

NaNoWriMo 2004

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"You Sir are a liar, cheat and a scoundrel," the half-elven lord said as he slammed down his cards on the antique Arborean pine table. The other card players around the table fell silent and waited for the half-elven lord's opponent to respond.

"Well Sir, you've got one out of three right," the tiefling prince said with a hint of a smile. "But then again, we all know that certain of the exploits that you regale to us all too frequently are.... Shall we say embellished?"

There was a titter of laughter from the other lords and ladies in the room. The half-elven lord's face went through different shades of pink then red and finally scarlet all the way up to the tips of his pointed ears. This had the rather unfortunate effect of clashing very badly with the beautiful jade coloured silk robes that he wore and made him look like some strange Arborean vegetable spirit come to life.

"How dare you accuse me!" shouted the half-elf. The lord rose to his feet in rage, towering over the tiefling who had remained seated calmly holding his hand of cards. "Lord Horacio accuses me of embellishing tales of my travels." The half-elf spoke to his opponent and at the same time addressing the others in the room.

Rarely did such distinguished and refined gentry in the city of Sigil gather for a socializing over games of cards and chance, but when they did - something spectacular was always guaranteed to happen. Fortunes were won and lost, challenges laid and accepted and the only real currency exchanged was that of reputation and standing amongst the Golden Lords.

"Tell of your last journey," challenged the half-elf. "Which exotic location did you last venture to? When last did you travel to a place fraught with danger and almost certain death?"

"A good question Lord Redthorn," replied the tiefling prince pondering the question for a moment. "I do believe that it was... Ah, yes - the last time that I visited the Hive."

The others in the plush chamber laughed and it looked as though the half-elven lord was going to erupt in fury. Just at that moment one of the other guests rose from his seats and held out his hands in a gesture signalling for calm and quiet. The large man wore an elaborate cloak covered with numerous mystical symbols.

"I do believe that Lord Redthorn has a point," began Lord Ashmantle. "Many of those gathered here tonight are distinguished explorers who have done much to increase the knowledge of locations around the planes." He paused for effect and smiled smugly as he saw that his words had managed to amuse and catch the attention of many of the other guests. "But unless my memory has begun to fail me, I have yet to hear of any of your travels Lord Horacio."

The smile on the tie fling's face disappeared instantly to be replaced by an angry glare at Lord Ashmantle. He rose slowly from his golden chair and straightened himself up with a deliberate slowness, as if to emphasize his

movements or perhaps to keep his anger under control.

"Though it is true that I have not spoken of my travels Lord Ashmantle," the tiefling prince stated in a neutral tone. "It is for the simple reason that the places that I have been to are not topics that should be discussed at gatherings such as these."

"Oh," replied the well-dressed fat man feigning surprise. "I was not aware that you frequented places of ill-repute. Then again, if you do make a habit of going to the Hive...." The other guests were now all watching the exchange with keen interest. Lord Ashmantle's words were beginning to him home with Lord Horacio, despite his best efforts not to let it show.

"The Hive is nothing compared to the places that I have been to," Lord Horacio's words dripped with undisguised venom. "Baator, the Gray Waste and the Abyss even don't compare."

"Well, well." Lord Ashmantle chuckled with a look of disbelief on his face. "I'm sure that we are all dying to hear of your travels if those places are really so terrible. Fear not for our delicate sensibilities, my friend. I'm sure that we can stomach whatever exploits you are willing to regale to us." There were murmurs of agreement from several corners of the dining room as well as a the sound of stifled giggling.

Lord Horacio took in a deep breath and for a moment the entire chamber was silent. "Alas, I cannot." The silence was broken by mutterings from the corners of the room that became angry and the tiefling prince was keenly aware that his party had taken a sharp down-ward turn. "Though I would dearly like to share them with such a distinguished groups of ladies and gentlemen, as well as my good friend Lord Redthorn; I have taken an oath never to speak of such things again." The tiefling prince's shoulders slumped and he lowered his gaze so as not to make eye contact with anyone.

"Come, come," said the Lord Redthorn joining in. "Surely there is some small part of these nightmarish travels that you can tell us about."

For a moment a look of utter hatred and malice flashed across Lord Horacio's face, but it was quickly replaced by a look of congenial embarrassment. "My apologies, my good friend. But I'm sure that neither of us would like to cause the beautiful Lady Kyle to lose any sleep over the stories that I could share with you." The tiefling prince gave Lord Redthorn's daughter a warm smile and sly wink.

For a moment Lord Redthorn was lost for words and Lord Ashmantle once again came to his rescue. "So it appears we are at an impasse," Lord Ashmantle said in a weary tone. "You can neither tell us of your travels and we cannot confirm whether you have ever left the City of Doors at all." He paused again and adjusted one of his diamond necklaces. A conspiratorial smile spread across his face as an idea began to blossom in his mind. "Perhaps there is another solution to this dilemma."

"I'm all ears," replied Lord Horacio with an air of extreme confidence.

"Surely the solution is simple. If you were to undertake another journey, one that you could tell us about - well then you would have something to share with all these distinguished gentlemen and ladies." A brief ripple of

applause spread across the room and Lord Ashmantle gave a curt bow. "After all, this is the annual meeting of the Extraordinary League of Planar Cartographers and one has to have at least been somewhere before one can join. Why even Lady Kyle has been to the Outlands once."

The beautiful Lady Kyle blushed and hid her face behind her fan. She looked to her father for support or direction, but he was too busy gloating at Lord Horacio. Instead she got up, excused herself with a brief curtsy and left the chamber. Lord Horacio's gaze lingered on her as she left the chamber, but her father failed to notice.

"I'm intrigued by your suggestion and the meaning of your proposal," stated Lord Horacio acknowledging the proposal as well as the accusation that he had not met the entry requirements to be in the Extraordinary League of Planar Cartographers. "Perhaps you could elaborate for all of us where one could travel to in order to return with tales of daring-do and high jinks."

"I'm glad that you asked me that Lord Horacio," replied Lord Ashmantle smugly. "Perhaps a gentleman of your fine standing, who has been to such unspeakable places, would be capable of Walking the Great Road in say a hundred days?"

The room immediately burst in to a tumultuous cacophony as numerous guests began talking, shouting and arguing at once. Some calling for Lord Ashmantle to retract his challenge and many more arguing the point that no one in the League had managed to travel around the Great Ring in less than one hundred and twelve days.

"Preposterous," shouted Lord Gensen, his booming voice drowning out the other guests. Lord Gensen was large for a bariaur and his platinum tipped horns together with his large physique made him an imposing figure. His ceremonial breastplate was always polished until it reflected as well as any mirror and his adamantite bound staff made for an impressive staff of ceremony.

"Order!" Lord Gensen boomed again and the guests reluctantly fell silent as the master of ceremonies brought the meeting back to a semblance of civility. "Lord Ashmantle it is within your rights to challenge Lord Horacio. But the rules state that you must have a second."

"I'll second him," Lord Redthorn stated immediately.

"Very well," Lord Gensen acknowledged the motion proposed with the thump of his staff. "However, our rules also state that a challenge of Walking the Great Road cannot have a time limit imposed on it."

"Please forgive me," Lord Ashmantle said. "I spoke in haste. If I recall correctly the best that any in the League have managed is to complete the journey in one hundred and twelve days using no less than one hundred and twenty portals, gates, conduits and what have you." The richly dressed lord was about to continue his proposal when he was interrupted by Lord Horacio.

"I accept," the tiefling prince stated in a loud and clear voice.

"Just a moment, Lord Horacio." Lord Ashmantle looked displeased at the interruption and was busy trying to think of a way to win back control of the challenge. "I had not finished the terms of the challenge."

"The challenge has been accepted," Lord Gensen said in his booming voice and thumped his staff to emphasise his point. Lord Ashmantle and Lord Redthorn both looked crestfallen, but the fat man more so as his cunningly prepared plan had not worked out exactly how he and Lord Redthorn had planned it.

"I not only accept the challenge," Lord Horacio said with a confident air. "I will do so in one hundred days and in eighty gates, portals, conduits what have you - or less."

"Without passing through the City of Doors," Lord Redthorn interjected, clarifying the terms of the challenge.

"Absolutely," Lord Horacio replied with a smile. "I shall not set foot in the city again until my journey is complete. Otherwise I will have failed the challenge and will resign from the League."

Once again those gathered in the room began talking excitedly, shouting and arguing all at the same time. Even Lord Gensen's best efforts to bring the gathering back under control failed. No one much noticed Lord Ashmantle's suspicious glare towards Lord Horacio or Lord Redthorn's toast to a mission doomed to certain failure.

The lively debates, excessive amounts of drinking and partying continued for several more hours without any further challenges being set. As the evening drew to a close the cream of Sigil society filed out of the mansion house in the Lady's ward and headed home in their carriages and sedan chairs. Lord Gensen was the last to leave and as he stood on the top of the stairs bidding his host farewell, he could not help but pause and turn to face Lord Horacio once again.

"Lord Horacio I commend you on your valour and bravery in accepting the challenge, but do you not perhaps think that you have over-estimated how long this journey will take you?"

"Fear not," Lord Horacio replied with an air of supreme confidence. "I have given my word as a gentleman, accepted the challenge and may even exceed the deadlines that I have given myself."

The retired bariaur general shook his head in resignation and prepared to leave. "Well, I'll say this for you Lord Horacio - if you succeed then you are guaranteed a place in the annals of our society. Even the modrons take months or years to complete the journey. What makes you so confident that you can traverse the Great Ring in such a short time period with so few gates?"

"A good question, Lord Gensen." Lord Horacio studied the bariaur general for a moment before continuing, in an attempt to discern the reason for Lord Gensen's question. "I plan to travel in the opposite direction that the modrons go in their Great March."

Lord Gensen sighed and then straightened his back to give Lord Horacio a perfect salute. "It has been a pleasure knowing you, Lord Horacio. My thanks and the thanks of all those in the League for entertaining us tonight. I hope that you complete the challenge and return in one piece." But I doubt that you will, the bariaur general left the last part unspoken. He turned abruptly and departed with his entourage of bodyguards.

"Oh, I fully intend to complete the challenge," Lord Horacio whispered to himself standing in the entranceway

of his mansion. "Rest assured that I will not only do so, but that the League will never be the same again."

Later that evening several of the League members met in one of the more expensive and exclusive taverns in the Lady's ward. This particular establishment was renowned for the revitalising hot pools, sauna's and baths as well as the high calibre of the staff working there. All who went there were guaranteed to come out feeling relaxed and refreshed, without the worry that anything discussed therein would pass beyond the walls of the tavern. Some believed that the place had a powerful enchantment placed upon it so that none of the discussions taking place inside could ever be re-told, in any shape or form, outside. When asked about this the staff of the tavern simply smile and shrug - indicating that it's not something that they are at liberty to discuss.

"Well done on out-manoeuvring that damned tiefling at his own party," complimented Lord Anisen as he lay in a large copper bath. The water was covered with a thin layer of bubbles and one of the serving girls was busy giving the powerfully built man a neck massage. "I for one will be glad to see the back of him."

"Hmm, I'm not convinced that our plan worked out exactly as we had intended," mused Lord Ashmantle sitting dressed in an ornate robe and looking rather uncomfortable in the hot chamber with steam drifting up slowly from between the floor tiles. He kept shifting in his chair, but was unable to find a comfortable position that he remained in for long.

"Nonsense," Lord Redthron remarked. "We've got him right where we want him."

"That's all thanks to you," complimented Lord Jertsend. The dwarves nobleman was sitting in a copper bath slightly smaller than that of Lord Anisen's and it was filled with icy water that a continuous stream of servants kept filling up with buckets of ice. The water was covered with a billowing layer of mist and steam rising from the bath and two serving girls were busy braiding the nobleman's beard in to a elaborate and convoluted pattern. "Your performance tonight was masterful, even for an elfling."

Lord Redthorn's face turned a darker shade of red and was about to reply angrily when Lady Westcoat interrupted him. "And where exactly have we 'got' this damned tiefling upstart, Lord Redthorn?" The lady was lying on her stomach on a padded bench with a few towels to cover over her modesty. A man servant, who could pass for a epic hero from Greek legend, stood next to her and was busy giving her a scented oil massage. "Is it possible that he might succeed at the challenge?"

The men in the room began laughing at Lady Westcoat's suggestion and she glared at them angrily. Pushing her man servant away and pulling her robe on as she stood up, the lady's stare caused the men to quickly fall silent. "Perhaps you would like to explain what you and Lord Ashmantle have in mind?", she said.

"Well, it's quite simple my dear." Lord Ashmantle shifted in his seat again, got his robe stuck and struggled with it for a moment and thus missed the look of consternation that passed across Lady Westcoat's face as he addressed her as 'my dear'. "We intend for Lord Horacio to go on a one-way trip so that our esteemed gatherings to once again function at the level that they are intended without the presence of such upstarts as Lord Horacio."

"Tell her about where we plan to send him," Lord Anisen stated as he chuckled to himself. Bubble filled water splashed over the sides of his bath and a small group of servants rushed over in silent efficiency to mop it up and return the bath house to its pristine order and tidiness.

"I was getting to that," Lord Ashmantle said clearly irritated at having his flow interrupted. He took a deep breath and paused for dramatic effect. "As I was saying, we intend to send Lord Horacio on a one way trip out of town."

"So where is it that our tiefling friend will come to a sticky end?" Lady Westcoat asked clearly intrigued by what the others had planned. "In Baator? During his travels in the Abyss? Or perhaps in Mount Celestia?"

"It's better than any of those places," Lord Jertsend said with a loud laugh. "It's going to be right here in the city of doors."

The others looked at Lady Westcoat to see if she had understood their meaning and her silent stare informed them that she was waiting for further enlightenment.

"It's quite simple, my dear." Lord Ashmantle continued. "We're intending on starting his journey with a portal in to one of The Lady's mazes." Several of the others began laughing aloud and clapping with joy. "Even if he ever does make it out of one of the mazes, he'll return to the City of Doors and thereby lose the challenge. It's simple and yet very clever, even if I do say so myself."

Lady Westcoat turned the idea over in her mind a few times and a cunning sly smile slowly formed on her face. Unable to contain herself she joined the others in laughing at their plan and called on the servants to bring them fine wine and foods so that they could celebrate in style.

In Lord Horacio's mansion the household was busy with the preparations for the journey. Staff hurried along the gloomy corridors, past large empty rooms with no furniture or decorations inside, gathering the items that their employer had requested. The mansion only had a few rooms with any items in them at all and the staff liked to gossip amongst themselves as to whether this was because the tiefling prince was short of funds or simply did not like to have too many possessions in case he had to move off in a hurry.

The second theory was rapidly gaining popularity by the servants rushing in and out of the mansion as they busily scoured the Ward for the peculiar and hard-to-find items on their master's list. However, they had little time to stop and chat as the master's favourite servant was prowling the house. Some whispered speculatively that Brent was the unofficial butler in the household hierarchy, but the chef and others argued that an ogre could never rise to the level of butler. This was reinforced by the fact their employer never referred to the ogre by his given name, instead always calling him 'berk'.

"Berk!" the tiefling prince called out from his study as he sat with his booted feet on the table. Scrolls, maps and dusty tomes lay scattered across the tables giving mute testimony to the hurried nature of the tie fling's search for a quick route across the seventeen Outer planes. "Damn, good for nothing ogre," Lord Horacio muttered to himself just as a large lumbering form shuffled in to the room.

The ogre was considered handsome by his race, but by the standards of other races he simply looked like a

brute. He wore his household uniform well but his large thick-fingered hands and ugly face meant that he had made few friends amongst the other servants. Also, the other servants were unsure as to whether the fact that Lord Horacio called him 'berk' all the time was a form of endearment or a because he was displeased with the ogre servant.

"Yes, master." The ogre bowed deeply upon entering the library.

The tiefling prince acknowledged the bow with a dismissive wave of the hand and picked up one of the maps to fan himself. "Have you seen Otto lately? I'm keen to learn what his divinations have uncovered."

"He's in the observatory, master. Like he always is." The ogre waited to see if his master had any further requests and was about to leave when Lord Horacio stopped fanning himself abruptly.

"Well, berk. What are you waiting for? Go and fetch him at once."

"But master, the gnome does not listen to me and he never leaves the observatory."

"You dare to question my command?" the tiefling prince dropped the map and leapt to his feet with a feline grace. "What do I pay you for, you sodding imbecile? Fetch me the gnome at once, else I will have your head on a plate." As the ogre was about to leave, the tiefling prince called after him. "As a special reward for your services I have decided to take you with me on my journey." He sat back down and chuckled silently, the movement of his shoulders being the only hint at his amusement.

"Thank you master," the ogre bowed again with a somewhat confused look on his face. He waited a few moments for his master to issue him any further commands or berate him some more. But when none were forthcoming he hurried off to the observatory in order to fetch the diviner. As he climbed the stairs to the tower a sudden thought occurred to him. "The master hasn't paid me in a long time," he said to himself. "In fact I can't remember the last time any of us got paid."

Some twenty minutes later the tiefling prince could hear the approach of the gnomish diviner from his shouts of protest from being having his work interrupted. The gnome was small even by the standards of his race although he made up for it in the volume that his lungs could produce. Lord Horacio knew from how loud the gnome was protesting that it would be another ten minutes or so before Brent would manage to drag him down to the library.

Therefore the tiefling prince was rather surprised to see his ogre man-servant stroll back in to the room several minutes later. The gnomish diviner was in mid-rant at the indignation of being carried under the smelly armpit of the overgrown, clueless brute - when he realised that he had entered his employer's presence and fell silent.

The ogre set the little man down and bowed deeply. Lord Horacio stared at his large servant for awhile with a blank look on his face. "Well, what are you still doing here berk? Surely you have things to prepare? Perhaps even some possessions to pack?"

"Yes, master. Of course master." The ogre bowed again, walked backwards out of the library, closing the doors behind him as he did so.

The gnome stood in silence for several long minutes waiting for his employer to speak, but the tiefling's attention seemed to be entirely focused on the closed oaken doors. After what seemed like an age and a day the gnome cleared his throat and promptly took an involuntary step back as the tiefling prince focused his entire attention on the diviner.

"So tell me Otto, what news have you for me? Better make it good as I've not had a very good day."

The gnome gulped and glanced up at the ceiling to draw inspiration for how best to present his findings. His fingers were unconsciously twining and untwining in a manner that his employer had learned meant that the gnome was about to deliver some unfortunate news.

"Let me guess," Lord Horacio said just as the gnome was about to open his mouth. "It's not good news. Am I right?"

"Yes, my lord." The gnome tried looking everywhere in the half-empty chamber except at his employer, but his gaze was always drawn back to the tiefling prince. "Despite my best efforts I have been unable to extract any information from the meeting that the League members held."

"Well," Lord Horacio commented congenially. "If you have tried your best efforts, then that is all that I can ask of you." The gnome diviner let out a sigh of relief and mopped the sweat from his brow. "I'm well aware of the nature of the place where the League members met and have come up with a contingency plan for this eventuality."

The gnome's face brightened at the news that his employer had found another way to get the information that he was after, but just as quickly he became suspicious at how his employer had managed such a thing. Before he had accepted Lord Horacio's offer of employment he had made enquiries as to the tiefling's credentials and had heard several suspicious stories regarding Lord Horacio's previous supposed conduct. Never the less he had accepted the employment and had not come to regret it as he had been left in peace for most of that time to carry out his research as he saw fit. Occasionally Lord Horacio would send a servant with a message to uncover some specific information or to find out about the general conditions prevailing in a certain plane. On the whole though the employer and employee rarely met and being carried in to Lord Horacio's presence by the ogre was very much out of the norm of how they interacted before.

"May I be so bold as to ask how you have overcome the protections around that building?" the gnome asked, his natural curiosity overcoming the fear of his employer.

"Of course you can, dear Otto." Lord Horacio laughed heartily and picked up a metal urn from beneath the table. As he opened the seal on the urn a high-pitched whine emerged from within accompanied by a jet of steam. The steam hung in the air for a moment and Otto was surprised to see two glaring red eyes form within. His surprise, however, soon disappeared to be replaced by a look of disgust at recognising a steam mephit. "Otto, I'd like you to meet Semhanphesitus my favourite spy."

"Urgh, a gnome." The steam mephit stated in a whining tone. "Please master take this ugly creature out of my sight. The information that I have to tell you is for your ears alone and not some earth-dwelling runt."

"Now wait just a minute," Otto replied angrily at being insulted by a mephit. "Who are you calling ugly? You're nothing but a waste product from a spell gone wrong."

"Come, come," Lord Horacio said firmly as the two small creatures faced off against each other. "First I'd like to hear what you have learned and then we can settle the matter of who is ugly and who should not remain in my presence."

"As you wish, master." The steam mephit said in a whining voice, attempting to ingratiate itself with the tiefling prince by flying close by and fawning over him. "If the master trusts the ugly gnome-thing then I will tell you what I have learned."

Brent the ogre was on his way to the library to inform his master of a delivery that he had left instructions to be notified off, when he heard a horrendous screeching coming from the library. He quickened his pace and considered putting down the parcel so that he could rush to the chamber but the high-pitched wailing ended abruptly and was followed by the door to the library opening with an ashen face gnome slowly stepping out of the room. The diviner quietly closed the door behind him and did not become aware of the ogre's presence until Brent was standing right in front of him.

"Oh, it's you," Otto said sighing in relief. "Probably best not to disturb the master right about now." He remained standing in front of the door with his hand still resting on the door knob.

"Is the master in trouble? Should I go in and help him?" Brent asked.

"Yes and no." Otto became aware of the fact that his hand was still resting on the door knob and quickly drew it back to his side. "What I mean is that 'yes' the master is in trouble, but 'no' you cannot help him right now."

"What should I do then?" the ogre asked, being at a loss as to how to respond to these new developments.

"Well, it's probably best to act as if nothing is wrong. Deliver your package and if with any luck it's what he's been waiting for - then he'll most likely not kill the messenger." The gnome's small frame gave an involuntary shudder and he tugged on the bottom of his waistcoat to help him to restore some calm to his appearance. "The master plans to leave at two hours before peak and meet up with his friends from the League outside the Palace of the Jester."

"What are you going to do?" the ogre asked noticing for the first time that the gnome had a scroll tucked under his arm.

"I'm going to send out an invitation to an old acquaintance of Lord Horacio," the gnome pushed himself away from the door and forced himself to begin walking down the corridor.. "Hopefully our contact will be brief and I never actually have to meet her in person."

At exactly two hours before peak Lord Horacio climbed in to a black carriage that Brent and the others had loaded with two metal-bound trunks. The small number of household staff were gathered outside the mansion to bid their employer farewell and also to see that he was actually leaving after so many years confined to just one building. A large building, but a single structure none the less.

The tiefling prince lent out of the carriage window and beckoned over the chef. The aging woman solemnly walked over to the carriage with the aid of her daughter-in-laws. She remained out of arms reach and curtsied with a practised ease that came from decades of service. "My lord?" she asked.

"I expect the house to be in exactly the same condition as how I'm leaving it now," Lord Horacio commanded. "That includes the rooms filled with dust and not much else. I will only warn you once not to set foot in any of those chambers and the same goes for all of the staff."

The chef had heard the warning hundreds of times and had never broken her master's command. She made a mental note to tell the other servants once again when the master had gone, just in case any of the others were curious. She doubted that anyone of them would be foolish enough to enter in to one of the empty chambers, but in all of her years at the mansion the master had never been away for long and often then only for one night.. The journey that the other servants spoke of the master going on was very out of character for the tiefling prince.

Brent climbed on to the back of the carriage and managed to get a good grip on the metal handles just in time for the coach to start moving off through the Ward towards the Palace of the Jester. The horses pulling the carriage had a red tint to their eyes and their hoofs left scorch marks on the cobbled streets. Intimidating though the horses were, the fact that the carriage did not have a driver was the main reason why people hurried to clear a path for it.

When the carriage pulled in to one of the courtyards inside the Palace, Brent leapt gingerly off the back of the coach and opened the door for his master. Lord Horacio looked down disdainfully at the ogre holding the door open and then to the puddle just outside the door of the carriage. The ogre followed his master's gaze and with a brief "Oh," of realisation immediately crouched down on hands and knees to form a step for his master to come down past the puddle.

Lord Horacio descended from his carriage, across the back of his ogre servant, with all the elegance and grace of a king stepping down from his dais to meet his various courtiers and diplomats. This was not lost on the gentlemen and ladies from the Extraordinary League of Planar Cartographers who were gathered at the other end of the courtyard on a specially laid out carpet. Intricately carved metal tables had been laid out with a selection of wines and refreshments that numerous servants were busy offering to all the guests. Incense and herbs were burning in braziers to sweeten the air and to give the gathering a more uplifting atmosphere.

"Why Lord Horacio so good of you to come along," Lord Ashmantle called out. The fat man wore his usual rune embroidered robes. The colour of today's robes were bright red and did little to hide the folds of his body or flatter his form in any way. Yet he still managed to carry around with his an air of power that warned others not to trifle with such a powerful wizard.

"We'd almost despaired that you would not come along today," the fat wizard said with a smile as he embraced the tiefling prince. Lord Horacio did not return the embrace and for a brief moment wondered if he would

disappear in to the red folds of the cloak never to return. "I on the other hand had assured Lord Redthorn that you would be here today to begin the challenge."

"Quite, quite. Never fear Lord Redthorn, I'll be gone and back so quick that you'll hardly miss me at all." Lord Horacio quipped. "My servant here tells me that I will be missing the next event that is taking place at your mansion in a week's time. Please convey my apologies to the other guests, as well as the beautiful Lady Kyle."

The half-elven lord managed not to let his smug smile slip from his face as he focused his thoughts on the plan that he and the others had prepared. 'You'll never sully the City of Doors with your presence again,' thought Lord Redthorn. 'And if you ever dare to mention my daughter's name again then I will kill you where you stand.' Lord Horacio smile broadened to a wicked grin as if he was able to read Lord Rethorn's mind. Infuriated further the half-elf turned his back on the tiefling and motioned for the bariaur Master of Ceremonies to begin the proceedings.

"Order, this meeting will hereby come to order," Lord Gensen was dressed in his usual buffed breastplate and carried his sturdy staff.

"A Challenge has been Set and a Challenge has been Accepted." The bariaur spoke the words of the ritual and all the nobles gathered in the courtyard quieted down in a matter of moments. "Will the one who has Set the Challenge please step forward?" Lord Redthorn, the half-elven noble moved up to the Master of Ceremonies and gave a curt bow. ""Will the one Accepting the Challenge please step forward?" Lord Horacio walked forward and gave a florid bow to the bariaur, then to Lord Redthorn and finally a very extravagant bow to all the other gentlemen and ladies.

"This is the portal from which you shall depart," Lord Gensen stated whilst pointing to an archway with his staff. "You may ask One thing of the League before you go and then must depart forthwith."

"Ladies and Gentlemen," the tiefling prince said in a sing-song voice. "Today I begin an epic journey that will live on forever in the memory of this illustrious gathering and I shall complete it faster and by traversing fewer gates than any other. This endeavour could never have come about without the Challenge of my dear friend Lord Redthorn." There was a brief ripple of applause, but Lord Redthorn and some of the others were clearly not amused by the speech.

"Therefore I would like to request a small token from y dear friend so that I may think of him often on my journey and hurry back to his side to sip fine wines with you all and regale tales of my exploits until your ears drop off." A few of the gentlemen laughed although the majority of the others did not appear to be impressed.

"Very well," said Lord Redthorn. The elven lord fished around in the pocket of his jacket and pulled out a silver coin with the image of The Lady of Pain engraved upon it. "Here you go, Lord Horacio. A keepsake for your journey."

The tiefling prince accepted the silver coin gracefully by reverently putting it in to his top pocket and then turned to face the portal. Brent picked up the two metal bound trunks and hurried through the crowd with an uncanny grace and rushed to stand a step behind his master. "Farewell, dear friends. I'll be back soon."

Lord Gensen handed Lord Horacio a small scrap of paper with a sheep drawn upon it that had a red circle around it and a red line bisecting it. The tiefling prince raised one of his eyebrows at the scrap of paper and took it none the less. He held it forth to the archway that immediately began to crackle with blue lightning and energy along its edges. Lord Horacio and Brent stepped across the threshold and disappeared from sight.

"Drop the trunks and start running," Lord Horacio called out over his shoulder as soon as he set foot on the other side of the portal.

"Begging your pardon milord," the ogre said as he bumped in to the tie fling's back.

"I said: DROP THE TRUNKS AND START RUNNING YOU CRETINOUS BERK!" Lord Horacio shouted at close range in to the stunned ogre's face. The tiefling prince did not wait for a response and began running down the narrow corridor.

Brent watched his master dashing off and put the trunks down carefully. Just as he was about to set off he felt a deathly cold hand trying to grab hold of his boot. Looking down he saw the molten form of a man without bones whose flesh and organs undulated gentle as he crawled along the ground. The large amorphous and opaque man was joined to another man at his foot and as the ogre looked up he saw a river of living bodies surging along the corridor towards him over the tops of other bodies

Brent stamped down on the creatures hand and set off at a fast pace to catch up with his master. It did not take long for him to come to a four way junction and he turned right without pausing in his long strides. The ogre had only managed to get a few dozen yards down this corridor before he came across his master hurtling in the opposite direction.

"Turn around, you ignorant berk." Lord Horacio said as he shoulder barged past his servant. "Nothing but death and madness this direction."

Brent immediately spun on his heels and began to follow Lord Horacio down the twisting and winding tunnels that they had stepped in to from Sigil, the City of Doors. "Where are we milord?" Brent called out. "What is this place?" The ogre's fear gave him renewed strength and he finally caught up with the tiefling prince. Behind him he could hear the wet, gurgling sounds of a river of boneless bodies cascading down the tunnels after them.

"We're in a Lady's maze," Lord Horacio explained as he continued running. "A place she puts people that threaten her city when she does not flay them alive."

"I thought we were going on a trip around the planes," said Brent despondently.

"All in good time, dear berk. Now concentrate on running." Lord Horacio came to an abrupt stop as the sounds of pursuit receded from behind to be replaced by the sounds of the mass of bodies coming from directly ahead. The tiefling prince quickly backtracked and took another corridor just as the pale horde of boneless men crawled rapidly in to view.

The two men ran for hours through the tunnels. Each time that the sounds of pursuit fell away, they stopped and

chose another direction as the creatures came at them from a different approach. Lord Horacio stumbled a few times and on each occasion Brent was there to catch him and push him back on to his feet. However, even after a few hours the ogre's strength began to flag and he too stumbled to the ground.

"How long..." the ogre said gasping for breath. "Do we have.... to keep running for...milord?"

"Not long now," Lord Horacio said as he pushed himself to his feet. "Damn thing... should have taken the bait by now." He muttered under his breath. The tiefling prince grabbed hold of the ogre's shirt and pulled him close. "If I die in here..... it will be your fault berk. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes..... Master," the ogre said in a weary manner.

Suddenly the ground shook under their feet causing dust to fall from the ceiling that covered them in a thin layer. The corridor shook a second time, but this time it was less violent than the first.

"What's happening, master?" The ogre braced himself against the sides of the corridor and the strain of trying to remain upright was plain to see.

"Just a little insurance that I brought along," Lord Horacio stated smugly. He brushed off the dust from his clothes using a silken handkerchief and tilted his head to listen in both directions. "I was not entirely sure what we were going to encounter in here, but my informants did manage to find out that whatever it was - that Lord Ashmantle kept it fed on a regular basis. Apparently it's something left over from when the Blood War raged over at the Slags."

Brent frowned and tried to piece together what was going on. "There was a Blood War down at Molly Mogs?"

"No you sodding berk," replied Lord Horacio testily. "Not the ladies of dubious virtue who ply their trade at Molly Mogs. But rather the area of the Hive where few live or even venture since the Baatezu and Tanar'ri used it for their little War. The Lady mazed quite a few of those that fought there and it appears that Lord Ashmantle has kept one of them alive within this Maze. Sort of as a pet I presume."

Before the tiefling prince could continue the sound of bodies slapping against the stone floor, accompanied by the liquid sloshing of boneless forms washing over the top of them, came from the tunnel to the right. This time Lord Horacio did not need to instruct his servant to beat a hasty retreat and the two began running once again down the tunnels.

"How much... longer do we have to..... keep this up milord?" the ogre asked, not having had to exert himself like this for many years.

"Not much longer, I hope" his master replied. "I've got a theory - quick turn right here - that there might be a safer location in this rat-hole." Another violent explosion rocked the tunnel spraying dust and knocking the two men off their feet. A second quake followed shortly afterwards, together with a third that they barely noticed.

"Of course, dear berk. Every time that happens we buy ourselves a little more time. I do hope that Otto is having

more luck than us." Lord Horacio set off again at a quickened pace with Brent following close behind.

"Merciful marilith, why is she not answering the summons?" the gnome diviner muttered to himself as he sat alone in the observatory. Few servants ventured in to this part of the mansion and the gnome was grateful for the solitude and lack of interruption to his research. The chalk circle that he sat inside was of a simple design that had only a few magical seals and runes. Otto had lit several candles for dramatic effect, but no matter how hard he tried he felt his mental link to his target blocked for some reason.

"A pox on all Tanar'ri. Especially those that my master deals with." The gnome stood up and shook out each of his feet in turn to work away some of the cramps of having sat in the circle for hours. "Why he wants to contact this particular Tanar'ri I'll never know. In fact I'd pay good money never to find out."

Having spent days and weeks by himself immersed in his studies the diviner had become accustomed to speaking to himself. Once many years ago he had the companionship of a familiar to communicate with, but unfortunately he had lost her during a trip to the Beastlands. Sometimes he thought that he could still sense her presence nearby, reassuring him that his research would bear fruit. 'I believe in you,' she would whisper in his mind and he would pet her affectionately, sometimes offering her a treat.

Otto stepped out of the circle and walked over to the main desk with a large metal bound tome lying open. He flipped a few of the pages and quickly scanned the writing, muttering and complaining almost inaudibly under his breath. He was about to throw his hands up in the air and give up for a few hours of rest, when he changed his mind and walked back in to the circle.

"I could have sworn that I've done it right. Followed every step of the ritual and still nothing. One more go and then I give up." The diviner eased his cramped legs back in to a sitting position and closed his eyes. "I used to be very good at this you know."

"I believe in you," said a sultry voice from the corner of the chamber.

"Thanks you, dear." The diviner said unconsciously in reply. "I'll get you a reward soon, my pet." So lost was the gnome in the ritual that he responded to the familiar sounding voice automatically without giving it much thought. He could almost hear the rustle of his familiar's wings and the gentle fanning that cooled him when as we progressed through the phases of the ritual.

"Ooh, I'm looking forward to that." This time the voice sounded subtly different than before. It carried with it a hint of carnal lust and rabid anticipation.

"What?" Otto said opening his eyes. The thought had slowly filtered through his mind that something was very wrong. He looked up and saw a ravishingly beautiful woman with large red bat-like wings, a long sinuous tail that moved back and forth in a mesmerising pattern. The woman was so perfectly formed that Otto refused to believe that she was real. But when he felt her demonically stunning beauty stir his blood - he knew that she was very real and that he was very much in trouble.

"How did you get here? You're not supposed to be here. This isn't how it's supposed to be. We should be doing this from a distance, with our thoughts alone." The gnome diviner stood at the inner edge of the circle covering as far away from the succubus as possible. "Please go away so that we can communicate from a distance."

"Ah, poor little gnome." The succubus was basking in the terror and longing that she inspired in the diviner. She breathed in deeply to taste of his fear. Her chest rose as she breathed in, causing the gnome to give a small gasp and pass out. "Goodness," she said swearing aloud. "Rarely have I seen a little man more in need of female companionship than this poor lonesome soul. Whilst I'd love to carry off your beautiful and bright soul to my mistress, that's unfortunately not the reason why I'm here."

She walked up to the edge of the circle and promptly stepped across it to kick the unconscious gnome with her booted foot. When he did not stir she kicked him again, this time with a bit more strength behind it.

Otto groaned in pain and slowly woke up from his tortured dream in which he had been carried off by a succubus to the Abyss. Looking around him he saw his familiar books, candles, magical circle with an out-of-place pair of long black leather boots. Following them up with his gaze he saw that the imposing doom boots were worn by an unbelievably beautiful woman who held out her hand to help him up.

"You're Her aren't you?" Otto asked as he was helped to his feet.

"Alas, no. She was busy and I was sent instead." The woman gave the gnome a reassuring smile. The diviner promptly let go of her hand and backed away until he was standing against the bookcase.

"Well," he stammered. "I've.... been told to give you...."

The woman had bent forward at the waist to gather her long pitch black hair in her hands. As she straightened and twined her hair in to a knot, she gave the gnome a glimpse of her cleavage causing Otto to lose track of his thoughts and almost pass out again.

"Oh for the love of Demogorgron," the woman said clearly irritated. "If your tiny mind can stay focused on what you are supposed to tell me, I'll be out of here before you go in to convulsions." She paused for a moment and suddenly began to giggle. "Better yet, why don't you turn around."

"Good little gnome," the succubus said as she walked up behind the diviner. "Now I promise you that this will not hurt a bit. Well, perhaps a bit but as you mortals like to say: 'no pain, no gain'."

Otto felt her hands wrap around the sides of his head and heard her utter a string of barbaric words of power. He lost all feelings in every part of his body and felt himself rising slowly upwards away from his mortal shell. As his spirit rose in to the air his body began to thrash and he heard himself scream in utter agony and terror. Otto's spirit watched in mute detachment unable to do anything but drift further away from himself.

After a minute the succubus let go of the gnome's body and it slumped to the floor. She stood up, licked her lips and walked to the door. Glancing back over her perfect shoulder she smiled sweetly and waved to the diviner's spirit gently drifting away from his body. Suddenly she frowned and snarled angrily, her face

becoming a mask of hatred and malice.

"Much as it pains me to do this, my cousin would not be pleased with me breaking his play things." She spoke the same barbaric words of power in reverse and Otto felt himself rapidly drawn back to his body. As his spirit slipped back under the skin and he regained consciousness, the diviner became aware of every nerve in his body feeling as if it was on fire. The last thought that registered in his pain-wracked mind was that the succubus was leaving and he could safely pass out again.

Brent the ogre could no longer feel his legs. In fact, he could no longer feel his arms or hands either. He could still feel his chest due to the knot of pain that kept his ribs constricted and caused his breath to come in short, sharp gasps. The ogre and his master had been running through the corridors of the maze for many hours and Brent had gone past the point of endurance.

When he heard the sounds of bodies surging along the corridor towards them, he moved off instinctively. Thoughts required energy and Brent had none to spare. When the corridor shook and the bodies receded, then Brent knew that he could rest for awhile. Had he been a little more alert he would have noticed that his master was not looking all that tired. In fact Lord Horacio looked more as if he had just done a little warm up lap before a big race.

Through the haze of pain and exhaustion Brent was vaguely aware of someone else standing in the corridor talking to his master. His nose registered a demonic scent and his blood began to pound in his ears, but the ogre's thoughts were simply too scattered to make much sense of what was going on. The other person talking to his master departed and returned some time later. Brent remembered this more clearly as they did not have to run during that time period. When the stranger returned, she led through the Maze to an unremarkable alcove.

The creature thrust something in to her master's hand, winked at Brent and promptly disappeared in a flash of light. Lord Horacio stepped forward and the ogre instinctively followed. They were surrounded by a flash of light and then the ogre smelled the familiar scent of the City of Doors. The air had a familiar ashy and gritty taste to it. The air was filled with the sounds of vendors hawking their wares in numerous languages. The words 'Lower Ward' registered in Brent's mind.

"Well, that was a rather exciting start to our journey wasn't it dear berk?" Lord Horacio smiled smugly and dusted himself off with one of his handkerchiefs that seemed to come from an endless supply somewhere in his jacket pockets.

"Now listen carefully." The tiefling prince pulled out a small pouch of coins and counted out several in to the dazed ogre's large hand. "I need you to purchase some military uniforms, some priestly regalia. Actually make that something more along the lines of a high priest and also get a jack-in-a-box. If you can find someone who sells mephit-in-a-box then that's even better. Do I make myself clear berk?"

"Yes milord." Brent scratched his head and tried to adjust from being chased by a nightmarish Baatezu creation to standing in the streets of the Lower ward. "I'll bring them to the mansion as soon.."

"No, you sodding imbecile." Lord Horacio slapped the ogre and glared at him in disdain. "Did I instruct you to go back to the mansion? No. That's right. You will meet me at Akin's shop. Do you know which one I mean, you clueless berk?"

"The Friendly Fiend?" Brent asked timidly.

"Well at least you have got one thing right today." Lord Horacio hailed a passing pony-cab and paused before climbing onboard. "Meet me there in three hours and don't be late. Also, I've tolerated your questions so far because... well to be frank about it you're a berk. But from now on you will simply comply and not question. Understand?" The tiefling prince did not wait for the ogre to acknowledge that he had understood before climbing in to the cab and setting off.

Brent looked down at the coins in his hand and shrugged. As he set off to go shopping he tried to remember what his master had told him to buy.

Several hours later Otto the diviner woke up lying on the back seat of a coach. Sitting opposite him was a lady with beautiful silver hair that obscured her face. She lay dozing with her head resting against a cushion that was propped against the window of the coach. The lady was dressed in a pale lavender dress that was so exquisite and expensive it could probably keep a family in the Clerk's ward fed and housed for a month. A gag made from an expensive handkerchief covered her mouth sealed and her hands were secured with a sturdy silken cord.

The gnome diviner sat up when the realisation struck him that the resting or unconscious lady was being held prisoner in the same coach as him. Just then the woman stirred briefly and her hair fell away revealing her pointed ears and stunningly beautiful face. Otto gasped in recognition and wondered briefly if this day of encounters with incredibly attractive females was actually a dream. His musing were soon interrupted by the appearance of his master's ogre servant at the door of the coach.

"You there," began the gnome diviner.

"Brent," replied the ogre.

"I beg your pardon?" Otto said somewhat confused as to how the word 'Brent' suddenly entered the conversation. "What has 'Brent' got to do with anything."

"It's my name," the ogre said as he opened the door to the coach and reached in to gently lift the lady out.

"Oh, but of course it is." The gnome said in a slightly embarrassed tone. "Do you know who that it you are kidnapping there?"

"Kidnapping?" the ogre asked innocently. "My master has informed me that Lady Kyle has been invited to come along on his great journey and she has gracefully accepted."

Otto got up from his seat, jumped out of the coach and followed the ogre over to the shop front. He glanced around briefly and noted from the look and smell of the streets that he was in the Lower ward. Looking up he saw the brightly painted sign that read 'The Friendly Fiend'.

The gnome stopped in his tracks and stared at the small shop about which he had heard so much but never dared venture inside. Turning back to the ogre he saw that Brent had with incredible care, recently put down the Lady Kyle on a wooden crate filled with clothing.

"Excuse me," the gnome said, his squeaky voice rising with indignation. "What do you mean 'gracefully'? She does not look like a very willing participant in this suicide mission if you ask me."

Before the ogre could reply - the door to Aki's shop closed with a forceful thud. A familiar voice from behind Otto said: "Suicide mission is it? Tsk, tsk I must say that I am a little disappointed to hear my chief navigator speak like that."

The gnome's face suddenly lost all colour and the pale looking diviner slowly turned around. "Master, forgive me for speaking out of turn. I chose my words poorly.... What do you mean chief navigator?"

The tiefling prince chuckled and Otto's blood ran cold. "My dear Otto. Do you really think that I would leave without you? I have need of a gnome of your talents on this journey to 'see' if the way ahead is clear."

"Surely master, I could help from my observatory." The diviner's mind was working furiously trying to find a way out of his dilemma but he kept coming back to the same thought: 'you already know too much'. "We could stay in touch somehow...."

"Nonsense, my good gnome. I know that you mean well and that you are loathe to leave the Cage for reasons of your own." Lord Horacio smirked and Otto could see that the tiefling prince was getting a great deal of enjoyment out of his predicament. "But I really need you by my side to get the information first-hand. There's no knowing who might tamper with our messages. Besides, I shall enjoy having you as a travelling companion. Just think of all the wonders and marvels we shall encounter."

Otto's shoulders sagged in defeat and he stared at his feet. For a few moments he continued to look down at his feet, the cobble-stones and a nearby puddle whilst all around him there was activity. He felt a pat on his back and look up to see the ogre smiling at him reassuringly. The pat had been more of a shove and Otto had found the smile very intimidating, but he realised that Brent had meant well.

The gnome sighed and walked over to the crate where he waited for the ogre to give him something to carry. Brent thrust a bundle of clothes that were wrapped in a leather hide and were tied with a red cord in to Otto's arms. The diviner adjusted the package in his hands before figuring out a way to carry it across his back as an improvised backpack.

Within a short time the travelling companions set off down the cobbled streets of the Lower ward in search of a portal out of the city. Brent the ogre had several packages slung across his back and was gently cradling Lady Kyle in his arms. Otto the gnome had a bag of clothes slung across his back and was looking around despondently. Lord Horacio, the tiefling prince, was dressed impeccably as always in a black suit and waved a handkerchief in front of his face to ward off the smell of the ward. He was happily humming a tune under his breath, of which Otto only caught the words 'sweet home something, something; where the sky are blue. Sweet home something, something I'm coming back t you'.

After half an hour of wandering through the small back streets of the ward past taverns, smithies, artisan studios, storehouses and brothels - they finally arrived at an old weapon smith's shop. Lord Horacio stopped so suddenly that Brent had almost walked in to the back of him. The ogre still felt drained and in pain from running around the Maze, although the pint that he'd had whilst waiting for his master had given him some renewed strength.

"Right, here we are." The tiefling prince looked the dilapidated shop front up and down. "Are you ready for the next step of the journey?"

"Yes milord." Brent answered tiredly.

"What's that?" Lord Horacio said raising his voice. "I can't hear you! Speak properly when I address you!"

"Yes, milord." Brent repeated louder and more firmly.

Lord Horacio slapped his ogre servant in the face and shouted at him from only a few inches away. "You will address me as Sir! DO I MAKE MYSELF CLEAR?"

"Yes, Sir." Brent and Otto said at the same time, both taken aback by Lord Horacio's sudden and unexpected angry outburst.

"That's better." The tiefling prince said, still speaking in far louder a tone than was necessary. He pulled the improvised backpack from Otto's back and began to pull some clothes out. "You will address me at all times as Sir! Failure do so will be met with immediate punishment. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir, yes Sir" Otto replied, adapting quickly to the rapidly changing developments.

"Good," Lord Horacio took off his jacket and pulled on another one that had several insignia on the shoulder pads. "Glad to hear that at least one of you is not a complete wet blanket." He put on a strange hat that looked more than a pastry than a gentleman's hat. The tiefling prince spent a moment adjusting the hat and pinning several broaches to his jacket.

"The trick to travelling the planes," Lord Horacio whispered conspiratorially. "Is to get in to the spirit of things."

"Sir, yes Sir." The ogre and the gnome both said. Brent even saluted. The gnome frowned briefly as his quick mind began to think about what his master's statement might mean with regards to travelling across Gehenna and Carceri if they ever got that far.

"Right, no point hanging around. There's a War going on and it's not waiting for us. So let's move out. This way men." Lord Horacio held up a broken arrow and indicated that the gnome and ogre should step across the threshold of the weapons workshop. After his two servants had passed in to the portal to Acheron, Lord Horacio followed.

The gnome diviner, ogre servant, tiefling prince and unconscious half-elven noblewoman arrived on the metallic war-town surface of the plane of Acheron. The ground was hard and covered in gritty layer of reddish dust. The air stank of death and held the promise of more bloodshed to come. Smoke drifted across the ground, blanketing it in an ashy fog that mostly concealed the carnage and detritus of war. Discernable through the black billowing clouds could be seen the outline of broken siege engines, partially collapsed fortifications and old watch-towers.

"Permission to speak, Sir?" the gnome diviner asked as he got his bearings on the new plane.

"Permission granted," Lord Horacio replied with a wave of the hand.

"Sir, is it not customary to walk the Great Ring from Mechanus in a clock-wise direction?"

"Why yes, I do believe that is correct my dear Otto. However, as you can see this is Acheron."

"Sir, does this mean that we will be travelling widdershins?"

"That is correct. I have never been very fond of the Great Wheel diagrammatic representation of the planes. But since that is the generally accepted way that most planars look at how the planes align from a world view perspective. Then the answer is indeed: yes, we will be travelling anti-clockwise."

"Sir, if I may be so bold." The gnome felt unnerved at being away from the relative safety of Sigil and his fear of this, as well as his master's recent changes, was clearly reflected in his eyes. "Why have... err, invited Lady Kyle to come along, Sir?"

The tiefling prince laughed out loud and both the gnome and ogre began to shiver at the sound. It was a laugh that would have made a Yugoloth proud and sent a Gehreleth in to a murderous rage.

"I'm glad that you had the courage to ask that question, my dear Otto. I would hate for the question to be left hanging unspoken as it were. Like a festering wound that will not close and continues to leak pustulant fluids." The tiefling prince stopped laughing and straightened his jacket. "The answer is quite simple. I have need of a way to confirm to the Extraordinary League that I have completed the journey within the specified number of days and gates. Lady Kyle will act as my witness."

"But Sir, surely she will refuse to act as a witness. Sir."

"Oh, she will act as my witness. Of that you can be sure, dear Otto. When this journey is completed and has beaten all previous records, not only will she be willing to tell everyone about it. She will sing from the roof-tops. Now straighten you clothes and clean yourself up. This is a respectable outfit I run here. How do you think that we are going to acquire an army to march in to Baator if we look scruffy?"

The gnome diviner gulped involuntarily and blanched. "Sir, did you just say that you were going to march an army in to Baator?"

"We are going to march an army in to Baator." The tiefling spoke the words slowly with a harsh edge to them.

"Is there something wrong with your hearing? No. Fine, well set up your cards, crystal ball or whatever it is that you look at and tell me where the nearest armies are located."

Otto back away slowly from the tiefling prince and hurried over to the ogre and his possessions. He rifled through his pack knowing that he would not be able to find what he was looking for. Brent was seated on a metal block that had pipes running in parallel along it and was still holding Lady Kyle in his arms.

"What are you looking for?" the ogre asked.

"My etheroscope, have you seen it?" Otto asked anxiously.

"I'm not sure. What does it look like?"

"Sort of like a... well, it's kind of like..." The gnome was at a loss for words on where to begin to describe an etheroscope. "Picture if you will some metal bands, they are circling a thingy and when the right levers are turned so that the planar harmonic align with the other thingy. Oh it's no use, I can tell from that sorry look that you have no idea what I'm talking about."

"I'm not sorry." The ogre sounded somewhat offended.

"My apologies, I did not mean that were sorry. Merely that you had a sorry look. You know, kind of like despondent or unhappy."

"Actually I'm quite happy right now."

"Pardon me? Did you say you were happy?" The gnome threw his hands up in despair and sat down on the rust covered ground. He tried to wipe off some of the rust and the thought occurred to him that perhaps it was dried blood. With that unsettling thought he abruptly stood up and began to pace. "Look, why don't you go back to looking after Lady Kyle? I can't believe this. I'm stuck in Acheron with an ogre who says that he's happy, whilst holding captive the daughter of one of the most vindictive Golden Lords of the City of Doors. On the other side of me is a tiefling prince with delusions of grandeur. Not only does he want to circumnavigate the planes in a shorter time and in fewer portals than anyone had ever done before. But to top it all off he wants to invade Baator."

"Actually," the ogre said after a short pause. "The reason why I'm smiling is that there is a device similar to the one that you describe lying just a few feet to your left."

"What!" Otto froze mid-pace and turned around slowly. "I must be going deaf. First Lord Horacio says he's going to invade Baator and now you tell me that there is an etheroscope lying a few feet away from me. Do you know what the probability of that happening is?"

"Actually the odds on the invasion taking place are three to one. The odds of it is succeeding at significantly less." The ogre said calmly as he worked through the numbers. "However, the odds of finding a working etheroscope in Acheron are four hundred and sixty seven to one."

Otto closed his eyes in despair and for the first time since his childhood felt like crying. When he opened his eyes he saw that indeed just a few feet away from him were the remains of an etherscope. Of course it was not the model that he was familiar with, but it was an etherscope all the same. He rushed towards it, fell to his knees and cried with joy as he hugged it. Now if only he could find some parts lying around that would enable him to get it working.

"What an odd thing to do," the ogre muttered to himself and shook his head.

"Well," said impatiently Lord Horacio emerging from the black fog. "How goes the divining?"

"Sir, I believe that Otto is making progress. Sir," the ogre replied.

"Good. Let me know when he's managed to locate a nearby army."

"Sir, there is an army approaching. Sir"

"Oh, and how pray tell do you know this?"

"Sir, an ogre has a nose for war, Sir."

"Really, well I suppose that this might be true."

"Also Sir, I can feel the vibrations of the cavalry moving on to our side of the cube. Sir"

"Do you know, you are a remarkable specimen for an ogre."

"Sir, thank you Sir."

"Well, carry on. Let me know when they are a mile away from us."

"Sir, yes Sir."

The tiefling prince in his military uniform walked away from the resting ogre and gnome who was working away furiously. Within a matter of seconds his outline became hazy in the ashy fog and he disappeared from sight.

Some fifty minutes later Brent the ogre gently put down the sleeping Lady Kyle. He cupped his large hands around his mouth and shouted: "Cavalry approaching. One mile and closing, Sir." The ogre shouted it again and then sat down calmly. Otto stopped in the midst of hammering a rusty screw in to the etherscope with a broken lead pipe.

For what seemed like an eternity all around them was silent. The black fog billowed across the landscape casting the world in to shades of grey. Brent sat calmly with his eyes closed and a smile on his face. Otto was still holding his piece of broken pipe and the broken screw had fallen in to the red dust. The etherscope sparked briefly and began to rotate but the gnome failed to notice it.

Suddenly the ogre, gnome and sleeping noblewoman were surrounded by a dozen riders. The gnome was rather startled by their sudden appearance, but when he saw that the red glowing eyes and fiery hooves of the steeds - he understood how they had become surrounded without hearing anything.

"Identify yourselves," one of the riders demanded in harsh voice from behind a black steel mask.

"Err, I'm Otto."

"Name and Rank," the voice said in the same harsh and efficient manner.

The gnome looked over at Brent, but the ogre was still sitting calmly protecting Lady Kyle. "Corporal Otto of Her Majesty's... err, Royal Divinatory Corps. Sir."

The rider sat quietly on his horse absorbing the words without giving anything away. Otto shifted nervously and wondered why he had not bothered to put on a military tunic of some kind.

"Hmm, Divinatory Corps. Well, well don't see many of them." The sound of muffled laughter came from the other riders. "Not very popular with soldiers knowing whether they are going to win or lose."

Brent casually kicked the abandoned etherscope and it began to whirl, whilst emitting a high pitched wail. Otto spun around and stared at the ogre in horror. The riders backed off somewhat and lowered their barbed lances. They then began to slowly advance on the ogre and gnome.

"HALT!" shouted a voice with an unmistakable ring of authority. "Stand down, Captain." Lord Horacio sauntered out of the gloom in his mock uniform with a confident swagger and no visible weapons.

The riders hesitated and several of them wheeled to face the new comer. Several of them looked at the one who had spoken and he nodded almost imperceptibly.

"I hope that I don't have to repeat my order," the tiefling prince said as he walked up to the wall of barbed lances.

This all the riders stopped and their spokesman turned to face Lord Horacio.

"Name and Rank."

"Brigadier-General Horacio," the tiefling prince said. The riders sat silently on their horses and the moment seemed to last an aeon.

The air around the tiefling prince rippled and Otto had the feeling as if one layer of reality was being peeled away to be replaced by another. What had changed the gnome could not be sure of, but the riders lowered their lances and suddenly seemed a lot less threatening. Before he knew it, he had sunk to his knees and was prostrating himself in front of his master.

"Good day to you, Brigadier-General Horacio." The rider spoke in a subdued tone, as a slave to its owner or a lowly soldier to the head of the army. The gnome and ogres watched in awe as the riders dismounted and bowed reverently.

"That's better." Lord Horacio waved his handkerchief and indicated that the riders should remount. "As you can see. I and my personal Diviner have captured this ogre and half-elven woman. Therefore I will require an escort back to headquarters."

Otto was trying to fight the urge to prostrate himself and managed to get back to his feet. For the first time he noticed the fact that the etherscope was still spinning and that arcs of coloured lightning were jumping between the different metal bands.

"Err, Sir." The gnome said as he tugged on his master's coat-tails. "There's something that you should know sir."

"Not now," Lord Horacio whispered fiercely. The riders began fidget with some of them reaching for their swords. Otto became aware that his master's control on the cavalymen was beginning to slip.

"Sir, I just thought that you should know that the signs are bad." Otto whispered quickly whilst cowering behind his master.

"How bad?"

"I think that a collision is going to happen soon, Sir."

This caused the riders to stop their threatening advance and pause.

"Right men, you heard my Diviner. There is a collision due within the hour." Lord Horacio stepped up to one of the riders. "You will give me your horse, find another steed to share. The same goes for you," he said pointing to another rider.

Reluctantly the two riders dismounted and got on to other horses. Lord Horacio leapt in to the saddle and the black steed with glowing red eyes immediately bucked trying to throw its rider. The tiefling prince held on for dear life and lent forward to whisper in to the steed's ears. Just as quickly as the nightmarish steed had began to thrash around, it suddenly remained absolutely still. Otto grabbed his etherscope and bundle of clothes and climbed on behind his master.

Brent walked up to the other steed and looked sorrowfully in to its eyes for a brief moment. He then lay Lady Kyle across its back and climbed on to its back with the toes of his boots dragging along the ground. The nightmarish steed did not buck or try to throw its rider and Lord Horacio raised one eyebrow.

"Hmm, well men." Lord Horacio sat casually in the saddle leaning on the pommel. "We have less than an hour to reach the other side. What are you waiting for? Let's ride!"

The black steeds raced for the edge of the cube, trying to outrun a collision with a nearby cube that seemed to fill the sky. Dodging between skirmishers and the odd pocket of intense pitched battles taking place between nameless and faceless soldiers, it took the riders just over forty five minutes to reach the edge. By this time the nearby cube had drawn so close that it seemed to fill the whole sky. Battles could be seen taking place on the other cube, as well as lines of fleeing soldiers and refugees trying to reach a different side.

As the riders reached the edge of the cube the nightmare steeds leaped over the edge of the world and hung in the air for a perfect moment. In that moment of frozen time each rider caught a glimpse of absolute clarity of both sides of the cube - laid out perfectly below them.

They could see every contour of the landscape, the face of each soldier fighting, fleeing and being killed; as well as the ephemeral sea of lost souls that covered every inch of the cube. However, the moment came and went in a flash of absolute clarity leaving the riders with only a miniscule recollection of what they had experienced.

Unfortunately, it was at that exact moment that Lady Kyle woke up. She promptly began to scream at the top of her lungs, wailing like a lost and frightened child who was experiencing her worst nightmares. Brent the ogre tried to soothe her, but he was too busy trying to keep his steed under control. Rather than be frightened by the wailing and screaming, the steed seemed to draw strength from it and began to outpace the others.

Lord Horacio spurred on his mount and after a minute or two managed to catch up with his ogre servant.

"What in The Lady's name do you think that you are doing, berk?" Lord Horacio had to shout to be heard.

"Sorry milord," Brent said trying to reign in his steed. "I can't get her to stop."

"Sir! Always address me as Sir here."

"Sir, yes Sir."

"That's better, berk. Now I'm going to halt the others outside of that camp up ahead and you had better get this wailing banshee calmed down. Do I make myself clear?"

"Sir, yes Sir."

Brent managed to get his horse to stop and as he dismounted, still holding on to the now struggling Lady Kyle, the majority of the other riders passed him by. Three of the riders upon receiving a hand signal from Lord Horacio also stopped and remained behind to stand guard.

The ogre ignored the three riders, their nightmare steeds and the fact that all three had drawn their blades. He struggled to keep the woman from thrashing about too much and her silver hair whip-lashed him in the face several times. The ogre could have easily kept the woman still by sitting on her or hitting her, but he was trying to do so without hurting her.

After several long minutes of writhing, screaming and struggling to break away from the ogre, the half-elven

woman finally stopped moving. She lay on the ground with her chest falling and rising rapidly from the efforts that she'd expended.

Her eyes narrowed as she took a good look at the ogre servant standing over her. Brushing her beautiful silver hair out of her face she caught a glimpse of the three cavalrymen and saw their leering faces. The riders had taken off their heavy metal black helmets, that were forged in the image of different monstrous creatures in order to inspire fear in the enemy. Lady Kyle was not sure which was more frightening - the monstrous helmets or the dead stares of the cavalrymen and their hunger-filled grins. The cavalrymen seemed to her more like a hunting pack than a group of disciplined fighting men. There was little sign of intelligence in their faces. That had been leached out of them through endless and mindless battles. All that remained was a terrible cunning fuelled by a desire to inflict thoughtless suffering and death.

"I demand to be taking back to my family at once!" The half-elven woman spoke with such a voice of authority that the ogre found himself complying with her command for a second before catching himself in the act and sitting down.

"Sorry milady, but that will not be possible at this time." The ogre was seated opposite the noblewoman and pulled an apple out of his pocket that he began to peel.

"Perhaps I did not make myself clear. I demand that you take me home immediately." Despite the fact that Lady Kyle was still tied up, she still carried herself well - commanding respect as someone of a superior social stature.

"Well at least you would have the courtesy of untying me."

"Ere, let me help you with that," said one of the cavalrymen walking towards her. The others laughed and slapped him on the back as he passed. "I'll make you feel so good, you won't want to go home."

As the cavalryman walked up to the prone noblewoman, he found his way blocked by the ogre servant.

"Get out of the way beast," he said looking up at the ogre. "Else me and the boys here will carve a path through you." The others laughed and one of them shouted 'nice one'.

"No," replied the ogre.

"Well, if you want to try it the hard way..."

The cavalryman did not get a chance to finish his sentence as the ogre's hand flew forward, struck the man in the head, and sent him flying over to the other men. The cavalryman lay unmoving on the ground and the others immediately began to advance on Brent.

"Halt," Brent ordered in a quiet tone that hinted at a berserk fury barely kept under control. "I don't wish to harm any of you but will do so if need be."

"Try it, mate." One of the cavalrymen said as he and the others continued to advance with deadly intent. As they

quickly covered the ground between their fallen comrade and the ogre, one by one they stopped walking forward. Until there was only the one cavalryman standing in front of the ogre.

"Right, you're going to pay for that." The man raised his sword and as he prepared to swing it down he was flung across the broken ground like a rag doll by one of the ogre's blows. The man had tensed in anticipation of the counter-attack but it had come so swiftly that he had simply had not seen it coming.

As the second man landed in a crumpled heap of flesh and metal, the others backed away and sheathed their swords. Lady Kyle whimpered in terror at the sudden display of violence and prayed reverently that everything around her was but a dream.

"As I was saying milady," the ogre servant said apologetically. "I am unable to return you to your place of residence. It is currently not safe to do so. There is also the fact that my master wished you to accompany him on his journey. But as a token of good faith I shall untie you."

"Who is your master?" Realisation dawned on the noblewoman as she was being untied and she moaned in dismay. "No, it cannot be. Lord Horacio would not dare abduct me."

The ogre remained silent and went back to peeling his apple.

"It cannot be." The noblewoman kept repeating the phrase. As she did so the vague memory of the dashing handsome tiefling prince standing over her bed with a scented handkerchief surfaced in her mind. She let out a string of swear words and insults that would have made a harlot working the worst part of the Hive proud. Brent the ogre blushed at the words that he recognised and was glad of the fact that he did not understand the rest.

"Just wait until I get my hands on that.... Oh frell, I've run out of words to insult that man. Even comparing him to the worst of the fiends is an insult to fiends everywhere."

"Would milady like some apple?"

"Pardon? You're offering me apple at a time like this, how rude!" Lady Kyle hitched up her skirt, turned her back on the ogre and began to walk away. Her progress was impeded by the debris strewn around the war-torn landscape and threatened to bring her well choreographed departure to an embarrassing end.

"Is milady taking a walk?" the ogre asked politely.

"Yes, milady is taking a walk." She shouted back at the ogre. "I'm going home. Right now."

"How?"

"What do you mean 'how'? I will simple find a portal back to Sigil and return home. Everywhere has portal to the Cage. Why everyone knows that it's the centre of the Multiverse?"

"No it isn't." The ogre said quietly.

By this time Lady Kyle had stopped in her tracks and was trying to figure out a way across the uneven ground towards somewhere that looked a little more like civilization and less like a battlefield.

"Well, you can believe what you like. You're an ogre and everyone knows that you ogres are stupid."

"If you say so milady."

"I do say so." Lady Kyle turned around, gave the ogre one of her best practised angry glares and placed her hands firmly on her hips. "Now if you would be so kind as to tell me where the nearest portal to Sigil is, then I would be much obliged."

"I'm sorry milady, but I can't."

"I demand that you tell me at once!" she yelled as she stamped her foot. The half-elven noblewoman was becoming somewhat disconcerted that one her best glares seemed to have little or no effect on the ogre.

"I'm but a stupid ogre milady and don't know about such things." Brent bit in to the apple and noisily chewed on the half that was in his mouth.

"Oh I see, is that how you would like to play it?" Lady Kyle walked back to the ogre and did her best to look imposing. She tried to tower over him, but even seated the ogre was taller than her. "You're obviously not a stupid ogre otherwise Lord Horacio would not employ you. So if you would be so good as to tell me where the nearest portal is, then I will make sure that my father will spare you life."

"Sorry milady."

"Is that all that you can say? Just 'sorry milady this' and 'sorry milady that'?"

The half-elven woman considered giving her most imperious stares, but she had a nagging suspicion that it might not work. Whilst throughout her thoroughly pampered life she had been able to get everything that she wanted and more - the noblewoman had learned the value of visibly displaying her displeasure. Servants in the Lady's ward whispered of what the consequences were of raising Lady Kyle's ire, but this simpleton ogre seemed oblivious to this or was simply too stupid to comprehend it.

"No milady."

"Oh for Heaven's sake. I don't know why I'm wasting my time with you. Never have I met such a rude servant before. When my father hears of this, you will beg to be incarcerated in the Abyss rather than face his wrath."

"I'm sure that milady is right."

"So what do you expect me to do? Just stand here?"

"Yes milady. The master has just gone to get an army in order to invade Baator." The ogre ate the second half of

the apple in one huge bite and chewed contently on it as the apple's juices dribbled down his chin. "He should be back within a few hours."

Dumbfounded, confused and frightened by everything that had happened Lady Kyle could not find any words with which to reply. Instead she sat down in a huff and began to cry. When she found that this had no effect on the ogre she stopped crying and instead stared at him angrily for several long hours.

Otto watched in amazement as his master and the remaining cavalymen rode in to the army camp. He'd been expecting a couple of tents, a place to tie up the horses and perhaps a unit or two of footmen. Instead what he saw was a mercenary army made up of numerous different races that numbered in the tens of thousands.

The rows of tents seemed to go on for miles and looked more like a miniature city than a small army camp. There were no permanent structures and the tents became larger and more ornate as they drew closer to the centre of the camp. By the time that they had passed the sentry posts on the outskirts and ridden along one of the main thoroughfares, the gnome diviner was finally beginning to get a feel for just how big a real army actually was.

They passed a large group of hobgoblins that numbered in the hundreds camped next to a small cluster of war trolls that were spread across an equal amount of space. Alongside them were approximately two thousand spearmen all dressed in red chain mail that were practising their drills led by a monstrous creature with the head of an eagle and the body of a giant snake.

After a short while Otto began to notice a pattern to the way that the camp was laid out and came to the conclusion that they were travelling through ever decreasing rings of army tents. Looking ahead he saw that they were headed for the very centre of the camp where a huge tent towered over those nearby. It had numerous flags fluttering high in the wind, but the meaning of the flags was lost on the gnome diviner.

At each large intersection along the path the riders had their progress blocked and on every occasion Lord Horacio got them through. The gnome diviner was able to see first hand the barely perceptible ripple of reality that originated from around his master and then waited for the abrupt change in the demeanour of the soldiers. Sure enough the soldiers changed from challenging, even in some cases overtly hostile, to being helpful and accepting of any orders.

Since Otto was seated behind his master on the nightmare steed he did not get to see many of the faces of the soldiers until they had passed by, but he began to see a pattern there as well. When they were challenged and surrounded by wary guards the men or creatures blocking their path stared at them with a naked lust for bloodshed. But after Otto felt the ripple pass from his master to all around them, the faces of the guards became blank stares of exhaustion, like those who had witnessed too much mayhem and death to register anything else.

However, as they passed each sentry post in turn Otto could feel the strength being sapped from his master's body with each ripple that passed outwards. By the time that they had reached the inner ring and came across a ring of two dozen Maelephants standing guard, Lord Horacio was slumped forward in the saddle. The tiefling prince slowly climbed down from the horse and lent against its flanks almost ready to collapse from sheer exhaustion. The gnome diviner slipped off the steed as well and stood as close to his master as he could.

"Sir, is there something wrong Sir?" The gnome diviner shifted uneasily as he saw the riders beginning to pace around, looking more and more restless.

"I'll be alright Otto. I just need a moment to gather my strength."

"That's good to hear Sir, as our escort looks ready to leave at any moment. Sir."

"Thanks Otto, but I am fully aware of the current situation." The tiefling prince pushed himself away from the horse and straightened his immaculately tailored black outfit. With a curt wave of the hand he dismissed the cavalymen and waited patiently until they had left.

Several of the Maelephants were staring at the tiefling prince and the gnome diviner. The large upright-standing elephantine creature were imposing enough individually. Seeing so many in one location filled the gnome with trepidation. Otto was very put off by their stares and felt as though they were looking right through him, laying open all his fears for their inspection. Lord Horacio on the other hand appeared not to notice or even pay them any attention.

"Sir?"

Lord Horacio stood silently staring at the tent whilst all around them messengers, soldiers and all manner of monstrous creatures moved around the vast camp. None came within a dozen yards of the central tent and since the tiefling prince and gnome diviner stood ten yards away, they were left alone - unchallenged by the guards or passers-by.

"Sir?" Otto asked again, trying to get his master's attention.

"Just a moment Otto," Lord Horacio stated with a strong hint of disappointment. "Be a good fellow and see if you can scry who is inside the big tent over there, would you?"

The gnome diviner gulped and stared at the large tent that was covered with protective runes and glyphs. Now that they stood close by he could even make out great arcane words of power on the flags fluttering above the tents. The inquisitive part of his mind was already busy piecing together their meaning and he began to understand the enchantments woven therein were the magical 'glue' binding the army together.

Otto raised his hands and drew strength from the fey part of his blood to channel the magical energy in to the mental constructs that came easily to his mind. He closed his eyes and slowly allowed the magic to fill the runes floating in the fore-front of his thoughts. As the eldritch energy flooded his mind he felt a part of himself shifting forwards to the edge of the tent.

This close to the tent, past the guards, he could feel the hum of power emanating from the runes protecting the tent. In his minds eye he slowly floated around the tent and saw a tiny gap in the magical shield. Knowing that he could not report any failure to his employer he pushed himself forwards in to the tent through the tiny gap.

Inside the tent it was entirely dark and he could make out absolutely nothing. For a moment panic threatened to

overwhelm his mind and he felt the magic slipping away, but Otto managed to get it back under control. Suddenly a small light appeared in the tent and as it grew slowly larger it began to outline the shape of a heavenly beautiful woman who was lounging on a divan, swinging her perfectly formed foot back and forth. The light danced around her, creating patches of shadow and light, that showed her to be a celestial creature. However, when Otto looked at her eyes he saw that they were pits of blackness within which not even a spark of goodness remained. The gnome diviner felt as though she was looking right at him and he immediately ceased the divination.

"Lady's grace, dear Otto. But it does appear that you are shaking. I do hope that all went well and that you have some good news for me."

"Well master," Otto began as he tried to collect his thoughts in order to present his news in the best way. "Do you wish the better news or the not so good news first."

"Good news first," his employer replied. "Always start with good news, then bad and then finish with good."

"Sir, the good news is that there is only one person inside." Otto took a big breath before proceeding. "The not so good news is that she is a fallen angel."

The gnome paused and looked up uncertainly at his employer, trying to gauge how his master had reacted to the news. Lord Horacio simply responded by raising one of his eyebrows. Otto waited a moment or two before proceeding.

"And Sir the other bit of good news is that she knows that we are here and I believe that she has invited us in." Otto twiddled his thumbs and wondered if that could really be classified as good news. "Sir," he said remembering belatedly to add 'Sir' at the start and end of every sentence.

"Well. Best not keep her waiting," Lord Horacio began walking towards the wall of bodyguards and they melted to the sides just as he came within reach of their wicked looking glaives. "Coming Otto? Wouldn't want you to miss the fun."

The gnome rushed to catch up his employer as fast as his little legs could carry him just before the ring of Maelephants closed around the tent again. Within moments they were at the entrance to the tent and Lord Horacio promptly stepped inside. Otto followed and walked in to the darkened tent. As they both moved forwards they headed for the only discernable thing within the large tent. This being an angelic female lying on a divan who was beckoning them over with her pale, smooth and perfectly manicured hand.

Lord Horacio did not slow his strides and walked over to her at a confident and energetic pace that left Otto running to keep up. As the gnome drew closer he saw something small moving just behind the angel although it seemed to be close enough to be somewhere on her back. He could barely make it out against the shifting light from the orb of light dancing around her. When he reached he saw that the movement that he had spied were the stubs of bone and flesh that were all that remained of her once magnificent golden wings.

"My lady," Lord Horacio bowed with a flourish of his handkerchief and gave his most dashing handsome

smile. "It is an honour to be in your presence. My name is Lord Horacio, hailing from the city of Sigil. May I present to you my chief Diviner, Otto Bressail?"

Otto felt himself being kicked in the shins and realised that his master wished him to bow. The gnome hurriedly bowed deeply and looked up to see the fallen angel stare at him with her black bottomless eyes. A shiver passed through Otto's entire body leaving him feeling chilled to the bone.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance Lord Horacio." The angel spoke with a musical lilt to her words that was incredibly, uplifting to listen to and had clearly a heavenly ring to them. "You may address me as General Kale."

Lord Horacio bowed again and Otto followed suit. "My thanks General. This is indeed a blessed day to have met one of the finest generals in all of Acheron. Why all the lords and ladies in Sigil speak your praise whenever anyone asks about the latest news regarding the Blood War."

The fallen angel laughter had an innocent quality to it that was only ever heard from babies or very young children. Underlying this pure mirth was an echo of a voice that laughed with a malicious glee.

"Please excuse me, Lord Horacio. But it is a rare day that anyone can make me laugh. I'm sure that you could flatter the blades off The Lady of Pain if you were so inclined." She stopped laughing and stared intently at the tiefling prince to size him up. "It is an even rarer day when a Cambion prince enters my tent."

Otto took a step away from his employer, unable to conceal his sudden fear of him.

"Please General Kale, perhaps you have not looked carefully enough." Lord Horacio's diplomatic words and soothing tone appeased the fallen angel. The general waved her hand to indicate that the tiefling prince could continue and Otto was surprised to see that he had not been transformed into a small pile of ash. "If the General would be so kind, then she will see that the Taint is not as strong as others of my kind."

The degraded celestial rose from her divan and took a step closer to the tiefling prince. The gauze shawls covering her immaculate body slipped and Otto could not help but notice the countless scars marring her otherwise perfect body. The scars varied in length, some little more than nicks and cuts. Whilst one of the longer ones ran the length of her thigh. The gnome diviner stood mesmerised by her uncovered form and was oblivious to his master and the fallen angel gazing into each other's eyes.

"How did you do this?" the fallen angel asked. "Explain yourself."

"My lady, I have spent a very long time divesting myself of certain attributes."

"I can see that, fascinating. Truly fascinating. You must tell me how you managed it." Kale brushed her hand along Lord Horacio's cheek. She closed her eyes and repeated the motion several times.

"Lady General, nothing would gladden my heart more than to share the secret with you. However, there is a small boon that I would dare request as a token of goodwill."

The fallen angel opened her black, bottomless eyes and smiled crookedly. "There's always a catch, isn't there? Very well, Lord Horacio. Name your price."

"My lady, I seek to travel around the Great Ring through the Lower planes first and then in to the Upper Planes. In order to traverse these planes I am in need of a safe means of passage."

"So what you are saying is that in exchange for your little secret, you'd like to borrow my merry band of soldier-boys. Is that correct?"

"Yes, General. You have summed it up perfectly."

General Kale stepped back from the tiefling prince and lay back down on the divan, stretching herself and luxuriating in its soft feel. She almost appeared feline in her appreciation of it as she stretched herself out. The fallen angel lay back, but the remains of her wings prevented her from lying comfortably and she shifted her weight on to her elbows.

"Very well Lord Horacio. In exchange for your secret, I will put my army at your disposal."

"Thank you my lady." Lord Horacio bowed again deeply. Otto forgot to bow and instead stood entranced by her naked beauty. Having seen three stunning female in one day had scrambled his brains to such an extent that he could do little more than stare and drool a little.

Lord Horacio walked up to her and took the ring that she held out to him. He kissed her hand briefly and walked backwards away from her so as not to turn his back on her. As he walked backwards he dragged the gnome with her and then promptly exited the tent.

The light was beginning to fade in the Lady's ward as anti-peak drew ever closer. A small number of light boys wandered the streets despite the best efforts of the Harmonium, although they were the best dressed and best paid light boys in the whole of the city. As a number of the larger taverns began to close their doors and usher their patrons in to the streets to head for home, the light boys jumped in to action offering their services to guide the various party-goers and socialites to their houses and mansions. Many of the nobles had private carriages and sedan chairs, but on occasion one or two would amuse themselves by being led home by one of the light boys.

The girls and boys of different races who worked the streets with their magical lanterns would sometimes huddle on the corners of the streets when it wasn't busy. There they would exchange the latest gossip, boast about whom they had escorted that evening and from which start point to which destination. One of their favourite games was to imagine what the various nobles got up to when they arrived at their destination or why they were leaving a particular exclusive tavern or high class inn.

When they tired of gossiping they would turn to discuss the latest rumours, legends of the city and other stories to scare some of the younger and less experienced light boys. The one that was most popular at the time was that of one particular nobleman who liked to wander the streets with a light boy in order to have business

discussions with other nobles. The rumour was that the matter which was discussed was so confidential that none of the light boys ever returned. There had in fact always been rumours of light boys disappearing this was the latest incarnation of the myth.

One such gathering of light boys was listening to one of the more experienced boys telling the others the latest variation on the most popular urban legend. Just as he reached the climactic and gory end of his story two nobleman wandered in to view, turning the corner in to their street. One of the men had a slim build, pointed ears and blonde hair. He wore a pale green suit with a design of inter-locking leaves on it. The other man was much larger in comparison and had the build of a gladiator. He walked down the street with a supremely confident stride and wore a nobleman's outfit with strong military overtones.

"Hey Telsa," said the light boy who had finished telling the story. "Why don't you go ask those men if they need someone to light their way?"

Telsa glared at the older boy, hating him for picking her out. She knew that she was one of the youngest in the group and the least experienced. Also, the fact that the story-teller knew that she disliked listening to the horror stories meant that the timing could not have been worse.

"Why don't you go do it, seeing as you're so all knowing." Telsa tried to put on a brave face, but the older boy out-stared her.

"Scared are you?" the older boy sneered. Telsa could feel the eyes of everyone on the group on her, something else that she disliked and their mocking laughter made her cheeks burn with embarrassment. "Worried that you ain't coming back? Poor little Telsa."

"No," the girl said defiantly. "I ain't scared. None of your silly stories scare me, they're just boring and very long-winded."

"Is that so?" the older boy asked. He pushed his way through the small group, grabbed the girl by the scruff of her shirt and pushed her roughly away from the others. "Well, if my stories ain't good enough for you perhaps you should go elsewhere."

"Fine," she replied. "In fact, I will take the job as light boy for these men. Just you wait and see, when I come back you'll be falling over each other to hear what stories I bring back."

Some of the other light boys laughed, but most of them simply stood and watched. Telsa approached the two noblemen who were engrossed in conversation and politely interrupted them. The larger man shook his head and was about to dismiss her but the nobleman with elven features gave her a coin and indicated that she should lead the way. The trio silently walked down the remainder of the road before turning the corner and disappearing from sight.

After another minute or two of walking in silence the half-elven man finally spoke.

"Lord Anisen, I would be delighted to make the necessary arrangements. As you know my household has been very busy of late and hence the reason why I have not been able to arrange a meeting."

"Yes," the well built man replied. "I've heard that your household has been positively turning the place upside down; they must be very busy indeed."

The half-elven nobleman cast a sharp accusatory glance at the other man, but the other merely smiled and continued to look straight ahead.

"A fair point Lord Anisen and that is one of the reasons why it was so fortunate that we met this evening. You see I would like to request your aid in helping me to find that which is missing."

"Let us not beat about the bush, Lord Redthorn." The larger man replied and his manner becoming more business-like and less congenial. "Despite your acceptance of my request to court your daughter, she is in fact no longer in your care. Am I right?"

"Indeed you are," Lord Redthorn replied with a heavy heart. "She was taken last night from her room and we have not been able to locate her within the mansions since then."

"Perhaps you have thought to look a little further afield than your palace of residence? Have you attempted to scry the city to determine her whereabouts?"

"A fair point Lord Anisen and this is something that I made sure was done immediately. However, this again met with no success and so I ordered the search be continued around all of the known planes if need be. Fortunately I have within my employ a gifted seer who was able to see that my daughter is in fact in Acheron."

"Acheron?" Lord Anisen asked, being genuinely astonished. He had watched Lady Kyle's rise in their social circles with interest. She had recently begun to play a larger role as her father introduced her more and more to the circles within which he moved and Lord Anisen was immediately struck by her beauty and innocence. He knew from the first moment that he saw her that she was something that he wished to possess and that nothing would stand in his way to getting her.

Having just heard the news that she was no longer in Sigil sent his thoughts flying through all the possibilities of the plans that he had put in to place to win her hand and make her in to his wife. He had even formulated a plan whereby he would buy her off Lord Redthorn in exchange for controlling interest in several very lucrative ventures that were also very entertaining. Lord Anisen was loathe to give up control of those interests, but he considered the silver-haired elven princess to be worth the price.

"Acheron?" Lord Anisen repeated. "Well, that is a turn up for the books. What on earth possessed her to go there?"

"I don't believe that she went there voluntarily," Lord Redthorn replied angrily. The slim man was beginning to shake with fury and he fought to keep his voice calm and level. "As I said, I do not believe that she went of her own free will. My seer has informed me that she was visited by a certain member of our League and forcibly taken by that person."

"Oh," said the well built man not liking the idea at all that someone had beating him to taking possession of Lady Kyle. "I suppose that you have a name for this person?"

"Indeed I do," suddenly Lord Redthorn's manner changed and he became a lot more subdued. "But first I must ask you words as a gentleman and member of the League that you will not divulge this information to anyone."

"Of course you have it Lord Redthorn. Of that you can be certain." Lord Anisen was anxious to hear the name but he did not wish to let it show. When the half-elven lord had come to see him and had hinted at the idea that he could court his daughter, the well built nobleman had been delighted and deeply suspicious at the same time. Now, however, he understood the reasons behind that suggestion and his suspicions had only become deeper still.

"I believe that the name of the man who has taken my daughter is Lord Horacio," the half-elf said solemnly.

"But that's impossible!" the other man replied. "He was sent in to a Maze with Lady knows what monster Lord Ashmantle keeps fed inside of it."

"I too thought this same way," Lord Redthorn stated calmly. "But since that revelation I have employed the services of a very talented and discreet diviner to locate my daughter and show me her location. Fortunately I caught a glimpse of her in the blasted hell that is Acheron. Unfortunately the diviner was not able to track her for long as we both sat and watched her being carried in to the middle of an enemy camp where she was taken in to the command tent. It was at that point that the divination was thwarted."

"Ah, I see." Lord Anisen stroked his chin and thought the matter over. He briefly made up a mental list of the people and things that he would need to get her out of the camp and came up with the basics of a plan. "Did you see the cursed tiefling?"

"Alas, I did not. Therefore I cannot say for certain that it was him, but I would stake my life on it."

"So what you would like me to do is to help you to return your daughter."

"Correct."

"In exchange for what?"

"Well, the privilege of being able to court her, of course."

"Of course. But why did you come to me with this? Perhaps one of the other lords could handle this better?"

"I don't believe so, Lord Anisen. Besides, should my daughter favour you in her affections then it would ease my heart to know that she was being cared for by a man who is capable of venturing in the very jaws of Acheron to bring her back to safety."

"Of that you can be certain Lord Redthorn."

"I'm glad to see that we are in agreement." The half-elf held stopped walking, held out his hand and the other man shook it. As the well-built man maintained the hand-shake he looked briefly at the girl holding the lantern and then back at Lord Redthorn.

"Oh, don't worry about that. I shall take care of it."

"A good evening to you then, Lord Redthorn. It has been a pleasure doing business with you." The well built nobleman gave a curt bow and walked away. Once he was outside the radius of the magical light and out of ear shot Lord Redthorn began walking again.

"Now then child," the half-elven nobleman turned to the girl carrying the light. "Tell me your name?"

"Telsa, milord."

"Telsa? What a beautiful name for a sweet child." The half-elf put his hand on the girl's shoulder and the light boy was amazed by the strength of his grip. "Perhaps we can go for a little wander, Telsa? Wouldn't that be fun."

The mercenary army belonging to the fallen archon, known as General Kale, mobilised and prepared to invade the plane of Baator. Under the direction of the new Voice of the General, the army packed it's gear and formed up in to orderly columns in order to march across the cubes of Acheron towards the gates to Baator. Despite having only just arrived in to the army encampment, the tiefling who had taken up the role of the Voice of the General appeared to know a great deal about warfare.

The only part of the army that seemed to be experiencing problems were the sentry points that restricted the movements of troops from one side of the army to the other. Whenever members of various units rushed to join up with the rest of their battalions, they found that the sentries either directed them in the wrong direction or delayed them for unknown reasons. Eventually after a day's worth of preparations the army was ready to roll out. The elven princess and her ogre bodyguard that the Voice of the General had captured, were brought in to the camp and sent in to the General's tent together with the tiefling's pet Diviner.

Eventually after several more hours of effort, orders being sent back and forth along the lines and the coordination of travelling through gates tested several times - the army was ready to move off. With cavalry and flying skirmishers leading the way the army slowly advanced across the warn-torn surface of the immense cube floating in the black void. Following outriders were the infantrymen, siege weapons and bringing up the rear under heavy guard were the wagon trains. As the thick columns of ten of thousands of men and creatures marched, crawled, slithered and flew they kicked up a huge cloud of smoke and dust that followed behind. The billowing wall of smoke and dust loomed over the back of the army heralding its advance from miles away and smaller armies, temporary settlements and military outposts were all abandoned in a rush to avoid the juggernaut that was the army of General Kale.

Lady Kyle, Brent the ogre servant and Otto Bressail, gnome diviner all found themselves in the tent belonging to the lady General. Their movements were restricted to the large tent as the Voice of the General had ordered the Maelephant bodyguards not to let them out of the tent whilst they were on the move. None of the three knew exactly how the tent was able to move and remain upright, but none of them was curious enough to find out what was causing the tent to rock lightly from side to side.

The passage of time was measured by the candles that the gnome diviner burnt to ward off the pitch darkness within the tent. The only other light source came from the small globe of light that circled and danced around the tall, classically beautiful human woman whom Lady Kyle and Brent were introduced to as General Kale. Otto was aware of the General's true nature but he was not overly keen to discuss it with the others, especially

within the fallen angel's own tent.

Otto knew that each of his candles burned for approximately a half a day and he counted on his fingers that he had burnt six so far. Part way through the burning of the seventh candle his employer came in and conversed with the tall, elegant General at a different corner of the tent. He could not hear what they were saying and he was grateful not to know. Otto smiled at this thought and realised that for the first time in his life he was glad of being ignorant of some things. Curiosity had led him down the path of becoming a diviner but for the first time in his life he wished fervently that he had chosen a different path.

When the tiefling prince had finished talking to the general he called Otto over and gave him some very detailed instructions on scrying for a portal in Gehenna that would take them to the Gray Waste. The instructions included information about the portal such as where it was roughly located and landmarks that pointed to its location. Once his employer exited the tent, the gnome was left scratching his head trying to figure out how to divine the bottomless chasm that Lord Horacio had described without being on the volcanic plane of Gehenna itself.

The thing that worried Otto the most was the deadline by which he had to succeed in his divinations, it was not very far away. Considering the fact that Otto had never been to Gehenna and that his search was like looking for a needle in a haystack - he knew that he had quite a challenge on his hands. The gnome diviner looked over at the ogre attending to Lady Kyle and wondered why he had not been given such an easy assignment as looking after the noblewoman's wishes. But after listening to the conversation between the two, he thought that perhaps he had got the better deal of the two.

"Can't you do anything right, ogre?" Lady Kyle scowled at Brent and stamped her foot. "If I am to be kept prisoner in this blasted tent with only a clueless ogre and a shy gnome for company, then at least you can put some effort in to keeping me entertained. Now let's start again."

"Yes milady," Brent dutifully picked up the cards again from the small table that they were seated at and began to shuffle them. The gold edged cards almost disappeared from sight as the ogre handled them with his large hands and he began to deal another set of seven cards.

"No, no, no." The noblewoman threw down her cards and pushed them back to the ogre. "I refuse to play with such a hand."

"That's a good hand, milady."

The ogre had spent the past couple of days teaching Lady Kyle how to play various card games as it was the only form of entertainment that she seemed to tolerate for any length of time. His dancing and attempts at singing had amused her briefly, but that had worn short after awhile.

"I don't care if it's a good hand or not. I'm not holding a card with that ugly picture of a troll on it."

"It's not a troll, milady. It's a treant."

"Treant, troll - what's the difference?"

"Well milady, you see...."

"That was a rhetorical question, you silly ogre. Can't you at least try to keep up with the conversation. Now deal me a good hand, otherwise I shall send you to the kitchens."

Brent sighed and shuffled the cards again before dealing another hand. This time he made sure that she received the cards with the drawings on them that she liked the most despite the fact that it was not a good set of cards. Lady Kyle was almost child-like in her attitude towards the cards and the ogre and gnome were quickly learning just how spoiled and pampered the Golden Lord's daughter really was.

"Oh, I do like these cards. Especially this one, that's very pretty indeed."

"That, milady, would be a sword archon."

"Thanks you, ogre. But I am fully aware what that card means." Ooh, a sword archon. Lady Kyle remembered hearing about Zadara the Titan having two archons in her employ and had begged her father to let her see them. It was one of the few rare occasions that he had refused, although he had given in sufficiently to promise her archons of her very own one day.

"Uh, milady. It's your turn to play a card."

"Really? What happens if I don't want to pick up a card and discard one of these delightful cards? Who knows what horrible cards I might pick up? There was that one of a silver coloured man standing in front of a very tall and incredibly thin mountain. I really did not like the look of him."

"He was a Rilmani, milady."

"Rilmani? Oh how droll. I'm sure that it is a name that you have just made up."

"If you say so, milady."

"I do day so."

The two card players paused their conversation as Otto lit the eighth candle with the flame from the remainder of the seventh candle.

"How many days have we been travelling?"

"Three and a half days, milady" the ogre said as he put his cards down.

"Bored now," Lady Kyle sighed.

"Yes, milady."

"Well.... Aren't you going to entertain me?"

"Sorry milady, but I have no new games to teach you."

"Oh. Well that's not good enough. You and that little man had better come up with something soon, else I shall be very upset. I'm sure that Lord Horacio would not like that."

"Yes milady is correct."

Lady Kyle left the table and walked to the edge of the candle light to try to peer in to the darkness. She felt the gentle rocking of the floor swaying from side to side as if she was on a ship, but she could hear nothing from outside the tent. Suddenly she felt someone nearby and hastily took a step back as the tall, elegant human woman stepped in to the light.

"Greetings, child." The woman moved to embrace the half-elven noblewoman who reluctantly let her do so. She noticed that there was something wrong with the human's eyes, but she could not say exactly what it was. However, she was relieved to feel that the woman was indeed warm flesh and blood. During the three days of the journey Lady Kyle had only seen her on occasions and then only from a distance. She was not sure where the human woman went when the light went away, but she was sure that the human had not left the tent.

"Good day to you, lady General." Lady Kyle curtsied as she was not sure how to greet a General and the whole embracing thing had unnerved her somewhat.

"Please, call me lady Kale."

"Very well, Lady Kale. Please can I go home now?"

The General laughed and shook her head, glad to be in the presence of someone so youthful, innocent and vibrant. She took the disappointed half-elf noblewoman by the hand and led her back to the table.

"Alas, child that is not possible." She held up her hand to gently reprimand the noblewoman who was about to speak and Brent rushed to help them each get seated in turn. "Thank you Brent," The lady General said, despite never having been introduced to the ogre.

"Please milady," the ogre replied with an awkward bow. "If that will be all my ladies?"

"Don't go just yet," the lady General said and Lady Kyle breathed a sigh of relief at not being left alone with the strange woman. "Please take a seat."

"The reason why it is not possible Lady Kyle is that I have made an agreement with Lord Horacio to accompany him through the Lower planes and in to the Upper planes. Having given my assurance as a lady that you will be safe in my protection, I am honour-bound to make sure that you do not suffer in any way as we traverse through Baator and beyond."

"But Lady Kale, every day that I am away from my father I suffer terribly. Please will you not reconsider and let me go home?"

"Alas, child I cannot. But come, since this journey will take some time perhaps I can tell you some stories. The journey across Baator will take quite a few days and will be very busy for everyone outside of this tent."

"How soon will we be in Baator?" Lady Kyle asked in trepidation. She had heard many hints and whispered rumours about the plane that some Primes referred to as the Nine Hells. Being stuck in the tent meant that she could not experience either Acheron or Baator in any way, but the thought that only the cloth from which the tent was made separated her from the Hells was not a very comforting one.

"We're already in Baator, child."

"Really? Aren't we supposed to travel through a portal or gate?"

"We have travelled through a gate, several in fact. But don't worry your pretty head about such things dear. Lord Horacio is taking care of all of those details."

"Are we really in Baator?"

"Truly we are." The tall woman left the table briefly and came back carrying a large tome that she laid out on the table. She opened the dust covered tome, which creaked in protest from years of disuse and turned the page to an illustration of a beautiful drawing containing magnificent mountains and lush valleys. "Let me tell you a story about a Prince and a Fox as they travelled through Arborea, it is one of my favourite stories."

"I like having stories read to me," the half-elven noblewoman confided.

"I am pleased to hear it," the woman replied. She looked over the table at the ogre and her smile disappeared. "Since we shall be travelling for some time, you will have plenty of times to listen to stories. Who knows, perhaps Brent will even tell us a story or two?"

"Please Lady Kale, I want to hear the story about the Prince and the Fox."

"Very well child, now let me see how this one goes again..."

The next day Lord Horacio began to enter in to the tent on a more frequent basis. Each time that he did so, the General interrupted her reading of the fairy tales to the enraptured Lady Kyle. The two of them moved out of the candle-light and held a conversation in private somewhere else in the darkened tent. On one occasion Lord Horacio came in looking travel-stained and with a scimitar that was dripping with gore. This time the General did not get up from the table and instead waited for the tiefling prince to make his report.

"General Kale," Lord Horacio held out his hand to invite her to another part of the tent.

"I'm quite comfortable here," the General replied.

"As you wish Sir." The tiefling prince drew out a handkerchief and used it to wipe off the gore, much to the disgust of Lady Kyle who had turned a whiter shade of pale at the sight. Brent jumped up and offered to clean the sword as well as his master's jacket. The tiefling prince accepted the offer and cuffed his servant lightly with a handkerchief more out of habit than for any wrong-doing.

"Well," General Kale said as she turned the page. "How goes it on the field of battle?"

"We are on target for our destination, Sir." Lord Horacio reported. "It seems as though the eruptions of flame on Avernus itself seek out our troops in order to decimate our ranks. However, within a day we should reach the portal to Gehenna."

"And how exactly do you intend to get all my men through this portal? I presume that there is just the one portal?"

"Yes, my lady. The Lords of the Nine have as we anticipated prevented us from gating straight through to Gehenna and even now sent an army of lesser and greater Baatezu to block out path."

"Lord Horacio, I do believe that you have just avoided my question."

"Forgive me lady General. It is my intention to go through the portal single file."

"Oh really, is that so? Well, how much of my army do you is still intact?"

"Just under half, lady General."

"Half? You have managed to lose me half my army in the span of four days?"

"Yes, my lady. Although it would be more fair to say that this half was lost only today."

"I suppose that makes it somewhat better. How many battles have we won?"

"None, we have withdrawn from the field of battle in every engagement lady General."

"Lord Horacio," the elegant woman said in a steely tone. "I have lent you my army so that we can travel together. There is something that we both want and I am doing my part to help you at this moment in time. If you would be so kind as to not lose the second half of my army, then I would be able to sleep a little better tonight."

"I understand, General Kale." The tiefling prince accepted the cleaned jacket and scimitar that his ogre servant brought back. He pulled on the jacket and sheathed his sword. "However, it is my intention to dispose of the remainder of the force either before or shortly after we enter the plane of Gehenna."

The elegant and classically beautiful woman sitting opposite the tiefling prince sat in a composed posture, not displaying any outwards sign of emotion. However, when she next spoke her mask of civility slipped and her unbridled fury sent the gnome and half-elf both fleeing for cover.

"Traitor! You come in to my camp and promise me my hearts desire, but all the time you are simply trying to weaken my power and destroy what I have spent years building up. You have led us on to the field of battle for the sole purpose of destroying me and my army."

The sounds of fighting outside the tent began to drift inside leaving those inside in no doubt what so ever that a large and bloody melee was taking place not too far away. As the wall of sound came crashing in the illusion of safety and isolation of the command tent was stripped away as they heard the sounds of thousands of men and

fiends battling, dark magics being channelled to create swathes of destruction and one of the skirmishes in the very Blood War itself taking place on their doorstep.

"Please, lady General can I have a moment to explain." Lord Horacio spoke hurriedly and held up his hands to ward off the fallen angel's fury. "You cannot take with you this army where we are going. It is the first thing that you must give up."

"You dare to order me! In my very own tent, in the seat of my power!"

"Kale it has come to this," the tiefling prince was fully aware of the risk he took by dropping the title and honorific of the fallen angel but he was willing to risk the gamble. "If you are serious about what I have offered. Not promised, but merely offered. Then you must accept that your army ends here."

The two faced off against each other over the table as the battle raged outside the large tent. Slowly but surely the sounds of the fighting died away and as it did so the tension in the air seemed to lessen. Lady Kyle whimpered as she lay huddled next to the terrified gnome and the dumbfounded ogre stood not too far away.

"Very well, it was only an army. I have raised and lost many."

"Yes lady General. But this is the last of your armies."

"Perhaps I will one day have a different kind of army."

"Perhaps lady General. But not for a very long time, the temptation would be too strong."

"Oh the irony of this. Here I am being lectured to by the likes of you."

"Sir, we are both trying to be something that we are not."

"The only difference is that I am trying to return, whilst you have never been there."

The words cut Lord Horacio to the quick and he fell silent. The General sat down again after having stood up in their heated argument and she waved her hand to indicate that the tiefling prince was dismissed.

"One more thing before you go, Lord Horacio."

"Anything for you General Kale."

"Can you tell me how many battle we have fought in, that is including the one that is currently raging."

"One, Sir."

"Oh. Just the one. Well, I commend you on your ability to lead an army and lose half of it in the first engagement."

"Thank you Sir."

"Good luck getting rid of the other half, they're a stubborn bunch who hate to die."

"Don't we all General Kale. I will do my best."

"One more thing, how soon until we get to Gehenna?"

"Within a day, my lady."

"Very well, you are dismissed."

"Thank you lady General."

The elegant woman got up slowly from the table, curtsied to the ogre, gnome and half-elf before walking off in to the darkness of the chamber. The candle flickered briefly at her passing and Otto noticed that he could make out the stumps of her broken wings in her shadow, but not in her disguised form. He looked over at Lady Kyle who lay shivering in his arms, but she appeared not to have noticed. Glancing up at the ogre he saw that the large creature still had the same vacant expression as when the tiefling prince had first walked in to the chamber.

"Lady Kyle," the gnome said gently. "You had best prepare yourself as we shall soon be leaving the tent. Brent, come and help me with her."

The ogre servant and gnome diviner helped her back to the table and the half-elven noblewoman sat crying quietly for a few minutes. Once her sobbing had died down a little and the ogre had brought her some more wine and sweat cakes she regained some of her composure and began flicking through the pages of the fairy tale book.

"I'm fine now, thank you." The noblewoman lifted her chin and brushed the tears from her eyes.

"That is good to hear," the gnome diviner replied sounding relieved.

"Perhaps you would be so good as to tell me what was discussed," Lady Kyle said in an off-hand manner. "My mind was on other matters."

"But of course, Lady Kyle. It's nothing much to concern yourself with. Merely that Lord Horacio has succeeded in navigating us across Avernus and to the portal to Gehenna."

"Wonder news. Not the going to Gehenna part, but the part about surviving this hell hole."

"Oh very amusing my lady."

"Yes, I suppose it was. Now tell me little man, will we have an armed escort all the way through?"

"Uh..." Otto was reluctant to let the noblewoman know just how much bloodshed had occurred to get them this far and how much more was to come. "In a way, yes my lady. However, this army has business elsewhere once we reach Gehenna."

"Really? Are you sure that this is a good idea?"

"Yes my lady, it is all part of Lord Horacio's plan."

"I assume that being the chief Diviner in the employ of your master that you are privy to a great many secrets?"

"Actually, no my lady. Lord Horacio is a man with few secrets and he does not share those few with me."

"Oh you are funny little man. A Golden Lord with few secrets? Next you are going to tell me that The Lady of Pain is nothing more than three ratatosks with a mask of flaying, ring of levitation and a wand of mazing?"

"Of course not my lady. I have never heard such a thing before, but now that you mention it perhaps you could tell me more?"

"How curious that an inquisitive little man such as you does not know any of the legends of Her Serenity the Lady of Pain?"

"Perhaps, my lady you can educate me."

"But of course. It amuses me and will help to pass the time." Lady Kyle looked around and smiled confidently. "You there, ogre. Fetch me some more wine and be quick about it. Right then, where to begin with The Lady of Pain. Well, the most popular story is that she is a fallen angel whom the gods imprisoned..."

"Forgive me my lady," the gnome interrupted quickly. "Perhaps this can wait for another time."

"Suit yourself. In the mean time I shall amuse myself by reading this book." The half-elven woman made a pretence at reading the book for awhile, but later gave up when she got bored and simply scanned through the tome looking at the colourful illustrations. "The artist has a very curious and talented style of illustration, although some of it looks a little hurried. This Terlizzi fellow who drew all the monsters and things is very good. Don't you agree?"

"Yes my lady," the gnome answered absent-mindedly whilst beginning to work with his etherscope. "He's positively inspirational."

"Is it true that he was the inspiration behind some of the greatest plane walkers of this generation?"

"Yes my lady."

"Really? Even the renowned plane walker Rip and the enigmatic sage Ashenbach. Or how about that mechanical lich that people are talking about. Imagine if what is in this book inspired the likes of Wintery Noj and The Marable One. The of course there is Galen, famous explorer of the obscure and there are even rumours that Shemeshka and a clueless once exploring the planes before coming to Sigil. Do you really think that was all the work of this Terlizzi chap?"

Lady Kyle looked dreamily at the book and imagined what it might be like to walk the planes, discovering strange and wondrous things. She wondered what it might be like in some of the less inviting locations and realized that she was in fact in Baator and about to enter another of the Lower planes.

"I'm sorry my lady, I was not paying enough attention. What was the question?"

"Have you been listening to a word that I have been saying?"

"Yes, my lady."

"Watch out! The Orroloth is standing behind you, little man!"

"Yes, my lady."

"Oh, never mind."

"Whatever you say my lady."

"You're as bad as the ogre."

"Of course, my lady."

Lady Kyle slammed the book shut and stormed off leaving the startled gnome and waking the ogre from his rest. Just as she got to edge of the circle of light Lord Horacio came storming in to the tent covered from head to toe in blood.

"I just came to tell you that we need to leave the tent. Now"

"Why?" Lady Kyle demanded. "Surely there is a War going on?"

"Indeed there is. Unfortunately we have just run out of men and monster with which to fight it. Every last one of them." Lord Horacio's smile combined with the blood dripping down his face was sufficient reason for Lady Kyle to faint, but the news that she was unprotected in the Nine Hells just made things that much worse.

Brent the ogre caught Lady Kyle before she fell the ground and scooped up the gnome diviner with his other arm. He continued, without missing a step, to race after his master who had turned to leave the large tent. Otto began to struggle and protest at being treated like luggage for the second time in a week, but promptly gave up when he saw the devastation outside of the tent.

Being tucked under the arm of the ogre meant that he did not have a good vantage point of what remained on the battlefield, but it looked to him as though their army had been fleeing for some time before making a final stand. Fortunately for them the final stand had delayed the fiends long enough for Lord Horacio, General Kale and the others to flee for the portal. However, the sight of so many dead in such a huge pile would forever haunt the dreams of the gnome diviner for the rest of his days.

A few of the fiends pursued the companions as they raced for the tumbledown ruins where the portal to Gehenna lay. General Kale stopped and shot three of the pursuing fiends out of the air with a large bow made out of bone and the other pursuers soon got the hint. Instead they reformed and flew closer to the ground so as to make them a harder target to hit.

Lord Horacio ran at break-neck speed towards the ruins, all the while dodging in between the blackened boulders made from razor-edged volcanic rock. Several times, flames erupted from the ground and balls of fire arced across towards him. But each time one of the fireballs looked like it was likely to hit, Lord Horacio ducked behind one of the boulders or took a sudden turn and thus escaped each of the blasts unharmed.

Brent the ogre servant, on the other hand, was beginning to fall behind with two people under each arm. The fallen angel had just outpaced him and was catching up with the tiefling prince when she stopped, turned and grabbed Lady Kyle from out of the ogre's hands. Before the ogre could protest she sprinted away in the direction of the ruins and all that Brent could do was follow her as quickly as his long legs could carry him.

"Come along, berk." Lord Horacio said once the ogre had reached the ruins. "We have not got all day and there is the matter of some fiends over there wanting to have a word with us. So if you would be so kind as to step up to this doorway then we can all be on our merry way."

"Yes milord." The ogre lumbered up to the doorway and prepared to step through.

"No, you lumbering sack of bile." The tiefling prince slapped the ogre and pushed him to the side so that the fallen angel and the noblewoman that she was carrying could go through first. "Ladies always go first. Unless it's a portal out of the Abyss. In which case it's every man and woman for themselves. Ready?"

The tiefling prince thrust a small crude axe made from a sharp piece of volcanic rock tied to the end of a femur bone in to the doorway and the portal crackled in to life with blue energy. General Kale stepped through first, followed by Brent and Otto with Lord Horacio bringing up the rear.

When they emerged on the other side they found themselves standing on the edge of a built up terrace on the side of an seemingly infinite volcano. There had at one time been a house or dwelling of some kind built there, but it had in past slid down the side of the volcano and was now balanced precariously on the edge of a large fall down a steeper section of the side of the volcano. General Kale, still carrying Lady Kyle, walked carefully and quickly to a spot that looked somewhat more stable than the rest.

However, when Brent arrived still carrying Otto the ground beneath their feet began to shift. Lord Horacio had to jump to the side as soon as he arrived to save himself from being carried off down the slope. Brent was desperately manoeuvring towards the foundations of the terrace when the treacherous ground slipped beneath him, causing him to fall and grab hold of a sharp outcropping. Lord Horacio clung on to the ogre's leg and worked his way up his servant's body. When he got to the ogre's head he beat him lightly several times and swore at him for almost causing him to lose his grip. Otto climbed out from beneath the ogre and worked his way carefully over to where Lady Kyle lay next to the lady General.

"Do hurry up, berk. You have all the grace of a beached Astral whale." The tiefling prince tried to dust himself off with a handkerchief. But the combination of being covered in blood from the battle and the volcanic ash meant that he was only able to get a small amount off. "When you have quite finished clinging to that lump of rock, then do come over here and help me get cleaned up."

"Yes milord. I will do so immediately."

The ogre carefully moved over to his master despite the fact that he lost his footing on several occasions due to

slipping pebbles beneath his feet. Once there he helped to clean his master of the worst of the dirt and received a half-hearted slap for his reward.

Once they had gathered their possessions they were forced to leave the remains of the terrace in a hurry as lava began to bubble from a point just higher up the slope. This new lava flow meandered down and carried off the remains of the buildings and stone workings. In a few places the ground was simply too hot to walk and Brent spent a minute or two stamping his feet to put out his boots that had caught fire. Otto whispered to the ogre not to set him down as he feared that his small shoes would soon be burnt away and the ogre shifted the gnome diviner to sit on his broad shoulders.

Lord Horacio seemed to know where he was going and led them along one trail after the next that criss-crossed the enormous volcano. Several times they passed crevices in the ground and each time the tiefling prince went over to have a closer look. Some of them had hot gasses billowing up from them and one of them erupted spewing lava, ash and rocks in all directions. Lord Horacio nimbly dodged between the falling rocks and rivulets of lava before returning to the others. Eventually after some hours they found an uninhabited cave and settled down to get some rest.

"Right then," Lord Horacio announced. "We're on track so far on this journey and I hope to be at the portal to the Gray Waste in several days."

"Where is this portal located?" General Kale asked as she stretched herself out on a sleeping mat.

"The best person to answer that question is Otto."

"Me, my lord?" the gnome diviner asked. He'd been working on trying to find a way to locate the portal, but unfortunately it was not something that he had been trained to do. "Uh, alright. Yes, I'm working on locating the portal even now."

"Delightful," said the fallen angel. "In that case I shall get some rest."

The General disrobed in full sight of Otto and the other and lay down to get some rest. The gnome diviner watched her with enraptured fascination and noticed that she had closed her eyes. However, he felt as though she was still looking at him and Otto found it very disconcerting. The half-elven noblewoman lay sleeping next to the fallen angel and the ogre had been sent out to find something to eat or drink as their supplies would not last long.

Otto fiddled with his etherscope and tried to think of a way to tell his employer that he was not skilled at locating portals. When they got up after their rest he had still not found the right words or mustered the courage to confess this to his master. They left the shelter of the cave several hours later to walk across the burning mountainside with the tiefling prince leading them. The only creatures that they encountered were two lost looking halfling who were insistent on throwing a ring of invisibility in to the volcano. Lord Horacio gave the halflings a few directions and left the two crazed pilgrims to try to complete their quest.

Over the next couple of days Otto became more and more frantic and was in such a panic that he was ready to collapse when his etherscope began to behave strangely. However, as soon as it started the strange behaviour

went away. The gnome diviner tried to get the device to repeat its behaviour without success. Eventually he stumbled on to the fact that by thinking about how much a coward he was and dwelling on the thought of not wishing to confront his employer - he was able to get the etherscope to give him some interesting readings.

General Kale reported that they were being followed and went off to scout briefly. This left the ogre servant carrying Lady Kale, who by now had withdrawn in to a moping silence, as well as the gnome perched on his shoulders. All the while Lord Horacio was leading, he was berating his burdened servant for deliberately slowing them down and causing them to fall behind in their schedule.

On the third day the fallen angel returned and informed them that they were being followed by a man leading a group of Yugoloth mercenaries. Lord Horacio questioned the General about the description of the man and when he had enough details, he began pushing them at an even faster pace. By this point Otto had figured out that by feeling like a coward he could use the etherscope to figure out when nearby changes occurred and had even managed to 'feel' the location of some of the crevices that he now realised were portals.

At the beginning of the fourth day Otto felt confident enough to use the etherscope to locate the portal. Just as he was beginning to hone his skills, the readings kept jumping around and he felt as though something was interfering with the information that he was trying to glean. Just as he had managed to get the device back under control again he came to two conclusions in rapid succession. The first being that a portal to the Gray Waste lay just lower down the volcano. The second being that a disturbance higher up was about to cause a major landslide.

"Uh, Sir?"

"Yes Otto. What is it?"

"Sir, I've found the portal. It's a hundred feet directly lower down from this exact spot. Sir."

"Jolly good news, dear Otto. Oh and also you can stop calling me Sir now. You're not in the army any more."

"Thanks you, Sir. Sorry, my lord. There is one more thing though."

"Yes, Otto? Am I going to like this news? Remember, it must be good news, bad news followed by good news."

"Yes, Sir. The bad news is that a landslide is about to sweep up down towards it and bury us under tons of rubble and cooled lava unless we start rushing either right or left in a perpendicular direction to the slope."

"A landslide, eh? Well that's not too unusual in these parts."

"As you say my lord, but this one will be caused by our pursuers I suspect."

"Hmm, that would be rather unfortunate."

"Yes, Sir. The good news however is that if we were to create a landslide of our own, a small one that is. Then it would carry us through the portal." Otto looked up at his employer and was grateful to see the tiefling prince deep in thought. He was well aware of the fact that his suggestion was not exactly good news, but it was the best that he could manage under the circumstances.

"Well, dear Otto. I have heard worse ideas. Not many I'll grant you. But that is possibly one of the worst that I have heard in a very long time." Lord Horacio paused momentarily and stroked his chin pensively. "On the other hand, I do not have any better suggestions. Well no point waiting around to be crushed in to little tiefer-sized pellets, let's make a dash for it."

Lord Horacio gave his ogre servant a shove forcing him to start running down the mountainside. Otto held on to Brent's hair for dear life. Lady Kyle screamed in terror as the fallen angel who was carrying her began to follow behind the ogre. Neither ran for long before they lost their balance and began tumbling down the side of the volcano over the bumpy, hot ground. Lord Horacio took a few large steps and slid down the remainder of the way as if riding on some invisible plank.

Brent the ogre was the first to reach the portal and tumbled silently in to the bottomless crevice without a word of protest. Otto's clothes had become heated by his prolonged contact with the ground during his descent and the smouldering gnome fell in to the hole with a pain filled screech. General Kale did her best to protect lady Kyle from the worst of the fall but both women bumped and bounced across the volcanic surface in to the blackness of the crevice.

As Lord Horacio reached the edge of the bottomless hole he leapt up in to the air, performed a double summersault and landed feet first through the portal at the bottom of the crevice. A half a minute later the rumbling that has been building was replaced by a huge crash of rock and frozen lava that cam crashing down the side of the volcano completely obliterating any sign of the portal.

A half an hour afterwards a powerfully built human warrior dressed in baroque armour descended to the spot where the portal once existed. The man was accompanied by a contingent of lesser Yugoloths who scanned the devastation for awhile. He motioned for one of the creatures to come over to him and pointed at the ground.

"It appears that our prey likes to gamble and has won the first challenge," the warrior smirked evilly. "However, they cannot escape us forever and there are not many places to run or hide in the Gray Waste."

"Shall we take you to another portal to the Gray Waste. Lord Anisen?"

"No," the man replied. "That will not be necessary. We will follow their exact trail and that means we use this portal. Now dig for all that you are worth!"

"Otto, it's good to see that you are finally awake," Lord Horacio said to the gnome diviner. Otto felt rather disoriented as his master appeared to him upside-down, but it was then that he realised that he was once again being carried by the ogre.

"Yes, my lord. Have I been out for long?"

"Oh, not more than a day I'd estimate. That was quite a fall you had there."

Otto groaned in pain as he tried to shift his weight a little. Aches, bruises and possibly a broken rib seemed to be the worst of it. But looking up he saw the edge of a bandage that was wrapped around his head. The improvised bandage appeared to be made out of handkerchiefs tied were knotted together.

"Thank you for looking after me, my lord."

"It was the least that I could do, dear fellow. Besides it appears that berk here is quite adept at patching people up. Which is a good thing considering the fact that he was the one who is responsible for most of your injuries."

"Really my lord?"

"Why of course, the blundering idiot had the nerve to fall on to my favourite diviner."

"Ah, that explains a lot," Otto looked up at the creature who was carrying him, but the ogre seemed to be oblivious to the conversation going on in front of him. Instead he continued to pull the unwilling half-elven noblewoman along with the fallen angel brining up the rear. "So where to next, my lord?"

"I'm glad that you asked that question, my good man. It appears that Lord Anisen has taken it in to his head to take lady Kyle away from us, most likely in a forcible manner considering the fact that he has Yugoloth friends."

Lady Kyle looked up at the mention of Lord Anisen's name and for the first time since the start of her nightmare journey she felt a spark of hope stirring inside her. Despite being surrounded by a bleak and unforgiving landscape where even the air itself leached the colour out of their clothes and very beings, the noblewoman had found one glimmer of hope to hold on to. Brent the ogre did not appear to be faring well either as he had not spoken since their arrival in to the Gray Waste and only did anything when instructed to do so by his master.

The gnome diviner has been more fortunate as he had slept for the duration of the first day. He was only now slowly becoming aware of the bleak isolation in which they found themselves marching across a plane without much colour and few landmarks. Acheron had looked like a series of endless battlefields, the place where they found themselves now was nothing more than a site where intermittent blood baths took place on titanic scales and even then the tides of blood lost their colours rapidly.

Lord Horacio and the fallen angel seemed least affected although they adapted to it in different ways. The tiefling prince became even more indifferent to the suffering of his ogre servant or the pleas from lady Kyle who had been commanded to be dragged along by Brent. Instead he did not allow them to rest for even a moment nor permitted the noblewoman to be carried by the brute. General Kale became more and more agitated, especially now that they knew that they were being pursued. For the first day the fallen archon spent many hours scouting ahead, finding a path that led away from all signs of battle, habitation or native creatures.

By the end of the second day the fallen angel's paranoia had risen to such a level that she refused to come close to the others. She kept her blade in its scabbard at her side at all times and often stroked either the hilt or the length of the scabbard - as if in anticipation of violence that could occur at any moment. Lord Horacio seemed not to care, Brent appeared oblivious to this and the only thing that lady Kyle cared about was the state of her boots and the ache in her legs from hours of constant walking.

On the evening of the second day in the Gray Waste they were approached by an elderly woman who was unquestionably ugly. She had hair coming out of her warts that covered her face, arms and hands. Grey skin hung in loose folds and small clumps of moss and fungus clung to her skin and clothing. The tiefling prince spoke to her for approximately an hour out of earshot from the others. He gave her a pouch, she gave him several small bottles and in the end the old woman went away. Otto could see from the way that they moved their hands as they spoke that their conversation had become quite agitated and was grateful when the old hag finally wandered off.

"Tomorrow we will travel along the river Styx to Carceri," Lord Horacio announced. His words were flat and emotionless, uncaring of what the others thought. "Perhaps once we are on the river we can lose our pursuers."

General Kale looked up at the mention of the word 'pursuers' and reflexively drew her sword. The blade was formed out of black energy that curved slightly. There was no metal to the blade, only a dark light that writhed within the confines of a blade-shaped space, bounded in space and time by the runes carved on to the hilt. Otto scrambled back from the blade immediately and Brent also took a step back. Lady Kyle stared at it in uncomprehending fascination as if suddenly seeing a new toy to amuse her. Lord Horacio looked at the fallen angel without even a hint of concern.

"Put the sword away, Kale." The tiefling prince waited for his ogre servant to put out his bedroll before lying down. "Someone should keep watch and since you are the most alert of us, I hereby volunteer you."

Lord Horacio did not wait for an answer and simply rolled over to go to sleep. Lady Kyle lay down on another bedroll that Brent had prepared for her and offered the remaining one to the gnome diviner. Otto took the bedroll and wrapped it around him to ward off the lingering chill of the plane. He watched General Kale storm off into the gloom, but he was certain that she had not gone far. Simply away from the creature that she desired to kill in the hopes of finding their pursuers and turning the tables.

In the morning they awoke, ate the last of their rations and walked for several hours until they reached a great big river of blood that lazily worked its way through the plane. The colossal red highway flowed across the land, creating a single great big splash of colour across the grey scenery. At the edge of the river a large skiff was moored next to which stood a tall figure in a dark robe.

Lord Horacio led the others over to the figure and as they drew closer Otto saw that the creature was obviously not mortal. Lingering in the air around it was an aura of fiendish malevolence and cunning. He would have run away there and then had he any other means of getting off the plane, but he could not muster the courage to object to dealing with the creature. Instead he stood by in fearful silence as his employer negotiated with the ferryman. In the end they handed over Kale's ring, a necklace belonging to lady Kyle and Otto's etheroscope.

The gnome diviner watched the items disappear in to the creature's robes and wondered where they had gone. All that he had seen of the ferryman where it's emaciated and ancient looking hands. He could not make out any of its facial features underneath the long hooded cloak and was not in the least tempted to find out. The thought that he was losing his sense of curiosity was a sobering one for the gnome diviner. He pushed that thought to the side and climbed in to the unsteady boat with the others. Crammed in to the small vessel they had to sit very close as none of them were keen to touch even a single drop of the river Styx.

"No more than five vortices, gates, portals or conduits. That was the deal, right?" Lord Horacio sounded as if he did not care, but Otto felt some of that might have been putting on a show for the ferryman and the others.

"Agreed," the hollow voice responded from the depths of the hood. Otto could have sworn that he saw a greenish mist escape from the opening of the hood followed by a en echo of mocking laughter. He tried to move further away from the creature but only succeeded in causing the boat to rock alarmingly.

The journey by boat was very uneventful. Off in the distance they saw a thundercloud or two sweep across the land, made up of hordes of fiends fighting a physical war in order to prove that their philosophy was the superior one. One or two Blood War scouts passed them by, but none of them slowed down as they flew over the river of blood.

Minutes turned in to hours and possibly even days. Otto prided himself on being able to tell the time regardless of where he was and he had been doing well until he arrived in the Gray Waste. Here it was next to impossible to tell what time of day it was in the continually gloomy light. Having been unconscious for some time meant that he still felt disoriented and the journey by boat made matters even worse.

Sometimes the land seemed to crawl by and at other times it appeared to fly past. The broad river had a dizzying number of eddies and tides that pulled the boat in one direction and then another. The ferryman lazily guided the boat along the various twists and turns. After one period in which the landscape went by so fast that it became a blur, they suddenly decelerated and saw that the river had slowed as it passed through a deadly swamp under a pale red sky.

The ferryman guided the boat to the edge of the river and motioned for them all to get off. Lord Horacio stepped off and helped lady Kyle disembark. Brent hoisted Otto over to the side and General Kale was the last to leave the boat. She kept sniffing the air and cocking her head from one side to the other. Once the boat pulled away Otto began to wander away from the river to the edge of the tree-line whereupon he realised two things in quick succession.

Firstly that he was the only one moving away from the river. Secondly that there were figures emerging from the tree-line to block off their escape. The creatures were lesser Yugoloths and leading them was none other than Lord Anisen. The Golden Lord looked resplendent in his baroque armour, that despite being travel-worn, still glinted in places. He and his mercenaries each had their weapons drawn and as they advanced they closed in the net on their prey.

"Well, well," said Lord Anisen in a scorn-filled and condescending manner. "Carceri is the first place that I should have gone to look for a insect such as yourself Lord Horacio."

"Why Lord Anisen," said Lord Horacio feigning surprise. "What an absolute pleasure to see you in such a dreadful place. Perhaps we can have lunch some time and catch up on the latest events in the City of Doors."

"I tire of this charade," the powerfully built warrior replied. "Give me lady Kyle, now!"

"Perhaps that is why you are not very good at the Kriegstanz," Lord Horacio retorted. "As for lady Kyle, I believe that she will be safe in my custody than yours."

"Is that so?" Lord Anisen was beginning to lose his temper with the glib-mouthed tiefer-spawn and decided to act. "Perhaps we should ask her? Lady Kyle, would you care to accompany me back to the Cage?"

"I'd be delighted to," the half-elven noblewoman said. Her path was blocked by the tiefling prince and fallen angel. The ogre servant was still holding her bruised arm, when he suddenly lifted her up and began to carry her across to Lord Anisen.

"I command you to stop!" The shocked Lord Horacio shouted angrily. "Berk! Are you listening to me? Turn around this instant and bring the young lady back to me."

The sudden betrayal had now caused the tiefling prince to look like the one who had lost his cool. General Kale weighed up intercepting the ogre, but realised that it would leave her too vulnerable to a Yugoloth counter-attack. Otto watched the ogre betray his master by delivering lady Kyle to the powerfully built warrior with open-mouthed astonishment. He was standing quite close to one of the insect-looking fiends and slowly backed away to the river as everyone else's attention was on the ogre.

"You'll pay for this, you worthless piece of dwarf-fodder." Lord Horacio drew his scimitar and took a step forward. As he did so all the Yugoloths took a step forward as well. Lord Anisen embraced the half-elven noblewoman who was sobbing with relief at finally being rescued. He turned and led her away in to the jungle with the ogre servant trailing behind.

"Orders?" one of the fiends rasped in a gravelly voice to its departing employer.

"Kill them all," Lord Anisen answered back.

"No!" lady Kyle's moment of joy suddenly crumbled to be replaced by fear. "Please don't kill them all. The gnome has done nothing to me and I think that the human is in fact an angel trying to find her way home."

"I'm so very sorry, my lady." The well built man struck the noblewoman in the side of the head and knocked her out. "They chose the wrong side. You there, ogre. You chose the right side. Now make yourself useful and carry her."

Otto watched in utter despair as the ogre, carrying lady Kyle, together with Lord Anisen marched off in to the poisonous jungle leaving them alone on the beach surrounded by Yugoloth mercenaries. Behind them lapped the waters of the river Styx and as the insect-like fiends lowered their glaives and pole-axes, the gnome diviner knew that they would soon be floating down the river in small pieces. With a ear-splitting scream of unbridled fury the fallen archon charged in to the ranks of the fiends. Lord Horacio screaming in anger at the betrayal of

his loyal servant followed behind Kale. He threw several bottles to the ground and drew his scimitar in preparation for a final stand.

The cries of rage shook off the mantle of despair that had settled on Otto and he too charged forward. Brandishing a small dagger that he had only ever used for opening seals on scrolls and letters, he threw himself in to the melee. Blades whirled overhead and red and green blood began to rain down on the gnome diviner. The feeling of exhilaration at making a final stand made Otto feel as though he was invincible and he fought with every fibre of his being.

"It's not nice to strike a lady," Brent muttered as he carried the unconscious noblewoman. Looking down at the beautiful silver-haired woman in his arms, he saw that it had not taken long for a livid bruise to spread across her cheek where Lord Anisen had struck her.

"What are you rambling about, sod?"

Lord Anisen paid little attention to the ogre as he cut his way through the poisonous jungle. His armour protected him from the worst of the jungle's effects and he tolerated the ogre's presence due to his usefulness in carrying his prize. The thought of finally possessing lady Kyle gave the Golden Lord renewed strength as he continued to blaze a path ahead.

After several hours of slow progress through the jungle they came across a path along a dry stream-bed. Lord Anisen led them along the path for several more miles and then turned off that path to follow a different one. This led to a clearing with a steep cliff over-looking a foul smelling swamp. A vine-bridge extended from the edge of the cliff in to the mists above the swamp to another section of more solid ground.

The well built warrior sat down in the clearing and ordered the ogre to find something relatively comfortable to lie on. Brent spent several minutes looking around for something and in the end decided to use his cloak, due to it's relatively comfortable and non-toxic qualities. Lady Kyle woke when the ogre gently lay her on his cloak and her hand immediately went to touch her cheek. She winced in pain and she began to cry quietly. Brent smiled sadly and gave her a somewhat reassuring smile. He very slowly reached across to cover her eyes and shushed her silent tears.

"It's best that you not see what happens next, dear lady," the ogre whispered with a great deal of sadness.

"Right then," Lord Anisen announced as he drew his sword. "I've had it up to here with all your muttering, ogre. So let's get one thing straight - I don't want to hear another sound coming from you unless I order you to do so. Do you understand?"

Brent rose from where he was crouched over the half-elven noblewoman and turned to face well built warrior. "Yes, I understand."

"I don't like the tone in your voice, ogre." Lord Anisen took a step closer to Brent and positioned his feet in one of the classic offensive stances of a Githyanki knight. "In fact, I do not like the look of you at all. If you can betray your master so easily - you can just as easily betray me."

"My apologies if my tone of voice or manner of speech in any way implies disrespect," the ogre replied as he moved away from the noblewoman to stand opposite the powerfully built warrior. The ogre adjusted his stance and his feet became positioned in one of the classic defensive stances of a Githzerai monk.

"This needs to be settled here and now," the warrior stated firmly. He noted the stance that his larger opponent had taken and changed his accordingly. Shifting his sword to a higher position and adjusting his centre of balance he took up a subtly different and far deadlier posture. "Will you serve me, or must I kill you here and now?"

Lady Kyle opened her eyes just enough to make out Lord Anisen and the ogre facing off against each other. The Golden Lord carried a powerfully enchanted sword and wore armour with protective charms, whilst his opponent had no weapons and armour - despite this Lord Anisen had yet to strike. She gasped in surprise as she saw several figures materialise behind Lord Anisen, one of whom was incredibly beautiful with bat-like wings and wore long leather boots.

"The Rule of Three dictates that there must be a third option." The ogre countered.

"Serve me or die!" Lord Anisen shouted, preparing to strike down the insubordinate brute.

"I take the Third," the ogre replied.

Just as Lord Anisen was about to strike down the serenely calm ogre he felt someone grab hold of his wrist. At first he tried to shake off the grip, but then he changed his approach to using their hold against them. Spinning around he intended to use the sudden change in momentum and balance to gain the advantage, but instead he found himself on his knees staring up at one of the most ravishingly beautiful females that he had ever seen.

The pain in his wrist became unbearable and he felt the bones of his arms grinding against each other. The succubus smiled sweetly at him and she placed one of her boots on his shoulder to intensify the agony. The powerfully built warrior gathered in his strength to throw off the fiend standing over him, but it appeared that she anticipated his plan and instead used his sudden push upwards to trip him and send him sprawling. As Lord Anisen landed on the ground he became aware of the fact that the pain in his arm had not gone away and that his wrist had been broken in his attempt to break free.

The succubus sensuously walked over to the ogre, placed her pale long-nailed fingers beneath his chin and gently pushed it up to close his mouth. "It's not like you've not seen me before," she whispered seductively as she made her way over to the terrified half-elven noblewoman.

"Oh dear, has the bad man over there hurt you?" The succubus pulled the noblewoman to her feet and embraced her. Lady Kyle was not sure where to put her hands as the creature was not wearing a great deal and her bat-like wings made embracing a difficult task. Instead she stood in rigid, petrified silence waiting for the fiend to break the embrace. "Men have sacrificed whole empires for a moment such as this," the creature whispered teasingly in to the noblewoman's pointed ear.

"Anyway," the succubus said as she grabbed lady Kyle by the hand and walked her over to the injured lord Anisen. "Now let's see what we can do about that bruise."

The powerfully built warrior drank in the beauty of the fiendish creature as if held enspelled. He dismissed the notion that she had charmed him as he was warded against such an attack. Instead he quickly and systematically worked through the reasons and possibilities for why he was allowing this creature to take control of the situation. The conclusion that he came to exhilarated and appalled him at the same time - this was the first female that he was attracted to that he did not wish to possess. He wished to be possessed by her.

"All in good time Lord Anisen," the succubus said as if reading the prone man's thoughts. "Now then my lady. I can heal your bruises by taking some health from this monster of a man. Would you like me to do that?"

"No," lady Kyle said very quietly.

"I'm sorry, but I did not hear you correctly." The demonic seductress brushed her finger along the tips of Lady Kyle's ears tracing the outline of her features. "Do you know what this man had in store for you? It would not have been very pleasant. In fact, I like the way that he thinks so much that I may decide to keep him as a pet. What do you think?"

"I really don't know," the terrified noblewoman replied as she tried to back away.

"Please do not toy with the lady," the ogre stated as he took lady Kyle in his arms. For the first time the half-elven noblewoman felt grateful for the ogre's touch and safe in his protective arms.

"Spoil-sport," the succubus hissed. She turned to the other two fiends that she had brought along and ordered one of them forward. "You will take them to my citadel. Do not harm them in any way or you will end up in the Sheal'Ta Maw."

The creature growled in response and began to lead the ogre and half-elven noblewoman in the direction of the portal to the Abyss. After they had departed the succubus turned to the other creature and ordered it to hold the well-built warrior prone. Lord Anisen did not resist and instead his face was filled with pure naked malicious anticipation.

"Well, well, Lord Anisen." The succubus said seductively as she began stroking her barbed whip. "Who's been a naughty boy then?"

"Well, well Otto," Lord Horacio chuckled. "You seem to have a knack for missing out on all the excitement."

The gnome diviner woke up in a soft bed covered with fine linen in a room covered with dust. His employer was busy dusting off one of the chairs with a handkerchief so that he could sit down on the chair.

"Still, when the occasion called for it - you certainly rose to it dear Otto."

"What occasion my lord?"

"Lady's Grace, but I do hope that the blow to your head was not too severe?"

Otto checked his head, but he could feel no bandages and when he looked down he could find no sign of injury whatsoever. "What head... huh?"

"Come now, my good man. Do you honestly believe that I would leave my favourite diviner all bashed up in that dreadful prison plane?"

"So we're not in Carceri"

"Not any more." Lord Horacio got up from his seat, wandered over to the window and took a deep breath. Otto glimpsed many dark clouds through the window and could see that a terrible storm was on its way. "No, this place is a temporary refuge before we venture in to the Abyss."

"The Abyss?"

"But of course, how else are we to rescue lady Kyle?"

"Lady Kyle is in the Abyss?"

"Oh do try to keep up, dear Otto." The tiefling prince made his best theatrical sigh and walked slowly back to the bad. "You've only been out for a few hours, but it seems that there is a great deal for you to catch up on. Now where shall I start?"

"At the beginning, my lord?" the gnome diviner suggested.

"Very well, in the beginning there was Nothing. Then there came the illusion that there was a division in the Nothing and thus..."

"I'm sorry to interrupt my lord," Otto said hastily. "But I meant at the point of our attack by Lord Anisen's forces."

"Oh," Lord Horacio replied somewhat crestfallen that his rendition of the Beginning had to wait for another time.

"Dear Otto, I am very fond of you. But if you continue to make a habit of passing out at inappropriate times, then I will not fill in the gaps in future. Understood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Very well. Three things of consequence happened whilst you were... Alright, skipping over that detail again. The first was that with the help of the Gehreleths we were able to defeat the Yugoloths."

"Gehreleths?"

"Yes, Gehreleths. You know - they're native to Carceri, created by Apomps when he went off in a bit of a huff. They have an infinite hatred of the Yugoloths and can be bought in easily transportable bottles. Very useful, but not too easily controlled."

"So that is what you bought from the Night Hag!"

"How very astute, indeed I did. Although by the end of the fight, the Gehreleths had to be eliminated due to their reluctance to depart in peace or go back inside their bottles. Unfortunately Kaleliel was badly injured during the negotiations."

"Kaleliel? Do you mean General Kale?"

"You see, that's just the very reason why I like having you along dear Otto. You possess a keen mind that has just enough insight to see the outline of my genius plans."

"Yes, my lord." The gnome diviner answered, somewhat confused as to whether to feel praised or feel insulted.

"The second item of note was that some archons came to our rescue and brought us to this dead world to recover for awhile. When I say recover, I do of course mean healing you of your mortal wounds and doing the same for Kaleliel. Of course, you are more fortunate than her as they have not seen fit to lock you in chains and bring you back to the Mount."

"Mount Celestia."

"That is correct."

"But why did the archons appear?"

"Why, because I invited them to."

"Knowing that they would take General Kale away, my lord?"

"That seemed rather a certainty."

"So you betrayed her?"

"Not as such. Merely speeded up the rate of her rehabilitation, dear boy."

"But my lord, what about the possibility that they may simply bring her to trial and then execute her."

"Oh dear, I've gone and fallen for the most clueless of blunders believing the archons to be all forgiving and merciful."

"I'm sorry to have brought the subject up, my lord."

"No that's quite alright, dear Otto." Lord Horacio walked over to the bed, held out his hand and helped the recuperating gnome out of the ancient bed. "Alas, we have a different emergency to deal with at the moment. Lady Kyle is being held in the Plane of Infinite Portals and is in dire need of rescuing."

"Umm, very good my lord. I uh... Sorry my lord but I'm not very courageous by nature."

"Nonsense, dear Otto. This is exactly the reason why I have brought you along. You are exactly the kind of gnome who can pull off a rescue such as this."

"Do you really believe so, my lord?"

"Without a doubt."

Otto paused for a moment or two to consider the response. "Without a doubt.... I will succeed. Or without a doubt I will not succeed?"

Lord Horacio answered with his poker smile and beckoned Otto over to the portal to the Abyss on the other side of the tumble-down castle. "I'll try not to hinder you too much, dear Otto."

"So Otto, what's the plan?" Lord Horacio asked as they stepped in to the first hellish layer of the Abyss. The area around them seemed somewhat familiar as it shared many of the characteristics of the first layer of Baator. But instead of being on the lookout for Baatezu patrols, the tiefling prince and his gnome companion spent most of their day trying to evade or run away from the hordes of Tanar'ri that roamed the layer.

"Plan, my lord?" Otto asked nervously as they crouched amidst several large red boulders. The gnome had an unsettling sensation that the red of the boulders clashed with his clothes and made him stand out even more. When he considered this observation - he thought about the fact that everything in the plane seemed to object to him being there. Standing next to the calm and composed Lord Horacio just seemed to make matters that much worse.

"Yes, you know. Like we rush in and rescue the princess and then gallop off in to the sun-set." The tiefling prince lit up a dried, rolled-up leaf, stuffed with exotic herbs and puffed on it several times before offering it to his companion.

"What? Uh, no thank you my Lord." The gnome diviner anxiously watched the thin streamer of smoke drift upwards from between the red boulders and worried about the flight of Vrocks passing nearby. "Excuse me my lord, I don't wish to be rude, but aren't you leading this expedition?"

"Absolutely, dear boy." Lord Horacio's gaze became a little less focused and he slowly moved his hand back and forth in front of his face. "That's quite remarkable, are you sure you will not try some, old bean?"

"Quite sure, my lord. In fact I would recommend that you not continue to partake of a substance that is banned in Sigil as well as half the gate-towns on the Outlands."

"Oh do lighten-up. You can be so.... What's the word that I am looking for?"

"Cowardly?"

"Hmm, yes that sounds about right. I was actually thinking about.... obsessive. Yes, that's the word."

"We're in the Abyss!" the gnome whispered fiercely in frustration.

"No need to shout, old bean. My hearing is working quite well."

"Well, if you'll forgive me for saying so - you're mental faculties are not."

"That's exactly the point, dear Otto."

The two travelling companions lapsed in to silence. The tiefling prince continued to smoke his leaf until he was dozing gently whilst the gnome diviner sat fuming in cold fury. After some time had passed and Otto was sure that his employer was actually asleep and not faking it, he very slowly drew in magical power in to the mental runic constructs that he had prepared in the morning. When the eldritch power had built up sufficiently he channelled it through the words of power and spoke each of them in turn.

As he looked upon his employer with enhanced vision and insight, the gnome diviner became aware of some very unusual and disturbing pieces of information. Otto continued to gaze into his employer for longer than was necessary, unwilling to give up until most of his secrets were revealed. Unfortunately either the plane's effects on the magic of the spell or his employer's condition prevented him from gaining enough information to draw a conclusion with absolute certainty.

Otto sat for an hour and tried to absorb the information. He approached the puzzle from several angles and tried to piece it together, but just when he thought that it all fit - he would find some pieces left over or a few vital clues missing. In the end he decided to wake his employer and to ask him some rather direct questions.

"Lord Horacio, is that really your name?"

"It's as good a name as any. I have created it and made it my own, therefore it is as much mine as any other." The tiefling prince smiled amicably, but there was no mirth reflected in his eyes.

"Some information has come to my attention my lord that I would like to discuss with you." The gnome diviner was a little hesitant at first, but once he was committed to finding the truth - he decided to continue questioning regardless of the consequences.

"I was wondering how long it would take you, dear Otto. For awhile I feared that the Lower planes had sapped away your curiosity."

"Almost my lord, but not quite. But speaking of the planes, it appears that you have a unique relationship with them Lord Horacio."

"Not precisely unique, but special in a very rare way - yes."

"I've noticed that we seem to be affected by planar energies much more quickly than would normally be expected, my lord." Otto watched to see if his employer was giving anything away, but Lord Horacio was using his best poker face. "At first I thought that it might be a coincidence, but later the pattern became too clean to ignore."

"Very astute, my good man."

"Thank you my lord. Now moving swiftly on, during our sojourn in Acheron you demonstrated that war and the pressure to comply and follow orders could be used to your advantage. Next in Baator you demonstrated how the rule of law could be perverted by forcing an army to follow the chain of command despite the fact that it was suicidal."

"Splendid observation, I am so looking forward to the conclusion of this."

"Then in Gehenna you used your status as my employer to exert your influence of the strong over the weak. Only by channelling my fear was I able to detect the portal and then we fled before a stronger force arrived. In the Gray Waste you were uncaring, although now that I think about it that came rather easily to you. No offence intended, my lord."

"None taken."

"In Carceri you were betrayed by Brent and in turn you betrayed Kale. Err, I mean Kaleliel. In fact, it appears that this is what you intended all along. Perhaps you even planned for Brent to betray you."

"Perhaps. Speculation can be a very pleasant way to pass the time."

"If you did plan that betrayal, then it means that you should be acting in a manner that reflects the nature of the Abyss. That's it, isn't it?" Otto almost jumped for joy, but he remembered just in time about the Vrocks flying nearby. "You reflect the nature of the plane, that's what you've been doing up until now. How is that you manage that?"

"How is not very important right now. What is important, dear Otto is that I am currently trying very hard not to do so."

"Why is that my lord?"

"Because I am, or rather was a cambion. In fact, not just any cambion. I am descended from the clan that Red Shroud has spawned and she would not be pleased with what I am doing at the moment."

"Which is what exactly, my lord?"

"Again, as I said earlier. Why is not so important right now. Rescuing lady Kyle from the dungeon of one of Red Shroud's extended family is more of a priority."

"Are you really related to that clan?"

"Yes, although not in the same way that mortals tend to view family and relationships."

"Oh, I see."

"No, you don't and if I were you - then I would not spend much time thinking about it. In fact, not thinking about it at all would be a good idea. Therefore I will ask the question again: So Otto, what's the plan?"

"I'll have to think about that, my lord."

The two of them sat in silence for several long hours. During that time Otto sat almost perfectly still, but Lord Horacio shifted about on numerous occasions in order to get comfortable. Several times his body began to shiver almost violently, but he managed to light up his leaves just in time to calm him down. The gnome diviner noted that the smoke smelled faintly of citrus leaves and that it had a rather pleasant aroma.

"It has a pleasant smell, my lord."

"Indeed it should, this is one of Bytopia's finest."

"Wouldn't that attract the Tanar'ri very quickly?"

"Possibly, dear Otto. However, I'm sure that you've noted that they don't actually come too close to this place."

"Why is that my lord?"

"Because some angels perished here defending the innocent. Or perhaps it was because several fiend rose here in defence of the innocent. I can never remember which."

"So what you are saying is that this spot is barely inside the Abyss."

"Precisely why I chose this spot to sit and have our little chat. By the way, have you come up with a plan."

"Yes my lord."

"Very good." Lord Horacio raised an eyebrow expectantly and waited for the gnome to elaborate. "Well, aren't you going to tell me?"

"First I'm going to steal one of those ships," Otto said as he pointed to a group of hideously decorated flying vessels that were disembarking fiends and Blood War mercenaries. The ships had a screaming head carved in elaborate details across the prow of the ships and had sails that dripped with blood. The keels of the boats exuded a thick black layer of smoke that made the ships appear as if they floated on their own small clouds.

"A ship of chaos, jolly good choice."

"Secondly I'm going to fly it in to the citadel where lady Kyle is being held."

"Do you know where that is?"

"Yes my lord, I sort of had a quick look through some of your memories."

"Ah, not very sporting of you old bean. Never rifle through another man's memories without his permission and never ask a man where he is going when he's carrying a shovel in the Abyss."

"My humblest apologies, my lord. Anyway, thirdly I plan to fly back here - pick you up and then fly off in to the plane of Pandemonium."

"Do you know..."

"Yes my lord," Otto interrupted. "The information about the portal to Pandemonium also came from your memories."

"Well, it seems that you have things pretty well planned. Just how much of my genius plan regarding this journey did you see?"

"None, my lord. The memories that I saw where at the edge of your mind, it almost appeared as if you were ready to discard them. Everything else deeper inside was protected by some kind of reflective barrier."

"Well, that's certainly curious." Lord Horacio smiled and closed his eyes as he smoked on his leaf. "And how exactly do you intend to storm the citadel?"

"I shall have a ship full of fiends and Brent will be inside the citadel."

"Berk, did you say? Yes, he's quite a remarkable ogre."

"I tried to have a look at him with the same spell my lord. I got no information about him at all. It was almost as if he wasn't even there."

The tiefling prince laughed ruefully and gave the gnome diviner a mock salute. "Well, it looks like your curiosity has not deserted you after all, dear Otto."

The gnome diviner returned the mock salute and snuck off in the direction of the flying ships. He dove to the ground several times as patrols passed overhead and as he got up he saw that the red dust covering his clothes and flesh made him blend in to his surroundings quite well. By the time that he got to the ships he saw that the first lot of fiends and men had disembarked and a new set were getting ready to board. Getting on to the ship was much simpler than he had ever dreamed that it would be as he simply slipped in between the larger creatures. They tried to stab him and stamp on him, but the nimble gnome was too fast for them to get pinned down.

Otto's running around the ship caused quite a commotion and in a very short time a fight broke out amongst the troops trying to get on to the ship. This in turn caused the creatures on the ship to start fighting and very soon the whole embarkation area had become a small war-zone of its very own. Otto fled from several of the fiends and ran as hard and as fast as he could. When he suddenly came to a reinforced door he ducked to the side and his pursuers continued forward trying to batter their way in to the control room. Shouts of anger from the pilot house of the ship as well as that from commanders on the ground conflicted and the gnome diviner lost track of exactly what was going on.

When he crawled out of the side hatch that he had been hiding in he found the door open and mutilated bodies everywhere. The pilot house of the ship was a complete mess with carnage everywhere and nothing alive remained inside. The fighting on the deck of the ship seemed to have only intensified, as Otto slowly ventured forth to grab the controls of the ship. The first thing that he figured out was how to seal the chamber and then he set about trying to make the ship fly. It responded to his commands very quickly and he almost fell over as the ship of chaos ascended in to the air with a deadly grace.

As soon as his ship was airborne the other ships launched as well, even though there were still fiends and mercenaries trying to get on board. Fighting was still continuing on each of the three ships, but now there was a conflict between the three ships as well. As if sensing this upcoming conflict the combatants on each of the ships calmed their hostilities somewhat in preparation of the airborne mayhem yet to come.

Otto felt the ship get knocked through the air from the impact of one of the other vessels. He saw that the other two ships were trying to force him out of the air, but also that they were not coordinating their activities. The

gnome diviner used this to his advantage to ensure that the two ships collided with his as often as they did with each other and hence a three-way aerial battle ensued. This was punctuated by frequent collisions and sometimes brief boarding actions. The defenders often had the advantage but even when a ship was successfully boarded, the new creatures in charge fought to defend it just as hard from their former allies as they did their enemies.

The gnome diviner watched in horror as dozens more ships of chaos rose up to pursue the other three across the plane of Infinite Portals. With so many ships all trying to destroy each other they formed in to packs with Otto's ship leading the way towards one of the smaller citadels. He did not slow down his approach as they got close and only banked to the side at the last moment. Most of the remainder of the creatures on board fell off at that point but several of the pursuing ships collided with the citadel's outer defences.

The stronghold had been built primarily to defend against a land assault, but could deal with an aerial attack as well. However, a dozen flying ships with enraged fiends inside was somewhat unexpected and the defenders were caught off guard. When one of the ships daringly flew straight down the remains of one of the toppled towers this sent the other ships in to a frenzy and they each attempted to breach the citadel.

The attack was an uncoordinated nightmare, but so was the defence of the citadel. The initial onslaught had done severe damage to the towers and fiends were literally dropping out of the sky to take down more of the towers. Flying ships battered the sides and within a matter of minutes half of the citadel was overrun. Shortly afterwards more of the towers collapsed until none remained standing and a thick column of red ash drifted upwards signalling yet another massacre taking place in the plane of Infinite portals.

When one of the flying vessels launched itself out of the remains of one of the towers, shot in to the red sky like an arrow loosed from a longbow, only a couple of the surviving ships of chaos gave chase. They did not last long as the fleeing ship darted in and out of several craggy outcroppings and a flight of Vrocks took the last pursuer down.

"This is incredible," lady Kyle said as she clung on to the bone railings in the control room. "I had no idea that flying was this terrifying and fun at the same time."

"Yes milady," the blood-soaked ogre replied. Fortunately most of the blood was not his, although the ogre did look exhausted to the point of collapse.

"Where did you learn to fly like this?" Lady Kyle asked the gnome whose face was a mask of studied concentration.

"I was a helms-pilot of a frigate class assault boat in the second Inhuman war," the gnome replied.

"Pardon? Second what?" Lady Kyle frowned and tried to figure out if the little man was trying to make her look a fool.

"Never mind, my lady. Let's just say that I took the helm when we needed to get out of trouble fast."

"Oh, that sounds awfully exciting little man."

"Well I'd love to tell you more about it, but it will have to wait until we are out of the Abyss my lady. Brent, are you ready?"

The ogre gave Otto the thumbs up as he hoisted a rope tied in to a loop at the end over the side of the ship.

"What are you doing?" Lady Kyle asked.

"Trying to pick up Lord Horacio."

"Whatever for? He's the one who is responsible for this nightmare journey."

"I'll have to explain that later as well, my lady."

The half-elven noblewoman tried to talk Brent and Otto out of picking up Lord Horacio several times as they flew over the spot where the tiefling prince sat, but neither refused to give up on him. Since the Tanar'ri were still after them they did not have long to wait around and it was a very close race to see who could get to the portal to Pandemonium first. Lord Horacio was hoisted aboard and Brent gave him in to the protesting care of lady Kyle. The ogre then gathered all of the bows, spears and other throwing implements that he could find in order to try to slow down some of their pursuers.

The ship of chaos had taken a severe beating and had fiends clinging to its sides when it plunged vertically downwards in to a massive gorge. Otto had warned his companions of the sudden shift and so they managed to hold on although a number of fiends were not as fortunate. The gnome pilot flew the vessel over and under several of the arches that spanned the gorge before finally passing beneath one that acted as a portal to Pandemonium. Just before he did so he shouted for his companions to join him and they huddled in one of the small cargo compartments near the controls. The portal required an act of madness to activate and flying the ship uncontrolled under the arch acted ensured that the portal flared in to life. As the ship passed under the arch one of the other ships tried to follow, but it came in several seconds too late and plunged in to the side of the gorge.

When the ship of chaos arrived on the other side of the portal it struck the side of the tunnel, rebounded and hit the opposite side. Fiends clinging on the sides were crushed and those inside were thrown about. Fortunately Otto and the other were very cramped in the cargo space and so cushioned each other. However, by the time that the crashing ship of chaos finally came to a stop approximately three dozen miles away from the portal, all that remained of the ship was a large pile of bone, metal and wood that lay strewn across the sides of the tunnel. Not a single fiend remained alive, yet Otto and the others climbed out of the wreckage almost unscathed.

"You lucky, jammy sods!" a nearby voice said filled with envy and madness.

"What rotten luck," Lord Ashmantle said as he stroked his pointed beard. The large wizard sat in a very comfortable chair in Lord Redthorn's favourite study. He wore his usual ornately decorated robes that shimmered with runic symbols.

"Indeed so, Lord Ashmantle." The half-elven lord nodded in agreement. He signalled for one of his servants to bring over some refreshments and the two noblemen toasted each other over a glass of razor-wine.

"Here's to stopping that tiefer-sprog."

"Amen to that. May he rot in the heavens or hells for all eternity."

"Here, here. As long as he does not set foot in the Cage I'll be a happy man." Lord Ashmantle waited just the briefest of moments before drinking to ensure that his host was also drinking as well. "I say, what ever happened to your daughter?"

"Oh my good friend," the half-elven nobleman said somewhat over-dramatically. "You have put your finger on what pains my heart the most. It was enough of an insult to be called out by that rascal in front of my peers, but to then have the audacity to steal away my darling child - surely that goes beyond the pale."

"Indeed so, my friend." Lord Ashmantle narrowed his eyes and studied the half-elf closely. His spies had told him about the meeting with Lord Anisen, but not the details of the conversation. Although they had tried questions many of the light boys, none of them seemed to be the one that had been present that fateful anti-peak. Reports had dripped back that the well-built warrior had gone off to rescue Lord Redthorn's daughter, but not much had been heard from him since. There were vague rumours that Lord Anisen had been in Gehenna, the Gray Waste or even the Abyss. Some even claimed that he had gone to all three.

By now word of the challenge had leaked out to the various grape-vines that were spread across the city and it was the topic of discussion from the Lady's ward all the way around to the Hive ward on the other side. Touts, gossip-mongers and even the gutter-rags in the Lower ward each had their own fantastical version of events that occurred during Lord Horacio's travels so far. Each story was more outrageous than the last and it seemed as if this topic of debate and gossip was not going away any time soon.

Lord Ashmantle was aware of this going on in the city and knew that the more people believed that Lord Horacio would succeed - the more likely that it was actually going to happen. He had made careful enquiries using magical and mundane means to find out what had happened with regards to the kidnapping of lady Kyle and Lord Anisen's failed rescue mission. The wizard had been around for long enough to know that Lord Anisen was not doing it out of simple good will or chivalry. In fact, the wizard suspected that lady Kyle might not be Lord Redthorn's real daughter and instead she was someone that he had either bought or kidnapped to raise as his daughter. Hence his ease at which he used her as a bargaining chip with Lord Anisen.

Lord Ashmantle knew that he could not prove his suspicions, but also that he did not want to be the next to try to stop Lord Horacio. With so much popular support in the city of Sigil and on the Outlands he was aware of the fact that the tiefling prince had the power of belief on his side and hence the wizard came up with another plan.

"It pains me to say this Lord Redthorn, but I do not believe that the place where our quarry is currently at - is a place that I would be able to strike at him."

"Oh, well I was not proposing that you try to fight Lord Horacio in the Abyss..."

"He is no longer in the Abyss," Lord Ashmantle interrupted. He had been tracking the tiefling prince using magical means and was fully aware of the fact that Lord Redthorn had several gifted seers in his employ. Therefore the reference to the Abyss had simply been a test or veiled insult. "The scoundrel is currently in Pandemonium. Seeing as he has survived most of the Lower planes relatively intact and in a short order of time - then he should make it to Limbo in no time at all."

"Surely a mage of your talents should be able to take care of lord Horacio on that plane, as well as bringing back my daughter?"

"I would if I could. However, the plane of Limbo is an erratic place to practice the Art and it's propensity to wild surges can lead to unfortunate and embarrassing results."

Lord Redthorn understood that his guest was not enthusiastic about going to confront Lord Horacio in person and respected him enough to wait for a proposal of a compromise solution. However, plans and schemes were already beginning to form in his mind as to how to 'repay' Lord Ashmantle at a future point in time.

"Perhaps Lord Jertsend would be best to step in during the next phase of Lord Horacio's travels?"

"Lord Jertsend?" the half-elven nobleman asked in mock surprise. He pictured in his mind the well-groomed dwarf floating amongst the pure chaos of Limbo with an army of solicitors, lawyers and scribes. "I don't quite understand."

"It's quite simple, my good friend." Lord Ashmantle replied with a conspiratorial smile. "Lord Jertsend often talks of the great wars that he has fought in and perhaps it is time for him to back up those stories. Perhaps if he were to ready a welcoming party in Ysgard, then he could catch Lord Horacio there."

"What a positively splendid idea," Lord Redthorn replied with a false smile.

"Well, this has positively made my day" the voice of envy and madness said from out of the darkness.

Otto cast a brief incantation that summoned a small globe of light, but it did not illuminate the tunnel very far. It was almost as if the small light highlighted the vast darkness of the huge tunnel, rather than bringing any comfort or guidance. The gnome diviner felt great gusts of wind whipping past and the roar of their passing was deafening. However, when he looked at the others he noticed that their clothes were not blown about at all. Neither were his and yet the roaring of the wind remained in his ears.

Lord Horacio walked over to the ogre and rifled through one of the packs. He took out the religious garments and put them on. Their were torn, travel stained and had holes in them - and when the tiefling prince presented himself to the others he looked more like a jester than a high priest. Lady Kyle immediately began to giggle and found that she could not stop herself. She continued giggling for some time until at last she had to sit down due to the pain in her stomach.

"I said, that has positively made my day," the same voice repeated some time later.

"Heard you the first time," another crisp voice replied.

"What? Back in the Beginning?" a third voice added querulously.

"Oh don't get him started," the second voice complained.

"Really?" the first voice asked with a uniquely different blend of envy and madness. "You remember the Beginning?"

"Uh," the third voice began hesitantly. "Yeah, let's see how it goes. In the beginning there was stuff. And from out of the stuff came more stuff until eventually there was us."

"What a load of screed," the second laughed.

"I rather liked it," the first one said wistfully.

"Actually," Lord Horacio interrupted. "I can tell you of the Beginning and it's infinitely more complex than you might imagine. But at the same time it is also infinitely simple."

The tiefling prince, dressed as a high priest of clowns, stepped out of the radius of the light walked off down the tunnel. Otto went stumbling after him leaving Brent to quickly pick up the still giggling lady Kyle and follow as well. When they finally caught up with the lord Horacio they found him standing in the midst of three very large howler beasts each of which had a small rider on its back. The four legged beasts stood about as high as lord Horacio's shoulders and the cloak enwrapped riders were about gnome size.

"In the Beginning there was nothing," lord Horacio began as he struck a pose of a man who was about to launch in to a lengthy reading of a poem.

"Don't you mean Nothing?" one of the howler beasts asked. Otto, who was the first to catch up with his employer, realised that the emaciated beast with a manic stare and an elongated snout was in fact the second voice that they had heard down the tunnel. He came to an abrupt stop, but the howler beasts nor their riders paid him any attention.

"Yes, of course. I meant Nothing." Lord Horacio said as he began jumping up and down.

"Let him finish," the first howler beast said.

"Don't you mean Finish?" the third howler beast joked. All three of the creatures laughed with a whooping guffaw that sounded as if they were choking to death.

"Anyway, in the Beginning there was Nothing. And within the Nothing there was formed an I."

"An eye?" one of the creatures asked.

"No, an I," another of them replied.

"Oh, an I. Right, I see now." Again they all laughed and Brent, Otto and lady Kyle watched in bemusement and apprehension.

"CAN YOU HEAR WHAT THEY ARE SAYING?" the gnome diviner asked the ogre.

"Yes," Brent replied. Lady Kyle simply giggled some more.

"So, what did the I do?" one of the howler beasts asked.

"What was the I?" another asked.

"A very good question," the tiefling prince said as he pranced around. "The I said: I AM..."

"Very difficult to pronounce the....." the third howler said.

"....." the first one countered.

"Wait a minute?" the second one stated sounding almost rational. "I AM..... implies a relationship."

"BINGO!" shouted Lord Horacio in euphoria.

"Has he got a row of numbers?" the first howler laughed.

"No, a row of letters and spaces," the third one countered.

"Well, that's cheating that is." The second sat down to sulk.

Just then a huge blast of wind came roaring down the corridor like a wall of air and it knocked Lord Horacio off his feet. The tiefling prince was sent tumbling down the tunnel but the howler beasts ducked down instinctively just in time. Brent held on to lady Kyle and shielded her from most of the gusts, although he giggling did die down.

Otto was completely unaffected by the wind and remained standing upright. "That's a little better," he said even though the others could not hear him. "Now I can hear things a little better."

After the winds died down the howler beasts moved down the tunnel to gather near Lord Horacio again. He was slowly getting to his feet, although he appeared quite shaken by the fall. Brent, Otto and lady Kyle hurried after them.

"I AM.... implies a relationship between the two." One of the howler beasts argued. "Therefore it's a three way division of the Nothing."

"Very good," Lord Horacio clapped manically until his hands went red. "Now that you understand the Power of Three, there's little else to see."

"I always thought that it was 3.14...."

"BINGO!"

"Huh? What for?"

"He was about to say a row of numbers."

"Hey!" Brent shouted to get all their attention. "We need to get to Limbo. Can you help us?"

"Get to Limbo, you must be mad."

"I'm not mad."

"You're all mad," the ogre stated firmly.

"We're all mad," all three howler beasts and lord Horacio chimed back.

There was a pause as they all waited for the response that they each knew was coming. After several minutes when no one had said anything, one of the howlers stepped forward.

"Alright. We'll help on the condition that this two-leg here tells us about the Nothing."

"Done and done," Brent agreed.

"WHAT ARE THEY SAYING?" Otto asked in confusion at seeing some people's mouth move but not being able to hear what they were saying before the words were ripped away by the gale-force winds.

The three howler beasts, their riders and the tiefling prince began howling that lasted for what seemed like hours. Their voices never grew hoarse and every so often their howls were interrupted by rapid and intense discussions about the Beginning, colour of Her Serenity, The Lady of Pain's undergarments and why the planes appeared to be shrinking.

Eventually a horde of howler beasts came running down the tunnels. The numbered in their thousands ranging from those the size of horses to some as small as hares. Brent, Otto and lady Kyle were instructed to ride on the backs of mounts that suited their size and height. As soon as they had climbed on, the mass of howler beasts began to rampage down the tunnels howling, debating and singing as they went.

There was little difference in the sound of their voices as they sang, debated or howled and after awhile it all began to sound like one vast roaring noise, not unlike that of the wind at times. Otto could hear best when the

horde was loudest and he figured that in places the tunnels echoed causing waves of sound to resonate before hurtling through the tunnels at the speed of sound.

It was a maddening journey and yet it was not. The howler beasts appeared to talk although their riders were each ventriloquists. However it appeared to be bad form to make it sound as if your own mount was talking. There were frequent tea breaks even though no one had any tea. The singing was in celebration of the Beginning, but when someone pointed out that this meant that they were celebrating Nothing they all fell silent. Instead they spend many hours commemorating the Beginning by making a lot of noise. Unfortunately this noise happened all at the same time and this great bang send shock-waves through the plane.

Otto was grateful when after an unknown number of days they stepped through a portal in to Limbo. His recollections of the journey through Pandemonium were fragmented and each time he tried to record them or tell someone else, the version was wildly different to the one before but not so much the one before that. Although it was often identical to the penultimate telling of his random journey through the Howling plane of Madness.

"In *knowing* the teachings of Zerthimon, I have become stronger."

Those were the exact words that lord Horacio spoke as he stepped in to the plane of Limbo, instantly creating a bubble of stable ground covered by a hemi-sphere of air around them half a mile in diameter. Unfortunately for the Githyanki strike team hiding in the Chaos soup of Limbo, this new imposition of Will on the plane conflicted with theirs. This resulted in the Githyanki knights falling a fair distance before hitting the solid seeming surface of the area of calm that Lord Horacio had created for his travelling companions.

Several of the Githyanki knights got to their feet immediately and gathered their weapons. One checked on her fallen comrades and saw that many had survived the fall. The remainder of the conscious members of the team charged at the startled tiefling prince and his friends. Otto had spent the first moment of his arrival on the plane admiring the miasma of elements and other primal forces colliding, converging and interacting with each other in the Chaos soup. He stood mesmerised and only saw the attackers at the last moment.

Lady Kyle was still gasping for breath having giggled for almost a week and she collapsed to the floor in pain. The sight of pale warriors in baroque armour registered briefly with her, but she was simply too tired and had too many aches to pay it much mind. Brent stood in front of his master in a defensive posture that the attackers recognised and spurred them on in their advance.

As the Githyanki knights got close lord Horacio rapidly altered the protective shell surrounding them so that small holes appeared inside it, similar to a Bytopian cheese with pockets of air trapped inside. He rapidly placed these pockets of Chaos in the path of the oncoming Githyanki to slow their advance. When the knights wielding their silver swords surrounded lord Horacio and his travelling companions, they found that he had cut them off with a wall of ever-changing Chaos. It was at that point that the Githzerai monks launched their counter-attack. They dropped in to the hemi-sphere of stability like bombs and exploded in to action. Defying the laws of the bubble they performed amazing acrobatic feats that made it appear as if they swam through the air. All these performances were not for show and within a matter of minutes all of the Githyanki had either been incapacitated or dispatched.

"I *know* what I am," the tiefling prince proclaimed with absolute certainty.

"No, you do not." A Githzerai guardian countered as he swam towards them through the air. "You *know* the moments of transition, but you do not *know* yet what you really are."

"Am I destined to become this? Or am I choosing to become this?" Lord Horacio asked the figure dressed in simple grey robes. The Githzerai had yellowish skin with pointed ears that had several earrings in them. His upper body was covered in tattoos that were patterns of lines in abstract forms. He wore simple grey breeches.

"Yes and yes," the guardian replied. He bowed in midair and beckoned for lord Horacio to follow him.

As soon as the tiefling prince began to follow, the hemi-sphere of stable ground moved as well as it was centred around him. The others walked on the solid seeming ground after him, making sure to stay close by and not pass through in to the Chaos soup. Every so often shards or rock-sized fragments of Chaos matter passed through the barrier seemingly unaffected by the Will imposing stability.

The captured Githyanki and the remaining Githzerai captors were soon left behind. Several times they appeared to pass through some kind of vortex where the Chaos matter spiralled around a point even though the matter was constantly changing. In some places the rain of Chaos shards was very intense whilst in others there was hardly any matter penetrating the sphere. They passed groups and solitary Slaad of various hues, but none challenged them as they passed by.

Eventually they arrived at a titanic monastery that appeared to be absolutely immense and could easily house hundreds of thousands of people. The structure was the size of a small city and it was teeming with people. Frequent patrols of Githzerai crawled on the outside of the citadel and the whole place had very strong militaristic overtones.

Lord Horacio and his companions were met by a Githzerai woman wearing a plain yellow robe about half a mile outside the city. She approached the tiefling prince with an aura of complete certainty and equanimity. Stopping a short distance from him, the Githzerai woman bowed. Lord Horacio returned the bow with a flourish. She responded by spreading her arms to symbolically encompass the bubble of stability in which they stood, amidst the swirling Chaos. Then the yellow robed woman brought her hands together to symbolically represent gathering in the essence of the bubble in her small hands.

Lord Horacio stood and stared at her for awhile and then mimicked her motion. As soon as he brought his hands together she stepped right up to him and placed her cupped hands underneath his. The tiefling prince smiled at her touch and was about to withdraw his hands when he saw the steely gaze of the woman opposite him. The Githzerai woman nodded her head when realisation dawned on Lord Horacio. His smile broadened and he gratefully let control of the stability bubble both symbolically and in reality pass over to her.

Once the control of that region of Limbo passed from Lord Horacio to the Githzerai anarch, they proceeded in to the city. They passed the fortified walls, numerous guard posts and a virtual labyrinth of tunnels that opened up finally in to a vast artificial cavern in which the city resided. The houses were of all shapes and sizes. In the midst of the city a series of islands of matter floated that each slowly changed shape before the visitor's eyes. The Githzerai anarch escorted them to one of the floating isles and left them there. The guards remained on the

island as well, but none of them said a word or gave any indication that they would respond to attempts at starting a conversation.

Otto was overwhelmed by the scenes that he had witnessed in the city and was very curious to explore the island. He began to walk around cautiously at first, but soon his exploration became bolder and more enthusiastic. The gnome diviner spent minutes and then hours looking at each plant, animal and insect that roamed the island. None of them tried to bite, stab or eat the gnome for which he was very grateful. Not only did the island change in shape and contours, but the animals slowly morphed as well. Every so often Otto encountered an orange robed Githzerai, but none of them answered his questions. Never the less he kept up his questioning and exploring.

Brent sat down on a rock and watched Otto wander off. He waited for an order or instructions from his master. But Lord Horacio suddenly seemed absorbed by lady Kyle and hovered near her. For the most part during the journey he had either ignored her or had not been terribly kind. But now out of the blue he appeared to be totally enthralled by her. The half-elven noblewoman was rather surprised by the sudden change in the way that the tiefling prince treated her although she tried not to let it show. Instead she idly wandered down one of the paths on the island and was relieved to have Lord Horacio follow behind.

"I'd like to apologise for what you have suffered as a result of my arrogance lady Kyle," the tiefling prince said humbly as he walked at her side.

"Well, it has been the worst time of my life ever and I doubt that I shall ever recover from it." The noblewoman pouted and reached up to touch a hummingbird that transformed in to a bumble bee.

"Oh, please say that it is not so fair lady," Lord Horacio said as he dropped to one knee. He took hold of lady Kyle's hand and pressed the back of her hand to his cheek. "It would shatter my heart to know that I have caused you this irreparable harm."

"Well, there is one thing that you could do to remedy this."

"Anything," he said longingly as a single tear rolled down his cheek. "You have but to ask."

"Take me home right now," she replied as she jerked back her hand. "Oh, and having your head on a silver plate. No, on a spike would be just perfect."

"My lady," the tiefling prince clutched his hands to his chest. "You cut me to the quick. I have done terrible things and would dearly like to set them right. But before you ask this of me - please let me humbly suggest another idea."

"You have me at a disadvantage, lord Horacio. Here I am in a city full of these yellow skinned, silent freaks held prisoner against my will. This is not the first time that I have been held against my will and I'm sure that as long as I remain in your company it will not be the last."

"Lady Kyle," the tiefling prince sigh was full of regret. "What you say is very true, more so than perhaps you know. But you must understand that I too am a prisoner."

"Do not mock me," the noblewoman angrily retorted. "You have been in control the entire time and have plotted every step of this journey. I may play the foolish daughter of a rich Sigillian socialite but I have eyes, ears and a brain to figure out what is going on."

"I am a prisoner of love, lady Kyle," lord Horacio confessed quietly. "I have loved you from the moment that I have met you and will always love you."

"Pretty words easily spoken," lady Kyle replied with bitter disbelief. "You love only yourself and have no room for anyone else. We are all just pawns in the games that you like to play. Well I am not a pawn and I will not fall for your beguiling rhetoric. Firstly you kidnap me from my home, abduct me with the aid of a succubus and taken to Acheron. There I am imprisoned in the presence of a fallen angel, for Lady's sake. What ever possessed you to do such a thing? Everyone knows that fallen angels try to outdo the very fiends themselves!"

"All this is the truth, but you were never harmed in any way." Lord Horacio got up from his knees and held one of her small porcelain white hands in his. "Then I forced you to cross the treacherous volcano of Gehenna where you almost perished, only to take you in to the Gray Waste."

"And what a picnic that was," the half-elven woman found it difficult to remain angry with a handsome man who kept agreeing with her. There was something about the tiefling prince's manner or how he spoke that ringed true and she felt that lord Horacio was trying to be genuine in his apology. "I almost lost my sanity crossing that place and still have nightmares. Let's not forget being betrayed in Carceri and then being dragged off to the Abyss by a succubus. How do you plan to make up for that?"

"I cannot," lord Horacio confessed. "What is done is done and only by balancing them with happy memories and a bright future can you leave the Gray Waste behind."

"Lord Horacio, whilst all of this is very nice can you please get to the point. I'm sure that you are trying to tell me something or ask me something but can you please just say your piece and be done with it?"

"I will. The other idea that I would like you to consider is that you please continue on this journey with me willingly."

"WHAT?!" lady Kyle screamed in outrage. "How can you have the gall to ask me to come with you when I obviously have no choice? Here I am as your prisoner and you would like me to chose to be at your side willingly? Has the nightmare journey across Pandemonium addled your brain? The answer is a resounding 'no'. I'd sooner have tea with the Lady of Pain."

"My lady, please a moment more of your time." The tiefling prince let go of her hand and looked at her pleadingly. He had bet everything so far on this moment and needed for her to at least be open to the suggestion - even if it was just a tiny glimmer of possibility. "I will lay my plans bare which will pain me more than even confessing my love for you."

"At last, one of Sigil's most famous liars finally speaks something resembling the truth." Lady Kyle chuckled and gave the tiefling prince one of her most disapproving glares.

"I am a cambion who is trying to cast off his nature."

The half-elven noblewoman showed no outward sign of shock or fear, but inside she was trembling. Risen fiends were so rare as to be mythical and she found it incredibly difficult to even entertain the idea that lord Horacio could be one.

"I have undertaken this journey to shed myself of my inherently evil nature, most of which I have divested myself off before we left Sigil. There is an ancient ritual known as the Transformation of Rings in which one or more people walk the Great Ring and thereby cause subtle changes that ripple across the Outer planes and beyond. The modron march is simply a way for Primus and his automatons to learn about the planes and shape it a little bit more to their liking. Well, I have altered the ritual so that by travelling the rings I can change something more difficult than the planes themselves - namely my nature."

Lady Kyle stared off in to the distance at the small figures moving about the city and absorbed the information. She had heard rumours that the Extraordinary League of Planar Cartographers was more than simply a group of rich bloods who like to travel and boast of their adventures. So far her inquiries had not yielded much information, but she had recently found that there were hints about the fact that the League had quite a bit of influence around the planes. The influence was very subtle and hard to detect, but each member employed numerous seers and there were always rumours of the inner circle manipulating planar events. None of the rumours could be proved, but lady Kyle had thought herself to be in an ideal situation to find out and possibly benefit from this information.

"Let's say for a second that this might be true. Oh, the second has come and gone. Too bad lord Horacio, you should have tried harder."

"Please lady Kyle," the tiefling prince said somewhat disappointed. "I have not finished. The ritual is working, although not always in the way that I would expect it. So far I have planned the journey this far, but I did not have time to plot across Limbo or beyond. One of the effects of my divestment of my nature and the ritual is that I strongly reflect planar energy. Why do you think that the Githzerai appeared so quickly and took us in to the heart of their city? Certainly not for our benefit. This is simply for their anarchs to practise keeping my influence on the plane contained. I am as much a prisoner here as you are."

The half-elven noblewoman began to laugh, despite having spent almost a week in Pandemonium giggling manically and was still aching from that experience. She continued laughing for some and after awhile she felt very uplifted by it. Unbeknownst to her flowers blossomed nearby and lush green grass sprouted up. The joy at laughing at her abductor, tormentor and focus of her anger felt therapeutic, cleansing of the stain of having travelled through the Lower planes. A great weight of despair, anger and other negative emotions was lifted and although she was not being physically set free - lady Kyle felt as if she had finally been liberated.

"I can't tell you how good that makes me feel to hear that," the noblewoman said once she had finished laughing.

Lord Horacio sighed in defeat and sat down on a boulder that morphed in to a bedside cabinet. He hunched his shoulders somewhat and blew his nose using his never ending supply of handkerchiefs.

"So what is it that you would like from me, lord Horacio? Oh, the idea of me ever loving you. That's never going to happen in this Multiverse or the next."

"Such a thing is beyond my wildest dreams, my lady. What I would like humbly ask is that firstly you accompany me to act as a witness of this journey through all the planes that it will pass. And secondly that you not work against me for the duration of this journey?"

"I'll think about it," lady Kyle replied.

"That is all that I can ask of you."

"Well, I would quite like to ask something in return?"

"But of course."

"How long do you plan to stay in Limbo?"

"I have no idea, it depends on when the Githzerai let us go."

"Ah, I see. One more thing, if I agree to accompany you I would ask two things of you. Firstly, that I be allowed to leave at any time that I choose."

"Though it would pain me beyond belief to see you go, the answer is yes."

"Good. The second thing that you explain to me is who and what your ogre servant is."

"Ah, now that could be a little bit of a problem." Lord Horacio smiled ruefully and pondered how best to answer that particular question.

"So what's your story?" Otto asked the ogre after he had spent some time exploring the island.

"I don't have a story," the ogre replied simply.

"Oh come now, everyone has at least something to say about themselves." Otto tried not to sound too curious and hoped that he had not crossed some invisible line in ogre etiquette.

"I don't have a story," the ogre repeated.

"You know," the gnome said trying a different approach. "You really are a very curious ogre. There was that whole probability thing that you rattled off awhile ago. I did some of the maths and your figures were fairly plausible. Added to which is your martial prowess and seeming immunity to some planar effects, that's quite something."

"If you say so," Brent shrugged his shoulders noncommittally. He glanced over in to the distance to look for lord Horacio and lady Kyle. They were in the midst of a deep discussion and did not notice the Githzerai anarchs moving to create a perimeter around the tiefling prince and half-elven noblewoman.

Otto followed the ogre's gaze and although it took him awhile - he watched the new developments further along

on the island. "That's exactly what I am talking about, what I find interesting about you. I would not have spotted what the orange robed Chaos-shapers were up to until you pointed it out just now."

"Point out what?" the ogre asked innocently.

"The fact that the Githzerai anarchs have taken up a strategic position around lord Horacio," the gnome diviner studied the scene for awhile longer. "By the way, is that significant? Are they in any danger?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Come on Brent. You're a complete mystery, an enigma. I know more about lady Kyle than I do about you. I even know more about the fallen angel Kale that I do you."

"Her name is Kaleliel," the ogre corrected.

"Pardon? Oh, there you see it is again. You're a mine of information that you just casually drop in to conversation. Please, please, please will you share at least just a tiny bit of knowledge." Otto clasped his hands together and looked up at the ogre pleadingly.

"Very well, but will not prove anything." Brent pointed to several of the orange robed anarchs and made sure that Otto was able to see which ones that he was pointing at. "Those are the more senior of the Chaos-shapers. These Githzerai are manipulating the fabric of this plane to hold in check lord Horacio's effect on the plane."

"But they are just standing there. Nothing is happening."

"Exactly. The true nature of the plane of Limbo is a whirling realm of infinite chaos in which elements mix without rhyme or reason and very few places even approximating stability exist. By imposing one's will on the plane and with the proper training, it is possible to create a region in which the Chaos matter remains in a stable state."

"Yes, I know about the nature of the reality that we find ourselves in. Well at least most of it, although I'm glad that we are in the safety of this fortress city."

"The most important thing that you could ever learn about the plane of Limbo is that the stability that you see around you is but an illusion." The ogre spoke slowly as if weighing every word that he spoke. "It can disappear at any moment. If the anarch Chaos-shapers stopped concentrating on the shape and layout of the city, then it would disappear in a instant."

"So what does this have to do with lord Horacio?"

"Lord Horacio is currently one of the most disruptive influences in the city."

"But he's just sitting there."

"It's not what he's doing, it's what he is. Or rather what he is becoming."

Otto felt as though he was beginning to get somewhere with his ogre travelling companion. However, he had to fight for every scrap of information about the ogre. Even now he realised that he was only learning about lord Horacio and not about Brent himself. He was impressed by how easily the ogre had directed the flow of the conversation in a different direction. Yet he was desperate to hear more.

"Becoming? Come on Brent, you can't just start something and not finish it."

"That's very true Otto. Lord Horacio as you know is a cambion, the direct offspring of a demon and mortal. He has undertaken this journey to divest himself of the remainder of his malign and demonic nature, but what he will become - even he doesn't know or understand."

"Can he really do that? Stop being a half-demon?"

"Yes he can. At least he is trying to do so." The ogre sighed as if he was carrying around some great unseen burden. "However, as he has already learned he is becoming a planar catalyst of sorts. On most planes he reflects the planar energies and hence the effects of the plane are amplified in his surroundings."

"Ah, now that explains a lot."

"Indeed it does. When we travel through the various heavens he will still be reflecting that energy and we will have to be very careful."

"Why? Surely it will be much safer to travel through the Upper planes compared to the Lower planes?"

"Otto, you are a learned gnome who in his short years has seen a fair amount of the Outer planes."

"Well I started this journey..." Otto was ready to launch in a to a lengthy counter-argument, but he fell silent when the ogre held up his large hand.

"Travelling through the heavens will be just as dangerous as travelling through the various underworlds." Brent spoke the last words quietly with a great deal of gravity. "Come, we must prepare for the journey ahead. There is much that the Githzerai will show you before we go."

"Goody, I'm looking forward to seeing the Upper planes. I do hope that we can leave soon."

"I said that we must prepare," the ogre smiled apologetically. "But the Githzerai will not let us go just yet."

"Then how long must we wait." The gnome puts his fists on his hips and stood defiantly. "They can't hold us against our wills. There must be rules about such things."

"Perhaps in the City of Doors, my friend Otto. But here the Githzerai rule and their will is *law*."

A short while later the Githzerai came and separated each of the found companions on to four smaller newly-created islands. There each of them was provided with a residence of sorts and taught the simplest fundamentals of shaping the Chaos matter that made up the plane. These lessons lasted for many hours and were practised every day. Very soon the days turned in to weeks and before long they found that the Githzerai had kept them as their guests for three whole weeks.

Each of the travelling companions were also given specific training according to their nature or some hidden insight that the Githzerai thought was appropriate. Otto was taught to pronounce the name of the city which was actually a simple children's song about a three cornered hat. It took him a couple of days to become proficient in singing the song and just then the Githzerai tutors changed their lessons. Instead of singing the whole song, the gnome diviner had to drop firstly one word of the song and then another and finally most of the key words. This meant that he had to keep the song going in his head and was only permitted to sing a few of the words.

The lesson that this taught to Otto was how to sense the flow of planar energy around him and how to attune himself to the plane around him. The strong words left unspoken resonated in his mind and awakened the understanding in his thoughts that beneath the surface of the world of the senses, there was another world that if properly trained for - can be perceived as well. Towards the end of Otto's lessons his teachers confided in him that this lesson normally took years to perfect and that they were sorry not to have taught it to him properly. However, given the time-scales of the journey that they had yet to complete; it was the best that they could do. Otto sat in stunned silence as he finally comprehended that the planar energies that he had tried to capture and understand with his etehroscope - this was what the Githzerai had taught him to do using just his mind all in only three short weeks.

The tiefling prince's lessons were very straight-forward and repeated every single day without fail regardless of what had gone on the day before. Each day the Githzerai taught lord Horacio how to enter a meditative state in which he was aware of his surroundings, but not affected by them in any way. Then they would unleash planar energy collected from other realities to see if he could balance out the effect that they had on him so that he was able to remain unaffected. For the first week he consistently failed to counter the energies and was not able to undo their effects in any way. During the second week it occurred to him that fighting against them might not work, but trying to balance them out with their equal and opposite energies might be more successful. By the time that the third week drew to a close he was bordering on despair but he had found that his theory was indeed correct. "***Balance*** in all things," his mentors repeated the phrase as a mantra and it was the only words that lord Horacio said during that final week.

Lady Kyle was treated as a lady of her station and taught how the beings in the upper planes interacted with each other and with travellers, as well as would-be invaders. She was taught about Celestial etiquette, how to make diplomatic overtures and what kinds of responses to expect. Identifying the various heavenly choirs and understanding how each of the benign after-lives were structured were all part of her education. During the third and final week they taught her to meditate as well with the aim of filling her body with light until at the very end she felt joyful and uplifted. Whilst the nightmare journey through the Lower planes had left their scars both physical and mental on the noblewoman. The training that the Githzerai gave to lady Kyle inspired and purified her, giving her a glimpse of the joys and happiness that she could experience during her travels in the Upper planes.

The Githzerai did not teach any lessons to Brent. Instead different members of the yellow-skinned race living in the fortress city visited the ogre and consulted with him on a vast range of topics, sometimes up to a dozen different subjects per hour.

During one of the lessons Otto told his tutor that he felt indebted to the Githzerai people and wanted to know if he could repay them in any way. The tutor smiled for the first and only time during Otto's stay and pointed at the ogre. "***Know*** that bringing him to this city if reward enough," the Githzerai answered cryptically.

Lord Jertsend sat in his command tent surrounded by the leaders of his warriors. It had taken a couple of weeks to build up his forces, call in some favours and finalize the strategy that he had in mind to neutralise lord Horacio and his travelling companions. The reports that he had been getting from his diviners indicated that lord Horacio was travelling with lady Kyle, the daughter of lord Redthorn, a gnome diviner by the name of Otto Bressail and an ogre servant called Brent.

The dwarven Golden Lord prided himself on always winning the battle before it started by getting to know his enemy better than they knew themselves. Lord Jertsend had studied the 'Art and Craft of the Blood War' by the famous Yugoloth scholar called the Orroloth. This manual had given him a significant edge in his previous military campaigns and had ensured him victory in all but one of his battles. The fortunes that he had accumulated whilst plundering various worlds and less visited sections of the planes had made the dwarven nobleman immensely wealthy and it seemed only natural that he join the Faction called the Fated.

This Faction had recently risen to greater prominence under the leadership of Duke Rowan Darkwood. Since the Duke owed Lord Jertsend a couple of favours, the dwarven nobleman had called them in so that he could prepare the proper welcome for lord Horacio that the tiefling prince deserved. Lord Jertsend had even managed to get someone to spy on his enemy in the Githzerai city called "Hakovah Shell'ie Sha'llosh Pinot" and so he was aware of lord Horacio's nature and the manner in which they had all been trained.

However, despite his extensive contacts he had not been able to come up with a definitive answer as to who or what the ogre was. Therefore he had decided to eliminate the ogre first, then capture lady Kyle. Next kill the gnome and finally deal with lord Horacio. Since the dwarven nobleman was not an evil man by nature he did not have any great speeches prepared that he was planning to bore lord Horacio with and thereby giving the tiefling prince a chance to escape. Instead he simply planned to have an executioner chop off his head.

"My lord," a runner announced as he was let in to the command tent. The young man bowed to the dwarven nobleman and his generals. "I bring news that lord Horacio and his companions have arrived on the plane of Shard."

"Thank you," Lord Jertsend dismissed the man with the wave of his hand and turned back to the tables covered with maps and scrolls with long lists. "Right gentlemen", he said getting everyone's attention in the tent. "As you know we will be fighting a small force that will be difficult to track, but due to some foresight on my part - it will not be impossible to detect. Therefore I recommend that we send out the griffon patrols first of all and bring the dragons in when we have cornered our prey. Last but not least will be spell jamming fleet."

"Sire," one of the generals asked. "Now that all is in preparation, would it not be appropriate to tell us the size and make up of the forces that we will be engaging?"

The dwarven nobleman weighed up the question carefully before deciding to answer. "We will be facing one cambion who is attempting to rise. By that I mean that he is trying to become a celestial instead of a fiend. We will also be facing a half-elven noblewoman who is not to be harmed under any circumstances. There is a gnome diviner of no importance who can be killed on sight. Last but not least there is an ogre whom I believe to be a Rilmani agent."

There was a long pause during which the generals absorbed the information that they had been told. A risen fiend was a very rare thing and some of them were curious to know why they were trying to prevent a creature

of evil and chaos from trying to become a creature of good. Such risen fiends rarely escape from the Lower planes as they were always hunted by the other members of their race. The half-elven noblewoman sounded as if she was easy to capture and they doubted that a gnome diviner would give them any trouble. The ogre agent on the other hand was a different matter.

There had always been rumours floating around about an enigmatic race called the Rilmani that lived at the centre of the Outlands in a region where magic did not work, powers of the mind failed and even the gods themselves had no power. This reclusive race was said to promote maintaining the Balance between Good and Evil as well as between Order and Chaos. In the same way that the celestials promoted the side of good and the fiends promoted the side of evil, so too did the Rilmani actively promote maintaining a balance between good and evil.

The fiends were plunged in to a battle across the length and breadth of the various underworlds fighting a war of belief and power in which the stakes were nothing short of control of all the Lower planes. The battle was waged between those fiends who promoted evil supported by Order versus those who promoted evil ruled by Chaos. The side of Chaos were more numerous but their very natures prevented them from winning the war. The side of Order were fewer and had better strategies, but were often overwhelmed by sheer weight of numbers that the enemy could bring to the field of battle. Also in this conflict were the Yugoloths, the fiends who did not side with Order or Chaos, and they hired themselves out as mercenaries. Some believe that the Yugoloths keep the Blood War going for their own evil ends, but there are some who maintain that it is the Rilmani who keep the War going to prevent the fiends from overrunning the Upper planes.

Little is known about the Rilmani aside from where they live. Some claim that the Rilmani are divided up in to a caste system and that each has a specific function. Others maintain that the Rilmani are able to change their form and function depending on the nature of their assignments. Since these champions of Balance have at times come in to conflict with most of the other Outer planar races, some say it is only the fact that they reside at a place where all are stripped of power that has ensured their survival. Others claim that the Rilmani are the great manipulators of the planes, that it is them who are responsible for starting the events that re-shape the planes, or preventing such events from even getting started.

"A Rilmani agent?" the same general asked. "Does this mean that we can expect them to come with reinforcements?"

"No, err I mean yes." The dwarven nobleman had withheld the information about their enemy for the very reason that the ogre was an enigma. He did not like to own up to not knowing about his opponents and wanted to bring the matter to a close as soon as possible. "Let's just say that we should be prepared for some surprises. You gentleman are at the top of your class. You have each led a series of successful campaigns for me and I have brought you together one more time in order to deal with this small matter with me. You will not discuss the matter of the Rilmani agent with any of your men and you will have to improvise if things go differently to the scenarios that I have instructed you about in the past few days. Now, are there any questions?"

"Just one my lord," another of the generals asked. He had exchanged glances with the others and had read the same unspoken question in each of their eyes. "Why do you require the use of such a large force in order to capture and kill four individuals? Even with the presence of a Rilmani agent they should not pose too great a challenge?"

"Why indeed," lord Jertsend replied, not bothering to hid his annoyance. "The reason is simple. Under no circumstances can this mission fail as it will effect my standing in the League and if that were to happen then the past few decades of conquering worlds that you have all been so busy with has been for nothing. This is the culmination of a great deal of time, effort and money. Therefore nothing can be left to chance and the use of overwhelming force is the best way to guarantee success."

The dwarven nobleman waited to find out if there were any other questions. He sensed that his generals were uncomfortable with the mission and felt as though they were wasting their time with something insignificant instead of worrying about how to conquer the next set of worlds. However, since their employer lord Jertsend was sponsoring the cost of all their military campaigns, as well as a few that they thought he was unaware of. They were willing to put their own personal feelings aside and concentrate on the mission.

"Very well then," the dwarf said with a broad smile. "Keep me informed as to the progress of the mission. You are dismissed."

Several hours passed before the first reports began to filter in. The griffon scouts had roamed far and wide without any seeming success. However, despite the fact that not all of the scouts had reported back - one of them had returned with news that a tiefling, half-elf, gnome and ogre had been spotted in a halfling settlement some hours before. Normally lord Jertsend would have waited to confirm such a sighting, but this time he mobilized his entire force and sent it off in pursuit of his enemies.

He had deliberately created a very mobile force of griffons, dragons and flying ships to be able to track his foes more easily. Some of the dragon handlers had reported problems when they had first arrived in Ysgard, but a few strong words with the dragon riders had soon brought those troops back in to line. Only one of the dragons had to be killed to be made an example off and the others soon began to comply with orders again. When the aerial army reached the halfling settlement consisting of several log houses on hill by a river, they discovered that the halflings had aided their foes by providing them passage in one of their long ships. Lord Jertsend ordered the village evacuated and then burnt it to the ground. As he and his army followed the course of the river they left the halfling villagers crying out in anger to their gods and he laughed at the thought of being scolded by a peeved halfling goddess.

"Sire," one of the generals reported some time later. "We have reports coming in that our forces have met with some resistance."

"And," lord Jertsend prompted impatiently. "Are you going to tell me what the forces are or should I guess? Hmm, let me see. At a guess I would say that you have encountered some angry halfling." The dwarven lord roared with laughter and almost fell off his mount. When he saw that none of the generals were laughing he realised that something more serious was going on.

"Yes my lord," the general reported. "The halflings appear to be using longships that are capable of flight and they have taken us by surprise."

"Well I'll be a Ultroloth's monkey," the dwarf swore. "Have you been able to identify their leaders?"

"We have, Sire. They are being led by several slightly larger halflings. One of them has a hammer as big as he is, the other travels using rainbows and the third one has two small black birds that sit on his shoulders. He

seems to be the one overall in charge."

"This leader," lord Jertsend said hesitantly. "Did he by any chance have an eye patch?"

"Why I do believe so, my lord."

Lord Jertsend sighed and turned his flying mount so that he symbolically broke off pursuit. "Call back our forces, order a tactical retreat."

"But Sire," one of the generals stated. "They are only halfling and can easily be dealt with."

The dwarven lord took in a deep breath and then slowly counted to ten as he exhaled. "Only halflings? Have you lost your wits man? Do you know nothing of the plane of Ysgard? The figures that have just been described match certain characteristics that should cause you to think twice or even a million times before going up against them. Have you by any chance heard the names Thor and Odin?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Well in that case, I suggest that we remove ourselves from the plane of Ysgard and regroup in Arborea."

The generals called in their troops and broke off the pursuit. There was some grumbling in the ranks but when they heard who was aiding their enemies they soon fell silent. Rumours began to circulate as to the nature of the foes that they were up against and when lord Jertsend caught wind of this, he realised that he was facing a far greater challenge than he had previously thought.

"Generals," the weary dwarven lord ordered his top men. "It seems that we have a problem. Our men believe that our foes are far stronger and more powerful than they actually are. Therefore, since I do not believe that we can fight against this tide of belief - I would like you to get me a new army. The dragons, griffons and ships will be returned to their previous postings and assignments and I expect a new strike force to be formed ready for hunting lord Horacio through the plane of Arborea in two days."

"Those halflings were very friendly," lady Kyle said as she waved farewell to the halfling women with winged helmets who had given them a ride on their flying horses to the portal to Arborea. "I did not care much for their fighting songs or the way that the halfling with eye-patch kept staring at us in a funny way. But on the whole travelling through Ysgard was not too bad."

"Even if we were chased by dragons the entire time," Otto said despondently. The gnome had regained his curiosity and had studied the dragons chasing them for some time. However, there was only so long one could look at the majestic creatures that were determined to scorch them to a crisp before it became too depressing.

"I rather enjoyed it too," lord Horacio said with a dazzling smile as he took lady Kyle by the arm. "My lady, shall we?" he asked beckoning her towards the portal.

The four travelling companions stepped through the portal and entered in to a land of soaring mountains and very deep valleys. It felt as though every tree and blade of grass was alive and watched over by a guardian spirit. There was a vibrancy to everything that was hard to pinpoint. Otto felt as though the brook that they were

standing nearby to was not simply a gurgling stream of water, but rather that this stream was gurgling more than any he had seen before and the water sounded almost as though it was making music as it merrily ran down the mountainside. The trees swayed in the wind and the rustle of the leaves made it sound as if all of the trees in the forest were talking.

Otto looked around and saw that everything had a clarity and a vibrancy that he had never seen before, until he heard his employer sigh deeply as if under a great deal of stress. It was at that point that the scenery around them seemed to dampen a little the level of vibrancy. The trees still sounded as if they were whispering to each other and the stream still sounded musical, but it was less so than before.

"Are you alright?" lady Kyle asked the tiefling prince. When they had first stepped through the portal she had felt an almost overwhelming urge to kiss the prince and even after he had sighed loudly it still remained to some extent. "You do not seem quite yourself."

"I'll be fine, thank you my dear." Lord Horacio smiled reassuringly and took the half-elven noblewoman by the hand. "It just takes a little while for me to adjust when I arrive at a different plane of reality. But now that the moment has passed perhaps it is time for us to be one our way. Berk, how long have we been travelling and through how many gates?"

"When we left the Gray Waste, milord, we had been travelling for two weeks and had passed through thirty three gates." The ogre replied as he worked out the numbers aloud. "Add to that another week and two days plus two gates to get through Pandemonium. By the time that we left Limbo and had navigated to a portal to Ysgard we had travelled for fifty four days and passed through forty five portals."

"Just tell me the totals, berk." Lord Horacio stated impatiently.

"Today is the fifty sixth day of our journey and we have passed through a total of forty seven gates."

"Ah, well it seems that we are somewhat behind schedule and have exceed our quota of gates." The tiefling prince bowed his head in thought and lady Kyle spontaneously kissed him on the cheek. "What was that for?"

"To steal your worrying thoughts and to lift your spirits," she answered coyly. The half-eleven woman was blushing but she was still holding on to his hand.

The tiefling prince looked at her for awhile and the noblewoman's blushing only intensified until the very tips of her pointed ears had turned red.

"Are you simply going to stare at me, lord Horacio?" the noblewoman asked. "Or are we actually going to start travelling again."

"Forgive me my lady," the tiefling prince said as he drew her close. "For a moment I was drowning in your beauty and was ready to let everything slip away."

"Milord," the ogre interrupted. "Lord Jertsend will soon have more forces hunting us."

Lord Horacio went from looking at lady Kyle longing in one moment to utter fury in the next. The tiefling prince spun around and slapped the ogre so hard in the face that it sent Brent sprawling to the ground.

"Don't you dare interrupt me like that again," he said as he barely held his anger in check. "I am well aware of lord Jertsend's forces and the fact that he will be after us. You are not the only one who can spot him riding on the back of a dragon. Now go and make yourself useful, you lumbering pile of dwarf fodder. Lead the way forward until nightfall. If you have not found a glade with a ring of mushrooms in it by then, you will be in severe trouble."

The ogre set off in to the forest and the gnome diviner followed behind as he did not wish to be in his employer's presence. Otto was aware of how the tiefling prince reflected the nature of the plane and he did not relish the idea of being over-exposed to it. Arborea was called a plane of passion in which gods and men experienced great highs of emotions as well as great lows. The very land itself was formed on an epic scale and if someone stayed there for long enough they were sure to experience the sublime heights of elven bliss and dark lows of Greek tragedies. Since lord Horacio reflected such energies and intensified them, the gnome preferred to be away from him. The Githzerai training that lord Horacio had received appeared to be working, but practising and doing it for real appeared to be quite different in terms of challenges and actual success.

"I'm not sure what to make of all of this," the gnome confessed as he ran to keep up with the ogre.

"Make of what?" the ogre asked as he scanned the forest.

"Well, it seems that lord Horacio is still amplifying the effects of the plane and that the Githzerai training is not working."

"Fear not," Brent smiled. "Whilst we are gone lord Horacio and lady Kyle will fall in and out of love at least a dozen times. But despite that the effects of the plane will not be as severe as they would be had lord Horacio not had the training. They will still be alive and well by the time that we return."

"A dozen times, did you say?" Otto scratched his head and wondered how many days they would be searching for.

"Yes," the ogre replied. "We should only be gone for a few hours."

Sure enough after a few hours the ogre and gnome came across a glade next to a waterfall in which not one but several rings of mushrooms had sprouted up. Brent cautioned Otto not to step in to the fairy circles and they immediately traced their steps back to where lord Horacio and lady Kyle were waiting for them in the forest. It was not too difficult to locate them as they could hear the shouting from miles away. When Brent and Otto turned up they found lady Kyle hurriedly lacing up her dress and lord Horacio pulling on his breeches.

"Oh," said Otto as he finally understood what Brent had meant about falling in and out of love.

"Right then you two rascals," lord Horacio said as he pulled on his jacket. The tiefling prince tried to sound angry but he was smiling too much. Lady Kyle was trying to glower at the tiefling prince, but his smile was infectious and they both burst out laughing. "Did you find anything?" lord Horacio eventually asked.

"Yes, my lord. "Otto tried not to look at lady Kyle as she was dressing, but the gnome found that he could not help himself. Perhaps it was the plane's effects stirring his passion or simply that he was growing very fond of the noblewoman, but he began to feel resentful towards his employer. "We have located a ring of mushrooms not too far from here."

"Splendid, dear Otto." The tielfing prince gave him a congratulatory slap on the back that almost bowled the gnome over. "I knew that there was a reason that I brought you along, aside from the fact that you are my favourite diviner."

As they walked down the mountain trails towards the waterfalls, the gnome diviner went through a series of rapid mood changes. At first he felt angry at lord Horacio, but that soon turned to pity at the thought of what kind of life his employer had in store for when the fiends found out that he was attempting to Rise. Next he thought about lady Kyle and was moved by her beauty and grace. However, that was soon replaced by feelings of fear and paranoia as he thought about how much she had changed during the journey. He wondered how much of that change was actually real and how much that she had been playing them all for fools for this entire time.

By the time that they reached the glade with the waterfall it was almost dark and Otto was unsure of what to feel or think. He was not someone who was easily swayed and going from one emotion to the next was not something that usually happened rapidly. Therefore spending a day of walking down one of the mountains in Arborea and experiencing so many emotions, left the gnome diviner feeling very much drained and confused. Later on he used this as an excuse for why he did not pick up on the fact that it seemed as though the stars were falling from the sky when he unthinkingly walked in to the fairy ring that the mushroom circle bounded.

When Otto realised what had happened he looked up to see the stars landing quietly on the grass around him. The star creatures moved with such unearthly lightness and grace that the gnome diviner found himself crying with joy. This brought amusement to the fey creatures that danced through the glade. Lady Kyle stood motionless as the fairy creatures moved past and around her, fearing that if she breathed too loudly that they would all disappear as if in a dream. Lord Horacio bowed to one of the fairy knights and asked her to dance. The ephemeral knight bowed in return and with a laugh of pure ecstasy accepted the offer of a dance. At once the glade was filled with haunting melodies, overlaid with more joyful ones. It seemed as if two orchestras were competing with each other to lead the music and yet despite that the two melodies complimented each other.

"Where are you travelling to?" one of the fey asked as she took the gnome in to her arms and pulled him in to the circle of dancing figures.

"Uh," Otto sputtered as he tried to form a coherent sentence. "We are travelling around the planes."

"How exciting," the fairy princess smiled in delight. The gnome diviner felt as though he had died and gone to heaven. It almost appeared as if the fey creature could read his thoughts as she laughed out loud and began to sing a joyful song. As Otto listened entranced to the song and tried to keep up with her in the dance, he realised that the song was definitely one of the most bawdy tunes that he had ever heard.

"You see," the gnome said as he finally managed to keep a sentence in his mind for more than a second without being distracted. "We are travelling around all of the planes."

"All of them?" the fairy princess asked, both surprised and delighted.

"Yes," Otto replied with a cheeky grin. "Our next stop is the Beastlands and then on to Elysium and beyond."

"Aha!" the woman cried out. "So you're the ones that the Greeks are hunting. I should have recognised you from your descriptions, but I somehow pictured you somewhat taller."

"Well..." the gnome began, but was swiftly interrupted.

"Fear not, my love." She said and then proceeded to give him the most passionate kiss of his life. "We'll see you safely through here."

The fairy princess clapped her hands and the music died away. As it did so the dancers came to a stop and they were all left with the feeling as of great expectation.

"There is a hunt on tonight," the princess announced. "And we shall be the prey. Though the greeks seek us high and low, hunt for us with sword and bow - we will see these good people on their way; and gladly lead the Greeks astray."

And so it was that lord Horacio and the others were escorted by the fey creatures, belonging to one of the Courts of the Stars, through the plane of Arborea. Lord Jertsend and his Greek army were always close behind. But each time that it appeared as though the tiefling prince would be caught, some tragedy would befall lord Jertsend's army ensuring that his foes could escape.

Finally after what seemed like years, but was in fact on a few exhilarating and exhausting days they arrived at a portal to the Beastlands where they fey bid farewell to their travelling companions.

"Will you come see me again?" the fairy princess asked Otto quietly in the few moments that they had alone. "I can hear the fey blood singing in your veins and the longing that you have to be here."

"Of course, my love." The gnome diviner promised. He was unsure of whether the love that he felt for the princess was a passing fancy or something that would last. He was also unsure of whether she felt the same or if he was simply a plaything. But he did not care either way. In that moment and in that place he knew that his love for her was real and that one day he would return. "I will be back," he vowed and then stepped through the portal.

In the plane of the Beastlands the companions were hunted by lord Jertsend's forces from the moment that they arrived to the moment that they left. Lord Horacio's facial features took on the appearance of a sly fox more and more as they travelled through the primordial jungles. Lady Kyle sprouted feathers around her eyes and on her head, that gave her the appearance of a beautiful and deadly bird of prey. Otto looked in to a reflective pool one day and saw that he had begun to resemble a shrew, although Brent assured him that some shrews were very able and vicious fighters. The ogre was the only one left unaffected by their journey through the Beastlands.

A combination of lord Horacio's cunning and the fact that he was able to control how much of the plane he reflected meant that they were able to elude the majority of lord Jertsend's soldiers. It became a game of cat and mouse across a vast landscape teeming with life in the forms of insects, animals, birds and reptiles. Some of the animals spoke and others appeared fairly ordinary. Some others of the creatures looked like nothing that they had heard of before, resembling giant lizards that lumbered noisily through the jungle.

When the soldiers of lord Jertsend did manage to catch lord Horacio and his companions, they were either outwitted by the tiefling prince at the last moment. Or lord Horacio let out a ripple of reflected planar energy that made the soldiers take on the animal natures at an accelerated rate that most reflected what was in their hearts and minds. Many of the soldiers were unable to deal with the rapid transformation as well as trying to battle lord Horacio and so they were able to escape each time.

However, the dwarven nobleman became better and better at tracking and laying in wait for the tiefling prince until it seemed that lord Horacio would one day be finally caught. Only by climbing on to the backs of one of the huge reptiles were they able to break the blockade around the portal that lord Jertsend had set up to block their entry in to the Elysium fields.

"Shall we follow them in to Elysium?" one of the generals asked, exhausted from the hunting and the battles.

"No," the dwarven nobleman responded in an equally weary tone. "We will wait for them in Mount Celestia. All who enter there fall in to the Silver Sea and if the holy water does not kill lord Horacio, then I plan to have the Archons ready and waiting for him. Risen fiend or not, he is going to have some explaining to do and all that I really need to achieve is to delay him for long enough to get back to Sigil."

"And should the archons let him go?" the general asked.

"Then I have been informed by lord Gensen that lady Westcoat will be waiting to deal with them in the plane of Mechanus. If she cannot stop them then no one can."

"Is lady Westcoat experienced at catching people like lord Horacio?" the general asked, too tired to realise that he had over-stepped his bounds.

"No," the tired dwarf replied as he made a mental note to demote the impertinent general or to have him court-martialed. "Lady Westcoat is experienced at draining the life out of people from the rumours that I have heard. That should definitely slow lord Horacio down or do away with him entirely. My dedication to the League have been tested to the limits and if the archons do not help - then I shall resign my position."

Whilst the animal appearances of the tiefling prince, gnome and half-elf disappeared when they left the Beastlands. They were still hunted as they travelled through Elysium and Bytopia. Rumours had circulated around Sigil, the City of Doors, that lord Horacio was actually a fiend hell bent on conquering the Upper planes. This had made journey many times more difficult as the Celestials were now looking for them. Word of the supposed demon-army spread quickly and it took a lot longer to cross the peaceful fields of Elysium and the industrious plane of Bytopia than lord Horacio had hope for.

Eventually they decided to travel using the river Oceanus as the planar highway from one plane to the next. This meant that they were less likely to be found by the Celestials as they did not venture on deck of the ship, but also that their journey took even longer. Lord Horacio was keenly aware of the fact that they had only a week or so left in which to complete the journey and still several more planes to travel through.

When they stepped through the portal to Mount Celestia they immediately fell in to a clear sea of holy water. Lord Horacio began to scream in agony and was rescued just in time by some strange elven creatures whose lower bodies looked like octopi. Lady Kyle had found the sea to be very soothing and warm, but never the less she was glad to be out of it so that the tiefling prince's torment could be brought to a halt. As soon as they reached the shore they were met by a host of angels who healed any wounds that they had received during the journey, including those of lord Horacio, and then escorted them along a path up the mountain to a beautiful white city.

Inside the city lord Horacio was led to a small prison complex and the others were housed in a mansion nearby. When they asked the angels why lord Horacio was being held it was explained to them that their companion had been responsible for a great many misdeeds, not least of which included leading several Blood War skirmishes on to the Upper planes. They tried to argue against this, but the archons assured them that lord Horacio would receive a fair trial.

"How long will the trial last?" Otto asked as he, Brent and lady Kyle looked over the city from one of the mansion's many balconies.

"About an hour," Brent replied.

"An hour?" Lady Kyle looked at the ogre in disbelief and wondered how she could feel so worried and afraid in such a heavenly place. "Surely the trial will go on for days as they read out the list of charges, dig up the life that he led before he came to Sigil. I mean, surely as a cambion he has done all manner of bad things that the archons will seek to punish him for."

"Under normal circumstances, I would agree my lady." The ogre explained calmly. "But these are not normal circumstances and lord Horacio is not really a cambion any longer."

"Even if he is not," she reasoned passionately. "That still does not excuse him from all the things that he has done."

"My lady," Brent said as he turned his back on the city. "All that you say is true, but unfortunately the

Multiverse is not a simple place that can be divided in to black and white, right and wrong. I have asked that Kaleliel give evidence on his behalf and explain that lord Horacio has cast off his fiendish nature."

"Sorry for interrupting," Otto said as he got up to join the discussion. "But I have yet to see many signs of lord Horacio actually trying to Rise. I mean, with all due respect, he still acts and says things that are less than pure and noble."

"Indeed, Otto that is also true - but you are labouring under the misconception that lord Horacio is trying to Rise."

"So what is he trying to do then?" Lady Kyle asked, getting more and more annoyed by the cryptic ogre.

"He is trying to achieve Balance," the ogre patiently explained. "He is trying to become neither Good nor Evil. Neither swayed by Law or by Chaos, but is instead taking the middle path. As the Githzerai like to put it: *Balance* in all things. Although even they do not comprehend the full meaning of this phrase."

"Aha!" Otto exclaimed. "I see it all clearly now. YOU are the one who is helping lord Horacio to achieve this. That explains so many things. You are unaffected by the planar energies, know far too much about the planes for an ogre and have subtly been manipulating everything around us since the start of the journey to make sure that lord Horacio completes walking the Great Road."

"Is it true?" lady Kyle asked as she looked at the ogre with newly opened eyes.

"Is what true?" the ogre responded.

"That you are one of the Rilmani," Otto said with complete confidence.

"Whether I am or not does not matter right now." Brent folded his big arms across his chest and turned to look back across the white heavenly city.

"Yes it does," lady Kyle insisted. "If you have been manipulating things from the start then I would like to know. In fact I have a great many questions to ask you."

The ogre responded by remaining silent.

"Well Brent," Otto said. "Aren't you going to answer the lady's question?"

"It is not important at the moment," the ogre stated enigmatically.

"Yes, it damn well is." Otto walked up to the ogre, grabbed him by the elbow and tried to turn him around. "You have a lot of questions to answer. Both mine and the lady's - probably many more from lord Horacio as well"

"I am not on trial here," Brent stated firmly. "Lord Horacio is facing trial."

For awhile the three of them stood facing off against each other on the balcony whilst the tiefling prince's trail was played out in a building across the road. After awhile lady Kyle went in to the house to get some food before coming out again to see Otto still brooding and the ogre still standing calmly.

"He's not going to answer our questions," lady Kyle said to the gnome diviner. "I think that this is as close to the truth as we are going to get and that is the end of it. There are something that we will never get the answers to. Such as who is The Lady of Pain, why did my father let me be taken on this journey and did that fairy princess really love you."

"Whilst I cannot answer you regarding the The Lady of Pain," the ogre said after what seemed like an eternity. "The reason why your father allowed you to be taken is because you are simply a pawn in his game. He likes to partake in the undeclared war taking place in Sigil called the Kriegstanz and although it pains me to say this my lady, you are not in fact his real daughter. He took you in off the streets and raised you as his daughter, making sure to erase any memories that you had as working as a light boy or your life before then. You are the only child that he has ever spared, but he still does bear a great deal of love for you."

Lady Kyle dropped her plate, cried out in shock and sat down in a daze. Otto rushed over to her and fanned her to make sure that she cooled down and remained calm. She cried for a long time with the gnome trying to comfort her by holding her. However, it was not until the ogre gently lifted her up and took her to one of the bed chambers that she felt safe and consoled. As he lay her down to rest, he smiled at her and she knew then that he had spoken the truth - and that she had the strength to go on with her life.

"So did the fairy princess really love me? What I mean is does she still love me and do I really love her?" Otto asked later on that night, despite his anger at the ogre.

"Absolutely," Brent replied with a great big assuring smile.

"Congratulations," lord Jertsend said as he shook lord Horacio's hand after the one hour trial had drawn to a close. "Whilst I cannot deny that I still have very strong ill will against you. It appears that you have not only won this battle but also the war."

"Oh," the tiefling prince raised his eyebrow in surprise. "How so?"

"It seems that some of the other lords in the Cage are not happy with the actions of the League." The dwarven nobleman explained as they walked away from the courthouse towards the mansion where Otto and the others were residing. "Word has spread about your journey, the bet that you and lord Redthorn placed and our attempts to stop you from succeeding. It appears that you either have friends in unusual places or there are those who would seek to use this situation to their advantage. Perhaps it is both."

"I would find it hard to believe that many could move against the Extraordinary League in our fair city."

"Fair city indeed," the dwarven nobleman said with a derisive laugh. "I for one shall not be going back there and will instead concentrate on rebuilding my empire. You would not believe the expense that it was taken to track you and try to capture you. However, I count myself lucky compared to some of the other members. Lord Ashmantle was encouraged to step in to a portal by Shemeshka the Marauder, the same portal that I believe that you stepped through to begin your journey."

"You don't mean the one in the Palace of the Jester," lord Horacio asked with an evil grin.

"Indeed I do," lord Jertsend answered grimly. "Zadara the titan is rumoured to be responsible for Lord Redthorn being arrested by the Harmonium and the Mercykillers are falling over themselves trying to hunt down lady Westcoat in the plane of Mechanus. It is said that the merchant lord Estavan has put quite a bounty on her head. Last I heard she had taken refuge with those strange creatures that look like women with glowing balls of light suspended in the backs of their heads. Do you remember what they are called?"

"I haven't a clue, dear boy." The tiefling prince replied. He had heard of such creatures and knew that they absorbed others to gain knowledge and make copies of themselves. He thought it a rather fitting end for a woman who had spent centuries living off the life-energy of others. "What about lord Gensen?"

"Oh him," the nobleman said as he scratched his beard. "It appears that he has left the City of Doors and has taken over leadership of a large city that roams Bytopia on the backs of giant beasts."

"Not the Roaming Herd?" lord Horacio asked, surprised at the news.

"Yes, that's the name of the place. Anyway, I must be on my way. Please give my regards to lady Kyle and I will not wish you good speed on your journey." The dwarven nobleman began to walk away but after a dozen paces he turned back to face the tiefling prince. "It's up to you if you wish to finish the challenge, but I don't really see the point. The League no longer exists and already people have stopped talking about the Challenge in the Cage. The latest rumours are regarding the reason why the modrons have started marching early and I'm sure that this will keep the touts and gossip-mongers earning a living for many months and years to come."

The dwarven nobleman did not bother waiting for lord Horacio's response and instead walked away to where his men were waiting. When the dwarf was out of sight two celestials appeared and escorted the tiefling prince to the mansion. After they had rested there for the night, the archons took them to a portal to Arcadia and escorted them across the plane in only a day. From there they entered the Outlands and crossed through the gate-town Automata in to the clock-work plane of Mechanus where laws govern everything and all happens with perfect precision. The archons bid them farewell and Brent led them through the modron labyrinth to a portal to Sigil.

"It feels like such an anti-climax," lady Kyle said as they entered the Cage.

"I know what you mean," Otto agreed.

"What in the Lady's name are you talking about?" lord Horacio asked in genuine surprise. "We have walked the Great Road in less gates and fewer days than anyone has ever done before. We have seen fiends, angels and all manner of creatures. Lands that are so beautiful that they steal your breath away and lands that make every step a challenge to complete. You have done what few will ever achieve in their lives and yet you feel as though it is an anti-climax?"

"Yes," both the gnome and half-elf replied.

"What about you, Brent?" the tiefling prince asked using the ogre's name for the first time ever. "Do you feel as if this is an anti-climactic end to our journey?"

"No Horacio I do not," the ogre replied without bothering to use any titles. "All this has simply been a

preparation for the adventure that it to come."

"Well," lord Horacio said. "Perhaps you are right about something after all. I shall miss calling you berk though. And I shall miss the company of my favourite diviner and of course you too lady Kyle."

"Why do you keep calling me your favourite diviner? I mean, how many have you employed?" Otto asked after the question it had been bothering him for too long.

"Just the one, dear boy." The tiefling prince replied with a smug smile. "Lady Kyle, what do you plan to do with your life? Would you like to come with me and Brent to explore the base of the Spire at the centre of the Outlands?"

"Thank you for the kind offer, lord Horacio. But much as I would like to see the mythical cities of the Rilamni, I have my adopted father's business to take over and my own life to lead. Who knows, perhaps I will put my efforts in to rescuing unfortunates who have suffered from the fall-out of the Blood War. That always seemed like a worthy goal to undertake and now I finally have the money, influence and maturity to dedicate to such a task as it deserves."

"What about you, dear Otto?"

"Thank you my lord," Otto said with a bow. "But much as I too would like to see how the Rilmani live, there is a fairy princess waiting for me in Arborea and I cannot resist her call any longer."

"Well in that case it's just you and me, Brent." The tiefling prince kissed the half-elven noblewoman farewell and hoisted the gnome off his feet in a farewell hug. He and Brent walked off to a nearby portal and stepped through in a flash of blue light.

"Do you think that we will see them again?" Otto asked with some regret at seeing them both depart.

"If this journey has taught me one thing Otto, it is that the Unity of Rings always bring you back to the place where you start from. You may be somewhat different and the place may also be somewhat changed. But we live in a Multiverse governed by the Unity of Rings, the Rule of Threes and the Centre of All."

"I have never understood the Centre of All," Otto confessed.

"Neither had I," lady Kyle said with a smile. "Until I had met Brent and witnessed lord Horacio's Transformation. Now I am finally beginning to glimpse at what the Centre of All really means."
