

AROK'S END (opening chapters)

By Julian Boote

'So I have travelled throughout the land, and was a pilgrim all my life, alone, and was a stranger, feeling alien. Then Thou has made grow in me Thine art under the breath of the terrible storm in me.'

Paracelsus

Rai's Children

The teardrops fall.

Again, Kaal weeps bitterly. He is shouting, raving, struggling against the soldier's arms, looking past her stern face toward and beyond the shuttle's shrinking airlock outer door. It is closing on his new life. The new and now burning life; filled with screams of pain and despair, flash-framed by explosions and gunfire, both hostile and friendly. Kaal rages and screams. He cannot rejoin this world...

'Kaal...'

...cannot take responsibility for it, die with it as he knows he should. The soldier won't let him. He pleads, begs with her to let him go, to halt this abduction from his rightful fate. His hands reach out, claw for the conflict before him, but she holds him, her grip as strong and firm as her expression. The airlock opening is tiny now; a still shrinking circle of noise

and flame that tightens...tightens. Then the bulkhead is a solid and unbroken grey, and his world is gone forever.

Kaal screams-

'This is an implant interrupt. Kaal! Wake up!'

* * *

Kaal's eyes snap wide.

The stars gaze coldly back.

He is bodiless in space. Further disoriented, he panics, looking about him. Then he realises he can feel himself struggling in his flight seat, hear his fast and heavy breathing, the rustle of his suit. He notices his ident on the periphery of his vision, matching every move of his gaze, then spots the dirty rock camouflage of the third drop-ship, following dark and distant behind him.

He calms, switching his vision back to the cabin interior.

Coori is watching him from his own flight couch, his face a mixture of concern and slight amusement.

'Jitters?' he asks, his accent a thick Raien. Kaal nods, embarrassed. The memory of the nightmare is making his eyes water. He wipes them with his hand.

'Fell asleep while patched into ship-sight.'

Coori nods, understanding. The hypnotic, relaxing stare of the universe on an ship-sight user is an occupational hazard. Some troopers need the relaxation before a landing. Though he dislikes the feeling, Coori prefers being tense during a drop.

'Bad dream?' he prompts. Kaal sniffs.

'Yeah. Uh, yeah. My Imp woke me though...before it got any worse.

'Oh?' Coori assesses this info. Nods again. 'An Imp, eh? Catastrophe Syndrome is it?'

'Yeah, that's right.'

'They say you were downbelow during the Breakdown?' It is both question and statement. Kaal nods. He has the shakes now, and doesn't want to talk about it anymore, but Coori appears unaware of his discomfort. 'Was it bad?'

'Yes, it was bad!' Kaal barks, irritated.

Coori finally realises. 'Sorry, professor.'

Kaal waves a hand, dismissive, apologetic, immediately regretting his outburst. He looks at the two other crew, hoping he hasn't woken them. Chantal's eyes are still shut, the chest armour on her suit rising and falling slowly with sleep's rhythm. He looks to the Rhiatya. The mission commander has turned her head toward him, eyes smouldering. She is silent a moment, then:

'How long 'til my watch, Coori?' she asks evenly, eyes still focused on Kaal.

'Another half-hour, ma'am.

'Fine.' She stares at Kaal some moments longer, the irritation and concern still glowing. Then she turns back, settles, and is still once again. Coori grins at Kaal, looks to

the Rhiatya then rolls his eyes. Kaal smiles slightly, feeling better.

'You've gone up in his estimation,' notes the warm voice in his head. It is friendly, almost fatherly.

'Oh?' thinks Kaal, inwardly groaning. It's post-stress dialogue time again.

'Yes. He feels you must have seen some heavy action to warrant needing a personality implant to keep you sane. He doesn't feel so much a baby-sitter now.'

'No. That's your job.' The shame suddenly washes over him, and Kaal again hates the thought of needing an Imp wrapped around his fractured psyche, keeping it intact. He cowers at the idea in many ways he lacks strength and mental stamina. 'Thanks for waking me, Grishta.' Even though Kaal thinks his answers, the Imp still hears the guilt, is aware of his reluctance.

'Want to talk about it?'

'What's there to say?' Kaal switches back to ship-sight, and the drop-ship's cabin dissolves into a wash of stars. Alone again. As always. Around his own and the other drop-ships--unseen--Kaal knows are the fragments of the Shailo meteor shower; the annual storm currently providing necessary cover for the four crafts' journey planetward. He turns his attention to the home world, slowly enlarging ahead of the convoy. Ten hours away. 'I'm going back.' he thinks. 'I have to go back. You never gave me a choice.'

The voice that is Grishta says nothing a moment. Kaal knows the synthetic ego is considering a response. Finally:

'You'd still be down there now. If you weren't dead, then the Disciples would have you. And it'd be over for us all.'

Kaal knows it is right, but wants to fight anyway.

'The community could still be standing-'

'It would have been overrun, sooner or later!' Grishta has become testy. It's the same old argument. The voice sighs.

'I'm sorry Kaal. Truly I am. I didn't think my actions would have any affect on you. I was thinking of the long term.'

Kaal knows the Imp is right, and hates both himself and it all the more. Of all those who could and should have thought ahead, Grishta had been the only one. He'd been reviled and derided for his actions in the decades since, but his reasoning had been unquestionably correct for all to see.

The Imp's tone changes. 'Right, enough of this.'

Then the self-loathing begins to drain, fade away. The Imp is getting down to business, explaining its actions along the way. Kaal can never accurately convey the sensations produced by the procedure the synth personality follows (the technical term is "psycho re-routing"). At best, all his descriptions are of an unnerving mixture of angst and elation, whilst his mind is scoured and reordered to correctly process and deal with the memories and feelings dredged up by the latest Syndrome attack. In extreme cases such as Kaal's it is the best way to aid the

subject toward a healed psyche. For milder attacks, the two just talk it through. Lately, that was all he and the Imp had been doing, and even the need to talk had been lessening. The pre-occupation that Grishta now knew his most intimate thoughts (a common characteristic among prescribed Imp-users) had also finally disappeared. Now, the dream and the memories it conjured are an unwelcome, worrying reminder that re-routing is also a long-term treatment, that all it takes is the right trigger to shake the cracked and delicate mind to its very shored-up foundations...

'...to remember is we knew there was a high probability this would happen,' continues the voice of Grishta. 'Returning to the incident-site will always provoke a reactive response of this kind, especially so early on in the treatment. We knew the doctors at Psyche-Labs felt it'd be a potential catharsis for you, but personally, I was hoping the reaction wouldn't be so strong, or so soon. Still, it needn't be too much of a worry, and since it's happened now, I can- Is that a...? Or...oh no. No, that's alright.' The voice is pre-occupied, as the original Grishta Tooval would have been back in Exile Control; eyes scanning the instruments, mind absorbing the telemetry, mouth working slowly, almost disinterestedly discussing another topic. And suddenly Kaal misses the original Grishta. The Grishta who died two decades earlier.

Despite the re-route, his eyes well up again.

* * *

The teardrops fall.

Drop-ships of the highest order, they have been grown with stealth in mind. Shape-shifters, they absorb sensor-waves, are sentient, small, but slight-armed and thinly armoured, so as to be light and fast. Ideal for covert ops. All of the colonies contributed to their development, see the need for them. They are essential to the colonies' survival. Each craft carries four passengers, making the total mission compliment sixteen.

Sixteen.

Too few. And Kaal knows it.

When he has not been sleeping (badly), he has been watching the space around him, brooding about the mission-plan over and over. Each time he reviews it, he wills it to change, each time knowing it cannot, will not. Now, as before, he finds his thoughts slipping away from Grishta's death, back to the plan. That *great* plan. He knows a small landing party is the best way, that secrecy is the key (or surprise, if necessary). He knows the tacticians have calculated this as the best time to try, as all the right elements are in place; the Shailo meteor shower, the harsh winter in the northern hemisphere, the heavy snow storms over Ashenland, making enemy movements difficult. He has seen the latest spy satellite observations, confirming the most recent ground-scout reports that there is only a small Disciple

presence around the target. Indeed this seems the most favourable time.

That's what worries him. Perhaps he is being paranoid, but everything appears too favourable. Perhaps he has seen too much to believe any more that fortune could be on their side, but he is still concerned about the overdue report from the construct-scout operating in the target area. The message from it should've been received three days earlier, though it is more than likely the delay was due to the electrical storms over the region, typical for this time of year. Still--

'Re-route complete,' chimes the Imp. 'It's important you rest when you can downbelow, so from here on in I'll override REM recall. You won't remember your dreams.' Kaal says nothing, staring at the world ahead.

'Say, "Thank you, Grishta".'

Despite himself, Kaal grins.

'Thank you, Grishta,' he mimics back in his mind.

'Don't mention it.' The conversation is not over though. Kaal can feel the Imp looking him over. He knows it's going to say something more. Finally: 'You're wishing you could've transmatted down, aren't you?'

'You must feel so smug knowing everything,' Kaal counters, slightly sullen.

'Well, aren't you?' pushes Grishta. The Imp's tone is more of a friend reassuring; being deliberately, irritatingly dependable. And again, the Imp is right. Kaal relents.

'I would've preferred...immediately knowing what's down there, rather than this...waiting.' It's true. Drops such as this are long hauls involving much mulling and tension. Soldiers, pilots, even the drop-ships themselves are used to it, but not Kaal. This is his first combat drop. Were trans-matting to downbelow still possible, the mission could well have been over by now. Kaal's team would have materialised inside Exiles' Crater, and he would have been thrown into the thick of his task, with no time to dwell on the realities of his situation. But the colonies haven't the power to trans-mat over such a distance, to then punch through the interference the Disciples have set up about the world.

'That's all?' nudges Grishta.

'Yes'

'You mean you wouldn't rather have avoided this...' the Imp challenges.

And Kaal is suddenly re-living his departure from the Rhiatya Senga military base on Rai, six weeks previously.

* * *

Officially, it looks like a standard send-off; the team is among a troop-relief and acclimation tour to the Bhatton colony at L5. Kaal's group are gathered outside the base's yawning

entrance lock, their own farewells with commanders, partners, children and parents deliberately lost among those of hundreds of other soldiers leaving for Bhattan. Few of his team's relatives are constructs, as most need the comfort of physical presence. Of course, they know nothing of the mission, but instinctively feel those leaving them are this time going further, closer to the danger. Unlike Rai's free-and-easy one-third G, Bhattan's has the full count of one; the gravity of homeworld, with all that implies.

Still, they all say cursory "see you soon" or "give us a full remembrance now, every moment!" or "bring back a snowflake for us" (Bhattan is currently enjoying a winter season). The children are asked to take care of the parent left behind with them, older parents told by their offspring when the latter are due to return. Tears are kept to a minimum. Each team-member is aware of our chances--Kaal recalls--this is their way of saying perhaps the final goodbye. Even Rhiatya mei-San has someone; her husband, Sei. He too is physically there, but his goodbye appears to Kaal's momentary glance only cursory, impersonal. A brief touch of lips, a hand on her cheek, then he leaves without looking back. *How cold*, thinks Kaal. Of all the relations gathered there, surely he would know most, make more of this time.

Kaal himself stands apart, unknown, disguised by a perception field. He only knows the base commanders, some heads

of state, Psyche-Lab doctors...few people outside his own team, only those needing to know of his existence. There is no-one there to whom he can say the true fond farewell. No, he considers, *my goodbyes were said a long time ago, kneeling over a muddy grave in twilit rain.*

It is at this moment Grishta gets his attention, telling him it's about to alter his perception. Two privates are approaching Kaal, who, as the Imp adjusts his mind's eye, he can see are--like himself--disguised. The men reveal to Kaal's Imp the access code to their perception field idents, allowing Kaal to see the strangers' real faces. One is First Senator Tol, his face the customary frown of a man grown used to perpetual worry. The other, his bodyguard. Around them--unseen by anyone else in the bay--are the ghosts of other colony premiers. The otherwise invisible constructs have come in this form, as most of the system-wide colonies are too far away for them to personally visit so soon, and such trips would be too conspicuous. Tol though has made the effort, probably at great risk, and Kaal smiles, appreciating his physical presence. The Rai colony's premier stops, facing him.

'It'd look odd if no-one were here to see you off,' Tol says, a wry up-turn of his lips breaking the gloom. He offers his hand. 'Thank you.'

He makes it sound like I volunteered, Kaal thinks, resentful.

The Raien premier speaks no more. Everything else has been said between them days before. The ghosts too are silent; shadows mouthing good wishes, nodding, saluting, each construct's expression individual to its colony of origin. Words are not really needed. Whether physical or phantom, all are demonstrating just by their presence the full weight of the mission's importance, Kaal's importance. As if I didn't know, Kaal thinks. He acknowledges them, shakes Tol's hand, and walks through the gate without looking back...

* * *

The memory fades, and Kaal nods to himself, to Grishta. 'So many goodbyes,' he whispers. 'Too many.' He mentally turns to the Imp. 'Must you do that?'

'Healing can come only from facing what ails you.' It says. The standard, truthful response. 'Besides, if we could've transmatted you, you'd have missed this...'

* * *

And Kaal now leaps back in time eleven hours. Along with the others, his team has nonchalantly joined Bhaten's day shift change and found their ways to their drop-ship locked to the exterior of habitat's industries wheel. The four vessels--disguised as escape pods--were fitted just ten days before as part of a safety upgrade to the colony's smelting plant, processing ore from Rai. Only Kaal, the mission team, and a critical few on-station are aware of the great drama about to be

played out...and solely for the mission team's benefit. The official story will be they were four maintenance crews checking the new pods when the accident occurred, and--unable to escape the area and in danger of being overcome by the increasing centrifugal force--had no choice but to order their pods to eject...

The official story.

They've sealed themselves inside, the pre-flight and weapons checks are complete. Now they just await their cue. They do not change out of their maintenance gear in case a mission abort comes through. But they feel the expected judder as planned, and Chantal puts the station's chatter on speaker.

'...I said we have an explosion in the smelting plant-'

'...a hull breach, deck three! Losing atmosphere fast-'

'Evacuating the plant now-'

The Rhiatya, deadpan, adds, 'Station-wide alarm any second now...'

It comes.

Bhatten's AI abruptly cuts through the chatter: 'Warning! Orientation and rotational protocol failure. Polar Axis Manoeuvre Drive misfire in progress. Rotation speeds increasing on peripheral wheels...'

Even as the industries' wheel's evacuation alarms sound, Kaal can feel the increasing weight as the wheel's rotation speed increases, each faster revolution adding to their final velocity

on release. He tries keeping his breathing calm while his body presses into his flight couch.

Three Gs...four.

Kaal pictures the station losing orientation; the "malfunctioning" manoeuvre drives turning its mirrored face from the life-giving light of Shool, bringing its habitat cylinder, the agriculture and industry wheels...the entire profile of the station to bear on homeworld. Kaal feels for the colony's worried inhabitants, but the manoeuvre is required if the drop-ships are to rendezvous with the meteor shower prior to planetfall. Still...it's risky. Not that for the duration of the launch and some hours after Bhaten is deprived of shoolar power--it has contingencies--nor because it now presents a bigger target to Menshyssa. Intelligence is confident the enemy have no resources that can respond so swiftly. No...the gnawing concern is that any Disciple spy on-station, any watching Disciple strategist downbelow will see this unpredicted re-orientation of Bhaten and, despite the elaborate accident scenario, the urgent and very real emergency comms traffic they might intercept, begin to suspect...

Six Gs.

Sure enough, the blue-green crescent of mother world Menshyssa comes into view; falling upwards with each rotation as it creeps in from the left of Kaal's heads-up display, the target

cross-hairs finally skimming the edge of world's dark side as the manoeuvre ends.

Encrypted inter-drop-ship chatter increases, counts down. Kaal listens as over the speaker comes a panicky maintenance crew announcing to Bhatten they'll have to eject their pod, and on the next rotation, the first drop-ship can be seen shrinking planetward. Release-time between the ships is marginally different, minutely altering their individual trajectories, making each final re-entry clicks apart from the others.

Coori and the Rhiatya are relaxed, exchanging murmured comments. Neither bother with their couch HUDs. They are professionals, veterans. They have been on drops before, and though none have been like this, both are well acquainted with Chantal's flight skills. The pilot herself even takes a few moments to add the odd quip to the conversation. That's the best way, thinks Kaal, treat this like a routine drop. Avoid the jitters by pretending it's nothing special.

And now it's their turn.

Final countdown.

The Rhiatya chatters momentarily with mission control for any final instructions and advice. All she gets in response is a wish of goodspeed. Coori looks across the instrument boards to Kaal, a wicked grin on his face.

'Last chance if you've any second thoughts...' he quips. Kaal has many second thoughts, but stays silent. They wouldn't stop on his whim anyway.

It's because of him they're going.

The planet rears into view once more. Chantal counts down.

A brief clang against the hull.

Immediately they are weightless again, and the homeworld ceases its upward fall, HUD target cross-hairs locked precisely on the planet's dark curve. Excellent timing. Kaal switches to ship-sight, and the cabin is replaced by night, stars, the world ahead. He looks behind him, to see Bhatton colony turning, rapidly falling away. They are already some distance from it, but the structure's massive habitat cylinder still dominates the view. The drop-ship fires its attitude thrusters, and Bhatton's cylinder, its mirrors, the four huge, spoked, independently spinning wheels at the rear of it, containing factories, workshops, hydroponics, storage and transport bays, all pivot about the cross-hairs. The entire colony up-ends in a silent, smoothly balletic movement. A beautiful expression of physical laws. The station is well over sixteen centuries old, and was the first orbital colony. Its population has fluctuated around twenty thousand throughout that time. The newer and larger colonies are in higher orbit, making Bhatton the nearest viable bridgehead to Menshyssa.

Kaal watches the station turn, mesmerised by its size, shape, motion. A deep gash rears up on the habitat cylinder; a reminder of a Disciple missile strike on the station years previously. The outer hull wasn't breached, but extensive structural damage has been feigned by the colony ever since. An indicator of just how close this bridgehead is to downbelow.

A pin-point drifts away from the industrial wheel centred in the cross-hairs—it's Madel's team in the third drop-ship. The craft becomes darker as its skin morphs into ashen hues, roughens its shape to a meteor's.

Now the pock-marked, grey-blue semi-circle of Rai the Fallen peeps out from behind and to the right of Bhatton, the cities' lights on the moon's dark side describing its hidden curve, while in the distant left--little more than a brighter star--shines the smaller, farther, Phai the Lost.

'I still can't believe your final actions were based on an ancient Liman myth,' Kaal thinks to his Imp. The synthetic ego sounds nonchalant, but he can sense within the reply its underlying sincerity.

'I had to communicate the importance of not abandoning our motherworld to itself somehow. The colonies still need it. We can't forget our heritage Kaal, whether it's the myth of the fall of a Liman goddess, or our biological home. If Rai won't return there, her foster children must.'

A fourth dot soon joins the convoy, and--launch complete-- the shrinking station continues its feigned tumble..

* * *

Then, it was just over a day to planet-fall. Now, eleven hours later, the Imp says, 'You took part in a launch manoeuvre few have experienced. You relished watching Bhaten fall away behind you. You felt alive. Despite yourself, your worries, you found it exciting.'

'Some experiences are better than others,' Kaal reasons, half-grudging.

'Of course,' Grishta counters. 'It's part of living. That's the point. Accept it Kaal.'

* * *

The tear-drops plunge planet-ward; dark, silent, powered down. Inter-ship communications are confined to short, tight-beamed, encrypted pulses. There is little chance of eavesdropping at this distance, but every care must be taken. Procedure dictates a constant sensor-sweep for traffic. The drop-ships make no such scans. Sensor emissions can be detected. Instead, their onboard AIs rely on colony-supplied maps of all orbiting objects they have tracked--known and unknown; what will be where, and when. Collision is not the primary concern. Possible interception is, though the likelihood has decreased since Breakdown. No traffic from downbelow has been detected for eighteen years.

* * *

They pass within the orbits of satellites and facilities a few thousand, and soon mere hundreds of clicks above the atmosphere. Previous expeditions have stolen onto these buoys and way-stations, the wedges, globes, cylindrical farms and factories, checking for signs of life, usefulness. Most were dead and dark, the rest made to appear so. The colonies have no intention of giving away their continued interest in homeworld.

The nearest structure they pass is the enormous old shoolar array that is Shool's Looking Glass, fifty-two point oh-four clicks away. The most famous and oldest sky-mark that can be seen from downbelow (it began operating another century before Bhaten), close-ups with ship-sight now reveal the huge mirror-like panels turned away from the star, Shool, the energy processing and projection facility likewise angled from the planet's face, instead pointing into deep space.

'I was on that expedition,' says the Rhiatya quietly, startling Kaal. The nearness of her disembodied voice in the vast night is momentarily disturbing, as if some spirit has joined him on his own wanderings. As though Rai herself were suddenly falling downbelow with him. The supernatural impression quickly fades when he spots her ident below his own at the edge of his vision. She has joined him on ship-sight. His gaze is hers.

'Oh?' he coaxes. This is a rare moment. Rhiatya Sool-mei-San is normally reticent concerning her private life, and Kaal wishes to take advantage of her temporary lapse into openness.

'Yes,' she continues. 'Around twenty years ago now. It was a close-run thing. We'd received intelligence that...Her followers had captured the Caspa microwave receiving station downbelow. We had to close down Looking Glass before they could send up a team to gain access to it and consolidate their position. A few shuttles were still available to them at the time. One approached even as we were turning the shoolar array. Look closely at the projection facility.

Kaal does so. In the shadow of the massive structure, he can make out the small dark wedge of an orbital passenger craft.

No lights show.

'They were on final approach, hailing us to surrender. So arrogant. There was still plenty of power stored, so we swung the beam projector to bear on them...'

Kaal disconnects from ship-sight, regarding the Rhiatya across the instruments, wanting to see her eyes. They are focused on events far away, beyond the drop-ship's hull, beyond her present mission. Chantal and Coori listen too.

'We warned them, but they kept coming. Taunting, threatening us. We emptied the whole charge into them, point-blank. Tight beam, full intensity. Their communications

remained open while they baked. I couldn't watch them, but I heard their screams...'

Kaal notices she doesn't smile, telling the story. Somehow it's a relief.

'After, we went aboard to make sure, then stripped them of everything useful.'

'And you just left the shuttle there? Wouldn't that be useful too?'

'Not at the time. We disabled it, like Looking Glass. Besides, having it just...hang there is a good visual warning to downbelow.' She disconnects and looks at him now. 'Appearances are important.'

Is that the truth? he wonders. Two valuable items just left to decay and vacuum-freeze over the years? They couldn't possibly be so foolish as to let such a historical monument-

Appearances are important.

Kaal switches back, staring once again to the structure as it shrinks into the distance. No... They wouldn't allow decay to set in, couldn't afford it. How many technicians were even now swarming over Looking Glass and other satellites, hidden, furtive, quietly caring for their charges?

Dark does not necessarily mean dead.

* * *

Four hours later, they enter low orbit. Every few seconds, a streak of fire arcs across the globe below. As anticipated,

the Shailo meteor shower is at its height. This is the critical time, as each drop-ship must slow, and alter its individual trajectory to reach the desired re-entry window for the target landing zones. Kaal's ship's LZ closest to Exiles' Crater is just behind Shed-toh's Ridge, six clicks away. Secondary LZ is Bhatal Lake, another twenty-two clicks distant. Drop-ship teams one and four are to act as diversions should any of the convoy be detected. Drop-ship three is back-up for Kaal's team.

The four are now suited up and strapped down. As before, chemical thrusters must be used, as gravidynamic manoeuvres would register on energy sensors. Thus the darkness of the teardrops' hulls and the necessity of the primitive launch method. It's more than likely no one's looking, that orbital monitors tracking the station's movements and the four small craft have long since lost power or been destroyed. But care must be taken.

Homeworld mustn't know Rai's children are coming. Nor where they will land.

* * *

The re-entry window is fast approaching. The drop-ship fires thrusters, manoeuvring itself into the correct angle for retro-burn. None of the craft are detecting sensor sweeps from downbelow. Nevertheless they have begun slow rotations to mimic tumbling rocks, casting randomly chosen mass-size "shadows" in case of detection, all pretending to be smaller than they actually are.

We grew them well, Kaal thinks. We have always done everything well. Every achievement has been a spectacular success.

With the drop-ship's eyes he looks planetward, down on clouded continents that should sparkle with city lights, as he remembers them. Below should be the fist-shaped Goyan peninsula in Lima, outlined by its coastal cities. Instead the city lights are dark. The night is total.

Even our mistakes, he ponders, looking down, even they are spectacular.

Retro-ignition. Thirty to upper atmosphere.

The ship's crew briefly feel weight return while the retros fire. Will their glare be seen? wonders Kaal. Surely someone might spot the ship from the ground. The Disciples know the colonies are far from dead. And the re-entry glare, the glowing ionisation trail the drop-ships leave behind them, the sonic boom.

I know we're coming in over the ocean to lessen the risk, thinks Kaal, it's snowing, but there're still millions down there. All it takes is a break in the cloud-cover, just one of an organised team of Her followers to look up and see the trail, to hear the boom...

'Re-entry...mark!' notes Chantal.

There is a low rumble, and the cabin begins shaking.

The teardrops burn.

But they don't vaporise, don't dwindle under the heat to nothingness, like real tears, oh no. Real tears are wept and lost, eventually (hopefully) forgotten like the reasons that released them. Not these tears, Rai's tears, keeping her children within them cool and as comfortable as can be when falling in fire and thunder back to her--their--original home.

Ship-sight is useless at this moment, but Kaal can still picture the ship surrounded by raging plasma, the ionisation trail stretching bright and far behind them-

He begins to feel once more the pull of Menshyssa upon him.

He tries to stay calm.

* * *

The drop-ship tells Chantal its external temperature.

'We're hot and getting hotter!' she calls over the roar, more to herself than the rest. Struggling against the shaking, the returning gravity, Kaal looks over to the Rhiatya, sees her grim smile break into a broad grin when she momentarily glances from the HUD to him.

And again he sees her kissing her husband goodbye outside the bay airlock on Rai, sees the passion in the last touch of their lips, the love in Sei-mei-San's eyes as he finally breaks, caresses her cheek, mouths silent words, turns, and is gone.

Recalling the scene, witnessing it more fully, Kaal now understands. Sei wasn't being indifferent. Far from it.

And you thought staying as long as possible with Tya was the only way of showing love. Even when it was too late. Kaal, you're so naive, he thinks, turning back to his own HUD.

* * *

Re-entry is almost complete when the burst comes. Chantal shouts a warning, and the Rhiatya is already scanning the information on her board. Ship-sight reveals a glow already fading fifteen clicks away, above and to their left. No more appear.

'Possibly a low-grade ground-to-air emission,' the Rhiatya says, evenly.

'Madel's team?' asks Coori. Chantal nods. The third drop-ship would have been in that position.

'Shall I scan to see if they were hit?' The concern in Chantal's voice is tangible. She wants, needs to know. Rhiatya mei-San's answer is firm.

'Negative, we'd be spotted immediately. Assume the Disciples still have tracking capability.' She checks her HUD. 'We'll be over Ashenland in one minute. Chantal, when we're above the mountains, use the electrical storms for cover and alter course from primary to secondary LZ.

'What?!' blurts Kaal. 'That's further from Exile Control!'

'Yes, professor, exactly!' the Rhiatya shoots back without hesitation. 'In case you hadn't noticed, the Disciples have just let us know they have a significant presence near our target.'

The primary LZ is too obvious in such circumstances. I think I can vouch for my comrades here when I say I prefer to touch down and get my bearings before having my butt shot from under me!’

It is a hard and fast put-down, using Kaal’s title for emphasis of his inexperience and her authority. She is not even angry, her words are just statements of fact. Kaal’s face flushes with anger and embarrassment. The Rhiatya nods to Chantal to carry out her orders.

‘Why are you angry?’ asks Grishta’s voice. ‘She’s thinking of your safety.’

‘If she were truly thinking of my safety, she wouldn’t have agreed to this trip. She’d have waited for that scout’s report!’ retorts Kaal. He knows he’s being foolish, but feels he must say something. ‘Besides,’ he adds as an afterthought, ‘“Safety” is a relative term for this situation.’

‘Isn’t everything in this universe?’ the voice returns. By its tone, he can sense it is smiling, trying to lighten his mood. It adds: ‘We should know.’

This only makes Kaal angrier.

‘I suppose it’s occurred to you you’re in as much danger as I? That that’s why they sent you with me?’

‘Yes,’ comes the thought-reply. ‘I suppose this could be considered a punishment. Maybe they think of it more as a penance for me. It’s a shame such pettiness could exist now. Still, I don’t mind...’ The voice trails away. Kaal knows the Imp

has lapsed into thought. *It's a lot to chew over*, he considers, *for both of us.*

* * *

The cloud canopy approaches; the vast billowing shapes given heavy shadowy faces in the moonlight. An expanse of bulbous ghosts sweeping the slate-grey sky, bloated with cold crystal rain, bewailing the world below.

Despite his brooding imagination, Kaal welcomes them. Their heavy cloak has hidden at least the re-entry trail of his own craft from surface eyes. Then he corrects himself. The destruction of Madel's ship is still uncertain.

The drop-ship arcs down, and he has a few seconds more to look at the stars before the swirling mists swallow them up.

The HUD indicates drop-ship air-speed, it is painfully slow now compared to their velocity on re-entry. There is no comfort in the fact that-unpowered--the drop-ship has reached its projected airborne terminal velocity, that it's falling like the proverbial stone.

'Faster!' Coori urges the craft. 'Fall faster!'

He's like me, thinks Kaal. He can picture Madel's ship disappearing in white fire. He can see sensor-guided gun-sights on us too-

And suddenly the clouds are gone, leaping up and away from them. The weather reports are accurate. Snowflakes whip by, a

blur of pale streaks twisting in the craft's slipstream. High winds buffet the craft.

'Five to power-up!' shouts the Rhiatya. 'Prep for wet landing!

Immediately a visor grows out of each crew member's suit and seals their helmet. It's a precaution against hull breach for this kind of combat landing. The team don't want to come this far only to drown.

'New LZ in sight!'

All shipboard HUDs switch to night-vision, superimposed over a tactical map.

Bhatal Lake looms large below them.

* * *

'Power-up...Mark! Grav-boost, full!'

The drop-ship awakes. Kaal has time only to wince as the cabin and instrument lights glare bright, before the team have the breath knocked out of them. The gravi-dynamics kick-in. It's the fastest and only way to halt their fall in time, requiring the most power. In these few fleeting, eternal moments of crushing deceleration, the drop-ship also scans the area for hostiles. Infra-red, light-intensifiers, movement, sound and energy sensors direct their sights about the lake, the surrounding shore, the land beyond. It knows how conspicuous it is now, how vulnerable it has made itself. Should it detect anything at all, the drop-ship will boost itself up and away, out

of sight and out of range. And at such speed, it might just kill all aboard anyway.

The snow falls, the lake is still. The land is quiet and dead.

The teardrop decides, and slowly descends. It drifts silently over the steaming lake, searching for the right place, hovers a moment. Gently, the drop-ship lowers, touches the water, sinks under the surface. No splashing down--the ship mustn't be heard--and the hot volcanic waters will cloak any residual heat the craft might still be giving off.

Within, the team free themselves of their couches and prepare, quickly and carefully collecting their weapons and equipment. They hesitate a moment when there is a slight jolt as the drop-ship touches bottom and settles, then return to their tasks. The Rhiatya approaches the airlock inner door. There is no indication it exists at all until a thin vertical line draws itself into the bulkhead, opens out like side-wise eyelids, becoming a wide, oblong chamber. The four enter it, and the "door" seals up after them.

'Final check!' orders the Rhiatya over the comlink. Each team member examines their own weapons and equipment, then each other's armour, suit seals, packs, calling "Clear!" on completion. Kaal checks Coori. The drill is almost instinct to him now. A year ago, he wouldn't have had a clue. A century ago, no one system-wide would've had a clue either. A happy

thought. He allows the wave of nostalgia a moment only, then quells it. No time for that now.

Valves appear in the outer hull, open. Hot lake water spills into the compartment.

'Okay, this is it.' The airlock lights dim as the Rhiatya speaks over the suit intercom, her voice assured and steady, and Kaal feels both weak and strong next to such confidence. 'It's silent running from here on in. Remember, stick close to each other, use proximity finders, direction sixteen point two-four magnetic on your compasses. A short jog, Professor Chessar there will do his job, then it'll all be over. HUDs,' Kaal engages his suit display, switching to ground tactical. Through it, in the weakening light, he sees the armoured environment suit that protects the Rhiatya raise its rifle. 'Lock and load!'

The lights are dull red points now. The airlock outer door silently appears, parts, and vanishes into the chamber walls, revealing a solid wall of night.

One by one they step out into the dark.

For Kaal, it is like being almost weightless on the night side of the moon Rai again. He steps away from the hull, slowly falls, gently hits the lake bed at the base of their craft, and moves off in measured strides. The suit is already compensating for the watery world, enhancing his steps, doing most of the work for him. As planned, no one speaks. The darkness is total, unnerving. Reliance on suit proximity finders and tactical is

deliberate. Lights would be seen and infra-red is useless in the hot waters of the lake. IR and light-intensifiers will come into play only once they've reached the shoreline. In the meantime, all Kaal sees is his own HUD; suit operations, contour lines marking the gradual rising of the lake bed toward the shore, moving blue blips with idents the only indication he is not alone in the dark. He has been assured that the pre-Breakdown records and scout findings are accurate. The Bhatal lake-bed has not changed significantly for over a century. All large vents have been detected and logged, but still his imagination taunts him. In this watery night, his next step could so easily be into a new, and oh so deep hole...

The blips reach a contour line which flashes amber, and the group stops. Fifteen below the surface. A blip breaks off to the left--it's Coori. He moves some distance away from them, pauses. Right now, by touch alone he's assembling the Dummy--a final precaution. The blue blip moves back to the main group, leaving an emerald square behind. It begins flashing as it activates, and the small recon drone crawls toward the shore. Windows in the team's HUDs give the drone's point-of-view as it breaks the still surface, reaches the shore of the lake, begins to look round-

Blue flame lances from the bank above. Suddenly the lakeside is alive with energy-fire.

The dummy dies.

In the water ahead of them, neon lines of steam appear, reaching down to the lake bed, instantly disappearing to be replaced by others. Looking up, the team sees above the surface their source: splinters of light from the shore criss-crossing, piercing the water.

Rhaitya mei-San swears.

The enemy were waiting here all along.

* * *

Information floods in from the drop-ship. Ground fire is coming from all directions...energy and older projectile weapons, but nothing heavy. A constantly pulsing web of lightning, at first concentrated on the dummy's location, then punching the entire lake surface, seeking out the team. The four duck behind a rocky outcrop.

Kaal's suit-com is alive with voices.

'Where in Phai's name did they come from?' shouts Chantal, more puzzled than alarmed. Not like Coori. Though covering, he can't hide worry from his voice as he comments:

'Kinda pretty, isn't it?'

'I don't get it,' continues Chantal. We ran a scan, we should've spotted them!'

'Check out the fire they're laying down!'

'Be grateful it's not artillery.'

'Maybe they want the drop-ship,' Kaal hears himself suggest. He knows it's not true, but doesn't want to think of the

alternatives. The Imp within him says nothing, but he can feel it watching, assessing him. Numbing him.

'Guess this means the party's off, huh boss?' quips Coori.

'Shut it, Coori!' The Rhiatya's authority cuts into the talk, silencing it at a stroke. 'Tactical!'

'Drop-ship counts two-fifty-nine guns, at least another hundred moving in,' recites Chantal quoting feedback from the drop-ship's AI.

It is Coori who speaks out their fears.

'They knew we were coming.'

'Oh yeah? How?' challenges Chantal. 'How could they? Three days ago we didn't know!' But her voice lacks conviction. She knows Coori speaks the truth. And though he can't see them, Kaal can feel Rhiatya Sool's eyes on him. She knows the answer, as does he.

A burning village, two years previously.

* * *

'What do we do, Rhiatya?' asks Chantal.

By the light of the gunfire above, the silhouette that is the Rhiatya's suit stands motionless, the occupant within apparently thinking. Finally, it decides.

'Plan B. Chantal, send to commanders ships one and four via drop-ship--Code Eight-Amber: "Proceed to Brakow geothermal plant, best possible speed. Unable to join you. Will take a few with us, signed, Sool-mei-San, mission Rhiatya.'

Coori groans, adding: 'Guess that's it then.' He knows what's coming.

The Rhiatya begins her own private dialogue with the dropship, then suddenly:

'Get down!' she orders. 'Polarise suits now!' The team understands, knowing she has no choice.

They all slow-tumble themselves to the lake bed, face down. Before the flash and the roar, Kaal hears Grishta echoing in his mind; 'For better or worse, Rai's children have returned.'

The water around them boils, vaporises.

The teardrop explodes.

Shoolar Day 39,675

(FIRST DAY)

ONE

...They exploded; hitting the panes hard, spattering then collecting, the water running in fast rivulets down the glass. Other drops managed to shoot through the opening, striking the sill, soaking the carpeting, or darkening the already drenched scarlet curtain, which had flapped outside, jamming the window open in the first place.

At least, that's what Mietre had guessed had happened. But she didn't raise a finger to change the situation.

All she could do at this moment was watch the rain fall.

She'd seen it thousands of times before, sometimes struggling to ignore it, sometimes--as now--mesmerised by the daily early morning shower. With it always came the promise that the rain was within reach, especially during moments like this; finding the window stuck ajar, with a moist draft and the smell of the downpour in her nostrils. Such a promise seemed again a practical reality. Yet she didn't reach out her hand to feel the drops, daren't. She knew what would happen. And it was her knowing, her certainty of the result, which had transfixed her into a longing, aching inaction.

That was the problem. Knowing meant everything here. And everything here meant something more than what it actually was. That's why even the simple act of looking and the memories it conjured, could cause so much pain and anguish. Mietre's own life-long experience had only too well taught her that. Now-- immobile--she was being reminded of it again, while the rain fell and fell. Tantalising, taunting..

Normally, Mietre didn't bother to check the sealed rooms during her dawn patrols, but she'd had her reasons this morning.

It had come upon her the night before. At the very edge of sleep the knowledge had touched, nudged her wide awake, to lie still in bed, listening. Among the Brood's usual round of poundings and scratchings, their nightly attempts to get in, Mietre had thought she'd heard something else. Surfing all the sound frequencies being generated, that echoed unceasingly from dusk 'til dawn among the rooms and corridors of the House, Mietre could find no definite cause for the sudden disquiet within her. No alarms had been triggered, so none of the sealed entrances or barricades had been breached. But that meant nothing. That was occasionally the way it started. As good as their tell-tales were, the devices couldn't think, couldn't empathise on the level of Mietre and the others. They couldn't be attentive, couldn't learn about, stretch, *feel* oneself into the building's very fabric. That was normally how she could tell. It was why she had awoken the night before. Why she could see now.

One of *them* had got in.

* * *

It hadn't been a major breach. The lack of alarms, the feeling of disquiet remaining only a vague sensation 'til dawn had told her that much. Duren and Bard had stayed safe within their rooms, silent, doubtless untroubled, and certainly it'd been nothing worth leaving Govan's sleepy embrace for. At least, she'd told herself that during the night. But still it had kept her awake--last night as with others--pondering, which room? Which wing? Which floor? Only just before dawn were her suspicions heightened. Among the scratchings, the poundings and growling from outside, came--muffled, distant--the crash of tumbling furniture, a smash, a tearing. But the muffling, the expanse and layout of the House, had confused the origin of the noise, making Mietre wonder a moment if perhaps Bard wasn't throwing another of his creative tantrums. She'd quickly dismissed the idea, though. The old man's latest painting was progressing well by all accounts, so he would have no reason to trash his room. Which left the more likely--and worrying--alternative:

It must be one of the Dead rooms.

Her concern hadn't made her alter her routine, though. The need for discipline remained paramount. The starting point for every dawn patrol was randomly, deliberately, different. As always, Mietre began this way (today choosing the small, first

floor west dressing room) and continued the sweep as normal, adding a check of a Dead room only when she came upon one.

If touching the icy handle to Sinya's door hadn't banished all uncertainty, then a look within was surely confirmation she'd found the right room. The puzzle was why the window had been opened. The tell-tale had recorded no entry through the door since the room was first sealed, so it had been none of the others, and House would have no reason to air a room no longer in use. Unless...

Mietre had sighed. She would have to tell the others about House's new tactic. Tell-tales would probably have to be fitted to all windows now. Approaching the window to begin the clean-up, the patter of the rain had begun to lull her, absorb her, finally disturb her...

'Ground Floor clear!' came a voice from downstairs. Its tones were tinged with a childhood recently passed, breaking headlong into adulthood. It was full of frustration at routine's tedium, felt by the young everywhere.

Duren.

His echo nudged Mietre out of her reverie. Even this far upstairs, deep within the eastern wing, she could faintly hear him marching into the kitchen to prepare breakfast. If desired, she could hear how his mood made him clink the cups around, bang the cupboard doors, pots and pans, listen in on him hum and hah with anger and apathy. If she desired.

She decided against it, instead watched again the rain twist and alter the world outside, making it insubstantial. Ugly. That's how we were, she thought to herself, seeing the garden, the trees beyond, blurring and morphing through the wettened glass.

That's how we still are, came a knowing reply from deep and dark within her. She shivered, and reached out to the window.

The rain shrank away from her.

Though unsurprised, she still fought down the disappointment, anger and bitterness, concentrating instead on the task in hand. The window was pushed open, releasing the curtain, and Mietre leaned out, taking advantage of the unnatural rain shadow forming about her to wring out the water. Pulling it in, she let the curtain hang, wrinkled, and slammed the window, locking it. She then checked how damp the carpet had become, shrugged. Though sodden cloth never decayed within these walls, there was always a first time. Let them both moulder, she thought, and let the House worry about it, if it allows these things to happen.

She turned away and surveyed the room. The previous night's "guest" had really taken advantage of the open window. The chairs, chest of drawers, the wardrobe, all had been toppled, thrown, or overturned, their cloth coverings now shredded ribbons strewn about the room. The bed was on its side, the mattress and sheets a torn pile on the floor, and in a corner, the bedside

lamp; a shattered mass of coloured pottery and glass. But no scratch-marks. The room's structural integrity as always was intact, and the door was still sound. House had made sure of that at least. Only the painting above the bed remained untouched. Not that the vandal wouldn't have tried. The picture's cloth covering was gone, and faint, parallel lined shadows were all that remained of the attempts made to pull it from the wall. Yet despite the effort, the elaborate gold-wrought frame wasn't even askew. The canvas itself was unmarked, and the face, *Her face-*

'DON'T LOOK!!' screamed an inner voice.

The order scratched, grated through her mind, to the core of her very soul it seemed. She jumped, as always startled by its power, quickly averting her eyes from the picture.

It still happened occasionally, much to her regret. She'd find herself slipping, then one of her programmed commandments would spot the danger, and scream and shout a warning 'til she removed herself from--or the cause of--the temptation.

She cursed her stupidity. The rain had dulled her, knocked her off-guard. She re-focused, concentrating on the bed, the wardrobe, anywhere but the painting.

Whenever there was an entry now, the resulting mess would be left for them to clean up. As with many things, it had not always been so. Duren had said the House was becoming lazy. Mietre knew he felt the truth wasn't so pleasantly simple.

Looking on the carnage, she thought for a moment--the briefest moment; 'Why tidy it? What's the point? No one uses this room anymore. And it's not as if Sinya has had need of it for a long time-'

Sinya...

Mietre busied herself tidying what she could. Once done, she left, locking the door behind her, re-setting the alarm. Before moving on to check the other rooms in the wing, Mietre stared at the oval portrait in the middle of the door frame. Sinya's face, rendered in oils, no bigger than Mietre's palm, stared back; young, thoughtful, melancholic. Mietre caressed the portrait's pale cheek gently with the forefinger of her left hand, reading the caption:

Sinya beth-Too-Roh:

Lost.

Remembered.

There was no date on this door, nor on any of the other twelve portraits attached to bedroom doors dotted about the House. There was no need for them. Recalling was enough. Sometimes, recalling was too much.

Mietre moved on down the corridor, continuing her sweep, checking doors, rooms, the ubiquitous white dust-sheets billowing gently at her passing.

She made a point of ignoring the rain. Again.

TWO

Among the many truths Mietre had picked up on her travels, was the axiom that knowledge is power. Prior to the Set's arrival at the House, her knowledge had always given her dominion over others, and any pain felt from her exercising this power (which, she regretted now, was always and considerable) had been merely one-sided; theirs. So strong and compelling was this axiom, that she had ranked it highly in her long and detailed list of personal lore. In coming here though, she had discovered the post-script often attached to this maxim--that the more one knows, the more it hurts--had taken a U-turn.

On originally examining and discovering all she could about the House and its surrounds those many, many days ago, assuming her trust in her maxim that the knowledge gained would stand her in good stead here as elsewhere, it hadn't occurred to her 'til too late that all the while she probed and learned how the House worked, the House could also be watching her, studying her, learning how she worked.

And it had been.

Once it knew her, it had begun chipping away, exposing Mietre to an arrogance and shallow self-confidence within herself she'd never previously known existed. She'd quickly become aware of the tactic, but as much as she tried to avoid it, still the

House sometimes inverted her thinking, exploiting both its knowledge of her, and their mutual knowledge of itself. It had been knowledge of the House which had brought her into Sinya's room that morning. It had been knowledge of the House which had held her in check, hurting her, while she stood motionless before the rain, wishing...remembering. Regretting.

* * *

On Mietre walked, looking, checking. Room by room, floor by floor, wing by wing. East wing was now checked and secured, leaving only the north side left to go on this level. She approached the intersection of the north and east passages, taking a final measured look back at the way she'd come, seeing Sinya's door; small, distant. The first floor was always the worst. Mietre would've preferred skipping it altogether, and the irony was that she could. No one lived on this level anymore, couldn't. The problem was not of disrepair, the House was in excellent condition. There were just not enough of them alive now to occupy it. Avoiding this floor would be so easy; leaving the barricades in place protecting the stairwells, knowing that with them active they'd all be completely safe regardless of any entries. But Mietre checked it anyway. Peace of mind was also important here, one needed as much reassurance as one could get.

She turned left, quickly right, and came to the intersection. Directly before her was the arched doorway of the circular stairs to the north tower, its curved steps rising from

and back into gloom. To her left was the beginning of first floor north, and to her right a solid wall of wood and stone. Set into the stone, near her on the corner wall, was a dull, metallic-black circle. From it, an amber light winked periodically, and it had begun chiming at heart-beat speed on her arrival. Proximity warning. She approached the plate and touched it, spoke to it, let it know it was she and all was well. The chiming ceased and the circle blinked green. Immediately, the way ahead rippled as though viewed through disturbed water, then once again became solid. Mietre stepped through the open field-barricade and on into the north passage, her voice calling back to it, ordering it to re-activate. A confirming chime answered faintly from behind as she came to the first door.

How things had changed. The air was stale, thick with dust, the whole atmosphere of this level made dour and subdued by long years of disuse. Even though raincloud-weakened light spilled in from the odd corridor bay window overlooking the courtyard, to bounce off the dust sheet-covered chairs, tables, sideboards and paintings, the walls' dark wood panelling tended to absorb both light and warmth. And with locked bedroom doors either side, this made the corridors, though high and wide, appear tunnel-like, if not tomb-like. All colour, all complex decoration seemed to have leached, drained away from these main and side passages. Multi-hued, foliated capitals atop chevron-incised, fine-grain wooden columns were instead blurs of brown lining the

walls, rising-- Mietre knew--into complex fan-vaulting and intricately carved ceiling bosses; all lost to shadows. What made checking each wing on this floor difficult at best was the fact, the knowledge that the majority of the rooms within them had once been used. They had contained movement, laughter, music, talk, the slow easy-breathed rhythms of sleep, the faster pantings and moanings--cries even--of pleasure. They'd been filled with sound, they'd been filled with Life! Walking amid the quiet now, the sheet-softened furniture-forms, the permanent dusk, with the past on the brink of easy recall every step of the way, made searching for signs of entry all the harder. It was easy to feel one had passed into the world of the dead, with each oval portrait on a door a monument representative of a life, a light Mietre had known, and that was no longer. Doubtless that had been House's intention. The sensation of winter here was overpowering, making the temptation to open up the level once more to light, warmth, air, all the stronger. Mietre resisted it. Such action would serve no purpose other than to make more work for them all, come nightfall. More than once she'd reflected that, if desired, each of them could have all floors of an entire wing to themselves. Only Bard had come closest to doing so, remaining isolated high in the south tower. Duren, Govan and herself had decided to remain together in second floor west, partly for company, mostly for back-up. The House had been built into the south-facing slope of the island, putting the

ground floor for most of the north and east wings underground, bringing their upper floors closer to ground level, whilst making those of the south and west wings higher. Strategically, the extra height afforded them little physical advantage over the Brood, but the important fact that the second floor of the west wing was always touched first by Shoolrise counted for much. The soonest dawn came, the better. The west wing's passages were also unhampered by any of the minor stairs periodically recurring on the upper floors of the northern and southern wings. A clear, level traverse could be critical in a sticky situation.

She came to the end of her sweep, back outside the dressing room; her starting point. The north-west barricade was sealed behind her. She walked down the west wing towards the main staircase, thinking again of the curtain-jammed window and its implications, of the rain-morphed world outside twisting, churning, the shower's continuing patter registering dully in her head.

Oh, how things had changed since their arrival.

Take the rain. From simple weather phenomena it had become a weapon of psychological warfare. Every day now the raindrops fell by the million, and each was a symbol, a message. A taunt.

It hadn't always been like that. In the early days, she and the rest of the Set could open the windows to feel the rain splash on their hands, or fling wide the doors to run out and catch the drops in opened mouths. The sky was abundant with

water, pouring its fill on any and all of the Set who wished to catch a joyous soaking. It was a simple pleasure, quickly indulged, gladly received and much appreciated. A lighter moment to be treasured on this island world. Then one morning, Yanek--whooping madly--trotted out for a run in the downpour, only to return moments later, deflated, nervous, telling of a shadow forming over him, of raindrops recoiling from him, refusing to strike him, wet him. From then on, each and every time, when opening a window to the shower, a shadow fell over the Set's hands so the rain would not fall on them, or--later--they would charge out of the House, open-mouthed, arms out-stretched, eager to catch just a few drops, only to be greeted by a warm breeze and a clear sky. The rain would not simply stop, petering out as the final drops were let fall. Instead, the downpour would vanish. Whether it were an almost-mist, or the heaviest of sheets, a member of the Set would only have to open a door and take their first step, and the element would disappear, leaving just wet grass and dripping leaves as testimony of its passing.

At first this phenomena was a curiosity, one of the many the House possessed or had developed, but only for a time. When soon all that could be gleaned from the rain was a roll about the sodden lawn, this curiosity became frustrating, then maddening, making the reason for this development, and others which had begun occurring, all the clearer:

To make living just that little bit more unbearable.

And for Yanek, it did just that. One stormy morning, on seeing the turbulent downpour, knowing he could never again feel the wind blow about and through him, nor the raindrops' hard wetness on his face, he had coolly, calmly walked to the front door, and opened it...

* * *

Mietre shook her head, clearing it of the associations, the memories, considering only the fact. Turning one's face up to the splashes of rain... As innocent, as joyous an expression at nature's wonder as any could feel or want; even that simple pleasure was now denied them. How could there be justice in that? But then, she considered, perhaps being here wasn't about justice anymore.

* * *

'Cellar's clear!' called another voice from the ground floor. It was deep and strong. Govan.

Whereas before she avoided listening in on Duren, now Mietre's mind squelched out the rain, the extraneous frequencies, following Govan's movements. She heard him slide the barrier shut on the lift, allowing the outer door to swing closed behind him. His measured footfalls then passed through the dining room, scuffing on the thick, soft rug, into the inner hall, his shoes padding on the stone floor tiles, onto the carpet running down the centre of the wide, main corridor, the minute echo-alterations telling her as he passed the sitting room, the garden

alcove room, approached the study, then the main entrance hall and the front door. Always Govan checked it last, even though Duren would have already done so, and she listened as the footsteps halted before it. Then came the customary moment's hesitation (a summoning of courage?) before the slight hiss of his gloved right hand as it traced over the door-lock, the handle, the crack between door and frame. The checking of the tell-tale alarm. Then, an exhalation (relief at a job done?), and faster steps clacked upon the floor-map, then within the south passage, and on into the kitchen. She heard Duren and Govan acknowledging each other. Did Govan want breakfast? Maybe later. He'll go for a run, burn off some excess energy. Hang on, said Duren, it's your turn. There was a rattle of crockery on a tray, a pause. In her mind's eye Mietre could picture the two looking at each other; Govan, tight-lipped, reluctant, a little annoyed; Duren smiling, amused, glad it wasn't him. I did it yesterday, added the latter. Govan grunted, his feet turned, trudged out of the kitchen toward the lift, the crockery rattling agitatedly while the door, the lift cage were flung open.

Mietre ceased listening and smiled, but only slightly. Breakfast for Bard. She didn't envy Govan's task.

'First floor clear!' she called.

* * *

Last stop.

Second floor sweep was complete, and Mietre was looking up at a hatch in the ceiling. Even on this floor, where the rooms and corridors existed on a smaller scale to those of the floors below, the small, shadowed square was well beyond her reach, at least twice her own height away. Still, without a moment's thought, she crouched. Leapt.

Nimbly, without trouble despite the smooth-gloved hands, her fingers caught the holes that constant grasping had bored into the hatch frame over time. Her purchase assured, she then released one of her hands, easily compensating for the shifting of her centre of gravity, swinging slightly, catching hold of the lock, turning the key. The hatch popped up slightly--still a little startling even after all this time; the sudden upward movement could always mean *something* was helping it--and Mietre paused a moment, dangling from the ceiling by one hand, letting the released air breeze down over her face, analysing its content. An important test. If any of Them were present, the air would be different. Nothing so obvious as odour or temperature-change, more...a subtle decay in its ambience, a way it brushed against the cheek swifter than expected, as though the atmosphere itself were now carrying dread in its shifting, twisting currents, seeking escape.

The moment passed. The breeze was cool, but leisurely. Normal.

Satisfied, Mietre pushed the hatch wide, pulling herself up and through, into the gloom.

Into the Line Room.

It was the same every morning; the first few moments spent standing still, growing accustomed to the shadows, the silence. Mostly the silence. Everywhere about the building could be heard the odd light creaks and groans of an old house settling on its foundations, the drumming of the rain, yet few rooms were weighed so heavily with the quiet contained within this place. Time was here, their history. Here, the Past echoed into the Present, stilling the Now. The sheer expanse of it all crushed a stillness into the space, filling it with a contemplative, an awful hush.

Mietre looked round. The light spilled up through the square opening, bouncing off the roof beams, back down to the floor, and up again, repeating, weakening into the gloom. An attic, stretching the length of the north wing. There was no dust-covered objects or heirlooms or furniture long-since past its usefulness, to be stored or hidden, then forgotten. No such objects wore out in the House, and on the floors below there was plenty of room for a storeroom. Besides, there was no dust either. There were no cobwebs, as there were no creatures to make them. The attic was utterly empty, barren of life.

But not the signs of life.

The space was yellowed. Not from a smooth, even yellow of paint or of aged, discoloured plaster, but from lines. Thin, yellow scratches of chalk scrawled vertically. Thousands upon thousands of angry, uneven marks the length of Mietre's little finger, covering walls, beams, roof, floor, the light from below reflecting off them, giving the attic around the hatch an eerie glow.

Down the centre of the floor ran a thin pathway through the markings. It too ran the length of the attic; wayward, meandering about like a dark, dry river, formed by uneven spacing of groups of marks, over-enthusiasm, anger, forgetfulness, or a keen desire to have a particular column of lines stretch from the roof and into the floor as far as possible.

The room was a clock, a marker.

This had been Roolah's work, then Yyanka's. Digoh's, and now Mietre's.

She lightly stepped over the hatchway, carefully treading the curving path eastward toward the wall that marked the end of the attic, and which--rising out of the roof--would become the western face of the north tower. It was darker this end, there were fewer columns of chalk-marks providing less reflection, and Mietre kept a hand above her head to avoid bumping it against the cross-beams. She could have seen into the dark if she wished, but she enjoyed the struggle of doing things as she used to before receiving the Gifts. Not that using them for this simple

purpose would be a temptation toward reversion. She simply felt the vulnerability to circumstance served as a useful reminder of who she once had been long ago, before joining Her Set, before filling and giving away her cup.

Darkness. The path abruptly ended, though the tower wall was still some distance away. Mietre turned to her left. Dimly before her she could make out the scratch pattern of the newest column. She stepped toward it. Already it was halfway down the wall, and it seemed like only yesterday she'd made its first mark at the roof apex. She smiled at the thought. Yesterday. If she wanted, she could count just how many yesterdays it had actually been. She knelt to the floor, picking up the piece of chalk waiting there, rose, then traced her hand to where the latest row was, being careful not to smudge the lines with her glove. Roolah and Yyanka had followed the Set's timescale when making their marks, Digoh too mostly, up until a few months before his passing, when he began using the Shoolar calender, following Mietre's order to try out the ways of House's builders. It had heartened Mietre when she discovered he'd been doing this, it meant he'd understood her motives, and despite his initial reluctance had been genuinely trying to do as she asked. It would have been so easy to keep this small fragment of the Set's origins alive, hidden away in this attic where none but the House would see, but Digoh hadn't. She'd been encouraged, even though in darker moods she'd cynically considered it was probably

because House could see all this that Digoh had changed to the Shoolar calendar.

* * *

It had been taking over Digoh's job of checking the upper floors every morning when Mietre had discovered the Line Room. Digoh had died the night before, and she'd told the others she'd take up his patrol. Even now, she wasn't certain why. Perhaps it had been to give herself the sense she was doing something more to aid their security, though Govan had doubted that, pointing out she had already done enough. He'd been right too. Still, she had insisted, perhaps out of practicality, perhaps as defiant response to the events of the previous night. Deciding to sweep the second floor first, she'd happened to look up and spotted the hatch. What had immediately struck her was the fact the frame was clearly marked with the deep depressions of fingers constantly grasping it tightly, indicating the hatch was regularly opened. She'd remembered from her exploration of the house on their first day so long ago that nothing of interest was up there to warrant such attention. But what was especially suspicious was that normally the House wouldn't allow such wear to become evident over time, which hinted the depressions clearly meant something significant, something House had approved of, if not sanctioned. She'd leapt up, opened the hatch and, climbing in, made her discovery.

She'd found Roolah's rune at the north-western end of the attic, scratched on a wall-beam above the first marks, along with the statement:

* * *

"The road ends here! But death they deny us! Their weakness makes our Song go on!"

* * *

On reading those words initially, Mietre had thought the words triumphant, that Roolah was undaunted by their (at the time) new situation. But then she'd noted the way the words were scrawled, and the number of lines following it marked down with a similar energy. Thirty-eight of them, obviously all scratched on the same day, one after the other. And she'd realised Roolah had been frustrated, angry. The scene would have been easy to reconstruct without House providing a playback; the truth of the situation finally dawning on him, Roolah had marched off to the cliffs on the thirty-eighth day, ripping off a chunk from the yellow chalk-face. He'd returned, found the attic, and made the first of those many, many marks. Not in triumph, but probably in apoplectic rage and bitterness. It had been an unpleasant realisation for Mietre. She could recall that day so long ago, so many lines distant, and Roolah had appeared calm, even cheerful, joining in the Set's activities. It had struck her with a painful force that, even with all their Gifts, no one knew that day, nor for a long time after, that he'd done this, and

continued to do so 'til the last. Despite the Gifts, Roolah still had secrets, another, hidden self. And Mietre--*his* Mietre--seeing the marks for the first time, after years of travelling with him, experiencing with him and within him, years after his death, had suddenly learned she'd probably never truly known him.

Nor Yyanka. Nor Digoh.

Numbly, she'd followed the chalk-marks as they progressed along the years, spotting each new marker's rune and style as they took up the chalk and the task from their predecessor. Events in the Set's calendar were noted; discoveries, thoughts, changes in themselves or the House. Birthdays. Deathdays. Especially the Deathdays. They were all there, spread across the years; Sinya's, Yanek's, Roolah's. All but her own, Duren's, Govan's, and Bard's names listed: the last of the Set. Coming to the final mark, knowing it had been Digoh's last, she too had picked up the chalk, mechanically recorded his death, how she'd found the attic, and put her own rune. Then, after a moment's thought, she'd finally scratched that day's mark. And had continued every day since.

She'd wondered many times, taking up the chalk, how the marking had continued over the years. Roolah must've told Yyanka shortly before his suicide, and Yyanka disclosed the secret to Digoh in case she died. It could only be conjecture, as no such encounters or agreements had been recorded within the Set's

memory-pool. Maybe--like she--Yyanka and Digoh had made similar stumbled discoveries.

But why had they kept it a secret? Why did she keep it a secret now? Was it because the Set'd been so used to living each day as it came, the idea had practically become unwritten law? Was it fear that to let slip you were counting the days, was to let slip that you were weakening, that Time mattered when nothing should? Probably. It would account for House not minding the ritual on the outset. But not for Mietre. Hard as it had been to relinquish, that law didn't matter any more to her. They had changed, she had changed. So why continue the ritual, its secrecy? Mietre didn't know about Roolah and the others, but for herself, it had become a private duel, a continuing defiance against the House and its builders, as if to say to them, 'We are alive another day, so you must watch us, feed us, clothe us for another day!' It wasn't much, and was probably an empty gesture, but any way to show them she was still undaunted meant a lot to her.

Her glove came to rest. There. Nine lines in the latest batch of a row of five. The row was almost complete. She raised the chalk, putting a stroke straight through the batch of nine. Day number ten, the end of another week.

Mietre dropped the chalk, thought a moment, then picked it up again, and made a brief note about the entry in Sinya's room the night before below the latest week. She then began threading

her way back along the wiry path to the hatchway, wiping her gloves. They'd have to be changed after all she'd been doing this morning.

* * *

A door slammed, a voice cursed.

Govan.

Mietre was just closing the hatch when the noise came. Immediately, she attuned to it. Govan was marching--muttering--away from the south tower door. From behind the heavy wooden partition, she could still make out the echoes of an old man's cackling. *Another round to Bard*, Mietre thought. She adjusted her grip on the frame, clicking the hatch into place, and turned the key. Govan's feet pounded down the main stairs, onto the first floor landing, round, down again. She let go the lock, and hung from the frame by one hand, swinging slightly, analysing his movements, assessing how angry Bard had made him this time.

Very.

She shook her head, then angled it to see out the passage window overlooking the rain-swept garden beyond, awaiting the inevitable. She'd advised Govan not to even speak to the old man when he brought the breakfast, but Govan still insisted on reasoning with Bard, trying to make him see sense, which made Govan either a model of perseverance, or just sheer bloody-minded. Definitely his father's son. No wonder they bickered so

much. If only Govan wouldn't be so easily baited, she thought. If only Bard wasn't so good at baiting.

Govan had reached the entrance hall. He swept through the south passage and into the kitchen, ignoring Duren. He walked to the outer door--more stone tiles--pulled the upper bolt back, turned the key, then the handle. A brief bluster of air, shoes on gravel-

The rain was a memory once more.

And Govan was gone, his gravel-scrunching steps quickening to a run, fading toward the now sun-lit trees.

Mietre dangled from the hatch frame, still absorbed, watching the twisted world outside quickly alter as the rainwater trickled from the window panes, dried. Trees and flowers regained their natural shape and sharpness. The garden shone with colour once again.

Another beautiful day.