

THE LAST DAYS OF ARCHOPALASIA



TORMENT

TIDES OF NUMENĒRA

TONY EVANS

From the Depths: Blue

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by Tony Evans

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Chapter 1

“Sage Reen!” gasped Teylen as he burst into my laboratory. “A stranger! Come see!”

One tries to be patient with one’s assistants. One really does. But it becomes difficult when they have all the grace and forethought of an aneen in rut, and when one is in the middle of a complex and vitally important experiment, and when one’s dying wife is in the next room and desperately needs her rest.

I admit it. I snapped.

“Can you not keep it down, you brick-footed imbecile!” I hissed. “I’ve just this minute got Kyria to sleep, and now you’ve likely woken her up all over again!”

Teylen bowed like he was having convulsions. “So sorry, Sage. So sorry. But a stranger! And he’s come—”

“Quietly, I said!” and glanced back at the curtained doorway that separated my work area from my wife’s day room. “You really must learn to adjust your enthusiasm to the importance of the situation. Screaming at the top of your lungs should be reserved for moments when the roof is on fire, or the Iron Wind is approaching, or raiders. The appearance of a stranger, while admittedly rare this far from civilization, could have been communicated to me in a normal tone of voice after a polite knock at the—”

“But, Sage,” he burred. “He came from the east!”

The rest of my admonition died on my lips. To the east of Camp Gnoseus was the Tempest Waste, the vast and barren hellscape that I had been studying and exploring for these last twenty five years. Nothing ever came out of the Tempest Waste. Nothing.

“Impossible,” I said at last. “There is nowhere east from which he could have come.”

“I know, Sage,” said Teylen. “Nevertheless, he has.”

There was a whisper of cloth behind me and I turned. Kyria had pushed aside the curtain and was leaning in the bedroom doorway in her robe. She looked as beautiful and fragile as a pressed flower.

“Why don’t you go see, Reen?” She smiled. “Aren’t you the one who always says, ‘Save impossible until you have all the facts?’”

I hurried to her and took her around the shoulders. “My dear, you shouldn’t have gotten up. Come back to bed. I told Teylen he was shouting too loud.”

She chuckled softly and patted my arm. “It was you scolding him that woke me, beloved. You really must learn to adjust your anger to the severity of the offense, eh?”

I flushed. Kyria was always poking holes in my hypocrisy and bluster. It was one of the reasons I loved her. She was among the rare few with the courage to stand up to me when I flew into a tirade.

“Forgive me, my dear. You are correct as usual. I will try to tear his head off more quietly next time.”

She clutched at me for support as I lowered her into the bed, and her fingers accidentally touched the scar on my back. I flinched. She winced.

“Oh, Reen. I’m sorry.”

“Never mind. Never mind. I woke you. You poked me. We’re even, eh?”

She kissed me on the cheek. “Go see the stranger, then come back and tell me all about it.”

I kissed her back. “Most assuredly, beloved. Most assuredly.”

I arrived at Skotoko’s lock-up sweating and gasping for breath, my chest and legs aching from trying to match Teylen’s pace. The inconsiderate stripling seemed to have forgotten that, since my collapse a few months ago, I had promised Kyria I would be careful about exerting myself, and here the boy had me running clear across the camp like a man half my age.

Skotoko, a glaive and former mercenary, was my chief of security at Camp Gnoseus, a scarred and glowering tower of a man, capable of turning unwanted visitors away with nothing more than a scowl and a roll of his door-wide shoulders. He gave me a salute as I leaned against the lock-up porch and panted.

“He’s inside,” he said. “But I don’t know if you want to go in. He looks...plagued.”

“Did...” I took another breath and tried again. “Did you touch him? Did you bring him inside?”

“No, no. He walked in and I ran out. The smell was...” He shook his head. “Tempted to burn the place down and build a new one, rather than go back in.”

“No need.” I held up a flat card attached to my vest, one of many artifacts I carried for my work. It glowed a faint yellow. “This alerts me to any such threats. If the man was infectious, it would have started glowing purple or green the moment he came within a kilometer of the camp.”

Skotoko grimaced. “I don’t trust those old gadgets. I’d rather rely on my nose and my gut.” He shrugged. “But you’re the boss.”

Skotoko was right about that. I am the boss—Reen Gnoseus, founder and chief researcher of Camp Gnoseus, the research station I set up here twenty-five years ago to study the phenomenon known as the Tempest Waste and the vast variety of numenera to be found within it. Now it's a bustling little community of about thirty, mostly contract prospectors, who pay me to be allowed to dig for the valuable cyphers and devices that are found only on my claims, and which I was the first to discover and find uses for. The rest are the cooks and drivers and guards like Skotoko who keep it all running and safe. There is also my wife, a naturalist of some repute; my fellow researcher and camp medic, Shwyr, who is also an accomplished nano; and myself. We are the ones who do the actual researching and cataloging. Oh, and there’s Teylen too, of course, my idiot apprentice.

Skotoko was also right about the smell. The reek of rotting flesh as I entered the lock-up hit me like a hammer, combining with something stranger and more gut churning, something acrid and chemical. At first I couldn’t find the source of the stench in the dim interior, then something that looked like a pile of dirty rags shifted in a dark corner.

“H-hello?” I said. “Are...are you human?”

The rag pile slowly unfolded itself to reveal the horribly disfigured face of a man. His rotting flesh seemed to be melting from his bones, and he was covered in weeping

lesions. I couldn't be certain if I was looking at a fellow survivor of the Iron Wind, or just the worst case of sunburn I'd ever observed.

"What happened to you?" I asked.

He opened his mouth to speak and a flap of skin from his lower lip stuck to his upper and tore free, leaving behind an oozing sore. The man winced, then licked the sore with his tongue, but that only made it worse. His tongue seemed even drier than his lips.

"Never mind, never mind," I said. "Let's get some water in you first. Teylen!"

The man shook his head, then lurched painfully to his feet.

"No," he croaked. "No time."

He stumbled toward me, flayed hand raised, and I flinched back, afraid he was going to touch me, but instead he limped past, staggering doggedly toward a large map affixed to the front wall. I knew the map well because I'd drawn it myself. It represented the known topography of the Tempest Waste and the surrounding lands, with, sadly, large blank spots of terra incognita all over it. Long ago, when I'd first founded this camp, it had been my driving ambition to fill in those spots and complete that map, but that had been before my encounter with the Iron Wind had ended my taste for exploration.

The man prodded weakly at the map, leaving behind a peel of grimy skin on the paper.

"Here..." he gargled. "I come from...here."

I stared in disbelief, for the man was pointing at a spot deep within the largest of the blank areas, the very region I had been trying to reach when the Iron Wind had caught my last expedition. A shudder shook me as the memory of it overcame me. The great red cloud had killed my entire company, and Kyria and I had only survived due to a shield device I was able to cobble together at the last second. I had not, however, survived unscathed. I had pushed Kyria under the shield ahead of me, then dived in after her—and the wind had caught me. It had touched my back for but a fraction of a second, but that had been enough. My back now bears a scar of glistening black un-flesh that writhes from my left hip to my right shoulder like a half-submerged snake,

and the never-ending pain of it serves to constantly remind me of the cost of the reckless pursuit of knowledge.

I shook myself from the memory and stared at the revolting skin smudge on the map. “How is that possible? Nothing can live there. The Iron Wind consumes everything.”

He pressed a quivering hand against a nearby table so he could straighten up, and met my gaze. It shocked me. Behind the blistered mask of his face, his eyes were clear and determined. He jabbed his shaking finger at that same spot once again and uttered one word.

“Archopalasia.”

It seemed the effort to speak had taken everything he had, for he collapsed to the floor immediately afterward as I stared at him in shock.

Archopalasia.

I had spent nearly half my life searching for that city of legend. It had been the reason I’d decided to explore the Tempest Waste in the first place—before fear of the Iron Wind had forced me to give up pressing toward the center, and I’d turned this camp into a moneymaking venture. Every rumor and reference I had ever heard said it should be in there somewhere. A city of marvels, it was supposed to be, of numenera undreamed of, of perfect harmony, of human gods, where all the knowledge of the world was stored and freely shared among its citizens. A city, I had once hoped, where I might find a cure for the disease that was slowly eating my wife from the inside.

And now, could it be? After so many failed expeditions, after abandoning the dream entirely, was this stranger truly confirming that my theory was true? Did I dare believe? Did I dare disbelieve?

I knelt beside the fallen figure and shook him, though I shuddered to touch his rotting flesh. He didn’t wake. I leaned closer. He was still breathing, but for how long? I had so many questions he needed to answer. He couldn’t die yet.

“Skotoko! Teylen!” I called. “Call for Shwyr! Then help me get this man to my lab. He must be revived!”

Chapter 2

Shwyr stood from sticking a feeding needle into the arm of the still-unconscious stranger, then pulled the spirit-soaked cloth she had used to mask his smell away from her mouth.

She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m sorry, Sage Reen. There’s not much else I can do. I have no idea what is causing it, nor how to stop it, but this man is decomposing before our eyes. It’s a wonder he’s alive at all.”

“It’s not a disease?” asked Skotoko, who was standing as far from the body as possible.

“It’s not contagious?” asked Teylen, who was doing the same on the opposite end of the lab.

The nano shook her head and began to put away her devices of divination and diagnosis. “Not that I can tell. If I had to guess, I’d say he’d been touched by the Iron Wind, or perhaps come into contact with some dangerous ancient device. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Well, can you wake him?” I asked. “Perhaps use the shocker artifact we obtained from that beggar in Sagus Cliffs.”

She shook her head. “I’ve given him a nutrient solution to help with his malnourishment and dehydration, but I fear anything more drastic would kill him. You’ll just have to—”

With a gasp like a steam break, the man jerked and opened his eyes. Everybody jumped. My heart twinged.

I laughed nervously as I recovered. “It seems there is no need.”

Shwyr blinked, nonplussed. “Evidently.”

I patted her on the back. “Thank you, Shwyr. You’re a miracle worker.”

“It won’t be a miracle that lasts,” she said as she gathered her things. “Get what you need from him as quick as you can.”

“Don’t worry. I intend to.”

I sat down next to the man and gave him what I hoped was a reassuring smile.
“Now then. Where were we?”

“Much to say...” he began.

“Yes,” I said. “Please. You must tell me of Archopalasia.”

“Archopalasia...my home. I beg...take me to them.”

“Them?” Skotoko stepped forward, alarmed. “Them who? How many are there? Are they armed? Why did you come here?”

The man goggled at the glaive, confused. I waved him down. “Quiet, curse you! There’s no time!”

The big man grunted, but stepped back. “Only doing my job.”

I turned back to the stranger. “Please. Is it true what I have read? Does Archopalasia have an artifact that can cure any ailment?”

The man nodded. “The...Vivifier.”

My heart rose in my chest. Then there was yet hope for Kyria—if I dared seek it out.

Suddenly the stranger’s hand clutched my arm. It felt like the grip of a skeleton.

I recoiled. “What! Don’t touch—”

“I must...go back,” he rasped. “Promise me...”

I pulled my wrist from his grasp. “Do you think you’ll make it? Frankly, I’d be surprised if you lived to see another sunrise.”

“I...won’t,” he breathed. “But...take my body...with. Please!”

I nodded. He wanted to be buried in his home. An understandable request, though if that was the case, why had he left it in the first place?

“I can make no promises,” I said. “But if I decide to go, I will take your remains with me when I do.”

The man nodded and eased his head back, apparently satisfied. He closed his eyes. For a moment I waited for him to open them again. He never did.

After Teylen had sealed the stranger's body in an airtight box and removed it to a storage tent, I performed my daily ritual, studying a drop of my wife's blood through an ocular glass.

The nanites were still there—more numerous than ever, in fact—swarming a blood cell, multiplying within it, then hatching from it and moving on to further cells.

The Waning, it is called. Most people think it a random disease, like leprosy. My wife, who is devout, believes it is the punishment of the nano spirits for some sin she committed in her past.

I believe neither of these things. First because I have no belief in the supernatural or the divine. Second because I know my wife incapable of any sin worthy of a god's wrath. Indeed, if anyone's sin has caused her condition, it is mine.

Since she acquired the condition fifteen years ago, I have come to the conclusion that it came from exposure to certain kinds of cyphers and devices—a less immediate danger than pressing the wrong button or aiming a device the wrong way, but no less fatal. And since it has been my life's work to find and study such devices, how can I but think that, since my wife would not have been in contact with so many if not for me, it must be my fault she is dying. If I hadn't brought her to the Tempest Waste and asked her to join me on my expeditions and help me with my research, she might have lived another forty years. Instead, because of me, she was dying, and not slowly. Not anymore.

I made the calculations in my head. I could no longer deny the mathematical hopelessness of Kyria's condition. Her decline was steepening exponentially. I could determine with unbearable precision the number of days remaining before she would leave my side forever.

Unless...

Unless the stranger had been telling the truth about the "Vivifier" he had mentioned—the machine that could cure any disease. But was it the truth? Did it really exist? And if it did, was it worth going in search of it?

A brave man might be shocked that I would even ask such a question. A brave man would likely have started packing for Archopalasia as soon as the stranger had mentioned the name, racing into the unknown with only one fear in his heart, that he

would find the machine too late to save his wife. But I am not a brave man. Not anymore. Not after that last expedition into the Tempest Waste, and that near-fatal encounter with the Iron Wind.

If I knew where Archopalasia was—precisely where—if I had a map and a sure welcome when I arrived, if I knew for certain the vivifying machine existed, it might have been an easier decision. But I had only the word of a dying man that any of it was real, and nothing but a piece of skin stuck in the middle of a blank spot on a crude map to tell me where to go.

Were these enough to go on? Should I risk my life and the peace of my wife's final days on so thin a rumor? Did I dare face again the treacherous landscape, the carnivorous flora and fauna, the poison springs and putrid swamps, and worst of all, the horror of the Iron Wind?

Or should I just make Kyria as comfortable as I could for the time she had left? Surely that was the more logical choice. What if the expedition came to naught? Would she thank me for dragging her into the most inhospitable place in the Ninth World for nothing?

“You have been staring into that glass for the last ten minutes. Have the nanites taken up pantomime?”

I spun around. Kyria was standing in the door again, as lovely as ever. “Darling, I thought you were asleep.”

“I was,” she said. “I was lulled to dreamland by your constant shuffling, but when you stopped and didn't start again...well, I couldn't bear the suspense. What is it? Good news?”

I was tempted to lie to her as I had done so many times in the past, tell her that the tests were inconclusive, or that my latest experimental treatment had worked better than expected, but when I tried, my throat closed up and my eyes flooded with tears. I put a hand to my face.

“Oh, Reen!” she cried, and hurried to my side. “It was a joke. I didn't mean...”

“I know,” I sobbed. “I know. And I wish I could reply in kind. But...but...”

She held me. “But it’s bad, isn’t it? The end. Well, don’t cry, beloved. I’ve known it for as long as you have. You don’t have to hide it anymore. It will be better if we face it together, openly, honestly. Won’t it?”

I turned away from her for a long moment, still shielding my face, but then finally I wiped my eyes and nose and turned back to her. “What would you say, darling, if I said there might be a way?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Is there a way?”

“Possibly. Perhaps.” I cleared my throat. “How much did you hear of what that stranger said?”

She frowned. “Something about a machine? I was half asleep just then.”

“A Vivifier, he called it. A machine that can cure any illness, just like the legends say. If we could find it...”

“And where is it?” asked Kyria.

“Archopalasia.”

Her eyes widened. “Archopalasia? The city you thought existed somewhere in the waste.”

“He showed me where it was,” I said. “On my map. But...”

“But what?”

“But only roughly. And he might have been lying. Or mad. And it would be a difficult and uncertain journey. We would face all the dangers we faced before, when we were twenty years younger and stronger. And the machine might not exist. Or might not work on your...condition. And—”

“And you are afraid,” she said, touching my arm. “For yourself and for me. And I understand that fear. I am more afraid of returning to the waste than of dying. It took so much from us, and not just...” She reached her hand toward my scar, then pulled back and went on. “It took our dreams too, our goals, our confidence. In the twenty years since we escaped it, we have sat at the edge of it, trying to convince ourselves that analyzing what others bring to us is what we wanted all along, but we both know that’s not true. Your goal—our goal—was to map the unmappable, to catalog the unclassifiable, to be the first to know the unknown.”

She squeezed my arm. Her grip had only the ghost of its former strength, but it was no less comforting. “I know you have many years left to you, Reen, as long as you take care of your heart, so I will not blame you if you don’t want to go, but I...I have nothing to lose, do I? Nothing but a bed and a few months of agony and confusion. If you are willing, then let us use the excuse of this ‘Vivifier’ to reclaim our dreams. Let us once again be the first to know the unknown.”

Well, I ask you, what could I say to that?

In the end I said nothing. I just kissed her long and deep, then turned to the door and shouted for Teylen.

“Boy, get the stranger out of the storage tent. We’re going to Archopalasia!”

Chapter 3

It took a day to pack and provision ourselves for the trip, and sadly, even in so short a time, Kyria took a turn for the worse, going from an afternoon and evening of alert lucidity to a morning where she didn't wake at all, and then hours where she drifted between fevered slumber and constant prayer, and was suddenly unable to walk without assistance. It seemed my previous day's calculations might have been overly optimistic. I'd thought I had a few weeks before she succumbed. Now it seemed it might be only days. Maybe hours.

And that wasn't the only problem. In her weakened state, she couldn't walk or even ride in the bumble cart, Shwyr's homemade self-pathing supply wagon, which, though it was keyed to follow Shwyr anywhere she went, and could make its way over almost any terrain, had little in the way of suspension, and would have bucked Kyria off at the first patch of rough ground. This made transporting her the foremost difficulty of the trip. Finally, I solved the problem by commandeering a few antigravity devices from some of the camp's prospectors and affixing them to a narrow cot with walls like a crib's to prevent her from falling out. I dubbed my new invention the hovercot.

Stabilization was an issue at first, with it flipping over and dumping Teylen on the floor on the first test, and then wobbling so much on the second that he vomited over the side. Finally, I had a flash of inspiration and solved two problems at once by fastening the box containing the stranger's remains to the underside of the thing. This gave it the ballast it needed, and opened up some desperately needed room on the bumble for more food and water. As a finishing touch, I installed a device that could erect an energy barrier around the whole conveyance. It wouldn't provide much protection against the Iron Wind, but it would hopefully repel more mundane threats like vicious creatures and burn-rain.

Of course, my attempts at protection turned out to be pointless, as we discovered a far more effective shield just after our midday stop on the first day of our journey, when Teylen vanished into thin air right in front of us.

Besides myself and Kyria, the company as we set off for Archopalasia was made up of Teylen, his head covered in a burnoose; Shwyr, who would serve as our medic and maintainer of our devices, walking with a yellow parasol over her head as if we were out for a garden stroll; Skotoko, our protection, in much-scarred synth armor and a bandana; and a fellow who Skotoko insisted we bring along as a scout and extra blade, an unsavory-looking jack by the name of Biver who had drifted into our camp a few weeks previous and who I had never met before.

I took an instant dislike to the fellow, whose attitude was sullen, and whose choice of attire was dire to say the least—a ridiculous ankle-length coat of bright red leather that made him stand out like a blood barm in a burkfowl pen, and which he occasionally petted and whispered to as if it were a living thing. I was going to object—to him in general and his coat—but I relented after remembering that many beasts of the waste are agitated by bright colors, and realizing that he might provide a distraction to them that would keep the rest of us safe.

Before we left, Teylen insisted we give the man from Archopalasia a name so we weren't always calling him "the man" or "the stranger"—or "the stinking corpse-in-a-box," as Skotoko referred to him. Shwyr imaginatively proposed we call him Archo, and the name stuck due to nobody other than Teylen caring in the slightest. He wrote the name on the box and off we went.

Then, after lunch, Teylen disappeared.

It was as we were going up a steep hill, and I was just calling to him to help me steady the hovercot, which was not at its best on inclines. He was ambling along behind the bumble, fiddling absently with his belt, when a second later he wasn't there at all.

I gave a startled yelp and the others turned to see what I was looking at.

"What happened?" asked Shwyr.

"Trouble?" asked Skotoko.

"He...he...he vanished!" I said. "Teylen. Just..." I snapped my fingers.

"I saw it," said Biver, who had been patrolling our left flank. "Went away like he'd never been there."

Skotoko drew his blade and started cautiously back toward the point where Teylen had vanished, probing the ground with his feet like he thought the boy had fallen in a hole.

“He didn’t drop,” I said, annoyed. “He vanished. I told you.”

“Aye,” said Skotoko. “Just seeing for my—”

He yelped and almost swung his sword as Teylen suddenly popped back into existence right in front of him. The boy shrieked and fell back, just as startled, but then looked around with an expression of relief and joy.

“I’m back!” he cried. “Thank the nano spirits! I’m back!”

“And where exactly did you go?” I asked, stepping toward him. “What happened to you?”

Shwyr joined us. “Are you okay?”

“I...I don’t know,” he said, touching his belt. “I was...I was just fiddling with the buckles of the belt I took off Archo and—”

He did something to the belt, and the world dissolved into utter blackness around us.

Well, not utter blackness. Though it was black in every direction, I could clearly see Teylen, hand still on the buckle, as well as Skotoko and Shwyr, who were staring around in terror and astonishment. We were all cupped within a bubble of dim light, perhaps three arm-spans wide. Beyond that, it was as dark as the lair of a ravage bear. My mind froze in a paralysis of terror. I couldn’t move. Shwyr, on the other hand, wore an expression of utter wonder, like a child seeing a flutterby for the first time, while Skotoko flailed around at the bubble with his sword, clearly panicked.

“What is this? What have you done, you idiot boy?”

“Skotoko!” I cried, snapping out of my shock. “Your sword! Be careful!”

I clutched his shoulder to calm him, but he jerked backward into the blackness with a cry that was cut off as he vanished.

My arm hair stood on end. Had I just banished the glaive into the outer dark? Where had he gone?

“You see?” said Teylen, staring around obliviously. “This is what happened the last time I turned it.”

“So turn it back!” I shouted. “Turn it back!”

Teylen turned the buckle the other way and we found ourselves back on the hillside as though we’d never left, except that Skotoko—alive, thank fate—was standing there holding his greatsword over his head and looking around for someone to strike. For a moment it seemed that would be Teylen, but I stepped between them, and after some heavy breathing, the glaive backed up and lowered the blade.

“What was that?” he asked. “What did you do to us, boy?”

“You took that belt from the stranger?” I held out my hand. “Give it to me.”

He cowered back, but started to undo it. “I...I just thought it looked nice. I cleaned it up and...”

I snatched it from him as he held it out. “You thought it looked nice. Can’t you even recognize an artifact when you see one?”

“You didn’t, did you?” he whined.

“Enough of your insolence,” I barked. “Keep walking.”

He gave me a sullen look, but turned around and continued up the hill as I carefully put the belt in my satchel.

“You’re keeping that thing?” asked Skotoko uneasily.

“Of course,” I said. “I’ve never seen anything like it.”

He shivered and turned away. “Well, keep it away from me. It gives me the crawlies.”

That night, after we made camp and had our dinner, Shwyr and I sat apart from the others and made a fuller examination of the belt. We determined that it was the buckle alone that was the artifact, and that it seemed to have but one function—to hold the user and the space immediately around him outside the normal world.

I theorized that this bubble existed in a different dimension, but we really had no idea. However it worked, once the buckle was activated, nothing outside the bubble

could get in, and to an outside observer, anything within it was simply gone—invisible, inaudible, and incorporeal. Only if the buckle device was deactivated or if someone stepped outside of its circumference, as Skotoko had done when he had stumbled, would they reappear.

"Which means we must take care not to walk out of here and leave the buckle behind," I said as we sat in the bubble's darkness. "We would have lost it forever, then."

"Probably the reason it's attached to a belt." She shook her head, marveling at the thing, which she held in her palm. "Explains how the stranger was able to cross the Tempest Waste, doesn't it? Iron Wind or juralisk comes along, he just twists the buckle and waits out the danger in the bubble."

"But for how long?" I asked. It was cool inside the bubble. Cold even, and there seemed to be a breeze on my face, though I didn't know how that was possible. "How much air does the bubble hold? If you waited too long, would you die of asphyxiation?"

"Good question," said Shwyr, and started fumbling in a pocket. "I have a device here somewhere that measures the elemental makeup of air. It should be able to tell us if it is changing over time. Ah! Here it is. Let's—"

She clicked a button on the device, then paused and tapped it, then pushed the button again. "Hmmm. It doesn't seem to be working." She reached into another pocket and pulled out a small translucent orb. "Let me put a light on it and have a look."

She rubbed the orb with her thumb and held it over the measuring device, but it didn't light up. She frowned and rubbed it again, then shook it. "Is this broken too?"

I started pulling cyphers out of my pockets. "Check all your devices. It may be some function of being inside the bubble."

And so it proved. None of the artifacts on our persons appeared to be functional while we were in the bubble, but as soon as we twisted the buckle again and returned to the world, they all worked as expected, much to Shwyr's relief. As a nano, devices are more than just tools to her. They're her constant companions and extensions of her body and will, and she found it frightening and isolating to lose access to them and their various utilities, even for the short time she was in the bubble.

We had still not answered the question of how much breathable air existed within the bubble, but both of us found staying inside it for any length of time so unsettling

that we decided to put off further testing until we could do it in a safer and more controlled environment. Still, we had determined that it would work as a temporary refuge for the party, with just enough room for everyone and Kyria's hovercot to fit together—though not the bumble—and not feel uncomfortably crowded, and that made me feel considerably better about our chances of making it to Archopalasia alive and in one piece.

Chapter 4

The Tempest Waste was worse than it had been when last I'd led an expedition into it—far worse. Well, perhaps I don't mean worse. It certainly wasn't more dangerous. In fact, in some ways, it was safer than before, but only because nothing in it was alive.

Yes. On further consideration, I guess what I should have said was, it was much more dead.

The last time I'd ventured into it, it had been filled with twisted and toxic flora and mutated and dangerous fauna, and traveling through it had been a constant battle to keep from walking through patches of poisonous plants and avoiding encounters with savage animals bent on devouring one whole. This was one of the reasons I had insisted on overloading the bumble cart with provisions for this journey, because I had remembered that it was unsafe to eat or drink anything one found in the wastes.

But now, only twenty years later, there was nothing to eat at all. We saw hardly any plants beyond cancerous-looking lichens and mosses, and no animals but insects and spiders with entirely asymmetrical sets of legs and eyes. We hardly even saw any birds, let alone laaks or mik-miks or bauls. If the waste had been a rotting corpse before, it was a meatless skeleton now—an observation that actually pleased me in a way, as it seemed to confirm a theory about the place that I'd formulated after our previous exploration.

This theory was that in the not-too-distant past, perhaps no more than a few hundred years ago, the Tempest Waste had been a verdant and teeming grassland, alive with normal, healthy plants and animals. Then something—I don't know what—began to cause a rapid deterioration of the soil and air, and this, in turn, caused the Iron Wind to manifest there more frequently, which soon warped the land into the twisted and corrupted waste I'd known back when I'd first visited it.

That it was even less habitable and more twisted now, such a short time later, seemed to suggest I had been right, that something was leeching the wholesomeness from the place and leaving only disease and corruption behind. I tested this by occasionally scooping up samples of the crimson, awful-smelling dirt, performing

simple experiments on them, and comparing the results to those of soil samples I had taken before.

The findings were unequivocal. There had been a few nutrients in the soil twenty years ago. Now there were virtually none, while the base toxicity was many times higher. The spirits forbid you tripped and fell on your face here. You might die just from licking your lips or getting dirt in a cut.

For all that, it was still a place of awe and wonder, of mad landscapes shaped by erosion, collapse, and the terrifying whimsy of the Iron Wind, and the others walked through it with their jaws unhinged and their eyes bulging from their sockets as they took in the sights.

We saw a wide field filled with rippled ranks of metal waves—some taller than Skotoko—like a vast bronze sculpture of a stormy sea, which sang in the wind like the wailing of children. We passed a range of hills that looked like finest lacework, great slanting walls of bone white rock so full of filigreed holes that you could see the sun setting behind them. We avoided a series of spiral ponds filled with a purple, jellylike substance that stank like feet. We traversed a sea of dunes that sent up clouds of sparks every time we scuffed our feet across their sands.

And the farther we went, the stranger it got, and hotter too. By the fourth day the heat was like an oven even at dawn, and most of us were soon stripped down to the bare minimum that modesty allowed. All except Biver, who insisted on remaining fully clothed, though it caused him to sweat profusely—and smell. So much so that Shwyr eventually had to ask him, politely, to walk downwind of us.

Skotoko shed his armor and shirt, revealing rippling muscles and ropy veins along with an impressive assortment of shining silver tattoos and countless scars from old wounds, some that looked as if they should have killed him. Shwyr refused to look at him in this state of undress, making me wonder if she was horrified by him, or attracted.

Kyria wasn't bearing the oppressive weather well at all, drifting in and out of delirium. I spent most of my time at her side, wiping her forehead with a damp cloth, and praying to the spirits I didn't normally believe in that we would make it.

After five days, we reached the edge of the blank area on my map, and conditions got even worse. The heat became unbearable and the air so dry that our lips and fingertips cracked, and we began going through our supply of drinking water far faster than I had anticipated.

I took more samples and confirmed that not only were the wastes more lifeless than they were twenty years ago, they were also more lifeless the closer to the middle of the map we traveled. And yet the stranger had said that Archopalasia, that legendary oasis of learning and technological marvels, was supposed to be farther in. Was it all a lie? Would we find only bone-dry ruins at the center? Would we find anything at all?

I hoped so, for at the rate we were consuming water, we would never make it back to our camp without at least one refill.

A day later, Biver went mad.

Despite the ever-increasing heat, he had steadfastly refused to remove his long red coat, and at midday, with the sun at its highest, it finally caught up to him, and he started snarling and slashing around him with his daggers at enemies only he could see.

“Bite me, you bloodsucking little bastards?” he snarled. “I’ll bite you! I’ll cut your knobby little heads off!”

Shwyr and Teylen backed away from him, uneasy, as did I, moving Kyria’s hovercot out of his reach as well.

“Skotoko,” I snapped. “Deal with your friend.”

“He’s no friend of mine,” said the glaive.

“Then why on earth did you bring him?” I asked.

“Because he’s a fell man with a blade.”

I shook my head. “Not really such a good thing now, is it?”

Skotoko just grunted and edged toward Biver with his hands out. “Come on, brother,” he said. “Pull yourself together. You’re fighting air.”

“I have a calming cypher,” said Shwyr, joining him. “It should cool the fevers of his brain—if we can get it on him.”

Skotoko brandished a fist the size of a sugar melon. “I’ve got one too. Just stay back a minute.”

He took another step closer to Biver. “Easy now, boy. It’s all in your—”

“Get away!” shouted Biver, slashing wildly at him. “This is my fight! I—”

Suddenly he broke off and started shrieking. “They’re on me! They’re on me! Get them off!”

And as we all watched in horror, he started stabbing at his own arms and legs with his knives.

“Mad idiot,” said Skotoko, then charged and caught him in a diving bear hug.

Biver thrashed and shrieked in Skotoko’s embrace, but the glaive had the man’s arms pinned to his sides, and he could do nothing.

“Your cypher,” gasped Skotoko. “Quick.”

Shwyr hurried forward and pulled a shin-sized object from her carrier belt, then reached for Biver’s head. He snapped at her, narrowly missing her fingers.

“No you don’t,” growled Skotoko, and butted Biver’s forehead.

Biver’s head sagged to one side and Shwyr jammed the little object in his ear. His thrashing slowed and finally stopped, though whether the cause was Skotoko’s skull knock or her cypher, I could not tell.

“Well done, you two,” I said.

Skotoko and Shwyr exchanged a shy glance, then looked away from each other.

“Thanks,” said Shwyr.

“He’s my responsibility,” said Skotoko.

“Well, while you have him calm,” I said, “maybe you can get that coat off him and clean him up. I’m afraid we haven’t enough water to bathe him, but anything would help.”

“Good idea,” said Shwyr. “We can at least air him out.”

She got to work undoing all his buckles while the rest of us gathered around, morbidly curious, I suppose, to see what the coat had been hiding all this time. We were not disappointed. Horrified, yes. But not disappointed.

As Shwyr pulled the coat's flaps aside, the cloud of stench that rose from within forced us all back, choking and huffing. My eyes burned from it, then recoiled from what was revealed. He was practically skeletal, ribs showing, collarbones sticking out like blades, and his grimy skin covered in the worst heat rash I had ever seen. It spread from his armpits in angry blisters, cracked and weeping pus and blood, and stretched from neck to belt line.

"No wonder he thought things were biting him," said Teylen, standing at my shoulder. "His whole body must sting."

"And the poisoned dirt has been getting in those sores," I said. "He's likely been hallucinating for days."

"I don't know how he's alive," said Shwyr.

We found the answer to that when Skotoko rolled him over to peel the coat off his back. Two translucent tubes extended from the inside of the coat to points just below Biver's shoulder blades, where they seemed to be attached somehow.

"What in the world?" asked Shwyr.

She reached for one of the tubes, but it seemed to writhe away from her, and suddenly Biver was wide awake again, twisting onto his back again and flailing like a pinned snake.

"Don't you touch me!" he cried, slashing Shwyr across the cheek with his nails while kicking at all the rest of us. "Get your hands—"

Skotoko applied his fist to Biver's jaw and it worked as he'd said it would, dropping the jack like a gutted aneen.

"Th-thank you, Skotoko," said Shwyr.

The glaive shook his head. "Shoulda punched him before. Just to be sure."

She patted him on the shoulder. "You couldn't have known. But now that he's really out, maybe we can proceed."

“See to your own wounds first,” I said. “His nails are probably as filthy as the rest of him.”

Shwyr agreed and allowed Skotoko to apply a cleansing salve from her healer’s kit to her scratches, then used it on Biver’s rash and blisters. She also examined the tubes that connected him to his coat.

“I don’t know what’s happening here,” she said. “If it’s a creature of some sort or a kind of bio-synthetic garment, but whatever it is, where the tubes touch his flesh, they seem to be affixed with...teeth. Either the coat is feeding on him, or he’s feeding on it.”

“It seemed to wake him up when it felt threatened,” I said. “It jarred him into defending it.”

“Yes,” she said. “I thought so too. A symbiosis of some kind. It may be that, as disgusting as it is, the coat has kept him alive despite his sores. It may be clearing the toxins from him in some way.”

I grimaced. “So you’re recommending we let him keep it?”

“I think he may die without it,” said Shwyr.

“And he may kill us all with it,” muttered Teylen.

Shwyr closed the coat over Biver’s emaciated torso and stood, frowning. “I think his real enemy is the heat. He has—we’ve all had—no escape from it for days. If we could keep him cool for at least a few hours a day, some of those sores might begin to heal.”

“And how do you propose to do that?” I asked. “We can’t even keep ourselves cool.”

She pursed her lips unhappily. “Loath though I am to suggest it, perhaps we should sleep within the buckle’s bubble until we reach our destination. It is cool in there, and possibly free from the toxins that surround us out here in the waste as well. It would help us all sleep better, I think.”

“But you hated it in there,” I said. “Can you stand it?”

“I will have to,” she said. “I need to escape the heat as much as any of—”

At her feet, Biver twitched and opened his eyes, and we all stepped back, anticipating another fit of flailing, but he only stood, clutching the coat tightly around him, and stared at us all.

“What did you do?” he demanded. “You didn’t—”

Shwyr held up her hands. “I only cleaned and salved your wounds, Biver. We left your...your coat alone.”

I cleared my throat. “Er, about your coat. What can you tell me—”

Biver backed away. “No,” he said. “No no no.”

I held out a hand. “My boy, please. All I want to know—”

“No no no!”

He turned and ran to a distance of about fifty paces, then just stood there, glaring at us and rebuckling the coat.

I sighed and turned away from him. “Fine. On we go.”

Chapter 5

One pleasing thing that came out of the Biver fracas was that Skotoko and Shwyr had taken to walking next to each other and talking quietly together under the protection of her yellow parasol, which Skotoko held. For a while I eavesdropped out of curiosity, but it quickly became clear that they had little in common, so they spoke at length about nothing at all. Neither seemed to mind.

Another was that Biver continued to travel at a distance from the rest of us, either trailing behind, or paralleling us to our left or right. I assumed he was still sulking, or perhaps plotting revenge, or both. Anything that kept him far enough away that we couldn't smell him was a blessing.

Still, the violence and strangeness of the incident put me on edge for the rest of the day. Or perhaps it was our discussion of the heat and the toxicity of the land. Whatever the cause, I found myself afraid of the waste again, in a way that I hadn't been since I realized how dead it was. I had somehow tricked myself into believing it a safe place because there were no living threats, but now I was suddenly unbearably conscious of all the inanimate threats around us. The heat could kill us. The poison in the soil and the air could kill us. The madness of isolation. The Iron Wind.

The wind, of course, was my greatest fear. It had been the Iron Wind that had stopped me from entering the area before, and nearly killed me in the process. And every legend of the waste said that it came more frequently the deeper one penetrated. Yet it had not so far appeared. Not even a hint of it. No red clouds in the distance. No rumble of thunder. No scent of ozone or rust. No sourceless whispers echoing in the corners of my mind. But still, every time the un-scar on my back pulsed, every time Kyria moaned or twitched in her sleep, every time the sands swirled beneath my feet, I scanned the horizon for the racing red of its rolling front. It was never there, but strangely, even its absence was unnerving.

We walked on until it was full dark in the vain hope that the day might get cooler, for despite her suggestion, Shwyr was still hesitant about spending a night in the

bubble, but it soon became apparent the heat would not lessen, so we gathered around Kyria's hovercot—even Biver—and I turned the buckle.

The relief of the cool was immediate as the bubble popped into existence around us, but so was the tension of the unsettling silence, and the impossibility of knowing what was going on beyond our refuge. It was difficult for me to resist turning it back off every few minutes to check on the bumble and our supplies.

I increased the grav repulsers on the hovercot, raising it so that we could lie down beneath it, but it took a long time for everyone to relax enough to sleep. Shwyr in particular had a terrible time. She could not seem to stop tossing and turning, and her hands would occasionally fly to one or another of her devices, as if she wanted to check something. Then she would remember none of them worked within the bubble, and she would put them back down with a grunt of disgust.

After this happened for the tenth or so time, she curled up in a ball and started sobbing quietly to herself. On the other side of the bubble, Skotoko sighed and stood, then crossed and sat beside her and offered her his hand.

She stared at it for a long second as if she didn't understand what it was for, but then she took it and squeezed it hard. He lay back and after a time she uncoiled and stretched out beside him, quiet at last.

I fell asleep soon after. I don't know if Skotoko did.

It was with some trepidation that we readied ourselves to return to the world after we had awakened and dressed. There was no way of knowing what might have happened in the night, or what was happening now. We didn't even know when "now" was. We might have slept two hours, or eight, or twelve. The passage of time was impossible to gauge inside the bubble, as were the conditions outside it. We might come out into deepest night, the hottest part of the day, or the middle of the Iron Wind.

Still, we couldn't stay in it indefinitely, so, finally, we all went on our guard and I twisted the buckle back to its "off" position.

The waste instantly appeared around us, as hot and dead and horrible at midmorning as we had left it last night. The bumble was also where we'd left it, and

nothing in our surroundings appeared to have changed—until, that is, Teylen looked toward the southeastern horizon and gasped.

“Sage Reen! Look! Is it the Iron Wind?”

My heart leapt into my mouth at his words, but when I turned to see what he was looking at, it returned to its normal position and I breathed a sigh of relief. Though it was indeed a wonder we were seeing, it was not anything like the Iron Wind.

We had made our camp the night before on the east side of a low ridge, in the lee of an outcropping of rocks. Now, in the light of day, I saw that the ridge was the edge of a vast depression, a hundred kilometers across or more, and in the very center, perhaps three days’ travel away, rose a tall swirling funnel of what looked like brown dust. It stretched up from the ground, impossibly tall, expanding and thinning as it went, until it dissipated into a cloud of yellow haze high in the too-bright sky.

“No,” I said at last. “Not the Iron Wind.”

“A cyclone, then?”

“No. Cyclones are frantic, chaotic.” I pulled a chain of lenses from my pack and lined up three so I could see the funnel more clearly. Its twisting seemed unnaturally steady to me, uniform and fixed, never moving nor subsiding, never swaying from side to side. Was there something beneath the vortex causing this to happen? Could it be Archopalasia?

“Then what is it?” the boy asked.

I put the lenses away. “I don’t know, but whatever it is, it lies directly along our path to where the stranger pointed on the map, so...off we go.”

We walked all day with the ridge receding behind us, but the funnel of dust seemed to get no closer ahead of us. And so it went for another two long, monotonous days. The basin was not like the rest of the waste. Gone were the impossible landmarks and mad geography. Here there were hardly any features whatsoever. It was as if some great stone had been rubbed across the land, wearing it smooth. Or, as Skotoko put it, as if some giant posterior had sat upon it and crushed it all flat.

The only break from the tedium was a brief moment of sheer terror when, in the blistering heat of the late afternoon of the second day, I saw shifting red out of the corner of my eye and looked to the horizon. There, at last, far on the far side of the funnel, crawled the Iron Wind, moving like a crimson fog bank pushed by a hurricane.

My instinct was to run, but I fought it down, not wanting to embarrass myself in front of the others. The wind was five days' walk from us at least, and moving away to the north. As long as it didn't turn, there was no immediate danger.

I cleared my throat and beckoned to Teylen. "There, boy. You wanted to know what the Iron Wind looked like. That is the Iron Wind."

Teylen stared, as did the others.

"It doesn't look like much from here," he said.

I chuckled. "Pray you never get a closer look."

"It's not going to get between us and the dust column, is it?" asked Shwyr.

"The worst part of the Iron Wind," I said, "is its unpredictability. It could vanish. It could double back. It could come straight for us. It could swallow us whole."

"And if it does?" asked Teylen.

"Then we turn the buckle and hope hiding in the bubble is proof against its terrible transformations. Otherwise we are dead." An involuntary shudder shook me as memories of what had become of my companions who the wind had overwhelmed came unbidden to my mind. "Or worse."

We continued on, keeping an eye on the wind for the rest of the day, but by sunset it had vanished to the north. Oddly, this did not give us any feelings of relief. Now that we had seen it, knowing where it was felt more reassuring than not knowing where it was, just as, when there is a bore-wasp in the room, you are much more at ease when you can see it than when you can't.

On the morning of our seventh day in the wastes and our second in the basin, only an hour after we had awoken and left the protection of the bubble, I was shocked to hear Kyria calling me from the hovercot.

"Reen. Reen, are you there? Where...where am I?"

I hurried to her side, astounded. She had been either asleep or in an unresponsive state since our journey had begun, and now, suddenly, she was speaking and apparently lucid.

“Beloved,” I said. “You’re awake.”

“Am I?” she asked. “I feel...I don’t know. Where is our home? What strange bed is this? Why am I outside?”

I took her hand. “We are in the Tempest Waste, my dear. Heading for Archopalasia, do you remember? We are going there in the hopes they have a cure...for both of us.”

She frowned, then nodded. “Yes. I remember. The stranger. And the machine that cures all ills. So we are on our way, then?”

“Yes, you fell ill on the eve of our departure, but we are seven days out, and, I believe, within sight of our destination.”

She blinked. “I have been asleep that long?”

“You have,” I said. “I have been very worried.”

She struggled to sit up but was too weak. “May I see...may I...”

I reached under her and helped her into a sitting position. Despite our best efforts, it had been difficult to feed her, and she was as light and fragile as the skeleton of a bird. It nearly broke my heart just to hold her.

“There,” I said, pointing toward the dust funnel. “That, I hope, is Archopalasia. It is certainly in the right place on the map, and there aren’t a lot of potential alternatives—at least, none that I can see from here. We will know more when we get closer, I hope.”

“Is...is it a whirlwind?” Kyria asked. “Is it smoke?”

“A whirlwind, yes. Of some kind,” I said. “But not a naturally occurring phenomenon, I don’t think, for it is too regular, and too consistent. Here.” I pulled my lenses from my satchel. “Have a closer look.”

I held them up for her, and she moved my hands to focus on the column.

“Remarkable,” she said. “It never even wavers, and—” She paused, then moved my hands again. “Is...is there a building in the base of it? Or a disk?”

“A what? Where?”

I stepped away from her and used the lenses myself, training them on the column and searching the twisting dust for what she had seen. Then I found it, an enormous structure—or possibly several structures—at the base of the great funnel. It was hard to make out the details in all the dust, but there were definitely large disk-shaped structures obscured within it. My heart swelled. Could this be Archopalasia? It certainly seemed large enough to be a city, judging from the few parts of it I could see.

Teylen appeared at my side. “Have you seen something?”

“A structure in the dust,” I said, and passed him the lenses.

He gasped as he found it. “I see it! I see it! Amazing!”

Shwyr and Skotoko heard his squeaks and looked back from where they had walked ahead.

“You’ve found something?”

“Not I,” I said, and turned to Kyria. “My wife. She spotted...”

I stopped. Kyria was looking up at the sky, her eyes puzzled. “Reen? What am I doing outside? Where are we? Why am I in this bed?”

My heart sank, but I told her everything again as if I hadn’t explained it all to her only moments before. She was just as interested and excited the second time, and forgot it again after another few moments. Only a half an hour later she had once again fallen into her usual state of semi-slumber.

Teylen put a hand on my arm as I walked beside her, trying to swallow the lump in my throat.

“I’m sorry, Sage,” he said. “She seemed happy, at least.”

“It’s only one more day to the column,” I said. “Surely she will last until then.”

Teylen nodded. “Of course she will. Of course.”

I could hear the pity and disbelief in his voice, but was too heartbroken to chastise him for it.

We continued on.

Chapter 6

Later that day, we heard a shriek from behind us, and Biver, who had continued traveling at a distance from the rest of the party, ran toward us, flapping his arms and pointing behind him.

“Hounds!” he cried. “Hounds are coming!”

Skotoko sighed. “He’s lost it again. Stay back, Shwyr.”

Biver hurried to me, pleading and pointing. “Hounds!”

“Easy, boy,” I said. “Don’t hurt yourself. Do you need your wounds cleaned again?”

He snarled at me. “There’s nothing wrong with me, curse you! Just look!”

To humor him, I looked where he was pointing. Then stopped in my tracks. There was movement behind us. At least there had been. It was gone again as soon as I looked.

I took out my lenses and held them to my eye. There were a series of shallow hills behind us. We had been going up and down them all day. As I focused on one, a black shape came over the top and down the other side. Then two more. A fourth paused at the top of the hill and seemed to look in our direction, then followed its fellows.

Whether it was the heat shimmer that rose up off the basin’s hard-packed earth or some distortion in the lenses, I was not able to make out more than the fact that the beasts were dog-sized and walked on four legs, and had long, narrow heads. All other details were too blurry.

Still, no detail could have been stranger than the fact that the things were there at all. As I have already said, we had seen no animals but for a few bugs since we entered the waste, and almost no plants either, and yet here, in the most desolate area we had so far traveled, was what appeared to be a pack of alpha predators. What were they feeding on? What were they drinking? Without an entire food chain of bugs and plants and small herbivores beneath them, they should not have been able to survive. It was impossible. It made no sense.

“Are...are they following us, do you think?” asked Teylen.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Just keep an eye on them. We’ll see. Let’s keep going.”

“Another reason to sleep in the bubble,” said Shwyr as we started walking again.

Skotoko growled. “They won’t touch you, love. Not while I live.”

I paused at his words and gave the two of them a sidelong glance. So, that confirmed that.

After an hour, all doubt was erased. The creatures were indeed following us. They had now come up parallel to us, but remained at a distance. I observed their silhouettes against the sinking sun. Still no details, but I could now see that there were seven of them, and that they had elongated heads disproportionate to their gaunt and spindle-legged bodies.

Skotoko wanted to hunt and kill the creatures so they wouldn’t get into the supplies on the bumble while we were in the bubble that night, but I vetoed the notion. There was no sense in the glaive putting himself in harm’s way when we weren’t sure there was any danger to begin with. If he got hurt or killed, we would be without anyone else to protect us except Biver—if he was any protection at all.

We kept walking until twilight, hoping to find some sort of natural protection for the bumble, but nothing presented itself. Finally, with the light completely gone, we were forced to make camp where we were and cooked our supper out in the open, since fire did not work any better than cyphers inside the bubble.

Finally, when we were ready for bed, we doused the fire, unloaded the bumble of everything we thought the beasts might consider food, stacked it all next to the hovercot, and twisted the buckle.

Inside, it was its cool, silent self, and its protection should have relieved us. But tonight, once again, wondering what was happening outside of it made sleep difficult, and it was a long night, made longer when Skotoko’s usual attempts to calm Shwyr this time turned into something more.

I could hear them softly exploring each other’s bodies beneath the blanket they shared and glanced beside me at Teylen, whose blanket was right next to theirs. I chuckled at the horrified expression on the boy’s face.

When we woke the next morning, we drew every weapon and defensive cypher we had before we turned off the bubble. The hounds, however, were nowhere to be seen, though they had definitely been there. There were paw and claw prints all around the remains of our fire. And not only that, they had also apparently liked the taste of the bumble.

It seemed incredible, but I could see no other explanation for the damage. The tires of the vehicle, which were solid masses of dense, spongy gray synth, were chewed ragged up to about hip height, and the dura-silk tarp with which we usually covered the cargo had been pulled down and torn to ribbons.

“This might explain how they’ve survived out here,” said Shwyr as she prodded the pockmarked tires. “Perhaps they can digest inorganic materials.”

“Impossible,” said Skotoko. “Hounds eat meat, not rocks.”

“For the offspring of the Iron Wind,” I said, “nothing is impossible.”

“You think they were touched by the wind?” asked Teylen.

I shrugged. “If they’ve lived out here for any length of time, it is almost certain.”

“Well,” said Skotoko, “I hope they’ve had their fill and moved on.”

“Not likely,” I said, patting a tire. “Still a lot of meat on our beast of burden. They’ll be back.”

“Will it survive another night?” asked Teylen.

Shwyr looked toward the column of dust. “We’ll reach our destination before sunset, right? Maybe we don’t have to worry about it.”

“Assuming the dust storm actually holds the destination we seek,” I said. “And it isn’t abandoned. And they let us in.”

“That’s a lot of assuming,” said Shwyr.

“Yes,” I said. “We must prepare for the worst, not the—”

A high, thin howl from the north drew our attention, and we saw dark forms scurrying over a distant ridge. As I had predicted, the beasts were staying within range of their prey. Then another howl came from the south. We looked in that direction, but could see nothing.

A chill went down my spine.

“They’ve called their friends,” said Skotoko. “If we are caught outside, there will be a feast tonight.”

Teylen swallowed. “Only inorganic material, right? Like you said. They don’t eat meat anymore?”

“I’m not putting it to the test,” I said. “We’ll get in the bubble at the first sign of trouble.”

By the time the sun started falling from its zenith, the hounds had grown bolder, inching closer on all sides, and there were more of them too. At the third hour past noon, I counted at least thirty of the beasts, divided into scattered groups that formed a rough ring around our company. Their frequent howls had us twitching and looking over our shoulders in constant fear.

Then a worse danger appeared.

The Iron Wind, which I had hoped had continued north, reappeared, this time at the eastern edge of the basin, and appeared to be crawling right toward us. Unless it turned away again, it would be a race to get ahead of it before it swallowed us whole or cut us off from the dust column for who knew how long.

“What do we do?” asked Teylen. “Do we retreat?”

“To where?” asked Skotoko. “We’re like spiders caught in the middle of a big table. There’s nowhere to run but forward.”

“I agree,” I said. “If we fall back and hope the storm passes in front of us, then we will be out in the open for another night, and once again at the mercy of the hounds. We must press on. And quickly.”

Shwyr nodded. “Yes, let us hurry.”

All in agreement, we quickened our pace—not to a run, I was too old a man for that, and my heart too weak—but to a brisk walk, with me holding onto Kyria’s hovercot for support, and after an hour it seemed as if it might have been the right decision. Though the hounds had increased their speed to match ours and remained our constant, if distant, companions, it looked like if we kept up our sprint for another

hour, we would at least outpace the Iron Wind, which would pass just behind us, allowing us to slow again and continue toward the dust column in a more leisurely fashion.

I hoped I'd make it. I'd been pouring sweat from the moment we increased our speed, but, despite drinking water constantly from our dwindling supply, by the middle of the second hour I had stopped sweating entirely, and my skin had turned cold and sticky. I also had a stitch in my side that threatened to double me over, and my tongue was beginning to fill my mouth.

Then, just as it seemed that the storm would pass behind us, my head swam and I went down hard on my hands and knees as Kyria drifted on in the hovercot. I tried to stand again and catch it, but I couldn't. I was panting like a bellows, and my arms and legs were shaking so much they would not support me.

"Wait," I gasped, then louder when it seemed the others hadn't heard me. "Wait!"

Teylen turned and rushed back to me, eyes wide. "Sage Reen! What happened?"

"I fell, curse you! What does it look like? Now help me up and catch the hovercot!"

He got me under the arms and lifted, but as I tried to find my feet, my chest tightened as if a giant hand had squeezed me, and my left arm started tingling. I collapsed against the boy, grunting in agony.

"Help!" he cried, lowering me to the ground. "Master Reen is hurt! He cannot stand!"

The others hurried back to me, and Shwyr checked my pulse and eyes and forehead. "Heat stroke, heart palpitations," she said. "He must rest."

"But we can't stop," said Teylen, looking to the sky. "We're not nearly far enough from the wind."

"Give him to me," said Skotoko. "I'll put him on the bumble and tie him down under a tarp."

"Good," said Shwyr. "And hurry, we—"

She cut off as the howl of a hound interrupted her. Another followed the first, from a different direction. I raised my head and looked around with the rest of the party. The hounds were closing in. Had they sensed my weakness? Did they think we had

stopped because we were defeated? Were they making their move before the wind took them?

Whatever their reason, they had blocked off all our routes of escape and were seconds away from attacking.

“Master Reen!” cried Teylen. “The buckle! Hurry!”

“No!” I pointed to the hovercot, which had drifted beyond the bumble, almost to the hounds. “Not...yet! Kyria!”

Teylen leapt up. “I’ll get it!”

He ran toward the cot as the hounds started leaping at it, snapping at the underslung box that carried the stranger. The hounds on the other side of the circle bayed and started bounding forward, as if spurred to action by the boy’s sudden movements.

“Skist!” rasped Shwyr, who pulled a cypher from her belt and tossed it into the oncoming hounds. I shielded my eyes and my fingers became stark black silhouettes as the device exploded in a flash of white light and sizzling pops. The hounds it had hit were twitching and smoking on the ground, while a dozen more were racing away, yelping and shrieking.

I looked back toward Teylen, trying to see through the spots in my eyes. The boy was pushing the cot back toward us as fast as he could go with the hounds nipping at his heels. Then one caught him and he went down, losing his grip on the cot, which coasted toward us.

“I have him,” said Skotoko as he raced forward, drawing his sword and starting to sing as he went.

“Oho Nahnekai tai kerchet murden...”

I recognized it immediately as the Nahnekai, or “Battlesong,” a martial technique practiced by the most accomplished of the Matheunis mutant hunters. This was a good thing for Teylen, for under the song’s influence, a practitioner was nigh unbeatable, and the boy would almost certainly be saved, but possibly not the best thing for the rest of us, for the very same reason. Once the hunter started singing the song, it was

almost impossible to get him to stop until there were no more enemies to kill—and what we really needed was to get into the bubble.

Skotoko charged into the hounds that were leaping on Teylen and began swinging his blade in great looping circles. A beaked head went flying. Another beast was split completely in half.

“...yehe Nihliesh fo renden margr...”

“Skotoko!” cried Shwyr. “Come back!”

“Forget him!” I hissed. “Stop the cot! Stop it!”

Sobbing, she reached up as Kyria’s bed passed above us, and caught it, then choked. The box in which we had placed the stranger had been torn open by the hounds. An overwhelming stench of decay was gassing from it, and I could see the dead man’s putrefying head grinning at me through the hole.

“...ven Gayv-oreth ate minek phatnin...”

I clutched the corner of the cot and started to pull myself up, reaching for the switch that would turn on the force field that would protect Kyria, but a movement in the corner of my eye made me flinch.

“They’re coming in again!” I shouted. “To your left!”

Shwyr hurled a second cypher at the surging hounds and once again the world briefly became nothing but white light and hard black shadows. Another handful of beasts went down, and another score went scurrying, but more were coming from another direction.

“To the right!”

“I have no more cyphers!”

I depressed the switch on the cot then dropped again to my knees with the hounds nearly upon us. A translucent pink energy barrier arched up over it, sealing it from outside attack. At least Kyria would be safe. At least until the battery ran out.

“...fur Ni-chodoss sekt multu teeton...”

I fumbled a shocker artifact from my belt and aimed it at the closest hound, but it knocked me back before I could trigger the device, and its teeth snapped inches from my face. Beside me, Shwyr was in similar straits, and I thought it was the end, but then,

in a flash of red, Biver leapt over the hounds from behind and started slashing at them with his dagger, all the while screaming, “I am the death of death! I am the death of death!”

The hounds turned to face this new threat and Shwyr and I were momentarily hound-free. I looked around. Teylen was limping hurriedly back to us, his clothes torn and bloodied. Biver was above us, back to the hovercot as he slashed at the hounds. Only Skotoko was apart from us, still singing and slaying with joyful abandon as hounds surged and leapt all around him.

“...ald Mada-liviss fakt elden...”

I picked up the shocker artifact I had dropped and tossed it to Teylen as he joined us, then looked for another weapon for myself. I had nothing but my belt knife, and all Shwyr had were her scalpels. There were too many hounds around us, and more coming in from all sides. We would not survive.

Unless...

I pulled out the buckle.

“Don’t you dare!” cried Shwyr, batting it out of my hands as I made to twist it. “Not without Skotoko!”

The buckle flew beyond the wall of hounds and out of sight. I turned on Shwyr, snarling. “You mad margr! What have you done? Now we will all die!”

But then, just as suddenly as they had attacked, all of the hounds backed away from us and bolted west as one, ululating in a way we had not heard before.

Skotoko raised his bloody arms and his dripping sword and howled the last line of his battle song after them.

“...teh Skotoko isht fekken viktur!”

Then he paused, blinked, and toppled slowly backward, flat onto his back, apparently spent.

“Why...why did they run?” asked Teylen. “They had us. They had us!”

Suddenly I doubled over in agony as if I’d been struck across the back with a barbed whip. It was my scar, hurting more fiercely than it had since the Iron Wind had

first inflicted it upon me all those years ago. It felt like the living thing I always feared it was, clawing at me to break free of its fleshy prison.

Every muscle clenched at the pain. My fingernails gouged my palms as memories of that terrible event flooded back to me—the thunderstorm scent, the sound like a dissonant chorus of rending metal, the wind like giant fists raining blows upon me from every side. Then my eyes flew open as I realized that these weren't memories. We'd been so busy fighting the hounds that we had forgotten the approaching storm. But the hounds hadn't forgotten. That was why they had fled.

“The Iron Wind!” I shouted. “Find the buckle! Find the buckle!”

Shwyr shrieked and jumped up, throwing aside her pack and parasol, but she didn't start looking for the buckle. Instead she ran to Skotoko's fallen form and started tugging on one of his legs, futilely trying to drag him back to us.

“No, damn you!” I shouted. “Get the—”

But she would never leave the glaive, would she? Not until he was safe. I shoved at Biver and Teylen. “You! Go! Bring Skotoko!”

They obediently ran to the big man and grabbed him by the ankles, then started dragging him toward me as Shwyr wept and thanked them.

“The buckle!” I shouted at her. “Find the buckle!”

She immediately started searching for it as I began pulling myself up and clutching the hovercot. The Iron Wind loomed over us like a red cliff, racing closer with every second. I looked into the cot, hoping against hope that Kyria would be awake and that I could say goodbye. Her eyes were closed, though she seemed to be in the throes of a nightmare. I reached for her, but the pink barrier stopped me. I couldn't even touch her.

Teylen and Biver jostled me as they dumped Skotoko at my feet. I waved them off again.

“Go! The buckle! Find it!”

They didn't seem to hear me, and I understood why. The sound of the storm was deafening now. It felt like my eardrums would burst and my skin tingled painfully all over. The overpowering smell of ozone made bile rise in my throat.

Teylen was shouting and covering his ears at the same time. Biver started scratching himself uncontrollably, as if he were fighting invisible pests again, then, with a shriek I could hear over the wind, suddenly bolted west, just like the hounds.

“Biver!” I called. “Come back, you fool!”

But he was gone, his flapping red coat swallowed up almost instantly by the whirling dust that preceded the storm. I turned to look for Shwyr—now our only hope.

She was standing right in the path of the wind, head down, searching. Then she bent to pick something up. The buckle! She held it up and ran back toward us. But the storm was coming too quickly. She looked over her shoulder and screamed.

For a brief second, I thought she was going to turn the buckle and save herself, but instead she screamed, “Skotoko!” and threw it in my direction.

The wind caught it and I threw myself away from the cot to reach for it. My ribs and chest screamed in agony as I landed hard, but my fingers were wrapped tight around it. I had it!

Beside me, Skotoko sat up, gasping and groaning, just in time to see the Iron Wind envelop Shwyr in its red embrace.

“No!” he roared, and surged to his feet. “No!”

The wind lifted Shwyr’s silhouette high off the ground, and Skotoko, Teylen, and I watched in horror as it contorted until her head bent back to touch the bottom of her feet.

Then the storm was on us. I could wait no longer. I twisted the buckle just as the first red clouds reached us, and instantly all was quiet.

All but Skotoko.

“No!” he howled again, and stumbled toward the edge of the bubble, hands reaching and eyes lost.

It took all of Teylen’s strength to knock his knees out from under him and stop him from walking through.

Chapter 7

After the chaos that preceded it, the silence in the bubble was overwhelming. Or, rather, it made those sounds we could still hear overwhelming. In the battering roar of the storm, all other noises had been lost. Now Skotoko's sobs filled our ears—and Teylen's shivering breaths, and the arrhythmic staccato of my heart.

Grief, fear, and warnings of unavoidable mortality. When all else was stripped away, always these remained.

I turned off the barrier around the hovercot and checked on Kyria. She remained in a deep sleep, but blood was leaking from her ears and nose. This was the final stage of the Waning, perhaps exacerbated by proximity of the Iron Wind. She had only hours before it claimed her life, but if we could make it the last few kilometers to Archopalasia, there might still be hope.

I sat down, torn between fear and relief, and took stock of myself. Would I make it to Archopalasia? My chest was still tight, and my left arm still tingling, but at least my scar had stopped throbbing so intensely. Unusual, as it generally pained me more in the bubble than out, but our brush with the Iron Wind had made it scream, so its usual in-bubble nagging was a relief by comparison.

I looked around, widening my reckoning. Shwyr gone, Biver gone, the bumble gone, which meant all our supplies were gone. Besides Kyria, it was just Skotoko, Teylen, and myself. I examined my companions. They were both head to toe in claw and bite wounds, but seemed to have sustained no life-threatening injuries. The hovercot was intact, save for the split box that held the stranger. The panel the hounds had cracked hung open ever wider now, and the stench from the box was unbearable, worse in the bubble because of the absence of all other smells, just as the sounds of our breath and sobs were louder here.

“Teylen,” I said.

He looked up. “Master Reen?”

I was going to order him to repair the stranger's box, but then the image of him pushing the hovercot back toward me as the hounds snapped at his legs returned to me.

“I...I just wanted to thank you for fetching the cot and saving Kyria. She would have been lost without you. It was a noble and selfless act.”

Teylen beamed. “Thank you, Master Reen. I would never have forgiven myself if I hadn’t.”

“You did well,” I said. “Yes. Now, would you mind fixing ‘Archo’s’ box? The smell is unbearable.”

The boy blinked, as if confused by my quick change of subject, but then nodded vigorously. “Of course, Master Reen. Of course. I’ll get right on it.”

Unfortunately, there was very little in the bubble to repair the box with. In the end, Teylen bound it up using strips of his robe as rope, a fix that mitigated the smell somewhat but did not eliminate it entirely. He also discovered, during his labors, that “Archo” was missing an arm. Apparently the hounds ate organic material after all.

Despite the smell, I was reluctant—perhaps terrified is a better word—to turn off the bubble again, for fear the storm was still raging outside it, so I told the others that we would sleep first.

I don’t think any of us did, but we all lay there in the darkness for as long as we could stand it, then rose again and prepared ourselves. There was, of course, nothing one could do to prepare to face the Iron Wind, but the hounds might have returned if it had left, so Skotoko unlimbered his sword, and Teylen and I clutched our belt knives in our fists as I twisted the buckle.

We emerged into early morning light. The Iron Wind was nowhere in sight, nor was Biver, or the hounds—not even the bodies of those few of them we had killed. It was as if the wind had picked them all up and carried them away when it left.

Some things, however, remained.

The almost-unrecognizable bulk of the bumble rose to our east. It had tentacles instead of tires now, and it and its cargo had become a single gelid mass, and a prostrate figure lay a short distance from it.

I didn't want to look but couldn't stop myself from following Skotoko as he stumbled toward the figure. It was Shwyr. Rather, it was what the Iron Wind had made of Shwyr. Her body was twisted like a screw, and one of her legs no longer existed, but a third, shriveled arm now sprouted from her back. Black-cruled sores cratered every inch of her exposed skin, except where the left side of her head and neck were covered in what looked like fish scales. And judging by the expression of agony frozen on her face, these transformations had not killed her quickly. She had felt every moment of her death.

Skotoko bent down and scooped her up, then knelt there, pressing her close and kissing her scaly forehead and gaping mouth as he wept. I stared, transfixed. Teylen vomited at my feet, splashing my boots, then yelped an apology.

"I'm so sorry, Master Reen."

"Forget it, boy. Perfectly natural. Here." I pieced together a small hand trowel from the components on my belt and handed it to him. "Dig the poor woman a grave."

"Of course, Master Reen."

He took the trowel and began chipping away at the hard earth of the basin while I crossed to the hovercot and held Kyria's hand. After a time, Skotoko took over from Teylen and attacked the dirt as if it were the enemy responsible for his lover's fate. The hole was finished soon after, and Skotoko carried Shwyr to her grave and laid her gently within it. Together we all scooped and shoveled the loose soil back into the hole. I felt a shameful surge of relief once the soil covered Shwyr's deformed corpse. It was very hard to look at.

"I've researched death extensively," I said as we stood over the grave. "And I can tell you that there's no cure for it, and there is nothing beyond it."

"Is that supposed to make me feel better?" Skotoko growled.

I swallowed. I'd never been very good at sympathy. "Er, yes? In a way? What I mean is, for those of us that remain, there's a long path ahead, replete with pain and tribulation. But for Shwyr, there is only the peace of oblivion, so try to be happy for her."

Skotoko grunted, apparently unmoved, but at least he didn't hit me.

Before we left, he took Shwyr's parasol, opened it, and stabbed the handle into the loose earth of her grave as if to shade her from the terrible sun.

As we traveled toward the dust funnel—now so close that the particulate it threw into the stratosphere darkened the sky above us and made it seem as if we walked in twilight even at noon—I started to get the uneasy feeling that we were being watched. There were times when I swore I saw something at the edge of my vision, but when I turned to look, there was nothing.

Initially I dismissed it as my eyes playing tricks on me, but after the third occurrence, I turned to Skotoko.

"I feel like there's something out there, following us."

He nodded. "I've seen it too."

"You have?" Teylen breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought I was going crazy."

"Do you know what it is?" I asked.

"No," he said. "There are mutants in the Cold Desert that can cloak themselves from plain sight, but they still appear in the corners of your eyes. Perhaps it is one of those."

"So what are we to do?" I asked.

"Pretend we don't notice. Whatever it is will soon grow bold, and attack. And we'll be ready."

"I hope so," I said.

"Me too," said Teylen.

I fell back to walk beside the hovercot, and wicked away some of the blood trickling from Kyria's ears and nose with a cloth, then looked ahead again. Though the structure in the dust column was still mostly obscured, as we got closer to it I could better make out the tiered cluster of gigantic oval saucers that seemed to float within it. Was it Archopalasia? Could they save my wife? Only a few hours more and I would know.

I noticed our pursuer another four times throughout the afternoon. True to what Skotoko had said, if I let the figure remain in the periphery of my vision I could see it, but the moment my eyes glanced toward it, it was gone.

Finally, I managed to resist the reflex to look and was able to observe the thing's blurry outline for nearly a minute. It watched us from about a hundred meters over my right shoulder and seemed vaguely humanoid, though it had strange, almost-winglike skin flaps that hung from its haunches, and it moved with the gait of a four-legged beast. It kept shaking its head, as if it were bothered by gnats, or telling itself "no."

Soon, however, I was distracted by the nearness of the dust column and forgot to keep a lookout for the stalker. By late afternoon we were less than a kilometer away from the swirling mass, and I could distinctly make out eight immense saucers hovering a hundred meters or so above the base of the funnel. Each looked easily big enough to contain a village five times the size of Camp Gnoseus, and they did not float in the air as I had originally thought. Instead, I now saw that they sat atop narrow pillars, like mushrooms upon slender stalks, etched with decorations in a style I did not recognize.

Our pace quickened in anticipation. Even Skotoko seemed eager to reach the destination and jogged along in front of us, scouting ahead.

And that was when our stalker struck.

I saw something lean and crimson launch itself at Skotoko from his flank, so quickly that I could not shout a warning. The glaive fell on his shoulder and face, and the being straddled him, pulling his greatsword off his back and tossing it away, out of reach.

"Skotoko!" cried Teylen, and ran toward him, drawing his belt knife.

I followed, doing the same, while the dark red creature slashed Skotoko repeatedly with its foreclaws.

Teylen leapt at it, tried to knock it off Skotoko, but without even looking, the creature twisted one arm straight back, its joints bending unnaturally, and threw the boy past it with terrible strength. Teylen landed on his head with a sickening crunch meters away and lay still.

Skotoko took advantage of the creature's distraction and elbowed it in the head, then struggled to his feet. The thing recovered and leapt at him again, but the glaive caught it around the neck with both hands and held it aloft, roaring.

It jerked and twisted unnaturally, snarling and trying to pry itself free, and suddenly Skotoko's eyes widened and he flinched back, allowing the monster to swipe him across the face and kick away from him.

I dropped to the ground as it bounded at me and got my first good look at it. It had a human head, but a long, beaked face, very like one of the hounds, and what I had originally thought were wings or flaps of some kind now looked like the tails of a long red coat, somehow fused to its torso. I suddenly knew why Skotoko had hesitated.

It was Biver.

The glaive snatched up his greatsword and ran after him. "Biver! Stop!"

I pushed up to my knees and looked around. My heart stopped. The Biver-thing was tearing into the hovercot.

"Kyria! No!"

I picked myself up as the monster tipped the cot and Kyria rolled to the ground. The creature saw Skotoko coming and darted off, dragging Kyria with it, a gnarled claw crushing her ankle.

"Stop!" shouted Skotoko. "Let her go!"

But the thing was terrified and ran on, Kyria trailing after it. Her head cracked against a rock as the thing bounded over it. Blood gushed from the gash.

"No!" I shrieked, running at it too.

Confronted with two attackers, the Biver-thing finally let her go and dodged out of reach. I ran to kneel beside Kyria as Skotoko pursued it. The back of her head was shattered and seeping blood, and her neck hung limp.

"Kyria!" I cried.

I reached under her, hoping to get her back to the cot and the medical supplies that were stored in it, but as I struggled to stand, my heart seemed to burst in my chest and I collapsed on top of her. I fought to stay conscious, fearing that if I closed my eyes it

would be the last time I saw her. The pain was like being crushed beneath a mountain—I could not move or think, I could not cry out.

Through blurred eyes, I watched Skotoko and the Biver-thing fight in and out of my field of vision. Finally, it sprayed some kind of venom at Skotoko from its mouth, and the glaive lurched back, clutching his face, and dropped his sword. Then the thing turned on me, stalking forward, claws out.

I could not move. It was going to kill Kyria. It was going to eat her in front of me. I had to—

An arrow sprouted from the beast's shoulder.

It lurched in pain and spun, snarling. Five robed figures stepped into my view. One of them aimed a bow, and another arrow struck the Biver-thing. It gave a horrid, gurgling roar, then turned and ran.

I struggled to call out, to beg our rescuers to help Kyria, but they passed again out of my vision. Could fate be so cruel? Did they not see us?

Then one of them turned me over and leaned down to look at me. A pretty young woman. She smiled and said something I could not hear, and then I lost consciousness.

Chapter 8

I awoke to absolute peace, and utter confusion.

I was lying on a soft bed in a cool, dimly lit room that I had never seen before in my life. It had a high ceiling and carpeted floors, and was handsomely appointed with timeworn but beautiful furniture and graceful statuettes set into alcoves in paneled walls. Delicate vases and planters were everywhere, all bursting with colorful flowers and lush plants, and the wall opposite the bed seemed to be a floor-to-ceiling window, louvered with wooden slats.

After blinking several times to be sure it wasn't all a dream, I cautiously pulled aside the covers and sat up. My travel-worn clothes were gone, replaced with a white, flowing robe of coarse cloth cinched at the waist. I had a moment of panic when I realized I was not wearing my belt and had none of my devices or cyphers, then I saw both belt and items laid out on a small table by the bed, including the buckle. Relieved, I pocketed the buckle. Whatever happened in this strange place, I was now ready—I hoped.

I stood unsteadily, then stepped to the window and found the cord that adjusted the louvers. I raised them and looked out. Beyond the glass, a swirling curtain of dust whipped silently past me, and through it, far below, I could see the Tempest Waste.

I stared, thunderstruck, as I realized where I must be, then pressed as close as I dared and looked left and right, just to be certain. I could see a portion of a large disk-shaped pod to my left. Yes! I was in the structure in the funnel! We had made it! Somehow we had made it!

I turned to survey the rest of the room and was startled to find a man standing behind me, bowing in front of a golden-threaded tapestry depicting a robed man and woman dressed just like him. They were nurturing a sapling amidst a grassy field, the saucer pods in the background. There was something familiar about the man, though I would have sworn this was the first time I'd laid eyes on him.

"I would welcome you to Archopalasia," he said in a soft, lilting accent.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. It was all too strange.

He smiled serenely, as if he knew what I was feeling.

“My life is owed to you.” He kissed his open palm and laid it on the left side of his chest. “I hold great respect for what you endured to bring me here.”

It took me a moment to process what he was saying, as his manner of speaking was exceedingly formal and archaic.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“You stand before Fallodrin,” he answered.

Then I noticed one sleeve of the man’s frock coat was flat and empty. He was missing his left arm. I stared. Could it be?

“Are...are you the man who came to Camp Gnoseus? He who told me about Archopalasia?” I felt foolish the moment the words left my mouth. There was no way..

“I am he.” Fallodrin smiled, then shrugged his left shoulder so that his empty sleeve flapped. “Lacking one arm.”

“You were dead!” My mind was reeling.

He nodded. “When last we spoke, you asked about an artifact here in Archopalasia.”

“The...the Vivifier?”

“Yes,” he said. “Death is one of many infirmities the Vivifier can correct.”

A device able to revive the dead! How was it possible? I was speechless.

Fallodrin smiled again and gestured toward a door on the opposite end of the room. “We will speak of it later. There is someone waiting to see you. Through there.”

I stepped to the door and it slid opened when I neared it. Sitting on a bench in the room beyond was a beautiful young woman who looked familiar. She raised her eyes to me as I entered and smiled like she knew me. As I tried to puzzle out how I knew her, she stood and glided to me.

“It seems not even death can separate us.”

It was my wife’s voice. A chill ran down my spine. I looked again.

“Kyria? Kyria!”

I flushed at not having recognized her immediately. She looked young, the way I remembered her from our first years together. Gone were the silver strands glinting

from her dark hair. Gone were the wrinkles on her forehead. Gone were the crow's feet at the corners of her eyes that had made her smile a map of delight. We embraced. Her skin was as soft and smooth as a baby's.

I held her for a long while, my head swimming. Perhaps this was a dream after all. If so, I didn't want to awaken from it by questioning its reality.

Finally she stepped back and spread her arms.

"Look at me, Reen! I'm healthy again...and beautiful."

She twirled, showing herself to me. She was wearing a light blue robe of similar style to my own, but the cloth was thinner and softer, and she had not tied it at the waist. It billowed out, revealing the lithe, firm body I remembered kissing and caressing all those years ago.

I was at a loss for words, and before I regained my capacity for speech, she went on.

"You must try the Vivifier," she said. "It is wonderful!" She pulled me toward a door on the far side of the room. "Come. You will love it!"

A sense of unease came over me at her words, and I looked back at Fallodrin as she dragged me through the door and into a long, curving hallway. He smiled and waved me on, then began to follow at a slower pace.

In the corridor we passed two more robed people. They stopped and smiled after us until we rounded the curve and they disappeared behind us. A few minutes later, Kyria took a right and we stepped onto a narrow catwalk enclosed in some kind of glass. Vertigo assaulted me as I looked down, and my knees froze in fear. Through the slats of the catwalk, I could see all the way to the ground, hundreds of meters below me.

"Don't worry, beloved," said Kyria, squeezing my hand. "It's perfectly safe." She seemed as carefree as if she were standing on solid ground.

I pulled my eyes away from the drop and looked up instead. From here I could see nearly the entirety of Archopalasia. There were eight saucer pods perched above the ground at varying heights—including the one we had just exited—all arrayed in a wide

circle around a massive cylindrical spire in the center, and connected to it by narrow catwalks like the one I was standing on.

Several of the pods, however, seemed in disrepair. The saucer below and to the left was pocked with broken windows. Another, above and a few pods to the right, was tilted on its stalk, and its catwalk partially collapsed, which made me even more leery than I already was.

Kyria took my hand again. “Come on, darling. There’s nothing to fear, I promise you.”

I wasn’t so sure, but what could I do? I followed her across the catwalk and into the enormous central structure.

Falldrin caught up to us as we entered the spire. “You stand within the heart of Archopalasia, Sage. The machines here provide us all our needs—light, food, comfort, and life everlasting.”

“What do you mean by ‘life everlasting?’” I asked as we walked along. Kyria hugged my arm.

“Regular treatments from the Vivifier keep us perpetually young,” he said.

I turned and looked at him, giving him a quick once-over. “So you’re not as young as you look? How old are you?”

“Of my years, I have not kept an accurate count, but...” He paused, as if doing sums in his head. “If pressed, I would guess I have seen something over four hundred.”

Again, I was speechless. I had a thousand questions but could not decide where to begin.

He gave my arm a friendly squeeze. “I will happily answer whatever you ask, but for now, please follow your wife. Experiencing the Vivifier is the best way to learn what it can do.”

I opened my mouth to question that logic, but Kyria tugged on my arm, insistent, and the moment passed. She led me to a tall glass tube. Within was a circular platform large enough for four men to stand abreast. We stepped onto it and Falldrin waved his hand over a slender glowing pillar that rose from it. The platform began dropping

quickly, causing a lurching and tingling sensation in my gut and groin, and a dizziness in my head.

As we descended, I caught glimpses through the tube's transparent walls of what the spire contained. In the first level we passed, concentric rows of crops grew under transparent domes, though the walls of the level were windowless. The next had more concentric rows, but no crops, and the third contained strange machines. Then the platform reached a speed so swift that the next levels blurred past in the blink of an eye and I had no opportunity to see what was in them, but as it slowed again, I saw a level of large, oval vats filled with clear liquid. I assumed it was water and wondered how they procured it in the middle of such a vast, dry wasteland.

The platform stopped at last one level below the vats, and we stepped into a small hexagonal room dominated by a tall metal door with a glowing panel in the far wall. Fallodrin approached it and waved his hand over the panel. The door split down the middle and we entered a hallway that sloped and curved down to the left. We followed it until I had completely lost my bearings as to which direction we were going, then finally stepped through another door into a large, round room empty of all furnishings except for a few wheeled stretchers parked along one wall, and a glowing, man-high device right in the center. It looked like a smooth, eggshell-white chrysalis—or a coffin.

“This is the Vivifier!” Kyria said excitedly. She squeezed my hand, hard.

As she led me toward the device, Teylen poked his head out from the other side of it and waved at us, a silly grin on his face.

“Teylen?” I said. “I’m surprised to see you, boy. I...I thought you were...well...”

“I was. Biver broke my neck.” He shrugged. “At least that’s what they tell me. I don’t remember being dead.”

“I don’t expect you would.”

I looked up at the machine as it began to make a deep buzzing sound. “What is it doing?”

Teylen jerked his thumb at it. “Skotoko’s in there now. His face was eaten away from what Biver did to him, and he lost his sight in one eye.”

I stepped closer and the others followed. The buzzing noise continued, rising slightly like a ray emitter when it's warming up as the glow brightened and began to pulse. Next came a muffled hiss from inside, and the air around the Vivifier seemed to ripple and distort, as if it was giving off heat. Finally, with a gurgle, a thick gray sludge poured from a pipe in the base of the Vivifier and plopped into a large metal bucket.

I bent to inspect it. "What is this?"

"You see the by-product of the Vivifier," Fallodrin answered. "We call it grow mud. It is rich in nutrients. We use it to fertilize our crops."

I wasn't sure what mystified me more, that the artifact could apparently cleanse the body of illness, repair damaged flesh, and raise the dead, or that it could produce nutritious mud by doing so. It seemed fantastical. I also wondered why the thing couldn't regenerate severed limbs, as was proved by Fallodrin's missing arm. Why perform so many miracles and not that one?

The Vivifier was silent for a long while, and I began to feel awkward and nervous standing with everyone, watching it. "Is...is it working? Is everything okay?"

"It is working," said Fallodrin. "The machine is miraculous, but not instantaneous. A few more minutes."

At last, after another awkward wait, the artifact tilted upright, then split in the middle and opened up. Thick, cool vapor lingered in its cavity, obscuring our view until Skotoko stepped out, looking ten years younger and wearing nothing but a scowl.

He looked down at his broad chest, and his scowl deepened.

"What in the hoary Hells of Haref?" He barked. "My tattoos! My scars!"

He ran agitated hands over his chest and shoulders, alarmed. "Nano spirits be cursed! My skin! It's fekken soft! This is terrible! Do you know how hard I fought to win those damned—"

He clenched his fists and howled, then turned and kicked the Vivifier, hard. It did nothing but abrade the skin of his foot.

Fallodrin put a hand on Skotoko's arm. The glaive spun on him with the wild-eyed look of a seskii about to bite. Fallodrin didn't even flinch.

“Upon first experiencing the miracle of the Vivifier,” he said, “it is natural to feel unsettled. I trust your vision has been restored?”

Skotoko put a hand to one eye, then the other, and glared at the man with both of them for several seconds.

“I feel like killing something,” he growled. “Out of my way, little man.”

Fallodrin obligingly stepped aside, and Skotoko started for the door, then paused as he saw me. “Oh. You’re awake. I wanted to let you know before I left.”

“You’re leaving?”

“I’m going to get Shwyr.” Skotoko looked back at the machine. “This thing can bring her back.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” I asked. “The Iron Wind changed her. She could return a monster, like Biver.”

He set his jaw. “I’m going to get her back.”

I sighed. “Very well. Then I’m coming with you. I’m as much at fault for her death as—”

“Reen, no!” Kyria objected.

“I’ll come too,” said Teylen, his voice shaking.

Skotoko shook his head. “No, Sage. You be with your wife. Besides, I heard these people talking. They need you for something.”

“Oh?” I looked at Fallodrin.

“He speaks truly,” Fallodrin said. “We will speak of it tonight.”

“You can’t tell me now?” I asked.

“You must meet the others first,” he said.

“Well,” I said to Skotoko. “We’ll at least see you off.”

“Oh, but darling,” said Kyria. “You must have a treatment. That’s what we came here for, remember?”

“Er, yes, but it can wait. Skotoko seems in a hurry, and...and I want some more time to think about it.”

I didn't tell her that the Vivifier scared me to my core. I would not of course wish my wife or Teylen still dead, but I could not yet fathom how their return was possible. Dead was dead, as I had told Skotoko when we buried Shwyr. There was no coming back. If that immutable law had changed, I wanted to know all I could about how and why it had changed before I allowed myself to become subject to the new law.

Chapter 9

As we returned to the elevation platform, we passed a young woman pushing a sheet-covered body on a wheeled stretcher. She smiled at us as we approached. I knew that smile. This was the woman I'd seen in the waste. The woman who had saved us.

Fallodrin lifted the sheet, revealing a young man with his throat cut from ear to ear.

"It is this again, Sindrea?" Fallodrin said.

"Just so, Fallodrin," she replied. "He wanted it done."

"I know this, but tell me that you did not leave such a mess as before."

The young woman shrugged. "Each time my technique improves."

"All as well as all, then?"

"All as well as all."

The clear implication was that this woman had slit the boy's throat. Their casual attitudes, though, made it seem as though there was no foul play. I've seen enough strange customs in my travels to know better than to make hasty judgment, and in these situations it is best to act normal, stay silent, and observe. Still, it was difficult to suppress my alarm.

My companions seemed more sanguine. Even Kyria, inexplicably. I don't think Teylen even noticed the corpse. He was too entranced with Sindrea. That was perhaps for the best. The last time he'd seen a dead body, he vomited on my boots.

The woman noticed Teylen staring, and stopped in front of him, smiling.

"You stand before Sindrea," she said.

Teylen turned bright red. "Um, I-I'm Teylen. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Pleasure. Yes." Sindrea seemed to taste the word. "I would like to see you again tonight, Teylen."

"I..." Teylen stammered. "I...I don't..."

But she was already walking on, wheeling the stretcher around the curve of the hallway in the direction of the Vivifying chamber.

I frowned after her, concerned.

Teylen's expression, on the other hand, was that of the fellow who hadn't known it was loaded.

To leave Archopalasia, one entered one of the elevation platforms that ran down the centers of the narrow pillars beneath the pods and rode it to the bottom, and this, Teylen, Kyria, Fallodrin, and I did with Skotoko. Knowing the pillars were hollow made me somewhat nervous. I tried to tell myself they had borne their loads for many centuries, and likely would for many more, but the hairs on the back of my neck still stood on end if I thought about their delicacy for too long.

At the base of the pillar we entered a wedge-shaped chamber with a circular door on the curved side. Fallodrin pulled a lever beside the door and it opened like an iris, letting in the hot, dry air of the Tempest Waste.

Skotoko shouldered his pack and stepped to it, then turned back to us. "Goodbye, then."

"Are you certain you can find your way there and back?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I once tracked a mutant through a gigus blizzard that froze all but the top tier of Nihliesh. I'll manage."

I took the buckle from the pocket of my robe, then looked at Fallodrin. "This is yours, but...may I give it to him?"

Fallodrin bowed. "Please. They are common here."

I held it out to Skotoko. "Take it. Those hounds may still be out there."

He looked at it askance. "I don't like gadgets."

"How many times did this one save our lives?" I asked.

He hesitated, scowling, but finally snatched it from me and stuffed it in his belt pouch. "Thanks. Hope I won't need it. So long."

He turned for the door, but Kyria stopped him and gave him a hug. "Thank you for bringing me here, and for saving my life."

He shifted uncomfortably. "It was nothing."

I clasped his hand. "Good luck, my friend."

He looked me in the eye. "I'll bring her back."

"I don't doubt it," I said. "Be safe."

"You too," he said, then shot a sidelong glance at Fallodrin. "These people are crazy."

And with that, he stepped through the portal and into the whirling dust. He didn't look back.

Watching him disappear into the haze jarred some questions loose in my head. I turned to Fallodrin.

"What is the column of dust? What does it do?"

"We call it the vortex," he said. "And it serves as a shield to protect us from the Iron Wind. The wind is blown back by it and never touches us." He closed the iris again and started back toward the elevation platform. "It was not always so dusty. Back in the days when the Tempest Waste was not a waste at all, when there were grasslands and scrub forests for as far as the eye could see, it was nothing but air. The dust only came later when the land withered and the grasses died."

I thrilled to hear it, for it confirmed my theory that the wastes were getting worse over time.

"And how long ago was that?" I asked. "How long has it been a true wasteland?"

Fallodrin frowned, thinking. "I would say it was over three hundred years ago that we saw the first signs of the land being corrupted, and it got progressively worse over the next century as the frequency of the Iron Wind increased."

"So you believe the Iron Wind is the cause of it?" asked Kyria.

He shrugged. "I can think of no other."

When Kyria and I retired to our chambers, she immediately threw off her clothes and fell upon me with a vigor and passion that, because of her debilitating illness, she had not been able to show me for a very long time, and because of this sudden ardor, I responded with a vigor and passion that, because of my age and how long it had been

since last we made love, I had not believed myself still capable of. It was a joyous reunion, and the loveliest afternoon we had shared together in years.

Afterward we lay together in the bed, talking of this and that, but not—for the first time since she had fallen ill—about the Waning. It seemed amazing how discussion of her condition had taken over all our conversation in the past years, swallowing every other topic and pushing all else aside. Now that her disease was gone, the rest of the world came flooding back. We talked about our future, our past, our recent journey, about resuming our research, about books we had read, but never anything about diagnosis or prognosis or her sad, inevitable end. All of that had been forgotten as if it had never been.

Eventually we drifted off into a deep and blissful sleep that felt more natural and comfortable than any I'd had since we'd entered the waste.

It was too good to last, of course, and the worms of unease that were gnawing at my subconscious came to the surface when I woke to Kyria nibbling on my shoulder.

“Ermph?” I said, suavely.

She grinned at me, eyes sparkling. “Maybe it’s the air in here, but I’m in the mood again.”

I chuckled. “Then feel free to start without me. It has been a long time since I could fulfill my marital duties more than once a night.”

She pouted. “You see? This is why I wanted you to use the Vivifier. Don’t you remember when we were young? You were a jiraskar then! A rampaging beast! There were nights when we never slept, and kept the camp awake with our cries. Don’t you want that again?”

I flushed with embarrassment and confusion. “It...it would be lovely, darling, but I...I just wonder what I would be giving up.”

“Nothing!” she cried. “You would give up nothing!”

She stood up in the bed and spread her arms, glorious in her nakedness. “Look at me. Have I lost anything? I still have my mind, my memories, my dreams, everything I was before. It is only that the vessel that holds it all has been renewed and freed from

the disease that made it a prison for the last fifteen years! I have been freed, Reen! And you will be too!"

"But how does it work?" I asked. "How does it decide what age one will be? Does it subtract a number of years from one's current age? Is it set to a particular age? Is there a way of setting it for another age? And is your disease truly gone, or just returned to its nascent state? Would my heart be--"

There was a quiet rapping on the door to the outer chamber. Kyria and I paused and looked toward it.

"Fallodrin," said Kyria. "It must be time for our dinner."

"I'll go see."

I rose and threw on my robe, then entered the forechamber to let him in. He bowed in the doorway. Teylen was with him.

"To express our deepest gratitude to our new guests," he said, "we have prepared a feast."

"Excellent," I said. "Give us a moment to get ready."

"Take whatever time you need." He bowed again and stepped back into the hallway to wait, and I went back into the bedroom.

Kyria was already dressed, looking as fresh and elegant as a willow. She smiled at me. "Ready."

I chuckled. "Wait a moment, my dear. Straight-from-lovemaking is never the best look with which to make a first impression. Let me just have a look at myself."

There was a wash basin and mirror in an alcove to one side of the room. I disrobed and stepped in, and began washing my face—then paused and gave it a good look. Kyria was right. I was not the man I was. The wrinkles of the old man looking back at me, the loose skin of his neck, the patchy gray and black stubble, the faded green eyes, the bushy white eyebrows all spoke of long years and wearying labors.

For a brief moment I longed desperately to be the young man Kyria wanted me to be, and was ready to tell her to take me to the Vivifier. Then I shook my head as I remembered Skotoko stepping from the machine and gazing in horror at the blank skin where his scars and tattoos had been. Like him, I would feel lost if I used the

machine and came out smooth and young. My wrinkles had been earned though a lifetime of wondrous and terrible experiences. They were who I was now, not the energetic fool I had been when I'd been a "jiraskar," and I didn't want to lose them.

Kyria wouldn't like it, of course, but fortunately, with Fallodrin and Teylen waiting in the hall, the argument could be avoided for a while.

I stepped from the alcove and held out my arm. "Ready, beloved."

She took it and we stepped to the door. Fallodrin bowed as we joined him.

"This way, please."

He led us all up a ramp, then through a long, curving corridor of the type that seemed so common in Archopalasia, and we walked for several minutes, going up another two ramps. It gave me an appreciation of just how large the saucer pods were. Each one seemed to have at least four or five levels, and you could have housed a moderately large village on each floor. Not that the Archopalasians appeared to have done so. We met no other residents along our way. The place was eerily empty.

Fallodrin stopped before thick wooden double doors carved with images of the sun, moon, and stars. How long had it been since these dust-cloud dwellers had seen the heavens?

Fallodrin paused and looked back. "I would not want you to be alarmed, but all of us wished to meet you, and so we have gathered as one."

Then he opened the doors and bowed us in.

Chapter 10

For a moment, I couldn't tell if we were stepping into a garden or a room, for it was an enormous space, hundreds of meters across, and seemingly open to the sky. Then I saw that we were under a vast transparent dome, though which I could see the central spire of Archopalasia towering over us, and rising above that, the swirling funnel of the dust column seen from within. The ribbons of dust twisting endlessly away above us made my stomach feel as if we were falling at a great speed, and I had to look away as dizziness almost overcame me. Teylen too seemed to shrink from it. Kyria, on the other hand, could not stop staring.

Below the dome, the area was like a park, with fountains and sculptures and shrubbery and clusters of chairs and benches in little plazas connected by curving walkways. In the largest plaza, near the center, a banquet had been laid out, with cloth-draped tables brimming with platters of fruits, vegetables, mushrooms, nuts, cooked dishes, and chilled desserts, as well as glittering bottles of wine and spirits. Such variety made even the famous feasts of Castle Sarrat seem a pauper's affair.

A semi-circle of dining tables surrounded the food, and rising from those tables as we approached were perhaps three dozen men and women, all young and attractive, and all staring at us and smiling.

"Fellow citizens of Archopalasia," Fallodrin said to them. "May I introduce the great Sage Reen, and his wife, Kyria, who we have all waited so long to meet. And also, Sage Reen's apprentice, Teylen."

The people bowed to us as Fallodrin had, kissing their hands and placing them on their hearts, then murmured a welcome.

"Er...thank you," I said, unsure of what was expected of me. "Thank you for saving us. Thank you for bringing my wife back to me, and Teylen. Thank you for...everything."

The people applauded politely, then sat down again, and Fallodrin turned to us.

"They are very eager to speak to you, Sage, but all understand you must be hungry. Please, eat. We are very proud of the bounty we are able to provide."

After my moment of dizziness looking up into the funnel, I wasn't as hungry as I had been, but Kyria was apparently voracious. She led me to the platters and began filling plates for both of us. It was, as I said, an impressive spread. There were types of produce that I'd never seen before, and at least two that I knew were considered extinct in the outside world. I picked up a gogglefruit and bit into it. The tart taste made the top of my mouth tingle.

Teylen too was looking over the feast, but then Sindrea appeared beside him and began pointing out things for him to try, and he suddenly had eyes only for her. It looked so much like the sort of flirting I remembered from my youth that I dismissed my earlier unease and decided to let them have their fun.

I turned to Fallodrin, who remained at our side. "Are these people your leaders?" I asked. "Is this a governing council?"

For the first time since he had surprised me in my room, his expression was less than beatific. His eyes clouded.

"This...this is the entire population of Archopalasia."

I frowned. "The entire population? Just three dozen of you?"

"Yes."

"Surely you mean the entire adult population," said Kyria. "You must have children."

"No," said Fallodrin. "No children. With the Vivifier to restore us, procreation has long been considered irrelevant."

Kyria blinked at him. "But children offer so much more than just propagation of the population."

"I am sure you are correct, and considering the people we have lost of late, spawning young would benefit us now. Sadly, it is impossible. We are all sterile. A price paid by those who use the Vivifier."

"You didn't tell me that," said Kyria, glaring.

"I was not able to," said Fallodrin. "You were dead, if you recall."

"And did you intend to tell me?" I asked. "Before I used the machine?"

"It..." Fallodrin looked embarrassed. "You will forgive me, but Archopalasia has made its peace with this so long ago that I did not think of it."

I exchanged a look with Kyria. So there was a price after all. And perhaps this wasn't the only one. How had the city's population shrunk so disastrously?

"Is there anything else you haven't thought of?" I asked. "How is it possible that, with the Vivifier to bring back your dead, you have still lost so many people?"

He pursed his lips. "Many have chosen to leave us over these centuries, and a great number of us died during the recent collapse of one of our habitats. Their bodies could not be recovered." He raised his eyes to the dome and pointed through it to a tall pillar in the distance standing alone, with no pod perched atop it. "That is the one that fell."

I scanned the vista, doing a quick count. It seemed there had originally been nine habitats. Now there were eight, and one of them, the one I had seen earlier, was hanging off its stalk like a wilted flower. If it too fell, there would be only seven.

"So," I began. "Is the rest of the city safe? Are the other pillars in danger of collapsing?"

Fallodrin smiled. "I can see how that might be of concern, but the Pedestals played no part in the collapse of the habitat, I can assure you."

"Then what did cause it?" I asked. "Will the same happen to the other habitats?"

His smile widened. "I am pleased that you ask that question, for the answer to it is the reason I was sent to bring you here."

I frowned, confused. "You...you were sent to me? To bring me here?"

"Of course. Why else did you think I came to you?"

"I thought you were lost. I thought you were trying to get back home."

"I was trying to get back to the Vivifier," said Fallodrin. "But I had come to you for the specific purpose of telling you where I came from, for I knew you would not be able to resist returning with me once you heard the name."

Kyria laughed. "You're correct there. Nothing could have kept Reen away after that. He's been obsessed with finding this place for years."

"But how did you know the bait would work?" I asked. "How did you know these things about me?"

“I will show you,” he said, and beckoned us farther into the room.

In the very center of the room, a tall pole extended up to the top of the dome. At the bottom was a device with two handles and an oval lens. A glow came from behind the lens.

He gestured to it. “If you would peer through the aperture.”

I bent down to look through and saw a yellow landscape, a cluster of dark purple silhouettes—buildings, I thought—and glowing green silhouettes that looked like people moving about. There were also some smaller red shapes, some of them over the buildings, others attached to the people.

I wasn’t very impressed at first. “What am I looking at?”

“You are seeing your home, where I traveled to find you.”

“The camp?” I looked again and recognized the shape of my house. “Look, darling. It is! I can see our home.”

Kyria peered into it as well. “Why, so it is! Remarkable. But why is everything so unnaturally colored?”

Falldrinn shrugged. “It is the nature of the device. It colors things according to their nature. Animate, inanimate, powered, et cetera.”

“A marvel,” I said. “But it still doesn’t explain how you knew I had an interest in Archopalasia, or why you wanted me in the first place.”

He nodded. “For the first, you must touch your forehead to the frame as you look through the lens.”

Kyria put down her plate of food and followed his instructions, then gasped and stepped back.

“That...I can...That’s impossible. Reen, try it.”

I bent again and this time pressed my forehead firmly against the top edge of the aperture. It vibrated and buzzed against my skull, and then those buzzes became sound. Words. I was hearing the voices of the people whose outlines I saw moving in the image. And I recognized the voices. It was Galgot and Yeusse, two sample collectors, arguing about a game of tiles they had played the night before, each challenging the other’s claims of victory.

I gaped. It was, as Kyria had said, impossible. I could barely conceive of how the device could see so far, but how it picked up sounds at that distance? That was beyond any science I knew. But then another consideration pushed aside my astonishment.

I stood and glared at Fallodrin. “You spied on us? You listened to our private conversations?”

He stepped back, holding up his single hand. “We were desperate. The scope had shown us that you were an expert in the identification and repair of ancient devices. They appear highlighted in red in the aperture, you see, and you have them all over your home. We could see you repairing them, unearthing them, cataloging them, using them, making improvements to them. It seemed clear to us that you were far more knowledgeable about them than any of us, so we studied you closely, hoping to find a way to entice you here.” He swallowed. “That is how we learned of your interest in our city, and also that you sought a cure for your wife’s—”

I cut him off, furious. “You played upon my grief to lure me here? You used her illness as a trick to—”

“Was it a trick, Sage?” Fallodrin asked. “Your wife is alive, and no longer ill. Without our spying, she would be dead.”

I glared at him for a long moment, then looked at Kyria, who was watching me with uneasy eyes. He was right. She would have been dead by now had he and his fellow citizens of Archopalasia not interfered, but I still didn’t like it. None of it felt right. None of it.

I turned away from both of them and stared across the beautiful domed park, observing the people around the tables, laughing and talking and casting occasional sidelong glances our way. They all seemed to be leading perfect, tranquil lives. Far better than most people in the Ninth World. And they were immortal on top of that. It seemed impossible that they had any problems at all, and yet here I was, summoned by the gods to assist them.

“And what, precisely,” I asked at last, “do you think I can help you with?”

Fallodrin shrugged. “To put it simply, Archopalasia is dying.”

Chapter 11

For the next few hours, Fallodrin and his friends sat with Kyria and me and told us just what that statement meant. Everyone had stories of minor warning signs and worrying technological failures, in addition to larger tragedies that all of them had experienced or witnessed.

A stocky, bearded fellow named Dreman told us that the destruction of the ninth habitat a few years ago was their first indication that a problem existed. The artifact responsible for stabilizing it atop its pillar stopped functioning, and it toppled to the ground, killing everyone within. The same nearly happened with the tilted habitat. Its stabilizing artifact stopped functioning for less than a second. The habitat stopped tipping in midfall but never righted itself again. No one dared enter it anymore.

Others told me of other habitats that had become unusable. Some had lost all power. Some had become as hot as the wastes around them. One had an acrid odor that caused vomiting and burning eyes. In one—the habitat with broken windows that I saw from the catwalk—the system controlling its climate had malfunctioned, causing snow to spew from the air vents. Initially many of the residents had been thrilled, as none of them had seen snow before. The novelty quickly wore off, however, when doors started freezing shut, trapping people within their rooms, and several died of exposure. Subsequently this pod, nicknamed “the Blizzard Habitat,” was abandoned like the others, and everyone in Archopalasia now lived in one habitat: Habitat Seven, the one we were in now. All agreed it was the most stable, but even so, there were signs of entropy, elevation platforms not working, lights flickering, and a few degrees’ drop in temperature over the last year, which many feared could be a precursor to it becoming another Blizzard Habitat.

And the problems didn’t stop there. A good-natured woman named Kircha told me that within the central spire—which they called the Nexus—there were once several floors where they grew hydroponic crops, but that had been reduced to one floor, both by the failure of some of the light emitters that provided false sunlight and by the reduced number of people using the Vivifier, since the grow mud sludge by-product was used to fertilize the crops.

I stopped her there. “Do you mean people are using the Vivifier less frequently, or is this a problem of your reduced population?”

“It is a problem of our reduced population,” she said. “We all use the Vivifier daily, but once there were thousands of people using it. Now there are just those you see here.” She motioned to the bounty on the tables. “As you can see, the grow mud produced is still enough to provide us with all that we need, but every few days another light fails, and every few years someone leaves us, or dies in a way that makes it impossible to recover their body. Someday, and many of us think it will be someday soon, the balance will tip, and we will begin to starve.”

The first part of what she said shocked me so much I hardly heard the latter half. “You use the Vivifier daily? All of you?”

“Of course,” she said.

I cleared my throat. “And do you do it solely to provide grow mud, or do you...need it?”

Kircha slid a glance at Fallodrin. “Uh, both?”

That was worrying. “What happens if you do not use the machine?”

Another glance at Fallodrin.

He sat forward. “Without regular treatments, we simply tire more quickly,” he said.

“That’s the only side effect?”

“The weariness can become quite acute after a few days, but yes. That is all.”

He seemed to be holding something back, but I had a more immediate concern. “Does that mean that my wife will have to use it every day? Does that mean we are tied to Archopalasia from now on?”

“Possibly not,” he said. “It was hundreds of years ago, but I seem to remember that the first few times I used it, I could go years between treatments.”

Others nodded in agreement.

“It becomes less effective over time, however,” said Kircha. “And anyone who has used it more than a hundred times must use it every day. Every two days at the least.”

“Still,” I said. “Even if it is years, we would have to return here on a regular basis. We could never leave Archopalasia behind.”

“That is what we believe,” said Fallodrin. “Yes.”

My fists clenched and it took an effort to relax them. Fallodrin had said earlier that he had not tricked us into coming here. He had said that he had delivered what he had promised, my wife’s life and health, but that wasn’t entirely true, was it?

“I believe I see now why you have all been so eager to have me use the Vivifier. Because, once I do, my fate is tied to Archopalasia just as yours is. I will have a stake in repairing it, because I won’t be able to walk away. I will live and die with it.”

“Sage,” said Fallodrin. “I assure you, our only concern is with your age, and your heart, which you know is not strong.”

“It will still allow me to go where I want!” I cried. “It is not a leash!”

Kyria put her hand on my arm. “But I am, darling. As you heard, I must stay, or at least return often.”

“And that does not enrage you?” I asked. “That they tricked you into using the machine without telling you the cost? That they knowingly allowed you to become an addict?”

She nodded. “They didn’t trick me, my love. I was dead, remember. But even if I hadn’t been, even if they had tricked me, the benefits, the vigor—perhaps they are worth it. This is a fascinating place, after all. You will never run out of things to study here. Is it so terrible that we must stay?”

“It is terrible that we were given no choice,” I said, and with that I stood from the table and took her hand. “Come, darling. I suddenly find this little room too confining.”

The citizens of Archopalasia called after me as I started to lead her to the exit.

Fallodrin caught my arm. “Please, Sage. Don’t go. Let us continue talking. I am certain that together we will discover a way to repair Habitat Seven and—”

“I no longer have any interest in fixing this place,” I said, pulling my arm free of his grip. “My sole focus is now finding a way to free you all from your addiction to the Vivifier so that you may leave this place before it dies. Not that I give a damn about any of you now, but I will free my wife!”

“But Sage,” pleaded Fallodrin. “Please. We don’t want to leave. We love this place.”

I spun on him. “Very well, I will see about repairing your habitat, but only after I learn how to free my wife from the Vivifier, understood? Good. Then tomorrow, I will begin tests to determine the extent of the side effects of not using the Vivifier. You will find me some subjects who are willing to skip their treatments for several days, and have them report to my rooms.”

Fallodrin paused, looking decidedly uncomfortable, then nodded. “If that is your wish, we can arrange it.”

“Good,” I said. “Now take us back to our rooms.”

It wasn’t until Kyria and I were following Fallodrin out the door that I remembered Teylen. I had been so distracted by my discussion with the Archopalasians that I’d practically forgotten he existed. Now I looked around for him. He wasn’t there, and neither was Sindrea.

Kyria tried to calm me as we wound through the habitat after Fallodrin. I wasn’t in the mood to be calmed.

“All their formality,” I whispered. “All their bowing, all those placid smiles. It’s all a mask to hide their selfish, manipulating ways.”

Kyria took my arm. “Try to see it from their side, beloved. They are desperate, and desperate people do desperate things.”

“I have been desperate for years!” I snapped. “I worked in an absolute frenzy trying to find a cure for you. Did I abduct anyone in your name? Did I hold anyone hostage in order to flense their knowledge from them? No! I—”

The unmistakable sounds of a couple in passionate congress stopped me in mid-tirade. Sindrea and Teylen, unless I missed my guess, climbing to the upper registers in the room we were just passing. Kyria grinned at me. I rolled my eyes. That was one sound I did not need locked in my memory.

But as we continued down the hall, I heard a strange gurgling, a choking. I stopped, a sudden fear gripping my heart and overriding my desire to not see whatever was going on in the room. I hurried back to the door and threw it open. There, on the sheet-

covered floor of a handsome apartment was Sindrea, straddling Teylen with a knife in her hand, and riding him in ecstasy as he jerked and spasmed beneath her, blood fountaining from his throat.

I rushed in, shouting, and kicked Sindrea off the boy so I could get to him. Kyria knelt on the other side of him.

“Hold on, Teylen!” she sobbed, as I clasped my hands around the gaping wound in his throat. There was no closing it. It was too deep and too wide. The boy’s spasms slowed as the blood spread in an ever-widening pool around him on the sheet. Then he stopped moving. His dead eyes stared up at me, unseeing. His hands fell slack.

“Please, you have no need of alarm,” said Fallodrin, who hovered behind us. “He will be fine.”

I ignored him and turned to the girl, my heart pounding painfully.

“Why?” I sputtered. “Why?”

She flinched away from me, raising a warding arm. “Do not strike me again, please.”

“You’re lucky I don’t kill you!” I snarled.

“Honored guest,” she began, still trembling and drenched with Teylen’s lifeblood. “I shared with him the intimacy of my favorite way to die. To have the throat slit at the height of climax is ecstasy.”

My jaw dropped. “Favorite way? To die?”

“The loss of breath is euphoric,” she continued. “The last sensation felt is of tingling life pulsing from both loins and throat.”

“You can’t be serious,” said Kyria.

“There is nothing else like it,” Sindrea said. “When he is revived, I would ask him to do for me, as I did for him.”

I had no words. I just stared at her, jaw slack.

“Please, Sage Reen,” said Fallodrin. “No lasting harm was done to the boy, I promise you. Now come, we must get you cleaned up.”

Kyria and I let him help us to our feet, numb. He turned to Sindrea and lowered his voice. “Sindrea, if you would please take the boy to the Vivifier immediately. And upon your return, I would speak to you about this occurrence in my quarters.”

“Yes, Fallodrin.” She bowed her head and then went to retrieve a wheeled stretcher from the corner of the room, leaving bloody footprints in her wake.

Fallodrin gestured to me and Kyria. “Come. This way.”

I wanted to accompany Teylen to the Vivifier, but I was struggling to even walk. My legs were shaking and my chest felt pinched and stiff. After a few steps, Kyria noticed, and she and Fallodrin supported me from either side all the way back to our chambers.

Fallodrin at least had the decency not to suggest the Vivifier again. I had to give him that.

Chapter 12

“Teylen will be fine,” said Kyria as we lay together later in our bed. “The Vivifier will bring him back again, just as it did before. And as he’d already used it once, the damage—the dependency you fear so much—is already done. He suffered no additional harm tonight.”

“Do we know that?” I asked. “Truly? Every time one of these people speaks of the Vivifier, we learn of a new side effect. Infertility, weariness, dependency. What else haven’t they told us? What else don’t they know?”

She shrugged. “If there is anything else, how terrible could it be? They have all lived for hundreds of years, after all.”

“And they murder each other for fun!” I rasped. “Has the thing stolen these people’s conception of right and wrong?”

She lifted herself up on her elbow and looked down at me. “You see it as wrong because you cannot divorce murder from death. But if nobody dies, is murder still a crime? How can something that does nobody harm be a bad thing?”

I shivered. “I think it is the fact that it does nobody harm that troubles me. How can dying over and over again be natural?”

She chuckled. “You have worked all your life with devices that could be described as unnatural. Your primary focus has always been to improve upon nature, find ways to defeat its horrors, its diseases and infirmaries. These people have found the ultimate solution to everything you care most deeply about and you want to turn your back on it. Perhaps...perhaps you’re just jealous.”

I smiled. “Perhaps I am. I suppose...it just seems too good to be true. It seems like a thing that shouldn’t work, and that makes me suspicious of why it does.”

She lay back and patted my arm sleepily. “I’m sure you’ll get to the bottom of it, darling. You always do.”

I lay beside her in silence for a while, but my mind was still whirling. After a few minutes I sat up again.

“Sorry, darling,” I said. “But I’m curious. Having used the Vivifier, having had the experience, how do you think it worked? How did it bring you back from the dead?”

“I...” She paused, long enough that I thought she might have drifted off to sleep. “Why, I suppose it must have healed my body enough that my soul—or whatever you wish to call it—could return to it.”

I frowned. “And where do you think your soul was while your body was dead?”

She thought again, then shook her head. “I really don’t know. Maybe it stayed in my body, asleep. Whatever happened, I still have it, don’t I? And isn’t that all that matters?”

I took her hand and kissed it. “Yes, darling. That is everything.”

But as I lay there, I wondered. Did she have it? Did she have the same “soul” she’d had before? Or was her head filled with nothing more than revived memories, possibly degraded memories, lacking some essential empathy? Could that be why the Archopalasians played at murder, and felt no compunction about tricking me? Because their consciences didn’t return with the rest of them?

Sleep was elusive after that, and when it came, it was fitful. When I closed my eyes I kept seeing death—Teylen’s lifeless face with his throat slashed open, Kyria lying limp in my arms after Biver had killed her, Shwyr’s mutated form, Fallodrin’s decomposing corpse.

A gentle knocking freed me from the nightmare the next morning, and I stumbled gratefully to the hallway door.

Falldrin was waiting outside with a bashful Teylen standing behind him. My eyes widened at seeing the boy again. Even though I knew that he was going to be revived, the image of his cut throat and my brain’s atavistic understanding that there was no coming back from a wound like that had still convinced me that I would never see him again, but there he was, as foolish and awkward as ever.

“My boy,” I said. “I...”

“Forgive me, Sage Reen,” he said. “For last night. I heard you saw me—”

“Think nothing of it,” I said. “You may do as you like on your own time. I was only concerned for your safety. And...speaking of. Come in a moment. I want to examine you.”

He shuffled reluctantly in, and I scrutinized him from head to toe as Fallodrin waited with seemingly perfect patience. I was looking for any obvious signs that using the Vivifier again had changed him, but though I poked and prodded and checked his eyes and mouth and skin and temperature, I found nothing, which was both a relief and a disappointment.

I turned to Fallodrin. “Have you found me some volunteers?”

“Yes, Sage,” he said. “Three of our citizens have agreed to skip today’s treatment. You may examine them tomorrow.”

“Excellent,” I said. “Then, today, I think, I would like to examine the Vivifier itself.”

Fallodrin pursed his lips, then bowed his head. “It sorrows me to disappoint, Sage, but the Vivifier is needed for our treatments today. Give me a few days and I will arrange for it to be unused for a full day. In the meantime, if you would like to look at the growing lights for the hydroponic crops, Kircha would be most grateful.”

I glared at him. “Is this some sort of delaying tactic? You can’t keep me away from it forever.”

“Not at all, Sage,” he said. “It is only an adjustment in our schedules. We have never had to plan for a break before.”

I sighed. It was a reasonable excuse. “Very well,” I said. “Lead me to your garden.”

Kircha was tending to the crops when we arrived, pulling a hovercart full of tools and buckets behind her and sprinkling fertilizer onto soil where nothing had yet sprouted. She grinned at Teylen.

“Sindrea told me that for this fertilizer, I have you to thank, my boy.”

Teylen didn’t know what to say, so he just nodded and looked at his feet.

“It is of the finest quality.” She sounded strangely excited about it. “I would welcome some more from you, if you happen to die again.”

I'm certain the woman meant nothing malevolent, but Teylen turned white and held up trembling hands.

“Uh, twice is enough,” he squeaked.

She chuckled as if she didn't believe it, then turned to me. “So, I hope you're going to look at my lights.”

I nodded, then peered up at them. They hung from long curving rails above the crops, glowing with a faintly purple light, except those that weren't working, which were more than a few.

“I will see what can be done. Have you a ladder?”

She nodded and went off to fetch one as I continued to squint up at the ceiling.

Teylen and I tested and experimented with the light emitters for the rest of the day, taking occasional breaks when I felt my chest tightening, and plucking ripe-looking fruit and legumes from the surrounding crops when we were hungry.

As far as old devices go, the light emitters were fairly dull. They had only two interesting properties. First, when our hands passed in front of their light, we could see stains on them that were not visible in ordinary light. The stains turned out to be juice from the fruits we were eating, and after we scrubbed our hands clean, they were gone again. The second interesting property was that the lights had no built-in power source and were not physically connected to any such source, and yet they were indeed powered—at least, the ones that worked were. They seemed to function entirely by magic.

Even more baffling—dare I say frustrating—was the fact that, no matter what I checked, I could find nothing wrong with the ones that didn't work, nor any reason why the others did work. Those that didn't work had the exact same components as the working ones. As far as I could tell, every piece was intact and in exactly the same condition as in the functioning lights, and yet they would not turn on. By afternoon, my temper became as short as my breathing, and when I returned to my quarters that evening, I felt the day had been wasted.

I woke the next day eager to examine the volunteers who had skipped their treatments the day before, but when Fallodrin came for me, he had bad news.

“I apologize, Sage,” he said. “But none of them were able to resist the urge to get another treatment.”

I blinked. “None of them?”

“I’m afraid not. They all snuck to the chamber in the night and used the Vivifier.” He gave me a weak smile. “You are still scheduled to look at the machine the day after tomorrow, however, and of course that will mean that everybody will miss a day, so we will all be your subjects after that.”

“Well, that’s good news at least,” I said. “So what would you like me to look at today?”

“Do you wish to continue with the light emitters?” he asked. “I understand you did not have much success—”

“I am thoroughly sick of light emitters,” I said, cutting him off. “Maybe I could look at your climate control system. Perhaps in one of the abandoned habitats so that I can compare later with this one?”

“Of course,” said Fallodrin. “I will show you number six. Everything works there except for the climate systems, which is a shame. It was my home habitat, and I miss it.”

Habitat Six was dark and cold, its air stale and still, even though one or two fans were still working. My chest hurt more while we were working there than it did elsewhere, and Teylen and I had to take frequent rests in Habitat Seven so I could get my breath back. We also sometimes heard strange noises and shiftings faintly in the distance, as if the place were haunted.

Nevertheless, by the end of the day we had discovered two interesting things. The first was that, like the light emitters, the fans of the climate control systems had no internal power source and did not seem to be connected to an external one. Not only that, they appeared to turn on and off according to a set schedule, yet they had no built-in timing mechanism. So what was controlling them, and how?

The second interesting thing I discovered was a part in the fans that made a difference when it was removed—a small coil made of dark metal. I found one in a working fan I had opened up in order to compare it to a nonworking one. When I extracted the coil, the fan deactivated. When I replaced it again, the fan resumed its function. I pulled the coil from a nonworking fan and put in the coil from the working fan. The nonworking fan started up.

Was the coil some sort of miniature energy supply? I tested it. It had no power whatsoever. So what was it? And why did these fans have coils while the light emitters did not? Or did they? Had I missed them?

I went back to the farm level of the Nexus to make sure, then kicked myself for a fool when I found the coils in the lights immediately. They were hidden in what I had yesterday mistaken for a handle jutting from the top. It was actually a coil housing. These coils were slightly smaller than the ones in the fans, so I couldn't scavenge working ones from the climate system for Kircha's lights—or vice versa—but taking a coil from a working light and putting it in a nonworking light did the trick just as it had with the fans, so that was promising. Still, it didn't explain why some of the coils functioned properly and others, seemingly identical in every way I could measure, did not. Nor did it explain the mystery of how the devices were powered or timed.

Then I had an epiphany. What if the coils were receivers? What if the fan was being told to turn on and off by some sort of transmitter? No, a device couldn't receive power remotely, could it? I had never heard of such a thing, but this was Archopalasia, the city of wonders. Anything was possible.

But if it was possible, then where was this transmitter? And how did it work?

Chapter 13

I woke the next morning eager to begin the day.

This was the day I would finally get to tinker with the Vivifier, the day I could begin to solve the problem of the hold it had on the people of Archopalasia. I threw off the covers and stood, and suddenly found myself very light-headed. I clutched the wall to steady myself and nearly slipped because my palms were sweaty. In fact, I was covered in sweat, though I wasn't in the least bit hot.

Another problem with the climate control, I thought. Well, it would have to wait until tomorrow. My only focus today was the Vivifier.

I got dressed, rubbing my blurry eyes repeatedly, then went out into the anteroom where Kyria was having some breakfast in her robe.

“Good morning, darling,” she said.

“Good morning, dearest.” It looked like there were two of her smiling back at me. I rubbed my eyes again, then bent to kiss her.

My back caught me, and I hissed. “Oh, I'm getting old,” I said.

She squeezed my hand. “You know you don't have to.”

I sighed and kissed her. “Maybe you're right. If I can't find a way to loose the machine's grip on you, then there is no reason I shouldn't let it take hold of me too, for I certainly will never leave here without you.”

Kyria looked up. “Do you mean that? You'll take the treatment?”

“If its secret eludes me, then...yes. I suppose I will.”

“Darling!”

Kyria threw her arms around me, kissing me. And suddenly I was doubled over with pain. My chest was crushing in on itself, just as it had right before we reached Archopalasia. My knees buckled and I toppled to the floor. I couldn't breathe. Kyria was shouting my name. My vision darkened, and her voice seemed to grow more distant, as if she were yelling at me from deep within a tunnel, then everything went black.

I jolted awake and sucked in a deep breath. All was still completely black, and I was overwhelmed by vertigo. My back was pressed against a contoured surface that seemed to cradle my body, and I could not move, but whether I was lying flat or standing up or hanging upside down, I could not tell.

A moment later I heard a mechanical whine and a loud hiss, and then the air pressure changed around me, making my ears pop. Next, a vertical sliver of light widened in a rush of billowing steam, and then the steam dissipated, revealing Kyria, Teylen, and Fallodrin peering in at me from a bright room beyond the darkness.

My stomach clenched with dread as I realized where I was. The Vivifier. I clawed forward.

“What have you done?” I cried. “What have you done to me?”

“Darling,” said Kyria. “You are reborn.”

I recoiled from her. “I did not consent to this! I told you! I told you I—”

She caught my flailing hands, then held them to her chest. “Reen. Reen, please. You died. Your heart stopped. We had no choice.”

“Died? Who said I died? I don’t remember...” But then I did. The pain. The tunnel vision. Kyria’s silent screams. The blackness that swallowed me. I tried to remember anything after that, any impressions, dreams, any hint that my consciousness had continued after that moment, but from my perspective, no time had passed between that fade to darkness and my waking in darkness just now.

“I...died,” I said at last.

“Yes,” said Kyria. “Just as I did. And just as I was reborn, so have you been. Look at yourself.”

For the first time since I’d stepped from the Vivifier I took notice of things other than Kyria and my own thoughts. I held up my hands. The wrinkles and age spots were gone, and my knuckles were no longer knotted. I looked down at my body. Gone was the sagging flesh and the skinny limbs, the pot belly and gray hair on my chest. I was as trim and firm as I had been in my twenties, without a scar or a blemish anywhere to be seen, and I felt an energy and liveliness that I hadn’t been able to muster for years.

I chuckled. “Well, I admit, it has its attractions.”

Kyria smiled widely and threw her arms around me. “You look magnificent!”

“I feel—ow!” I was about to say magnificent, but Kyria’s hand hit me in the middle of my back, and something it touched made me jump in pain.

Kyria turned me around to inspect my back. “I don’t understand. Your scar is still there. The one from the Iron Wind.”

I didn’t understand either. I’d seen Skotoko emerge from the Vivifier with all of his scars healed, even his tattoos erased. And my other scars were gone too. Why not this one?

Fallodrin cleared his throat. “This I have seen before. With others who were afflicted by the Iron Wind. Their mutations did not heal either.”

I grunted with disappointment. Earlier, when I’d struggled with the idea of using the Vivifier, the only thing I had looked forward to was finally freeing myself of the unscar, and now it was not to be.

“Oh no,” said Kyria. “Does this mean that Shwyr...?”

I sighed, then nodded. “Very likely. Poor Skotoko. He will be so disappointed.”

“He’ll wreck the Vivifier,” said Teylen.

My eyes widened. Fallodrin looked uneasy as well. The boy was likely right. “We will have to warn him, then,” I said. “If he ever returns.”

Teylen handed me a robe to cover my nakedness, and I dressed myself. Then Fallodrin bowed to me.

“I am sorry for your untimely death,” he said. “I know you wished to know more of the machine before you used it for yourself, but if it is any consolation, it is still available for your examination. As promised, no one is scheduled to use it until tomorrow.”

I laughed—a great bellowing, body-convulsing laughter that seemed as if it would never end. When it did, with tears streaming down my cheeks and an ache in my sides, everyone was staring at me as if wondering if I had gone mad. Perhaps I had. Perhaps the world had.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I just...”

I looked back at the Vivifier, and the thought of examining it inch by inch just bored me. It sounded like the dullest idea in the world. I was young now, young and strong and virile. The occupations of old men suddenly held no interest for me.

“Another day, perhaps,” I said, then held out a hand to Kyria. “Today is my birthday. I think I’m going to celebrate.”

The two of us spent the rest of the day like a young couple in lust, and I came to appreciate the stamina I’d gained from my treatment. I was once again the jiraskar Kyria remembered, and I reveled in it. But there was another aspect of our lovemaking that was more disturbing.

Kyria wanted me to be very rough with her, though she had never asked for such a thing before in all the time I had known her. I was reluctant at first, but after some initial awkward attempts at playacting the dominant male, it began to feel very arousing and almost natural. I beat Kyria’s bare bottom with my open palm, yanked her long hair, even picked her up and pinned her against a wall at one point. It was unlike anything we’d ever done before. It felt both intimate and distant, like we were two strangers cheating on our spouses with each other.

During one of our most intense moments, Kyria wrapped a sheet around my neck and pulled it tight. An image of Sindrea slitting Teylen’s throat came to me unbidden, and fear and disgust nearly overwhelmed me, but a moment later I was lost in the ecstasy of climax and my qualms faded into the afterglow.

After Kyria fell asleep, however, and I was alone with my thoughts, my unease returned. I felt uncomfortable, perhaps even ashamed. I had never been this way before. I looked at Kyria’s naked body and counted the bruises I had given her. How could I have hurt her, even for pleasure—especially for pleasure? Then I looked at her face. She was smiling blissfully. If she truly enjoyed it, what was there to feel guilty about? Perhaps it was that I had so easily given in to her desire to be hurt—relished it, even—when I had never had any inclinations in that direction before in my life. It felt like I had betrayed some core notion of who I was. And coming so soon after my rebirth, the obvious question lingered.

Had I changed, or had the Vivifier changed me?

Chapter 14

The next morning I woke from a nightmare in which we were all once again in the waste, surrounded by endless waves of hounds, with Shwyr throwing dozens of flash cyphers and Skotoko singing his Nahnekai and slaying hounds by the score, all without any effect. There were always more, and they were tearing our flesh from our bones.

I opened my eyes with a cry, and to my distress saw that Kyria wasn't there. Had she been eaten by the hounds? No. That was the nightmare. She was fine. Not here, but fine.

But Skotoko? Gone in search of poor dead Shwyr? Was he fine? I had been so distracted by all that had happened since he had left, I had nearly forgotten him. Wasn't it past the time he'd said he'd return? Where was he?

Seized by this sudden concern, I got up and got dressed quickly, then roused Teylen where he dozed on the bench outside my door, and together we went in search of Fallodrin.

Instead we found Sindrea, breaking her fast in Habitat Seven's communal dining area. Teylen shifted uncomfortably in her presence.

"Have you seen Fallodrin?" I asked.

"I am sorry to say I have not," she said. "Is there some way I might assist you?"

"Not unless you know how to use that remote viewing device on the upper level," I said.

"Fortune is with you." Sindrea smiled and stood. "There are none among us who know better the function of the scope than I."

"Oh?"

"It is so. I am the one who discovered you and your camp, and during your journey here I would often track your progress. In this way, I saw the danger you faced on your last day in the waste, and we came to your rescue. Come, I will assist you with it."

I was lost in thought as we followed her to the domed garden. I'd avoided her since I had found her murdering Teylen. But now, knowing that she was so integral to my

being here made me think again. She had probably saved our lives, so it was perhaps petty of me to continue begrudging her for her playful and inconsequential homicide.

I caught myself, surprised that I could ever consider Teylen's death meaningless.

Sindrea showed me how to manipulate the scope so that it could turn left or right or focus closer or farther away by turning the handles of the device. Starting at the base of Archopalasia, I slowly tracked back through the route of our last two days through the waste. When I saw no sign of Skotoko, I had Sindrea confirm that I was operating the device correctly.

"Is there any cause he may have had to stray from this path?" she asked.

"Not that I can imagine. He is an experienced tracker. Perhaps he's just using the buckle artifact."

"Perhaps he's dead," Teylen said, too casually.

I scowled at the boy and he lowered his head.

"Sorry."

"I have nothing else to do today," said Sindrea. "If you have other obligations, I will continue to look for your friend for you."

After such a friendly offer, I felt even guiltier for having avoided her earlier.

"Thank you," I said, then considered what I wanted to do.

I should have, given my recent rebirth, been eager to examine the Vivifier more closely. Instead, the reluctance I had felt yesterday, when I'd said I would rather be with my wife than tinker with it, remained. Indeed, I felt almost a sense of dread when I thought about learning how it worked. I was already fearing what I might have lost in my resurrection. Is it any wonder I flinched away from learning more?

"I think today," I said at last, "I shall explore the Nexus from top to bottom."

The Nexus had twenty-one levels, and I had so far visited only three of them, one of which was the Vivifier level, at the very bottom. I therefore bypassed that one and started with the next level, which is where I had seen the vats of water. They once

again sparked my curiosity. We had taken the water we drank and washed with here in Archopalasia for granted since we had arrived, but where did it come from? In a dry desert like the Tempest Waste, where did they find it? Was there a well? Did they have some kind of water-making device? I suddenly wanted to know.

We found a resident I hadn't spoken to before kneeling on the catwalk that hung above the rows of vats, dipping a transparent bucket into one of them.

"Excuse me," I said. "Do you know where this water comes from?"

He looked up and smiled. "Hello to you, gentlemen. I thought that this time, I would drown myself."

"What?"

"Never have I gone that way before," he continued. "It hurts at first, Merrifer told me, but then you are at peace right before the end."

"I asked," I repeated, "if you know where all this water comes from."

"Perhaps the ground?" the man offered as he stood and lifted the bucket. "Or the sky? I do hope you will find the answer you seek. Now I am away to find an answer of my own, in the bottom of this bucket."

Teylen and I watched the man walk back to the elevation platform, bucket in hand and whistling cheerfully to himself, then exchanged a look.

"They are a most incurious bunch," I said, "Are they not?"

"Yes, Sage."

And so we began to try to trace the source of the water. First we lowered ourselves to the floor beneath the catwalk and examined the bottoms of the vats. Each had a small pipe at the base that joined other small pipes to form a larger pipe that ran along the floor to a wall and then up through the ceiling.

"It seems we must go up," I said.

"Yes, Sage."

With the interior layouts of the levels above being often confusing, it wasn't easy tracing the big pipe's path up through the Nexus, but we eventually managed it, finding it as it passed through service hallways, closets, and back rooms.

Then, halfway up the Nexus, it passed through what looked like some forgotten workshop, and I found myself surrounded by ancient devices the likes of which I had never seen. Piles of them, in all states of repair. It was incredibly tempting to just stop there for the rest of the day and tinker, but now was not the time. We were following the pipe. I could come back here another day.

As I was steering Teylen out again, however, I noticed a dozen bubble buckles fitted into a case on a workbench, and I paused. I had given the buckle we had to Skotoko. It would be good to have another, just in case. Maybe even two.

I stepped to the case and reached for a buckle, then noticed that the case also held another larger device that shared the same basic style and markings. It looked a bit like an elongated metal egg, with four different colored bands around its center, each with a different set of symbols on it. I picked it up and looked for a way to turn it on. I could see no switch or button or pad, but the bands seemed like they would turn. I twisted one. It clicked a little at each symbol—tik tik tik—but otherwise did nothing. The other bands rotated too.

“It looks like it’s supposed to work with the buckle,” said Teylen, standing at my elbow.

“Yes, but how, I’m not sure.” I put it back in the case. “A mystery for another day.”

I took a buckle and gave one to Teylen. “Here. But we’d better make sure they work first. After you.”

Teylen obligingly turned his buckle, and as expected, the world disappeared around us, leaving only those things that fit entirely within the bubble—in this case, a chair, the workbench, and a few scattered devices.

I nodded, satisfied, and was about to tell him to turn it back again when I noticed something bright out of the corner of my eye. I turned. The bands of the silver, egg-shaped device were glowing from within.

I stared. No device we had ever brought into the bubble had worked. They had all been stone cold dead, but this one, which had been dead in the world, was working here. I reached out and picked it up, this time being careful not to touch or turn the bands. Instead I just looked at them closely. I could not decipher the symbols, but it seemed like the device was designed so that turning the bands would make different

combinations of them. A lock, perhaps? A code-breaking machine? A translator? How did any of those mesh with a buckle that took one out of the world? No, it was something else.

“What is it?” breathed Teylen.

“I have no idea,” I said, “and unfortunately, we don’t have time just now to figure it out.”

I did know, however, that this time I wasn’t going to leave it behind. I put it in my pocket.

“All right, turn it back and I’ll test mine.”

He twisted the buckle again and we returned to the lab, then I tested mine, which worked fine, and we continued up the Nexus, following the water pipe level by level, until finally, at the very top, it passed through a synthsteel wall and we discovered we could follow it no farther. There was a heavily armored door in the wall, secured with several complicated-looking locks and thickly covered in dust.

I took out the light emitter we had borrowed from the farm level to use as a torch and shined it on the mechanisms, then frowned. The light seemed far brighter than normal.

I looked to Teylen. “Is it my imagination, or...”

“No, Sage. I see it too. It’s blinding.”

“But why?” I asked. “Is the air up here more rarified, or...”

I looked at the door again, ideas forming in my head, then turned and walked away from it.

“This way, Teylen.”

“Yes, Sage.”

We walked back to the elevation platform, holding the light in front of us. Even before we reached it, the light dimmed slightly, and when we took the platform to the floor just below, it was back to its normal soft illumination.

“Now, back up,” I said.

“Yes, Sage.”

We went back up, and just as I expected, the light got brighter again, and once more blinded us as we neared the armored door. Had I at last found the source of the coils' power?

"Let's go find Fallodrin," I said.

"Yes, Sage."

Unfortunately, when we found him, he had little to say.

"I know the door you speak of," he said. "Unfortunately, the keys to it were lost hundreds of years ago."

I frowned. "You didn't make new keys? Or force the door?"

He shrugged. "What reason was there? We always have water."

I grunted in frustration. "Do you know, I believe you could likely have solved all your problems without me if you had even the slightest curiosity about your environment."

He did not contradict me.

I dismissed Teylen and returned to my chambers to find Kyria for dinner, though my mind was still churning at Fallodrin and the others' lack of interest in knowing anything about the place they lived or how any of it worked. It was maddening, and I was determined that right after dinner I would return to the Nexus and find a way through that door, even if I had to break it down. Nothing was going to stop me from finding the source of Archopalasia's water. Or...maybe I'd see what the banded egg I'd found did. One or the other, certainly.

But then I found Kyria sprawled naked on our bed, waiting for me, and suddenly all thoughts of food, water, exploration, or answers vanished in a surge of lust, and once more we spent the whole night ravaging each other, and just as savagely as before. Indeed we were even more violent this time. It was as if Kyria was possessed. She had been trembling with desire from the moment I entered the room, and threw herself at me before I could take my clothes off, and her passion remained undiminished throughout the night, no matter what I did to her or how many times I sated it.

It was an incredible, indescribable night, and also a terrifying one.

Chapter 15

The next morning I again woke disturbed about what we had done, and my sense of unease only grew when I looked at Kyria, who had gotten up before me and was nibbling on some fruit. There was blood on her robe. Only a few drops, but still.

I pointed to it. “Did...did I do that?”

She looked at the blood, then shook her head. “I don’t believe so.” She smiled, sultry. “We did many things last night, but I don’t believe either of us drew blood.”

“Then where did it come from?”

She shrugged. “I have no idea. Perhaps it isn’t even blood. I’ve been eating berries just now.”

I frowned. It seemed a reasonable enough explanation, but there was something in her expression that made me wonder. Kyria had never hidden anything from me in the past, but then she had never wanted to be beaten either. Was she lying?

I was just about to question her further when a knock came at the door. I quickly threw on my robe and stepped through to the hallway door.

It was Fallodrin and Sindrea. They smiled and bowed.

“Good tidings, Sage,” Fallodrin said. “Your friend lives, and he is approaching Archopalasia.”

“Come see,” said Sindrea.

Kyria and I followed them to the domed room and looked through the scope after Sindrea had aimed it for us. As before when Fallodrin had showed me my camp, objects viewed through the aperture were blocky and oddly colored, and details were difficult to make out, but the central object definitely looked Skotoko-shaped, and was trudging wearily in our direction. It also seemed to be dragging a litter of some kind behind it, on which lay a large lump. Shwyr? Had he actually managed to find and rescue her corpse? If that was so, he was going to be terribly disappointed if the Vivifier couldn’t reverse what the Iron Wind had done to her.

“How close is he?” I asked.

“At his current pace, it will be tomorrow before he reaches us,” Sindrea answered.

Suddenly all my hesitations and reservations about examining the Vivifier vanished. I had to know as much as I could about it, as fast as I could learn it.

Fallodrin and a handful of other Archopalasians watched anxiously as I began to examine the Vivifier's surface, looking to find a way to access its inner workings.

"It is my hope that you will exercise the utmost caution," said Fallodrin. "If the Vivifier were to be damaged, we would all suffer. Including you and your wife."

"Yes, yes," I said. "I know. There is no need to remind me. I will endeavor to be careful."

A few minutes later I found the hidden fasteners that opened the machine's casing, but after that it was slow going. Its workings were enormously complex and confusing, and I had to work very carefully to make sure I didn't damage anything or remove something that I couldn't put back.

Eventually, I found two of the spiral components that I'd also seen in the light emitters and the climate control fans. I pulled one of the coils and the lights at the base of the mechanism went dark. Fallodrin gave a sharp gasp.

"Now, now," I said. "It will turn back on if I replace it, you see?"

I popped the coil back in and the base lit up just as before.

Fallodrin breathed a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Sage, but please—"

I pulled it out again and he gasped once more.

"Sage!"

I was too deep in musing to notice him.

"Interesting," I said. "This coil only seems to affect the base. The Vivifier remains powered. I wonder if it will still work."

I stood and opened the chrysalis. "Let me try."

"No, Sage!" said Teylen. "If something were to happen to you, we'd all be in jeopardy. Let me do it."

I stared at him, surprised and touched. "You'd put yourself in danger for me? What if something happens to you?"

“You’ll put the coil back in and run it again. I’ll be fine.” He shrugged. “And even if I’m not, I know you can fix me. You’re the smartest man I know.”

I flushed. “Your confidence in me is alarming.”

He laughed at that, then shed his clothes and stepped into the machine. I closed it on his smile, then pressed the activation pad. It began to glow, as usual, but this time I didn’t hear any noises. No buzzing or hissing, no constant hum, just silence and the pulse of the chrysalis’s light.

Fallodrin and I watched and waited as it continued, glancing down every now and then to see if the gray sludge was coming out of the pipe at the base, but it never did. Instead, after the normal amount of time had passed, the Vivifier tilted upright again and the hatch opened.

Fallodrin and I stepped to it, waiting for the steam to clear. When it did, we gasped, for lying in the chamber was not one Teylen, but two, side by side.

“Two?” said Fallodrin. “How are there two?”

“What does it mean?” asked another onlooker.

“I...I cannot make a hypothesis at this time,” I said softly. “Further research is required.”

A man backed away, muttering, then turned and hurried for the exit.

Fallodrin called after him. “Soro! Wait! Don’t...”

The man didn’t stop, and with a grunt of dismay, Fallodrin started after him. The others were quick to follow.

I scarcely noticed them leave. I was too busy inspecting the two Teylens.

Both were unconscious and breathing, and seemed identical—externally at least—in every way. I tried slapping them both awake, but neither revived. I transferred the bodies to two stretchers and began to examine them more closely.

Several minutes later, the Vivifier chamber began to fill with people. Soro, it seemed, had eluded Fallodrin and spread the word, and the citizens of Archopalasia were coming to see the strange occurrence for themselves. What an annoyance. I didn’t need to be stared at while I worked. I needed peace and solitude.

Fortunately, just before I might have exploded and said things I would have later regretted, Kyria entered with Fallodrin and took in the situation at a glance.

She stepped to me and squeezed my arm. “Don’t worry, darling. You keep working. I’ll deal with them.”

She turned and clapped her hands. “Friends, please. The sage will make much better progress if we leave him alone. Please, let’s all retire to the domed garden and wait for word of his findings there.”

“Yes,” said Fallodrin. “Please. Let us all go.”

The citizens seemed reluctant, but eventually they allowed him and Kyria to herd them back out the door. Soon, only one was left, Sindrea. She stepped to me hesitantly.

“May I help?” she said. “I...I am fond of Teylen.”

Fond enough to kill him, I thought, but her concern seemed genuine, and with my usual assistant lying unconscious in front of me, I was going to need someone.

“Very well,” I said. “But please stand aside and don’t do anything until I ask you to. Is that clear?”

She nodded and backed up. “Yes, Sage.”

“Thank you.”

The first thing I wanted to do was determine which of the bodies was the original Teylen and which was the facsimile. They were identical in every way that I could measure without cutting them open. Then I remembered our trip to the farm level and had an idea.

“Sindrea,” I called. “Here’s a task for you. Can you bring me a working light emitter from the hydroponics floor? There is something I want to check.”

“Of course, Sage,” she said, and trotted out, returning a short while later with the light.

“Excellent,” I said, taking it from her. “You see, I remembered that when Teylen and I were tinkering in the crop level, we found that if one had gogglefruit juice on one’s hands, it would show up as a stain under the emitters, though invisible in normal light. And it occurred to me that the original Teylen, who as you know is not the tidiest

of young men, probably neglected to wash his hands after eating a few at breakfast this morning, and so..."

I turned the emitter on and shined its purplish light over the hands of both Teylens, and as I had hoped, one of them—the one on the left—had a few ghostly marks on his fingers. He was therefore the original. The other was the copy.

Good. At least I knew that.

What I didn't know was why there were two of them. How had turning off the base...

Like a thunderbolt, a theory came to me that caused the hairs on the back of my neck to stand up. If it was true...

But no. One should never speculate when one can confirm. I just needed a volunteer. I looked at Sindrea, then hesitated. If what I believed was true, then...But did it matter? It was what she had done to herself a hundred, possibly a thousand, times before.

"Sindrea," I said at last. "Would you be willing to use the Vivifier for me once? I will return it to its normal function first."

She smiled. "Of course. It is always a pleasure to use the Vivifier."

"Good," I said. "But first, could I ask you to run another errand for me, and bring me some gogglefruit juice?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Gogglefruit juice? I...Oh. You want to do another test. I see. Very well. I'll be back."

As she ran off, I put the spiral component back into the Vivifier and the base lit up again. So far, so good. Now I could only pray that I was wrong.

Chapter 16

She was away for longer this time, and when she returned, she brought the juice, and also the entire population of Archopalasia, including Fallodrin and my wife, all back again.

“Didn’t I say I didn’t want to be watched?” I snapped.

“I’m sorry, Sage,” said Sindrea. “When I went to the eating area to get the juice, Revik and Dreman and some others were there, and I told them you were very close to learning the Vivifier’s secrets.”

“We couldn’t stay away,” said Dreman. “We have wondered too long about this.”

“And when someone came into the dome and told the rest of us what was going on, everybody wanted to come,” said Kyria, then hugged me. “I’m sorry, darling, I tried to keep them away, but...”

I patted her hand. “It wasn’t your fault, darling. These fools just...”

I was about to round on them all for coming back when I’d expressly asked them to stay away, but then I realized I was glad they were here. If my experiment played out as I feared, I wanted witnesses, and I also didn’t want to have to explain the result more than once.

“Very well,” I said. “But you all must stay well back. And be silent.” I beckoned to Sindrea. “Here, let me have the juice.”

She came forward and handed it to me.

“Thank you,” I said. “Now, dip your fingers into it and wipe them dry.”

She chuckled, then did as I asked, and I shined the light emitter on her hand to confirm that the liquid had left a stain. It had.

“Now show your friends.”

She held her hands out to the crowd and I put the light on them again.

“You see?” I asked them. “Stained, yes?”

There was a general murmur of agreement.

“Very good,” I said, then turned back to Sindrea. “Now, please enter the Vivifier.”

“Of course.”

And with that she shed her clothes, stepped up onto the base and laid back into the chrysalis as the crowd and I watched.

“Are you ready?” I asked.

“Ready,” she said.

I pressed the activation pad and the machine powered up as Sindrea relaxed, but then, just as the doors started to close, I saw her smile falter and a frown crease her forehead, and she looked at me through the steam as if to say something.

She was too late. The chrysalis closed with a hiss and began its cycle. My heart lurched. I could tell that she’d suddenly realized the point of the experiment and was having second thoughts. There was nothing I could do. The process was automated, and I had no idea how to abort it, or what might happen to her if I did.

My distress must have been noticeable, for Kyria turned to me. “Is something wrong with the machine, dear?”

I shook my head. “Everything, I’m very much afraid, is working as it always has.”

I clenched my hands, trying to suppress my emotions as the Vivifier continued to work, this time with all its familiar hissing, buzzing, and rippling air. And at the end of its cycle, just as it had every time but the last, the gray nutrient sludge oozed out of the pipe and into the pan. I had to look away.

Finally the machine opened again and Sindrea stepped out. The crowd breathed a sigh of relief, as if they had been afraid it wouldn’t work after my tinkering, but Sindrea still looked uneasy. Wordlessly she held out her hands to me, and I passed the light over them. There was no stain.

I sighed.

She choked.

“Sage...” she said. “Sage, I...”

“Let’s take it slowly,” I said, then turned to the crowd. “First, let me ask Fallodrin, in his own words, to tell us what he thinks the Vivifier does.”

Fallodrin blinked, confused, then spoke. “The Vivifier repairs and restores the body,” he said. “Regular treatments in the Vivifier have allowed us to extend our lives by centuries.”

“You are certain of this?” I asked.

“Of course,” he said. “That is its function, to remove afflictions and reverse aging.”

I faced him directly. “Can you then explain why there are two Teylens?”

He looked at the two bodies for a long moment, then shook his head. “I cannot.”

“Then I will give you my theory,” I said. “I believe that the Vivifier does not actually heal the body. Instead, I believe it duplicates the body.”

The crowd murmured at that, and Fallodrin shot a nervous glance at them.

“But then,” said Sindrea behind me, “what becomes of the original?”

I turned and picked up the bucket of sludge from under the pipe in the base of the Vivifier, then walked it to her.

“I’m sorry, Sindrea,” I said, setting it down in front of her. “But this is the woman who walked into the Vivifier. You are a copy of her.”

She had known already—I had seen it in her eyes before the doors had closed, but finally hearing it out loud broke her, and she convulsed in a great gasping sob.

The sound seemed to free the rest of Archopalasia from its shock, and the room erupted into commotion. People shouted at each other. Still more shouted at Fallodrin. Kircha vomited. The man Teylen and I had met at the water vats ran out of the room, wailing. A few people just stood, staring at the bucket, stunned into silence. Others yelled at me, accusing me of being wrong, of lying, of tricking them. Only Fallodrin didn’t seem shocked by the news. Concerned, certainly, but not surprised.

People started leaving the room, some running, some talking in groups, some shuffling along in a daze, trying to process what I had discovered. I was still reeling from it myself. Each of us had used the Vivifier at least once, meaning our original bodies had been destroyed and made into fertilizer for the foods that we had all eaten. We were all copies, or copies of copies. Most of the Archopalasians were likely hundreds or thousands of generations away from their original selves.

As I've said before, I've never been a spiritual man, never believed in the soul. Even so, knowing that my original self was gone, and that I now inhabited a manufactured shell, I couldn't help but feel that I'd lost something, though I knew not what.

My mental faculties seemed still intact. In fact, I felt sharper than ever. But was there something missing? I didn't even know how to begin to figure that out.

Falldrin put an arm around Sindrea's shoulders as she wept, then looked back at me.

"A thing I have learned over these last centuries," he said coolly, "is that knowledge and wisdom are not always the same thing. Good day, Sage."

And with that, he steered Sindrea toward the exit and walked out with the others. Eventually everyone was gone except for me, Kyria, and the two Teylens.

Teylen—the days-old version of him—began to stir. He sat up on the stretcher and looked around, groggy.

He yawned. "Did I miss anything?"

Then he saw his unconscious twin and screamed.

We calmed Teylen and told him what had happened, then disposed of his twin by taking the coil from the Vivifier but leaving the one in the base, then putting the twin inside. Teylen vomited as he watched the gray sludge pumped from the machine, and ran weeping from the room.

Kyria did not cry until we got back to our room and closed the door, then great blubbing sobs convulsed her, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

I caught her and held her tight.

"Oh, darling," I said. "I'm so sorry. I should have kept the truth from you as Falldrin suggested. What point is there knowing a thing you cannot—"

She interrupted me with a great wail and ran into the bedroom. "Oh, I am damned! I am damned! What have I done?"

I followed her, confused. “What have you done? You have done nothing. You were dead. You were put in the Vivifier without your consent. No god or spirit could condemn you for that, surely. You are innocent!”

She shook her head, tears flying. “You are innocent, dear Reen. You turned your back on the Vivifier as if you knew instinctively what it was, even when I did my best to seduce you into using it. But I...” She sobbed again. “Yes, they resurrected me without my consent the first time, but afterward—”

“The first time?” I stepped back. “Afterward? What are you saying?”

She sat down on the bed and put her face in her hands. I stood over her, staring, unable to relax enough to sit.

“Darling,” I said. “Please. Tell me.”

“Six times,” she said. “I have used the Vivifier six times.”

“What!” I shouted. “Why? I thought Fallodrin said we wouldn’t feel any weariness for years. I certainly haven’t felt any. What—”

“I haven’t,” she sobbed. “It wasn’t that.”

“Then what?”

She chewed her lip and looked at the floor. The urge to shake her, to demand answers, was almost overwhelming. Finally she spoke.

“Do you remember when I died? When Biver grabbed me?”

I shuddered. “How could I forget? It is forever etched upon my memory. The worst moment of my life.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “Yes. But also, for me, right at the end, when the blackness of death was rising and the pain was consuming me, there was a moment, as brief as a spark, of peace and joy and pleasure and contentment like none I had ever felt, as if every promise of paradise ever preached might actually be true.” She smiled sadly. “In fact, my first emotion on waking in the Vivifier was disappointment, for that spark, brief as it was, lasted until the Archopalasians revived me.”

I scowled, torn between jealousy and disbelief. I too had died, but had experienced nothing like that. All I remembered was pain and screaming. Had Kyria been offered some sort of paradise while I, old sinner that I am, had been denied it?

“Go on,” I said.

“Well,” she said. “Then I forgot it. The excitement of having my youth and health back, of being able to love you as I hadn’t been able to for so long, overwhelmed everything else until...” She looked embarrassed. “Until the night when we found Teylen with Sindrea together, when she was...killing him.”

She looked up, holding out her hands as she looked into my eyes. “What she described, when she was speaking of...of the joy of having her throat cut, of her final moments, was so similar to my memory of that spark, that I thought...”

“You thought you would try to recapture it,” I said, sighing. “Ah, Kyria.”

“But it worked, Reen!” she cried. “It worked! Every time Sindrea opened me up, the spark—”

“Sindrea?” I cried. “You and she—?”

“No, Reen, no!” Kyria clutched my arm. “I could never betray you like that! She only killed me!”

It says something about the strangeness of our situation that those words actually relieved me. I frowned as a memory came to me.

“So the blood on your robe. That was...”

She nodded. “I’m sorry I lied to you. I was afraid of...well, of this conversation. I feared you wouldn’t understand.”

I shook my head. “I’m not sure I do.”

“If you had felt it, you would,” she said. “The bliss, the calm, the shimmering light of it—so brief but so perfect, so...” She looked up at me again. “I can’t describe it, but you felt it, or the echo of it in my passion. Every time I came back I was...fizzing with it!”

I snorted. “There was nothing calm or peaceful about your passions, beloved. We did things that—”

“But you don’t understand! The passion, the recklessness, came from knowing that the spark was waiting for me no matter what. Whatever we did, whatever I did, I was forgiven, and would be blessed with it again. Everything was permitted! Everything I had ever been too embarrassed to ask of you, too afraid of dying or being bruised to

dare, I could finally try, because I would always be reborn, clean and fresh and new! There were no consequences!”

“Except,” I said, “there were.”

She hung her head. “I...I don’t know. I have always believed in the afterlife. That, if we are virtuous, the nano spirits call us up to the datasphere, and we dance together in the aether forever. And when I came back in the Vivifier and Fallodrin told me I’d been resurrected, I convinced myself that it meant my soul had been brought back to my body—my original body—so what I had experienced was more of a near-death moment, a window into paradise that I could return to anytime I liked. But now...now my original body is six deaths behind me, and...”

I sat on the bed and put an arm around her. “And you fear that your soul was lost in the first, and you will never rise to the heavens.”

She pursed her lips. “There is an even worse possibility.”

“What is that?” I asked.

“That paradise doesn’t exist. That what I felt was nothing but some natural phenomenon, and not the afterlife at all. Six times I felt it! And each time as wonderful and blissful as the last, but...but what if it was nothing but a last tickle of the nerves? A last trick of the brain? What if it was all...meaningless?” She shook her head. “That I may have lost my chance at heaven is a tragedy, I suppose. That heaven might not exist at all...that is a loss I cannot comprehend.”

She began to cry again, and I held her close and let her wipe her nose on my shoulder. A lifelong atheist such as myself had no answers for such questions save open arms and an open heart.

Chapter 17

A pounding on the door woke us early the next morning, though to be honest I don't believe Kyria had slept at all. Every time I'd turned over, I'd found her staring at the ceiling.

She sat up at the noise, silent and calm, but I patted her on the shoulder.

"No, no. You rest."

She nodded and sank back and I stumbled into the antechamber, pulling my robe on as I went. Teylen and Sindrea peered in at me from the brightness of the hall.

"Come quickly!" Teylen said. "Skotoko draws near!"

When the portal irised open, we saw Skotoko just under a kilometer away, still dragging the litter he had been pulling when we had spied upon him through the scope, though he was struggling now even to move it.

We raced out, calling to him.

"Skotoko! Wait!"

"Let us help you!"

He looked up and shielded his eyes, then collapsed to his knees when he saw who was coming.

Kyria, who'd had enough forethought to stop and get water before we descended to the ground, handed him a bottle as soon as we reached him, and he gulped down a few swallows before pouring the rest over his head.

"Thank you," he croaked. "I..."

And then he flopped face first on the ground.

It was not hard to see why. His skin was blackened from exposure and dehydration, and he had bloody bandages all over his arms, legs, and torso. It looked like one of his legs was splinted.

"Skotoko, what happened?" asked Kyria.

“Fekkin hounds,” he said in a weak, raspy voice. “Sang the whole goddamn song. Twice.”

“We must get him to the Vivifier,” said Sindrea.

Kyria and I exchanged a look as we knelt to help him.

“Well,” said Kyria. “We must at least get him inside.”

As we got him to his feet he grunted and pointed a flailing hand back toward his makeshift litter. “Wait! Shwyr!”

We looked at the litter for the first time. It wasn’t much more than a blanket with a rope woven into the edges so that he could pull it along, and lying on top of it was something wrapped in another blanket. We could see nothing of what was inside, but the smell coming from it would have been enough to knock down a callerail.

Teylen and Sindrea grabbed the ropes of the blanket while Kyria and I put Skotoko’s arms over our shoulders, and we all made our way back to the base of the pillar.

Skotoko glared at it as we approached. “Fekkin place. Better be worth it.”

Kyria and I exchanged an uneasy look over his lowered head.

“What are you waiting for?” growled Skotoko as we sat him on one of stretchers in the Vivifier room. “Put me in the damned machine. I wanna be in good shape when you bring Shwyr back.”

I cleared my throat. “There are a few things you should know first. A few things we learned while you were gone.”

He glared at me with an impatient eye. “Aye?”

“Er, well, the first thing is, we learned how the Vivifier works, and it’s not what we thought.”

“So what is it?”

I decided to stop beating around the bush. Skotoko obviously didn’t care for it. “We thought the Vivifier repaired our bodies. It doesn’t. It kills our bodies and makes clean, new copies.”

Skotoko's eyes refocused on me. "What? So...I'm not me?"

"I'm afraid not."

He shrugged. "Well, I feel like me."

Kyria gave him an unhappy smile. "Yes, but, er, if you are one of those who believe you have a soul, or that after you die, you live on in some kind of afterlife, this might have—"

The glaive waved an impatient hand. "I never understood any of that crap. Life is life, and when it stops, that's it. If I got another life, I'm ahead of the game. Anything else?"

I breathed a sigh of relief. One hurdle crossed without wholesale slaughter being done. Now just two more.

"Er, yes," I said. "There is a problem with the Vivifier."

His head snapped up. "What? It's broken? You can't fix me? You can't fix—"

"No, no," I said, holding up my hands. "It works as it always has. The problem is, there is a hidden defect. Once you use it, you have to keep using it, or you start to lose your strength. You have only used it once, so it will take a long while before you start fading, but once you do, you'll need to use it again to regain your vigor, and each time, the fading comes quicker."

Skotoko's brow lowered. "Do you mean to say that we're stuck here in this ugly place, forever?"

"Yes," I said. "It would seem so. I'm sorry."

I thought he might explode at that, but he grew quiet instead, and I marveled. Was he going to accept this as easily as he had accepted being a copy of himself?

He turned his head and looked where Teylen and Sindrea had left the blanket upon which lay the bundle that contained Shwyr.

"There's only one way I don't burn this forsaken place to the ground," he growled, then looked right at me. "Bring her back!"

I swallowed. Now it was going to get touchy. Now I was starting to fear for my life.

"There is one last thing to consider," I said.

“What?” he snapped. “If I’m chained here, I want to be with my girl!”

“Yes,” I said. “But you see, the problem is...Well, I’ll just show you.” I pulled my robe off my shoulders and turned so he could see my naked back—and the living scar the Iron Wind had gifted me with. “The Vivifier...It can’t fix mutations caused by the Iron Wind. If we bring back Shwyr, she might not be...”

I looked over my shoulder. Skotoko was staring at my back, a look of despair in his eyes, but then he shook his head and punched the stretcher with his fist.

“No,” he said. “She was stronger than you. Better than you. She will fight it. She will come back whole.”

“I...I really don’t think that has anything to do with—”

“She will come back whole!” he bellowed. “Prepare the machine!”

I sighed. “Very well, but don’t blame me if things go wrong. Would...would you like to go first?”

He thought about it for a second, then shook his head. “No. I must see. I must know.”

I closed my eyes, certain of the heartbreak that was to follow, but who was I to deny the man a chance at a miracle—particularly when he could cut me in half if I said no?

“Very well,” I said. “Let’s begin.”

I opened the Vivifier, and Skotoko, as weak and wounded as he was, unwrapped Shwyr’s blanket, lifted her broken, mutated, reeking corpse in his arms, and placed her inside.

“Do it, Sage,” he said.

With a tremor of trepidation, I pushed the activation pad and the chrysalis closed, then began to hum and glow. We waited, Kyria and I, Teylen and Sindrea, in nervous agitation, Skotoko just staring at the machine like he was willing it to work—or possibly daring it not to.

Finally the cycle finished and the sludge poured from the Vivifier into the bucket as usual, except that it looked and smelled rank and acrid, like rotting meat and burning machines.

Then the chrysalis hissed open, and we could hear Shwyr screaming.

With a moan of distress, Skotoko pulled her out and laid her on the ground. She was just as mutated and deformed as when we'd first found her after the Iron Wind, only now she was alive, a twitching, twisted, shrieking travesty of skin and scales and deformity. She was still missing her left leg, and a third arm with a claw flailed weakly on her back as she howled.

“Shwyr!” Skotoko cried. “Shwyr!”

Her mismatched eyes found his, and there was a moment of recognition. Her wailing trailed off and she reached out as if to touch his cheek, but before she could, another fit took her and she flailed at him instead, gashing his face.

“Shwyr!”

She clutched at him convulsively and pulled her writhing lips close to his ear.

“Kill me,” she croaked. “Killlllll...”

Skotoko could bear it no more. He pried her hands free and stood, then pulled his sword off his back. With a grunt of effort that was half a sob, he stabbed down where her heart should have been, but the wind had moved it. The thrust only made her jerk and scream.

With a curse he severed her head, then threw his sword aside and shoved roughly through the others toward the exit.

“Skotoko!” I called. “Your wounds, do you—?”

Kyria put a hand on my arm. “Not now, beloved. Not now.”

The others went after Skotoko, afraid he might do himself or someone else injury in his rage, but though I found it hard to look at Shwyr's body, I found I couldn't leave it.

Maybe it was her last words that made me stay. Hadn't her “Kill me” proved that, as mutated as she was, her self—her soul, as Kyria would have it—was still trapped within that horrid shell? And if that was true, and if it was within the power of the Vivifier to bring her back, surely I was obliged to try to find a way to give her a clean, unmutated body to return to.

But how to do it? Was it a matter of surgery? I had never studied more than the basics of physiology, and I was far from the healer Shwyr had been. On the other hand, she was already dead. What harm could I do?

I lifted her body onto a stretcher and went to work with a beam scalpel, cutting open her torso. A foul smell rose from the cavity, and I saw that her organs were studded with black tumors. I cut one open and a mass of squirming larvae spilled from it. I heaved and had to walk away as my mouth filled with hot bile.

After a drink of water and a few deep breaths I came back, then firmed my resolve and began cutting away everything I knew did not belong there—all the tumors, all the bezoars and interior teeth, her third, shriveled arm, the black cap of what looked like fungus in the spot where her left leg should have been. What took me the longest, though, was prying each of the tiny scales from her face and left side.

Finally, satisfied that I'd removed every anomaly I could find, I untwisted her as best I could, placed her back inside the Vivifier, balanced her severed head on her neck, then stepped back and activated it.

I gripped the beam scalpel in a sweaty hand while I waited, prepared to once again put her out of her misery if she was not recovered. The sludge that poured out of the pipe was a hopeful sign, for it had the right color and smell, but I did not yet allow myself to hope.

Finally, the doors opened and Shwyr toppled out, surprisingly intact except for a missing leg. I caught her. She gaped up at me fearfully.

"I...I..." She looked down. "Spirits preserve me, am I myself again?"

I lowered her to the floor and let her sit. "You've lost a leg, and...well, you'll have to tell me if anything else is amiss. I see nothing external, but..."

She frowned and moved her hands across herself, prodding and squeezing. "I don't know. I don't feel anything wrong."

"Well," I said. "We'll just wait a bit, shall we? I'll get you some water."

And so, for the next hour I sat with Shwyr and related everything that had happened since she had died in the Iron Wind. I told her how we had come to

Archopalasia, and of Skotoko's bravery in going back out into the wastes to bring her here. I told her of the dangers of the Vivifier, of how it trapped us here, and how we would eventually require its treatments every day. I also warned her to be wary of the strange mental side effects that came of using it, including the creeping loss of empathy and the casual attitude toward the loss of life.

Then, just as I was beginning to think I could go tell the others I had revived her, I heard running footsteps in the corridor outside the Vivifier room and Kyria's voice calling to me.

"Reen! Reen, are you there?"

I stood as she ran into the room. "I'm here. What is it?"

"Oh, Reen," she said, and started toward me, then stopped abruptly as she saw Shwyr beside me. "Shwyr! You're alive! You..." Her face fell. "Oh. Oh, no."

"Oh no?" said Shwyr.

"What is it, darling?" I asked.

Kyria cast another look at Shwyr, then beckoned to me into the hall.

"Reen, this is awful," she whispered. "Skotoko...Well, he was raging through the habitat, swearing he would kill himself, but then he realized that even if he did, we could still bring him back, so he became determined to find a way to destroy himself from which there was no returning."

My heart sank. "Please tell me he did not succeed."

She swallowed. "I don't know. He has barricaded himself in his chamber with some volatile spirit and vowed he would set himself on fire. I ran here hoping you could come and talk him out of it, but it may be too late." She glanced beyond me back into the Vivifier room, where Shwyr watched us from the floor, then sobbed. "And if it is..."

"Don't say it," I said, then pulled her back into the room with me.

"Shwyr!" I called. "I'm afraid we must carry you. There isn't a moment to lose!"



Chapter 18

With Kyria under Shwyr's left shoulder and me under her right, we raced up through the Nexus and then across to the bridge to Habitat Seven and through its corridors until we reached the section where Skotoko had been given quarters. At first I thought we were too late, for I smelled smoke and saw the hallways ahead filled with a gray haze.

But then, just as I was about to lose heart, I heard, over a heavy, arrhythmic pounding, an unfamiliar tune, but sung by a very familiar voice.

"Skotoko!" said Shwyr. "He lives!"

"Yes," said Kyria. "But that is the death song of the Matheunis. The song they sing when captured before they take their own lives."

We hurried ahead and came at last upon a hellish scene. A small group of Archopalasians led by Teylen and Sindrea were huddled together in a smoke-filled corridor, smashing a large metal planter into a closed door like it was a battering ram.

Kyria and I ran with Shwyr to the door.

"Call to him!" I gasped. "Call his name!"

"Skotoko!" she shouted. "Skotoko, it's Shwyr! Come to me!"

There was no answer but the crackling of flames behind the door and Skotoko's powerful singing.

Grunting in frustration, I turned Shwyr over to Kyria and added my strength to the others who were pounding at the door with the makeshift ram.

Behind the door, Skotoko's singing broke off into coughing, and the sound of the flames got louder.

Finally, after another half-dozen strikes, the door flew open, revealing the burning room. I peered through the smoke, searching for Skotoko, and saw him at last, sitting cross-legged on the floor in the middle of a circle of flames. His sword was across his knees, and he was still trying to sing, though he could only manage a wordless croak between coughing fits. There was a wall of fire between him and us.

I grabbed Shwyr from Kyria and held her upright in the doorway. “Now, Shwyr. Now!”

“Skotoko!” she cried. “Skotoko, I’m alive! Come to me!”

For a second it seemed as if he still didn’t hear her, but then he looked up at the ceiling, as if he thought she was calling him from the datasphere.

She waved her arms. “Skotoko! Over here! Come to me!”

At last he saw her, and his eyes went wide. He tried to speak but coughed again, then, using his sword as a lever, he pushed himself to his feet and stumbled ahead to the door, running through the fire as if it wasn’t there, and wrapped her in his arms.

“Shwyr!” he choked. “Is it really you?”

She laughed. “Close enough, Skoto. Close enough.”

I backed off to give them a moment alone, and also to allow the others to run in and start shooting at the flames with anti-fire cyphers, but Skotoko caught my shoulder.

“Sage,” he rasped. “If it was you who brought her back, thank you.”

I patted his hand. “I’m just glad it worked.”

The rest of that day and the next were a respite of sorts from the strangeness and confusion that seemed to be an integral part of life in Archopalasia.

Once the fire in Skotoko’s room was out, we returned to the Vivifier and he took the treatment, then, unwounded and unburned, he carried Shwyr off to their new room for a more intimate reunion. And this moment of romance seemed to inspire the rest of us, for very shortly after, Kyria and I went back to our room as well, and I believe Teylen and Sindrea did the same.

Then, at dinner, we all met up again and talked among ourselves, the five survivors of the trek across the Tempest Waste and Sindrea, who, despite my initial misgivings, now seemed a good companion to Teylen, wise where he was foolish and bold where he was shy. He would learn much from her, I thought, and not just throat cutting.

Much of our conversation was devoted to bringing Skotoko and Shwyr up to speed on everything we had done here in Archopalasia and everything we had learned. Shwyr was particularly interested in seeing all the systems I told her about—the hydroponic crops and the water pipes, the damaged habitats with their wild fluctuations in climate—and she concurred with my theories about the coils, also coming to the conclusion that they must all be connected in some way to a central artifact, and that that artifact was likely behind the armored door.

The next morning I fashioned Shwyr a pair of makeshift crutches, and for the rest of the day all six of us traipsed around Habitat Seven and the Nexus, exploring and examining as we went, and ending once again at the very top of Archopalasia, outside the armored door.

We examined it together and determined that it was too strong to break down with simple brute force, and the locks too complicated for any of us law-abiding citizens to pick. Sindrea echoed what Fallodrin had told me before: the key had been lost for hundreds of years, and nobody had bothered to try to enter it since.

After a lot of thinking, Shwyr said she thought she could open it but would need a few tools. She made a list, but Sindrea was unfortunately little help. She hadn't heard of many of them and didn't have many of the others, but her interest in what lay behind the door had been piqued by our explorations and examinations, and she told us that, as a resident of Archopalasia, she gave us full permission to use anything we found anywhere in the city if we needed to fabricate the tools we needed, even if it meant dismantling working machines.

We started back toward Habitat Seven, resolved that the next day we would begin an exhaustive search of all the habitats we could still enter and scavenge for parts, which Shwyr and I would hopefully be able to cobble together into the tools that would open the door. And we were still making our plans when we entered the communal dining area and came upon a most peculiar scene.

Fallodrin was backed up against a pillar in the center of the room, while a mob of Archopalasians surrounded him, all shouting angrily and shaking their fists.

“What is this?” I cried, pushing forward with the others. “What has happened?”

The crowd turned toward us and I stopped short, for it was immediately apparent that they were all sick. They had weeping lesions on their faces and arms, their eyes were rheumy and bloodshot, and their skin was sallow and gray. For a brief moment, I feared they had caught some plague, and I backpedaled into Kyria, covering my mouth, then realized I had seen these symptoms before.

Falldrinn had shown the very same indications when he arrived at our camp all those days ago, only far worse. These people were beginning to fall apart just like he had.

“Falldrinn lied to us!” said one man.

“He knew we would sicken if we didn’t use the Vivifier!” said another.

A woman showed her desiccating flesh. “Look at us! We are dying!”

Falldrinn raised his voice. “You merely have to use it again like the others are doing and all will be as before!”

“But how can we use it knowing what it does?” shouted the first man. “It is killing us!”

“And what are you preserving after all this time?” Falldrinn asked him. “You are a copy of a copy of tens of thousands of other copies that came before them. Do you think you will save some infinitesimal part of your soul if you stop now, but that it will be too late tomorrow? Too late happened centuries ago. We are what we are, and if we are to survive, this is how it must be done.”

“We are murderers!” shouted the man. “The greatest murderers in history! We have each killed thousands! And you knew it!”

“You hid it from us!” cried a woman.

“Of course I did,” Falldrinn said, and looked pointedly at me. “You were happy before you knew. Now look at you.”

If he was trying to make me feel guilty, he failed. I was furious as well. “You told us that the worst side effect of the Vivifier was that we would grow tired. You mentioned nothing about falling apart.”

“I did not know myself until I left the city to find you,” he said. “The weariness comes first, and no one ever delays using the machine after that sets in.”

I raised my chin and glowered at him. “And how long have you known the truth of what the Vivifier does? How long have you known it makes copies of people and kills the original?”

He shot a sidelong glance at the crowd. They were listening intently. He looked at the floor. “Almost a hundred years.”

There was a collective intake of breath, and then a rising murmur of outrage. I cut it off with a question.

“And how did you find out?”

“There was a sage among us,” he said. “Conn was her name, the last of us who truly wanted to know how the machines worked and how to repair them. Like you, she studied the Vivifier, and like you she discovered its secrets, and struggled with what the knowledge meant. In the end, she could not bear to use it again, so she left Archopalasia with her husband, never to return.”

“She died then,” said Shwyr. “Her husband too.”

“Very likely,” said Fallodrin.

“So you read her notes?” I asked. “You discovered her research and kept it to yourself?”

He shook his head. “Before she left, she confided in me, for I was a good friend to her. She could not decide whether telling the others was the best course of action, or if it was better to hide it from them, so...she left it to me.” His one hand clenched. “I have never forgiven her.”

“You should have told us,” said a woman. “We would have killed so many less of ourselves.”

“And we would have all been dead so much sooner,” said Fallodrin. “Archopalasia would have ceased to exist.”

The crowd started arguing among themselves, and I turned to my companions to discuss what we had learned, when, across the room, the far door flung open and Dreman, who I remembered from our first meeting with the Archopalasians, burst in. He was sobbing.

“Kircha ended her life,” he announced. “She...she took inspiration from the outsider and...burned herself.”

The crowd gasped.

“The ultimate step,” said one.

“There is nothing left?” asked another.

Dreman shook his head. “She is truly gone. She could not bear to return, knowing...what it meant.”

Falldrin’s head drooped. “It is as I feared. The beginning of the end. What have I done?”

I looked at him. “You? It was I who spoke your secret.”

“Yes, but I brought you here.”

I barely heard him. Guilt was consuming me. I had done this. Kircha’s death was directly attributable to my demonstration of how the Vivifier truly worked. And if these people died because they refused to use it, then I would have done that too.

“I have to find a solution to this,” I said. “I have to fix what I have broken.”

“Simple,” said Skotoko. “Force them to use the machine. Then no one will die.”

“And no one will be happy either,” said Kyria.

“The real solution,” said Shwyr, “is to find the cause of the deterioration and cure it.”

“Then it will be you that finds it,” I said. “For I am no healer.”

She shook her head. “I don’t think the problem is in the body, but in the machine. If we fix the machine, we free the people.”

“I looked at the machine,” I said. “It seemed to be in perfect working order.”

“Then perhaps the problem is the general deterioration of Archopalasia itself,” she said. “Perhaps the Vivifier is affected by the same malaise that is affecting the light emitters and the climate controls and all the rest.”

I nodded. “We must get into that room.”

Chapter 19

It took a day of frantic scavenging and salvaging—including a very fruitful return to the workroom where I'd found the strange banded silver egg—and then another day of even more frantic engineering and building before we had the tools we needed, then we raced back to the door at the top of the Nexus. An audience of Archopalasians joined us, including Fallodrin, all curious to see what was in the room, and all watching anxiously as we got to work.

The first thing we did was try to make sure nothing bad would happen when we opened it. We probed with sensing devices for alarms and defenses. We used echolocation to try to learn if there were any objects behind the door that might be damaged in our efforts. We erected shields to protect ourselves if something went wrong, and we told the Archopalasian observers to stand as far back as possible.

Then we starting trying our various plans, least dangerous first. This was a magnet and amplified listening device of my invention, with which we hoped to manipulate a possible hidden locking system. It did nothing.

Next came a cutting torch made of an over-amped beam scalpel that Shwyr had devised. This burned out and started a small fire before it had done more than scratch the surface.

After that, we tried the craziest option, a cryopaint that had been a collaboration between the two of us. I'd found the chemical components needed to make it work—if it did work—and Shwyr had built the applicator.

First we set Teylen and Sindrea to spreading the stable half of the compound onto the door with a trowel. It was a lavender-colored paste that smelled faintly of hot metal and stung like fire if it touched the skin. They covered the whole door in a thick, even layer. Then Shwyr mounted the applicator device on a tripod and aimed it at the door. The difficulty with the compound was that the reaction when the two parts were combined was so swift that the second part must be applied to the first at all points at the same time, or only the parts that touched first would freeze.

This had presented an interesting engineering challenge, but at last Shwyr had conceived of and built a single-direction blast charge. In theory this would spray the second part of the compound at the entire door all at once.

In theory.

When the device was aimed correctly and the charge primed, we all hunched down behind the shields and covered our ears, and Shwyr depressed the remote plunger.

There was a blinding flash and a deafening bang, followed by swiftly clearing smoke.

“Did it work?” asked Teylen.

We all raised our heads.

Apparently it had.

The pale purple paste was now bright pink from top to bottom and as shiny as synthsteel. It was also cracking like a ceramic glaze in the fires of a kiln, but instead of heat, an intense cold wafted from it, making us shiver in our thin robes. At the same time, the door behind the paint groaned and creaked within the frame as if some giant was twisting it in his hands. The frame itself had frosted over, and tiny tendrils of ice were spreading across the walls on either side of it like glittering and fast-growing ivy.

“That looks very promising indeed,” I said.

“Yes,” said Kyria. “Frightening, actually.”

“Skotoko, dear,” Shwyr said. “It’s time to show your strength.”

Skotoko rose, chuckling, and hefted a giant mattock we had made for him out of spare parts. He stepped to the door, set himself, and swung for all he was worth.

The heavy head hit the door with a booming crash, and the impact starred the pink shell that covered it, sending tiny shards tinkling to the floor as cracks snaked to every edge. The question was, had it cracked the door underneath as we’d hoped, or just the compound?

He swung again and this time the cracks seemed to go deeper, and there was an unsettling shifting in the door that we felt through the soles of our feet.

“Once more, Skoto!” called Shwyr.

But as he pulled back, suddenly a great wedge of door tipped forward, and he had to dance back to avoid being crushed it. It landed on the floor at his feet and shattered like glass, then the rest of the door collapsed and fell out of the frame like a broken window.

Our audience edged forward, eager to see inside, but we waved them back.

“We must wait,” I said. “Until those shards thaw, touching even the smallest of them could give you frostbite. Even through your shoes or clothes.”

Kyria gave me a hug as they edged back. “Well done, darling. That went marvelously!”

“Not bad,” I agreed. “But that was just the opening of the door.”

It took a maddeningly long time for the synthsteel shards of the door to return to a safe temperature, but at last we were able to tiptoe between them and pass through the portal. The room within was dark until we entered, then green sconces glowed to life on the walls, showing it to be a large round room with a ramp that spiraled upward around a central column of pipes, ducts, and conduits—including the water pipes that had led me here the first time.

This was the place.

The ramp led us up to the very pinnacle of the Nexus, which, like the top of the habitats, was covered in a solid, transparent dome. Directly beneath the center of the dome was a high, square obelisk, so black it seemed to swallow all light, except at the base, which was decorated up to the height of a tall man with row upon row of tiny bronze designs that glittered in the darkness.

Then, as we got closer, I realized they were not designs. They were coils, the same as the ones I had found in every device in Archopalasia, thousands of them, all set into tiny depressions in the obelisk.

“This is the source,” whispered Shwyr. “This controls everything.”

“Please,” said Fallodrin, who had crept up behind us. “Take care. If it is as you say, even a brief disruption of it might well end us.”

I gave him a sour smile. “You forget again. You deliberately made us just as dependent upon Archopalasia as you are. I assure you, we will be cautious.”

After the gawkers had gawked their fill, we ushered them out and I posted Skotoko at the door to make sure they stayed out while Shwyr and I got down to the nerve-wracking business of examining the obelisk.

Using various testing devices we had found in the habitats, Shwyr was able to determine that each of the coils transmitted power to other coils in the city through some sort of aetheric connection, though there seemed to be no way to tell which coils were connected to which. She could also determine if a coil was alive or dead. We also learned that we could reactivate any of the deactivated coils by pressing a button below its depression, but this would cause another coil to deactivate. It seemed there could be only so many active at one time, which suggested that there wasn't enough power to run them all at once.

After we had examined every coil on the obelisk, we spent a few fruitless hours searching the room and the upper floors of the Nexus for some kind of schematic or diagram that could guide us, but we found nothing. Instead we were going to have to figure it out by trial and error.

We started by making a drawing of their layout, planning to blindly turn them off and on one by one and see what they affected in the city, when Teylen of all people wondered aloud if taking the coils out of the various devices in the city might cause feedback at the monolith.

I sent him to get a light emitter, and when he brought one I had him pull its coil while I, Shwyr, Kyria, and Sindrea watched the four sides of the monolith. Sindrea immediately called out. One of the coils on her side had glowed momentarily before fading out again.

We put the coil back into the light emitter, and the coil on the monolith glowed again. Then I pulled the coil from the monolith, and the light from the emitter faded and died. A breakthrough.

After that we had Teylen, Sindrea, and Kyria running all over the city and talking to us via ancient voxes we'd found during our scavenging, calling in when they pulled

a coil from a device so we could locate the corresponding coil on the obelisk and then testing it back and forth. In this way we discovered that some coils on the obelisk powered more than one device. For instance, the coil that had turned off the light emitter actually turned off all the light emitters in the hydroponic farm. Another powered all the elevation chambers in a particular habitat.

Basically, it was an entire day of, “Is it on now? How about now?”

Then, many hours in, I noticed that a coil we had already marked as working—which ran a temperature control module in an unused habitat—had inexplicably deactivated, and that now the total number of coils that could operate at once had been reduced by one.

“What do you make of it, Reen?” Shwyr asked.

“I’ll give you my tentative theory,” I said. “It appears this obelisk is a power source for everything in the city, and it is gradually running out of power.”

“But how quickly?”

I scratched my head. It felt good to once again have hair up there to scratch. “We won’t be able to calculate that until another coil fails. We’ll have to watch for it.”

Of course we missed it. Another coil failed sometime during the night, after we had all grown too weary to continue and gone to bed. It was dead when we returned the next morning.

Well, when I say morning, I mean afternoon. We were all so tired from the previous day’s events that we slept late and didn’t make it back to the Nexus until noon, bringing hampers of food so we wouldn’t waste time on a sit-down breakfast.

“So the two coils failed anywhere from six to thirteen hours apart,” Shwyr said as she munched on a gogglefruit.

I did the math in my head for best and worst case scenarios. There were approximately nineteen hundred coils on the obelisk, and by Shwyr’s count, only about a third were currently powered. Of those, about fifteen percent controlled critical functions such that if they were deactivated, it would cause more habitats to collapse or freeze over. I couldn’t assume all components had an equal power draw, but taking an average, I came up with a very rough estimate.

I shook my head. “I would say we have between three months and a year before the obelisk loses power completely and Archopalasia dies. And the next disastrous loss of power could happen at any time.”

Fallodrin, who had accompanied us to the Nexus to see how we were getting along, groaned and hung his head. “It is the end then. Just as I feared.”

“Not necessarily,” said Shwyr. “If we could recharge the obelisk, all would be well.”

“Which brings up an important question,” I said. “We now know that the obelisk powers the devices and systems of Archopalasia. But what powers the obelisk?”

Shwyr and I looked at Fallodrin.

He shrugged. “As I said, I have never been in this room before you opened it. It was the domain of others who have since left us or perished.”

I sighed. “You realize that, if Archopalasia does die, it will have been the apathy of its citizens that killed it.”

He hung his head. “Yes. I know it only too well.”

After he left, Shwyr and I refocused on the problem of why the obelisk was losing power. We knew we were missing something but had no idea what, or where to start looking.

“Is it powered by the sun?” she asked, looking up through the clear dome. “And is it not getting as much power now because of the dust column?”

I stroked my chin. “Fallodrin did say that the column used to be far less dusty, before the wastes started to die, but the dust doesn’t seem to be getting worse day by day. It has seemed fairly constant, hasn’t it? If the amount of dust in the column was affecting the obelisk, one would expect the reduced amount of power to also remain constant—a steady eighty percent, or thirty percent, or what have you. Yet the coils are dying off as if there was less power every day—a slow but inevitable diminution.”

She nodded. “That makes sense, but I don’t know what else it could be.”

We resumed our testing, sending Kyria, Teylen, and Sindrea back out into the habitats to continue cataloging what coils powered what systems, but I couldn’t keep from gnawing at the puzzle of the obelisk’s power, and I would catch myself staring

blankly at the thing and scratching my head when I should have been marking our diagram with the latest findings.

A short while later I was jarred from one such reverie by Skotoko stomping up the ramp from his post at the door.

“I’m hungry,” he announced to no one in particular.

“There’s gogglefruit in the hamper,” Kyria offered.

“Fruit again,” he snorted. “I’m sick of fruit.”

Nonetheless, the big man crossed to the basket, picked up a gogglefruit, and took a big, noisy bite. Then he spit it out again, gagging.

“Fekk!” he said, wiping his tongue. “Fekken thing is rotten!” He squatted and took another, then crushed it in his hand. “Ugh. They all are.”

“Eh?” said Kyria, looking up. “How can that be? They were fresh picked this morning. Manaea at the dining room told me so.”

“Then she’s a fekken liar,” said Skotoko.

I looked up, frowning. “Just a minute. Kyria and I both had some earlier, and they were fine.”

I stood and looked in the basket. All the fruit in it was rotten, and not just the gogglefruit. Everything. I hefted a mushy sugar melon and stared at it, then scratched my head again. Something wet slicked my fingers. I looked at them. Blood. I had scratched myself bloody.

Or had I?

A sudden dread came over me. “Kyria, come here a moment.”

She stepped to me. “Darling?”

I tipped my head toward her. “Look at my head. I’m bleeding. How bad is it?”

She reached up and parted my hair, so thick since my rejuvenation. “I don’t see any —”

Her breath caught. “Oh, Reen. Your scalp, it’s...”

“It’s like the others, isn’t it?” I asked. “Like those who have refused to use the Vivifier again.”

She nodded, eyes fearful. “I don’t understand. Fallodrin said it would take over a year before we would start to see the symptoms.”

“Fallodrin says a lot of things,” I said. “But in this case I think he was right. Anywhere else but here in this room, we would have had a year. But here in this room, everything is accelerated.”

Shwyr came around from the other side of the obelisk, where she had been working. “What are you saying?”

I held the fruit toward her. “The fruit is rotten when it was fresh this morning. We were so tired from working here yesterday that we slept until noon today. I, who have been working in closest proximity to the obelisk, have developed lesions I was not supposed to acquire for another year. I believe I may have found our answer.”

Shwyr pursed her lips. “Have you? I’ve been working just as close to the obelisk as you, and I don’t have any lesions.”

She raised her arms and looked down at herself to prove her point and Kyria gasped.

“Oh, Shwyr! Your neck!”

Shwyr twisted but of course couldn’t see. Skotoko crossed to her and turned her head, then ran his fingers from her ear to her collarbone. They came away bloody.

She stared at them in silence for a long moment, then we all turned and looked up at the obelisk, as black and dense as night, drawing in all light and reflecting nothing back.

“Can it be?” asked Kyria.

I dropped the rotten melon back in the hamper and crossed to the edge of the dome. The others followed me. Through the swirling curtain of dust that surrounded the city, we could see the nightmare of the Tempest Waste, the vast blank desert of the lifeless basin, and far in the distance, the pockmarked ring of madness that surrounded it, poisoned with pools of deadly acid and suffocating gas vents, but otherwise dead.

That was the ultimate strangeness of the Tempest Waste. It existed in clear defiance of the natural order, the predictable, circular pattern of all life—birth, growth, and death, then decay that feeds more births and new life.

There is no new life in the Tempest Waste.

And the same thing could be said of Archopalasia. Until now I'd seen this city as a bastion of life that had, against all logic, endured and flourished in the heart of a lifeless husk. Now, though, finally, I could see the truth. It was no coincidence that Archopalasia was in the dead center of the waste.

“The obelisk gets its power by absorbing life,” said Shwyr.

“What life?” asked Skotoko.

“Any life,” I said. “The life in these fruits. The life in our bodies. It was probably meant to draw life only from the surrounding land, but when it had sucked that dry, it began draining anything handy, desperately trying to maintain enough power for its systems.”

“So the Tempest Waste...” Kyria trailed off, staring at the twisted horizon.

“Yes,” I said. “The obelisk caused everything you see.”

“And now it feeds on us,” said Sindrea.

I nodded. “But we are poor fuel, so it is dying—systems failing, devices malfunctioning. In the end, either it will suck us dry and stand empty but for our corpses, or some critical system will fail and it will collapse. Either way, it will kill us if we stay.”

“We have to tell the others,” said Teylen. “We have to warn them.”

“Tomorrow,” I said. “Suddenly I am very, very tired.”

Chapter 20

I awoke with a start to the sound of someone pounding at the door. Bleary eyed, I threw the covers off and sat up...and stepped into a thick carpet of snow.

Gasping at the cold, I stared around and saw that half the room was covered in the stuff, and more was spraying from a vent above. I looked back at Kyria. She was still asleep, but shivering and curled up in a ball for warmth. I'd stolen all the blankets in the night, as I often do, and she slept only in the sheet. I threw the covers over her and hurried out into the anteroom. It too was snowed in.

Skotoko, Shwyr, Teylen, and Sindrea were waiting for me outside my door, all looking concerned and cold.

"How widespread is this?" I asked.

"It's everywhere throughout the habitat," said Sindrea.

"Some froze to death overnight," Teylen added.

"We need to do something," said Shwyr.

"Wait here," I said. "I'll get Kyria."

I hurried back into the bedroom to find Kyria awake and hugging herself as she looked around in confusion.

"R-R-Reen, what's happened?" Her teeth were chattering.

"I don't know," I said. "But I have to fix it. Put on your warmest things. We're going back to the Nexus."

As we hurried through Habitat Seven we passed scenes of panic and fear—two women trying to chisel the ice from a door that had been frozen shut; a man with a black and bleeding foot, weeping as he limped down the hall; a fistfight between two men who appeared to be arguing over a blanket. We were tempted to intervene each time, but knew that we could aid them all better if we continued to the Nexus and fixed the problem.

All around us the habitat was creaking and groaning from the expansion of the ice, and every now and then we heard the distant shattering of glass as another window burst from within.

A moment later we exited Habitat Seven and hurried across the catwalk. We weren't the only ones. A stream of refugees were fleeing the cold, some alone, others in pairs or carrying frostbitten comrades.

In the entry area of the Nexus, Fallodrin and some others were tending to more refugees and helping set up temporary shelters around the walls.

He nodded to us as we entered. "It gladdens me to see you safe," he said, though it didn't sound as if he meant it.

"And you too," I said. "We're going up to the obelisk to see what can be done."

"I am sorry, but that cannot be allowed," he said.

I grunted. I'd been afraid of this. "Because you think we caused this?"

"Did you not?"

"I..." I hesitated. Had we? We'd been as careful and methodical in our experiments with the coils as we could, but after a lifetime of experience working with old devices, I've learned that they are inherently unpredictable and unknowable, and that sometimes one can do something to break or unbalance them without knowing it. Given that Habitat Seven's climate catastrophe had begun so soon after we tinkered with the obelisk, it stood to reason that we were responsible.

"I don't know," I said at last. "Possibly. Regardless, it is certainly our responsibility to fix it."

"And what if you make it worse?" he asked.

I frowned. "Are you hoping that it will just get better by itself? When do you plan to return to your rooms?"

"We will not return," he said. "We will live here in the Nexus."

Shwyr gaped at him. "What? What kind of life is that? There are no residential areas in here—no beds, no dining areas, nothing."

"There is food and water and warmth," said Fallodrin. "And stability. We will survive."

“But we could fix it!” insisted Shwyr. “We could give you your life back!”

“And you could take it away as well. You could kill us all.”

Shwyr groaned. “You stubborn fool. You’d rather—”

I put a hand on her arm, stopping her, for Fallodrin’s words had sparked an epiphany.

“Fallodrin is right,” I said. “There is no point trying to save Habitat Seven, for two reasons. First, as he says, we might make things worse. And second, fixing it would only be bailing water from a boat without a hull. Even if we reversed the climate malfunction and made it livable again, how long would it last? We saw the future of Archopalasia yesterday when we looked out at the waste. The city has devoured everything around it. Now it is devouring itself, and sooner or later it will kill its inhabitants, either by sucking them dry, or by malfunctioning catastrophically.”

“The city feeds on the waste?” asked Fallodrin.

“You’re surprised?” I asked. “Or is this another thing you’ve known for a hundred years.”

“I swear to you—”

Shwyr cut him off. “What are you proposing, Reen? Are we supposed to just hide in here as Fallodrin says, and wait around to die?”

“No,” I said. “We must leave. All of us.”

Fallodrin snorted. Kyria gasped.

“But darling,” she said. “That’s impossible. You said so yourself. We will end up like Fallodrin was when he came to our camp. We will die.”

“I have a plan for that,” I said. “But first we must help get everyone out of Habitat Seven and get them ready to travel.”

“No,” said Fallodrin. “You may certainly help in the rescue efforts, but we are not leaving. Archopalasia is our home.”

“And it is going to kill you,” I said.

He raised his chin, defiant. “Perhaps, but at least we will die here, not rotting in those hellish wastes.”

I stared at him. “But...but I’m telling you that you don’t have to die at all.”

“And I am telling you,” he said, “that I don’t believe you. Whatever you have in mind will undoubtedly make it worse for us. You, of course, are free to leave, but you may not take anyone with you.”

“We must,” I said. “Everyone has to come. The only way any of us will survive the journey is if we shut down the obelisk. It’s all or nothing.”

Fallodrin laughed. “You are mad! You mean to murder us all!”

“I mean to save you!”

He turned away. “I will hear no more of this.”

I stepped after him. “What if we put it to a vote? Once we get everyone safely out of the habitat and taken care of, let us bring them together and present our arguments. He who gets the most votes decides the course of action.”

He didn’t look back. “I cannot prevent you from speaking, but I do not agree to a vote.”

I sighed. “I suppose that will have to do.”

Over the next several hours, we helped evacuate people from the frozen habitat, breaking down doors, carrying out people too frozen to walk, melting through ice-blocked hallways with devices of our own invention. Some we reached too late, finding them frozen to death in their rooms. Those we brought back with the Vivifier, while those of us who were wounded or weakened waited. The lesions on my head and hand that I had received from proximity to the obelisk seemed to be getting worse, so when it became available, I took a turn, as did Shwyr.

Finally, when we had recovered everyone we could, we all gathered in Fallodrin’s makeshift camp. Fallodrin himself ignored us, as if hoping we wouldn’t start anything if he didn’t acknowledge us. In that I disappointed him, stepping forward with Kyria, Shwyr, Skotoko, Teylen, and Sindrea.

I cleared my throat. No one turned my way. They were murmuring among themselves. Skotoko noticed and pounded the pommel of his sword on the metal floor. The resounding clang silenced the room.

“Thank you,” I said, then saluted the crowd. “Citizens of Archopalasia, I know that some of you—perhaps all of you—blame me for the loss of Habitat Seven, and you may be right. Our testing may have triggered some unforeseen reaction.”

The muttering that followed that statement told me I was correct in my assessment, but I soldiered on.

“We were not, however, responsible for the collapse of the other eight habitats, were we? Those happened over the last centuries, without any outside tampering, and were the result of the obelisk’s gradual but steady loss of power.”

I hesitated, not wanting to deliver the bad news, then continued. “Yesterday we discovered that that loss of power is irreversible and will end with the complete shutdown of Archopalasia. That may happen in a year, or ten, but it will happen, and when it does, you will all die.”

“And we will die sooner if we follow you,” said Fallodrin. “Don’t listen to him, friends!”

“Fallodrin, please,” I said. “When the obelisk is shut down, it will stop feeding on you. You will be free!”

Fallodrin turned to the crowd. “You hear him? He has already killed Habitat Seven. Now he wants to kill all of Archopalasia!”

“Archopalasia is killing itself!” I shouted, then sighed. “I’m sorry, Fallodrin. I realize it is difficult to accept change, and I understand you are terrified of leaving behind the everlasting life and comfort of your home, but it is time. There is nothing to cling to here.”

I faced the others and swept my hand in the direction of the wastes. “All of you have lived here long enough to recall what this land was like in centuries past—a healthy, fertile grassland, teeming with life. But to sustain and renew your lives, the obelisk drained all that life for hundreds of kilometers in every direction, killing the flora and fauna, and leaching the nutrients from the soil. And now that it has sucked the last drop of sustenance from the world outside, it has turned inward and is feeding on the only available fuel left.”

I pointed at them. “You.”

An angry murmur rose at this and quickly got louder, until Skotoko banged his pommel on the floor again.

“Listen to the man!” he roared.

In the silence that followed, I continued. “I know you don’t want to believe me, but I can prove it. Or rather, you can prove it to yourselves. Think back. Wasn’t there a time, long, long ago, when the waste was green, when you only had to use the Vivifier if age or disease or injury had killed you? There was no weariness or withering no matter how long you went between treatments. The Vivifier healed you and that was that.”

The murmuring rose again, but this time it was the confused conversation of the Archopalasians asking each other questions.

“It wasn’t until the land around you started to die,” I went on, “that the treatments were no longer permanent. It still took a long time for the weariness to manifest—a decade, maybe longer—but it always did. And then, over the centuries, as the wastes grew worse, the interval between treatments grew shorter and shorter because the obelisk was taking less from the land, and more from you.”

The murmuring had stopped now, and the Archopalasians were staring into space, remembering, thinking.

I spread my hands. “Has anything I’ve said rung false? Does any of it not make sense?”

No one spoke up, not even Fallodrin.

I nodded. “Then hear our plan, for it will affect all of you, and I will not act without your support.”

Now Fallodrin spoke. “Go on, then. Prove to them that you are mad. They will laugh in your face, as I did.”

“We will see,” I said, then turned back to the crowd. “You are leashed to Archopalasia by your need for the Vivifier, but what causes you to need it is the obelisk, which is constantly sucking the life out of you. Unfortunately, if you were to deactivate the obelisk, all the systems that support your life here in Archopalasia would fail. There would be no water. Your plants would die. There would be no climate

systems to keep you warm or cool. It would become unlivable, and you would die. If you do not deactivate it, then it will kill you more slowly, but it will still kill you. Therefore, the only solution is to shut down the obelisk and leave Archopalasia behind forever.”

The murmuring began again. I shouted over it.

“With the obelisk dead, you will no longer tire or wither unnaturally! You will no longer need the Vivifier! You will be free!”

Some of the crowd, mostly those who had vowed not to use the Vivifier again after they had learned its true nature, cheered at these words, but the rest looked at me in horror.

“That is not freedom!” cried one. “That is death! Without the Vivifier, we will age and die! We will be mortal!”

“That is right!” said Fallodrin. “The sage’s plan condemns us to certain death! But if we stay, there is at least a chance—fifty more years, perhaps even a century, perhaps longer! Who knows what solution we might find before the end?”

I was going to respond, but Sindrea stepped forward and spoke for me. “And is that what you want to do with your last century? Merely survive? Huddle in a dark, windowless tower as it falls apart around you, as the bloodsucker at its peak leaches more and more life from you with each passing year? Do you want an immortality where you will eventually have to use the Vivifier every hour of every day to keep from rotting where you stand? Does that sound like paradise to you?”

She thumped her chest. “I am ready to die—naturally, after a life lived in a natural world, where thought and curiosity and creativity have not been dulled by lack of want and fear. I intend on leaving Archopalasia, and I urge all of you to come with me!”

“Yes,” I said. “Come to us now. Show yourselves.”

A dozen or so Archopalasians, again mostly those who had tried to forgo using the Vivifier, hesitantly stood and joined us. A few more followed when they saw so many others going, but many more remained with Fallodrin.

He glared at me, looking noble and proud, as fools often do. “And will you murder us then, those of us who wish to stay? Will you shut down the obelisk and leave us to die?”

“That is not a question for me or those who journeyed here with me,” I said. “Though you hoped to tie us to the Vivifier, and though, when you first explained it, I believed we were trapped here forever because of it, that is not true, at least for us. Since it is the obelisk and not the Vivifier that causes the decay, and since we have not yet begun to deteriorate at the rate that you do, that means if we can get beyond the obelisk’s sphere of influence before it starts to affect us, we are free of it.”

I shrugged. “The journey will last a week—nothing for those who won’t start showing symptoms for months, but a death sentence for those who will begin rotting in two days.”

Sindrea turned on me, eyes wide. “You would leave us behind?”

“I don’t wish to,” I said. “But neither will I make a decision that affects more than half the people of this community without their consent. You and those who want to come with us will have to convince the others to come, at least a majority of them.”

She gave me a hard look as if she felt I had betrayed her, then sighed. “That is fair, I suppose. Though I am inclined to leave them to die for being fools. We will try to convince them.”

“Excellent,” I said, and turned toward the inner door. “We are going to the hydroponic farm to gather supplies for our journey. We will come back here before we leave. Good luck.”

As we left the room, we saw Sindrea and the others who had come to our side cross back to those who wanted to stay and sit down to talk to them.

Falldrinn looked like he was going to explode.

Chapter 21

I knew we would not survive eight days in the waste with just the food and water we could carry on our backs, so we raided the hydroponics farm for more than just food. We took two of the high-sided hoversleds that Kircha had used to move her supplies up and down the long rows of crops, and loaded them—one with food, the other with barrels of water—until they were floating just centimeters off the floor. We also scoured the other levels, looking in old workshops and supply rooms until we found bubble buckles for each of us, so that we could defend ourselves against the hounds and the Iron Wind even if we were separated.

Finally, when we had gathered all we could think of, we started back toward the entry way and the makeshift camp. Kyria chewed her lip nervously as we approached it.

“Do you think they convinced the others?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “Fear of change is a difficult thing to overcome, but Sindrea is an eloquent speaker. Hopefully—”

All at once, out of the darkness of the hallway rushed Fallodrin and a dozen or so of his most ardent supporters, all waving beam scalpels and synthsteel knives. I cried out in surprise and shoved Kyria behind me, but I needn’t have worried.

With a roar like a ravage bear, Skotoko leapt in front of us, slashing with his sword. Three of the men went down instantly, bleeding from grievous wounds, and the rest pulled up short, suddenly consumed by mortal fear—perhaps for the first time in centuries.

Teylen and I drew our belt blades and stood at Skotoko’s sides as Fallodrin and his companions hesitated just out of reach and their wounded fellows writhed and screamed on the floor.

“I take it the vote didn’t go your way,” I said.

“They are insane,” he said. “They would give up a long life of safety for death and the unknown!”

“Is that any different than what you’re doing now?” I asked. “Skotoko will kill you here, and I doubt anyone will bother to bring you to the Vivifier before they leave.”

He stood frozen for a long moment, looking back and forth between Skotoko, Teylen, and me, then he let out a breath, raised his knife, and closed his eyes.

“So be it,” he said, and charged straight at Skotoko’s sword.

The glaive killed him with a single stroke, then readied himself for the others. They did not come. Instead they threw down their weapons and held up their hands.

“We’ve changed our minds,” said one. “We will make the journey.”

Sindrea gasped and ran to us as we entered the makeshift camp with Fallodrin’s bandaged and chagrined followers in tow.

“What happened?” she asked.

“Fallodrin jumped us,” I said. “I believe his intent was to kill us so we could not disable the obelisk.”

“Is he...?”

I nodded. “By his own hand.”

She hung her head. “He was a good man, I believe. But he could not defeat his fear.”

“Or his pride,” said Shwyr.

We shared an awkward moment of silence for the man who had started as the architect of this venture and ended as its vandal. Then I raised my head.

“So,” I said. “The rest have agreed to leave?”

Sindrea smiled. “Yes! We convinced them! They will all come! We just need some time to provision ourselves.”

“Very good,” I said. “Then go and do so, and remember that it will be eight dangerous days with no food and water but what you bring. Pack hoversleds and bring as many bubble buckles as you can find. They are your surest chance for survival.”

“Right away, Sage Reen,” she said, and hurried back to tell the rest.

“And now,” I said, turning to Kyria, Teylen, Shwyr, and Skotoko. “I must go up to the obelisk room. The rest of you stay here, and when the Archopalasians are ready, take them down and out of the city, beyond the dust column, then raise me on the vox

to let me know that you are clear. I will then deactivate the obelisk and follow after as soon as I can. Don't wait for me, though. Head for our camp."

Concern furrowed Kyria's brow. "Don't wait for you? Why not?"

I gave her a reassuring smile. "Once I power down the obelisk, leaving Archopalasia and getting to you is going to be a slow process. Also, I don't know what will happen with the dust column when the obelisk stops working. All that poison dust may fall straight down, so it would be best for you all to be as far from it as possible when it happens. I will catch up to you, I promise. This is not goodbye."

Kyria did not look entirely relieved, but she just nodded. "If you say so, my love."

"Aren't you risking more deterioration?" asked Shwyr.

I shook my head. "It will only take me a second to do what needs to be done."

"Do you need any help?" asked Teylen.

I grinned. "No, I can do it on my own. You two stay with Skotoko and Sindrea. They're the ones that will need the help."

Shwyr laughed. "All right then, but hurry back."

"Good luck, Sage," said Teylen.

Kyria walked me to the elevation platform, then kissed me.

"Nano spirits be with you, my love," she said.

For once, I sincerely wished that they would be with me for what I had to do next.

"And with you, darling," I said, then stepped into the lift. "I'll see you soon."

When I reached the top of the Nexus, I entered the big round room and walked up the ramp to the obelisk, then just sat there awhile, staring at it from a safe distance and waiting for the others to call and tell me they were clear of Archopalasia. I hadn't wanted to tell them, but I was all but certain that once I deactivated the obelisk, there would be no way to leave Archopalasia. I had never seen a conventional stair or ladder anywhere in the city.

In time, I hoped Kyria and the others would forgive the deception.

Finally, after roughly two hours, the vox hissed and Shwyr's voice crackled in the silence.

"Sage Reen, it's Shwyr. We are outside the column and heading west."

I was slightly disappointed that it hadn't been my wife who had called, but maybe it was for the best. I don't know if I could have kept my composure.

I swallowed, then keyed in. "Very good, Shwyr. Carry on. I shall begin."

"See you soon, Sage," she said. "And good luck!"

"Yes," I said stiffly. "Thank you. And good luck to you too."

I put down the vox and closed my eyes. "And...and my best to my wife."

When I had recovered myself, I stood up and detached the buckle from my vest, then approached the obelisk. It was time.

A hand touched my back. I whipped around, terrified. Had Fallodrin risen from the dead? Was he here to stop me?

It was Kyria.

"Darling!" I gasped. "What are you doing here? You should be with the others!"

"I should not," she said. "I should be with you."

"But...but you don't understand. I...This...There is no way out of Archopalasia once I do this. All the elevation platforms will stop. All the—"

"I do understand," she said. "You were sending me away to save me, but why would I want that? We spent our lives together. We should end them together as well."

I sighed. "Sadly, this time, I was not lying. Obviously I did not tell you the whole truth, but when I said 'this is not goodbye,' I meant it. At least I meant that I hoped it was not goodbye. It's just...Well, the means by which I was intending to get back to you are..."

"Dangerous?" she asked.

"Notional, I was going to say. Theoretical, at best."

"You mean they might not work."

I laughed. "I would say there is a roughly eighty-five percent chance of it."

She smiled. “That means that I have a fifteen percent better chance of surviving than I thought I did a minute ago. Excellent!”

I stared at her for a moment, stunned that this fearless woman wanted anything to do with me, let alone die with me, then I took a deep breath and held out a hand.

“All right, then, come on.”

She took my hand and together we stepped to the obelisk, then I activated the buckle and the bubble popped into being around us, encompassing the towering artifact as well. It went still. The unnatural blackness of its surface faded to common synthsteel and the deep hum of it stopped. It was dead. Like other numenera devices, the obelisk did not work within the bubble.

“Well done,” said Kyria. “And now do we just walk out and leave the buckle behind?”

“Well,” I said, “that would certainly take care of the obelisk, but it would also take us back to Archopalasia, where we would be trapped. However, I found a device during my explorations the other day that just might allow us to take this bubble, er...elsewhere.”

“Elsewhere?” she asked. “Where elsewhere?”

I shrugged and took the banded silver egg out of my pocket, then held it up. The colored bands were once again glowing. “That is the eighty-five percent possibility of failure part. I have no idea. I don’t even know if we’ll go anywhere at all.”

She stared at the egg. “It’s beautiful. What does it do?”

“I think it is some kind of navigation device, and turning these bands allow one to set a destination, while touching this depression on the end sends one there. But since I cannot read the symbols on it, I don’t have any way of knowing where it might send us. It could take us to another place in the world, or to another dimension, or perhaps even to another time, but also maybe...under the ocean, where we would drown. Into the stratosphere, where we would suffocate. Maybe to another planet, or into the sun—who knows? Or it might not be a navigation device at all. It could be a clock for all I know, or a bomb.”

Kyria bit her lower lip, apprehensive. I found this so endearing that my heart rose in my chest and I hugged her tight.

“Oh, darling, don’t look like that. I’ve recalculated, and I am now ninety-six percent certain we’ll survive.”

She laughed and gave my arm a playful shove. “Oh, stop lying!”

We embraced for a long time, then, finally, Kyria stepped back and looked at me at arms’ length.

She smiled. “A new adventure for a pair of old souls, nano spirits be willing.”

I kissed her. “I can’t believe I would have left you.”

She kissed me back. “Me neither. And I reserve the right to hold it against you. Now, let’s go, Reen. Turn the bands and let’s go!”

About the Author



Tony Evans is a jack-of-all-trades game designer, writer and producer. He has developed more RPG's than any sane person should. A partial list of his credits includes Knights of the Old Republic 2, Neverwinter Nights 2, and Dragon Age 2 (hey that's a lot of 2's). He's also very proud to have worked on Mask of the Betrayer, the last RPG that was anything at all like Torment. Oh, and it's totally Tony's fault that Storm of Zehir was so awesome (or awful, depending on who you talk to).

Most recently, Tony has been bringing his unique brand of madness to mobile and social games, while also moonlighting as a designer and writer for Torment: Tides of Numenera. Tony's contemporary work includes SkyTopia (which is probably the best Facebook game you've never played) and an upcoming mobile re-imagining of the hit children's game Animal Jam.

Tony is a proud husband and father of two children and currently resides in Salt Lake City, Utah. In his spare time, he designs and plays computer games, does Yoga, folds origami, and posts crazy game ideas on Twitter.