

Chapter One

Any landing you can walk away from is a good one.

This wasn't.

I crawled out of the wreckage of the dead triplane, grabbing at the jasq to take that, at least, with me as I twisted out of the ripped canvas and broken spars. Blood was oozing from the gash in my side, and from the gash in my head, and probably from the other gashes I hadn't spotted yet.

Merik was dead. A branch had skewered him cleanly through the heart. His face had a look of surprised annoyance. I howled obscenities at the lafquassing scarlet trees that had wrenched the aeroplane into the ground and killed my friend, and more obscenities at Wrack, wherever he might be. I use too much foul language at the best of times - Tolly used to complain that I couldn't complete a sentence without saying 'volg' or 'lafquass' - but now I discovered just how wide a vocabulary of swear-words I possessed. The volging lafquass had followed us down, scorching the wings, buffeting us with his passage, tearing the little triplane apart piece by piece. I hoped the lafquass had hit this impossible jungle down here, too, torn his own wings to shreds.

I had the jasq in my grip, squirming in my uninjured hand like a sack of porridge as I squeezed it. My head was spinning. But I had the jasq, and if Wrack wanted it he would have to come down here with us.

With me.

The heat was extraordinary, worse than the hot springs at Werintar. Spiralling over two miles down, Wrack sniping at the aeroplane every yard, I hadn't had time to be aware of the rise in temperature. Up in the air over the surface, I needed the fur in the flying suit, or I would freeze in flight. Down here I was poaching in my jacket. Sweat was dripping from my forehead. I pulled the jacket up to see my side - a branch had ripped through my breeches, and through me, and I needed to see how badly I was hurt. Volg it! I needed Merik. He knew far more medicine than I did. There were trees all round me, leaves blood red. Red vegetation? And everything was soaking wet. The humidity was unreal. I blinked droplets of sweat out of my eyes and flicked another drop off my nose.

I peeled the jacket off my good side, and tried to ease the sticky leather away from my other half. I needed to put down the jasq, but the volging thing would ooze away if I let go of it. And I had been through too much to let it go. Wrack was not having it back.

I glanced around. The canopy above me was thick like a woven red mat. He had to be able to see the rip in the trees where we had crashed, but I doubted even he could land without tearing his own wings apart. Good. I wanted the volg to suffer.

I gently undid my breeches and eased them down enough to look at the gash over my hip, and the world promptly went crimson. More crimson, that is. I could feel the blood pulsing from the wound in my side, and the pain was like a dozen saws along my ribs. Blunt ones, at that. I hadn't managed to get to my feet since getting out of the triplane, but even on my knees I felt as though I was going to collapse. I had to stop the bleeding. The wound was killing me. The ground was soft, matted with fallen leaves, wet with condensation. I thought I had seen some sort of snake writhe away from the crash, but now there was no sign of anything more than insects, buzzing around me, drawn by the smell of lunch - my blood. I hoped that none of them were poisonous, but I had more serious concerns. I could see the injury. The branch had gored me below the ribcage. My vision was swimming. I, on the other hand, was drowning. I knew enough to know that I was dying, losing blood, and with a potentially fatal wound in my guts. The damage needed to be cleansed and the opening sewn up.

And all I had was a wrecked triplane, the torn clothes I would be standing up in if I could stand, and an empty knife sheath on my lower leg.

I was twenty-seven years old. I didn't want to die. There were so many things I still wanted to do. Good food. Fine wines. Men I wanted to bed. I wanted to climb the Red Tower in Darshaal. I wanted to see an ice worm. Take the steam train over the Grand Bridge at Juldressi. Maybe even have children.

And I was dying in this impossible red jungle more than two miles down at the base of the Chasm, under those permanent clouds. I wanted to tell people what was down here. So much for the theories that there was a vast ocean down here, or that the Chasm went down to the centre of the world.

I wanted to see Wrack's face as I told him what I had done with his jasq. Fat chance of that now. I should have thrown it from the aeroplane before we crashed. But the volging creatures were pretty well indestructible, and he would have found it. It squirmed in my grip. Red despair snarled through my veins and pumped out of the gaping wound in my side. I had enjoyed watching Wrack bleed when I cut the jasq out of his arm. Sweet revenge. He would heal eventually - I had, when he did it to me.

The old scar on my left upper arm itched again. I was too weak to scratch at it. I was all alone in this dimly-lit red jungle, clutching at my side to try to stop the blood flowing. Fat, iridescent flies were buzzing around me, wanting to drink my blood. Fear was clutching at my chest, tightening my heart.

The jasq squeezed through my fingers, trying to escape, the gelatinous blue creature crawling across my flesh, a cruel parody of my own long-dead jasq. I would never cast spells again. I stared at the blue mush in my grip, remembering Wrack's gritted teeth as I carved it out of his bicep. He hadn't screamed. I had, when he robbed me of *my* jasq. I looked at the amoeboid, remembering how mine had knitted the

clean cut Kelvar had made in my arm when he first gave it to me, remembering that a jasq could repair a great deal of harm.

The idea was madness, raw and bloody in my thoughts. This was Wrack's jasq, not mine. Mine was gone. No one could have two jasqs. Everyone knew that a second jasq would poison you, kill you in agony, react against the first jasq's taint.

Except that this jasq was not attuned to human stock. It was Wrack's. How human was he? I was dying, my vision fading. A jasq could repair a lot of damage. If it killed me, because it rejected me from my first jasq - well, I was dying anyway. Or if it did nothing, because it was not attuned to humans... what did I lose?

I pressed the squirming ameoboid against the bloody wound in my side. It flowed into the gash, greedily slurping at the living tissue, its blue pallor suffusing with crimson. Pain flared within the wound - I tried to whisper an obscenity, but I hurt too much. I had lost the gamble. Fear clamped into my stomach - I would die in this red hell. I was dying now. My vision blurred, lit in scarlet, and I felt all consciousness flee.

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I was aware of the heat. I was burning, my mouth the taste of a pan boiled dry, my skin prickling. There were shapes around me, low growling voices in a tongue that should mean something... but didn't. It didn't sound good, though. I could not focus. My eyes were rolling in my head, lids too heavy to open fully. Everything was blurred, flowing as though the world itself was half-melted. Hot hands on me, at first just pulling off my leather flying helmet, but then tugging at my shirt, at my breeches. My body raged with fire, and I was glad to feel rough hands peeling my sodden shirt from me, even though the wet air was no cooler. I groaned a demand for cold - my only reply was more of the harsh language. The smell of hot, sweating bodies. There were hands on my bare skin, exploring. Too hot. All I could see was colour, shifting and changing like oil on water, red and scarlet and vermilion mixing with ivory and emerald green, amber eyes and yellow teeth. More hands on me, rolling me like a rag doll. Faces swirling, faces with tusks and yellow eyes, harsh, cruel amusement in them. Vague accounts of monsters from the other side of the world or from old stories mixed with bitter memories of capture. Sound drifting in and out of clarity. Rough earth squishing under my back. Pain in my side, but no longer the agony I was feeling before. I wanted to close my eyes and sleep, but the hands were insistent, invasive. More tugging at my semi-conscious body, efforts to drag me to my feet. The world swayed around me. Memories of Wrack manhandling me slid through my nightmares, and I felt a silent scream of fury building inside me. For so long I had crushed my rage. I tried to focus on the dark red face in front of mine, but everything was vague except my anger, which was boiling. Part of me wanted to kill Wrack. Tear out his throat. Hard

fingers tightened around my arm. The rage was roiling through my veins as it had so many times, impotent, all powers lost, and I screeched through my burning dry throat as I thrashed from side to side. My thoughts were full of blood, remembering Wrack bleeding as my dagger carved into his arm, enjoying his gasp of agony.

Something caught the side of my body, below my ribs, and the pain was intolerable. I tried to scream, the colour red all that I could see. I wanted to escape, or to fight. Ancient memories, from years before, flooded my thoughts, and I reached for something long lost. For a moment, the world was a blaze of colour, a different, yet familiar, place. I clutched at the scarlet near me, knowing I wanted to fight. Everything was vague and swimming, moving and swirling. I could still, as though at a distance, feel hot hands on me. More immediate was the agonising pain in my side. I swept the brilliant colour in a circle round me, and then the pain took me. I screamed, and I was barely aware that there were other screams from around me. Agony, scorching through my veins and blazing behind my eyes, was all that I was aware of. I had never felt such torture, even in Wrack's clutches. I had to get out of the realm, retreat away from the anguish. I had wanted to return to the realm so badly and now it was hurting me. I would have wept but my eyes were burning. I wrenched myself back, away from the impossible brightness of the other place.

Everything went dark, back to the dull ruddy place I had been before, except that now there was the crackle of hot orange fire. I felt the flames blazing out around me. More screams. My sight was purple and yellow, the ground swaying under me, the smell of burning flesh in my nostrils. I knew that smell - vague memories of Wrack snarled through my mind's eye, and more anger surged within me like an unstoppable tidal bore. I heard the crackle of flames and then a roar, more fire flaring a distance away, but the men who had been dragging me off were gone. The fever roared within my ears, drowning any cries from elsewhere... drowning my own moans. I could feel the flames on my bare skin... or was that just the heat of my burning flesh? I stumbled, unable to stay on my feet. There had been water, I thought, but everything was swaying, smoke swirling above me, my eyes blurred again. Two drunken steps, a slope; I rolled down the incline, feeling impacts on my outstretched legs, and then felt a sodden splash into a layer of blessedly cool liquid. Only a few inches deep, but lower than the temperature of my boiling blood. Mud under the back of my head, my eyes looking up at branches that waved and shook. Were those wings above me? I imagined something sinuous, soaring beyond the thick canopy of the jungle, black against the orange clouds. I tried to shout a curse, but the effort was too great. My anger had failed me. I slid into dark, dream-infested unconsciousness.

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Voices in my ears, hauling me out of the darkness. I groaned and rolled over, wanting to sleep, only to find my mouth and nose filled with water. I spluttered and tried to sit up, my nose sore from the warm fluid filling it, my eyes blinking. I was in soft gloom, two shimmering lights only a few feet away, held by shapes that moved like men. I was in six inches of water and six more inches of ooze, my body mostly naked apart from the mat of dead leaves and mud smeared across me, and the torn fragments of my clothes. My thoughts were clearing. I was still hot, but now the heat felt natural, rather than the fever burn I had had before. I could still smell smoke and the taint of roasted meat.

One of the shimmering lights lifted closer, illuminating the man who leaned over me, his fair skin and fair hair lit by the lantern that was its source. A man... a human. A real person, impossibly - how could there be people down here? He was wearing what looked like a short dark blue leather kilt - no fashion sense, whoever he was - and a leather harness with a sword over his back. His skin was pale, almost white, unnaturally pallid. His hair was golden blond, and I felt a rush of envy. I had always wanted to be blonde, like Shenli or like this man. His face was calm and concerned, his voice level and friendly. Unfortunately, I couldn't understand a word of his strange tongue. I pulled myself to my feet, and the jungle swayed around me. He put out a hand to steady me, and I took it gratefully.

"I'm Sorrel" I said. Not the greatest of first lines, but I was still not really myself. He was looking me up and down, his eyes lingering for just a moment on my breasts. I'm not unused to being naked, and I'm in good physical shape, but I felt a rush of irritation at his attention, and scowled fiercely, pulling my hand from his. He grinned, and I felt the ire growing. My side pulsed in sympathy - I looked down to where the *jasq* was half-hidden in the mud and mulch sticking to my hip. The creature had already grown into the wound, a blue scab inside my skin. I shivered despite the heat, and the man facing me reached to take my arm again. I shook away his proffered assistance, glaring at him, and stumbled, my foot tangling in a shrub protruding from the marshy water. The pale man spoke again in a low, calming voice, gesturing off to one side. I could see nothing but darkness in the direction he indicated. To be fair, there was nothing but darkness all around us, just the two lights the men were holding. Only the blond man near me was clearly visible - there were two other men a little further back, equally pale-skinned, in similar skimpy garb. Not so surprising in this heat. Their eyes were on me, too. I could feel anger flowering in my blood. I needed a weapon. I had been helpless for too long!

One of the other men said something, his voice low and worried. The only word that meant anything was "graalur". I stepped back further, my feet squelching in the marsh in which I stood, and repeated the word, questioningly, my fever memories snarling at me.

The blond man nodded at me, and pointed up the slope to the left of me. "Graalur" he replied, nodding again. "Skal ragga tathrioki graalur, belid."

More gibberish. Graalur were black legends, monsters, goblins from the far ends of the world. The stories I'd heard about them were travellers' tales, talking of them pillaging and raiding - were there such

creatures here? Unclear memories of feverish struggles tiptoed through my thoughts. My head was spinning, but I needed to know what was nightmare and what was real. I reached out and seized the lantern, ignoring the blond man's protest, before pushing past him and his friends and scrambled up the shallow slope down which I had rolled... how many hours ago? The climb was hard, my legs not moving properly, as though something was tangled round them.

At the top the lantern revealed a scene of carnage. Five figures lay still on the red mulch, contorted in death, flies crawling across the remains, a low, intense buzz telling of their activity. Beyond them I could just barely make out the remains of the triplane in the dim illumination, canvas wings scorched and blackened, the spars burned to ashes. Merik's funeral pyre. I could see from here that the fuel from the tank had turned the tripe into an inferno, leaving the aeroplane a charred ruin. I felt tears sting my eyes. Perhaps it was a result of the smoke I could smell in the air. I would not weep. No.

Hands gently took hold of my shoulders. I ripped free of the blond man's grip, and walked forward. The flies buzzed away angrily as I leaned down to look at the corpses, lifting the light to show them clearly. Something slid away into the darkness, long and sinuous on too many legs. The bodies had been torched, the fat burned from the bones, but there was enough left to see the remains of dark red skin, the tusks, the burly muscled bodies... and the pointed ears. Almost human. I glanced down one of the bodies, his loincloth lost or discarded. Yes, in some ways very human, if large. The graalur of the pulp stories were bogeymen, a delicious thrill of vicarious danger, spicy tales of ravaging and derring-do in exotic distant lands. These... these were brutal savages, all too much flesh and blood. If the fire had not roasted them, I had no doubt that my fate would have been grim. How could they be here? Next someone would say that there were still elves, too.

That thought made me shiver in earnest.

I looked up at the trees above the dead creatures. The lantern's faint radiance was not enough to show the rent in the canopy above me through which we had tumbled. I gazed around at the fire-scorched ground. I had a vague memory of sliding into the magerealm, of using sorcery to blast the graalur. Or had that been a fever dream? Memories of jagged agony returned, too, and I shuddered, not wanting to think what that meant.

The blond man spoke at my shoulder, his voice concerned. I ignored him, picking up my jacket. It had a pattern of flames across the brown leather, and the gash in the side was black with dry gore. Flies had been working, building their own civilisations in my spilt blood. I flapped it hard to knock off the insect eggs, before bending down and scrubbing the tough hide on the charred earth to remove some of the ordure. The insects buzzed in protest at the end of their dreams of empire.

The blond man had been looking at the ruins of the aeroplane. Now he was just waiting, his two friends at his back. He was keeping them away, giving me time. I felt a faint tinge of gratitude for his

forbearance as I pulled the jacket around my shoulders, fastening it closed. Having my jacket back helped a lot - I felt almost myself again. I lifted the lantern from where I had put it down on the ground, looking down at my breeches. They were torn, no more than shreds around my legs. They were several yards beyond repair. I realised what it was that had been tangling my efforts to walk. I tugged at them and flung the remnants aside. My boots had been dropped a few feet away. I picked one up, and something moved within it. I dropped it hastily, and something small and scaly writhed out of it and slithered away. I grimaced, checked the boot again, carefully, before putting it on, and more warily picked the other boot up. It was unoccupied. I had my boots, my underwear and my jacket. I picked up the unpleasant curved blade of one of the graalur. I felt it gingerly. Not desperately sharp. The metal looked like bronze, lighter than I had expected, and probably less strong. Wonderful. But at least it was a sword, and having one in my hand again made me feel a bit more human. I hadn't been the world's greatest swordswoman in the war, but I could handle a blade pretty well.

I turned back to the waiting man, feeling a touch more confident than I had been an hour ago.

"All right, blondie. Lead on."

One of the others, dark hair and bearded, gestured, clearly unhappy about me having the sword. I glowered at him and hefted the blade, making it clear that they were not taking it from me without a serious fight. The blond man nodded and snapped some kind of command at the others. Grudgingly, they turned to move off. The blond man held out his hand towards me, inviting me to follow. Odds were that I was walking into more trouble, but the alternative was staying here, in the midst of the jungle. And it would be here that Wrack would be looking for me. I paused for a moment, looking over to where the remnants of the triplane enshrined Merik's remains. I thought about trying to bury his body. No – Merik would not have been unhappy about his body ending in cleansing fire. And I hadn't got the tools to extract his remains from the impromptu pyre. I swallowed, my throat closed with a grief I couldn't voice, and headed after the unknown men.

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Two dim lanterns, unknown terrain and three men moving at speed. A recipe for a broken ankle or a painful fall. Fortunately, I didn't suffer either - quite. Blondie's bearded friend was setting a strong pace, and I was struggling to keep up. The two lanterns shed little useful light, and all I could see were the dark hulks of trees and the flicker of scarlet leaves; most of my effort went into watching my footing against the gnarled roots, tangled vines and uneven, mushy ground across which we strode. This was a landscape quite unlike the wildlands of the surface, with pine trees and coarse scrub through the snow – this was lush, rampant and vigorous life, red in branch and leaf. Occasionally I saw the twin points of eyes reflecting back the lantern-light, or shapes writhing away from our passage, but nothing dared to

approach us. I was acutely aware of the chitterings and shrieks of the jungle night, which told me that we were by no means alone out here. As we walked, the men muttered between themselves, all three of them glancing back on occasions to see if I was still with them. The dark bearded man scowled every time he looked at me. I made a point of scowling back.

Despite the deep night darkness, the air was still bubblingly hot, steam rising from the soft, wet earth. My body was drenched in sweat and droplets of moisture from the air. When I did stumble and my hands sank into the ground I could feel how warm the soil was.

I wanted an opportunity to catch up with Blondie, try to talk to him somehow. Find out something about this land, about these people. There were people down here, people like me. Trees, a jungle. How could that be? The Chasm was supposed to be bottomless. Or else drowned in a mile of deep water. The stories said it had been created when the world had been devastated in an ancient sorcerous war that was almost a myth. I'd heard of half a dozen aeroplanes that had vanished into the Chasm – I hadn't heard of anyone returning. Not a thought that improved my optimism.

Blondie wasn't going to stop to talk. No chance. His two friends weren't giving us any time. I hefted the sword and hacked at a liana that had tried to garotte me, taking out my irritation on the scarlet vegetation. I was glad of my leather jacket for protection and modesty, but I was perspiring inside it. I knew that I already stank abominably, and sweating hard wasn't helping.

I don't think I'm ever going to forget that first night-time journey through the scarlet jungles of the Chasm, starting in surprise at every shadow and seeing strangeness in every pool of light the lanterns spread. All around me towering trees, not one remotely akin to the pines and sycamores of the surface. Dripping foliage with leaves ranging from small to bed-sheets, in shapes from needles to dinner-plates. The smell of damp heat, wet soil, of rampant growth and sour decay. And always movement, eyes, the myriad denizens of this deep world watching my passage in terror or with hunger, sometimes both.

I wasn't much of a wilderness girl – I preferred the stone-clad pavements of the cities or the short grass of the aerodrome. If I wanted to travel I could fly, or else take a train or one of the new steamcars that were breaking down on more and more of the roads throughout Sendaal. Jungle treks weren't my idea of a good night out.

I needed to think, to decide what I was going to do. Merik was dead. I was alone down here, the triplane was a hopeless wreck, and Wrack was out there somewhere. I should have killed him when I had the chance. If I had, Merik would still be alive. Guilt and misery clawed at my stomach, old despairs rising in my throat. No one knew where I was. I hadn't believed Wrack could recover so fast. We should have been safely into Belkani aerodrome in two hours, not veering off course over the gaping canyon to try to escape Wrack's wrath. I could feel the muscles of my jaw grinding my teeth together. He had been trying to force us down. All common sense said that he wouldn't flame the triplane over the Chasm. But he had,

his callous ruthlessness driving us into the morass of cloud. And I had been too stubborn to turn back and land... too scared to fall into his clutches again.

Another reason to kill Wrack next time. I felt my scarlet fury like an old friend seething inside me, crushing out my depression. I concentrated on hacking at the red vegetation as I went past, imagining it was Wrack's neck, letting the anger burn.

I was trying to get some grasp on the geography, but even with my eyes better adjusted to the darkness, all I could see was the tangle of virulent jungle. At first I was really pleased when I saw a flicker of flames to one side of us. The three men obviously saw them too, and there was a staccato exchange of conversation between them. Their tone told me that there was something awry. Again I cursed that I did not understand what was being said. Blondie snarled an order, and the four of us headed towards the flames.

Within a few dozen paces I had some idea of what was there. I was not a stranger to the ravages of war, so I had a nasty suspicion of what I would see. We burst out from under the leaf canopy into the wreckage of a cluster of stone and wooden houses set within an open area of land. My attention was caught by the gigantic spire of rock on one side of the village, climbing hundreds of feet above us, the village nestling in its shadow. As I looked at the village itself, I saw that the buildings were broken ghosts. A few still smouldered, low flickering fires consuming the remaining timber. Most structures had already burned out, thatched roofs torched and timber frames charred, stone walls crumbling. Those that had not been set afire had been shattered asunder as though some gigantic beast had trampled them. That was when the stench hit me. The village was a charnel-field, strewn with the bitter remnants of the inhabitants. Uncooked meat and charcoaled buildings. I had no doubts as to what I was seeing. I gagged, and jabbered a protest at the three men. Blondie turned, his face grim, and lifted his lantern, illuminating enough to show the devastation. They had not known of this, and their bleak tones and drawn faces told me that the victims of this assault had been their friends. I tried to look at my three companions, rather than the scene they were examining. This was not their home village, of that I was sure after only a few moments. They were not moving to look at the individual bodies, or to search for loved ones who might be amongst the dead.

And dead there were. Despite my efforts not to look, the light from the lanterns was enough that I saw the bodies of children and old people, hacked down without mercy, of men and women in the contorted tangle of those who had died fighting. This had been a very recent tragedy; it had to be less than a day since this village was put to the sword. Some of the bodies were heavy-set, the bloody skin much darker than the pale humans. The graalur had not had the assault all their own way.

Blondie and Dark-beard were moving through the ruins, looking to see if there were any survivors. The place had been looted, that seemed obvious. A savage, brutal raid by the graalur. I still found it difficult to believe that I was seeing the bodies of goblins from my childhood stories.

After only a short exploration of the field of the dead Blondie growled a terse comment. The other two replied in kind, equally grimly, and then turned away from the wreckage. I felt only relief when we plunged back into the jungle, even though the stench of the slaughterfield clung to us like a sadistic lover for too many hundreds of yards. I could see all three men stiff and grim, not meeting each others' eyes or mine. I wondered if this had been their original goal, but there was no way I could have asked, even if I had wanted to.

We had trekked for no more than another hour, as far as I could judge it, before I had the opportunity to put my new sword to use. We were climbing slightly, angling up the side of a ridge. I fancied I could hear the sound of water rushing somewhere ahead. The jungle was still thick around us, its own orchestra still in good voice. My feet were growing sore inside the boots, and I was ravenously hungry. After the slaughtered village, the thought of food had turned my stomach, but now I was regaining my usual appetite. I gritted my teeth. I was feeling feverish again, hunger and exhaustion coiling around my thoughts and making my vision swim, when one of the men ahead cried out. I peered forward through the gloom, the note of alarm in the man's voice clear enough. I tightened my grip on the hilt of the blade, and something surged out of the undergrowth straight at me.

Chapter Two

I recognised the acrid odour as the grathk flung itself at me, long neck extended, orange beak wide. The grathk was *big!* The ones I had tangled with on the surface were only about two or three feet long - bad enough when there's more than one, I can tell you - but this one was almost twice as big, and equally fierce. Tolly always reckoned they were insane, attacking savagely until they were hacked to pieces. This one was just as psychotic. Instinct took over and I thrust the sword low under its charge, trying to jam the blade's point into its throat. My blade took it in the neck, as I intended, and there was a gush of dark, foul-smelling blood, but the grathk was not stopping. Its blue-purple scales glistened in the dim light, the two heavy claws of its legs scrabbling at the earth as it tried to get to me with its snapping beak, despite the blade in its jugular. I could feel the bronze bending as I tried to hold it back. The heavy beak was a foot wide, and if it closed on my arm I would lose it. If it closed on my throat, I'd be dead. And it didn't want to die! I tried to twist the sword, afraid the metal would break. I was filthy anyway from the mud I had awakened in, but the grathk's blood was even worse. It hopped forwards again - I threw myself backwards, keeping my grip on the hilt, letting it come over me, hoping the claws wouldn't connect. I pulled my legs up and kicked it hard in the chest, trying to fling it backwards. It felt like kicking an engine block - the impact jolted me back onto a lump in the ground, and for an instant I thought I'd broken my back. The grathk squealed, the high-pitched squeak that always sounded so ridiculous coming from the savage lizard-birds, and it toppled backwards, its tiny forelegs waving pathetically as the long neck lashed back and forth, spraying blood everywhere. I scrambled to my feet and hacked at the neck, taking the head off the brute. It continued to twitch and kick, the body not realising the head was gone.

Ahead of me, I heard shouts and more grathk squeals. I staggered forward. One of the men was down, a grathk snapping at his body sadistically. I couldn't see which man it was, nor where the others were. I dived forward and hacked at the grathk, catching the volging lafquass by surprise. My first blow caught it in the side, and barely got through the blue scales. I swore as it spun round. They were amazingly agile on their two powerful legs. It lunged at me, beak open in anticipation. The beak raked across my side, the leather of the jacket preventing it carving a ravine in my ribs. I mentally praised my sense in putting up with the heat and leaving the jacket on, and hacked at the grathk's head. It felt good to let rip at something. I was snarling in battle-lust. It swung its head into the blade. Dumb cluck. Blood spurted from the cut in its skull, but - typical of my luck - it didn't stop. The beak snapped down on the blade, and I thought the bronze would crack. I shoved hard, feeling the strength of the bird's muscles, and it opened its beak again, more blood frothing around the mouth. Nothing in the way of a fatal blow. It leaped upwards, and I dived sideways. Grathks on the surface could jump up to four feet vertically. This one jumped higher than me, and I'm five foot six. It came slamming down, missing me by three feet.

It might be fast, but I was faster. I sliced at a scrawny leg, hoping to cripple it. Missed completely. No score to either of us. I twisted to the right, feinting. The dumb bird was stupid enough to follow the motion, and I ducked under its bite to cut home at its neck. The blade caught the grathk cleanly, and carved deep. Not deep enough to decapitate it, but enough to have worried it if it was smart enough to worry. Which, of course, it wasn't. It was bleeding profusely from the neck wound, staggering slightly. So was I, for the record, but I wasn't seriously injured.

It was then that I realised that actually I was bleeding quite a lot from a ragged wound on my left hand. I hadn't felt it, but I must have fallen onto something sharp. A branch or something, from the look of it. I didn't have time to worry - or else I was as dumb a cluck as the grathk. It was stamping, swinging its head, spitting blood to the left and right in the process. I could tell that it was dying, but it wasn't going quietly. It lunged at me again; I dodged to the right, hacking wildly in the hopes of keeping it back until it did the decent thing and expired. My foot caught a half-buried stone, and I fell backwards uncontrollably, hitting the ground much harder than I would have wanted. My head slammed into the hard earth, and for a few moments I could see blinding lights in front of me. Fury surged in my thoughts. I was not going to die here at the beak of some overgrown chicken! I swiped madly with the sword, kicking with my feet. One boot connected and I kicked again, hard. I blinked, trying to clear my vision, and something heavy slammed into me. Hot fluid sluiced across my face; the smell was appalling, the taste of the quantity that went into my mouth worse, like liquid manure. I kicked and shoved instinctively to get the grathk off me, my sword slicing randomly. The grathk was twisting and squirming against me, but I could not feel its beak connecting. I heaved harder, and the body slid sideways, suddenly still. I dragged my hand across my face, smearing the corpse's blood everywhere but clearing my eyes.

The grathk was dead, sprawled beside me. I felt weak, anger leeching out of me the same way my blood was escaping. I slapped my right hand over the wound on my left, trying to quell the blood loss until I could bandage it properly. I felt bruised and sore all over, particularly the small of my back and my left thigh. I didn't remember being hit there, but I could see a dark red graze all across the skin.

Blondie was walking back towards me. He didn't look much better than I felt. He knelt beside the man my second grathk had savaged, looking down at him worriedly. A hand to his neck - a motion I recognised all too well. But then a smile, and he nodded at me, saying something in that unknown language of his. I wished I could *talk* to him! I felt irritation surge in me at the unfairness of the universe. At least the other man was alive. I pulled myself to my feet. I needed something to bandage my hand. Blondie was treating the other man's wounds - he was not in good state, but he was better off than the grathk. I walked over slowly, and saw the dark bearded man making his way towards us. He had bloodstains on his arm and his kilt was torn, but he looked in reasonable shape. He came over and looked at me coldly. From across the way Blondie said something firmly. Dark-beard raised an eyebrow, and replied, his voice somewhat warmer. I grinned at him. He responded by turning away and walking off. So much for proffered friendship.

He bent down and pulled some leaves off a shrub to one side of the path we had been following. He walked back, nodded at my wounded hand, pushed my other hand aside and pressed the leaves against the injury. To my surprise, the blood-flow lessened, the wound scabbing as I watched. He cracked a small smile. Maybe this was the start of a beautiful friendship after all.

I was perspiring heavily, my heart still pounding painfully in my chest. The volging canyon was so squuming hot! It had no right to be so warm in the time before sunrise.

The sky was brightening... a little. Perhaps it was dawn. Blondie had managed to get the injured man to his feet. He gesticulated towards the top of the ridge, and Dark-beard nudged me onwards. I complied, despite the fact that I was beginning to feel as though I had been drained dry. I was desperately thirsty, and the jasq in my side was pulsing uncomfortably. My own jasq had never done that. I wished I knew what was happening.

The top of the rise, and my legs were telling me I was not going any further. I just hoped it was only downhill from here. Blondie turned back and grinned. I'm sure he was just trying to be reassuring, but in the growing dawn light it was more like a skull's amusement. I looked at the way ahead of us. Forty feet below us white water sparkled indistinctly, and the roar of the rapids battered at my ears. A narrow rope bridge spanned the gorge. Dark-beard was waiting for me, lantern in hand. Blondie gestured. I didn't know if I could do it. Heights don't worry me - I'm a flyer, after all - but the thought of walking across that single rope, with a rope on each side... I wasn't sure I had the strength.

Blondie gestured again. It was definitely getting brighter. I had two shadows.

Hunh?

I looked back, towards where the sun was rising.

Or not.

Above us was the solid ceiling of clouds, still pretty much as dark and enclosing as they had ever been. Perhaps they were glowing slightly, not quite as black as an hour ago. The light was not coming from there. From this height I could see across the valley out of which we had just climbed. Laid out like a red carpet was the jungle, a few openings in the canopy hinting at the presence of more villages. Towering above the leaves a mile away I could see a far taller tree, dark, rough bark, with a cluster of bulbous gourds growing from the upper branches like grapes. The gourds were glowing brightly, shedding brilliant light across the scarlet jungle. The tree had to be three hundred feet high, each of the gourds between ten and twenty feet across. And they shone like sunlight.

I stared around. On the far side of the gorge, a good two or three miles away, I could see another tree of gourds, equally bright. I stared at a bunch of the glowing fruit. Not as bright as the sun, then - I could look at it without hurting my eyes. I adjusted my estimate of its brightness. Looking across the roof

of the jungle, I could see the rock spire that had bounded the village. We must have come at least two miles in the last hour, mostly uphill. No wonder my feet hurt. There were other spires, too, climbing half-way to the clouds, and beyond them a faint, distant dark wall that seemed to climb to the sky, too. The edge of the canyon. It looked terrifyingly distant, and impossibly high. There were more lights glowing in the middle distance, rising above the jungle. I also fancied I could see the glitter of light on water, a lake or a wide river dozens of miles away. I shivered, trying to grasp the size of the Chasm, and I looked back at the impossible tree as it shone brilliantly.

Blondie could see where I was looking, and caught my gaze. He gestured at the brilliant light and said something in a matter of fact tone. I gritted my teeth, angry yet again that I couldn't understand a volging word he was saying. He pointed at the rope bridge again.

“Volging lafquass, Blondie!” I swore. “You expect me to cross *that*?” Knowing that he couldn't understand me only added to my vituperation.

There was nowhere else for me to go. I just had to find the strength and get on with it. I scowled at Blondie again, and stepped onto the bridge.

Believe me, I'd much rather be in an aeroplane at ten thousand feet than on a fragile rope bridge forty feet over a churning river. The spray from the rapids meant the ropes were slick, and as I moved over the rapids the roar of the water became deafening. The universe is fundamentally unfair – all that water, and I couldn't do anything to quench my thirst. The growing light from the trees made the peril clearer. That didn't help. I held the rope tightly, and walked steadily, slowly, watching my footing. If the rope was stretched a foot above the ground, I'd have crossed it without a second thought. Yeah. But when all that's supporting you over a lethal drop is a set of three ropes that look like they've been here for centuries it feels far more unsettling.

Half way over, I glanced back. Blondie was not far behind, assisting the injured man. Two of them together? Blondie was braver than I was. Despite myself, I felt ashamed of my own nerves. I strode faster, wanting to get off the bridge before the other two put too much weight on it.

Dark-beard was waiting for me. He assisted me off the end of the bridge. I would have brushed aside his aid, but I was realising just how exhausted I was. I dreaded the thought that we had further to go to... well, to wherever it was we were going.

* * *

Half a mile more felt like ten leagues. It wasn't all downhill, either. Instead of jungle, the ground was craggy, our route weaving between monoliths of granite, like the tumbled ruins of a giant's fortress. More

of the crimson vegetation festooned the rockery, mostly mosses and grasses. I was concluding that Blondie was a callous volging bastard when I realised that the crags and vegetation were giving way to more artfully crafted stonework. Ancient, solid blocks of cut stone, swathed in burgundy plants. I was beginning to realise how many different shades of red there actually were. I could kill for a glimpse of honest greenery. Blondie called out something, and two figures appeared atop one of the slabs of masonry towering over us. Spears pointed in our direction for a moment, and then we were gestured to pass.

The camp beyond nestled in a relatively level area, with cliffs rising on two sides, a stream tumbling down rocks into a pool at one end. The ruins of old stonework formed buttresses on the other two sides. The makeshift encampment lurking within it would be relatively defensible. Canvas and skin tents mingled with makeshift huts of jungle timber and rushes to provide shelter for people. Forty or fifty tired, dishevelled men, women and children, most virtually naked, only strips of cloth and leather about them. Refugees. The look is universal, whether down here in the depths of the Chasm or up on the surface. It looked so like some of the camps from the... from my war. Sad eyed children were hustled away from us by bleak, worried women. Bitter men, helpless after the turmoil of a retreat or a flight. The major difference between this camp and the ones I had been in was that the inhabitants weren't fighting over any fur or shred of blanket that might keep them warm. I still wasn't used to the heat down here, and the place smelt rank, the warmth making the people stink nearly as badly as I did, but it was probably better than struggling to survive in the bitter surface snow.

Blondie and Dark-beard were ushering their injured friend into one of the nearest huts. Other people were talking with them, and I could guess from their tone that they were reporting the destruction of the village.

I stood by the entrance, forgotten by everyone, and eyed the camp more carefully. They had not been here long at all - the structures looked recent, semi-finished. But the surroundings... now those were much, much older. I blinked, working out what I was seeing. Lloruk work. The shaping of the stones, the carvings mostly smothered by plum-red moss. Swirls and coils, knot-work and scales, and the stylised, vertically slit eyes that were the mark of the primordial saurian-folk. In a couple of places there were coils and spikes of dark metal, too, embedded in the stonework in artful patterns that almost seemed to make sense, until I looked at them more closely. I had seen pictures of lloruk ruins in books, historical texts I had read at school, before the war. Why should I be surprised at the presence of lloruk remains in this canyon? Their war had caused the devastation of which the Chasm was one example. I just hadn't thought that there could be anything left down here.

I realised someone was gazing at me. Blondie had come back, and was watching me, noting my interest, I gestured at the nearest carving.

"Lloruk" I said simply.

He nodded in agreement. "Lloruk" he echoed back at me. "Old ruins."

I blinked, and then realised that he was speaking in the ancient lloruk tongue. I had had the volging thing drummed into me when I was a child - a mark of erudition, my teacher had called it, back when our lords and masters allowed us humans to learn more than basics. A dead language, not used by anyone apart from a few scholars with nothing better to do. And yet here it was being used by a savage in the depths of the Chasm.

I hadn't used the lloruk tongue for ten eventful years. How much could I remember? I let the sibilant syllables of the language echo in my mind, and responded. "Old. No lloruk now."

Blondie's face broke into a vestigial grin. "You speak the lloruk tongue" he said, stating the volging obvious. I was so glad to be able to talk to him, albeit in my halting and half-forgotten school-girl vocabulary, that I did not protest.

A few people had gathered around us. A man with tattoos on his face was talking vociferously - and incomprehensibly - to Darkbeard. A tall, pretty, fair-haired woman walked up to us, saying something to Blondie, and I caught her expression when she glanced sidelong at me. Jealous. Ho hum. I glared back at her. I hadn't been chasing Blondie, and I didn't need grief from his woman.

An older man was at my elbow, saying something utterly meaningless. I glared at him, too, and said, firmly, "Talk in lloruk." At least I hope that's what I said. My teacher at Telmarak School had done a good job of etching the language into my skull, but it had been a long time ago. I hadn't had a need for it since I addressed the headmaster in lloruk at the leaving ceremony, proving I had got a decent grip of the tongue. Ten years. It felt like a lifetime.

The older man nodded. He had greying, receding hair, a sparse beard, and a bright expression. I christened him 'Grey'.

"I'm Tulher." So much for my nickname. "Darhath and I verulnarch the camp together." Veruln-what? Verul was ruler in lloruk. Govern, perhaps. Darhath? Tulher was already continuing. I struggled to keep a grip on his words. "Which town are you from?"

He was eyeing me, running his eyes up and down. I bit back a comment - I couldn't instantly remember my lloruk swearwords, unfortunately. I fixed his gaze. "I'm Sorrel. I came from the surface."

His expression was blank, uncomprehending. Join the club, Tulher. Before he could respond, though, the woman who had been talking to Blondie was at his elbow. She looked at me; even in this heat, her expression was icy. "There is a water for washing" she rasped.

I began to bridle, then realised that actually the idea was extremely appealing. I had been wishing I was upwind of myself for some considerable time. I wanted to say "Lead on", but had to settle for "I follow you."

* * *

A vigorous scrub down in the warm, clear water of the pool to which she led me left me feeling almost human again. I was surprised how warm the water was - I had nervously expected the sort of icy mountain streams we had on the surface, but it was pleasant, warm enough to be comfortable, not far off body temperature. The blonde stood, making sure none of the camp's inhabitants made the most of me being naked. Mostly I suspected she was making sure Blondie didn't get too near me. I can spot a jealous woman at fifty paces. I rubbed my hair, wishing I had some soap, glad yet again that I kept the dark locks cut short. Long hair is hopeless under a flying helmet. Getting it soaked like this would only make it curl even more unmanageably, though.

Once I'd got the blood, mud, ordure, gore, leaves, filth and general yuk off me, I took the opportunity to examine the jasq. The dark blue scab occupied a substantial fraction of my side below the ribs. I ran my hand down it; it was smooth, not unlike my own skin apart from the colour. If Wrack wanted it back he'd have to cut it out of me. Hmm. I'd better not give him *that* idea - he'd enjoy it. A nasty corner of my mind replied "like I did." I shouted it down. Yes, I'd enjoyed it. I had no regrets. Wrack had deserved it. How it was part of me, now, I did not know - all rational logic said that my feverish decision to claim the jasq had been lethal madness.

But it had worked.

I felt it again, with no new rush of comprehension. It was growing into me, just as my original jasq had. And that meant... the temptation to reach sideways to the other realm was for a moment intense, and then I slid down into the water, soaking myself thoroughly as I thought about what I was going to do. I was tired, hungry, aching in more than a dozen places - this was not the time to experiment. A twisted memory of agony after the crash convinced me I did not want to try it yet. The risks... all common sense told me I ought to be dead already. I was in no shape to compound that risk. And there was no hurry. There was no way Wrack could use it now - was there? I shivered, despite the warm water. Wrack was not going to be happy. It was only a matter of time before he found me.

I was not scared of Wrack. Honest I wasn't. The scar on my upper arm itched. I scratched it roughly.

Memories told me I was lying to myself. I ignored them, grinding my teeth together hard, and attacked my flying jacket. It did not fare well; the leather was not coming clean easily, and the pale fur and lining were sodden before I was satisfied it was fit to wear again. I had bought it at considerable cost to

replace the one I lost after Wrack brought me down during the war. I did not intend to lose another expensive jacket. The woman was watching. I lifted the jacket up, and water poured from the seams. She grinned. Bitch.

"I need something to wear" I said harshly. She nodded, and walked round the rough wattle screen that masked the pool. This was obviously the main bathing area for the camp; the water flowed down over a tumble of stones into the pool, and poured out into a trickling brook that headed further down. I just hoped it wasn't used for drinking water anywhere below. I felt better than I had been in hours. I was also aware how tired and hungry I was.

The woman returned, and tossed a bundle of dark blue straps to me. I stared at the garment. Using the word in the widest sense, unlike the clothing, which was narrow bits of cloth on a leather harness. My first instinct was anger at the stupid clothing... but then I looked at the woman, and realised that her own garb wasn't much different. In this wet heat, leather made some sort of sense, with softer cloth to cover more sensitive bits of skin. Anything more substantial and I'd bake. I shrugged into the harness, and cinched it tight around me with the small bronze buckles, smoothing down the short excuse for a skirt around my waist. Better than some of the things I'd had to wear at Wrack's.

The woman inspected me. I looked her up and down, too. More muscles than most women I knew on the surface. Hard faced, the lines of care in her features. She had lived already. So what? So had I.

"Name Kelhene" she said simply. It occurred to me that her lloruk might be worse than mine. I gave her my name, and bluntly asked if there was food.

* * *

Water to drown my thirst, and food - not desperately substantial, but anything was welcome - and then a place to curl up on softish grass - well, something that looked sort of like red grass - to one side of the camp. The place was abuzz with noise and clamour, people talking, arguing, haggling, flirting, shouting at children and each other - all the usual activities of humans in groups. I was too tired to care, despite it being mid-morning. The jasq was still warm, throbbing slightly, and the bruises and cuts all over me stung, but most of all I couldn't keep my burning eyes open. I slid into a bleak slumber. My dreams were tangled mixtures of Wrack, falling aeroplanes, scarlet trees and glowing lanterns. I did not sleep easily, despite my fatigue.

Chapter Three

Tulher and Blondie - no, get used to calling him Darhath - were both looking at me in disbelief. Blondie - Darhath's blue eyes were hard and suspicious. Above our heads was the solid ceiling of cloud, unchanged, unyielding. And I had come down from above it. I suppose I could understand their doubts. I gestured again, spreading my arms instinctively. It didn't help that there was no word in lloruk for an aeroplane.

"Three fixed wings, one above the other, and a... a..." Volg it, how did I explain a propeller, let alone the engine? "...a thing on the front that turns fast, pulling the winged box through the air so that it flies." All right, so it sounded improbable to *me*, and I'd flown them ever since the aerodrome got its first delivery of Malagan biplanes, two years before the war started.

"This... *machine*... where is it?"

I grimaced, and explained it again to Tulher. Darhath was slightly more satisfied; he at least had seen the wreckage of the triplane, albeit in the dark and at a distance.

"From the surface, all we can see in the Chasm is a sea of cloud" I added. "Sometimes we see flashes of lightning, but we don't know what's down here. The stories tell of its creation in the elf-lloruk war, but that was over two thousand years ago."

Tulher shook his head. "We have stories about lands beyond the sky, but they're fairy stories. Myths of water that becomes glass, and clouds that fall from the sky and coat the land with white fur." He half-smiled. "The elf-lloruk war - that's something else we have stories about."

I grimaced, and sipped the hot, spicy drink I had been given. The light blue mug had a smart glaze and an attractive abstract pattern in yellow. It also had chips in the rim, evidence of hard use. These refugees had brought some of their goods with them, but their escape had not been easy. Across the camp, I could hear a child shrieking in protest, and a woman's tired efforts to calm the brat. "We had no idea there were people at the base of the canyon." I responded shortly. "I don't know what else there is down here." I gestured at the stonework. "Are there still lloruk here?"

There was a cool pause, and I wondered what I had said. Tulher drew in a breath, and then nodded. Sometimes the simplest motions can be the most chilling.

I couldn't ignore the horrible thought that Tulher's response awakened in me. I looked at them both and asked one word. "Elves?"

Both shook their heads, and I felt myself relax, but only a little. The idea that there were lloruk down here, improbable as it sounded, was bad enough.

Not that lloruk were my problem. I needed to get back to the surface. I still had work to do – courier and observation duties by day, and by night... I had a jasq back. If that meant what I hoped it did, then I could do far more within the Firebirds now. Always assuming the raid on Wrack's mansion had not brought the wrath of the other Lords down on my friends. I shook my head, dispelling the dark fears crawling around my thoughts, and looked at Darhath. "How can I climb to the surface?"

Tulher answered first, shaking his head firmly. He gestured to the left, and I followed his gaze. All I could see were the cliff walls to one side, rising up thirty or forty feet from the edge of the camp. "You can't climb the walls of the world" he answered plainly.

I got to my feet and looked upwards, trying to see past the tops of the cliffs. They weren't that steep, at this stage. "How close are the walls?"

"About ninety miles from here" Darhath replied slowly. There was a yell from the far side of the camp, and people began making their way over. I'd already found out that the ramshackle building at which they were gathering was the communal kitchen - I'd had a rather thin breakfast there an hour before. My thoughts were still with the walls.

"Can they be climbed?"

Darhath's turn to shake his head. "No one ever has, to my knowledge. There is no path - how could there be?"

"Stairs? A tunnel into the side of the canyon, angling upwards? I can't believe you haven't tried to reach the surface!"

Tulher laughed. "Why? The surface is cold, too cold to live any more. There is no life or warmth up there. And it is impossibly high."

I put my hands on my hips and canted my head sideways, looking at him sternly. "Squuming lafquass, Tulher. *I* come from up there. There's plenty of life on the surface."

"So you say."

"I need to get back home!" I wailed. I realised with growing shame that there were tears in my eyes. I missed Tolly and Verin and Kemal and - volg it - I even missed Shenli. All the Flying Corps. The war might be over, but we still had work to do. Mail and urgent messages to deliver, areas to observe, even the occasional passenger. We had feared the Lords would close down the aerodrome after the war, but our little aeroplanes still had uses, and Tolly and the Marshall had justified us continuing to fly. Dragons

couldn't be everywhere – our ramshackle collection of fliers patrolled the northern edges of Sendaal, giving early warning of ursoid incursions or grathk flocks. I had a purpose up there. I had friends.

And I had the Firebirds.

Darhath put a hand on my shoulder. I shook it off, angrily, and rounded on him, telling him to leave me alone. All right, so I used somewhat richer language than that. A few hours had been enough for me to dredge up from my memory some lloruk swearwords, picked up illicitly after lessons or in whispered conversations in class in a school that no longer existed. I didn't need Darhath's sympathy! I stalked away and made for the kitchen tent.

I stopped before I reached it, and paused. This place was struggling to survive. I had no right to their food. Hell, they'd taken me in without any good reason. They could have left me to rot in the jungle. I owed them some thanks, not my ever-present anger.

I needed to go back and make my peace with Darhath. It wasn't his fault that I was stranded down here.

Fine thoughts. I don't do apologies.

I looked round. Tulher and Darhath were watching me, worried faces and wide eyes. I almost laughed at them.

Twenty paces back, and I sat down, facing them again. Typical Sorrel. Act first, think about what to say later. I gestured around me, giving me time to put a question into my fast-improving lloruk.

"What caused all this? Who are you fighting? The graalur?"

Tulher looked at me levelly. "You really don't know anything, do you?" he asked quietly.

I looked at him and raised my eyebrows. Wrack could raise just one eyebrow - very stylish, very effective. I wished I could do that.

Darhath chuckled, but there was little humour in his tone. "If she has fallen from the sky, how would she know?"

Tulher took a deep breath. "The enemy we face is the graalur – that is who we are fighting. We've lost nine of the Solani towns in the last two months, and we've had to flee in the face of their advance. But they are not the minds behind the attacks – they are being controlled." He held my gaze, making sure I understood what he was saying. "The true enemy is the lloruk."

I took a slow, careful breath. Beings from deepest myth, one side in the most devastating war the world had ever known. They had been gone from the surface for two millennia. The idea that they were

here, now, and waging a brutal war against the humans of the Chasm was almost beyond belief... except that Darhath and Tulher were so clearly deadly serious.

“The Solani occupy most of the land between the rocklands of the Neldar Ridge and the edge of the Helkin Expanse” he explained. “The graalur hit suddenly and hard, far better organised than they had been before. They took Cangedran, Zarilas and Belgran before we had any chance to fight back. Enslaved the people they took alive, but more than half of the population were killed.” I could picture burning towns, the dead sprawled across the cobbled streets where they fell, the grim survivors chained and whipped to make them march. Perhaps my pictures weren’t a true image of the fallen settlements, but I had seen the aftermath of the fall of Trakomar. Tulher’s words evoked memories I did not want to recall. “We tried to fight back, but we were too few, and too disorganised.”

Darhath took up the saga. “We asked for help, but it was already too late. The remaining towns didn’t stand a chance. We were in Muranon when the graalur attacked. We gathered some of the survivors here, but we’re outnumbered and in no shape to offer a real fight to the graalur and the lloruk sorcerers.”

Tulher nodded. “We wanted to flee into the Eski lands, the other side of the gorge, but they refused to allow us to come into their region. Their minister, Norghlin, fell out with my predecessor over the rights to a copper mine, and now they seem to think our misfortunes are amusing. That’s why we’re stranded here.”

Darhath scowled grimly. “That may have changed now. That settlement we saw burned out – that’s the north-western boundary of the Eski lands. They’d been keeping a watch on us, making sure we didn’t try to move into their territory.”

Tulher shrugged. "Maybe they’ll be more willing to aid us now the lloruk have come south and started on them."

His bleak amusement was punctuated by a shout from one of the guards atop the outcroppings of rock overlooking the encampment. She was gesturing, pointing upwards with a spear, indicating a dot against the grey clouds. A dot that was approaching, wings outstretched. I stared up into the sky, my heart in my mouth, guessing what I was seeing. Wrack had found me. He had sensed the jasq, and it had called him to it. He had come to cut it out of me again. I was on my feet, backing away, my heart hammering in my chest as the shape swooped low over the camp...