

19. Death and damnation

Karzer is leading Heiger and Atgar to a site significant in his clan's history, where he will perform a rite to name them as his lawful issue for inheritance purposes. Heiger intends to perform the same rite for Azer, for purposes both of raising him as his adopted father, and for passing the inheritance along. Lina has tagged along because she wants to participate in the rites, and Zantar has joined them for added security.



Heiger and Zantar kept wondering when they would see the platform on which the cremations were performed. The typical arrangement was to burn the bodies on a coarse screen through which the ashes would fall down and be collected, for potential use in familial or clan ceremonies as a way of connecting the living to their ancestors. The typical setting was a garden located near the ancestral family compound. There were no houses at all where they were hiking, which wasn't surprising since the hills though which they were traveling were carved with too many narrow, deep ravines to be usable real estate even by Homeworld standards.

The path they were on joined up with another one, and terminated at a non-descript grey metal door wedged into one of several clefts in the steep rocky slope in front of them.

"The thief goes over the wall..." announced Karzer with a bit of drama as he placed his hand several times, with several different configurations of his fingers, on a vaguely round contraption attached to the rocks by way of a short pedestal, "while the proprietor goes in through the gate." Lights began to swirl from somewhere inside the device. The words were a well-known passage from scripture. Zantar silently wondered if Karzer's habit of quoting scripture at seemingly mundane moments did not constitute profaning the sacred. The device chortled agreeably and the door opened automatically.

The precision of the fit of the door into its frame and the smoothness with which the door glided open on its well-balanced hinges were evidence of Lyrian craftsmanship. What struck Zantar as being rather

odd was its total lack of Lyrian design. The concept of utilitarianism was foreign; Lyrian culture was such that one tended to consider decoration as being part an integral part of the job. A Lyrian dad inspecting such work of his son would have shook his head and said “Poorly finished and never begun!”

Atgar pulled some glowsticks out from the bag he was carrying and handed them around. The party went in, and Karzer closed the door behind them, and then fiddled with a device he pulled out of his bag.

It was a remote control, something Zantar and Heiger realized when it seemed to make a row of dots light up along either side of a tunnel. They only seemed to serve to prevent someone from running into a wall, for they were too dim to light up the whole tunnel. The glowsticks didn't help much either, since their light was not focused.

“Why we path-lamps didn't bring?” asked Zantar irritably.

“We have one but we won't need it yet. Just follow the floor lights. The glow-sticks are sufficient to keep us from bumping around in the dark. If there's something thou really want to see or explore, we can either turn up the glow-sticks, or I'll pull out our path-lamp”, Karzer answered. “This way please”.

The tunnel was no more attractive than the entrance. The walls were dark grey with a slightly bumpy surface, and they were barely lit by the floor lights. The tunnel was roughly hemicylindrical in shape, and almost featureless except for the lights and arched supports ever roughly 3 paces.

Heiger grabbed Azer by the hand and pulled him close. Lina took his other arm, and Zantar with the other as they walked uneventfully down the tunnel for about 500 paces. After a while, Heiger started noticing that the tunnel was starting to look increasingly decrepit. Near the entrance, the walls were intact and no worse than dusty. As they progressed into the tunnel, they looked increasingly rough, dirty, and stained with mineral-laden water seeping in through cracks. Some of the lights along the floor were missing.

The strange part was that Lina, Atgar, Karzer, and even little Azer seemed perfectly nonchalant despite what seemed to him to be a dreadful place. It seemed to be an inauspicious place to keep the ancestral ashes.

A short time later Heiger stumbled into something in the dark and inadvertently sent it flying. His heart pounded hard at the sudden fright, but thankfully for his pride he was able to suppress his first instinct, which would have been to scream. Lina rushed over to where it sounded like the object landed, picked it up, and headed to the side of the tunnel with it.

“What was that?!” Heiger asked. She didn’t answer immediately, and he didn’t wait for the answer, but approached with his glow stick aimed at what she was holding in her hands.

For just an instant, she held it up to the light so that he could get a better look, then set it down where the wall of the tunnel met the floor.

It was a priestly skull. Most of it, anyway. One horn was broken off completely, and the tip of the other was missing.

“Sweet mother world!” Heiger exclaimed.

“Heiger! Please, show thy respect!” Lina scolded in a whisper. She held her glow stick to the skull as she pulled some things out of her bag. One was a candle, which she lit and placed next to the skull. The next item was a sacred-swampwort-blossom. The plants shed water and muck, and so they rose exquisitely undefiled despite the muddy environment in which they grew. Because of this property, and perhaps also their appealing fragrance, they were commonly associated with holiness. She placed the blossom next to the candle and the skull.

“Rest in peace, mother priestess,” Lina said solemnly.

Heiger wasn’t paying attention to the rite. Instead, he held his glow-stick low to the floor, near the wall. He ran his fingers over the litter until he stopped at something that looked suspicious. He picked it up. It was a bone. He could not tell if it was Lyrian or priestly. Lina noticed what he was up to, took his hand, and silently made him put the bone back down.

“What are those priestly bones doing here?” asked Zantar gruffly.

“Resting,” answered Karzer.

Zantar was tempted to press the question of how it could be that the ashes of Karzer’s ancestors could possibly be interred with priestly bones, but decided to keep quiet since there had to be an obvious

explanation for such a gross violation of protocol due the priestly people. He didn't want to sound ignorant to his know-it-all compadre.

Karzer gestured further into the tunnel. Heiger and Zantar collected their senses and kept moving.

A hundred more paces and the walls were lined with bones piled against the wall reasonably neatly. Some were Mordovian. A few were priestly. Most of them were Lyrian. Heiger and Zantar were both left wondering why the Lyrian bones had not been cremated.

The tunnel ended in a room that was too dark to make out in its entirety, but seemed to be fairly large. The head and torso portion of a skeleton lay just inside the door, head against the wall. Something about it registered in Heiger's subconscious. He looked closely at the vertebrae of the neck. There was a rough cord wound where the throat had been. The room was a total wreck, filled with mechanical-looking debris, a thick accumulation of dust, and what looked like at least the head and ribs of a Lyrian skeleton buried in dust that had neatly traced its form. From here on, the ceiling, walls, and the dust piled high on the floor and over the debris were not only devoid of color but also of any texture other than dust. Karzer walked boldly along one of the walls, until he came to a doorway and abruptly disappeared into it. Zantar followed, but was surprised when Karzer's arm caught him and held onto him.

"Mind your step, please. We're going down."

Zantar took the hint and grabbed hold of Karzer.

"Thou have got Azer, Heiger. I'll help Lina," said Atgar. Heiger picked Azer up around the waist and held him under his arm, which seemed like the most secure way. Azer made a grunting noise but didn't complain.

This room was in even worse condition. The ceiling appeared to have collapsed and machinery, cables, beams, and whatever else had fallen down from the rooms above were piled in the middle of the room. A skull poked out from the rubble along with a skeletal arm.

"What happened?" asked Zantar.

"Groundquake," answered Karzer.

"It looks like they didn't even bother to rescue trapped victims. Much less clean up the mess."

“The authorities said it was too dangerous. They closed this facility, and never got around to come back and clean up the mess.”

Zantar grunted.

He watched for Karzer’s next move. He wondered what Karzer was planning when he walked around the center of the debris and stopped at a dead-end. There was something significant, though: all the dust had been cleared away from the area.

He felt uneasy as Karzer got down on his hands and knees and started crawling towards a small gap in the debris. He was about to ask just how hard this expedition was going to be, when he considered that Lina was going on it as well. He had the feeling she had been here before, so it couldn’t have been too bad. In any case he didn’t want to sound like a sissy if Lina wasn’t complaining.

“Atgar, would thou be so kind as to bring up the rear?” asked Karzer casually.

“Yes, Sir,” answered Atgar.

When Zantar crawled into the gap he was relieved to discover that it mostly wasn’t too bad. Debris had obviously been cleared out to make a crawlspace with enough clearance to pass through reasonably comfortably. There was a lot of rusty metal, a building material that was porous, bumpy, and somewhere between concrete and fired clay in strength, and curved rods of a stiff, organic material used to reinforce the porous material. Zantar was already a little claustrophobic when he felt an unpleasant jerk. He felt a surge of adrenaline and was near panic.

“Let me help you, Uncle Zantar,” called Atgar from behind in a friendly tone of voice. “It looks like you just got snagged on a piece of reinforcing frame.”

Zantar stopped struggling, and with a certain amount of conscious effort, allowed himself to be unsnagged.

Up ahead, Karzer stopped for a moment. “Can all of you hear me?” he asked. Please follow the person in front of you closely, and watch the ledge to your right. Stay on the left. Atgar?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“Please assist Zantar. I’ll help Heiger, who has Azer. Lina, thou will be fine won’t thou?”

“Mmm...hm” answered Lina in sort of a pleasant little hum.

“Um, are thou sure?” asked Heiger worried. “Why would thou not need help if I do?”

“Because I know the way, Love,” she answered confidently.

One by one the members of the party crawled out of the tunnel and into not a room but just a space whose function was hard to guess at in its present condition, cluttered with wires, cables, and trash. There was not enough clearance to stand up so they lined up squatting behind Karzer, who was next to a hole even narrower than the tunnel they had just come out of.

Karzer got into his carrying sack and pulled out a rope. He tied several knots at regular intervals, then handed one end to Atgar, who tied it around his waist and held on to one of the knots. Karzer dropped the other end down the hole, and then went himself, slowly and methodically for not being particularly agile, feet first, hanging onto the rope.

Zantar was next, despite protests about the safety of Lina and Azer.

“Heiger, can thou take Azer?” Atgar asked. Heiger nodded nervously. Heiger had Azer put his arms tightly around his neck. He thought he might be able to spare a hand if anything went wrong. He was surprised at how calmly Azer clung to him as they went down. This was slow, but eventually he felt several hands helping him down and some voices encouraging him.

“Azer, thou can let go now,” chuckled his grandfather when they reached the bottom. Heiger helped him slide off.

Lina went down slowly but quite gracefully. She had superb concentration on what she was doing. Heiger watched nervously as he stood under her ready to catch her.

“Um, who’s going to hold the rope for Atgar?” he asked. “There doesn’t seem to be anything handy to tie the other end of the rope to”

“We’ll get him down,” answered Karzer reassuringly. “Now, if thou will please step over here, yes, that’s right. Now, please cup thy hands.”

Heiger did as he was told, and despite realizing what Karzer was up to was surprised when Karzer was actually standing on his shoulders a few seconds later. A few seconds more, and there was more pressure on his

shoulders, but it was bearable. Atgar must have been partly supporting himself.

“Heiger, please stand very still and very steady,” Karzer told him. A few seconds later, one set of feet was off his shoulders, and he was catching his father-by-marriage on the way down. Once on the floor, Karzer grabbed him to steady him and another set of feet landed on his shoulders from a short drop.

Heiger was still chuckling at the acrobatics when he turned around just as Karzer was turning up the glow-sticks to full intensity. He almost ran into three Lyrian skulls skewered by rods sticking up out of the floor. Two of the rods had loops of thick wire curling along their length. Heiger looked startled for a moment, and then looked around. Lina just inclined her head in the direction they needed to go. The only one somewhat reacting to the grisly totem was his own father, who opened his mouth, but then, with a frustrated look on his face, closed it again, squinted a little, and shook his head just slightly.

The room was huge; in the darkness only the nearest wall was evident. The ceiling roughly the height of 4 men had to be supported by columns roughly every 6 paces; they were 4-sided and undecorated, both of which facts suggested priestly taste. This room wasn't as colorless as the tunnels and rooms preceding it; it had a slightly reddish cast. There were roughly hundreds of pairs of cords hanging from the ceiling with pointed hooks attached to the ends, of roughly the size and shape used to hook meat. Some had matching pairs lying on the floor below, while others, connected to a track on the ceiling, did not. The track led to a firepit in the middle of the room, with a few metal rods still sitting in it as they had been when they were last heated, on top of a bed of coal and ashes. Some of the rods had a clasp on one end about as big around as one could encircle both of one's hands. Others had cuplike ends, that looked as though they were used to handle something molten from a safe distance. In the midst of the firepit were several cauldrons.

There were other tools at regular intervals around room. Several of them looked like vices. One looked like a grain mill, with grinding wheels set close together so that anything rolled between them would be crushed. Another appeared to have something to do with forcing an

object through the middle of a curved blade, like a giant fruit-coring machine.

Karzer lead the way to one end of the room...which seemed to contain another pit. At least this time someone had conveniently left a ladder. As the group followed Karzer, Heiger shuddered as Lina bumped into one of the meathooks. Luckily time and oxidation had rendered its tip too dull to rip into her flesh.

He began to feel dizzy and claustrophobic. They were somewhere deep underground, he imagined. On a planet with frequent groundquakes. And they were headed still deeper.

“Almost there. This is our destination at the bottom of the ladder,” said Karzer reassuringly. The group approached the pit and quietly descended one by one. Azer said that he could handle the ladder—and had done so before. Heiger insisted on going down first so he could catch him—or Lina—if necessary.

A few seconds after Heiger disappeared, the rest of the party heard a sudden shriek of fright. Then two excited voices, one Heiger’s and one belonging to an unseen man, both trying to make sense of what had just happened.

“Grampa! Grampa!” squealed Azer excitedly. Azer hurried down the ladder, and shortly thereafter the man who was apparently “Grampa” was heard protesting, in a tone of voice that sounded like mock indignation, “Stop that! What is the meaning of this? My pockets are empty! Alright, alright! Thy treat is in my pod—obviously I wouldn’t bring it down here silly boy!” He was stocky with a bit of a paunch, had tan skin and dark reddish-brown hair the color of a nicely-finished exotic wood except where the beard and sideburns were graying. He was impeccably groomed, dressed in fine ceremonial clothes, and spoke a dialect associated with the original inhabitants of Serinand City with a crisp upper-caste accent. He picked up Azer, who grabbed him around the neck, and made a gesture that meant “hush” while harshly knitting his thick, bushy eyebrows. Azer obeyed, but retained an eager grin and an expectant wide-eyed look.

While this was going on, the rest of the party had continued climbing down the ladder one by one. Lina laughed as her first father-by-marriage grabbed her and gave her a hug and a kiss.

“What an unexpected pleasure!” she exclaimed. “Why didn’t thou tell us thou would be here?”

“Because I didn’t know the opportunity would occur until it was too late and you were incommunicado,” he answered.

“Well, then, to what do we owe our good luck?” she asked with a smile.

“To my patient dying,” he answered matter-of-factly.

Lina suddenly held her hand up to her mouth. “Oh! I wasn’t thinking...so sorry!” she said, embarrassed.

He closed his eyes and shook his head. “The old girl had seen over a thousand moons come and go,” he said firmly. “She cleaned up her house after a big party that she had invited her family and friends to, went to bed, and never woke up. I dare say she planned it that way.”

Grandpa then turned his attention to Heiger. “You there, young man, are you the one who is adopting my grandson at this ceremony?”

Heiger nodded. “Um, yes, Sir. You must be Sakhner’s father?”

“Indeed I am. My name is Dakhnar. And you must be Heiger. Come here, dear boy, and let me have a look at you.”

Heiger obeyed. He got the impression that Dakhnar had meant what he said quite literally, for he was indeed looking him over, his eyes paused over his one piece of clan jewelry, of a very humble make, and then again as he looked him rather intensely in the face. Satisfied, he gave him a few friendly paternal pats as he put his arm around his shoulder.

“Young man, my son, whose legacy is a blessing to us all, is unable to finish the job of raising this boy. We’re putting you in charge now. Can you handle that?”

“Yes, Sir!” answered Heiger grinning.

“Well then, see that you teach this greedy little rascal to behave himself!” he commanded sternly.

Heiger looked at Azer. “Azer, how do we greet Grandpa when we meet him?”

Azer looked back with feigned innocence and said nothing.

“Azer, thou have to answer the question. There won’t be any treats or any fun until thou tell me how we greet Grandpa when we meet him.”

Azer blushed and buried his head into his Grampa’s chest. He felt a strong hand grasp his shoulder, gently reminding him that his interrogator was not giving up. Finally he turned around, grinning, and said “We check his pockets for treats!”

Azer was disappointed that this did not have the intended effect of provoking the adults to laugh the incident off. In fact, his mother’s eyes flashed threateningly. Heiger made a signal to her that meant “I’m handling this”, then he turned to Azer, closed his eyes and shook his head doubtfully, as he had seen Karzer do so many times. “No, that’s not right, is it? I guess we’re going to be here a long time waiting for the right answer. If getting treats makes thee greedy and ungrateful, then we’re going to have to...”

Azer didn’t like where that sentence was going, so before Heiger could finish it he sighed and gave in. “I’m supposed to say ‘Respectful greetings, beloved Grandfather’.”

Dakhnar gave a furtive wink to Heiger, then an encouraging gesture that meant “go on”. Heiger took the hint and prodded some more. “That’s very good Azer, but what else are thou supposed to ask?”

Azer looked back, this time with genuine innocence. “What else? I don’t know!”

“Thou are supposed to inquire about his well-being. Now that thou know what to say, thou can say it.”

“But I haven’t just met him. We’ve been talking for several minutes!” Azer answered.

“If thou mean that thou should have greeted him properly earlier, and are late doing so now, that’s true. But the way that we learn to do what we ought to do is by practicing it. So go ahead and greet Grandpa properly”.

Azer sighed again, but actually looked his grandfather straight in the eyes as he gave a formal greeting in the High Speech, and then inquired about his health.

Smiles and chuckles broke out all around, except on Azer's face, which was flushed with red and quickly buried in his paternal grandfather's chest again.

This was a small pit, like a well but wide enough for the whole party to stand comfortably at the bottom of it. It was furnished with little tables, lights, and even a tiny shrine. The ground was covered in coarse mineral ash with a few bone fragments, to a depth that was impossible to guess. There were bones piled as neatly as possible along the wall. Zantar and Dakhnar, holding Azer, took their places off the center of the pit, leaving enough room for the guests of honor in the middle of the chamber to kneel, facing each other but heads bowed, and leaving clearance around the edge of the pit.

Karzer put out the lights. There were several minutes of such silence and darkness as one experiences in a cave or mine with the lights out. Then as a single tiny flame began flickering somewhere in the space, Karzer began singing the liturgy.

It was in the Ancient High Speech. Heiger couldn't understand it, but Karzer had taught him the words and what they meant. Heiger simply looked at the ground under his knees, but he began to notice movement in his peripheral vision. Lina was dancing around the perimeter of the room, and as he noticed her she began singing too, but a different tune and different words than Karzer's that created a counterpoint melody. Every now and then she would place a flower next to the piles of bones, sometimes stopping for just an instant to lovingly caress them with her hands.

First his body was washed in a cold draft. He felt his identity being blown away, and nothing was left except existence without beginning or end. There were hundreds of billions of hundreds of billions of stars. Worlds were silently born and died. Time began and he woke up on a world and slithered out of its seas. Eons later he cried out in terror through trillions of mouths as its atmosphere was violently disturbed with an incandescent flash, and then he watched his doom approach

through trillions of eyes, as the shockwave smashed everything in its path and hurled the debris grinding against itself, and then nothing.

Naked except for her necklace of human bones, Lina's body was breathtakingly beautiful and hideous. When he saw her the next time around, she was carrying the skull of one of her ancestresses. The next time around it was Lina's skull and her granddaughter's granddaughter was dancing with it. Panic. Terror. Searing pain. Nowhere to run; every house crumbled and its inhabitants crushed. Seas churning violently, and rivers knocked out of their banks. Blood everywhere. Karzer poured the contents of the skull over his sons-by-marriage. Heiger felt a warm fluid tricking down his skin in several streams.

A small amount of a fragrant, volatile fluid was poured on the ground and ignited. The gates of hell opened up under his feet, and he fell. Flesh burst into flames like dry leaves. Hell's fury rushed past the gates and set upon every kind of creature. The forests burst into flames and every kind of beast cried out in panic and agony.

He awoke to a shattered world covered in debris and ashes. He felt the ashes of some of Karzer's ancestors sifting past his body, some of them clinging to his still-wet skin. He felt Karzer's fingers touching his forehead as he pronounced the words of dedication.

Atgar and Heiger got up, and Atgar took a place off the center of the pit, while Heiger took Azer from Dakhnar and put him in the center of the pit. The ceremony was repeated, but this time it was Heiger singing the liturgy and performing the rite in somewhat accented Ancient High Speech. It ended with Heiger pronouncing the words to dedicate Azer's life.

The sacred portion of the rite concluded, Heiger asked for a small bag from his rucksack. He opened it up and pulled out a small armband, which he put on Azer. It did not have any clan markings on it, but instead two symbols that implied that it was a gift from one person to

another. The two symbols represented the personal message conveyed by the gift. It was made of gold, was exquisitely crafted, and was decorated in Northlands style with intertwining dragon-blossom vines with their blossoms and thorns in relief. Zantar silently wondered where Heiger got the money to pay for it. Once the band was on, Heiger dressed Azer in new clothing. Dakhnar walked over to Heiger and without asking that the gift be accepted, attached to his body two armbands, and a legband for holding ritual weapons. One armband bore Dakhnar's clan-symbol, the other Karzer's. The legband had some personal symbols on it. "These were my son's. Now they're yours. See that you pass them along to Azer with honor." Karzer put new clan-jewelry onto Atgar. Finally Heiger and Atgar accepted new clothes from Karzer that had his clan-pattern embroidered on them. He wondered why the clan-symbol of his own birth-clan was missing, but then figured that his mother didn't embroider and his parents didn't have the money to hire someone. There was a round of hugs. Heiger felt a lump in his throat as he embraced his own father...and felt a tear on his father's cheek. He was surprised when Dakhnar also gave him a hug...and also had a tear. Azer had profuse tears, but he didn't sob. Heiger realized what he was thinking and nodded to him meaningfully. No tears from Karzer, Atgar, or Lina. In fact, Lina was beaming, even as she casually comforted Azer, who recovered quickly from the sad thoughts.

The old clothing was bundled up and given along with one small piece of clan-jewelry to Zantar, to be given to another member of the clan.

Everything else that was to be taken with them was packed up again, and the pit was tidied up. Each person in the party started up the ladder again in turn. When everyone was out of the pit, Dakhnar walked over to a spot just off the center of the room, pulled out a small remote-control, keyed in a command code, and announced "Everyone stay back please. The carriage is coming down."

"Carriage?" asked Zantar suspiciously.

Dakhnar turned around and addressed Karzer. “Karzer old boy, thou didn’t take them the long way did thou?”

“I did,” was the answer, “it’s all part of the experience.”

“Ah, well, I’m a bit out-of-shape to be scrambling through the ruins. Thou don’t mind if we take the easy way?”

“Easy way?” muttered Zantar under his breath.

“I don’t. They’ve already seen what they needed to see,” Karzer answered Dakhnar. “Besides, the easy way out will get us where we need to be for the sunrise ceremony.”

“Excellent, excellent,” said Dakhnar as the carriage stopped next to him and its doors opened. “Please, dear friends, after you,” he said, bowing his head slightly and graciously gesturing towards the compartment with his open hand.

Zantar and Heiger both guessed that Dakhnar was in fact the highest-ranking person present. Nevertheless, Azer was the first person Karzer put into the compartment, and so naturally Heiger darted in after him to keep him out of mischief. Then Lina took Zantar’s arm and lead him into the compartment. He let go, got in, then offered his arm to her again to help her up. Atgar got in next, and he helped Karzer up. It seemed as if etiquette had been completely backwards, a fact not lost on Zantar.

“I’ll stay here and come up on the next trip,” said Dakhnar.

“Don’t trouble thyself, friend” answered Karzer, “There’s plenty of spare weight capacity so we’ll be fine.”

Dakhnar’s face fell slightly. He did not want to draw attention to certain inconveniences...and so as discretely as possible he sucked in his gut and got into the compartment. Instead of turning around to face the door, he let it close behind his back as he faced Karzer and started chatting away very casually as if nothing was wrong.

The carriage lifted slowly and smoothly. As part of the machinery for a complex far from help, it was built for reliability. Its windows went dark as entered a hole in the ceiling and kept going up some distance thereafter. It was hard to tell when it had stopped, and for a while it seemed as though they were stuck. But finally the fact that they had arrived at their destination was announced in a chime-code used to communicate mechanical events, and the door opened.

Dakhnar worked his remote control and some dim lights came on. Even in the subdued light it was plain that they had entered a different world. It was clean and comfortable-looking. There was plenty of noticeable damage, such as broken window-panes and cracks in the wall and floor, but it wasn't littered with wreckage and debris like the lower levels, and everything had a finished look to it.

They were in an oddly-shaped room with a circular floor and sides that flared out, like an all-the-way-around amphitheatre. At regular intervals there were windows in the sides of the room, at an angle, that looked out over the room down below. Between the windows were footholds and rails, which was what priestly dwellings provided for getting between floors of a building, in lieu of the ramps Lyrians used.

Dakhnar worked his remote control again to turn out the lights in the room below. He gestured towards the footholds, and the party made their way out of the room they were in.

Dakhnar must have had a sense of drama, for he turned on some powerful uplights just as Heiger and Zantar reached the top. They lit up the massive structures overhead. One was the vaulted ceiling supported on diagonal beams that went from the floor where they curved ever so slightly, up to the center of the ceiling where they met ram-rod straight. The closer structure was sculptural in quality, but with its flowing curves that seemed to defy the idea of stone it presumably represented something organic. It was monolithic and carved out of a pinkish stone. On the base of it which was close enough to see the detail, they could just make out that the stone was not uniformly colored, but had a fine pattern on it that created the illusion of a bit of texture on its polished surface. It was broad and more-or-less elliptical at the base, then curved and tapered towards the free end, which was rounded at the tip. It looked a bit like a curved tongue sticking out, except for odd-looking fin-like projections snaking out here and there.

Zantar looked at it rather intensely, with a definitely puzzled look on his face. "Karzer, that thing to me will thou please explain?"

"I think Dakhnar can explain it better than I can," suggested Karzer.

"Ah, yes? Well that, my friend, signifies the presence of the priestly deity, Shifels," Dakhnar explained. "This is a very ancient structure, my

friend, and at the time it was built, this very, ah, monument would have been considered not just a symbol but the actual presence of Shifels.”

Zantar looked up again, this time his focus went further, to the ceiling. He stared for a number of seconds. He started shouting as soon as the realization hit him. “Sweet mother world, we’re inside the temple!” His voice echoed against the hard surfaces of the vault.

He looked livid. His son only looked surprised, and perhaps a bit frightened.

“Please calm yourselves, friends,” said Dakhnar smoothly. “This temple was decommissioned centuries ago. If the priests had any objections about our being here they wouldn’t have sold it to Karzer now, would they?”

Karzer turned to him and nodded. “Yes, I own it now. Because of the damage it isn’t in usable condition, and even if it were there aren’t enough priests left in this region to make it worth their while. It can’t be torn down without a significant expense to handle the demolition in accordance with priestly law. The local municipality started levying taxes on it and so it was nothing but a drain on the priestly agency that owned it. To avoid any more expense for something they had no interest in, they gifted it to the local municipality, with the suggestion of turning it into a museum. The municipality sold it to me for the price of paying back taxes, and I have turned it into a private museum. The priests have expressed their satisfaction with this arrangement.”

Both Karzer and Dakhnar had the sense not to inform Zantar that he was desecrating the holy of holies by standing much too close to it.

“We’d better hurry to make the sunrise, don’t you think?” asked Dakhnar. “This way, please.” He walked briskly towards the base of one of the beams that supported the ceiling. Azer must have realized what was next, because he hurried to catch up with his paternal grandfather as he went around to the far side of the beam. Dakhnar beckoned the rest of the party to stand close, and then he activated another mechanism with his remote control. A handrail lifted right up off the floor and stopped at about waist level, surrounding them. Then the platform they were standing on, which up until then had looked like part of the floor, began climbing up the beam like a funicular tram. The handrail would have

been useless to protect children, who could walk right under it and fall to their death, but then no one but adult priests were ever expected to use the tram to reach the base of the temple. Azer had far too much sense to wander off the edge, but Lina and Heiger both held onto him a bit nervously. As they passed by the levels inside the pyramid that corresponded to the setbacks on the outside, they could see that the interior of the pyramid was not one room but many, the one in the middle merely being by far the largest, although some of the larger rooms were bigger than the extended-family halls of the old Northlands. This was not only a place of worship, but an entire temple complex with communion halls, schools, libraries, and courts of law.

“Most of the furnishings of the temple were salvaged before it was abandoned,” said Karzer, apparently speaking to Dakhnar, but not necessarily exclusively so. “However, I did find some student study-scrolls left in one of the classrooms, and some miscellaneous scrolls that had been overlooked in a storage-room in the library.”

“Interesting,” said Dakhnar. “If I had time...” He didn’t finish the sentence.

“Yes, I know, thou are a busy man, my friend. “

Upon reaching the top of the 4 main beams, where they intersected, they headed for one of several staircases that went up, through a hole in the roof, to the top of the pyramid. It was all open; when the temple was in use, the outermost gates of the temple had been in the village itself, the road between village and temple was private and walled, and there were multiple redundant gates along the way to control traffic in and out of the temple complex. There would also have been priests on the terrace on top of the pyramid, and others circulating around the base.

The lordly 320 degree view of the valley and mountains was the best they had seen so far. They walked up to the gate that was aligned in the general direction from which the suns rose, joined hands, and began the rite. Dakhnar officiated. In an old dialect of his ancestors that was still retained for liturgy, he chanted thanks for the rescue of his grandson and daughter-by-marriage, thanks for a new leader to step forward to help raise his grandson, and, just as the two brightest of the Homeworld’s suns peeked over the horizon within a few minutes of each

other, and joined the 3rd for a gloriously bright morning, he gave thanks for old friends both living and departed, and new ones.

The snow on the higher peaks reflected the pink light of dawn. The members of the party observed silence for several minutes as their faces reflected the warm glow in the gathering suns. Zantar, to his credit, kept his peace through the end of the rite.

The Northlands dialect was probably the most ineffective language on the planet for swearing, lacking “forbidden” words, but within seconds of the conclusion of the rite, Zantar was making the most of it, supplemented with words from the Common Speech where necessary.

“Ye damnable ones! Ye nothing but criminals in fine raiment are! Sons of no-good jailbirds ye are, and thou, bastard son of Lashkner’s harlot, the worst of the lot! Profaners and thieves, all of ye! What have I done? Thou bastard, thou no son of mine art!” The last sentence seemed to be directed at Heiger, who was stunned, taken completely by surprise by this outburst.

“What have I done, thou unwanted bastard! I me wretched self off these walls should throw...”

He got no further than turning towards the nearest ledge. Atgar who was no more than two steps away, grabbed him and tackled him. Then Heiger got into the fray. “Don’t hurt him! I’m sorry he said those things but don’t hurt him!” Then Karzer got involved trying to pull Heiger off. Zantar gave a yelp of pain and then went limp.

“Get off! Nobody’s trying to hurt thy father...but I think he did get hurt...” Karzer yelled to Heiger. For a few more seconds nobody moved, but then Heiger yielded as Karzer pulled him off Atgar.

“He threatened to jump off the terrace...it’s a long way down...we are not going to allow him to harm himself. But I think he did get hurt when thou jumped on Atgar.” Atgar, for his part, was still holding Zantar down, but loosened his grip. Zantar was apparently helpless at the moment as he lay whimpering pathetically. Lina walked over and crouched by Zantar’s distraught face, which was red and damp with tears and sweat. She gave him a sad look and stroked his cheek.

Up to this point, Dakhnar had been standing well outside of the action zone. Azer had been hiding timidly behind him. Now that it was over, he walked casually over to Atgar and Zantar. Crouching down, he said "Let's have a look."

"Sons of harlots, your hands off me get!" Zantar huffed in lieu of shouting, which apparently hurt. Atgar ignored his protests as he continued untying Zantar's shirt and then gently lifting it out of the way, but Karzer decided to step out of the situation. Zantar seemed to be oblivious to Lina, neither directing his anger at her nor showing any appreciation for her sympathy. At some point Azer must have thought it was safe to investigate what was happening. He came and stood behind his mother.

"Don't give me any trouble, old boy. I'm here to help you. Tell me where it hurts, please" ordered *Doctor* Dakhnar as he began poking around. Zantar said nothing until he cursed when Dakhnar touched the right spot. ". Hmm...rib. I don't think it's broken; more likely cracked and the area over it bruised. Let's get you to your home so that I can have a closer look and you can get some rest."

"We'll need to get him off the temple," said Atgar. "What's the safest way for us to do that?"

Dakhnar looked at Zantar and asked him if he thought he could stand. Zantar didn't reply at first, and just looked distressed, but eventually he nodded. Atgar motioned to Heiger and mouthed something. Heiger took the hint, and he and Lina helped Zantar to his feet. Atgar hovered very close.

"Will you walk down the steps with us?" asked Atgar.

"Alone me let," answered Zantar.

"The sooner we get you down from here, the sooner you'll get relief. But I need to know that you're not going to do anything rash."

Zantar nodded, which meant "yes, I'm not going to do anything rash", which was the proper way to agree with a question stated in the negative. "Just your hands off me keep," he said in a contemptuous tone of voice.

"I won't touch you if you don't give me a reason to. Do we have an understanding?" asked Atgar.

Zantar nodded.

“Whom will you allow to help you?”

Zantar didn't answer. He just looked down.

“Will you let Heiger help you down?”

Zantar nodded slightly.

Heiger stood at his father's side and took his arm.

“What about Lina?”

Zantar didn't answer, but Lina didn't wait for one. She took his other side. He didn't react. Azer tried to follow his mother but Karzer held him back.

Dakhnar took out his remote control again, touched some controls, and sections of the side of the pyramid rotated until they formed steps. It was an awkward journey down the temple with no one in the mood to talk. At least Zantar didn't make any more trouble; he was too broken at the moment to resist, but they had to stop several times as he stopped, dropped to his knees, and began sobbing. At all times Atgar followed closely behind him, ready to pounce again.

Dakhnar's pod was secured on the base of the pyramid. Its blue-grey finish was so sleek one had the desire to run one's hand over it. It was built in the factories of the town in the Forest of Dreams, a town famous for its precision craftsmanship. Heiger felt heartsick to have the privilege of associating with someone who owned such a beautiful machine, but under such inauspicious circumstances. Dakhnar worked his remote control to fold away the staircase, and then worked his remote control again, causing the doors of his pod to swing up and open on both sides. Dakhnar gestured towards the seat he wanted Zantar to occupy and said “Please.” Zantar looked nervous and hesitated.

“It's a long walk back to the village and you won't like the service there. We can be in Mirsand in under 30 minutes. We stop there briefly. You're a Northlander are you not?”

Zantar nodded.

“We can be at the gates of the Northlands in about 2 hours after Mirsand.” His pod was fast, and there were no such things as “speed limits”.

Zantar hesitantly got into the passenger seat.

Lina headed towards the pod. Karzer stopped her. A seemingly tense conversation broke out, but neither Heiger nor Zantar could understand it because it was in an unfamiliar language. It seemed to Heiger that Lina was arguing with her father—something he had never witnessed before. It ended quickly, and Atgar squeezed into the pod next to Zantar, while Dakhnar stood at the door on the driver's side, working his way into the driver's seat. Like almost all pods it was built for only two. Once his door was closed and Zantar was trapped, Atgar patiently repositioned him so that he wouldn't be squashed between a portly man and a big muscular one.

"As a precaution, Atgar will escort thy father home. He's highly capable, which is why I'm sending him," Karzer whispered to Heiger. "Thy father will be taken care of."

Dakhnar was fussing with something, and then reached an arm out of the pod with a package. "Azer, Grandma told me to give this to thee."

Azer walked over, solemnly accepted the package from his grandfather while giving the proper thanks, and then ran over to the other side of the pod, and thrust it into the window in the direction of Zantar, who was completely oblivious to him.

Atgar took the package, winked at Azer, and whispered, "I'll see that he gets it."

Heiger looked stunned and confused. He walked away from the pod and sat down on the ground at the very base of the pyramid, holding his head in his hands, and staring down at the ground. Lina was still occupied with the pod discussing something with its occupants, but Karzer, who stood back a ways from the pod, was quick to notice Heiger's reaction to the whole business. He walked over and sat next to Heiger.

"I don't understand," Heiger muttered.

"Thy father is having a nervous breakdown," explained Karzer. "He's not been happy for a while now. Thou realize, don't thou, that thy parents never approved of thy wedding?"

Heiger sighed. "No, although I was suspicious that something was wrong. But I thought my father likes Lina."

"He does. I'm the one he has something against. He told me as much in private. Neither he nor thy mother approve of thy marrying into my

clan, especially not with me as clan-leader. Nor did they think thou were old enough to marry. However, since thou were old enough to sire a son, I made it very clear to them that I do and that my opinion counts.”

“Why did they give their blessings?”

“Desperation and pressure from others. Although thy clan-leader wasn’t happy with the marriage either, he assumed that thou would never otherwise be able to afford marriage, would never have heirs, and would never be anything but a financial liability to the clan.”

Heiger turned to face Karzer.

“Please excuse my bluntness; I’m taking the liberty of informing on thy clan because thou need to know so that thou can cope with this incident. Thy father is angry at me for giving thy clan-leader an opportunity to get rid of thee, and temporarily at thee because he blames thee for the situation.”

A question formed in Heiger’s head that he dared not ask even though it burned in his heart, because he feared hearing the answer.

“No need to look so forlorn,” said Karzer, “Thou are not abandoned. Thou are a member of my clan now. I understand why thou would be upset at thy father’s outburst, but thou must at least accept what has happened, and willing to help us sort it out. Thou might even be grateful that thou have a roof to live under and a family to look out for thee.”

“What thy father saw today was more than he could endure in his present state of mind. He took it worse than I expected. I’m sorry.”

“I too am troubled by what I saw today,” Heiger muttered.

“Are thou going to give us trouble too?” asked Karzer.

Heiger shook his head.

“Good,” said Karzer. “Because that wouldn’t help matters. Don’t imagine problems into existence. Stay focused on what thou know needs to be done.”

Lina walked over before Karzer finished talking, looking as if she had something important to say, but Karzer started talking again before she had the chance. “Thou have a clean start, which, to be blunt, is a favor to thee. Once in my life I had to start all over from nothing, and I was on my own. I worked it out.”

“But *thou* are not alone!” Lina reassured Heiger. She gave him a kiss which he did not return; he felt too guilty, as if he had not earned it. Lina turned to her father and said, “We’d better get over to the pod to give our parting blessings.”

The three hurried over to the pod. Karzer said something to Atgar in the mystery language and Atgar nodded his agreement. “God’s love will go with you”, he added hastily in accented Common Speech before backing away. It was the first time Heiger had ever heard him use the dialect. He poked his own head into the pod, oblivious to Atgar, and for lack of words, gave his father a peck on the cheek. Then he turned to Atgar and asked “Would thou be able to let me know when you arrive at his house?”

Using “his” instead of “our” was not lost on Zantar, but he remained passive and motionless except for his slightly agonized breathing.

Atgar nodded confidently and said “Sure. Don’t worry; I’ll see that he’s OK.”

Heiger nodded and pulled his head out of the pod.

“I’ll see to his injuries. All right then, we’re ready to go...” said Dakhnar.

“God’s love will go with you,” Lina slowly pronounced to the occupants of the pod as she stroked Zantar’s face. “It’s healing power surrounds you, penetrates you, and comforts you.” She repeated the benediction in accented Northlands. This time he looked back, doleful and teary-eyed. She got a peck on the cheek from Atgar before withdrawing.

Zantar looked out the window of the pod. He spotted Karzer—cowering, so he thought—behind the others. “Son of Lashkner”, he called.

Karzer stepped up to the pod and faced Zantar.

“Thy accursed ancestors in the pokey for what were?”

With a cool silkiness and casual smirk that Heiger found unnerving, Karzer answered, “Blasphemy”.