



GARUTHGONAR

A NOVELLA

AND THE ABYSS

ROBERT HOOD

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Garuthgonar and the Abyss

Robert Hood

A Tale of Tharenweyr

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Author’s Note

“Garuthgonar and the Abyss” is a “precursor” to the novel
Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead insofar as it relates to
the past of one of that novel’s main characters, Shaan—the Saral or
“demi-god”. Though Shaan is not mentioned directly here, he does
make a sort of appearance. The story is, however, more focused
on his father, Durras, and that character’s struggle with issues
of survival and moral responsibility in a much earlier period of
Tharenweyr’s history.

This is its first publication.

Fragments of a Broken Land: Valarl Undead
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Garuthgonar and the Abyss

A Novella by Robert Hood

SSOMETIMES, Durras dreams of a vast empty space. It is deep, drawing sight toward infinity—a seething pit of distant light and dark that no eye can penetrate.

Durras struggles with his friend on the edge of that space, each blow threatening to tumble one or the other of them into the abyss. Jakl has become barely human, more a slathering monster than a man, eager to feast on Durras' soul. His blade sweeps toward the dreamer's skull again and again, and the whisper of its passing as his victim leaps aside is cold and unforgiving. It will have its way in the end.

At other times the dream plays out differently. Instead, Durras hears the sound of a sword tearing Jakl's heart from his chest, and screams of terror as the still-beating organ tumbles into the abyss, trailing blood and torn flesh.

But are the screams his or Jakl's?

Either way the echoes of them haunt him.

*

After Confirmation, Durras slept with the woman the Makers had allotted him. Myrana was her name—a reward for service to come. Though the circumstances left its taint, lying with her warm flesh against him, engulfed in her heat, afforded him the last peace he was to know. At the moment of consummation, though, the room had filled with light—light that burnt into their flesh and entwined itself around their bones, as though seeking to re-mold them into something new. Afterwards Myrana could recall no such light and Durras came to believe it had been yet another puzzling dream.

Next day he and Jakl set out from Darmiton-Cail, hiking across the inner plains toward the river's source. The journey was Jakl's idea, an obsession that had finally and fatally ensnared Durras, perhaps against his will.

“Three weeks, Durras, that’s all we have,” Jakl said, his uneasy gaze demanding response. “Our last chance to see the valley’s edges.”

“Our lives don’t end with Initiation. They begin.” Durras pulled away from his friend’s intensity, staring across the farmlands toward the wild. “We’ll travel further than ever—”

“Killing, that’s all, and being killed. And in the Makers’ service. Once their Voice is in us, they’ll know our every thought. We’ll lose the selves we’ve always known. I want to see as much as I can before then.”

“See what?”

“What they don’t want us to see.”

“It’s puerile, Jakl, and you know it. If we’re discovered—”

Jakl curled his lip into a sneer. “We won’t be. I’m well prepared. They’ll think it’s an exercise in comradeship—and *that* the Warrior-Priest is forever telling us to embrace, the fucking hypocrite. He’s extolled the value of wilderness training often enough.”

“But Myrana –“

“Will be here when we return. What I do know for sure, Durras, is misdirecting the Warrior-Priest this way won’t be possible ever again. Now’s the time. Or never.”

Though inclined to the latter alternative, Durras eventually gave in to Jakl’s passion, telling himself he was doing so to save his friend from himself. Perhaps the lie was true on some level. Jakl was quick, hard and determined, but fragility was always there in his manner, an irrational resentment Durras saw all too clearly. It was not safe for a Warrior to harbour uncontrolled emotions; they could all too easily destroy him—and Durras didn’t want that to happen. He’d known Jakl all his life and believed they’d be together to the end if he could only restrain his friend’s passions.

“What’s the point?” he demanded.

Jakl stared away toward the mist-obscured distance. “To know,” he said. “For a moment to hold the illusion of being free.”

As they hiked across the valley floor toward the furthest edge, Durras doubted how well he knew his friend after all or if he could ever restrain him. Mountains grew tall to either side, wreathed in snow and mist. Huddled into their furs, the two young men spoke little: Durras apprehensive about the journey, Jakl unrelenting in his urgency.

But Durras could not hold back his impatience indefinitely. “What’s this really about, Jakl?” he asked at last.

Jakl stopped and turned on him. “I told you. Finding the truth of things.”

As Durras knew, though neither spoke of it, Jakl intended to go further than the edges of the Azsh Valley. He wanted to reach the plains beyond the Mountains of Cail, to see the forbidden areas for himself. The

prohibition lured him. “Why?” Durras had persisted, and finally Jakl had offered him more than vagaries.

“To find the crypt,” he said.

Not that it surprised Durras. The legendary tomb that held the bodies of the ancestral Makers had been an obsession of Jakl’s for many years.

Durras laughed unsteadily. “A bogeyman to frighten children. You only ever hear it spoken about by idiots and fools.”

“Fools know the truth.”

What they’d been taught was that the Makers’ bodies and souls were woven into the Great Idol in the Temple of Darmiton-Cail. It was ridiculous, not to mention heretical, to believe that the Makers had been literally interred within some distant mausoleum. *That* would mean they were dead. But how could they be dead when they still commanded the warriors and spoke to the priests who served them? Whenever the notion arose, the priests condemned the heresy, of course. Despite this, Jakl was fiercely determined he’d find the Crypt and thus, somehow, revenge himself on the Warrior-Priest—a man he hated with a passion. It was absurd and dangerous, yet something about Jakl’s lust drew Durras in and weakened his resolve.

They’d set out on Jakl’s foolish quest after the Winter Festival, hoping to return before their final initiation into the Warrior Clans. That was when the Maker’s Voice would be implanted in them. Before then, they were merely children, carelessly play-acting at heroics. Afterwards they would be men, tasked with fighting Darkness for the survival of their people. Amongst the trees and stones Durras, Jakl and the other warriors, no longer initiates, would seek out the servants of the Dark Gods—the twisted, unhappy creatures infesting their valley—and slaughter as many as they could find. They’d lose count of their kills soon enough, it was said, yet it would never be enough. How could there be an end to the killing when the evil creatures worshipped the source of all corruption and corruption was eternal? Yet Durras hoped he would find peace at last in the strength and purpose the Voice would offer him and in the wisdom it would impart.

“We’d best leave this gorge soon.” Jakl glanced toward the winding river. “It’s an obvious trail—they could follow us easily.”

“Why would they follow us?” Durras said.

“Sometimes I think you’re worse than the others, Durras. *They* can’t help themselves. *Your* ignorance is willful.”

Durras walked on, bothered by Jakl’s words—though unsure why. “We’ll go into the mountains towards the east and circle around,” Jakl continued, regardless. “It’ll take longer, but this way they won’t guess we’re heading for the Plains.”

They struggled over broken rocks towards the high forests then

swung in an arc that would bring them to the Pass of Lorwithnor, along the near edge of Garuthgonar and, eventually, to the plains beneath the Waste Lands Wall. Durras became increasingly anxious. If their trespass should be discovered, would the Makers throw them into the Abyss? To plunge into Garuthgonar scared him much more than the prospect of death in battle.

Garuthgonar had always haunted his dreams. In them, Durras stood beside the Great Chasm, staring fearfully into its depths. Wind thrashed his face and limbs, but he remained there, mesmerized by it. Between the distant cliffs on the far side of the chasm and the Valley of Azsh itself lay an emptiness his mind could never fully grasp, a space reaching to the core of the world. He would hear it call to him. Somehow, too, images of his friend Jakl would become entangled with the dreams, crowding his days like a dark, forbidding inevitability.

“Jakl!” he shouted; his friend was ahead, clambering over the slope like a rabbit, “Jakl, we shouldn’t be here.”

Jakl glanced back with a contemptuous snarl. “You don’t have to come.”

But Durras knew otherwise.

*

Seven days later they emerged from a rainstorm on a lowering slope to see two giant figures squatting on either side of a gorge cut through the mountaintop. This was the Pass of Lorwithnor and the monstrous statues had been long set to mark the outer borders of the forbidden area. Beyond them the mountains dwindled toward plains once again, but the misty rain and gusts of snow rolled across the slope below and obscured their view. They could see neither the plain nor Garuthgonar’s depths and the high walls of the Waste Lands that constituted the borders of the Azsh Valley were lost in greyness.

The Makers had sealed them within this confined space, the Warrior-Priest always claimed, in order to save them from the poisonous chaos that had engulfed the world beyond—the aftermath of an apocalyptic war that had swept through all of reality. Durras could recite the Priest’s words, he’d heard them so often. “Great men and women they were, who understood desperation and what was needed for survival.” The man’s voice was authoritative and strong. His eyes, though, remained cold and distant, always, and, engulfed in his vision, Durras saw not hope but ice-coated fields and chilling winds. Thin wrinkles, marks of time, moved around his mouth.

“We’ve made it this far.” Jakl’s lips dripped rain and the wind lifted his words, quickly flinging them toward the Pass. “Nothing can stop us now, Durras. The air will be calmer lower down.”

Durras hesitated.

“Not put off by relics, are you?”

“There’s death here, they say.”

“Superstition!” Jakl’s eyes expressed his contempt. “These symbols of tyranny mark the limits of the Warrior-Priest’s rule, that’s all. There’s death here alright—the true death of the Makers.”

He led the way along a track that wound past the foot of the statues. It was scarred by ancient wheel-ruts and the vegetation was sparse and brittle, but there were no newer marks. This road might not have been trod for centuries.

Up close, the statues became harsh in aspect. Wind-tossed ice whipped across the stone faces and settled in indentations and the contours of sculptured armor. Occasionally, as he looked away, Durras caught out of the corner of his eye some evidence of breath, as if the statues had gasped in the cold. He stared at them suspiciously, but they did not move again.

“Look at this!” Jakl’s voice came to him through the wind.

He pointed to something chiseled into the stone at the base of one of the guardian-statues. “I was right.” Durras squinted against the sleet to see it. The sign of the Makers had been chiseled into the stone—a crescent-shape supporting a stylized galley. Beneath, in ancient script, were the words:

*In humility come, and boundless fear,
For everything must end.*

“The Makers knew!” cried Jakl. “Knew they would die, and perhaps that evil men would usurp their power. They knew that dead, they would front a conspiracy to tyrannize those who remained --’

Discomfort fueled Durras’ anger. “Yes, they died—and their souls and bodies were molded by their own magic to form Lamatun, the Great Voice. That’s their Rest. We’ve been taught this, Jakl. Where’s the conspiracy?”

“It’s lies. The Warrior-Priest and his followers are Lamatun’s only voice. They use our respect and fear of the Makers to keep us under their thumbs.”

“Why are you fighting the inevitable so hard?”

Wind obscured Jakl’s reply. Then: “—swore it to my father. Swore the deepest of oaths.”

Durras shifted uneasily. He’d heard his friend’s arguments many times before, but now they seemed more than youthful rebellion. “Your father was a great Warrior, Jakl,” he said. “I know you blame the Priest for his death. But the risk is there in everything we do.”

Jakl grabbed Durras by wind-coat and pulled him close, so Durras could feel the warmth of his friend's breath. "They took him from me before I even knew him."

"I know and I'm sorry. But why destroy what remains?"

Jakl released his grip and stepped away, as though repulsed by his friend's question. "We don't need them."

"Perhaps we need what they represent."

Jakl was silent for a moment, measuring his next reaction. Then he grinned through lips speckled with frost and went before the wind down the Pass.

Durras shivered, fear churning in his belly. But fear of what? The path ahead? Shadows of ancient stone darkened the mist and encased it in a grim tunnel. As he stared the guardian statues disappeared under the weather's debris. Jakl became a smear of dull color moving ahead of Durras. The Pass of Lorwithnor had been engineered as a memorial and its walls were decorated with the likenesses of the Makers themselves. Durras knew these images were stone, but when the mists drifted or were torn apart, and the faces appeared around him, he could not help feeling that the Makers were there—in the flesh—tracking the course of his transgression.

"Wait up, Jakl!" he yelled. Soon he lost sight of his friend in the storm.

He continued blindly until he heard something distant in the air's fury. A shout?

"Jakl! Is that you?"

"Down here!" came the reply, dim but triumphant. "Hurry, Durras. It's here!" Durras slowed warily, his heart pounding. "Here, Durras, it's here!"

As Durras descended from the mists, the wind-currents curved upward, carrying the rain and sleet away from him. He stood beneath a swirling bank of cloud that stretched across the mountain slopes and ended halfway over the plain, far below.

Jakl was perched on a log. In the extreme distance, across the plain, an ochre patina topped the cliff-faces of the Waste Lands Wall—all that was left of Ancient Michalin. Up there, they'd been told, life was extinct or at least twisted into evil parodies of itself. It had long ago become a realm of monsters. There, the *drontagis* ruled.

On their left, like a vast wound, was the Chasm, Garuthgonar. Durras shielded his eyes from its enormity.

"See it?" yelled Jakl, pointing away from the Abyss. "The Crypt!"

Durras followed Jakl's gesture along the contour of the mountain spur they were on. Far across the plain, the land rose again. Durras couldn't see the summit of the rise—a cloudbank hung like sticky webbing on its rocks and cliffs.

“Along the spine!” Jakl snapped.

Mist drifted over the bluish distance. Shafts of light produced a moment of reflected brilliance from the middle of the escarpment, something not natural—it was too symmetrical, more sharp-edged than the bluffs and ridges around it. Durras picked out the shape of a building, dug in against the cliffs—and stairs, thousands of stairs, leading up to the edifice, which was only partially obscured by fog.

“Do you see it?” asked Jakl. “The Makers’ Crypt?”

“How can you be so sure what it is?”

Jakl turned to Durras sharply, squinting against the wind. “Only one way to find out,” he said. They stared at each other for several moments, each testing the other. The wind blew Jakl’s dark hair across his face and his eyes blinked, searching for a sign of reassurance in Durras’ expression. Durras nodded and Jakl turned away. Together they continued on, silently but with a greater sense of communion than had existed between them since the beginning of this trek. Durras didn’t understand that sudden camaraderie and resented it.

The low fir-trees hissed as they wove among them.

On their left, Garuthgonar disappeared into haze and darkness, as though being deliberately hidden from them. Durras had no objection to that. Their trek across the plain would take several days at least and the Chasm frightened him in a way nothing else could. His dreams of it were vivid and painful the whole time they were in its vicinity. At night, he wished he could hold Myrana; even though he had known her for so brief a time, she represented a potential that offered some vestige of comfort. But he could no longer evoke a sense of her presence.

Three days’ hard journeying passed before they reached the foot of the stairs. There were thousands of them, some smashed, but most merely worn. The climb became a different kind of torture—the continuous, even, striding motion, upward, stretching Durras’s endurance to the point of collapse.

“We must rest,” he shouted at Jakl’s distant back.

Jakl glanced around, but continued without comment. Durras took a deep breath and, resigned to exhaustion, trudged on in his wake. As he topped the rise, however, he found Jakl waiting for him. “We’ve made it,” his friend said, gripping his shoulder. Sure enough, a large building lay about half a mile ahead of them, over open plateau-land. It had been hidden by the contours of the climb.

“It’s huge!” Durras shielded his eyes from a flurry of snow.

Some trick of distance or the perspective of the mountain-saddleback had masked its hugeness until that moment. As they approached it along a broken, long-disused roadway, the building became more and more oppressive. Even the stairs that led to its massive portal, visible from far

off, seemed unnatural: perhaps ten or fifteen paces from step to step and some two hundred paces wide. It belonged to giants.

"I don't like it, Jakl," Durras said in a last attempt to leech his friend's resolve. "Let's go back while we can."

Jakl ignored him.

Cold air swept around Durras's ears. All the pulses in his body took up the wind's rush and pounded desperately. For some distance either side of the road no trees and grasses grew. There was only rock—a flat, irregularly shaped expanse almost completely devoid of soil and plant cover, but carved into animal shapes and the forms of legendary creatures. What sort of devotion had provoked such enterprise?

As they got closer, however, he could see that the building was suffering from age. Wind had chipped it and in places there were cracks, though its strength was still obvious. Despite appearances, Durras suspected that as long as the mountain spur stood there, the structure would hold. Instinctively he feared and hated it all the more for its air of permanence.

"Jakl!" His companion stood passive before the great carved doors, waiting for some inner signal to move. "It's a trap."

The gaze Jakl turned on him was hard and critical. "What are you talking about, Durras? It's a tomb, that's all."

Durras approached from behind him, stood looking up at the huge porticos. "We shouldn't be here."

"Don't be so weak, Durras. This place is a relic, nothing more. Others have known it existed—my father for one, and he was killed for the knowledge. They were all too afraid. They didn't go far enough." His eyes bored into Durras's. "He said to me our lives were built on delusion, lies that carried with them an immoral survival. Now we can free ourselves, Durras, because this is the Crypt where their rotted corpses lie. They can't rule us if we can prove they're dead!"

He pushed on the door.

With deceptive ease it swung open. Mustiness flowed around them like a mist and Durras coughed to clear his throat of the irritation it caused. Jakl, however, stood unmoved before the open doorway, shrunken in the huge opening and tense with expectation.

"Let's go now," Durras said. "While we can."

Jakl's eyes were blood-shot and rheumy. "There are pains inside me, my friend," he said with effort, "pains I can avenge in this place. Don't you see? We have to take back some sign, depose the priests with proof the Makers are gone. A tombstone ... some fragment." There was a desperate edge to his voice. "Something ... there must be something." He gripped Durras with his eyes.

"It's useless, Jakl," the latter said. "Even if what you say is true, why would the priests care what you bring back? Leave it be."

Jakl turned from him and strode through the doorway. The shadows swallowed him beyond where the dying daylight sprawled across the steps. Durras watched without moving, but when Jakl's phantom body disappeared completely he followed.

Inside the building there was enough light for Durras to locate Jakl standing motionless in the centre of a large open space. The floor was tiled, ceramic plates forming intricate patterns that radiated from a central mandala. The arms of the design ended against the wall of a raised section of stone-work and there were twenty-four of these around the dais. These ramparts were about two men in height and stretched straight back to the outer wall of the building, like the spokes of a wheel. They were surmounted by sculptures in abstract shapes like twisted stone skeletons. Darker obscurities played among their upper contours.

Durras walked slowly up the narrow corridor that led from the door to the centre. Pillars spiraling upward into darkness defined the passage, and behind them he could see mounds set in symmetrical patterns on both sides of the walkway.

He grabbed his friend's arm.

Jakl shook himself loose. "Look around for god's sake. Look at this place!" He darted toward the end of one of the ramparts and rammed his fist against the designs carved there, his white face glowing with ferocity in the gloom. "Read that and then tell me the Makers are still alive. These are graves."

Durras read the words embossed in faded crystal and gold on the stone:

TES'SORHIN RANPELL
STONE-WIZARD—MAKER

Beneath it was a long list of names. Some he recognised—all the names of the Makers. He said nothing.

Jakl slapped his hand on the engraved rock. "The bodies of these men and women have rotted here while their evils live on elsewhere—a fantasy that sucks us of hope." He looked up, his face gaunt with emotion. "Haven't you ever asked yourself why we are trained to hunt and kill the ones they call the Servants of Evil? What have those pathetic creatures done, apart from defend themselves?"

"They're our enemies."

"We are their's." His eyes looked haunted. They delved into Durras' spirit until he began to feel the pain that churned behind them as a throbbing in his temples. "How can I satisfy the Emptiness, Durras?" Jakl said. He paused at the non-sequitor, as if expecting a response. But it made no sense to Durras. "It claws at me," he whispered, holding his hands to his head, as if to block out a sound Durras couldn't hear. "It comes to me

and whispers its demands. It threatens, curses me, cuts my thoughts like knives ... It wants something, something... I don't know what."

He shambled closer to Durras, placing his hands against the warrior's chest. "It's the Emptiness that showed me the sins of the Makers, the Emptiness that drove me here." He spun toward the stone and pounded the wall again. "Why do you demand righteousness, but keep us in darkness? What do you want? Monsters!" he shouted. "Monsters and demons!" He stamped across the tiles, shaking his fists in a rage, voice echoing hollowly around the space. "The Makers are dead. What more can Garuthgonar have me do to them?"

Garuthgonar? He was calling upon the Chasm itself now? Made voiceless by his friend's madness, Durras stood watching, lost and afraid.

It was then he noted a restlessness in the air. At the moment he sensed it, it sharpened and he felt a palpitation that was almost a heart-beat. His attention leapt away from Jakl, and a Voice echoed in his ears: "*Look upon them, lords, look upon our rebellious children who would call down Wrath and the curse of the Waste Lands. For so speaking against the security of our rule, what is the penalty?*"

"*To wander in places where the ground is poisoned,*" began another Voice, and gradually the chant was taken up by a multitude of others. "*To speak where none can hear. To cry without comfort. To live where nothing lives. To die where death is a perpetual misery. To dwell in monsterlands beyond the divine havens ... to sorrow for Life lost. This is the penalty of lawlessness.*"

Durras glanced at Jakl; he was crouching low against a wall, snarling upward at the disembodied Voices. His eyes flicked to and fro like those of a hunted animal.

"Leave him alone!" Durras cried.

The many-Voices laughed humourlessly. "*You dare come to this haunted shrine and dictate to us! You disappoint, Durras. Perhaps you are a commoner at heart, not an honoured Warrior at all. This sinner, this Jakl, is beyond redemption. He has forfeited sanity. Don't think of him.*"

The darkness was veined by weak light-trails emanating from the tombs around them. Was there a shape forming?

Jakl shrieked. Durras reacted immediately, fearing what his friend might do. He leapt toward him. But Jakl was fast and evaded his grasp. He shrieked again, drawing a sword from beneath his fur-coat and threatening Durras with it. "I'll kill you, too, if you try to stop me. I've been driven toward this moment and can't turn back now. Please—" There was sudden desperation in his voice, "support me!"

"What are you doing, Jakl?"

"By coming here we've exposed them, made them appear as they are. Once manifested, they can be slain."

“There’s nothing here but echoes—”

Light-trails converged on the central dais, over the mandala patterned in the floor—the thing Durras thought he saw was almost tangible now. A huge face. Bodiless. A tulpa formed of condensing darkness. Its thick-lipped mouth smiled sardonically.

Jakl screamed inarticulate rage and rushed at the image that represented everything he’d come to hate. Durras cried for him to stop but four steps carried him into the light-matrix. In another instant Jakl had driven his sword through the spectral forehead. Threads of energy burned around him for the time it took him to stagger back, then he was covered by raging blue light. He jerked and dropped to the floor. The light faded. The face was gone.

“The Makers cling most jealously to their immortal prison, Durras. Do not think you have gained anything here. You have gained nothing and lost a comrade.”

Durras knelt beside Jakl. He would not respond to touch and wasn’t breathing. A hand pressed against his chest felt no sigh of life there. “Did you have to kill him?” Durras cried, turning constantly to face each tomb.

“He brought his death with him.”

“You murdered him,” Durras began, but the sound of the Voice, suddenly multitudinous, cut him off. *“Enough!”* It resounded in the chamber. *“You will be a Warrior. After Initiation, our Voice will speak inside you. But to be of use you must be pure. Thus we offer you combat. Lose and you will be free. Conquer and you will be our’s forever.”* Consciousness wavered, as though he’d been poisoned. Durras lost sight of Jakl and of the tombs as both faded like a forgotten dream.

Then, with a sudden rush, clarity returned. He sensed a movement behind him where Jakl’s corpse had lain, and spun to meet it. Jakl was rising.

“You’re—”

Jakl’s blackened eyes smothered the words before he could speak them. “Blasphemer,” he growled. His lips were tight and bloodless and barely moved as he spoke. “The sin doesn’t lie in this graveyard, but in you, my friend—in the pitiful acquiescence that allows indignity and oppression to thrive. You’re the polluter. Now my eyes are clear. I understand.” He readied himself for attack.

Durras whispered at the darkness: “Let him go, for pity’s sake.”

“You call on your lords in vain.” Jakl leapt, wielding his sword like a scythe. The gleaming blade winged Durras’s coat, ripping away a strip of fabric as the warrior dodged aside. Jakl circled him then, warily reading his movements.

“I haven’t drawn.” Durras held out his hands. “I don’t want to fight you.”

“You can’t hurt me. I’ve passed beyond injury.”

Jakl’s sword-blade jabbed. Durras turned out of its path and tried to grip Jakl’s wrist as he did so. Jakl converted the lunge to a backward sweep and missed Durras’s belly by a hair’s breadth. Air hissed around the sword. Durras swiveled away, rolling across the tiles. As he fell, his head cracked against the floor and he lost all sense of direction. He pushed himself away, blindly. Jakl’s sword smashed and scraped with a deafening impact, sending tile chips into the air. Their sting on Durras’s face brought him back. He glanced up into lifeless eyes. Jakl swung the sword again and Durras threw himself to one side, flailing out at Jakl’s legs. As Durras gained his feet, Jakl was recovering his own balance. A sharp pain throbbed in Durras’s neck, but he ignored it and fought to remain standing.

Blood dripped down his back. He reached for his sword. The hilt slid into his palm. “Damn it, why don’t you resist them?”

Jakl drove at him like a wild beast. Quickly Durras drew and parried. Impact jarred his shoulder and he cried out in anger as he turned the blade back into a familiar attack position, driving it in a wide arc. As he did so, he felt the sickening quiver of the steel slicing into flesh and the crunching deflection as it hit and splintered bone. He looked around to see Jakl impaled on his sword, its blade buried to the hilt in his belly. When Durras wrenched the sword free, Jakl fell lifeless to the floor once again.

“You have conquered, Durras,” came the Voices of the Crypt, *“and now you are ours. Rejoice and return to the City.”*

Durras screamed at them, but the Voices sang out and the singing destroyed his balance. All around him the Crypt was dissolving as though under a blanket of gray snow. He put his hand to the back of his neck, feeling the pain there and the rich wetness of blood. “Damn you!” he shouted as the Makers jabbered at him.

“You’d curse us?” came a conglomerate Voice. *“What greater curse can we endure than this bondage from death?”*

As the last words thundered about the chamber, the darkness fractured into shards of black ice, and Durras’s mind seethed with the agony of it. The Makers sang a chaotic hymn of complaint, their voices interweaving and distorting in waves of sound. Durras used his last fading strength to reach for Jakl’s corpse and lift it across his shoulder. Staggering under the weight and the power of the Makers’ spell he fought his way to the portal, out into the forecourt. Even there the Voices roared in his head. Day followed day as he staggered down the spur and along the plains, until he no longer knew where he was. Fever set in and the world turned red with infection.

Perhaps he dropped Jakl’s corpse—he couldn’t remember. But at last, ahead of him, something breathed, vast and inhuman. The Chasm. How

had he come here? Mist swept aside but all he could see was emptiness. From far below, darkness flew up with the churning currents. An immense distance across the Gap was the denser grayness of Garuthgonar's other wall. The sky above, anaemic with cloud and diffused light, was like the inside of a giant's skull.

Below, unseen in the depths of Garuthgonar, something heaved, as though moving in its sleep. Its roar echoed around him, forming words as the vibrations dissipated into the upper air.

Come to me! it said.

The mists shifted once more and the Chasm filled with a blue-green light that seemed as dense as an ocean. It stretched across the entire width of the Gap. While Durras stared dizzily, a dot appeared in the foggy distance. The dot grew bigger: a ship larger than any that had ever sailed the Valley's rivers. Its masts reached to the sky, resplendent with sails of embroidered light that rivaled in their splendour the tapestries in the Hall of the Makers. A scarlet figure on its prow raised a hand as though in greeting. Then the spectral ship slipped back into the light waves. *Wait!* the warrior cried in his delirium, and the figure on the prow leapt, forcing him backwards.

Durras stumbled over the edge.

Fear smashed against his heart. Far away, the Makers cried out in terror.

A moment of clarity and the depth broke into him as he twisted in mid-air. He saw the endless drop into blackness below, felt the touch of something powerful calling to him. The rocks tumbled; his consciousness slipped and buckled.

Brokenly, he was aware of light and darkness spinning around him. A splash of water hit the back of his hand. Wind-pressure battered against his body and face. His stomach churned with vertigo.

He fell.

*

Still falling, Durras felt the cold pricking of water. He opened his eyes. Shadows and mist swirled about him, wind tearing at his clothes. For a moment he saw the ancient stone wall of Garuthgonar as he broke through to a patch of clear air. At once the wall retreated, a gust of wind slamming against him, tossing him across the space.

Consciousness slipped. He couldn't know for how long the fall continued.

Still the depths called to him.

Then all at once he was no longer falling. Now there was light so intense his head hurt and he could see nothing through the incandescent pain. He closed his eyes to ease them, but the light was still there—as though it burned inside him.

He fumbled about, hoping for shadows in which to hide. Rocks ground and water splashed, and the glare twisted in secret, irregular patterns as though his movement stirred currents in it. He stood at the edge of a sea, amidst stones and rock-pools. But the glare! Why was there so much light?

He staggered over the rocks, blind to everything except the undefined brilliance. His eyes reached beyond pain into numbness, their tension gone in the impossibility of effort. Perhaps he was becoming part of it. He felt lost in the light, flesh dissipating into air. He slipped on a stone and collapsed onto one knee. Water splashed about him. Had there ever been any hope? He thought not. When his Fate as Warrior was declared, everything died for him, though he had not known it then. Only Jakl had known.

Yet despair was not enough to free him. He pushed himself up and struggled further along the shore. He had to survive. That desire was alive in him. The light seemed to consume with an intensity that was unremitting and his muscles knotted in agony, throwing him to his knees again.

If there were gods in that place, he cried to them.

The light attacked remorselessly, stripping away the solidity of his flesh. Like the rocks that he felt but couldn't see, he too was disappearing in the brilliance.

"Garuthgonar!" he screamed, "Garuthgonar! Mercy!"

A roar echoed around him, an undulating sound that might have been words; it came into him at all points, touching all parts of him with a balm like cool breezes in the heat of high summer. The near-words bound his flesh to his bones and the pain of loss was eased as the light untwined from about his limbs. Something that might have been a friendly hand touched him. The brilliance pulled away then, retreating across the seaside rubble and into the lapping waters. He closed his eyes to soothing darkness.

"Let the past fade, Durras." For a moment he wasn't sure whether there was a voice at all, but then it said clearly, "Open your eyes!"

Hesitantly, he peered through the gap between his eyelids. Light remained, but somehow it had been tamed, driven back into the waters. The sea appeared to be made of it, liquefied into gentle waves.

A figure cloaked in scarlet stood before him. The warrior looked for its face. Shadows deepened in the folds of the hood that covered it, but he couldn't see any features—just a thick darkness. Somehow Durras knew

it was watching him, for he imagined silver eyes deep in that darkness. “Who are you?” he said.

The creature did not answer for a moment; but finally its left hand emerged from the scarlet cloth, a hand made of shadow like the creature’s face. It moved its long fingers in a gesture Durras could not interpret. The sign was neither reassuring nor malicious, and the creature made no further move.

When it spoke, its words vibrated in his bones. “This is my domain, perhaps my prison. I have slept here for many times the duration of your life, Durras, seeking respite.”

“Who are you?”

The creature’s hand swept toward the sea. “Look about you, then give me a name.”

The two of them were standing on a promontory that jutted into the sea from a higher shelf of stone. Earth-matter was broken by streaks of light, so that it seemed to churn like water. Behind the rock shelf—which stretched along the foreshore as far as the eye could see—hills rose like huge knives, a landscape of crags that ascended gradually through mist and light into a mountainous terrain. Beyond these, a vast cliff dominated the scene, mounting high into darkness far above him. He looked over the sea into the scintillating distance. There, too, he saw an enormous wall of rock, nearly parallel with this closer one. Both walls formed a canyon that had no visible ends.

“Garuthgonar!” he said.

The phantom did not reply.

“How could I survive such a fall?”

“This is not a place where death is absolute. You stand near the spiritual heart of the world.”

“Why am I here?”

“An end must be set to the quest for Survival. You and your people have pursued it at all costs, even to the corruption of your souls. But at last your friend Jakl has brought you here and set your way. There is hope.”

“Hope?”

“You will free your people. But to do so you must fight a battle you’ve already lost.”

“What battle? I lost no battle.” Durras let his confusion fade into silence. As it did, the walls and crevasses around him blurred and faded, as though a poisonous mist was leaking from them, consuming everything. He shut his eyes against rising nausea.

*

Time passed. Within the stillness and dark Durras could hear the movement of small, padding feet. Suddenly alert, he opened his eyes. But no one was there. The sense of utter confinement that had been oppressing him had gone, replaced by ordinary mountains that rose beyond fog-shrouded hills, like giants emerging from the earth. Tall pines dripped water in globules that splattered noisily onto the mud and rock. His body ached with the air's chill.

He gazed around slowly. How had he come here? Where had he been? The last thing he could recall was leaving the training fields. Since then, nothing. All that remained was an image of dark, haunted eyes in a scarred face.

He looked at his hands. There was blood on them. He didn't know whose. But he soon found out. Off the trail, not far away, lay a corpse. Slumped over a rock, it stared up at the sky through sightless eyes. His friend, Jakl, gut sliced open, no life in his broken body.

Sorrow made Durras moan aloud.

"The past is fragmented by regret," said a voice. Durras glanced in the direction it had come from and both the chasm and memory returned. The spectre stared at him.

"Haven't I suffered enough?" Durras protested. "They made me kill him!"

"Suffered enough? There is so much more to come, Durras, not only for you but for your people also, and the creatures that have suffered the Made's delusions for so long. Only you can stop the suffering."

"Me? I can do nothing."

A sudden wind roared along the canyon, swirling the darkness into thousands of black tendrils.

"If you allow yourself to do nothing, there will be no future."

Again, his surroundings were subsumed by mist and darkness.

*

Ten years pass. Long years of fighting, of service to the Makers' war, of blood and slaughter.

As an emissary of the past, he fights for survival. Seeks to forge a future from the torn flesh of his enemies. Memory of the past is dim, almost non-existent, while the future struggles to achieve clarity ... But what future?

None ... No future ... only ...

Screaming. The earth cracks apart under his feet. He staggers as a vast swathe of forest splits away and disappears into the Abyss. Stares in

horror as the devastation reaches the outermost buildings of Darmiton-Cail and the Watchtower on the western rim crumbles and falls. The roar of it is so loud it makes his ears bleed.

Silence takes over and an unnatural night collapses across the Azsh valley.

No future, only this destruction.

Breathing heavily, Durras opened his eyes to find himself standing at the brink of the Abyss. As he gazed into it with waking eyes, his mind shrank from the sight. *The Demon Fissure*. Approach to it had always been forbidden. Often, in the warrior's dreams, the Gap filled with water. It was empty now, as it had been when he first saw it, so long ago.

How had he come here?

He stood beside a fallen tree, its roots exposed to the abyss by a collapse of the cliff-edge. Dirt and stone flaked off as he watched. Around him the world was grayed by vapor, except where, from far below, darkness flew up with the dismal currents. An immense distance across the Gap he saw the denser grayness of Garuthgonar's other wall. In its length he could see no end.

How could such a place exist? Wind thrashed Durras' face and limbs, but he remained there, mesmerized by it. Between the distant cliffs on the far side of the chasm and the Valley of Azsh itself lay an incomprehensible emptiness. Hulking blocks of stone and split earth, space that reached to the core of the world, were revealed as swirls of cloud broke across the vastness. He watched the currents of monstrous air-columns, terrified over the endless fall.

Slowly the scene melted. Tears warmed on his cheeks.

This is our Will, the Makers spoke inside his head. There dwells in this place an emissary of Evil, a leader who foments apocalypse. You must find and destroy it.

"But the Chasm is forbidden."

Search along the edges. Spiritual danger lies only in the Chasm's depths. Do not enter there. It will weaken you.

The sky above, anemic with cloud and diffused light, mimicked the inside of a giant's skull. In places the skull bled, for the sky's purer light slashed through more intensely where the cloud-cover was broken. "I can't," Durras whispered.

The Voice said: *There is nothing to fear but the fear that plagues you. Our Righteousness overrides such terror. Remember your Calling, and obey.*

That night as he slept alone in the wilderness near the edge of the world his dreams once again offered up images of the Chasm filled with a blue-green ocean. It stretched across the width of the Gap, heaving with inhuman life.

He woke to fighting. Creatures came at him from the mist—squat,

ugly creatures, shriveled and hardened by the evil the Makers said had corrupted their souls. An initiated warrior of his people now, he fought them, slew them—but there was even then great conflict in his heart. Doubt assailed him. Their blood splattered his clothes and the stink of their torn flesh lingered in his nostrils. When the mist swept aside, a shape like a man emerged, hand raised. Light shot from its fingers, soaking into Durras's sword blade, flowing like strong wine through his body.

Darkness takes him.

He came to his senses much later, chained in a gloom-shrouded place of earthy smells and chilled air. When he wrenched at the corroded chains, they snapped. They were old and poorly made. In the distance the muffled sound of voices, careless of him and engaged in other counsel. He began searching for his sword, but it was gone. He must do without it.

He moved to one side, feeling his way along the wall. It was thick with shadow, but his touch awakened memories in him. Relief sculptures carved there depicted a giant humanoid figure from whose eyes flowed serpentine currents, tendrils that groped for, and found, smaller fleeing shapes, and uprooted trees, mountains and village buildings. What did it represent? A necromantic charm, perhaps, designed to evoke submission in enemies interred in this prison. A representation of the Dark Gods? Certainly it was the Dark Gods' violence the figure dispensed.

The warrior ran his fingers across the wall again, held in admiration of its workmanship. The carvings were sensuous, frozen in the stone during a moment of considered passion. The texture of the grain and the strokes of the sculptor's chisel were exciting. Though he knew it must have been evil, the warrior felt a kinship with the unknown artist.

Moving on, his fingers passed over the Fury whose eyes brought destruction, and traced runic shapes on its chest. The warrior knew them. His breath faltered. For a moment he was too confused to act. Then coldness and a new terror rushed over him. He began to shake. Those runes, stamped on the demon as a mark of identity, were the sacred runes of the Makers — they were tattooed on his own forehead, burned there at his Initiation as a Warrior. He closed his eyes and gasped for air. What devil, or what god, did he represent to these beings?

The Evil Ones are the devils, the Voice whispered. You do not hear, you do not see, you do not feel, except as we direct. We are your Life. Without us you are nothing, like the Void of Garuthgonar. Honor us.

Pressure built in the back of his skull, forced from the magic core of the Makers that had been immured there. Beneath his fingers he felt the demon-sculpture, burning like corrosive on his skin.

He heard a sound and looked up. One of the creatures stood in the doorway, paralyzed by sight of the warrior's distress. He could sense the depth of its terror. He was a monster in its eyes, a monster trapped in

some monstrous spasm. But what kind of devils were these, he thought, that knew such fear?

Under pressure from the Voice he leapt to kill the creature, but a shadow intervened — the phantom that had earlier been his downfall. He ran towards it, howling. The thing did not run from him, but he could not catch it. It led him through long, rough-hewn corridors, and into the walls of Garuthgonar itself.

*

At last, unexpectedly, the corridor came to an end. Beyond it was a ledge—then nothing. On the ledge, framed by void, stood the spectre.

Its eyes were silver and glint fractured light. Their power touched Durras. As he stared helplessly, the spectre raised its right hand, gathering light from the air, while around it the shadows darkened. Its long fingers plucked and wove. It held its left hand high and performed the same ritual, until it became the center of a vast web of light-trails. Its face was impassive, yet also commanding, though the warrior did not know what it asked of him. The face was human.

There is danger in restraint. The Ancestral Voice was faint, its magic thin here. Durras wanted to fight it. The strength of this desire made him uneasy. *Obey us,* the Voice insisted, *do not seek your Way in surrender to this demon. Slay it and gain the gift of Survival. Survival is everything.*

Still Durras refused to act. Pain flashed in the base of his skull, reverberating throughout his body. He staggered, never taking his eyes off the creature. Its lips moved, perhaps in sympathy, but he couldn't hear what it said. Instead he felt the pull of the Makers straining at his will, forcing him on. Tension built into a shriek; erupting from his throat, it echoed briefly in the corridor, before being absorbed by the emptiness.

Driven by a passion not his own, the warrior leapt forward. But as he reached out to grab the spectre's throat it turned its hands toward him. Re-directed light struck him in the chest and enveloped him in a sparkling cocoon. He staggered on, caught in the momentum of his attack. Suddenly the void was beneath him. Through the light, he looked up and saw the stony silhouette of huge cliffs, crowned by gray-black monoliths of spiraling mist.

Fear smashed against his heart. The Makers cried out.

A moment of clarity and the tentacles of power broke into him as he twisted in mid-air. He saw the endless drop into blackness below and felt the touch of something powerful as the light-web was sucked away. The rocks tumbled; his consciousness slipped and buckled.

“Too late!” the Blackness cried. “Too late!”

Brokenly, he was aware of light and darkness spinning around him. A splash of water hit the back of his hand. Wind-pressure against his body and face. His stomach churned with vertigo.

He screamed, clenching his eyes against insufferable distance.

*

While he falls, the warrior feels the cold pricking of water. He opens his eyes. Shadows and mist swirl about him, wind tearing at his clothes. For a moment he sees the ancient stone wall of Garuthgonar as he breaks through to a patch of clear air. At once the wall retreats, a gust of wind slamming against him, tossing him across the space. Sickness rises in his stomach.

Consciousness slips. He cannot know for how long the fall continues.

*

As the darkness approached, Durras awoke.

“Is this your vision of the future?” he asked.

The spectre gestured dismissively. “Not mine, but a reality that has not yet come about.”

“How can I stop it?”

The spectre said nothing for a moment, the howling of wind in the rocks around them becoming his voice. Then he continued: “Your Makers long ago established a ritual of Survival, wanting to exclude all dooms, every trace of the world they feared. They came to my realm, where I lie in an endless act of healing, though they did not know me—or to the extent that they recognized my presence, denied me and sought to destroy those who lived here before them. To this end they built Lamatun and the Crypt that is its centre, prepared to lay their own lives into the substance of the building so that they would always remain to mold the people into their image. I have been too weak to act against them, needing a spirit of defiance to carry my will.”

“What have I to do with this defiance?”

“It is in you and in Jakl... it is you, Durras.”

“And if I refuse?”

“Then the Made, your people, will be unmade. My time of freedom, of rising, has come. Once I depart, the land will collapse and be swallowed up. You will all die. I can wait no longer. Your people must be freed from tyranny and carried away before Azsh falls into oblivion.”

“How carried?”

“You’ve seen the vessel, Durras. In many dreams.”

Durras moved aside, understanding nothing, distrustful of this spectre. “I won’t do what you ask. Why should I trust you?”

“Trust is irrelevant.” The spectre raised his hands and light streamed from their fingers, surrounding Durras in a cocoon of brilliance. “The Makers are just shadows—remember that. Go and seek your friend. And this time don’t give in to death.”

*

There was silence, the silence of a mausoleum.

It descended like a thickening black snow, dropping over him and undermining whatever confidence he had left. What if Garuthgonar was evil? For generations the Makers had been the measure and oracle of all action and thought, the source of survival for the last remnants of his People. Was it blasphemy Durras now carried in his breast?

How could the Void take form and speak to him?

But he remembered the light and recalled the Chasm’s last words: “Seek your friend and this time don’t give in to death.”

He opened his eyes and found himself in the Crypt.

“Makers, listen to me,” he said at last, groping with his hands and shuffling toward the tomb engraved with the name of the great stone-wizard. “Listen, Lord Ranpell! I have come from Garuthgonar, been in his presence. He is about to rise and with that rising Azsh will perish. You’re wise, Ranpell. If there’s a spirit in you that still clings to life, then you’ve seen that within Garuthgonar the secret of your beginning and ending lies. I’ve often dreamt of the Chasm’s rising, and now I know this vision comes to all my people, perhaps even you.”

“*Garuthgonar!*” said a Voice, tremoring like an overlapping echo. “*Have you spoken with the Abyss?*”

“I have spoken with something that resembled a man.” Durras rubbed his palm across his forehead, weak with strain.

“*It is the source of Evil!*”

“Garuthgonar has said you must release your hold, Makers,” Durras persisted. “There’s doom in holding on. Does he speak the truth?”

“*We do not release, we do not yield. We are Survival!*”

“Garuthgonar claims that Survival is not possible this way!” Durras shouted over their Voice, loud with sudden urgency. “The Valley will collapse into the abyss. But he offers a way.”

“*Do not utter that name again. Never speak it. Like him, you are a*

traitor. You and your friend have for too long trodden a path of treachery, hot with rebellion and doubt. We saw hope in you, we believed you could be brought within the Law. But we misjudged the depth of your sickness. You gazed too deeply into the abyss. Now you must perish, so that the echo of Garuthgonar might be silenced.

The darkness lightened into a dull twilight. In the haze Durras saw a powerful humanoid figure, slouching into an upright position.

“Jakl? Garuthgonar said I’d find him again.”

It turned its gaze on him, deathly and cold.

“I killed your phantasm once before,” said Durras to the shadows. “Not again.”

Jakl stalked him, but Durras didn’t move, simply watched with tired eyes. At last the dead warrior stood directly before him, sword blade catching what light there was and amplifying it in dull sparks of gloaming.

“I won’t fight you,” Durras said.

He clasped his hands to his ears as a cry, resounding in that stony place like thunder, crashed around him. He forgot Jakl, aware then of shapes moving into the blackness. The shapes walked slowly, creating a sound like straining cloth on the verge of tearing. The Makers. Dead, but not dead. Coming for him.

His legs were weak, could barely support him, let alone move. He flailed at the shapes, the dead Makers, seeing in their faces the likenesses of his ancient leaders—he had seen these faces often, etched in the stone of the Temple and at Lorwithnor. Now the faces were contorted by decades of agony, drained of life and re-formed from decayed flesh. The Makers closed around him, indecipherable whispers pricking the silence into a roar. He felt their presence like ice. He pushed them away. Their bodies had the toughness of stone and their proximity drained the heat from him.

Wanting to avoid their touch again, Durras staggered one way then another, but the circle closed relentlessly. Traces of familiarity in the desiccated features leered from deepening shadows.

Yet at the same time power stirred inside him. He knew what it was. He had come here carrying the light of Garuthgonar—and now it wanted out.

“Garuthgonar is about to depart this Valley!” he said. “There’s not a thing you do can stop it.”

“*You know nothing.*”

“I know his departure will destroy our life, a life which has survived on violence and death. I know Garuthgonar offers a way for us to escape destruction.”

They came for him, dry mouths open in inarticulate fury, bony fingers bent into claws. Power swelled in Durras. The pain of it made him collapse to his knees. He felt as though his skin would tear apart.

“Stay away!”

But the Makers’ corporeal forms crowded around him and Garuthgonar’s power surged higher. Durras became aware of a light that gradually filled the chamber. He glanced around to locate its source.

The stone of the Crypt around him had begun to lighten, as though the radiance within it was bursting through the flimsy tissue of matter.

But the light was coming from himself. It grew stronger each moment. It rushed from him, its currents swirling around the chamber. Rising.

Suddenly it was a devastating force, as it had been in the depths of the Chasm. Through aching eyes he watched the light tear at the dead Makers, lifting layers of darkness, eroding them as though they were mounds of dust in a wind. The Makers screamed, staggering away from him. Relentlessly the light found them. As Durras watched, the corpses crumbled, becoming dust that faded into the luminous eddies. Something of the Makers still remained, that he knew; he felt their presence like a dull after-image. But he had taken their ancient vessels from them, weakened their hold on the world --

“It doesn’t end so easily, Durras!” growled a familiar voice. Durras turned towards Jakl, towards the unliving eyes and the bloodless lips, and felt terror and grief. Bathed in Garuthgonar’s light Jakl became almost ethereal. “We’ve heard enough of these lies. Draw your sword!”

“I’ve lost it, Jakl.”

“It’s by your side.”

Durras felt in his scabbard, expecting it to be empty. But his hand folded around the familiar hilt. He jerked his fingers away as though they’d been burnt. “I won’t fight you,” he said.

“Fight or I’ll kill you outright.”

“There’s no meaning in it. This is a time for life.”

Jakl roared insanely. “Fight, damn it!” He slashed with his sword and Durras felt the blade cut across his forehead. Blood seeped out and dribbled into his eyes, momentarily blurring his vision. He wiped it away.

“Fight!”

“I won’t be a tool of the Makers, Jakl.”

Pain seared his shoulder as Jakl’s sword penetrated the flesh there. Durras staggered and then avoided Jakl’s next sweep. “Now!” the dead warrior cried, “kill me now!”

Durras turned to face his lost friend. He took an unexpected step sideways. As he did so, Jakl’s sword found his abdomen. It ground through his muscles, scraping the bottom of his ribcage. He reeled with the agony as Jakl pulled the blade from him, clutching at the wound and spitting blood between his lips. His legs collapsed. “No!” He heard a voice cry out, not his own, and raised his eyes to see who had spoken. In that moment Jakl’s eyes were alive with fire and Durras realised that the cry, which still

continued, belonged not to his friend but to the Makers.

“You’re free, Durras,” said Jakl, bringing his sword around for another strike. The blow struck Durras’s skull, releasing all the pressure that had built up there. Garuthgonar’s fire in its purest form flowed from the wound, an incandescent explosion that swept through the Crypt in a vengeful fury. It burnt away the last spiritual remnants of the past, erasing all magical traces of the Makers from the ancient stone. There was a stab of the most intense torment Durras had ever known then his consciousness fell away.

“The people...” he whispered...

*

“... are free.”

Myrana heard the words again, as she had the first time, spoken in pain and exultation both. Durras’s voice, resounding in a dream.

Then, she had woken, afraid in the darkness, knowing he was dead and that everything had changed. Now, there was grass beneath her feet and the touch of rain upon her face.

“Myrana? Are you unwell?” She looked toward the speaker: the Warrior-Priest. His hair was knotted in the formal mode required by rites of travelling.

“I was remembering,” she said, “remembering the first time I heard his voice in my head.”

“The day the Makers fell silent.”

“Yes.”

She gazed about at the camp: the meagre cloth tents, the campfires, the people awake and prepared even at this early hour. Mounds of luggage—the keepsakes of a race—lay about them. There was food and its odors, and a less tangible atmosphere of hope. “I’m sorry, Myrana, that he never returned,” the Priest continued. “He should be with us now.”

“Garuthgonar will say nothing of him?”

“The spectre appears rarely and says little.” The Priest gazed northward as light rose over the Chasm. “I think he speaks to you more in your dreams than he speaks to us face-to-face. With the Makers gone, we are irrelevant.”

Myrana looked across at the many hundreds of figures dotting the glades and river-valley. “When Garuthgonar’s ship comes, and we leave in it, then I must abandon hope of ever seeing Durras again.”

“You still have hope?”

She thought about that, but knew it was merely a conceit. “He’s dead.

I felt it.”

“Then you must be content to have his child.”

She stroked her belly, sensed the growing life there, and nodded. “One thing I know,” she said. “This child is important. He has a role to play.”

“A role to play in what?”

“There comes a crisis he must live to help dispel. So Garuthgonar has declared.”

“A crisis?” The Priest rubbed an arthritic hand against his right temple. “I had hoped we could have peace for a time.”

“*This* crisis is far off,” Myrana smiled at the old man’s agitation. “Far beyond our own last days.”

Something touched her side. She looked down into the large eyes of Car’hagog, the leader of the Garnatil—no longer the Evil Ones—who had come as well to find Garuthgonar’s freedom. The creature trusted Myrana, looked to her for protection, though she couldn’t understand why. Men such as her husband had slaughtered his people—how did she now deserve the Garnatil’s forgiveness? Yet forgive her Car’hagog had, though the diminutive creatures would approach no others of the Made and would trust them only from behind Myrana’s protection. Their arrival caused much argument among the people, but the Made’s prejudice was reduced by the weight of a heavier guilt, and the rightness of their presence was reluctantly acknowledged, even among the Warriors. Even so, she saw that the Priest backed away from him suspiciously.

“Yes, Car’hagog?” she said.

The creature wrinkled his thin lips, releasing sounds into the crisp morning air. His elongated fingers pointed toward the Chasm.

The Emptiness of Garuthgonar had caught fire under the new morning. Air-currents splashed against the Chasm’s lip, then turned like the tidal eddies of a great sea. The Void had become an ocean of light. Riding the ocean’s swell and a fierce breeze from the North came a familiar ship with sails of light, its prow slicing the waves and its rigging catching the brilliance and throwing it back in ribbons of flame.

Myrana thought then of Garuthgonar and sensed the spectre’s rise. Soon the Valley would collapse into Emptiness. “Garuthgonar will be gone soon,” she said. “And Azsh will fall.”

The Priest merely nodded.

The people were gathering eagerly at the spot where the ship would dock. Even now its huge shadow fell over them. It was familiar — something they had all dreamed many times.

“The past must go with it,” Myrana added.