

**VOYAGER 15
SNEAK PEEK**

**SAMIHA'S SONG
CHRONICLES OF THE TREE BOOK TWO
MARY VICTORIA**

Prologue

‘Kill the witch!’

The crowd waited for her. She could hear its faraway voice, a hundred mouths speaking as one. The sound echoed surprisingly loudly over the city though the docks were some distance away. It faded as the breeze changed direction. The young woman listened a moment. She sat on a stool in a tiny, windowless room, at a table littered with scraps of paper. The candle by her elbow provided the only light. A draught caught the flame, causing it to gutter. Carefully she shielded it with her hand until it grew bright. Then she turned her attention to the paper, dipped a pen in an inkwell and wrote.

I used to know who I was. I was the twelfth Kion, the Chained One, the last Nurian sovereign before the End Times. My fate had been foretold by Grafters down the ages. I would be captured by my enemies and put to death. After my passing, the old world would be consumed and a new one grow up out of the ashes...

‘Kill the sorceress!’

She did not heed the angry cry from the air-harbour. A single voice led the pack. The crowd took up the words with bleating conformity. She continued to write, bending close to the paper, urgent. There was not much time left.

Now, I am not so sure. Now I wonder. Who is this woman who is so eager to embrace death? Am I only that cipher of destiny marched onto a dusty stage to perform her role,

deliver her lines and make way for more important players? Or am I the deluded fool the Argosian priests describe, half mad and living out the lies drummed into her by a dangerous sect? Neither option permits much in the way of personal thought. Neither allows for a mind, a heart, a soul.

‘Death to the whore of Nur!’

The morning hours had already slipped away. It would not be long before the soldiers came for her. She wrote furiously, a slight frown wrinkling her forehead, pale and freckled in the candlelight. They would come and she would not be ready.

I refuse to be either a heretic or a martyr. I will not play their game. Though I stand by my beliefs, I would not have anyone think I died willingly. Nor am I as convinced as I once was that when change comes —for it will come — it will be the familiar, satisfying mix of reward and retribution we Nurians expect.

It will be uncomfortable, unsatisfying for everyone, as compromise generally is.

I rely on you, Tymon, to tell my story as it was, without embellishment. I am not a hero. I am not a martyr. Mine is a tale of failure, written in the language of defeat, the language of the conquerors. Only my name, Samiha, survives in the original. The people here mispronounce it. In any case the name and the person will soon be rubbed out. I go now to my execution. But I do not begrudge them this final payment. I do not ask for retribution.

The woman’s eyes darted away from the page as bolts rattled in a trapdoor on the floor of the room. A man’s shape — an Argosian, a soldier — rose up against a background of torchlight.

‘Out,’ he growled, and withdrew.

She did not comply immediately, bent over her copy. Her hand clutching the pen moved across the paper of its own accord. She could not stop writing. The red-brown ink spilled from the end of the reed like a trail of dried blood.

Remember, my love. There is no triumph without loss, no power without weakness. My life has been the exact opposite of a hero's. A hero spends his time fighting for victory and making his mark on the world. I fall, and fail, and will be forgotten, at least for a while. If you wish to see me again, do not fear darkness and defeat. Do not fear Loss. If you can do that — if you can unbind yourself from wanting and winning — then we will meet again at the heart of the world, where all divisions cease.

‘Samiha.’

A voice called to her, summoned her, though the soldier was no longer visible. The sound did not come from the square of torchlight but from somewhere near the ropes that dangled through a small aperture in the ceiling. It whispered through cracks in the walls with the breeze. It was a joyous voice, a resonant, free voice. It did not send her to her death but called her home.

‘I know you,’ she murmured. She looked up, both puzzled and happy.

And woke up.

Woke up on an open-air sleeping platform in the high, bare twigs of the Eastern Canopy. She was home. Around her on mattresses and in sleep-sacks stretched the slumbering forms of the Freeholders who shared the communal platform. She pushed aside her blankets and sat up in her shift, freeing the strands of sweat-tangled hair at the nape of her neck. Slowly, her heartbeat returned to normal.

‘Was it the dream again?’

She turned to see her love peering drowsily at her over the rim of his own sack a few paces away. There he was, the perfect antidote to a martyr's hopes. Her Tymon. He sat up in the rumpled bedding, blinking in the moonlight.

‘Yes.’ She sighed. ‘It keeps coming back. I'm up there in that high place without windows ... they're about to take me to my execution. The same thing every night since we

signed the peace treaty. I can't help wondering ...'

'It's not the Sight, Samiha.'

He reached out and caught her by the elbow, quick as a Tree-snake. He pulled her playfully towards him even as she protested under her breath, glancing anxiously about them at the other sleepers.

'Marry me,' he whispered. 'I promise you'll stop dreaming and start living.'

'You know I can't marry you,' she hissed. 'Not in the sense you mean, anyway.'

'Why not? It's not like I'm asking you to play house or cook for me when I get home. We could have a temporary marriage just to try things out. Go on, say yes.'

'A night-marriage?' She gave a soft snort of derision. 'How touching. We'll live together in provisional bliss, as possible soul mates, till death doesn't us part.'

'Alright, so anything you want,' he persisted. 'I just thought you'd like the freedom.'

'You think you're free. I know I have to wait.'

'Nonsense.' He drew her towards him again. 'You told me yourself, the Kion chooses her own mate. No one interferes. What reason could there possibly be to wait?'

'You're forgetting the prophecy,' she answered, quietly.

He had been about to kiss her, then. But her reply caused him to tense and jerk back as if stung.

'That's not a valid reason,' he muttered, in irritation. 'We've talked about this, Samiha. The tradition's disputed. The fact that you dream about it isn't proof — just the opposite. The only thing it proves is that you're obsessed with this notion of dying for your people.'

'What if you're wrong?' she countered, low and urgent. 'What if the twelfth Kion is destined to be put on trial? You'd be marrying a dead woman, Tymon.'

He sighed in exasperation and locked his arms about her again.

‘You don’t seem very dead to me,’ he murmured. ‘You aren’t a Grafter. The Focals told you that. The dream isn’t a prophecy, just a nightmare.’

She relaxed at last, leaning against him. ‘I know. It just feels so real.’

‘Does this feel real, too?’ He planted a kiss on her forehead, then on her lips.

‘More or less,’ she said, teasingly. ‘I’m not sure. Try again and we’ll see.’

‘How about this?’

‘Much better. Maybe you aren’t a dream. Maybe you’re really here.’

‘And here?’

There was silence on the communal platform. The moon shone down on the half-built village, on the people pressed cheek-by-jowl in the cramped, temporary encampments. It watched over both the old and the young, the grieving and the joyful, those who had their whole lives before them and those whose lives would be cut short and who would be plucked away before their time. It saw all, and made no judgment.

Part one: Root

Look not for comfort in that season

Nor shelter seek in human reason

Death the fruit — and fire eternal

Life burns in a kernel.

— Nurian prophesy

1

‘Why would you ask a girl to marry you in any sort of way, when you’re about to leave for three months?’

Samiha’s words rattled unpleasantly in Tymon’s memory as he trudged alone up the path on the western spur. It was a chill morning in late autumn eight weeks after the attack on Sheb. The rains had washed the Freehold clean of its coat of ash and only the outer branches of the promontory, pocked by blast-craters and shorn of their twigs, bore witness to the battle with the Argosians. He squinted up at the *Lyla*, hunched like a black mantis at the shattered extremity of the spur. A small group of people stood by the machine. He picked out the Kion’s slender figure, her spark of hair leaping in the breeze. The sight of her there, ready to see him off, was bittersweet. Galliano’s wizened silhouette was a bent punctuation mark beside her. There was no sign of Jamil but Tymon guessed that the workshop supervisor would be stretched out beneath the *Lyla*, tinkering with the engine. Puffs of steam escaped the machine. His friends had gathered on the spur to bid him farewell, for he was due to leave that very morning for Cherk Harbour to pursue his Grafting studies with the Oracle of Nur. The departure was something of a wrench for him. He had not expected to leave Samiha so soon.

He remembered his answer to her, the night before. Pleading. Stupid.

‘Be fair, my love. I couldn’t know I was going so soon. Don’t hold out on me. You know I’m yours, whenever you want.’

He recalled the proud lift of her chin, her profile caught in the gleam of the village lanterns. They had been talking some way off to the side of the branch-path, in a little hollow at the base of a vertical twig, a far more intimate option than the packed sleeping platform.

‘What we like and what we want,’ she had whispered, sliding her arms about his neck, ‘may not be the only issue here.’

But her closeness, her pliancy in the darkness, had been at odds with her words.

He was under no illusion that their relations were a secret in the overcrowded, half-built village. They had been discrete out of respect for others. It was still only a few weeks since the devastating loss of the battle: the Kion was supposed to be focusing on reconstruction work, not midnight trysts. He had not minded maintaining her privacy. But he wanted her to acknowledge him eventually. He wanted to prove he was good enough for her, for the judges, for the whole Freehold.

‘Promise me,’ he had mumbled. The smell of her was intoxicating. ‘Promise me you’ll be my merry night-wife when I get back from Cherk Harbour.’

She had not answered, but her actions had spoken louder than words. Breathless, they had lain down beside each other in the hollow, biting their lips so as not to make a sound. It had been their last night together, as he imagined, for three months. He did not allow himself to contemplate the possibility that it might be the last of all.

A paltry few weeks. That was all that had been given him, the extent of the homecoming promised by Samiha. It was not that he was reluctant to meet the Oracle. He needed a suitable education, and for the time being she was only person who could provide it. But he had never expected his stay in Sheb to end so abruptly. His broken bones had barely healed before Oren’s letter arrived, upsetting all his hopes and plans. The missive had reached the Freehold three days earlier and left little doubt as to Tymon’s duties in the coming months. He was to start his studies at once. The move was obligatory, vital, ordained by the Sap. Oren’s language had been stark: miss this opportunity and disaster would ensue. Disobey and the consequences would be devastating. He had not provided reasons, only imperatives. It had sounded to Tymon more like a directive from the Dean than advice from a

fellow Grafter. He had accepted, but only for Samiha's sake, because she had begged him to. Oren was the closest thing they had to a Focal, she had told him. To ignore his judgment would be a great mistake. He had found her attitude, as usual, perplexing. Had she not ignored the judgment of all five Focals in order to travel to Argos city? And yet he could not refuse her, even if it meant losing her for a little while.

She had gone on ahead of him to the spur that morning, left him after breakfast with a hurried embrace and an admonition to find a heavier cloak in the village stores. He had taken the opportunity to bid farewell to those of his friends who would not be seeing him off at the air-chariot: Pallas, Rua and Tamal of the Young Guard, and the men at the refurbished workshop; Gardan and the other judges, and even Davil, who had mellowed greatly since the Argosian attack. Shasta, the youngest and most earnest of his new acquaintances, had taken wistful leave of him at the foot of the spur. He had asked Tymon in a voice hushed with awe whether he had yet foreseen the time and place of his own death, as the other Grafting student was rumoured to have done — and whether, like her, the knowledge had cured him of all fear.

It was not only the prospect of leaving Samiha that weighed heavily on Tymon as he rounded the last bend in the branch-path. He scrutinised the fourth and final member of the group by air-chariot. There she was: Jedda, his fellow student, lithe and tall and tawny as a Tree-cat. Not yet sixteen years old, she could look Laska in the eye and towered over Tymon with her height and brooding, feline confidence. It was she who had brought the troublesome letter from Oren, travelling aboard a spice-merchant's vessel from Marak. Samiha had translated the whole thing for Tymon. As harsh as the young Grafter had been with regards to him, he was full of praise for Jedda. He had written of her great aptitude for Grafting and her natural strength of mind. In the three days since she had set foot on the Freehold Tymon had heard practically nothing but talk about Jedda, praise of Jedda and wild speculation about

Jedda's part in the liberation of Nur. It was beginning to pall. He found the fact that he was obliged to abandon Samiha in order to travel with this hoyden frankly disturbing. The Marak girl's attractiveness was of the daunting variety.

The Kion had stepped into the air-chariot just before he arrived; he could see her shoulders through the hatchway as she bent over Laska at the controls. Jamil's legs poked out from beneath the *Lyla's* belly. So only the hoyden, standing beside the blindly beaming Galliano, saw him as he approached. She turned towards him.

'Tymon.' She threw out the name casually, as if she were commenting on the weather, and bared a set of perfect white teeth. He gave a panicked grimace in return.

'Is that you, boy?' Galliano's voice summoned him, a welcome distraction. 'I should say 'young man' of course: you're off on your first apprenticeship, after all.'

'I suppose so, Apu,' laughed Tymon, hurrying to his mentor's side. 'A Guild for Grafters: that would be a fine thing, wouldn't it?'

'That's called a seminary,' noted the old man, dryly, 'so I wouldn't consider it so fine, no. In fact, I'd call it an idea fraught with problems.' He dropped his voice to a loud whisper. 'Now, on to more important subjects. This will be the trip of a lifetime I hope you know.'

'How so?'

Tymon peered curiously at his friend. Galliano had conveniently slept through the events on board the *Envoy's* dirigible and his attitude to Nurian beliefs had, at least until that morning, been one of healthy skepticism. Was the scientist saying that he approved of his studies? Galliano's ruined gaze was fixed on Tymon with uncanny accuracy. He had recovered from his illness and seemed as brimful of energy as ever. He rapped his new walking cane on the bark of the spur.

'Look lively! You're going to the Fringes. You could see the Well of Worlds for yourself. If you miss the opportunity, I shall personally skin you.'

Timon stifled a sigh. Galliano expected him to take time from his studies to search for the fabled second canopy beneath the Storm, which according to legend could be glimpsed from the southern marches of the Tree. He heard Jemma's soft laughter behind him. 'I don't think Cherk Harbour is far enough south for that,' he began, cautionary. But Galliano was already giddy with his stratagems.

'Keep a weather eye on your toes,' he pronounced. 'You must take notes on everything you see between the clouds, even if it's unrecognizable. You have an opportunity to make invaluable observations. Did you pack a roll of parchment? I'd ask for sketches but that won't be of any use to me now, more's the pity. I want a description of colours, forms, the temperature of the air currents, all of it. Every detail.'

'Excuse me, *syor*.' Jemma stepped up beside them, smiling genially. 'I could not help overhearing. Do you really think you can find the legend of *Lacuna* — your World Below — hidden inside the Storm?'

There was no missing the edge of condescension in her voice. Her mastery of the Argosian language was perfect, though she spoke with a thick accent, as if revelling in her difference, her foreignness. She loomed over them both. Tymon could have howled in frustration. He wished the scientist had kept his foibles to himself.

'Tymon is going to help me,' Galliano replied, unflappable.

At that moment Samiha's familiar form appeared in the air-chariot's hatchway, putting an end to the discussion.

'Ah! Tymon. You're here.' She jumped down onto the spur and hurried towards him, smiling. His heart contracted at the sight of her. 'Did you fetch the extra things?'

He nodded, silent, holding up his pack as evidence. He did not look forward to the moment of parting and felt unable to meet her gaze. He took refuge in the task of hoisting the heavy bag through the hatch and pushing it under one of the *Lyla*'s benches. Laska nodded to

him in brief greeting. The walls of the *Lyla* shuddered as the captain opened a valve, allowing steam from the boiler into the engine. The propeller on the roof began to revolve, slowly at first then with thudding regularity. The machine strained on its moorings.

‘*Beni, Jamil,*’ Laska shouted through a window to the workshop supervisor below the craft.

Tymon moved away from the hatch as Jamil wriggled out from under the *Lyla*, his face streaked with steam and spice-dust.

‘*Sav vay,*’ rumbled the red-haired giant, creaking to his feet. He grinned down at the two students — he was the only person there who could address Jedda from a height — and pumped Tymon’s hand. ‘Farewell, and good luck to you both.’

‘*Sav vay. We are grateful,*’ purred Jedda, speaking for Tymon in a way that rankled him deeply.

Before he could respond, however, Galliano took hold of his arm again and tugged at him imperiously, drawing him closer.

‘I hope you remember what I told you about the Grafting,’ he hissed in Tymon’s ear. ‘Everything has limits. Learn the grammar, speak the language. The Sap follows rules just like the rest of us..’

So the old scientist did think something of his studies! Tymon could not help feeling vindicated. He gave Galliano’s hand a squeeze and winced as Jedda’s strident tones interrupted them yet again. This time, the girl from Marak was addressing Samiha.

‘One thing gives me special pleasure, *shanti,*’ she declared. ‘I’m glad my journey brought me to Sheb. I am honoured to meet you, even briefly.’

She placed a special emphasis on the ‘you’ and made a deep bow to Samiha, who seemed taken aback by this exaggerated show of respect. Tymon realised, with a jolt, that

Jedda was one of the few people in Marak who were privy to the Kion's identity, and that the sovereign herself had not expected her to know this information.

'Likewise,' Samiha brought out. 'Likewise. I'm honoured.'

Jedda hesitated, as if waiting for something more. She glanced at Tymon and back again to Samiha. A lazy smile tugged at her lips. Finally, she bent her ferocious yellow head and pulled herself into the *Lyla's* hatchway. Tymon expelled a pent-up breath. He wondered how he was going to survive three months in Jedda's company.

And then his love was in his arms, her face pressed against his neck, and he forgot entirely about the objectionable Grafter. He held Samiha tightly and breathed deeply of her scent, intending to store it up in his memory. He knew that she would not kiss him here in front of everyone. This was no formal welcoming ceremony. All too soon she pulled back from him.

'You'll see, it'll go by quickly.' She cleared her throat over the sound of the propellers. 'Three months isn't so long.'

'I know,' he answered miserably.

'You're doing the right thing,' she assured him. 'The Grafting is our only weapon. The Argosians have blast poison: we have the Oracle.' She laughed. 'My money's on us, actually.'

He nodded. He was unable to think of anything else to say. He had been dreading this instant but now that it had arrived his mind had gone blank. He did not know how to tell her how much he cared for her. He berated himself for acting like a boor.

'Do you have the pendant?' she asked, suddenly anxious.

He patted the pouch at his belt where Wick's rod of *orah* lay hidden. He was supposed to deliver it to the Oracle for ritual cleansing: Wick's abuse of it had somehow

tainted it, making it unfit for use by proper Grafters. The smooth cold rod repelled Tymon like the skin of a dead thing. It did not feel like dried sap, however much it gleamed.

Samiha laid her palm lightly on his cheek, the warm touch of the living. He cradled her thin white hand in his brown one. It was all he could do. No passionate declarations came to him now. She appeared to understand his predicament.

‘You’ll do fine,’ she murmured. ‘You’re ready. You’re strong. Don’t doubt it.’

‘Tymon.’ Laska’s voice rang out from the cockpit. ‘We’re going.’

‘Goodbye, young apprentice,’ called Galliano from the sidelines. ‘I know you’ll do me proud.’

Samiha accompanied him to the hatch and waited patiently as he manoeuvred himself inside. He hollered a last farewell to Galliano, but still held onto Samiha’s hand through the open hatchway. Jamil released the air-chariot’s moorings with a shout of warning. Samiha kept pace with the *Lyla* as it rose thunderously into the air.

‘Come back to me, Tymon,’ she called.

On impulse, he bent down and kissed her upturned face. Their lips barely touched before they were ripped apart. She ran alongside the machine. Her fingers clutched his through the hatchway, slipped, let go at last. She was smiling, her cheeks streaked with tears. She came to a halt when she could go no further, standing at the ragged tip of the spur. He watched until her slim form was swallowed in the hazy distance.

‘I will,’ he whispered into the rushing wind.

He pulled shut the hatch, struggling against the updraft, and knelt a moment on the floor of the cabin with his head bowed. Then he turned towards the interior of the craft. There sat his fellow student, watching him. Jedda did not bother to speak over the din of the propellers. She smiled her healthy, toothy smile and settled herself comfortably back on the bench.

The journey to Cherk Harbour took the better part of the day. Laska put down at noon on a lonely stub of a branch poking up over the bare twig-tips. They ate their lunch huddled in the air-chariot's cabin, for winter-time in the Eastern Canopy was as cold and inhospitable as the summer was hot. It was the first of the three so-called 'airy' months of the Argosian and Nurian calendars, the month of Piercing Breath, and Tymon felt that he had never experienced so thorough an illustration of the name. An icy breeze blew through every nook and cranny, penetrating his bones. He soon broke out the cloak Samiha had told him to bring and wrapped it about him gratefully as he munched through the familiar Nurian meal of dried fruit and shillee's cheese. He was content to eat in silence, observing his two companions as the air-chariot creaked and shuddered in the wind.

At first they had spoken in Argosian out of courtesy to him. Laska had described their destination of Cherk Harbour, a self-governing Lantrian settlement on the southern Fringes of the canopy. As the fiercely independent Lantrians had no great love of Argos a run-in with seminary agents was unlikely. Freeholders had traditionally been left unmolested by the authorities. This did not mean that their troubles were over, however. The Governor of Cherk Harbour was known to be corrupt, his city a haven for criminals of the worst order. They should keep their wits about them, Laska warned, and stick together until they were able to contact the Oracle. This was apparently more easily said than done: despite, or perhaps because of her legendary power, the Oracle was notoriously difficult to trace. Tymon learned to his surprise that they were making the long journey to the Fringes simply on the strength of a reported sighting. No one knew if the Oracle was still in Cherk Harbour. If she were alerted to their coming it would be by means of the Grafting alone, for no regular communications or bird-runs existed between the city and the Freehold. They might arrive there to find that their quarry had moved on to another location, or even disappeared completely from public view, as she was rumoured on occasion to do.

This uncertainty did not seem to trouble Jedda or Laska. Laska had other business to carry out for the judges in Cherk Harbour and was happy to bring the two young people home with him if their search proved fruitless. As Jedda was the first to point out, Oren seemed confident enough of them finding the Oracle, and he was the most advanced Grafter of their generation. She had said this with a sidelong look at Tymon which he could not quite interpret; he wondered irritably if she considered herself more gifted than Oren, too. For it was clear that of the two of them she believed herself to be the superior talent. As he made no further effort to participate in the conversation, it drifted back into Nurian. He knew enough of that language now to understand that Jedda was questioning Laska about Caro's public break with the judges. The militant had formally rescinded his Freehold citizenship after the signing of the peace treaty. Tymon had heard that he and his supporters had sworn to oppose foreign rule by any means necessary. Peace, they claimed, was impossible, as the enemy would always seek to twist the terms of any agreement. No treaty had ever stopped the seminary before. Tymon could not help fearing that in this case, Caro might be right. It irked him all the more that he was required to desert Samiha at such a time.

After a brief turn about the wind-swept branch to stretch their legs they re-embarked, flying due south. By mid-afternoon the Treescape beneath them was transformed. The bristling carpet of the upper canopy gave way to a descending slope of staggered grey twigs and the wind drove great eddies of cloud towards them, plunging the *Lyla* into periods of disturbing blankness. Although Cherk Harbour was positioned near the southern marches of the trunk, many miles from the actual fringes of the Tree, there was no escaping the change in atmosphere. The promontory had been an eagle's nest perched high above the world. Now they descended into the heart of the canopy, banking between the great boughs that twisted up to meet them. Laska steered the air-chariot deftly between these outstretched arms but even he was obliged to fly on occasion through a blind rack of cloud.

They almost missed the city. They had seen no air traffic, spotted no dew-fields that might indicate the proximity of a settlement, until — without warning — it was there, practically behind them, a jumble of structures half-glimpsed through the scudding fog. The next moment the vision was erased. Laska brought the air-chariot around, circling the ring of vertical boughs that enclosed the area. The clouds shifted and suddenly the city became visible again, a mass of dirty white cubes crammed into a gigantic fissure. A mile-long cavity split the south side of one of the vertical branches, its interior teeming with buildings like an infestation of white grubs. To Tymon, brought up in the shadow of the Divine Mouth, it seemed a desecrated place. Who would build a city in a Tree-rift, a market town in the precincts of a temple? He had to consciously stop himself from raising his hand to his forehead in the gesture to ward off bad luck.

At least the houses were built with more regard for the weather than those in Marak. He saw as they drew closer that most of the buildings had flat roofs fitted with rain-catching cisterns. Some of the larger residences at the top of the fissure boasted elaborate balconies or entire gardens on their topsides. Roads were few and narrow, hardly more than footpaths zigzagging up back wall of the cleft, and there seemed to be a fair number of ether-barges circulating between the buildings. A rich city, therefore, with at least some citizens able to afford the luxury of air travel. They were faced with a stark hierarchy as Laska dampened the *Lyla's* engine and steered them down the face of the branch towards the docks at the base of the fissure. First they passed the panorama of expensive, irrigated gardens, the dwellings growing plainer as they descended to a level of warehouses and workshops. Below these lay the air-harbour itself, an open circle of wooden quays and jetties. Though the mouth of the fissure narrowed after that, becoming no more than a jagged slit closed off by compost cloths, the city did not come to an end. Tymon glimpsed constructions in the cavity beyond, a dim

continuation of the town under the bulging weight of garbage. The slums in the depths of the fissure languished in the cumulative shade of everything else.

The *Lyla* came to juddering halt at the far end of one of the jetties, its beetled form ungainly beside the other graceful dirigibles on the dock. Tymon gazed with admiration at the bustling scene outside the *Lyla's* windows. The docks of Cherk Harbour were filled with ships of every description, including several magnificent Lantrian greatships of the largest size. He felt a stirring of his old enthusiasm for fabulous craft. He was particularly impressed with three long-bodied dirigibles of unusual design on the opposite side of the air-harbour, their narrow hulls flattened like the bodies of fleas and perfect for transporting cargo at the maximum speed.

'You can see why they're called a nation of ship-builders,' he remarked to Laska when the noise of the propellers had died down. He pointed out the vessels.

He was rather taken aback when the captain barely glanced up, giving his attention to a loose tie on his backpack.

'Those are resettlement ships, Tymon,' he observed quietly. 'Keep away from them. Do not approach them. They are slavers. It's completely legal in the South Canopy, of course. Lantrians don't bother going through the pretence of recruiting pilgrims. Their ships make raids on Nurian settlements and press-gang refugees into the mines. Basically they do what the seminary does, except that they don't pay.'

Tymon turned away from the window, his excitement deflated like a balloon. He made no reply to Laska as he could think of none that would suffice. He had grown up with a very different notion of Lantria. It was a fitting end to the last of his childhood daydreams, he reflected glumly. Far from being the beacon of hope and enlightenment he had imagined at the seminary, the 'nation of ship-builders' was as eager to avail itself of cheap labour as Argos. He was glad he had never gone there.

Sailors lined up on the decks of their vessels to stare at them as they disembarked and he remembered that no one in Cherk Harbour would have seen a propeller-driven craft before. Laska was obliged to placate the irate dock-master who barrelled down the quay to meet them, demanding to know what monstrosity they had brought into his city. A short, cantankerous Lantrian, he was surrounded by perpetual puffs of blue smoke from the pipe clamped in his jaws, which gave him the air of a miniature, mobile storm cloud. He also kept two pens jammed firmly behind his ears. Tymon was reminded with a twinge of nostalgia of his old friend, Safah. But the dock-master at Cherk Harbour was no mystic in the rough. He was persuaded to accept them on the register only after the administration of a hefty and very concrete bribe. At last he deigned to take down Laska's name on his roll, snapping his pen disrespectfully beneath the captain's nose.

'We've been expecting your lot, Nurry,' he wheezed. 'Your names were sent down to my office this morning. You'll explain yourselves directly to the Governor, first thing. Run along now, his Lordship doesn't appreciate being kept waiting.'

He clamped a hand on Laska's shoulder, propelling him with a show of false amiability along the quays. There was no time to fetch their bags from the air-chariot. Tymon and Jedda were barely able to slam shut the *Lyla's* hatch before stumbling after the dock-master through the steep streets of the city, at a loss as to how the Governor had learned of their arrival and what sort of explanation he expected them to provide.

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