THE CITY OF CORPSES

THE SECOND BOOK OF LOST CARCOSA

JOSEPH SALE

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“The tower’s old cook that must climb and clamber
Catching small birds in the dew of the morn
When we hale men lie stretched in slumber
Swears that he hears the king’s great horn.
But he’s a lying hound:
Stand we on guard oath-bound!”

—W. B. Yeats, The Black Tower

PROLOGUE

THE SCOUT TRAVELLED a hundred leagues from the dismal swamps of Yhtill, over the dreaming deserts of Demhe, and at last into the land of Blue Light, the abode of Pe'kar, the Six Ringed City, the Magnificence of Ages, the Enclave of Eternity, the Court of the Demon King.

The scout was a master of his craft, having trained long eons in the service of his master, and even the likes of Cali and Cassilda had not been able to detect his presence. He had observed the party ever since they dispatched the warband of Pe'karian soldiers. He had seen them enter the Temple of Namtar, and then leave, bearing The Claw.

"Cali has failed you, my Lord." The scout knelt in the great courtroom of Pe'kar. A thousand, thousand eyes fixed upon him, their scrutiny more agonising than nine-tail lashes. But nothing in their judging eyes could compare to that of the Demon King himself.

The scout could not look directly at the Lord, for to do so would be to abandon sanity, to cast his mind into the empyrean with no hope of ever returning. The Six Ringed City's streets were littered with the gibbering, mad souls who had dared to look upon their Lord. Only the strongest of demonkind could comprehend his majesty, his beauty, his magnificence, and remain anchored in the realm of soil and sand. The scout was not hubristic enough to believe he was one of the strongest. So he served Pe'kar with eyes downcast. The only thing he could see was a turquoise light that emitted from the throne, stabbing the pupils with its intensity.

"And The Claw," the scout added. "It has been recovered by an outcast from Earth."

Pe'kar's Shadow stretched across the stone tiles of the courtroom as a murmur went about the hall. The Shadow did not

obey the dimensions and proportions of its master, nor did its movements align with his. The scout had heard Pe'kar often conversed with his Shadow. Apparently, it was the only being of sufficient intelligence to stimulate the god in true conversation. Or so the legend went.

The turquoise light changed to green, a green so horribly saturated that the scout felt like he might void his stomach over the royal flagstones. He fought with all his will to keep his food down.

"This is . . . unfortunate . . . "

The scout choked. The voice—it was so resonant, so sweet, so *perfect*. Though like all Pe'karians, the scout had long ago been gelded. He felt a tingling sensation where his genitals had once been, a memory of desire so powerful it could almost make him whole. The urge to look at his master overwhelmed him.

"Thank you for your service, honoured scout."

The scout prostrated himself, touching his forehead to the stone, as much to restrain himself from gazing upon his Lord as a gesture of obeisance. The scout remained with his face planted on the stone flagstones for what felt like hours, each second ticking by with the slowness of a nightmare. He sobbed with the effort of resistance. The voice and light, they were siren-songs, the whispers and moans of a lover, parental praise, all of these at once.

"You want to look," the Lord said.

"I cannot, my Lord. I am not strong enough. Your beauty . . . "

"But you have served well. You deserve a reward."

"Please, my Lord . . . I wish to continue to serve you . . . "

"And you shall. Look upon me."

Slowly, with the agonising pleasure of relinquished restraint, the scout began to lift his eyes. Blue, green, and white lights seeped into his pupils, stinging through the corneas, entering into the brain, and once there, blasting neural pathways, washing the jelly of his mind with poisons sweeter than honey. As he lifted his heavy lids the final microcosmic distance, to behold his Lord fully, the scout inhaled a sharp breath—orgasmic, fleeting, beautiful yet transient as a butterfly landing upon a broad leaf—and instantly his heart stopped. He keeled over and lay dead upon the courtroom floor. His face remained contorted in an expression of pure ecstasy.

Pe'kar rose from his throne, and slowly the entire courtroom filled with sickening, multicoloured light. The courtiers cheered

and applauded, content to wash in his glory, forgetting their own excrescences in the cold illumination of his fell loveliness.

"Raise Haercus from the dungeons," the Lord commanded. "*I have in mind a task for him. And rally the second legion. Carcosa is weak. This time, it shall fall."*

"Long live Pe'kar!" the voices called, their multitude shaking the foundations of the black planet. "Long live Pe'kar! Long live Pe'kar!"

CHAPTER 1
THE RETURN OF THE KING

CALI KNELT BEFORE the King In Yellow. The overwhelming potency of His aura pressed upon her like the gravity of a fell star. His approach threatened to expose all the defences she had put in place to conceal her intentions and emotions. *Bury the truth,* she thought, *bury it deep, let no trace of it remain, cast it out! You are the loving daughter! You are the loving daughter . . .*

But then even her thoughts washed away, like a sandcastle consumed by the onrushing tide. The King's psychic presence was an ocean, vast, tumultuous, merciless, and deeper than any vault. She wondered how Eric, the foppish courtier dressed in motley, could bear standing so close to the King as he was.

Unlike Pe'Kar, who allowed his naked splendour to enchant all, the King wore a tattered robe, concealing a cyclopean form that no one—save for Camilla—had ever gazed upon. Layers upon layers of grey, reeking folds entombed shadows and secrets. Perhaps he resembled a man, perhaps something altogether stranger. He stood ten feet tall, conveying a sense of colossal enormity but also rake-thin anorexia. His movements were painfully slow—it was easy to understand why. He had lived through eons upon eons, known the world when it was a seed. Or so the stories went.

Lies, Cali thought, *He made himself into a god. But even He has an end . . .* The strength of the thought almost caused her mask to slip, but she caught herself just in time, once again practicing the telesmatic ritual of forgetting—a practice she learned in her studies in the deep West, in the lands of Blue Light. One took a thought, an intention, an idea, transformed it into sigillography, then cast the sigil into the void, later to be retrieved, its power

increased tenfold. It was the only method she knew of that could conceal her inner mind from the King. The void was her only escape from Carcosa's Lord.

"Dear daughter," the King said.

Cali lifted her eyes. The affection in His voice unnerved her. Ever she had been the black sheep of the family, in form and function. Ever He had shown favour towards her sister, Cassilda. But here, He honoured her with a term of endearment. Cynicism and desire for approval warred within her.

"Father," she whispered. Her breathless awe would have irritated her, had she the presence of mind for self-consciousness, but before Him, thinking became difficult. Cali had stood before many powerful beings in her time. She had killed a few of them. But none, not even Pe'kar, had an aura like that of the Yellow King.

"Thou art troubled." A statement, no question on his lips. If, indeed, there were lips beneath the cowl of that tenebrous, filthy hood. One thing she had never understood about her father was why He chose to dress like a hermit—less than a hermit, like a coprophage of the lowest order clad in shit-stained robes. Perhaps it was some gesture of humility? She did not think Him capable of that. There had to be some other reason. He was secrecy personified, a lord of mysteries, His every word concealing ten beneath, His every deed a smokescreen for some other act performed with the hidden hand. "And wounded," he continued, concern weighing his voice with granitic sincerity. "What has happened, Cali? I have slept too long."

"Do not blame yourself, my Lord," Eric stammered.

The King waved a hand and Eric fell silent, lowering his eyes. Foolish, but not stupid.

Cali's mind raced. It seemed He had not detected her deception. Yet, she could not be certain. His affection towards her was unusual, suspicious. But then again, perhaps such a display was designed to draw her out of hiding, make her crack . . . She had spent her life navigating the labyrinth of her father's crooked emotional designs. Always He seemed one step ahead. She begrudgingly had to admit her own ability to create plans came from Him.

And it did you no good, she thought. *Your plans failed.*

"What failed?" The King demanded, responding directly to her thoughts.

Cali swallowed down her alarm that she had come so close to revealing her true nature. She teetered upon the edge of a precipice. One false move and she would plunge into an oblivion deeper and blacker than anything imaginable. She could still fulfill her mission, if she held course.

"Father . . . I struggle to even begin . . . " The image of Cassilda rose within her mind, pale and slight like a moonbeam, a storm surrounding her. The angry, accusatory words she spoke rang in Cali's ears. *O sister, thou hast overplayed thy hand.* The rage frothed and boiled. She felt her wounds—the lightning-shaped scars criss-crossing over her ebony flesh—aching with remembrance. She could use this pain to mask what had really happened. "Cassilda . . . she has betrayed us, betrayed *you*."

A terrifying silence followed her pronouncement. Though she could see no eyes—a strange reality of her life, that she had never once looked her father *in the eye*—she could feel His immense scrutiny, punishing as an avalanche.

"Betrayed?" He repeated, quietly. "My beautiful Cassilda, the image of her mother . . . *betrayed*?"

The titanic stones of the palace trembled. Cali would not have been surprised to learn that everywhere across Carcosa the church-bells had begun ringing their dirge in sympathy for his betrayal.

The King turned away from Cali. Moving across the stone tiles with concealed limbs. Eric could not conceal his horror at the news. He had always been Cassilda's pet.

"My favourite daughter . . . " the King whispered. "A traitor in blood?"

Cali trembled like the palace, the rage a toxin in her veins. She hated Him, but this anger was directed inward for being stupid enough, *weak* enough, to think He had changed for a moment. She could not control the circumstances of her birth. And in fact, it had been *His* fault, His sin, that had brought her into being.

Cali was the offspring of her father's infidelity, her mother being a succubus who had seduced the King many eons ago. She was therefore a child of two worlds. Strangely, she thought of Alan Chambers in that moment. Perhaps that was why she had been so lenient with him, had not seen what he was becoming until it was too late. She wondered where he was now. The group would have fled. If they returned to Carcosa, Cali would make sure they were seized. But she doubted Cassilda would be stupid enough to do so.

She knew how Cali held favour with the people, if not with her father and the court. So, where would she have gone?

"Where is she?" the King asked. He had turned back to face her, not that any face was visible. Once again Cali was reminded of how careful she had to be with her thoughts.

"I do not know, father," Cali said.

"We must find her. We must bring her back. I must question her myself . . . "

Cali would do all she could to avoid that happening, for if the King probed Cassilda's mind, He would discern the truth in short order. Still, she could play along for now.

The King drew closer to Cali and extended a dishevelled sleeve. A digit—perhaps a finger, perhaps something more octopean—touched her chin through the gauze of soiled cloth. It was all she could do to conceal her revulsion and disgust. He lifted her chin so that she stared up into the impenetrable blackness of His hood. The closest they had ever come, perhaps, to emotional intimacy.

"Did she give thee thy wounds?"

Eric averted his eyes, stood awkwardly to one side, not wishing to eavesdrop, but not yet dismissed by his master.

"No," Cali answered, swallowing down bile. "It was another, one Alan Chambers, an outcast. I regret that I brought him to this world. He held great promise. I thought that . . . he could do great things." No theatre was required here. She truly felt all these things and more. They said actors drew on lived experience to make their dramas believable.

Now she found herself thinking about LeBarron, the actor who had helped them get to the Temple of Namtar. She remembered the night of passion they had shared—then his betrayal. What sane man would give up her to ally themselves with a demented pervert like Alan Chambers? Who would follow a gimp over a goddess? Yet he had chosen him, not her, at the critical moment. And it had spelled her undoing.

"He has The Claw, father," Cali finished.

"The Claw?" the King hissed. "Cali, thou hast truly overstepped thy bounds."

It wounded Cali doubly to realise how similar Cassilda and her father were, what kindred high falutin terms they thought and spoke in. The rage, suppressed as it had to be, had condensed into an ingot of solid loathing, a physical thing in the pit of her stomach.

Forever Cassilda and the King reminded Cali of how she had overstepped, overplayed, gone too far. They placed limits on her—and on Carcosa itself. For all their magic, they were narrow-minded beings. Cali would surpass them. She would—

A deep breath quelled the thoughts and banished them into the abyss. She would suffer for this magic later, when it returned tenfold in power, but for now her true aims would remain undetected.

"I have failed you, father," she said, projecting every bit the image of the repentant daughter. "It was in my efforts to please you that I overstepped my bounds. I desired to bring you a champion, a hero of the same legend as Haercus, one who could wield the Claw and defeat Pe'kar." She took a deep breath. The outpouring of emotion had once again become very real, and she did not want too much of that truth to spill. "But I misjudged, in my fervour, in my devotion . . . " She broke down into inconsolable weeping. This, too, was real in its own way. Her wounds pained her. The bright yellow scars would likely never truly heal. The Claw marked reality, that was its power. It was the mechanism by which mortals could change the universe. Her only consolation was that Alan would, like Haercus, likely be driven mad by its power. Only by removing the Claw had Haercus escaped insanity, and not long afterward he had been captured by Pe'kar. Stories of his death were spread to the far corners of the black planet, but Cali had learned the truth in the land of Blue Light, that Haercus lived, imprisoned in the deepest of Pe'kar's dungeons, his mind—already on the brink of collapse—overthrown by the Demon King's esoteric devices of torture.

"Hush now, dear daughter," the King said. "I have treated thee harshly in the past . . . "

Cali looked up, tears scalding her with almost as much fury as her wounds. Did she hear regret in His voice? Repentance? A flood of emotions broke through the dam that the solid ingot of hate had stoppered. If He truly were to ask for her forgiveness, if He were to acknowledge His failures as a father, then perhaps she could forgive him, and perhaps there would be no need for her to overthrow Carcosa. If He was capable of change, then she would much rather see that change than risk the city she loved so well under the armies of Pe'kar. Nothing she had done could not be undone . . . yet.

The Yellow King's oppressive aura increased in intensity, until it felt as though she were in a wind-tunnel, barely able to remain upright even though kneeling and close to the ground.

"Father?" she murmured, unsure what this change portended. Was this His love for her, rising? Was this what it felt like to be loved by the King In Yellow? To be at the centre of His cyclone? To be accepted by father and god? It took all her restraint not to cry out in joy, to throw her arms open, to cast herself upon Him, embracing His filthy robe.

"I have treated thee harshly in the past . . . but now thou shalt know *agonies* for thy failure."

Cali's eyes widened with shock. A second later she was thrown back and pinned to the ground by a force so colossal it seemed the planet itself had fallen upon her. She screamed and then convulsed as invisible power coruscated over her limbs. Ten thousand volts, a hundred thousand, were not equal to this. Every atom of her being vibrated at an infernal frequency. Her mind felt like it had liquefied. Her limbs threatened to fly from their sockets. The seizure was so great that white foam erupted past her lips. Her screams gargled under the bodily fluid. Her brain felt as though it was being squeezed by two tectonic plates. She was a grub in His disgusting fingers. A beetle beneath His heel. Nothing.

He had punished her like this before, of course, but always there had been an end point. She had grown accustomed to knowing when He would relent. Now, there was no cessation. Even her screams died as the pain became transcendental. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head as her limbs thudded against the stone floor. No man had ever pressed himself physically upon her without her consent, but this was a higher form of rape, her soul squeezed in a death grip. What manner of being was her father that He could asphyxiate the stuff of spirit?

Blindness took her. Then loss of hearing. Thus, she did not see or hear Eric weeping as he watched her twitching form. Nor did she see her father's eyes, blazing out of the darkness of His cowl like two yellow stars in the gutter of outer space, the omens of their malicious shine unreadable to even the wisest of seers.

CHAPTER 2
THE LAKE OF FORGETTING

LEBARRON LED THEIR party to the shores of Lake Hali: Alan Chambers, now bearing the macabre Claw, the dwarf scribe Petruccio, and Princess Cassilda. The lake stretched far, far into the distance beyond eyesight. Above the lake, and reflected in its black surface, was Aldebaran, the woeful star that yet had become a comfort to Alan in this strange land, if purely because of its eerie constancy.

A little way from the shore, yellow flowers—each larger than an elephant—bloomed with petal-patterns that conveyed geometries defying the Euclidean. Whatever ratio or mean had created such a display was not golden, Alan thought, but surely as disgustingly yellow as the city walls of Carcosa.

"What did you say these flowers were called?"

"Xanthimums," Petruccio said. He sat propped upon a fallen hali-tree, his notebook and pen in hand, sketching the listless lake, its flowers and reflections. The wind was high, yet Hali's surface remained unperturbed by its bluster.

"How did you become so knowledgeable in so many fields?" Alan said, admiring Petruccio's sketchwork, which had a vitality he rarely saw, save in the work of masters. "Music, art, now botany too."

Petruccio chuckled.

"I was a palaeontologist, in my former life."

"Former life?" Such was the strangeness of Carcosa that Alan wondered whether he meant reincarnation.

"When I was an ignorant man of Earth," the dwarf corrected.

Alan smiled.

"I enjoyed sketching the archeological finds we made, and then

of course envisioning what the things would look like with muscles and flesh, scales and feathers . . . So those two loves went hand in hand. I only took up music when I met Cali . . . " His expression darkened. Cali had betrayed all four of them, but her betrayal of Petruccio was arguably the deepest and most profound. Alan had no idea how long Petruccio and Cali had worked together before he arrived at *The Black Star,* what felt like decades ago now, but it seemed they'd shared a rich history. She'd offered Petruccio's life to the demon Namtar without a sliver of conscience.

Alan placed his good hand upon Petruccio's shoulder. The artist smiled in appreciation.

"Don't worry about me. It's her I worry about . . . " He nodded towards Cassilda, who was staring out across the vastness of Lake Hali. Alan wondered whether her eyes saw more than he and the others. " . . . she has a great responsibility upon her shoulders. For her, failure to stop Cali is not merely a personal vendetta. She cares about Carcosa. Its people."

"We *will* stop Cali," Alan said, hearing a certainty in his voice that sounded like someone else's.

"It will take some doing," Petruccio replied, darkly. He shaded his illustration, drawing shadows under the flowers and in the spaces between ripples on the lake.

Whilst Petruccio had an extraordinary eye, Alan noticed he took license, lengthening the shadows, distorting the image somewhat so that it was not merely a photographic likeness of the scene before him, but an interpretation that implied subconscious meanings.

The eyes, Alan realised, were somewhat treacherous. They could not convey the full mystery of the world. The enigma of Carcosa did not lie in its flora and fauna, or even in its aberrant stars, but somewhere deeper. *And I will find it,* he thought, with sudden longing and determination. *I will find the mystery.*

He had tasted a little of it in the Temple of Namtar, wielding the full power of The Claw against Cali, feeling the secret Self he had always known existed but forever denied. Now that the moment had passed, he was trying desperately to hold onto that glimpse of paradise he had obtained, but it was difficult. The mundanity of existence kept getting in the way: his aching feet from the long journey, the coldness of the winds, the ravenous hunger in his belly (they had consumed the very last of the rations),

a cacophony of inanities that drowned out the still voice he had briefly heard within.

Then there were his fears and uncertainties about what was transpiring between himself and Cassilda.

They had not talked much since their kiss. She still looked at him with desirous eyes, but he wondered if he were not imagining it, as he had imagined so many things, including Cali's infatuation with him. He cursed himself silently for such foolishness.

Alan moved towards Cassilda, leaving Petruccio to finish his sketch. LeBarron appeared to be investigating the shoreline and determining the best path towards the flowers. The lake reminded Alan of bathing in the waters of Hali when he had completed the Ritual of Five in order to reach Carcosa in the first place, a coldness like nothing he could ever have imagined, a coldness that not only froze the body but sucked away all sense of Self, leaving only oblivion.

"Whosoever drinks forgets both joy and grief," Alan muttered.

Cassilda turned and looked at Alan, meeting his eyes with frightening directness. Her flaxen hair shimmered in the light of the twin suns. She was a vision of light, more alien and wilder than even those blooming xanthimums.

"Thou art forever quoting poetry," Cassilda said. She had returned to using a more formal mode of speech, which saddened Alan, though he suspected that the first chip in her armour would not be the last. He had glimpsed the real her underlying the regal exterior. She still wore the bloodied bridal dress, still spoke in the manner of an Elizabethan playwright, but beneath that, she had changed. He had tasted her passion under the Black Star's light.

A small smile quirked her thin lips. "When we entered the centre of the labyrinth, and thou spied Namtar, thou recited some line . . . It was truly strange."

"Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss . . . " Alan parroted. "And mad'st it pregnant."

"That was it!" Cassilda said, delightedly. "How peculiar . . . "

Alan smiled.

"Milton was a peculiar man."

"No, I mean the act of recitation at such a moment! Thou art not an actor like LeBarron." She pointed at their companion, who was still inspecting the shoreline for some hidden feature none of them understood. "Is thy brain a repository of knowledge that

simply cannot avoid spilling into the ether?" He had never known her to be so playful and had to admit it sent a thrill through him.

"Their words are a lot better than mine."

Cassilda shook her head.

"One day, thou wilt learn to speak with thy own voice."

"Perhaps."

Cassilda turned back to the lake, and Alan stood beside her.

"Do you fear for your mother?" he asked, gently.

Cassilda nodded.

"She has been imprisoned now for many weeks. Pe'kar . . . his tortures are legendary. Thou hast no parallels in thy world for his engines and mechanisms. They are agonies not of matter but of spirit."

She had used the words "thy world", yet Alan felt very little connection to the Earth he had left behind. He had already begun to think of Carcosa as his nation, and its people as his own kin.

"We will get her back." The second time he had given positive affirmation in mere minutes. He wondered if he were not a delusional optimist.

Cassilda smiled, however.

"She is strong. I learned so much from her, yet now I see there was so much more I could have learned, had I not been so headstrong."

Alan raised his right hand—the hand ending in the vicious Claw—to instinctively place it tenderly on Cassilda, only realising his mistake and pulling back at the last moment. There had been a few incidents like this, one in which he had gone to scratch an itch on his chin and almost sheared off half his face. It was not only the deadly taloned fingers that proved a hazard, but the power he felt throbbing in the palm of his hand, something like an electrical current but far more potent: elemental, as immutable as the black planet itself.

"My friends!" LeBarron cried, drawing all their attention. "I have found the way again. It has been a long time since I last ventured down to Alar."

Alan, Cassilda, and Petruccio made their way over to the actor, who was pointing theatrically down at a patch of water that looked no different to any other place on the shoreline.

"I'm not mad," the actor said, hurriedly. "Look *very* carefully here and you will see that there is a shelf beneath the water. It's

much shallower here than elsewhere, and we can walk along this all the way out to those flowers. Be very careful of your footing. If you go under, the cold will take you in seconds . . . and those seconds will turn into eternity . . . "

Alan remembered the feeling of timelessness as he lay submerged in the strange initiatory pool filled with Hali's waters. When he had surfaced, consciousness and self-awareness returning to him with stinging force, Cali had asked him how long he thought he was under. He had lost all sense of time, garbled that it had been a few seconds, and she had simply smiled. Had he actually been under for minutes? Hours? More? A shiver passed down his spine.

"There's no way to avoid the water?" Alan asked.

LeBarron shook his head.

"It is shallow. You should be able to endure. It will not be pleasant, but better than trying to swim. Besides, if the lake's waters do not destroy you, the sharks will."

"Sharks? I . . . I did not expect that."

"Sharks are older than the rings of Saturn," Petruccio said absently.

"Saturn is long way from here, my friend," LeBarron replied. "And besides: Carcosa is older than both." LeBarron coughed, violent and hacking, putting a hand to his lips. A disturbing wetness lay beneath. When he pulled his hand away, there was blood coating his fingers and palm.

"Mind that does not drip into the lake," Petruccio said, his voice stern as iron.

LeBarron nodded. He moved away from the shoreline and found a hali-tree. He wiped until his hands were relatively clean.

Alan felt his heart plummet. He had hoped LeBarron's fears about the mortal nature of his injury were unfounded, but it seemed the poisoned Pe'karian blade was still taking its toll. Alan had done his best to patch him up, and perhaps he had given him more life than he would have had otherwise—that was the small comfort he could take from the situation.

Despite LeBarron and Cali's liaison, which at the time had wounded Alan deeply, he found it hard to hold LeBarron responsible or blame him. No malice had been intended. LeBarron had merely seized opportunity for pleasure. And when the crisis had come, LeBarron had stood by Alan. He was more solid and reliable than he pretended to be.

"Art thou *sure* this is the best course?" Cassilda said.

LeBarron nodded, somewhat solemnly.

"Alar will be safe. Even if Cali guesses where we have gone, Carcosa will not be able to marshal against the city in a hurry, given its natural defences."

Cassilda bit her lip. She had expressed doubts about Alar from the very first, and Alan wondered if she knew something they did not.

"Cassilda, if there is a problem with our plan, then don't hide it. We don't want to be walking into a trap. Especially not in our current conditions."

Cassilda glanced sideways at Alan, then relented.

"We have long had good trade with the city of Alar, but a few years ago our emissaries went missing there. We would have investigated, but the war with Pe'kar came to our very walls. As such, I do not know of anything explicitly, only a sense of a foreboding."

"All is well in Alar, I can assure you," LeBarron said. "In fact, I visited there not long before I first met you all. As you know, I travelled far and wide, even to the lands of Blue Light, to perform my masterpiece: *The Monologues of Mananganggal*. I played to an audience of thousands in the amphitheatre of Alar mere weeks before taking to the stage in Carcosa for our matinee of *The King In Yellow*."

"Very well. If that is the case, then something else must have waylaid our emissaries," Cassilda said. "Perhaps it was Pe'kar's armies? Their scouts might have captured them in order to discover intelligence . . . Yes, that seems more likely."

"Excellent!" LeBarron crowed. "Then let us set off. Step where I step and nowhere else!"

"Wait." Petruccio's eyes had narrowed. Alan knew that paranoid look well, for he had often seen it staring back at him from the mirror. "Moments ago, you said that it had been a long time since you last visited Alar. Now you say it was mere weeks ago?"

LeBarron missed no beat.

"Do the weeks not feel like years to you?"

Petruccio paused for a moment, uncertain what lay behind LeBarron's sparkling eyes, then nodded. Alan did not blame Petruccio for his caution or suspicion. He had been betrayed so deeply it was a wonder he could tolerate anyone's company again.

"And you are sure you heard rumour of the pigment?" Petruccio added.

LeBarron nodded.

"Certain. What better place to hide it than under a lake of forgetfulness? Come, friends. Alar awaits!"

CHAPTER 3
THE ONE WHO CRAVES

THE DOORS OF the Six Ringed City were thrown open, and out of them rode a single rider. What remained of him burned with an all-consuming fire that would know no satiation until he completed his quest. Like a fell star, this desire guided him, unwavering, awful in its clarity and brightness.

The armies of Pe'kar had already marched out before him, a smokescreen of sorts. Scouts would no doubt return to Carcosa bearing news of the approaching army, but the lone rider would go unnoticed.

He wore armour of midnight blue, fashioned from ore dredged from the bottom of Lake Hali. At his belt was a sword coated in Pe'kar's bile and gifted with lamprey serrations. It was known as *Hope's Devourer* and said to have been made by Pe'kar himself in the fires of a dying planet's core. A black cloak shrouded him, bearing sigils of weapon-deflection upon it, so no arrow might find its mark in the rider's flesh.

His steed was a monstrous gorgonopsid, a thing both catlike and reptilian, resembling the terrifying offspring of a wingless dragon and a sabre-tooth tiger. Gorgonopsids were a favoured creature of Pe'kar, plentiful in his kingdom, but the one that had been gifted to the rider was perhaps the apex of his race, a monstrous alpha with cunning eyes and a smile that spoke of more than animal intelligence.

The most precious gift the rider possessed was attached to the severed stump that once terminated his right arm: a hand of mechanical wonder, a metal simulacrum of that which he had willingly given up, long ago.

It was not enough. Nothing ever was. For eons he had been

tortured in the bowels of Pe'kar's darkest dungeons, but the pain inflicted upon his body, mind, and spirit had not been equal to the pain of withdrawal. *The Claw, The Claw, The Claw*. That was all he could think of, all he could imagine, all he could yearn for. He cared nothing for his life, nor for whom he served, only to possess it again, only to feel its power, only to be whole once more.

This new metal hand attached to his cauterised stump was but a poor imitation, a hackneyed magician's trick. He craved the *real* Claw, the Claw that could rend worlds, obliterate armies, that made mortal man equal to god. He had given up The Claw—for some foolish reason he could no longer remember. He cursed himself every moment that he wasn't thinking about getting The Claw back.

In the end, Pe'kar had relented in his tortures, for the once-prisoner had taken to torturing himself, lacerating his flesh with nail and hook and teeth, tearing away great swathes of skin and muscle and sinew, gnawing bones like a masochistic hyena. The only part of himself he would not desecrate were his eyes, for otherwise how would he once again behold the object of his desire?

The mutilations he had performed upon himself should have killed him—indeed, they had. But Pe'kar had clad his body in this armour, and now he found life once again. There was no pain, anymore. Only the craving remained. His hollow vessel knew only the burning need to be reunited with his true soul. That desire, matched by a will to achieve his aim, was all that animated the ravaged corpse that had once been Haercus, Right Hand of the Yellow King.

With a swiftness and hunger that knew nothing of sleep, the rider crossed the Dreaming Desert, drawn by the siren song of the talisman that was rightfully his . . .

CHAPTER 4
XANTHIMUMS

THE ACTOR LED the way. From a distance, it seemed he walked on water, but Alan could now see, with active concentration, the rocky formation just below the water that formed a hidden pathway over the lake. Alan's heart pounded in his chest as he lined up behind Petruccio and Cassilda.

If the cold of Hali's water affected LeBarron or Petruccio, they gave no sign. LeBarron hopped and leapt lightly, like a ballet dancer on point. Petruccio trudged, but his every step was sure and stable. Cassilda winced once as her delicate feet were swallowed by the black waters, but from then on, she traced the path smoothly and easily. Alan was already beginning to forget LeBarron's early moves. He hurried forward, conscious of not falling behind, but also terrified of experiencing that bitter cold once again.

The first step was an icicle through the sole of his foot. His leathern shoes did nothing to stop the cold for even a moment. He withdrew his foot sharply and nearly toppled sideways into the shallows. The Claw was weighty, and as he flailed his arms for balance, he realised he would have to adjust to being slightly one-sided from now on. Cassilda wheeled about and caught him by the forearm, saving him from humiliation.

"Careful," she said, then she turned back and raced after the others, seeming to skip over the surface of the water like a smooth stone.

Alan cursed, returning his foot to the shore. *Let's try again.*

This time he forced his foot downward quickly, forgoing his tentative approach. Again the icicle stabbed through his sole, instantly numbing his ankle and shin, but he forced his other foot forward, and soon had a steady rhythm. He would normally close

his eyes to try and ignore the pain, but when he did, he found his balance wavering, and in places the secret reef LeBarron had discovered was narrow. Alan breathed deeply, but somehow rather than soothing his nerves it only seemed that he was inhaling the cold, drawing it into him.

He staggered onwards. Now there were no shallows to catch him if he fell. Blackness deeper than that of space fell away to sightless depths either side of their strange pathway. The xanthimums seemed an insurmountable distance away, miles upon miles. Alan was not sure how much more of the cold he could endure. There was no respite, no protrusion of rock jutting above the waves that he could rest and warm his feet on. The cold had made its way into his bones, into the depth of his being. Reality seemed dimmer somehow. The light of the twin suns could not reach him.

Once or twice, out of the corner of his eye, he caught sight of a flashing, finned thing in the waters, and had to swallow down a bolus of dread.

"Not too much farther," LeBarron called back. "The next bit is tricky, however. Very narrow. Grip the path like a monkey!"

Balancing like a tight-rope walker, LeBarron walked across the invisible obstacle and then alighted on what seemed more certain ground. The flowers now loomed larger. Indeed, Alan's impression that they were the size of elephants had been skewed by perspective and distance. In truth, some of them were as large as small houses. Their colours were an eyesore, yet garishly beautiful. The yellow petals were marked with small black spots, a kind of distinguishing feature, for no two patterns of spots were the same. The huge stigmas protruding from the mouths of the flowers were unmistakable phallic and crusted with urine-yellow pollen, the granules as large as hand-fruits.

Alan approached the narrow path LeBarron warned him of. He gulped, swallowing down another wave of nausea and fear. He was no stranger to discomfort or facing his terrors, but one phobia he had never had much need to confront was heights. The lake's dark waters created the illusion that he was, in fact, stood upon a precipice with an abyss falling away either side.

In all the dangerous and occult situations Alan had survived, he'd felt some degree of agency: if he was tied up, he could struggle; if he was locked in a room, he could plot his escape; if he was

attacked, he could run as fast as his legs could carry him or fight tooth and nail. But falling . . . Nothing could save you from that.

It's not falling. That's water around you. He could swim, so theoretically there was nothing to fear. But how often did theory hold up against reality? In Alan's experience, reality was too strange for theory to comprehend. *I doubt you could swim in these waters for long anyway* . . . He could barely stand straight now, due to the cold, and had lost all feeling below the knee. It was a miracle his toes still knew how to grip the rock through his leather soles.

Slowly, take it slowly.

He placed one foot on the ledge. It could not support his entire foot, and so he really did have to grip it, monkey-like, slightly off to one side. His heart pounded in his chest. He tried not to let the image of fish-forms in the deep flash through his mind. He inched his second foot forward. Balancing on the ledge was infinitely more difficult when one could not feel one's feet. He breathed in and out, trying to smooth out his breath, but only succeeding in ragged suctions and expulsions.

He stumbled, almost slipped. Then he raced forward. *Yes, get it over with quickly.*

Momentum only carried him so far. He slipped.

For a second he plummeted and felt a scream building in his throat. The scream was released as he felt impact, his thigh coming down hard upon the rocky formation below the water's surface.

"Alan!" Cassilda cried.

He now straddled the rock formation, submerged to the hip in the freezing waters. Though he felt a kind of tidal-wave exhaustion overcoming his senses, he had not completely fallen in. A grin split his features and he could have whooped were he not being dragged under by the cold.

"Hold on, Alan!" Cassilda cried.

"Get up!" Petruccio barked. "Now, Alan! Stand!"

Alan gripped the formation with his good hand and pushed himself upright. The others cheered—though their cheers seemed to die as soon as they were born.

Alan looked down. He hadn't felt it, due to the numbing waters, but the rocks had gashed his left thigh. He wore only robes—which were now sodden through—and they had done little to protect his bare flesh from the sharp rock.

Blood oozed down his leg into the waters below.

"Run!" LeBarron hissed.

Alan had—albeit clumsily—made it across the narrow sliver, and here the formation widened, allowing him a level plateau to sprint across. The waters of Hali, usually so placid and immune to the wind's ferocity, undulated, their waves disturbed by more than quixotic tides.

The others were a good deal farther ahead, at the foot of one of the largest xanthimums. Alan did not know if whatever lived below the lake's surface would brave the rock and open air, but he did not want to find out. He ran as fast as his deadened feet and bleeding leg would allow.

The water beside him churned, foamed, and rippled. A disgusting mouth emerged—all teeth, rotten breathed, and with a black maw that spoke of abandoned hope. Its face was hobgoblin, not like the sleek great white sharks he was familiar with from television. A needle-toothed mouth protruded under a bulbous snout. He managed to get past it, but more were coming. Then, with a *gushing* sound, a shark emerged fully from the water. Nine meters long at least, it surged toward Alan, its mindless eyes rolling with anticipation of satiated bloodlust.

Instinctively Alan raised his right hand. In a past life, the gesture would have been useless, but now a bright light gathered in the palm of his hand and surged, a blast of yellow energy. A rumble of thunder crackled, echoing across the vast lake, as a beam of lightning struck the shark. Its flesh peeled away in ribbons, its black eyes burned in their sockets, and it dived back into the waters, scarred and cowed.

Alan fled, running towards his companions. Any moment he expected another to rise from the deep, but it seemed they had forgotten their hunger, or perhaps in their own alien way sensed the danger of their quarry.

Panting, Alan joined the others. Petruccio clapped him on the forearm. Cassilda stroked his shoulder. LeBarron nodded approvingly. Alan did not know why, but he somehow felt safer under the shadow of the xanthimums.

"You did well," LeBarron said. "It is not an easy road."

"It is a wonder Alar has any visitors at all!" Alan said.

"Most reach Alar via the submersibles built by the underwater folk," LeBarron said. "But given the war, it is unlikely any are being sent to the surface. We're almost there, Alan! Have faith!"

LeBarron turned and led the way towards the xanthimums. Stopping before a particularly large specimen, maybe the size of a three-storey building, LeBarron began to climb up one of the petals lolling down from the central blossom like a fat yellow tongue.

"Up! Follow me!" LeBarron cried. He sounded almost hysterically jovial. Alan was grimly reminded of Cali's mounting excitement as they had approached the heart of the maze—in hindsight, it seemed obvious she possessed an ulterior motive, but of course, hindsight was always clearer.

This was Alan's first experience climbing with The Claw. He'd thought it would be a hindrance but found instead it was a boon. The talons hooked deeply into the flesh of the flower-petal, allowing him a more secure hold. He hoped that hooking the Claw into the flower's tissue to hoist himself up didn't hurt the xanthimum. A strange thought, perhaps, but in Carcosa he supposed pretty much anything was possible—a plant might well have feelings. His left hand found the surface of the petal to be softly furred, which afforded him another handhold.

The higher he climbed, the more his olfactory senses were overwhelmed by the flower's scent. He hadn't been aware of the smell on ground level. But indeed, what he had mistaken for Carcosa's unique taste emanated from these giant flowers. Now, so close to the heart of the flowerhead, the smell struck him with force; it had no parallel in Earth, though it was most like a sacred pyre.

He sneezed involuntarily. After climbing a few feet higher he sneezed again and his eyes began to water. Had he not possessed The Claw, which grappled sloth-like to the petal, he would have lost his grip and plummeted to his death.

Where the petal joined the central pistil, it became level, allowing them to stand. LeBarron, having already made it to the top, grabbed Alan's left wrist and hauled him over the lip onto firm ground. The actor grinned ear to ear.

"The next bit is fun," LeBarron said. "Though I was terrified the first time I did it."

Soon they were joined by Cassilda, and lastly Petruccio, who though incredibly strong had experienced a much harder climb due to his short legs. Drenched in sweat that gleamed more brightly than oil, he poked his head over the lip of the folded petal, his breathing corpse-ragged. The trio all gripped him and pulled him up to safety.

"Well done," Alan said.

Petruccio sneered and waved his hand. He wasn't in the mood for false praise.

Standing close to the inner workings on the xanthimums felt somehow wrong to Alan, perhaps because the flowerhead was unmistakeably sexual. The pistil jutted phallically out of the flowerhead, yet its tip possessed an opening that was also like a puckered orifice, five feet wide, large enough to swallow them. A viscous goo dripped from the opening. The stigma was similarly phallic and weighed down by pungent pollen. The centre of the petal's corolla was a vaginal unfurling.

"I begin to think thou art mad, LeBarron," Cassilda said. "It is a fate shared by many followers of The Stranger."

The actor grinned.

"It is a good thing, then, that I am no mere follower, but The Stranger himself!"

Cassilda's gaze hardened.

"Were that true, I would have to kill thee."

LeBarron did not take back his statement, but merely looked sadly upon her.

"Great are the sins of those who know not themselves."

"Do not quote thy play to me!" Cassilda hissed.

"Where next, LeBarron?" Petruccio said, looking from one to the other and clearly trying to move the conversation along.

"This is our entrance to Alar." LeBarron pointed dramatically at the gooey opening in the pistil. Beyond the mouth lay absolute blackness.

"What?" Alan felt queasy merely looking at the hole.

"We go in here," LeBarron said. "It looks dangerous, but it's perfectly safe."

"I don't understand."

"I do," Petruccio said, his eyes widened. "These stalks run all the way down to the bottom of the lake. Is that what you're saying?"

LeBarron grinned.

"Yes! We slide down them, right into the Merchant District of the city, if memory serves. They are used as a secret and expedited trade route, especially in times of war."

"But what if something damaged the stalks?" Alan said. "Like the sharks. Wouldn't we then be sliding down into a watery grave?"

"Well, yes . . . " LeBarron said, as though the suggestion were

mildly annoying. “But that is a very pessimistic view. The flowers are strong. They have bloomed here longer than Carcosa and Alar have existed. Legends say the King In Yellow tended to them at the very beginning of the black planet. It is through these flowers that air reaches the lower city. They are the lifeline of an entire civilisation. I doubt highly that they are easily compromised.”

Alan looked again at the black opening. He tried to visualise it like a slide in a waterpark and all the childish fun that implied, but it was impossible. The orifice grinned like death. What kind of madman would willingly catapult himself into the flower’s maw just to see where it ended up?

He’s standing right in front of you, Alan thought wryly.

“Friends, I have done this many times.” LeBarron turned and—just like the water slide Alan had been trying to visualise moments ago—placed both his hands on the upper rim of the pistil’s mouth and planted his feet in the sloshing ooze. “It reeks like an old cloak, but really, it’s very safe. I’ll see you all in Alar! Here I exit the stage!”

“Wait!” Alan cried.

But it was too late, LeBarron launched himself forward into the pistil’s mouth, disappearing from view instantly. He even made a *weeeeeeeee* sound like a happy child as he descended into the fathomless tube.

The three stood, jaws agape. It took some time for them to recover.

“He stood up for me,” Petruccio said, quietly. “So I will stand up for him. Besides, what do I have to lose? Either I find the pigment, or my life is worthless . . . ”

The dwarf clambered onto the pistil, sat down, and sedately pushed himself forward. Though there was no flowing water as with a pool slide, the ooze acted as a lubricant. Petruccio was gone in seconds.

Cassilda and Alan’s eyes met.

“I never thought I would follow an emissary of The Stranger into the unknown,” she said. “But I suppose that the world has been turned upside down. You’ve changed things, Alan.”

As with the night they kissed under the black star, hearing her drop her formal mode of speech sent a thrill through him. But that thrill was matched by sadness to think he was the cause of much woe.

"It's not me . . . "

"Oh?" She raised one eyebrow. "What other factor is there? You are what is new in Carcosa, Alan Chambers. For eons things were the same. And a few weeks after you arrive, everything is changed. Cali was right about me, you know. I have spent much of my life resisting change, trapped in my misery and my past . . . " She indicated her bloodied bridal dress. "But for the first time I see a change that I like, a change that may indeed bring good. So, I'll follow you into the darkness . . . "

There was silence for a while. He wanted to kiss her again but feared overstepping.

"Cassilda . . . you just gave a speech. I thought you hated them?"

The princess blushed.

"Like I said, many things are changing."

Alan extended his good hand.

"Let's go together," he whispered.

She smiled and nodded, a sunbeam on his heart.

They both stepped up into the mouth of the pistil. Alan sat in front, Cassilda behind. She wrapped her arms about him. His heart pounded in his chest. He could feel hers against his back, so closely did she hold him. Taking a breath thick with fetid, damp air, he pushed forward.

Together, they slid into the abyss.

CHAPTER 5
THEY COME

CALI LAY DREAMING of burning cities; she awoke to the sound of alarm bells. Her body and mind still ached from the King's punishment. Her thoughts were flurried and nonsensical, a stream of images that lacked context or narrative. Her dream had been potent, and she found it hard to push away the image of Carcosa on fire, her dancing over its ashen ruins, a blood-slicked grin spreading across her features.

The bells clanged with rancid fervour. Her head felt like it would split with pain and frustration. She heard her teeth creaking as she gritted them hard. Something was wrong, but she could barely stand, let alone attend to some new obstacle in her path.

She thought her father would kill her. Indeed, she had been closer to death than at any previous moment in her life. At the last second, he had relented, leaving her twitching upon the floor, gargling in the filth spawned in her lungs, unable to form words or even thoughts.

It sickened her to think that Eric, that simpering motley courtier who so adored her sister, had been the one to carry her to bed, that he had seen her so weak, so humiliated. She would now have to endure his pitying looks and the ridicule of the court every time she walked through the palace. She could have spat in disgust if she had the energy.

The bells continued their incessant, disharmonious tolling. What could possibly warrant such a clamour? The city was always noisy, but this bordered upon hysteria. *They celebrate your father's awakening,* she thought, with bilious distaste. *That is all. The bells chime for Him.*

One day they would chime for her. One day the whole city

would kneel before her. Instead of a cruel god, they would have a glorious queen. Instead of a hypocritical monster, they would worship an eternal beauty. And more than that, with her double birth-right, bearing the royal blood of demon and Carcosan, she could unite the black planet, end the war with Pe'kar . . . *But first, you must overthrow Him.* Her father had to die. To even think such a thought was to risk calamity, but weakened as she was, she could not suppress it.

Her body burned red hot. Her skin felt as though it might bubble and melt. *No* . . . All the rage she had magically cast out was now returning—tenfold. That was the price she had to pay. She tried to stand, to walk towards the basin that served as a toilet in the corner of her room, but instead she collapsed onto the floor, weak-kneed, and spewed her guts. A whimper left her lips with the agony of regurgitation, and her whole body convulsed, as though sickened by itself. *This is what your anger does to you, Cali. It twists and contorts your innards. Now you feel it truly. If you are to succeed, you must move beyond rage.*

Her thoughts were cut off by more heaving. Her throat burned, scoured by her own stomach acid. She wept as she convulsed. Hatred ate away all her thoughts and left a burning coal in their place, making her brain feel as though it were succumbing to fever.

When it was finally over, a kind of peace descended over her, broken only by the clangour of the churches. She lay in a puddle of her vomit and stomach acid, shivering, spent.

You will prevail . . . You will prevail . . .

Slowly strength returned to her. She managed to stand; her muscles uncertain of their operations. She grabbed a robe and tied it about her. She staggered her way to the royal bathhouses. There were a few female courtiers bathing in a warm pool, but when they saw Cali, they climbed out of the pool, bowed respectfully, and left. Cali wondered what they would say once well beyond earshot. She must look a state: dishevelled hair, sick-stains on her face and throat, her eyes lustreless, her movements feeble. She hung her robe upon a peg and slid into the warm waters. Immediately, she felt life kissed back into her limbs. Her scars ached—she knew they would continue to do so until she killed Alan. They were a reminder of her failure, of her blindness.

She slid beneath the waters, closing her eyes, fully submerging. She allowed the warmth of the thermal baths to cocoon her. Cali

did not often think about her mother (her true mother, that was, not the hideously self-righteous Camilla), for asking questions about her had been forbidden, but now she wondered if her mother's womb had been this warm, this gentle, this comforting. Did demons love? It seemed a ridiculous question, yet given the life she had known, she had to wonder. She supposed her father *was* capable of love, He had merely chosen not to love her.

The anger began to surface again, the temperature of the pool rising. *Control it, Cali. Control.* She'd become sloppy with her mental discipline the last few decades, possessed by the idea of creating a champion, of changing Carcosa, of fulfilling her destiny. Her daily practices had slipped, and she'd lost some of her magical prowess as a result. *I could have beaten him . . .* She held the strength within her. But Alan had taken her by surprise. And the problem was he had barely unleashed half of The Claw's true potential. He was inexperienced, learning, but soon he would begin to master it. The longer Cali left Alan alive, the more dangerous he would become. If he discovered his true name, and unlocked The Claw's full power, she would not be able to stop him. No one would. It was only Haercus' love of her father that had stopped him becoming lord of not just Carcosa but the black planet.

She surfaced from the water, gulping air even though she would normally be able to hold her breath much longer. She swam from one end of the pool to another, kicking the water harder than she needed to. She felt a burning desire to act. To do. But as she reached the other side of the pool she realised it was in *acting* that she had caused her ruin. She'd tried to seize control of the universe, of fate, and paid the price. *You have to wait, to see what happens. An answer will come. Resist the urge to control.*

She rested her arms upon the tiled side of the pool, closing her eyes, planting her chin upon her forearms. She breathed deeply and tried to centre herself. There were so many things that needed doing: she needed to fashion a new instrument, though the materials were in short supply; she needed to figure out her next move in terms of stopping Alan; and finally, she needed to work out a way to reposition herself in the eyes of the court.

She let out a long breath. *Blow them away, Cali. There is only here and now.*

Within a few minutes, her thoughts calmed, the waters of the pool likewise stilling after her thrashing kicks.

She climbed out of the pool, donned her robe, and returned to her room. After drying, she picked out a dress she had fashioned from a waterfall of gold in the deep east. It shimmered as she moved and clung to the contours of her body. Her scars also matched the dress's gilt hue, making it seem as though it were a tentacled being that had embraced her, its limbs creeping up her neck and down her legs. Upon her fingers she placed rings studded with stones from the Cave of Wonders in the depths of Demhe's dreaming expanse. She placed an anklet around her right calf, a living serpent biting its own tail, its scales aurelian. Lastly, she painted a yellow *bindi* upon her brow, where the third eye sits.

She strode out of the palace via a special gate—known as The Groom's Exit for how it was rumoured to have been used the night The Stranger ravaged Cassilda and left the palace—that led onto the high walls of Carcosa. The gate was perhaps the most heavily defended of all the posterns in Carcosa; it abutted the northern wall of the city, and if breached would allow an enemy into the inner sanctum of the palace. More than two hundred soldiers stood sentinel upon its battlements. Many were armed with gigantic bows that could kill at five hundred paces. The men on the ground wore the familiar insectoid armour of the Carcosan military, bearing spears that gleamed cruelly. Cauldrons stood ready to be poured on attackers below, filled with dreadful acids. The men here had been handpicked by Carcosa's lord for their unwavering loyalty and insane courage. They would not withdraw from the gate no matter the odds. They would clog the corridor with their bodies if need be.

Gaining the walls of Carcosa, Cali looked out northward over the vast expanse of Hali. Beyond that, Yhtill lay shrouded in fog. She could never again look at those lands without a lump of anger and shame rising in her throat.

Foul winds blew scents of decay to her nostrils—no doubt the corpse-piles heaped against the city's walls. The clamour of the bells continued to nurture her blossoming migraine. She hated and loved the city. Its banners fluttered brightly in the fetid winds, its mycelial architecture rose to daunting, obscene heights, and its streets throbbed with ant-like activity. Many times she had considered simply abandoning the city altogether. Her father would not miss her. She could go wherever she wanted on the black planet, forge a new fate . . . But the city drew her back, as it had

drawn millions of outcasts over the eons, moths to its cosmic flame. She would either become the ruler of Carcosa or die trying. There was no other destiny for her.

She sighed. Though the sky was clear, thunder rumbled. She frowned. Had she seen a brief flash of light across Hali's waters?

Alan. The thought came with an injection of venom in her bloodstream. She walked slowly to the edge of the battlements, peering out across the distance to the lake. She knew it in her heart. *Alan*. He was near Hali, only a few miles from the city.

She gripped the stone crenulations as though she would break them. She wanted to order an attack, ride out of the city herself, hunt him down and take his head from his shoulders. But she knew it was folly. He was heading to the underwater city of Alar, and there was no way that she could reach them before they entered. *You have to wait, Cali*. They could not hide there forever. *Stop trying to seize control.*

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply the rotten scent of the city. She allowed her revulsion, disgust, and anger to wash over her—they were merely clouds and she was the sky. *Centre, focus, breathe*. All would be as destiny intended. She was the child of Fate. She was the Universe, blackly dancing, utterly free . . .

"Princess Cali!"

Her eyes snapped open, and she saw a soldier running along the wall towards her. She vaguely recognised the guard as a captain who usually manned Carcosa's main westward-facing gate. He shared the same onyx flesh as Cali—a birthright of demons, rare in Carcosa. Their kinship had caused Cali to enjoy him as a bedfellow for a time, but soldiers proved boring lovers, too regimented to embrace more spontaneous and creative acts of pleasure. Still, it seemed his loyalty to her was assured, for he knelt as though she were Queen Camilla.

Cali smiled.

"Speak your message quickly, Roland."

The warrior rose. Perhaps it was simply that she felt the need for pleasurable release after the pain of torture and the hardship of failure, but Roland looked magnificent, thick carapace armour augmenting his already brawny frame, his glowering eyes shining from underneath the sloped helm of the eurypterid's chitin skull, his spear gleaming and polished.

"Princess, our scouts have returned from Demhe. Pe'kar's

armies have been seen approaching from the West. The alarm bells ring in preparation for war."

Cali almost laughed then. How ironic, she had thought the bells were celebratory. No wonder they tolled so harshly. The city was readying itself for another attack.

"How far? And how many?"

"It will be weeks before they reach here. It is a vast force. Gorgonopsid cavalry. Tens of thousands of infantry. And, according to one scout, the Siege Ender."

Cali turned away from Roland so as best to conceal her conflicting thoughts and feelings. Clearly, Pe'kar had decided to abandon their plan and make his own plays. Perhaps word had reached him of the Claw's recovery—though how, she was not sure—and he had deemed her a failure. This was not good, for now she had two enemies rather than one.

On the other hand, perhaps the universe had handed her the boon she had been waiting for? Pe'kar's armies could easily overrun Carcosa in its current state. If Pe'kar had dispatched his gorgonopsid calvary and the Siege Ender, his attack was in earnest.

Pe'kar would defeat the King In Yellow's forces. With the soldiers and guards defending the city walls, the King would be more vulnerable. That would be her moment to remove one of her enemies. She could deal with Pe'kar later . . . Yes, this was no curse, but a blessing. And what's more, if she elected to take charge of Carcosa's armies, she might well make it easier for Pe'kar to gain the upper hand.

Concealing her smile in the darkest chasm of her heart, she turned.

"This is grave news indeed."

Roland inclined his head.

She saw something in his eyes, a flickering doubt.

"Tell me, Roland, how does it feel to fight against your own kin?"

"My kin?" he growled. "The Pe'karians are not my kin. They mutilate themselves to ape the form of true demons, but we share no blood."

"But they serve Pe'kar," Cali said, innocently. "And he is the Demon King."

"I was raised in Carcosa, lifted up by Hastur, the King In Yellow," Roland growled. "My loyalty is not in question."

Cali smiled.

"You did not add praise to His name, Roland. *Deathless be He . . .* "

Roland's eyes burned.

"Fear not, I do not question your loyalty. You and I share a bond of heritage, and whatever rank we hold, we will always be outcasts in this city. But your strength of conviction is admirable. If only more warriors had your purity of heart. How can a warrior fight if their mind is clouded, after all."

"You are wise, Princess Cali." Roland bowed.

Indeed, Cali thought. With those words she'd unwittingly resolved her own conundrum. She had not lost to Alan because of the element of surprise, she had lost because her heart had been riven with conflict. There was something about Alan, something inexplicable: she was drawn to him, even now. A wretch, a pervert, a man of desperation and selfishness, and yet . . .

She needed to purify her spirit, to gain clarity, focus. She would not make the same mistake again. Next time, she would kill without hesitation.

"I will approach my father and ask His permission to take control of the city's defences. It will be my chance to redeem myself for past mistakes . . . " She let the bitterness and irony of those words sit on her tongue for a moment. She had learned to enjoy even the unsavoury flavours of life. "But for now, I have a task for you, Roland."

The warrior's eyes met hers. She saw desire burning there: desire to serve and desire to conquer, desires that at once reinforced one another and conflicted. She had seen it time and time again in the men she wrapped about her fingers.

She approached Roland and put a hand on his chest-plate.

"If war is coming . . . " she said, softly. "Then we should enjoy what we can, while we can."

"I have . . . duties . . . " Roland said, voice hoarse with restraint.

"Your duty is to me," she whispered. "Unless you are not the man you once were?"

The appeal to his pride cut through his resistance and he placed his lips upon hers. It was a crude and brash kiss, like the affectionate tongue-licks of a dog, but she did not care. She would have her way with him, take him to heights of pleasure he had never known, and then, when he was but a husk hollowed out of will, she would puppet him to meet her dark designs.

CHAPTER 6
THE SILENT CITY

THE JOURNEY DOWN the xanthimum's stem might have exhilarated Alan as a child, but as a grown man all he could picture was disaster ahead. He imagined the two of them suddenly plunging into deep water from which they could not escape. He visualised the tube ending, blocked by rubble, the pair becoming trapped and unable to climb out due to the slimed walls, dying of starvation in a claustrophobic funnel. A thousand other ways to die flashed before his mind's eye. Only Cassilda's tight embrace kept him from losing his wits.

They hurtled in perfect blackness towards an unknown destination. Alan considered that this was perhaps even more reckless than seeking Carcosa in the first place. What madness had driven him to agree to this plan? Were LeBarron's handsomeness and charisma so great that Alan would blindly follow him to his death? He had been deceived by false beauty once with Cali. He vowed never again.

Down, down, down.

Alan was not of an anxious disposition, yet he felt his chest tightening with every second ticking by, his heart racing as though he might be about to have a panic attack.

Terror, however, has an expiration. The body cannot sustain it. And after what felt like hours slipping down the slick funnel, Alan realised he had neither fear nor exhilaration left in him, only a kind of alert boredom that threatened to tip over into fatal exhaustion. His eyes hurt from peering into the darkness with such intensity.

"Do you want me to make a light?" Cassilda whispered, seeming to sense his thoughts.

"No," Alan replied. "I don't think there will be much to see, anyway."

The stem descended everlastingly despite the steepness of its slope. His arse was sore, even with the lubricating goo of the plant's innards. His lungs felt clogged by the thick, cloistered air. If Cassilda suffered similarly, she gave no indication. Her breathing was eerily soft and regular. He supposed that with her magic she had less to fear than he.

When the journey was finally over, he could scarcely believe it, letting out a whoop of joy that felt like it belonged in a corny Hollywood movie. They emerged into hazy light, shooting out from a splayed opening in the xanthimum stem into a round, glittering room. Their landing was soft—on a bed of white roots. The roots also curled around the edges of the room. The walls were formed from glass panes set into a crystalline substance, allowing a view of the lake's bed. To Alan's surprise, it was not pitch black down here. Varieties of neon-bright coral, seaweed that sparkled like faerie lights, and fish that he had never seen before—many of them sporting flashing lures—illuminated both the lake's bed and the interior of the room. No doubt Petruccio would have a field day documenting the multiplicity of species on the other side of the glass. Alan suspected it would be a lifetime's work to categorise and name them all. He wondered if his lifespan would extend as a result of coming to these strange lands. He had so much yet to learn.

Petruccio and LeBarron both waited off to one side. LeBarron reclined in a nest of roots, and Petruccio—as Alan predicted—stared out the glass, sketching in his notebook.

"So the two of you held your nerve?" LeBarron asked happily, getting to his feet. "Good, good."

Alan and Cassilda likewise stood, the two catching each other's eye a little awkwardly. Both were now covered in the strange ooze that lubricated the inside of the xanthimum. The smell was odiously rich, like wet compost warmed in the sun. The one thing Alan *did* miss from Earth were warm showers. In fact, even a cold one would not go amiss at this stage.

"I assume there is another way to the surface?" Alan said, realising that one could not readily travel back *up* the slide.

"Yes," LeBarron said. "There are a few. But this will be a safe place for us to lie low for a while, until we come up with a plan."

Alan nodded. Something was off, however. At first, he could

not determine what it was. But then, listening closely, he realised it was an *absence* triggering his paranoia.

"It's quiet," he said, at last. "I thought you said this was a city? I can't hear a thing."

LeBarron frowned and cocked his head.

"Now that you mention it, it *is* quiet. Especially for the Merchant District . . . "

There was no one to greet them, nor any sound of commotion issuing from the single corridor leading away from their room. No voices, no carts rumbling—nothing. It was as though every soul in Alar had sworn a vow of silence.

"LeBarron, if thou hast deceived us . . . " Lightning flickered in Cassilda's eyes, her skin beginning to glow luminously.

"I am as confused as you!" LeBarron held up his hands.

"But you are also a good actor . . . " Alan could not deny he felt suspicious. LeBarron had been overly eager to persuade them to come here. Had they fallen for the same trap as with Cali all over again? Alan felt a tingling in the palm of his right hand, a hand that was no longer a hand but a weapon of mass destruction. What would happen if he used The Claw here? Would it shatter the glass walls of the city and drown them all?

"I can wear another's skin, speak with their voice, but the *feelings* are always true," LeBarron said, backing away. "I would not lie to my only friends in the world! Can you imagine how false my fellow mummers are? How many years I have endured their pretences? With you I have tasted something real! I would not throw that away!"

"We shall see . . . " Cassilda softened, the light dimming until her flesh was pale but no longer glowing. "For now, we shall go forward on the basis of trust. But if thou hast crossed me, I'll do unto thee what I should have done to thy master!"

LeBarron bowed in gratitude. He looked shaken, perhaps even tearful. If he was acting, it was a convincing performance. Then again, Alan had seen him utterly transform, even remoulding his face into new shapes. Such performances caused Alan to wonder whether LeBarron really *was* The Stranger incarnate—a ghost of the many-faced darkness—in which case it called into question their friendship. If what Cassilda had told him was true, The Stranger had raped her, an unforgiveable, unpardonable sin.

Cassilda, however, seemed to view LeBarron as merely a

deluded follower of The Stranger. She mistrusted him, saw his beliefs as misguided, but she did not judge him as the sinner himself. It was similar to the way Alan hated certain Presidents and Prime Ministers but did not necessarily extend that hatred to their voters—for to do so would be to write off millions without ever having given them a chance to explain or prove themselves.

But if LeBarron turned out to be the true Stranger, not only would Alan disavow LeBarron's friendship—he would be forced to turn The Claw upon him.

It occurred to Alan that one test of LeBarron's true nature would come very shortly. If he really was The Stranger, then surely he would not die from his wound. If The Stranger was a god, then surely mere poison couldn't kill him, however potent.

Alan had believed LeBarron might die when he was first stabbed in Yhtill, and had done everything in his power to prevent his death, including a blood transfusion, but he wondered now if he had stood back, allowed things to take their course, he might have witnessed LeBarron's transformation. Would The Stranger have been forced to show his true face if his vessel began to fail? Alan knew too little about Carcosa and its gods to answer these questions.

As complicated as the situation was, Alan did not want to lose LeBarron. His charm was infectious—of course, that was also what was so dangerous about him.

Petruccio, having heard the minor altercation, pocketed his notebook and tore his eyes away from the gleaming fish-forms dancing upon the lake's bed.

"We're here now," the dwarf said. As ever, he was the grounding they all needed. "So we must make do. I am keen to see what the city has to offer."

"While we explore, we stick together," Alan said.

On that, they were all agreed.

CHAPTER 7:
PREPARATION

STRIPPED OF HIS ARMOUR, Roland was still an impressive specimen. Contoured muscles invited Cali to descry their shape with a delicate finger. Scars created a calligraphy she was only too happy to read.

He lay sprawled on the bed, a shit-eating grin smeared across his features, his teeth cocaine-white. Cali's room was sumptuous, even if she was the less-favoured daughter. Shimmering sheets fashioned from the silk of two-pronged manalishi worms covered her bed. The walls were onyx, veined with white, each corner sporting a gilded pillar. Her room also contained a floor-length mirror (though Cali used it for magical purposes more often than vanity), a white armoire crafted from the wood of a hali-tree, a toilet basin (all the waste in the palace flowing down into a subterranean level where the coprophages performed their duty of devouring royal shit), a small cushion for meditation (which her instrument had once sat against), and finally a cabinet that contained her weapons and leather armour. She'd left her habit of concealment behind when she fled the Temple of Namtar—another wretched loss of that endeavour.

She undressed for Roland.

"Your scars . . . "

"Don't speak of them," she said, coldly.

Cali massaged his limbs, worshipfully. She gripped the soles of his feet with her hands while she enveloped his cock with her soft lips. She rubbed her heavy breasts over his torso and genitals, kissing every inch of his flesh, as though attempting to bring it back to life. Already he moaned. Cali smiled inwardly. Like a fly, he had flown into the venus-trap, and did not perceive how it closed over him.

She pinned and straddled Roland, pushing her cunt down over his throbbing cock. He gasped at her warmth and wetness. She began to ride him. At first, he grinned, thrusting upwards with his hips, confidence overriding uncertainty, but after a while even his soldier's endurance was overtaxed by the ferocity of her lovemaking. Unlike with LeBarron, whom she had allowed to take control, she kept Roland pinned the way a cat might pin a mouse. Roland's eyes—yellow as the twin suns—burned into hers as she rode him until he whimpered. She had to restrain laughter, reducing an olympian warrior to a trembling and fragile thing. When he spilled his seed, his entire body convulsed, and he seemed relieved it was over.

She allowed him no respite, furiously attending to him with her mouth until he was once more erect. *So brittle,* she thought. *They are weakest in the place where they think they have most strength.* She rode him again until his breathing grew ragged and his eyes begged her to stop.

She did not stop.

When he came, she gulped down all of him as he moaned, agonised and pleasured at the same time.

He started to rise from the bed, drenched in sweat, eyes bleary, head heavy, seemingly unable to control his limbs. She pushed him down again. From her armoire she fetched an alchemical vial—specifically, powdered dimetrodon teeth. Those lizards bred like crazy, to the extent the palace had become infested with them. She tapped out some of the powder from a glass vial onto her finger, got into bed, and placed it under Roland's nose.

"Sniff," she said.

"Cali . . . "

"You wish to do your duty?"

Roland swallowed, then inhaled. He let out a grunting sigh, and within seconds he was erect again, the black flesh of his cock turning purple with excessive blood flow.

"Let me give you another view." This time Cali straddled him facing away, curving her spine to amplify her endowments—a generous gift. Men and women had killed to place their tongues inside her, to worship as only coprophages could, to abase themselves before their living goddess. But in truth, she'd turned away so he would not see her face, would not see that she was looking beyond this moment to greater moments to come, moments of blazing cities, of utter victory.

She rode Roland until he screamed. The third time he came there was barely any seed. A soft, almost sob-like sound escaped his throat as he lay back, his limbs utterly exhausted. Cali could have gone again, but she'd done enough. Roland's eyes flickered and he blacked out. She had known only a few men who could keep pace with her. LeBarron had been one of them—it pained her that she would certainly have to kill him next time they met. Still, Roland was now hers. It was much the same as breaking a horse. Show it who the master was, and the horse never forgot, however wild it had once been.

"Sweet dreams," she whispered.

Donning her gold dress once again, Cali went in search of her father.

The palace was a labyrinth one could get lost in for weeks. Cali doubted any one soul, even the Yellow King Himself, knew the functions of every room and nook, nor, for that matter, every courtier and servant. Iron-wrought doors led to vast rooms Cali had never explored, even though she had grown up in these corridors, rooms, and gardens, and had played hide and seek with Cassilda, eons ago, when theirs had been a sisterly love and not a sisterly rivalry. Cali felt a long-repressed nostalgia welling up within her, remembering her moony little playmate. How dopey Cassilda had been as a youth. How innocent. More than once Cali had saved her from being bitten by a dimetrodon as Cassilda went up to stroke it. Or else pulled her back from a precipitous drop as she strode with carefree abandon along a forbidden ledge. Cali remembered Cassilda trying to visit the coprophages dwelling in the lower vaults, because she pitied them and their miserable plight. Cali had tried to explain to her sister that they chose their fate willingly. Cassilda had not listened, and the consequences had almost been dire.

Cali shook her head. She didn't want to remember these things, for then she might pity her sister, might pity the one who had taken everything from her: her right to the throne, her father's love, and now her champion, Alan.

Though the palace was usually a hive of activity, this morning it was even more so with the looming threat of another battle. Banquets were in full, raucous swing, no doubt hosted under the feeble pretence of strategic planning. Soldiers moved about the hallways more readily than the norm, their chitin armour

clicking, their spear-hafts tapping upon the onyx floor. Many of them saluted Cali as she passed. She had not entirely lost her standing with them, it seemed; perhaps because she had always been respected as a warrior. Large flocks of brightly dressed courtiers, carrying long scrolls of parchment no doubt detailing numbers of infantry and supplies, bickered and filled up the corridors and entrances. Ceaseless chatter assaulted Cali's supersensitive ears.

If there was one thing she and her father shared, it was a love of the quiet. She gave an outward show of sociability—indeed, her sister was the one with a reputation for cloistered misanthropy—but deep down she loathed crowds, or perhaps more accurately loathed the way that people began to think alike when gathered in great numbers. She had seen fine minds reduced to sterile rubble by the numbing mantras of the herd. Cali remained an individualist at heart.

Therefore, she knew exactly where to find her father among the many thousands of rooms, halls, and secret spaces of the palace: The Garden of Grim Knowledge.

The garden faced the east, positioned on a balcony yet concealed from easy view by a high wall on its northern side that was overgrown with dreadful vines. Its southern side was dominated by plants of breeds exotic even by the standards of Carcosa: flowers with purple bulbs at their head oozed a bright blue fluid, orange flowers flexing with hundreds of tendrils like deep sea anemones, and a red flower that intoxicated with merely a whiff of its opioid scent. In the southern corner of the garden, a large dimetrodon skulked, its vibrant spinal sail turned towards the twin suns, the colours almost brighter than the flowers. A crystal-clear fountain stood in the garden in which four tiny xanthimums grew. With a pang, Cali thought of Alan, Cassilda, LeBarron, and Petruccio—did fate mock her?

The garden's principal feature was a great disberry tree, its sallow trunk thicker than three men standing side by side, its boughs arcing elegantly into the sky, laden with puffy leaves and fruits bearing screaming faces. So tall was the tree that it made her towering father seem of ordinary proportions.

Already, His presence encroached upon her being. He stood with His back to her, reaching up to pluck one of the disberries from its bough. As he did so, the sleeve of His robe fell back, and

she saw a brief glimpse of a hand, a hand so disgusting that it took all her effort to hold down the contents of her stomach.

Monster. My father is a monster. She wondered how she had not inherited any of His abnormalities. Perhaps they had been inflicted upon Him. Perhaps they would come to her with age. There were so many things she did not know about her own lineage—it was one of her few blindspots. Or so she thought.

The King let out a deep sigh.

"This garden is my favourite place in all Carcosa." He whispered, yet she heard every syllable as though He had spoken in her ear. "One moment of perfect beauty."

"One . . . moment?"

The King turned toward her, the grey cowl overhanging His face somehow conveying His disdain greater than any expression could.

"Yes. All places are moments. All times are places." He walked slowly toward her. The disberry disappeared into the folds of His cloak, perhaps never to reappear again. "And all souls are objects."

"Objects?" Cali tired of philosophical games, but she knew it was best to humour her father, especially as she came here seeking a request.

"Objects to be beheld by the one true Subject."

"God?"

The King paused a few steps away from her. His presence was now overwhelming, like the reverberation of a terrifying gong, cutting through sinew and rattling her bones.

"Do not speak of that which thou dost not believe in."

"But some would say *you* are a god, Father."

"Some would say the sky is a god . . . " Evidently, He was in a contemplative mood, for He paced toward the fountain. Cali fell into step. Again, she sensed an unanticipated softness in her father, yet she was wary lest she be lulled into a false sense of security. " . . . I suppose it is. All things are god, for god cannot be divided. Therefore, *I* am god."

A dark wind blew through the garden, causing the flowers and trees to murmur, to whisper, and to dance. Overhead, the sky was cloud-torn, grey with thunderous potential. In the far, far distance she heard a rumble as of horsemen over a plain—the weather, or Pe'kar's great second legion bearing down on them?

"War is coming, Father."

"So I am told."

"You will need someone to organise the defences . . . unless you wish to attend to the matter yourself?"

"The desire for war left me a long time ago, dear daughter."

There were those wretchedly ironic words again. Cali fought to maintain composure, to soothe her thoughts. She felt much calmer this time, able to control the direction of her thoughts and steer them towards preconfigured channels when they began to waver.

"Then you will need someone. Please, Father, let it be me. I have let you down . . . But I seek redemption. War was always a better suit for me. Let me put right what I have done wrong. Let me defeat Pe'kar's armies in battle."

The King paused by the fountain and stared down into its waters. Or perhaps it was the yellow flowers He examined. She wondered what He saw when he gazed upon His own reflection. She wondered what He saw in general, what mists those hidden eyes could pierce that even Cali's lambent orbs found impenetrable.

"These flowers are perfect, yet still not half so perfect as Camilla . . . " The sorrow in the King's voice almost broke Cali's heart. "I find thy logic faulty, Cali." From sorrow to anger in less than a heartbeat. More mercurial than the sky. The hiss of a serpent was unmistakable in His tone, now. She stiffened, anticipating the psychic lash of His willpower, but for now, He held off. "Thy fault does not lie with Pe'kar, nor the defence of the city. Thy negligence is in leading an outworlder to the sacred relic—a relic my dear Haercus sacrificed much to keep safe. If thou seek'st to make amends, then obtain The Claw."

"I know where it is," she said. "But surely, the defence of Carcosa—"

The King turned and Cali felt as though a hand had gripped her throat. She immediately dropped to one knee, then two, lowering her forehead to the floor in a sign of obeisance.

"Thou hast learned something of humility, then," the King thundered. The sky matched His wrath, and a yellow-bright flash of lightning scoured the cloudcover, followed momentarily by crepitation that shook the palace stones. "But still, thou dost not see clearly. I will not entrust my armies to thee, Cali, for thou art unworthy to command them. Once, thou held that honour, but thy failures and deviations have been manifold."

He turned away from her. A ray of sunlight found its way through the clouds. Cali breathed air gratefully. Her head ached, as though with a bruise, but she would take that small scar over what she had endured the previous day.

Worse, however, was the realisation of failure. If her father would not give her command of the armies, her ambition would be infinitely more difficult to realise without taking drastic action, action that would expose her far too soon.

The King moved into the southern corner of the garden. The dimetrodon, though a hulking reptilian beast easily large enough to devour a fully grown man, backed away from the imposing figure of the King, its reptilian face glaring with incomprehension at the lord of the dismal city. Slowly, He stooped, offering, in His mutilated hand, the disberry He'd plucked from the tree. Dimetrodons were predominantly meat-eaters, keen on fish, small amphibians, and even larger reptiles, but it seemed to have developed a taste for this particular succulent fruit, for it clamped its jaws upon it and gulped it down in one. The King straightened. If He was pleased, His pleasure remained hidden. Cali wondered whether this was a regular interaction between them, that her father was somehow *conditioning* the dimetrodon against its nature. Or perhaps there was some secret symbolism in the act intended only for her.

Or perhaps, Cali, you are losing your mind.

"Who will you appoint in my stead?" she asked, trying to keep her voice even and void of accusation.

"There is a young captain," the King replied. "He fought well in the siege. He has distinguished himself time and again. Though of demon blood, he has shown the spirit of a true Carcosan." The King turned. "Captain Roland shall be appointed General of the Carcosan forces and lead our people against Pe'kar's assault. As I have spoken, so mote it be."

"I understand, Father," Cali said, bowing her head.

She could barely conceal her victorious smile—a dark flower blooming in a beam of moonlight.

CHAPTER 8:
ALAR

BEYOND THE GLISTENING chamber in which they had first arrived they found what once had been a bustling centre of commerce but now resembled—at least to Alan's eyes—an abandoned factory. Workstations lay untended. Long rows of tables stood absent of wares. A vast dome enclosed the area, sporting grand windows. According to LeBarron, all of Alar was made up of these large domes, interconnected by passageways running along the lake's bed. Viewed from above, the city resembled a spiderweb.

The bright lights of the aquatic world beyond the colossal windows, which at first had presented a colourful and exotic diorama, cast everything in a gloomy, pelagic hue. Blue shadows fell across the mosaic flooring and clung to the niches where rib-like bands of crystal separated the large glass panes. Alan felt like he was simultaneously standing inside the carcass of a hollowed-out whale and in a base stationed on the moon.

"Something is very wrong," Cassilda said.

"I agree," Petruccio said. "Where are all the people?" The dwarf moved over to a nearby table and picked up a leather satchel sitting upon it. It jingled. The dwarf tipped the bag over and coins spewed over the floor. The noise reverberated in the empty dome. "*No one* leaves gold behind."

All eyes turned again to LeBarron.

"I swear to you . . . " he said, his voice ragged with emotion. "I was here not four weeks ago and all was well. Something has changed."

"Then we must find a way of egress, and quickly," Cassilda said.

"If the city is abandoned, might that not work well for us?"

Alan piped up. “We wanted a place to lie low. If no one else is down here . . . ”

“The city will not have been abandoned for no reason,” Petruccio replied. “Perhaps some of its levels have been compromised? Perhaps some wild animal has gotten loose? The possibilities do not look good.”

“That is a pessimistic view,” the actor said, his handsome features bent in a rare frown. “Perhaps a special event is on that has drawn people away from the Merchant District?”

“To leave their bags of money behind?” Petruccio laughed. “Please, I have seen men leave their limbs behind over their purses.”

“You mentioned another way out,” Alan said. “Now is the time to show us the way, LeBarron.”

“We should search the city first,” LeBarron said. “That way, we can look for the pigment.” All heard the appeal in his voice. The actor was not stupid. He knew if he could persuade Petruccio, Cassilda and Alan might listen. “And if we do not find it, then we will have simply found a way out. We stick together, like you said, Alan.”

Cassilda and Alan shared a glance. Neither felt like trusting LeBarron, but equally, nothing had attacked them yet. They had not seen the rest of the city. One bag of gold was not reason enough to abandon their plan.

Petruccio turned to Alan.

“The bearer of The Claw saved my life. All of you have vouched for me, but you I’ll follow most of all, Alan Chambers. What is your view?”

“How long have you been seeking the oneiric pigment?”

Petruccio’s face shadowed.

“Longer than you have been alive.”

“Then we should not turn away now. My only suggestion is that if we discover any areas have been flooded, we should leave at once. Provided we *can* leave.”

“Agreed,” Petruccio said. “LeBarron?”

“The Merchant District sits next to the Living District, which is where Alar grows its food, and where the majority of its people live. There is a tunnel nearby which will lead us there. It’s only a few tunnels from there to reach Parliament District, which is where we can find our exit.”

"Parliament?" Alan pictured English MPs in suits and ties, arguing like bellicose schoolchildren.

"Yes. Alar recognises no monarch, and governmental decisions are made by a council of elders elected every one-hundred years. The current council is made up of twenty-nine elders, the majority of whom are supportive of the Yellow King."

"*Deathless be He,*" Petruccio muttered.

"But nonetheless, there have been great tensions between our states," Cassilda put in. "They refused to aid us in the war with Pe'kar, preferring to remain neutral and protect their own borders. I despise such cowardice."

"Alar is caught between two empires," LeBarron said. "They are simply doing what they think will ensure their survival."

LeBarron led them through a long, narrow tunnel—similarly formed from glass and crystal. Alan felt like he was at an aquarium. He remembered his parents taking him to one as a child, pressing his hands and face against the glass to look at all the colourful fish, crustaceans, and cephalopods flitting or hobbling about in their strange ways. He favoured the yellow ones, of course, begging his parents to let him take one home.

Alan could imagine that these tunnels formed bustling thoroughfares. He was no detective, but he could see scuffmarks on the mosaic flooring from where tables or other paraphernalia had once stood. There were one or two bowls that looked like they might have once belonged to beggars—still filled with dull-looking coins. His anxiety grew. Petruccio was right. No one left money behind unless some kind of catastrophe had compelled them to. What didn't yet make sense to Alan, however, was that the city seemed in-tact. If an earthquake or other natural disaster had plagued Alar, surely they would have seen the damage by now? *Foolish to trust LeBarron, foolish to come here,* a dark little voice said inside his head. His right hand twitched.

"Kill him."

Alan stopped and turned around.

"Which of you said that?"

Cassilda and Petruccio stared at him blankly. LeBarron was still marching purposefully ahead. The actor paused and turned on his heel, sensing the others were no longer with him.

"What's the matter?"

"Which of you spoke?" Anger tingled Alan's palm like the prickling of static electricity.

"No one spoke, Alan," Cassilda said, gently. "Perhaps 'tis the water thou hearest?"

Alan swallowed. He was *sure* he had heard the words "Kill him", spoken not with mania or fury, but soft certainty: a simple instruction, an order to be obeyed.

"It . . . it must be my imagination," he said.

Cassilda must have seen something in his eyes.

"Alan, thou told me not to hold back my misgivings, I ask thee to do me the same courtesy."

Alan nodded.

"I've been hearing a voice, ever since I . . . I put on The Claw." He looked down at his taloned hand. Yes, it did not feel like a weapon anymore—though its danger was obvious to any that looked upon it—it had begun to feel like his own hand. Every inch of it glittered with cruel intent: hidden barbs, dark mechanisms, and blades. There was something utterly forbidden in its design, like looking at the entrails of a human being revealed by a grim incision, a wetly gleaming secret that should have remained secret. Yet, Alan found it hard to tear his eyes away.

When he did at last drag his eyes from its haunting form, the others were exchanging worried glances.

"What?"

"Some say The Claw drove Haercus mad," Petruccio said, darkly. "That was the real reason that he rid himself of it."

"And you tell me this now?" Alan hissed.

"It was not our idea to give it to you in the first place," Cassilda said, and he noticed that once more her formal manner had dropped, her voice cracking with emotion. "Cali did not care what happened to you, so long as you served her ends. We've no way of knowing if the legend is true . . . "

Alan stared down again at the talisman.

"Then I should remove it now. To be safe."

He wrapped his left hand around the base of the device, gripping firmly. He would rip it out of the wrist-socket if he had to. So what if he bled? Cassilda's healing magic would save him. He gritted his teeth and readied himself for the agony of separation.

But the more he thought about removing it, the more he willed

himself to pull, the more he realised that he didn't want to. The Claw had saved his life. The Claw had made him powerful. The Claw was who he really was beneath the pathetic pervert, beneath the lost child, beneath the idiot animal. The Claw was what made him not merely human but perhaps a god.

Alan finally let his left hand fall uselessly by his side.

"Its talons are in you, Alan," Petruccio said.

Alan laughed bitterly.

Cassilda moved towards Alan and folded him in an embrace. He shivered with the tenderness of it, feeling her slight body pressed against his. LeBarron and Petruccio looked upon him pityingly. At first, he was confused, then angry.

"No," he growled. "Do not pity me." He pushed Cassilda away, albeit gently. "I am not some lost cause. I choose—I choose *willingly*—to bear The Claw. I'll find my true name . . . I'll . . . I'll . . . " But he did not know what he would do. Having thought he had ascended a mountain peak, he now discovered an entire range before him.

A loud groan broke in on their argument. Alan frowned and turned.

"I heard that," the dwarf said, quickly, allaying Alan's fears that he was still hallucinating. "Down the tunnel."

"There's someone there," Cassilda said, her supersensitive eyes descrying what theirs could not. "They appear to be injured."

Petruccio drew his woodcutter's axe from his belt. LeBarron put a hand on the hilt of his sword.

"We proceed cautiously," Alan said.

The four went forward down the tunnel. After a short distance they found a T-junction, with another tunnel leading off towards a large dome.

"The Pleasure District," LeBarron said. "Not where we want to be."

"They have moved on," Cassilda said, pointing in the direction the sound had come from. "Whoever they were."

"I don't like this," the dwarf grumbled. "This is almost worse than the maze."

"Worse than a eurypterid, Petruccio?" Alan said, with a grin. "Your tune has changed."

"On the contrary, my tune remains the same. Beasts are simple to understand and kill when one knows how. But this . . . I don't know what is going on here."

"We'll know soon enough," LeBarron replied grimly.

They continued on their path down the tunnel until they finally reached a second dome. This one was larger than the first and resembled a vast terrarium. Hanging down from the ceiling was an orb, about the size of a football, Alan guessed, suspended from a silver chain. The orb was orange, glowing like a coal. He wondered if it was a magical alternative to sunlight.

A pathway ran around the edge of a raised platform from which luscious looking grass sprouted. The cultivated ground was perhaps half a mile in diameter—unkempt, speckled with weeds, and in places flattened as though a stampede had trampled it underfoot. The edges of the dome were colonnaded by disberry trees, their great boughs offering basketfuls of the succulent fruits. Petruccio raised his axe and knocked one from the stem. It fell at the lightest touch, showing they were ripe. The dwarf bit greedily into the orange and white fruit—ignoring the screaming face painted in its flesh—and grinned as juice ran down over his chin.

"I'm fucking famished," he said, knocking down another.

"You're not the only one!" LeBarron replied.

All four of them helped themselves to disberries. Though it was poor fare in terms of filling their cavernously empty bellies, the sweetness was gratefully received after weeks of sour, dried rations.

"If I had some Desire-wine to wash it down," Petruccio said. "I should be happier than I've been in a long time."

"If the city truly is abandoned, the cellars shall be open," LeBarron said. "Although I highly recommend Revenge over the Desire. The kick is legendary."

Petruccio grinned.

"I suppose it is more apt. But if we do acquire any, I shall save it for Cali's funeral."

The actor smiled.

"What animals would they have kept here?" Alan said. He had moved over to the unruly field situated in the centre of the aquatic dome, not unlike a tiny diorama depicted inside a snow-globe. He felt a strange sensation of not only looking with his eyes, but looking with the universe's eyes, a camera pointing down at him somewhere beyond the glass, observing him in third person.

"Livestock. Lambs. Pigs."

"Those seem like mundane animals for this weird kingdom."

Petruccio let out a bark of laughter. He walked up beside Alan, his pockets full of the sweet, screaming-faced fruit.

"I know what you mean, but even ordinary things are made strange on the black planet."

Like hands, Alan thought. He could no longer say he knew something like the back of his hand, for every time he looked at the back of his hand he saw a new, esoteric mechanism, some glimmer of occult industry, secrets of animation and flesh and power.

"Blood," Alan said, pointing at one of the long stems of grass.

"Something went terribly wrong here," Petruccio answered.

The groan sounded again, this time much nearer. Then, from the tall grass in front of them, a dishevelled shape lurched. Alan and Petruccio both recoiled in shock, backing away so fast Alan almost tripped. LeBarron and Cassilda instantly appeared at their side.

The man—for it was a man—now lay face-down on the floor, his legs still caught up on the ridge of the raised platform. He was filthy beyond words—even more gruesome than the cannibals Alan had seen in the forbidden district of Carcosa. Blood ran from ghastly wounds, some of which were so deep they showed slivers of bone. His flesh was leprous. His clothes mere rags.

Slowly, the man raised his head, revealing a face that had—upon impact with the mosaic floor—caved in. Teeth, skull, and ligament were exposed in the dim light thrown by the dome's curious chandelier. The eyes were utterly white, devoid of pupils. Yet there was life in those destroyed features—twitching, insect life.

The man opened his mouth and a groan escaped once more, this time clotted with blood and perhaps teeth too, a wretched gargle.

On shaky legs, the man rose. Alan felt his blood freeze. No ordinary person could have risen with such injuries. His body was a torn wreck. He looked like he had climbed out of a blender. Alan could not understand how he was still alive.

"What happened to you?" Alan said.

Before Alan could ask anything further, LeBarron walked forward and swung his sword into the rotten man's neck. It took two hacks to cleave the head from his shoulders, after which the body collapsed, convulsing, neck fountaining gore. The man's head rolled away from them, trailing blood after it.

"LeBarron . . . " Alan said, horrified by the execution.

"O come now, Alan," the actor said, grimly, wiping his sword clean on his britches. "You have eyes in that face of yours. That was not a living man."

Petruccio pointed. "It looks alive to me."

The actor turned. The headless corpse was still moving. Not twitching now but reaching toward them. Its bloodied fingers gripped the mosaic tiling as it dragged itself along the floor. The orifice in its neck made a disgusting, incomprehensible sound.

To Alan's surprise, LeBarron's face showed very little surprise or even horror; instead, it contorted into a staged grimace of admiration.

"She has improved her craft," he said. "Usually, taking the head off does away with them."

The headless creature gripped LeBarron's boot. The actor tugged it free.

"Who is 'she'?" Alan demanded. "Cali?"

"No," LeBarron said.

"Allow me to deal with this." Petruccio strode forward, raising his axe. He brought it singing down upon the elbow joint of the creature. It parted all-too-easily, as though the flesh and bones were sodden, wet and soft. The dwarf—a mania lighting his eyes—went to work like a butcher. He hacked each limb from the torso and then divided the limbs at the knee and elbow. Finally, to be sure of things, he split the separated head in twain. Alan had seen many gruesome sights, was no stranger to guts or gore, but even he had to turn away at points, holding his mouth and stomach, feeling bile creep up his throat like a poisonous slug. When at last the dwarf had completed his grisly work, he stepped back, an artist wishing to gain perspective on a canvas. The corpse lay still. Each of them breathed a sigh of relief.

Cassilda turned to LeBarron. "If thou knowest what has happened, tell us now."

LeBarron let out a grim sigh.

"This is Scarleth's doing." He swallowed. "And we have to get out of here as soon as we can."

CHAPTER 9:
NECROPOLIS

"WHO IS SCARLETH?" Alan asked.

"A woman none of you want to meet." LeBarron closed his eyes and exhaled. It seemed he was wrestling with a decision. Under the weight of their combined gazes, he reached one. "But also the woman that I came here to see."

"LeBarron . . . " Petruccio growled.

"I did not deceive you like Cali did!" the actor snapped. "I really did think this would be a safe place to hide. And that the pigment might be here. But I also had another aim. Can you blame a dying man?"

"Don't try to make us feel sorry for thee!" Cassilda snarled. "Thou lied to us."

"I did not lie," LeBarron said. "I merely did not tell you all that I knew."

Cassilda sneered.

"Mummers always have a problematic relationship with the truth, as do servants of The Stranger. I should have known from the first thou would'st prove a traitor."

"I'm no traitor," LeBarron snarled. "And let us not forget that without *me* you *all* would be dead. Alan would have never obtained The Claw without my help."

Cassilda snorted, but silence fell on the group.

"Who is she?" Alan prompted again.

"A necromancer," LeBarron said. "And . . . my former lover."

"Great King save us!" Petruccio hissed.

Cassilda rolled her eyes and turned away, too disgusted to even look upon him.

"This would have been pertinent to know *before* we came

here," Alan said. "But why in God's name would you seek out such a practitioner?" Alan had known several necromancers on Earth. Most of them had been deluded hacks, no better than false mediums claiming they could commune with the spirits of the dead, preying upon the human desire for closure. But one of them had been the real deal—he had done things Alan still could not explain, things that made his hackles rise merely in remembrance.

LeBarron swallowed.

"I was thinking, most of the time we explored the labyrinth, about how I could get around Pe'kar's curse. I came to the conclusion there *is* no solution. Alan, you bought me time. But I am a dead man walking . . . " The actor raised one finger. "*But!* If I die, the curse shall wear off, and then Scarleth can bring me back . . . And I shall live on."

Cassilda wheeled on him.

"Art thou mad, LeBarron? Thou would'st trust thy life to a *necromancer?* There is a price for these things. To play with life and death—that kind of magic always requires sacrifice. Hast thou considered that even if she could bring thee back, that thou would be changed? Or else *enslaved* to her will? Thou meddlest with things thou dost not understand."

"It's that or cease to exist!" LeBarron cried. "And I *will not cease*."

Silence reigned once again. LeBarron stood blood-red in the face. His eyes burned like flames. His teeth were bared, wolflike and proud. Then he turned and vomited blood over the floor. He fell to his knees, clutching his stomach. The growl that tore from him was bestial. Convulsions of pain wracked him for a few moments longer, then subsided. He breathed raggedly.

"I will not cease," he said again.

"I knew one person who had mastered the terrible secret of life and death," Alan said. "And that knowledge drove them *mad*."

"Why do you think I left her?" LeBarron said, giving them a cheeky grin made frightening by the blood on his face.

"This is not a time for jokes," Petruccio snapped. "You have doomed us all bringing us here, into the playpen of a dark sorceress! For all we know she could have turned the entire city of Alar into a necropolis!"

"The greatest playwrights know that comedy and tragedy are intertwined . . . " LeBarron whispered, looking not at them but

through them. Alan got the sense of a man commenting upon his own life and witnessing it unfurling before him, like a black and secret scroll, something only God should be able to read. LeBarron roused himself from his dreamy state and looked each of them in the eye. "I just didn't want to die."

Alan walked forward and placed his good hand upon LeBarron's shoulder.

"All men die, LeBarron. But we will do what we can to help."

LeBarron laughed hollowly. "Not in these lands, Alan. Death is famished here. Or was until the war began. I suppose that is why it is infinitely more terrible." A smile broke through the despair. "But I appreciate your offer of help."

"I do not," Cassilda said, and Alan heard the thunder in her voice, the magical potential brooding just below the surface. He felt scared but also comforted; if there was a necromancer around, then Cassilda would surely prove her equal. "We all pity thee, LeBarron. We all lament the injury thou hast sustained for our sake. But to consort with a necromancer . . . She is just as likely to kill us all and bring us back like that undead creature as she is to offer aid."

"I can talk to her," LeBarron said. "She knows me. We were lovers once—" In Alan's experience, this seemed more likely to reduce LeBarron's chances of getting what he desired, but so impassioned was the actor's speech he thought it best not to interrupt and crush his hopes. "—she is *a little* crazy, but not so far gone that she is beyond reason."

"It's you who is beyond reason." Petruccio wiped his axe clean and slung it in his belt. He walked up to the actor and prodded him hard in the chest. Because LeBarron had fallen to his knees to be sick, the dwarf and he were now equal height. "Have you no awareness of your surroundings? She has turned the city of Alar, the city you claimed to love, into a graveyard! Look around you, LeBarron. There are no plays being performed here, anymore. This city is dead. And only a prophet knows how many of these slaves she has created."

"Perhaps she had good reason for taking over the city?" LeBarron said. "Perhaps there are some survivors in one of the other districts?"

Petruccio laughed cruelly.

"You are *whipped,* boy. I see it clearly now. The great seducer

of women LeBarron has a weak spot." The dwarf let out a howl of contrived laughter. "Only a man in love could be mad enough to defend a mass murderer."

LeBarron gritted his teeth but did not respond. There was nothing he could say. Petruccio had cut to the heart of things.

"We are wasting time," Cassilda said. "I have no desire to try my powers against hers. LeBarron, show us the way out of here."

LeBarron snarled.

"No."

"No?"

"Because what then? What then after we leave? I die somewhere, buried in an unmarked grave? Will you sing sad songs, *princess*?" The actor trembled. "We are not in Carcosa now. You don't get to sign my death warrant."

"Calm yourself," Cassilda commanded, and despite the furious emotion welling within LeBarron like a volcanic spring, bubbling up to the surface and burning even stone with its intensity, he held his tongue. "I did not mean to sentence thee to death. There are magicians in Carcosa who know far more than even I or Cali. We might return to the city via stealth and seek out their help."

LeBarron waved a hand. He got to his feet, wiping the blood from his chin with his sleeve.

"No, Cassilda. Returning to the city is suicide. Cali will have already alerted the watchmen to arrest us. Then she will have us killed before a trial can be held. And besides, you deal in uncertainties. Perhaps those magicians know some magic you do not, but every magical attempt to remove the curse failed. That is Pe'kar's glorious gift." LeBarron sneered. "I would stand a better chance beseeching the Demon King than your hack sorcerers."

Cassilda's eyes blazed.

"Thou claim'st thou art no different to Cali, but now I hear thee offering thy loyalty to Pe'kar."

"At least the Demon King does not sleep while his subjects die upon the city walls."

Cassilda lunged forward. Though a waif in appearance, her form belied her true strength and power. Alan grabbed her by the arm, only managing to hold her back because she did not wish to harm him.

"Let me go, Alan, or I shall strike thee down too!"

Her voice crackled like a storm birthed over the dark Atlantic.

Alan felt her skin burning white-hot beneath the fingers of his good hand.

"No! This is what your sister wants!"

At this, Cassilda stopped struggling. She looked from LeBarron to Alan, then nodded, bowing her head.

"You are right, as ever, Alan Chambers," she whispered. "Please let me go."

Fearing what she might do, but knowing he had to show trust, Alan relaxed his grip. Cassilda did not lunge once more at LeBarron. Slowly, she raised her eyes to meet his. The actor's blue chips of ice met gold flecked with ruby.

"I'm sorry, LeBarron."

The actor bowed, then dropped to one knee.

"No, it is *I* who is sorry. I have endangered my only friends. Now, I must make it right." He straightened. "There is a submersible, in Parliament District. It is a fair way, but I know of shortcuts. If we hurry, we can get there before she knows we're here."

Cassilda put a delicate hand on LeBarron's face, and Alan felt a dark surge of jealousy sting his heart like a needle.

"I thank thee."

"Kill him."

Alan turned. No one had spoken. The palm of his right hand tingled. His eyes met Petruccio's and the dwarf frowned, concern deepening the already trench-like lines of his face.

A mournful utterance brought all of their attentions to one of the dome's exits. The same despairing, grave-deep groan emitted from the throat of a dead slave. Three figures shambled toward them.

"There, too!" Petruccio said. More shapes were appearing from another tunnel. Five at least with shadows in the corridor behind them.

Each was rotten and deformed in their own way. Faces slid from skull-moorings. Ribs flexed, stretching translucent, sodden flesh. Broken limbs somehow supported weight. All of their smiles were bloody. Their eyes pure white.

"This way!" LeBarron said. He led them to smaller tunnel running what Alan imagined to be southwards from the dome, though in truth he was all turned around and had no sense of the cardinal points. Hastily they fled through an arched opening and

down the glass tunnel. One of the dead met them and LeBarron cut it down with his sword. Petruccio set upon it with his axe.

"No time!" Alan said, grabbing the dwarf's arm and hoisting him away. Petruccio shook off his bloodlust and nodded to Alan in thanks.

They left the animated corpse where it writhed and sprinted down the tunnel.

CHAPTER 10:
PREPARATION

TWO DAYS HAD passed since Cali's audience with the King In Yellow. Since then, the city had changed. Once, she would have compared Carcosa to a great beehive, a buzzing metropolis full of the productive agency of millions upon millions of tiny bees. Now, it had become a wasps' nest. The drone of its people was an angry sound. The church bells tolled incessantly, an acerbic, infuriating dirge. She knew it was a device of her father's, designed to rile up the population into a spirited defence. She had studied the magical powers of sound extensively, but her father knew even deeper secrets. Once, she had coveted them. She had tried to please him in the hope he would teach her these secret principles, but now she knew he would never share them. Better that he died with his secrets unsung.

The walls were now equipped with mighty ballistas. All four gates were sealed, and no one could enter or leave the city without royal permissions. Soldiers had been redeployed from the barracks to the walls, and patrols passed continuously around the city's titanic circumference. Those soldiers not on patrol trained, as Cali did now.

The room was full of light, which streamed in from a wide opening in the ceiling. The walls of the training room were engraved with swirling images of waves caught in a storm's ferocity. The floor was a soft and springy mat made from hollowgrass tied together.

Cali danced. Wearing her black leather armour and wielding a curved sword, she leapt, somersaulted, kicked, span, and cut with an elegance that would have shamed a ballet dancer. Her body, though voluptuous, was also strong and supple, and this duality

was reflected in the way she flowed through her martial forms: grace and elegance were juxtaposed with power. As her foot came down in a stomp on the ground, the stone trembled. As her blade sang in a horizontal cut, the air quivered ecstatically. Her breath married her movements. And deeper than that, her thoughts. The martial forms, which explored both animal and spiritual archetypes, were not merely a series of movements to be memorised and acted out with the body alone. Like a dance, they had to be felt, experienced, *lived*. One moment she was a praying mantis, the next a crow, then a scorpion, an ape, a serpent—her mind shifted from one to the next as fluidly as water passing over differently shaped rocks, inhabiting the persona for only brief seconds before changing.

In practicing these martial forms Cali experienced a rare peace. The only other thing that brought her this level of acceptance was music, a joy that had been taken away from her. She had tried practicing with an *ecg'tar* loaned to her by a courtier, but it could not match her original; the sound the courtier's instrument had produced was tinny, empty, soulless. To reforge her ecg'tar and experience the bliss of its true music would take decades she did not have.

As she landed on her left foot, her knee twinged. Alarmed, she sought to correct the mistake, but soon realised that it had been only an illusory pain. The overcompensation nearly unbalanced her. She gritted her teeth. Her mind had wandered. She had to maintain her focus.

Slipping once again into the skin of another being—a warrior king, a shaman, a necromancer, then an eagle, a shark, a crocodile, and stranger things still—she continued to dance. Her sword hummed as it sliced even the air's atoms to ribbons. Her muscles ached from exertion. Her body felt as though it was expanding, each joint finding spaciousness, every pore in her skin widening to receive the milk of the universe. She was light as air, hard as earth, energetic as fire, smooth as water, and stubborn as the tall oak.

But even trees could be felled by lighting.

She saw Alan, wreathed in yellow, serpents of electricity spilling from The Claw. The look in his eyes . . .

She slipped and fell, crashing down on her hip. She wanted to scream in frustration, but she held it in, lest someone hear her and come running, lest her turmoil become apparent. She had to

continue to wear the mask, even though it was spiked with needles on its inside . . .

She lay there panting, allowing her concentration to dissipate, knowing it was useless to persist. Sweat drenched her body.

I choose life! Alan roared.

A flash of bright light, the agony racking her body as she was lifted off her feet and sent crashing through solid stone. Her scars ached worse than her exhausted limbs.

He is only going to get more powerful.

"Your Highness?"

Cali saw that Eric stood in the entranceway.

She let out a sigh and beckoned for him to enter. She got to her feet.

The courtier timidly stepped into the training arena.

"You train hard, your Highness."

What an inane statement.

"Yes."

"I feel safer knowing that Carcosa's walls will be defended by warriors of your calibre."

Cali grunted. She could barely stomach the sight of Eric ever since he had carried her near-dead to her room. The thought of a weakling like him *pitying* her was an unbearable poison. Perhaps her father had known that and deliberately chosen Eric to be her deliverer as a further form of punishment. It was not beyond his creative cruelty.

She moved to the side of the training room where a towel and water waited. She dabbed at her sweat-soaked neck and brow and drank the grief-tinged waters. Their bitterness was oddly comforting.

"What do you want, Eric?"

"I . . . I want to fight, your Highness."

She turned. This she had not expected. Eric forever went about the palace with a sword at his side. She assumed he had some degree of proficiency with it, but clearly had never had the opportunity to wield it. His face was an earnest mask—so earnest it might have been parodic worn on another face.

"Why?"

"My brother—he died in the siege, while I was back at the palace, doing . . . nothing. He was a good soldier. I . . . want to honour his memory. I want to fight like he did." He swallowed.

Cali folded her arms. She had never before been curious about Eric's life, but now she saw golden opportunity.

"There's more."

Eric swallowed.

"I always served Cassilda with my heart and soul because . . . because I felt sorry for what happened to her."

"We all did," Cali lied.

Eric nodded fervently.

"Yes, yes, we all did. But now, with her betrayal . . . "

Cali nodded, as though Eric need not say any more.

"We are often wounded deepest by our own blood."

"Yes!" Eric seized upon it like a famish man upon bread. "Yes. I am wounded, your Highness. And . . . and angry. If I saw her, I do not think I could restrain myself . . . "

"From killing her?"

"Yes. Were I able. I am no great warrior like you."

Eric hung his head.

Cali strode towards him and put a hand on his shoulder.

"But we might make you into one."

Eric's eyes widened.

"You would . . . train me?"

"Yes."

Tears ran down his eyes.

"Thank you! Thank you, Cali! You know . . . " Then he frowned, swallowed down his words, clamping his lips shut.

"Say what you were going to say," she purred.

"Many of the courtiers utter untruths about your Highness. I hope you are not offended."

"The eagle cares naught for what the insect says about it. Go on."

"Well, I say they are wrong! You have given heart and soul and *blood*." Eric seemed to have discovered a mummer's theatrics. "All for Carcosa! And you receive no thanks. Who else has tried to rescue the Queen Mother? It is easy to sit and talk . . . So much harder to take action. But you . . . you *act*." Eric swallowed. Cali watched his eyes tracing her sweat-drenched form. Yes, she did indeed know how to act, how to use her body in ways that were likely beyond even his furtive and sordid imagination. "And the way the King treated you . . . "

"Hush now," Cali whispered, putting a finger to his lips. It was

as much to stop him reminding her of such humiliation as it was to protect them from unwelcome eavesdroppers. "I *appreciate,* so, so *appreciate,* your kindness, Eric."

Eric looked like a man transfixed, and indeed he was, Cali's yellow, serpent-slit eyes holding him in a trance.

"Think nothing of it," he whispered.

"I will speak to General Roland," she said. "And I will ask for you to have a role in the battle. We will train together, and I shall make you into a swordsman that Pe'kar himself shall fear." A shiver of pleasure passed through Eric. Cali wondered what biological or chemical anomaly it was that made all men into fantasists.

"Thank you, Cali. Thank you."

Cali allowed Eric to bow and walk away. She only called out to him once he reached the door.

"O, Eric . . . "

"Yes, your Highness?"

"There is one, small favour I could ask of you—in exchange."

"Anything."

She knew he meant it.

"Cassilda destroyed my ecg'tar." It made the better story, and would deepen the antipathy towards Cassilda, for Carcosa prized music above all other art forms. "I'm sure you know it was a priceless artefact."

Eric nodded gravely.

"I shall be needing something new, but I think a weapon would be more apt in our time of war, don't you?"

Again he nodded. Truly, he was like a puppet. One tweak of the strings and he moved as she commanded.

"I have in mind a bow, with a special purpose in the battle to come."

"To slay the Siege Ender?"

"Precisely," Cali said, though that had been far from her mind. "It will need to be a weapon of great potency. With suitable arrows too. I shall forge it myself. But I need the materials."

"I shall have the vaults scoured for you, your Highness. Just name your requirements."

When Cali told him, Eric stiffened.

"That will not be easy, your Highness. Many of those materials are forbidden."

"I know. But would you allow the very walls of Carcosa to be

reduced to rubble beneath the Siege Ender's tread? Or would you . . . *act?*"

Eric met her gaze for a few moments longer.

"It shall be done."

He bowed and left.

Now I must find my other puppet.

Cali left the training room and returned to her bedroom. To her surprise, she found the once-Captain and now General Roland waiting for her there. He paced anxiously backward and forward.

"Cali!" he said, no sooner than she had entered. How quickly he had dropped the formal title of "Princess" and begun to think of her as his lover, his consort, not as his royal mistress. Still, it did not bother her, so long as his mind remained hers for the moulding. "Cali, I hoped to find you. Your father demands much of me, and I need your help."

Cali smiled. She was growing to like her new approach of allowing the universe to come to her. Her mission was becoming easier by the moment.

"He has trusted you for a reason, Roland," she said, moving toward the bed and sitting down upon it. Roland sat next to her. His armour seemed a comical inconvenience in this smaller, more intimate space—he resembled a beetle crawling around in an ant's nest. Only his helmet lay to one side. Cali ran her fingers over his smooth, shaven head, allowing them to rest at the back of the neck. It was a subtle gesture, easily mistaken as a sensual one, but in truth, all mothers carried their cubs by the scruff of the neck, and by gripping here, she psychologically returned him to that primal helplessness.

"I will do my duty," he said, though his eyes betrayed his fear. "But if I should make a mistake . . . "

"You will not fail," Cali said. With her other hand she touched his cheek, pulled his face so that his eyes met hers. He seemed uncomfortable with this, looking anywhere but directly into her eyes. Perhaps he had begun to sense the hypnotic power she held there and instinctively drew away? "I am here to help you, Roland. I have fought with Pe'kar's armies for centuries. And I dwelt in the land of Blue Light for a time. I know their ways. Their tactics. With my small help, you will not only win this battle, but achieve the greatest victory Carcosa has known in eons!"

Roland's eyes gleamed and burned. She knew him of old, how

his ambition ran deep through his veins, yet he lacked the will to reach for it, hence why he had been a mere captain for so long. Greatness had now been thrust upon him, and he was unready for it—knew his own inadequacy deep in his heart. Cali had to ensure he never mastered this inadequacy, yet she also had to feed his ego to the point of bursting.

"You know Pe'kar's strategies?" he whispered.

"O yes. He does not think like we do, Roland. That is why our battles have been so hard fought. Cassilda, my father, the courtiers, they do not understand their foe. They operate based on an outdated series of military procedures. If it were not for the courage of men like you, of the *soldiers* who defend Carcosa's walls, we would have been overrun long ago."

Roland put his head in his hands. He appeared to be reliving some trauma, for muscles twitched in his face without his volition.

"It was a desperate battle—the siege. I was nearly slain many times. The bodies, piled against the walls . . . I shall never forget that."

"And you need never live through it again," Cali purred. "You can spare your soldiers from such a trauma."

"But how, Cali? I told you I was raised in Carcosa. I have never been beyond its walls. I know nothing of our enemy's plans. I have killed hundreds maybe thousands of Pe'karians, but I am none the wiser to their games."

"Then listen to me, Roland," Cali said, exuding utter sincerity, and keeping the secret bloom of her triumph to herself. "And I shall tell you all."

CHAPTER 11:
THE TOWER

THE CITY WAS a warren, a network of interconnected tunnels subdued by a permanent half-light. Beyond the glass windows, fish swam freely through the magnificent expanse of Lake Hali's depths. Alan longed to be with them. He felt trammelled, claustrophobic, like a rabbit navigating a series of cages: increasingly splendorous, increasingly spacious, but still part of a prison.

The domes of the Living District contained daunting reversed favelas of housing that clung to the walls, rising like high sea waves over them, illuminated by strange glimmering stones built into the structures. Here, they couldn't see the glowing bed of the lake; instead, a thousand thin, arrow-niche windows stared down at them like eyes. Some of these houses dangled from thick chains. Others were clamped barnacle-like to the inside of the dome. Wooden walkways created paths between them.

Unlike Carcosa, where everything from building to street to doorway seemed organic in some way, and where a Gothic majesty pervaded every nook and cranny and overawed the senses, Alar had been built like a Greek polis turned inside out. The architecture was clean, ergonomic, with white and grey marble plinths, rounded columns, and elegant stairwells. Yet, the beauty of these ancient Greek cities was somewhat lost due to the way that Alar did not rise in ordered fashion from the ground, but rather grew inward from the outer walls of a sphere. It was as if Athens had been interpreted by a deranged introvert. Alan constantly questioned the architectural integrity of these living spaces. It felt as though the laws of gravity should cause the whole edifice to come crashing down upon them.

But they had other things to worry about. Petruccio was right: Alar had turned into a necropolis. The dead looked from every window, strode every hallway, and congregated in large spaces that might once have been meeting places and forums. Hundreds of them. Maybe even thousands. Where possible, LeBarron led the party via alternative routes to avoid the crowds of slaves. But sometimes, they were forced to cut through.

Alan enjoyed his first experience using The Claw as a melee weapon. A dead slave lunged at him from the shadow of an alleyway, and he threw out his right hand in a back-handed sweep. The Claw's talons passed through flesh and bone with disgusting ease, reducing the slave's head to ribbons of cartilage, nerve-endings, and wet flesh. An electrical charge then passed through the slave, and it collapsed to the floor, first twitching like a mindless bug, then falling still. Unlike the others, Alan did not need to dismember his enemies to finish them off. The Claw's magic quelled their animating principle and left them husks.

Exhilarated by his kill, Alan had almost failed to notice the second slave lurching from the other direction. It was only when a dark, quiet voice had spoken in his head, speaking the urgent word *Turn!* that he had perceived his danger. Pivoting, he thrust out The Claw, punching clean through the slave's ribs with the ease of tearing paper. The slave's groan became a gargled shriek as currents of energy discharged. Alan smelled burning meat. The slave keeled over, a gaping rend in its chest. Bloodsoaked, The Claw gleamed even more beautifully.

As they fled through the shadowy corridors of the underwater city, Alan's mind raced faster than his feet. He appeared to have two new voices in his head, not including his own mental chatter.

The first voice was one that had started up the moment he had arrived upon the black planet. It was the softer of the two voices, the one that had told him to *Turn* when the slave attacked from behind, and the one that had comforted him when he first donned The Claw. What had it said? *I am that which lies dreaming within you.* He had initially thought that voice was the voice of Carcosa itself, its spirit. But now he wondered if it was something else, something that had been awakened inside him as a result of coming here.

Then there was the second voice, a more recent addition. Unlike the first voice, which very clearly resided in Alan's head,

this voice seemed to come from outside him, and when it spoke, he could not distinguish it from a foreign speaker. *In that way, it's more like a schizophrenic voice* . . . That thought sent a chill through him.

This voice was aggressive. Twice it had told him to kill LeBarron. Alan had known intrusive thoughts—every person had them. The urge to laugh at a funeral was human to the core. Yet, he had never before experienced those intrusive thoughts as powerful external voices, as *commands*. That scared him more than a little.

The second voice additionally had started later than the first, and Alan was sure there was only one explanation for its origin: The Claw itself.

This led to a number of terrifying possibilities: The Claw could be sentient, with a mind of its own that was now indissolubly linked to Alan's; The Claw could be amplifying his own repressed thoughts and desires; The Claw could be infected, and that infection was causing aberrations in his brain. None of the options left particularly optimistic outcomes.

As another slave stood before Alan, he raised The Claw and brought it down in a swipe that left eye-searing imprints of yellow upon the cornea. The slave disintegrated, exploding into chunks of burnt gore. The Claw was now sheathed in fried blood. Alan was beginning to like the smell—and to love the power. He had been forced to watch LeBarron, Cali, and Petruccio risk their lives for him on the journey through the marshes of Yhtill. He had been called a gimp, a cripple, and felt powerless to help. Even in his life before, on Earth, he had never been much of a fighter. Now, he pitied those that stood against him. A savage grin split his features.

Be careful, Alan. Pride cometh before the fall.

The first voice, at once stern yet sympathetic.

"Who are you?" Alan whispered.

I am that which lies dreaming within you, came the familiar reply.

"What does that mean?"

Silence within.

Alan cursed. He would have to figure all of this out on his own, no doubt. He could not tell the others. They already feared for his sanity, quite rightly so, and to inform them he had multiple voices warring for dominance inside his mind would not dissuade them of the notion.

"We have to cross one more dome before we reach Parliament," LeBarron called back to them as he sprinted ahead. For a dying man, he moved like a panther. Petruccio could barely keep pace.

They ran through a narrow connecting passageway. There were slaves, but most of them lay propped against the walls, limbless or gutless, too damaged to even move, though horrid life still stirred in their pupil-less eyes. Alan wondered whether they were self-conscious of the torture of their existence or whether the soul had long ago fled—leaving only the animated meat.

"Bring them mercy."

Alan flexed The Claw, a sheath of lighting appearing, and with a cry taking off the head of the nearest slave in a single crackling swipe.

When he turned, Cassilda was looking back at him, concern etched across her delicate features. Petruccio and LeBarron continued to hurry ahead.

"What art thou doing?" she said.

"I thought you . . . I thought you said . . . " He gritted his teeth. The voice had once again deceived him. It sounded so *real*. He knew, now, that there was a sentience behind The Claw; it was testing the waters, seeing what he would and wouldn't do upon command. *I must question everything,* he thought, *I must weigh options before action*. He wondered how he could be certain this thought originated from his own mind. Indeed, what was the mind? How did one define it? Alan trembled. He felt close to tears. Was he coming apart at the seams? Just when he thought he had been made whole. Just when he thought he had found and forged a new life.

Cassilda extended a hand. A bloodied bride whose face yet shone with light purer than flame. They had kissed under the Black Star, but she *was* that star, the continuity of the heavens, the fixed point by which he could navigate, the sanity he so desperately needed.

"Alan," she said, softly.

He took her hand.

"Come on," she said.

She led him away, and just in time. Hordes of slaves followed them down the passageway, their shambling gait surprisingly rapid, not slowed by hunger, tiredness, or sleep. Alan wondered—

as he raced hand-in-hand with Cassilda down the tunnel—what would happen when they all eventually tired. He and the others, even Cassilda, would need to rest at some point. Would the dead corner them? Would they be overrun? Perhaps they could escape before then.

They emerged into what LeBarron said was the final dome of the Living District. What he had failed to mention was that this one was far larger than any of the others. The dome must have spanned many miles across, and stood perhaps a mile high, containing within it not just the clusters of buildings rising up the sides of the dome like ancient birdhouses, but also a central eight-sided tower echoing the Tower of Winds in Athens, only that it rose to the height of a skyscraper. Balconies jutted from it in regular intervals, resembling protruding lower jaws. Once they had been hung with lush vegetation and ivy—perhaps even the fabled grapes of desire—but now they were rotten waterfalls of diseased hair. The architecture of the building, indeed of Alar in general, had been intended to convey splendour. But in un-death, it resembled the horror of a mausoleum reared by an insane builder. Balconies hung with corpses that were not dead. Arched windows full of broken glass gaped blackly like mouths filled with jagged teeth. Blood ran in tributaries down once-gilded steps.

"What is that? At the tower's peak?" Petruccio said, pointing with his axe, the head of which was caked with gouts of blood. A dismal light shone in one of the tower's upper windows, resembling a cyclopean eye, flashing orange, then yellow, then red.

"The necromancer," Cassilda answered. "I can taste her magic." She stared at LeBarron. "Thou art more reckless than even I first surmised. I feel her power like a cancer eating away at the air. Thou say'st thou art in love with this creature?"

"No." LeBarron showed teeth. "We were once together. She had not at that time gone so far . . . "

"She was still a practitioner of dark arts," Petruccio growled. "You might as well admit to having dated a pure poison."

"I see before me murderers, perverts, madmen, obsessives, and yet prior to this moment I cast no aspersions upon you; I did not condemn you with judgement!"

"We do not condemn thee, LeBarron," Cassilda said. "Thou condemnest thyself."

LeBarron threw back his head in a raucous laugh Alan thought

was most ill-advised in their present situation. More dead were already beginning to lumber towards them. Those in the corridor behind were gaining.

"You are full of petty wisdoms, *princess*. Yet your sentiments are hollow. You despise mummers, yet we are guardians of the true wisdom of the human heart: something you lack miserably."

Cassilda turned away from the actor, wrapping her arms around herself defensively—or perhaps she was fighting to contain a destructive outburst. Alan would have found it strangely charming if he hadn't been so outraged by LeBarron's insult, and if he hadn't been so aware of the danger they were in.

"We don't have time for this," Alan snapped. "I shall have words with you later, LeBarron. But we must keep moving."

Sour looks were exchanged all round, but they followed his lead. LeBarron set off down a long stairwell. Two undead slaves appeared at the bottom. LeBarron's sword flashed and one fell. Petruccio brained the other with his axe. They hurried on. The baleful eye of the tower seemed to follow them, though Alan knew it was an illusion. He wondered why the light was changing hue—was there some kind of fire or conflagration up there? Or was he seeing magical power similar to the light that had enveloped Cassilda when she fought with Cali?

All his past encounters with magic had been musical. Cassilda sang when she wished to invoke her power. Cali played her mystical instrument, and also used her voice. But Alar was deathly quiet, like the tomb it had become. What power, then, did this necromancer have? A new type, perhaps.

"This way," LeBarron growled. More and more of the dead were appearing from the shadows of alleys, from behind large pillars, one even came splattering to the ground from a rooftop. LeBarron threaded his way through the crowds into a dark path weaving between rows of houses.

"I'm sure it's this way—a short cut," he muttered.

His tone did not inspire Alan with confidence.

One corpse lurched towards Petruccio and he cut its feet out from underneath it with a brutal horizontal swing. It collapsed mewling. Another opened its mouth, full of blood-flecked teeth and gangrenous gums, and tried to sink its rotten jaws into Cassilda. She side-stepped the creature and lifted her hand. A harsh, almost a-tonal note left her lips and a blade of light formed in the air,

hovering like Macbeth's dagger, only unlike his bloody dudgeon the weapon was forged from pure, translucent gold. Alan smelled ozone, and the air trembled nearby the magical weapon, as though vibrating at a frequency discordant with his fleshly existence. Cassilda's voice quivered as it lifted an octave, piercingly high, and the blade shot forth, spearing through the chest of the foremost undead slave, then through several behind it, slicing throats, tendons, puncturing torsos, and spewing nests of intestine. The slaves collapsed, gore pouring from their wounds.

By the time Cassilda had turned to run, many of them had risen again, dragging broken limbs and entrails behind them.

LeBarron darted down a passageway between a high wall and a row of bleak, empty houses. Once, their artisanal facades might have charmed Alan, but their empty windows reminded him too much of a skull robbed of eyes. Their doors were broken open in many instances. Shattered pottery, glass, and trinkets lay strewn under their feet, slicked with blood.

"No," LeBarron said. "No, no, no, there was a path here!"

They had reached a dead end, a blank and pitiless grey wall rising sheer—without handholds or even groves between its bricks.

"It is the Temple of Namtar all over again!" Petruccio slapped the wall.

The dead poured down the corridor after them, moving faster now that their quarry had slowed, as though sensing they were trapped.

"LeBarron, search for a way!" Alan marched towards the dead, The Claw already charging with tectonic power. His first sweep, like the mauling blow of a tigress, disintegrated three of the dead slaves, their sodden beings unable to withstand the impossibly sharp talons, let alone the thunderous magical discharge. Yellow currents of lightning zagged and swirled around Alan as he fought back the horde, every sweep of his clawed hand ripping flesh, cutting bone, slicing ligaments and musculature. The power was intoxicating, electrifying, almost sexual. He scooped the dead, clagged heart from a chest cavity. He gripped another dead slave's head and crushed it, skull and brains together, with a mere flex of his finger.

"Revel in it, Alan," the dark voice whispered. "But know these are mere dead playthings, not real opponents, not really living. Their lives will sustain you for now, but soon you will crave something oh so sweeter."

"Who are you?" Alan slashed a dead slave vertically, carving him into bloodied ribbons. *Unseamed him from the knave to the chops,* Alan thought, poetry once more filling his brain, though in the whirligig of his aggression he did not utter it aloud. *"Who are you?"*

"I am The Claw. Is that not obvious?"

While Alan punched The Claw through the gut of one dead slave, another came behind him and sank its jaws into his shoulder. He wore only a black robe, and so its teeth easily passed through cloth and into flesh. He screamed. A moment later, the teeth retracted, though the pain remained, and he turned to see Petruccio standing over the slave, hacking off its limbs with his axe.

"Thank you!" Alan said.

The dwarf nodded.

Alan meant his thanks in more ways than one, however. The pain of the bite had brought him back to his senses. The voice had fallen silent once more. *I must conquer my mind . . . I must . . .*

More and more dead were lumbering into the enclosed passage, too many for them to fight even with The Claw.

"Alan!" Cassilda cried.

"Come, Petruccio!"

The two retreated, Alan clutching his shoulder with his good hand, feeling warm blood running between his fingers.

"There's no way out." LeBarron squat by the wall, head in his hands, tears running down his face. So overwrought was his expression he resembled a tragic clown. "I have failed you. I . . . I have killed us all . . . "

Cassilda gritted her teeth.

"Now is not the time for theatrics and soliloquies, LeBarron. How do we get out of here?"

"There is no way out!" LeBarron shrieked, tearing out clumps of his lustrous hair as he did so. For the first time, there was nothing handsome about LeBarron's face, it was as though his tears caused the flesh of his face to melt and slag, dripping down his sleek jawline into a thick puddle beneath; eventually he would be left just a skeleton squatting over a pool of liquid skin. "I remember now," he choked. "This has always been a dead end. The other way was up a set of stairs. That would have allowed us to reach Parliament. We're so *close*."

"Cassilda," Alan said. "Might we fly once more? With your song?"

"They're coming," Petruccio said.

"We can try." Cassilda reached out a hand and clasped Alan's bloody one. They shared a rueful smile.

"Along the shores the cloud waves break," they intoned together. "The twin suns sink beneath the lake. The shadows lengthen—in Carcosa."

"Come on," Petruccio muttered. The dead were almost upon them, gibbering and rapid, chins stained with blood, rotten limbs twitching with excitement.

"Strange is the night where black stars rise, and strange moons circle through the skies—"

A reverberation with the rancid texture of rotten milk cut across their song, silencing both Cassilda and Alan. Such was the depth of the note that blackness took Alan's vision for a few moments. He stumbled and only just managed to catch himself upon the nearby wall. His chest felt fuzzy, as though a few small bones had been shaken loose. He felt the *basso profundo* in his joints, his heart, his lungs, his brain. And something else: he realised that the note had been constantly sounding ever since they set foot in Alar, but only now had it raised in pitch just enough for his ears to be able to detect it. He had been wrong. Scarleth's magic was no new archetype, simply a deeper music.

"There!" Petruccio screamed. "Upon the tower!"

"Her!" LeBarron hissed.

A dark figure, the silhouette of a woman, stood at the apex of the tower. From her pale form, waves of crimson light flowed like the arterial matrix of some foetal god, being formed before their very eyes. The light stabbed into the depths of their eyes and made them gasp in wonder and dread.

Cassilda looked like one drugged and only just emerging from their trip. She staggered and Alan caught her.

"She counters me. I . . . I can't . . . "

"They're here!" LeBarron seemed to have lost his courage, or even knowledge of how to hold a sword, for the dead set upon them and he did not even raise his weapon. Petruccio was the one who acted, his axe flashing, imbedding in the knees of his assailant and toppling them. A few of the other slaves tripped over the one who'd fallen, and their momentum was halted for mere seconds.

"In there!" Petruccio said, pointing towards one of the houses. "Hurry!"

The others scrambled into the house through the open door. Alan was last, turning to take one last look at their enemy. Against the backdrop of the bloody sky she created, unfurling about the black shadow of the necromancer like the thunderheads of Judgement Day, Scarleth stood in sensual robes of silver and red, a black staff in one hand capped with a glowing ruby, her other raised to the heavens as if to call down fire upon their heads. The white-eyed dead were illuminated by the awful crimson light, their gormless idiocy somehow a fitting metaphor for worship, for there was a new queen of Alar, and she gazed down upon them from her high pinnacle like the Harlot of End Times come at last.

Alan threw himself over the threshold, turned, and with the help of Petruccio slammed the door shut, leaning their shoulders against the wood. A moment later they felt unreal weight as the dead threw their bodies against the barrier.

"The bar," Petruccio called, pointing to the wooden mechanism. Alan saw the upright wooden beam and slammed it down, where it locked into place.

LeBarron seemed to have regained some of his composure, for he ran forward with chairs in each hand, piling them up against the door. He and Cassilda returned moments later with a large wooden table. Alan and Petruccio stepped back from the door. They heard fingernails raking the wood, saw the door shuddering on its hinges, but it was made of sterner stuff than modern doors—ancient iron welding and thick rivets—so it held. For now . . .

"The windows!" Alan said.

The glass of one window shattered, and one of the dead tried to climb through. Alan took off his head with a single sweep of The Claw, leaving the air tasting of thunderstorms, iron, and blood. LeBarron angrily kicked away the lifeless head when it rolled under his feet. Alan pushed the headless corpse back out of the window. The others fetched more furniture and applied it to the windows.

"A hammer," Petruccio said. "Get me a hammer. And nails."

With Alan and LeBarron desperately holding the furniture in place—and the dead back—Cassilda and Petruccio searched for the tools, overturning collapsed shelves, raiding lockboxes, sorting through the abandoned life of what had once been a family home.

"They're coming through the other window!" LeBarron left Alan to hold one entrance, drew his sword, and ran to the second window. He cut down a corpse crawling through the narrow

aperture. It collapsed to the floor of the house, missing an arm, but soon began to rise. LeBarron hacked, screaming in frenzy, until only body parts remained.

Still more came. He ran to the window and thrust with his sword, intending to skewer a new slave attempting to come through. One of the dead gripped LeBarron's arm and sank its teeth into his flesh. The actor screamed and dragged his arm away—a wet sound as a mouthful of meat was pulled from its mooring. Bloody teeth marks rimmed a hole the size of a golfball in his forearm. LeBarron cleaved the undead slave's head in twain. He pushed its still grasping corpse back into the throng clamouring outside the window.

"Here!" Cassilda handed hammer and nails to Petruccio, having found them in a lockbox. The dwarf sprinted to the windows and began to slam pieces of broken chair, table, and bookshelf into place over the windows.

After a few more moments of mad panic, they had sealed all the entrances. LeBarron collapsed onto the floor—all the chairs had been used to board up the windows—blood running from his arm in a thick stream.

"What do we do now?" the actor choked.

"We do what we originally came here to do," Alan said, softly. "We formulate a plan."

CHAPTER 12:
DESCENT

AFTER FOUR DAYS' ride without rest or even pause, Haercus arrived at the shores of Lake Hali, drawn by the call of The Claw. The feat would have been impossible for any mortal. But Haercus was far from mortal, now. Though only a shadow of his former being, what he had once been was mighty indeed, and so his shadow was vast, stretching to the very end of possibility and reality.

The armies of Pe'kar were long ago overtaken, marching ponderously as they were and pausing for food and rest. Haercus hadn't slept—had no need of sleep. His gorgonopsid steed did require some measure of sustenance and respite, but not as other creatures did. Its hunger and endurance were such that it could roam for many days before tiring.

Dismounting by the shore, he approached the black waters. Even beneath the numbing, opioid power of the lake, he could sense his beloved Claw. His body ached for its missing piece. The crude contraption clapped to his wrist was nothing more than artifice, mummery, no better than a pirate's wooden leg. He craved to be whole.

He paced towards the edge of the shore. Beyond the lake, south-east, Carcosa sprawled like a ruinous leviathan beached upon the land. Indeed, if Haercus had not met the aberrant soul who painted the city into being, Uboth, he might have believed the city had lurched from the lake onto the shore, a living thing that slowly came to be inhabited.

Even in his unliving state, Hali's vastness impressed itself upon him, more an ocean than a lake, and concealing within it ecosystems, civilisations, and secrets beyond most people's wildest

dreams. Once, Haercus had swam the length of Hali in a competition, never succumbing to its forgetful waters, unlike his competitor who nearly drowned, and, even after they were resuscitated on the shore, knew not their own name. Once, he had gleefully explored Hali's depths with friends and fellow adventurers. Once, he would have burned to uncover further mysteries of the Alarians. But now, none of it concerned him. It was merely another obstacle in the path of his reclamation.

He paused beside a hali-tree. The spindly, almost spider-like birches cast a thin and wiry net over those who stood beneath their branches. One of the trees was smeared with blood. He moved close to the edge of the shore and knelt, his platemail clunking as he did so. Below the skein of the water, he could see a pathway, cleverly concealed, navigable only by foolhardy souls or those with prior knowledge. He followed its direction with eyes that rivalled an eagle's in sharpness and saw the path led to the xanthimums. Someone had used the secret trade route to access Alar. It could only be his enemies, the ones who had taken his hand from him. Haercus smiled beneath his visor. The call of The Claw had shown him the true path.

Straightening, he motioned to his hulking steed, making a circular dance with his fingers. The gorgonopsid, cunning as it was, understood the instruction, letting out a snort of what was perhaps amusement before beginning to patrol the shore, lowering its distended head to the ground to sniff for further scents. If any tried to leave the lake bearing his talisman, the gorgonopsid would chase them down and bring them to Haercus.

Satisfied there was no escape, he began to wade out into the lake. The first shelf dropped sharply, to perhaps waist-height. Most would have been overcome by the cold already, but Haercus felt nothing. The second shelf of the lake was a good deal further out, but it dropped away into an abyss, the infinite and mind-bending depths of Lake Hali, at the bottom of which glimmered the secret city of Alar.

Once, Haercus had been dared to swim to the bottom of the lake holding his breath. He had made it farther down than any swimmer in history before he could go no farther and had to turn back. The pressure upon his lungs was an excruciation he could never forget, matched perhaps only by the pressure that'd built in his ears as tonnes upon tonnes of water began to crush his

muscular body. Worse than either of these, however, had been how his memories slipped from him with every stroke. And not only memories, but sense and being. Sensations fell away. Emotions. The word *I* became a dull sound echoing uselessly in the chamber of his head. What head? The body became a thing of myth. There was only awareness, darkness, and no time. There was a temptation in that void, a bliss he yearned to give way to, and that scared him, for he was Haercus, the mighty, the Right Hand of the Yellow King, a man defined by doing and not being. Why, then, did the prospect of silence and stillness, of consciousness without memory or deeds, so draw him into its black depths? With the last gasp of his selfhood, he had turned and kicked towards the surface.

The memory lived still, yet it held no sway over him. All Haercus could think as he relived those moments from his youth was that he did not need to hold his breath any longer. He did not breathe at all.

Raising one foot over the precipitous blackness, he stepped. In slow motion, he began to fall, the weight of his armour dragging him beneath the surface. There was no panic, no fear. He sank like a leaden stone into the darkness, entombed in ceremonial armour appropriately resembling an atmospheric diving suit.

As the darkness and pressure mounted, he felt fish forms gliding by him, some no larger than a fist, and some so vast that they left currents in their wake. None bothered him, however, sensing perhaps that he was not truly alive.

Down and down he went, heedless of the bleak depths, his eyes open and fixed upon the abyss below, fearless of any gulf, waiting for the darkness to bloom with light and the promise of his beloved Claw.

CHAPTER 13:
SURVIVING

ALAN, LEBARRON, CASSILDA, and Petruccio did not know how long they'd holed up in the house. It could have been two days, maybe three. They'd found food in the cupboards, mainly dried fish specially treated with a kind of preservative salt, though precious little now remained.

None of them had slept much. Cassilda, not at all. She stared stonily at the doors and windows, as if she could see through them to the ravening hordes beyond. Alan had sat with her a few times, wrapping his arms about her shoulders. One time she wept. Another, she petulantly raged. How could a princess of Carcosa suffer such an ignoble end? Other times she merely rest her head against Alan's shoulder. They enjoyed the near-quiet together.

Petruccio drank. He staggered about the house, blustering, spouting a continual stream of ideas, none of which were much effective. There were only two real options. The first was a last stand, where they waited for the dead to break through and tried to use their defensive position to advantage, though as Alan had said, plucking the quote from the dungeons of his mind, "No battle was ever won on the defensive."

"Who said that?" Petruccio asked, frowning.

"Napoleon."

The dwarf drank.

The other option was that they make a break for the submersibles, try to fight their way through the horde. Though Cassilda's powers had been somewhat stymied, they still had The Claw. It was likely not all of them would make it, but some might. However, one obstacle in the way of that plan was LeBarron.

LeBarron's condition had worsened and worsened. He now could hardly stand. He lay with his back to the wall, resembling a mannequin in an abandoned shopfront. Perhaps that's exactly what he was. Now that his body crumbled, The Stranger's spirit was leaving the empty shell. LeBarron's face, so rubbery, elastic, so animated, and so shockingly handsome now resembled a doll's lifeless mask. The perfection of his features had turned into a haunting nightmare of cavernous pits, stretched flesh, and glassy eyes.

At first, Alan had thought it was the bite in his arm. Though Alan had washed it with a pungent alcohol they found in one of the store cupboards—and which Petruccio had finished off in the next few hours—there was undoubtedly an infected tint to the wound, a whitening, as though mould were growing in the suppurated flesh. Alarming though this was, Alan had another theory about LeBarron's rapid decline: this was Pe'kar's bile. LeBarron's prophecy had been proved correct; Alan had only delayed the inevitable in Yhtill.

"A-Alan . . . " LeBarron said.

His voice was barely audible over the crashing of limbs against their paltry defences. One of the wooden boards had broken the other day—who knew exactly how long ago—and now a gangrenous hand penetrated their defences, scrabbling mindlessly at air, hoping one of them would come within reach.

Alan sat next to LeBarron, cross-legged. He felt strangely sanguine about the whole affair. One of the core teachings of the occult path was to let go of the things you couldn't control. So much of Alan's life had felt outside of his control: his maledictions and behaviours had seemed, at times, like a form of possession, some dark spirit entering him and forcing him to obsessively pursue his desires; his employment and career had similarly felt like it was thrust upon him, like he didn't really have any say in the matter—he certainly had little interest in the business of software; and his marriage, the phrase "happy accident" took on a dark connotation if Alan thought long about his ex-wife, Sharon—he'd known from the very first she was not for him, yet he went through with it like a man under hypnosis. In Carcosa, specifically when he finally united himself with The Claw, he had finally experienced a sense of control, of choice. Now trapped, that was slipping away. But he was okay with that. Better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Better to have died knowing freedom.

"Alan," LeBarron said again.

"I am here."

"O, good. Good . . . " LeBarron trailed off. His eyes seemed incapable of focus, as though he drifted between waking and sleeping, though Alan knew it was not sleep that called the actor into the darkness. This was the second time he had seen LeBarron on death's door, and he could not help but think it would be the last. LeBarron roused himself from stupor. "Your wound . . . not troubling you?"

Alan smiled.

"No." It had healed with alarming rapidity. Another gift of The Claw, Alan suspected.

LeBarron nodded. He seemed genuinely happy.

"I'm so sorry, Alan."

"You did not know this would happen."

LeBarron wept.

"I guess she gets the last laugh, after all."

"Scarleth?"

He nodded.

"What happened between you two?"

LeBarron swallowed. Even talking seemed an effort for him.

"She showed me new worlds, Alan. You have to understand, she was a *vision*. We met as mummers. She was a fine actress. She could play Camilla, Cassilda, the Harlot, the Stranger—anyone. I sensed there was something special about her, a greater magic than was in any of our bones, but only later did I discover who she really was . . . " LeBarron's tears ran down his cheeks, silver as scorching stars. "I found her, Alan, in the midst of her grisly work. She kept a secret room, full of her occult experiments. There were body parts. Ingredients you can't imagine. Books written in languages even I can't speak." Alan remembered that LeBarron's shapeshifting powers extended into the realm of speech as well. "But even then, I managed to delude myself. Or she bewitched me, perhaps. No, I should take responsibility, I fooled myself." LeBarron laughed, which soon turned to coughing. Blood stained his lips and chin. "Ah, a bitter irony, Alan. For I began my mummer's life playing the Fool."

"We all begin life playing the Fool," Alan said.

"Quite so. But I was more foolish than most. I convinced myself with the old scientist's lie that the ends justify the means. Her

research was repulsive, but it would lead to greater aims." LeBarron sighed. "But there was no dead lover she wished to revive, Alan, as in the old stories of necromancy. There was no long-lost hero she wished to bring back at the hour of need. No, she was *mad,* Alan. Simply mad. With a will to enslave all life. I played the part of her slave happily for a time. Then I left. I've wondered, since we realised what happened here, whether it was my leaving her that was the final straw of her sanity."

"Don't overburden yourself with that responsibility. She has chosen to do this, of her own free will."

LeBarron smiled.

"Free will. Now there's a magical idea. You would not believe so readily in it if you had met The Stranger."

"I think I already have," Alan said.

LeBarron smiled ear to ear.

"We are all The Stranger in His many guises." A shadow passed across LeBarron's face. He turned and gripped Alan's robes, bringing himself nose to nose with him. Alan smelled death on his breath. "Alan! I saw you in a dream The Stranger sent to me. He told me you would save Carcosa. Free will or no, you must fulfil your destiny. Maybe I'm not the true Stranger. Maybe that is merely a delusion of my ego. But what I know to be true is He came to me, instilled me with this message . . . You! You alone can do this thing! You are the one who is real . . . " LeBarron's eyes went shockingly wide. "It's come to me, the great answer to the riddle. *You are The Stranger, Alan. You."*

Alan's hairs rose. His heart pounded.

"That can't be."

"It is!" LeBarron said, triumphantly. "It must be. And you have come to take your bride once more!"

Alan trembled. The awfulness of what that meant could not be expressed.

"No."

"You may not believe, but I have to believe, or else my life has been in vain . . . " LeBarron descended into hacking coughs, so much blood erupting from his lips it was a wonder he had any left to share. He slumped back against the wall, powerless, once more like a mannequin, pieces of plastic in the image of a man.

"Your life has not been in vain. You have done more than I ever could. Without you, we would be dead, just like you said. Whatever

strength remains in me, I will use for the good of Carcosa." *If we can get out of here alive,* Alan thought.

LeBarron smiled dreamily.

"It's the mark of a great actor, you know," he whispered.

"What?"

"A good death scene."

Alan laughed. LeBarron did not laugh with him. He was still and quiet as a stone.

"LeBarron?"

He did not answer. Could not.

Alan hung his head.

"He is dead?"

Alan turned and saw Cassilda stood in the doorway to the bedroom. She had changed out of her bloodied bridal dress, wearing a toga fashioned from white cloth. The garment was humble, yet that served only to augment her slender beauty, the refinement of her features—so fine in fact Alan doubted any sculptor possessed the dexterity to capture them—the cascade of her golden-blonde hair, the lamplike eyes, flecked with ruby.

Alan nodded.

"You look beautiful," he said.

"I wanted to die as I am. Not as I was."

Alan smiled sadly.

Petruccio staggered from the kitchen counter to where they gathered. Woozy eyes examined the dead LeBarron. The dwarf finished off the dregs of a bottle. Alan was fairly sure it had to be the very last of the alcohol in the house.

"What now?" he muttered. "I can't think of anything."

Cassilda paced towards them, kneeling by LeBarron's corpse.

"We should choose," she said. "Die as we want to. Fighting."

She met Alan's eyes as she spoke, and he knew that she had heard much of his conversation with LeBarron, but if she believed his crazed final words, she gave no indication.

"Yes!" Petruccio said. "Yes, we'll make the bitch regret ever having set her dogs loose upon us!"

Alan's mind felt like a bomb had detonated there.

"That's it . . . "

"What?" Cassilda and Petruccio said in unison.

"Regret." Alan reached over and softly closed LeBarron's eyes. "We shall get an audience with our enemy."

Alan bent and scooped up LeBarron. Once, he would have found the weight of a full-grown man unbearable, but his weeks travelling in Carcosa, and augmented by The Claw, had made him stronger than he could have believed.

"Alan, tell us your plan," Cassilda said, rising as Alan staggered towards the front door.

"I'm going to make her an offer she cannot refuse. Pull away the boards."

"You are mad!" Petruccio said.

"A moment ago you were both prepared to die gloriously in battle," Alan remarked, more than a little wryly. "What's the difference?"

"Well for one we won't have The Claw fighting with us!" the dwarf said, then let out a huge burp. He could barely stand straight.

"Fighting is pointless, and we all know it. We'll die sooner or later. But this way we stand a chance."

Cassilda and Petruccio exchanged a glance.

"We've followed you this far, Claw-bearer," Petruccio said, and that was all, enough to tell them where his loyalties lay.

Cassilda's face was a near-unreadable mask, enigmatic as the Mona Lisa. Perhaps a half-smile curled her lips, perhaps it was desire that made her eyes fix unblinkingly on him. Perhaps a terrible knowing, a foresight gifted to those of royal blood. He could not be sure.

"Being with you brings an endless bounty of surprises, Alan Chambers," she said.

"I aim to please." Alan grinned. "Petruccio, the door, on the count of three?"

"Yes." The dwarf moved over to the door. He readied his axe in one hand and placed his other upon the bar.

"One."

"Two."

"Three."

He lifted the bar and a colossal weight slammed against the door, splintering it. The battering-ram force came again and this time the lock snapped, showering Alan and Petruccio with metal. The door swung violently open and the dead, at last having peeled the shell off their desired prey, greedily poured into the opening.

Every instinct told Alan to run. Every fibre of his being longed to turn tail and run for his life—or else to throw himself upon them

with the burning Claw, which even now began to smoulder with dark energies in response to his fear.

But he held firm, standing his ground. He opened his mouth and spoke in the voice of an orator.

"Scarleth! Hear me through the ears of your slaves! Your lover is slain. We will bring his body to you, yours to revive and treasure forever—is that not what you wanted?" Cassilda's face contorted in horror at Alan's words, but she managed to hold her peace. The dead slowed as he spoke, their ferocious charge halted. Some of them seemed to be cocking their heads, as though listening, though Alan knew it was not they that heard him, but the puppeteer. "If you do not grant us safe passage . . . " Alan knelt, draping LeBarron over one knee, freeing his right hand and raising it high. Energy crackled about the talons. "I shall rend him into a thousand pieces so that he might *never* be yours!"

The dead held still. The only sound was Petruccio, Cassilda, and Alan's ragged breathing. White eyes stared at them, and Alan knew they were windows through which another pair of eyes gazed.

Slowly, the dead shuffled, moving until they formed two columns. Like the sentinels of a royal chamber, they stood upright—or upright as they could with their deformities and injuries—and impassively fixed their eyes upon nothingness. Slowly, Alan rose. He knew he had to be the first, to set the example. He strode forward, carrying LeBarron. None of the dead slaves stirred. It was as though he were not there, or else that they had become mere features of the landscape.

Outside the house, all of the dead—thousands—were arrayed in the same fashion, forming an eerie pathway towards the glowering tower, upon the peak of which a shadow watched them. The ruby of her staff flashed intermittently, sending pulses of crimson across the dome. Her robes blew in a wind that did not exist. He could make out little detail of her face, only that she was a devastating beauty.

Alan continued to walk down the corridor formed by the dead, Cassilda and Petruccio at his heels. He met the shadow's gaze. The stare was held for many moments, then, as though satisfied with some revelation gleaned from the exchange, the necromancer turned and withdrew from sight.

The trio continued towards the ominous tower. Alan could not help but think of a funeral procession. And he, the coffin bearer.

CHAPTER 14
THE FIRES

THE DOORWAY WAS gifted with a face: a curmudgeonly, stubborn, arrogant face that Cali would give a kingdom to destroy. She held herself in check. The ancient, sentient doors of the palace were well loved by her father. And they had their uses, for they could deny entry even to one who had the correct key or password—such as a thief who had stolen or learned the methods of entering. They were not totally infallible: a skilled mummer could deceive them with illusion-craft, and chameleon robes would throw them into confusion, but largely they provided an additional failsafe should the palace be breached.

This door's name was Hephaiton, and he guarded the entrance to a sacred smithy. He was one of the oldest doors, remembering the days of Haercus and the old heroes. Some said that Hephaiton was the first door painted by Uboth when he had used the oneiric pigment to spell Carcosa into being. He was carved from a black substance that loosely resembled onyx, though it was altogether more porous, living. His features were terrifying, for though they aped the human, they deviated into bestial realms. His eyes were like a neanderthal's, buried so deep in his skull it was a wonder he did not see with tunnel vision. His teeth were needle fangs. His brow was studded with a third eye.

"Greetings, Princess Cali." His voice was gravel in a cement mixer.

She bowed politely.

"Greetings, Mighty Hephaiton. I seek entry into the Fires."

Under one arm she carried a box in which Eric had placed the forbidden materials she required. He had obtained them only just in time, for the latest reports from the scouts suggested that

Pe'kar's armies were only a day away. If she worked tirelessly, she might be able to complete it before the siege began.

Her other plans had all fallen into place. Roland had proved exceedingly pliable, especially after she seduced him a second time, reducing him to outright tears after she had milked him dry. She wondered why he so loved punishment, whether it was experience or some defect of bloodline that caused him to be weak. She had always believed those who were strong in battle must also be strong in mind, yet Roland she saw as an anomaly to that rule. If her mind were not occupied with bigger aims, she might have been tempted to investigate this puzzle.

"No access is granted to the Fires of Manifestation, save by order of the Yellow King." The door sucked in a cyclonic breath. "*DEATHLESS BE HE!*" The bellowing hallelujah shook the floor with its volume.

Cali smiled, concealing her wrath.

"I have His approval."

Hephaiton made a face as though he were chewing cud.

"Then provide adequate documentation."

It was all Cali could do not to shriek. This was not the first time the mind-numbingly torpid door had obfuscated her designs. Hephaiton was perhaps the one being in all Carcosa, save her father, whom she felt powerless to influence. The greatest warriors, magi, scholars, politicians, all fell before her eventually. She was splendour incarnate. Yet, crusty old Hephaiton cared nothing for her physical nor mental charms, despised her eloquence, abhorred her haste. Sometimes, she almost believed the door took pleasure in frustrating her plans, though surely Uboth would not have been so sadistic as to paint a door that did not deign to be opened?

"We are at war, Hephaiton. My glorious father does not have time to issue documentation for small needs."

The door wheezed.

"The Fires of Manifestation are no small matter, child . . . " The door patronised all souls this way, excepting her father. *"With their energies, one might craft weapons capable of overthrowing even those touched with the divine. Such power is not to be distributed to the riff-raff."*

"But with due respect, Hephaiton, I am not riff-raff, am I? You know me. I am Princess Cali, daughter of Hastur, The Yellow King—"

"*EVERLASTING HIS NAME!*"

Cali felt like a gunpowder keg.

"Yes, everlasting His name indeed, and in His name, I bid thee open!"

Hephaiton considered her remark, all three of his eyes closing, his face becoming a sepulchral and contemplative image. Cali had to exert all of her considerable willpower to stop her foot from tapping impatiently. The door's eyes opened after a few moments. He inhaled a deep breath.

"No."

Cali felt her face turning white with rage. She could hardly speak.

"Let her in, Mighty Hephaiton. She really does have the authority of the King—*Hideous and Bright is He!"*

Cali turned and saw Eric walking down the corridor, his motley garb making him appear the eminent fool of the city, and yet she hated to admit she was positively delighted to see him in that moment.

He looked less the fool these days than he once had, partly because his training with Cali had awakened dormant musculature. No one in Carcosa had an easy life, the city was a danger even to those it protected, like a psychotic mother fearing eternally for their child's safety, but Eric certainly had enjoyed more comforts than most at the heart of the royal family. Now, his cross-gartered, patchwork tights showed bulging thigh- and calf-muscles. His flamboyant tunic, this one purple and red sleeved, stretched over a barrel chest. His face had acquired a more heroic mould too, though that, Cali was sure, was more due to a change within than without. He had made for a surprisingly adept student. Of course, she could kill him in an instant—there were forbidden techniques she had learned in the lands of Blue Light and would never share with any man or woman—but a few times in sparring he had proved more than a walkover, which in the brief space of time they had practiced together was fairly extraordinary progress.

If we had more time, I could mould Eric into my champion, she mused. Then she discarded the thought. No more champions. She would never again put so much responsibility on her pawns as she had on Alan. She had thereby created a monster.

The door contemplated Eric's pronouncement.

"*Very well.*"

To Cali's utter disbelief, accepting the word of the motley courtier, the wise door swung ponderously open, a gush of heat and smoke billowing out from behind his facade, stinging Cali's eyes and prickling her flesh. She imagined primitives of Earth, stood where she stood, would see the doorway to Hell. But the Fires of Manifestation were not destructive unless the wielder willed it—they were the flames of creation.

Cali turned one last time to look at Eric. He smiled, as though he read that she was impressed. He nodded once, a soft smirk still making his features those of another more handsome man, then calmly strode away.

You have ensorcelled him, she thought. *But perhaps he has ensorcelled you a little too.* He was certainly much more interesting than Roland. For all Roland's ferocity and bravado, he was the stereotype of the hardshell concealing fragile contents. Eric reminded Cali of Alan: he'd seemed a pander and a creep upon the surface, yet in spending more time with him she had discovered unexpected character. *You must cut off all ties with him. You cannot make the same mistake.*

Smiling, she stepped forward into the wreathing smog that exhaled like foul breath from the black door. With a groaning sigh, the door began to swing shut behind her.

With every step she took, the heat mounted, scouring her to the point of near agony. The room was a dancing confusion of orange light seen through a pall of thick white smoke. Acrid on the tongue, the smoke nearly choked her. Presumably there was some chimney that vented these noxious fumes, but still it cleaved thickly to the room. As the white vapours coiled and uncoiled, swirled and gyred, she saw not air but liquid: a milky inchoate substance from which all potential sprang forth. Perhaps the universe had resembled this milky froth at the beginning of Creation. Her father said he was not present at the making of the world, but somehow, she disbelieved Him. Her theory that the universe was partially created by those observing it, a theory she had once foolishly shared with Alan Chambers, thereby granting him further clues as to the occult power within him, indicated that *someone* had been present at the making of the cosmos. Perhaps, she mused, her father had forgotten. Such was His lifespan that a little senility was perfectly forgivable—if not His many other sins.

Her skin had already begun to perspire with humidity. Her

eyes watered constantly from the acerbic fumes. She had to keep her breathing shallow and even, lest she inhale too much foul-smelling smoke.

At last, the light began to intensify, flickering and dancing at the heart of the mystery, and then she beheld the Fires of Manifestation in full—no veil between her and living imagination. The Fires burned in a bronze-coloured brazier stood upon a bare stone plinth. No sigils were engraved upon its surface. No ornate designs distinguished either brazier or dais. At the heart of creation, all was purity. Cali smiled as she noted the presence of the five elements: the nameless wood at the bottom of the brazier, which would burn eternally, and from which she had once fashioned the neck and body of her ecg'tar, fetching the still smouldering faggots out of the fire and fashioning them—as her palms blistered—into an instrument of immortal power; fire, of course, blazing yellow, orange, indigo, and purple in a roaring column; earth, in the form of the humble stone plinth; air and metal, in the vapour surrounding them, and in the brazier itself; and lastly water, in the sweat sheening her body, in the tears rolling down her cheeks.

She laid down the box of materials. Then, she cast off her golden dress, removed her rings and anklets and necklaces. She stood naked before the raging pyre, the firelight kissing her onyx flesh and impressing shadowy forms upon it, the suggestions of gods that had yet to be born.

"In the name of demon and man, god and mortal, I call thee forth most holy flames to inhabit this vessel and bring forth my manifested Desire into the world."

The flames hissed, spat, coiled. Yes, they were alive in all senses of the word. They heard her plea.

She stooped, taking up the box, and opening it to reveal her dark materials.

The rib of a dragon.

The feathers of a three-eyed crow.

The spittle of the Demon King himself, contained in a small glass vial.

The wood of a tree struck by lightning.

Stone stolen from The Cave of Wonder and dipped in the blood of innocents.

String fashioned from the hair of a centaur.

"With these, I seek to fashion the weapon of a great huntsman," she intoned, presenting the materials before the fire. "With these, I seek to fashion a bow worthy of the great starry archer Orion, of the immortal huntswoman Artemis, of the magically-handed Arjuna! Let this be a weapon no living thing can escape. Let its arrows fly unerringly to the ends of the black planet. Let the horizon fear the coming of my bolts. Instil inspiration in me, O flames, that I might forge the dart of Death himself!"

With that, the Fires roared, exploding upward like an erupting volcano from the brazier and overspilling onto the ground. Cali screamed as the flames washed over her, drenched her.

But there was no pain or harm, only an energy so potent even her strong body could barely contain it. Vibrating at this new frequency of untrammelled potential, her mind a pyre, her soul a bonfire, she set to work fashioning a weapon that would bring the life of one immortal to an end.

CHAPTER 15
THE AUDIENCE

THEY CLIMBED MORE than a thousand steps, snaking their way up through the now deserted tower with only the dead for company. The burden of LeBarron weighed heavily upon Alan, and several times he had to stop and rest. The others offered to help, but Alan felt it had become his responsibility, his cross to bear.

With aching feet, they ascended the tower's many stories. Through open doorways they glimpsed atrocities: mangled body parts spread over once luxurious bedding—the remains of those too destroyed to be brought back to life—the dead feasting upon near-liquid offal; other rooms seemed given over to more occult purposes. Chains were affixed to the ceiling, reminding Alan of the manacles that had bound him during the Ritual of Five, what felt like a lifetime ago, when he had thought of Cali as his guide, his goddess, and not his mortal enemy. Hanging from these chains were men and women, stripped naked, strange marks written in blood upon their flesh, the cuts upon their bodies forming elegant yet alien patterns, their entrails arranged in configurations that resembled geometries Alan could not correlate to any known system of magic he had explored.

The higher they climbed, the stranger the visions afforded by glimpses through the doorways. Bodies lay arranged in patterns, six- and five- and seven-pointed stars, limbs sometimes robbed from one corpse and affixed to another to complete the design. In a bizarre way, it comforted Alan to know some people in this city of corpses were *actually* dead.

At last, they reached the final level, which ascended to the rooftop garden. With ragged breaths and weak legs, Alan climbed

the last stairwell, and emerged into the open air which though not fresh—nothing in this dead and underwater city could be—was better than the clogged corridors of the bloodbath tower.

Above them, the dome's ceiling seemed to close that they could almost touch it. A vast darkness like that of the night sky waited beyond it, occasionally lit by silver flashes of form and scale.

The garden was withered, though one white flower still bloomed there. Trees stood shorn of branches. Grass hung sere and drooping. The flowers were rotten. The necromancer, Scarleth, stood at the other side of the garden, contemplating the lone surviving flower with what seemed all of her concentration.

It was easy to see why LeBarron had fallen for her. She was a deadly beauty, milk-skinned, wide-hipped, her flowing robes split at the thigh so as to allow them view of her strong, supple legs. The front of her robe parted in a deep V. *Bearing her heart to the world,* Alan thought, *daring any to strike at it.* Her hair was bronze, with flecks of gold. About her neck, a black choker both drew attention to her long, elegant neck—inviting one to grip it in the heat of passion—but also seemed a joke, for her business was death, and the choker resembled the marks of a noose. Her lips shone ruby red, perhaps painted with blood. Her eyes were amethysts.

Cassilda and Petruccio stood just behind Alan, warily eyeing the sorceress. When Alan caught Petruccio's eye, he knew the dwarf was thinking the same thing as him, that LeBarron's temptation was more than understandable.

The necromancer dragged her gaze—seemingly with difficulty—from the perfect flower and regarded them. She said nothing, which unsettled and surprised Alan, for he'd expected grand speeches and self-importance. Instead, she just watched them, as though they were of equal curiosity and insignificance to her as that white plant.

"LeBarron is dead," Alan said, lamely. He did not know how else to begin. He risked a few, short streps forward, knelt, and gently lay the body of the actor on the ground.

The necromancer smiled. Her teeth were lupine.

"I have little interest in that narcissist," Scarleth said, demurely. "The only remarkable thing about him was his oversized cock. Ah, you blush. I presume you have seen it in action. Did he fuck you in the arse too? He liked both, you know."

Alan had no idea what to say.

"Then why did'st thou call off thy slaves?" Cassilda said.

Scarleth's eyes flickered to Cassilda, though so briefly it looked more like a nervous tic than a real inspection.

"Ah, a daughter of old Hastur," Scarleth said. "I thought I smelled your taint here." Scarleth giggled. "Pun intended."

Cassilda gritted her teeth but decided against rebuke. Alan found it strange to see Cassilda hesitant. She had fearlessly fought against Cali even though Cali was evidently the more powerful combatant, yet here she held back, afraid.

"I let you live because whilst I care *nothing* for that dirty old cocksucker there . . . " She wrinkled her nose as she looked at LeBarron's corpse. "I've become *very* interested in this one here."

She pointed at Alan. He felt his heart thud against his ribcage, as though it were trying to evade her pointing finger.

"The one with the magical hand," Scarleth whispered.

Slowly, the necromancer paced toward them. As she approached, Alan heard a sound similar to the throb of a fridge, tremendous voltage passing through cables nearby. He realised it was her staff, crowned with a ruby. The weapon emitted a ferocious pulse of energy that even one in the infancy of magical knowledge could detect. His hairs stood on end.

Cassilda went to step between Alan and the necromancer, but to Alan's surprise Petruccio gripped the princess and pulled her back. When Cassilda looked down angrily at him, he just shook his head. It could have meant many things. *Not now, bide your time,* or *let her have what she wants*. Whatever Cassilda interpreted from the gesture, she straightened and held back.

Scarleth now stood just a few feet from Alan, separated by LeBarron's body. She prodded it with her foot. Then a smile split her devastating face.

Cassilda's was a beauty of delicacy and elegance, small and perfectly formed features giving her an elfin attraction. Cali's beauty was the reverse: pure sensuality, fullness, well-endowed goddesshood.

But Scarleth's was third type of beauty, and apt considering she had once been LeBarron's lover. It was the beauty of a Hollywood starlet, a woman of death-defying magnificence and unbridled charisma. Every feature was tapered, trimmed, enhanced, and therefore a sharpness to her looks that Alan found

simultaneously intriguing and repulsive. Her cheekbones could cut glass. Her chin was a dagger-point. Her eyes glittered like the lit wick of dynamite.

She circled Alan, placing one hand upon his chest. He felt his breathing grow shallow.

"Who are you, Claw-wielder?"

"I do not rightly know."

Scarleth laughed.

"Curioser and curioser. You have tumbled down the rabbit hole like little Alice, haven't you?"

Alan's eyes widened. Scarleth completed her circle and stood in front of him once more.

"You're from . . . "

"Earth. Yes. How is the old bird? I came here as a seeker of knowledge. And what knowledge I found, Man With No Name!" She laughed. Throughout their exchange, Cassilda gritted her teeth so hard it was audible to Alan.

"Forgive my interruption," Petruccio said, slurring his words slightly, sodden with Desire-wine as he was. "But does that knowledge include the whereabouts of the Oneiric pigment?"

Scarleth raised a perfectly trimmed eyebrow.

"My, my, you are ambitious for one so short."

Petruccio's expression soured, but he saved himself by then performing a mock bow, which seemed to delight the necromancer. She clapped her hands and laughed again.

"What a strange trio you are! In truth, I have become lonely, of late." Her eyes flashed to Alan. "There is no one left in Alar to hold a good conversation with . . . "

"And may I ask what happened to cause this . . . change." Alan gestured to the city at large.

Scarleth's eyes bored into his.

"I did, my dear Man With No Name. And I will tell you why, as I have so lacked conversation these last few weeks." She turned away from them and walked back to the other side of the garden. She placed one sculpted leg upon the garden's wall, which rose only to hip-height, and leaned forward, peering over the edge. Alan glanced at Petruccio, who had his axe at the ready. Should they chance a sneak attack? Surely this was a trap, too easy . . .

"This city was rotten long before the dead ruled it," Scarleth said. Her voice had changed, deepening, vibrating their sternums

with power. A dark red light shone from the ruby at the top of her staff. “I was a physician, you know. I bet LeBarron never told you that. I wanted to save lives. But the council disapproved of my methods.” She spat. “They don’t understand science, like we do.” She was speaking to Alan now, and their shared origins. “They don’t understand that to make progress you have to experiment, and you have to make sacrifices. I tried to ensure none of my explorations hurt anyone, at least not intentionally. And all of my subjects were volunteers, people with incurable conditions, people who would do anything for even the slightest chance that I could succeed and restore them to life.” Scarleth’s voice had become a whisper, yet still the magical current beneath imbued it with a bone-shaking force. “The council cared nothing for my progress nor my scientific principles nor my morality. They burned my laboratory to the ground when I would not desist. They destroyed my research . . . ” Scarleth turned. Her eyes were purple coals burning with the ferocity of suns. “So I had to turn to other means.”

“The pigment?” Petruccio said, hopeful.

Scarleth shook her head.

“Whoever told you the pigment dwells here is a fool, little dwarf.”

“I thought so,” Petruccio said.

Amidst all the emotions Alan was feeling—terror, uncertainty, a little hopelessness—he found sympathy for the artist as well, for once again he had been sent on a wild goose chase. The quiet way he’d accepted this defeat pained Alan.

Scarleth walked back towards them.

“I cannot give you the pigment. But I can give you another gift. You and her. You may go free from Alar. But there is a condition . . . ” Her blazing eyes fixed on Alan. “*He* must stay.”

“No!” Cassilda hissed, the word torn involuntarily from her lips.

Scarleth only smiled.

“I admire your passion, little princess. And therefore, I will not regard that as your final answer. The choice is this: either you die here, and I claim this man as my own. Or you live by walking away. Think it over.” Her wolfish grin dazzled with the sexual promise of a pornstar. “I’ll give you some time.”

“I need no time,” Alan snarled. He raised The Claw. “You will let us go, now, or *you* will join the dead.”

Scarleth did not blink or flinch.

"Go on, then. Try your little toy on me."

Alan roared, currents of power surging through his hand. The sinister voice within him rejoiced.

"Yes. Kill . . . KILL!" Did Alan say those words himself, or did he simply hear them?

Alan threw The Claw forward and a blast erupted from his palm. Phosphorous energy snaked towards Scarleth—xanthous, wounding to the eyes—and crashed against her. There was a miniature explosion of concussive force and the dome's glass groaned. The tower shivered.

But when the light had died, Scarleth stood unharmed. Her staff glowed terribly bright.

"The Claw is not the only talisman of power, little man," the necromancer said, her grin wide enough to devour planets whole. "And overconfidence weakens the spirit."

She swept her staff forward, and, mirroring Alan's yellow serpents of lightning, red eels slithered along the ground. When they struck Alan, he instantly collapsed. The agony was transcendental, invading every atom of his being at once, causing him to writhe and twist, to howl and shriek like a little child stung by a cloud of hornets.

"Let him go!" Cassilda screamed.

Scarleth only smiled.

Cassilda's eyes blazed and she rose into the air, a whirlwind forming around her, ribbons of white light encircling her like the rings of Saturn. She stormed forward, but Scarleth raised one hand, flicking her fingers, and Cassilda was thrown violently back, somersaulting, nearly toppling over the tower's precipice. Only Petruccio saved her, reaching out and gripping her wrists with his immense strength at the very last moment, dragging her back to solid ground.

"Thank you!" Cassilda gasped.

Alan still screamed, but now he was rising, The Claw sending a surge of energy through his bloodstream equal to the agony he experienced. Yellow light blasted from his taloned fingertips, eyes, and mouth.

"A fight it is then!" Scarleth said, joy lifting her voice.

Alan charged, the magical red eels that bound him dissipating. He raised The Claw and swung it down. The bladed talons were

met by Scarleth's black and unbreakable staff. A thunderous noise reverberated across the dome. Yellow and red light danced, erupting from the point of contact, zigzagging away and then exploding midair, showering the tower in an apocalyptic lightshow.

Crackling power simmered between the two talismans and their wielders.

Alan gritted his teeth, pushed with all his might, trying to break Scarleth's defence, the talons inching closer to her face. She laughed and licked her lips.

Faster than Alan could respond, Scarleth struck with the butt of the staff. He felt teeth loosen and his jaw crack. Blood flew from his mouth. Scarleth swung the ruby crown of the staff down in a savage overhead swing. He raised The Claw and only just caught it in time. But again, the tail end of the staff snapped out, striking him in the groin. He howled in pain and staggered backwards, feeling like his testicles had either been shattered or pushed up into his torso.

The staff was a more versatile weapon than his Claw. She had reach and greater variability in her modes of attack. He knew if he struck, nothing could withstand his weapon's power, but landing a blow might be harder than it seemed.

An axe sailed past Alan's ear and Scarleth's staff glowed bright, sending the woodcutter's axe careening off and over the lip of the tower. Petruccio cursed.

Cassilda came forward once again.

"Together, Alan. Not alone."

They exchanged a brief look, a brief smile and acknowledgement. He nodded.

Scarleth spat.

"How saccharine . . . "

Cassilda rose, energy billowing about her.

"I'll defend you, Alan," she whispered. "Focus on the attack."

Alan leapt forward, like the Hyrcan tiger, his Claw flashing. Scarleth parried the blow with her indomitable wand, lashing back out. This time her staff rebounded off a wall of white light. Alan slashed again, and this time Scarleth leapt backwards, only narrowly avoiding the vicious talons, the lightning crackling against her flesh, leaving her with a burn mark upon the skin of her sternum so boldly revealed by her robe. Scarleth snarled.

"Two against one? Now that is hardly fair."

Scarleth raised his staff in two hands and the red jewel pulsed once.

Groaning dead clambered up the stairs.

"I'll hold them!" Petruccio said, though he had no weapon with which to do so. He picked up a slab of rock, and as the blank-eyed faces of the undead slaves emerged up the stairwell, Petruccio cracked the stone over their heads and sent them tumbling back.

Alan came again at the necromancer. To his surprise, Scarleth did not intercept him, but neatly evaded. A second later, agony rang out as he felt bone-breaking force against the backs of his legs. His feet were swept out from under him, and he cracked back on the floor. A stiletto'd shoe slammed down on his face, puncturing his cheek and he screamed—only for his cries to be cut off by the well of blood that choked his lungs.

Scarleth wheeled as Cassilda charged, furious as a fallen angel. Her shape began to change, as it had in the fight with Cali, becoming a luminous She-Wolf, furred, golden-eyed, graceful and elegant as snowfall, yet just as deadly as a blizzard. But Scarleth raised her staff. The shockwave that emerged from the ruby sent Cassilda hurtling to the floor, the wolf sloughed off like a cheap costume. There was an ugly cracking noise as Cassilda's head slammed against stone. She lay still. Alan roared, but Scarleth turned and slammed the butt of her staff into his throat. He gargled, spluttered.

Petruccio was overrun, pinned down by sheer body-mass. The dwarf wailed as dead slaves took bites out of his arms as he tried to hold them back from his face.

"The Claw *is* powerful . . . " Scarleth placed a stiletto boot upon Alan's chest. He choked and blood left his lips. "There is no doubt it's the most potent object on the black planet. But you have yet to learn how to unleash its full power. I watched you fight my little pets, and I knew you had not mastered even a third of its potency. A shame, really. Great gifts are so often wasted on vile men." She sneered and glanced once more at LeBarron's corpse. "If I was prepared to mutilate myself, I would take it from you. Then nothing could stop me. But the price is too heavy, I think. Besides . . . " She bent from the hip and licked blood from his cheek. " . . . why eat my cake when I can have it too?"

Alan's eyes widened in terror.

Scarleth laughed.

"Now, you cotton on. I can have you *and* The Claw in my possession. Don't worry. I'll make it quick. Then you'll be mine *forever*."

She raised the staff in two hands, intending to bring it crashing down on his skull.

Alan wanted to close his eyes, to turn away from the death—worse than death—that now stared down at him. But no, he had to be courageous, had to face the end he had come to. Death was another experience. All his life, he had been a seeker of experience, of modes of being unlooked for by the general populace, of secrets and mysteries of sensation and desire beyond the scope of most imaginations. What could be more mysterious, more profound, than death? This was the final, the ultimate, the transcendental experience.

But as he stared up, time slowing to a slug-like pace, he saw something beyond—behind—Scarleth. Overhead, a dark figure loomed. Alan frowned, shock contorting his wounded features. The figure looked like a knight, but no shining white-knight of fairy stories or chivalrous books. His armour was indigo like a midnight sky, horned and cruel. A black cloak wrapped around him, though now it floated loose like wings. Eyes burned out from the helmet visor, bright as stars. In his hand, the knight held a black sword, almost as large as Alan was tall, serrated, engraved with faces so rageful it seemed they were alive.

But the strangest thing was this knight stood *outside* the dome.

Scarleth perceived Alan's shock and wonder and turned to see the apparition standing atop the dome's peak in the black-cold depths of Hali, enduring pressures which surely should have reduced him to a crumpled tin-can. Her eyes likewise widened in horror.

The knight wordlessly raised his blade in two hands, angling the sword downwards.

"No!" Scarleth screamed.

The knight brought his weapon down, the blade puncturing a layer of glass more than three feet thick, erupting out of the other side. A webwork of cracks splintered like lightning from the original wound. The dome groaned, accompanied by a tinkling noise.

Then, with a sound like an Arctic glacier cracking, a slab of glass gave way, and in a gush of jet-black water and shrapnel, the

knight descended with awesome fury upon the necromancer. Scarleth raised her staff horizontally, but the force of the knight's downward swing was so colossal that it buckled her defences, the sword cleaving down through her shoulder, into the chest, even down to the stomach, rending ribcage and organ as though they were no more substantial than thread. The thunder of the knight's armoured form landing—like a humanoid meteor upon the tower's height—reverberated with volcanic finality. Scarleth shrieked. Blood spewed from the ghastly rend. She collapsed to her knees.

Alan scrambled on all fours as water poured from the wound in the dome. It gushed into the city below, a geyser that could not be stymied by any means they possessed. Alan saw the streets filling with water. The thrashing dead were swept up in its force, black bodies like flies drowning in syrup. The whole dome was flooding. At the tower's pinnacle, they had some time before the waters reached them, but not much. Soon, the entire secret world would be flooded. And that was providing that more of the glass did not give away.

Alan raised The Claw and aimed it at the dead slaves pinning Petruccio. Some of them had already been knocked aside by the deluge. The garden was drenched and slippery. But many more still pinned the dwarf.

A blast of lightning from The Claw and the remainder fell.

Petruccio rose, his arms pockmarked with grisly bite-wounds. He mouthed a thank you to Alan as he scampered towards the stricken Cassilda. Alan followed suit, kneeling beside her. A moan escaped Cassilda's lips as they rolled her onto her side into the recovery position. Her eyelids batted open.

"Take it easy," Alan said, gently moving aside her hair to inspect the wound. A deep cut resided there, but when he pressed gently, there was no give of bone. Though the cut would have required medical attention had Cassilda been an ordinary person, she healed far quicker than most, the magical energies replenishing her body.

"I'm fine," she said. "Merely ashamed."

"There's no shame here. All three of us together could hardly overcome her."

Cassilda met Alan's eyes.

"Twice I have tried to protect you and failed."

"Third time will be a charm," Alan said, smiling.

Cassilda smiled too, and with that, she placed a hand on the stone and began to rise. Her hair was matted with blood, her new dress sodden and crimson, as her last had been. That saddened Alan deeply.

The cessation of Scarleth's shrieks brought all of their attention back to the matter at hand. The knight had now unseamed her from knave to chops—cutting her vertically in half, all her glamour despoiled by the revelation of spilled innards. As terrible as she had been, it seemed to Alan too gruesome an end for anyone, even a villain. The discarded halves of her corpse lay like meat in an abattoir.

So much about the knight seemed inhuman. His size, for one, defied the average or even above-average man. The hulking behemoths of wresting or sumo might just about stand shoulder to shoulder with this beast. His strength was clearly not natural. Though the catastrophic blow to Scarleth could perhaps be explained via the momentum of his fall, shattering the dome's glass could not. He had been underwater when he plunged the sword down, and still struck hard enough to pierce glass which previously kept an ocean's weight in check.

Armour covered him head-to-toe, allowing no scrap of what lay beneath to find light save the eyes, which peered out from a visor with a coke-fiend's intensity. The eyes were the only evidence something living inhabited the armour, for his left hand was covered in a black glove, and the right ended in a metal gauntlet-like contraption . . .

Alan felt clammy, as though he had imbibed Hali's freezing waters from the font now spewing into Alar's interior. Could this be—another Claw? The device looked similar to his own, though was altogether more mechanical than organic.

The knight placed one foot forward. His metallic gauntlet raised, palm upward. He spoke no words, but it was clear what he wanted. *Give me The Claw,* the gesture commanded.

Alan stared into the knight's insane eyes and saw in them a mirror of his own madness. He knew, then, who he was looking at, for though he had only seen him impersonated, only heard whispers and legends of his tale, it could only be the warrior who had once borne The Claw.

It was fitting, Alan thought, as he summoned his courage for what was to come, that Haercus had slain a necromancer to announce his return from the dead.

CHAPTER 16:
THE APPROACH

CALI STOOD UPON the battlements. Beside her, hundreds of soldiers and many civilians also looked out over the vast deserts in the west and watched the approaching army.

It was hard to believe this constituted merely one of Pe'kar's six legions. A cavalry line, three ranks deep, stretched across the desert horizon—perhaps two-thousand strong. Black-armoured riders bore banners of turquoise and emerald and cerulean, denoting different battalions, but all bearing a six-pointed star that blazed with diademic brightness over the sands. Their helms were conical and pointed, as were their heads, skulls elongated with surgery and magic. Cruel swords that more resembled sickles hung by their side, all coated in Pe'kar's dreadful poisons. They bore spears and triangular shields, likewise emblazoned with the six-pointed sigil of their master.

Their steeds were war-broken gorgonopsids, hulking monsters halfway between tiger and reptile, their furred flanks glistening and muscular, their feet monstrously taloned, their jaws overfull of teeth, making them seem permanently afflicted by malevolent smiles.

Behind the calvary marched infantry in the tens of thousands. The thunder of their approach boasted of greater destruction than any storm.

But these were not the only tools in Pe'kar's terrifying arsenal. Overhead, winged shapes darkened the skies. Even Cali drew shocked breath when she beheld them. They loosely resembled men and women, though their limbs were ungainly, spider-like, as though an additional joint was present. Unlike the Pe'karian

soldiery, their heads were organically cone-like, stretching back in unmistakeably phallic shapes. Batlike wings gifted them with flight. Their flesh ranged from onyx black to deep purple to a crimson so dark it was poisonous to look upon. Cali knew their hearts were blacker than night, merciless as suns, and stranger than Carcosa's half-devoured moon. These were the true demons. Pe'kar's elite. It was a testament to how decisive the Demon King intended this battle to be if he had sent members of his warrior clade into battle. Unlike the soldiers marching under their shadows, the demons each bore weapons unique to them. One carried a greatsword large enough to split five men in half with a single swing. Another bore a barbed lash and sickle. A third bore two long, curved katana-like blades. The fourth, a spear and buckler. The fifth, a terrifying hammer, the head of which was sculpted into the face of a snarling wolf. The sixth bore a halberd and a crown—Pe'kar's general, perhaps.

The last of Pe'kar's horrors was a monster of such mighty proportions that Cali felt she need not have worked so hard to subtly undermine the city's defences. Surely, Carcosa could not stand against anything so titanic, bred in some chasm deep beneath the crust of the planet, where forgotten things still lived out their torturously long lives. Legends spoke of a time where such prodigies had once walked the black planet freely, and it was her father and His minions, Haercus and others, who had rid the world of them, and allowed space for more humanoid races to thrive. Cali was not sure if she believed the jingoistic self-aggrandisement of the stories, but she did believe that terrors such as this must have once held the planet in their sway, in times long before Carcosa was ever painted, before demons and men walked the black planet, cast out from whatever paradisical state had existed before.

The Siege Ender, they called it. But her old slave Petruccio would have named it an *anteosaurus colossus*. The monstrous lizard was of equal height with Carcosa's wall, a hundred feet at least. It crawled on four prodigious limbs, its back legs curiously shorter than its forelimbs, and half-webbed, as though in another time it had traversed sea as well as land. Despite its body spanning the length of a city quarter, its head was still disproportionately large, both long and bulbous, its jaw ending in a calcification of bone-hard scale. Its tiny eyes peered out from underneath layer upon layer of enamel-like flesh armouring its brow. Its tread shook

the earth. A thousand or more chains were connected to the beast's hide as the followers of Pe'kar marched, pulling it along with them, though clearly it was not their strength or will that compelled its movements.

The Siege Ender opened its mouth, gums clagged with corpses and still living sufferers, letting out a roar that caused the soldiery around Cali to collapse, clasping their wounded ears. What offended Cali most, however, was the stench of its breath, washing over Carcosa and making even the rotten corpse piles seem a wholesome scent. She gagged, spat. No matter what she did, the taste of dead meat would not leave her.

"Carcosans!"

Heads turned. Hearts lifted. Roland stood upon the wall, clad in eurypterid plate polished to a ruby-bright gleam. His voice resounded with strength. Gone was the weakness Cali saw in him every time they made love. Gone was the pliant mind she had so easily distorted from its purpose. In the heat of battle, of crisis, Roland became who he truly was.

In one hand, he held a banner. Though a million or more tattered yellow banners flew from the myriad windows that hungrily glared from the towers of Carcosa's cityscape, this one was special, a treasure from ancient history, and would send fear through the hearts of the Pe'karian army.

The banner had not yet been unfurled, rolled up at the top, but with the pull of a single string Roland could release its magic.

Slowly, the army before their gates ground to a halt. Five of the great demons circled, but the one bearing a crown flew towards them. At this, most of the civilians on the wall began to flee, careening down the steps, some so hasty to get away they tripped clumsily and fell, breaking bones for their trouble. The stampede was short-lived. Some civilians remained, clearly drawn by morbid curiosity.

Cali saw fear in Roland's dark eyes, but he did not flinch, holding firm as the demon approached. Within perhaps thirty feet of the wall, the demon paused, flapping his wings to hover at eye-level with Carcosa's General.

"Roland," the demon sneered. "I see treachery has reaped you the rewards of promotion."

Roland gritted his teeth.

"I was not the one who abandoned *you* at birth."

The demon snorted.

"The way of our people is not to molly-coddle our young. Carcosa has made you weak, Roland. I see it in your eyes."

"Do not speak as if you know me," Roland spat. "You have presumably come to parlay. Speak your terms so I may refuse them more hastily."

At this, faint cheers went up from the Carcosan soldiers.

The crowned demon regarded the arrayed warriors. His glittering, white eyes lingered for a long while on Cali. She wondered if he had been warned about her by Pe'kar, or if perhaps Pe'kar had withheld judgement upon her, waiting to see what her actions were in the battle. Cali had decided to leave her bow, which she had named *Hand of the Empress,* in a secret compartment of her room, lest the enemy spy it and misread her intentions. She now thanked her past self for having this foresight.

At last, the crowned demon returned its gaze to Roland.

"Parlay? There will be no parlay. You will open the gates and surrender. You will lay down your arms. Or you will be slaughtered, your dead defiled and ravaged, and your children conscripted into the harem of our living god." The demon licked coal-black lips. "But, for the sake of fairness, I should warn you: your fate, Roland, will be the same regardless of whether you surrender or not. You will be taken to the dungeons of Pe'kar, there to endure spiritual agonies the like of which are beyond your imagination. Speaking of . . . " The demon turned to one of the other demons, a female armed with twin blades. "Bring her forth."

Cali's heart pounded in her chest. They surely could not mean *her*. Yet who else could it be?

The foremost gorgonopsids parted, revealing what their tight tanks had concealed: two Pe'karian soldiers brought forth a raven-haired woman in a filthy rag. She staggered, her footing uneasy. In the immortal land of Carcosa, it was rare to meet someone whose age showed, yet this woman looked every one of her countless years. Her eyes were sunken so deep into her sepulchral face they seemed on the verge of vanishing. The lines of terror, worry, and grief were so deeply entrenched that they surely cut to the bone. She walked groggily forward, now released from the soldiers' grip, allowed to stagger forward towards the city that had once been hers.

Cali trembled. She had arranged for the capture of Queen

Camilla by Pe'kar's assassins, revenge for how her mother stood by and allowed her father's abuse to continue. But she was not made of stone and seeing her in this broken state was almost too much to bear. *What have I done?*

Carcosa had fallen silent. Not just its people, every one of whom seemed to be holding their breath, but the city itself: its pennants ceased flapping, its doorways closed silently, its streets muffled all footfall; even its vermin paused in their foraging. Nothing moved, spoke, or breathed.

The crowned demon broke the silence. "Would you like to hear what she is saying?"

Cali could see the woman's lips moving, but could not hear, even with her enhanced senses.

"Allow me." The demon uttered forth a guttural syllable and suddenly, the woman's voice rang as though composed of trumpets.

"*Where am I? Where is this? It looks awful. Take me back! Take me back to my home! Take me!*"

The woman began to shriek. This they could have heard without the need of amplification.

"Release her," Roland said, quietly. Cali could not help but admire his spirit, and the tone of threat with which he uttered those words.

The crowned demon laughed.

"I admire your optimism, but even if we did, you can hear for yourself she would not want to come back." The demon's lips curled in a sneer. "How awful is it . . . " he projected now, so that the whole city might hear. "That your so-called King is absent, when his wife—and your Queen—weeps at the gates of your city! Will he not come? Hmm? Will the great King In Yellow not come forth—"

A blinding light suddenly struck the crowned demon, and shrieking, he recoiled, almost falling out of the air. Cindered flesh fell away in flakes as he beat a hasty retreat, face contorted in a snarl of rage and shame.

For a moment, Cali's hairs stood on end, her heart quickened, and her blood burned the inside of her veins, thinking that her father truly had come forth from the palace to face the horde. But no, Roland had unfurled the Banner of Uboth, a gift to the King In Yellow from the wielder of the oneiric pigment. None could stand

before the banner's image without suffering great agony, save those who bore the Yellow Sign.

Screams and cries rose from the assembled ranks of the Pe'karian army as the an awful light shone from the banner. Many shielded their eyes either with their hands or shields. Some stumbled backward, as though physically struck by the awe-inspiring tapestry.

The image wrought upon Uboth's banner was simple, yet its symbolism was itself a wound. It showed the King In Yellow, enthroned, with two figures kneeling at His feet. The first was a nude woman bearing the Yellow Sign upon her spine—symbolic of the human race. The second figure was Pe'kar, depicted not as a magnificent being of light, but as a wretched, squalling six-limbed child, obeisant and defeated, one hand reaching out to touch the foot of the Yellow King, as though in supplication. It was an unlooked for reminder to the hosts of Pe'kar that their master was but a newborn compared to ancient Hastur, who had watched stars form in the galactic abyss. It showed Hastur, the Yellow King, as the rightful master of both man *and* demon.

But the armies of Pe'kar were not so easily subdued. And though pride had caused the crowned demon, Pe'kar's general, to overstep, he yet had more tricks in his arsenal.

Swooping low, the crowned demon began to rally the afflicted forces.

"Each warrior closes his eyes and touches his shield to the man in front, save the front rank! March forward. After twenty paces, second rank switch forward!"

One of the other demons scooped up Camilla and carried her to the rear of the army. Some of the civilians on Carcosa's wall wailed and wept and bashed their heads against the stone when they saw this. Cali could have wept with them. *What have I done?*

The front rank of Pe'karians raised their shields against the light, discipline overcoming pain. Many had endured countless agonies to render their shapes into an image more pleasing to Pe'kar. The pain of the banner was venom in their brains and bloodstream, but not unfamiliar.

The army began to march. The gorgonopsids yowled and shrieked, as though eager to begin, frustrated at having been delayed so long. Indeed, they seemed even hungrier for war than their masters.

The mighty Siege Ender roared, causing Uboth's banner to flap in the ghastly wind created by its breath. Roland planted the banner into the stone and leapt down from the battlements.

"To your stations!" he cried. "They are coming."

Soldiers rushed to their places like blood rushing through the body in response to threat, flowing down the arteries of its streets and stairwells to their positions either at the walls, upon the gates, or deeper in the city. Teams began to load the ballistas with deadly bolts. The whine of bowstrings pulled back split the air. Cries of *"For the King In Yellow; Deathless Be He!*" rang out from every tower and bastion.

"Cali!"

She turned and saw Roland pacing towards her. He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Are you alright?"

She nodded, though it was a lie. Another war had already gotten underway within her. Was it too late to turn back? Was it too late to abandon her wild plan, to fight wholeheartedly for the city, to undo her wrongs?

"Roland . . . "

She was on the verge of telling all.

"Get back to the palace!" he ordered. "Tell your father you saw Camilla. Perhaps then He will come and aid us."

With those words, everything came flooding back. She remembered her father in the garden. *The desire for war left me a long time ago, dear daughter.* Even when His people, His city, were about to perish. Even when His great love was being tortured into madness by His enemy. Even then, the King had not come forth. And now, Roland was sending her to tell Him, to beg Him to help. It was a sickening kind of moral insanity.

"No, Roland," she said, quietly. "He will not come. Believe me, I know better than most. My place is here, by your side."

Roland stared hard, then finally nodded.

"For Carcosa," he said.

"Yes, for Carcosa."

CHAPTER 17
I PITY THEE

HAERCUS FLEXED HIS fingers, a motion that said clearer than words that time was running short. This was true in more ways than one. The hole in the dome's ceiling allowed Hali's magical lakewater to gush the city at an alarming rate, drowning houses, flooding streets, and carrying the dead—who were now *truly* dead and motionless, no longer animated by their slain master—upwards on a rising tide.

Alan stared down his doppelganger. A war raged within. A part of him wanted to give up The Claw. Responsibility was beginning to weigh heavily on him. LeBarron lay dead, and though it had been the actor's idea to come to this city, Alan couldn't help but feel responsible for his death. His quest for The Claw had led to LeBarron suffering the original, poisoned wound, after all.

He loved Cassilda, that much was becoming apparent. And she clearly loved—or at least felt fondly—about him. Petruccio was perhaps the only friend he had in the world. He couldn't let them die or suffer.

But another part of him would not relinquish The Claw, not for paradise. His life had been a messy journey, fraught with loss, loneliness, and pain. Cali had said one true thing: uniting with The Claw had made Alan feel whole, for perhaps the first time. *No, Alan, it is Cassilda's love that makes you feel that way. Remember what she said? Only you can make yourself whole.* And yet, that voice of reason, which paradoxically was also the voice of his heart, was soon drowned by other voices.

The Claw is what makes you whole, Alan.

The Claw is what makes you worthy.

"You can kill him, Alan. You're strong enough."

"Do it!"

He closed his eyes. The voices—oh, to be free of the voices! He should hand over The Claw, be rid of it, spend his final hours—for he could see no way out of Alar now—as a free man.

But "shoulds", the arguments of logic, could never stand long against the black, burning desires of the heart.

"Even were I capable of forsaking my beloved Claw," Alan whispered, his gaze hardening. "I would not part with it. Not for fear. Not for riches. Not for *any* price . . . "

Haercus seemed to consider him a moment, a softness to the blue chips of ice, as though he understood, perhaps better than anyone else could. And then he pronounced the judgement of Death without words, leaping forward, faster than any warrior laden with such heavy armour should be able to move. Alan narrowly managed to evade to the side, the knight's great blade slamming into the floor beside him, the air rebelling at the passage of supernatural metal swung with such force.

Alan howled and lashed out with The Claw. Flickering lightning coruscated around the gleaming talons. Upon contact with the knight's armour, the blue-black metal—immune though it was to so many armaments—rent asunder. Alan recoiled in horror at what lay beneath. Suppurated, gangrene flesh. Bubbling grey leper-skin. But worse, tumorous growths, studded with tiny eyes. The armour was not merely protection; it was *containment*. Whatever tortures had been enacted on Haercus had changed him in ways difficult to contemplate.

Haercus swung his sword horizontally, Alan leapt backwards, again only just evading in time. He knew that if a simple Pe'karian soldier's blade was coated in Pe'kar's bile, this blade would no doubt be lathered with even viler poisons and steeped in abyssal magics. The knight came again and Alan stepped back, finding his foot suddenly touching the walled edge of the garden. He pinwheeled for a moment in sheer panic, regained his balance. He had nearly plummeted backwards into the watery grave steadily rising to claim them. But he was not saved. Now, he faced Haercus bearing down on him and there was nowhere for Alan to run.

Cassilda screamed and slammed her hands together: a thunderclap. A blossom of light flashed from her palms with the force of a grenade. Haercus staggered backwards. However mutilated his body was, his eyes remained human, or at least

animal—and they were scarred and blinded by the light. Alan was also blinded, collapsing to his knees, clawing at his face with his good hand, letting out an agonised moan.

Cassilda ran forward. She knew what she had to do. She was tired of Alan always protecting her. She was a sorceress, a daughter of Hastur, bearing the Yellow Sign deeper than skin: in her very blood. She had spent long eons cloistered and hidden, afraid of the world. She would fear it no longer—but fight for it!

As soon as her fingers wrapped around the haft of the necromancer's ruby staff, she felt its disgusting power, pressing upon her like the touch of an overeager lover. It repulsed her, in truth, but she knew she could no longer afford to fear power, or to fear her ability to wield it. She raised the staff toward Haercus. He pivoted, blinking away the light.

"I pity thee, Haercus." Cassilda felt the staff's eagerness to supply her with energy, her tongue, lips, soles of her feet, and fingertips tingling with calamitous energies. A lesser mage might have died merely touching this weapon, their soul blasted away upon contact with voltage beyond their abilities to channel. But Cassilda gripped the thing like a poisonous snake, bending it to her will and desire, the desire to save the one she loved. "What thou must have endured at the hands of Pe'kar was no doubt unspeakable. But I am sorry. Thou shalt not harm my prince!"

A blast of red light erupted from the staff and struck Haercus squarely in the chest. The force of the blast caused the tower once again to tremble. Cracks appeared in the pillars and foundation. The stones moaned like a sufferer upon the rack. An ordinary being would have been obliterated, unmade, by the potency of that eruption, Cassilda's innate magical talents combining with the talisman's to produce something godlike. But his armour, forged as it was via such profane techniques, took the brunt of the blow. Before her eyes, as the red energy poured and poured from the crimson stone atop the staff, the great metal plates slagged, melted, and stripped away, revealing more and more of the quixotic and amorphous flesh beneath. Haercus screamed—the first sound he had made—and then was lifted off his feet and thrown over the edge of the tower, plummeting into the foaming depths below.

Cassilda swayed, unsteady on her feet, planting the staff and leaning upon it to stop her falling into a swoon. The energy she had unleashed was immense, and though exhaustion now settled in—for

she was unused to such a channel for her magical powers, preferring her natural voice—she could not help but smile in grim satisfaction.

Alan stood, blinking, still a little dazed from her illuminating thunderclap.

"I'd say we're even on the saving front now," he managed.

Cassilda's smile widened, then faltered as she once more took in the water pouring through the dome's breach.

"Alas, I'm not sure I can save us from drowning."

Alan turned to Petruccio, who still knelt by LeBarron's body.

"I don't suppose you can think of anything?"

The dwarf shook his head.

"I've never been to Alar. I know nothing of the city's secrets. If the dome cracks, the water pressure will kill us. If it doesn't, we'll be drowned." The dwarf laughed bitterly. "A new meaning to the phrase: damned if you do, damned if you don't."

"There must be something," Alan said, looking from one to the other. "Perhaps we could swim to the submersibles LeBarron mentioned?"

"We don't know the way," Petruccio said. "And I doubt one could survive in those waters. They're churning something fierce." The dwarf straightened. "It's been a bold adventure, Alan. You know, I had almost begun to believe you really were the messiah." The dwarf laughed harshly once more. "When you threw down Cali in that maze, I thought you might be a god, or the King In Yellow in disguise. It seems, however, we're but mortals after all, and fate has us in her teeth now." The dwarf sniffed. "I would have liked to have tasted power before I died, like you two."

Cassilda looked at the staff in her hand.

"It is not as wonderful as thou hast been led to believe," she said, softly.

"I agree," Alan said. "Power comes with a price."

"Still." The dwarf looked Alan dead in the eyes, a stoic firmness Alan envied in his gaze. If he was afraid to die, he hardly showed it. He seemed, as he claimed, merely disappointed. "I would have liked to have discovered it for myself."

"I understand." Alan sat down cross-legged facing Petruccio. Cassilda sat next to Alan, laying the staff across her knees. They sat not speaking for a few moments, the only sound the gush of the water flooding in through the hole in the glass ceiling, and the churning of the rising tide surrounding the tower.

Slowly, Alan reached out and put a hand on Petruccio's shoulder, a small gesture of comfort, coming from a place he knew not where. The dwarf smiled. He returned the comfort. Then, he looked to Cassilda. She smiled, placing her delicate hand on Petruccio's shoulder. He reciprocated. Cassilda rested her other hand on the back of Alan's Claw. Alan could feel her touch, even though The Claw was as mechanical as it was organic, foreign though grafted to him. He smiled sadly.

The trio formed a triangle now, the dead LeBarron at their centre.

Alan and Cassilda shared a long look. Everything was spoken between them in that moment, every possibility unfulfilled, every moment lost, everything they meant to one another. Alan wondered, not for the first time, if that last month had been a beautiful and strange dream, if he would wake up once the water closed over him, back in his empty house—one that was about to be repossessed by the bank. He laughed at such a petty concern; the things that had once troubled him were no longer able to reach him. At least he would have tasted true love for the first time in his life, just once, before he died.

"Better to have loved and lost," he said.

Cassilda smiled. "Is that another of thy quotes?"

"It is."

"But it's true," the dwarf said. "I always thought that no matter how many friends one has, you die alone. But this . . . this is good."

All shared sad smiles.

"What's that sound?" Alan asked.

"The glass cracking," Petruccio replied.

He was right. White lightning bolts were etching their way across the surface of the dome. A high-pitched noise, like ice creaking beneath weight, set their teeth on edge.

"I think death is going to come quickly rather than slow," the dwarf said, looking up. "When it breaks, a few metric tonnes of water are going to come crashing down on us. We'll likely be reduced to pulp."

"Thanks for that last detail," Alan said, dryly.

Petruccio grinned. "I'm a man of science, Alan, not diplomacy."

Alan turned to Cassilda. "If you think your magic can save you, you should go. Someone has to stop Cali."

Cassilda shook her head.

"No song of mine can hold back this flood, not even with the power of the staff."

A splintering noise rang in their eardrums, like the squeal of advanced tinnitus. The dome was a spiderweb maze of white cracks. Alan tried to fascinate himself with the patterns, to immerse himself in beauty one last time, rather than think about his impending demise.

But as he stared, he could not help but see a shadow beyond the glass. A fish, perhaps. He laughed bitterly again, thinking that the sharks would have their meal after all. *And The Claw will sink to the bottom of a forgetful lake, maybe never to be found.* Maybe it was no bad thing, though he regretted they would not be able to stop Cali. Perhaps someone else would? Petruccio was right: Alan had almost believed himself a messiah or chosen one, but that was surely pure ego. Someone else *could* stop Cali. He smiled, comforted by that thought.

The shadow on the other side of the glass was getting bigger, however.

Alan's heart pounded with nervous anticipation.

A whale, a monster, a shark . . .

Water began to trickle through the dome's cracks, causing rainfall inside Alar for the first time. The ice-cold water splashed their foreheads and shoulders. Even a few drops of the lake's amnesic waters still conveyed the sapping effects.

"Any minute now," Petruccio said, similarly mesmerised by the spiderweb of pale cracks now bleeding black lakewater. "It will break."

"Unless a miracle is about to happen," Cassilda whispered, breathlessly.

"If a miracle occurs," Petruccio said quietly. "Then I will convert. I will believe."

"In what?" Alan queried.

"In what else? You, Alan."

Glass cracked; water burst through like ravening black serpents. Cassilda took in a breath sharply. Petruccio closed his eyes and furrowed his brow, clearly willing himself not to cry out or scream. Alan let out a wild wail. But even as Alan screamed, a quite voice spoke within.

That which dreams does not die.

Alan saw no hope in the situation, but he felt a quiet peace and

satisfaction that it was the deep and calm inner voice that had the final say, not the schizophrenic monster tempting him to violence.

The dome shrieked and came undone. Oblivion hurtled down around them as though the sky itself had broken and collapsed. Jagged shards cascaded around them like falling stars, some large enough to cleave them in half.

But in the darkness was a deeper darkness still, enfolding them, surrounding them, familiar as it was terrifying. Alan's scream died in his throat as his brain caught up with the fact that he was—impossibly—still alive, shielded, some force keeping back the waters, yet he could not see, for all was blackness.

Then two white eyes opened in the abyss. Alan's hairs stood on end as he realised he sat face-to-face with one he knew, though how and why they had come to their aid were beyond the frayed grasp of Alan's mind. A hand grasped him, its fingers long enough to fully enwrap his body, strong as steel, and Alan choked the name of their unexpected saviour.

"Namtar?"

The demon smiled.

"Alan Chambers," the demon thundered. "I promised the gratitude of one of the great demons to whomever set me free. You released me, and now I release you—*from death!*"

With a movement that sent ripples through the black abyss pressing in around them, the demon rocketed upward, a soaring flight like lightning reversed, carrying in each of his colossal limbs one of the four brave souls who had ventured down into Alar.

As the city shrank beneath them, its lights darkening, Alan wondered at the irony of being carried to salvation by a winged demon.

CHAPTER 18
THE WALLS BESIEGED

HUNDREDS DIED IN the first wave. Pe'karian infantry scrambled up the rubbled mounds of corpse-piles in order to reach the walls, thinking that their enemies had carelessly left such an opening in their defences, not suspecting the horrors that waited for them, emerging from underneath dessicated remains and sludged flesh: the spider-kin.

They resembled torsos and heads grafted with eight arms, each ending in talon-fingered hands. They were volunteers—either mad or religiously devoted—forged in the Fires of Manifestation by the Yellow King himself, wrought into the shape of spiders—though infinitely more horrifying than true arachnids. Their mouths were already stained with blood, their teeth clagged with corpse-flesh, their pupils wide as black holes, the throes of cannibalism having claimed their minds. They leapt like the arachnids they had been smithed to resemble, pinning Pe'karians and tearing into their bodies with razor-sharp teeth. Others dragged Pe'karian soldiers under the corpse-piles, to whatever disgusting nest they had built in the filth of compressed dead.

This was the city's first line of defence, and perhaps one of Roland's simplest but most efficacious strategic decisions. The Pe'karians were hungry for victory and saw the Carcosan dead as a ladder to their ultimate aim, little realising the trap that was laid for them. Soldiers were dragged screaming into the quagmire of body-parts, drowning with lungs full of diseased scum. On the uneven terrain, the spider-kin had the advantage over their armed and armoured opponents. One Pe'karian raised his shield in time to deflect a leaping assault from one of the abominations, only to then overbalance on the slippery mound, falling on his back,

quickly seized by other hands below him. Their armour weighed them down, so that they sank ankle deep into the swamplike mire of dead. This made them easy targets for the ballistas: the second line of defence.

As the Pe'karians climbed higher and higher, now ready for the assault of the spiders and able to level their spears and swords, moving in pairs, each one covering the back of the other, the ballista crews rotated the deadly engines and unleashed arrows the size of javelins upon the infantry. Many were not only impaled but lifted from their feet and launched from the tops of the mounds to crash upon the desert floor below, shattered and crumpled. Their shields, whilst broad and strong, could not deflect the powerful spears launched at them with catalytic force.

Cali watched it all with a grim smile. She had not interfered with this part of the defence. She knew that if she had, it would have given away her ultimate aims. The first show of resistance had to be convincing. If they slew many Pe'karians in the initial wave, the Carcosans would find hope, and hope would blind them to the truth of how she had undone all possibility of saving the city.

With thunderous steps, the Siege Ender drew closer. No weapon existed in the Carcosan arsenal that could deflect *that* attack, save perhaps the *Hand of the Empress,* but she had secured that in her room, ready for when the assault reached the palace itself, ready for the ultimate blow . . . *Focus now, Cali. Don't dream of the future before the present has been achieved.* She could well die if she was not careful. She was a great fighter, but war was messy. She would not be fighting her opponents one-on-one, in the arena, but in bloody melees of crushed bodies. And not only that, but once they had slaughtered enough of the Pe'karian dross, the true demons would take to the field, and against those kinds of foes, Cali knew even her mettle would be tested.

Uboth's banner continued to shine its black and yellow radiance down upon the advancing army. However, it seemed the second legion had begun to acclimatise to the pain of its light, for they pressed ever harder forward. The gorgonopsid calvary moved at an almost sedate pace towards Carcosa's walls. Their time hadn't yet come. Cali knew that they served a dual focus: in the event the Carcosans launched a counterattack, for sometimes the best defence truly was an offence, they would be able to deal with it rapidly. And, once Carcosa's mighty gate was breached, they would

rampage through the city, stampeding over any defences erected within the city's streets.

Overhead, six dark shapes circled, their gleaming weaponry like new constellations in the storm-choked heavens.

Roland ran to and fro along the wall, giving instructions, encouraging the ballistas. Couriers ran back and forth from the palace via The Groom's Exit, delivering freshly forged ballista ammunition to those defending the city.

But below, the enemy was equally vigilant. A large number of Pe'karians had broken away from the main force and established beetle-like shield formations: shields held both overhead and at the sides, overlapping, forming a gleaming carapace. Ten of these bright blue beetle-formations now scuttled across the desert floor. Cali knew exactly what they intended. She put on her best performance.

"Roland! Look, down there! Those formations hide ladders! They plan to scale the wall another way!"

Roland turned to the nearest ballista crews.

"Target the shields, the shields!"

The ballistas swung on oiled mechanisms, directing their deadly lances down at the approaching formations. The siege engines unleashed their payloads. Pe'karians were shattered beneath the hail of spears, shields splintering, the dead left like the victims of the ancient vampires dotting the plain, impaled mouth to groin.

But the beetles kept crawling along. Regardless of how many dead they left behind, the formation remained intact. No doubt, Cali mused, they feared their demonic masters more than whatever Carcosa could hurl at them.

Meanwhile, without the withering fire of the ballistas, those storming the corpse-piles to the wall were now gaining ground. Many spider-kin lay slain, their heads lopped off, their limbs ripped from their strange moorings, their bodies pierced through with spear and sword. The Pe'karians who had reached the summit alive marshalled, ready to leap from the pile onto the wall.

The Carcosan soldiers lowered their gleaming, black spears, presenting a thorny row of spikes upon which any leaping Pe'karian would undoubtedly impale themselves.

"For the Demon King!" one Pe'karian cried savagely. He raised a particularly cruel and twisted blade and leapt. The Carcosans

were true to their threat, a soldier in eurypterid platemail skewering the leaping warrior through the gut. But the Pe'karian by his side made the jump successfully and swung his blade in vengeance, cutting down the Carcosan soldier.

"First upon the wall!" the victorious Pe'karian cried, savagely. "And first to draw Carcosan blood!"

"But still dead!" Another Carcosan soldier shrieked as he charged the Pe'karian with spear lowered. The Pe'karian's arrogance was earned, however, as he gracefully side-stepped the lunge and sliced his sword elegantly across the Carcosan's throat. Blood sprayed the stone walls. The Carcosan fell as though boneless.

"It is no shame to die by the hand of Lu'korah!" the Pe'karian cried. Then Lu'korah leapt into the fray, felling two more Carcosans, his blade always finding weak joints in their armour; he was a dazzling fighter, one Cali would like to challenge herself. By the red plume on his conical helm, she knew he was a captain at the least, one aspiring to demonhood and the gifts of Pe'kar.

More Pe'karians were breaking through the Carcosan line of defence, landing upon the wall, supporting their fellows. Cali cut several down with fluid strokes of her blade. Most were chaff, novices never before tested in war and sent as cannon fodder into the early meat-grinder, but some, like Lu'korah, proved artful fighters, blooded and experienced. Still, they were no match for Cali, who danced through their ranks, allowing her mind to momentarily release its concerns and schemes, and simply embrace the joy of unfettered combat. As blood splashed her armour and skin, she let out a hallelujah that Carcosans answered riotously. The thunder of their battle cries was a music healing to Cali's soul.

In this blissful transcendence, she could almost forget her pain and her purpose. At last, she had cut a bloody swathe to Lu'korah. More Pe'karians were arriving by the moment, leaping from the corpse-pile atop the battlements while their brethren below moved the siege ladders closer to the city's wall.

Lu'korah turned, and a savage grin split his features. He had been human once, as all Pe'karians began, but now he little resembled his origin. His teeth had been extended into fangs that barely allowed his mouth to close, gleaming sharply white like ivory tusks. His arms were overlong, stretched in the manner of

pureblood demons; Cali observed he used this augmentation to deceive and confound his opponents, his reach being longer than it seemed. His flesh was pale, and once he might have been handsome, but either magical or surgical interference had rendered the texture of his flesh as a bubbling malfeasance, as though he were sculpted out of wax, not organic matter. His features seemed to drool, making the sharpness of his smile even more pronounced. His blade was filthy with Carcosan blood.

"Ah," he whispered. "A true challenge! One of royal blood, on two counts."

"You know me, then?" Cali said, sinking into a battle stance. Unlike the other Pe'karians, whom she could cut down purely with speed and strength far beyond their own, she knew Lu'korah would prove a more challenging foe.

"Every demon knows the story of Cali, traitor to Carcosa, traitor to Pe'kar . . . " His smile became a clown's demented grimace. " . . . and traitor to herself."

Cali snarled.

"You are no demon!"

She leapt forward, her blade singing. Lu'korah laughed with sick delight, his own scimitar meeting hers. Their blades flashed so fast it was barely possible to track their progress, sparks flying. Though the fighting was brutal and thick upon the battlements, space cleared to accommodate the two gods of battle clashing in their midst.

Cali first approached the fight with testing strokes, light and not overly committed. Lu'korah mirrored her with parries turned into swift counters. She quickly determined an anomaly: usually, her opponents were male, and therefore stronger than she was but slower. Her superior agility and speed proved an advantage she could press in order to overcome. But Lu'korah was faster than her. Whether through relentless training or Pe'kar's dark ingenuities, his reflexes were not only superhuman but supernatural, returning her strokes with disgusting speed. At times, Cali thought of pressing an attack only to desperately step backwards at the last moment and narrowly avoid a counter that would have sliced open her face.

She knew, too, that she could not afford to sustain even a light injury. Though she could heal magically, at a pace rivalling even the self-replenishing salamanders of the east, Lu'korah's blade was

undoubtedly coated in Pe'kar's bile, and therefore to suffer a single wound was death.

She withdrew, now turning her mind to a defensive approach. She needed to see whether he was weaker on the offensive, to regroup and see where an opening might appear. Lu'korah did not disappoint. Sensing her hesitation, he came screaming down upon her, his blade cycloning. She marvelled at his technique. He was not merely a competent swordsman, but had developed his own unique style, a kind of mesmeric, flowing sequence of rings, circles, and patterns that slowly eroded his opponent's defences. His attack pressed her far more than she pressed his. Irritated, Cali began to growl and sweat, and she worked hard to turn aside his furious and relentless blows. Just when she thought she had deflected the last attack, another came from an unusual angle, his circles sometimes large, sometimes so small as to be imperceptible to anyone other than a fighter of Cali's calibre.

A Carcosan ran into the melee to intervene, perhaps sensing Cali was on the backfoot. Lu'korah spun and slashed his throat open with a graceful arc of his sword and continued to buffet Cali with fluid strokes, as though the soldier had not interrupted at all.

It was after Cali was forced to somersault over another Carcosan soldier—thereby condemning him to death at the hands of Lu'korah—that she realised she was losing, and not only losing, but had no idea of how to win. *You are a fool, Cali. An arrogant fool. All your preparation will be for nothing if you die here at the hands of this lunatic.*

But there was barely time for thinking, for still he came. Madness shone in his eyes, which were tattooed with the sixfold sign of Pe'kar.

Somewhere, Roland was shouting to his men to kick down the ladders. She could hear them going up, the *thud* of their frames striking the walls, followed by the sound of metal hooks slamming down, which gripped the wall and took great effort to leverage up again. Soldiers from both sides were screaming. The stones beneath her feet trembled—the titanic footfalls of the Siege Ender as it drew closer, closer, closer. Cali had been counting on them losing the walls—her plan was to lead a retreat to the Groom's Exit, where she had carefully orchestrated the defences to be greatly reduced. Five hundred souls were usually responsible for guarding that entrance to the palace, but Cali had managed to siphon off

three hundred to other places in the city—or rather, she had persuaded Roland into doing so.

So carried away with her thoughts of the future was she that she almost did not see Lu'korah's blade change direction mid-swing in a flawlessly smooth feint. Her only option was to dodge, bending backwards from the hip so that her hair dangled to the stones, his blade passing horizontally over her stomach. She straightened and only just managed to deflect his return swing. They stood nose nearly nose to nose. He withdrew his blade and stepped back. She was pleased to see that sweat sheened his grotesque face.

"You dance well, Cali, just as the legends claim. But you're no goddess." Lu'korah spun his blade, shifting it from hand to hand to disorient her. She had no doubt he was ambidextrous—it was one of Pe'kar's many "corrections" to the human condition on the path to demonhood. "When I bring your head back to my master, he will raise me to godhood, and I will stand alongside him."

Cali laughed. She was exhausted beyond words. The walls were falling around her. Her scars ached—they always pained her the worst when either despair or failure once more clawed at her heart. She supposed she should be grateful to Alan for that: they were a permanent reminder that galvanised her to do better.

"He will not raise you up, Lu'korah. Try as you might, you will never be like them . . . " She pointed to the sky, where the six dark generals wheeled. She grinned savagely. "Nor even like me, a half-blood."

Lu'korah sneered.

"Blood is nothing," he spat. "Those with the blood of demons stand on both sides of this wall; some are brave, some are cowards. It is *action* that determines one's worth."

Cali stood stunned. This drooling maniac had spoken a truth into being. All her life she had remained conflicted about her heritage, with both the blood of the Yellow King and demons running through her veins. She had thought that it was her destiny, therefore, to unite the black planet, to play both sides and reign as supreme empress. But now she saw a secret folly that underlay her thinking. Her goals were not necessarily at fault, but her motivations were. She had allowed her blood to dictate her identity and therefore her destiny. She had described herself as the black sheep, an outcast and a villain. But now she saw that in all of this

she had *choice*—and it was her actions that defined her, not her birthright. With this grand-scale revelation came a smaller one: the reason she could not beat Lu'korah is she had also defined herself by what she was not. *I am not like my sister. I am not like my father. I am not like Camilla, or my mother . . .* But that did not mean she could not learn from them.

"I am Lu'korah," the Pe'karian warrior said, proudly jutting his chin forward. "*First* upon the wall. *First* to draw Carcosan blood. And now, your end!"

He leapt at her with the savagery of a gorgonopsid, bright teeth, gleaming blade, catlike agility and speed. This time, Cali did not raise her sword to defend herself. She closed her eyes and allowed a single note of song to leave her lips. Her voice had never been as strong as Cassilda's, or indeed her father's, and therefore she rarely used magic where she did not have an instrument to enhance its power and resonance. But that did not mean she *couldn't*, and as Lu'korah had said, actions defined her, not blood.

Lu'korah was taken aback as he slammed into a solid wall of shadow. Cali's eyes flicked open. Sweat now ran profusely down her face. These seconds of concentration, holding the strident note, allowing it to swell as her throat relaxed and opened, as her chest expanded, drained her far more than the bloody combat. But even so, a dark smile spread across her lips even as she sang louder and louder.

Lukorah struggled, a fly caught in a shadowy web, powerless.

"Dishonour!" he shrieked. "Filthy magic!"

Cali answered him with a note so piercing that for a moment combat ceased upon the battlements as Pe'karian and Carcosan alike clamped their hands over their ears, some even collapsing to the floor. She pushed her free hand forward and Lu'korah was thrown headlong over the edge of the wall, plummeting a hundred feet, and shattering upon the ground below.

"First upon the wall," Cali smirked. "But you fall from it like the rest."

Silence followed the ringing note of her song-magic, and Cali wondered for a moment if she, too, was deafened. Then she realised, with wide-eyed awe, that the turning point had arrived. She felt it like a collective inhalation of breath, a pause as the universe made up its mind. Then the scales tipped, and all was plunged into chaos.

THE CITY OF CORPSES

The Siege Ender had reached the gates of Carcosa, rearing its terrible head like a battering ram, and then bringing it crashing down. The entire city shuddered with the impact. Men were thrown from the wall, following Lu'korah to the grave. Cali, weakened as she was, collapsed to one knee. As she placed one hand on the stone to steady herself, the juddering vibration made her bones feel loose in their moorings. The sound was deafening, an apocalyptic, reptilian roar accompanied by the scream of bending metal and the crackle of splitting masonry.

"Bring it down!" Roland cried to the ballista crews, save there were no ballista crews anymore, for all were engaged in desperate struggles upon the battlements.

The great Siege Ender once more reared its hideous, draconian head, and brought it down with meteoric force upon gates that had denied entry to invaders for more than ten eons.

To their credit, the gates held to the last, though warped and bent out of all shape. It was the stone surrounding them that shattered, sending living souls—both Pe'karian and Carcosan—along with rubble, showering down into the streets below.

The city was breached.

CHAPTER 19
WASHED UP

THE LIGHT HURT Alan's eyes as they emerged from Namtar's black cocoon into the glow of twin suns—though the suns were now setting, casting a dreary yellow light across the dunescape surrounding Hali.

Cassilda lay still, eyes closed, by Alan's side, still clutching the black staff. He reached over and gently stroked her hair, then touched her neck. He felt a pulse there and breathed a sigh of relief.

Petruccio sat upright shrugging off sleep. LeBarron, whom Namtar had perhaps grabbed thinking him merely unconscious, lay dead by the shore, his hair caked with sand, blood staining his lips and cheek. He was the image of the knight fallen in battle, a perfect actor even in death.

Alan rose, dusting himself off, though no amount of light dusting could remove the grime, sweat, shit, and blood from his robes. He would need to bathe for a day to finally be clean.

The sight which greeted Alan stunned him into incomprehension for a few moments.

In the distance shone the jewel of Carcosa, its living spires, its megalithic walls, its turrets, banners, and strange luminosity . . . but the city was besieged. A colossal reptilian creature had decimated part of its western wall. At its feet marched serried ranks that stretched farther than Alan's eyes could discern. The tattered flags of Pe'kar blew in cold winds, their six-pointed sigil a scar in Alan's brain. Some of the soldiery were mounted upon terrible half-reptilian, half-feline mounts. They now poured towards the breach in the city walls.

Petruccio stood by Alan's side.

"I had never thought to see an Anteosaurus," Petruccio whispered.

Alan would have smiled, were he not watching the destruction of the city he had come to love so well.

"Cali struck faster than we could have guessed," Alan said.

"This is not Cali's doing." Namtar stood beside him. The mighty demon rose twenty feet tall, his enormous head-crest glinting like a black scimitar. It was strange seeing him in daylight, even if that daylight was waning. His black wings cast shadows wherever he walked. "Pe'kar has perceived Carcosa is weak, and now strikes to the heart."

Alan turned to the great demon.

"Why did you save us?"

Namtar's eyes twinkled, like the gems of a secret cave.

"A demon does not forget his debts . . . "

Alan smiled.

"In truth," Namtar went on. "I came to Alar seeking another. My old enemy."

"Haercus?"

Namtar inclined his mighty head.

"Cassilda slew him," Alan said. "With the necromancer's staff."

Namtar snorted. He made a noise somewhere between the whine of a pig and the mockery of an ass.

"I doubt that very much. That which should already lie dead can be very difficult to kill."

"How did you know he was alive?"

The demon did not answer for some while. The distant sounds of battle reached their ears over the plains, somehow all the more terrible for how they were muted.

"I felt it," the demon answered, and Alan thought he heard pain in Namtar's voice. "His Claw, that awful weapon you now bear . . . it left its scars upon me. And so we are bonded, he and I." The demon's white eyes locked upon Alan's, mesmeric. "Just as you and Cali are now bonded."

Alan looked away. He did not want to contemplate the full implications of those words. Though he had faced her before, he knew he was not truly ready for their next confrontation. And there *would* be another, of that he was more certain than the Black Star itself.

"No . . . "

Alan turned and saw Cassilda, awake, staring with horror at the unfolding siege: the walls of her home reduced to rubble, the

enemy flooding into the breach. He had never seen such despair on her face, not even when Cali betrayed them; it cleaved his heart in two.

"Cassilda . . . "

She strode past him, her eyes locked on the devastation Her grip upon the staff was so tight that her knuckles threatened to break the skin. Alan felt a fluttering of fear in his belly.

"Now she has the staff, she does not need you," the dark voice said.

Alan resisted the urge to reply.

Tears ran down Cassilda's face, each glistening like a pearl. A younger Alan would have had to fight the urge to collect those tears, put them in a jar, make them into a tincture. Such strange desires and urges still came upon him, but he recognised them for the madness they were and could put them to one side. The voices, on the other hand, were harder to ignore.

"They are an army of thousands, Cassilda," Petruccio said, his voice soft. His tenderness was in vain, however, for Cassilda wheeled upon him.

"I care not if they numbered in the millions!" she shrieked. "Hiding to escape my sister's wrath is one thing, but allowing the city to fall while we have breath in our lungs and strength in our arms? That is cowardice!"

Alan felt goosebumps. She made a fine military leader. But stirred as he was, he had to agree with Petruccio that going to save the city was absolute folly.

"I don't want to see Carcosa fall," Alan said, quietly. "Even though I only spent a little time there, I regard it as my true home . . . But how can we stand against an army?"

A terrible look crossed Cassilda's face, a kind of tortured euphoria, as though a master of excruciation had worked their subtlest and most terrible arts upon her, leading to the ultimate confusion of pleasure and pain, both now intermingled, one causing the other. A dark mania lit her eyes. Her pale skin glowed with the ghastly energy of the moon. Her silver hair blew in a breeze that was not there. Whispering voices surrounded her.

And the staff's ruby shone bright.

"We will *make* one."

She turned and walked to where LeBarron lay. Daylight faded. Alan smelled ozone; a storm had recently passed over. And now, it

seemed the storm returned, or else some force of nature blocked out the last light of the suns, an eager night swallowing the last glimmer, not even leaving stars in its wake. Cassilda trembled crown to toe.

"He said he wished to be revived. To break the curse . . . " She pointed the staff downwards towards LeBarron, washing his corpse in a crimson glow. "And now that lies within my power. I bid thee rise, servant of The Stranger! Take up thy mask once more. The dance is not ended, nor thy part in it! Rise, rise, rise, mummer and poet, vagabond and lover. The realm of nothingness is not thine; I call thee forth from the foaming blackness into this vessel. The dance is not ended! The dance is everlasting! I bid thee rise, if thou art a true servant of The Stranger! Rise, LeBarron, for thy part in the drama is not yet done!"

CHAPTER 20
THE KINGDOM

GEOMETRIES DRAWN UPON the black canvas of space. Cloud, water, earth, all were one. Midnight blue, purple, black, all the most beautiful colours, ribboning, folding, undulating, lapping like waves, rising like smoke from a flame, burning and fizzling, inchoate yet coagulate, thicker than honey, lighter than air, deeper than water. The universe eternally transmuting into something else. Consciousness the only fixed point. The "I"—but no "I" of ego, of Self, of identity—a formless "I" that was also an "eye", that watched, that sensed, yet cast no judgement or aspersion. *Is this death?* The thought rising from the darkness—no fear attached, no worrying. Simply a question, and the resounding answer: *YES!* A strange joy to it, the colours strobing, and sounds travelling through the deep like great barges composed of music, hummings and tinklings, cascades, bass notes—singing. The "I" felt like singing too, though there was no throat with which to sing, pure consciousness only, adrift in the miasmal yet beautiful sea of many colours.

Truly, this is the kingdom of The Stranger . . .

For all was formless here, and all was One. This is what lay behind the Mask of life, and the Mask of He whom the "I" had once adored.

The strength of that love seemed to drag the "I" forward, deeper into the swirling mists which were also pools, intermixed and yet distinct. Hard to tell apart sound and substance, colour and texture, smell and sensation, all was One here. Yet the "I" sensed they moved deeper, the colours richer, the sensations fuller, the joy rising like a sea wave within him, higher and higher, never to

fall. Black mysteries unfolded like flowers. Beasts of pure emotion devoured with a shivering ecstasy. There were others in this great sea, the "I" could feel them. But they were also part of the "I"; and the "I" was part of them. Not "I" then, truly, but "We". Singing, singing eternally. Glorious, vibrant, bright. The darkness responding joyfully to the song, creating new patterns, new whorls, new colours.

Deeper, moving deeper. Infinite depths, perhaps, awaited. The "I" could never tire of this discovery, of this beauty, of this mystery.

But now something strange emerged, something impossible, something hair-raising—had the "I" any hair to rise. The blackness opening like a curtain pulled asunder and behind it a great stone platform, raised upon pillars, its dimensions absurdly vast. A man, standing upon the platform, so small against its enormity he might have been a single droplet of ink upon a thousand blank pages of vellum. The "I" shifted closer and closer to this platform, like a bird descending towards an island. At some point, the "I" alighted, though they had no feet, no body. Yet, the sensation of walking, of cold stone beneath soles long ago left behind in another world somewhere. A world that did not matter, anymore.

Approaching the man, who stood at the far side of the platform, his back to the "I", staring out at the infinite complexities of this undiscovered realm that all must one day return to. A strange man: short, brown-haired, not particularly imposing. He wore simple black robes. His arms were folded across his chest, or else held out in front.

It took an indescribable length of time to walk across the platform and reach the man, though the "I" did not mind at all, for worries and concerns about time had long since passed, and there was only a kind of mild delight at the eternal now. At last, the "I" stood perhaps thirty paces from the man, though distances were ever-changing and treacherous as the landscape reforged itself into new wonders.

"Hello?" the "I" said, timidly.

The man slowly turned.

A lightning bolt passed through the "I", their consciousness nearly blasted to smithereens by the force of shock, their very soul scoured at some level beyond the physical. *It cannot be!* Yet such words were meaningless in this place, where everything was and was not.

The "I" knew the man. And now that the "I" beheld him, the "I" realised this was inevitable, the only possible conclusion—yet still it seemed unthinkable.

The man was Alan Chambers.

"What . . . what are you doing here?" the "I" stammered. In a place where distinctions had been dissolved, in a place where all was supposedly one, Alan remained himself. Stranger still, or so it seemed to the "I", Alan did not bear his fabled Claw, but rather stood before the "I" with his naked stump bared, a curious smile upon his face.

The shock felt by the "I" was such that the universe trembled, the colours warping ever-faster, spinning in a tremendous wheel that the "I" now perceived was circling around Alan as its central point. *He* was the axis. He was the fulcrum, the centre of all.

Terror and wonder filled the "I".

"What are you doing here?" the "I" asked again.

Slowly, Alan raised his left hand and put a finger to his lips, a gesture indicating the "I" keep silent about what they knew.

"But why? I don't understand . . . "

Alan smiled.

The song of this mysterious realm rose to deafening pitch, so resonant that only the stuff of dreams could endure its thunderous vibration; the cacophony of angelic voices filled not only the infinite and fertile abyss, but the "I"'s own being, and the majestic secret of everything was revealed in a flash of terrifying light.

LeBarron awoke, spluttering. Darkness surrounded him. He tried to scream, but his throat was clogged with blood, and so he choked instead. Firm hands gripped him, pushed down on his chest. He retched and blood flew from his mouth, a thick rivulet. When he inhaled, his lungs were clear. The sickness that had gripped his limbs was gone. One or two of his scars ached, but he was . . . alive. Better than he had been in . . . a sharp pain went through his head. Memory was difficult, clouded. But no matter, he felt pure and salubrious joy. *Alive!*

He blinked and tried to take in his surroundings. Cassilda stood over him, a staff in her hands, panting, her face conveying a mixture of emotions, each of which was worthy of being shaped into a beautiful mummer's mask. Horror, on the one hand. Yet elation also, as though she had succeeded in some difficult venture. *She raised you with the necromancer's staff,* he thought. The night

sky hung above him, the stars beginning to shine through the penumbra like eyes opening. *We're no longer in Alar. Scarleth must be dead, or we left her behind . . .* So many questions, but again joy flooded him to know his friends had honoured his request, brought him back from the strange realms.

Petruccio knelt by his side, grinning ear to ear.

"Good to have you back, stranger," the dwarf said.

LeBarron smiled in return, a rogue's grin.

"I . . . I think I can stand . . . "

Slowly, the actor got to his feet.

He nearly fell over again when he saw Namtar standing there, towering over their group, his eyes like livid white flames. LeBarron scrambled away, but a voice stilled his fear.

"He saved us."

LeBarron turned and saw Alan. A chill went through him, deeper even than the cold of Hali's waters. Alan looked not unlike the version of him existing in whatever strange dream LeBarron had just voyaged through, though unlike that vision he bore The Claw on his right arm, its talons gleaming, crackling with cosmic potential.

LeBarron stared at Alan, shivering despite the fact his body felt warmer than it had in a long time. He swallowed down a thousand questions. Alan looked at him worriedly now, not understanding. *Is it possible he does not know yet?*

"What didst thou see, LeBarron?"

Cassilda always had a knack of reading the minds of others, LeBarron thought, and he doubted even his best performances could deceive her. She knew he had seen something. He had to tell them, but what? Once he had known a thousand monologues on death and the afterlife, but now they seemed distant from him. His elation at returning to the land of the living was beginning to be undercut by a deep fear. *Where is my mind? My memory?* He had lost something, left it behind in the kingdom of eternal dreams. And now he thought about it, was it such a good thing to be alive? That place had been beautiful, wondrous beyond description; he had felt a peace he'd never known in life. The last of his defences and masks had been stripped from him—and he had been able to be his pure Self.

But Alan . . . Alan was as he is now, or near enough. What could this mean?

Cassilda's eyes implored him earnestly to relate that which he had seen beyond the doors of death. The others, too, looked at him with profound curiosity. Only Namtar turned away, disinterested, or perhaps LeBarron's answer simply would not be relevant to him, demons having their own afterlife. LeBarron didn't know.

"I . . . " He remembered Alan, pressing a finger to his lips, a dark smile on his face, bidding him be silent. "I cannot say."

"Cannot?" Petruccio said, frowning. "Because you would struggle to describe it, or because you were forbidden?"

"I cannot say," LeBarron muttered again.

"It's okay," Alan said, smiling warmly. How unlike the terrible and secret smile he had shown LeBarron in the kingdom beyond . . . "Some secrets cannot be told."

LeBarron stared at Alan.

"Indeed . . . "

Namtar turned back to their gathering, moving towards Cassilda, towering over the slight princess.

"You now bear power over life and death, daughter of Hastur," the demon growled. "Wield it wisely."

Cassilda, to Alan's surprise, bowed.

"I will, great Namtar. I thank thee for thy aid. I will not ask thee to fight against thine own."

Namtar snorted.

"My own? I belong to no-one, daughter of Hastur. Not even Pe'kar. Perhaps we shall meet again, perhaps not."

With that, the demon stretched his wings and soared into the night sky, his pinioned form soon lost amidst purple clouds.

CHAPTER 21
OVERRUN

PE'KARIAN CAVALRY POURED into the city, slaughtering Carcosan soldiers in the streets. The gorgonopsids were by far more savage than their masters, pouncing upon the armoured Carcosans, and tearing their chitin platemail from their bodies with feline talons, guzzling on blood pouring from opened throats.

Upon the walls, their casualties were also mounting. The great demons had now taken to the field, performing great swooping dives upon those left defending the battlements. After passing through their ranks with devastating force, they rocketed back up into the sky, either with victims skewered upon their weapons, dragged behind them via lashes, or left to fall into the churning melee below. Cali did not wish to slay one of the six, for her goal was to ensure Pe'kar's victory, but when a howling demoness came at her with twin katanas flashing, Cali had no choice but to dance once again.

The demoness was called Shle'guloth, and vast dominions had fallen beneath her blades, worshipping her as a goddess; it was forbidden, all reverence and worship being due to the Demon King Pe'kar, but as one of the favoured courtesans and assassins of the Demon King, Shle'guloth was permitted leniency where others were not. Her face might have been beautiful were her eyes not devoid of iris and colour, her tongue—like Cali's—long enough to wrap around a human neck and squeeze, and her teeth fine as needles. The allure of her beautiful physique, muscular yet curvaceous, was likewise offset by her abnormally long limbs.

"Wingless One!" Shle'guloth spat. "Pe'kar's little runaway pet! How delicious!"

Her katanas flashed like bolts of lightning. Cali unashamedly drew from her reservoirs of magical power to enhance and accelerate her movements. Had she not, Shle'guloth would have cut her to ribbons in the first few seconds. Cali spun, somersaulting out of the deadly weapons' reach.

"I don't want to fight you," Cali growled, parrying a lightning-fast diagonal swing with her scimitar and ducking the second katana with acrobatic poise. Her words were true. She would rather not slay one of Pe'kar's generals, as her plan was to deliver them the city from within. But she could not well confess her plans to Shle'guloth now, surrounded by Carcosan soldiers. Besides, she doubted the mad courtesan would care very much, even if she had reason to believe it was true. Shle'guloth was battle-crazed.

Shle'guloth shrieked, beating her wings to bring her into the air. Her katanas jabbed downward, a series of aerial thrusts that would have easily overwhelmed the defences of a lesser opponent, but Cali maintained her distance, turning aside each blow with efficiencies of movements so slight human eyes could hardly discern them.

Shle'guloth was not done, however. She descended with shocking speed and snapped out a kick. Cali misjudged the distance, the demon's gangly limbs unpredictable in their reach. The clawed foot slammed into Cali's chest, and even with her leather armour, she felt bone-breaking shockwaves pass through her. She was launched from her feet and collapsed on the ground. As she went to rise, Shle'guloth was already upon her, swinging two katana blades down. Cali threw up her sword horizontally in a desperate parry. Cali stared into eyes so unlike her own. They shared blood, but little else.

Shle'guloth pressed harder downwards. Cali's arms began to tremble with the effort of holding back the deadly blades. She gritted her teeth, allowed a growl to escape her throat. Shle'guloth perhaps anticipated some kind of spell, for she suddenly alleviated the pressure, causing Cali to lurch forward. In answer, the demoness brought up a sharp knee, cracking against the underside of Cali's chin. Teeth broke. Bones fractured. Cali spat blood as she was thrown back to the floor once more. She raised her legs in order to leap to her feet, but Shle'guloth's clawed foot rose and fell in a deadly axe kick, slamming into Cali's stomach with enough force to have breached a castle gateway. Cali vomited blood, and

her limbs went limp. *Fight!* A voice inside her screamed. *Fight.* But she could not fight. She was winded, barely able to suck in breath, her extremities no longer responding to the instructions of her brain.

Shle'guloth straddled her, katanas raised in a reverse grip, pointing downwards like deadly teeth. One hovered over Cali's heart, and one over the stomach. She would not survive this blow, and she doubted her armour would turn aside those blades.

"Goodbye, little pet!" Shle'guloth hissed.

A flash of black, yellow, and red passed over Cali's woozy vision, a fluttering sound almost like wings beating the air, and suddenly Shle'guloth was shrieking.

Roland!

He had leapt over Cali, bearing the banner of Uboth aloft, and driving the metal-clad butt of the banner through the demon's chest like a spear. Roland was strong of arm, and he drove the flagpole all the way through, silver erupting from Shle'guloth's spine. She howled, not just from the pain, but from the agony of what now confronted her: the cursed image that adorned the garish, livid flag. She could not withdraw from it, could not escape it, and the awful light of the banner—wounding to any who did not bear the Yellow Sign—blasted her with its full and undiluted radiance.

Roland grinned savagely. He wrenched the banner from the wound, a messy effusion of gore spilling, proving that even the great demons—though godlike in power—could bleed.

Shle'guloth was not dead, however.

"Miscreant!" she snarled.

Roland answered with his strange new weapon, swinging the banner's horizontal yardarm like a halberd. Shle'guloth's preternatural reactions would normally have allowed her to evade such a swing with ease—even to laugh at it, clumsy as it was. But the grisly light of Uboth's masterwork flashed, dazzling and dazing her, distorting the image of reality. It seemed to Cali like the banner's flag not only trailed behind its pole, as if caught in a wind, but also drew strokes of colour upon the air, like a great paintbrush. Yellow and black spilled from the holy image, and Shle'guloth stumbled.

A moment later the yardarm sank into her brain, her eyes rolling into the top of her head, blood sluicing down from a grisly

wound, and coating the flag. Strangely, the blood did not mar the image, but rather seemed to be incorporated into it, forming crimson halos around the figures depicted, deepening the existing colours with an undercoat of scarlet. The flag drank the blood flowing freely from the demon's rent skull, and its light shone brighter and greater.

With a growl, Roland withdrew his esoteric weapon and raised it high. Shle'guloth slumped to the ground dead, her mighty body large enough to cover the entire span of the wall. Cali clambered to her feet. She could have kissed and made love to Roland then and there, and not as she had before, with manipulative magics, but in truth and earnest. She had underestimated him, and undoubtedly, he had saved her from death. When the time came for her new kingdom to arise, she would do all in her power to ensure he had a place in it.

See, I can love, Father!

The light of Uboth's banner illuminated the dire battlefield. Carcosa was overrun. Hardly any soldiers were left in the streets to stop the pillaging of the Pe'karian forces now. Only the city itself defended.

Cali watched, not without wonder, as the city's towers threw themselves down upon serried ranks of gorgonopsid cavalry. Faces in walls came to life, tongues flicking from their mouths, dragging unwary Pe'karians into their maws, the sound of crunching bones reverberating up even to their height on the wall. Mycelial structures glistened and emitted noxious vapours that killed any who inhaled it. Large squadrons of Pe'karians marched into alleyways, only to then turn around and see their way back had been blocked, and the thousand ways forward led only to graves. The bells of the churches rang with demented enthusiasm, sending throbs of colour through the streets, and deafening the Pe'karians that dared to draw too close, causing blood to rupture from their eardrums.

The cannibals had come from the city's filthy and forbidden district, and now threw themselves with ape-like strength upon the soldiers. Many were cut down by the Pe'karian's flashing blades, or trampled by gorgonopsids, but some were successful, dragging soldiers from their mounts and ripping out their throats. Cali had taken the cannibals to be mindless freaks, but here they too fought for the salvation of the city, though in vain.

She watched as one unit of Pe'karians were suddenly beset—though by what, Cali could not see. Floating weapons drove themselves through the backs of unwitting Pe'karian soldiers. Some were hoisted from their feet, as though by invisible birds, and dropped, their bodies cracking on the teeth-like spires of the city's many churches.

"The shades," Cali whispered. "Even *they* defend the city."

"This is a fight for survival now," Roland said. "Not a war, but a holocaust. We must endure."

Cali trembled. Had she gone too far? Had she overplayed her hand once again, leading to the destruction of Carcosa? She did not want to burn the city, after all, she wanted to rule it.

No, Cali. Your aims can still be achieved. There will be damage, but the city cannot be destroyed in a single battle, its foundations are too strong. Lead them, lead them to the Groom's Exit . . .

"We must pull back to the palace," Cali said.

Roland turned to her.

"And leave the walls?"

"The walls are taken already." There was no lie in her words. Even now, Pe'karians swarmed the city streets below. The Siege Ender clambered over what little remained of the rubbled gate, its thunderous footfalls crushing friend and foe alike, breaking the earth. Most of the defenders on the wall lay either slain or locked in combats so deadly there was no rallying them for further defensive action.

Roland finally nodded.

"The Groom's Exit," she said. "It's the only way."

"But the defences . . . "

"It will be enough," Cali said.

This was the key moment—did he trust her enough to obey?

A war took place within him, she could see it rage, but it was short-lived.

"Pull back to the Groom's Exit!" he cried. "Pull back!"

Cali hid her secret smile within.

They fled along the wall, taking what little remained of the Carcosan defenders with them. The Pe'karians pursued, and a trail of both Carcosan and Pe'karian dead were left along the northern wall as they retreated. Whenever the five remaining great demons came, Roland warded them with the banner of Uboth. The light of

that flag seemed even more painful to the great demons than ordinary Pe'karians.

At last, they stood by the black and once-secret entryway to the palace. A mere one hundred and fifty guards were now stationed here, where once there had been five hundred—all Cali's doing.

But even a hundred and fifty soldiers could make a stalwart defence of a narrow defile, and that is what the Groom's Exit was.

The Pe'karians charged but were greeted by a withering hail of bone white arrows that decimated their bloated ranks. Roland formed up the straggling defenders into a spear-wall, and as the Pe'karians came a second time they were met by both spears and arrows.

"Shields!" one Pe'karian cried. "Wedge! Break them!"

The Pe'karians had their own military tactics, and now formed into a V-shaped wedge of gleaming shields, interlinking tighter than scales. They drove forward in a reckless yet devastating assault, ramming the front line of the Carcosans and breaching their ranks. The foremost Pe'karian, elated at having succeeded, broke from their own formation and began to slice at the Carcosans. He was put down by a perfect arrowshot to the throat. The Carcosans closed their ranks and pushed back, spears snaking under and over the shield-wall. The fighting was gritty and tight. The Pe'karians could only come at the outnumbered Carcosans five abreast. The stone beneath them, that had once welcomed the footfall of a fleeing god, was now so slick with blood it was almost impossible to remain upright.

Cali slipped through the sweat- and blood-soaked ranks of the Carcosans to Roland. She put a hand on his shoulder.

"I must defend the king!"

Roland nodded.

"Go, Cali."

The simple heroism of that statement wounded Cali's heart. She had thought of having Roland by her side in the new world order she created, but now she saw no way of taking him with her; he would never leave his soldiers behind or abandon his post. He would hold the Groom's Exit until his dying breath—and he would die, there was no doubt in Cali's mind now that the Pe'karians would overrun the palace defenders, no matter how heroic their defence.

Leave him, Cali. Queens do not cry over pawns. He served his

purpose, and you will remember him. You cannot falter now, not when you are so close.

She had almost died several times on the wall, and other calamities had nearly offset her plans, but now all had fallen into place, everything where she wanted it to be. This was the moment. She would take the *Hand of the Empress* and do what had to be done . . .

She left Roland there, knowing that she had consigned him and all of his men to their deaths.

CHAPTER 22
TO BE OR NOT TO BE

"WE MUST RETURN to the city," Cassilda said, already marching forward, heedless of whether the others followed her or not.

"Even if you *can* bring one man back to life, which by the way I am still reeling from a little, how can that help the city?"

Alan was dumbfounded, a little shellshocked. LeBarron had lain dead—unequivocally, inarguably so. When LeBarron had first given up his ghost, in the little home in Alar where they had held out against the dead slaves, Alan had wondered if it were not some performance, LeBarron's last gamble to get them close to Scarleth. But soon, he'd realised that even an actor so great as LeBarron could not fake death like this. Cold, rigid, insensible to the world. Alan had held his lifeless body in his arms. And now he stood by Alan's side, gazing at the world as though it were new to him.

Something had changed in the actor, Alan could not quite put his finger on what yet, but Near Death Experiences were in the habit of reshaping character.

Cassilda offered a rare smile at Alan's question.

"The corpse-piles, Alan. We shall raise all of the slain Carcosans."

Alan shuddered. He had seen the great corpse piles outside the city, witnessed men and women trying to climb them, only to be devoured by the hungry spider-creatures that fed off the dead. Those festering mounds were a reeking eyesore, a true horror. To bring them back would create a dark army indeed.

"You have that power?"

Cassilda nodded.

"She is becoming far too powerful, Alan. Something must be done . . . "

Alan turned but found no speaker. He ground his teeth together. The voice was getting stronger. And now, it didn't merely bark monosyllabic commands, it reasoned and persuaded, a far more sinister prospect. He wondered whether it would soon become impossible to determine the unreality of the voice. *That will be the moment you go mad, Alan.*

"Cali will be waiting for us," Petruccio said. "The demon may have been right that she did not cause the war, but you can bet she has used it to her advantage some way. Trust me. I know her arguably better than any, save perhaps you, Cassilda."

Cassilda shook her head.

"I think you perhaps know her better even than me." The raw honesty in Cassilda's voice was complemented by her dropping the formal dialect. "I grew up with her. We played together in the palace. But the sister I knew is long dead. Something happened to her in the land of Blue Light, in her endless searching for a champion of Carcosa; she changed and none of us perceived it. I have no doubt you're right, Petruccio. Cali waits for us, in Carcosa. But is that not all the more reason to go? If Carcosa falls, what is there left for us to do? Run and hide? Flee to Urth? No. We must save the city. And we must do it now."

Alan placed a hand on Cassilda's shoulder.

"I'm with you, my love."

She turned to him, her eyes widening. She was so powerful, yet in that moment she seemed more delicate and vulnerable than ever. A secret passed between them, a promise of what might be, should they survive . . .

"And me," LeBarron said. "Though I don't know what good I'll be."

Something was definitely off with LeBarron, Alan thought. His usual confidence and cockiness had melted away. He seemed a shadow of his former self.

"Neither you nor I have weapons," Petruccio said, laughing.

"There will be plenty when we reach the city," Cassilda said. "Come."

They set off, walking at a pace that was very nearly a run. The walls loomed in the distance, black forms no larger than ants at this distance crawling over them, smoke rising from within the city.

"That creature," Alan said, pointing at the tail of the anteosaurus, for the creature had now entered the city, no doubt causing devastation with its every step. "How do we stop that?"

Petruccio pondered the question.

"Its back legs are weak," he said. "You notice it is lopsided? Only God—or perhaps the King In Yellow—knows why. If you could collapse its back legs, at least it would stop moving. Its skull is likely thicker than Carcosa's walls, so I doubt a blow to the head will do it."

"Through the eye?"

"Possibly. But its eyes are very small."

They went on in silence for a while. The sounds of battle rose steadily like a symphony rising towards grandeur at a snail's pace. Eventually, their silence was broken by LeBarron, who appeared to be mumbling under his breath. Alan risked approaching the actor.

"*You, sir, should unmask . . . "* LeBarron muttered. "And then I say, I say . . . " He let out a frustrated cry. "Why, why won't it come? Why?" He tore his hair out in great clumps.

"LeBarron?"

The actor looked up sharply, oblivious to Alan sidling up to him. His face was a mask, but unlike any of the theatrical faces he had once worn. Indeed, the melting pot of emotion was so confused that it left LeBarron's handsome features in a gormless stupidity. *Something is definitely wrong*.

As Alan watched, the alchemical mixture of emotions was overridden by one dominant ingredient: LeBarron's face became the image of despair. He turned away from Alan. Tears glistened on his cheeks.

"They're gone, Alan."

"What is?"

"My speeches. My poetry. The plays. I can't remember a damn line. And my face . . . " LeBarron rubbed his fingers roughly over his cheeks, as though he were trying to pull his flesh into different shapes. There was a disturbing amount of give in the rubbery texture of LeBarron's cheeks. They seemed so chiseled and defined, yet when he touched them, they became soft and malleable as melting butter. One of The Stranger's many mysteries.

"I can only hold the masks for a few seconds . . . " LeBarron turned to Alan and Alan nearly recoiled in shock, for LeBarron's

face was his own, as though Alan were looking into a mirror. But then it slipped, and the actor stood before him once more. "Useless! I'll never perform again . . . "

"I am sure it is just exhaustion. You were *dead* not moments before, LeBarron. Cut yourself some slack!" Alan tried to injected humour into his words, and indeed the actor laughed bitterly. It didn't suit him, like a reptile's hiss emerging from the throat of a bird.

"I am *still* dead if I cannot use The Stranger's arts, cannot live the lives of a thousand, thousand men and women like I once did. What am I without that?"

Alan placed his good hand upon LeBarron's shoulder.

"Yourself, my dear friend. You are *yourself*."

LeBarron's eyes widened, as though pieces of a puzzle had finally come together in his mind. Alan sensed it actually had very little to do with what he said, but rather some other context he was unaware of. Still, if he had triggered a positive turn in LeBarron, he was glad.

"Yes . . . Thank you," LeBarron said, gripping Alan's shoulder with a firm hand. "Truly. I thank you."

They continued on, Petruccio and Cassilda saying nothing about LeBarron's predicament, awkward at having overheard perhaps, or else simply not wishing to dampen his newly reforged spirits. They could smell the battle now: blood, fear, death.

A grim task awaited them, and with every step they took the magnitude of their challenge became more and more apparent. The city dwarfed them with its enormity: so mighty, so imposing, so magnificently strange. Yet the city was falling, its bells tolling a death sentence, its spires either aflame or else crashing to the ground like felled trees. Most of the Pe'karian army had now poured into the wound in its wall, laying waste to its citizens like a poison destroying healthy tissue, though some still circled the city's extremities, massacring any straggling defenders.

They met a small squadron of twenty Pe'karian scouts that had been held back from the main force, perhaps in anticipation of a counterattack, though no doubt Pe'kar's generals had expected more than four souls to come to the city's aid. The Pe'karians wasted no time with boasting, but savagely attacked. A sweep of Cassilda's staff sent half of them burning and screaming to the ground, red light shredding armour and flesh alike. Alan's raised

The Claw and thunderous serpents of yellow electricity decimated the others. LeBarron and Petruccio helped themselves to Pe'karian blades. LeBarron also took a shield. They were too tall for Petruccio to wield, however.

"When you raised me, Cassilda," LeBarron said, quietly. "Could you have made me into one of those slaves?"

Cassilda nodded, her eyes flecked with sorrow.

"Thank you for being honest. And thank you for bringing me back as fully as you could."

All sensed a slight hollowness to his last statement, but none could challenge it; he had lost a great deal that was important to him, that much was clear, but perhaps in time he could rediscover it.

"Do what you must do," Alan said.

Cassilda stood grimly over the soldiers' remains.

"Rise," she commanded.

They were the first of her undead slaves.

But not the last.

CHAPTER 23
THE DOORS HAVE GONE MAD

CALI RAN THROUGH the labyrinth of the palace, heading towards her bedroom, where she had secreted away the *Hand of the Empress* and her three mortal darts, arrows capable of slaying divinity, demon, or ancient terror alike. She heard panicked sounds from many of the hallways and rooms she passed, the grating of stone as doors were sealed, the clamour of footsteps as courtiers fled for their lives, the distant noise of blades clashing, spears splintering, and shields breaking.

As she rounded the last turning that would lead her back to her chambers, she saw a face she did not expect.

"Princess Cali!" It was Eric. He was covered in blood, though none of it seemed his own. His motley was torn in places. His eyes were a wild, pale fire.

Curse him, she thought. Always as she approached her destiny some little creep stood in her path.

If Eric saw her frustration or hesitation, he gave no sign, but blundered into rapid, near-senseless speech.

"You must come. And quickly. They have slaughtered the soldiers! There's no one left, Cali. Even the ancient doors are revolting, crying out about some kind of prophecy! Only Hephaiton holds firm, barring the Fires of Manifestation from the enemy. The others are throwing themselves open! They say One is coming who will deliver Carcosa and that they must remain open for him. They've gone mad, Cali! All Carcosa has gone mad! The defences crumbled as though they were made of straw! Not one soldier was where he was meant to be! It is as if Fate herself has orchestrated our ruin! O Carcosa! O wretched Carcosa!"

"Calm yourself, Eric!" Cali snapped, though inwardly she was

pleased to see her designs had been so effective; the rebellion of the ancient doors was an unexpected bonus. Her alterations to Roland's plans had been infinitesimally small in most instances, but as with chess, one piece out of place destroys the integrity of the defence. "Explain the current situation. Surely *someone* must be defending the palace or the Pe'karians would be within the walls." *And if they get in before I can complete my mission, all will have been for naught!*

"Now the courtiers mount a defence on the palace steps," Eric babbled. "But it will not hold long. We need you, Cali."

"No Eric, they need *you*."

He stood in dumb silence for a moment, then his eyes went wide.

"This . . . this . . . is my moment?"

She nodded.

"This is what you have trained for. You are a good swordsman. I must defend my father, be His last line of defence . . . But you, you will hold the stair. Hold it for all you are worth and make them bleed before entering the palace. Reinforcements will come. Carcosa will not fall."

"Yes . . . Hold the stair. Defend the King. Yes, that makes sense." Eric muttered like a madman, but his spine straightened, chin jutting with pride. "Thank you, Princess Cali . . . Your Highness . . . "

"Thank me by spilling Pe'karian blood," she said. It was perhaps a little overwrought, but in the heat of the moment, Eric did not seem to notice its performative tone.

"Deathless be Carcosa!" Eric whispered, clapping Cali on the pauldron.

She smiled.

"Deathless be He."

Eric fled back down the corridor whence he came, and Cali darted into her bedchamber. Muttering secret words, she unlocked part of the wall, stone turning liquid, softening, then opening like a baby's lipless mouth, revealing hidden spaces beyond the illusionary facade. Within lay her masterpiece, a dark weapon forged of bone, magic, and intent. Cali had once delighted in the fact her ecg'tar could bring both joy and death, was both instrument and weapon, but now she saw the folly of her old ways: the *Hand of the Empress* was purer, distilled; it represented the new order of things once she became Queen of Carcosa.

Beside the black bow lay three equally black darts, each with an arrowhead wide as a human palm yet tapering to a tip so sharp it hurt the eye to look upon. Even ordinary weapons carried memories, and one glance at their pockmarked surfaces, chipped edges, or dark stains revealed the history of their bloodshed. But the *Hand of the Empress* and its deadly bolts emanated not just memory but *feeling*. Its hatred—for an artefact made solely for Death must hate all life—radiated from it with the virulence of a nuclear missile. And that, in many ways, is precisely what it was.

Delicately, so as not to cut herself, she took the black arrows and slotted them into the belt around her waist. She slung the bow over one shoulder; it was surprisingly heavy, given its ergonomic frame.

She sprinted from her bedchamber towards the centre of the palace, where the two massive doors barricaded the way to the King's private chambers. She had never been allowed inside, though she knew the opening spells. Cassilda had visited her father once or twice in his rooms, always to discuss some grave matter, and Cali suspected to discuss her, too. Cali felt it was justice, therefore, that at Carcosa's end of days she would enter the forbidden place of her own free will. And fitting, too: her father had spent so much of his life hibernating, sleeping, in his dark and secret room. Cali would put him finally to rest there.

The sound of the fighting increased in volume as she neared the royal chambers. It was not far from here to the palace steps in relative terms. The ferocity of the fighting surprised her. Perhaps a contingent of Carcosan soldiers had managed to reinforce the steps? Or perhaps the courtiers simply sold their lives dearly, knowing that if Pe'kar took the city, there would be no place for them in his new regime. Either way, it would buy Cali time, time to do the unthinkable, to change the course of the black planet's history forever. *Black Star, light my way. Great spirits of the heroic dead, guide my aim.* Cali had long ago forsaken worship of the gods, knowing they existed—for what else could her father be?—but doubting their total omnipotency. Now, however, she sent forth whatever prayers she could to succeed where so many had failed. The number of Pe'karian assassins, and those of other more mysteries realms, who had come before The Yellow King intending His death was legion, and all had failed. But Cali knew—knew she would succeed.

She stood before the mighty doors, engraved with a thousand, thousand images of the profane dance of life and death, form and void, beast and man. She spoke the word of opening, which she had been taught by her sister—afraid to use it until now. Though eons had passed since those childhood days, the doors groaned in response. Unlike the sentient, ancient doors, they could not forbid her entry on a whim, though they protested her command with the squeal of their shrieking hinges. Beyond lay a gulf of blackness impenetrable even to Cali's night-vision.

Slowly, she strode forward into the abyss.

CHAPTER 24
GRIL'DAKKEN

BY THE TIME they had reached the gates of the city, their numbers already ranked in the hundreds. Dead slaves, white-eyed and brainless automatons, stumbled behind their party towards Carcosa. Petruccio's face had become an immovable and grim-set mask. LeBarron did not look behind, perhaps fearing he would see some kinship with the newly resurrected dead. Alan's heart thundered in his chest. He knew Cali waited for him in the city.

Cassilda stopped, now standing between the twin corpse-piles which had only grown in size as a result of the recent battle, fresh Carcosan and Pe'karian dead decorating the decayed mounds like bloody baubles. Beyond them, the megalithic archway lay decimated, rubbled boulders all that remained of its grandeur. The warped metal of the gate sank deep in the sand and earth, blood oozing from under its rim where it had no doubt flattened countless soldiers as it fell.

Cassilda raised the black staff, the ruby at its crown vomiting forth light like a toad regurgitating the poisonous contents of its stomach. The sky itself seemed to shriek, red serpents undulating through the air and shooting forth into the colossal mounds of crushed, mangled, and liquefied corpses.

"Rise!" Cassilda cried. Her voice reverberated with the thunder of Joshua's horn. Alan thought she could have brought down the city walls if she'd desired it. "Rise now! Pe'karian and Carcosan! Warrior and servant! I wash thee of thy former allegiances! It is I thou shalt serve! I am thy goddess and thy master! And I command thee to march upon the enemies of my city!"

The ground trembled. The mounds of dead began to pulse and

glow. A shudder ran through thousands upon thousands of dead limbs, making the corpse-piles seem like monstrous millipedes awakening after a deep sleep. There was something mortifying yet also spellbinding about the process of animation: the gory splendour of childbirth, some divine mystery never supposed to be glimpsed. And he supposed it truly was a divine mystery—or else a profane one. Deeper even than the birth of life was the restoration of life to that which had perished. He feared suddenly for Cassilda. Would her mind be overthrown wielding such powers? Clearly Scarleth had become unhinged . . . But it seemed that Cassilda, unlike Scarleth, had not *studied* the maddening mysteries, nor did she need to: the staff did the work for her, she merely focused its energies. It was the creation of the staff that had driven Scarleth mad, not wielding it. At least, that is what Alan hoped.

The corpse-piles began to shed bodies, the more recent dead sliding to the ground, jerking and sputtering. It was grotesque—turning Alan's stomach—yet also miraculous. Mouths partially caved in by mauls opened, though they did not draw breath. Limbs bent the wrong way began to move, seeking purchase. Eyes roved, though scoured of colour, seeking out their new master—or perhaps prey. The jittery awakening took several minutes, minutes in which Cassilda stood still as one of the pillars holding up the sky, red energy flowing from her staff, her eyes closed in deep concentration. She whispered words under her breath, telesmatic sounds.

The dead began to lurch on their desiccated limbs towards their group, forming up behind them, tired soldiers called to muster. Pe'karian. Carcosan. And crawling spider-kin.

"Stand we on guard oath-bound . . . " Alan muttered.

At last, Cassilda opened her eyes. They glowed white hot like supernovas. Alan loved and feared her all the more in that moment.

"Think what you and she can do with your combined powers," the dark voice whispered. "Nothing can stop you. You should take Carcosa for your own . . . "

Alan ground his teeth together.

No.

"You can't keep running from your true power forever."

Alan's lips curled into a snarl. The voice had become almost sardonic, teasing, dripping with disdain. The fact it was acquiring

personality, *identity,* troubled Alan deeply. He could only hope the other voices within him were equal to the task of combating the darker one.

"Now . . . " Cassilda proclaimed. "Now we fight!"

She began to run forward, her slender legs carrying her at a cheetah's swift pace. Alan did not think; he was after her in moments. The Claw, instinctively it seemed, began to crackle with power. LeBarron and Petruccio shared one look, then sprinted too, raising their swords and issuing battle cries, Petruccio's dedicated to The Yellow King, and LeBarron's to The Stranger.

The dead trundled after them, their charge much slower, but building momentum. Alan heard the thunder of their feet upon the earth. A horrid yet glorious host, led by the woman in white, whose staff glowed brighter now than the moon and stars.

Beyond the fallen gateway, sanity gave way to insanity. Alan felt as though he'd stepped inside a Beksiňki or Dali painting—one of the landscapes painted by Petruccio that'd adorned the walls of *The Black Star*—the laws of reality defeated by the surreal. Pe'karian cavalry slew civilians and soldiers alike as they plunged deeper into the city's mazelike streets; but the city itself was at war with them, pieces of rubble rising and striking at the soldiers, hideous plants coiling down from balconies and ensnaring riders in thorny nooses, walls coming alive and swallowing troops whole.

Farther still, they saw the massive tail of the Siege Ender, sweeping side to side, decimating buildings and spires. Though the city pummelled the creature with whatever esoteric magics animated its living architecture, its might and power rendered it immune from real damage.

A battalion of Pe'karians turned to meet them. Alan raised his Claw and screamed, a blast of energy shooting forth, striking down two soldiers. The others ran at Cassilda, deeming her to be weak due to her small size, but she swung her staff in a two-handed grip, red light blossoming from the ruby, an arc of flame, incinerating the soldiers, slagging their armour from their flesh.

The other Pe'karians raised shields, then saw the host that ran—at full tilt now—behind Alan and Cassilda. Their eyes went wide with fear. Though they had bent their features to resemble those of demons, they were human still at their core.

They turned but did not have time to escape the catastrophic charge. The dead thundered over the Pe'karians with the ease of a

herd of bulls trampling a pack of scrawny, malnourished wolves. Enemies rose before Alan, no more than blurs of silver and white and flesh, and he answered them with The Claw, never meeting weapon, armour, or opponent who could withstand its rending talons. Alan saw flashes of red ahead of him in the crazed melee and knew it was Cassilda likewise carving her path towards the Siege Ender.

A great beast lumbered towards Alan, what Petruccio had called a gorgonopsid, resembling a panther clad in scales with a draconic, fanged snout. It had long ago lost its rider, but did not seem to care, perhaps possessing intelligence enough to continue fighting in the name of its demonic master, or simply driven by hunger.

It lunged at Alan and this time he was forced to back away, stumbling clumsily into a group of dead. They turned blank eyes on him, then on the gorgonopsid slinking his way. Under the will of their mistress, they leapt upon the mighty creature. Its jaws flashed and one of the dead was rent asunder. Its clawed forelegs swiped and another fell. But the third lodged their sword in the beast's flanks. More dead came, and soon the great creature was dragged whelping under the infinite tide of undead slaves, all stabbing, biting, ripping with bloodied nails. Those that the creature had dismembered continued to drag themselves along the floor toward new enemies.

"Alan!"

He wheeled around and saw Petruccio clambering over the body of a Pe'karian he had just felled. LeBarron fought by his side, finishing off two warriors, with a single, elegant slice of his blade. He might have lost his powers of disguise, but he could remember how to fight all too well.

The voice, however, had been Cassilda's. He searched for her and saw her standing amidst a group of dead Pe'karians, all of whom were shuddering with new life. Her eyes were comets. Her bloodsoaked dress fluttered in a breeze of magic.

"Cassilda!"

"We must destroy the Siege Ender," she said. "If it reaches the palace, all of this will have been for nothing!"

Alan looked at The Claw. One thing his darker and brighter voice agreed upon: he contained more power within him than he truly realised. Scarleth, too, had intimated that The Claw was the

most powerful of all talismans, and if he knew how to use it, to unlock its full potential, he would have been able to defeat even her. He had no idea how he would unlock this dormant power, but he knew he must, for even though Cassilda's dead were relentless, he doubted their ordinary swords—or teeth and nails—could break through the monster's hide.

"I will do it," Alan said.

Cassilda planted a kiss upon his lips—swift, all-too-brief. It tasted of blood and sweet honey. He yearned for more, but they had no time.

"For The King!" Petruccio roared, charging ahead of them.

"We shall cut you a path, Alan!" LeBarron said. "Let me play the role of your bodyguard. It is a simple part, but as you said: I should cut myself some slack!"

The actor was grinning. Alan couldn't help but return it. There was nothing like bloodshed to raise the spirits. The Romans had understood this dark paradox all too well.

The four of them forged ahead, fighting like demigods. Alan knew that very little of his actions could be attributed to his own will or strength. The Claw made him powerful. The Claw knew when to move and intercept a sword-swing. The Claw knew when to strike. Though his muscles ached, sweat poured down his back, and his joints cracked with the thuds of bone-jarring impact, he knew his body was less responsible for his marshal feats than the entity—ever gaining definition—with which he had established a psychic connection.

Always remember: the dream begins within, not without.

Alan took comfort in the words of the mysterious and quiet voice, even as he took the face from a gorgonopsid with one downward sweep of his lightning-wreathed talisman. He did not fully comprehend their meaning, but that didn't matter. He knew the voice was trying to reassure him.

Their swathe was bloody, ruby and yellow light blasting as Alan and Cassilda fought side by side, LeBarron shielding them with his stolen war-gear, Petruccio simply bloodying the enemy, a patriot to this demented kingdom.

They fought through market squares, synagogue plazas, the tunnels formed by crumbling towers, dilapidated forums, past the gibbets where Alan had watched a traitor to the Yellow King be hung, past the mummer's stage, where the discarded costumes

continued to dance in the absence of the players. Closer and closer they drew to the mighty Siege Ender. The streets were now ankle-deep in the blood of slaughtered soldiers; they waded as though through a filthy marsh.

Then suddenly they were set upon. A group of Pe'karians had decided to lie in wait for reinforcements to the palace, a rearguard. They stood upon the buildings and spires—those that were not rebelling against the invaders—bows drawn and aimed towards their party.

The Pe'karians loosed their arrows and the dead surged forward at Cassilda's command, placing their rotten bodies between the arrows and their intended targets.

A battle cry alerted Alan to an assault upon the ground, Pe'karian cavalry surging from alleyways, emptied buildings, and the husks of leviathanic creatures that had once simply been part of the strange architecture of Carcosa. The gorgonopsids were devastating, their weight alone demolishing the ranks of the dead, let alone their savagery, tearing undead soldiers in half with each snap of their saurian jaws. The riders were no less blood-crazed, stabbing with long spears, sweeping back and forth, enjoying the carnage for its own sake, yelling cries to their dark master.

One gorgonopsid carved a path towards Alan, but he put a hole the size of a dinnerplate through its face with a blast from his Claw. Undeterred, the rider leapt from his dying steed and stabbed with his spear. Were it not for LeBarron's intervention, Alan would have been run through, poisoned by the same Pe'karian bile as he. But the actor threw his shield in the way, turning aside the spear-thrust. LeBarron's retaliating strike took the conical head from the Pe'karian's shoulders.

"You make a fine bodyguard!" Alan cried, joyously.

LeBarron grinned.

"I always commit to a role!"

Despite their jollity, the situation was dire. They were surrounded on all sides. The calvary decimated the undead ranks. And Cassilda was too preoccupied with fighting to raise more from the slain. Their charge had at last been halted. More arrows rained down around them, dead falling in droves, bolts thudding off LeBarron's shield. *All it takes is one,* Alan thought, the dreadful poisons of their master making every stroke a curse.

"We're caught in a killing box, Alan!" LeBarron cried. Petruccio

wrestled with a Pe'karian in a pool of blood. The gorgonopsids rampaged, too mobile to be pinned, like the moving walls of a hurricane, keeping them trapped in the middle. The archers nocked and loosed with ceaseless routine, pulverising those trapped in the press. A few more volleys and they would be slaughtered to a man.

A shriek cut across the clamour of bloodshed. It was so high, so piercing, Alan could not help but wince. The Pe'karians at first took it to be one of their own, perhaps one of the true demons taking to the field. But no. Bone-white figures had appeared upon the buildings, leaping upon the archers like demonic apes, pinning them and biting off their faces with sharpened teeth. More of the monkey-like forms leapt from windows, archways, rooftops, and seemed to crawl up from the very ground. Their hair was lank and unwashed. Their eyes tinted red like a bloody dusk. They fought naked, yet their bones jutted out underneath their skin, living weapons.

"The cannibals!" LeBarron cried. "And look!"

He pointed up to a spire, where, framed by the light of the stars, stood a figure like ancient Saturn, Kronos, the child-devouring titan. His naked body—muscular to the point of repulsiveness—was sheathed in gore descrying hieroglyphics, a language perhaps known only to him. His eyes burned, painful to look upon. His mane of wild hair blew, blacker than shadow, in the winds that now began to howl down upon the city. His teeth were black diamonds, too large for his lipless mouth. A single nod, he gave Alan, imparting far more than words ever could.

"Who is he?" Alan said, filled with wonder and terror.

"Gril'dakken," LeBarron said. "The Cannibal King! He is buying us time, Alan. Come on, towards the Siege Ender!"

CHAPTER 25
THE SIEGE ENDER

THE CANNIBAL ASSAULT had opened a pathway, which Alan, LeBarron, Cassilda, and Petruccio were able to struggle through. The dwarf looked worse for wear, covered head to foot in blood, chunks missing from his arms where the Pe'karian soldier he'd wrestled with had bitten him. They hurried on, only a few of the dead able to follow, most still locked in conflict with the Pe'karian ambushers.

The ground shook beneath their feet, making it difficult to maintain balance while running. None of them needed an explanation as to why. They were now almost underneath the Siege Ender.

Its vastness was difficult to comprehend: half a mile long, perhaps, and over a hundred foot tall. Alan did not know how one could even get near its vital spots to strike a killing blow. The Claw burned, itching for more bloodshed. *Have you not had your fill yet?* Alan wondered, wearied by all the fighting, the smell of death.

It will never be sated. That is not within its nature.

For the first time, Alan found himself irritated by the calming voice. Sometimes wisdom is unwelcome.

"It's almost at the palace," Cassilda whispered. She turned to Alan. "We stop it now, or all is in vain. Alan, do you think you can do it?"

He looked down at The Claw. It glowed like an ember.

The dream begins within, not without.

"Yes," he said, though even now he was uncertain. "But how do I get close enough?"

Pe'karians marched under and beside the anteosaurus, great chains looped around them. Dead Pe'karians were dragged along

by these same chains where they had been trampled or crushed by their own weapon of war. It seemed the creature needed little guidance now. It ploughed a relentless path towards the maddening palace of the Yellow King, as though its very destiny were to reduce it to rubble.

"I can get you on top of the creature," Cassilda said. "If you trust me."

Alan smiled.

"With all my heart."

"Then go, Alan. Save Carcosa!"

With that, Cassilda closed her eyes and began to sing the words of a familiar song. Alan had little time to admire her beautiful voice. The ruby became too bright to look upon, and he was enveloped in red light. He felt his feet leave the ground, as they had in the depths of the Temple of Namtar, only this time his defiance of gravity was more assured. Upward, he flew, held in Cassilda's magical grip. Sooner than he would have thought possible he was far above the battle, the hulking Siege Ender slouching its way through Carcosa below him. Cassilda did not drop Alan, however, but gently lowered him onto the creature's spine. His feet touched flesh so ice-cold he felt it through his boots. He'd expected scales, but instead found skin hardened to an unbreakable enamel; he had to hope The Claw would prove the exception to the rule. If the creature felt his presence, it gave no sign. He doubted he weighed more than a mosquito from its perspective.

He began to clamber along the beast's back, a slightly upward slope, towards the neck. It was the only thing he could think to do.

"Alan!" he heard Cassilda cry.

Alan turned just in time to see a dark shadow in the air. He threw himself flat and felt wind and metal pass over him, so close as to shave off a few hairs. He scrambled to his feet and saw the form of a winged demon hovering before him. The demon had purple flesh, and carried a two-handed sword patterned like an undulating serpent, large enough to split several men in half with a single swing. The demon's large headcrest curved back from a face leering with delight.

"The Claw-bearer," the demon said. "Come to kill our siege ender." The demon alighted on the back of the creature. Its physique was a series of juxtapositions. On the one hand, obscenely muscled, making Namtar seem slender and dainty by comparison,

but on the other hand still stretched, as though the demon had been tortured upon his master's rack.

Alan's heart pounded. He swallowed down bilious-tasting spit. Fear gripped him tighter even than The Claw. Cali had been afraid to stand against one of the true demons even with her sister by her side. There was no way Alan stood a chance.

"You will slay him as you have slain the others," The Claw whispered. "And your fame will be legendary."

"Hush," Alan said. He looked around, desperate to find somewhere to run. Instead, Alan saw another winged shape descending upon Cassilda, LeBarron, and Petruccio, this one female, armed with a spear and buckler, jabbering insanely as she rushed into battle like a swordfish darting forward to skewer its foe. "Cassilda!" Alan cried.

The demon smiled.

"Your little princess is caught up. I have you all to myself, Claw-bearer. And what a prize your corpse will make!"

Alan shook with rage, his fear forgotten in the face of Cassilda's danger.

"If you were wise, demon—" Alan spat. "You would call off your friend, retreat from this battlefield, and tell your master that The Claw is lost forever, buried at the bottom of the ocean."

The great demon cocked his head.

"You have more spirit than I first thought. That is good. I would hate for you to mewl, unworthy of the weapon you bear. Therefore, I will grant you an honour. You shall know the name of the one who slays you: I am Tal'agron, chosen of Pe'kar."

"It matters naught to me," Alan snarled. He began to walk towards Tal'agron, The Claw crackling with thunderous potential. "I will not remember your name."

The demon smiled.

"Pride cometh before the fall."

The demon surged to meet Alan, moving with inhuman speed. Tal'agron's blade flashed, wounding the air with its swiftness. But something new had birthed within Alan, a darkness: livid, ataxic, roiling, and almighty. He now knew what the secret of The Claw was. Its reservoir of strength was limited to his *intent*. To save himself accessed only a limited portion of The Claw's power. But to save *another* . . . He could already feel it. Whereas before the power of The Claw had been a fast-flowing river, now it was an

ocean, and his sense of Self was almost swept up in its tides, dragged under by its unlimited depths. The Claw was the hand that grasped reality. It was symbolic of human potential to influence the external world. Therefore, only by pursuing aims external of the Self, only by directing the intent *outward* could its full potency be unleashed. That was why he had been able to wield such catastrophic power when he struck at Cali.

But he knew there were even greater depths to The Claw. If he were to take his mind beyond one person, to think of the city, to think of the *world* . . . There was no telling what The Claw could do then.

But he could not control such power, now. So Alan's mind was filled with thoughts of Cassilda as he swung The Claw with all his might to intercept Tal'agron's blade. When the two weapons met, there was detonation. The demon howled and was thrown back by an explosion that sent shards of shrapnel, black energy, and liquefied metal showering in all directions. Alan felt his face washed by superheated particles of atomised meteorite. When the force of the explosion subsided, Tal'agron knelt, having been knocked to the ground, clutching a sword handle and nothing more.

The demon trembled, perhaps with rage and fear, perhaps with grief for his lost artefact.

"That sword was made by Pe'kar . . . " Tears of molten mercury scoured his cheeks as he raised his eyes to Alan. "The Demon King *himself* forged it . . . "

Alan raised The Claw. He thought of the billion souls of Carcosa. He thought of Cassilda, Petruccio, and LeBarron. He thought of all that would be lost should he fail. The ghosts of the women and family he had wronged appeared too, a reminder of what he had once been, but could never return to. A reminder of the cost of failure. *I am The Claw that grasps reality. And I choose life. Not just for me, for all of them.*

The light shining off The Claw was terrifying, illuminating the night sky brighter than the twin suns. Elsewhere in the city, fighting stopped as eyes were pulled to the birth of a new celestial body in their midst. Yellow light enveloped Alan. He gave himself to the ocean of power, allowed himself to sink under, to become no-one yet everyone, a droplet in the sea of the universe.

Tal'agron shielded his eyes from the effervescence pouring out

from Alan and from his dreadful talisman. The demon could barely hold his ground as power buffeted and cycloned about the Claw-wielder.

"You call yourself a demon," Alan said, and his voice was pure thunder. "But you are no demon in my eyes." His voice rose to become a storm. "You call yourself chosen, but I am the One Who Chooses. And I choose *Carcosa!*"

The energy beam that shot forth from The Claw reduced Tal'agron to atoms, an incendiary bolt that burned matter into less than dust. One of the mightiest of Pe'kar's lieutenants was felled in an instant, reduced to black soot upon the nameless wind. But the beam did not stop there, it continued on its path, blasting through the seemingly indestructible hide of the Siege Ender, tunnelling through the mighty creature and erupting from the other side, leaving a ghastly, reeking wound—charred meat still smoking from the supernatural heat—all the way through its torso, and through its colossal heart.

The beast staggered on, so insensibly large that for a moment it did not register the slowing of its blood, that its titan-heart was no longer beating. Then it swayed, drunkenly. Buildings crumbled beneath the staggering idiocy of its limbs. The beast's legs trembled, unable to support its gargantuan weight. The Siege Ender collapsed, crushing hundreds of Pe'karians beneath its body, its head crashing to the ground with meteoric force at the very feet of Carcosa's palace.

A second and no longer, Alan admired his dark work. He had clung on to the falling beast with The Claw, but in truth, its back was so broad there had been little danger of him slipping off.

Alan clambered down the side of the creature's flanks, using The Claw for purchase. He searched the skies for the spear-wielding demon but found nothing.

"Cassilda!" A dreadful notion took him that the Siege Ender had crushed Cassilda and his friends as it fell. *No, no, no*. He sprinted alongside the beast, feet catching on the piles of Pe'karian dead, some of whom were still alive, their bodies crushed like a half-used tube of toothpaste. The blood was shin-deep, obscene.

He rounded one of the massive fallen forelegs, and found what he was looking for, his heart soaring with relief: Cassilda, Petruccio, and LeBarron were all alive. The demon lay at their feet, and standing atop it, bending the demon's wings back with ungodly

strength, was The Cannibal King. Once again, he fixed his blazing eyes upon Alan.

Alan did not know the correct mode of address or thanks for one as glorious yet also savage as the king, but he bowed. The Cannibal King seemed to approve, for his bloodied, blackened, and cracked lips peeled back to reveal his overlarge teeth. Then The Cannibal King pulled. The demon shrieked and writhed, but could not escape, the Cannibal King's foot pinning her to the ground. With a tearing sound that would stay with Alan for the rest of his life, the wings were ripped from their moorings. The demon screamed as black blood poured out of the ragged wounds. The mighty demon began to whimper. It was a pitiful sight.

Cassilda ran towards Alan and embraced him. They shared once again an all-too-brief kiss.

"I thought—"

"Hush," Cassilda said. "All is well. And you, you did more than I could have dreamed. Such power." Her eyes were living fires. He could tell she desired him. For the first time in his life, he felt greatness within. It was a terrible greatness, but greatness nonetheless.

"I hate to dour the mood," Petruccio said. "But look there . . . " He pointed to the sky, where three dark shapes were now flying away from Carcosa, westward, towards the lands of Blue Light. "They will return bearing words of your deeds to Pe'kar." The dwarf looked worriedly at Alan.

"Let them!" Cassilda said fiercely. "Let them know that Carcosa's hero has come!" Then she seemed to sober, some of the fire dimming, though not extinguished. "But I get ahead of myself. The battle's not yet over. We should make safe the palace."

All agreed, and they set off towards the great steps.

CHAPTER 26:
THE VOID

CALI STRODE FORWARD into the abyss. She knew her father's room would be cloaked in darkness, but this was something else, less darkness and more a void, absent of form. No sooner had she stepped inside than the walls, ceiling, and floor vanished. She was aware of solid ground beneath her, yet her eyes told her otherwise. Lights danced in the void, but subliminally, descrying patterns unknown even to one as old and learned as Cali. She turned around and saw only the vaguest suggestion of a doorway back, a single sliver of light, no more.

"Father?" she said.

Lights coalesced around her, inquisitive wisps. She looked at each in turn but found no answer to her question. They sped away from her and circled and danced through the darkness. Cali followed them, but soon found following impossible. They disappeared from sight and left her striding through the total dark.

Sweat greased her palms as she held tightly to her bow.

"Father, I am here to protect you."

Somehow, uttering such a lie here seemed more profane. It was as though the emptiness confronted her with her own emptiness. Sometimes, when she lied, she almost did not know she was lying. On the wall, she had felt genuine kinship with Roland and the Carcosan soldiers. How glorious it would have been to die defending a city she truly loved, how much simpler and sweeter than whatever dark tapestry destiny wove for her.

That I weave for myself!

The strength of the thought disturbed the void, like dropping a stone into a pond. Ripples spread out from her, near-invisible disruptions of the tranquil blackness. There were forms revealed

by those ripples, the way a rising wave might show the shadow of a shark flitting through it. The forms made Cali's flesh and blood run cold. Her mouth dried and she almost spluttered swallowing that dryness. She could not hear her own breaths in the void. It was cold but no mist or vapour emerged when she exhaled.

"Father?"

She looked all around: up, down, left, right, but saw no sign. *This is a pocket kingdom,* she thought. *He has built a dimension within the very walls of Carcosa's palace, a universe within a universe* . . . The power of it made her momentarily dizzy. She nearly fell but caught herself. If she fell here, she might fall through the illusionary floor, fall into black gulfs roiling with potential.

Lights ahead. She had nothing to do but follow them, so follow them she did. Were they stars? Yes, stars, but not the ancient eyes that glared down at the black planet from the heavens, from within the constellation of Taurus. No, these were different stars yet again, farther even than Aldebaran, and *young*. Her eyes widened with wonder and terror. These curdled, milk-white effervescences were stars being *formed,* birthed, coagulating in the void, interstellar dust gathering, drawn in by some secret law of gravity yet unknown to Earth's scientists.

Starlight surrounded her now. Galaxies swirling. Cosmic flowers of lightyears' span. The universe one garden in the black of night flowering beneath the moon of God's face.

God? You still cleave to those ideas He filled your head with. Have you not proven there is no one almighty God? Only those like your father who pretend.

But against the awe-inspiring power of this creative act, she found her rationalisations impotent.

"Father!" It was now a scream, a demand. She had come here to kill him. She must see it through. But how could she find him in this vast abyss? Had he created it to escape her? No. This had always been here, hence why she was forbidden from it, why everyone was forbidden from it, except Cassilda and Eric. The thought nearly made her snort with derisive laughter.

But why? There had to be some secret in this, some truth her father had not wanted her to glimpse.

"I always wanted thee to glimpse it, Cali. What saddened me, was that thou couldst not."

Cali wheeled. His voice sounded like it came behind her, but the King was not there.

"Where are you, Father? I must protect you now. The city is falling."

An incomprehensibly loud silence greeted her. Galaxies continued to swirl, growing larger, their lights glimmering like the lights of far-off cities, welcoming in the night. In the black spaces between these lights, serpentine forms, darkly rainbow, slithered and undulated.

"The city is already saved."

Again Cali turned, but found no speaker. She was beginning to suspect he was *everywhere.*

Then it clicked.

"Wait . . . Is this . . . this darkness . . . *you?*"

"There is in god, some say, a deep but dazzling darkness."

Cali knew her father was quoting an Earthen source but could not place it off the top of her head.

"Then you *are* God, as I have always maintained."

"Still thou dost not understand." A sigh made the abyss tremble. "I pity thee, Cali."

Cali could have screamed, could have roared at the vast darkness, firing her deadly bolts into the heart of one of these nebulas in the hope of finally silencing the tormenting voice, but instead, the back of her mind began to percolate on what he had said: *The city is already saved*. Her father was prescient. Not omniscient, perhaps, but certainly able to know things others weren't. It was likely His comments were not idle bravado, but truth. If this was the case, then to go through with her plan now would be foolish suicide. She had to make sure . . .

She turned and fled from the abyss, running back to where the sliver of light indicated a doorway to reality. For a moment, she feared she would not find it again, but it was there, where she had left it, a narrow ray of hope. She slipped through and found herself stood in the palace. Her suspicions were immediately aroused when she no longer heard the sound of fighting.

She decided to make for the main entrance. She looked for bodies but found only evidence of a hasty retreat from the courtiers, no violence penetrating the deeper levels.

How did they not break through? Cali couldn't comprehend how the Carcosans had won unless there was some outside interference. *Eric must have received reinforcements,* she thought. *Will the luck of fools never end?*

She threaded all the way through the palace, occasionally encountering a group of courtiers hiding, weapons readied, though none of them had seen any action. Her walk turned into a run as she hurried towards the main entrance, finally emerging into vibrant moonlight.

A shocking sight greeted her. At the feet of the thousand steps lay the carcass of the Siege Ender, a crater blasted in its spine. The bodies of more than a hundred Pe'karians lay slain upon the steps: armour rent, swords broken, some dismembered, dimetrodons now feasting upon the fresh corpses. A few courtiers armed with makeshift weapons also lay among the dead, but the Pe'karians far outnumbered the Carcosans. She looked to find the source of this carnage, and discovered a lone, familiar figure propped up against one of the titanic pillars standing sentinel over the palace entrance; next to the backdrop of the palace, the felled anteosaurus, and the vast night sky, he seemed impossibly small, less than a dwarf, yet in this moment his aura glowed.

"Eric?"

Trembling, he turned eyes already fogging with death's cold upon her. It wounded her to see delight there.

"P-princess," he stammered. "I d-did it." Every word cost a mouthful of blood, yet he uttered them with a strange joy. "I did it. I held the stair."

Cali looked again at the slaughtered warriors. The bodies of one-hundred and forty-six Pe'karian soldiers adorned the steps. Eric had been stabbed fourteen times. His sword lay broken in two by his side. In his hand was a small knife, more apt for filleting fish than slaying a human being.

Slowly she knelt, never taking her eyes off his. Eric shivered, guttering in his own blood.

"You fought bravely, Eric." She could not deny it. Among the Pe'karian dead were some of the best soldiers the realm had ever known, slain by a man in motley wielding a kitchen knife.

The full weight of all her wrongdoing fell upon her, heavier than a blacksmith's hammer. Her lies had led him to his grave, and for what? She had accomplished nothing. If she had fought on the steps, he might have lived. Eric now died the death she wished for herself: a noble death, a pure death.

"Eric . . . I'm . . . "

"Don't . . . a-apologise," he said, through a mouthful of blood thicker than it had any right to be. "I die . . . for C-carcosa."

Cali nodded. She wanted to save him, to confess to him, to tell him she was sorry. But what could she do? Without her ecg'tar, her healing magic lost much of its potency, and he was beyond healing anyway. Even now he stared into an invisible world, through Cali to something deeper. With great effort, however, he dragged his eyes away from this vision of the great world only accessible via death, fixing upon her one last time.

"Will you write a song about me?" he whispered.

Cali wept the first genuine tears she had shed since she was a little girl.

"Yes." And she meant it.

"O . . . " His eyes filled with wonder. "To be a song!"

He shuddered, and the life went out of him.

CHAPTER 27
THE TRIAL

WITH THE ARMY of dead slaves and cannibals at their back, Alan, Cassilda, LeBarron, and Petruccio marched up the palace steps. What they found at the top was a sight strange even to their eyes, which had seen so much in the last few weeks. Cali—their great enemy—knelt, weeping, over the body of a motley courtier. The pose was so unlike her, so disingenuous, that for a moment all were stunned. She seemed not even to notice them as she sobbed, cradling the dead man in her arms as though he had been her child.

But slowly, her awareness dawned, and she turned to see her enemies arrayed there: Alan's Claw crackling, Cassilda's eyes harder than diamonds, LeBarron baring his teeth, and perhaps darkest of all, Petruccio, who looked like he wanted to tear Cali limb from limb, to inflict tortures upon her that would make even Pe'kar avert his eyes.

Cali rose slowly. She wore ragged battle-armour, a bow slung over her back and three arrows at her belt. She looked like she had been through her own version of hell, and despite everything Alan found pity in his heart, though it would not sway him from destroying her. The only thing holding him back was that he felt Cassilda and Petruccio had been wronged more deeply, and deserved to speak first, if at all.

"Sister," Cassilda hissed.

Cali raised her chin, perhaps a gesture of pride and defiance, perhaps the only way she could hold back the grief flooding from her. Alan was no expert actor like LeBarron, but he could tell this was real emotion, that her mask had slipped, and something had wounded her soul.

"If you have come to kill me, there is nothing left to kill."

"Looks plenty to me," Petruccio said, the blade in his hand trembling as he pointed it at her, the strength of his hatred shaking him crown to toe.

Cali's serpentine eyes swept over each of them.

"I know I deserve death," she said. "I have betrayed everything I loved. Even the city I wanted to rebuild." She spoke like one sleepwalking, in a dream. "But now death has come, I am not ready for it."

She turned and fled. Alan raised The Claw, intent to blast her to smithereens, but Cali halted of her own accord, for someone was emerging from the shadow of the palace entrance.

Like a great shark attended by brightly coloured fish, a tall figure came forth. Instantly Cali fell before the figure, lying prostrate and in total obeisance. Cassilda, Petruccio, and LeBarron did likewise. Even The Cannibal King and his minions, who gathered at the bottom of the immense stair, knelt, bowing their heads with a reverence at odds with their feral appearance. The dead, though supposedly bound to Cassilda's will, regained some of their humanity, their eyes clearing, their faces warping into expressions of awe—perhaps even recognition—and like the rest they fell to the ground.

Only Alan remained standing, confused. A part of him thought of kneeling, but the others had fallen as if they had no choice, as if compelled by a force of magic. That made Alan suspicious as to whether he should follow suit.

The figure in tattered robes strode towards them and Cali, a mysterious giant in hideously filthy garments, all that He was concealed, yet a strange majesty still in His subtlest movements. With a single motion of a clothed limb the courtiers fussing around him dispersed and stood respectfully distant. He moved towards Cali and their party alone.

"Alan! Kneel! His aura, it will overwhelm you!" Petruccio hissed. Then he planted his forehead upon the ground.

But Alan felt no aura.

The grey giant in tattered robes appeared to regard Cali for a moment, although no eyes were visible, then turned and approached Alan. As he drew nearer Alan experienced small awe, for the robed figure towered over him, perhaps ten foot tall. However, he felt no kind of psychic aura, as he had done on the

other side of the mysterious door inside the palace. He felt only himself.

"Alan Chambers," the robed figure said. "The one who wieldeth The Claw of Haercus. I have heard much about thee. Much that is untrue, it would seem."

"Father . . . " Cassilda had managed to raise her eyes to the robed figure, though it seemed an effort of will for her to gaze upon Him long. In that moment, Alan realised that he was stood before the King In Yellow. He instantly fell to his knees, blushing crimson, terrified that he had caused some deep offence.

A rancid sound reverberated down the palace steps. It took Alan a while to realise it was laughter.

"Do not falsely kneel before me, Alan Chambers. Thou shouldst stand as an equal." The King raised a grey-swaddled limb. Nervously, Alan got to his feet. "Thou hast slain the Siege Ender with The Claw, and with the aid of my daughter delivered the city from peril." The grey hood turned towards Cassilda. "Dearest daughter. My heart burns brightly to see thee again."

"Father!" Cassilda said, pure delight illuminating her face, tears streaking her cheeks. "Thou hast seen through Cali's lies? I would *never* betray thee or Carcosa!"

"I have seen through them now," the King replied. "Ever she clouds reason with her madness."

"Enough!" The spell momentarily was broken, and all eyes lifted to see Cali stood, having thrown off the aura's oppressive weight. It evidently cost her no little effort, sweat streaking her brow, her limbs trembling, and pure hatred etched upon her face, deeper than any scar. "I have listened to your insults long enough, Father. I have let you torture me. Punish me. Abuse me. Call me a monster, when it was *your sin* that created me. Your weakness of the flesh! I will stand for your hypocrisy no longer! Can you not see, Father, how Cassilda has twisted you around her little finger? What wrong have I done? What sin committed?"

"The sin of lies, Cali!" Cassilda roared. "You told Father we had betrayed Carcosa, but we have delivered it!"

"And how does He know your intentions are still true? Trust is won with false acts of grace. You come before his throne with an army of slaves at your back! The scars on my body—" She bore them proudly, pulling down the topmost segment of her armour and revealing the yellow, coiling serpents. "—testify to the fact The

Claw was used on one of Carcosan, royal blood, the very people it was built to defend." Cali threw herself down to her knees once more, wringing her hands. "Please, Father, if you have one shred of pity for me, one trace of paternal instinct left, listen to me! Do not believe their lies!"

Alan was astonished. He could almost have believed her lies himself; her performance rivalled even LeBarron's.

The King hesitated.

"Is our testimony not enough?" Cassilda cried.

The King, though expressionless, seemed sad, hanging His head, as though He knew Cali's accusations of favouritism to be true, that His own judgement was somehow clouded. To see a god doubt is a terrible thing, and it shook Alan. He dreaded to think what might have happened had not another figure suddenly emerged from the palace: a warrior clad in the familiar eurypterid platemail of Carcosa, though he wore no helm, his shaven head as darkly fleshed as Cali's and sporting the same yellow, serpent-slitted eyes. He walked proudly, blood-splattered, coping with numerous wounds. In one hand he gripped not a sword but a furled banner, partially leaning upon it for support.

"I can testify . . . " the warrior croaked. "I testify that Cali is a traitor."

Cali turned to regard the warrior with pure loathing in her eyes. The mask, so convincing, so concrete, fell away in an instant.

"And what evidence do you bring to this . . . trial?" She said the last word mockingly, but that was exactly what it was.

The warrior gritted his teeth, looking between his lord and Cali, enunciating every word as though following the complex syntax of a spell.

"I realise now how deeply she deceived me. She persuaded me, Great King, to weaken the defences at The Groom's Exit. To reposition the troops holding the city-centre to extremities that were never likely to see battle. And countless other subtleties."

"You poorly defended the city and now you lay the blame upon me!" Cali snarled.

"Let him speak," the King thundered, and Cali fell reluctantly silent.

"She took me to her bed," the warrior went on, his voice cracking at this, his shame deep enough to break the earth, or so it seemed. "She seduced me." Cali hissed at this. "Do not pretend

innocence! All in Carcosa know your ways, including me, but still I fell. I thought perhaps you had changed. That your experiences in the marsh had humbled you. But no . . . " He let out a bitter laugh. "You are even more deceitful than before. You manipulated me into calamity."

"How then how didst thou discern the truth," the King rumbled. "All of this is, at the moment, conjecture only."

The warrior nodded, undeterred.

"A wise question, Great King, and one I have an answer for. When Cali left me at the Groom's Exit, I thought some of her behaviour odd, but I did not suspect, and certainly did not know her falsity." He cleared his throat. Alan could tell there was blood in with the phlegm. "Then one of the great demons arrived, the hammer-bearer, Ashe'non. He came like thunder, tearing us apart. Had I not unfurled the banner of Uboth he would have destroyed us, and the Pe'karians would have gained entrance to the palace."

"You aggrandise yourself," Cali spat.

"Silence!" the King hissed.

"But Ashe'non said something, before I repelled him. He said, 'Where is the traitor, Cali?' At first, I thought nothing of it. Cali, like me, is born to the demon bloodline. I presumed he meant a traitor to her race . . . But as the words turned over in my mind, while I fought, they increasingly made no sense. Cali has always been considered a royal scion of Carcosa. She was raised here. Her blood carries the royal lineage of Your Highness. Therefore, the only way the question could make sense, was if at some time she *had* served Pe'kar . . . " The warrior's eyes hardened as he levelled his final accusation at Cali. "As I considered this, still fighting for my life, and the lives of all those who call the palace home, a thousand minor inconsistencies in her behaviour revealed themselves. I knew then I had been deceived, tricked into fighting a losing battle." He grinned then, surprisingly impish despite his warlike bearing. "It's funny, Cali. Had you not deceived me, I think I would have died defending the gate. But knowing you betrayed me and Carcosa and everything I love put a fire in my belly, and I fought like I have never fought before." At last, the warrior knelt, bowing his head. "I humbly submit this testimony to the case."

Cali looked between the warrior and The King, her eyes wild with desperation.

"Thou hast spoken well, Roland," the King intoned. "But still,

those words are conjecture. Perhaps Ashe'non indeed meant she was a traitor to her kin. Often I have held my daughter's origins against her, and wrongly so."

Cali smiled.

"Then allow me to submit *my* testimony, Great King!" It was Petruccio who stepped forward. Alan experienced a wave of awe, seeing the dwarf, so diminutive next to the towering King, yet equally strong enough to withstand his cosmic scrutiny.

"Proceed," the King said.

"Who is he to give testimony here?" Cali snapped.

"Your erstwhile servant of eighty years!" Petruccio roared. A stunned silence followed his pronouncement. Alan tried to wrap his head around what the dwarf had just said. He knew that lifespans extended in Carcosa, but he had not imagined that Petruccio was so old. He had to be more than a century, yet he looked to be in his late thirties at most. "Cali found me, when I was a young man of Earth," Petruccio said. "She showed me a world that made my own seem hollow." Tears now rolled down the dwarf's cheeks, slow, thick, and agonising. Even Cali looked humbled by the volcanic emotion erupting from her once-friend. "She taught me about Carcosa, magic, music. She told me of her quest to find the champion of Carcosa. Like many outcasts here, once I had tasted the city, I could never go back, and she *knew* that!" He grimaced. "But it was a trade I made gladly. My world for this one. I fell in love with Carcosa, and to serve her was no small price to return here. So every decade or so we ventured back to Earth, looking for the champion Cali said would deliver Carcosa. Little did I know she really wanted a puppet, someone who would dethrone you, Great King!" The dwarf instinctively bowed his head, afraid to even report such heresy, let alone think it. "But Alan—Alan Chambers proved her better!" The dwarf said it with triumph. "Not only did he survive the trials she set before him, like no other that came before, but he refused to bend to her will. Yes, he wielded The Claw against her, but only in my defence, and the defence of your daughter, the noble Cassilda." The dwarf now dropped to one knee, turning his gaze earnestly up to the implacable cowl of the Yellow King. "I beseech you, Great King. Hear me! I know that it is only our testimony against hers, but we are four, and she—" A cruel smile quirked Petruccio's lips. "—as ever, is *alone*."

Cali sobbed, evidently wounded by his words, at last bowing her head. It seemed the defiance had gone out of her.

The King turned, regarding her; Alan felt cold rage emanating from the King like the onset of a devastating blizzard. But before The King could pronounce His judgement, Cali leapt to her feet, her bow in hand, an arrow nocked.

"Cali! Stay the madness you are about to perform!" Cassilda cried.

"We're all slaves, dear sister!" Cali roared. "And I won't be anymore!" She loosed her deadly bolt.

Now! A voice shrieked in Alan's ears.

He moved faster than lightning. No, that wasn't quite true. Rather, the universe slowed down around Alan, arrested, to the point where he could see the arrow, moving glacially through the air. He reached out—he must catch it. And catch it he did, The Claw closing around it with clunking finality.

The world jolted back into its regular pace. He stood, holding the black arrow in his taloned hand, its tip mere inches from the grey robes of the King, the stunned onlookers gaping at him as though they had just seen a ghost.

"That which dreams does not die," Alan whispered.

Cali trembled with rage, and perhaps a little fear too.

"Another one of your quotes, Alan?" Cali scoffed. She had nothing left but mockery.

Alan smiled.

"No. *That* was an original."

He snapped the arrow and threw its shards upon the ground.

Roland leapt forward and drew a dirk from his belt, putting it to Cali's throat. Alan thought that he would have to get in the queue behind Petruccio.

"Do not slay her!" the King commanded, and Alan thought there was grief in His voice. "We must discover what she knows of my enemy. Cast her into the Screaming Pit."

Roland nodded, beginning to drag Cali away. More warriors emerged from the shadow of the palace to assist him in escorting her.

"Father! Not the Pit! I can explain! Father!" Cali pleaded, horror making her eyes wide, her voice hysterical. Alan did not know what the Screaming Pit was, but he could scarcely imagine how terrifying it must be to make Cali afraid.

The King regarded her with bleak indifference.

"Thou hast forfeited the right to that word."

With that, He turned and made his way back into the palace. Cali shrieked and screamed as she was dragged away, leaving them in stunned silence upon the stairs.

"Come on, Alan," Cassilda said, extending a hand. Alan clasped it with his left. "A conquering hero should enjoy the delights of a palace." With that, she led him up the stair. The dead remained sentinel on the steps, unmoving, silent guardians. Alan wondered if they would become the substitute Carcosa military, until such a time as they were able to replenish their ranks with living men.

Petruccio and LeBarron followed the pair up the steps, exchanging a dark look.

"I always thought death would be too good for her," the dwarf said. "But now she faces the Pit, I feel it would have been better simply to have killed her."

"What is the Screaming Pit?" Alan asked, unable to restrain his curiosity.

"A place where people like Cali are forced to confront their true self," LeBarron answered, grimly. Alan could not tell what role LeBarron played then, whether sympathetic or vindictive, he only knew that they must be in a Tragedy, for only in Tragedies were the villains brought to such grisly justice.

CHAPTER 28
THE CONSUMMATION

CASSILDA AND ALAN bid a temporary farewell to Petruccio and LeBarron, who went in search of Desire-wine—and possibly women too; there was nothing like death to sharpen desire, and Petruccio had abstained his whole life. Alan wondered whether he would finally submit to his baser urges, or whether his vows would hold despite Cali's treachery.

Cassilda led Alan through a complex series of passageways until they came to a familiar fork, where Alan had first met Cassilda, what now seemed years ago. She took him through the right-hand set of doors, into her personal boudoir.

At first Alan thought that a great spider had made its home here. But what he took for cobwebs were in fact near-translucent silver curtains, almost glimmering; he would learn later they were fashioned from the rare thread of the manalishi worm. Not only did the curtains hang from the corners of the gnarly fourposter bed dominating the centre of the room—that looked as though it might well crawl away if it didn't fancy being slept on—but they were also arranged so that they flowed over the other furniture. A blade of moonlight fell in through a diagonal slit in one wall, illuminating silver lace snaked around a great black cabinet that stood so resolutely Alan was sure it was alive and guarding well its secrets. A chaise longue, clad in gold, with black velvet cushioning, stretched in one corner of the room. The placement of one pillow and a soft blanket led Alan to believe this was where Cassilda slept. The fourposter had been abandoned for some time, a coldness emanating from it. He wondered if that dreaded bed was where The Stranger had done his dark work. He trembled with an intermixture of sorrow, rage, and pity.

Cassilda led him over to the chaise longue and bid him sit. Her gold and ruby-flecked eyes bored into his. Funny, he thought, how her eyes already contained rubies within them, even before she had ever held the black staff. She still carried the deadly weapon with her, but, as if reading his mind, she now stood and walked towards her cabinet. Its wood, though black, was like no ebony Alan had ever seen, impossibly smooth. Proud defiance, like that of a soldier, radiated from the seemingly inanimate object.

"Great Do'ledon, please keep this safe."

For you, my princess, anything, the cabinet replied, with no mouth. Its doors opened, revealing a yawning abyss of impossible space. Cassilda handed over the staff, and in a split second—so little time Alan wondered if his eyes saw correctly—a terrible, withered hand shot out of the cabinet and clutched the staff, dragging it into the dark. The cabinet doors closed. Cassilda inclined her head in gratitude and made her way back to the chaise longue.

"My sister hates these living things," Cassilda said. "But for a long time, they were my only friends. Them and Eric . . . " She sighed deeply.

"I wish I had known him better," Alan said.

"There is a reason my father loved him so. He was a fool only where it mattered."

Once again, she fixed him with golden eyes. Her expression was positively coquettish. He longed for her in ways he had not longed; his desire was a flame fanned to an almost destructive height.

"They say there is nothing better after a battle than sex," she whispered.

"I feel like I am in a movie . . . "

"What is a movie?" she said, never taking her eyes off him, touching his chest with one impossible soft and delicate hand. "I know very little of your world."

"My world is full of sin."

"I would like you to show me some of it."

She pushed gently on his chest, until he lay down, then climbed atop of him, her lips locking with his. What began tenderly gave way to fury. Their kisses became devouring. She was so light, soft, tender, like the rarest cut of meat, melting in the mouth, impossibly flavourful. He longed to taste all of her.

His left hand was in motion of its own accord, trying to get into her dress. Hers likewise tugged at his robe.

"You first," she said, hardly taking her lips from his. "Let me see." The earnest desire in her voice commanded obedience.

He lifted his robes over his head and threw them aside. His scars were grisly, yet she seemed to have no eyes for them, her gaze drinking in his body as she ran her hands over his thighs and stomach, like he was some Grecian god. His cock had risen to supernatural stiffness. He could barely catch his breath he burned so intensely with desire.

Her soft breath warmed his erection. She planted her delicate, purple lips on him, kissing along his length. Her tiny mouth made his cock seem so much bigger, for which he was simultaneously grateful and aroused.

"We can't completely . . . " She bit her lip. "*Yet* . . . I'm . . . I'm not ready for that." She stood, and with a deft movement of her hands behind her back, undid her battle-smeared dress, letting it fall to the ground. Alan's breath caught in his throat. Even partly caked in mud and blood, she was a vision of heaven, like a moonbeam shaped into a perfect sliver of womanhood. Her breasts were tiny discs. Her stomach muscled and flat. Despite how slender she was, her ribs and collar bones showing like bluffs illuminated by the searching eye of a lighthouse, she was endowed in one area: her hips wide, her buttocks heavy and equine. A small fur of blonde hair led the way down to her sex.

"I'll do whatever you want," he said. "Whatever you're comfortable with."

"This is what I want," she said. She climbed on top of him once again, but with her hands positioned behind, her knees bent, sort of like a crab, or yogic bridge-pose. Her legs opened and revealed her sex, a beautiful pink flower, already wet.

Supporting herself with one hand, she wrapped her other around the haft of his cock. She lowered herself slowly onto him, but it wasn't her cunt that she wanted him to penetrate. His eyes widened with shock but incredible arousal as the bulging tip of his penis pressed against her other tiny hole. She let out a moan, stroking him back and forth over the orifice, then pressing her hips down more firmly. He could feel her weighty buttocks enveloping his cock, and it was almost enough for him to lose control then and there. A little look of discomfort crossed her face.

"It won't go in like that," she said.

She climbed off Alan and knelt before him. He propped himself up on his elbows. He felt like he was getting too much attention. He wanted the attention to be on her, to kiss her in all the right places, but she seemed to read his intention.

"Not yet. I can't . . . I can't cope with anyone touching me there."

"Okay. Cassilda, we don't have to—"

"Shush. We just need to make it easier for you to fit."

She opened her mouth and let her tongue loll out, sweet and pink. She ran her tongue all the way from the base of his cock to the tip, then swallowed him, pushing down with a confidence he had not expected but found heart-stoppingly sensual. When she withdrew, the end of his cock shone with spit, a trail of silvery spittle linking her and him.

"More," she whispered. Not a question, a statement of what she wanted.

This time she pushed him deeper into her throat. The sensation was so pleasing he could not help but lift his hips to meet her. She made a little sound—between a moan and a gag. He withdrew.

"Sorry—"

"No," she said, breathless. She reached up and grabbed his left hand, drawing it to her golden ringlets. He curled his fingers through her hair. "Like that. Faster," she said.

He pushed once more, this time not fully withdrawing, but using her mouth like it was the other part of her he so desperately craved to explore. The sensitive underside of his cock rubbed against her soft tongue, sliding along the slight grove as though made for it. He began to pick up speed. As his passion mounted, he thrust without restraint, touching the back of her throat. She never took her eyes off him throughout. That eye contact held him transfixed and burning. O how he wanted to give her everything she was asking for. Her eyes pleaded it of him, and he could not deny them. He thrust so deeply that she made that same little gagging sound, and he was ashamed to admit it made his hair stand on end with arousal. She read his excitement in the goosebumps upon his flesh, in the firmness of his erection, and she snaked her tiny hands to his hips, pulling him closer. She wanted him to do it to her again. He did. There were now great flecks of spittle dripping from her lips and his cock, like cobwebs. Every thrust made her gag.

"Is it too much?" he said, worried she could not breathe.

She emphatically shook her head, never taking her lips from his cock, never taking those eyes from him.

He began to use her mouth ferociously, unable to restrain himself, and she moaned—perhaps it was sympathetic pleasure, a transferred sensation.

Suddenly, the sensation was too much, he had to slow down, letting out a slow and heavy exhale, exorcising a level of restraint that felt like tearing his brain from its moorings.

Cassilda wasted no time. She climbed on top of him once again, her cunt facing toward him, knees spread, back arched. She gripped his now soaking cock and pushed down, the tip meeting her taint, then pushing against that place normally forbidden. It was strange but Alan had always found women's arseholes to be quite beautiful—so perfectly tiny and enticing. He told Cassilda hers was the most beautiful he had ever seen, which was true. She laughed and smiled.

"You truly are a pervert of Urth."

He grinned in reply.

She let out a yelp as he slipped inside her, shaking head to foot. Then as she forced him deeper the yelp of pain became a moan of pleasure, her eyes closing to more deeply connect with the sensation. She forced him so deep her beautiful buttocks came to rest on his hip and thighs.

Gently, breathing as one might when struggling with intense exercise, she lifted her hips and brought them down again. Then again, establishing a rhythm. The sounds she made caused Alan's cock to harden to an almost painful ripeness and she squealed a little, but never gave up her rhythm, the sounds of her buttocks slamming down against him so animal it was music.

Cassilda's moans grew louder. Sweat beaded her brow, ran down her chest into her naval, and glistened on her slender limbs. She and Alan shared an unbreakable stare, communicating without words, now joined in body in the most intimate and secret places.

The stare was broken as her eyes screwed shut with pleasure, her hips slamming down harder. She was so tight that Alan was almost worried she would break him, but he carefully adjusted his position, making sure he was always hitting that particular place that made her cry out in the way he liked.

"You're going . . . you're going to make me cum, Alan," she said.

"I didn't think I could like this but . . . I am . . . " And then she was screaming. Her arms gave way and she collapsed, but her hips continued to rock up and down, enveloping him. Her cries pushed him over the edge.

A cry escaped his lips in answer to hers. He withdrew as delicately as he could while exploding violently.

"Yes!" she said, and he realised it was his pleasure that was giving her such joy. She writhed as he showered her. So many women he'd slept with saw men's pleasure as an inconvenience, perhaps even a weakness. They would rather be loved by machines. Here, her passion showed him that his pleasure was hers. And hers was certainly his. His orgasm became cosmic, but in moments the sensation was done. Such was the curse of being a man.

Cassilda panted, covered in milky white spatters. What was it about a woman drenched that so roused the male libido? There was nothing Darwinistic about spilled seed. Yet Alan found nothing so sexually alluring as he did Cassilda lying there, her pretty features coated. She breathed heavily, and there were tears running down her cheeks.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked urgently, leaning forward and putting his good hand to her cheek.

"No. No. It was perfect."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. "They're happy tears. How ridiculous!" She laughed at herself.

He knelt and held her shoulder gently with his left hand. He dared not touch her with the dreaded talon on his right.

"You have just given me more pleasure than *anyone,*" he said.

She touched his cheek with her soft fingers, her eyes drinking him.

"You mean that?" There was an unspoken question there. He was not too dense to sense it: *More than my sister?* She knew then, what they had done in the Ritual of Five. But that act seemed cold and quotidian next to what he had just experienced.

"A thousand times more," he said.

She threw her arms around him, and they held each other, both covered in blood, mud, and semen. They kissed and whispered promises. And after a short while, she asked him for more, and he gave her all that she desired.

CHAPTER 29
REVISITING THE VOID

ALAN WAS GRANTED perhaps the highest honour ever bequeathed to an outcast: to enter the inner sanctum of the Yellow King. The doors groaned opened, and he stepped into the abyss lit by treacherous stars and cosmic ghosts. Unlike Cali, who even now had been cast into the Screaming Pit, he felt no frustration or confusion—the abyss was beautiful, and he could watch its bizarre symmetries for hours.

"Alan Chambers," the King's voice boomed. "I welcome thee."

"I thank you, lord."

"Call me . . . Hastur."

So that was the name of the King In Yellow. He had heard it mentioned in passing but never quite put two and two together. It felt uncanny to be on first name terms with a god.

"Great Hastur, I thank you for the honour of receiving me here."

"Thou art welcome, saviour of Carcosa."

The grey cowled figure materialised from the void, and a shudder went through Alan. He still felt no overwhelming aura emanating from the King, but the sight of Him manifesting from the darkness brought to mind questions and secrets of creation he yearned to know the answer to, but knew he was not ready for.

"Know you the provenance of the weapon thou bearest?" the King said, raising a concealed limb in the vague direction of The Claw.

"I only know that it belonged once to your friend, Haercus."

The King nodded. He began to walk through the void, treading upon clouds of cosmic dust, stars rising to meet his feet, great clouds of gas and light wheeling overhead. Alan followed, having to walk double-time to keep pace with the god's long strides.

"Haercus wielded it, but it was not made by Haercus. It was made by Pe'kar."

Alan stopped. The King paused also, turning to face him once more.

"But . . . Pe'kar is your enemy?"

"Not always. In the beginning there were three of us." The King once more bestrode the galaxies, and Alan hurried to keep up. "Myself, Pe'kar, and one other."

"Who was the other?"

The King paused a long while. The infinitude of space stretched before them, endless.

"The Mother."

"*The* Mother?"

"Yes. She whose womb formed the first Carcosans, and the first demons too." The King sounded aggrieved.

"What happened to her?"

"She died in the birthing. Her fertility proved her ruin, as a thousand, thousand living things tore from her womb. She was my first love, and it was my love that killed her . . . " The King's voice rumbled with regret and rage. " . . . And his . . . "

"Pe'kar?"

"Yes. We were rivals from the beginning, though we posed as brothers for many eons. I see in the conflict between Cassilda and Cali an echo of that rivalry, and I feel ashamed that I was not able to prevent history repeating itself."

Alan did not know what to say to that. He dared not criticise the King's harsh treatment of Cali, for to do so would not only risk offence but also seemingly justify her actions, actions which could not be justified, however much He had tormented her.

Hastur seemed to know Alan's thoughts.

"It appears my judgement is not as sound as I thought," He said, demurely. "I have need of a new Head Courtier to replace my beloved Eric. I already know thou shalt decline the honour. Besides, thy nature is not well suited to it. But if thou hast any recommendation, I would gladly receive it."

Alan stood dumbfounded. But no sooner did he experience shock than the answer presented itself.

"Petruccio."

"Elaborate," the King rumbled.

"Petruccio is your ideal choice. He has an incredible mind, and

he knows Carcosa like the back of his hand. He is fiercely loyal. He has risked his life many times for the sake of the city. I don't know if he will accept, but I cannot think of anyone better."

"I shall take it into consideration. I thank thee, Alan . . . " The King let out the same, strange, reverberatory sound as He had on the palace steps: eerie laughter. "I tire of calling thee that, for thou knowest as well as I that it is not thy true name."

They came to a halt at what seemed the edge of reality, all the stars dying, a blackness lying beyond; a wall, perhaps, in this room of impossible space, or else a true abyss.

Alan swallowed. His heart pounded.

"You know my true name?"

"Yes. I know many things about thee, 'Alan'. Some things thou art not ready to learn. At least, not from one such as I."

"Will you tell me?"

"I shall tell thee thy true name. It is . . . Abracadabra."

Alan frowned.

"That . . . that makes no sense."

"I thought that would be thy reply. But consider its meaning, and the way shalt be revealed."

CHAPTER 30
THE SCREAMING PIT

THAT EVENING, Alan, Cassilda, Petruccio, LeBarron, and Roland were summoned to retrieve Cali for questioning. Petruccio, newly appointed as the Head Courtier, had replaced his usually drab black clothes with motley pants—yellow and red—in honour of the late Eric. However, he did not wear the same floppy hat as the former courtier but kept his sleek skullcap. He had also been given shiny new shoes, a beautiful jewelled dagger, and a cape, which he wore proudly. The dwarf looked ten feet tall when he first strode up to meet them.

LeBarron likewise had a makeover, though perhaps not to the same extent. It was almost strange to Alan, seeing everyone in their finery, after being with them so long upon the hard road. The actor smelled of unnameable perfumes. He had trimmed his hair and enhanced his ringlets so that he seemed a vision of Apollo. His tunic was smart and tailored. His britches fit tightly to his skinny legs.

Cassilda wore a purple dress—which matched her lips. Alan wore a white robe. He enjoyed the symbolism of a clean slate, even though what was coming weighed heavily upon him. He had never interrogated anyone before, and the thought of it made him uncomfortable. However, the King was right, they had to know more of what Pe'kar planned, what his capabilities were, and what might come next. Alan hoped Cali would seize upon this opportunity for redemption, that perhaps it might even mean her forgiveness. He hated her, yet he also felt inextricably bonded to her, as though her death or suffering would mean his own. To occupy the state of bliss he had been in for the last twelve hours or so felt somehow wrong.

The Screaming Pit was situated on a lower level of the palace, one even Cassilda had rarely visited, save in her foolish childhood. It took them an hour to descend the many levels, led by Roland. There were no windows this deep inside to allow in natural light, and so Roland's torch provided the only illumination: flickering, yellow, ghastly. The sounds of feasting met Alan's ears—somehow more disturbing than if he had heard shrieks. What could be eating in this blackness? At last, they entered a wide room which had only a single feature at its heart.

No more than a few feet wide, The Screaming Pit was a hole bored vertically downward into mantle harder than diamond, with sheer sides smooth as obsidian, and no obvious means of ingress or egress. The mere sight of it turned Alan's stomach.

From within sounds rose up, horrifying, ear-splitting, soul-wrenching. They could not be described as shrieks, for they had form and purpose, yet they also could not be accurately called language; torturously, a-rhythmically, they rose and fell with the seasickness of a boat tossed about in a violent storm. If the volume of those cries was this loud at the top of the perilously deep pit, Alan could only imagine how loud they were at its murky nadir.

Roland approached the edge as close as he dared, and it comforted Alan to know even the fearless warrior was hesitant.

"Cali!" Roland cried. "You stand accused of treachery against Carcosa and your father, the King—*Everlasting His name!* Your punishment is assured, but you might reduce the severity of your sentence if you cooperate."

Alan found his eyes drawn away from Roland and the main drama of the scene to LeBarron, who was pacing around the room, his eyes focused intently upon something Alan could not see.

There was no response from the pit, only the continual shrieking.

"Cali!" Roland barked. "Do not cleave to pride! Answer me and you might be spared the horrors of the Pit. We seek information about Pe'kar."

Again, no answer came, or else it was lost in the sea of dismal shrieking.

LeBarron crouched. He reached out and gripped something, his fingers moving frighteningly close to the Pit. Alan half expected the floor to come alive and pitch him headlong into the abyss. This

was not mere vertigo; Alan had seen firsthand how so much of Carcosa was living.

LeBarron gripped something and stood, holding it between thumb and index. It was still too fine for any of them to see (or perhaps the actor had gone mad and was seeing what was not there—Alan could not blame him, given that he had returned from the other side).

"Cali!" Roland bellowed. "Answer me!"

"She will not," LeBarron whispered. "She isn't there."

Roland and the others looked aghast at LeBarron. The actor raised his hand higher, and by torchlight they discerned a thin, black hair.

Roland hissed and moved right to the edge of the Pit, his former fear submerged by a deeper one. He raised his torch over the abyss and peered down into its very depths.

"Gone!" he said. "Gone! How? How?"

"Sound the alarm!" Cassilda cried. Then, "My father!"

CHAPTER 31
THE GARDEN

CALI FOUND THE King in the Garden of Grim Knowledge. She was covered head-to-toe in filth, shivering still with the memory of the place she had escaped, of the unspeakable entities that had assailed her there, of the visions of her life that had tormented her with their exquisite reality. It was a wonder He did not smell her approaching—reeking not only of shit but also residual fear. Her hands trembled as she raised her bow, deadly arrow nocked. She had retrieved it easily enough, Roland not knowing its true provenance or power, merely stashing it away in a lockbox, whereas it should have been sealed in the deepest and darkest of Carcosa's vaults.

The King stood with his back to her, beside the disberry tree He so loved. As she watched, He reached up and plucked a disberry from one of its many, fertile branches.

"I often wonder what it would have been like, had we remained just three . . . "

Cali did not understand His words; were they aimed at her, or was the mad god talking to Himself?

"From her came all of the first Carcosans . . . Uboth, Haercus, the great heroes . . . Camilla . . . "

Cali's heart thundered in her chest. All she had to do was let go of her bowstring and the King would die, yet now she was here, now the moment was arrived, she found herself paralysed. Perhaps it was the effects of the Pit still wearing away at her psyche, but she felt weak, impotent, confused.

"Your mother too, Cali."

Cali swallowed. So He *did* know she was there. It shouldn't have surprised her. He was a being not entirely of matter, but of

the Spirit and Mind. Still, there was nothing He could do to stop her bolt.

She knew she should fire, get it over with. They would discover her escape soon enough, yet she wanted to know more; she had rarely if ever heard him talk about her mother.

"My mother's mother?"

"Yes. The first Mother. Who gave birth to all the others."

"Wait . . . " A sickness twisted Cali's guts. "You . . . you fathered my mother . . . and Camilla. You slept with your own *daughters*." She nearly let go of her weapon, threw up the contents of her stomach upon the glistening grass. The suns were dawning, shedding light into the garden, yet all the beauty in the world could not cleanse the revulsion she felt in the pit of her belly.

"Strange is the night where black stars rise," the King whispered.

"No poetry can justify the horror that you are!" Cali snarled. "People say I'm a monster, a traitor. You were always keen to remind me of that. But *you* are the real monster."

"O of that I have no doubt," the King said, and the mildness in His voice irritated her. Still, He had not turned to face her. Indeed, she hoped He wouldn't. "But gods are monstrous by definition."

"You admit it then!" she said, a savage triumph in her voice, though she did not know why. "At last, you finally admit what you are—a malevolent god, drunk on His own power!"

The King sighed deeply.

"I still pity thee, Cali."

Cali let out a scream, and at last found the strength to loose her arrow. It flew through the air with purpose, as though it knew her intent and acted accordingly. Its flight was brief, striking the grey cowl and passing clean through it, imbedding in the tree. As the arrow found its mark, something strange occurred. The grey cowl *folded,* as though there was nothing inside it, and like a heap of useless rags it fell to the ground. One moment her father had stood there, tall and imposing, the waves of His aura washing her senses. The next, there was only a pile of dirty garments on the floor. It seemed like a trick. Cali ran up to the tattered cloak and pawed it with her foot. It couldn't be He had escaped her. She would not permit the thought to enter her head. Was this, then, what the death of a god looked like? A simple fading into nothing. It was so anticlimactic, so unsatisfying. She almost thought she could hear laughter, mockery.

"No! *No!*" she growled.

She kicked the robes more firmly and a single disberry rolled out from underneath their folds.

She froze. She knew there was a cosmic joke here, some meaning she could not grasp. She let out another scream, this one of pure frustration, of a lifetime's rage—and her lifetime longer than any human's—unvented, unreleased.

"I HATE YOU!" she screamed, falling to her knees, gripping the rags in her fingers and twisting and tearing. "I HATE YOU!"

He did not answer her.

The sounds of soldiers marshalling brought her out of her rage. They would soon discover her here. They might have heard her shouts—but even if they had not, they would leave no corner of the palace unturned.

Getting to her feet, she ran to the balcony, and threw herself over the edge—floating down upon magical energies she could barely control for the surges of emotion running through her—and leaving the fallen fruit where it lay.

CHAPTER 32
UNDYING

A HAND EMERGED from the black waters and clutched the land, rather like the first primordial monster dragging itself from the soup of fertile possibilities. The process was slow, yet inexorable, a hulking monstrosity besieging the shore, creating waves in the wake of its passage.

The thing that had once been Haercus was hardly recognisable anymore. Damaged armour clung to rabidly transforming flesh. Amorphous limbs sprouted from orifices and eye-sockets. Worm-mouthed tendrils blindly explored the new territory of open air. What was within was becoming without, its horrid splendour revealed to the world. Yet despite all this, his artificial hand still gripped *Hope's Devourer,* as though it was his last tether to who he had once been.

He resembled, loosely, a breached terrarium, abundant, mutant life exploding out through shattered glass, dazzled by the diversity of its new world. As he crawled, pieces of him sloughed off like a discarded chrysalis. The water claimed flesh which had been pulped to such a soddenness it was thinner than paper. What was revealed beneath the torn flesh writhed, stared, and fervently explored the boundaries of a new reality.

Haercus raised eyes that were not eyes any longer—protruding as they were on slug-like stalks—and beheld his steed, the hulking apex gorgonopsid. The beast was a fearless killer, yet it hesitated to approach its former master, uncertain. The smell coming off Haercus was violating in its pungency, a cocktail of gore, excrement, and the seedy elixirs of birth—for that is what Haercus was now: eternal birth, and rebirth, an ever-becoming scion of change. Pe'kar had not tortured him. Pe'kar had not

ruined him. Pe'kar had set him free. The armour was his last prison.

Haercus drove his sword into the ground and rose on his knees. With his other hand, which now resembled more a series of phallic tentacles, he gripped the ragged edges of his shattered platemail. The metal from which it had been forged was strong enough to repel thousands of tons of weight, to deflect the most powerful magics, but now he bent disgusting strength to its ruination, peeling back the artificial carapace like one might peel a scab from a wound. In places, the metal had bonded with his flesh, his expansion barely contained by the suit of armour. A wet, ripping sound echoed across Lake Hali. He felt nothing as he tore slabs of himself from stable mooring and cast aside his armour piece by piece. Not long after he did, the red wounds gave birth to new life: fronds blooming with prodigious suckers at their ends; maggots bubbling up and then spilling from him, searching the ground for new hosts; eyes and mouths and tongues sprouting to populate the cavities.

The gorgonopsid was as close to fearless as possible for a creature of flesh and blood, but it was not stupid, and beholding its master's new form, it fled.

Haercus tore his helm off, and with it, his face. Though he had no breath in his lungs, he let out a rasping, choking shriek as the darkness within him raced up and out of the puckered orifice—eager to find the light.

CHAPTER 33
DEAD TREE

CASSILDA LED THEM, seeming to have some premonition of where her father would be. Whilst the soldiers searched the palace, she took them directly to a garden overlooking Carcosa's eastern side. She burst through the doorway and froze, a hand coming to her mouth, the scream within her so powerful it could not emerge. Alan tried to put a hand on Cassilda's shoulder, but she shrugged him off and ran forward.

A pile of grey rags lay next to a dying disberry tree. The tree had once been a mighty specimen, its branches spreading wide, forming a beautiful vault that resembled the matrix of veins lying beneath human skin, or perhaps the intricate pattern of neural pathways in the brain. Now, its bark was rotting before their eyes, a green syrupy sludge sluicing down its trunk. Black fester erupted from knots. It was hard not to see the tree as both weeping and bleeding at the same time. Branches were stripped to skeletal bareness; the fruits once vibrant and blooming had turned gangernous. Because of the screaming faces disberries depicted, the melting fruit gave the impression of faces dissolved by acid. Many fruits had already fallen and smashed on the garden floor, spilling a putrid-smelling pulp. The tree-trunk sagged. As more pieces of it came loose, a groan of agony escaped.

There was an arrow imbedded in the tree. They all knew its provenance.

"Father!" Cassilda wept, kneeling before the rags, bringing them to her face, sobbing uncontrollably into the filthy fabric. "Father. Father. Father. Father."

Alan saw, lying beside the empty rags, a single disberry,

unaffected by the rot. He wondered what that meant, what kind of cosmic meaning the universe—or perhaps the King himself—had communicated in this final anomaly.

"Cassilda . . . " Alan said, stepping toward her.

She was inconsolable, hardly aware he existed, weeping and weeping and weeping.

Roland, who had come with them after giving orders to his men, bowed his head.

"I've failed . . . I've failed . . . "

"How did she escape the Pit?" Petruccio said. Alan could hear how tightly his jaw was clenched in his voice. "It's magically sealed is it not?"

Roland nodded, piteously.

"She has learned new magics from Pe'kar," LeBarron said.

They all turned to him. Alan frowned.

"You seemed unsurprised by her escape, LeBarron. You were the one to find the first evidence she had slipped the net. Now you offer an immediate explanation."

LeBarron nodded.

"I am the only one here who has ever been to the lands of Blue Light. It is something I and Cali share. One cannot venture into those lands without being changed forever. It leaves its mark upon you, as sure and bright as the Yellow Sign. I suspected that no prison would hold Cali, that the best course would have been to execute her on the spot, but it is not my place to defy the King, and His wrath can be terrible."

Roland grabbed LeBarron by the collar and shook him violently.

"But now your negligence has caused the death of our King!" Roland roared.

"*Deathless be He,*" Petruccio muttered.

Roland rounded on the dwarf.

"Was that some kind of joke?"

"No," Petruccio said, defiantly. "Purely a statement of fact. Do you think that such a claim would be made lightly? Do you honestly believe that a single arrow, no matter how deadly, could slay the King In Yellow—*Everlasting His Name?* There's no body, here, just a pile of robes. I suspect He lives, though where and in what form, I do not know."

Roland surprised them all by kneeling and embracing the

dwarf. Petruccio looked a little uncomfortable, but Roland cared not, crying into his shoulder.

"Then there *is* hope. I thank you, Petruccio. I see now He was right to trust you."

Petruccio patted the soldier on the back. Roland released him and straightened.

"She has one arrow left . . . " LeBarron observed, darkly.

"I wonder whom she intends it for?" Petruccio said.

The two shared a look, but if they came to an understanding, they said nothing.

Cassilda's sobs had finally subsided somewhat. Perhaps she had overheard their conversation, or perhaps she had come to the same conclusion. She picked up the lone, hale disberry, alive amidst the desiccation and rot. Tears ran down her sweet face, but she smiled.

"I have to believe you're right, Petruccio. As ever you are as strong as the foundations of Carcosa."

Petruccio bowed and smiled sadly.

Cassilda rose.

"The guards will not apprehend my sister. If she can escape the Screaming Pit, then she can elude capture until she is out of the city. LeBarron, do you think she will return to the lands of Blue Light?"

The actor nodded.

"It is the only possible solution I can see."

"Then we must follow her," Cassilda said, her face a grim mask. "Chase her across the deserts of Demhe, to the ends of the black planet if need be."

"I will go with you," Roland said. "The city doesn't need a soldier. Besides, I failed in its defence."

"The dead shall guard the city," Cassilda said. "Have no fear, Roland."

The soldier bowed in gratitude.

"I will appoint a council," Petruccio said. "The courtiers govern themselves best, anyway. I'm coming with you."

"You have my sword," LeBarron added, a curious smile quirking his lips. Alan wondered if the actor, well-travelled and well-read as he was, knew precisely what he was referencing.

"There are five of us," Alan said, quietly.

All showed confused expressions.

"What is the significance of that?" Roland asked.

"Five fingers upon my hand, five senses to grasp reality, five elements that make up all matter—I take it as a good omen we shall succeed."

Cassilda smiled radiantly.

"You are with us, then?"

Alan smiled in return.

"I am always with you."

THE STORY WILL CONTINUE IN
BOOK THREE:
THE DREAMS OF DEMHE . . .

THE DREAMS OF DEMHE

The Third Book of Lost Carcosa

PROLOGUE

THE PAST IS a treacherous kingdom. Its ways sprawl labyrinthine beyond the doorway of the mind's eye. Many get lost in this kingdom. Some never return. Alan Chambers knew this, but still could not stop himself from opening the door upon a memory he'd almost forgotten, one that returned to him as though upon the singing winds of the desert.

Fourteen-year-old Alan sat in the back of a taxi, drunk and trying not to show it. He had a good hour-long journey in which to sober up before his parents questioned him on every microscopic detail of the party. The smell of weed clung to his clothes, though he hadn't partaken. It wasn't that he morally objected, simply that its promises seemed so sundry next to the exotic visions of his imagination. Alcohol, on the other hand, was attractive because it numbed and quieted said overactive imagination, which at times bubbled up so strongly within him he felt he might explode—in all senses of the word.

The party had been so-so. His friends always promised so much. Alan's mind would be filled with fantastical dreams of social ascension and euphoric release in the build up, but in actuality the

parties were often awkward, sometimes a little dreary, and only seemed to emphasise his loneliness rather than dissipate it. Perhaps that was just him? He'd always known he was a weirdo. Maybe he should give up the whole social thing altogether? Become a hermit in a far off land . . .

It didn't help his social standing that his mother *insisted* on ordering him a damn taxi back at eleven o'clock, when everyone else was crashing. It both exiled him from the intimate boy-talk conversations that inevitably occurred just before bed and made him seem like a posh twat. His parents were richer perhaps than the average family in Alan's school, but not outrageously so. Forking out for a taxi every time Alan went out however made them seem like the very embodiment of the out-of-touch moneyed elite.

Perhaps *because* Alan was slightly wasted, he couldn't help but fixate on some of the odd details of the taxi and its driver. The car was ancient, hailing from the '70s at least. The driver was a gruff-looking man. Not exactly scary, but not pleasant either. It seemed most of him was draped in shadow, as though the darkness fled to his arms for comfort from the light. Even when they passed streetlights, the shadows remained. They churned and turned and warped, but they never left him. Thus, only a few odd details ever really jumped out: a bristly chin, suggesting he hadn't shaved in some time; black sunglasses that made his eyes a mystery; and large, spidery hands that scuttled across the steering wheel with light dexterity. They were the kind of hands Alan expected to belong to a pianist.

The driver sensed Alan's inspection, because his dark sunglasses turned towards the rearview. A grin of pearlescent teeth ruptured the darkness.

"Mind if I smoke, kid?"

"Be my guest."

Alan was never one to come between someone and their pleasure.

The driver took one hand off the wheel, fished in his jacket for the packet, and brought it to his lips. He bit down on a cigarette and pulled. He returned the packet to his inner pocket. Next, he fished out a lighter. A beautiful silver thing, its engravings impenetrably intricate—or perhaps Alan was just too drunk to work it out. A little flame cast momentary relief on the driver's

features: dark, leathern, the face of a man who'd endured blistering sunlight, and perhaps harsh cold too. Still no eyes behind the dark shades. The cigarette began to emit smoke like an ireful dragon. He wound down the driver-side window, and the smoke coiled out. Even so, the smell was pungent and thick in the cloister of the car. Alan quite liked it. Tobacco had a strangely uplifting aroma; the bitterness pricked the senses into life.

"Thanks," the driver said.

"No problem, Mr . . . " Alan looked for a name-tag. The driver's license, pinned to the dashboard, was partially obscured in shadow, but Alan could make out the first two letters of his name: UB. *Ub,* Alan thought to himself, stifling a laugh. *That's the kind of name that would feature in an '80s fantasy flick. A goblin or something.*

"Something funny?"

"No," Alan said, forcing his expression into one of sobriety.

"Yeah, it is. But it's okay. You don't have to tell me. I believe everyone should be allowed their own secret world."

There was a pregnant pause after this, as though the driver were gauging Alan's reaction. The boy's curiosity was certainly piqued. Imagination was something of a taboo topic in his home. Partly because Alan tended to want to enact the fantasies in his head, not merely content to let them play out in his mind.

"What do you mean?"

The driver puffed on his cigarette. Reflections of fire played in the dark lenses of his glasses. Why would anyone wear sunglasses at night? Alan's mother said people who wore sunglasses all the time were usually drinkers or druggies hiding their drooping eyelids. Alan, however, thought it far more exciting to imagine his taxi-driver was a vampire, sensitive to light.

"The mind is a secret palace. We can choose to fill it with wonders. Or we can choose to fill it with horrors. We can try to control the inhabitants of the palace, like a tyrannical king, in which case things get very miserable indeed. Or we can let the freaks play where they will. Everyone is entitled to their palace, their way. Though of course there are consequences."

"Consequences?"

"A great woman once wrote, 'Unbridled license leads to degradation; but unbridled idealism leads to psychopathology.' You'd do well to remember that, kid. Balance is everything."

"I'm all out of balance . . . " Alan muttered. He hadn't meant to be confessional, or to sound so mopey, but the truth of it left his lips like a bird eager to escape its cage—before he could seal the gilded door.

"You're having a hard time adjusting is all," the driver said. He spoke like he knew Alan, and that raised the hackles at the back of Alan's neck, made his heart hammer in his chest. He was wary now. He knew there were men—and sometimes women too but it was most often men—who preyed upon children. Alan was fourteen, a teenager not a boy, but he knew he wouldn't stand a chance against a fully grown adult, especially one like the driver, who looked so solid as to have been sculpted from the hardened enamel of the earth's deepest core.

"I didn't mean to alarm you, kid, but I've got a bit of a sense about me. I can feel when people are different. When they're going through something. You strike me as the kind of kid who's felt like an outsider his whole life."

"Can we talk about something else?"

"Fair enough," the driver answered, and lapsed into silence. No sooner than he stopped talking than Alan wished he would start again. He had never felt understood, and here he was, for the first time talking with someone who seemed to know his struggle, telling them to be quiet. He lacked the courage to start up the conversation again, however, so instead he looked outside at the world streaming by.

Residential houses, each a redbrick copy of its neighbour, rushed past in a crimson blur. As they slowed due to late night traffic, no doubt many other souls wending their way back from parties like Alan, he saw a group of kids in grey hoodies on the pavement. They were throwing eggs against the windows of a house, shouting and screaming. The eggs made a resounding *thud* as they struck the glass and shattered, so loud it could be heard over the sound of the taxi's engines and the groan of car-wheels of tarmac. The eggs left smeared yellow yokes in their wake, like melting citrine eyes.

But Alan was more fascinated by the scattered egg-shell. Some clung to the exploded yokes. Some lay at the foot of the house. These little pieces resembled fine china or pottery, something infinitely precious shattered. And he found something within himself rearing like serpent. A vague image—or perhaps it was a

memory—of a cave, dark and glittering and deep. There was eggshell all over the floor, but the pieces of the egg were huge, great pink-white slabs, as though an urn the size of Alan's head had been cracked open. He was crawling through these massive pieces of shell.

Weird, even for your imagination, Akan thought. He shivered and shook off the vision. The taxi soon sped up and they left the egging kids behind. Alan was glad. The memories—or dreams—or whatever they were of the cave had unsettled him. It had felt momentarily so real, as though the taxi drive were just a videogame, just a simulation, and he had temporarily been yanked back into sensate reality. The cave's shiny, crystalline walls had been so perfectly clear in his mind's eye. The giant eggshell pieces—he could feel their porcelain texture beneath his inquisitive hands.

"You ever wondered what came first . . . the chicken or the egg?"

Alan looked up sharply. He searched the taxi driver's face, using the rearview mirror, for some hint of dark humour. But there was none. *Was he reading my thoughts?* Alan believed in pretty much everything supernatural: telepathy, telekinesis, psychic phenomenon. He'd yet to evidence-base his findings, but he was pretty sure there had been a few unexplainable instances in his life. *Relax, he simply saw the kids too, and his brain followed a train of thought, like yours.* Maybe that was true. Strangely, Alan wanted to believe it wasn't.

"Well I guess it depends."

"On what?"

"If you're a creationist or not."

The taxi driver roared with laughter, so much so that his cigarette when flying out of his mouth. He scooped it quickly out of his lap and hurled it out of the window. In a few seconds, he'd replaced it with another.

"Something funny?" Alan parroted.

The taxi driver's manic hilarity subsided in an instant.

"Oh? So he gives as good as he gets, does he. Interesting. Well, you certainly strike to the heart of things, kid. Am I a creationist? Well, I'd have to say I am. All things come into existence as a result of intelligence. This universe is probably no different." The driver flexed his fingers. Alan knew it was some kind of tic, an unconscious habit connected to familiar runnels of thought. Something clicked.

"You're an artist."

The driver showed his pearl-white teeth again.

"My, you are sharp. A chip off the old block."

Alan frowned.

"You know my dad?"

"Depends what you mean by your dad."

Alan felt cold again. He shivered. The driver interpreted the gesture literally and wound his window up. The car began to fill with grey, bitter-smelling smog.

"What're you saying?"

"What do you think I'm saying?"

"You're . . . I don't know . . . you're making weird comments about my dad."

"I did no such thing. I just said, 'Depends what you mean by your dad'."

Alan gritted his teeth.

"You're trying to say my dad's not my dad. Why the fuck would you do that, man?"

Alan rarely swore—he was introverted by nature, and his obsessions rarely led him to anger, only to absorption—but this guy was asking for it.

The taxi driver's stupid fucking grin remained plastered across his shadowy face. Alan had never felt a stronger desire to knock someone's teeth out.

"Relax, kid. I'm only messing with you. Although, to be fair, if you're getting so hot under the collar, it probably means you've thought about it before, right? Something not quite adding up . . . Something disjointed . . . "

"Shut up." Alan hated how weak he sounded, because the taxi driver had hit a nerve. He *had* thought that he might be adopted. He looked nothing like his mother, who was the quintessential pale English Rose, nor like his father, who was a black-haired gallant; Alan was short where his father was tall, brown-haired where his mother and father were blonde and black, brown-eyed where they were blue, angular where they were soft, dark skinned where they were fair, just about different in every conceivable way.

"Don't worry about it, kid," the taxi-driver said, as though they had been discussing something no more personal than passing one's driving test. "All things are revealed in the fullness of time. Nothing can remain secret, nor static. The nature of the universe

is ever-changing, transformative, and knowing the patterns of that transformation is the essence of magic."

Alan's heart thudded in his chest, his breathing shallowed. *Magic!* Now there was a word he loved, and didn't hear nearly often enough. His parents laughed at it. His peers thought of magic as silly playground tricks. What he wanted was the real thing, and if ever Alan had met someone who gave off the energy of a real sorcerer, it was this mysterious driver.

"Tell me!"

The taxi driver took a drag on his cigarette.

"Never stop believing the world's magic, kid. There are gunna be times when you don't. Hard times. Times when you think the world and everything in it—especially the people—is just shite flowing out of some giant, cosmic orifice. But keep the faith, kid. Keep it deep in your heart, where no one can find it. The world's magical, and so are you."

The car came to a slow stop. Alan had been so wrapped up in their conversation he hadn't noticed they had arrived just outside his house. A light shining through the window on the bottom floor told him his mum was waiting up for him. He dreaded the interview. And what's more, he dreaded returning to normalcy, when the taxi-driver, Ub, or whatever his full name was, had offered him a glimpse of paradisical mystery.

"I'm sorry, kid. I can't hang around. I would have liked to talk more." Strangely Alan heard sincere regret in the driver's voice, even a crack of deeper emotion. "It's just the way it is. Got places to be. Times to be too. But all things spin upon the dragon-wheel. That which is lost returns to us in glory. I look forward to that day."

Alan stared at the driver. There was a secret hidden in these words, but he could not grasp it. He yearned to ask so many questions, but ultimately his voice failed him, and with a mantle of abject failure he climbed out of the car and stood on the pavement.

For a second, a brief second, Alan caught sight of the driver's eyes, glimpsing what lay behind the thick sunglasses.

They were bright yellow, like strange stars.

But the glimpse was only momentary, for the driver was suddenly speeding off, at illegal speeds in fact, his wheels screeching upon the tarmac. He rounded a corner and vanished into the night, leaving Alan shellshocked and questioning whether

he had truly seen the yellow eyes, eyes that promised an answer to the mystery of his aberrant soul.

With dragging footsteps he walked up to the door of his house, knocked. It swung wide immediately and his mother stood framed in yellow light, but it seemed a false light to Alan, a garish simulacrum of the shining secret in the driver's eyes.

"Finally!" she said. She ushered Alan inside, practically with force, slamming the door shut. She behaved as if murderers could, at any time, rush down the street to take Alan's life. But no sooner was he safely inside the house than he became the suspect.

She bid him sit on the sofa; she sat opposite in an armchair. The living room was the very model of a middle-class abode: TV, coffee-tables, languid décor, beige everything. Alan much preferred the more garish, '90s designs that he'd seen round friends' houses, including the one he'd just been to, but his mother and father were painfully modern.

His mother had bags around her eyes and worry lines that distorted her otherwise elfin features. Alan loved his mother best when she allowed her inner pixie to emerge, but as she got older, it seemed anxiety, and all the fears that accompanied slavish devotion to the games of society, were catching up with her, weathering the cliff-face of her beauty into increasingly jagged formations.

She asked about the party, tersely. He answered vaguely. He didn't really care about it, anymore. What he wanted to ask about was what the driver had insinuated, and he was so tired, still a little drunk, that he blurted it out without a shred of decorum.

"Am I adopted?"

His mother looked as though he'd slapped her. But behind the rage, did he see a note—a sliver—of fear? And why would there be fear there, unless there was something to hide, unless Alan really was adopted.

"Nonsense!" she said. "What on earth brought this on? Are you drunk?"

"I only had a few beers." This was a lie, but he sincerely wasn't drunk. Couldn't be, with the flame of truth burning at his core. "Mum, it's okay if I am, but I really need to know."

"What's brought this on?" his mother said, ignoring his question. "Was someone saying this to you at the party? Who?"

Alan rolled his eyes. His father was the lawyer, but over time

his mother had developed a lawyer's mindset, perhaps by a process of osmosis, and in every slight, she saw an opportunity to sue.

"It's not like that mum. I was just thinking in the taxi ride home." He added sheepishly, "Thanks for that, by the way."

"Thinking about what?" The anger had returned, an undertow beneath the waves of her words.

"About how different I am from you and dad."

Alyssa relaxed, sitting back in her armchair.

"Alan, *I* was so different from my mother. Or so I thought at my age. When I got older, I realised we were actually very similar. I think every person goes through a phase where they feel different and alienated from their parents. But ultimately, we're family, and more alike than you might care to admit. I was like you at fourteen—I just wanted to live in a fantasy world. And I hated social events. God, your father used to drag me to networking events even when we were young, and I hated it!" Alan smiled at this. "But when I grew up, things changed. And they'll change for you too."

"Thanks mum." Alan stood up, walked across the room, and kissed his mother on the cheek. She smiled warmly at him in return.

"You stink of beer and cigarettes," she said.

Alan grinned sheepishly.

"Have a shower before you go to bed."

"I will."

"Okay, off you go."

Alan went to the stairs. He felt reassured, and the taxi ride—with all its ominous yet enticing mystery—was already beginning to fade like a dream. He felt he had woken up as he stepped inside the house, and all the strange coincidences and phrases that had seemed so loaded with significance now seemed a load of nonsense and gibberish. *I was probably drunker than I realised,* he thought. *Luckily, mum has taken the whole thing pretty well.* Even so, he couldn't help but think about the look of fear in his mother's eyes when he asked whether he was adopted, the look of a woman who'd long feared the day would come when her changeling came to know his own strangeness, and the darkness of things not understood, that had always dwelt on the periphery of their lives, finally spilled in.

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Lastly, I give thanks and gratitude to you, dear reader, for sticking with this journey. There are many more miles for us to travel together, full of darkness and danger, into the very beating heart of Carcosa. I hope by the time we reach the end, you will, like Alan Chambers, have discovered a little of the magic of your true and secret self . . .

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joseph Sale writes dark fantasy and epic poetry. He has authored more than ten novels. He grew up in the Lovecraftian seaside town of Bournemouth.

His short fiction has appeared in *Tales from the Shadow Booth,* edited by Dan Coxon, as well as in *Idle Ink, Silver Blade, Fiction Vortex, Nonbinary Review, Edgar Allan Poet* and *Storgy Magazine*. His stories have also appeared in anthologies such as *Blood Bank* (Blood Bound Books), *Lost Voices* (The Writing Collective), *Technological Horror* (Dark Hall Press), *Burnt Fur* (Blood Bound Books) and *Exit Earth* (Storgy) alongside writers such as Richard Thomas and Neil Gaiman. In 2017 he was nominated for The Guardian's 'Not The Booker' prize.

You can chat with him on Twitter @josephwordsmith, or, if you want to go deeper down the rabbit hole, you can sign up to his newsletter for a free eBook novella: http://themindflayer.com