

9 – the Library of Ahmer

Chronicler was ankle deep in an equal combination of dust and sand. Behind him Tsuru and two porters were wading tentatively through the rotted morass of paper, leather, wood, mud-bricks, and soil that had collected in the library.

One of the riders had come back earlier that morning saying he'd come across an interesting ruin. He'd described it to Chronicler – a daubed structure with sloped walls with beams of wood sticking out of the walls, surrounded by the disintegrating remains of smaller huts. It was abandoned and had been reclaimed by weeds and climbers.

Immediately Chronicler had known what it was: the ruined library of Ahmer.

Sallan had relented and allowed them to rest, if only due to the natural spring the rider also reported close to the ruin. They made for the spring, leaving Chronicler and a few volunteers at the ruin while the rest replenished their dwindling water supplies.

He'd found it more of a ruin that the rider had described – derelict, its surface worn down by decades of bad weather, the marks from where rain runoff had marked channels into the mud surface clear to see. Rotted wattle and mud-bricks protruded from the structure's skin. What had once been high walls had been worn down to ridges of weed-covered earth running between towers.

His face had sunk when he'd first seen it and it was only stubbornness that saw him wade through the ruin in the hopes of finding more. He managed to break away part of the wall of a tower, and slithered through into its belly. He'd put his weight on one of the wooden beams, which shattered under his weight. He fell to the bottom and found himself in a gloomy hollow.

His hopes of unearthing anything of value were quickly ended as he picked up books that had been turned into mulch under what looked like the effects of flooding. The few salvageable things he found were fragmentary at best – books that had remained on lopsided shelves, avoiding the worst of the weather, though they were so dry that the papers just flaked away as he picked them up.

He was almost ready to admit defeat when he saw a book lying on the top of a pile of dried mud. Fingers smudged a thin layer of powder-like dust as they handled it, picking it up. He wiped it on his qaftan carefully, noticing that the cover was leather and seemed in better condition than the others. It was quite bulky, like an old manual, and the pages turned without protest when he tried flicking through it. It was filled with a claustrophobic script and hand-drawn diagrams. It looked like an original, rather than a printing. That alone made it interesting. When he got to a two-page spread detailing the heavens and constellations, he knew he had found something of value.

He took the book and met up with the rest of the caravan soon after.

They carried on past sunset, guided by the light of the Ivory Moon. Gorged, the light that fell onto the plains below was enough to guide them through the night. They'd taken advantage of it two nights so far and in two nights she would begin to wane again, and the Blood Moon, barely a sliver out of new, would rapidly supplant her dominion in the sky.

It was a never-ending cycle, Chronicler knew. He looked up as they walked, picturing the stars, the invisible lines connecting them into arbitrary anthropomorphisms. They might have meant nothing in the present world of telescopes but ancient man had clearly seen something in them to be remembered so many years later. To the north, he saw Araell the Angel. Then Braal. Azaraota the Dragon. Askafer. The great beast Tarragon, most which was hidden beneath the horizon.

The land to their left – the west – had risen steadily as they moved forward and the road, if road it could be called, came to be guarded by a stepped cliff, its cracked rocks half-covered by loose soil that trickled slowly to its scree-covered base.

They made camp there and Chronicler sat for a while looking through his newly-acquired book. Its cover was of simple leather, its edges scuffed and frayed. It was otherwise featureless with no title plate or attributions. Inside, the pages were dry, covered in spots and blemishes. Chronicler smelt it, his mouth curving into a wide grin as he did so. He did love that dusty smell.

Inside, he looked at the title page, which was penned in words from a script he was largely unfamiliar with. It was the language of the northern empire, which had accompanied its conquests across the Inner Sea, becoming the standard for scientists. Parts of it had even found its way into common usage in Saviud. Though still, it was difficult for him to read, but he could just about make out what

particular texts were referring to, if little else. He saw a date: 3,742 RM – or the *Reign of Malichar* – confirming his suspicions that it was a Korachani book, or at least one intended for the High-empire. He wasn't intimate with the different calendars of the Inner Sea, but reasoned it was over two-hundred years past.

The book was divided into four parts. The first appeared to be an index or dictionary of sorts with categorised listings and explanations varying in length from a few lines to a string of paragraphs. Its subjects were myriad, ranging from places, objects, flora, fauna, events and individuals. The second part was peppered with anatomical drawings of animals and beasts mundane and fantastical, some showing musculature and others skeletons. He saw indriks, aurochs, chiters, felids, horses, monitors and the great feathered balours of legend, all displayed with clinical objectivity, any beauty they might have possessed in life altogether absent. The third section had at its heart a map of the Inner Sea, and seemed to concentrate on the lands to its south and west, venturing as far as the eastern Saviud: where they were travelling. Labels were often misnamed and outdated, noting settlements that Chronicler knew did not exist, or missing regions that had emerged in the last hundred years. Still, it was an interesting insight into imperial perception of the world in that day.

The last section appeared to be a natural treatise on the world – continents; constellations and stars; nullambit and Firmamental and Atramental foci, respectively; mountains; oceans; climates. It was thorough and technically well-presented leading Chronicler to believe that it was not as old as he had thought. Shame he couldn't understand it fully. Still, it was a beautiful piece and if he could get it rebound it would one day sit proudly on his shelf.

He lay the book aside as the moon disappeared behind the cliffs. He lay down, trying to get comfortable but it was amazing what a day of riding could do. Though his body ached he always found his thoughts racing. He fidgeted and sat up, trying to pry what mote of comfort he could from his sleeping bags. He fussed with them, eliciting some groans and curses from the others. He ignored them and carried on.

Then he saw her, Hadia, moving away from the camp. She hadn't noticed him watching her and carried on to the north-east, her body wrapped around a burlap cloak. He thought for a moment about following her but decided against it. She'd avoided him since their encounter near the stepwell. Just as well, he'd thought, having learnt that she had no plans of carrying on with them.

Not again, he thought, rolling over trying to sleep. For too many days he'd found his thoughts bounding back to those two revelations – her way with the art, and her intention of leaving them in Zaffre. They were probably a week out and that would be it, he wouldn't see her again.

He sighed and tried to sleep.

They were standing on a plateau looking at half the world. They saw scrubland stretching ahead for what looked like hundreds of miles. To their right the plateau tapered, levelling off with the rest of the land some miles distant. A river meandered east-to-west, its slow course carving a channel into the surface of the land leaving its banks steep-sided, covered with scattered vines and creepers. Beyond the river, the land itself was far from level, the grey honeycombed rocks dipping and rising erratically, barely visible for the thick tangle of vegetation that dominated the landscape. There were trees, mostly scattered, though Chronicler could see a few copses to the north-west, where the water from the river seemed to collect into a small lake. It was early morning and much of the area was covered in a layer of mist. "Quite enchanting," he said, to no-one in particular.

One of the porters pointed, shouting, "Zaffre, Zaffre!" but few of the others could identify what he was seeing through the haze of distance and the mist. They'd been on the road for over three weeks. Surely Zaffre was close, but if that was it they had made record time. Chronicler knew that without atmospherical limitations a man could see three and a half miles on level ground. Given their height he guessed that might increase to ten or twelve miles at best, but given the mist, it must have been less than that. Was Zaffre really that close? Only time would tell.

Wordlessly, Sallan resumed his march, moving to the west, hoping that the route would continue to lead them north. Chronicler had noticed how difficult to follow the path had grown. When they had been travelling on bare rock there had been nothing; no milestones or markers of any kind to guide their path. Once they'd moved to greener lands, they often found a vague path of trod earth and trampled plants, but they were hardly indicative of a well-travelled route. Here, in what Szigall called the heart of the plains, there was very little path to follow, and it was likely that Sallan was navigating by memory

or just following his instincts. Szigall could occasionally be seen perusing a map but it was clear he was not relying on it.

What they thought was zaffre was actually a smaller settlement. Chronicler was looking forward to a few days' rest and his spirits sunk during their approach. What the porter saw was a polished blue dome glinting in the morning light and he'd confused it with Saffre's famous dome.

They passed fields of rosemary and citrus groves nestled behind low walls, guarded by picturesque fortified farmhouses. Chronicler noticed a look-out on the roof of one such farm, a crude telescope in his hands.

There were men and women working the fields. Some looked up to see the caravan, though most just carried on their work.

They passed five such structures, interspersed with fields and groves, before coming to a crossroads with scattered buildings around it. Dominating the area was a wide octagonal building with a large polished blue dome. It was small next to the bronze dome of Yeppo, but it was easy to see how it had attracted their attentions that day from the plateau.

They stopped there for a while, resting their beasts beyond the periphery of the buildings (there was no caravanserai or stables large enough to accommodate them) and traded a few wares with the locals.

Sallan came back after trading, a smile on his face. "Zaffre is just three days out," he said.

"What about the raiders?" asked Tsuru.

"There have been a few sightings to the north, nothing reaching this far south."

Tsuru nodded. "Good. The quicker we are behind Zaffre's walls, the better."

They stayed the night outside the village and Chronicler busied himself with his new book.

Hadia saw him sitting down, back against a rubble wall where he caught the light from a nearby fire. "Looks interesting."

Chronicler nodded absently, closed the pages and look up at her. "Found it in Ahmer. Only thing worth salvaging."

"What is it?"

"It's a book," he grinned. "Wish I knew exactly. Looks like a form of Encyclopaedia. All sorts of entries."

"Anything about the art?"

Chronicler looked at her, eyes wide. "Hadia!" He looked around, seeing if there was anyone looking at them. There didn't seem to be. "I do not think so. At least if there is I cannot understand it."

"Oh."

"Why? Why would you need that?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Fair enough. Where would you go, if you wanted to improve your skill with the art?"

"Short of crossing a continent, I'd go to Zaffre."

Chronicler nodded. "Good. Why leave when we get there when you can stay and study?"

"You asked where would I go if I wanted to. Doesn't mean I want to."

"Why not?"

She sighed, annoyed. "I'm happy enough the way I am."

Chronicler raised his hands. "Fair enough."

The caravan continued early the next morning. It would be a long three days, though with Zaffre so close, he did not mind so much.

They saw its dome they day before they reached it, glinting in the high-sun light, clear in the haze.

Chronicler was grinning like a child most of the way. Finally they were there. "You know, I think I may sojourn here for a while," he told Mahr absently as they moved onwards. The book had rekindled in him the desire to study and read and write, things that travel had taken away from him. He wanted to study the book and maybe add to it. It had been written by an imperial hand. His was far from, and he thought the juxtaposition might work well. Annotations added to the antiquated imperial point of view by the hand of a local. Yes, he liked the idea.

Mahr looked at him, though did not reply. He had heard similar confessions dozens of times before. He'd believe it when it happened.

“There’s the problem of money though,” continued Chronicler. His money was running out. Normally, he offered his services as a scribe. Illiteracy was still the rule of the day in most cities and those needing clerical or notarial work needed the services of men who understood the law and who could write clearly and in legal terms. Chronicler could offer one of those things, and he did it well, and in various languages.

He’d go on to think about it for the rest of the journey, and he ended up missing the changes leading up the city’s immediate environs.

What had been dry scrubland was slowly changed through the actions of mortal hands into a tamed landscape dominated by low rubble walls and fields, most of them empty and decades overgrown, possibly harking back to a more prosperous age.

They passed a hollow tower, half crumbled and deserted. Its doorway was ten feet up the wall and left them puzzled as to how it might work until Szigall identified the stump of a stone stairway that would have once stood before the tower, leading to a wooden drawbridge.

As they went on it quickly became apparent that the city was built on a hilltop. The descending buildings made the dome loom all the larger, and afforded them better views of the many smaller domes and spires that surrounded it like inferior simulacra.

They passed another tower, this one occupied, its battlements home to a handful of guards who asked them some lazy questions before waving them on. The abandoned lands slowly gave way to functional farms, each overseen by a tower-like house, similar to those of the village they’d passed earlier on. In parts the farmhouses were clustered in small groups of four or three, forming miniscule settlements.

They must have passed a dozen such clusters during their ascent to the city walls, which became clearer throughout the afternoon.

We’re almost there, thought Chronicler.

Sallan slowed the caravan (a feat in itself) and rode up to the gatehouse with his entourage.

“What news of the raiders?”

“You mean the followers?” the man shook his head, “Things are under control. It’s worse to the north. We’ve had no word from Daktra in weeks.”

Sallan frowned, scratched his head. “That is ill news. Daktra is a sizeable city. If she has fallen silent Zaffre might not be as well-defended as you boast.”

“We are not blind to the threat. The militia is warned and a citizen levy has been raised. Much of the surrounding populace has been called within the walls. People are on edge. We must be careful what they hear. We cannot risk a panic.”

“Are the gates closed to traffic?”

“No. You are free to enter through the Camel Gate,” he said pointing to the west, “given your papers are in order.”

They broke away from the main road and followed a smaller crumbled path that led to the so-called Camel Gate, where all trade entered and exited the city.

But there was no gate. Before they could reach the walls they came to a sprawling shanty-town of low walls and haphazard structures above which rose an aqueduct leading to the west. Huge blue awnings spread from its arches, covering much of the buildings in shade.

The sounds and smells coming from the place were spectacular and it was evident by the crowds that it was in no way stifled by the overprotection that had been forced on Yeppo. There were various caravanserais flanking a paved square in which was assembled a huge market. Sallan led them to a particular caravanserai which looked very much like one of the fortified farms they had seen earlier, only it had had halls and other rooms added to it.

“Finally,” said Chronicler, not knowing that his life was about to change in ways he could not imagine.

10 – the Autonomous City of Zaffre

The caravan dismantled, and with the goods on their way to the market with Sallan, Chronicler and Mahr found themselves in the middle of the rapidly emptying courtyard. Szigall was busy signing off some papers and Hadia was nowhere in sight.

For a horrifying moment, Chronicler thought she might have already left, but he saw her emerge from one of the rooms, doing her hair up into a plait.

“You’re leaving already?” said Chronicler.

“I have to speak with the rulers first.”

“Mind if I come with you? It would make a change exploring a new city with a companion.”

“Even though I was going with you anyway,” said Mahr dryly.

Chronicler ignored him, concentrating on Hadia, who just shrugged.

He smiled, “We leaving now?”

“Yes.”

They headed towards the Camel Gate, which was concealed behind awnings. Hadia paused beside one of the guards and asked him something. Almost immediately after, there was a furore amongst the guards. Two of them grabbed her and another moved closer, questioning her.

It all happened quickly and Chronicler was busy looking elsewhere. By the time he reacted to Mahr’s nudge Hadia was being dragged away.

“What’s happened?” they shouted.

One of the guards turned to confront them. He was large, sallow-faced and thick skinned, with black eyes. His uniform was meticulous, of many-layered silk and fine chain. He was leaning on a pole-gun that looked too ornate to be functional. “She is being taken to the Council’s Chamber.”

“What’s she done?”

“Besides thrown in her lot with the attackers? She asked to be taken there.”

“Hadia!” yelled Chronicler.

“You are with her?”

Without thinking, Chronicler nodded. There was a shout and more guards appeared. Before he could offer any resistance, his hands were bound behind his back and he was being kicked forward. Mahr was not far behind.

“The hell you doing?” shouted Mahr, struggling to break free.

“You are followers of the otherworlder. We have strict orders to deal with the likes of you.”

“No, you are mistaken,” said Chronicler.

The guard turned around. “You saying I don’t know how to do my job?”

“No, no,” said Mahr, trying to save his friend. “What he meant was we are not followers of the otherworlder.”

The guards did not reply, only pushed them further.

They were taken to a station inside the walls and pushed into a windowless wagon and locked inside. They heard muffled shouts and orders from outside. Then a slap on the side of the wagon and a whip crack. Then a jerk forwards.

Chronicler squinted in the dark and saw Mahr, head downcast. He’d managed to pull his hands over his feet and was resting, back to the wall, forearms on his knees. Chronicler knew better than to talk to him.

On his other side, Hadia was trying to stand. She too had pulled her hands from behind her and was fumbling at the door, looking for any hinges or locks. There was nothing – all mechanisms were on the outside.

“What are you doing?”

“Looking for a way out.”

“Can you use your...” started Chronicler, pausing when he realised they were not alone.

She did not notice his hesitation and replied anyway. “Would I be doing this if I could?”

Fair enough, thought Chronicler.

After a while Mahr spoke, “Use your what?”

“What?” said Chronicler.

“You asked if she was using her... something. My daggers were taken from me, as I assume your weapons were too. What were you referring to?”

“I’m a shaper.”

Chronicler looked at Hadia, eyes wide.

“What? I have nothing to hide. Zaffre is an open-enough place if one has a licence. I am no longer a member of the caravan. I don’t need to worry about Sallan anymore.”

Mahr shrugged. “Hardly the first time we’ve travelled with shapers. You’ll find no prejudices here.”

“And the licence?”

Hadia was silent.

Mahr laughed. “Figures.”

“I wasn’t planning on staying, and no part of that stay was meant to feature any shaping.”

“Anyone screens you, you better hope they’re as bad as that creep in Yeppo,” said Mahr.

“Where do you think they’re taking us?” asked Chronicler after they had been sitting in silence for a while. The journey so-far had been peppered by a steady ascent and bumps and jerks that bruised Chronicler’s already aching body.

“I asked for an audience with the council, or any proxy who represents it. I suppose they are taking us there.”

The wagon stopped, rocked slightly. They heard footsteps outside and keys jangling. Then the door opened. Following the burst of light they saw the barrels of three powderguns staring back at them, and a guard gesturing for them to move forwards.

They jumped off. Their hands were cuffed behind their backs again.

After the commotion had passed Chronicler had chance to view his surroundings. They were in a dark alley flanked by high marble walls, stained by rain and neglect. They were pushed into an open doorway and led through a string of store-rooms and decrepit corridors, before emerging into something that seemed more presentable.

“Move,” barked a guard, poking Chronicler with the butt of his weapon. It caught him in the ribs and Chronicler reeled.

One of the guards leant in close to Chronicler. “I know people who’ve been injured, killed by your kind.” He was pushing hard against him now. Chronicler was trying to hold his ground, but he was no match for a trained soldier. He was probably not much of a match for an untrained soldier or an untrained man, at that. But he tried to push back.

“Enough of that,” came a woman’s voice, curt and strong.

Immediately the soldier backed away. Chronicler almost stumbled forward but saved himself at the last moment.

Chronicler gathered himself as best he could and looked up at the new arrival. There were three in all. The woman who had spoken stood at the fore, light cowl concealing her form. She was bald, a pattern or tattoo running down the length of her pate, tapering into nothing above her wide nose. Large eyes observed the three prisoners at length. In one hand she held a brass rod with a patterned leather hilt. Behind her stood a man and a woman. The man was of black skin and armoured, dressed in delicate silk skirts with leather tabard, intricately patterned. He carried a long curved blade the likes of which Chronicler had never seen before. It was easily five feet long, with a lazy curve and a second hilt halfway along the blade. At the moment he was holding it from the middle hilt. The last figure was more than a girl, dark-skinned, bald, and dressed in simple robes. She was carrying an inkpen and was writing.

The woman who spoke moved in front of Hadia and regarded her. “Is this the one who asked to speak with us?” she asked, addressing the guards.

One of them nodded.

She cocked her head to one side and looked down at the shaper who was avoiding her gaze. “You would come to our city, demanding to speak with our leaders? Who gave you this authority?”

“I am merely a messenger,” said Hadia, her gaze downcast. “I am not a Follower, and nor are we their allies,” she said reaching into her clothes. She produced a dull grey disk. The size of her palm, there was a line running down the middle with delicate hinges on either side. A wax stamp, still intact, sealed it.

The woman snatched it from her grasp and inspected it cursorily. “You would have us believe that you are not a Follow, yet you carry the seal of their leader? And these two, your cronies?”

“Companions.”

She regarded them with the same disinterest she had shown to everything else so far. “And who is to break this seal?”

“Anyone with the authority to act on behalf of the city of Zaffre.”

No sooner were the words out of her mouth had the woman cracked the seal, opening the flaps. There was a small square of paper, folded many times over. She removed it, handing the case to her scribe. She read the paper quickly before screwing it up and throwing it onto the floor.

“You took your time getting here: there is nothing on that paper that we do not already know. What else were you told to do.”

“Nothing,” said Hadia. Her earlier reluctance had quickly been replaced with nervousness. “I am just a hunter, a tracker. I was promised payment to deliver the message.”

“I can vouch for her,” said Chronicler, his tongue quicker than his wit.

The woman ignored him. “Lock these two up while I handle her.”

Wordlessly the guards separated Mahr and Chronicler from Hadia. The two men were led away, their protests ignored.

They were separated soon after that and Chronicler was taken to a cell. It wasn't the first time he'd been in a cell and he was sure it would not be his last. As far as cells went it wasn't that bad. They had chairs and a table and partitioned room with a hole in the floor for them to piss in. That was nice.

He was in there for the better part of the day before a pair of guards came for them.

Finally, thought Chronicler. But that was not it.

He was quickly taken through a wide loggia overlooking a lush garden where he passed busy figures. Some stared at Chronicler as he was pushed ahead. He wondered what they must have thought. Even worse were those who did not bother to look. He dreaded what *they* were thinking.

Soon he was in front of a dark wooden door, one of the guards knocking on it. Without waiting for a reply he opened it and disappeared inside. Moments later he appeared again, gesturing for them to enter. Chronicler was remembering his visit to the Civic Palaces of Yeppo. The circumstances could not have been more different.

He was in a meagre limestone room, quite different to the rest of the building Chronicler had seen thus far. It was bare, with a dresser and a few cabinets and a large simple desk, behind which sat the woman who had accosted them before. To one side, farther back in the shadows was the young scribe, with her own small table.

“Sit.”

The guards pushed him forwards before moving back to flank the door.

Chronicler sat.

“If you are looking for your companions, they are not here, not anymore.”

“What have you done with them?”

“You are in no position to ask questions of me. One more and you will no longer possess a tongue with which to speak. Zaffre is a city of laws. No city can prosper in Saviud unless its foundations are strong, and that means law, order and obedience. To you I am Zaffre. I am the law. And in protecting this city rest assured that I will not hesitate to eliminate any threats that rise against her well-being.”

She paused, waited for a response. Nothing. She smiled. “Now, what are you doing here?”

The first thought to enter his head was *I was dragged here from my cell*. He fought the urge to voice the thought, and remained silent for a while. “I am Niyush of Payaman, an explorer, a studier of mortal life, and a chronicler of tales, histories and customs. I have been travelling across Sammaea for the better part of my life, moving slowly west from Siriphagos and a hundred places in between. That is my life, and that is what I am doing here. I rarely know where my next stop is, or how long I will be staying at my latest port of call. Sometimes it is a mere days to resupply and rest, others it is months if not years. But I do know that I do not have anything to do with the Followers.”

“Yet you are acquainted with their leader.”

“No,” it took him a moment to realise what she was talking about. “You mean the Priestess Ohrima? I spoke with her in Mern. Professional curiosity. As I said before, I interview people, chronicle their cultures.”

The woman waved a lazy hand in dismissal. “You admit your contradiction, then?”

“The fact that I spent the lesser part of one morning talking to their leader does not make me a part of their cult. For the record, I am agnostic.”

The woman raised an eyebrow.

“I believe in the old gods. I know that one sits on a throne five-thousand miles south of here, but I do not believe that they are inherently superior to us or that they have a birth right making us their subjects. No-one was born to rule, not even a god. That people believe such things and impart such power upon organisations that represent such gods is... A church can have the loftiest of goals, but it is still only controlled by mortals, prone to sin and weakness. All it takes is one immoral leader to nullify everything its people believe in.”

“That’s quite the tangent, given my question.”

“You’ll forgive me for being somewhat nervous.”

“Why should you be nervous? Do you have something to hide?”

“You have nothing to prove that I have done any wrong, of that I am positive because I have done no wrong. Hadia was travelling with us as she carried a seal of the Followers, given to us by the new alliance in Mern to safeguard our passage north from their raiders. She was a spokesperson, intended to help us, should we encounter any such groups along the road.”

“Why would they listen to a mercenary?”

“She carried their seal – they see it, they know she has the permission of the alliance between the Zenarchs and Mern. It’s a political situation. The only way they allowed us to leave the city was by taking Hadia with us.”

“Us being?”

“The caravan my companion and I were travelling with for safety. It has all necessary papers and letters of marquee officialising its role,” Chronieler went on to give her Sallan’s name and the caravanserai they were staying at, knowing they had nothing to hide. The woman took note of his words.

“What have you learnt of the Followers in your dealings with their leader?”

“There are two of them. The Visyon Orkon, a man in black. And the Priestess Ohrima. I have not spoken with him, but she regards him as their leader. I think she might be a halfblood, her bloodline very-much diluted. There was an air of the unnatural about her that most halfbloods have, if you know what I mean. I first learnt the name of their cult from her, though I believe it has since travelled wide. The otherworlder they worship is called the Principal, and she says he was born two Blood Moons ago, at the time. Whether or not they have found him in that time, I have no idea. I’d wager you know more than I do at this point.”

“Your wager would bear winnings.”

Chronieler’s eyes widened and he leaned closer in his seat, hoping the woman would reveal some of her knowledge. Her face was blank. She just sat there, stiff as a rod, taking notes.

He sat there, despondent, while she wrote, awaiting the verdict. “What is to become of me,” he said, finally.

“That is to be determined. First we will speak with your companion. Since there is no concrete evidence against you, our civil laws do not technically allow us to hold you captive.”

Chronieler sighed in relief.

“Though luckily,” carried on the woman, “we are on the onset of war, which means chances cannot be taken. I hope you understand.”

“I am to remain imprisoned?”

The woman exhaled. “Technically? No. Effectively? Yes. Until we question your companion, you will return to your cell.”

“This isn’t fair...”

“This is Saviud.” The woman waved him away, gesturing for the guards to take him.

He crossed paths with Mahr, who was being taken to the woman’s office, but they did not have chance to share words.

And then he waited.

It seemed ages before Mahr returned, and when he did Chronieler was surprised to see that he was no longer chained. Beside him stood the woman who had greeted and interrogated them.

“You are political prisoners,” she said brusquely. “Are you familiar with the term?”

“The definition is broad and can be interpreted differently depending on the land. Since I am unfamiliar with your law, I will defer to your interpretation,” replied Chronieler.

“Under Zaffresi law a political prisoner is one who is accused of inciting unrest or being involved with those seeking to foment such unrest. Your guilt is only, thus far, circumstantial, so under normal conditions we would have no cause to imprison you before a fair trial. Since the declaration of provisory martial law seven days ago, things have changed. You will go to trial.”

Chronicler’s face sank. He knew the outcome would be in the city’s favour. Was there any other way it could go? He swallowed and nodded, awaiting the rest of it.

“We have cause to keep a close eye on you until then. Since you are considered companions of an emissary of a foreign power, be that it may yet be a power unrecognised by our law, you will be treated as a political representative of that power until the times comes for a trial, and as a political representative you will be granted appropriate quarters. You will understand that though we cannot keep you under full lock-and-key, you will not be allowed to leave the premises of the Council Halls and you will be under constant supervision.”

“Come, Niyush,” said Mahr from behind the woman. “Let us await our fates.”

“I would know the name of the woman who had dealt with us.”

The woman bowed gently. “I am the Consul-secondary Nimah Argassa, and it is to me you owe your fates.”

They were escorted to an annex where foreign dignitaries and other ambassadors were housed. The corridors were wide, lit by skylights and flanked by smooth tapering columns between which stood doorways leading to other wings where the rooms proper were located. It wasn’t half bad, thought Chronicler. He saw well-dressed men and women, and felt his fate could have been worse, though as they kept on walking, they left the wide corridor behind and followed a spiral staircase downstairs, below ground-level.

The rooms here were far more functional. It wasn’t as busy as upstairs and most of the people Chronicler saw were dressed in servants’ clothes. They weren’t even going to be allowed to stay with the dignitaries, despite what they’d been categorised as.

Nimah had left them upstairs and assured them that the rest of their belongings, as well as the items taken from them before entering the Halls would be brought to them. Chronicler’s questions about Hadia went unanswered. He asked the guards again, as they showed them to their quarters, but was ignored.

Surprisingly, their quarters were sparse but by no means small. There were three rooms in all, all whitewashed and bereft of ornamentation: one with two beds and various dressers and chests; another with a small kitchen and table and a third with a simple toilet. The kitchen had a wide low window set high in the wall, as though overlooking the ground floor above. It was too narrow to even contemplate using as a form of escape, not that Chronicler would do that. Mahr, however...

“At least there’s light,” he said, sitting down at the table.

“The hell do we do now?” asked Mahr.

“We wait.”

Their goods were brought from the caravanserai later that day. Immediately, Chronicler began searching through his things, looking for damages or anything missing. By the time was done the floor was covered – papers, books, trinkets, maps, charts, drawings, all sorts of things. He was nodding slowly, as though satisfied. By contrast, Mahr had a simple chest with a few changes of clothes and some other personal belongings.

They were also brought a crate of food, with various fruits, loaves of flatbread, dried meats, casks of water and beer and preserved yogurts, and small containers with herbs and spices. “Looks like we’re cooking for ourselves,” said Chronicler.

Mahr was restless and spent most of the time pacing about, and knocking on the door, asking questions of the guards. All but the most cursory of questions remained unanswered. They were locked in, though could move within the annex as they pleased, but they had to be escorted by guards. What was there to do in the annex? Not much, but there was a communal study that served the purpose of a common room where dignitaries might mingle or eat together. They were told it was a pleasant-enough room, with a domed skylight and statues and books, but they weren’t allowed there. Were there any others like them? Yes, but that was all the information they got.

Where was Hadia? Nothing.

Chronicler busied himself packing his things back into their crates. He had no intention of admitting to himself that they might be staying there long – he removed his clothes to air them, as well as some writing implements and his most recent notes. Not to mention the book from Ahmer.

He made a quick meal with some fruit, yogurt and flatbread. It was nothing special but was welcome fare after a month on the road. He lay down on the bed and read, trying to ignore Mahr.

Defeated by the setting sun Chronicler lay down to sleep, annoyed that the first time in a month he had the chance to sleep on a proper bed and had no inclination to sleep. By the time he did fall asleep it was dark and Mahr was still awake.

They had been in there for two days when the guards came for them.

Chronicler had been at his desk when they called. He was transcribing notes from the old encyclopaedia and taking preliminary notes for what he was tentatively naming his *Sammaean Histories*. He was looking forward to the freedom and the time to really delve into the project. It was the perfect outlet for everything he'd learnt, finally putting all his notes to use.

"Stand back," barked one of the guards as another pushed his way into the room.

This is new, thought Chronicler. They had never tried entering the room before. Maybe they were carrying out an inspection.

Three guards entered. Two of them wore the now-familiar uniform with leather tabard that Chronicler assumed was the household guard. The third, had at his side a weapon that gave him away. Just as Chronicler identified him as the Consul's bodyguard she entered the room, another guard holding onto what looked like a prisoner in tow.

His face was sun-beaten, furrowed like only a man of the outdoors could be. He was wearing a burlap cloak over one shoulder, smeared in greys and greens. A thin green scarf concealed his neck and chin though betrayed his deep green eyes that were staring at Mahr and chronicler with trembling hatred. He was large and would have been intimidating were it not for the manacled wrists or the weapon prodding threateningly into his back.

The Consul ignored the two residents of that make-shift prison and concentrated fully on her new prisoner, speaking to him in a foreign tongue at length. Lazily, he removed his eyes from Chronicler and stared at her. He traded a single syllable with the woman in return for her troubles, "*Deh*," No.

She leaned closer, spoke again, this time a near-whisper.

The man hesitated, looked to Mahr and Chronicler again, eyes lingering on their faces, flitting across their features. He looked down and repeated the same word. "No."

Nimah lifted her head and looked at Chronicler as she dismissed the man and the guards. The man with the strange blade did not move.

It was only when the door closed that she spoke. "A prisoner, caught yesterday during a Follower ambush. They are growing in confidence. I offered him his life if he could identify you by name and profession. He could not."

Chronicler smiled.

"A good portent for you, though far from conclusive. They are dozens of different groups and, assuming that you are affiliated with them, it is unlikely that you have encountered all of them."

"What of Hadia?"

"What of her?"

"What have you done with her?"

"I recall telling you what would happen if you asked unsolicited questions."

Chronicler was silent.

The consul's eyes wandered to the desk where Chronicler had been writing. She moved closer and leafed through the papers. "Your work, I presume?"

He nodded.

She ignored him, and read the notes, deft fingers lifting papers to reveal more notes and musings. She found a notebook filled with sketches from Kerret, Ras, Mern and Yeppo.

She regarded him silently and returned her attention to the papers.

"If you don't mind, I will take these."

"No, that is my life's work. It's very important."

"I was not asking," she said, picking up a pile of the papers, placing them into a leather folder.

Chronicler's hand shot out, grabbed onto her wrist. Immediately the bodyguard was beside him, elbow connecting with his ribs. Chronicler's grasp loosened and he reeled backwards, trying to regain his breath.

"Assaulting a public official. That is a crime that I *can* punish you with. Mind yourself."

Chronicler tried nodding.

The Consul-secondary left, leaving Mahr to tend to Chronicler.

"Are you an idiot," he said, trying to get him onto a chair."

Chronicler tried to talk though managed only to cough.

"Stop it, stop it, you'll make it worse. Relax, breathe."

Chronicler nodded, took deep breaths until the coughing subsided. "That's my work. She took. My life's work. She better give it back."

"Or what?" said Mahr, a grim smile plastered on his face.

Chronicler could not reply to that. Instead he wandered over to his desk and leafed through the remnants of his notes. Not all of them had been on display – the older notes were still locked away in chests. Everything from Kerret onwards had been out and she'd taken most of it. He was shaking his head in disbelief. Months of notes and observations, interviews, sketches, maps. Almost all of it, lost. His *Sammaean Histories* was looking impossible now.

Mahr had come closer, was standing behind him. "You know it's not all bad," he said.

Chronicler turned round and shot him an exasperated look. "You can't say that!"

"Mahr was smiling. "Do you write everything in those?"

"Depends what you mean, but a lot of thoughts and memories find their way into those folios."

"Anything about the Followers?"

Chronicler's brow furrowed. "From the first words of bandits and raiders to our learning of their name and their ceremony in Mern before our departure, all of it."

"And do you write impartially or do you write your own feelings and thoughts as well?"

Chronicler was surprised. Mahr had rarely shown this degree of interest in his works before. It was odd that he'd chose this moment to ask him about his work. "Sometimes, depending on the context. I try to maintain an impartial tone in my writings but sometimes, especially when trying to point out cultural differences I must turn to what I know, from personal experience."

Mahr raised his eyebrows.

Chronicler was catching on, a grin slowly forming on his lips. He was nodding. "Yes. We were in the thick of it, from the beginning. The first whispers in Ras. Our frustrations in Mern. My encounter with Ohrima. Hadia's unannounced arrival before leaving there. Our close encounter on the road."

"Let us pray to god's dead and false that she reads your notes. And let us pray to those same gods that she does not mistake your observations for fiction.

Days passed and there was no sign of a release or any news of Hadia or any events that might be unfolding within the city, or without.

In his frustration Chronicler had given up writing and took to look absently through his older notes and the old encyclopaedia. Mahr took to wandering the halls of the lower annex, with guards in tow, of course. He had little hope or inclination to attempt an escape, but it was certainly better than rotting away in their quarters.

It was during one of Mahr's excursions that the guards came for Chronicler, saying that the Consul-secondary demanded an audience with Chronicler. They took him from his chambers and led him through the lower annex, up the spiral staircase Chronicler recognised from his incarceration almost a week earlier.

He recognised the corridors and wondered if the time had arrived for his trial.

Soon he was in front of her doors, awaiting the signal to enter. The door opened and the guards led him in. Inside was the Consul-secondary, her scribe and bodyguard. There was another figure in the room, seated in the corner behind them, bathed in shadow.

The Consul-secondary gestured towards a chair and waited for Chronicler to be seated.

She placed a knowing hand on his notes, which were spread across the surface of the table. "This makes for a very interesting read, the parts I can understand at least.

"Your accounts of the cities of Saviud are stark and unabashed. You do not hesitate to write a place's faults yet you are quick to praise, also. I have been to these places before. To Yepo I have been

many times. Your description of the Royal Arcade in Yeppo is faultless and I have had the pleasure of meeting with the Patriarch Mitra on two separate occasions, and I could not help but smile when you described his idiosyncrasies. You have an eye for detail, Niyush of Payaman. I can attest to a great deal of your writings as fact, some of which are no-more than conjecture on your part. The rest I must trust to faith.

“There is enough in here to exonerate you should things come to a trial. When were these words written?”

“All my notes are dated,” said Chronicler. Then, realising that the Saviud had dozens of different calendars – some moon-based, others solar or seasonal – added, “according to the Sarastroan calendar.”

“The Sarastroan calendar? We are thousands of miles from the Sarastroan court. Why not use something better, that locals might understand.”

“Everyone is a local in their homeland. I am a foreigner in every land. If I use the calendar of Zaffre, which I am embarrassed to say I am not intimate with, I may satisfy people here, but as soon as I move on elsewhere it is invalidated. Therefore I use the calendar I grew up with. I mark the passing of every day in my notes and it should be easy-enough to backdate everything in accordance with your own calendar.”

“That is not the issue,” said Nimah. “The issue is the verity of your claims. Were particular passages written on the dates you claim? Did they really take place?”

“Ask Mahr,” said Chronicler. “Ask Hadia, if you can. Ask Sallan if the caravan is still here, though he can only corroborate events from Mern onwards.”

“You think I have not already done that?”

“So why are you asking me? If this really is wartime, do what you must. You don’t need me to sway your decision. And if so, would you really place the fate of a man’s life within his own powers of rhetoric?”

Nimah was quiet. The room would have been silent but for the scratches of the scribe’s pen. She sat back and half-turned her head towards the figure seated in the shadows. A moment passed and the figure rose.

The movement startled Chronicler, who was expecting an assassin or lictor of some sort to kill him there and then. Instead the figure stood forward into the light, revealing himself as a man of fine clothes and flawless dark olive skin. His head, like that of Nimah, was bald and had a similar tattoo running down towards his nose. The scent of citrus and vanilla hung about him as he approached.

He paused beside Nimah and regarded Chronicler. “I am the Consul-primary Ieddonon, one of The Nine. From your writings one would assume that you are relatively well-acquainted with the geography of Saviud. Zaffre is perhaps centremost of its cities. She is not as celebrated as Daaz or as large as Varta, but she is important. She is a crossroads of trade, linking west with east and north with south. Hers are the largest markets, and hers are the most welcoming hostels. She calls no single religion her own and is accepting of different faiths. She is mother to all races and all are welcome here.

“But such diversity comes at a cost. You may not see it. The common populace may not see it, but she is ever-vigilant. She is wary of every religion, every new visitor. Her freedom and strength have been hard-fought and once-won must be maintained, at any cost. These so-called Followers have seeped from Varta and are slowly spreading west. To our knowledge they are only using the so-called Principal as an icon to perpetuate the belief that they are a religious organisation. They are in truth no more than a militant expansionist group. They were expelled from Varta for their beliefs.”

“Yes, religious beliefs,” risked Chronicler.

“Do not misunderstand my words. They believe in this Principal but he is an ends to a means. With their otherworlder-god resurrected they will gain a foolishly large following, which can then be indoctrinated to their cause. They want control of the Saviud from the inside-out. And that means Zaffre.”

Chronicler was nodding, absorbing the information. “And where do I come into this? I doubt it is a love of storytelling that had led to you removing me from my prison to tell me all this.”

“You have not only knowledge of their ways – first-hand, in some cases – but you are an expert on the region,” said the Consul-secondary, gesturing to Chronicler’s notes. “We have our ambassadors and diplomats, but they are familiar only with the court-dealings of other cities. You know about day-to-day life, religion, culture, in a way that they do not. You can be helpful.”

The Consul-primary stepped away from the desk and was standing in front of Chronicer. “We need an advisor. You have spoken with their high priestess, is that not so? You know about the cities in the area as we do not.”

“But why? What’s your stance on these Followers, on their god, once found?”

“Their god *is* found. Some nights ago in the plains. They have sent runners to all corners of Saviud with word of their god’s rebirth upon the mortal plane. They are gathering their numbers and soliciting patronage from around the area, asking anyone disenfranchised or discontented to follow them.”

They are rulers afraid of losing control, thought Chronicer. That is all, no more, no less. And they wanted his help.

“They are marching as we speak. We cannot say for sure, but the signs point to Zaffre.”

“I still don’t see my role in this. Despite what you may think, I am no diplomat. I am certainly not a warrior.”

The Consul-primary was shaking his head. He did not seem perturbed, as though his hopes did not rest solely on Chronicer’s shoulders. “Nothing of the sort. We want an advisor, someone who knows the other cities, their people, their attitudes, and not that of their rulers, but the people themselves.”

“Would I be freed?”

“Of course, and you and your companion would be granted quarters in the upper Annex as well as an office in the Hall itself, close to that of the ruling council, as well as a stipend.”

“And Hadia?”

The Consul-secondary closed her eyes. “She was working with the Followers, said so much herself, in front of us all. Her involvement was not circumstantial, as was yours. She was a willing associate, working for pay. That cannot be overlooked.”

Chronicer was shaking his head. “No. If you need me, then you need her, also.”

“That cannot be arranged,” said the Consul-primary, coolly. “You are still under suspicion and this is but a temporary position until all of this blows over.”

“Where is she?”

The Consul-secondary looked to her superior, who nodded. “She is being held prisoner.”

“I want to see her.”

“That can be arranged.”

“I will not – ” began Chronicer, but his words were cut off by a loud knock on the door. A robed man entered the room and rushed besides the Consul-primary, and whispered something into his ear. The man’s eyes widened and he nodded to Nimah, who in turn gestured to the guards. “You,” she said, pointing to Chronicer, “come with us. Until this is decided you are still considered to be in our custody. Any attempt you make to escape will be treated as a confession to association with the Followers. You understand?”

Chronicer nodded quickly, unsure of what was happening.

They rushed out of the room, The Consuls primary and secondary talking hurriedly with the man who had brought them the message, whilst the guards marched with Chronicer in front of them.

Any attempt he made at asking them something was ignored.

They were moving downhill, away from the Hall, to the periphery of the city. The streets levelled out and they were standing in an open space, the horizon and sky in full view. They were standing atop one of the fortresses surrounding the city, on its battlements looking east. There in the distance he could see black smoke rising from what looked like wide open-cast mines or quarries. Closer, between the mines and the city stood a host of the Followers, the white man painted on their black banners.

“The cobalt mines have been attacked,” said one of the guards.

The group was on the march and its flanks were spreading, moving quickly to encompass the city in a crescent moon. Men and women from the surrounding farmlands were rushing through the gates. Already Chronicer could see casualties.

This was not at all like the group he has seen in Mern. This was an army – troops on the march, cannons in tow, ranks of ruffled riflemen. Mounted leaders issuing orders, banners held high. One banner carried towards the middle of the army was impressive, held aloft on a platform carried by bound beasts Chronicer could not name. It was huge, with small flaps cut into it to stop it from catching the wind. It bore in ornate detail the symbol of the Principal, but amongst the heraldic devices was the

symbol of Mern and what might have been other cities. On the platform, in front of the banner was a woman in white.

“Ohrima,” said Chronicler.

“You can identify her?” said the Consul-primary.

Chronicler nodded, pointed to the large banner, “That’s her in front of the banner.” Indeed, though no voice could be heard in the distance and the chaos of the army on the move, it was clear that she was shouting, orating.

“Bring the General-secondary. Now. And summon a team of jezzail sharpshooters,” said The Consul-primary. His eyes had narrowed and the stern politeness that Chronicler had first seen was gone, replaced with a burning intent. He was looking at the high priestess, his objective clear.

“He continued issuing orders as more people, commoners mostly, appeared to witness the army’s arrival. “Call the militia! Sound the alarm to alert the citizen levy. Man the gates and walls. Prime the defences. And for the gods’ sakes, get these people away from the walls.”

Chronicler could barely see the soldiers and guards rushing about, so engrossed was he by the sight unfolding before him. The army was moving, slowly, spreading to surround the better half of the lands before him. They were trampling farmlands and fields. The spaces between individual units widening to cover more ground. Each unit or division had amongst its ranks a bannerman and some form of leader, barking orders. Most seemed equipped with crude arquebuses and blunderbusses, antiquated by most standards though still deadly if brought in such numbers.

Some of the smaller blocks of infantry were carrying bulkier weapons. It was difficult to make them out at that distance though they looked like some form of large-bored hand cannon.

There were some mounted units – mostly on mantras, horses and chiters. There seemed to be little organisation in the unit composition, and uniforms, as well. Most seemed to just be wearing whatever they had to hand. Many wore a form of stained burlap tunic daubed in the white icon of their god.

The sheer number of them was overpowering, though. There must have been thousands of men – and women, he could not fail to admit – there gathered.

And that was when he saw it, amid the mass of men and women. It was well-hidden, even though there was no attempt to hide it. It was snorting, its horned head shaking despite its mahout pulling hard on multiple sets of reins to keep it under control. It stood on stocky hind limbs, its pale stomach scales exposed beneath a net of leather straps. Powerful forelimbs waved in the air as it rose, fingers the size of children’s arms ending in lethal claws that caught the light. Its thick heavy tail was slamming into the earth, destroying vegetation and drawing clouds of dust.

“Is that a tarragon?” he heard someone shout, pointing at the beast. Some disagreed, saying it was a dragon, though Chronicler saw the Consul-secondary and other nodding, *yes, it’s a tarragon*. Were the situation different Chronicler would have been enthusiastic to speak with the mahout, to learn more about the creature, but as things were it made him realise that he was facing a real army and the possibility of a real siege.

“What defences does the city have?” asked Chronicler, of no-one in particular.

“These walls have withstood many an attack,” said the Consul-secondary’s guard. It was the first time Chronicler had heard the man speak and it was in an oddly high-pitched voice. “And we are not without other defences – Architonnerres, high-caliber jezzails, fire-cannons and mortars. We have nothing to fear from these cultists.”

“They have a tarragon!”

“A tarragon can be killed by any one of those weapons,” said the man, his eyes on the horizon.

“But it can climb these walls without problem.”

“You are a Mushir and you are not well-acquainted with war. You will trust a man-of-war when he speaks of war, as he will trust you when you speak of your profession.”

Chronicler had little time to process the words, when a squad of troops arrived. They appeared dishevelled and were as poorly-equipped as the attackers outside. Some were young, no more than fifteen, though most were older, in their twenties or early thirties. One of them spoke, “The Sandwall militia, reporting for duty.”

“Where are the real soldiers?” asked Chronicler.

“Likely assembling below, or manning the fortresses. In Saviud we cannot afford large full-time armies. We must rely on our citizens in times of war.”

“War,” said Chronicler. The word was like treacle, oozing out of his mouth slowly. He could scarcely believe it. Were they already referring to it as war? No shots had been exchanged yet.

He swore quietly. *I'm in the middle of a war. What the otherworld am I doing here?*

“Is it safe for me here?”

The bodyguard smiled, deferred to the Consul-secondary. “You will remain by my side. If I am here, then yes, it is safe for you. You are a Mushir, though you have not yet been sworn in, and I suggest you begin acting like one. It is your job to observe and take note. Take numbers, sketch their composition. Identify weapons. Banners. Where they came from. The time. The day. The weather. Anything. Everything.”

“But I do not have my things.”

“Then order someone to get them. In my presence you speak with my authority.”

Chronicler nodded, swallowed. He turned to one of the soldiers – he wasn't sure if it was a militia man or a professional. Did it matter? He reiterated the Consul-secondary's words and gave the man directions to his quarters. “And hurry,” he said finally.

He waited impatiently for his implements and stretched out over the battlements.

The army had slowed down it was only the flanks that were continuing to move, stretching out into their full position. The banner platform and tarragon had moved forward, accompanied by a few mounted figures. He wondered if the Visyon Orkon was the man on the tarragon, though it was impossible to tell, beneath the figures robes and tabard and layers of other clothing and helm.

Then from each block of troops stood a man bearing a huge drum. Then they began beating, slowly, rhythmically. Boom. Boom. Boom. Three times, then a pause. Then again. Boom. Boom. Boom.

And so on, like a ritual of abasement targeted towards the defence.

And then a figure mounted on a stone-crested chiter rode forward towards the gate, the powerful mount striding confidently, its high shoulders proud as its rider. Behind it rode a bannerman and another figure, both on a horseback.

The Consul-primary waded through the men until he was close to the Consul-secondary. “Will you take the honours and meet with their representative?”

Nimah nodded, her face grim.

“You know our stance. Take Shadonn and your new Mushir with you.”

She nodded again and turned to Chronicler and her bodyguard. “Come,” she said as she leapt down the battlements and moved with purpose towards the gate.

She took the time to explain a few things to Chronicler on the way down. He was not to speak or participate in the parley in any way. And a half-dozen other details. He was there merely as a recorder of events, what men to the north might call an amanuensis. He nodded, repeating every comment to commit it to memory.

They arrived at a blocky fortress behind which was the east gate. Inside they were given mounts. Shadonn was given a tabard bearing the city's livery and handed a large banner with similar colours. To Chronicler they gave an ill-fitting qaftan of blue silk with gold thread. On its back were the twin gold lizards that were the city's emblem. He mounted his steed and was handed a heavy rod.

“Your sign of office. Hold it forth so the others can see it. Do not let it touch your steed. Keep your arm parallel with the ground at all times,” someone told him.

Chronicler nodded, his face bereft of expression.

They reached the first of two gates, which was pulled aside with a series of heavy-duty pulleys in a tower beside the gate and they rode into the dark of the gate house as the gate was closed behind them. It reminded him of Mern. Then a lance of sunlight and the outer gates crawled open, revealing the enemy trio.

Immediately, Chronicler was astounded by the size of the chiter, whose rider towered over the rest of them. It was bulky, muscles rippling beneath its short coarse fur. Its head was shaking from side-to-side agitatedly, the stone-like crest crowning it waving wildly. Its rider did not seem to care.

“I am Consul-secondary Nimah Argassa, and I speak with the authority of the Consuls, the rulers of Zaffre.”

The man on the chiter nodded, almost in a bow, and returned the greeting. “I am the emissary Rashado of Varta, though the Surrachi Plains are now my home. I speak as proxy to our god and leader, the Principal and his lieutenants the Visyon and Visya.” His voice was one of authority, confidence. He

smiled hollowly as he spoke, regarding his three opposites in turn. "I am here to discuss terms and conditions."

Nimah nodded, raised a hand, "We will listen."

It was all very formal, Chronicler noticed, almost as though it had been rehearsed. There was a great tradition to their exchange, Chronicler could tell, and they were little more than players on a stage. For the moment, at least.

"We come with tidings of the Principal, our god and otherworlder reborn to the material. His wisdom is great and he sees Saviud as a single united state, with Zaffre as its capital. He sees the worth and future of this prosperous city and seeks it as his throne. A great honour.

"On condition of your surrendering of the Council to him, he will look favourably upon you and your people, elevating them to citizens of his future state. He will not forget your foresight nor your kindness."

"And if we do not surrender the city?"

"We will destroy it and everyone who resists, alongside your prized dome. Your corpses will be ground into the mortar we will use to rebuild Zaffre, larger, stronger. Those who survive may supplicate themselves before him and he will look upon their wisdom with kindness."

"We do not recognise your so-called god here. What is his authority?"

"His otherworldliness is his authority. He sees all and knows all. He has foreseen a future with your council disbanded, a great marble throne erected in its place, with him atop it. You would do well to heed those warnings."

"We have our own augurs, and they have woven the Firmament to see a fate, yet it is not this fate. They see Zaffre prospering as she always has. Why should we believe your intimidations?"

"You confuse choice with coercion."

"You come here, beholden to no city or earthly lord and demand that we hand over that which we have worked hard for over to you without complaint and you would call it choice? Go back to your false deity and tell him we do not recognise his claim, that we are not awed by this display. The bedrock of Zaffre is strong. Stronger than your notions. Tell that to your false god."

"Be careful your words. You know not the weight of events that will come to pass."

Chronicler did not even understand what the man meant by that. He turned to Nimah, whose response was immediate.

"As you do not know the resolve of Zaffre. We will not abandon our city to your claim."

"Then you have consigned your city to death."

"Tell me, if your god, this Principal, is so great and awe-inspiring, why does he not speak to us himself? Perhaps if we were to see him we would think differently."

"We believed in him before his body was made manifest in the material realm. Belief in something you can see and touch is not belief. True belief is a question of faith. I offer you the same chance we had, to have faith. To truly believe in his strength before he reveals himself."

"Go back to the plains and bother us no more. You have been given your warning."

"Your mistake will be recorded in the annals of the new Zaffre, and your name will be remembered as that of the person who cost the city its freedom."

"The city stands free *now*. She will not be free under the yoke of a tyrant. You are blind to your own lies."

The man smiled, shook his head slowly. "When the seas have diminished and the deserts consumed the land of mortals and empires are crumbled, what will people remember, the names of petty governors and consuls or the name of the great city they stood for?"

A breath passed before Nimah replied. "Your terms are not accepted and if you value the lives of innocents – both your followers and our citizens – you will turn back and scatted to the plains."

The man nodded in concession, his smile unchanging. "We will speak again before this is done."