

Iyetra

Book 01 : Sleeping God

Joshua Meadows

Copyright © 2010 Joshua Meadows

Smashwords Edition

iyetra.com

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this ebook with another person, please purchase an additional copy. If you're reading this and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please consider buying a legitimate copy. Return to iyetra.com to find a list of retailers online. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

Thank you to all my friends who lent me their opinions, proofreading and editing skills so that I could finish this book on time

Thanks to Lisa for convincing me to do it
and Adam for supporting me while I did

PROLOGUE : DAWNING

At the dawn of things, in the eon known as the Whole, Iyetra was a complete, harmonious world and its inhabitants lived with the blessings of the gods, watched over under the authority of the Advent. Blessed by those gods with abilities above man, they attended to the affairs of their people with kindness and responsibility.

But there were those who resented the Advent and railed against being governed by a minority with powers they lacked, becoming jealous and spiteful. They waged war against harmony, abandoned the blessings of the gods and locked themselves within their Imperium of Man. Turning away from the æther, they rebuilt themselves and became like machines. When they emerged from their self-imposed hiding centuries later, they sought to conquer and to convert.

In the end, the gods grew sad at this rebuke and abandoned Iyetra. With no guardians, the Imperium found a way to force their malevolent agenda upon everyone and brought about the Shattering, flinging shards of our once perfect world throughout space and throughout the æther. Within the last gasps of a dying people, the gods heard the voices of their faithful and took pity, fashioning a way for life to continue in this harsh, warped environment.

But they did not forgive, and the corrupted Chaos stands as a relic to the hubris of man and the depravity he can sink to at his darkest moments. The dæmons of the Chaos are poisoned and twisted, incapable of redemption and under the sway of evil gods.

They must always remind us of what we could have become.

- introduction to *The Dawn of Things*, compiled by Grandmaster Asher; provided by the Avener Library Arcanum, Triyard

01 : SHADOW

On the outskirts of Koton; date.1035/0418, Triyard Unified Time

Tela was roused by the sudden klaxon overhead, snapping her attention back to the present. She peered out through the viewport of the smooth, egg-shaped craft with a yawn, staring through the churning dark void that was pressing itself in against the ship. From the front of the vessel a stewardess appeared in the aisle, walking along the rows to politely remind the small assortment of passengers to collect their things and prepare to disembark; it was an early flight, and few people in Triyard had need of a direct trip to a city so far out as Koton, so most of the plush seats around her remained empty and unused. She arched her back to pop muscles made stiff from sitting in one position for so long, then pushed what little she'd brought in the way of baggage into a neat pile in front of her.

Her assistant yawned in the next seat, waving demurely as he saw her arranging her things. "Good afternoon, ma'am," he said sheepishly, wiping away the sleep in his eyes. "Do you need any help with that?" He brushed shaggy brown hair out of his face, although the action didn't help make him seem less dishevelled.

Tela shook her head. "No thank you, Brannon," she replied. The aide had tagged along at her father's insistence despite the fact that she found him entirely useless. It was a concession she was forced to accept after talking her father down from sending her along with a procession of bodyguards — she wasn't of the opinion that showing up for a diplomatic visit armed to the teeth would inspire the best opinion amongst the individuals she was attempting to court favour with. Even still, she found Brannon mostly useless; he was good for carrying things, but he was too lazy and dim to do much else. If he had a bit more guile she would suspect he was there simply to keep tabs on her at her parents' behest. He was barely into adulthood himself, just a few cycles younger than she was, and their similar ages made her feel uncomfortable tasking him with anything.

Though she had little political aspirations of her own, in Triyard she was the daughter of a high-ranking Senator and had certain responsibilities expected of her as a result. Adding to that lineage, she was also Advent, one of the rare subset of humanity gifted with an affinity towards magic — individuals that to the Consortium were soldiers, advisors and leaders, tasked with the burden of keeping their magic-dependant society functioning properly.

Realising Brannon was still staring at her expectantly, she forced a smile and waved him away. "You can help me once we're stationary, if you really want."

That seemed to satisfy the young man and he nodded, settling back into his seat to nap off the last leg of the trip before they docked, leaving her alone with her own thoughts as she reflected on her "mission." It made little difference that she'd only left the Avener months ago as a journeyman — she was no longer aspirant, which was all that mattered in the eyes of the *proles*: people with no ability to manipulate or utilise the æther.

She eyed the evidence of her own abilities, resting on the empty seat opposite her: a dark mahogany staff almost as tall as she was, mostly unadorned save for the claw carved at one end grasping a small green stone. The lack of decoration was indicative of her low rank compared to other Advent, but she stared at the weapon with a protective expression. She recalled her own ceremony, remembering how she had felt upon receiving her staff from the Matriarch herself. The Advent's inscrutable leader personally provided all graduates tools of their own, granting them permission to enter the ranks of practicing spellweavers. Although upon reflection she thought the feeling was a bit immature, being in the presence of the powerful sovereign filled her with a need to impress the woman.

As her first political task, her father had dispatched her to Koton to negotiate an agreement with the ruling Magisterium; although the city was distant from the rest of the Consortium, it represented a confluence of power to the other floaters within its Sphere. Because of that, the alliance had been eyeing it for a time — their previous overtures had been rebuked by the Magisterium, as relations between the two groups had still been chilly ever since the end of the Estfyn Gate Conflict ten cycles back. A handful of floaters near enough to Koton to give them concern had suddenly been destroyed, worrying the Magisterium that Koton would be ill-prepared to ward off a force powerful enough to breach and eliminate a floater if they were assaulted as well.

Some of the more devoted Magisters had balked at the idea of bringing in Advent for protection, but the more pragmatic ones realised the city simply stood no chance if it was attacked — they had learned that lesson from their brush with the extranatural during their experience with Estfyn. In exchange for some help from the Consortium, Koton was open to cooperating with the alliance to improve its standing with other frontier Spheres.

That was the plan, at least. In practice she wasn't convinced it would be as easy as that, especially with some within the Magisterium still holding a hostile view towards the Advent on principle. Their relationship had been tenuous and fragile ever since the war; thankfully there had never been a return to previous hostilities, but

they weren't friendly either. The Magisterium had originally been an offshoot of the same group of people who went on to found the Imperium — although they didn't share the former's paranoia of magic, they had significant mistrust towards the Advent, considering it inappropriate that the majority should be governed by a rare faction with unusual abilities. It was also common for those abilities to be attributed to dæmons or evil gods and over time the mistrust had become outright bigotry and propaganda.

She gave a weary sigh and returned her attention to the window, looking out for the city emerging from the dark, anarchic mist of the Chaos around them. The reality bubble around the ark did a respectable job of dissipating most of the madness, but from time to time she could still see glimpses of distant, distressing shapes in the fog like hellish nightmares made manifest. One such shape flew close enough to the dirigible to become visible through the mist, suddenly recognisable as a hellbeast despite being a featureless black blob heartbeats before.

She gasped as it appeared within her view and floated past their ship in momentary disinterest. The creature was as big as a house, leathery skin cracked and blistered like dry mud. This particular creature was like a massive snake, stretched out and tubular; two long arms were stretched backwards as it moved, each one possessing fingers ending in curved scythe-like nails. It flew by them using massive wings as propulsion, only a few hundred metres from their craft. Turning its reptilian head in the direction of the dirigible, the behemoth roared in challenge despite the fact that all sound was blocked by the ship's thick insulation. Its eye sockets were vacant aside from deep green flame burning within them. Even though she knew they were completely protected, sitting in a slightly different physical dimension while inside the ship's shielding, seeing a dæmon so close curdled her blood. After a moment without response, the creature snorted and turned away, continuing its lazy migration through the Chaos away from them. She let her breath out in a quiet sigh of relief; despite how close it was, none of her fellow passengers gave any indication of noticing the dæmon, however.

After a few more minutes of travel Koton's tangle of tall spires and skeletal structures resolved itself out of nowhere a few kilometres ahead of them, accompanied by a slight electrical charge passing over her skin as their craft passed through the outer boundary of Koton's space. She admitted feeling mildly impressed with the foreign architecture of the city, as it was certainly unlike anything she had seen back in Triyard; the buildings of the city reached upward from the surface of the floater as if they were trying to grasp the Chaos, a sea of slender digits covering every square metre of the rock with habitation as the city itself scabbled at the twisted madness surrounding it. At this distance, their ark had just slipped inside Koton's distortion field; else the city itself would still be invisible to them.

The floater quickly filled her view through the porthole as the ship silently pivoted around and angled itself towards the city's dock. Rapidly, Koton was all she could see from horizon to horizon as they sped through nonspace, crossing the city's second inner shield in a matter of moments. This time the ark shuddered turbulently as normal physics reapplied themselves to the vehicle and turned the egg-ship into a more conventional aircraft. The light coming through the window dimmed to the general purple haze she was familiar with as a result of the artificial weather that developed inside these reality bubbles. Koton, like other floaters its size, was in perpetual twilight.

She rechecked her bags in the brief time it took their ship to park, the klaxon switching to a low pulse to signal that it was safe to leave their seats. She grabbed her things, protectively clutching her staff to her body, and headed off towards the exit with Brannon close behind. A smiling attendant working for the commercial liner waved at them as she passed the ship's control centre — she peeked at the banks of electronics being administered to by uniformed men; the technological aspects of the ships always unnerved her, feeling far too similar to the sort of mechanical transformation the Imperium had subjected themselves to. Still, magic alone wasn't as efficient at traversing the Chaos and the ships were a ubiquitous tool.

Stepping out and down the departure ramp, she queued up with the other passengers waiting on the large field of concrete serving as a parking ground for the ships. Each one was a massive vehicle shaped like an egg with no wings or outer engine to speak of. It was Tech — as opposed to kraftwork — which as a rule the Advent discouraged the use of, but the Magisterium refused to allow nexusgates on their floaters. It was a policy decision endemic of most of their fears over magic: nexusgates were powerful modes of transport through the Chaos, but with that power came the legitimate risk of a malfunction tearing open a hole inside a floater's protective barrier.

Nexusgates were capable of bridging vast distances in a heartbeat, instantly transporting travellers from one floater to another without the long transit time that the egg-ships necessitated. They were preferred within the Consortium, but they were not without danger — using any magic thinned the veil between spatial reality and the Chaos, but typically it wasn't enough to allow a dæmon to pass through. When a nexusgate was used, this threat was increased due to the massive arcane energy used by the kraftwork tool as it functioned; still, it was rare for an irregularity to last long enough to be useful to those in the Chaos, but it *had* happened in the past.

As such, Triyard permitted a limited number of flights between itself and other floaters lacking more instantaneous methods of travel. The ship's chassis was smooth and off-white, dotted with rows of windows. At

full capacity one could ferry a few hundred people along with the crew and all assorted luggage. Outside of nexusgates, the dirigibles were the easiest way to move through the Chaos.

People were gathered on the opposite side of the ship she'd just exited, belongings in hand as they waited for permission to board it on its return to Triyard. Most of them were dressed like her, in plain clothing, meaning that they were not citizens of the Magisterium but from the free-states. A warm breeze brushed against her skin, refreshing after being stuffed into the cabin of the craft for so long.

In the arrivals area of the port a delegate from the Magisterium met her, bowing his head respectfully. She knew that she was disgustingly late, intending to arrive in Koton first thing that morning, but processing delays in Triyard had kept her in the capital city until her paperwork had been properly handled; she was slightly bemused that even diplomats and politicians were at the mercy of governmental bureaucracy.

"Welcome to Koton, Ambassador Niala," the delegate said to her politely as he ushered her through the security cordon. He was an older man slightly beneath her height, resembling something like a frog; she had little difficulty picturing him collecting insects in his personal time. "My name is Penat, I was sent here to bring you to the Magisterium once you had arrived." He was dressed in the same uniformed brown frock that all men wore here, scalp shaved close to his pale skin.

"Thank you for meeting me," she replied, banishing the mocking thoughts about his appearance from her mind. "I have to ask your forgiveness for my tardiness, I was held up in Triyard. Will there be much time for me to change once we arrive at my lodgings?" she asked.

He hesitated a moment, then tilted his head, "My apologies, Ambassador, but I was instructed to bring you straight to the Magisterium once you arrived. We won't have time to stop at your hotel along the way." He looked at her outfit and for a split second she thought something resembling derision crossed his features at the unorthodox garb she wore — while they didn't force visitors to adopt their own customs, it was clear he didn't approve of how she was dressed; women here were stuffed into long gowns like burlap sacks, faces veiled to obscure their features. "Obviously, I will make arrangements before we arrive to appropriate a place for you to change in privacy, before the ceremony begins."

She nodded with an inward sigh of resignation, knowing she had no choice in the matter. Negotiations between herself and the Magisterium would begin first thing the following day, but as a gesture of goodwill she had been invited to attend an infrequent but celebrated event for the floaters: the transference ceremony where one Archon stepped down to be replaced with their successor. It was a day of festivities and excitement, although the population as a whole wouldn't be permitted to attend the actual ceremony itself. As such, the Magisterium's invitation to her was a great honour, and it was her obligation as emissary to attend. They wouldn't delay the event, however, and would be gravely insulted if she failed to show up on time.

With a loud rumble behind her, she heard the docking clamps creak as they released the blimp once it had finished loading passengers and fuel. The craft detached itself from the mooring and gently floated away from the dock, surprisingly graceful for a massive white egg. In short moments it was ascending through the inner boundary, into the mist, and she quickly lost sight of it as it began to disassociate into the Chaos.

The port had been built on the edge of Koton, while the Magisterium's complex resided in the city's centre. From end to end, Koton occupied a chunk of rock about a hundred kilometres across; given its impressive population, that rock was crammed full of people — they'd long ago run out of space across the floater, so they began filling it vertically as well, erecting tall towers of stone and metal that twinkled against the dim, uniformly dour sky. The city's architecture was in contrast to the blasé appearance of the citizens, each of them dressed in the same brown uniform and filed into polite lines wherever they went. The delegate led her through the port's long hallways, speeding her through checkpoints with his credentials. As they walked he proudly rattled off platitudes about the city's founding and history; although she made an effort to pay attention, it didn't take long for boredom to set in and she was thankful when they finally reached the periphery of the harbour and the delegate led her to their transport.

They boarded a small, private carrier — one of the few passenger aircraft permitted to travel within city limits, looking something like a long box with a gyroscope of metal attached to its underside, orbiting a glowing chunk of warpstone as crackling slices of energy passed between each ring — and sped away towards the Magisterium complex. Koton used magic, of course; outside of the Imperium, no human society could function completely without it. But they viewed it, and its creations, as necessarily sinful tools that needed to be tightly controlled, lest continued exposure to the Chaos twist its practitioners into dæmons of frightening evil. As a foreign diplomat, she had certain latitude, but she wouldn't be receiving any of the usual deferential treatment that she'd grown accustomed to back in Triyard. Here, the *proles* saw her as a utensil at best or a conduit of devastation at worst. Individuals granted authority to practice were known as priests, and there were only ever a handful of them in service at any time.

"How long will the flight take?" she asked, cutting off the delegate mid-speech as he produced encyclopaedic trivia about the particular section of the city they were presently flying over.

He bowed his head again. "It will be inside one bell; the liners are the fastest craft we have available on Koton," he said apologetically. "We can't provide anything more instantaneous, but we will still reach the complex with enough time for you to prepare."

She smiled politely. "The carrier is perfectly fine," she said. Penat nodded and, perhaps sensing her disinterest in the history lessons, announced that he was retiring to a separate area of the craft to prepare for their arrival, leaving her alone with her assistant. She was lulled into calm by the gentle purr of the liner's kraftwork motors, nodding off for a brief nap until the delegate tapped her on the shoulder after they arrived.

"If it pleases you," he whispered as she smoothed her mussed hair down, "I've called ahead and had a chamber prepared for you to freshen up within before the ceremony starts. You have about a bell and a half. I've left directions with your staff —" he said, glancing at Brannon, "but you will be met by the Magisterium's Chief Secretary at the front gate. Is there anything else I can assist you with?"

She smiled and stood to her feet. "No, you've been most gracious, thank you. I'm sure I can handle things from now on." He bowed respectfully and departed, leaving her alone with Brannon and her bags once again.

The small liner had landed in a lot just in front of the grandiose entrance to the Magisterium complex. There were a number of floaters scattered about Known Space who had ceded authority to the religious establishment of the Magisterium, turning it into a respectable body of power. Their nerve centre was located on a floater called Providence, nearer to the central Spheres, but they gave their other vassals a certain degree of autonomy provided the other floaters operated within the framework of their established laws. Policing of those laws, as well as dealing with serious violations of them, were handled by their own Holy Guard, but for the most part the central authority rarely interfered with the activity of another city.

The square just outside the capitol building was packed with citizens eagerly gathered for the transference rite, leaving the atmosphere celebratory and excited despite the fact that they were all wearing the same dour brown uniform. Under the Magisterium, Archons were supreme rulers and protectors, even though their literal political role was largely symbolic; they served an essential function but had no real clout of their own. It was just as well, as their responsibilities were far too demanding to leave them as adequate politicians at the same time. For that, the Magisterium filled that role. They selected their Archons through conscription — once chosen, an individual could not turn the appointment down. It was something that she personally bristled at, but those who lived under this form of governance would consider such a refusal to be the ultimate disgrace.

She had heard a smattering of comments during her briefings that a growing number of people felt the Magisterium had made a poor choice, selecting someone who was both remarkably young and incredibly immature for the position. Rumour had it that the Archon-elect had turned his new job down and had been subsequently "relocated" in preparation for the rite by the Magisters as a result. It didn't make a difference if he was unwilling, she thought cynically to herself; the Magisterium would simply drug him and put him in place anyway — filling in as an Archon only necessitated having a body, but not necessarily a consciously participating one.

Koton's administration complex was imposing and Romanesque in the way she'd always associated with the Magisterial faction. Ornate columns of stone carved with flourishes and decorative accents surrounded the squared building, framing it like prison bars. It was constructed of concrete and marble, sand-blasted to smooth whiteness and dotted with openings in the front facade for windows. She guessed it was too expensive to fit them with actual glass, noting that most were shaded over with heavy cloth. Brannon trailed behind her, jaw slack in awe as he looked up at the massive structure.

It was thankfully just a quick walk from the parking area to the building and they crossed the distance in moments. She began climbing the high staircase out front with dignified poise, consciously aware of the many sets of eyes watching every step she took. At the top, a pair of well-armoured guards brandishing long halberds stood before the front entrance. The vocal crowd behind her disappeared out of sight over the horizon of the massive staircase. Neither guard looked her in the eye as she approached, and nor did they make any effort to step out of her way.

After a moment she cleared her throat pointedly and looked at the taller one. "Pardon me; I am Ambassador Niala, from Triyard. I am here for the transference rite."

The guard, a youth who barely seemed old enough for the position, shook his head curtly. "Weapons aren't allowed within the government complex, ma'am." When this was met with a blank stare of confusion, he gestured with irritation at the staff she held.

Now it was Tela's turn to shake her head, clutching her staff closer to her person as if it was a child. "I'm Advent, the Magisters understand this —"

The other guard stepped in front of her, puffing his chest out aggressively. "D'they not teach you glitter-rats anything over in *Treeyard* or what? He told you to ditch the staff." He jabbed her hard in her left shoulder blade to punctuate the order.

She blinked in confusion at his hostility and the pejorative he used for Advent, taking a step back in outrage. "What did you —!" she started to say, only to be cut off when the same guard grabbed for her staff in

his fat calloused hand. She gasped in stunned shock — a layperson touching an Advent's catalyst was akin to a stranger groping her breast — then screeched from the affront. "How dare you!" she yelled, as ripples of crackling energy began to slither around the body of the weapon and her eyes took on an electric, golden hue. The temperature of the surrounding area dropped noticeably by several degrees, and the guard paused slightly in his assault, looking worried.

"Enough!" a voice commanded over the noise of the rapidly escalating confrontation. It hit her in the face like a projectile, snapping her out of her outrage in an instant. "Unhand the woman," the stranger repeated, with both guards looking at one another as if realising the scope of trouble they'd found themselves in. The rudest one released her staff, taking a step back as his face reddened.

A tall, older man dressed in fine robes stepped through the opened front door of the complex, face stern. She realised immediately that he was stationed high within the Magisterium to avoid the same uniform as everyone else, but his position wasn't immediately apparent beyond that. A group of attendants, each dressed in plain servant-wear, followed him close behind. "Ambassador Niala, my apologies for arriving late. I had hoped to be here before your carrier landed in order to explain your presence to our guards." He looked at both the boys with an indecipherable expression. "It seems I arrived just in time."

Tela's knuckles were white from gripping her weapon and she slowly willed herself back to calm. It was a struggle to leash the energy she'd instinctively pulled on moments earlier — that was an aspect of discipline she was still working on, and it took several deep breaths before she was able to anchor it back within her staff. The first guard looked at the man who'd just arrived. "Chief Secretary, we were told no one could come in armed —"

"Boys, don't they prepare you for anything in that ill-advised training academy the Magisters insist on utilising? She's an Advent; that's not a weapon, it's a limb. How would you appreciate someone telling you to leave your leg outside before you report for guard duty? And here you were accosting a diplomat to do exactly that." They blanched considerably, looking at her as they realised the gravity of their behaviour. "You're both fortunate I arrived when I did; I've seen first-hand what the Advent are capable of when threatened. As you physically harassed her first, she would be completely within her rights to react however she felt was necessary." He punctuated this last point in particular, watching their faces as it sunk in.

Finally, the second guard dropped his eyes to his boots and mumbled, "My apologies, ma'am, my behaviour was unbecoming for one of t'Magisterial guards."

"It certainly was," the Chief Secretary said. He turned to her. "Well, Ambassador, what would you like me to do with them? Their behaviour was certainly criminal."

She took another deep breath and considered, weighing the gratification of punishing them with the probable expectation that she rise above how they had behaved. After a moment she shrugged slightly, saying softly, "I accept his apology. I don't think further discipline is necessary."

"Very gracious of you, ma'am," the newcomer said and then turned to the soldiers. "But, both of you can return home for the rest of the day, without pay." He held his hand up when they began to protest, cutting them off. "Have Mic and Enyar relieve you on your way out, and be thankful the Ambassador hasn't asked me to file an official report. Now go, before I change my mind." They both did so, quietly grumbling as they returned through the high archway of the complex's entrance.

He turned to her, bowing apologetically. "I do have to emphasise my contrition over those two. They're good men, but some have accepted the mandates of the Apology faster than others." He was referring to a proclamation by the Magisterium that had officially ended the Estfyn Gate Conflict. Many under Magisterial authority had viewed Advents as little more than witchdoctors, accusing them of practicing the sort of dark arts that had brought about the Shattering in the first place — ignoring the fact that it had been the Imperium who was responsible for that destruction, they treated the Advent with prejudice and demanded that the Consortium destroy the Avener and ban magic. Although the war had been over for cycles, not everyone had let go of the bigotry of the past.

She shook her head. "It's all right," she said, heart still pounding from the altercation. "No harm was done."

The man nodded, holding his hand out to her. "Well then, let me greet you properly. My name is Tamyer Hestone, I am the Chief Secretary for the Magisterium; I was asked to meet you here and make sure you were well handled in time for the ceremony." His voice was kind and warm, welcome after how she'd been treated moments before. "Irrespective of the previous... trouble, did you have any issues getting here?"

She brushed her hands against her pants, shaking her head again. "No, thank you for asking. Your deputy met me at the port and was most helpful during the trip over."

Tamyer laughed, leading her along through the grand front entrance. "Penat didn't bore you to death with his history lessons, did he? He tends to assume all visitors share his interest in the trivial minutiae of Koton — those of us born here don't even care as much as he does!" He grinned at her as if sharing a private joke just between them and she smiled back, finding herself warming up to the affable stranger quickly.

Tamyer directed them into the austere greeting hall — she exclaimed in surprise at the majesty of it, looking at high ceilings covered in complicated calligraphy and beautiful imagery over every inch of their surfaces; the mural depicted (and exaggerated) historical events, replete with paintings of famous Archons of the past battling terrifying *dæmons*. The hall itself was filled with people milling about sipping various beverages, each wearing more upscale versions of the uniform she was familiar with while still looking appropriately modest. The people gathered here represented another tier of the floater's hierarchy: they were considered important enough to not be kept outside with the other *proles*, but not important enough to be present for the actual ceremony.

Her guide led them around the bulk of the crowd, pushing through the packed swarm of bodies with the sort of expertise one only picks up through practice. "I've appropriated a dressing room for you to change in, since I know your travel delay pushed you off schedule." He brought her to the far end of the chamber and stopped before a plain door along the wall; opening it up and gesturing her through, his own aides taking up position to either side of it on the outside. She promptly left her assistant with them, and then followed behind Tamyer as he continued down a long corridor with open rooms on either side.

Stopping before one that looked identical to all the others, he handed her a key and bowed his head. "You still have some time, so don't feel rushed. I will be back to collect you at the sixthbell."

"Thank you," she replied, taking the key from him; with that he bowed low and headed back out the way they'd come, closing the door on the way out.

She locked it, dropping her baggage off beside the door, then looked around. The room was functional, if sparse, and she quickly rummaged through her suitcase for something more appropriate to the event. Making use of the room's simple bath system — a conjured heatstone had been warming up a basin of water in advance of her arrival, which she drained into the larger tub and scented with flower petals — she washed up and committed herself to the task of unravelling how to put on her clothing. She didn't consider herself a particularly gaudy dresser, hating the ornate robes expected of the Advent, but the complicated gown provided by the Magisterium was a mystery to her. Spending the majority of the fifthbell deciphering the strange and unintuitive clasps and buttons that held it together, she eventually worked out how to take apart and reassemble the brown outfit until it looked similar to how she'd seen the women look on her way through the port earlier.

Examining her appearance in the mirror she felt somewhat appalled with herself for compromising in such a sexist way, but understood that being from Triyard wouldn't exempt her from this particular social convention — she was lucky enough that they'd permitted her to keep her staff on hand. The cloth itself was heavy and stiff and she had to adjust to the strange imbalance of it when she walked, but she didn't anticipate a high likelihood of running around while keeping it on. If she'd showed up for the transference ceremony wearing her private clothing, she would likely jeopardise the entire diplomatic effort and inspire the never-ending wrath of her father.

She'd just finished preparing herself when sixthbell was announced courtesy of a glowing timesphere set on the room's wooden dresser, giving off a low chime of warning when the time struck. No sooner had it gone off than she heard a polite knock at the door. It was synchronised enough that she wondered if the visitor had been waiting around patiently for a few minutes.

"Ambassador Niala?" asked Tamyer's familiar voice. "It's the Chief Secretary again. I'm here to take you to the Archon's Hall if you're ready."

"Yes, just give me a moment," she replied, packing the last of her belongings into her suitcase again. She left her bags beside the door, knowing as soon as she left a maid would be around to collect them and ship them over to her actual hotel before she was finished with the evening. Quickly pulling the heavy veil over her face, she opened the door.

Tamyer gave a slight gasp of surprise as she appeared, no doubt caught off guard at her adoption of their ceremonial garb for women. "Ah, I was hoping they wouldn't put you into that ghastly box. It's unbecoming for someone as beautiful as you," he said with a grin, leaving her face flushed to an extent that she was happy to have a veil covering it. She clutched her staff for comfort, digging the lower end of it into the cobbled-stone floor.

"Thank you," she murmured shyly. "I feel like a monster from a child's tale in this."

He laughed heartily, then pointed in the opposite direction of where they'd originally walked. It was a short distance to the section of the complex where the ceremony would take place — something she was thankful for, as even just a few minutes in her dress shoes had her feet complaining loudly, despite the enjoyable conversation she shared with Tamyer.

The Archon's Hall was blocked by a large, heavily fortified door surrounded by more armoured guards — unlike the ones she had seen out front, these men were wearing reflective golden armour and holding polearms in their gloved hands. Any concerns she had of a repeat of the earlier incident were relieved when Tamyer put a hand on her shoulder and flashed the men his identification papers.

The nearest guard grunted. "Proceed, Chief Secretary." It took two of them on either side of the massive door to pry it open far enough for her and Tamyer to walk inside. On the other end of it, a simple white

hallway sloped down steeply and they walked for a surprising length of time before reaching its exit. In front of them stood another door, though this one was made of metal and interfaced with various unmistakable components of Tech — she fought the urge to recoil, knowing what it was. Before this strange obstruction another golden man stood waiting, face betraying no expression as they approached.

The Chief Secretary turned to her. "I have to leave you here, I'm afraid, Ambassador. I don't possess high enough rank to pass the Holy Gate; few do who aren't Magisters, so this is a considerable honour for you. I hope it is just the start of a beneficial foundation between Koton and Triyard."

She chose to not express her disappointment and nervousness with being left alone and attempted a curtsy as best as she could in the heavy gown. "It's been a pleasure to meet you, Chief Secretary Hestone."

He grinned, returning the bow, then went back in the direction they had come before. The gold-clad guard put his hand over a red panel set into the door, where a handle would normally be, and the metal portal irised open. With a nod from him, she stepped across the threshold, hearing the door close behind her.

In this new room, the lighting was dim and it took her a moment to realise that a number of the individuals already present had turned to examine her quizzically. Glancing about quickly, she realised that she was the only woman there — all the other brown figures were unmistakably men, shaved heads and homogenous uniforms worn proudly. A few of them were whispering to one another, looking at her pointedly.

"Ambassador Niala, yes?" called a voice across the chamber, belonging to an individual towering over the heads of the other men there. His earthen-coloured robe had a number of badges and tassels sewn into it, signifying some manner of rank that she wasn't familiar with. He strode towards her with calm deliberation and the others were deferential to him, parting from in front as he walked up to meet her.

Tela nodded slightly, then realised most of her subtle gestures would be masked underneath the veiled garment. She cleared her throat and said, "Yes, I apologise for how late I am."

He waved the comment away and held out his hand in welcome. "No matter, we haven't begun yet. I am the Senior Magistrate, but feel welcome to call me Donyvan." He glanced about the chamber with a nonchalant shrug and the other attendees took it as a cue to return to their own conversations.

She shook his hand, her gloved fingers slipping around his in the complicated gesture of respectful greeting she had been trained to execute during her briefings before her visit. She felt slightly absurd shaking his hand as an equal when she was bundled up with layers of cloth to hide her features, but if he thought anything of the disparity he was quiet. Donyvan Miama was the true centre of power in Koton; while the Archon might technically hold that position, it was the Senior Magistrate who actually utilised it.

He looked down to speak to her, his considerable height making him into something of a skyscraper. "Did you have any difficulty finding your way?" he asked her in a murmur, the din from everyone else quietly speaking drowning out most of their conversation.

She thought back briefly to the altercation with the guards on the front steps of the building, but thought better of mentioning it. "No, my delays were unfortunately on the part of Triyard. Your Chief Secretary was most gracious and helpful."

He nodded in distraction, clearly only partly paying attention to her. "Lovely, I'll be sure to let him know." Another small group of men filtered in through the metal door she'd used earlier and he mentally counted them off, lips moving slightly as he calculated. "We're waiting for just a few more stragglers, but they don't have much time — we have to start at seventhbell." She guessed he was waiting for someone specifically, but he didn't betray any details of whom that may be.

She looked around, examining her current location while the Senior Magistrate made a mental list of missing company. The chamber they were gathered in was mostly featureless save for a circular dais several metres across, which the men standing nearest to it seemed to be making a conscious effort to avoid. The dais was in the centre of the room, painted over with a number of faded glyphs that she immediately recognised as warding magic.

Most of the symbols were attached to extremely powerful spells — although she understood why, she was mildly surprised that even the Magisterium used Advent magic to protect their Archons. She wasn't sure if it was just her imagination, but the glyphs appeared to shimmer slightly on the surface of the dais, flickering a shade or two brighter for just a moment before returning normal once she focused her attention on them.

Tela knew that they were about a floor underground, more or less situated in the centre of Koton. Even though the dais looked like simple rock, she knew it was actually kraftwork — the fabric of its matter was imbued with heavy magic, as no mortal structure could contain the violent energies stored under it. It was known as the Archon's Grace, and beneath it the current reigning ruler "slumbered," his physical body drained to fuel his vital role in protecting the floater.

Sadly, that was the responsibility of the Archons — the guardian shield, the twin barriers she had passed through in the egg ship as she approached Koton earlier, was powerful magic that ran off of the life-force of specially attenuated individuals, using their bodies and spirits as batteries to generate a shelter against the lethal energies of the Chaos. Without the sacrifice of the Archons, civilisation would have failed after the Shattering as the outside maelstrom closed in and twisted the human survivors. It was a role of great honour, but

it was not without cost. Even though an Archon only served for a relatively small number of cycles, a term drained the individual tremendously, accelerating ageing and disease once they were released, leaving them as little more than a discarded husk of their former self afterward. It was no surprise that many of them took their own lives after being discharged, unable to reconcile the difficulty of their torment.

Aside from the dais, there wasn't much else to speak of within the chamber. Light resonated from high glowspheres set above them on the ceiling, but there wasn't even furniture in the room — the assembled men stood around in groups talking to one another, some of the older ones shifting back and forth on their feet in discomfort. As a sacred place, lesser staff weren't permitted past the Gate, and she overheard at least one grouchy Magistrate complaining about the lack of refreshments.

Suddenly, a chime sounded around them, calling the Senior Magistrate's attention. "Ah, blast it then," she heard him mutter, assuming it had something to do with whichever people hadn't yet arrived. He turned and strode over swiftly to the large door, pressing a button next to a speaker. "Please seal the Gate, we're going to begin."

"Very well, your eminence," came a tinny, crackled reply through the voicebox, presumably belonging to the gold-clad guard she had encountered before.

With that he turned around to face them. "If I can get your attention," he called out, not that he didn't have it already — the moment the timesphere went off, everyone in the room began watching him expectantly, waiting for the event to finally begin. "As you all know, today is the scheduled transference rite to instil the next Archon into his role as guardian of our floater." He looked off to one end of the room and Tela followed his gaze, noticing a door she'd missed before. As if on cue, it opened and two new golden-mailed soldiers appeared wheeling out a young man in front of them. She tried to stifle her visceral reaction at his appearance, but a number of other Magistrates gasped and grumbled audibly.

Obviously, the rumours she had heard in Triyard regarding the unwillingness of the replacement Archon were true: the individual, a boy who barely looked old enough to be out of adolescence, sat in the wheelchair with his head slumped forward. He lifted it with considerable effort, eyes lidded and bloodshot as a result of whatever substances they had pumped him with to force compliance. She wondered how long he'd been kept that way, though she had heard that the Holy Guard had only recently seized and relocated the boy away from his family. His dark brown hair was matted and stuck to his forehead from sweat, and his brown robe was discoloured with his own filth. It was hardly fitting treatment for someone who was going to spend the next five cycles undergoing prolonged sacrifice.

"Aenstara's grace," someone swore. "He's covered in his own shit, Miama."

The Senior Magistrate cleared his throat, pursing his lips at the reaction from his compatriots. "Gentlemen," he said firmly, making no reference to her presence there, "while I share your reaction to his appearance, I must stress that the child is completely unharmed. His cooperation came at a cost, as the boy fell under the influence of subversive elements of our society shortly after his nomination was leaked to the public. We had no choice but to bring him under our protection, and sedate him for his own safety — he tried to take his own life twice, and I *don't* think I need to underscore the gravity of what that would have meant for Koton if he had been successful." The child made a strange sound and she looked at him, realising he was focusing his attention on the Magistrate with a poisonous glare. If Donyvan noticed he gave no indication of it, snapping his fingers at the guards until they wheeled the boy onto the dais. "If you would all be so kind as to step onto the platform and form a circle, we can begin the ceremony."

With begrudging acceptance the other men did as they were asked. Tela started off towards the platform, but the Senior Magistrate reached out and grasped her shoulder. "Actually, Ambassador," he said, looking down at her and making eye contact for the first time since she'd arrived, "I would be honoured if you would accompany me personally."

His tone of voice was polite, but she felt an involuntary shudder of unease down her spine. Still, refusing his request was not possible. "Of — of course," she replied, dropping her gaze under the attention of the powerful man. Everyone else shuffled over to the stage and took their places, forming a ring around the outside circumference of the dais. The two guards positioned the Archon-to-be in the very centre of the ring, though the youth gave little indication of noticing.

Several Magisters stared down at the flickering symbols painted onto the stone under their feet. "Do they look brighter now than they did when we came in?" she heard someone whisper to the individual next to him.

Donyvan nodded to her and gave a slight push, leading her up onto the platform. He moved two men out of the way to take position in the circle facing the metal door of the "entrance," then motioned for Tela to stand beside him. As she stepped onto the stone she gave a gasp of surprise: rising up from the rock itself she felt a flood of ancient magic coursing up through her feet from the wards. It was ancient stuff, part of a ritual that was easily as old as Koton itself. Her legs started to give out and she almost fainted, saved from collapsing to the floor by the strong grip of Donyvan.

"So, it is true then," he murmured, "you are Advent." She pulled herself to her feet, using her staff as support, and cast an embarrassed glance about the room. "Shall I have something fetched for you?" he asked.

She shook her head and waved the offer away, swallowing hard as the foreign magic released its grip on her. "No, I'm all right. I was just caught off-guard, although I should have realised there would be a reaction."

He grunted indecipherably, waiting for her to pull herself together before continuing. "I know this is slightly unorthodox," he said, loud enough for his words to carry to everyone else, "but in the spirit of cooperation I felt it's only appropriate to have you standing in a place of honour beside me."

She simply nodded, still uneasy after her brush with the strong energy underneath the room. At this, Donyvan clapped his hands to attract the attention of everyone else in the hall. "Now then, gentlemen: we are gathered here at this moment to perform the sacred duty bestowed upon us as stewards of fair Koton. Today, as we did five cycles ago and five cycles before that, we will empower an individual —" he glanced disdainfully at the child in the centre of the platform, "—with the authority of our God to protect our people." From within his fine robes he produced a small crystal sphere, its surface reflecting the overhead lighting with scattering pinpoints of blue colour. He bowed his head and closed his eyes, lips moving in a silent prayer.

Never having participated in such a ceremony before, Tela was unsure of what she should do. She glanced at the other men present — unfortunately they seemed just as lost as she was.

Donyvan gave the crystal sphere a squeeze and looked up, though this time when he spoke his voice seemed as if it was coming from far away. His eyes were flushed with bluish energy, pupils dilated significantly. "*Graceful Aenstara, arbiter of creation, flood your supplicant disciple with your power so that we may breach the wards below and ensure the safety of Koton for another cycle.*" She drew back from him apprehensively, skin tingling from the unmistakable triggering of magic; it made sense, on reflection: the Archon's Grace had been warded by a spellweaver to protect the prone Archon from any threats — whether originating from the Chaos or something more domestic. Something similarly powerful would need to be employed in order to counteract that shielding, but she was puzzled at what the Magisterium had in their arsenal that would perform that function. Her robe's hem brushed against the ground, reacting to an ethereal breeze whipping about the room.

Moving suddenly, the Senior Magistrate threw the sphere in his wizened hands against the dais, shattering it upon contact with the wards. The glyphs flared brightly with blue fire, quickly lighting up with an intensity strong enough to hurt her eyes if she looked at them for longer than a second. Then, just as quickly, the fire subsided and they nearly vanished, dimming close to invisibility as the dais gave a shudder and began descending, taking them down as if in a lift. From her connection to the æther she knew the spell hadn't been broken, simply placated for the time being; presumably whatever tool Donyvan had used was a token to unlock the wards long enough for the ritual to progress, snapping back into power as soon as the next Archon had been installed.

They descended quickly as the platform migrated far below the rest of the administration complex, surrounded by a column of stone painted with the same inert runes that were on the Archon's Grace. The elevator was silent, giving off no sound even as it grated against the rock around them. Moving on a hunch, she bent down as gracefully as her outfit would allow and fingered a fragment of the broken sphere that had landed near her. As she had surmised, there was no resonance of magic woven within its fabric; whatever the Senior Magistrate had done came from some well of power within his being, not something called forth from an external source — given the Magisterium's preoccupation with magic, a senior official having latent skill with spellweaving would likely be a controversy.

She leaned over to Donyvan as the other Magisters were occupied with conversation, impressed with the display they'd just witnessed. "I presume the theatrics were your cover?" she whispered wryly. "I admit I was curious to see how an Advent ward could be counteracted with anything other than magic."

Donyvan regarded her for a moment, a small smile spreading across his thin lips. "You're more perceptive than one would estimate, Ambassador."

"I'm not sure what you would base such an estimation on, your eminence, stuffed as I am inside this beekeeper's outfit," she replied levelly.

He gave a hearty chuckle. "That's the best description I've heard for those ghastly things," he replied. If he had any further interest in talking it was cut short as the dais came to a rest at the bottom of the shaft. She looked up through the tunnel, but the end of it was lost in darkness high above.

The room they found themselves in now was vastly different from where they had been before; it was also much older, the air itself tasting stale and chilly. There was only way to progress: through an open hallway lit every half-metre with glowing lightspheres. "This way, please," Donyvan said to the group, stepping off the platform and striding quickly away. There was little ornamentation to the area they walked through — the walls were stone, barren of decoration or artwork in contrast to the part of the complex above them. As Donyvan directed them deeper into the tunnel she felt increasing pressure behind her temples from the strength of the

power that was about to confront them. Although she had never seen an Archon's throne before, she had a good idea of what they were going to find at the end of that stretching corridor.

The group stepped through a final doorway and Tela found herself at the front of a massive, poorly-lit hall stretching about ten metres in each direction. In the centre of it, cocooned within a mess of metal, wiring and stone was the Archon's throne — and, suffocated somewhere inside of that, she presumed there would be the Archon himself. The throne was a fusion of Tech as well as kraftmatter; she pressed her eyes closed, massaging her forehead again as her power centres resonated with the energy being generated by the device. Snaking away from the ebony carapace were a number of thick cables plugging into banks at the far end of the auditorium, each of them painted with more shimmering charter runes. The amalgamation of magic and technology was giving her a sour feeling in the pit of her stomach: being confronted first-hand with corporeal violations of her belief structures was affecting her on a clear physical level.

Accompanying the electrical tinge in the air was a deep hum from the machinery all around them, giving the room a gentle vibration that she felt up through the soles of her uncomfortable shoes. Several of the lightspheres had shattered, releasing sticky green ooze where they had burst and contributing to the overall appearance of disuse that she felt inside the throne room.

Donyvan paused briefly, looking from side to side as if he expected to find something waiting for them inside the dusty chamber. He snapped his fingers at the two guards, pointing to a spot near the carapace. They wheeled the young boy over dutifully, standing to either side of his wheelchair as they waited for their next orders. The Senior Magistrate tugged on a chain around his neck, producing a long, golden key from inside his shirt. The tool was richly decorated, covered with jewels and complicated etchings over its ornate surface. He knelt down in front of the throne, finding a matching lock along the base of the machine, and slid the key into the opening.

For a moment there was silence, and she realised she was holding her breath in anticipation. With a barely-audible click, the carapace fractured neatly down its front, splitting into two halves. These pieces slowly opened, revealing a withered corpse of something hardly recognisable as human; its twisted body was prone on the black seat beneath it, flesh petrified through whatever process the Archon's throne leeches the life-force from its user.

Not everyone was capable of interfacing with a throne successfully; in the ancient past, with no way to discern who was compatible, the process was carried out through trial and error of a barbaric degree as rulers went through scores of humans to find one or two who had the appropriate physical makeup to power the seats without burning up in a matter of minutes. Through the fledgling scholarly pursuit of *genetics* their modern society was able to run tests on the greater population, isolating the rare handful born every generation who could use the devices.

In Triyard, and most floaters within the Consortium, the responsibility was voluntary for those nominated, but such liberties had their cost: for obvious reasons, few people were willing to sacrifice themselves. There had been a number of crises for Triyard when it looked as if a suitable replacement wouldn't be ready before the existing Archon passed away; in some respects, she understood why the Magisterium simply elected to conscript their candidate instead of deliberating over the repercussions of choice.

The Senior Magistrate closed his eyes and crossed himself in prayer. "Beloved Aenstara, deliver your selfless child into the arms of the Eternal Father and honour him for his sacrifice," he whispered, bringing himself to his feet. "We're a bit late," he said to the others.

A question occurred to Tela, making her heart skip a beat. "Wait — if he's dead, does this mean we're vulnerable to the Chaos?"

Donyvan shook his head. "The guardian shield won't fail immediately; the Archon's throne has a certain amount of reserve power saved to allow the handoff to take place. We have a few bells of safety before the floater would be at risk." He looked at the readout along the left side of the chair. "He passed on just one bell ago, so our window is still intact."

The rest of the Magisters were milling about at a fair distance behind them, as if afraid to come any closer to the device. Donyvan gestured to the guards again. "Go ahead and remove the body, you're the only ones sanctified to touch the Archon."

They nodded and stepped forward, peeling off wires and cabling, pulling the unrecognisable corpse from the seat. Hefting the body between them, they walked off to one end of the room where a padded coffin already lay in wait — presumably, it had been there whenever the unknown Archon stepped into his role, a thought that Tela found more than a little morbid. The gold-clad guards gently laid the stiff corpse down and looked at the Senior Magistrate for direction.

Donyvan turned to everyone else in exasperation. "Aenstara's grace, men — it's a dead body, stop being such frightened children." He jerked his head emphatically towards the coffin, waving at them until they began to file in around it. "Would anyone like to say anything?" he asked.

Tela hesitated, then raised her hand slightly, suddenly overcome with a need to thank the anonymous stranger for the sacrifice he had made which undoubtedly went unnoticed by most of the citizens of Koton. Donyvan raised an eyebrow but nodded nevertheless, letting her step closer to the coffin.

She took a breath, gathering her words. "On behalf of the Advent, thank you for giving your life to protect a million others. Although many will never know what that entails, I find it more commendable than anything else —"

Suddenly she heard a clapping sound behind her, breaking the flow of her speech. The group turned back towards the source of the sound, finding four hooded individuals coming in from the long hallway at the front of the room.

"The little netherwitch has a way with words, don't you think chaps?" the lead stranger mocked, looking at his compatriots for confirmation. They all advanced towards the other Magisters slowly, cackling between them. The one who spoke before pulled his hood back over his head, revealing a shaved skull covered with dizzying tattoos of corrupted charter runes. His eyes were bloodshot and run through with hints of jaundiced yellow, glowing with their own light inside the dim room. She immediately felt the stench of someone who had touched Chaos, and felt herself withdrawing in fear from the approaching outsiders.

Donyvan pushed past her as the other Magisters looked to one another in confusion. "This is a sacred place!" he growled. "You are absolutely not allowed here! How did you even get down —?"

Moving with lightning reflexes, the lead man reached out, fingertips crackling with green fire. He jerked his right hand towards Donyvan, gritting his rotted teeth in pain as magic swirled around his limb. The veins of his forearm stood out through his paper-thin skin, sickly and black from the corrupted magic coursing through his body.

"*Shut your mouth, priest!*" he screamed, pushing the lightning out of his body to cross the distance between himself and the Senior Magistrate.

"No!" Tela screamed, gripping her staff until her knuckles turned white. Reacting just as quickly, she pointed her left index finger at Donyvan and closed her eyes, drawing a barrier of blue energy around his form within the æther. The stranger's attack hit the shield front-on, rocking Tela backward off of her feet as his ethereal missiles dissipated safely into her protective barrier. Even as she landed on the stone floor, body wincing in pain from the secondary effects of blocking the spell, she had a terrifying realisation that the stranger hadn't even put a significant fraction of his power into the attack.

The other three whooped and laughed madly, slapping the front assailant on the back in excitement. Donyvan stood in a daze, then realising he was still safe and alive, rushed over to where Tela was gasping on the floor.

"Good god child!" he swore, attending to her with the help of another nearby Magistrate. "Are you all right?"

She took a deep breath, knowing how much her body was going to hate her later on. With an effort she nodded, looking up at his concerned face. "I'll be all right; that will teach me to try and reject spells without being properly grounded," she said, coughing weakly.

"I hate to get in the way of this blessed occasion," the stranger said over the noise of everyone else, "but if we can attend to certain *necessities* without further interruption, I won't feel the need to splatter your collective lower intestines across every centimetre of this glorious room of death." He cocked his head backwards, twitching involuntarily, and let out a guttural scream of rage.

"What do you want?" Donyvan growled.

"They're possessed," Tela warned, hissing in pain as she tried to pull herself up into a sitting position. "Men who gave themselves over to dæmons for power. We call them Perversions." She spat the word out with vehemence, though if the man gave any indication of caring she missed it.

He twitched once more, then rested his hands on his hips. "Can we carry on then, now?" he asked; behind him the three others cackled, repeating "carry on, carry on!" over and over until he hissed at them to stop. "This floater will fall within one bell," he stated.

Tela regarded him fearfully, looking up suddenly as she heard a stifled chortle of laughter nearby. Looking over to the wheelchair, she saw the young Archon rocking back and forth in his seat, sobbing to himself in amusement. She opened her eyes wide with realisation. "You did this," she said.

Donyvan looked at her, coming to the same understanding himself. "I see. We relocated you too late, it seems. You made some deal with these *abominations* to save yourself?" he screamed at the boy, moving over to grab him by his shoulders; the child ignored him and continued to rock in place, laughing at the situation the individuals found themselves in.

The leader of the group shook his head, stepping cavalierly through the frightened politicians as he neared the child. "Save himself? Oh, no, you foul *idiot*," he laughed. He tiptoed around a pair of crouched Magisters, making a mocking expression of fear towards them as he crept past. Finally reaching Donyvan, he gave a theatrical bow, dipping low before the taller man. This close, Tela nearly wretched from the smell permeating around the person.

"Your most esteemed eminence, vessel of the White God; Donyvan Miama of the Magisterium, et *cetera*, et *cetera* —" he snickered, exhaling sickly air through his decaying teeth. "I hate to correct one so bestowed with a proliferation of titles as yourself, but the child isn't interested in saving himself; he simply chose the *sensible* team to sacrifice himself for." Shooting his hand out quickly, he reached past Donyvan and gripped the boy by the skull. The two of them let out a blood-curdling scream which caused the three lackeys to emulate them, filling the hall with painful screeches; Tela closed her eyes and screwed them shut, feeling the noise reaching into her mind and scratch across her thoughts.

The Archon-to-be continued screaming, convulsing within the wheelchair. His eyes rolled into the back of his head and the lead attacker traced the index finger of his left hand across the child's cheek, scraping a long, yellowed fingernail against his flesh.

"Blood of the Archon," he whispered, though somehow Tela heard his words within herself just as she heard them uttered from his mouth, "be the bridge for the foot-soldiers of anarchy, and call forth our wretched hell!" He jabbed his finger into the teenager's throat, instantly ending his screaming. With little effort he pulled the youth up out of his chair and threw his dying body against the Archon's throne. Blood from the gash across his throat dripped onto the device, resulting in a violent explosion somewhere else in the floater hard enough to rock the chamber they were within. Stone began to crumble around them, knocking most of the Magisters to the floor in the chaos.

At some point during the ritual, the other three assailants had moved into position around the Archon's throne, forming a triangle between them with the device, their leader, and the dying Archon-surrogate in the centre. They started chanting in some language foreign to her, the words laced with dæmonic, spinning in place and giggling to themselves through the course of their spell.

Tela pulled herself sitting, then crawled over to where Donyvan was lying, cradling his skull from a nasty brush with a piece of rock. She fumbled with the veil across her face, finally ripping it off in frustration — religious customs be damned. "Come on, we have to get everyone out of here. They're using the Archon's blood as a catalyst to open up a doorway through the guardian shield. In a few minutes this place will be flooded with Chaos dæmons."

Donyvan shook his head in a daze, face disbelieving. "How can this be happening?" he asked her. She had no answer for him, other than tugging hard on his robes until he sat up. Doing so, he cast a foul glare at the stranger who had been directing the rest of the cultists; presently he was administering to the failed Archon, bleeding him out across the machinery of the throne. Where his blood had been spilled the floor was glowing, filled with the same sort of distressed, thundering light she had seen earlier that evening as their dirigible crossed the Chaos towards Koton.

"Who are you?" the Senior Magistrate demanded, rocking as he stood.

The leader paused within the midst of his spell, regarding Donyvan and Tela with a feral grin. Finally, he spoke.

"I am the harbinger of the jackal god, and she resents the existence of your tidy world."

02 : WRETCHED HELL

Their escape had gone unthreatened; the cultists were completely disinterested in them once the Archon had been killed, focusing all their attention on completing their dark ritual. The only time they paid any mind to her group was when a brave — but foolish — Magister attempted to disrupt them by tackling one of the lackeys to the ground. Unsuccessful, the swift death that followed was enticement enough for everyone else to start running. Knowing that the "harbinger" was in the midst of summoning forth creatures that could easily rip them into pieces without effort, Tela figured he had no need to get his hands any dirtier than they already were.

"Come on!" she screamed at a group of Magisters lagging behind the rest of them. She and Donyvan trailed behind, making sure everyone had reached the lift before they boarded it themselves. "Go ahead, start it up," she said to the Senior Magistrate.

He hesitated, hands shaking in fear. With an effort of will he calmed himself, bending down to place his palms across the surface of the stone. There was no need for a ruse to hide his incantation this time and he simply channelled power into the magical tool, standing up again as it lurched and began ascending through the tunnel once more.

It was at this point that someone noticed the gold-mailed guards were no longer with them.

"Well, who saw them last?" Donyvan asked the group. The only conclusion they could agree on was that nobody had given them a thought since the four attackers had arrived.

"We have to go back," Tela said, even though she had an unsettling question: how had the four of them managed to descend to this level in the first place?

The Senior Magistrate groaned. "Ambassador, you know more than I do what they're doing down there. Those were members of the Holy Guard; they're the highest trained soldiers we have here —"

She cut him off. "Is there another way to enter or exit the chamber below?"

He looked at her, then shook his head. "This lift is the only way I know of."

"If this is the only way they can escape, then it makes little difference how much training they have. Dæmons will overrun them in a matter of moments and they will *die*. Do you want to be responsible for that?"

He gritted his teeth and stiffened. "With all due respect, Ambassador, that is *their* responsibility. They are to ensure the safety of the Magisterium at all cost, whether threatened by people or something worse. My conscience will be clear if they pass on whilst executing that duty."

She glared at him. "Fine, then. Take the others and I will go back on my own."

"Absolutely not!" he yelled.

"Donyvan!" she spat back, staring him down with rage, losing her patience as stress finally caught up to her. "You're responsible for enough death today already. I won't stand by and do nothing while you accumulate more."

They glared at one another as the lift reached a halfway point and the tunnel shuddered once again, reacting to the destabilisation of the floater's infrastructure further below. Regaining his balance, Donyvan finally conceded. "Aenstara help us," he muttered and then turned to one of the other Magisters. "Mychal, I need you to make sure everyone gets out of the complex safely. I will go back with the ambassador."

Tela looked at him, then nodded. "You need to evacuate the floater — with the Archon dead, the guardian shield will fail soon."

A ripple of consternation crossed the group of Magisters. "Evacuate the floater? Are you mad?" one of the politicians exclaimed incredulously.

Donyvan raised his hand wearily. "They're right. Six million people live here, there's absolutely no way to evacuate everyone in under one bell."

She swore, tears filling her eyes in frustration. "Well, you'd bloody well figure out a way! The outer boundary will be decaying as we speak and the inner one will fall soon. Once that happens, everyone will be exposed to the Chaos. You have to help them escape."

"All right!" he said, raising his hands in defeat. "We will try, I promise."

The elevator brought them back up to the ground floor. Tela looked over to the metal doorway from earlier, finding the body of a guard in golden armour just beside it, slain with a knife through his chest. She brought her hand to her mouth and stifled a sob of fear, then heard banging on the door itself.

"Is anyone there?" she heard, recognising the muffled voice of Tamyer. Donyvan stepped quickly off the pedestal and thumbed the call box, allowing the door to iris open. Behind Tamyer a number of other golden guards stood, weapons at the ready.

"Thank Aenstara, man. We are under attack — someone has killed the Archon." He paused. "Well, both of them." This netted a gasp of fear from everyone within earshot.

Tela walked up next to him, looking at the Chief Secretary with urgency. "You have to get everyone out of here. Koton is going to be destroyed."

Tamyer looked into her bloodshot eyes and nodded immediately as Donyvan directed his attention to the contingent of guards standing in the back. "You all make sure everyone gets out of here safely and calmly; getting people panicked won't help anything." He turned back to the lift, allowing Tela to follow him.

Tamyer hovered at the boundary of the Holy Gate, protocol still preventing him from crossing that threshold even under present circumstances. Briefly, he looked as if he would protest the Senior Magistrate going on his own, but an examination of the man's face seemed to cancel that thought. Instead he gave a salute and nodded. "I'll sound the alarm, ma'am; your eminence." With that he spun on his heel and retreated back into the main hall of the administration complex.

Tela caught her breath as she and Donyvan descended once again to the throne room. The magicked elevator creaked and groaned as it floated down the shaft, clearly struggling as a result of being put to use again so quickly. A cry of some hellbeast echoed around them, making Tela's hair stand on end.

"So, what magic do you actually know?" she asked him pointedly.

He was quiet for a moment, then gave her a heavy sigh. "As you certainly understand, it was beneficial for me to keep my abilities hidden. My parents wouldn't have sent me to the Avenir; they would have just as quickly killed me in my sleep than be responsible for raising a spellweaver. Without formal training I can't do very much, but I do know a handful of spells. I also have the blessings of Aenstara, of course."

She laughed, rubbing her forehead. "I've only just become a journeyman, so I'm not a powerhouse of magic either. Great — neither of us are proficient, and here we are about to ward off an assault from creatures of the netherhell with parlour tricks and prayer." He gave her a half-hearted shrug in reply.

The lift lurched again and neared the bottom of the shaft. Tela gripped her weapon as Donyvan crossed himself again and brought his hands up to his chest, channeling his internal power-well. Knowing the Senior Magistrate had no staff, like herself, his connection with the æther would be tenuous and limited, resigning him to very simple abilities. Tela had always been taught that an eon ago, during the time of the Whole, Advent were able to practice their craft wherever they wanted without limit. Since the Shattering, with the bonds of the æther ripped and twisted around spatial reality, weavers had to make use of a conduit to access that energy; for the Advent, their catalyst was the corestone attached to their staves: a piece of rock harvested from the Well at the centre of the world-chain, it was perpetually bathed in radiation from the Chaos and gave Advent a connection back to the ancient source of their power.

As before, the lift came to a stop against the floor, opening up into the long hallway they had used previously. In contrast from their exodus, there was nothing but unearthly silence this time around. From time to time the chamber would shake, still suffering the effects of whatever chain reaction had been set in motion by damaging the Archon's throne, but at the moment things seemed stable. Donyvan took the lead, walking slowly towards the spot they had last seen the possessed attackers.

"Aenstara's hell, where did it go?" Donyvan exclaimed in a hushed whisper. Tela blinked in confusion, coming up behind him to see what he was talking about. Much to her surprise, the throne room was entirely empty now, devoid of people, bodies, or even the machinery of the throne itself. In its place, up centre where the throne had been before, was an enlarged form of the portal she had seen the attackers summoning before; this time it was much more formed than when they had left it, and she felt a dizzying sickness staring into its depths — within the boundaries of the otherworldly doorway, arcs of sickly lightning crossed the sky, illuminating the forms of behemoths she instinctively knew she wanted no contact with up close. But, there was no sign of the guards they had lost earlier, and an overriding worry had begun tugging at Tela's consciousness.

"Come on," she said to Donyvan. "Let's get back upstairs."

He blinked at her. "Shouldn't we look around? You were the one who made us come down here to check for the guards in the first place —"

The chamber gave another violent wrench, shaking viciously around them. She and Donyvan collapsed under the manufactured earthquake, losing their balance and falling to the floor. Nearby she heard a crushing sound of something battering itself against the stone floor — looking back to the crack in the throne room, a massive creature was making an attempt to pull itself up through the portal despite the fact that the gateway had not yet widened enough to permit entry.

Donyvan was transfixed in fear. The dæmon had mottled, leathery skin the colour of ash, pitted with open sores and scarring from unknown, ancient injuries. Two sharp horns curved away from its skull, stained with caked-on blood from whatever victims it had encountered in the past. It angled its head around again for another attempt at bashing through the floor, then stopped as one of its enormous eyes caught sight of the two humans; where an iris or pupil should be there was nothing but a vacant socket filled with golden flame. It screeched at them in rage, nearly shattering her eardrums, and battered its skull against the portal with renewed effort. With the stone starting to crumble under its assault, it was only a matter of time until it managed to breach the barrier and escape the Chaos.

She pulled herself together and crawled over to where Donyvan was staring in petrified fear at the beast. "Come on, get up!" she yelled, shaking him until he responded. Snapping out of his transfixion, he scrambled to his feet and the pair of them started running.

As they came up into the open room housing the elevator, they discovered where the missing guards had disappeared. They were patiently holding their weapons, faces obscured by golden helmets, blocking the path out of tunnel.

Donyvan's face screwed up in rage, realising their betrayal. "How could you!" he hissed. "You trained — you vowed to uphold the safety of this city and its people!"

One of the men scoffed. "The Magisterium is a farce," he replied. "Look at how pathetic you treat someone holding as much sanctity as an Archon. This whole city will burn, and you should have got out while you still could." They slowly began advancing on them, holding their weapons outward to back them into the room with the dæmon.

Tela closed her eyes and held out her hand towards them, closing her fingers into a tight fist. Energy swirled about her hand and she fired it off towards them, pouring all her strength into the punch. The bolt slammed into the floor underneath the guards, sending them flying backwards and landing hard. She gasped in pain, doubling over and grabbing her staff to keep balance. Out of the corner of her eye she noticed the floor near her staff had started crumbling away, disappearing into the void as if the chamber itself was breaking apart. Donyvan grabbed her around the shoulders and started pulling her and with his aid they scrambled past the dazed soldiers to reach the elevator. The Senior Magistrate activated it once more with no pretence, lifting them up out of the cursed room before anything else could happen.

"Why did the ground start crumbling when you used magic?" Donyvan asked her suspiciously, once they had caught their breath. The elevator rumbled upward, jerking slightly every few moments as the floater continued to destabilise.

She thought of how to reply. "When the Shattering happened, the Advent's power escaped into the Chaos, becoming the æther and warping the creatures and people who were flung from the world into the dæmons we face today. We lost the ability to command magic wherever we were, and for a time the Advent even wondered if the art itself had been lost. Eventually, as loose pieces of the Well began to rain upon the floaters, it was discovered that magic again functioned in the presence of these stones. We collected them as cores and fashioned tools to become conduits for the loose magic lost in the Chaos," she said, gesturing to her staff with her left hand, "allowing us to again safely practice our craft. Most of the time this is no concern, and guardian shields prevent dæmons from using us as bridges into reality. But, because Koton's shield is failing, whenever I channel power I am unfortunately accelerating the local corruption back into the Chaos."

He stared at her, then shuddered. "How could everything go so wrong, so suddenly?" he asked himself in a whisper.

She shook her head. "I don't know, but I think we can make a safe guess as to what happened to the other missing floaters."

Donyvan gasped. "Aenstara's grace, I hadn't even thought of that! Do you really think that this was a coordinated attack?"

"I don't know, but I think it's a safe guess. I need to make sure Triyard knows about this," she said grimly.

Before any of them could do anything else, the stone gave a violent lurch and rocked dangerously, coming to a complete stop halfway through the shaft. Whatever propulsion system had been powering it had fallen static, stranding them a few hundred metres from the top.

"Fantastic," she muttered, staring up at the pinprick of light high above them signalling the tunnel's exit.

Donyvan looked at the glyphs under their feet, noticing how dim and faint they appeared to be. "What will these wards withstand?" he asked.

She immediately thought back to the giant dæmon presently battering itself against the floor of the floater. "They're part of an ancient ritual, cast by someone infinitely more powerful than I am. Theoretically, they could escape undamaged even under assault by a leviathan, but I wouldn't be concerned with the charter glyphs failing during their attack."

"What would you be concerned with?" he asked wearily.

"I think the tunnel itself is going to fall apart and break away from the floater long before we have to be scared about the wards dissipating." She looked again at the top, and gave a sigh. "I can get us out of here, but as I said before — the more I draw on the æther, the more I will blur the border between spatial reality and the Chaos."

"Frankly, Ambassador, I don't think that line can get any blurrier right now. Get us the hell out of this place."

She nodded. "Grab a hold of me, then." The priest did so, wrapping his arms around her neck, both of them feeling rather awkward considering the circumstances. She closed her eyes and a bubble of light snapped

into place around them; almost immediately he felt gravity begin tugging on his clothes as they slowly started ascending through the tunnel. All around them the warding glyphs began flaring up brightly, filling with azure light, then shorting out and becoming inert.

Tela gritted her teeth, gripping Donyvan hard, as the rock where the wards had been inscribed started falling away, becoming little keyholes into the Chaos. The faces of a hundred frightening creatures peered in at them through openings that were still — blessedly — too small to breach, but being watched by so many dæmons left them both terrified; knowing that those creatures were patiently biding their time until they could rampage the floater made it that much worse.

They floated ever upward, Tela struggling to keep the bubble functional. "I really am not strong enough to do this sort of thing," she said in a strained whisper. Donyvan noticed with concern how tense her muscles were and how tightly she kept her eyes shut. But, despite her difficulty, the spell held and performed its purpose, bringing them to rest gently above the opening of the shaft. Nearby, Tamyer gasped in startled exclamation — he was speaking with a number of servants and guards, each of them scurrying around the room. Everyone stopped to gape at the pair of them, flying up out of the tunnel enshrouded in gold.

"No one will ever accuse you of failing to make an entrance, Ambassador," the Chief Secretary said dryly.

"Someone grab me, please," Tela whispered, "before I lose control of the spell and we fall to our deaths." Several guards scrambled towards them, reaching out across the abyss to grip the hem of her robe. As if tugging on a balloon string, they pulled them over onto solid ground. She let out her breath and passed out, caring nothing for protocol or grace as she lost consciousness.

Her fleeting moments of black were occupied with visions of creatures from her childhood nightmares laying siege to her while she was trapped within a high stone tower. They tore into the building's foundations, chasing her from floor to floor. No matter how high within the extensive staircase she climbed, they were only metres away and nipping at her feet; even the roof provided no respite, as winged beasts gnashed and gnashed outside — cornered and alone, she backed herself into a cupboard and waited to be found.

"There, gently — no, I said gently! Get her sitting up; she just needs something in her stomach. Did anyone bring the fruit I sent for?"

She awoke slowly, grabbing onto coherent thought bit by bit. She felt something pushed up against her lips, pouring a cool liquid down her throat. Tela sipped, feeling marginally better. Groaning, she opened her eyes and weakly pushed the decanter away.

Looking around, Donyvan and Tamyer were standing on either side of her, watching with concern as she finally started to sit up. Nearby, a contingent of guards ringed the elevator shaft; every now and then one would nervously lift his weapon and point it at the hole, only to return to an idle position a moment later.

"How long was I out?" she asked.

Donyvan thanked a servant who arrived with a basket of oranges, then peeled one apart and handed it to her. "Just a few minutes. Eat this."

She did as she was told, biting into the ripe fruit. The Senior Magistrate was right, and she should have known better than to over-exert herself when she had as little control over her abilities as she did. The simple food did its work, withdrawing the searing headache thundering against her temples just a tiny bit. With the help of the two men she got to her feet, trembling briefly before steadying.

"Well, now that she's up, what is the next move?" Tamyer asked.

Donyvan looked at the others gathered around the room, clearing his throat. "Obviously, Koton is lost. I don't accept this easily, or with any measure of happiness, but if the Archon is dead we have no further say in the matter. As we speak the guardian shield is failing, and when we lose it completely our city will be exposed and uncovered. There is a horde of horrible, hellish creatures gathering about outside waiting for that moment and when our last vestige of protection fails I have every expectation we will suffer the same assault that destroyed a number of other floaters in our Sphere in recent weeks.

"It would appear that the mystery of their destruction has been solved, and we are the next victims of a coordinated blitz against our stability. It's too late for anything to be done about Koton, but we can warn the rest of the world-chain what is happening and make sure the next attack isn't carried out unopposed. We have no choice but to make our own escape from here before the shield collapses and we lose that opportunity."

Tela frowned. "What about everyone else though? We have to help them; we can't just leave *ninety-nine percent* of the floater behind to be fed on by those creatures."

"Ambassador — Tela — please listen to me," Donyvan said slowly, dropping on his haunches in front of her. "I understand how you feel, but even if we had advance awareness of this attack there would simply be no resources available to do anything about evacuating the entire floater. We're out on the frontier; the central Magisterium hardly even pays attention to us. What few dirigibles were still docked at the port, Tamyer has made available for people who are able to evacuate. We will fill them as much as we can, and we will get as

many people out of here as we can — but there's no point in pretending that most people are going to make it out of here."

She glared at him. "But I'm sure that it's important for you to be among those who do — even though it's your backwards decisions that brought this problem down on your blasted head! Look at how you treated that child; this is absolutely your fault!" she spat.

Donyvan sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Look, Ambassador, I'm being pragmatic here. We had one Archon and he refused to accept his elevation — he put his own selfishness above the well-being of everyone else in Koton. Because of that, he — and he alone — has brought about this situation. You can rage against me for performing the function expected of me as a leader, but I will only hope you are never faced with such a difficult series of choices. At any rate, there's no reason that things have to turn sour. I'm a high-ranking official within the Magisterium. You came here on an expedition for Triyard to secure our support. You also need to make sure you get *back* to Triyard to let your people know about this attack. If we work together, everyone can be happy; or, at least still alive."

She squeezed her hands into a fist, feeling her skin crawl. Though she was loath to turn her back on the millions of people who weren't lucky enough to be present in that room, she had to admit that Donyvan's speech rang with certain logic. She also had to acknowledge that his plea for self-preservation aroused interest in a part of her more selfish than she generally wanted to be. But he had a point: if she didn't make sure Triyard knew about what happened here, they would be unprepared the next time this "harbinger" struck.

Suddenly she looked around, remembering Brannon. "Oh, gods — where is my assistant?" she gasped in concern, feeling terrible for forgetting her awkward attendant in the first place.

Tamyer scrunched his face. "The young man who accompanied you originally? I sent him to the docks personally."

Her eyes widened. "You what? He's not going to make it off of Koton —"

Tamyer held up his hand. "I sent him along with several other Magisters, ma'am. He would be on the first dirigible off of the floater. He's certainly safer than any of us are — you have my word on that."

She studied him for a long moment, realising she had no other choice but to take him at it. Brannon was her responsibility and she felt guilty losing him, but if Tamyer promised he was safe she could only trust him; it was too late to track him down at any rate. Finally, she turned back to Donyvan. "Fine, I will go with you. But, it took a full bell for us to get here from the dock in the flying carrier. By that time, the shield will have collapsed. We'd be lucky to even take off before that happens." The dirigibles themselves had generators of their own that were capable of repelling any denizens of the Chaos, but with travel time to the port she doubted they would be able to board one before the dæmons swarmed them.

Donyvan tapped his lower lip. "It's good you ask about that, actually; it turns out that I have a better idea."

Before he could elucidate any further, one of the guards called out in concern. "Sir! There are flying things down there!" Tela scrambled to her feet, heart already pounding in anticipation from what she expected they would find. Sure enough, her intuition was correct: she could see a number of dark winged creatures circling the bottom of the elevator shaft, having torn into the stone itself through the fractures left by the damaged glyphs. Even as she stood over the lip of the tunnel, she could see the lowest parts of the shaft crumbling away into the dark abyss of the Chaos; whatever had remained of the Archon's throne room had disintegrated while they were talking.

"Everyone, step away from the hole. We have to seal this off or those imps will be up here in a matter of minutes." As she said it she could see the nearest of them screech a chorus of amused screams, flapping their wings lazily as they slowly ascended the tunnel. Tela took a deep breath and closed her eyes, already feeling her body protest as she dove once again into the well of power at her centre. *I know, I know*, she thought to herself. *Just bear with it.*

She dragged the bottom end of her staff around the circumference of the hole, watching as a silver beam of light trickled out of it where she touched it against the floor. Moving methodically around the opening, she traced out a circle just along the edge of the hole where the broken elevator had been before. Once it was completed she knelt down, folding her ugly brown gown underneath herself, and touched the glowing line with her index finger. Light flared out along both ends of the circle, spinning around and around at a rapid pace. Letting out a pained breath she stood again and looked at the others.

"We'll have a few minutes until the lower end of the shaft falls apart enough to let that big creature we saw earlier come through. This ward will keep the smaller imps at bay." She turned her attention to Donyvan. "But we need to get out of here; the floater itself is falling apart. So if you have an idea for an escape plan, I would love to hear it."

"Ah right. Well, simply, there's a nexusgate underneath the Senior Magistrate's personal lodgings."

It took her a second for that to sink in. "How is that possible? The Magisterium doesn't allow them."

"As I explained before, Ambassador, the Magisterium doesn't really pay a lot of attention to the frontier Spheres." He gestured to the large group, directing them back out through the metal door and towards the larger

assembly hall. "When three floaters go silent in as many months, we thought it was smart to come up with a backup plan if needed."

"We?" she asked.

"The rest of Koton's Magisterial echelon. I would expect most of the other Magisters are already on their way over, now that the general alarm has been sounded."

She narrowed her eyes at his smugness. "Oh! Isn't that just lucky. And meanwhile, everyone else can be a diversion so you and your compatriots can get out alive. You bast —"

He sighed and placed his hand across her mouth, silencing her on the spot. She stared at him with raw anger, barely containing her fury. He leaned over to her, staring her down from atop his considerable height. "Ms. Niala, please. Are we going to go through this every step of the way? Bringing you along is a courtesy; it would certainly strain relations between the Magisterium and Triyard were their ambassador to come to any harm, but if you continue to obstruct this evacuation I will be forced to leave you behind and let you figure out your own way off this decaying rock. Do we have an understanding?" He lifted his fingers from her face, looking at her in expectation of an answer.

"I hope whatever gods you pray to show you more mercy than I would," she said tersely, wiping her face in disgust. "And if you ever touch me again without permission I will turn you to ash on the spot."

Donyvan laughed with condescension. "Oh, impetuous child. We both know you aren't at all capable of doing that. Come along now," he chuckled, walking away from her without further comment.

Outside in the foyer of the Magisterium complex, there was absolute chaos. They couldn't hear the screaming on the opposite side of the Holy Gate, but once the guards pushed open the massive doors to the rest of the building the anarchy was evident.

"Dear gods," Tela whispered, looking in fear as robed parishioners ran back and forth across the austere hall.

"Guards, surround us and clear a way out," Donyvan ordered, pleased as the golden soldiers fell in around them like a circular human shield. Initially the other people failed to notice them as the Senior Magistrate and his aides, along with Tela, shuffled forward to the exit, but this quickly changed — surrounded by a number of tall, well-armed individuals, it was hard not to draw attention. Some people dropped what they were doing and ran up to Donyvan, though the dangerous weapons of the elite guardsmen blocked them from coming any closer to the politician.

"Help us, your eminence!"

"My children! Please save my children!"

Tela screwed her face up in anger and sadness, watching the frightened people surrounding them. She was disgusted that the people in charge had completely failed to contain the crisis, leaving their citizens to their own devices.

"Everyone, please!" Donyvan called out above the noise of a hundred begging strangers. "You need to get to the dock as quickly as you can. There will be dirigibles there that can evacuate you from Koton, but you have to hurry. We can't provide any help for you here."

She glared at him as the crowd dispersed, driven off by some shred of hope. "There aren't enough ships there, you said it yourself. You're sending them off on a lie." Donyvan ignored her, directing the guards out through the building's front. The situation beyond the entrance of the government complex wasn't much better; though much of the crowd had dispersed from the cordons around the building's grand steps, they had left a hurricane of destruction around them. Tela had assumed they would be walking over to the parking lot to take one of the flying carriers to Donyvan's home, but glancing in that direction it was immediately obvious that wasn't an option any longer.

Although there had been several vehicles earlier, all of them were gone now. At least one had been involved in some form of altercation, as its smouldering remains had crashed back to the earth a few metres away from the parking area. The rest of the fliers were gone, appropriated by whoever had been lucky enough to commandeer or hijack them as they made their own escape.

"I hope you have another plan," Tela said to him shortly, as Donyvan stared at the empty lot himself.

"Come on," he replied tersely. "There should still be an emergency flier locked away in the garage." She followed him, while Tamyer and the others stood looking around in mild concern at the frightened citizens clambering over themselves to find some way off of the floater. It was a long walk around the side of the complex — the administration building was enormous, and once again Tela found herself hating the painful shoes she was wearing. Eventually reaching the garage, Donyvan again produced the key she had seen him use earlier when he opened the Archon sarcophagus. He slipped it into a slot beside the door, opening the iron gate with a satisfying click.

Lightspheres flickered on from the proximity of nearby people and Donyvan quickly confirmed his private vehicle was still available. "That's a relief," he mumbled to himself.

When the rest of their group arrived, a new problem presented itself: the flier didn't have enough room to take everyone. Donyvan immediately discounted the guards from travelling with them — there were ten of

them in tow, well beyond the capacity of the private flier, and Donyvan considered them hardly above servants in the first place. With Tamyer and his other personal aids, plus Tela, the Senior Magistrate was unyielding in his decision not to allow anyone else on the ship. Though the Holy Guards were highly trained, Tela could see the upset this was causing, and was beginning to feel concerned that they might hijack the craft for themselves — Senior Magistrate and his helpers be damned. Thankfully the escalating conflict was averted when Tamyer's further investigations of the garage turned up another flier; splitting their group between the two ships, everyone could be transported after all.

"How will we fly them, though?" she asked. "It's not as if any of us are pilots."

Tamyer shook his head. "We don't need to be. The ships have a number of pre-planned routes and the Senior Magistrate's personal home is one of them. The shuttle can fly itself."

"Let's get along then, we don't have a lot of time." Tela looked at Donyvan. "If you don't mind, I would rather go with the others. I think I've had enough exposure to how the Magisterium looks over its people to last me the rest of the day."

Donyvan shook his head. "Dislike me all you want, but it's entirely out of the question. As a visiting representative of a foreign state, you're my responsibility. You will accompany me and my staff; end of discussion." He turned on her dismissively and entered the craft, leaving Tela to glower on her own beside it.

"Ma'am," Tamyer said softly. "Let's just get you out safely, okay?" he asked.

It took a few minutes to fuel the vehicles and tow them out of the garage; all the while, rumblings rippled underneath their feet as if Koton was experiencing distant earthquakes some distance off. The ground shook a number of times, disrupting her balance repeatedly. At the rate of destabilisation the floater was undergoing, she knew that she wanted to be away from Koton as quickly as possible. She said nothing further to the Senior Magistrate as he directed the guards on refuelling duty; between her mood and feeling physically drained, she wasn't interested in further conflict. The quick flight from the administration building to his personal house would provide some welcomed rest after the sudden events of the afternoon.

By the time they were ready to take off, "night" was starting to creep across the floater. There was no true weather on Koton — it was simply too small to have enough local gravity, so any effects were artificial results of being under the guardian shield — and no true sense of day or night either. Instead, depending on its position during its orbit around the Well, some sense of cycle could be emulated. Currently a shadow was spreading across the twilight-purple sky, deepening to a darker shade of colour as the inhabited-half of the floater faced away from the Well.

Such orbits depended entirely on the physics of the floaters themselves; some had "days" of thirty bells or more, some lasted barely six. The Consortium had attempted to standardise an alliance-wide universal time across its holdings, but so far the idea hadn't gained a lot of traction. She estimated it was a little after eighthbell and it seemed hard to believe that the world had ended in such a quick space of time.

"All right, we're ready to go," Donyvan called out after getting confirmation that the vehicles were finally ready for them. She boarded the one that the Senior Magistrate and his staff would be travelling in, all the while staring daggers at Donyvan's back to no effect. She climbed into the passenger cabin behind Tamyer, finding a seat to herself near the rear. The ground shook violently once again: the miniature quakes were picking up in frequency and each time she felt the earth shake, her heart lurched in fear.

Donyvan went into the cockpit to speak with the staffer who was wrangling the ship into taking off under its own power, then settled himself in for the duration of the trip. She was thankful that he hadn't attempted to engage her further — her mood was so foul at the moment that she didn't trust herself to deal with him any longer.

They took off from the floater's surface unceremoniously, lifting up from outside the parking garage in near-silence. The second ship, filled mostly with the soldiers that Donyvan had appropriated as his bodyguards, followed soon after. They quickly reached their flight-altitude just above the tops of Koton's impressive skyscrapers — they wouldn't be ascending any further than that, as the fliers couldn't handle immense altitudes. Out of nowhere there was a horrible crunch, like a massive building suddenly collapsing in upon itself.

"Aenstara help us," Tamyer exclaimed, staring out of the passenger-side window.

Tela moved to the opposite side of the shuttle to see where he was staring, gasping in horror at the sight within the window. The administration complex no longer existed — where it was before a massive gash in the floater now existed, as if a mudslide had consumed the entirety of the enormous building. She saw the last remains of the building slowly folding in on itself as the outer walls collapsed into the opening, falling through Koton and out into the Chaos. The maelstrom of the void was plainly visible through the hole, having spread from where the portal was opened inside the Archon's throne room to the size it was now. As the last pieces of the building fell into the maw, a black cloud of flying imps erupted from the opening as if exploding from a pustule. There were easily a hundred of them circling the opening in the earth like a tornado, but it was what she saw beneath them that caused her the most concern.

Making its full appearance was the behemoth they had encountered during their earlier reconnaissance when searching for the missing guards. Now that the portal had expanded enough to permit its great size, the

massive creature was scrabbling against the sides of the manufactured sinkhole, trying to gain purchase enough to crawl through the hole that had been punched through Koton. In the hierarchy of dæmonic beings, behemoths were just beneath leviathans in terms of total size; they were colossal creatures on their own, despite being ants compared to the next step up on the ladder.

Finally managing to extract itself from the portal, it crunched a nearby building under its enormous leathery foot — just that appendage was easily the size of the ship they were flying away in, covered in black scales and ending in frightening talons. At its full height the creature was about four storeys tall, covered in scarred ebony skin and brandishing claws longer than her entire body. It let out a thunderous roar loud enough to reverberate hard against the flier's chassis, momentarily shaking the craft. It unfurled enormous wings of its own, flapping them a few times as if stretching a set of tired limbs.

As if the monster's scream was a rallying cry, the swarm of imps stopped orbiting around the creature and started off after the two escaping carriers, gaining ground on them quickly as the behemoth lurched in ground pursuit as well.

"Holy hell!" she swore, watching as the small dæmons neared the flier transporting the guards. The imps caught up with it in a few minutes, gripping the metal sides of the craft in their long, black fingers. Their wings flapped hard as they struggled to stick to the ship — many of them slipped off, tumbling down in the flier's wake, only to right themselves again and renew their attack against the aeroplane. Eventually the side partition opened up on the exterior of the ship and a guard appeared, grabbing onto something in the cabin to keep from falling outside; he tried in vain to wave his halberd at the imps to dislodge them from the carrier, but this only served to agitate the dæmons more. They whooped and chuckled, making frightening warbling noises like laughter — it was as if they were enjoying themselves.

At one point one of the imps discovered the warpstone-powered gyroscope beneath the ship, touching it with its bare hands. Making contact with the Chaos-matter on the wrong side of a guardian shield, the creature immediately erupted into green flame, screeching painfully as it disintegrated into dust and disappeared. However, the flier itself rocked violently, jerking left and right with enough force to tip the guard out of the craft. Tela watched in horror as he flailed wildly in the open air, plummeting to the ground below.

Nevertheless, the example was set, and a number of other imps arrived at the underside of the craft, prodding the warpstone core with their talons to provoke a reaction. No matter how many of their compatriots burst into arcane flame, there seemed to be a never-ending supply of the grunts nearby to continue attacking the craft's engine. All the while the ship continued to shake violently, as if it was struggling to maintain control and altitude.

The guards were unable to reach them with their pikes and halberds despite the urgency of their efforts, and it was only a matter of time until the imps had managed to sufficiently dislodge the core from the gyroscope, knocking out the plane's power source. It started dropping from the air immediately, falling like a heavy stone to smash into the side of a residential building and exploding in flame.

Horrifying as it was, Tela realised instantly that the imps who had detached themselves from the liner in time were patiently flapping their leathery wings towards her ship now. Despite being ahead of the other liner by some distance, it would be only a few short minutes until the dæmonic beings reached them and repeated the other craft's demise.

Tamyer came over to her seat, eyes wide with concern. "What are we going to do?"

She thought for just a moment, coming up with an idea. "How did those guards get the passenger door open?" she asked him.

It didn't take them very long to pry off the emergency latch to the carrier's door, freeing them for when they needed to open it to the outside air. Working quickly they fashioned a long rope by tying together several seatbelts; Tamyer looped and secured one end around an armrest so Tela could have some security from falling to her death. Donyvan came over to them, a quizzical expression on his otherwise fearful face.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I certainly have no plans on being killed by one of those things," she said succinctly. "Unless you have a fascination with becoming a crater in the side of a building, I suggest you grab the other rope and tie it around your waist. You need to attack the imps on the opposite side of the ship." She gestured at a second cord of seatbelts and left him to it, tying the one she was holding around herself like a belt. Tamyer gave a puzzled look at him and Donyvan hesitated for a moment, holding the rope as if he was going to deny his magical ability. Finally, logic wore out over anything else and he did as she said, looping the rope around himself. At last ready to deal with the threat, she grabbed her staff and let Tamyer open the door.

The frigid air hit her immediately — along with the realisation that the only thing keeping her from falling to the ground far below was a flimsy handmade lasso. A wave of vertigo washed over her but she held her balance, took a deep breath and leaned outside the carrier.

The nearest of the imps were still several metres behind them but closing fast. Gripping her catalyst in her left hand, she channelled forward a spell and spit it out from the palm of her right hand towards the closest

beast, punching a hole through its torso from the blast. It squealed and dropped immediately, falling out of sight in a second. She yelled in excitement, looking back into the cabin.

"There you go!" she said happily. "Throw whatever you have at them Donyvan, keep the things from getting any closer."

The Senior Magistrate nodded, following her example. Between the pair of them, sticking out on either side of the ship like human turrets, they did respectable damage against the total number of imps. The dæmons continued flying after them undeterred, however, and it seemed like every time she killed one there was still another right behind it to take up the spot of whatever beast had fallen. Worse still, each time she attacked one of them, the air around her palm would fizzle with cold unlike anything she'd ever felt before — it was a complete absence of temperature and she had a worrying feeling that she was somehow feeling the Chaos itself, brought closer to Koton the same way she had destabilised things using magic in the Archon's throne room.

She continued launching magical projectiles at the flying rats, gritting her teeth through the pain in her abdomen. Glancing at Donyvan, she could see that the Senior Magistrate wasn't faring much better — his breathing was laboured and sweat had broken out across his forehead, but he continued his offense against the incursion despite the obvious difficulty it was causing him.

Tela frowned slightly; the worst damage she could do would be working herself to exhaustion, but by that point she would just pass out as her body's own defences kicked in to prevent her from expending too much of herself. She was protected from permanently burning up through the connection she had with her staff and the rites she'd undergone during her ascension training.

As Donyvan had neither of those things, he was at real risk of irreparably hurting himself if he pushed his abilities too hard. Still, watching him continue to blast the dæmons despite the obvious physical pain it was causing him made her relent somewhat on her sour opinion of the priest. Although she knew that it was mostly concern for his personal safety in effect, she softened her feelings about him slightly: considering how the Magisterium felt about magic, she thought it was brave of the politician to admit and use his abilities in front of the others, even if he was only doing so to save his own neck.

Paying attention once again to her own half of the attack, she destroyed a pair of imps who had managed to get within a metre of the shuttle. Her hand tingled with arcane electricity, killing the nearby creatures in an instant.

This continued for many minutes until finally, as the unrelenting mess of dæmons at last appeared to thin, the surviving beasts turned around and headed in the opposite direction abandoning further pursuit. Tela breathed a sigh of relief, collapsing against the doorframe. Donyvan was in an even worse state, needing Tamyer to help him sit in the carrier's padded seat. The Chief Secretary attended to Donyvan, then sealed both doors back once again. Looking at a clock set at the front of the liner she saw that they had only been in flight for ten minutes.

"How much further?" she asked Tamyer, panting heavily.

"Not too long now, ma'am. We're over halfway there," he said, looking between both of them with worry.

She nodded, finding a seat to herself and settling down. She closed her eyes, snatching what rest she could before they made the final sprint to escape Koton. Even now when she looked out of the passenger windows, she could see that the artificial weather had begun dissipating as a result of the disruption to the guardian shield. The manufactured clouds were evaporating through the increasingly porous barrier and into the Chaos.

Even worse, far out in the distant sky she was able to make out a number of dark, threatening shadows flying lazily around the periphery of the inner boundary; the outer one had almost certainly collapsed by this point, and a thin membrane of reality was all that separated the floater from the twisted maelstrom of the greater Chaos. Sooner than later that bubble would pop, and she could only hope to be on the opposite side of the world-chain when those dæmons were unleashed upon the floater.

Even though she and Donyvan were successful in scaring the imps away, the behemoth was still in pursuit. Although it was some distance away from them and momentarily out of sight, she could feel its presence like a smothering shadow across her emotional state. They had no hope of challenging it: such a powerful creature would present a challenge for even a group of Advent masters, so a journeyman and a self-trained priest had no hope. Their only chance at success was stalling the malignancy long enough to get the nexusgate working.

The liner started to slow and descend as they neared the outskirts of the Senior Magistrate's mansion. Like all the other government buildings belonging to the Magisterium, the private home for the floater's top politician was as every bit as box-like and imposing as the administration complex had been.

"The carrier will land just out front," Donyvan wheezed. "The nexusgate is in the basement of the building. We just have to key in a location and we'll be off of this rock." He looked at her. "I presume you know how to use one?"

She nodded. "I do, but where are we going?"

"I assume you would like to return immediately to Triyard? It's the easiest option — none of the Magisterium-controlled floaters have nexugates that I know of."

"You said that about Koton as well, until it was beneficial for you to point out your omission."

Donyvan tilted his head. "I concede. But even if other floaters are hiding gates of their own, that hardly helps us — we have to know about them to port to them."

She rubbed her forehead, feeling the first stabs of a migraine. "Fine, I give up. I will take us to Triyard. I am ready to be far from here."

"That's decided then. Once we land, just get everyone to the basement and I will leave the rest to you."

The carrier manoeuvred around to the front of Donyvan's estate, landing just outside its lavish entrance in near-silence. Knowing that Magisters kept rooms within the administration complex, she wondered to herself why Donyvan also owned a private mansion and if that was the case for the other politicians as well.

"I haven't been here for almost a month — we were occupied dealing with the new Archon and the transference rite," he said. "I hope Annabelle is still safe," he mumbled quietly.

"Is that your wife?" Tela asked.

He looked at her, nodding slightly. "We've been together for seven cycles now. I can't imagine the thought of anything happening to her. I've tried to put it out of my mind entirely."

Further conversation was cut short when Tamyer popped open the liner's doors, gesturing for everyone to exit the shuttle. "We should get ready," she said.

Donyvan nodded, getting to his feet with a painful wince. As she started to leave the cabin he grabbed her hand and stopped her. She looked up at the taller man quizzically. "I know that we've disagreed with one another on the best way to handle things today," he said. "I won't pretend that I haven't made mistakes — I just wanted to thank you for your help. There were a number of situations where, if you hadn't reacted quickly, I certainly wouldn't have survived."

She stared at him, feeling uncomfortable. "It's all right. It's not as if I have a fascination with dying." He let her hand go. "Really, we need to get out of here; when the behemoth catches up to us, there's not a lot I can do. We don't want to be here when that happens."

Donyvan's wife had run out into the courtyard outside his home by the time they started walking up to it. He scooped her up in his arms, kissing her repeatedly on the forehead. "Oh Annabelle, thank Aenstara you're all right."

"I wasn't sure where you were," she mumbled, tears of relief streaming down her face. "I didn't know if I should go to the capital building and meet you."

"I'm glad you didn't — the building doesn't exist anymore." At her wide-eyed exclamation of surprise, Donyvan put her down and pointed to the estate. "Come on, I will explain later. We have to leave."

Tela looked up at the sky as they climbed the front staircase; purple ribbons of light flared across the horizon like an aurora, interspersed with bolts of lightning shooting from one end of the sky to the next. There were no longer any clouds to speak of, just a foggy mist barely visible from the floater's surface. Legions of dæmons were waiting just beyond the division created by the fading barrier, patiently waiting to swarm upon Koton like a plague.

They entered the grand mansion: Tela felt it looked a bit like a knock-off version of the administration complex, complete with a similar fresco complimenting ancient Archons painted across the foyer's high ceiling. They wasted no time with a tour, however, as Donyvan shuffled everyone through the building until they reached the basement and the nexugate.

Tela was feeling increased trepidation over the nexugate: they were commonplace on Consortium floaters, but she didn't know how it would function if used on a world where the guardian shield was already failing. She thought back to how drastically the local area of the elevator shaft had been affected just by using simple magic and shuddered. If she had been able to cause such a collapse by using elementary, weak spells she couldn't fathom what would happen when she switched on a device tremendously more powerful than she was.

Nevertheless, it was their only way off of the planet. Even if there were any dirigibles left, they wouldn't make it back to the dock in time to board one. Their options were limited and they were at the endgame.

The nexugate itself was in the centre of the chamber. The lower part of it was a circular block of inscribed stone covered with intricate glyphs and symbols of power. Just like the dais that had served as an elevator to the Archon throne room, this particular platform was a few metres in diameter — Triyard had a network of much larger nexugates, permanently keyed to particular relays throughout Known Space and able to transport a few hundred people at one time. The installations were arranged like ports, accepting and transferring a massive amount of human traffic at any given point in time. The nexugate beneath Donyvan's home was significantly smaller, but still large enough to handle the entirety of their group in just one trip.

Arranged around the outside of the dais were eight plinths of metal, set at each of the cardinal and intermediate directional points. They reached up to her waist and were shaped into black obelisks, carved with the same sort of symbols as on the main platform. Tela knew, however, that the most important part of the

device was on a high pedestal in the centre of the platform — resting upon it was a cylinder of bronze about five centimetres tall and half a metre wide. Although it looked at first glance like an elaborate timepiece, it was actually a complicated piece of clockwork machinery that served as the control terminal for the entire nexusgate. Its outer ring was inlaid with representations for the twelve colonised Spheres that made up neutral space — there were at least another twelve on the opposite side of the Well, but they belonged to the Imperium and were inaccessible to the free states.

For such a gate to be here, on Koton, it would have been authorised by someone in the upper echelons of the Advent: there were no "second-hand" nexusgates. Tela pursed her lips, realising what that meant for the first time since Donyvan had mentioned Koton had a nexusgate of its own: why would Triyard send her on a diplomatic mission to craft an arrangement with Koton when they had enough of a relationship with the authority here to help them break one of the Magisterium's most important dictates?

"Do you know how to use this?" Donyvan asked, snapping her out of her contemplation.

She stepped up to the pedestal and thumbed the outer ring and its elaborate pictographs for the various Spheres. "More or less; I've never used one myself, but we all know how they work."

She clicked the ring once clockwise and the device flared to life, projecting a holographic bubble of energy above the cylinder's surface. Inside that bubble was a hundred tiny fireflies of light, representing each floater that had an available nexusgate on its surface. She clicked the ring another notch, marvelling as the hologram flickered into a new configuration of orbiting lights. As always, no matter which way she rotated the ring, the Well sat at the centre of everything.

Once the home Sphere for Triyard had been picked, she used the other three dials to zoom in on that particular floater. She looked to Donyvan and everyone else, noticing they were still standing beside the door. "Well, if you plan on coming, you'd better get on the platform. I can transport us whenever you tell me to."

Their group scrambled onto the dais without further prompting, circling Tela beside the pedestal as they waited for the device to be activated. Unlike many kraftwork tools, nexusgates could be used by Advent and *prole* alike; it wasn't necessary to have magical ability to turn one on, as the nexusgate itself did all of the work.

Satisfied that everyone was standing in the platform, she confirmed her destination. The charter symbols on the plinths began glowing with crimson fire and a circle of energy spread out between each of the eight obelisks, connecting one to the next at their apex. This was the most basic form of protection to keep dæmons from escaping out of the Chaos — obviously it was irrelevant to try and keep dæmons off of Koton, but she hoped that it would be a sufficient shield for them as well: they needed to survive the transition as well as keep any creatures from following them back.

She watched the sparkling firefly that represented Triyard, seeing it change from yellow to green — this meant that a nexusgate on the destination floater had been found and held for them. It wouldn't accept traffic for the next minute in order to prevent multiple groups landing on top of one another at the same time, but it also meant that their destination platform was clear and ready.

Tela looked at Donyvan. "Any last words?" she asked.

He shook his head. "Get us out of here."

She nodded and pressed her thumb against a glyph at the front of the machine, activating the nexusgate.

All at once there was a terrible wrenching sound. Looking up in surprise, she saw the entire roof of Donyvan's mansion had been ripped clean from the rest of the building. It took only a second to realise how — the behemoth had finally returned, looking down at them with eyes of arcane flame. It howled, revealing rows of sharp fangs, and brought its claws down as if to flatten the humans under its leathery palms. The plinths erupted into golden fire, shining bright enough that she had to avert her eyes, leaving an afterglow of dazzling colour on the inside of her eyelids.

Then several things happened simultaneously.

As the creature slammed its house-sized fist down upon them, the ground beneath the dais started to disintegrate and crumble, breaking apart through deep cracks fissuring away radially from the nexusgate. The appearance of these ravines was accompanied by a massive quake throughout the room, violent enough to rock the creature and send it crashing to its knees. It lost interest in the nexusgate for the moment, focusing entirely on keeping itself upright, and screeched in frustration once again. Still, Tela was riveted in fear — transportation through a gate was supposed to be instant. She could only guess that the lack of a guardian shield was somehow affecting its normal operation, but she was terrified that it wouldn't work at all.

Donyvan's face mirrored her fright. "What's going on?" he demanded, clutching his wife to his chest.

"I don't know!" she screamed back but her words were drowned out by the horrendous grinding of stone against stone. Through the cracks in the earth's surface she saw the purple light of the Chaos shining through the fissures, giving off an ethereal glow like a cloud of cosmic gas. There was an explosion...

...and then another —

Tela screamed, squeezed her eyes shut, and the world seemed to flip and spin, tumbling over and over itself until she lost all sense of up and down.

The throbbing silence that followed motivated her to look around; she gasped, staring in petrified awe at the sight that surrounded her.

Koton had shattered into hundreds of splintered fragments like a meteor striking a planet's surface. Activating the nexusgate was the final addition of stress, pushing the fragile piece of rock beyond its breaking point. The nexusgate rested on a small chunk of earth, each of the plinths sizzling with energy as they reacted to the open atmosphere. Their party stood silent, most of them agape at the environment they were miraculously surviving in the middle of.

Pieces of the floater whizzed past, but what caught most of her attention was the bright ball of light hundreds of kilometres away, looking like a golden coin of flame at this distance, that she recognised immediately as the Well itself. The entire Sphere orbited it like a miniature solar system, and the Well was the corridor through which travel to other Spheres was possible; there were potentially infinite Spheres, but always at the centre of them, connecting them together like a long chain of worlds, was the Well — that reminder of how their world had shattered so many eons ago and the source of both their power and their arcane nemesis.

Bodies spun around Tela in multitudes beyond her ability to count as they fell free of Koton's gravity and lost footing on the various shards of rock, twisting and thrashing in the void for seconds before freezing and suffocating; sheltered within the nexusgate's ring of influence, Tela and her party were protected from a similar fate, but her throat tightened looking into the stiffened faces of those who weren't so lucky.

The behemoth was a hundred metres away, tumbling over itself slowly in a daze; it only took a moment of gentle free-fall until it unfurled its enormous wings and righted itself, gaining control of its own momentum once again. It whirled around towards them with a roar, flapping across the open Chaos with outstretched hands.

Before she could react, the nexusgate suddenly vibrated and shuddered, exploding once again with power and colour. She felt as if for a moment her entire being had been stretched to infinity and let go, snapping back upon itself like a taut rubberband. Her vision ripped apart, replaced in an instant with something she recognised as the receiving port on Triyard. Three of the new plinths here sputtered and sparked, fizzling out in a blast of acrid smoke; she collapsed to her knees, sobbing with relief, and unceremoniously vomited onto the stone of the nexusgate. There was no sign of the behemoth, or any other dæmons, but they were unmistakably safely home.

"Tela!" someone exclaimed. "Thank the gods you made it out of there."

She looked up in surprise, fighting off another bout of retching. Running towards her was her father, worry evident in his wrinkled face. With a rush of relief she saw her sheepish assistant walking quickly behind him; although he had been forced on her by her father, she would have been distraught if he hadn't made it off of Koton as well.

"Father!" she gasped in surprised, then looked at him in puzzlement. There was no way that anyone on Triyard could have known what happened on Koton yet: even within the Consortium, instantaneous communication between two different floaters was rare and difficult to use, and as all methods to accomplish it relied on magic, the Magisterium had banned the practice despite its obvious utility. The whole reason she had to return to Triyard — other than self-preservation, obviously — was to let them know about the floater's attack.

She stared at her father in confusion; he nodded, clearly seeing the question in her face. "Come on; there's a lot I have to explain to you, and you're not going to be happy with any of it."

"How *dare* you!" she screamed as she roared into the conference room, catching the three representatives of Triyard's government — including the personal assistant to the Matriarch herself — off-guard by her entrance. She knew it was wholly inappropriate of her to lose her temper in the presence of those officials, but considering the small part of what her father had filled her in on during the short drive from the landing port to Triyard's municipal centre, she had no other reaction. "You *manipulated* me," she seethed, slamming her fists against the wooden table in front of her.

The Matriarch's assistant was a bookish woman named Joyn Cartir; although she was of consistently average appearance, she was extremely intelligent and commanded a respectable amount of power within Triyard's government — and, by extension, much of the Consortium. The Matriarch herself would be unlikely to attend a meeting like this, but that she sent Joyn in her stead underscored the fact that it was taking place with her awareness and approval. The assistant's black hair had been tied into a severe bun and affixed to the top of her head. She wore black, thick-rimmed glasses on her pointed, hawkish nose, making her look like some sort of stern librarian.

Joyn pursed her lips and pushed her glasses further up. "Ms. Niala," she replied calmly, otherwise betraying no response to Tela's outburst. "Please have a seat."

Tela slammed the table again, sending a glass of water toppling over, spilling onto the conference room's plush carpeting. "Do you understand how many people died today? I do — I watched it happen."

The assistant tilted her head sideways slightly, folding her arms across her lap. "I believe," she purred, the subtext of her words drifting across the room like cold air, "that I asked you to take a seat. Then we can discuss your concerns."

Gritting her teeth to an audible degree, Tela stood for a long moment staring death at the assistant. Joyn met her gaze patiently, though Tela could feel the unspoken threat over disobeying the assistant's directive. Bluff called, Tela took a seat at the table and continued seething. "Do you care to explain to me about how Koton was a set up?" she said tersely.

Joyn bowed her head. "While I understand your anger at being misled, you weren't set up."

Tela spat. "Oh, rubbish. That's exactly what it was." She rounded on her father, jabbing an indignant finger at him. "And you! How could you tell me nothing of this beforehand?"

Her father raised his hands in protest. "I was kept in the dark about it as well, Tela. They didn't feel it was appropriate," he said, looking at Joyn derisively, "to alert me until after you were already gone. They rightly thought I would try to warn you."

Joyn laced her fingers together, leaning forward towards them. "Unfortunately, Stevin, we feared your emotional concerns would override your ability to be neutral and see the greater worth of Tela's mission. We decided to keep the ultimate nature of your daughter's dispatch away from you until after we felt you had no opportunity to sabotage it."

It was her father's turn to wear a look of outrage as he regarded the assistant. "If you ever use my daughter for anything without our full knowledge and consent — I will bring down the wrath of Abaddon upon you and all those you care about."

She simply rolled her eyes, waving him away. "Both of you: please try and let go of your emotions. We knew that something was out there and capable of destroying entire floaters. We didn't know what it was, what sort of threat it represented, or how it operated. The Magisterium was afraid — and quite rightly. With the transference rite coming up for Koton, it served as an opportunity to try and catch the attackers in the act."

Tela hissed. "And if you had to sacrifice a few million people, I suppose that's no real concern!"

Joyn shook her head. "There was no sacrifice —"

"Ma'am," said an individual to her left, raising a finger in caution. "I don't think it's necessary to get into specifics on this."

Joyn gestured him away. "They're entitled to an explanation; I certainly don't want either of them to leave this conference room under the impression that the Matriarch authorized the wholesale forfeiture of an entire floater just for a sliver of information." She turned back to them, repeating herself. "There was no sacrifice. We didn't know what would happen on Koton and everything you went through was real and unavoidable. The scant details we learned during our investigations of the other destroyed cities provided no preparation for what you went through. Donyvan was aware of our plan, clearly, and we provided him with a nexugate ahead of time just in case it proved necessary.

"But more importantly, the Magisterium was caught off guard just as much as we were and by being there you helped to successfully secure their cooperation far more than a simply treaty would have managed. Donyvan has been talking up your deeds to anyone who will listen, irrespective of the benefits he's likely to receive from the Magisterium as part of his role in events; you're the hero today, and it's because of you that we have a chance at a relationship with the Magisterium unlike anything that has happened since Estfyn. You should be proud of your daughter, Stevin."

Joyn looked at Tela directly. "And you, Ms. Niala, would be prudent to realize how this can benefit you personally. Everyone is thinking very highly of you right now — a smart individual would figure out how to use that sentiment efficiently and not squander the opportunity."

Tela sat back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, still smouldering in rage. "I have little interest in your politics."

Joyn laughed. "Even if you don't care about rising within the government, the Avener itself is every bit as political. Better you learn how to make use of that now, rather than allow someone else to use you later." She stood, and both of the men on either side of her left their seats at that cue as well. "I believe we're done here, then. As always, the Matriarch is available in case you have any particular concerns." She bowed politely and departed without further comment. The pair of officials hurried behind her and closed the door, leaving Tela and her father alone.

"As much anger as I feel about this, she does have a point," Stevin said after a few moments of silence.

Tela set her jaw contemptuously, simmering. "I feel like we were just given a warning, dressed up as if she really thought she had done something for us as a favour."

"That's because we *were* just warned," her father replied with bitterness. "I suppose I should consider it something of a compliment that they chose you for this, after all. At the time I was confused as to why the Matriarch would ask me directly to send you on the Koton trip — I still am, frankly. But obviously she sees something in you that she wants to cultivate, and this was as much a challenge for you as it was an opportunity for her to court favour with the Magisterium. Our lady gives and our lady takes away," he mumbled.

Tela was quiet for many minutes, thinking about that. "Maybe so," she said evenly, choosing her words carefully. "But I will never be anyone's pawn again." She stared at the closed door and pictured Joyn Cartir

walking through it, somehow at peace with herself after all the death of the day. Tela repeated the sentence slowly, attaching significance to it as if taking a vow as she stared at the door.

"I'm not going to be anyone's pawn ever again."

EPILOGUE : REQUIEM

The Matriarch was an enigmatic figure; as head of state for Triyard, as well as the highest official within the Advent, she commanded power and authority beyond anyone else. Despite the churning foam of temporary alliances and backroom deals that made up most of the Advent's political structure, the Matriarch had survived two wars, four assassination attempts and almost five hundred cycles — explanations for her unnatural lifespan ran from the plausible to the extreme, depending on one's personal opinion of the woman, but no matter what explanation the critic preferred there was no denying she was an individual of considerable influence.

She sat around a circular table attended to by a number of her closest advisors; people she could trust implicitly — a trait difficult to come by within the upper hierarchy of the Advent. Sometimes fear was a sufficient deterrent to betrayal, but it was one she considered too messy and brute-force. Those loyal to her, preferably, felt that way because they realised it was the best way to benefit themselves. The queen of wands took care of those who took care of her.

Unlike other spellweavers, the Matriarch's catalyst was not a staff adorned with a core of warpstone. She made use of a silver wand about as long as her forearm tapered to a point like a slender pillar candle. It was made of a rare, foreign metal that resembled mercury turned solid, reflecting no light but emitting a dull glow of its own. It was said that her magical talent was so absolute that she alone could command the æther without needing a core and the wand was simply for theatrics in order to dispel further rumours or accusations of dæmonology. Whether that was the case or not, her tool never left her side.

She only wore one outfit: a long gown of black fabric, cut favourably to hug her slender frame. The material was as dark as an utter absence of light, as if cut from some void entirely. Her hair was similarly coloured, raven-deep and falling to her shoulder blades. Most curious of all, covering the entirety of her face was a porcelain mask; its expression was vacant and neutral, with little in the way of decoration. There were no slits for her eyes or holes for her mouth, but when she spoke her voice never seemed muffled or covered. The origin of the mask was as unexplained as her magical prowess or long-life — a particularly common rumination was that she had made a disfiguring pact with an archdæmon or myrmidon in exchange for power and covered herself up to hide this fact. Whatever the case, the mask never came off either. The queen of wands took no lover and revealed herself to no one.

Before her was a thick stack of paper, representing a compilation of reports from people involved with the Koton incident — Ambassador Niala, the former Senior Magistrate, and a number of Koton's citizens they had interviewed after recovering their escape dirigibles floating across the open Chaos. She thought back to Tela as she thumbed the paperwork, recalling what her assistant had said about the young ambassador's reaction after returning to Triyard.

"It says here," she spoke aloud finally, her voice melodic and gentle despite her authority as supreme leader, "that the Perversion in question identified himself as the 'harbinger.' What, exactly, was he *bringing*?"

Her assistant, Joyn, organised her own stack of documents across from the Matriarch. "According to those present at the murder of the surrogate Archon, he said he represented the 'jackal god.' It was considerably difficult to research, but we turned up this tome in the archives of the Library Arcanum. This appears to be the only reference." The woman slid the manuscript over, distaste evident on her face. It was ancient, bound with a cover unmistakably crafted of human skin. Arcane runes danced across its surface, painted in blood. Before she saw it fully, the Matriarch knew immediately what it would be. She traced a pale index finger across one of the glyphs, seeing it slither gently, stubbornly under her touch as if begrudgingly stirring from a long slumber. The cover had a single word — a name, one of the few that even she dare not speak aloud.

"Old enemy, how nice to see you again."

END OF BOOK 01

###

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Iyetra is set in a world unlike our own; although some words may seem familiar, the meanings might not be what we are used to. A selected glossary of terms is provided here for the reader's convenience.

Advent: One of the larger governmental bodies and the largest practitioners of Magic

Aenstara: The deity that the Magisterium reveres as a goddess

æther: Slightly synonymous with the Chaos, it is the field of energy/radiation through which spellweavers power their abilities

aspirant: A term for an individual who has magical ability who is undergoing training at the Avener

Avener: The lead institution for the Advent where other magic users are trained; it also serves as the Advent's governmental building

bell: One hour

Chaos: The hostile open space surrounding floaters, occupied by dæmons and their followers. Floaters have to be shielded from it

Consortium: An alliance of floaters in opposition to the Imperium, led by the Advent

cycle: One year

dæmons: Denizens of the Chaos

floater: Remains of *Iyetra* that have been repopulated, protected from the Chaos under domes of magic or technology.

guardian shield: The particular barrier favoured by the Advent & floaters outside of the Imperium to protect against the Chaos. Anything within a guardian shield exists in a slightly offset dimension from the Chaos, preventing the two dimensions from interacting. A lesser, easier to project form is used for dirigibles and other passenger ships

Imperium of Man: A group of humans who turned against magic and waged war against the Advent in order to eradicate it. Their efforts to accomplish this led to the Shattering and the creation of the Chaos

Iyetra: The former name for a planet which was destroyed during the Shattering

Known Space: The term for the entirety of mapped civilisation

Magisterium: An alliance of religious floaters practicing worship of Aenstara; although unaffiliated with the Imperium, they share the former's distrust of magic and have had numerous conflicts with the Advent in the past

prole: A common term for an individual with no magical ability

Shattering: A cataclysmic event in *Iyetra*'s pre-history which heralded the end of the Whole, causing *Iyetra* to be destroyed into millions of smaller pieces

spellweaver: A term for an individual who practices magic; usually affiliated with the Advent

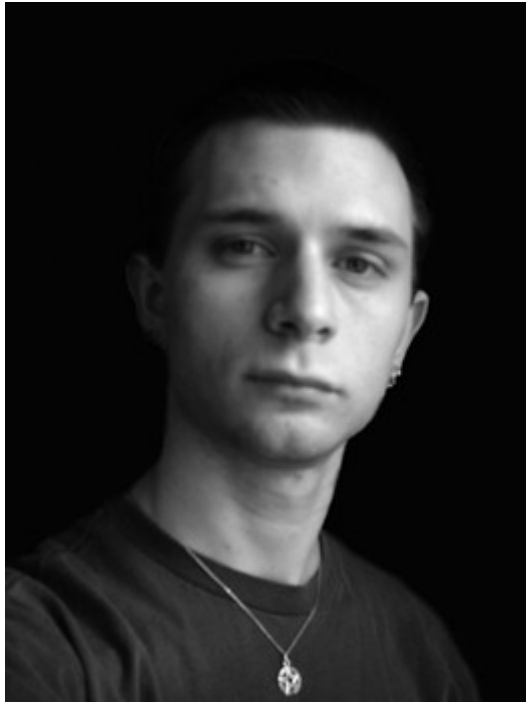
Sphere: An area of space, like a solar system, containing multiple floaters

warpstone: A piece of rock extracted from the Well which works as a conduit for Advent spells

Well: The physical remains of Iyetra's core and a portal that allows travel between each Sphere

Whole: The name for pre-history when Iyetra was a complete celestial body and the Chaos did not exist; ended with the Shattering

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Joshua Meadows hails from New York City but currently lives in Sydney, Australia with his partner Adam. His professional writing has covered a variety of topics from politics & gay rights to video games. In the past he has been on staff with *XY Magazine*, had writing appear on websites like WoW.com and has been involved in LGBT activism in NYC. As a teenager he attended the New Orleans Center for the Creative Arts and is also a classically-trained vocalist and pianist, having performed at Carnegie Hall when he was 18.

His musings on video games and LGBT rights can be read at ctrlclick.com.

For more information about the Iyetra series go to iyetra.com.

Book 02: Animus - Preview

Continue Tela's story in *Iyetra - Book 02: Animus*, available for purchase now. Visit <http://iyetra.com> for information on where to buy.

"If you'll take your seat, ma'am, we're about to begin the final insertion."

Tela turned to the voice behind her, breaking her focus from the writhing Chaos surrounding the dirigible. In the doorway to the hall leading back from the observation platform was one of Hemeth's fidgeting soldiers, nervously fingering the hem of his dress tunic as he delivered the message. Tela wasn't sure what the General had said to them to inspire such meekness amongst his men, but this youth was hardly the first one to react as if he feared being turned into a small animal through her spellcraft.

She nodded, feigning the warmest smile she could manage. "Thank you, I'll find my way back then," she replied. As the young soldier scurried out of sight she worried if her affectation towards politeness would do more harm than good in dispelling her reputation amongst Hemeth's soldiers.

She gave another look into space, protected on the platform by the dirigible's own bubble. It had been some time since she had travelled within a similar ship and her mind inevitably made unwanted comparisons back to the turmoil of that last occasion. This time, no hellspawn roamed the ætheric wastes around them; this fringe Sphere was a dead one, and the creatures only seemed interested in habituating ones with existent human life.

The only celestial body of interest was the Well before them, coming up into view as the dirigible pivoted towards it in preparation for the insertion. Sun-like, the Well was a violent cycle of gaseous expansion and contraction, energy crackling across its white-hot surface as it slowly rotated in place. There was only one Well, standing as both a scar and monument to the pre-history of the Whole, but that one Well was mirrored and replicated across the multiverse, holding each of the infinite Spheres together like a sandwich of parallel dimensions.

They had dropped out of voidspace a few bells before to refuel with the abundant natural resources that could be found in open space; the dirigible's final destination was far beyond the boundaries of the charted Known, so it was unfeasible to make the entire trip in just one jump. The location of their pit stop was a Sphere that hadn't been inhabited for many cycles, lying dormant and dead long after the battle that had caused so much destruction in the first place. It was a relic of the Endless War, caught between the Imperium and the dæmons of the Chaos.

Sighing to herself, she stepped away from the handrails that cordoned off the observation platform from the outer ship hull and headed back inside. In contrast to her previous journey in such a dirigible, this one was military — not commercial. Its design was more spartan and utilitarian, lacking the luxuries of the passenger liner she had used before. Most of Hemeth's men had already taken their seats, strapping themselves into hard plastis chairs that were uncomfortable to sit in for long stretches of time. This last insertion would be almost twenty-seven bells; her back was already protesting what it knew was coming.

She took her seat quickly as the initial turbulence signalling their proximity to the Well began slightly shaking the craft. It thrummed through the chassis of the ship like a far-away earthquake, picking up vehemence the closer they manoeuvred to the spatial rip.

Hemeth turned to her and bared his teeth in a toothy, nearly feral grin. "Almost there," he said in the next seat, watching her with a level of excitement she found unbecoming.

"I don't know what you're so thrilled about," she replied tersely, arranging her Advent robes around herself as a makeshift blanket. She purposefully had changed into her thicker gown a few bells ago, knowing how cold the dirigible would get as it was making the insertion.

"Ah, Tela the sullen mud stick," he teased. "No wonder the boys walk on eggshells around you."

She held out a finger. "Since you bring that subject up," she began in annoyance, jabbing her finger towards him, "as soon as we've landed on Alysta we need to have a conversation about whatever you've said to them that has your soldiers running like cockroaches whenever I enter a room."

His smile was saccharine and mischievous, backed up by a glint in his eye that told her he was about as trustworthy as a rat. "Ma'am, I would never disrespect the esteemed status of a Prelate with simple mockery."

Her response was a hard sock into his shoulder and a curse word that would make even one of the nearby soldiers blush. "You're a miserable scamp, Hemeth. How you earned a promotion to General I'll never understand."

He rubbed his arm in feigned agony, screwing his face up in faux-outrage. His voice was boisterous and haughty, carrying out across the passenger area of the dirigible. "I'll have you know right here that the Matriarch

saw fit to promote me for my demonstrable skills in cunning manipulation, scathing wit and incorrigible charm." Ever the performer, he pursed his lips in wounded hurt, batting his long eyelashes at her like a puppy.

Tela rolled her eyes and folded her arms across her chest. "Which are all well and good for a street-thief but hardly becoming of a General. Sometimes I wonder just how she expects to win this war."

"Which war is that?" he asked, wide-eyed. "We seem to be juggling a few of them." Hemeth turned serious for a moment, dropping his volume so his words were just heard between the two of them. "What do you think we're going to find on Alysta?" he asked.

Tela shrugged. "You attended the same briefings as I did. The Matriarch said it was an archive floater, a place that hasn't been touched since the Shattering."

"I know what she said in the briefings, I'm asking what she told you outside of them," he pressed.

She hesitated. Technically, she had the suspicion that her conversations with the Matriarch outside of the shared meetings were supposed to be kept in confidence. Still, despite Hemeth's inclination towards pranks and mischief she trusted him, and their mission could only be benefitted by him having a fuller understanding of their purpose. The Matriarch would have filled him in on the actions she expected him to take, but would have certainly kept the finer points as to *why* to herself. The Matriarch preferred to keep the knowledge of her agents compartmentalised and separate whenever possible, giving them less ammunition to use against her if they chose to go rogue.

"She told me that there should be a document there which has something to do with the people who attacked Koton months ago."

He made a quiet murmur of acknowledgement. "Are you sure you're up for dealing with that document, then? I heard what happened on Koton; I would still be unsettled, especially given Donyvan's promotion —"

"I'm fine," she replied flatly, narrowing her eyes at the mention of that name. Donyvan had been rewarded highly for his role in things after Koton. The Magisterium had even pardoned him for failing to disclose his magical abilities as required by their laws. The whole thing was still sour to her even now; he'd done nothing worthy of being lauded. "At any rate, it's too late to back out now. We'll be there in little over a day."

Hemeth nodded, knowing better than to press some issues. "Still, I can't imagine what she said to you to win you over again. From what I heard about Ambassador Tela Niala, her rage was so great she rebuked the Matriarch herself," he said with teasing reverence.

Tela chuckled. "Nothing as dramatic as that," she said. Reflexively, she cast a glance at her nearby staff and eyed the three coloured tassels dangling around the weapon's top end. Although he'd phrased it as a joke, they had worked together enough recently that she could tell when he was attempting to weasel information from her. Certainly, there were a number of politicians inside the Advent who had a similar inclination towards uncovering the rationality behind her sudden reversal of opinion about the enigmatic woman; some of the more simple-minded ones would have stopped their guesses at those tassels and their representation of the three ranks she had skipped when the Matriarch directly accelerated her to Prelate. Though part of her scorned the assumption that she hadn't earned that promotion, she understood the political benefit of being underestimated as simply the Matriarch's latest pet project.

"I think the more important question," Tela said as she looked towards the front of the ship, "is whether or not you are ready to deal with anything we happen to find on this dead world. You won't be able to prank your way out of a confrontation with a pissed off behemoth."

Hemeth cleared his throat, recognising her subtle hint that the subject had been changed. "Yes, truly," he said. "But to be fair, it's no fun tricking a behemoth; they lack the cognitive reasoning to realise what you've done and the whole thing feels like playing pranks on a baby. Unfortunately it deflates the entire amusement potential."

Tela laughed, rolling her eyes once again. "Spoken like the sort of tactical genius only the Matriarch could count upon."

Hemeth opened his mouth for a retort, but the two of them were distracted as a well-dressed soldier in officer garb stepped over to their seats, holding out a tray filled with tiny amber-coloured vials. "Pardon me," he said quietly, jutting the tray towards them. "Sleepdew, for the insertion," the officer explained.

Tela nodded, taking a vial from the tray. She turned to hand it to Hemeth but stopped when he waved it away. "I don't use the stuff," he said dismissively. "It makes me feel too light-headed and addled for several bells after I wake. I'll just pass out the normal way."

She shrugged and withdrew her hand, dismissing the officer so he could pass the tray on to his subordinate for distribution amongst the other soldiers. "If you say so," she replied, screwing open the sealed lid to the container. "Personally, I want to make sure I have no recollection of the next twenty-seven bells."

It was only a few moments later when the warning klaxon sounded out across the ship and the lights dimmed to a pale glow. By that point the ship was shaking enough to make normal conversation difficult. Usually, a dirigible would exist on a dimension slightly out of step with the baseline one as it travelled through the Chaos within its protective bubble — it was this shielding that kept the ships safe from dæmons. However,

the periphery of the Well was one location where such boundaries began to decay and fall apart; as such, their proximity to it caused the turbulence when otherwise the ship's reality and the reality it floated through never truly interacted.

Seating in the middle of the dirigible she wasn't able to get a good view of what they were navigating through, but through the window next to Hemeth's seat she saw pieces of glowing rock flying past them at high velocity. Those were the raw pieces of warpstone that served as the magical basis for so many vital pieces of Advent society — everything from the cores that powered their ability to create spells or the fuel sources powering the dirigibles relied on those ethereal fragments of their former world.

With their proximity to the Well and the subsequent confluence of dimensions surrounding it, those fragments could also cause serious damage to their ship if the two collided. While a free-floating chunk of rock might not do much in normal space, here the collision of two different realities would unleash volatile energy that would most assuredly obliterate them in a fiery instant. Several times the dirigible's pilot had swerved hard to avoid such an interaction, rocking Tela back and forth in her seat; she was thankful for the straps holding her in place.

Similarly, this was the moment where a dirigible was most vulnerable to attack by a dæmon as well. It wasn't uncommon for the creatures to lie in patient wait out of sight behind large chunks of stone, waiting for a hapless ship to enter or emerge from a Well, helpless to their strike. She doubted they were at risk of such an attack here, though; they had seen little evidence that any dæmons had been present in this Sphere for many cycles.

Before long their ship was at the mouth of the Well's tunnel and ready for insertion. The klaxon switched to a low trill and Tela began to feel the familiar stretching sensation that signalled their descent into the singularity itself. The dirigible's lightspheres switched off entirely in preparation and the craft's cabin was illuminated by nothing more than the nebulous glow of the Chaos around them. Seconds later they were inside and Tela's stomach reeled from the feeling of being pulled infinitely forward at high velocity. As they entered the tunnel from the front of the ship, Tela's face and chest felt as if they had been plucked by some god and stretched across the universe like Tela-flavoured taffy. It was a hard sensation to get used to — thus, the sleepdew. Most travellers preferred unconsciousness to the quantifiable feeling of defying the universe's physical laws.

As their ship sped through the reality tunnel surrounding them, Tela's view through the window was replaced by a shell of twisting, spinning colours forming shapes of dazzling complexity. That would be all she'd see for the duration of the trip; pretty as it was, it made her head hurt — unless that was being caused by the feeling that her face was somewhere else in the universe waiting for the rest of her body to catch up.

She placed her finger over the opening of the vial and tipped it upside down gently until the liquid spilled onto her digit. Wiping it across her upper lip, she inhaled the lavender and violet scent of the oil deeply. Before she could count to three, the drug had taken effect and she slipped into contented oblivion.

END OF PREVIEW

###