Noah; and there were words; SALE! on...; You've won a...; *don't trust him!*; Need to treat...; *he is the dark one*; Take just a few pills to...; *trust your Gods*; Buy now!...; *pain follows in his wake*. Then there was the face like Noah's again, before a window with nothing on it, just whiteness. No more came after it. Philip shook his head to focus on the now still screen. Now the seemingly infinite line of ads had come to a halt, he proceeded to close them all, one by one, and maybe look at those which appeared to be familiar faces, or messages that you wouldn't think of as belonging to adverts. Yet when he closed the white window, all those beneath it disappeared as well, meaning he couldn't view them again. Oh well, it's not like they mattered.

There was a knock at his bedroom door, and before he answered his mother was making her way in.

"Okay, I'm just popping out into town," Beth told him. "Is there anything you need?"

"Yeah," Philip looked up from where the pop-up ads had been, "Um, if you could get me some audio discs about ancient Egypt from the library, that would be helpful."

"Come with me; you can pick them out yourself," Beth suggested, leaving to pick up her handbag from the kitchen.

Philip looked back down at his computer, figured that this could wait until later, and that he really shouldn't leave it up to his mother to pick the CDs. He saved his document and closed down the laptop, before snatching his jacket from his chair and meeting his mother at the foot of the stairs. She was all ready to go, so she left through the front door while Philip speedily put his shoes on.

In the car, the mother and son set off down the road leading out of the village and joined the dual carriageway. As they drove past fields of lush green grass while surrounded by other vehicles heading in either direction, they listened to an audio-book version of one of the countless novels Philip owned. Listening to the familiar words read out by a well-spoken-

actor, he watched the world fly by, looking at the vehicles on the opposite side of the road. Ahead, coming towards them, was a line of long lorries, each with a different picture on the side. He watched them pass, fast enough that they were almost a blur. Philip tried to look at what they were. As far as he could tell, the first was of books, and the second a shot from science fiction, both things he enjoyed. The next couple he didn't quite catch, it may have been a man on horseback, or possibly a red face. There was a break in the line as the road bent around a hill, and then a lorry with a spider on the side went by, followed by a bearded face.

Abruptly Beth brought the car to a halt, and Philip was flung forwards against his seat belt, which dug into the skin of his neck.

"Sorry, dear," he heard his mother apologise.

Philip looked forward out of the windscreen to see a traffic jam reaching to the next junction, which had not at first been visible due to the hill.

The soreness in his neck subsiding, Philip leant back in his seat, listening to the CD once more.

*

In the room he saw a computer. There were in fact thousands, maybe millions, of computers lining the inconceivably wide ring high above the cavern at the base of the Tower, but he only saw the one ahead of him.

Warren strode over to the terminal, and the Braknagh sitting in the seat before it. The little creature gave a pathetic yelp when it looked up into the fiery eyes of the Lord, and cowered appropriately under Warren's gaze. Despite the fact that Warren enjoyed watching those under him writhe in fear, he needed it to stop.

"Get up you miserable wimp," he ordered, and at once the thing obeyed. "How are the manipulations coming along?"

"All according to plan, right on schedule," the minion squeaked with a maybe too optimistic cheer.

"Let me see."

The Braknagh brought up a file full of short sentences and pictures pertaining to Chaos and the Brethren Lords. Warren scanned the work his minion had been doing for him, and smiled with satisfaction.

“What state is he in?”

“The boy?” his minion replied, “Nothing drastic yet, though there are definitely the signs that it has had some effect upon him.”

“Good,” Warren turned from the screen, “Inform me of any changes.”

*

Philip was once again in his bedroom with his laptop resting on his legs, but this time he had the TV on as well. He had given up on trying to listen to the first CD; all he had heard were low-level snippets of sound which he couldn't fully comprehend. The CDs themselves had been fairly easy to find. He had been pleasantly surprised by this. He'd known that there were CDs on ancient Egypt there, he'd found that out on their website, but he just found it odd that they were in the first place he looked.

Now he was half working on his project and half watching whatever happened to be on daytime television. It was currently some pretentious drivel which he cared little about, but he had found nothing better, so had stuck with this channel.

It was ten past, and the program went to an advert break. Philip was about to redirect his full attention to the computer screen, when he noticed a flashing on the TV. He continued to look at it, and he saw that there was only a regular advert being played by the machine. It was for a cleaning agent claiming to 'kill 99.9% of all bacteria'. That advert ended, and another took its place. It was of a skeletal figure on a dark, stormy background, walking across a field of the dead. It was probably an advert for a new film of something. *Flash*. A message, less than half a second long, had appeared over the advert: *Good*. A few seconds later, another message appeared, for the same, short time: *He can help you escape the pain bringer*. And suddenly, completely out of the blue, the screen began flickering out of control, innumerable messages and pictures bursting out at him so fast it was like strobe lighting. Philip's head was burning, white lights popping in his eyes. He couldn't scream, he was in too much pain. He screwed his eyes up and held his head in his hands trying to shut out the stabbing pains, but it was no

use. Those messages were in his head, continually flickering under his eyelids in a white haze. It felt like his head was about to split open.

“Philip, are you okay?” an American’s voice slithered through the mayhem.

Philip opened his eyes once more. The TV was off, blackness replacing the white bombardment. He tilted his still-throbbing head to look at the speaker, and when he caught sight of Noah, a new wave of pain surged through him, forcing him to curl back up on the bed.

“Philip!” Noah exclaimed, quietly.

The man scooted around a mound of discarded books and to Philip’s bedside. Philip tried to open his eyes again, looking at Noah. He winced as the lightning in his head struck again, but the overall pain was lessening now, and he managed not to curl up in agony.

“What was that about?” Noah asked in a hushed voice.

“I don’t know...I’m fine now.”

Noah didn’t look convinced, “You don’t look it.”

Not wanting to continue this line of conversation, Philip changed the subject, “Why are you here?”

Noah remained kneeling, keeping a close eye on Philip, “I’ve been thinking about what to do next concerning Gryal and the other Lords, and I needed to speak to you about some things.”

Philip tried to sit himself up on the bed, pushing the laptop off of his legs, “What is it?”

Noah glanced at the bedroom door, “I’m not sure if we should speak here. Your mother could walk in at any time. I’ve got a car parked down the road, and a safe house where I’ve set up camp. If you’re up to it, you should come to the car, ask permission to go out if you must, and I’ll take you there where we can talk in privacy without risk of being disturbed.”

The pain had mostly cleared from his head now, and Philip did feel that he could get up and move about, “Sure, I’ll meet you there.”

Philip found his mother sitting with her latest read in the living room, flicking the pages casually, and as evident by her expression, not happy with the quality of the writing.

He leant around the doorframe and knocked twice upon the wood. Beth looked up, and shot her son a smile.

“Mum, I just got a call from a friend; he’s invited me over to his house now. Can I go?”

Beth sighed, putting her book aside, “I do wish you would give me more notice...Who is this friend?”

“His name’s Noah.”

“I don’t recognise the name, is he a new friend? Did you meet him on the school trip?”

Philip shrugged, “Something like that.”

“Well, okay, you can go. But keep your phone on you at all times, so I know when you’ll be coming home.”

The pair exchanged smiles, and Philip walked out the front door. It was probably best he left then, for a dark feeling of impatience had been growing inside of him as his mother carried on speaking.

A short distance down the road, around the corner and in front of one of his neighbour’s houses Noah was waiting by a new blue convertible. Philip made sure there was no way his mother could see him, then he got into the man’s car.

Noah began to drive. Philip made to turn the radio on, but Noah took a hand off the wheel to stop him.

“Can’t stand the presenters these days,” Noah muttered.

Consigned to an awkward silence, Philip looked out the window. They weren’t going far from the village, just into the next town. This wasn’t the same town as Philip had gone to earlier, that had been further away. Philip had often travelled through these streets, so felt comfortable amongst the independent shops and the friendly looking terraced housing, not nervous as many people would be alone in a car driven by a man they knew very little about.

Noah steered the car right, passed the fish and chip shop and down another road. Philip leant back in his seat, his head nestling in the gap between the headrest and the door. As the Mancynns curved around the kerb of the bookstore's road, Philip saw something unexpected out of the corner of his eye. Ambling out of the shop doors with a small number of plastic bags in her hands was Cary Cole. And just as he saw her, she looked up and locked eyes with him. The car had moved mostly out of sight before she reacted. Cary dropped the bags at her feet and began to run, not after them, but over the street to one of the terraced houses. The next moment Noah had entered the cul-de-sac and Philip couldn't see what the girl was doing any longer. Dread began to spawn in the pit of his stomach, for when had Cary ever made a situation better or more enjoyable?

Noah pulled the car over in front of a medium-sized house with a small garden and no vehicle outside the garage. There were full wheelie bins though, and through the large window in the front of the house he could see furniture, so either the family who lived here were on holiday, or something terrible had happened to them, for Philip wouldn't have thought that Noah would take him to a house with people currently living in it.

Philip got out of the car, slamming the door behind him. Noah acted similarly, joining him in front of the house. Philip looked sideways at him as Noah took a key from his pocket.

"You have a key?" Philip commented, quizzically.

"There's no need to *transit* everywhere. We can use the conventional means from time to time."

Philip eyes combed over the pristine building, "Nice place. How long do you have here?"

"As far as I know, just over a week," Noah answered, departing from the teen's side and heading up the path to the front door. Philip kept close behind him.

At the door, as the key clicked in the lock, Philip looked over his shoulder back down the road towards the main road running through the town, back towards the fish and chip shop. In the distance, he could make out the outline of a person standing outside a house, insisting to another person standing on the threshold to come out. Philip realised who the first figure was when he remembered that that was the house Cary had run to. Not wishing her to see him again (though the car parked outside may be a bit of a giveaway), Philip slipped into the hallway of the house after Noah.

The only thing on the walls of the hall, besides a lone coat hook, was a mirror at Noah's eye level. There was a door on each wall, and an ascending staircase at the end. Before Noah could lead Philip through the left-hand door, a girl a year or so younger than Philip came through it to meet them.

"You're back. Hey Philip," Eve greeted the pair.

She squeezed around them to go into the right-hand room, the kitchen, to get herself a drink. Philip continued looking at her, stunned by her unexpected appearance.

"Didn't Noah take you back to Venezuela?" Philip asked the back of her head, once again finding himself beyond astonished at seeing her away from her home country.

"Nope," she said over the sound of the fruit juice splashing against the sides of the glass.

"Eve decided at the last minute that her home was too boring," Noah muttered with a possible hint of resentment, as he guided Philip into the living room with a hand on his back.

Philip slumped down on the leather sofa, opposite the armchair in which Noah chose to sit. Eve joined them a moment later with a tall glass of juice clasped between her hands, perching on the arm of Philip's sofa, the other end to him.

After several seconds of silence only broken by the slurping of Eve drinking, Philip spoke, "So what..."

But at that very moment someone tapped four times upon the door, stopping Philip in his tracks.

The three of them went still. Nothing in the room moved. Even the rumbling of cars from the nearby road seemed to hold its breath, hush descending inside the room and outside it.

With slow caution Philip got off the sofa, and, *phasing* out of sight, slunk over to the window. Philip stuck his head through the glass out into the fresh air, twisting to face the uninvited couple. As he had suspected, one of the number was Cary. And what could make his heart sink further? Well, there was the fact that she had with her the little boy, Jimmy Authors. What were the chances that Jimmy lived down the road to where Noah had chosen to stay?

Philip returned to the middle of the room, coming back into *phase*.

“It’s Cary and Jimmy,” he said in the faintest of breaths.

To his surprise, Noah jumped to his feet and stormed to the door. Philip and Eve heard the American wrench the door open and drag Cary in, pinning her to the wall, pressing on her throat.

“What do you think you’re doing, following us here?” Noah growled.

Jimmy pressed himself against the wall and slipped into the living room. He turned, and faced the raised eyebrows of the two other teens.

“I didn’t want to come,” he managed to squeak. “She made me.”

“Sure,” Eve sarcastically agreed, nodding slowly.

Jimmy tried to make himself smaller, making another squeaking sound as he did, and when he still saw that they were looking at him, he shuffled over to the armchair.

Relieving him of the room’s attention, Noah re-entered the room dragging Cary by the shoulder.

“Well Philip, since you can’t control your friend…”

“Oh, she’s my friend now?” Philip scoffed.

“…she might as well stay here, where I can keep her under surveillance,” Noah finished.

Indignantly, Cary freed herself from the man’s grip and found a spot to sit on a vacant chair.

“Who’s missing?” Philip asked, looking around the room, suddenly feeling as though one of their group was absent.

“We’re the only ones, no one else knows about any of this,” Cary told him, looking quizzical.

Trying to put his confusion to one side, figuring he must have been mistaken, Philip finished the question he had begun, “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“There’re a couple of things,” Noah started, forcing Jimmy onto the floor so he could retake the armchair. “First of all, with your memory returning, is there anything the Brethren Lords may have said or done to you that may give any indication as to what they may be planning or what they will be planning?”

Philip racked his brains, though he highly doubted he would think of anything. “Nope.”

“Okay,” Noah said, sounding only slightly disheartened, “then now you need to listen to me. With no idea as to what the Brethren Lords are planning to do, we need to find a way of learning it, and how to ensure that it can’t come to pass. The Lords operate within a network of Towers...”

“What are you on about?” Cary interrupted, snidely.

“Our enemy,” Noah turned to her, “use a vast web of enormous space stations known as Towers as a base of operations. These Towers orbit the bubbles that are our universe throughout time, and they use them to observe as well as interact with our worlds, constantly updating their knowledge of the multiverse via data bursts on a subspace level.”

“And what is it about them that you felt I had to come here to hear it?” Philip asked.

Noah returned his gaze to the boy, “I already told you here was a better place to talk as we are less likely to be found...though I now see that didn’t work so well. But anyways, the Towers are a treasure trove of information, from which we can gain valuable intel giving us an advantage over them. There is also the possibility that we could damage the Tower, maybe even the network, if we have enough time.”

There was a moment’s pause before Philip understood what was being suggested, “Are you thinking of getting on board the Towers?”

“Indeed.”

“Okay, here’s my next question: how?”

“Although Gryal won’t expect it of you, it is totally within your power to summon him. In this event, Gryal would use one of their rather weak Hexagons to appear before you, or at least where you were when he was summoned, then leave via an artificial subspace tunnel connecting that location to the appropriate Tower.”

“What’s a Hexagon again?” Eve questioned him, and before Cary could make a sarcastic comment, added, “Besides a shape, of course.”

“A Hexagon is a device generated by six power modules that is mainly used by those who inhabit the Outer Region, the space outside of our universes, to create an artificial pocket of

space within the Alpha Realm, in which they can exist, their physiologies preventing them from directly co-inhabiting the universe with us. The reason the ones belonging to the Brethren Lords are weaker than those belonging to other races is that they have redirected most of the power usually meant for the Hexagons to something I have only heard in reference to as the Watch. Don't ask me what it is, I'm not entirely sure, other than it can produce pockets of Outer Region and that it was built by the Entities for their initial incursions into our realm." Explanation over, Noah returned the focus of the conversation to what he had to say to Philip. "If you were up to it, I would like you to summon Gryal under controlled conditions, so that we could travel via *transit* into the matter stream, hide on board the Tower and do what has to be done, with the appropriate equipment of course."

Philip leant forward in the sofa, "What equipment? Where would you get it?"

"Where would you get an ounce of sanity?" Cary chipped in.

Ignoring the annoying girl, Noah answered Philip, "Where I get the necessary tools is not important. What needs to happen now is I will take you home; Cary and Jimmy, you need to go home; and Eve...you can stay at home, I mean here."

"What about the rest?" Philip wondered aloud.

Again, everyone stared at him.

"Who else is there?" Cary smiled, though her eyes showed an inner fear.

Philip couldn't think of an answer, "...I just thought...there was another friend...I don't know."

Noah stood, and Philip followed him out to the car, an inexplicable feeling of unease concerning Noah's plan swelling in the back of his mind.

Just as he was thinking about this distrust, Philip took a hold of the door handle, and a sharp shock shot up his arm. Instinctively, he jumped back, shaking his hand. Noah hadn't noticed, and the teen found his negative sense towards the man had grown.

Philip saw Cary and Jimmy at the front door as he joined Noah in the car. They buckled up, and Noah started the engine. As they pulled away from the house Eve was currently calling home, Philip voiced what he had subconsciously been thinking.

“Will anyone get hurt during this?”

“Don’t worry, as long as you stick to my instructions, you’ll be fine,” Noah reassured him.

“Other than me though.”

“The Braknaghs’, the workers’, lives aren’t worth anything...Philip, please don’t tell me you’re talking about Gryal and the other Lords,” Noah said, slowly and warily.

“It’s just, how do we know that they would deserve it?”

Noah almost swerved them into another car at this sentence, “What do you mean, ‘do they deserve it?’ They are evil, Philip!”

“Do we know that for sure though?” Philip pressed on, to Noah’s alarm.

“Philip,” Noah said, through gritted teeth, valiantly trying to keep a level voice, “they would use you for their own gain with no concern for your wellbeing.”

“Yet their cause may be just.”

“That’s it!”

Noah careered the car onto the kerb and slammed on the brakes. Luckily they were both wearing seat belts; else they would have been flung through the windscreen. Twice in one day, what were the chances?

“Listen here,” Noah almost roared, “No intent of theirs is good or just, they only want to abuse their power over the Alpha Realm to overthrow the Entities and control the entire multiverse, becoming the most powerful creatures in creation.”

“But what if they end up being better than the Entities?”

Noah grabbed Philip’s head with both hands, his palms pressing on his ears, “Trust me, they’re not! They’re the bad guys in this.”

Philip tried (and failed) to shake his head out of Noah’s grasp, “How can you be sure we’re the good ones? You might be the bad guy; you have led me into a number of dangerous situations so far. The way I see it, I’d be a lot safer under Gryal’s protection than yours.”

Noah's nails began to dig into Philip's skin, "Have they done something to you? Have you had any contact with the Brethren Lords since you came back from Switzerland?"

Though no experience of coming face to face with the Lords came to mind, the memory of flashing words and familiar pictures swam before his eyes, "Of course not. They've been nowhere near me."

Still not happy with Philip's stubborn behaviour, Noah reluctantly let go of his head, "Just remember: we're the good guys, not the bad ones."

Noah turned the ignition key and brought them back into the flow of traffic, not that there was much. He didn't look at Philip for the rest of the journey. He could only hope that this newfound confusion would pass, or what they found in the Tower would bring him around.

Philip remained unsure as to what to think. All he knew was he was now uncomfortable with any future action on his part while the matter of who was in the right was shrouded by the unknown. Noah was so sure that he was the good one, yet the way he was behaving suggested otherwise. Philip saw it as more likely that Noah was becoming the enemy, and Noah's words had done nothing but water the seed that had already been planted in his mind. Whatever the American's hopes, the upcoming events of the coming day would not be able to change this.

15: Hidden Within

For the past couple of hours, Philip and Noah had been working nonstop to set up a rudimentary security camera system in Philip's bedroom, careful to keep close to each other, so if his parents were to hear something going on upstairs, they wouldn't suspect there was anyone else but their son.

The plan was to conceal themselves in the neighbouring bedroom once Philip had summoned Gryal. Then they would watch Gryal's movements over the cameras, and when he returned to his Tower, they would enter *transit* along with him, carrying a bomb in a crate Noah had managed to...borrow.

Now all of the cameras were up, and a quick glance over Philip's laptop screen told them there was nowhere in the room that wouldn't be under their gaze.

Philip snuck quietly to his bedroom door. He cringed as it creaked open, but it seemed that neither this, nor Noah's work, had alerted his parents to the stranger's presence. They were still watching the TV, blissfully unaware that suspicious events were taking place right above their heads. Closing the door carefully, Philip retook his place by Noah's side, who was just then closing the blue curtains.

"I take it it's not damaged at all," Philip said, glancing at the bomb before them.

"If I had damaged it," Noah responded, "we wouldn't be here pondering that possibility."

Philip accepted that point, "I'd better get on with it then."

Noah stepped over to the cameras to give them one last check over. Philip was left standing in the middle of his bedroom. He was about to get on with it, when he remembered something.

"Oh, wait. That person I was trying to remember. He's my friend, Tony. He went missing a while ago, just before I met you for the first time."

Noah looked at him quizzically, "Your point is?"

"I think Gryal must have taken him."

"And you're...!" Noah began to shout, when Philip shushed him insistently.

There was the sound of movement downstairs, but then all was still.

Noah continued, in a quieter voice, “And you’re only telling me this now?!”

“You know my memory is only coming back in patches. It’s only now that I remember Tony was taken. It’s only now I remember I *had* a best friend called Tony,” he snapped, with an inexplicable burst of anger. And just as quickly as this rage had come upon him, it dissipated.

Noah rested his head in his hand, exasperated, “Okay, we can try to rescue your friend. But his safety is not the priority. We only go after him if we have time, assuming he’s even in the Tower we’re taken to, which would be an absolute miracle. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” Philip confirmed, unsure why there was still an edge to his words. “Should I take the stone with me?”

“No, we don’t want to risk it being taken from us. Anyway, I think I remember the layout well enough.”

Satisfied he’d said all he had to, and ignoring Noah’s advice to calm down, he continued with the plan.

“As the one and only loyal Mancynn,” he spoke clearly, yet not so loud that it would alert his parents, “I request a meeting with Lord Gryal Repa.”

All was silent for a moment, and then the silence was broken by a faint crackling sound. A bright light, surrounded by smoke, was seeping down through the ceiling, coming down drip by drip, coalescing before him. The pair had only a split second to react. The moment they saw Gryal’s blurred form, they ran from the room, into the one next to it.

The Lord looked around the room, inspecting the surroundings. His midnight cloak billowed, though there was no breeze. Its blackness seeped over the floor, reaching into every corner like an ink-drop on blotting paper. The figure’s smooth, white skull revolved on the vertebrae that made up its neck, the artificial light of the overhead lamps casting shadows on the underside of his face. Gryal glared, possibly trying to intimidate the boy with his permanently bared pointed teeth, perhaps thinking he was hiding just out of sight, which in fact he was.

He took one step forward, looking around the bed to see if Philip was hiding there. Something broke under his foot. Lifting it away, Gryal saw the remains of a shattered toy which had been discarded along with others of its kind on the carpeted floor. Deciding

eventually that it had been a false alarm, Gryal began to return to his Tower, planning the just punishment for the worker who had misinformed him of the summons. The tendrils of his mysterious attire began to retract, pulling back to the skeletal form.

As he broke down in the beam, moving up in particulates, Philip took himself and Noah via *transit* onto the spot Gryal was disappearing from along with the crate, having watched him with the cameras, grabbing on to Gryal's energy transfer.

Most of what they could see was random, light colours, no coherent shapes or outlines. They were passing up a psychedelic tunnel. Looking up, it was possible to make out a kaleidoscope of golden rings swivelling around at the top of the vertical passage. However, they did not look with eyes as we think of them. It was more their consciousnesses that perceived the experiences. Their bodies had been demolecularised, each separate molecule spiralling upwards in a tempest of merged personas. And racing past these dispersed figures were trails of slithering ones and zeros, data streams carrying constant updates within the Tower network. Gryal would not be aware of their presence, so for the moment there was no risk of discovery. Above, the opening of shimmering rings was fast approaching. As Noah had been in the Towers before, he knew the best place in the local area to teleport to the moment they materialised. Philip and Noah had to brace for a split-second reaction. They only had one shot at this.

The embarkation room of the Tower was a wide cylinder of black surfaces, littered with crates and other materials scheduled for transportation. In the middle of the room was a raised, ovoid platform. Through a heptagonal hole in the plinth the trio rose, their individual atoms coming back into their original configuration. As soon as enough of the Mancynns' matter was solid again, Noah took them up to the rafters.

Above the bustling workplace the Mancynns secured the crate with discarded chains which looked like they were left over from some construction at this ceiling level. Once certain the bomb wasn't about to fall to the floor far below, they got carefully to their feet. Philip was about to ask Noah what their next move was going to be, when he saw something moving over his friend's shoulder. Seeing Philip's face, Noah whirled around, and in one swift movement released an energy ball square in the face of an advancing minion, a squat, red creature with both eyes on one side of his head and two tusks forcing themselves through the skin on his chin. The minion stumbled backwards, toppling off the rafters and crashing onto the floor below.

“Stupid Braknagh,” Noah muttered.

The Braknagh at the embarkation control console took no notice of its fellow hitting the floor next to it, but rather focused on stabilising its Lord’s form. Gryal stood as his once Entity energy form, a shining silhouette upon the platform. Then the bones and cloak rushed in all at once, snapping into place around the eternal consciousness, looking as if they had never left. Underneath the figure, metal plates rapidly unfolded to seal up the heptagonal hole.

From above, Gryal looked like a white pinprick on the black canvas. Philip knelt on the metal rafters so as to get a marginally better look at Gryal. The Brethren Lord stepped off the platform and strolled past his gaggle of minions, stepping over the splattered corpse. As he passed over it, the darkness of his cloak fed away at the mutilated flesh of the fallen minion, corroding the corpse. Gryal was set on a route march, weaving between the piles of export materials, when he paused. Philip could not have possibly known that the skeleton was inhaling, searching out the source of the scent which he’d detected upon materialisation, but he could definitely tell Gryal was turning his luminescent eyes up to the heights of the towering room. Philip’s heart was beating a quickstep against his ribcage. Surely Gryal wasn’t going to discover them this early on in their operation? But he was not. Having found no evident source, Gryal continued on his way towards a hidden door in the curved wall, which (having anticipated his arrival) melted away, allowing him access, before sealing up again once he had passed through. And once again, Philip felt something he didn’t understand, an urge to go down to Gryal, to be by his side.

Philip jumped as Noah placed his hand on his shoulder.

“Come on. If you want to find your friend, he’ll probably be this way.”

Philip stood back up beside Noah.

“You’re sure he will be in that direction?” Philip asked, questioning the way Noah was pointing.

“Though it has been many years since I have been in a Tower, I’m sure they wouldn’t have changed the layout too dramatically.”

Having said this, he began to walk in the direction previously indicated, not jogging or running, but at a decent-enough pace. Philip followed him along the rafters and into a corridor evidently designed for the Braknaghs (but to humans it might be considered a

ventilation shaft). Crouching down, the pair moved along the corridor into a network of tight passages. They came across no one, but heard several down side passageways. There came a point where the passages split into a fork, one descending into the lower levels of the Tower, the other curving to the left. Just by standing in the entrance to the descending corridor, they could feel an increase in the air temperature, so Philip was glad when Noah led him down the other path. He didn't feel much like going somewhere where he would be cooked alive.

After rounding the bend, the Mancynns were faced with a different design of room. The cramped tunnel suddenly opened up into a wide chamber made of a transparent material much like glass. They stepped out onto what looked like thin air, looking down into a cavern far too wide to see with the naked eye, big enough to hold a small star. There were metal rings suspended from the roof, decreasing in size as they went. At an immeasurable distance below them was a fiery lake, white hot, only as large as a pixel to the Mancynns.

They looked up one at a time, taking a new interest in what lay around them, rather than underneath. On the other side of the crystalline walls were industrial machines and shaded corridors, these big enough for a man to stand tall in. A couple of these corridors had faint lights at the ends of them; others revealed no secrets as to what lay beyond. Moving past the turning machinery, Noah counted the passages from left to right, selecting the third. Just as Gryal had been able to pass through the dark walls of the embarkation room, the glassy substance melted away to form an arch, letting Noah and Philip into the next section of the Tower.

Torch brackets burned on either side of the intruders. There were no windows or defining features for the corridor to have. The only difference between it and those like it elsewhere in the Tower was their footsteps echoing up and down the length of the passage. If the Brethren Lords were to have set up a security system in this sector of the station, their presence would have been detected shortly after they'd embarked on this new route. But by their total isolation, they could only assume there was nothing watching their progress.

Boredom and suspense were battling it out in Philip's mind. Nothing had happened since their entry into the tunnel network, not something he could complain about, but excitement wasn't exactly rife in this portion of their expedition into the heart of Gryal's lair either. Yet there was always that nagging thought that just as the corridor would come to a corner or an end of some description, there would be an adversary waiting to pounce upon their unsuspecting persons.

But it wasn't an adversary as such. The corridor ended where it joined a sort of river, a flowing, wide ribbon of inky fluid. Things floated along in the stream, indiscernible, disturbing things, and through the fluid ploughed the carved pointed prow of a boat of the same bleak nothingness. On the whole, the boat greatly resembled a gondola; it was long with shallow seats fit for only one person abreast. Every part of the boat was draped in shreds of bio-luminous plant matter. At the back of the boat was the shape of a man seven and a half feet tall. There was no visible body to the figure, just a cloak concealing anything which may or may not have existed beneath. He wasn't even certain that the cloak was tangible. To Philip, it looked more like dark air.

As the pair stepped up to the rim of the carved wood, the curls of the cloak rippled. From out of a slit in the darkness protruded a hand, pale as if it was thoroughly sun bleached. Turning the hand over, it revealed two coin sized holes etched into the palm.

"He expects payment," Noah informed Philip in a whisper.

Philip personally thought that a carefully aimed energy burst would suffice, and even if it wouldn't, he didn't expect Noah to have any money with which to pay the figure, not the type of money used in this godforsaken place. Maybe an energy burst should be used for good measure, just in case. Why didn't Noah just fry this piece of filth to hell!

The figure in the boat made a move, or rather, the air into which it moved became darker like its cloak, and the air that it left returned to its regular shade. It turned its shape of a head to look directly at Philip. If it had a head and face under its hood, Philip could not imagine it. The shadow cast by the hood seemed to prevent any concept of flesh under the veil. But either way, the teen could not shake off the feeling that he was being eyed menacingly by something more than just blackness.

"Whatever you're thinking, don't," Noah warned. "Though the Furimun will have been taught to speak, his native tongue is similar enough to our own brainwaves, so he can hear what you are thinking. He exists as consciousness, not matter. He and others like him were caught up in the early sweeps of the Alpha Realm. Due to their energy construct, they ended up being dragged up into the Towers, and almost like a filter, they couldn't find a way back out again. And on that note..." he turned back to the Furimun, "You can read my mind so go ahead, read it. Then you'll know what we're here to do. We can free you. You just need to help us."

The Furimun 'turned' to look this time at Noah, tilting its 'head' in a quizzical manner.

"I think you'll find I don't need to pay."

There was a pause, before the Furimun retracted the hand and raised a long, thin pole from the boat floor. With no sort of barrier preventing them from proceeding, the Mancynns stepped into the vessel, taking seats one behind the other at the front of the boat. The Furimun held the staff forth before him, and the river in front of them began to froth. Globules of the fluid oozed up above the surface level, stretching out towards them, but not being able to fully separate from the overall mass of the river. So instead of the fluid coming to them, the seemingly magnetic pull of the staff pulled them ever so slowly forwards.

They began their journey in silence, the three of them positioned in single file, Philip at the prow, the Furimun at the stern. Philip focussed his attention on his surroundings: the ethereal light sparkling through the translucent ceiling which brought up opalescent patterns on the river and walls; these walls themselves, the building blocks of the Tower both dark and crumbling in places; the sights and sounds of the goings on glimpsed through the odd unglazed window. When he saw these, the word 'home' sprung to mind.

Noah wasn't overly interested; he'd seen it all before.

"You said it was consciousness, not matter," Philip spoke in a faint whisper, so as to not let the Furimun hear him, in case he said something which could be misconstrued as an insult (though now he thought about it, if it could hear his thoughts, the volume of his voice would make little difference), "but it has a hand, we saw it. How does that work?"

Noah gave a sigh, followed by a noise like he was making up his mind, "It's complicated. I guess the best way to think of it is that for the scenario to work there is a need for the Furimun to have hands, both to accept the money and to hold the staff. Therefore, your brain sees a hand. It's not exactly what happens, but..."

"I get it, it's hard to explain."

They fell back into silence, listening to the rhythmic splashing of the fluid beneath them as it broke in the wake of the boat.

As would be expected, their centre of gravity remained at the bottom of the boat. The relevance of this wasn't clear to Philip until he once again looked through the windows to see

they were in fact travelling vertically up the Tower rather than along it. But it was only the rooms on the other side of the wall that gave away this fact. Neither the river nor the way their clothes were hanging indicated a change in gradient. Up they travelled, now gathering speed as the magnetic properties of the staff grew. The air was rushing past their faces, pulling at their rippling cheeks. If Philip had wanted to say something to Noah, he wouldn't have been able to. It was like one of those rollercoasters which shoot you forwards at around a hundred miles per hour. Even Noah, who had surely ridden with the Furimun a number of times during his time among the Lords, turned to look at the gondolier with a perplexed expression on his face, wondering if this speed was absolutely necessary or even that safe. And unfortunately with increased velocity came a decrease in the smoothness of their ride. The passengers were buffeted left, right and centre, their heads struggling to stay in one position.

Philip understood that they were levelling off when the light coming through the ceiling above them began to move up beyond their line of sight. And into view came a bay similar to the one at which they'd found the Furimun. The boat decelerated rapidly, jolting the Mancynns forwards as though they'd hit an invisible wall. The prow of the boat inched up alongside the dock before coming to a halt, the last of the ripples in the river drifting out of sight.

The pair stepped out of the boat and onto the black floor, Philip feeling a bit queasy now that he was standing still. Noah made a slight gesture of appreciation in the direction of the Furimun, whose only response was a continued stare.

Once again they were alone in the twilight of the Tower halls. Once again they were on the lookout for anyone who might be an adversary. Once again Philip was relying on Noah to find his friend.

It was just like before; they were hearing their footsteps echoing in their ears over and over again as they walked between the high-set torch brackets.

"At least it didn't take very long," Philip said, reflecting on what had not exactly been a comfortable ride.

"We didn't go very far, only a couple of dozen floors," Noah replied. "Even if we hadn't gone at such an...untempered pace, it wouldn't have taken that much time. And that wasn't as fast as the Furimun can go. Considering the size of the Towers, his kind have to travel much

faster than what the speed of light is in the Alpha Realm just to get people from the top to the bottom in a short-enough time that the Brethren Lords don't punish them. Don't ask, it's complicated."

The firelight illuminated the path ahead; the orange and yellow rays flickered on the blackest of walls, lapping up the darkness. And then, rather abruptly, the surfaces upon which they spread fell away as the corridor ahead split into a fork. Philip and Noah strode up to the junction, looking left and right upon arrival. Each path looked identical to the other, so there was no clear way of discerning which led to where Tony might be being held captive. Noah took a few steps down one corridor, then came back to look down the other.

"If you're set on finding your friend, we'd better split up," he said, turning to Philip. "I'll take the right, you can take the left."

With his instructions given Noah began to stride into the shadowy depths of the right-hand corridor. Philip stood still for a moment, staring after his partner. It took this time for what he had been told to sink in and when it did he didn't react instantly. Noah hadn't exactly given him any warning that he was about to be left on his own. Philip was just thinking that perhaps this wasn't the best idea looking down his designated path, but then reasoned that he didn't have a choice. Already Noah had vanished from sight, even with the light from the torches. The way he saw it, there was nothing else he could do.

*

Not that Philip had been an inconvenience, but now he was alone Noah could move with greater speed and stealth. He put into practice the skills he'd picked up over the years as the active Mancynn, keeping out of the torch light and stepping lightly so as to make the softest of sounds. He was covering great distances in his silent strides, passing open windows and very rarely a doorway.

Just when he was starting to get to the end of his tether with these repetitive hallways, Noah came out onto a balcony halfway up the side of the large, dome-shaped room he'd been looking for. He glanced up at the holographic ceiling, which was displaying a number of files open for anyone to see, before glancing at the floor, which was a maze of electric-blue, bookshelf-like furniture, a nest of databases humming away at a frequency undetectable by humans. Also on the ground level were small groups of Tower minions, scientists probably.

Noah vaulted himself over the balcony barrier and like a cat landed on top of one of the databanks. Looking around, he saw that no one had heard or seen his descent, and for that he was glad. None of the Tower's inhabitants were nearby, so the Mancynn swiftly climbed down, using the outward-sticking energy ports as footholds. Once on ground level, Noah jogged up to a monitor attached to the wall of electronics. Opening up one of the main systems, he found his position in relation to the rest of the Tower. Unfortunately he was not near the detention centre, where Philip's friend would most likely be, yet there was something to be had in this room. This something was why he'd chosen this path, temporarily leaving Philip to search for his friend alone.

Once familiarised with the floorplan of the dome, Noah set off between the azure shelves. At each corner he stopped to peer around it cautiously, his senses heightened so as to detect any hostile movement. It was down his sixth lane that Noah was forced to duck behind a core drive system as a lone Braknagh came walking the other way. Listening intently for the Braknagh to come within fighting range, the fingernails on Noah's left hand began to elongate into claws, a slight pain growing further up his arm as they did so. The Braknagh stepped out alongside Noah, inspecting the monitor on the opposite wall. Noah stood up slowly, creeping forwards. In one swipe he'd sliced through the Braknagh, his claws cutting the flesh as if it were butter. The body fell to the polished floor, and the Mancynn knelt down by it. Noah made a quick search over the corpse, looking for anything which may be of use. However, for all his (albeit brief) searching, all Noah found was some form of taser-like firearm. It might turn out to be handy in close-range combat, but there was no way he could use it to fight long distance.

He stood and looked at the frisked body, thinking that he couldn't leave it there to be discovered. There were no gaps in the computers to stow it away. The only space was on top of the shelves or... Noah retracted his claws while his upper arm increased in mass, his muscles becoming extremely prominent. With his newfound strength, he lifted up the limp corpse and slung it over his head, letting it fly high into the air before landing on the balcony above.

Noah turned again, his muscles shrinking back to normal size, and, now wielding a weapon, continued on his way. This minor hiccup in his journey hadn't occurred that far from the end point, so it was within a minute or so that he was walking into a wide circle in the streets

of machinery. In the middle of the circle was a thick book resting on a glittering lectern. Noah strolled over to the lectern, his footsteps the only ones to be heard.

He had had his suspicions as to what the book was, and up close he had them confirmed. The cover was purple and felt almost scaly. There was no title upon it, only a symbol consisting of two crossing lines.

It was the Book of Alternity, the book of prophecy the Entities had discovered in the Beta Realm. Noah knew he really should be retracing his steps so that he could find Philip and his friend, but he just couldn't resist taking a look at what apparently was to come. That was the point of coming here.

*

Philip had similarly found something other than bland corridor a short time previous, however this was not as interesting or as useful as what Noah had come across. At the end of the left-hand corridor was a seemingly bottomless crater. By the scorch marks on the walls, he assumed that there had been an explosion, and looking down into the space below, he guessed the blast had punctured the roof of a rather large ventilation pipe, one so huge that he could not see the bottom. The crater was far too wide to jump, and there were no ledges on which he could stand.

Philip turned, looking back down the corridor. There hadn't been any other routes to take. At least there was no one else in sight that he'd have to fight. As his line of sight returned to the chasm, he remembered something Noah had said to him.

"Your ability to enter transit, to phase, to fly..."

Of course, Noah had followed by saying that it wasn't flying as such, but even if it was, how had he put it, 'long-distance jumping', it was worth a try. Philip couldn't remember exactly how Noah had said it was meant to work, but he hoped that it would come naturally as he attempted to cross the gap.

With this thought in mind, Philip got in position for a run-up. His breathing became deeper, his muscles tensing. He started to run, his rapid steps quickly bringing him to the lip of the crater. Suddenly, without warning, there was a sharp pain like his cells were collapsing in his arms and a boiling sensation shot down his legs. In shock, Philip stumbled, tears blossoming from his eyes as he tumbled over the edge. Wildly, he flung out his arms, and by chance he

managed to get a hold of the charred floor. His arms were feeling extremely weak after...whatever had happened to them, so supporting his weight was far harder than it would have normally been. Even so, Philip was able to keep himself from falling into the abyss below his dangling feet...his heavier-than-usual feet. The downward force of his legs was too much to be pulled up onto the ledge, he wasn't moving anywhere. Then a thought occurred to him.

On the other side of the crater Philip exited *transit*. Why had he not thought of that in the first place? Philip looked down and saw his legs were still more muscular than was humanly possible. Despite his better judgement, he decided to once again test out his 'ability'. Why not? The crater was behind him so there was no chance of falling to his death, and there was no one ahead of him in the long corridor.

Philip bent his knees in preparation for his second jump. Blood vessels pulsated visibly as he paused. He pushed upwards from the ground with great ease in a forward direction. Before he knew it the air was rushing past his face, through his hair and down his jacket. From what he could tell he wasn't halfway through his arc when the same stinging sensation as before flooded his body, only this time in reverse. The extra mass and more from his legs shot up into the front of his body, adding further momentum to his flight path. His body was propelled forwards until he crashed into the black floor. Philip gingerly picked himself up.

"How in the world can you call that flying?!" Philip shouted at Noah, though the Mancynn could not possibly hear him.

Philip stood, shakily. There was no one running down the corridor to face him after hearing his outburst, so that was a good sign. Disgruntled, and only slightly deterred, Philip wandered on, seeing a change in the intensity of darkness ahead.

It turned out that his chosen corridor led onto a balcony not unlike the one Noah had found (though he couldn't have known this), a balcony overlooking the inside of a gigantic cylinder lined with numerous other balconies, level upon level. And each of these balconies, including the one Philip was standing on, was home to innumerable detention cells, whose doors were a mesh of bars rather than the ordered ones in human jails. Many appeared empty, though at this distance Philip could not be certain.

He began to walk around the balcony, past cells which certainly were uninhabited. He ran his hand along the cages, listening to the metallic sounds this made. Until, that is, he was stopped

in his tracks by a blood-curdling roar emanating from below him, deep as anything he'd ever heard. Philip leaned over the barrier that protected him from falling over the edge of the balcony to try and look at what it could be. He did this to no avail, but he did hear the sound of tearing flesh accompanying the animalistic growls. He only hoped that he wouldn't have to face the creature any time soon. '*Worthless beast*', he found himself thinking, instinctively.

Further up the path he came to a ladder climbing through holes in both floor and ceiling, acting as a means to travel between levels. Through the hole in the floor Philip could see a Braknagh carrying a tray of basic sustenance walking on the lower balcony. Philip didn't want to risk confronting that creature he'd heard, but that tray was more than likely intended for a prisoner, perhaps Tony.

The Braknagh didn't hear Philip land cat-like behind him. There was no sense in attacking the worker, no matter how much his bloodlust yearned to. If Philip did then there would be even less chance of finding Tony. He kept his distance, not wishing to be discovered, yet near enough as to keep the Braknagh within his sights. Around the circle of the balcony he snuck, peering into the odd cell just in case the Braknagh wasn't actually going to Tony. He didn't see anyone in the cells, though it was a bit disturbing to see bones, especially ones that didn't look completely humanoid.

Up ahead, the Braknagh came to a stop outside a barred door. Philip paused also, wondering whether to stay put or to risk getting caught by moving closer. In a second he had chosen the latter, and slunk along the wall towards what he hoped was the cell of his friend. Unfortunately, the bones from an ex-prisoner had fallen out of a cell and onto the floor in front of him. It was one of these bones that Philip kicked into the cell bars, sending out a metallic ring into the open space of the prison. Philip saw with wide eyes the Braknagh turn its head sharply, then hurriedly put the tray down to free its hands, which reached for a pistol-like weapon in its belt. Philip on the other hand had no weapon other than what the Brethren Lords had given him. And it wasn't as if he knew the full potential of his abilities, so when the Braknagh released an energy burst in his direction, the only thing he instinctively did was raise his hands in self-defence. As it happened, this had the desired effect. The energy appeared to bounce off Philip's hands and back at the shooter, blasting it off its feet. Shocked by what had just happened, Philip took a step back, looking at his hands. Was there anything he couldn't do?

The Braknagh didn't stir, but merely smouldered where it lay. The Mancynn stood over it, trying not to inhale the disgusting fumes it was giving off. Most of the body was fried, yet there were some things with colour in them, a colour other than ash grey. Among these few objects was a hand-held device showing a layout of this room and those around it, the images similar to those shown by the stone Noah had given him. Philip picked it up out of the ruined body and turned it over in his palms.

“Hey...Philip?”

Philip froze, not wanting to believe it until he was sure. He looked into the cell, into the shadowed eyes of the friend he'd lost in the penultimate week of term, his best friend for so many years. Tony Mantegna was getting to his feet, supporting himself on the wall as he did so, hushed sounds escaping his mouth. He was still wearing his school uniform, but by now it was almost dirty beyond recognition as well as torn in numerous places. Slowly he got to the web of bars separating him from Philip.

“Took you long enough,” Tony chuckled weakly.

Philip wrapped his fingers around one of the bars, and then tried to squeeze it.

“Stand back,” he said softly, getting into the right state of mind.

Once Tony had done so, Philip concentrated all his willpower into once again increasing his muscle mass. Now he had a better idea of what he was meant to be doing, the process was quicker, though only fractionally less painful. His body was still not used to undergoing metamorphosis. When his arms were sufficiently enlarged, Philip took hold of the cell door with both hands and began to twist the bars out of place, causing tears to open up in the joints between them. And all of a sudden, when the strain on the door became too much, the mesh snapped away with an almighty crash. Philip threw down the bars and helped his friend through the hole he'd made. There was a moment of silence where each stared at the other, and then Philip wrapped his friend in a tight embrace.

“Okay...okay, stop. You're hurting me,” Tony smiled.

“Sorry”, Philip apologised, letting go of Tony and returning his limbs to normal size.

With the moment of reunion fading, Philip looked once again at the device he'd picked up from the Braknagh.

“I think with this we can navigate our way out of here.” Philip sighed, “Look, Tony, I’m really sorry about what’s happened to you. You shouldn’t have been pulled in…”

“Philip, I just want to go home,” Tony interrupted, “Now use that thing to take me there.”

“Sure.”

Philip began fiddling with the device, pressing random buttons as well as the screen to try and get a response.

Whilst getting used to manipulating the map, he commented, “You seem surprisingly accepting about the fact your friend can deflect lasers and bend metal with super strength.”

“Well, you know, once you’ve been kidnapped by the physical embodiment of a supposedly mythical doomsday figure, you tend not to question details like that,” remarked Tony, watching Philip work.

Suddenly the device began registering Philip’s instructions, and illustrated a route to the embarkation room.

“This way,” Philip pointed towards a ladder further up the balcony, starting to walk.

He didn’t get very far, however, before the air in front of the ladder rippled, and settled in the form of Noah. Tony shot a cautious glance in Philip’s direction, but figured this man must be on their side from his lack of reaction. Worryingly, the Mancynn’s expression was one of deep unease.

“Is this your friend?” he asked briskly, striding towards them, a look of immense confusion rapidly spreading across his face. “Do you know what the odds are that he’d be in the one Tower we’d end up visiting?”

“Yes, this is Tony,” Philip answered, warily. “What’s wrong?”

“I told you about the Book of Alternity, right?”

“The book found in the Beta Realm, yes,” Philip said in the same cautious tone, nervous of what could be coming next.

“Well I found it. I read it...Look, its predictions haven’t been wrong so far...but it said that at some point in your near future, the fate of everything will rest on whether or not you kill your best friend.”

Both the boys took a step back.

“Why would I want to kill Tony?!” Philip burst out, panicky tones now filling his words.

“Yes, why me?!” Tony almost shrieked, some strength returning to his voice.

Noah put his hands on their shoulders in a reassuring manner, “I don’t know. As always, the Book of Alternity is anything but clear in its predictions. But if you remember, information was the primary reason we came here, and this was how I always meant to get it.” With the look of unease that had been on Noah’s face now on those of the two boys’, he pressed on, “Why didn’t you just enter *transit* and get back to the embarkation room as soon as you had your friend?”

Settling down slightly, Philip answered, “I figured that when you found your route didn’t lead to the prison, you’d find us down this one. I couldn’t guarantee that if we went straight there that we’d cross paths with you. And as you can see, I made the right choice.”

“Yeah, well, are you strong enough to take us there now?”

“I guess so.”

Tony was slightly perplexed when his friend and the strange man held onto his once-smart school uniform, and became even more so when he was without warning whisked away, only to land heavily on a metal rafter high above a dark room, lying separate from the others.

The man was already standing up and examining the scene far below, “Good, they haven’t sent the update yet.”

Tony turned his head to see Philip was standing by a crate which had been secured to the beam. In fact, he wasn’t just standing by it, but slipping off the chains and taking off the lid. Tony stood up on his weak legs and stumbled over to Philip. Up close he could look inside the crate, at the military-grade device being activated at his friend’s touch.

“So what is this?” Tony asked.

“It’s a bomb,” Philip put bluntly.

Tony continued to watch the bomb being prepped, the remote timer being adjusted, “One bomb won’t make much difference.”

Philip didn’t stop his work while answering his friend, “According to Noah, there are regular updates between the Towers, where data is transmitted to every one in the network so no one is unaware of any new information which may end up integral to their work. The idea is that we will program the bomb to detonate at the moment they open the portal,” he freed a hand to point at the ovoid platform, “so the energy of the blast will be transmitted to all of the Towers at once, hopefully doing some serious damage.”

“But that won’t be happening any time soon,” Noah said, coming over from his end of the rafter to join them by the bomb. “We’ll just have to wait until they begin to upload the program into the portal, and there’s no way of telling when that will happen.”

“While we wait, how exactly are we meant to get out of here if we’re utilising the portal? I assume that’s our exit as well,” Tony pointed out.

Neither Philip nor Noah spoke, but looked at each other.

“I’ll get to work on that,” Noah muttered.

It was twenty to thirty minutes later before something of interest began happening down at ground level.

“It looks like they’re about to start the update,” Philip informed the other two, walking over from his vantage point on a nearby rafter. “Have we got anything yet?”

Noah sat there, rubbing his temples with his hands, “I have no idea what to do.”

“Well that was some rescue, guys, thanks,” Tony said in a sarcastic and weak voice.

Nothing else was said, the trio was stumped as to what their escape plan should be, if one was even possible.

“Should we set the bomb then?” Tony suggested, finally.

“Why hasn’t it happened yet?” Philip changed the subject, ignoring Tony’s damning path of action.

“What do you mean?”

“I saw them start the update a few minutes ago, why hasn't the portal opened yet?”

Noah looked up at him, “There's always a delay between activating the update and it actually happening. It takes time to gather up all the new data for transmission...” Noah's voice trailed off, and a hopeful glint shone in his eyes, as if the man had undergone a eureka moment. “If we act now, we can get out of here.”

Without explaining his words, the Mancynn jumped to his feet and took Philip's place on the nearby rafter, squinting down at the ovoid platform.

“Care to elaborate?!” Philip called after him.

“When I give you the signal, set the bomb and move onto the platform.”

And with that, before their eyes, he jumped into open space and vanished. Philip stumbled over to where Noah had been standing, leaning over the edge to watch the Mancynn reappearing behind the Braknagh working at the platform's control panel and killing it in one strike. Immediately other denizens of the Tower were swarming into the room, throwing everything they had at the intruder. Philip could only watch as his friend fought off countless weapon blasts with his hands while trying as fast as he could to input his own commands into the terminal. Just when Philip thought that he could no longer do nothing but watch, Noah finished with the computer and jumped onto the platform. Still deflecting weapons fire he looked up into the shady rafters and nodded.

“Come on,” Philip instructed Tony, jumping the gap between the rafters to grab onto the side of the crate.

Tony looked on as Philip set the final settings on the bomb's timer, and saw his hand hover over the last of the switches.

“What are you waiting for? Finish it,” Tony pestered.

Philip's hand shook over the switch, and then he flicked it down. He took the remote detonator and grabbed onto Tony's arm.

The next moment Tony and Philip were on the platform alongside Noah. Ducking under the onslaught, Philip showed Noah the detonator, and as far as Tony could tell that they agreed the lag time between activation and detonation was enough.

Underneath their feet the heptagonal hole opened up and they fell down into the vortex of rushing colour. Before demolecularisation, Tony saw Philip flip the switch on the detonator, and then it all melted into incoherent shapes.

*

With a thud the trio fell to the carpet of Philip's bedroom floor. He wanted to lay there for hours, but Philip forced himself to sit up off the discarded, and now damaged, toy.

"When are we?" Philip asked Noah.

"The exact moment we left," was the reply he got. "Check the security cameras if you want proof."

Tony groaned, propping himself up on the side of the bed, "How exactly did that work?"

"When the update program is initiated," Noah explained, opening the door slightly to see if Philip's parents were coming up to investigate, "it takes some time to reach...critical mass, say. In this time it is possible to open the portal and travel through it. However, the moment the program reaches 'critical mass', the open portal automatically redirects to the other Towers so the update can take place. If we had been any earlier, they would have come through with us, any later, and we wouldn't have made it at all, assuming it worked."

"It did," Philip snapped, not wishing to think they had gone through that for nothing.

But then he remembered Tony, and realised that even if the bomb plan hadn't worked, their exploits wouldn't have been a total waste.

"Philip, go downstairs and get some drinks and snacks. It will be a while before we can move to the safe house," Noah instructed.

Philip didn't feel like arguing, so he did as he was told, careful to close the door firmly shut on the way out.

*

Jimmy and Eve watched as Cary bounced a ball against the opposite wall of the safe house while chatting to her friends on her phone.

“Sure, you can come over. Please do. It’s *so* boring here with only this little brat and a Brazilian for company...”

“Excuse me?” Eve glared at her.

“You’re not meant to bring people here,” Jimmy called to her, “they told us not to.”

Cary tried to shut out the squeaky voice, “Don’t listen to him. Yeah, so, you come over to...Hey!”

She tried to tug her phone out of Jimmy’s grasp as he attempted to take it from her.

“They told us not to let anyone in here,” Jimmy repeated, not letting go.

“Give me that,” Cary pulled Jimmy’s fingers off of the mobile, “Just get over to...”

“I’ll take that,” Noah said as he swiped the phone out of her hand, ending the call. “I thought I told you to not bring anyone here.”

“Told you,” Jimmy piped up.

Eve watched Philip follow Noah into the living room along with Tony, “Did you do it?”

“We think so,” Philip answered, sitting himself down on a sofa and proffering the spot next to him to Tony.

“Who’s this?” Cary snapped, looking at Tony. “Are we just letting anyone in on this now?”

“This is Tony,” Philip introduced his friend to the room, before he focused back on Cary, “I told you about him when you first came to me about the Egypt project.”

“You really expect me to remember that?”

“Let’s bring this back to the matter in hand,” Noah said loudly, bringing the focus of the conversation back to him. “Whilst in the Tower, as well as dealing a serious blow to the Brethren Lords, hopefully, and rescuing Philip’s friend here, I managed to gain some valuable intel. I do not know their plans, or when they mean to put them into place. But what

I did find out is that they are going to make a move in Egypt, specifically at 25° north, 26° east.”

“What’s there?” Tony spoke up for the first time.

“Nothing, just desert,” Philip was the one to answer, speaking softly, thinking carefully.

“Obviously *you’d* know,” snorted Cary.

“No, what’s obvious is that there is in fact something at those coordinates,” Noah spoke over her again, “Otherwise why would they go there?”

“Maybe to lure you away,” Tony theorised. “If that information was planted for you to find, then perhaps they’re trying to get you out of the way so that you won’t be able to stop what they’ll do here.”

“No, the information came from...a reliable and tested source,” Noah dismissed.

“There must be something buried there,” Philip butted in. “Any visible object or construct would have been found, and an invisible one would have been bumped into, assuming it was big enough. No, the most likely answer is that they’re after something under the sand.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Cary said with an increasingly incredulous tone, “You don’t expect us to dig up the Egyptian desert just to find some buried object?”

“It may not be an object,” Philip tried to clarify for her, “It may be a cavern..”

“Or a ship...” Eve suggested.

“Or a city,” Jimmy proposed.

A silence followed these words in which everyone present looked at the boy.

“What?” Jimmy shrank into his chair.

Cary got a word in first, “Isn’t that a bit...”

“Correct,” Noah finished the sentence, though probably with a different word to what Cary would have used. “I know what they’re after.”

“What?” Tony asked.

“As Jimmy said: a city. A city built over four thousand years ago by a group of aliens called Murorviosp.”

“And you think that’s what they’re after?” Cary still didn’t sound as though she was taking this seriously.

Philip closed his eyes, trying to remember something, “It has to be. I’ve got a feeling...I’ve heard about this before.”

“A feeling?” Cary could only just stop herself from laughing at how stupid Philip sounded to her.

“Yes...the Egypt project. That’s where I’ve heard about this city before. A city in the southwest of Egypt, lost in the sands of the desert built by people foreign to the natives. It came up in my research.”

“Wait,” Eve turned to him, “If this city has been lost to the desert for four thousand years, how could it come up in your research...unless they wanted you to find it?”

“They are not leading us into a trap,” Noah sighed.

“But just suppose...”

“Stop. Don’t think that way. If we follow a path of fear and paranoia we will lower our chances of success dramatically.”

“Assuming all of this is correct,” Philip adopted Noah’s method of speaking over the babble, “then we need to prepare. Noah, we’ll need you to get more weaponry from...wherever you got it from. I’ll go back over my research for any clues as to what we might face. Everybody else, I don’t know...work out how we’re going to get there.”

“Who are you to boss us about?” Cary objected.

Noah stood up and moved to the middle of the floor, “Philip’s right. He and I need to get moving as soon as possible. As I said, we don’t know when the Brethren Lords plan to make their move, so if we want to get there first, we should make our own move now. It’s better to be safe than sorry. And if we find it first, we may gain the upper hand.”

The two girls looked up alarmed.

“We’re not coming with you?!” Eve moaned.

“Not this time.”

“But we want to go,” Cary chipped in.

“I didn’t think you believed any of this?” Philip remarked, not that he was the one people were listening to.

“If you don’t take us with you I’ll...I’ll...go to the police!”

Noah scoffed, “Yeah, ’cause they’re going to believe this.”

“Then we’ll go to Mr Sneak,” Cary concluded, in the manner of someone who has just put another in checkmate.

This threat was followed by confusion, either because they didn’t know who Mr Sneak was or because they didn’t see how going to him would be any worse than going to the police.

“No offense,” Tony said, cautiously, “but that plan has just a few flaws...”

Cary proceeded to explain her train of thought before Tony could finish picking holes in it, “If Philip is right that this is the place he found in his research, then it’s possible that Mr Sneak, who came up with the project, wanted him to find it, in which case he’s working for those aliens. If all of this is correct, can you afford to let me tip him off that you’re going to Egypt against his bosses?”

Again silence fell over the group as the Mancynns weighed up their options.

“Do you have some sort of suicide wish?” Noah looked around at the assembled group, each with a different expression on his or her face, “Well, get on with it then.”

And as he had at the fork in the Tower, Noah disappeared without another word, purposefully not looking at the boy Tony, whose improbable return was still concerning him.

Left in an awkward silence, the teens waited for someone to do something. It ended up being Philip, who stood up with Tony and led him towards the door.

“Come on, I’ll take you home now.”

“You’ve never been to my home before, how do you know where to go?”

“You can lead me.”

Tony stopped, “No, I’ll stay here with your friends.”

Philip turned to look at him.

“You said all you wanted was to go home,” he said in a darker voice than he initially intended.

Eve jumped to her feet as well and skipped over to them, “He can stay with us if he wants to. Come on, I’ll introduce you.”

And with that she led his friend away and sat him down with Cary and Jimmy, while he watched with a growing sensation of...not satisfaction, but elation, as though he was gleeful that Tony was away from him, but he couldn’t think why.

He had to get home and back to his project, so Philip made once again for the door, until he heard Cary call, “So what is it we’re meant to be doing exactly?”

His buoyant mood shattered instantly, and a bubble of detestation filled the void it left. He span on the spot, fuming.

“Work out how to get there! We can’t go by *transit* as we don’t know the area and we can be tracked; so find us a plane! Give us a bloody holiday!”

The spittle flying from his mouth, and the sweat fresh on his brow, Philip stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him.

*

Warren looked up from the Waters of Lution at the assembled crowd, consisting of a few high-ranking minions and the rest of the Brethren Lords (who didn’t seem totally comfortable being this close to the working class).

“You see,” he smirked, “I have quickly and efficiently broken Chaos’ hold on the Mancynn. He is now confused and more likely to succumb to our influence, something you, Gryal, have failed to do since this whole ordeal began.”

Gryal glared into the fiery eyes of Warren, resentment boiling through every bone. Mordrin leant over to whisper where an ear would have been.

“Are you really going to let him make fun of you?”

Gryal didn't respond, but continued to face Warren, imagining the red face was contorting in anguish.

Warren carried on, unaware of any other conversation, “Now maybe you could implement the next stage of your plan, Gryal. Or will that be too hard for you as well, even with the Mancynn open to your suggestion?”

“There's no need to worry, Warren,” Gryal responded in a steady tone. “We should have no further problems in finding what we need and gaining the upper hand.”

“Then get on with it,” Warren waved the other Lords out, Petti, Stark and Mordrin following Gryal. When they were gone, he looked to his minions. “Go on, I know you haven't finished the repairs at the base of the Towers yet. Do you want our ability to interact with the Alpha Realm to remain impeded?”

All but one of the minions filed out of the observation room and down the service shafts to their stations. The remaining one took the Waters of Lution from the meeting table and set it on a shelf in a gilded cabinet. Fastening the lock on the crystalline doors, it turned to see Warren looking out at the empty space outside the Tower.

“So what happens now sir?”

“Now?” Warren didn't look at the servant, “Now we can make our move. Now we can take a step towards ending this war. Now, truly, it begins.”

16: A City Dead And Buried

The arrowhead shapes of overhead planes pointed the way for the people carrier as it drove as fast as the law permitted down the busy road to the airport. It was the next day. Their speed in preparation was due to Tony's skill with computers allowing him to book tickets a day in advance.

Thankfully, Jimmy had drifted off after his hundredth "Are we there yet?". They had left the dawn behind them a short time before. Just like every other drowsy group in their insignificant vehicles, the intrepid band of mismatched fellows trundled along in file to round the corner and enter the car park. There was nothing to suggest that they were any different.

No one spoke a word. The car doors opened and five stepped out. The sixth snored.

"You know," Tony leant over to whisper in Eve's ear, "we could just leave him here. He'll only slow us down. He's what, ten, eleven, he can look after himself."

This earned him a slap.

"And what happens when he wakes up?" Eve retorted, "The little guy would be scared out of his mind."

Somehow the excitement of these adventures had made Eve a kinder person of late, the good feelings they gave her having the side effect of her caring in some way for those she was sharing them with, even Jimmy.

Oblivious to the bickering, Jimmy turned over in his seat. Cary joined the huddle.

"And I hate to say it, but he could come in useful, again."

Tony had to accept this point and proceeded to poke the boy in the cheek. Jimmy started.

"Are we there yet?"

Tony groaned, "Yes. Now get out of the car."

Jimmy obediently slid out of the car. The four of them turned to go, only to see Philip and Noah had already gone off towards the entrance, carrying the bulky bags. They hastily began to follow. There was a tap on Tony's shoulder. He looked down into Jimmy's concerned features.

“Do you know what letter we parked under?”

“Does it matter?”

“Well if we don’t,” Jimmy had to jog to keep up with their long strides, “how will we know where to find the car?”

“Don’t worry about it,” he said with no hint of a soothing tone, then, to Eve, “I told you we should have left him behind.”

“Come on,” Philip called back to them from the open doors of the airport.

It was a time-sensitive operation; they couldn’t afford to be late.

A grown man in a dark outfit, two teenage boys in similar costumes, two teenage girls in modern fashion, and a younger boy being led by the hand. Metal objects were banging against many others inside the bags the man and one teenager were holding. All around them people were going about their daily lives, or as close to life as you can get at seven o’clock in the morning. They had gone straight past the check-in counters. Luckily not many holidaymakers were at the hand-luggage checks yet. Even so, they kept out of eye shot of the staff manning the desks. Noah put his bag on the ground. They crouched down, clustering in a shadowed corner.

“We’re never going to get that past them,” Eve pointed out.

Noah, Philip and Tony just stared at her. Philip reached into the inner pocket of his jacket and began to pull out something.

Out of the corner of his mouth, Noah muttered to Philip, “Does she not remember?”

“I thought she would,” Philip muttered back, letting go of what he was holding. “I guess she still isn’t used to what we can do.”

He turned to the huddled girl.

“Look, for me and Noah it’s simple to get this stuff past the guards. All we have to do is *phase* and we can walk right through the place. You remember what we did at CERN?”

Everyone turned to look at the security.

“Let’s get this over with,” Tony said.

Philip and Noah rose to their feet, a bag once again in each hand. The other four watched as the pair melted into the surrounding air. They waited a minute, guessing how far they’d got, when the pair reappeared at the door beyond the baggage checks. Seeing this as the all clear, they stood up themselves and strode up to the metal detector, presenting their boarding passes as they did so. Naturally, the men and women by the metal detector didn’t suspect anything as the group went through one by one. None of them set the device off, Philip and Noah had taken all the metal objects across with them.

The shops of Gatwick were open at this hour, lighting up the windows and enticing potential buyers to sample their merchandise. This was all bypassed, despite Jimmy’s tugging and moaning. Impatience grew inside Philip as his mind struggled once more against the influence of the Lords. They should be moving faster, not passively waiting in line like regular tourists.

There was a large room teeming with half-asleep individuals. Hanging from the ceiling were sizeable screens flicking through flight updates. Pushing the crowds apart, Philip bulldozed his way ahead, getting as close to the screens as possible. He’d left the heavy bags behind with the group so as to slip through the crowd easier. It didn’t occur to him to *phase*. He was simply too desperate to get this over with, to possibly get back to anything like a normal life. He reached the base of the screen and scoured it for the information he sought. He was not pleased with what he saw. It was then that Tony caught up with him.

“Found anything?” he asked.

Philip shook his head, “I can’t see it.”

Tony shrugged, “It’s probably on the next few screens. It’s Egyptian Airlines, isn’t it? It’s strange; I didn’t think they flew from here.”

“They haven’t finished rebuilding Heathrow yet, so all flights have been redirected here, or at least they should be.”

“What happened at Heathrow?”

The question went unanswered, and to make matters worse the flight they were looking for still hadn’t appeared.

Tony pointed at the screen, “There, isn’t that it?”

“Can’t be,” Philip despaired, “It’s been delayed.”

“By four hours, oh, that’s not good.”

The remainder of their party thrust their way through to the pair, the bags knocking into numerous bystanders.

“Before you ask, it’s been delayed by four hours,” Tony informed them over his shoulder.

“Can we wait that long?” inquired Eve.

“Not a chance,” Noah breathed.

“Has it occurred to you that this may just be one elaborate lie, that they let us see those coordinates? This place might be genuine, but it could just as easily be irrelevant.” mentioned Cary.

“It’s always possible,” Noah considered, “but what would they gain from sending us on a fool’s errand to a buried area of Egypt? No, it’s most likely that the Brethren Lords got Philip to learn of the city so that he would get whatever it is they want for them, but now he has turned against them, they will be going after it themselves.”

All this time Philip’s frustrated eyes hadn’t left the screen. Ignoring all of them, he turned and began to walk.

“Screw this.”

His companions followed suit, perplexed, tired of playing catch-up.

“What...” Tony got bumped around in the bustling crowds, then tried to reach Philip again, “What are we doing?”

Philip was similarly jostled, “If we can’t get there on our flight, we’ll have to get another one. There’s a private jet out there we can take.”

“I see a few problems with that plan. For one, it’s going to the wrong place, and two: it’s not our plane.”

Philip didn't reply, he just kept on moving. Gate after gate went past, he didn't stop. Noah was managing to keep up, but the others were finding it a little harder, especially Jimmy. Eventually he did stop, tapping his foot impatiently by a man in uniform waiting for the owner of the jet to come and board.

"Come on," he beckoned once more, a little more irritably this time.

Once they were all together, Philip started giving instructions.

"Noah, I assume you know what I'm about to tell you to do."

"That doesn't mean I like it." They had talked earlier about multiple contingency plans in the event of possible emergencies.

"That doesn't matter. I want everyone else to follow his lead and carry on in single file. I will take up the rear. Do not talk to anybody unless you absolutely have to. Are we all clear?"

There was a chorus of nods and confirmations. As instructed, Noah led the group past some line of lethargic travellers at the adjacent gate to the member of staff by it. There was a brief moment where the employee questioned their actions, which was followed by having sparking fingertips placed on his temple, an action which Noah tried to shield from any onlookers. Noah took the hand away, leaving the young man swaying slightly, the inside of his head prickling. The staff member made some incomprehensible noise of confusion.

Noah spoke clearly, yet quietly, so that only the man could hear him, "You were about to escort me and my group up to the plane before the others as we have a message to give to the pilot. And those who come after us aren't to be allowed aboard."

"Yes...yes, of course."

He opened the doors to the gate and led them through.

The roar of planes moving up to take off filled the open air. It wasn't a long walk from the gate to the plane. The one to which they were headed glistened blue in the light of the rising sun. The mobile stairs were in place. Cary walked behind Noah, leaning forwards to whisper into his ear.

"What did you do to him?"

Noah murmured back, “I simply scrambled his short-term memory with a minor electromagnetic pulse, nothing dangerous.”

Though the sun had risen, the summer heat had not yet settled in. The chill of the night still hung over the area, sending shivers down the spines of all those outside. All except Philip. The closest thing to a shiver with him was a twitch in his hand as it wrapped around the handle of his pistol concealed in his inside jacket pocket, compliments of Noah.

When they were all inside, the gate manager left them to see to those who were meant to be travelling in this plane. When he was out of sight, Philip placed his palm onto the mobile stairs. They retracted from the plane, so no one else could embark. He wasn't quite sure how he knew how to do this, he just did. The stewards were working at the rear of the plane, and as such had not noticed their arrival. Philip indicated the seats to his fellows.

“Please, have a seat. I'll just be a minute.”

“Where are you going?” Eve asked him.

“As our friend said,” Philip muttered, “we have a message for the pilot.”

He moved into the cockpit. They heard nothing at first, and began to wonder what he could be saying. Then there was the distinct sound of a gun cocking. Cary leapt to her feet and marched after him. Tony grabbed her forearm.

“I don't think you should be going in there.”

She wrenched her arm out of his grip and continued on her way.

When she got in there, she found Philip with a pistol pointing directly between the eyes of the pilot. The co-pilot wasn't moving, he was just transfixed by the scene before him, by the unmoving barrel. Philip hadn't noticed her.

“I don't see what's so difficult,” he was saying through gritted teeth, placing a piece of paper on the controls, “just take us to these coordinates. There are no passengers, they won't get hurt, and if you comply, neither will you.”

Cary edged forwards, placing her hand on his shoulder, “Philip, you shouldn't be doing this. You shouldn't have to *shoot* anyone.”

To her surprise, Philip's head whipped round to stare at her, but the barrel of the gun never moved an inch, "You're only here because of two things: you know too much, and I brought you here. If you continue to question my judgement, I will lock you away somewhere you cannot interfere, is that understood!"

She had stepped back at his violent manner; she had never heard his voice so angry.

Philip spoke again, a little more calmly, "Now get back to your seat."

She did so, and he turned his attention back to the pilots. There was a crackle from the speaker in the pilot's headset. Slowly Philip took a hold of it, and covered the microphone.

"Now I'm sure you don't want me to shoot you, so I'd advise you do as I say. And if either of you do anything ... unwise, if the authorities come to intercept us, then you'll be explaining to your employers why they have to replace their stewards."

Both just looked at him and the gun.

"Well?!" he stressed the word in a maniacal tone, "Get this damn plane off the ground."

They did as he said, preparing for takeoff. Satisfied they were doing as he wished, Philip lowered the gun and retreated back to the seating area. He didn't sit with the others, but a few rows back on his own. The plane rumbled and shook as it turned onto the runway. The captain's voice rang out through the intercom.

"This is your captain speaking. This is a message to cabin crew: in light of recent events, we have had to take a new course for today's flight. We will not be going to America as scheduled, but rather to a remote location in Egypt. This is an emergency flight, so we will not be carrying our original total of passengers. On our flight instead will be a group of six people. Enough time has elapsed for us to use our original take off slot. Please, enjoy your flight. Thank you."

Eve and Noah, who were sitting next to each other, turned in their seats to look at Philip as the plane took flight.

"You have to cut him some slack," Noah said in an undertone, "You have no idea what he's going through."

"No, and I won't until somebody tells me what's going on," she hissed back.

Noah thought about how to put this, “When I broke off from the Brethren Lords, they didn’t put up a fight. True, they’ve tried to kill me on a number of occasions since, but they never tried to take me back. But with Philip, for whatever reason, they’re not letting him go. Maybe they think that they don’t have time to mould a new Mancynn to the necessary standards, maybe they think he’ll be too much of a threat to their cause, we can’t know. So now he essentially has two mindsets: the rational one, the one that knows the truth and thinks for itself, and the Mancynn objectives, which they are pressing upon him. Think of it as a battlefield in his brain, the two personas struggling for supremacy and influence on his actions. With all that going on in his head, I’ll be surprised if he can tell right from wrong at this moment. He’s having to rely on first instincts and he can’t be sure if that’s the best course of action, even if he has no other ideas.”

Eve looked at Philip with new sympathy in her eyes. She watched as the stewardess came over to him when the plane levelled out, watched as his unbalanced psyche lashed out, watched the internal struggle show.

“He really should be left alone, to let everything settle. It will only prolong the pain if he is agitated.”

*

As the plane accelerated into takeoff, Philip closed his eyes and tried to shut out the rest of the world. This only resulted in increasing the irritation behind his eyes. The image of Gryal’s demonic face swam in the darkness of his vision, those yellow eyes boring into his. He knew he wouldn’t get any rest on this flight, so he might as well go over their plans, double check the timings for each stage of the operation. As he had done repeatedly in the car, he opened one of the bags and checked its contents, on the off-chance that they had forgotten something. Satisfied that everything was in place, he resealed the bag and put it to the side. This was going to be a long five hours. It was as fast as they could go, though he did wish they could go that little bit quicker.

It couldn’t have been too much later when he heard someone’s footsteps coming up behind him. The plane had levelled out by now and the seatbelt sign had been turned off. He raised his pounding head to look at the newcomer. The stewardess had braided black hair reaching halfway down her back. Her face was stiff with Botox, her cherry lips oversized. Her

fluttering eyes were an emerald shade of green. On a tiny, laminated badge, was the name Jasmine Petersen.

“Could I interest you in any refreshments?” her voice was as sweet as honey and sounded like, in any normal situation, it would wash away all of your troubles.

“No,” he replied, coldly.

She leant on the opposite seat, “Are you sure I can’t get you anything?”

“I said no!”

Disgruntled, she moved on to see to the others. Philip breathed out slowly, letting his head loll back.

*

Through the cockpit window the pilots watched the north coast of Africa pass underneath the plane, the sands of the Sahara painting the horizon a yellowy-gold.

This was not Captain Roger Richardson’s first flight as a pilot, nor was this the first company he’d flown for. He had spent much of his adult life in the service of one airline charter firm or another, and in this privatised one he was a figurehead to be idolised, a fifty-two year old figurehead. His youthful enthusiasm had gone, but there was still the drive of financing his wife’s, Elizabeth Richardson’s, home and creature comforts. And then there was his new co-pilot, Omari Ingram. He’d never flown with him before, so Roger had no idea to what standard he was at. But he could only imagine what he was going through. A hijacking so early on in his career. Nothing like this had ever happened to him. Roger knew he had to do something resembling heroic action, yet he didn’t want to give the lad next to him any stupid ideas that would get him into worse trouble.

Roger took his hands off the controls and stood up, making his way to the door to the cabin. Once it was securely shut, he returned to his seat. Omari watched as he picked up the in-flight phone.

“You shouldn’t be using that,” Omari warned him.

Roger ignored him, recalling the number of the airline firm.

“You know you’re not meant to be using that during flight,” Omari’s voice was beginning to turn into a growl.

Roger’s phone had already begun dialling, “We have to do something, and this is the only number I can think of that will help.” The person on the other end of the phone picked up, “Sierra-Uniform-Delta-Mike-Whiskey, transponder seven five zero zero. Two nine eight, two seven zero. Find tower communications from our departure.”

Suddenly, from behind them, came the sound of someone trying to open the door into the flight deck. Quick as a flash, Roger disconnected the call. Standing, Omari stepped over to the door, opening it for the expectant Jasmine. The pilot watched, placing his hands back on the controls, as the stewardess and his co-pilot had a few hushed words. He had no idea what they could be talking about, but didn’t fixate upon it, as he had to return to keeping the plane under control.

Omari and Jasmine’s conversation lasted mere minutes. Soon the young man was retaking his seat by Roger.

“What was that about?” Roger asked, changing the tone from that of their previous words.

“Nothing that concerns you,” Omari waved the question aside, then, reminding himself of what had happened before Jasmine’s entrance, “You shouldn’t have told them what was happening.”

Alarmed, Roger turned to see if the door had once again been shut, before replying, “What are you talking about? I had to tell them.”

“Not true,” Omari snapped, starting to growl again, “We should have just given them what they want and we could have gone home.”

“If we were to just give into them then they will kill us in the end. We’ve seen their faces.”

“And by calling in the cavalry you have almost certainly made our situation worse.”

*

Sometime later, Tony slunk over and perched on the opposite seat. Philip opened one eye, knowing his period of tranquillity was over.

“What do you want?” he grunted.

Tony braced himself for the oncoming storm of rage, “You know of this place primarily from a documentary about an Egyptian dig?”

“Yes...” Philip drew out.

“Well, isn’t there a chance that there will be archaeologists working at the site? They might be working for the Lords to find the city...”

“They won’t matter.”

Tony knew he was treading on thin ice, “It’s just that we’re nearly there...”

Before he could finish his sentence, Philip leapt to his feet and marched up to the cockpit. Tony looked after him, worried for his friend.

As Philip re-entered the cockpit he drew his pistol. The co-pilot flinched at the sight of it, letting go of his controls. The captain held his grip. But Philip didn’t make any other threatening moves. Instead, he moved forwards to look out of the window. Below and ahead was a sea of sand dunes, mountains of desert undulating on the horizon. There didn’t seem to be any defining landmarks to signify their location, not that they’d be able to detect them for much longer, as, out of the blue, the radar crackled and died. Without a word, Philip turned to leave, ignoring the questions of the cabin crew about what he’d done.

“It’s time.”

Noah understood, and got to his feet. Together, they unzipped the bags, rummaged within them and drew out smaller bags, one for each member of their party. Passing them out, Philip and Noah each put on one, heading for the rear doors, while throwing sunscreen to the crowd of teens and Jimmy. Obediently, though with no clue what was going on, the other four followed, doing the same with their bags and rubbing in the sunscreen. *They* never got to lead the group.

However, they didn’t get to the rear of the plane. From the back coming towards them was a flustered Jasmine. She stopped abruptly in front of them.

“We are coming to the coordinates you gave our good pilot. Would you want us to redirect our course to the nearest airport so we can land?” she smiled girlishly as she said this.

“No thank you,” Noah blankly responded.

“Then may I ask what you are doing?”

It was Philip’s turn to reply, “We are about to open the rear hatches and hopefully parachute down to the surface. And before you ask, we won’t use the front hatches as we don’t want to get sucked into engines. There are parachutes on this private jet, aren’t there?”

This was not the response Jasmine, or their companions, was expecting.

“Just to clarify,” Cary raised a finger, “we didn’t have anything to do with this.”

“Just let us past,” Noah persisted.

Jasmine put up one of her hands, indicated where the parachute packs were stored and stepped to one side. They trooped past, one by one, Jimmy sticking his tongue out at the stewardess. Watching them go, Jasmine smirked, and turned to strut into the cockpit, where she would tell the co-pilot what he needed to do.

At the rear hatch, Noah turned to the group, passing out bags from a cabinet.

“In these backpacks are parachutes. When you jump, wait for a three count, then pull the rip cord. If that doesn’t work, pull the emergency cord. Just remember to land on your feet.”

“We know,” Cary whined, “we’ve seen it on TV.”

The plane lurched in the air, dropping dramatically in altitude.

“We don’t have long now,” Philip reminded Noah.

“Right,” Noah said to the group in general, “let’s move out.”

He unlocked the door and pushed it open. There was a sudden suction on the air around them, any loose items being sucked out of the plane. Taking the lead, Noah stepped out of the vessel, getting whisked away in the wind. Tony followed in much the same manner, throwing himself away. Next was Eve, she too threw herself at nature’s mercy. The remaining three looked down at the ground below. It seemed to be rippling, changing, swirling. But it was the green streaks moving upwards that did it. Wasting no time, Philip grabbed onto the reluctant Jimmy and Cary (who smartly wanted to increase their chances of living to see another day by not jumping to their potential deaths) and pulled them out of the plane with him. Falling rapidly through the air, Philip let go of Cary and Jimmy. Separated, they each pulled their own rip cords. There was an abrupt lurch as the parachutes unfurled, carrying the trio to the

sandy ground. Looking up, they saw that they had jumped just in time. The plane had tried to turn back in the direction it had come, but before it had time to do so, one of the green streaks had shot up from the dunes, cutting straight through the fabric of the plane. The larger intact pieces of the plane began to fall down to Earth, while the smaller clusters of debris drifted slowly downwards, spreading out in the wind, covering a greater area.

The three of them touched down on the ground. Immediately, Jimmy began to run towards the place where the plane had crashed.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Philip called after him.

“We have to search for survivors,” he yelled back.

Philip began to run after him, and with longer legs, caught him quickly.

“No, we don’t. What we *have* to do is find Noah, Tony and Eve. Now start running that way!” He bellowed that final part.

*

At the wreckage of the plane, a woman got to her feet. The figure that had been Jasmine looked around at her surroundings. Her long, black hair had been singed into a shorter, uneven style. Her Botox-filled face was cracked, and in these cracks was what looked like the green of her eyes, seeping down her cheeks. Her stewardess outfit had been replaced with a dark robe. She lifted her head, taking a long intake of breath through her nose, smelling the air. It was not long before she found the scent she was looking for. Pleased she knew where she was and what she must do, she knelt on one knee and proffered a hand to the cockpit’s debris. And from the wreckage burst a grey hand, with three razor-sharp talons, grasping for the sky.

*

A trail of footsteps ran behind Philip, Cary and Jimmy, dots on the blank canvas of desert. Philip had already fired a shot into the air, trying to give the other three their location. He didn’t want to have to spend too much time looking for them; the unbearable heat of the desert was already beginning to get to him. Jimmy had just sworn that he’d seen three figures climbing over the next dune, but Philip had put it down to a mirage.

“Wait,” Cary pointed at the sand dune, “I see it too.”

“See what?” Philip snapped.

“What Jimmy saw; the others.”

They all looked up, shading their eyes with the backs of their hands. There were indeed three figures scrambling over the lip of the sand mountain. Jimmy smiled, and gave Philip a little punch in the arm.

“Told you.”

Sure enough, it was Tony that was attempting, and failing, to surf down the side of a dune. Stumbling the last few metres, the boy reached his friend, panting. Once there, he turned and waved to Noah and Eve, still at the summit of the dune. They signalled back with waves of their own. Satisfied, he turned back to those in front of him.

“Okay, I know this is a time-sensitive operation so I won’t waste any time.”

“Hi, then,” muttered Jimmy, begrudgingly.

“Hi. Now, anyway, Philip, you know that group of Egyptologists I suggested might be here?”

“What about them?” said Philip, his words layered with concern.

“Well on our descent, Noah, Eve and I spotted what looked like their cars and tents to the north-east.”

“So there are other people here?” asked Cary.

“Not exactly. We saw their equipment, but not the Egyptologists themselves.”

“So the camp’s deserted?” pondered Philip.

“Pretty much, why?”

Philip didn’t respond to Tony’s question. Instead, he began to lead the group back up the dune Tony had descended. At the top, he made it clear to the rest of the group that it was best if they located this camp, and found out what happened to the Egyptologists. There was also the chance that they could use anything the scientists had left behind.

The beige paint on the four by fours was scratched and worn by prolonged exposure to sand. Under the beating heat of the overhead sun, the band of six trod lightly across the desert floor past the abandoned vehicles. A research camp had been set up in this secluded plain of the Sahara. The canvases of the tents billowed slightly in the gentle breeze. Here and there was the occasional laptop, map or box of notes. However, the only real sign that anyone had lived here were many trails of footprints, still visible in mostly undisturbed sand. The group spread out, examining the derelict site, a couple bringing bottles of water out of their bags. Philip proceeded to walk around the perimeter. Jimmy went to scoop up a wad of paper, covered in spidery writing and complex diagrams, only to take a step back, having woken a skittish spiny tailed lizard.

“They’re dead.”

Everyone turned to face Philip. Tony took a step towards him.

“There are no bodies, how can you know for certain?” he asked.

Philip gestured with his arms, indicating the entire camp, “Look around you.”

“Yes, I have. And there’s nothing to suggest they’re dead.”

Philip sighed, “The ground was covered in footprints when we arrived, but did anybody see any footprints *outside* the camp? And there are no tyre tracks, so they didn’t drive away. Nobody who was in this camp left.”

“So where are the bodies? If they died, they couldn’t have just walked off,” Cary gave a nervous chuckle, trying to sound positive.

“Not everything leaves a body behind,” Philip retorted, darkly.

At this macabre thought, the non-Mancynn members of their group looked around in greater detail, wary and alert. Philip and Noah didn’t care though. The silence was more prominent now, thicker, stronger.

“This is getting us nowhere.” Noah voiced what some of them were thinking.

“I agree,” Philip concurred. “Has anyone found any supplies, anything that might help us?”

All present shook their heads, looking at each other for confirmation.

“Okay then,” Philip was thinking on his feet, “so we only have what we brought with us. In your second bags should be provisions and basic survival equipment.”

“This is ‘basic survival equipment’?” snorted Cary, taking a small grenade and a piece of the plastic explosive C4 out of her bag.

“In these circumstances, yes,” Noah replied.

“What did you do,” she snorted, “rob the military?”

Noah shrugged, “What’s your point?”

Cary raised an eyebrow, but didn’t say another word.

The westerly wind was picking up, sending spirals of sand into the hot air. The ground was being carried up into the sky, filling their lines of sight. Eve’s long fringe also blew about, coming down to obscure her vision. Great, something potentially worse than this heat. At least it wasn’t a proper sandstorm, yet.

Philip looked around, as best he could. “I believe the keys are still in the four by fours. We could use them to travel the rest of the way. It would speed up the time it would take to make the final leg.”

“But to carry all of us,” Tony worked out, “we would need to take two cars. Only one of us can legally drive: Noah.”

The sand was picking up as the wind grew. It was starting to get into their eyes. A couple of them reached into their bags, trying to find something with which to shield themselves. They quickly found pairs of sunglasses, which mostly blocked out the sand. Philip slipped a handkerchief out of his pocket and tied it around his mouth and nose.

“Seriously, we just hijacked a plane, and you’re worried about underage driving?”

“Fair point,” Tony conceded, “So who’s going to drive the second car?”

Eve tried to make herself seen, “I could. My father showed me how to drive the tour coach back at the Falls enough times.”

The walls of sand moving around them were getting thicker as more and more sand was gathering in the collective.

“Then it’s settled,” Philip announced. “Can everybody see me?”

Everyone tried to make out that they could. With this Philip continued.

“Then please follow me to your vehicles.”

He was about to circle round to his predetermined goal, when Jimmy called out to him.

“How will you know which way to go?”

Philip stopped in mid step, “Any ideas, Noah?”

“Did you bring the stone?” Noah suggested, catching up with him.

Philip knelt down and unzipped his backpack again. He plunged his forearm into its depths, essentially blind in the swirl of sand. His hand connected with many objects they’d brought with them: food, drink, notes they’d made on what they knew of their location, a few explosives. Eventually he found it, the stone Noah had given him. Taking it out of the bag now lined with sizzling sand, Philip laid the stone in his hand. It was small enough to nestle perfectly in his palm, not going over the edges or onto his fingers. The brown contours ran deep into the device.

“Well then, let’s see if this is as good as it’s made out to be.” Philip still sounded a bit sceptical about its abilities for some reason.

He squeezed the sides. Nothing happened for a moment, until all of a sudden Philip felt a cool gust flow across his hand and up his arm. From the ridges of the stone expanded a red bubble, flying out in all directions, before collapsing into a translucent, scale representation of the surrounding area; all of the dunes, the clouds of sand, even the camp site in which they were standing, were suspended above his palm, changing in real time. It was just as they’d seen it from the air, apart from the small valley in the distance. Within this valley was what looked like worn-away and crumbling Egyptian buildings, including a couple of minor pyramids. Tall statues, or at least they were in real life, lined the buried ancient streets. They were complexly detailed, even at this scale. All this lay to the southeast.

“Southeast it is then,” Noah confirmed.

“Into the cars,” Philip instructed, “Tony, with me and Noah. Jimmy and Cary, go in Eve’s car. We will start first as I hold our guide. You follow close behind, so as to not lose sight of us.”

His instructions were put into action. They moved out, continuing their race against their extra-dimensional foes.

Jimmy didn’t think it was too much to ask to go back and check the plane wreckage for survivors. What they were doing couldn’t be so important that they couldn’t take a few minutes’ detour. Those poor pilots, they didn’t know what they were getting into. He may have also sympathised for that creepily sweet woman, Jasmine.

That just goes to show how little Jimmy understood of their current situation as he was jostled about in the back of the four by four, trundling over the rolling desert behind Philip, Tony and Noah. His head bobbed and lolled on his neck. Ahead, through the screen of sand, were the faint glows of the other car’s rear lights. Behind them, the forsaken camp was falling away into the distance. They were driving into the growing storm, so progress was getting increasingly slower, the sandy wind trying to push them back. Philip hadn’t specified to them how far it would be, but if it was too much further, Jimmy felt that his head would fall off.

It turned out that actually it wasn’t too hard to drive this rust bucket. Eve had only stepped up because no one else had had any sort of experience, even if hers had just been her watching Alf and her father do it. But it seemed that her spying had paid off, and although the performance of this vehicle wasn’t at its best, it was enough to keep it moving in the right direction. If it wasn’t for this damn sand battering her windscreen, she’d have dared to go faster, yet she had to take it carefully. She didn’t want a collision with something, especially with the car in front. No, she had resigned to the fact that she would have to take it slow, and above all, boring. But when on a mission to save everything, you couldn’t always have what you wanted. Fun and important assignments didn’t mix in these circumstances.

It was imperative that the Brethren Lords didn’t get to the city first, Tony knew this. Of course, they had no idea how long it would take the Lords to get there, but the slower the cars were, the higher the chance was that the enemy would win. As it was, the four by fours were going as fast as they could in this weather, which greatly hindered their progress. And if his side was to win, he would need to do more than to arrive early. He would need the greatest skills and advantages they had at their disposal. He would probably also need any

information he'd managed to acquire during his time in their custody. This masquerade had to stop. They couldn't keep hiding and popping out with different disguises and illusions to conceal their presence. It was getting tedious. If they were going to bring the fight to humanity, then they should at least have the courtesy of showing their faces to the majority. But he wasn't in charge; he was just there to fight, to fight alongside his power-enhanced allies. He was made for times like this.

They should be getting near the rim of the ledge soon. Once there, the city should lie before them. That was what was displayed on the stone. In reality they couldn't see anything discernible. For the past god-knows-how-long Noah had just had to rely on Philip and going in a straight line. Not that trying to go straight did any good. It seemed every few seconds the wind tried to push them off their path. What he really needed was a SAT-NAV. But the best he had was that infernal rock.

"Slow down a minute," Philip advised.

Gladly, Noah did so, hoping this was a sign that he wouldn't have to brave this hellish weather for much longer. Behind them, Eve dutifully decelerated as well. Noah kept the car moving inch by inch across the Egyptian ground as he turned to look in Philip's direction.

"What is it, are we nearly there?" he asked insistently.

"More than that," Philip said, confused, not taking his eyes off their map, "We're supposed to be right on top of it."

Sure enough, on the miniature representation of the area, the tiny bump that was their car sat on the edge of the large, steep slope.

Philip unclipped his seatbelt, "Well then, we'll have to get out and walk, won't we?"

Outside the confines of the car, the sandstorm still raged. It would go for hours yet. Philip at first stumbled, but quickly balanced himself against the wind. Around him, his companions took this as a cue and came down from their vehicles also. There was some visibility, but that made everything even more puzzling. Ahead, instead of the ruined city displayed on the stone, there was just more sand, a flat plain stretching on to the horizon. The one defining sight before them was a large rock, about the height and width of a bedside cabinet. Its top was just like the ground ahead of them: smooth. It appeared untouched by civilisation. Then again, that wasn't surprising. If it had been there before they arrived, and not just appeared, it

would have not been seen by ground or air unless someone came up to it. And in the enormity of this desert, what were the chances of that, someone stumbling onto this exact spot?

As Philip got closer, he noticed an outline drawn on the flat top of the rock. It was very faint, worn away by time and wind. However, it was still visible. The shape of it was peculiar. It wasn't a regular shape, or a pattern he'd seen before. The only thing it reminded him of was the stone. The stone...It still lay in his palm. Carefully, he placed the stone in the outline.

This seemed to do the trick. All of a sudden, their ears were filled with a low rumbling, accompanied by a sound not unlike a long intake of breath. The sand just beyond the rock began to retreat, being sucked downwards. In the middle of the sandy plain before them, the ground was falling backwards to the bottom of a basin, where it started to form various structures.

There was now a crater, in which lay a city constructed from the sand of the desert. Dotted around on raised pedestals were magnificent statues of native animals, buildings stood as if they were brand new. And in the far distance, the final clusters of rushing sand spun up in the air and settled to form what was the top of a grand pyramid surrounded by towering obelisks, around which the rest of the necropolis was arranged. There were even the tall, thin trees which lined the streets in neat rows, not proffering much shade under their leaves of sand. What there wasn't, however, was people.

Jimmy looked up at him, "I thought you told me there was no such thing as magic. Were you lying to me?"

"No, look, there is definitely no such thing as magic!" Philip snapped; they'd already had a lengthy discussion about this after leaving CERN.

As he said this, he noticed out of the corner of his eye the rock, with the stone still upon it, lower into the sand, swallowed up by the desert.

"Let's hope we didn't need that," Philip muttered.

Tony took over, "Whoever wanted to hide this city must have found a way to disassemble it into the sand particles..."

Noah chipped in, "I know of a few races and groups with nanite technology at their disposal, one of which is Murorviosp."

"Yes, and they could have programmed the nanites to reassemble the city once the stone reawakened the console in the rock."

Jimmy stared at him blankly.

"You didn't understand a word I just said, did you?" Jimmy shook his head, "Let's get moving then. And whoever's slurping that water, please stop!"

Eve took her water bottle out of her mouth.

"At these temperatures, we have to drink a lot of water to..."

"I don't care. Stop it."

The slope was rather steep and the sand slipped away as they stepped on it, causing some of their steps to turn into slides. Each descended at a different rate down to the base of the crater. At the bottom, they were standing at the end of a long path, stretching all the way to the pyramid like shape in the distance. The trees swayed, though there was no breeze down there. In fact, when they looked up, they saw the sandstorm still blowing overhead, but none of it dropped into the basin. It was like being in a bubble, separated from the rest of the world. And being inside this bubble, it was like stepping back in time. Every home was pristine, every plant fully grown and healthy, every statue freshly carved. It was uncannily like what Philip had tried to picture and describe in his school Egypt project. He remembered trying to put into words how the obelisks stood over the buildings, casting their long shadows onto the ground, like they did before him now.

But still, the city was silent. For all the buildings, plants, statues and any item available in ancient Egyptian society, there was no sign that anyone had ever been there. Nothing had been touched; there weren't even any footprints in the sand.

And there wasn't the Sun burning directly overhead. Instead, there was a jade light filling the cavity.

The group looked around the forgotten ghost town. Splitting up, they went off to explore the places that no one had been to for over four thousand years. But even though they all went their separate ways, each seeing different aspects of the city (the walls of incomprehensible

hieroglyphics, the empty mudbrick buildings beneath the sands high above), they all eventually reached an impressive and towering image of an animal immortalised in stone. There were several animals from Egyptian mythology and society, such as cats, snakes, jackals and crocodiles. Their empty eyes stared out at the civilisation laid out under them. The effigies of the ancient gods were rather menacing, especially in the half-light. Not much light was getting through the sandstorm on the surface, but this was balanced out by a phosphorescent glow emanating from the tip of the pyramid. In the hands of the jackal by which Cary stood was a long Ankh. Though it was a symbol of life, it wielded it like a weapon. Cary didn't know what it was, but she felt uneasy in its presence. As for the others, they too felt something before their respective statues, yet there was something that kept their eyes drawn to their stony features. This attraction wasn't so strong, however, that they couldn't go on their way. Each of the explorers continued towards the central pyramid. Nevertheless, the thought of those sentinels didn't leave their minds completely.

Much of the city was the same; abandoned homes, the silent streets, the swaying trees. Some of them were starting to think that being on the clock could be less of a priority. There was no sign of anyone else in the city. They had lots of time, or so they thought as the obelisks surrounding the pyramid came into view over the Egyptian buildings.

*

The crater stretched just as far behind the pyramid as it did on the approach from the rock console. The humans and Mancynns had so far only explored the first half. They had no idea what lay, or rather stood, in the section beyond. Once the cover that was the desert plain had been removed, and the city had formed again, it had been easy for the Brethren Lords to make an appearance.

They were not far from the pyramid, among the statues and obelisks. Warren, Stark and Petti took in the field of play. They needed to quickly familiarise themselves with the high grounds, level regions, and the areas in which to take cover. Gryal and Mordrin on the other hand didn't waste time. They immediately marched forth towards the pyramid. Gryal knew what he was looking for. They soon left the other three alone to make up some ludicrous strategy that would inevitably fail and be replaced by something conjured up by the quick thinking of the supreme Lord. They were on their own, what Mordrin wanted. When they were out of earshot of Warren, Mordrin turned on Gryal.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

Gryal didn’t look at him, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about,” he hissed. “This is completely irrelevant to our search for the Archk. This has something to do with Mierdi. She’s done something to you.”

Gryal’s yellow eyes swivelled to look at his apprentice, “This is way out of your league. Don’t pry into this matter and you will continue as you are. I know what I am doing. What happens today will help us in our pursuit of victory. You have to trust me on that.”

“I’m finding that a little hard at the moment. You haven’t told us anything about what this place holds. All I know is: you fixated on this human country at the meeting about the Archk when Mierdi burst in, and ever since you’ve been acting suspiciously.”

“I don’t have to tell you or any of the other Lords every minute detail about our missions. That would not be time efficient. I understand what is best for us, you don’t have to.”

Mordrin tried to make himself as tall as he could, “You’ve lost the plot! You’re making rash decisions! You are not fit to lead anything anymore!”

Warren wandered over to see what the commotion was about, “Is there something wrong? Do we have to abort?”

Mordrin submitted in the presence of two of his superiors, “No, nothing’s the matter. We can proceed as planned.”

“Very well,” Warren was not entirely satisfied that he had been apprised of the situation, but let the matter go.

The final two came to join the rest, Stark’s flesh wobbling, Petti’s deformed feet causing an irritating scraping noise on the aged street floor, his features made more ghastly by the green light illuminating the lost Egyptian hollow. Now that they were all together in this once-abandoned place, there was no turning back.

17: A Tangent From The Mission

Philip's eyes raked the surface of the pyramid, searching for any sort of entrance, any sign of where to go next. He was soon to meet up with the rest of his party. All the different streets which they had taken eventually led to the base of the pyramid, it just so happened that Philip had arrived first. He could already see Eve drawing nearer out of the corner of his eye. As she came up to him, she took a long swig of water, turning her head up to see what he was looking at.

"Haven't you had enough water? I could hear you a mile off."

Eve forced the bottle into his hand, "As I tried to tell you before; in the desert we have to..."

"And have you noticed the temperature since we came down here? It's not as hot in here, it's more bearable."

"You still need to drink," she insisted.

He shook his head. He could go longer without water. What he needed was to find a way to get inside the great structure. But its faces were perfectly smooth, with no sign of a door or other entrance. They could try going around the pyramid, but they would have to wait for the others and who knew how long it would take. Too long, most likely.

*

The smell of exhaust fumes hadn't dispersed entirely. To the animal, it was as if there were two lines in the sand, leading it and its mistress to their goal. Scampering along the desert floor on its four paws, its long black nose rubbing on the ground, it moved faster than any natural animal of the desert had before. The woman in black following was managing to keep up, not walking or running, just moving. Her cloak billowed in the breeze, but no sand touched her form. It avoided her, bending in the air in a race to get out of her way. They were getting nearer. The scent was getting stronger. Their intervention in this was nigh.

*

Tony, Jimmy and Cary were still absent, but by now Noah had joined Philip and Eve at the base of the pyramid. None of them had yet come up with a plan to get inside. They had decided that if nothing occurred to them in the next few minutes, it would be best time-wise to check the other sides of the pyramid. Each face of the edifice was so big that it had taken

this long just to scour the first side, not that it produced any positive results. But they would have thought that if there was an entrance, it would have been here, where there was a funnel of obelisks guiding all to its presence. A brief glance at either end showed that at least two of the other sides didn't have obelisks, nothing as grand as what was at the front. With still no sign of the other three, they conceded that it would be best for them to go on without them. Philip, Noah and Eve began to move clockwise around the central construct. It would be unwise to split up. If one found anything, they would have to waste more time running around to find the others.

*

The lip of the precipice came upon them fairly quickly at the rate they were going. The shaggy fur of the beast was unkempt, blown about in the sandstorm. Unlike its mistress, it was hit by the many waves of sand. Shaking itself, it bound over the edge and raced down to the city. She took her time, gliding down the slope. The sand didn't roll down or move in any way, it remained absolutely still. She sniffed again, as she had in the wreckage. Away from the wind and sand altering the scent, the path was clearer. She didn't need her pet's nasal abilities anymore. She could find them effortlessly.

*

She was here, Gryal could feel it. Everyone who should be here, was. They were too close to fail now. He knew her tactics, and could formulate their movements accordingly. The other Lords were acting on his command; they would follow him to the grave, metaphorically speaking.

“We need to split up. From what I know, there will be an entrance somewhere on the floor around the perimeter of the pyramid. We are on the clock and not the only ones looking for it. Are we all clear?”

They each acknowledged his barked orders. As they set to work, scanning the ground for any sign or marking, Gryal turned on the spot, walking away. Warren strode after him.

“And where do you think you're going?”

“What I'm doing,” Gryal pronounced each word individually, clearly and carefully, “is none of your business. I have something important to do. I'm not saying that to be harsh, I'm trying to protect you. Stay here, brother.”

“The way you’ve been going on about this place, you’d think nothing was more important. What are you up to?” Warren persisted.

Gryal indicated with a bony finger, “Just stay here.”

Gryal departed around the corner of the pyramid. Warren stood for a moment, looking between Mordrin, Petti and Stark kicking sand aside along the pyramid, and the end of Gryal’s cloak disappearing behind the stone wall. In the end, he slunk off after Gryal, trying to do so without the others noticing. Little did he know, Mordrin’s shrivelled eyes were shiftily watching him go.

Two of the humans had their backs to him, an adult and a teenage girl. They were chatting animatedly by the slanted wall of the pyramid. What was disappointing was that Philip didn’t seem to be with them. Oh well, they could probably tell him where the Mancynn was. Silently, he crept up behind them. Their words were irrelevant to him, but it kept them occupied. He stretched his arm out, reaching for them. They still hadn’t reacted to his presence. Though he was a little distance away, he could still strike at them. He was just about to, when he distinctly heard the adult say:

“I was wondering when you were going to turn up.”

The adult turned around with a pair of handcuffs in his hands. Gryal looked down at them, stunned. Then he burst into a fit of rumbling laughter.

“You really think that that,” he said between laughs, restarting his advance, “is going to be enough to stop me?”

“No.”

His fingers were a hair’s breadth from them. But they hadn’t moved, hadn’t flinched. A pistol cocked behind him. Philip pressed the barrel against the back of Gryal’s skull.

“This is meant to, though.”

A bullet to the skull wouldn’t kill him, but it would certainly hurt and cripple his synaptic activity.

“I would be most grateful if you were to co-operate. I would hate to put a hole in your head. Think what a mess it would make,” Philip said in an overly sweet voice.

In that moment of distraction, Noah snapped the handcuffs over Gryal’s wrists. Gryal looked down and in that moment decided to play along with their childish delusions.

“What’s to stop me just returning to my Tower?”

“Three things,” Philip explained, “One: we’re holding on. Two: you don’t want us in the Tower again. And three: you won’t leave without what you came for.”

“But I’m the one who knows where the entrance to the pyramid is. You can’t kill me, or try to at least.” Philip didn’t lower the gun, “Your friend has put these pathetic and ridiculously tight cuffs on me, what harm do you expect me to do. I have restricted movement in my wrists and arms.”

“Then I guess you have no choice but to comply with our demands,” Noah remarked.

“You can’t keep that gun pointed at me forever,” Gryal pointed out.

Philip nodded to Eve. She reached into her bag and pulled out a block of C4 explosive. Before Gryal could react, she had jammed it up his rib cage, lodging it securely between the bones usually obscured by his cloak.

“I may not be able to follow you with the barrel of my gun, but our remote detonator reaches for quite a distance, so I wouldn’t advise trying to run,” Philip smirked. “Tell us where the entrance to the pyramid is.”

*

Warren had chosen to keep at a distance. He wasn’t meant to be following his brother, but then again, this wasn’t the first time he’d disobeyed an order. He watched his brother approach the humans, engage in conversation with them. It had to be part of his plan, but what was to be gained? It was at that moment that Gryal was surrounded and restrained. He was about to run after him, come to his rescue, but considered that this might be part of his overall strategy.

*

Now Warren was gone, Mordrin turned to Stark and Petti. These two weren't as high-ranking as Warren or Gryal, their influence was not the strongest in the group, but with his help they could still be useful. The only problem was that they wouldn't have the confidence to stand up on their own, even if they understood the situation.

"Do you not see what's happening?" Mordrin asked like he was just making conversation, trying to awaken mistrust within them without them realising.

The pair just continued to scour the sandy floor for some sort of an entrance.

Mordrin persisted, even if they were pretending not to hear him, "All these tangents he's taken us on, the number of tangents he will take us on, when will he actually make progress and get us to our goals? Gryal has lost sight of what's important. We need to unite in our cause, to show him his errors, to bring him into the light."

"You shouldn't be saying things like that. He has ears everywhere."

Mordrin almost didn't hear Petti's comments; the grotesque Lord had masked them well with the rhythmic swipes of his claws across the ground.

"What could he possibly do to us!" he nearly screamed in frustration. "We're not invincible, how could he be any different? He's made himself up to be this omnipotent being, lording it over us, but we only have *his* words for that! Has *anybody* actually tried to challenge him, or have you always been too afraid?"

"It's not that we're too afraid," Stark sighed, "It's that we're not that stupid."

"And we do know the Entities bestowed upon him extra abilities, better advancements than the rest of us. It was to certify him as our leader."

"Well maybe it's time for a change in command," Mordrin suggested, menacingly.

*

Tony dragged Jimmy by the hand along the winding street in what he thought was the direction of the pyramid. They had lost sight of the other four. Tony had had to abandon his own exploration route to answer the pleading calls for help from Jimmy, because he had 'gotten lost' and had heard scary things moving. Now, exasperated and exhausted, he was trying to call to the others, both to regroup and to get this infant off his hands. So far, he

hadn't heard a reply to his calls. They were alone in this section of the city. Jimmy wriggled persistently in Tony's grasp, trying to break free from the iron grip of his reluctant guide.

"Stop squirming you little squirt!"

Jimmy shot Tony a menacing glare, and then, gathering up all of his remaining strength, gave one last, almighty pull. This didn't do anything to improve his predicament. Tony glowered down at Jimmy.

"Right, that does it. I'm taking you back to the jeep."

"But...why?" Jimmy hadn't quite comprehended his new situation yet.

"I am not going to allow your constant whining to hinder the progress of this operation. I will take you to the jeep, where you will stay until this ordeal is over."

Tony released his grip on Jimmy slowly, making sure the boy wasn't about to run off at the first opportunity. Jimmy didn't make any sudden moves, so Tony stepped back. He turned towards the incline which they had all descended. He took a few steps before he realised Jimmy hadn't moved.

"We were doing fine until you turned up."

Tony didn't turn to look at the boy, "And what's that meant to mean?"

"The others didn't have a problem with me at CERN. They were able to put up with me. It's you that's making it unbearable, you that's pushing me out of the group, even though I've been here longer than you."

Tony snapped. He spun on the spot and ran up to Jimmy. He lifted the boy off the ground by his jumper collar with both hands.

"Listen here, you little brat! You will go back up to that jeep and lock yourself in, or with God as my witness I will make sure you fry from the inside out!"

"There you are!"

Tony dropped Jimmy immediately, swivelling to look at a dishevelled Cary stumbling from around a sandy building. From her relieved expression and her chest rising and falling, Tony guessed she had started to panic, having not been able to find anyone. As she approached,

meaning to join the pair, Jimmy gingerly got to his feet, scowling at the boy above. Cary came to a halt, bent over with her hands on her knees, panting heavily.

“I’ve been looking...for you guys...everywhere,” she managed to say between gasps for breath. “I was so alone...it was like being lost in a maze...and I swear something has been following me...”

“Not you as well,” Tony moaned, turning to address Jimmy and Cary, “Get this into your thick skulls, both of you. This city is dead; it has been for thousands of years. We are the first living things to walk these streets. Now I am going to take you back to the jeep, where you’ll stay so those of us with any sanity left can get back to uninterrupted work.”

It was then that the dead, eerie silence of the surrounding city was ripped away by an unnatural howl. It was the cry of an ancient creature that hadn’t been allowed to roam for a very long time. It was the cry of a creature that had gone oh-so-long without meat.

“What the hell was that?” Cary screeched.

“That,” Tony said, slightly calmer than his companion, “is the reason you should get back in the damn jeep.”

The pair in front of him didn’t need to be told twice. They immediately began to pelt in the direction of the jeep. Tony took it a little slower, until he once again heard the demonic roar, after which he also began to sprint towards the crater wall.

By the time he reached the slippery sand slope, Jimmy and Cary had already climbed quite a way up. Their progress appeared difficult, however. Though they were scrabbling at the slope as fast as they could, much of the sand they clung onto was slipping away from under their fingertips. Tony was quick to join them in their manic efforts to escape this forgotten pit of the desert. Above, the sandstorm still raged, obscuring their view of the outside world. The trio continued to scramble towards the chaotic event ahead, trying to grip onto weak and sliding footholds, fuelled by the fear of what was behind them.

Cary was the first to clamber over the edge of the crater, shortly followed by Jimmy and Tony. Immediately they were met by the full force of the storm, being blown across the desert floor, just lucky that they were forced towards their vehicles, which too had been blown around slightly in the wind. Digging his heels into the ground, Tony steadied himself against the nearest jeep. After a moment, in which he made a very difficult decision, Tony

swung round and caught Cary and Jimmy as they stumbled past, trying to similarly grab onto some handhold. But he couldn't hold on for long. Suddenly, Jimmy's small hand slid from Tony's grasp. Thrashing wildly with panic, the boy caught a hold of the jeep's door handle. The force of the storm propelled him further, but he didn't let go. The combination of these two factors resulted in the jeep door swinging open on its metal hinges. Tony and Cary took their chance and clambered into the vehicle, Cary helping Jimmy in at the same time. Inside, Tony made his awkward way into the driver's seat. Cary sat herself down in the passenger seat, pulling Jimmy onto her lap, shutting the door behind them. They sat there for a moment, nobody moving.

"Well? Get going!" Cary cried to Tony, stressed and exasperated.

Spurred on, Tony turned the key in the ignition, the engine coughed into life, and he put his foot down on the accelerator. He knew a thing or two about how to drive a car, but that didn't mean this was going to be easy with only theory to assist him. They turned the four by four around so the wind was behind them. The tyres span, throwing even more sand into the Egyptian tempest. It began to move forwards, more thanks to the wind and sand than to the engine of the jeep. The vehicle picked up more and more speed, diving blindly further into the unending plains. It was almost rhythmical, the bumping up and down over the dunes, racing against the elements. All around were shades of gold, ochre and beige, swirling around in an assortment of patterns. That's all there was, up until the moment the black mass rammed itself into the side of the car. The jeep was knocked to the side. The black mass fell behind. Jimmy screamed. They stared at the inward dent left in the passenger door.

"What was that?" Tony asked, cautiously.

Cary's face was ashen, "Who gives a damn?! Just keep driving!"

*

"I swear I heard something," Eve insisted.

"It was just your imagination," Noah assured her, stepping over a pile of fallen blocks of sandstone, not taking his eyes off Gryal.

The Brethren Lord had been leading the group through this secluded part of the ruins, closely followed by Philip and Noah, each holding a gun to the back of Gryal's skull, Philip also

holding the remote detonator. But now Eve jogged up in front of the group, blocking their way.

“I didn’t imagine it!” she pleaded. “You must have heard it as well.”

“Let it go, Eve.”

Philip continued walking forwards, disregarding Eve standing in the way. In doing so, he pushed Gryal unexpectedly. The skeletal figure stumbled over, falling in front of Eve. She didn’t react fast enough to get out of his way, so she didn’t avoid the sharp bone tips of Gryal’s fingers which tore through her trouser legs and into her shin. As quick as they could, Gryal scrambled back to his feet and Eve shuffled hastily backwards, looking down at her leg. Noah dashed around the skeleton and knelt down by Eve.

Philip looked over Gryal’s shoulder as he pulled him back in front of the loaded gun, “Is it bad?”

“No,” Noah said, pushing the ripped fabric away from the wound, “It doesn’t appear to have broken the skin that much.”

“You’re lucky,” Philip prodded Gryal with the gun, and then turned back to Eve. “Can you walk, or does it hurt too much?”

She walked, a little gingerly at first, back to Philip behind Gryal, and Noah was close to follow.

“Does that answer your question?” Eve replied.

“Close enough. And if there’s no more interruptions, let’s keep moving, shall we?” Philip prodded Gryal once more.

“We’re nearly there,” Gryal mumbled.

Taking the hint, Gryal raised his head high and strode on through the lines of buildings, leading the group round a corner and into a circular clearing.

“Wow, when you said we were near...” Eve breathed.

In the middle of an area of untouched sand was a trapezoid building caught in the coils of a massive serpent sculpture. The serpent appeared to be a cobra, its hood as wide as its open

mouth, fangs bared, head reared off the coils of its body. Its long, patterned body was wrapped many times around the building, finally ending in a pointed tail flicking up in the air. In between the enormous coils were spaces, here and there, maybe just big enough for someone to fit through.

Gryal hadn't stopped his route march, not wasting any time, and reached the largest gap in the statue at such a pace that the others had to jog to keep up, still keeping the guns pointed in the right direction. Ahead of the rest, Gryal clambered through the gap. Philip was first to go after him, followed by Noah and finally Eve.

On the other side of the serpent, there was a constricted space between the statue and the building itself, allowing some movement. The four explorers had to shuffle around the perimeter of the building to arrive at the dark entrance. Gryal came to a halt when he got to the rectangular hole in the sandy wall.

"Are you sure you wish to proceed? Once inside, you may not find things the same as they were."

"You're going in anyway, this is why you came. And we're definitely going to follow," Noah explained.

"So budge," Philip insisted bluntly.

If Gryal had had eyebrows, he would have raised one, and if he had had lips over his pointed teeth, he would have smirked. But he didn't, so he simply turned his head and continued on into the building.

From the outside it hadn't appeared to be that big, and it was such a distance from the pyramid that Eve had been wondering how it could possibly provide a method of getting inside the pyramid. So when she looked beyond the Mancynns and Brethren Lord and saw a stairway, descending into the ground in the direction in which they had come, she was both satisfied and intrigued further. The top of the stairs was in the middle of a room lined with decorative pillars, covered in hieroglyphs which were crammed in wherever there was blank stone. The cobra they'd passed outside often popped up among these ancient carvings and as major depictions on the walls behind the pillars. Between the pillars on the back wall were old torch brackets, which had not been lit in thousands of years. The only source of light in the room was through the entrance they had come in by (oh, and a little light was given off by

Gryal's eyes). This meant that much of the extremities in the room were hidden in shadow, lost from sight.

The group moved around the room and to the top of the stairs. They looked down into the darkness below in unison. Just as with the corners of the room, they could see nothing of their path before them. Noah broke away, reaching behind him to pull a torch from the wall. He laid his hand on the top of the torch, screwed his eyes up for a moment, and when he took his hand away, the torch was burning faintly.

"The human body gives off heat in the form of infra-red radiation," Noah explained without being asked, to nobody in particular. "Give something enough heat, and it will combust. It's just a matter of dialling up the heat given off."

"Nobody gives a damn," Gryal rumbled, "You have a source of light, you take the lead for now."

"I don't know," Noah pretended to consider the option, "Your eyes give off enough for you to see what's ahead of you. I'm sure you could keep the lead without the aid of fire."

"My eyes may illuminate that which is directly before me, but no one can argue that the torch in your hand is far superior when it comes to emitting light."

Noah glared at Gryal, trying to think of a witty retort. He didn't come up with one, other than a crude reference to his new pointed teeth, so, reluctantly, he took the lead into the unknown underground of the city.

Noah waved the torch in front of him, brushing aside hanging cobwebs. The weak glow from the serpent-entrapped building could still be seen at the end of the staircase behind them as a shrinking rectangle. The only sounds were that of the crackling fire and the clicking of Gryal's bones rubbing against one another. The stairs down here were not as even as the ones elsewhere in the city that they'd seen. Some were slanted, steep or gentle, while others were rough and hard to get a grip on. The stairs weren't that wide either. As they got lower and lower under the lost settlement, the steps seemed to get progressively narrower. It had got to the point that where they had been able to fit three easily on a step, now they could only just fit one between the encroaching walls. Dust fell down in spreading clouds on their heads as they progressed. All were focused, not speaking, which is why at the same time they all

noticed the growing swishing sound, like the tearing of silk. The next thing they noticed was that the passage was levelling out, which they saw by the light of the torch.

They all filed out into the level tunnel, thankful that it immediately widened out again. Ahead, the tunnel stretched on, blank, without any visible decorations or branching corridors. However, that swishing sound had become louder, filling the path before them. Cautiously, they took steps forward. Something golden flew across the width of the tunnel, further down, as quick as a flash. None of them had been able to see what it was, but all knew it was what was causing the noise. Philip slipped to the front of the group and took another step towards the unknown. The golden streak sped across the tunnel once more. The others followed suit, walking together towards the decelerating gold something, which was travelling from side to side. And it was when they were but a few steps away from the obstacle that it grounded to a halt before them, revealing itself to be a large, gold disk, as wide and as high as the passageway, concealing their path entirely. On the walls either side of the disk were tall, thin gaps, through which it swung, and above they could just see the end of a vine of thick rope attached to the top. It was a pendulum, a pendulum that had stopped mid-swing. Philip took another step forwards, once again leading the group.

“Wait!” He turned his head to see Eve had lunged forwards, her arm outstretched, “We don’t know if it’s safe. Don’t touch it!”

“And we won’t know until we try,” Philip retorted.

Ignoring her, he strode up to the disk and rested his palm against its surface. Unlike the walls around them, the disk did have inscriptions upon it. Most were of an obscure dialect, one that probably the best Egyptologists would have trouble understanding. Even Philip could make neither heads nor tails of it. But there was one thing that stood out, and didn’t need translating. At about Philip’s eye level was an engraved shape, but not of any hieroglyph letter or word.

“Does anyone know what this is?” Philip called over his shoulder.

“It looks like the Heqa-sceptre,” replied Gryal. “Sometimes described as the shepherd’s crook, it’s a staff owned by a Pharaoh to prove his authority. One was found in a place I believe you call Abydos. You all assumed there was only one, but evidently this is another area at which humans are ill adapted.”

Philip looked back at the impression of the sceptre, “So do you think we have to place one in the disk, like a key in a lock?”

“Most likely,” agreed Noah, “Which means we have to hope the sceptre’s in the city.”

Eve butted in, “So let me get this straight. We walked all the way down here, just to find out that we have to walk all the way up again?!”

“Not necessarily. We could get out of here through *transit*,” Noah suggested.

Eve’s jaw dropped like a stone, “Why in hell did we *walk* down here if you were able to do that, like in Switzerland?!”

“Because we didn’t know the layout of the pyramid. If we had just come down here, we could have materialised halfway through a wall.”

“Okay, what about the flight here? That whole hijacking thing could have been avoided.”

“Similar problem,” Philip said, “We weren’t certain that this was the right coordinates until the plane was about to be shot down. If this had been the wrong place, then we wouldn’t have a mode of transportation to do flybys over the desert. We’d have had to randomly jump from place to place. And before you ask, we can’t just teleport beyond the disk, as for all we know the path could suddenly go up, and to reappear at ground level would result in us losing our lower legs.”

“Also, for point of reference,” Noah said, quickly, “it’s not exactly teleporting. That would involve disassembling our bodies into their smallest components and transmitting them across subspace to the new location to be reassembled. What we do is rewrite reality so that we were already at the new location.”

“Not that I want to disrupt that fascinating explanation that, let’s face it, no one was really listening to,” Gryal groaned through his bare teeth, “but there’s a sceptre to be found and I still have a bomb in my chest. So if you don’t mind...”

“Okay, grab a hold on everyone,” Philip instructed.

Philip kept a strong grip on Gryal, so he could not escape on his own. He shut his eyes and concentrated. Then they were gone, allowing the pendulum to resume its swing.

All was the same. It had been for the past god-knows-how-long. Just sand brushing by the sides of the car, the three children staring ahead, and the dread of what had made the indentation in the passenger door still hung in the air. Suddenly, through the swirls of sand, a dune cliff edge loomed. Instinctively, Tony swerved to avoid falling over into the sand below. Cary cried out.

“What is it?” Tony asked, panicking.

“Down there,” Cary stuttered at first, but pulled herself together, “I’m sure I saw the wreck of the plane.”

“Are you certain?”

“Positive.”

“We have to go and rescue the crew,” Jimmy implored.

“You’re assuming that green light didn’t kill them,” Cary shifted the boy on her lap to get a better view of the plane wreck.

Jimmy followed her line of sight, “What was that light anyway?”

“How are we meant to know?”

Tony mulled it over for a second, and drew the four by four to a stop. Tony got out of the car, only to be forced back by the wind. However, he balanced himself on his two shaky legs, and made his careful way to the ledge. Now he too could see the outline of a plane wreck. He tested the steadiness of the slope with his foot.

“It’s not too steep,” he yelled back to the others, as they also got out of the car, “We could walk down, but I wouldn’t advise trying it in the jeep. It could tip over.”

So together, they slid down the slope to the plane wreck. It did indeed look like their plane. It at least belonged to the same private company. Down its side was a deep gash, cutting the whole of the craft in two. It was through this that they entered the remains.

This skeleton of a craft offered some protection from the storm. Much of what was inside the body of the plane was still intact, yet it was now layered with sand. The cockpit unfortunately hadn’t been so lucky. Cary and Jimmy trod lightly into the burnt and collapsed cockpit, while Tony thought ahead and searched the rear of the plane. They might need food.

As Cary overturned a rather large sheet of aluminium which was strewn over what was once a pilot seat, she heard Tony's exclamation, "I was right! There are provisions back here."

She jumped, as did Jimmy. They were bolt upright. They'd both heard it. It was the distinct sound of something, not so far away, tearing through a four by four.

*

"So here's the plan," Philip rounded on Gryal outside the pyramid, "*You* will go to your...associates...and get them to find the sceptre. You will then return to us and hand it over. All this time we will be watching you. Every one of us has a gun," he waved the C4 detonator, "and I have this."

Gryal glowered, as much as a skull can glower. He proffered his manacled wrists.

"You may want to remove these. They may give off the wrong impression."

Not wanting to waste any time, Noah roughly undid the handcuffs, letting them fall to the ground. Noah cocked his head, as if to say 'get going then'. Gryal strode off in front of Philip, Eve and Noah. The Mancynns and human, while keeping Gryal in sight, split off from his path and climbed onto the ancient rooftops. They spread out, covering as much ground, or roof, as possible. They watched the black-cloaked figure make his way around the pyramid to where the other Brethren Lords were still searching for an entrance.

Gryal's bones clicked as he lorded over his comrades, who were knelt over a particularly prominent rectangle in the base of the pyramid, which would inevitably turn out to be just a mistake some worker had made thousands of years ago. Stark was the first to turn under Gryal's shadow, and was the only one to fall over in a pool of sweat, panting uncontrollably through fear. The others stood up to meet his glare.

"And just where have you been?" Warren was as inquisitive and judgemental as ever.

"I have been doing something far more important than you could ever imagine," Gryal stood up to his brother's advances, keeping his ground. "What I did is not of your concern. However I now know what we need to find. To complete our task we must find a Heqa-sceptre."

"There was more than one then?" Warren pondered.

“Evidently,” growled Gryal.

Stark got to his feet, pulling himself up with Petti’s hanging arms, “Do we actually know where this sector...wotchamacallit is?”

“No,” replied Gryal, dully.

“Yes.”

To all their surprise, it had been Mordrin that had given the positive response.

Mordrin grinned with his thin layer of yellowing skin, “I might have seen its location on our way to the pyramid.”

There was a short pause, before Petti spoke up, “Are you going to lead us towards it, then?”

“Maybe,” Mordrin smirked.

He beckoned them to follow his lead, back down the palm-tree-lined road up which they had come. Gryal fell to the back of the group, trying to not make it obvious that he was purposefully keeping to the rear. He looked up to the rooftops, spotting the dark figures matching their direction, always watching.

Mordrin stopped the trek outside a dishevelled old hut, probably lived in by workers. There was nothing visibly fascinating about the building, not on the outside, anyway. Warren and Petti had already pelted him with questions.

“You’d think you didn’t trust me,” Mordrin chuckled, “And that’s probably going to continue. See, I’m not going to show you any further, unless Gryal lets us in on everything he’s doing. He has to tell us what this side track has to do with anything on our agenda?”

They all turned to look at Gryal who matched Mordrin’s meaningful scowl.

“I will tell you what I can, *once* we have the sceptre,” he snarled.

Mordrin knew this was the best he was going to get, “If you look through the hole in the wall, you can see the writing inside.”

“And you can understand this writing, can you?” Warren jeered.

“No, but you don’t have to. Look.”

Obediently, the Brethren Lords peered into the building, inspecting the writing scrawled across the walls. As Mordrin had suggested, there was indeed a big, and poorly drawn, image of a sceptre.

“And you spotted that on the way here?” Petti remarked, sceptically.

Mordrin held his head high, “Observant, aren’t I?”

“Yeah, whatever,” grumbled Gryal, as he and Warren pushed Mordrin aside to get at the hut.

The hut wasn’t that big, outside or inside. All that was within was the passage of hieroglyphs and a long chest along the far wall.

“It can’t be this easy. There must be a trap,” Stark mumbled.

“No one would think of looking for a Pharaoh’s object in the home of a worker,” Gryal rationalised.

Warren went straight for the box, not bothering to check for traps. His muscular red arms tore the lid off of the chest, throwing it carelessly aside, revealing the Heqa-sceptre. It wasn’t much, yet its original colours of blue and yellow were still as shiny as the day it was made. He picked up the sceptre, turning it over in his hands. As he did so, Gryal clamped a skeletal hand on his shoulder.

“I think you should hand that over to me.”

Warren held it slightly closer to his brawny chest, “And why should I do that?”

“Because I am the leader of this group and I know a lot more about this mission than all of you combined.”

“Whose fault is that?”

At that, Gryal snatched the sceptre from Warren’s hands and took it out of the building.

“None of you are to follow me,” he ordered.

Mordrin slipped in front of him, “Or what? Remember what you promised. We’re a part of this; we can follow this through to the end.”

“Not this time.”

Mordrin was knocked aside, he didn't stand a chance. The newest Lord picked himself up from the indentation he'd made in the wall, meaning to follow Gryal, only to find his superior was nowhere to be seen.

Gryal rounded the corner, the sceptre tight in his hand of bones, when Philip grabbed a hold of his cape and whisked them both away.

They reappeared back at the base of the pyramid, between Noah and Eve. Philip wrenched the sceptre out of Gryal's hand and tossed it to Noah.

"I know you did as I said, but call it spite." He then turned to Eve and Noah, bellowing, "RUN!"

They dived for cover as Philip activated the detonator for the C4 in Gryal's chest. The Brethren Lord had a second to look down at his chest before bones went flying in a ball of flame, the boom roaring across the necropolis. Ash settled on the sandy ground and the tiny charred bone fragments spread far and wide. Gryal was gone.

They had been lucky, for they had been standing but a few steps away from some discarded, leftover blocks of stone, scattered by the side of a towering obelisk. Over one of these blocks popped the heads of Philip, Eve and Noah. They watched expectantly as the embers rested upon the already sizzling ground. Noah stood upright, moving around their shield to where Gryal had been standing. With his foot, Noah brushed aside the blackened bones among the dead powder mixed with sand. Nothing happened. Then Eve screamed. He whirled around on the spot and began running back in her direction in one swift movement. Back behind the stone block, Eve was huddled on the ground, clawing at her shin, where Gryal had scratched her before. Philip was kneeling by her side, trying to pry her hands away so he could inspect her wound.

From what Noah could see, the faint marks in her skin were getting deeper and redder by the second, opening up her shin. While keeping a hand on the screaming girl's shoulder, Philip was rummaging through his backpack, though he already knew he had not packed for this eventuality. And even if he had, it wouldn't have done anything in time, for as he searched in desperation, white granules had begun to seep from Eve's leg, and float in a serpentine manner to the spot where Gryal had 'died'. Except that spot was no longer visible, for there a

whirlwind of bone and black powder was building, as wild as the sandstorm overhead. Into this whirlwind flew the white granules escaping from Eve. And in the heart of it all, they could see the faint image of a body, or to be more precise, a skeleton, coming together from tiny fragments. For now at least, it was still looking weak, broken and frail, but that wouldn't last.

Philip, as he always knew would happen, hadn't found anything of use in his backpack. He stared hopelessly at Noah, who was now kneeling on the other side of Eve. Of all the thoughts running through Noah's mind, only one had a chance of working.

"Eve!" he called to her over her yells of agony, "I have something, but it's going to hurt!"

She glared at him with her red, watery eyes, exasperation showing through her pain.

"Okay, it will hurt more, but only for a second. And it might stop this!"

There was a slight movement of her head, which could have been interpreted as a nod. Noah wasted no more time, and before Philip's horrified eyes took out one of his knives, twirled it in his hand and plunged it into Eve's already gushing wounds. The girl howled again, and the flow of white granules stopped temporarily. Behind them, the tornado of dust and bone dissipated, revealing a broken Gryal, with bones chipped and missing. He lunged for them, rather clumsily, stretching out with half a bony hand. Their window of opportunity closing, Philip grabbed the sceptre and backpack in one hand and Eve (who was touching Noah) in the other. They vanished. Gryal was alone in his seriously wounded and weakened state.

*

The trio reappeared at the end of the tunnel which led to the golden pendulum, Philip falling backwards, dizzy. Immediately, Noah propped Eve up against the wall, arranging her in what he thought was the most comfortable position. He and Philip rose to their feet, facing each other.

"She can't go on, not this time," Noah stated, despairingly.

"I know," Philip was resigned to that fact.

"Then you agree we have to leave her here?"

“I never said that,” Philip sighed. “At this moment, Gryal can’t get beyond that pendulum. The furthest he can materialise is in here, where you plan to leave her. If he were to find her alone, there’s nothing to stop him killing her. And we can’t leave one of us to protect her, for, let’s face it, one of us probably can’t finish this without the other.”

“But to carry her with us would impede our progress, slow us down.”

“We have to. I’m not going to let a friend die here today.”

“You don’t know what Gryal’s done to her. This is more important than that,” Noah hissed. “She is not worth the lives of countless...”

They both froze and looked down at Eve. Her watering eyes had opened and she was looking up at them.

“Just get the sceptre and get past the damn pendulum,” she croaked.

They knew she was talking sense. Philip knelt down, slipped his backpack onto his back and picked up the sceptre. Briskly, he strode down the tunnel to where the pendulum duly came to a halt. There it was, the slot for the Heqa-sceptre. Philip placed it in, the key in the lock. Almost instantly it fused with the surrounding gold plating, and a pale bubble exploded out, expanding in all directions like a shockwave, passing through the walls and the people within. Philip looked back at Noah and Eve, to see if anything had happened. It appeared not, until he looked back at the pendulum. The lines of the hieroglyphs were extending, interconnecting to form a web across the face of the disk. Then, at the centre where the sceptre had fused with the gold, parts of the disk began to fold backwards, creating a small hole. And the next innermost ring of gold, as marked by the web, also folded away, the third ring following suit. They watched in amazement as the pendulum came apart, until all that remained was the outer rim, which was now far deeper than it was wide. Beyond was a gentle slope leading down into the darkness. Philip beckoned the other two over, not taking his eyes off what lay ahead to see Noah pick Eve up in his arms.

“Once more into the breach, dear friends, once more,” Philip smiled.

“What?” Noah looked down quizzically at the boy beside him.

“It’s a...never mind.”

When the shockwave reached the outside of the pyramid, passing through the statues and obelisks to the myriad of buildings beyond, there were the sounds of snakes hissing, jackals howling, and scorpion pincers clicking.

18: From Out Of The Green

Outside, the sandstorm was dying down quickly, it was almost completely over. The other thing that was dying down was their anxiety. How long had it been since Tony, Cary and Jimmy had heard the sound of the jeep being ripped apart? None of them knew for sure. But they had heard nothing since, while they huddled in the shelter of the plane's carcass. As the sand brushing constantly by the hull lessened, Tony got up to peer out of the cracked windows.

"I don't see anything," he informed the other two, who were watching him from behind his back.

"Nothing that would want to kill us?" Jimmy piped up, not wanting to sound *too* hopeful.

"Nope," Tony confirmed, returning to the floor.

That was when it banged on the side of the plane.

*

Philip and Noah took a step over the threshold that was the rim of the pendulum. As they passed through it, they felt a slight tingling, as if they were walking through a veil of electricity. When they were on the other side, they edged their way down the slope, into the pitch black. Neither had a torch, so Philip had to feel his way by the walls. Noah could not, as he still carried the injured girl.

Fortunately, the slope levelled out after not too long. It was as they stepped onto the level ground that a beam of red light shot across the floor from where their feet touched it. It illuminated the passage ahead of them, revealing the many tunnels which posed as optional ways to go. And the illuminated route was not just a straight line. It zigzagged away down seemingly random corridors, into the heart of the maze.

"Do you think we should trust it?" Noah wondered aloud.

"Something must have triggered it, and it must have been for a reason," Philip added. "It might have been when we walked through the ring. I assume you felt that...buzz...whatever it was."

“I thought it was just me. But now I guess it could have been scanning for a certain genome. It would make sense that anyone without that genetic coding would be made to wander the maze, as they would most likely be thieves, and anyone *with* the genome would be deemed of good intentions, like Gryal, from their point of view, and therefore led straight to their goal.”

“What kind of defence is that?” Philip scoffed. “The Brethren Lords can get right by it.”

“I’m sure when this place was designed, the Murorviosp wouldn’t have considered that the ones that should be kept out were among their allies. I might have failed to mention that they, having learnt of their presence from the Entities before stealing the Chariot, reached out to the Lords, thinking them to be potentially corruptible in their favour. The alterations made to us are at a genetic level, which allowed us to pass through as the Brethren Lords would themselves. The changes may not have even been perfect. If our suspicions are correct, then the ring cannot have been the most sensitive, as it couldn’t differentiate between me and Eve, who I was holding to my chest.”

“You seem to know a lot about the Mancynn physiology,” remarked Philip.

“Before I split from the Brethren, I was tasked to do...things. Stuff I’m not proud of,” his voice trailed off.

Philip was about to inquire further, when he noticed the red light of their ‘guide’ fading. Looking down in alarm, he saw that the ever-stretching line was in fact finite in length. Now it had reached maximum length, the line was slithering off down the corridor, leaving them behind.

“We have to get moving,” Philip said as he began to jog, then run, “We can’t afford to lose it.”

Noah usually would have been faster than Philip, though under these circumstances, what with carrying an injured child, the best he could do was just manage to keep at his heels.

The line twisted left and right, its sense of direction seemingly awry; there seemed to be no pattern to its movements, and more than once Philip could have sworn that they had gone in a circle. But he couldn’t be sure, for the hieroglyphs and pictures upon the walls, covered in cobwebs, all looked the same in the eerie light of the line, which was ever so slightly moving further and further away. The three of them were just managing to keep on its tail. It was

lucky that they could, for without its guidance, they would be lost in this labyrinth, entombed in the sandy pyramid that might never be seen again.

Time was irrelevant within these walls. They had been going round and around like rats after a Pied Piper for so very long. They were beginning to give up all hope, when the path they were led along began to slope upwards. Higher and higher they climbed, with what little strength they had left in them. Philip had been feeling particularly weak after he'd jumped into the pyramid. The line was fading ahead of them, which he took to be a sign that they were near the end of their trek. Sure enough, the path levelled out a short way ahead of them, but the line was so dim now that they couldn't really see the room they were in. It carried on moving for a few more feet, before stopping in the blackness. Philip blindly walked the path laid out before him, only to walk head first into a wall. Cursing, he warned Noah of the obstruction. His companion felt his way to the wall with his foot and put Eve down by it.

"Are you okay here?" he whispered to her.

Her voice was pained but she made it understandable that she was. Satisfied, Noah made his way to where he had heard Philip's voice.

"The wall here," Philip was saying, "It feels different, weaker maybe."

"Let me have a go," Noah said, finding the spot Philip had been indicating.

With all his might, he pushed against the stone. Philip joined in, shoving his shoulder into the wall. The blocks were definitely moving backwards under their weight. The two Mancynns groaned and sighed as they made more and more progress, until...the blocks fell away. They stumbled, both the shock of what they saw and the glimmering green light suddenly pouring in putting them off balance. What lay beyond was thin air, and the outside of the pyramid. They were about halfway up, and had just made a hole in the outer wall. They hastily shuffled back from the edge, not wishing to fall, as the blocks were now doing below them. And once they got past that initial shock, they saw something new in the distance. There, among the buildings of the dead city, was a mass of sandy limbs, flailing, snapping, and lashing out. It appeared every statue in the city had come to life, and was a part of a chaotic feeding frenzy. There were snakes and jackals and scorpions and cats, all apparently hunting the same thing.

“It seems the Murorviosp have one more surprise in store for us,” Noah either made a grin or a grimace, it was hard to tell.

“One last defence mechanism, you think, like what shot down the plane?”

“You’ll probably find that whatever triggered them to come to life will also prevent us from now escaping the pyramid via *transit*. What would be the point of creating those things if those trapped could just move themselves to another point in space?” he was thinking out loud. “If...no...*when* you get what Gryal was after, you’re going to have to fight your way past those things to escape. If I go and take out as many as I can now, you may stand a chance.”

“Why can’t you wait until we’ve got whatever it is? Why are you leaving me to face it alone, and with Eve in this state?”

“You may still not be strong enough by the time you complete the task. A short while ago, you jumped twice in quick succession. Doing so severely weakens you.”

Philip’s voice was lined with exasperation and full of frustration, “I think we’ve established that by now.”

“That doesn’t matter. You’re going to be alright,” he assured Philip, pulling his two knives from his jacket, looking at them with what appeared to be regret.

Philip stared at them also, “To use those, you’ll have to get right up close to them.”

Noah pushed a catch on the side of each, and the blade extended from within the hilt, over doubling their lengths, “Not exactly.”

But Philip had just thought of something, “Wait a second. You said we probably can’t teleport out of here, and you won’t find your way through the labyrinth in time. What are you going to do?”

Noah smiled, “Something no sane person, for whom this trap was set, would do.”

Before Philip could say anything else, Noah took a short run-up and leapt through the hole they’d just made. For a moment, he was in freefall. Then Noah vanished into the air.

He watched the mayhem and destruction ensue across the city, the living stone and sand tearing through each building and each other. Behind Gryal, Warren came closer.

“Are you the orchestrator, or simply the observer?”

Gryal turned to look at Warren, who stopped just short of him, “That could be debated for hours.”

“Why all of this?” Warren asked bluntly, “Why this endeavour, why this necropolis, why not stay on track with the plan we spent countless years in planning?”

Gryal considered the question for a moment, before replying, “This is for a higher cause than our own. There are powers that be that not even you can comprehend.”

“You know, Mordrin has questioned your actions for a while now, but it’s not until now that I’ve taken any notice. The only beings more powerful than us are the enemy. They are the ones we have plotted against since our emancipation. These are the Entities and there are no others that can equal their strength.”

Gryal gave a quiet chuckle, “How naïve you sound.”

“Mierdi has blinded you with smoke and mirrors, dear brother. You have to understand that,” Warren pleaded.

“I am not your brother!” The skeleton screeched, the yellow fires in his eye sockets flaring. “I am much more than the old Gryal ever was!”

Warren’s eyes, instead of lightening, darkened, “Then Mordrin was right, you haven’t been the Gryal we’ve known for a while now. But whoever you are, compared to how you have been behaving recently, you do not seem yourself.”

“Au contraire, I have never been more *myself*. Unfortunately, the same can’t be said about you for much longer.”

“If that’s a threat, I should warn you, whatever happens this day, you will never divert my true brothers from our cause!”

Warren took steps forward as he said this, grasping the vertebra of its neck in his red, muscular hand.

The skeleton took no notice, “Such a pity. So much anger, such leadership potential, all going to waste.”

“What are you...” Warren faltered, looking down.

There was the sting of a stone scorpion protruding from his crimson chest. ‘Gryal’ had distracted him while it had come up from behind.

“Help me...” Warren moaned, his eyes flooded with fear.

“Never.”

The scorpion arched its tail back, flinging the dying body of Warren away. The one posing as Gryal raised a hand to his fallen fellow, soaking up the spilling energy, drinking it up, completing himself. He was back, only stronger and more dangerous than ever.

*

Noah landed cat-like on top of one of the sandy buildings, a few streets away from where the majority of the battle was taking place. Once he had been far enough away from the pyramid he’d tried to enter *transit*, and had been glad to find he could. Whether it was because he’d been far enough away, or because there was actually nothing to stop him doing it in the first place, Noah didn’t know. He could see the thrashing creatures moving in a westerly direction, following something smaller which was out of his line of sight. Not wasting any time, the Mancynn leapt onto the ground and ran towards the battlefield.

He turned a corner just to step back as a cat’s tail swept across the once-desolate street. Crouching down he waddled under the body of the humongous animal, and came out in the middle of an epic scene. Stark, Petti and Mordrin were fending off a horde of oversized monsters, escaping fatal injury by inches on several occasions.

Mordrin flung out a gnarled hand and a chunk of a jackal was blown away from its body. Seeing a gap in the wall of animals, Mordrin led Stark out of the battle zone.

Petti, in full animalistic style, was launching himself from monster to monster, talons swiping from side to side, pincers snipping out of control. With two of their prey gone, some of the statues chose to follow in pursuit, while others began to fight amongst themselves. On top of a scorpion’s head, the Lord looked down at Noah, who was wielding both his blades out before him, the remaining few creatures now focusing on him, trying to push through the

crowd to reach him. Now Petti had seen Noah, he pounced upon him, pushing off from the scorpion's head with his muscular legs. Noah only saw Petti out of the corner of his eye at the last second, and he swiped out with one of his swords. The blade glanced Petti's face and sent him sprawling on the ground. Flicking the second blade back to injure the oncoming serpent, Noah jumped to the Lord's side. Noah made to slice the Lord with his blades, but it grabbed him with one clawed hand. Petti's strength was too strong; he couldn't make any counter-move. Noah looked up to see that one of the cats had made it through the mass of statues brawling with each other. With no way of moving, Noah saw only one thing he could do, and he'd probably regret it in the long run.

*

High above the plane wreck the grappling Petti and Noah appeared and immediately began to fall. Shocked by the sudden change of location, Petti let go of Noah, and began to drop away from him. There was no way that Noah could enter *transit* yet again, he was just too weak. His only real hope was that he would be able to heal himself after impact with the sand dunes rapidly coming up to meet him. Noah forgot about what was happening to his former master as he closed his eyes and waited for the pain.

*

Tony, Cary and Jimmy were cowering behind a row of surviving airplane seats as the creature outside continued to bang against the hull of the damaged craft. Cary was busy trying to hush Jimmy's loud hyperventilating, while Tony was attempting to pinpoint the creature's exact location by the movement of the thumps. But then...he lost it. The thumping had stopped. The silence was worse than the deafening noise. Scared out of his mind, Tony got up from his hiding place and trod lightly over to the cockpit. He stared out into the desert, and froze when he heard a rumbling.

"What is it?" Cary hissed.

Tony just shushed her, and continued to peer around the fuselage. The sound was different to that of the creature, more mechanical. And as the rumbling got louder, he saw the front of a car come over the peak of a dune. It was an SUV, and Tony noticed that it was drawing the attention of the creature. Now it was leaving the plane wreck, he could see that it was larger than a man, even though it walked on all fours. It had shaggy, grey fur and a black mane.

Like Warren Marz, the muscles in its limbs were clearly visible, all the way down to the long, black talons.

“Tony,” Cary hissed again.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a car.”

“No, Tony, come over here.”

Tony tore his eyes away from the creature and SUV to return to Cary’s side. She was looking out of one of the windows on the opposite side of the plane to the creature. He joined her by the window, and saw the body of a man lying a short distance from them in the sand.

“Noah!” he exclaimed.

Checking the creature was still walking away from the plane, Tony rushed out into the open to where Noah’s body lay.

As he got closer, he began to hear the discomfiting sound of bones clicking back into place. When Tony finally stood over him, Noah’s eyes shot open, the blood fading out of the whites.

“Ow...” was what escaped from the Mancynn’s mouth.

“We need to get to safety, into the plane,” Tony insisted, looking over his shoulder towards the creature.

The SUV was redirecting itself towards the plane, while the creature was circling round behind it. Oh well, the people in the car were no concern of his.

With great discomfort Noah got to his repaired feet. He wiped the blood from his face and watched his fingers swivel back into position.

Horrified by what he’d just seen, Tony egged Noah on, “Come on, get inside before it comes back.”

Noah looked around for what Tony meant, and saw within moments the prowling creature.

“You’re right, we have to get inside.”

With an unexpected burst of speed, he began pulling Tony towards the wreckage.

“Do you know what it is?” Tony panted, trying to keep up.

“It’s a jackal, but one made into a weapon by a Murorviosp by the name of Mierdi, and trust me, you don’t want to cross paths with it.”

“I wasn’t planning to.”

Back inside the plane, Noah leant on a chair next to Cary and Jimmy for support.

“Are you okay,” he asked them.

“Sort of,” Cary shrugged.

Not really caring, Noah forced himself to stand unsupported and walked to the cockpit. There he watched the SUV pull closer to the plane, still unaware of the jackal behind them. In an attempt to save the incoming occupants of the SUV, Noah waved his arms in a direction away from the plane, trying to divert their course. The driver must have not got the message. Perhaps he thought Noah was trying to make himself seen so he could be rescued, but however Noah’s actions had been interpreted, the SUV didn’t waver an inch from its straight course towards the plane wreck. Noah could only watch in despair as the vehicle came to a halt and two Egyptian men in bulletproof vests, khaki drill cotton jackets and black berets got out, each carrying a submachine gun. The officers marched towards the Mancynn, weapons raised.

Alarmed and wide-eyed, Noah raised his hands, while shouting, “You have to get out of here! You’re about to be killed!”

“Is that some kind of threat?” the shorter of the men questioned, darkly, as the pair approached.

“No...” Noah continued anxiously, “but if you don’t leave now...”

“I am Sergeant Avari and this is Corporal Tahir. We are here to apprehend the individual called Philip for the hijacking of a private plane and the abduction of at least three individuals.”

“Are you not hearing me, you need to...what?”

The man called Tahir pulled a recording device out of his jacket. He began to play the message, and Noah felt a horrible sinking in the pit of his stomach. First there was Cary's voice, then Philip's:

"Philip, you shouldn't be doing this. You shouldn't have to shoot anyone."

"You're only here because of two things: you know too much, and I brought you here. If you continue to question my judgement, I will lock you away somewhere you cannot interfere, is that understood! Now get back to your seat."

Noah remembered the jackal that had surely come close to the vehicle by now, and returned to beckoning them into the plane, "That's not what it sounds like."

The officers did indeed follow him into the wreckage, Avari taking the recording device from Tahir, but the interrogation didn't cease.

"What is your name, sir?"

Noah wasn't concentrating enough to answer, but was looking out at the SUV.

"Sir, what is your name?" Sergeant Avari repeated, obviously not picking up on the fact that Noah's American accent was different to Philip's British one.

"Noah," Cary called from her hiding place behind the seats, "Get back in here!"

"So, you're not the one we want," Avari remarked, snidely, "But you may still have a connection to him."

Before Noah could say anything else in his defence, there was a scream of metal being ripped apart coming from where the officers had parked their SUV. The three adults span in the direction of the sound.

"What was that?" Corporal Tahir enquired in a deep voice as dry as the desert around them, eyeing Noah in the process.

"I told you we need to get down."

Apparently unfazed by Noah's warnings, Avari instructed, "Adwin, return to the car and see what is going on."

"Kasuf?" Tahir appeared not to be as confident as his superior.

“I asked you to do something,” Avari pressured him.

Somewhat reluctantly, Tahir left the plane wreck and their line of sight. Noah wanted to run after him, pull him back, but he knew it was too late.

All those within the plane heard the sound of the poor man checking the magazine of his submachine gun become fainter as he approached the SUV and undoubtedly the jackal. All of a sudden, the footsteps stopped, and they all heard the sound of bullets fired in short bursts. Over the gunfire, Tahir’s voice was just audible.

“Oh my...Kasuf! Help me!”

Then the shouting was replaced by one, drawn-out scream, and at last Corporal Adwin Tahir seemed to go the same way as the car.

“What did you do?!” Avari yelled at Noah, looking out towards his late partner’s place of death.

“I’m sorry, but we have to hide. Your friend is lost.”

But it was too late. The taste of blood like a drug for its predator mind, the hunger-driven jackal was once again on the prowl, following the sounds made by its prey-to-be.

It didn’t come through the hole in the cockpit, but rather stalked its way to the gash in the side of the wreckage, which exposed the humans and Mancynn the most. It didn’t move considerably fast, instead it came into view one horrible body part at a time. There was first a black claw leading up to the shaggy grey fur of a front leg, above which was the elongated jaw, from which serrated fangs protruded. The sharp yellow eye latched onto them as soon as they fell into its line of vision.

Avari swore in his native tongue, pointing the end of his submachine gun at the creature’s muzzle, where it got sprayed with spittle as the jackal growled. Avari fired several bullets into the front of the animal, but this only drove it backwards. Now enraged, and carrying a blood-drenched pelt, the jackal pounced forwards towards their hearts. The Avari and Noah dived out of the way in either direction, while Cary and Jimmy scampered further down the plane. The jackal, having missed its prey, landed on the tops of the seats, bending the headrests. It scrambled awkwardly on the small footholds; all four of its legs slipping off the fabric as it turned around to make a second attack.

Noah heard the submachine gun go off. It would appear that Avari had tried to fill the monster with as many bullets as he had left in his weapon. A small number of the brass-cased projectiles found their mark in the hide of the jackal, while most either flew out of the ripped metal cylinder or caused many tiny twangs as they ricocheted off the concaved plastic walls.

“A bit of advice,” Noah shouted at Avari over the cacophony the officer had caused, “Firing bullets randomly in a confined space doesn’t bode well for humans either!”

The chaos of flying bullets and the noise they were creating was sending the jackal insane. There was so much to concentrate on, so much distracting it, yet it just managed to keep a focus on the man bathing in a cloud of his own fear pheromones.

Noah saw what the jackal was about to do by the way it was holding its body. There was little time before it tried once again to rip Avari into bite-sized pieces. To his annoyance, he’d lost his knives in his duel with Petti. At least their last act had been against their providers. His eyes darted around his feet for anything of use. The sole item available close at hand was half a shattered luggage compartment door. He scooped up the fragment and hurled it towards the creature. It knocked the jackal squarely on the head. The red-flecked neck twisted so a yellow eye could lock on the new challenger.

In a second and a couple of bounds it was springing towards Noah. He shuffled backwards, ending up next to Cary and Jimmy’s hiding place. With them watching him with frozen horror, Noah called up all the energy he had regained since his double *transit* to move matter from his legs and abdomen to the nails on one hand, extending and sharpening them to as far as they could go. The jackal was but a few bounds away from him, teeth aimed at Noah’s heart. Noah began to run too, right into the face of the animal. They were seven metres apart...five metres apart...the pair were all but upon each other. Noah skidded, falling to the floor on his back, thrusting his weaponised hand upwards. The jackal wasn’t able to react to Noah’s sudden drop, and was in mid-leap when the Mancynn slid under it. Beneath the jackal’s exposed belly, Noah thrust his hand into its chest, his extra-long nails reaching all the way through the body. As each moved in opposite directions, the razor-sharp nails cut through flesh and bone, and the jackal was ripped almost into sixths.

The dying monster’s momentum carried it forward to the end of its jump, where it hit the floor between the rows of seats and flipped over, rolling to a stop in front of the cowering Jimmy, who let out a shrill scream at the grotesque face close up to his own.

Noah lay on his back, breathing heavily, letting Jimmy's terrified noises blend into the background. There was a funny feeling spreading through his extremities as the balance of body mass returned to normal. He only thought of getting up when he saw Avari lean over him, fear still evident on his face.

Noah pulled himself to his feet while listening to the shaky words, "What in the world just happened?"

"Something I can make you forget in an instant," was the muttered reply that Avari didn't hear.

Noah walked over to the corpse of the jackal, telling Jimmy to shut the hell up.

"But what if it's still alive?" the boy whimpered.

Noah held up his hand, which was still drenched in bodily fluids, then indicated the holes in the jackal that he'd made, "What d'you think?"

He shook his hand, flicking some of the creature's bodily fluids onto a chair.

"Can somebody help me move this," he gestured to the animal, "to somewhere where we won't be able to smell it?"

The body was indeed beginning to give off a nauseating aroma. Jimmy shook his head vigorously, pinching his nose as he had obviously noticed the smell as well.

"There's no way that I'm touching *that*," Cary insisted, looking mortified by the prospect of making contact with something so dirty and monstrous.

"I'll do it."

Tony stood up from his hiding place behind a collapsed seat. He had hidden well; neither Noah nor the creature had noticed he was there.

"Great," Noah appreciated that somebody was in a helpful mood, "Grab the hind legs as best you can and pull while I push."

Working with Noah's instructions, Tony found suitable hand holds on the hairy legs, which were bent at odd angles like the rest of the body. Noah moved around to the front half of the creature, where he hooked his arms under the head and forelegs. Together, they began to haul

the body out of the aircraft. Avari stepped out of the way, still not comfortable around all these...weird people and that...animal.

Outside the plane wreck, the pair heaved the corpse onto the side of a dune, where it could rot in solitude. All Noah could think was that if the pet was here, the owner surely was as well. If his suspicions were correct, he feared for his fellow Mancynn, he feared from the bottom of his heart.

*

With Noah gone, Philip was left with looking after the semi-conscious Eve. And with her unable to move without constant assistance, this meant he would most likely have to stay put. Yet if he did this, he would be giving Gryal a definite head start. He looked down at the girl, and thought about how inconvenient she was making things.

In the end, Philip decided that it wouldn't hurt to have a little look around, for even if he became trapped in another part of the pyramid, he could just come back here via *transit*.

There was only one exit to the room, other than the one they had come through. It was partially obscured by shadow, so Philip didn't immediately notice it was there. He entered it without caution, and began a gentle march down the winding corridor.

As there had been in some the previous passageways, there were torch brackets on the walls. These ones weren't lit, though, so the Mancynn took one, and, remembering Noah's earlier trick, closed his hand over the flammable end of the torch and concentrated on making his hand as hot as possible. The torch end flickered into life, generating a sphere of light around him.

It may have been chance or luck (or perhaps misfortune for the other thing in the corridor) that he lit the torch then, for at the exact moment the light reached out into the corridor ahead, the end of a black cloak whipped around the bend in the path. Philip's keen eyes had caught this, and he only knew of one person in this city with such a garment.

Reacting spontaneously, Philip made pursuit. But his echoing footsteps must have alerted his quarry, for this other person had similarly begun to run. Philip skidded around corners and pelted down passageways in an attempt to catch the one he presumed to be Gryal. The rushing air threatened to plunge him into darkness on several occasions, the flames he had conjured dancing around on the torch head. His lungs were burning as they yearned for more

breath, but he hardly noticed as he chased the black-clad foe, who had no exposed body parts which would confirm or disprove his identity theory.

After the umpteenth twist and turn, during which he had come no closer to the mystery figure, Philip found he had lost sight of 'Gryal'. His torch only illuminated a small portion of the chamber he had been led into, which looked as if it filled the whole top half of the pyramid. There were smooth, immeasurably high pillars a few paces to either side of him, and they carried on in rows into the dark shroud of the room. His little ball of light would be of no use to him, at least while he tried to find the other intruder, for even though he couldn't see it, it would be able to see him from a long way off, and skulk around him unseen in the shadows. This fact would have been true, except for the fact that when Philip took a step forward, all around him lamps, torches and candles burst into flame, throwing shadows against the walls and pillars, turning the air a flickering orange. His eyes adjusting to the sudden illumination, Philip saw the cloaked figure standing in the middle of a circle of ornate tables upon which were objects of wealth, beauty and wonder. Over each of the tables was a cover, made of something that looked like glass, but was probably something a lot more protective.

The figure wasn't standing perpendicular to him, but at an angle, so he could see part of what it was doing. Philip saw the figure reach with the right hand to something on its left, a ring perhaps, and then...he must have been mistaken, for he thought he saw the figure pull an object out of the ring, an object far too large to have rationally fit inside it. From this distance he could only make it out as a conical object as long as the person's hand, with a great ruby on the end. And after taking hold of this Philip saw, to his horror, the figure plunge the pointed end into its wrist, then slash it out to the side, spraying blood onto the glass-like substance. Now Philip realised that the figure couldn't have been Gryal, for a skeleton had no veins to cut. At the touch of the red liquid, the barrier seemed to melt away, revealing the treasures beneath. A hand stretched out and stole two jewels from the table, a topaz and an emerald, each the same size as the ruby. The figure dropped the bloody point and pulled two more out from within the cloak. These had no jewels on the ends, until the figure placed the emerald and the topaz into the spaces. It next, in a reverse of extracting the ruby one, pushed these two inside two other rings.

This unknown person turned away from Philip and began walking towards the opposite wall, where he presumed another exit would be. As if someone had unglued his feet from the floor,

he found he could now move, whereas before he could not. Philip strode forward, restarting the chase. When he got to the circle of tables, he picked up the blood-stained object and pocketed it.

There was indeed an exit on the other side of the room, and Philip pursued it down there. This time it was the person ahead who sped up, and he had to do the same to catch them. They were running faster than before, the torch was threatening more than ever to blow out. And it did. Philip was plunged into total darkness, so abrupt that he glanced off a wall on the next corner. He was forced to follow the path by feeling the walls, yet Philip stubbornly refused to slow down. Both his internal compass and his memory of the size of the pyramid from the outside were telling him that they couldn't go much further without going back down to the lower levels.

Philip turned one last corner, and ran into a cold, bony hand which sealed around his throat. Before he knew what was happening, he was being lifted off his feet by the neck and held up to the eye level of a tall skeletal figure with bright yellow dots in the shadowy eye sockets. Gryal, the new Gryal, would have smiled if he could. Philip tried to twist out of the Lord's grasp, but there was no time, as in a matter of moments the pair were being pulled up into the psychedelic tunnel which led to the Tower.

*

Once enough of the pair had rematerialised, Gryal flung Philip aside. The boy tumbled backwards, scrabbling at the ground beneath his fingers. He didn't get any grip, and before he understood what was happening, Philip slipped over a ledge. About to tumble into unknown depths, Philip lashed out, and managed to catch hold of a jagged part of the wall which was big enough to be a hand-hold.

They had not reappeared in the embarkation room as before, but on a ledge lining the rim of an enormous cavern. High above, there were scorch marks visible below the line of darkness, signs of the explosion Philip and Noah had caused. Below his hanging feet was a lake of white flames, taller than any human construct and hotter than the sun.

Philip metamorphosed his arms to many times their usual muscle mass, and pulled himself back onto the ledge. When he was standing steady, he saw Gryal was already a way along a metal bar, part of a web which spanned an abyss so wide he couldn't see the other side. There

were signs that there were once more metal beams building upwards towards the hidden room of the cavern, but now there were only burnt stumps.

Philip started to run after Gryal, returning his body to regular proportions. As soon as he thought of the idea, he flung an energy ball towards the Lord, instinct once again telling him how to do so. It missed, and Gryal turned to face the Mancynn. Philip threw another at Gryal who was now walking backwards. He deflected it, sending the energy back towards its sender. Philip did the same, and there began a twisted game of hitting a ball to and fro, the duelling pair moving ever further across the metal beam, over the fiery abyss. It could have gone on for hours, neither able to make a finishing blow with the ever-fizzing ball. Finally, Gryal flung the projectile aside, out into the abyss. This didn't stop Philip from continuing to march towards him.

"You cannot defeat me," Gryal called, "It is not in your destiny to do so."

"Well I highly doubt that it's in yours to kill me," Philip taunted back.

"No, you will join me, you cannot avoid this fate."

"I can bloody well try!"

With that, Philip hurled another energy ball, but again, Gryal waved it aside, not starting this endless fight again.

Behind Philip, on the metal beam, lines and scratches were starting to move, coalescing into the pattern of a face, into the body of a woman. After the body had fully formed, it rose, bending at the waist to sit upright. Her prey sighted, the metal effigy of Mierdi got to her feet and lurched forward with a stiff-legged gait.

"Your friend Chaos may have read some of the Book of Alternity, but he hasn't read it all," Gryal told Philip across the length of ancient metal. "There will come a time when you and I will fight side by side against the same enemy, and you shall help me at last face those who would shape our whole reality."

"No offense," Philip called back, "but don't expect me ever to help you."

He said this with bravado, yet in his heart he seemed not to believe it. As if to prove to himself that he was serious, Philip threw his largest energy ball yet at Gryal's chest. It ended up in the flames like the rest.

“Not only can’t you kill me, you won’t even cause me harm.”

“Really, what makes you think that?” Philip asked, angrily, the next energy projectile ready in his palms.

It was never thrown, not after what Gryal showed him. With a flick of his hand, the Lord had conjured up a window in the air, on the other side of which was Eve, resting on the sand, propped up on the wall.

“You won’t hurt me. You saw what happened last time you did, any first injury on my part will only lead to me taking more life from your friend. Is she really worth an attempt against my eternal one?”

Philip couldn’t throw his weapon, yet every fibre in his body was telling him to cause Gryal as much pain as was possible.

Prior to him making up his mind, a metal left hand closed upon his right shoulder. The hand wore jewelled rings on its second and third fingers. Philip jumped, and looked up into the cold metal face of Mierdi.

“Well, well, what a valiant boy, can’t decide whether to join your masters or to stay with your puny little friends?” Mierdi’s sweet voice came from the solid lips of the effigy as it came to stand beside him, “It looks like this friend needs some help.”

Looking back at Eve, he saw what he’d missed before: tiny bolts of green lightning skittering across the walls and floor of the room beyond the window, some flashing through the air as dust fell from the ceiling. Out of nowhere, a thin wall of green light swept across the scene and disappeared through the stony blocks separating Eve from the outside world. It had been slightly curved, as if it was part of a larger dome or bubble.

“Why don’t you help her?” Mierdi mused.

And without warning Mierdi flung Philip forward, through the window in the air.

*

Philip skidded across the yellow floor, getting covered in sand as he did. As he’d seen from inside the Tower, the pyramid was beginning to shake itself apart. Blearily, he got up on his knees and looked out of the hole in the wall at the city which lay beyond. The green lightning

was trailing between the buildings, as it did along the walls of the room he currently occupied. The monstrous statues were still moving, fighting each other with no other prey around. He moved his gaze upwards, and he saw the bubble of green expanding over the rim of the crater, and disappearing into the desert beyond.

Philip stood up, leaning on the stone wall. He turned to see Eve still lying on the ground, propped up on the wall. The bubble appeared to have had no effect on her, no visible effect at least. He put an arm under hers and helped her to her feet. It appeared that Eve had become slightly less conscious, and only showed minimum response to what was going on, like someone half asleep or in a trance.

He dragged her over to the hole in the wall. Now it appeared the green lightning had started a chain reaction. All around the city, buildings were swirling apart in storms of sand, filling up the crater once more. Knowing they wouldn't have long before the city was nothing more than desert plains, Philip took a firm hold on Eve and entered *transit*. He was thankful Noah had been wrong in that respect; it was possible to use *transit* to escape.

*

Philip and Eve reappeared next to the spot where the rock and stone had been, before they had sunk into the ground. Philip put Eve down on the warm sand and watched what was happening behind them. As if someone had pressed rewind on when the city had first formed in front of them, the sand was rushing back into place as if it had never been touched.

Above them, the peak of the green bubble was continuing to rise towards the sun, and Philip was reminded of the green maelstrom he'd seen when the temple at Auyantepui had exploded, the one he'd forgotten until Noah had reawakened his memories.

When the bubble faded, having reached critical size, Philip looked around for any sign of his friends. One of the jeeps was missing; he could only hope that they had escaped in that. Unfortunately the earlier storm had covered their tracks, so he couldn't know in which direction they had gone. One course of action would be to get himself and Eve into the remaining jeep and go looking for them, but that would leave them trundling through the Egyptian desert for who knew how long. There was another option though, if indeed they were where he thought they were...yet if they weren't there, he might need the jeep to find them anyway.

Even though it would weaken him further, Philip carried Eve over to the jeep, where he touched the door with the back of his hand.

*

The four by four along with the two teens rematerialised out of the rippling air around six hundred metres east of the plane wreck. Even from this distance, due to the flatness of the plain, Philip could see figures around the fuselage. Turning towards the jeep, he realised that it was Eve that knew how to drive, not him, so unfortunately, unless she woke up in the next few seconds, they would have to go on foot. Finding the last ounces of strength from somewhere near the pit of his being, Philip began to walk in their direction, the limp girl still in his arms.

Tony was the first of the confused group to spot Philip approaching. Recognising his friend, he jogged over to him, and helped him with the weight of the strange girl.

Back at the group, which had returned to the limited shelter which the plane offered from the blistering sun, the friends laid Eve down on a row of surviving seats. Relieved of his load, Philip stood up straight, and saw that everyone was either wearing a confused expression or one of fear. Jimmy was actually huddled in a chair, rocking back and forth in a ball.

“What’s wrong?” Philip asked, worry taking over from the weariness, before noticing Kasuf Avari. “Who’s this?”

“I am Sergeant Avari, officer of the Egyptian law enforcement. Would you care to inform us what’s going on here?”

Philip could understand if this stranger didn’t know anything about what they were doing, but it was rather disconcerting that no one else seemed to either.

“Tony,” he said, turning to his long-time friend, “You know what’s going on, don’t you?”

Tony looked awkwardly, and possibly scared, at Philip, “Sorry, but the last thing I remember is being at school. I have no idea where we are or why we’re here.”

Any positive feeling which Philip might have had was gone. He span on his heels to look at each of his companions in turn, each was as clueless about what had just happened as the next.

“Noah, do you know who I am?”

Noah looked at Avari, and then answered in a murmur, “I know that you are Philip Quint, the latest in the line of Mancynn, but I don’t remember ever meeting you face to face. I can guess where we are, but again, I don’t remember coming here or why I even would.”

As Philip ran his hands through his hair, confused tears blossoming in the corners of his eyes, Avari found the recording device in his jacket pocket. Thinking it might give some evidence as to what might be going on, he played the recording.

“Philip, you shouldn’t be doing this. You shouldn’t have to shoot anyone.”

“You’re only here because of two things: you know too much, and I brought you here. If you continue to question my judgement, I will lock you away somewhere you cannot interfere, is that understood! Now get back to your seat.”

The sergeant looked up sharply at Philip, who had turned slowly at hearing his own words.

“Ah,” Philip moaned, slowly, “Now out of context, that might sound incriminating...”

“What is this?” Avari growled, “Is this why we’re here? Seeing as you are the only one to remember anything, I can only assume you are responsible. Have you given us something?”

Philip glared, unable to pose a suitable counter-argument which didn’t reveal any information a normal person wouldn’t understand. And then, as he focused on the face of his challenger, he thought he noticed a sparkle of golden yellow in his eyes, a shade he’d seen in the eye sockets of Gryal.

“You,” the boy hissed, anger and a dire thirst for revenge taking over his being.

Philip lunged at the officer. He was about to morph his body, meaning to extend his nails into claws, but before he could, the Mancynn felt two pinpricks of pain stab him in the chest, which almost immediately encompassed his body. His muscles seized up and he dropped to the floor. Though Philip wasn’t totally unconscious, the shock to his nervous system left the mistaken teen unable to move on the cracked bottom of the plane.

Avari replaced the taser in its holster, looking down at Philip, “Do not worry, he will be fine. If this boy is indeed responsible, rest assured that he will be brought to justice...and if anyone else here is involved, you will follow him to court. Now, I ask that you try to make some

sense of the situation, while I see what I can find in the SUV. I shall also attempt to contact my superiors at Mut via radio, but if I don't manage to, they'll notice I haven't returned and they will send a rescue team."

Kasuf Avari left the plane for the open air, his change in position meaning the Sun's reflection in his eyes that Philip had seen shone brighter. He looked at his SUV, unaware of what had been the cause of the damage. Rescue wouldn't get here any time soon; this could turn into a long night.

*

Not all of the torch brackets were burning in the meeting hall. At the circular Table of Brethren, Lords Stark Vingfamyn and Mordrin Murner sat, each with a glittering chalice before them. Gryal's throne also had a chalice before it, as had Petti's seat, which was empty. Petti, as usual, was keeping to the shadows. There was no chalice before Warren's seat, as no one would sit in it. Gryal entered through the black doors without a sound, his cloak of night rippling around him. The scraping of his toes on the polished floor echoed around the room as he walked under the light from distant stars (or was it other Towers) seeping through the red windows in the walls and ceiling. He had nearly arrived at his throne, and no one had spoken, that is until...

"What the hell were you doing?"

Gryal twisted his neck to look at Mordrin, "Grief has obviously made you delusional. What could I have possibly done?"

Mordrin jumped to his feet, pushing his chair back slightly, pointing a quaking finger at Gryal, "It's your fault Warren's dead!"

Stark raised a podgy hand to Mordrin's shoulder. Mordrin's head turned to stare into the mourning man's eyes. He gave in, and allowed himself to be lowered back into his chair. But Mordrin's attention was still on Gryal.

"I saw him go after you, to see what the hell you were doing. Then he's dead. I'm sorry if I've jumped to the wrong conclusion, but what else could have happened if you didn't orchestrate his death? And as I understand it, it was we who gave the Murorviosp the knowledge with which to build those statues. Why were they ever given that much power?"

Gryal took his place at the table, “Why would I kill my own brother?”

“He was never your brother, not really. None of us are.” Mordrin paused, “You’ve changed.”

“More than you know. Have you considered that that is a good thing, that I’m better now?”

“Well that doesn’t matter now, does it?” Stark interrupted the argument before it could go any further. “We have lost one of our own today; we shouldn’t tarnish his memory with worthless accusations.”

All were silent, none wanting to be the next to speak. Finally, it was Petti that spoke from the shadows.

“It has been so long since we have lost one of our own.”

“Yes,” Gryal looked in his general direction, it was hard to see Petti’s outline in the dark, “but those circumstances were different. You know that though, better than us.”

“The cause is irrelevant; we still lost a Lord that day.”

“And let us hope that we don’t lose any more,” Stark announced, looking in turn at all present.

“We must use this as a...We may have lost the spy and the Mancynn, but we will just have to work harder,” Gryal said to the room in general. “I have a plan, one that can get them back. If we are to win this war, we will need them on our side.”

At the ‘I have a plan’, Gryal would have expected some witty remark from Mordrin, but he must have at last resigned himself to mourning as well.

“Without Warren, achieving victory will be a lot harder,” Petti put forth.

“Without Lord Marz, yes, victory will be one step further from our grasp, but it is still attainable. I know some of you are still unsure about my belief that destiny is changing, but it is. However, I see no repercussions of these changes that mean we cannot reach our goals.”

The other Lords around him still looked a bit sceptical. Gryal, sensing this, ventured trying a new tactic.

“Let me put this in perspective for you. If we don’t get the Mancynn on our side, if he doesn’t get to the Archk first, if we don’t win the subsequent assault, then every living thing on Earth,

no, on every planet, will die. We cannot allow that to happen.” He raised his chalice to eye level, “For the sake of every living thing.”

Stark and Mordrin raised their chalices also. Petti even crept out of the darkness, revealing his twisted features, his mismatched jaws; his bloated red skin pulled tight over prominent bones; his elongated and gnarled fingers; and his bulging compound eyes. With jittery movements on his hind legs he got to the table and picked up his own chalice. Together they chanted:

“For the sake of every living thing.”