

THE LAST
MAJESTY

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PART FOUR

THE WEST

FROM THE PAST

Through dust and time, the unlikeliest of things happened, and the Sun Crystal materialised. The clouds had scattered around the rocky isle of Cvyzagârd, and the powers that flow through the T'el could be presented as this strange stone with properties beyond any thing on Hzundus could form. As master J'hethelohhd stood and stared at the ingredients he had had in his possession for so long, he saw that which he had devoted his life to come to be, right before his eyes. The Prophet had been correct, and he could likely feel within him how the Sun Crystal was finally formed. What the Sun Crystal said and whispered, that was something entirely different, and it would require not only an extraordinary mind to understand this, but one with a close connection to the T'el.

Something had occurred on Cvyzagârd, which had allowed for this to happen, and it was Hhonzine who had noticed this. During her few years as an apprentice to master J'hethelohhd, she had never seen the clouds in such a formation. Bhesotzez had noticed it too, but did not think too much of it. As it happened, Hhonzine was correct, and a great ripple had formed in the fabrics of existence and time. As Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vrouzís met his end and passed away, he left behind him a scar. One of the four members of the Hand of the T'el had vanished, which would surely leave an imprint on the world. The acid of time sensed this, and grabbed on to the fungus of the Ëgrenhorim tree, to grow and crystalise around the salts of cijewk. This was the Sun Crystal, and it had sensed something.

At first the Sun Crystal remained silent, and merely acted as little more than a yellow stone which had taken decades of dedication to create. Master J'hethelohhd was just about to put it away to study later, as it started to warm up. It seemed the insides of the crystal had started to move, and they did this in such a way that they could see distinct shapes within it. And

with these images, came quiet, but clear whispers. At first it showed nothing more than the massive front wall of a decrepit temple. Master J'hethelohhd immediately recognised this temple, as he had seen an illustration of it in a book titled 'Temples in the eyes of Hgréiun'. Hgréiun was, of course, a floral painter, but had done a few works related to architecture for therapeutic, and financial reasons.

The Sun Crystal had shown him Z'Chundzaal, the most unlikely of things to show at this time, but there was no question about it, this was Z'Chundzaal. Flashes of light then appeared, and they whispered something.

"Fohlciha'ar," said a weak voice from within the crystal. It then remained silent, and showed a dark mass of horror emerge from the inner sanctum which, until now, had been completely unbroken for as long as anyone had bothered to take note of. This monstrosity could be nothing else but Dhrneevhvez, master J'hethelohhd was absolutely sure of this. He had read plenty of thick and dusty books with fragile frames about the many wars of old, and one had mentioned Dhrneevhvez hiding in the north. It became even more clear that it was a ghoul from the ancient world when it released a curse over all the innocent people of the north. The Sun Crystal was sparse with details on this, it merely showed what were once the beautiful D'uhmev crawl around without any hair, and rotten skin.

Master J'hethelohhd held the Sun Crystal closer to him. He needed to see and hear it more clearly, for what it showed was too horrible to ignore. He saw a man on a horse. A man with a braided beard, and with a white fox with him on the horse. J'hethelohhd recognized this man from the university, this was Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vrouüzis. They had never had a chance to talk for very long, but he was instantly recognisable. Things faded away in the Sun Crystal, and then showed a ship sailing towards a scattering of isles with gigantic trees and mushrooms growing in every imaginable colour. It then showed a peaceful terrace with a rather large group of people, and they were talking to a kind-looking man dressed in all white.

Things shifted again, and J'hethelohhd had to be quick in

trying to remember what he had been shown. Now it once again showed the darkness of the north, but it was far worse than before. Hideous creatures acting under the forces of evil, and no light to be seen anywhere. J'hethelohhd had naturally heard of the darkness of Juigyth, but this was not that. This could have come from no other place than Epohzra. What he did not know was why, and who this group of people were. Had the time come for him to leave Cvylzagård and join a bigger fight? The Sun Crystal certainly seemed to think so. It had to have shown him this for a reason, and what reason could it have been if not a cry for help. J'hethelohhd hoped that the horrific sights would be over, but now they showed things much more awful than before.

He witnessed mansions being burned down, families being decapitated, and a man who had to be Zuh-Kurnuff Tilaakethz. No one with allegiance to darkness but the Wizard could do what was shown here. No one except Arknzhahn, of course. Things progressed, and in J'hethelohhd's hand the Sun Crystal was now getting warmer. There was a brief flash of light, but it only showed Dhrneevhvez and the Wizard transport. Next came nothing but another whisper.

"Arknzhahn shall rise again," said the Sun Crystal. It said this, and then came flashes of a massive attack on the fighters for good. The armies of Epohzra approached from every side, and a traitor in the group had disappeared with what looked like the staff of Arknzhahn. J'hethelohhd did not see how many survived, nor did he see who they were. The final things the Sun Crystal showed was a black pillar of smoke over Epohzra, and a few tired and hurt fighters sitting around the great volcano on the isle of Suu'Wafijaæk. This was when the Sun Crystal went cold and silent, and the light within it went out. Both Bhesotzez and Hhonzine had seen every bit of it, but it was only J'hethelohhd who truly understood the impact of what had happened. He placed the Sun Crystal down on his desk with several scratches from Hoot's talons on it, and sat down in his moderately comfortable brown armchair. For a long time he said nothing, but seeing the awaiting faces of Bhesotzez and

Hhonzine, he had to speak about the horrors before them.

"Arknzhahn has returned," J'hethelohhd said silently, almost a whisper.

"Has he not always been here?" asked Bhesotzez.

"Yes," J'hethelohhd answered, "but he now has Dhrneevhvez by his side once again, and since I assume both of you at some point picked up any book on ancient history, I need not explain what a horrific thing this is. But what could be even more devastating, is that I saw a traitor in the group of freedom fighters, and I saw them carrying the staff of Arknzhahn. The Arknzhahn we have read about as distant folklore, could now truly be standing right before us."

"Could the staff not be destroyed," said Hhonzine.

"We still do not know what the staff is made of. It must be some extraordinary material from the depths of Blahfréehc, or something else completely unknown to us. All attempts to destroy the staff were not only unsuccessful, but in some cases lethal. People have lost their lives simply touching this staff, and now the Dark One has it."

J'hethelohhd went silent again, and Hoot flew over and sat on his shoulder.

"Excuse me, master," said Bhesotzez, "but I need to check on my bark growth in the greenhouse."

J'hethelohhd nodded, and sat still for some time with his trusty owl digging in his talons in his shoulder.

"It must have shown me this for a reason," he finally said. "But I know not if it happened a while ago, if it is to happen soon, or if it is taking place right now. I don't understand this tool, no one does. I doubt even the Prophet would have trouble saying something wise on this, and he probably knows more of the crystal than anyone."

"The clouds scattered here and now," said Hhonzine, "and if this terrible thing happened right now, that is what could have scattered the clouds."

"I suppose that is not impossible, but bear in mind that this is a tool we have little hope of ever understanding, but it does make sense that it would react strongly to such turbulence in the

powers of the world, and the T'el. Well thought."

"Thank you, master."

"It showed me the volcano on the Isle of Suu'Wafijaàk. It must have been there the group fled."

"Do we know who they are?"

"The only one I recognised was Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vrouüzis, the Oracle. We have crossed paths previously at the college, but I have never spoken to him closely, which I look forward to."

"So you mean to say we are travelling there?" Hhonzine asked.

"I would say we have no other choice." J'hethelohhd stood up and picked an ordinary looking book from a bookshelf. "Here we can read about many theories of what Arknzhahn's return could bring with it, and none of them play out particularly well for us. We must travel to the great Suu'Wafijaàk volcano, and meet up with the survivors. I do not know what can be done, I only hope that our combined minds, and the wisdom of the Sun Crystal could present some shimmer of hope."

"Do you think they will welcome us?"

"I do not know. If what we have seen is true, they will be deeply scarred by the loss of their friends, and indeed the failure of their quest. We might be welcomed, but it will not be easy."

"I will go get Bhesotzez," said Hhonzine.

As she walked away towards the greenhouse where Bhesotzez spent most of his time, J'hethelohhd sat still and thought. He thought about what could possibly be done in a situation like this. If the forces of evil have truly gone too far, and there is nothing left to do. He then looked at his desk and saw a small crystal he had been given by D'hesxelohhd. It was not a crystal of any significant meaning. It was more the opposite, as all it did was take up space where more useful things could stand. It was purely for the memory of his former master that J'hethelohhd had kept this crystal, and looking at it once in a while he liked to think to himself how D'hesxelohhd would have handled whatever situation he was dealing with.

He was a kind man, and someone who would go to

extraordinary lengths to do what was right. He had risked his life to study a sand of great importance in Hvtled, when he was captured by assassins. That dedication, that urge to do what needed to be done, that was what J'hethelohhd needed at this moment. He wanted to help, and he knew how to get to the Isle of Suu'Wafijaäk, but whether he could help was an entirely different matter. This will be a group in deep trauma, stricken with such shock and grief that they might not accept help. J'hethelohhd thought about how he had felt after the death of his mother, and actually even more so after D'hesxelohhd's passing. But then, as he knew this feeling all too well, he could perhaps provide some comfort.

Regardless, action needed to be taken. Arknzhahn had been unleashed once more, and the ghouls of Blahfréhc were gathering. Whatever research the three were conducting on Cvylzagârd was far less important than this. That, and personal feelings, needed to be pushed aside. They needed to get to the Isle of Suu'Wafijaäk. J'hethelohhd put the Sun Crystal in a pocket on his explorer's robe, and started gathering everything that might be useful on a long and dangerous quest. Hoot helped by tucking his head under his wing and having a quick little nap, which he did very well.

Bhesotzez had to put his research on how the thickness of tree bark varied under various atmospheric conditions, and while being affected by external factors, such as a gentle poking on hold. Hhonzine put her notes on the movement of air around the chaotic shape of the mountain of Cvylzagârd aside, and said to herself that there would be plenty of time to resume this later, even though she knew this was likely not true. It was quite interesting what she had found out in the few years she had been working under J'hethelohhd. Cvylzagârd is a place around which there is such a huge lack of information, and being quite fascinated by wind and air, Hhonzine thought it would be a good idea to study this more carefully.

All of this was left behind, and soon the three of them, four including Hoot, were on the boat the college had given him for short, academic excursions at sea. Little did the college know

that their boat was about to be used to venture out into the Yfgazean sea, to join a brave group in the fight against the most tremendous of evils on Hzundus. This was certainly not what J'hethelohhd or any of his students had expected, but the Sun Crystal could not be ignored. The Prophet had spoken of it as such an important tool that they had to take what it showed them seriously. There would definitely not have been time to visit the Strangers once again to ask them about this, especially if it meant dealing with the Speaker, they simply had to follow what had been shown through this peculiar thing.

The boat they had was certainly not intended for use at the deep sea, but it was needed to reach the Isle of Suu'Wafijaàk. Luckily, the forces of nature were kind to them, and the days it took to reach the isle passed by smoothly. At last, they could see the great volcano. It was the first time any of them had ever seen it, which was fascinating as they lived on the island the volcano itself had created such a long time ago. They passed by the scatterings of sharp rocks and splashing mud, before the ocean opened up before them. What at the start looked to be an ordinary trip out at sea, turned out to be a lot more serious. The giant pillar of smoke Arknzhahn had sent out to exclaim what might he regained, could be seen all the way from the coasts of Ngooxmahnxv.

This was naturally a worry, but they were heading to the Isle of Suu'Wafijaàk, a true sanctuary, if there is such a thing. Bushes and trees grew wild there, especially around the foot of the volcano. Not many live there, but those who have been introduced to it tend to visit often. This would include all of the Suu'Wafijaàk, being the Hand of the T'el, the Strangers, and a few scatterings of shamans. Zyhgkeert-ufd Zagilr was not a Suu'Wafijaàk, but he had gone through training on the island, and since then he had always been welcomed there. Master J'hethelohhd, on the other hand, had never visited the island, and was greatly looking forward to what exciting vegetation could be found there.

As the volcano appeared on the horizon they all prepared to embark. J'hethelohhd took on the hood of his explorer's robe,

Bhesotzez and Hhonzine put on their respective apprentice's robes, and Hoot took a firm perch on J'hethelohhd's shoulder. The Sun Crystal had not shown where on the island this group was, nor had it shown what they looked like. The matter of timing could also be a thing of worry, as the Sun Crystal did not mention whether the events shown were meant to be, have already passed, or are currently in motion. As such, master J'hethelohhd and his students walked around the island searching for a group of survivors from an event that may not yet have taken place.

Then, on a patch of bright green grass, surrounded by flowers, a group of seven people appeared. Some of them were standing, and one was laying down, being tended to by what looked much like a shaman. J'hethelohhd knew instantly they had found the right group, for he could sense the utterly shattering sorrow, hopelessness, and misery in their eyes and their posture. It was how he felt about his mother, and even more so about D'hesxelohhd. He could not spot Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vroüzis, which made him immediately assume the worst. But he could very well be out collecting herbs for their wounds, so it could be worth asking.

Zyhgkeert-ufd Zagilr, the Shaman from the Order of Kuuluhhk, raised his head, and asked who the robed people were. Upon removing his hood, J'hethelohhd was immediately recognised, and he in turn recognised Zyhgkeert-ufd Zagilr. J'hethelohhd decided to get it over with as fast as possible, and asked directly whether Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vroüzis was available to speak to. The crushing silence that followed, and the two words that were muttered, saying that he fell, struck much harder than he had ever expected. This was truly a group in mourning, and the most horrific enemy on Hzundus had just reappeared, what possible help could master J'hethelohhd offer?

He started by approaching the girl who laid down in the grass being tended to by the Shaman. J'hethelohhd then presented a small container of moss from a rftarkju stone, harvested with great difficulty on a slippery shore during a thunderstorm.

"This might help it close," said J'hethelohhd.

"Thank you," said the Shaman, "I have never seen wounds like this. They don't want to close, and they don't answer to anything I have."

"How is she doing? And what is her name?"

"Th'rehkwvá is her name, and she is doing fine under the circumstances, she is just sleeping now. She got hold of herself when it was needed, and she fled quickly. She is strong."

"You need not tell me more about the attack," said master J'hethelohhd, "for I have seen much of it in the Sun Crystal. What I suggest is that we gather everyone, hold a memorial for the fallen, and discuss what lay ahead."

The Shaman nodded, and so master J'hethelohhd and his students were welcomed into the group of stricken companions.

NEW ALLIES

The great Suu'Wafijaàk volcano made for a pleasant view. Its vegetation was utterly unique, with bushes and flowers of fantastic shapes and colours all around. Their oils and aromas are said to have many remarkable properties, hence why the Suu'Wafijaàk are so close to it in spirit. They study the natural, and unnatural things in this world, and the volcano represents much of what they think and believe. Not many outside of the Suu'Wafijaàk understand this, as it is such a specific, spiritual thing. However, things had come to pass as such that master J'hethelohhd had arrived, and the knowledge he carried with him was close to that possessed by the Suu'Wafijaàk. He saw the volcano, the shrubberies around it, and sensed the air rich with the aromas of peace, and knew exactly what this place meant.

Zyhgkeert-ufd Zagilr, the Shaman, knew of this very well. For while the shamans of Jhukktav are not Suu'Wafijaàk, they spend much of their training on the island, so he and J'hethelohhd were probably the two who understood its meaning best out of everyone in the group. This was a group in deep shock. Things had unfolded so quickly that they barely had time to process it all. One moment they were having tea with Mr and Mrs Kettle, and suddenly they were on a ship loaded with fighters, headed for the dark realm. And just moments after disembarking, the Oracle fell dead to the group and the complete devastation took place. It did not make any sense, and they did not understand it.

For now, all that existed was the Isle of Suu'Wafijaàk, and the remarkable things which grew there. Th'rehkwvá was laying underneath a bright orange tree, from which grew pale green spirals that hung down from the branches. What this tree was used for no one had yet figured out, and very few had dared to paint it. The one useful purpose of it seemed to be the comfort of its roots, which Th'rehkwvá greatly appreciated. Even the Shaman had never once used the spirals, or the orange leaves

for anything, and he was a man with a superior knowledge to anyone else of leaves, spirals, pine needles, and just about everything else that grew on a tree or bush.

Dhiina was sitting upright in a patch of flowers. Among these were the gredsier, drochecoon, and larrudine flowers. The gredsier had pointy petals with what looked like thorns along the stem, but upon feeling them they were actually very soft. This was likely just to scare away people from picking them, without causing harm to the things that grew closeby. The drochecoon had petals that grew wide and upright, giving it a most unusual look. These could be ground up to help cure nausea induced by poor cooking, which could be most useful in some households. And most beautiful of all was the larrudine. With pale pink petals, and slightly longer, a bit more transparent blue ones it truly sparkled in the sunlight.

The grass was short, as if it was recently tended to. This was strange, as very few actually lived on the island, but it could be that one of the many forces at play there made sure the grass was always short and bright green. It seemed almost impossibly green, the sort of green one would see in a painting and think to oneself that the artist had somewhat failed to capture reality, but perhaps they had meant to capture the Isle of Suu'Wafijaak, in which case it was very realistic. The grass was also soft and dry, and extremely pleasant to sit down on. Veiko sat on a grass patch a bit away from the group and thought about everything that had taken place. Of course, no amount of lonesome contemplation could possibly process all of this, but it was still nice to sit down and ponder. All of this was most pleasant to look at, and provided some calm at this strange moment.

Th'rehkwá had sustained a significant injury on her left thigh. One of Arknhahn's pawns had swung his sword at her, and while she managed to save her head and vital organs, her thigh was still struck. The wound proved especially difficult to manage, for they knew not what kind of black and hazardous things had been put into that blade. The blood would not clot, and the wound would not close. It seemed that all they could do was change the dressing, and try to clean it as much as possible.

Because of this, master J'hethelohhd was welcomed with open arms, for his many years of research had left him with immense knowledge on just about everything, including medicine. He retrieved some leaves gathered from a bush he had found in Dhjêht. The bush did emit quite the odour, and it spoke rather rude things at times, but the leaves had great healing powers within them.

"This is very strange," said J'hethelohhd as he was tending to Th'rehkwá. "The wound only seems to open more as I tend to it. Is it very painful?"

"Yes," said Th'rehkwá, "but I don't care."

"I could use some of the extract from the boiled horn of a desert-ram, do any of you know where I can get hold of this?"

"I might have some back at Ul Golanaar," said the Shaman. "We can meet there, and talk things through."

"A fine idea," said J'hethelohhd. "I think we can all benefit from going away for a bit."

The rest of the companions were not hurt, at least not severely, so they could get up without effort and make for their ship.

"I need to travel with the girl," said J'hethelohhd. "The trip will take weeks, and her wound will need re-dressing."

"Of course," said Majkhaalr. "Our boat should have room for all of you."

Then the group embarked on yet another long trip by sea. It was something they had gotten rather used to during the last few months, many of them having been spent at sea. Bhesotzez and Hhonzine also chose to ride on the large ship, leaving the small one they had arrived in behind. Then, as quickly as they had arrived at the Isle of Suu'Wafijaàk, the time came to leave it behind. It had provided an immense sense of calm and peace in this turbulent time. It had shown them that some beauty still remains in the world, and that there are places of pure and utter peace. But as nice as that is, it could not last forever, and the severity of the situation needed to be faced. That is why they set out for Ul Golanaar, and that is why they needed to leave the island.

The few survivors, J'hethelohhd, Bhesotzez, and Hhonzine went to the ship in silence, letting the gentle sounds of their steps on the drying grass do all the speaking for them. They had a long journey ahead of them, and going through it without their previous companions seemed impossible, borderline ridiculous. Still, this was the reality they were faced with, and they could do nothing other than deal with it in any way they could. At last they reached the large ship belonging to the Riik'la family. It had sustained minimal damage from the attack, and was deemed to be in suitable condition to take on the journey south in. So they all boarded, still not speaking. Everyone made themselves comfortable, and the journey could begin.

This was not the easiest of tasks, as the navigator, Doctor Gwzeietkh, had perished in the battle. Fortunately, Bhesotzez had taken a class at the college which at certain times was vaguely related to the reading of maps. He therefore took it upon himself to study the map, and determine a suitable route. With the goal of their journey being to essentially travel from the north of Ngooxmahnxv to its south-western tip, Bhesotzez suggested they start off by heading south. They would then keep as close to the continent as possible, to avoid the storm of Slu'Fhauckc, but also being careful not to get too close to Dhjjet. J'hethelohhd knew very well, probably better than most people alive, what dangers lay within the misty, pungent forests. They would therefore have to keep close to land, but not so close that they risk suffocation from the mist, but not so far away that they get swept up by the storm. It was a delicate matter, but Bhesotzez was fairly confident in his route.

So the journey began. It was just about to get dark on the Isle of Suu'Wafijaak, so they would be setting off into a still, peaceful evening. It seemed as if it was just about to rain, but whatever forces hold control over the skies decided to keep it clear. All the clouds from the afternoon had scattered, and left them with the heavens open and ready to welcome them into the night. It was just the atmosphere needed for this painful moment, and also the crucial point in the unfolding of things to come. To decide to meet and discuss what had past meant

admitting it had really happened, and that was just what the group was about to do. They would speak of the unfortunate, devastating event which led them to the Isle of Suu'Wafijaak, and they would admit that it had taken place. What had deeply scarred and hurt them would through this become a reality, rather than the distant memory of what could have been a dream.

It all felt very much like a dream. There were images that flashed by, and sounds that played, but these things were not clear enough for them to be actual memories. Reality had not yet descended, and it had not yet delivered its harsh truth. And with wounds this fresh, a quiet evening at sea was just what was needed. Sitting on the deck of the ship, inhaling the air and sucking in the smells of open water, it was truly medication for the soul. Some sat outside, and some had chosen to go to their chambers. Some thought about the events that had struck them, and some tried desperately to distract themselves from it. But whatever ways the group had of coping, departing silently into the night was a well-needed break. Just as gathering around the volcano had calmed and eased the sudden shock, this provided another opportunity to process the reality of their situation.

The winds picked up a little bit as they ventured further out to sea. This was to be expected, since even though they would stay as close to land as they could, the Storm of Slu'Fhauck would still be close. No matter what one would try to do at sea, they would at some point find themselves within reach of the storm. It was unavoidable. Anyone who chose to take on the Yfgazean Sea knew this, and knew that how their trip would turn out was sometimes entirely in the hands of what the storm felt it wanted to deliver. As for the companions, they would likely be out of the dangerous vicinity of the storm, and would only experience slightly rougher waves as they passed by.

As the days wore on and the sea got a bit more harsh, they could spot land to the west way back in the distance. This was the uninhabited peninsula which surrounded the island of Cvyzagård. No one had ever even thought about settling down on this piece of land, as the rocks were many and exceptionally

sharp. The air was dry, despite being close to the sea, and the winds could be so strong that they blew pebbles as sharp as razors in every direction. Cvylzagârd, being surrounded by land, was protected from this. Not many lived on Cvylzagârd, but still, it was many times better than trying to settle down on the horrible peninsula.

J'hethelohhd, Bhesotzez, and Hhonzine spent much of their time getting to know the other members of the group. J'hethelohhd quickly found himself getting along well with the Shaman, as they had many mutual interests. They had both attended the college of Uhhohlugh, and found herbs, spices, and other things one might find in nature highly interesting. As much time was spent taking care of Th'rehkwvá, J'hethelohhd got to know her quite a lot as well. Understandably, they did not speak much, but just being in the vicinity of one another meant they could connect somewhat. Speaking about anything that had happened, or mentioning the Oracle was far too painful, so Th'rehkwvá stuck with making pleasant small-talk with J'hethelohhd.

When he was not going over the navigation, Bhesotzez talked a lot to Majkhaalr. He wanted to learn more about fighting, so he thought speaking to Majkhaalr would be a good way to get started. Meanwhile, Hhonzine spoke to the Princess of the Sun. They were both academics, of course, and spent much time discussing the movement of the sun and the clouds. They would occasionally mention the stars and the moon, but the Princess of the Sun missed the Lord of the Moon so much that this was quite painful for her. The two of them had been alone in the observatory at Oihhg-fa-blorgk so much that they had become very close. Naturally she missed the Child of Stars as well, but the loss of the sir Öh Fegtuul'gh, the Lord of the Moon, was the most she had ever hurt.

Pdâkraznhuul Iffazdr, the Warden, was the one who knew the core group the least, as he had been recruited later on in the adventure. Naturally he knew the Princess of the Sun well, and was also deep in grief over the loss of the Lord of the Moon and the Child of Stars, but the rest he had not spoken much to.

He was likely one of the few that had read the Oracle's complete work on plumbing in Gsrôôcfxian ruins, something he found highly interesting, and that he adored the Oracle greatly for. While he was deeply upset over the Oracle's death, he was grateful to at least have met someone he carried such immense respect for.

Wuylqo'fh and Veiko had both gone very silent over the days at sea. Wuylqo'fh, who had emerged as one of the leaders of the group, felt much as if she had failed everyone. Of course no one else thought this way, but she could not shake off this feeling. Holding up the shield of Blekimir to Dhrneevhvez had shown her what she could do with nothing but her own strength, but the attack in Epohzra had struck deeply. She had fought as hard as she could on the battlefield, and had managed to take down some of Arknzhahn's soldiers, but this had not prevented the deaths of most of their group, including her own rebels. This had brought on this sense of failure, and there did not seem to be a good way of getting rid of it.

Veiko meanwhile was deep in sorrow. Her mind had been both racing and standing still since the attack. She had insisted on coming along, despite what her father had said, and it had led them here. Also, all the time she had spent thinking of what she wanted to ask the Oracle had gone to waste. It had been a clear thing she desperately wanted to do, and now there was nowhere to turn to with her concerns. She could of course speak to her father, but duke Hihchztouyd would likely not be able to provide more than some emotional support. This was of course nice, but not entirely what Veiko wanted. She had no answers to what was happening with her head. It seemed as if the very essence of her thoughts, speech, and being was put into question.

A few days passed, and the group was now approaching Dhjêht. This brought with it a multitude of emotions and memories. This was especially true for J'hethelohhd, who had spent much of his youth in the forests. He thought about Vbrêuhh, the trusty horse he had ridden all the way there, and he thought about how he met Hoot while preparing dinner.

Hoot was still by his side, and had proved a most useful and pleasant friend. As for Vbrêuhh, J'hethelohhd had not seen more of him after he let him run free into the horizon. He could only hope that the horse found a nice place to rest, and perhaps settle down. Perhaps he found a farm with a barn painted in a rich burgundy colour, and slightly worn white tiles on the roof. It would be owned by a farmer with a wholesome, hearty name, such as 'Khecmon', who would let his chickens run free and play with the cats. That is what J'hethelohhd wished for Vbrêuhh, nothing but the best.

The air got thicker and hotter, and strange smells were beginning to surround the ship. Many of these smells came from the utterly unique eailae tree one might find on the shores of Dhjjêht. Exactly why it emits odours as intense and pungent as it does is not entirely known, and no university will spare the resources to research the matter. There is, however, a recipe for eailae leaf soup, invented by a most important chef. No one has yet dared to taste this soup, including the chef, so whether the tree has any uses at all is a mystery. It is also not very attractive to look at. It seems as if the tree has too many limbs in the wrong places, and they seem to bend and stretch in ways that attractive tree limbs do not. Still, the tree does provide the useful tool of knowing for sure that one is indeed in Dhjjêht, for it will not grow in any other type of soil than the one found on the shores of these forests.

During this long trip, J'hethelohhd was doing everything in his powers to mend Th'rehkwvá's wound. He tried applying leaves from a trtui'hjo bush, but this merely made the leaves emit a slight screeching sound. Making a paste out of bouhgce moss and pbûbve sap also proved ineffective. This mixture was something J'hethelohhd had used on himself after he cut his left hand on a letter opener, which spilled blood all over the sheet of clear red paper he had requested from the college of Uhhohlugh. He then used the paste which had the consistency of a slightly overcooked porridge to quickly seal up the wound and help it heal faster, but none of this worked for Th'rehkwvá. All they could do was keep changing the dressing and hopefully

keep it from getting infected.

Throughout this, Th'rehkwvá remained brave and strong. She had been through so much that this was simply one more of her setbacks. She had been the first to be cast under the curse of Dhrneevhvez, and she had seen Zuh-Kurnuff Tilaakethz decapitate her entire family right in front of her. And she had been there, right at the frontline at Epohzra. She had waited for the Oracle to give the order to march forward and initiate the attack, only to see him fall backwards to the ground. She had not even noticed her wound until they were on the ship, heading for the Isle of Suu'Wafijaak. Memories of these things kept flashing by, so much that she found it hard to maintain focus on reality. She did not care where they were headed or what the master plan was, all she could do was exist.

Another few days passed, and the smells of Dhjêht started dying down. Soon they started encountering the first of the Scatteres Isles of Kuuluhhk. These were the small to medium large islands scattered just off the Ftgihkar coast. What had made them fall under the protection of the Order of Kuuluhhk was since long forgotten, and not much was done with the islands at all. The small ones had nothing but a few rocks on them, while the slightly larger might have a tree or two, or perhaps even a bush. Pretty as they were, they provided no reason to stay or slow down, so there was nothing to do other than admire them as they sailed by, only to wave goodbye to them a day later.

After weeks at sea, the actual Ftgihkar coast was within view, and with that they could also spot the magnificent Ul Golanaar palace. For half the group this was a friendly and familiar sight, but for Th'rehkwvá, J'hethelohhd, Bhesoztez, Hhonzine, Veiko, and Hihchztouyd, it was all new and exciting. While the Ahvred Plains was home to a fair few magnificent buildings, none of them came quite close to the grandeur of the southern style architecture. The tall towers with sharp tops, and the blocks and blocks of marble were just a few of the fantastic features of Ul Golanaar.

"Why did you not tell us of the scale of this place?" said

Hihchztouyd as they were pulling in at the docks.

"I suppose I do not think too much of it after a while," said Majkhaalr.

"I'm sure the Oracle would have loved it," said Th'rehkwá silently.

"He did," the Shaman responded. "He truly understood great architecture when he saw it."

The group disembarked, and they went straight up towards Ul Golanaar. As night had begun to creep in, they decided it would be best to go straight to sleep. The new guests were each given a spacious room with a comfortable bed, and the servants brought up a plate of sandwiches with marmalade, and a cup of hot grovha for each of them. It was quite a rejuvenating meal, and for a few moments everything felt silent and peaceful. The group then went to sleep, all of them grateful to be back on solid ground. As night washed over them Veiko had a strange dream about a mountain. It was just a lonesome mountain standing on an island, with a sharp light at the very summit. Nothing more was shown, as her dream shifted to show friendly animals running in a field, without any strange mountains.

Morning crept in, and the group awoke feeling refreshed. They ate together in the great dining hall, where they were served porridge, sandwiches, and hard-boiled eggs. The grovha was good as usual, and everyone ended up feeling well fed and satisfied. After this came the somber moment they had come to Ul Golanaar for. It was time to meet, and set up a memorial for the fallen. They had discussed ways of doing this properly during their long time at sea, and eventually they came up with something that felt appropriate. So they gathered in the library, just as they had done many times before, but this time they left the grand seats empty, and chose to sit on the floor instead.

In the middle of the semicircle they had formed they lit a multitude of candles, and with every one they lit and placed down, they thought of a soul they had lost. A candle was placed for the Oracle, and one was placed for the Lord of the Moon. Luhtaa'fh, Hejpagrd, and Klijah had candles placed on the seats belonging to them, and a black cloth was draped over

Êlfuohkratd's seat. Hihchztouyd lit a candle to remember his wife, Klijsarnya, and the many Riik'la soldiers that were lost, while Th'rehkvwá lit one for her lost siblings. Wuylqo'fh remembered her rebel friends that had perished, and she also thought about Ogljrä-äap, who she had connected with deeply. Doctor Gwzeietkh, Jqweeln Vluyr Pahr-Khytooni-Xj, the Witch Doctor, and Tocc were remembered by all, and the Princess of the Sun lit a candle for the Child of Stars. For a long time they all sat there in silence, looking at the circle of lit candles they had placed down. It seemed a fitting tribute, one that they all deserved.

As it was still fairly early in the morning, the candles lit up the great room in the library with a warm glow, providing a nice and gentle atmosphere. As they continued to sit in silence, the sun started creeping in, and its light seeped in through the great windows. Ordinarily, this would be when the hymn to Kuuluhhk would be played, but the musician, Klijah, had unfortunately perished, so they simply sat in silence.

"That was nice," said the Princess of the Sun, who sounded as if she was trying to hold back tears.

"Yes, it was," said J'hethelohhd, who had lit a candle for D'hesselohhd. Even though it was decades since his passing, he thought it was a nice thing to take another moment to remember and appreciate all he had learned because of him. "But we do need to talk about where to go from here," he continued.

"Have you any ideas?" said Majkhaalr. "It was you who sought us out, and suggested we meet in this way."

"I'm afraid I can offer no more than my sympathies at this moment."

"Master J'hethelohhd, has the Sun Crystal shown you anything more? Can it possibly be of further use right now?" said the Shaman.

"I'm afraid it has gone cold," said J'hethelohhd. "It wanted to lead us to you, which it did, but now it will not tell me anything more. It is a mysterious thing that I am sure I know not much about, so this is all it can tell us at this moment."

"I do not see that much can be done at all," said the Shaman. "Arknzhahn is once again at his full might. He has his staff, and he has both Dhrneevhvez and Zuh-Kurnuff Tilaakethz by his side. This, while we have lost our closest connection to the T'el, it seems we do not have much hope at all."

It seemed so strange to have to speak of the Oracle as someone who was no longer with them. It did not make any sense, that a person of such greatness could meet such a mortal fate. None of this was supposed to happen, the Oracle was supposed to be there forever.

"We still have the Sun Crystal," J'hethelohhd continued. "While it is silent and cold right now, it may prove essential in the unfolding of what is to come."

"What exactly is the Sun Crystal?" asked Majkhaalr.

"We do not know. I visited the Strangers, and the Prophet told me little more than the fact that it carried extraordinary connections to the T'el. It showed me flashes of what you had gone through, and it showed me the Suu'Wafijaàk volcano. But according to the Prophet, it is capable of much more."

"I did not even think it was possible to create it," said the Shaman. "I have only read about it as a legend, but to see it in person, it seems unreal."

"Do you think the Oracle knew what was coming?" said Th'rehkwvá suddenly.

"No," whispered Veiko, but no one heard.

"Zgalok'nihh often spoke of this," said the Shaman. "He spoke about how his connection to the T'el was close to the Dark One's, in how unpredictable and chaotic it could be. Of course, the two of them had very different ways of handling this, but they were similar in thought. This could mean that the Dark One will act impulsively and aggressively, something that may prove especially difficult down the road."

"Could it be worth visiting Hloh again?" said Wuylq'fh. She thought of how well the shield of Blekhmir had worked, and that this would be a time for Hloh himself to step forth and face the darkness.

"I suspect that is exactly what the Dark One expects us to

do," said the Shaman. "It seems extraordinary that we were not attacked on our way south, for I suspect he will have filled the Yfgazean sea with attack ships."

"Do you know this?" said the Warden.

"Of course not. I am not like Zgalok'nihh, I do not see these things, I merely suspect them."

"And I think it is a wise thing to suspect," said Majkhaalr. "Going back to Zk'avvr in this state would be unwise, especially now that we know about Êlfuohkratd."

"Precisely," said the Shaman, "Êlfuohkratd knows the order well, and she knows our group. She will have told Arknzhahn everything about us, so he will know how we think, and how we will act."

"Does this mean we need to do something unpredictable?" said Wuylqo'fh.

"It is possible," said the Shaman. "We cannot go back to any places we have been, for it will likely have armies of Arknzhahn ready to strike. This rules out Zk'avvr, the Pjjaxvian Order, and the Strangers.

"Have you visited the Strangers as well?" said J'hethelohhd.

"I did," said Th'rehkwvá, "together with the Oracle."

"May I ask why?"

"It was the book, it contained the password to Z'Chundzaal. We needed the help of the Strangers to translate it."

"Of course. I have read much about Z'Chundzaal, and I am sure they would have done a thorough job in sealing it up."

"Might we get back to the point?" said Majkhaalr.

"This is part of the point," said Hhonzine. "We are a new group to what we had before, and talking about anything, anything at all, is important. We need to stick together, for we are all there is. We need to be as one, and we cannot give up."

This made everyone fall silent. It was an excellent point, that all they had at that point was the group. No one else likely knew of what had passed, and no one else had been on the battlefield, staring down at the forces of Arknzhahn. Even though Hhonzine was new to the group, she understood the importance of staying together, to be as one.

"Is there any place we can go for help?" said Majkhaalr. "For surely there is no denying we need help. Can we go back to Oihhg-fa-blorgk? Surely that is safe enough. Or can we go to Uhhohlugh, or Ifarseiq? There must be a place where help lies."

"I would not want to return to Oihhg-fa-blorgk," said the Princess of the Sun. "Everything would remind me of Öh Fegtuul'gh. And also, the only ones left there are those who live there, and the guards. The tower is empty, the chapel has but one person in it, and the Great Hall of Discussions does not do anything other than collect dust at the moment."

"Then what about Uhhohlugh?" said the Warden. "The college perhaps?"

"Uhhohlugh is not safe," said J'hethelohhd. "Last time I visited it was a harsh and dangerous place, and as far as I know it has only gotten worse."

"You are correct," said Wuylqo'fh. "There is nothing for us at Uhhohlugh."

Suddenly, Th'rehkwvá had an idea. She had thought so much of the Oracle, and he would have to have left behind him a multitude of books and documents, and surely these could be of some help.

"What about the Oracle's home?" she said.

This was the first reasonable idea presented. And it was met by initial silence, but not a silence of rejection, but one of pondering.

"I suppose that would work," said the Shaman. "We have visited there once, and I am sure we could find our way back there."

"Where did he live?" asked the Warden.

"In Klm'fe-z. A little cabin out on a field," said the Shaman.

"What do we expect to find there?" said the Princess of the Sun. "Do not misunderstand me, I have nothing but respect for the great man that was the Oracle, but what could he have in his home that could help us now?"

"I just thought about his books and things," said Th'rehkwvá.

"A fine idea," said Majkhaalr. "It is a few days away from here, so shall we depart in the morning?"

"Should we really be this hasty to form a travel plan?" said Bhesotzez.

"I think we can be," said Majkhaalr. "You are under the roof of the Order of Kuuluhhk, or at least what remains of it, and here we make decisions."

"Of course, I meant no disrespect."

"I am sure you did not," said J'hethelohhd, "but you could do well to make decisions a little faster, Bhesotzez."

"Thank you, master. I stand with you completely."

So it was decided, in the morning they would depart for the Oracle's home, hoping that something of use could be found there. But before they departed they would take the rest of the day to relax and gather themselves. They ate a pleasant meal for lunch, followed by afternoon tea, and finally a light supper of Yfgazean fish and turkey stew, served with a wine that was a bit too sweet as it hit the tongue. After this, most of the group was far too tired to stay up and talk, so they went straight from the dining room up to bed. That night no one dreamt anything. They could simply enjoy a quiet and peaceful night.

There were some winds coming in from the west, making a slight noise as they washed over the palace Ul Golanaar. This was not too bothersome, as everyone was worn and tired after a long day of discussion. Knowing they had to depart in the morning did cause a bit of unease for some, while others saw it as a source of excitement. It was all very strange, to be right back where they had been weeks and months earlier. Ready to depart from the palace to seek out the unknown, but this time something was different, very different indeed.

THE LONE CABIN

The morning light felt good as it seeped through the windows. It woke everyone up early, and filled them with anticipation over the adventure they had before them. It would not be easy, and they had a possibly dark road in front of them, but they still enjoyed the light in the morning, for it was all they could do. This was a nice and pleasant way for them to prepare and gather themselves, and try to focus on the small things they were doing. The bigger picture could be far too intense and frightening, so it seemed essential to maintain focus on each little step in front of them, rather than the large and dark clouds before them.

Breakfast was arranged in the great dining hall, despite the fact that there were not many people there, and it was not time to dine. Nevertheless it was a comfortable and beautiful place to sit down and prepare for the rough days, or even weeks on the road they had before them. The kitchen had prepared a hearty breakfast of sandwiches, eggs, porridge, a variety of aged cheeses, and a surprisingly tasty breakfast soup. They enjoyed this light meal in silence, but not an uncomfortable silence, rather one to say they could sit down and be quiet, without it being a burden. It was simply that no words were needed to express the great variety of emotions present there.

"Nothing quite like soup for breakfast," said Hihchztouyd. "We used to have it from time to time at the Riik'la house. Whenever the mood struck, when the weather felt right, we used to boil up enough soup to feed the entire house, and those who lived close to it. We would gather in the main chamber and feed all those who wanted to be fed. It was truly special, and this brings back many memories of those warm and delightful mornings."

"It is unusual, yes," said the Princess of the Sun, "but I myself seem to recall times at Oihhg-fa-blorgk when a smooth, buttery soup of potato and celery was brought out in the

morning. This would sometimes be the case on days that might prove to be challenging in some way. Perhaps a difficult discussion lay ahead, or it could be that a storm was approaching, making work in the observatory a bit harder than usual. No matter the intention behind the meal, it always fulfilled its purpose, and was both filling and inspiring."

The group then finished their simple breakfast to the sole sound of their chewing and crunching. They finished quite quickly, and then returned to pleasant conversation. A few after-breakfast biscuits were placed on the table as the plates and bowls were cleared away, so they made sure to help themselves. It seemed wise to fill up as much as possible before heading out, as food on the road would most definitely not be of the same high standard as what was served in Ul Golanaar. Altogether it proved to be a delightful way to start the day, and as the last of the food was finished, everyone felt both full and happy, something which had not been the case for much of the adventure.

"I believe it is time to go over the route of our journey," said master J'hethelohhd. "I have been studying the map and the winds, and I want to suggest that we stay away from Au'aqwro as much as possible. The winds from the west have died down, and it is my opinion that it would be safe to venture north along the base of the mountains."

"I too have noticed a decrease in the winds," said the Princess of the Sun. "I gazed at the sun as it rose this morning, and stuck my hands and face out of my window, and I must say it felt calmer than usual. Au'aqwro can be rough, especially the southern part, and I agree that it is vital we stay away from it. Winds of this kind can get much harsher higher up, and I would rather not find out if that is the case here."

"I took notice of this as well," said Majkhaalr. "I normally do not pay the weather too much attention, but as I went out on the balcony of King Kuuluhhk I found that it was the calmest the air had been for quite some time."

"Then we agree," said J'hethelohhd, "it is for the best that we stay low down and on the plains. I do not know exactly where

in Klm'fe-z our destination lies, but I trust one of you remember this."

"I remember the exact way we took to see Zgalok'nihh's home," said the Shaman. "It was a small road with only a few houses along it. There was a surprisingly large tavern quite close to the house, and it seemed to be the place in the area where one would go to relax and warm up. After this it was only a few miles to the little cottage."

"How come you went there?" asked Th'rehkwvá, who had never visited the Oracle's home.

"He had left Dhiiná there, and he wanted to retrieve her before we set out on our journey," said the Shaman.

"Was it nice?" said Th'rehkwvá.

"As you would expect," said Majkhaalr. "A bit messy, but a great atmosphere of warmth and peace."

"Sounds wonderful."

"And I certainly hope Zgalok'nihh may have some of the herbs I am currently lacking," said J'hethelohhd. "Your wound is not getting any better, Th'rehkwvá, and while there are things I have not yet tried, I lack what is needed to try it. Therefore I hope the Oracle has a plentiful garden I can help myself to."

"I seem to remember that was the case," said the Shaman. "Of course you can take a look at the gardens here, if that may be of any help."

"I thank you for the offer, but I have already looked over what is grown here, and I'm afraid none of it would be of use to me."

"Very well," said Majkhaalr, "I see no reason to waste any more time. Let us prepare for departure, and swiftly."

Majkhaalr then went to the stables to secure horses for the adventure. They would need eleven of them, one for each of them, as well as a few just for packing. After looking over all of the horses available for the order of Kuuluhhk, he decided on a group of thirteen horses. They all seemed strong, and were friendly enough upon first interaction that Majkhaalr deemed them fitting for a journey together. It was a handsome group of horses, and they all had names. Daleon, Kriassin, Movian,

Sexnesh, Wrotlae, Druviphan, Qasiatid, Rallotzal, Ozaipal, Garteno, Cuvian, Bheateran, and Pheidae were their names. They had been through many horses so far, and this certainly felt like the strongest gathering. Majkhaalr was sure they would reach the Oracle's home with these horses, so he brought them out to the front of the palace, where the packing was being prepared.

The chefs in the kitchen had been working far more than usual to provide as much food as possible, and they made sure to cook food not only tasty, but as nutritional and filling as possible. Everything one does, one will do better with a satisfied stomach, at least that was the belief of the head chef at Ul Golanaar. Certainly no one in the group wanted to disagree, for they were getting a healthy supply of wholesome food without any effort from their part. It was extraordinarily nice, but not surprising, at least not to Majkhaalr. He was the one who had hired the kitchen staff, and he made sure to be most thorough in doing so. Clearly he had done a good job.

Each one of the companions chose a horse and got an amount of packing to ride with, while Bheateran and Pheidae were being loaded up with the most packing. No one would be riding them, so they could carry quite a bit more than the others. They had food for many days, tents, and tools to make enough fires to light up an entire city. They were certainly as well prepared as one could hope.

"Continue to take care of my palace," Majkhaalr said to one of the servants as they were just about ready to depart. "I do not know for how long we will be gone, but I trust you will look after Ul Golanaar as carefully as you have done so far."

With these words the group began their journey and set off north, away from Ul Golanaar. Their stay there had been short, but time could not be wasted. The enemy was as powerful as ever, and the amount of unknowns was great. It was no time to linger, and everyone knew that. It had still been nice to sleep inside a warm room, in a soft bed, but they knew that comfort would be secondary as they set out on yet another adventure. For some this was the second time they left Ul Golanaar in

recent times, and for some it was the first. For Majkhaalr and the Shaman it was the third, and by far the strangest and most unsettling. On previous departures there had been the presence of hope and excitement, two things that were not in as great a supply this time.

Soon the landscape opened up, and the group found themselves on a narrow gravel path in the middle of a field. In the distance they could see the outline of the Au'aqwro mountains, a path that one would normally have to take when going north. On this occasion the winds from the west were unusually weak, which enabled the company to take the much easier route. All around them were patches of flowers and tall grass, and the air was brisk and fresh. It filled each one of them up with a sense of joy and freedom. Being out on an open meadow with mountains on the horizon, that was truly a pleasure they all needed. And the light breeze washing over them also brought with it a variety of exciting smells and aromas from the large amount of flowers on this particular meadow. J'hethelohhd and the Shaman talked in great intensity about the various flowers, and whether they had worked with them before.

It turned out that they had similar experience, except for a few cases. The staggeringly beautiful, but slightly rare flower of morogn was one that only J'hethelohhd had experience with. He had found it to be effective in reducing swelling when dealing with infected toes, something that could normally present a number of challenges for the healer. The Shaman meanwhile talked at great lengths about the vathavn, which was a small, spherical flower growing along the roots of larger bushes and things. It was quite a challenge to pick these flowers, as they had many thorns on them and were startled easily. They would often dig themselves down in the earth to prevent the eager explorer from picking them. The Shaman had, however, been able to pick a few of them in the past, and he found that they tasted horrendously, but were useful in preventing flies around a few other plants.

The scenery remained the same for many hours, with the

only change being an increase in the amount of turquoise flowers they spotted. The grass rustled gently in the wind, and birds circled peacefully over the company. The birds sang songs of what sounded like adventure and the feeling of opening something new up. Naturally, it was rather difficult to interpret exactly what the birds were singing about, but sometimes their language seemed to surpass the barriers of words, and express something in pure emotion. This was the case on the still afternoon on their first day, when they were overrun by pleasant singing from the birds. They seemed to tell them that even though they were riding into the unknown, and much had scarred them in the past, there could be something promising up ahead. This was something they all needed to hear, whether it was from bird or man, for they had been scarred plenty already.

Night came ever closer, and the company soon found that the time had come to set up camp for the night. After looking for about an hour, they settled for a spot adjacent to a echeatzal tree. They could use the sticks and twigs from the tree for the fire, and the thick leaves would provide some protection in case the weather should decide to unleash its might upon them. In a short time they had all the tents set up, and Hhonzine had lit a fire using whatever she could find close to the campsite, as well as the fire starting device she borrowed from Th'rehkwvá. This was the only thing she had left from her old life, but since it was such a useful thing she thought it would be wise not to throw it away, no matter how much she felt like doing so.

As it was only their first night, they decided on a simple meal of bread, and a sauce for dipping the bread in. Regardless of its simplicity, it was very tasty. Though compared to the feast the day before it was nothing, but it was good enough for the tired adventurers. A humble tea was brewed from some of the leaves they had brought with them, as well as some freshly picked herbs from the foot of the tree. This tasted surprisingly well, and provided some warmth as the sun went down. Then as night finally arrived they all decided it was time to sleep. So they gave the horses a few well-deserved pats on their heads, and

proceeded to head into their tents to get some rest. It did not take many minutes for any of them to fall asleep, as the first day on the road had been a long one, and they were all tired and worn.

As morning came, a single hbestnoskf stood upon J'hethelohhd's tent and screamed as loudly as it could. This excruciating roar woke the entire company, J'hethelohhd most of all, and gave them all a searing headache in the morning sun. Majkhaalr chased away the bird to give them some peace and quiet, and after this they started preparing breakfast. Some of the bread was left over from the night before, so this became breakfast for most of them. Those who did not feel like eating bread for the second meal in a row got some boiled eggs, and this was washed down with the tea they had drunk the night before. And since there was no room for wasting time on this adventure, everything was quickly packed up, and the company was ready to go.

The second day would be one much like the first. The journey continued along the same narrow gravel-path they had been following the day before, and the scenery did not change much. Though something that was different this day, was that they spotted a few houses here and there, either next to the road, or a bit further away from it. They all seemed to be simple homes built of splintery lumber, but it was strangely cozy in a way.

"How many days do you think this will take?" asked Veiko as she gave Rallotzal some gentle pats on the head.

"Seven or eight," answered the Shaman, "at least if my studying of the map is correct. I'm sure master J'hethelohhd would agree to this."

"Indeed I do," said J'hethelohhd. "If we proceed without distractions, and set off early every morning, I see no reason why this should take any longer than seven days."

While on the topic of distractions, the company arrived at a village. It was not a large village at all, but it looked interesting enough for them to stop, just for long enough to get something to drink. Apparently there was a stream nearby, for the tavern

was proudly serving fresh, cold water, something which felt wonderful after many hours on the back of a horse. Other than the water supply, there was nothing especially interesting about the tavern. A few people sat down at a table and seemed to be playing some sort of incomprehensibly difficult card game. In one of the dark corners of the room stood a very tall and thin man, with an unsettling emptiness in his eyes. As J'hethelohhd got closer to him, the man spoke.

"Hello travellers," he said in a somber tone, and with a heavy lisp.

"Good morning," answered J'hethelohhd, who was not particularly in the mood to speak to this strange man.

"Chickens," he suddenly said, taking J'hethelohhd rather by surprise.

"I'm sorry?"

"Chickens, I breed chickens. I consider myself somewhat of an expert on chickens. I look at them all day, take care of them, and clean up after them. If there ever was a course at a university on tending to chickens, I surely would do quite well in it."

"I see, well, we'd better be going."

"No no, I did not mean to put you at unease, you see my chickens are much better than most."

"I'm sure they are, it is just that we are in a bit of a hurry."

"I'm sure if there was a course on chickens, I would be at the top of the class."

"Yes," said J'hethelohhd after a moment, "you did say that once already."

"I just thought you failed to hear me," the man lisped, "as you did not respond to it."

"Well, I can personally say that I have worked at the college for many years, and I cannot say that I've seen 'chicken course' on the curriculum, but I can be mistaken, it is a big college."

"I also enjoy building fences around my chickens."

"We really must be going now."

"Did I mention I am an expert on chickens? They truly are remarkable, aren't they? I could spend all day talking about

them, but this I cannot do, for I need to tend to them. If you'll excuse me, I shall be going."

The strange man limped away, leaving J'hethelohhd feeling somewhat stumped as to what had just happened. But being a professional man, he regained his composure quickly, and rejoined the group just outside. There they were all ready to go, as they had found nothing interesting to do in this small village. Soon it was all behind them, and the emptiness of the plains returned. Mountains could still be seen to the east, and a gentle breeze was still coming in from the west. Then, an hour later, a small gathering of trees presented itself, and by it was a little stream, likely where the tavern in the village had got its water from. It was a pleasant little stream, so they stopped to admire its peaceful stillness. There was talk about fishing in it, but they eventually decided that it would probably be best to stick to their plan, and minimise distractions.

That very afternoon, the company ran into a remarkable tree. It was one that neither the Shaman nor J'hethelohhd had ever seen before, which seemed most unlikely.

"I shall want to take some samples of this tree," said J'hethelohhd. "I always try to take as many samples as I can, for you never know when they might be needed."

"I agree," said the Shaman. "Are you hoping one of these will work on Th'rehkwvá."

"Certainly that is my first priority, but judging from the composition of these leaves, they are unlikely to carry any healing properties. Still, they might be useful in some other way. Perhaps they will prove to be highly combustible, which could make for an effective weapon whenever needed."

After this, the journey went on undisturbed, and seven days later a small, familiar cabin could be seen in the distance, this was the home of the Oracle. Majkahaalr, the Shaman, and the Princess of the Sun had visited there before, but for everyone else it was completely new. It was a small house, standing in the middle of a field much like what had surrounded them during the entire journey. Around the house was a plentiful garden, with trees, bushes, flowers, and herbs. In addition to this, a

swarm of animals came out as soon as the group got close to the house. Rabbits, parrots, chickens, a tortoise, and a deer came up to greet them. Dhiína and Hoot both got very excited about this, and quickly went up to the other animals. They sniffed each other for a while, and then they started playing and running around. Hoot seemed to have plenty to talk about with the parrots, while Dhiína chased the rabbits around in a playful manner.

"It's wonderful," said Th'rehkwvá silently.

"It is," said Veiko as she was getting up from slipping on a fallen piece of fruit. Th'rehkwvá politely pretended that she had not seen this.

"It may sound strange," said Th'rehkwvá, "but I never thought of the Oracle as someone who would have a home. He always felt so natural as a wanderer."

"I know what you mean," said Veiko. "Of course you knew him better, but I still understand what you're saying. He seemed to fit in just about anywhere without effort."

"Is everything going well here," said Hihchztouyd as he came up to the girls.

"Yes, father," said Veiko.

"Wonderful, and I suggest you try a piece of fruit from the purple tree, it is delightfully soft and sweet, though the peel is a bit slippery."

"I've noticed, thank you."

"Well then, carry on." Hihchztouyd then left to say hello to the parrots, as he was a man who would often befriend birds. Veiko did not care too much for this, as she often felt uncomfortable in the presence of birds. She was very fond of Hoot, but the Oracle's chickens and parrots were a bit too much for her, so she decided to sit down under the tree and pet one of the rabbits.

"I shall name you Mon'hteyouh," she said to the small, gray rabbit.

J'hethelohhd took Th'rehkwvá aside to the herb garden, where he had found something he hoped would help the wound heal. It was a very rare type of muzever leaf, one that takes

remarkable expertise to grow, and J'hethelohhd seemed to remember it being mentioned in one of the courses he had taken in medicine at the college of Uhhohlugh. So he figured it was worth a try, for it was unlikely that the herb was going to make the wound worse, and he was starting to run out of options in what to try and heal it with. He chopped up the leaves a little bit with his pocket knife, and he then placed rather large pieces directly in the wound. This stung quite a bit, causing Th'rehkwá to shift.

"Try to hold still," said J'hethelohhd. "I know it is difficult, but please try."

"I will," she answered.

Th'rehkwá managed to stay still through the pain, and soon J'hethelohhd's dressing was done. It had not been immediately convincing, but it was by far the most useful thing he had tried thus far, as it seemed to help the blood clot a bit better. The rest of the group seemed occupied enough with the many exciting things in the Oracle's garden, so much that no one had entered the cabin yet. The door had been wide open since they arrived, allowing the animals to walk in and out of the house freely. J'hethelohhd then was the first to enter, closely followed by Majkhaalr and the Shaman.

Inside they were met by a large mess, perhaps not surprisingly. Books and pieces of paper and parchment were scattered all over the house, and every single bookshelf was full far beyond their capacity. The kitchen was full of filthy pots and pans, with jars of herbs and spices lying just about everywhere. A container was labeled 'porridge', and had a large squirrel asleep in it. They decided it would probably be a nice thing to leave the animal alone, and not disturb its seemingly peaceful sleep.

"What exactly are we looking for?" said Majkhaalr.

"I do not know," said the Shaman. "Perhaps a book? Or a letter? Anything which may be useful. Although I am not sure if you will be able to find much in this mess."

"Th'rehkwá," said Majkhaalr, "did the Oracle ever speak about his home to you?"

"No," she answered, "or he might have done, I'm not too sure. I think he only spoke about his food and animals, and the strange man he had once purchased m'Bhafroks from."

"You don't say," said J'hethelohhd. "It can be so difficult to find a good m'Bhafrok, and this does not seem to be the most likely place to acquire some."

"That's all I know," said Th'rehkwá.

So, with only this to go on, the company started looking and digging through bookshelves, cabinets, and drawers. Most of the mess proved to be in some way related to the Oracle's seventeen-volume series on Gsrôôcfx architecture and plumbing, whether it was notes, or drafts, the whole house was flooded with information. As she saw the group look through the belongings of the man she had admired so much, Th'rehkwá found that she started having trouble breathing. She coughed once, and quickly went outside. Wuylqo'fh spotted this, and followed her.

There the two sat down on the grass, with Th'rehkwá's breathing being very fast and short. Whether it was shock, grief, or related to her wound, she did not know. All she knew was that it had felt extremely overwhelming to see everyone go through the Oracle's things.

"It doesn't make sense," she said. "He is gone, and all his things are in there, just as he had left them, waiting for him to come back home."

"If the belongings could sing, they would sing songs of sorrow," said Wuylqo'fh. "But they cannot sing, and they cannot speak. What is in there cannot hurt you. It can remind you of him, and it will be painful, but it cannot hurt you."

Th'rehkwá started to calm down, and her breathing got slower and smoother.

"I know," she said. "I know it should be that way, but it is so difficult. I have yet to cry for him, I have yet to think of it as a real thing, and here we are going through his books and letters. It is too strange to think of."

"I keep thinking that I could have done something," said Wuylqo'fh. "What if I had spotted it earlier, could I have

stopped it? It is these things that my head will not let go of."

"You know you did everything you could."

"Yes, but at the same time no. I know it is not my fault, what happened, but I cannot help but replay the scene in my head, and the way things turned around so suddenly. There was a strange feeling in the air, and could I have done something had I just listened, or looked a bit more carefully."

"I know you did well there," said Th'rehkwvá.

"And I hope you know how much you meant to him. You could see from far away how much he cared for you."

Th'rehkwvá did not answer, she just smiled and stared into the horizon. It had been nice to get some of these thoughts and emotions out in the open for the first time, but it was also difficult, and impossible. She could not think too much about what had struck them, for that was beyond what any one of them could handle, but now she knew she could allow herself to think of these things a little bit, and survive.

Suddenly a noise came from inside the house. It sounded as if a multitude of books had been dropped. Th'rehkwvá and Wuylqo'fh both went inside to see what had happened. Once in the house, they saw J'hethelohhd standing next to a pile of books, holding a strange pink-and yellow-patterned book.

"It cannot be," he said. "It is impossible."

"What have you found?" said the Shaman.

"Something I never thought I would lay my eyes on. I have read at great lengths about this, but I did not think one was actually found. It seems so utterly ridiculous and unlikely, and yet it seems fitting. That Zgalok'nihh Stròm-Vrouüzis should have been in the possession of this great thing all along, and for him to give it as his last gift, it is extraordinary."

"It only looks like an ordinary book," said Majkhaalr.

"Oh, this is anything but an ordinary book. What I have found, what Zgalok'nihh has had in his home all this time, is a relic from the ancient times. It is something that ripples through existence, and might be used to unravel the mysteries of our very world. This is one of the books of Hchrdaâhha."

THE STRANGE BOOK

"What are the books of Hchrdaâhha?" asked Majkhaalr carefully after a moment of silence. J'hethelohhd did not answer at first. He looked at the book and carefully stroked its worn spine.

"The books of Hchrdaâhha are said to contain the secrets behind the mysterious library within the ruin," he said eventually. "It is a long story which goes far back, and it is a story which not many know. I myself was unaware of this for a long time, until my research brought me to seldom used parts of the college library."

"Are you sure about this?" said the Shaman. "We know very little about Hchrdaâhha, and it is barely mentioned in any literature on the Gsrôôcfx."

"That is what I thought," said J'hethlohd. "I had only heard Hchrdaâhha mentioned once or twice before I delved deep into the dark parts of the library at the college. I thought it was a ruin like most, but it turns out it may hold many important secrets, or at least that is what I hope to find out through this book."

"How come he never mentioned this book?" said the Princess of the Sun.

"It could be that he forgot he had it, for I suspect it was a long time ago he acquired this. It had what seemed like centuries of dust on it, and it was at the very back of an unsturdy bookshelf."

"I seem to remember something," said Th'rehkwwá.

"What is it? Did Zgalok'nihh speak of this to you?" asked J'hethelohhd.

"It is not a clear memory, for I was not paying the highest attention of what he spoke, but I remember words being uttered about a strange book he found in a ruin several hundred years ago, and how he did not understand a single word in it."

"Could it really be so difficult to decipher? That would

indeed make our task more tedious," said J'hethelohhd. "I have studied many languages in my time, and I have read about distant and little known parts of Gsrôôcfx history."

"As did Zgalok'nihh," said the Shaman. "And he even met a few of the Gsrôôcfx."

"They would have devised a way to make the books of Hchrdaâhha more difficult to understand, I'm sure." J'hethelohhd looked down at the pink-and yellow-patterned book, which was tired and worn from neglect and the passage of time.

"Could you tell us about Hchrdaâhha, master J'hethelohhd?" said the Princess of the Sun. "I for one know little about it, and it seems you are as close to an expert on it as we can hope to find under the circumstances."

"Very well," said J'hethelohhd after a moment of thought. "I shall tell you all I know about Hchrdaâhha. It began as a way to store the increasingly large library the Gsrôôcfx were building, and it quickly escalated into a city, a home for all the highest academics. The solution to this became Hchrdaâhha, which in its prime was the most technologically advanced city ever built, and it quickly became a home for all higher learning. This was, of course, before the time of the college of Uhhohlugh.

"To access the inner parts of the library was a difficult thing, for the Gsrôôcfx wanted to keep their precious knowledge safe. They kept on building and building the library, until its function was nearly incomprehensible, even to those who had built it. They documented some of this in books, the books of Hchrdaâhha, but who knows how far they will take us."

"I thought Z'Chundzaal was home for all knowledge?" said Th'rehkwá.

"That is a common misconception," said J'hethelohhd. "Z'Chundzaal was originally built by the Gsrôôcfx as a home for art and beauty, which is why the walls of the palace are said to be delicately painted and inscribed with marvelous works of art."

"They were indeed," said the Shaman.

"Hchrdaâhha on the other hand, it was from the beginning