

Phaze One

Part one of a draft novel: Phaze One

Young Adult Fantasy/Adventure

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(The portfolio of work is part one of a draft, young adult fantasy novel, submitted as the candidate’s thesis. The novel’s working title: ‘Phaze One’)	

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Exegesis: 'Are you in Phaze?'

Abstract

The exegesis will elaborate on the research process undertaken this year to write a fictional draft novel.

The creative work is a young adult fantasy novel, and is part one of what will eventually be a three part series. At this stage, its working title is Phaze One.

The introduction of the exegesis discusses what may possibly be the attraction of the fantasy genre to many writers, especially in light of what some critics refer to as the 'light-weight genre', and why fantasy has attracted me.

There is an overview of Phaze One and why I have chosen to write part one of a three part series. The landscape of contemporary young adult fantasy, as well as, the categories of science fiction and fantasy literature and how they overlap will be discussed, with reference to academic literature. I will also discuss the relevance of mythic conventions and archetypes common in fantasy, and how these conventions have been adapted to the novel. Thus positioning the creative work within its wider context.

The exegesis includes reference to various writers who were relevant to the creative process; however, significant reference will be to the young adult fantasy writer Garth Nix and his 'Keys to the Kingdom' series. Various fantasy elements within the work will be discussed, as well as, the ideas for some settings, and the integration of Campbell's 'Heroes Journey' in the novel.

Exegesis: Are you in Phaze?

Introduction

'One, can't believe impossible things.'

'I daresay you haven't had much practise,' said the Queen, 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.'

Lewis Carroll, from Through the Looking Glass.

The Queen is right when she says you can believe in the impossible – that is the nature of fantasy. But of course fiction itself is a, ' literary narrative, whether in prose or verse, which is feigned or invented, and does not purport to be historical truth.'(Abrams M.H. 1985.)

Fantasy has seen a resurgence, no doubt due, in part at least, to revived interest in the Narnia stories in film; Tolkien's fantasy through film; Pullman's 'Dark Series', and of course the boy wizard in book and film. Yet many still see fantasy (and science fiction) as the lightweight genre. For example, E Mitchell in the New York Times (Dec, 19, 2001¹) described 'The Lord of the Rings' films as... *'the most intimidating nerd/academic fantasy classic ever.'*

The concept of fairy tales and fantasy are often used indiscriminately to denote anything that is not straight realistic prose. 'Fantasy is so often referred to as escapist literature, usually denigrating'. However, I agree with Woo who points out,' ... as if reading about characters in everyday quotidian situations were inherently more valuable.' (Woo, Celestine. 2006)

Also in some 'middle-brow' circles fantasy and science fiction have had some bad press, as Dr Downing points out in his journal article, 'The Uses of Fantasy. Knowing and Doing,' a teaching quarterly, that apparently normal adults are expected to resign themselves to the real world, if they don't then

they must be victims of the 'Peter Pan' syndrome, that is, a refusal to grow up and see the world as it really is. (Downing. C. 2006)

So why then do distinguished academics like, Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Phillip Pullman turn to fantasy? And why do such esteemed writers as Ursula Le Guin, Kafka, Margaret Atwood, and Gabriel Garcia Marques, to name a few, turn to fantasy?

Could it be the Queen is right – you can believe in impossible things. Is it that fantasy begins the itch in the imagination? Fantasy is the realm where the imagination can flow, it is '*a sense of what might be, or what could never be*' (ibid. p.3). Thus some critics of fantasy (and science fiction) have perhaps missed the point. Tolkien acknowledged that a basic purpose of fantasy is escape, but:

*'He sees this as a method of recovering reality, not retreating from it. Sometimes a flight of fancy may be the very thing required to give us an overview of our own world.'*²

Fantasy and science fiction is an area I have been interested in ever since my first readings of Alice's journeys through Wonderland, along side Jules Verne, Commando Comics, and Charles Dickens – yes where would we be without the fantasy element in a 'Christmas Carol'? Thus I have undertaken to write a draft novel that is an adventure fantasy, and the creative process has been influenced by contemporary young adult fantasy writers such as: Phillip Pullman, Eoin Colfer, and in particular Garth Nix.

The creative work is a young adult fantasy novel, and is part one of what I hope will eventually be a trilogy. Part one, is also a stand-alone draft novella, at this stage, its working title is Phaze One.

¹ Downing.C. 2006

² Downing.C. Dr. p 3. 2006

Firstly I will give an overview and why this story forms part one of a three part series. My research has involved a great deal of reading in this genre, which has informed the creative work. I will locate the landscape of young adult as well as science fiction/fantasy literature including a brief discussion of these two categories, and how they often overlap, with reference to academic literature. I will also include reference to various writers, who were relevant to the creative process; however, there will be significant reference to the Australian fantasy writer, Garth Nix, thus broadly positioning the creative work within its wider context.

The exegesis will include a reflection on other fiction and non-fiction texts included in the research process and how this informed the creative work. I will also discuss some of the fantasy elements within the work; experimentation with narrative, setting, and the integration of Joseph Campbell's 'The Heroes Journey' within the structure of the work. Thus the exegesis will elaborate on the research process undertaken this year to write a draft 'fantasy' novel.

Phaze One - overview

Part one of the novel focuses on the set up, complication, and introduction of main characters: Tama and the twins, Liam and Zina. Part one is essentially the discovery, and Tama's 'awakening'; his transformation and the call to adventure which will take him, and the two other main characters, the twins, into another world: Solaz.

Fantasy elements are introduced, initially through the prologue which sets the tenor of fantasy, however, the 'grains of sand' as passing on information in the 'archival caves' may be a new spin. Standard fantasy elements and tropes³ are introduced in part one and include magic, supernatural, heroes, etc.

Themes are interwoven throughout the narrative, touching upon: friendship; love; sexual desire; bravery; self-reliance; relationships and innocence moving into experience.

Essentially there are two settings intertwined in part one. The place where Tama, and his friends, the twins, live. The other is the world he and the twins will be going to. The two worlds are however interconnected and this will be developed a little more through part two – three. A good deal of the draft work has been changed however, including names, interspacing of original chapters, pacing etc. These are integrated into the text/and or will re-emerge into parts 2 - 3

³ Trope: figurative language where words, phrases, images are used in a way to effect a conspicuous change in what we take to be there standard meaning. 'Ornaments of language' integral to functioning of language, indispensable not only to poetic language but all modes of discourse. (Abrams M.H. 1993) Fantasy tropes can include but not limited to: magic items like wands, flying carpets, swords or rings; fantastic creatures from serpents to wizards; also other races – human or otherwise, the hero and their journey – often the journey is a maturation process; strange landscapes that reflect the fantastic element. (Fantasy definitions homepage)

The main action of the story takes place in Solaz. However, the novel opens after the prologue to a high school classroom where the main character, Tama, is supposed to be doing his math. Through flashbacks a little of his history is relayed, including where he lives. We also learn that something has happened to Tama, he has received a blade, but other stuff is happening around him.

Originally each of the chapters relating to Tama were interspersed with cut away chapters to action in Solaz, however, this has now been removed at this draft stage, along with other aspects, and either integrated into the text, or into parts two - three.

Structurally, the draft now has shorter chapters and the inclusion of Liam's drawings and notes to convey visual and extra information. (concept pictures to be drawn as I near closer to the completion of the draft & parts 2 – 3) this has altered from original cut away chapters but by incorporating the visual aspect it provided other perspectives, and texts that provide multiple perspectives are suitable particularly with teen males. In a world of sound bites, music videos and computer games, young people understand texts in this manner far more than prior generations used to conventional linear texts. (A Tatum 2005)

Part one also introduces the other two main characters, the fraternal twins, Liam and Zina. They are the same age, and in the same class, and a tad odd. The twins form another thread in the story as we come to learn that they were in fact born in Solaz. The twins are the children a Queen thus of royal birth through their mother, and have been hidden in the trailer park for their safety.⁴

⁴ A classic spin on the Old Testament story of Moses hidden in the bull-rushes; also a fantasy trope where heroic characters, unknown even to themselves, are of royal blood. As we discover the twins are. And by part 3 we will discover Tama is also.

However, the twins are now of age and so too must return to Solaz. Thus their story is intertwined with Tama's and is pivotal as the narrative develops through parts 2- 3.

Tama will journey back with the twins to Solaz, other characters like Shadze (an integration of previous characters into one) and the important mentor figure Rowan accompany them. Rowan is of course a Phaze Lord, he is the twin's uncle, but this will now be withheld until part two.

There is violence, however young adults are capable of making distinctions between fantasy violence and actual violence, boys also like humour, especially 'bodily humour' (Newkirk.T. 2002). There is the developing romance between Tama and Zina, which is physically consummated by the end of part two. It is a world filled with many dangers, strange creatures and weird landscapes. By the end of part one the heroes have made several journeys, they have grown, and it ends on a 'high' note in the safety of the 'green roads.' A hiatus before the battles begin.

Why have three parts?

The Phaze is rather epic in its vision, interweaving storylines, including the characters aging as the story develops. Thus it made sense to me to set it up this way. Phaze One is a complete novella in itself, and it deliberately ends now in the 'green roads' thus 'hopefully' encouraging the reader to want to know what happens next. Also many contemporary young adult fantasy (and non-fantasy) books are in a series and or parts.⁵ This is a great marketing spin, and each can be sold separately, however as Garth Nix said when you've got such a huge vista before you it pays to extend it in a series. His fantasy series 'Keys to the Kingdom' (Nix 2003; '05; '06; '08) and 'Shades Children' (Nix 2006) have been influential in my own writing. Reading Nix's contemporary fantasy fiction I was quite happy to suspend disbelief and take the magic carpet ride. A ride which impressed with the series' 'fantastic' scope; ensemble of characters; complex storylines, and quirky humour which does not fit into the more 'conventional fantasy' structure of some of his other books. His 'Keys to the Kingdom' is a series of seven books, some large some small, the last of which he is still writing, and the style changes through them.

Nix's series, 'Keys to the Kingdom' is not in the 'traditional' flair of fantasy, as say Le Guin's 'A Wizard of Earthsea'; or a Tolkien landscape; or the dark, brooding world of Brook's 'The voyage of Jerle Shannara. Book One Ilse Witch.' Nix's fantasy/adventure series is dark, but darkness within a flamboyance that reaches dizzying, mind-stretching heights.

⁵ For example, Phillip Pullman's 'Dark Series' trilogy; 'Harry Potter' ; The Artemis Fowl series; Applegate's Animorph series; Anthony Horowitz' 'Alex Rider' series; Pratchet's 'Disk World' Johnathan Stouds, 'Bartimeous Trilogy' and Garth Nix's 'Keys to the Kingdom' and 'Shades children.' There are of course many more.

I found it interesting that it was not till he was well into his second book that he really began discovering the details, and his story line and characters began to take on twists and turns that he had not planned for. (Media file. Faster than light. 2008 An interview with Garth Nix.) Thus extending *The Phaze* beyond one book, or part one, seemed sensible.

Main characters don't always appear in the first parts, which is another advantage to a series. It is interesting that one of Pullman's main characters, Will Parry, in his 'Dark Series' trilogy does not appear until the second book (Pullman 1998). And *Artemis Fowl's* arch nemesis does not appear till '*Artemis Fowl and the Lost Colony*' (Colfer 2006). Thus, a series or parts allows for character and story development.

Part one of this draft novel focuses on the set up, complication, and introduction of main characters but it is also the journey and entry into the world of Solaz, where people travel the Solaz roads on 'land-rigs'. However, it is not a fantasy world reminiscent of some romanticised 'agrarian society' where people gather round the hearth. Nor is it full of kindly, wise wizards or 'earth mother' witch characters tinkling crystals telling the hero he has to fight the dragon after he brings in the harvest.

Part two – three will include a good deal more with the twins, and Tama learning to wield his 'blade' as he faces the 'foe.'

Thus it is a huge landscape, with many twists and turns in a fantasy world that suits the style of a series, or trilogy, and could in fact have other stories spinning off part one – three. It is still a work very much in progress, and has many more twists and turns to undertake before parts 1 – 3 are completed.

The landscape of young adult fiction and science fiction/fantasy relevant background reading to this research. The blurring of these two genres, and reflection on other texts included in research process with a focus on 'mythic' conventions and archetypes.

*'Fantasy is often characterised by a departure from the accepted rules by which individuals perceive the world around them; it represents that which is impossible, or unexplained, and outside the parameters of our known reality.'*⁶

Fantasy and science fiction (referred to in rest of writing as SF) are often categorised together. For example, Ursula Le Guinn's the 'Dispossessed' is categorised as SF whilst 'The Wizard of Earthsea' is fantasy. SF is diverse, from the conventional through to its many cross forms (Abrahms M.H. 1985) that often blend with fantasy elements, and mythic structures. Both genres are usually shelved together, often because of their readerships' tendencies to overlap and the authors' tendencies to blur the lines between these categories. (James Edward, 1994)

We can see this blurring of boundaries in such writers as Piers Anthony who combines fantasy elements of sword and sorcery interwoven with folktales, magic and non-magic realms, and a satire reminiscent of Twain played out in his fantasy world of 'Xanth' which is based very much on Florida. Stephen Donaldson's 'Chronicles of Thomas Covenant' combines elements of dark humour and heroic fantasy, he also creates the anti-hero, with his rare form of leprosy, Thomas Covenant, the Unbeliever. Gibson's 'Neuromancer' synthesises computer technology of the computer matrix with cyberspace

⁶ Fantasy definitions. www.findmeanauthor.com/fantasy_fiction_genre.htm)

combining supernatural elements including black magic in his cyber-space fantasy environment. (Mathews R. 2002) ⁷

In Brian Aldiss' foreword to Olaf Stapledon's classic 'Star Maker' a novel first published in 1939, and classified as SF yet it blends these boundaries between the fantasy genre and SF. It's mythic in its sweep:

'...The story of a quest, but a quest on a cosmic and superhuman scale. The 'I' projects his spirit away from this Earth and "the world's delirium" into the universe, to encounter other worlds, other beings, other classes of beings, finally to confront the creator of the universe itself, the Star Maker, and be permitted communication with it/... It creates a myth for our time that will appease both the scientist and the mystic in us. A myth for the two hemispheres of mankind's divided brain.' (Stapledon Olaf. 1999)

As Aldiss says it is 'mythic', however, it is classified as science fiction, 'which it superficially resembles.' This genre classification of 'science fiction is purely coincidental.' (Ibid. p.1)

'Star Wars' is clearly within the science fiction genre yet includes certain unexplained fantasy elements. This can be said too of Frank Herbert's 'Dune' classified as science fiction, yet Herbert understood that science fiction was a way to express the oldest genre in the world, the fantastic tale. 'Dune' is a complex plot that demands a great deal of the reader, but it is a rewarding magic carpet ride that integrates mythic transformations, shape shifting shadows in the landscape and characters that change like the ripples of sand on the desert planet itself. Herbert drew on his extensive self-education to marry science fiction with some of the strongest elements from literature, history, mythology, Eastern religions, mathematics, science and his personal life to create his epic SF fantasy. (Kristen Brennan, Jitterbug Fantasia, 2006; Star

⁷ Donaldson Stephen. *The First Chronicles of Thomas Covenant, The Unbeliever. 'Lord Foul's Bane'* Fontana. 1978; Gibson William. *Neuromancer*. Berkley. 1984/ Gi My exegesis will elaborate on the research process undertaken this year to write the novel. Gibson William. *Virtual Lights*. Penguin 1993; Anthony Piers. *Magic of Xanth*. 1981. Double day

Wars the Magic of Myth. Teacher notes, 2002; O'Reilly Timothy, 1981) Thus the more critics have tried to explain the difference between science fiction and fantasy, the more it seems it is an emphasis rather than clearly defined boundaries (James Edward. 1994).

In modern fantasy literature anything is possible, and may blend with science fiction, this can be seen in Pullman's 'Dark Series' trilogy; 'Artemis Fowl' and in some aspects of Nix's 'Keys to the Kingdom' series – although each is classified as fantasy. Fantasy then can include flying cars; to talking animals; to elves who know about warp drives; faerie creatures utilising human technology for their own advantage; travelling to other worlds through wormholes or a simple piece of furniture like a closet door. And in my draft novel the characters travel to the other world through 'Fey shafts' – lifts that can miraculously travel through the space-time continuum. Thus there are elements of SF in the concept of 'old tech' and the Fey Shaft:

'Co-ordinates reset. Ng-dimensional vectors for patterns. Distance in Ng-dimensional space from this input node in Fey patterns.' (Draft novel)

In fantasy, anything is possible, and for many contemporary writers there is a 'postmodern' blend in the fusion of parody, pastiche, allegory and symbolism and their generic mixing of fantasy, and science fiction etc. SF novelists such as J.G. Ballard, Phillip Dick, William Gibson, blend these genres and yet still present visions of futurist worlds to illuminate the present high tech world and have had a huge impact. (Best Steven and Kellner Douglas 1991)

This 'blending' is evident in a lot of contemporary young adult fantasy literature. Yet as the fantasy writer Neil Gaimon said, one still 'cannot sum it up to a formula.' (Media broadcast 2008. Talk of the Nation. Children's Fantasy literature in the Modern World.)

Thus SF and fantasy provide a vast landscape with a rich history whose topography is varied from the richness of folklore and myths from around the world to Tolkien's Middle Earth; Herbert's Desert planet; Phillip Pullman's trilogy where the heroes journey through parallel universes and people have visible souls called daemons. Children are kidnapped, there are evil scientists and a magic knife that cuts through into alternative worlds.

There is the comic fantasy of Pratchett's 'Disk World,' where Rincewind the wizard is clearly not qualified to be one, at least in the traditional sense, and witches are stripped of many of the modern occultist perceptions of witches, they can use magic but prefer to use psychology instead. Not to be forgotten of course is Cohen the aging barbarian who is a remnant of a romantic by-gone heroic age, and is clearly out of touch with the modern world. The urban setting of Ankh Morpork shows the clashes that can happen when traditional fantasy meets with technology and modern civilisation.

The success of Harry Potter as the boy wizard grows into adulthood has been astounding. It has humour, tragedy, comic relief, it has a complex interweaving story, yet it is also playful with school yard humour, however, it is also a very dark and dangerous place.

The fantastic is seen in the witches of 'Macbeth'; the faeries in Shakespeare's 'A Midsummer Night's Dream'; and Caliban's mother the witch Sycorax in the 'Tempest' where the island is ruled by the sorcerer like Prospero and his faerie assistant Ariel. My character, the imp, Rhand, has some similarities to an Ariel figure.

Within the broad scope of contemporary SF/Fantasy one can accommodate the macabre, dark streets of Mieville's 'Perdido Street Station' where arcane races, humans and mutants brood in this dark dangerous place,

to the likes of Buffy the Vampire Slayer and William Horwood's anthropomorphic 'Dunctan Tales.' Thus fantasy has a huge range and scope and appeals to a wide audience – an audience though who are quite happy to suspend belief, and this is so for the young adult reader.

Young adult literature, often from the SF/ fantasy realm can be the stuff that turns us into long term readers and perhaps writers (Kreider 08.) However, the label 'Young Adult' itself is a little problematic and in relation to fantasy it is frequently considered, 'Children's Literature' often in a pejorative sense, particularly with its associations to magic, dreaming and the wildly imaginative. Children's fantasy tales may have more simple characters but this is not so for teens, even though 'Young Adult' is often shelved along side 'Children's Literature.' However, teens do not want to be told by their elders that they should read the classics, or don't read anything that will corrupt you. Most teens want to be seen as adults, so anything 'that marks them as something less than adult is often repulsive to them.' (Crowe Chris 2001)

'Young Adult' is clearly not children's literature, it is the cross over from the juvenile to the adult. Young people also live in a violent world, as the fantasy writer, Tamora Pierce said, 'We do not live in a safe and protected shell.' (Media broadcast 2008. Talk of the Nation. Children's Fantasy literature in the Modern World.) Thus these fantasy writers do not pretend otherwise.

The complexity of young adult fantasy is huge in its scope and in Garth Nix's 'The Keys to the Kingdom' he presents a kaleidoscope of books, set in a world that is dizzying, at times it is a vertiginous journey through these strange worlds. The main character, Arthur, transforms physically and metaphysically as he journeys into alternative universes, on a quest and eventually finds out he is a rightful heir. There are different planes of existence; the nature of the 'House'

is that no universe is necessarily the same. In this world there are sorcerers both good and evil and denizens that are barely human.

Writers, particularly in the fantasy genre garner many of their ideas from cultural myths. For example, Garth Nix integrates folk tales, where we can see the Pied Piper nursery rhyme in his tapestry of worlds. The idea of the 'Burrow' is from a Norse myth, and the 'Tower' has its genesis from the tower of Babel, yet by integrating these he anchors the novel with existing myths and legends. Thus mythic structures and legends are often important elements interwoven in fantasy and SF; there is a universality about them⁸ which embody elements of the human experience and writers use these conventions in their story telling.

J.M Sykes defined myth as, 'the expression of abstract ideas in concrete form' (Breen & Corcoran 1982). Jung posited the existence of a 'collective unconscious' below the level of each individual's personal unconscious, and the notion of archetypes or universal images, symbols in dreams and myths that reside in the psychic life common to human kind. For example, the cave of the underworld, the rose, the serpent; common themes of love, conflict, death; mythical settings and descent into the underworld; the hero and basic plot patterns like the heroes journey and the quest. (Kalsched Donald & Jones Alan 1986; Breen & Corcoran 1982; C.J. Jung Foundation) These are powerful symbols, thus symbolic webs, although often vaguely defined, yet they are emotionally charged and can be found in all cultures. (Gertz Clifford 1993) The cultural anthropologist, Frazer, whose work also influenced Jung, termed it as an 'essential sameness' that all humans possessed, not a very popular idea in Victorian England however. (Frazer George James. 1994)

⁸ 'Modern writers have also asserted an integrative mythology, whether inherited or invented, is essential to literature. Many other writers have deliberately woven modern materials on patterns of ancient myths. Recurrences of certain archetypes and basic mythic formulas, as Northrop Frye puts it, 'the typical forms of myth become the conventions and genres of literature.' (Abrams M.H. 1985.)

Carl Sagan, a respected scientist, did not employ 'myth' in its popular meaning of something that is 'widely believed contrary to fact' but as a metaphor of 'some subtlety on a subject difficult to describe in other ways.' And he speculated that myth is so integral to human kind that it may 'be hard wired into the brain.' (Breen & Corcoran 1982)

Storytellers then garner many of these cultural myths and integrate them into their narratives. This anchors the novel, so there is something we recognise in them, many readers may not understand them consciously, but something about them feels part of us. Thus in fantasy these 'mythic' conventions are often there. For example, Nix's 'The Nothing' although not clearly stated in the "Keys to the Kingdom" series, one could speculate is the raw chaos many creation myths speak of. From nothing there became something, from the darkness there was light, and he suggests a cyclic nature to the multiverse. As he said 'I think that may be ancient and modern physics.' (Media relay. Faster than light. 2008. An interview with Garth Nix.) Creation myths with a quantum spin. However, it needs to be stressed that whilst using these conventions in his narratives, Nix points out his story telling is not didactic, he has no 'grand' or over-riding message to convey. His books are entertainment. He is a storyteller first, not a philosopher or a cultural anthropologist or a social scientist. (ibid)

Nix's other book 'Shades Children' is very different in style and tenor to 'Keys to the Kingdom', it is darker, certainly more visceral. His young heroes in this imagined world struggle against the pitiless Overlords and all around them there are terrifying 'Myrmidons' who close in on and them and take them to the 'Meat Factory' where humans are processed into mutant creatures. The heroes are also sexually awakening but they must handle this natural process in a strange, bleak and frightening world.

Eoin Colfer's boy genius hero, Artemis Fowl, is also sexually awakening, even boy geniuses have to go this as they go through puberty. So too are the characters in Phaze One. It seems there is no escaping it.

The 'Artemis Fowl' series by Eoin Colfer, whilst stylistically very different from 'Keys to the Kingdom' and 'Shades Children' is just as complex in its quirky humour, reference to quantum physics, Celtic mytholgy and of course the believability of Eoin Colfer's teenage master mind, Artemis Fowl himself. He is the smart, savvy, anti-hero who amongst many other things:

*'...had also written a computer program that diverted millions of dollars from Swiss Bank accounts to his own, forged over a dozen Impressionist paintings and cheated the Fairy People out of a substantial amount of gold.'*⁹

The complexity and scope of Young Adult fantasy appeals very often to 'adult' readers as well. But, adolescent characters are in that 'betwixt and between realm'. So there are complex issues, moral ambiguity, seeing things in new worlds, different perspectives, a coming of age, a journey, and a transition where boundaries are blurred. Characters come to understand that they are not what they think they are, as Jung labelled it 'realisation of the shadow.' (Lazlo de V. (Ed) 1990) It is the realm of the not yet defined but a place of transformation, a borderland, a liminal state (Wright Allison. 2004.)

This research has provided the background and landscape that has influenced and informed a good deal of my own creative writing.

Thus SF and fantasy provides a feast of imagination where anything is possible, it has many forms, its borders are often blurred between myth, folktale, reality, high or heroic fantasy and science fantasy etc, often blending into each other.

⁹ Colfer Eoin. Artemis Fowl: A Psychological Assessment. Extract from Teenage Years in Colfer Eoin. Artemis Fowl The Arctic Incident.2002

But importantly, Lewis Carroll's Queen was right when she told Alice you can believe in the impossible – that is the nature of fantasy.

**Fantasy elements in novel; other non-fiction relevant to research;
narrative structural changes and reflection on Campbell's Heroes
Journey.**

Animals are classic tropes that have a long tradition in fantasy. Nix's fantasy is replete with such tropes, for example, his rats who also navigate ships. My own novel has anthropomorphic creatures, including the bat. The bat has a long history in western and eastern legends and myths. Some cultures see them as negative figures, harbingers of death and their association with blood-sucking vampires is well known. However, other cultures see them as messengers from the underworld and erect stone headstones to them. (Hepplewhite Peter & Jonge Neil, 1999) Thus my bat is also a messenger, but he is also more than just a messenger, he is a transformer, when he bites Tama, he in fact gives him the 'serum' he needs to travel beyond the 'red shift', that is, to travel through to the other world. He is the one who opens the path for Tama's transformation to begin. The bat figure will now be developed in more detail into part two. The bat, Chirop, however is important, thus elevating the sometimes lowly status of bats to one of considerable power. Chirop will form part of a Chiropteran battle line in part 2. The name Chiropteran is derived from a genus of bat. (Chiroptera at www.ucmp.berkeley.edu.)

The trope of transformed animals continues with characters like the snake woman, Lady Kee, who is the serpent of the Archives. The snake figure appealed to me because of its mythic symbolism both in western and eastern cultures. Although it has a more negative connotation in western culture, in particular as the serpent in the Garden of Eden coiled around the Tree of Life and the tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil.

But in other cultures the naga (Indian Serpent) are not always so negative. The serpent king rose up to protect the Buddha as he sat beneath the Bodhi tree of Enlightenment when a storm arose. In many eastern cultures it is also a symbol of guardianship, rebirth and regeneration, (Smart N 1969 & Mattison Chris 2006. Snake symbol at Wikipedia.) It also forms part of the medical symbol on the star of life where snakes are entwined on the staff of Asclepius. (Star of Life. Wikipedia) Thus it is a powerful symbol, both positive and negative and my snake character, Lady Kee, is really both of these.

Essentially Lady Kee is on the 'good guys' side, however, she is also morally ambiguous, and stings her attendants with venom, in her archival library that is 'infinite'. The archives are of course a repository of information thus knowledge and with knowledge there is power, so she knows all the 'grains of sand' in her archives, but to attain all this knowledge is beyond the scope of a mere mortal.

Researching Alice Springs, the Simpson Desert, as well as Ancient Iran (Giddice Del Marguerite. 2008) sowed seeds for ideas and settings in the novel. The landscape of the desert intrigued me, and this I have adapted to the desert world. I also became interested in Aboriginal culture, including the didgeridoo and the 'dreaming'. The 'dreaming,' in traditional Aboriginal culture has always been and will continue to be; it is interwoven with our plane of existence. (Arden Harvey 1995). The 'dream time' exists as well in the desert world of the Ba'Tharians and the sound of the Ardaki master can be heard in the desert call.

Also the 'blades' were forged in the key of the Ardaki. It is a sound, a scale that only the masters know, and I may have been influenced by reading about the song lines in aboriginal culture. However, it was not exclusive to that as 'music' is universal. Yet I was conscious of using other cultural traditions

different from my own. But, storytellers have the right to choose their material from wherever they wish, although it is desirable to be aware of and sensitive to cultural difference, however, this is not to be confused with political correctness, which is reductive and stupid. (Bradford Clare 2003)

Tama was originally part aboriginal, however, hopefully he has a more 'universal' persona now. The name Tama of course also means 'man'. Originally he played the didge, I changed this to the trumpet, but I may revisit this and return to the didge. However, he teaches himself; there is no one to help him, until one day when he is playing and there is a change in the harmonic, a frequency change, and this is what unlocks the box that holds the dagger. I also researched the sound of the didge and from this I was able to get a deeper understanding of the physics of sound waves and how to describe the circular breathing and frequency change. (Tarnopolsky, Fletcher, Hollenberg, Lange, Smith, Wolfe. *Nature*. Vol 43617. 2006. And Wolf J. *Music Acoustics*. 2005)

So the didge, or at this stage now the 'trumpet' he found in the dump is a symbol of something greater, more mysterious, and of course from this is the sound, the music. Music is a universal language that is a bridge between worlds and cultures. Music is the key. There is reference to music throughout the novel, whether it be in the characters singing, dancing, playing or listening to music and even the playing of Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' over the PA between school classes, it is always there, although perhaps not obvious. However, its recurrence is in effect a motif that symbolises the bridge. The bridge that spans the distance between people, and what is and what might be.

Tama's blade, or dagger, is a well-used fantasy trope. Swords and daggers and their variants are found in all cultures (Evans & Millard 1987). In

western culture of course there is the famous Anglo-Saxon Arthurian sword (Bradley.M. 1982), a symbol that still has resonance today. Contemporary writers like Phillip Pullman have a knife in 'The Subtle knife' (Pullman 1998), and of course where would we be without the Jedi's light sabre in George Lucas' 'Star Wars.' Not to mention the Freeman's 'crysknife' in 'Dune' (Herbert Dune, 1982).

Tama's dagger then has great significance. It is a Phaze blade, but not an ordinary one; it is not only a powerful weapon it is also a key. A key that can unlock the paths and move him into 'phaze shift'. But he and the blade must become as one to achieve this. Thus Phaze Lords are small in number but like the old Fey Lords can go where others cannot. Therefore the blade has magical properties (although this would be referred to as 'Fey tech or old tech' in the novel) but it can also communicate with Tama, indeed it has to if they are to work together. It even has a name, it is called 'Tok' – which is Pidgin English for 'talk', so the blade develops a character of its own as well.

However, the seed of the idea for the blade may well have been reading a Scientific American article on 'Rulers of Light' which was about optical frequencies and the control of light across a broad spectrum of frequencies, the optical combs increase the number of signals (Jun Y and Hall John. 2008). Thus the phase in the optical combs changes from one pulse to another. Granted, a far cry from a scientific article, however, it did generate that seed I was looking for at the time.

Magical symbols are common tropes in fantasy, and the sign of the two circles intersecting is inter-woven throughout. It is in fact the vesica piscis, which is also a common mathematical symbol. In geometry the lens is a convex shape that comprises the two circular arcs and if arcs have equal radii it is of

course a symmetrical lens. This shape is common in architecture and art, particularly Christian art. Thus the vesica piscis has been surrounded in mystical speculation for a very long time. (Pischel Gina.1968)

The Fey shafts are the passageways to the other world. They are the perilous threshold crossings. Often crossings are a descent, moving through tunnels, or caves, or crossing the sea, or in this case they are shafts that are very much like elevators. Thus crossings are universal and are powerful Archetypal images that embody elements of the human experience. They represent the confrontations an individual must face, no matter how mundane or exalted that may be. And the hero is no different; they too must confront their fears. (Donald Kalsched and Jones Alan. 1986.)

Nix too incorporated these age old fears in his different levels in, 'The Keys to the Kingdom' series, for example, the moving from the depths of the bottom of the 'House' to other levels in the 'House'. In The Phaze the Fey Shafts become Tama's first threshold because he is terrified of lifts. So Tama is a hero undertaking a perilous journey, thus he too must suffer the burdens of fear and conflicts within his own personality, but this is what makes the hero human.

The hero though does have helpers, they can be animals, (ibid) as in the figure of the bat, but also those around Tama, like the twins, the Mage (previously called Mr Bharna,) and Rowan. They are there as helpers to the hero. So the helpers are there although it may not seem obvious at first, but they are there to help the hero through the heroic cycle.

The 'Heroic Cycle' is broadly divided into three segments: Departure, Initiation, Return, and there are several steps within each. The heroic adventure begins with some sort of message or a call from some supernatural or

miraculous source (Campbell Joseph Foundation). Tama of course discovers the blade, he sees the strange little girl, who spouts her strange prophecies and returns in the novel. But, the bat (and Rowan of course) is really his first major call. The bite is his first entrance to the other world, Rowan cannot do this. The journey has begun, but he still has a while to go before that crossing is made. He will make several crossings.

The hero is often born into humble surroundings and this is so for Tama, whose father, Bob, runs the dump and they live next to the 'feral' trailer park. But there has to be something extraordinary, and Tama has managed to play in the 'key of the Ardaki' with his trumpet and because of this was able to open the box that contained the dagger. The twins were of royal birth, but they were removed from their homelands for their own safety and lived with 'ferals' in the earth plane, or the 'Leyland.'

Thus the rhythm of the heroes journey is interwoven into the story. And an understanding of its basic structure did inform the writing process. I did turn back to the story structure itself, and made changes. For example I had Zina as the one who was hesitant as the doors of the lift opened, but I realised the hero must have flaws and this scene seemed a perfect opportunity for him to confront his fears.

Tama's journey is heroic, in the sense of the 'Heroic Cycle'. He is of humble birth but he has an extraordinary gift. He shows his ability to earn those gifts by unlocking the box. He is visited by strange, magical/super natural beings; hears weird prophecies, and is called to take up the blade, Campbell's, 'Call to Adventure.' (Campbell J. 1949)

In Tama's journey he faces the first threshold, where he confronts his fears and undertakes the first crossing. He also has to deal with his feelings

toward Zina; it is more than just a crush and will be developed in later in part 2. However, helpers surround him although at times they don't seem very helpful at all, but they are around him never the less. So the rhythm of the heroes journey is interwoven within the structure.

However, the 'Heroic Cycle' whilst seeming mythic and fantastic is contained within our unconscious, and the 'Call to Adventure' lies within each of us. The 'Call to Adventure' may not necessarily be remarkable, or even dramatic, but at some point in our lives we feel the call or the urge to accept a challenge or reach that goal, or strive for that dream, whatever it may be.

The research process also involved experimentation, including writing a collection of short stories, by doing this I experimented with characters, voice and point of view, which then translated to the novel. For example, the novel was originally in first person, however, I realised that the 'epic fantasy' scale of the developing work limited me in this point of view. I needed that third person 'eye of god' perspective. Structurally the inclusion of cut away chapters was a complex one, but I altered this back to the straight chapter setting and included my original idea of the 'pictures'.

The characters are still developing and will continue to do so as they age. However, the characters as they are now were not that way originally. For example, Zina and Liam were not twins originally, and Liam was once a very minor character who I had nearly forgotten about. However, he emerged as a twin, and in this incarnation he became a more successful character. Rowan was just a brief idea, but an idea I worked with, until eventually he too began to take form. Tama originally had a strange 'sight', but I altered this to him receiving his blade.

The ice world of Noth has also been a relatively new creation and I confess to being influenced a little by the Ice Riggers series on television three. However, I also researched arctic environments, including the 'Ice Highway,' at [www:Fogonasos](http://www.Fogonasos) and Larry Haglin's article 'Ice worlds from top to bottom,' and there discovered a new term 'mega-dunes.' With this I began to create the ice world of Noth, including the ice-rig. This also helped me as I then returned to the land rigs which was a previous idea, and helped to re-formulate the 'roads' concept.

Conclusion

Fantasy may well stem from the 'itch in the imagination.' It is the realm where imagination can flow, 'a sense of what might be, or what could never be', and my research has confirmed, for me at least, that the Queen of Hearts was right when she informed Alice you can believe in impossible things. Yet to have 'the itch in the imagination' is really just the beginning, my love of fantasy and science fiction was the impetus to write a young adult novel. However, the research that informed the writing was a journey of discovery in itself.

The research process included writing short stories over and above this draft novel. Importantly, I also experimented with different point of views, voice, character, dialogue and structure itself, which has been a huge learning curve, and informed the creative writing process. The feedback and feed forward from mentors, re short stories and fragments of the novel, which at the time were more like putting together a jig-saw of ideas, as well as, the supportive class environment have been a valuable experience. Without which this research and the draft of part one, and now well into part 2 and notes for part 3 would not have come to this draft stage.

The research project involved reading a variety of texts, both fiction and non-fiction. It has also included a wide reading of SF and fantasy as well as contemporary young adult fantasy. I have been inspired and influenced by such writers as Garth Nix and the wide variety of other writers. A deeper understanding of mythic structures and archetypes, and their relevance to the 'human experience' is reflected in some of the fantasy conventions within the work, as well as the influence of Joseph Campbell's 'Heroic Cycle'.

The characters in the novel are still in a stage of transformation, which in some 'Through the Looking Glass' way also mirrors my own transformational stage as a writer of fiction. The creative process is a journey –one could say a 'Heroes Journey'. It is a discovery; and a good deal of that journey thus far has been reflected in this exegesis.

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(Part one of a three part draft novel. New working name for novel may be 'Roads'; illustrations to be completed, Liam's notes to look like handwriting)

Phaze One

Young Adult. Fantasy

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Prologue

Solaz: Archival Caves.

Following extract sourced from Lady Kee's grains of sand.

Beyond the dead suns the first blades were forged in the key of the Ardaki. This pleased the Mage who placed them on the Rock of Jade.

A flotilla of Fey unfurled the sails on their sato-wood boats and drifted in from beneath the bridge at Ten Shen. And those who were called to pick up their blades travelled into distant lands – some even beyond the mists of the Red Shift and into the Barbarians' lands...

... So it is told in the ancient myths of the Solaz roads.

Chapter One

'Take the gum out of your mouth, Tama.'

'Yes, Mr Leon.'

Mr Leon sipped his coffee and curled into his desk like a question mark. Steamy wisps from his cup reached up to a faded yellow poster of the school's motto on the wall, 'Quod in te est prome: Bring forth what is in you.' He wrote on Tama's last school report, 'In mathematics Tama is making satisfactory progress, however, he will need to put in more effort if he is to bring forth what is in him.' Tama thought it a statement of limp mediocrity, how did he know what was in him? The question mark uncurled, 'Tama, how about opening your book. The class is on chapter seven lad.'

'Sure thing, Mr Leon.'

Tama swallowed the gum opened his book and stared out the window. Trucks and bulldozers and men and women wearing yellow hats and orange overalls were busy making new roads. The old road had nearly gone.

'Tama, less staring out the window and on with your maths.'

The question mark curled back into his seat. The seat creaked. Mr Leon flicked his red pen. He seemed absorbed in his marking. Tick for right. Cross for wrong. Liam always sat next to Tama in Mr Leon's class. He flipped open the back of his math' book.

'Tama?'

'What is it, Liam?'

'Check this out.'

Liam showed off his latest dragon design. He designed comic strips with heaps of dragons and demons and snakes in them. His snake women were pretty cool even if their huge knockers were anatomically impossible but Liam didn't care about stuff like that.

'Cool eh?'

'Sweet as, Liam.'

Mr Leon's chair creaked as he stood up and wrote some equations on the whiteboard. He turned around and peered over the top of his paua-rimmed glasses, 'Liam, back to work.'

Liam ripped his cartoon page out of the book and started turning the paper into shapes. His hands worked quickly as he folded the paper. Folds became squares, squares became triangles, till the shape of a dragon appeared. He blew on his origami dragon and sent it flying towards the door. The classroom door flew open and Liam's twin sister, Zina, made her grand entrance. She caught Liam's paper dragon in her hands, 'Sorry I'm late, Mr Leon. Had to go to the counsellor.'

'Down the back, Zina.'

Teachers preferred Zina sitting down the back of the class, her outbursts were well known. Quite a few teachers were sure she had some sort of attention deficit disorder. Now Rambo from 11CH – well he really did have problems. But Zina just had her way of dealing with things, although you never knew if she was telling the truth sometimes. Just like the time she told her Social Studies teacher her father was a Shaman and her mother was a Witch Queen.

'Zina, sit down'

‘Yes, Miss. But, Miss, I feel I should inform you I could put a curse on you and my great-grandmother could have had you vaporised in one of her experiments.’

‘Zina, that’s enough!’

‘Don’t sweat it because I will personally make sure your journey through the red-shift will be in safety because I am a gatekeeper of my very own portal.’

‘Get out!’

Zina never took it personally when she was kicked out of class. She just did kung-fu kicks up against the wall till the Principal arrived. Zina was wired.

The twins lived in the Tuatara Street trailer park. It was off the main route, not what you’d call a tourist destination and buses never went there. The park only had a few trailers scattered in amongst thick mangrove swamps growing in the estuary mud. Couldn’t find it if you did a Google search.

The twins travelled a lot, but they moved into the park a few months back with Q. Q was a feral, that’s what the people in the park were called. Ferals were into bin diving around town, sometimes people yelled out at them from their speeding cars, ‘Damn scavengers. Now get off the bloody road feral or I’ll run you over.’ Ferals didn’t seem to mind that much though, most just went back to their bin dives or sold rain-forest unguents along the streets while others scavenged through the Tuatara Street dump.

It was because of the dump that Tama met the twins. Zina knocked on his door one morning and asked if she and her brother could have a blue ticket. Ferals were given blue tickets to go into the dump. Tama’s dad, Bob, was the manager of the dump.

‘Hey dad new ferals got any blue tickets?’

‘Nah – no more till next week.’

Tama was about to close the door on Zina but something made him stop when she went into a slow-mo kick boxing move. He waited till she had finished. He thought that was the polite thing to do. He'd seen ferals do the same sort of moves along Tuatara Street. When she'd finished she breathed in deeply, raised her arms and on the outward breath lowered her arms to a long low, 'Haaaagh,' and pointed to Liam. He was sitting on the stone fence wearing his green cape and sketching in his pad. Tama asked if they'd like to come inside and have a cup of tea.

'You have given permission for us to enter your dwelling?'

'Ah – yes.'

Tama's father was in the lounge watching television. He yelled out over the top of the footie finals, 'Tell 'em to go back to the park.'

'It's okay dad.'

'Don't like ferals in here – you know that.'

'These ones are different.'

'Oh yeah that's what they all say.'

Zina walked through the entrance way into Tama's house, Liam behind her with his cape draping along the carpet. Tama closed the door behind them, 'The kitchen is through here.' Zina draped her hands across the walls and followed him into the kitchen, 'You are not a wizard are you?'

'No I'm not.'

'I didn't think so you don't smell like one.'

'I'm, Tama.'

'You can call me, Zina, but my real name is, Zinaphanix Phillomenius, heir to the Solazian House of Zensumi. And this is my twin brother, Liamphanix Maximus.'

Liam went into a martial arts freeze frame then he slowly moved out of the frame, 'Just call me, Liam.' Liam kicked his legs up against the side of the kitchen bench, chopped his hands in the air, 'Aieeee. My hands can kill with one blow.' He flapped his cape then bowed to Tama, 'Honourable Tama, did you not hear the sound of the crickets by the mountain stream?'

'No I didn't, Liam, and would you not kick your feet up against the kitchen bench.'

'I am a guest in your dwelling. Whatever you say.'

Tama poured the hot water into the teapot, 'You two aren't from around these parts are you?'

'No, we are from different roads.'

Tama swirled the copper-red of the tea around the pot, 'Man that's for sure.'

'But we will be attending your school when the full moon wanes. Q, doesn't want truancy officers calling into the park so we have to go.'

For twins they didn't look at all alike. Zina was long-limbed with blue-black hair and Liam was on the small size. He had honey hair tied back in a flax band. But the twins did have the same piercing aqua eyes. Liam hopped up on the bench and carried on drawing. Tama poured the tea into the cups, 'You staying here long then?'

'Liam, and I will be leaving when the moons are in the third house.'

'That's interesting.'

'Yes, that's when the portal opens.'

'I see. Do you like milk in your tea?'

'I don't, but Liam, does. Oh and by the way I've just removed the curse from your dwelling.'

'I didn't know I had one.' Tama shrugged it off. He gave Liam a biscuit. Ferals were like that. But since that day Tama and the twins had become friends even Bob got used to them visiting from time to time. The twins always sat next to him in class.

'Zina, quietly thank you. It's chapter seven exercises one to fourteen.'

'Sure thing, Mr Leon.'

Zina placed the paper dragon back on Liam's desk then sat beside Tama. The question mark uncurled from his desk, 'Class make sure you check your answers as you go.' Liam began sketching his origami dragon but he ducked when Zina threw her rubber at him. He ran his fingers down the page of the textbook, 'The textbook's answer to question eight is wrong. Do you think I should tell him?'

'Please yourself, Liam.'

'Dunno might just draw another dragon.'

Zina turned over the page of her book then flipped open her hand-held. Students weren't supposed to in class and if the teachers caught you they went ballistic. She held it below the desk so Mr Leon wouldn't see. Her fingers tapped at light speed, 'Well... well another one?'

'Zina, isn't it about time you cut the, Cyber Shaman, bit out.'

'Tama, they love me. I send them greetings from their dead pets and husbands.'

'So will the cops if they catch up with you.'

'Ooh tetchy, Tamakins. A girl has gotta make a living you know,' she tapped a reply, 'Felix, is waiting beside the mountain stream, Mrs Goodlife.' Send. Zina turned another page in her math's book, 'You look terrible. No sleep again, Tamakins?'

'Would you stop calling me that.'

She pouted her lips, 'Mwaah,' and started giggling. Mr Leon peered over the rim of his glasses, 'Zina, what's so funny?' She flipped her hand-held shut, 'Nothing, Mr Leon, just figured out this equation.'

'Very good. Now carry on.'

Mr Leon uncurled from his desk and strode off to help a student. Tama finished another question and gazed out the window again. He watched clouds roll by. Shape shifting clouds – a bent old woman, a child, a flamingo and a bat rolled by. Watching clouds got him thinking about things. That's how he started figuring stuff out. Sometimes it took a while but he got there in the end. That is the way he learnt to play the trumpet he found in the dump. He found it a year ago sticking out from beneath a hamburger wrapper. But inside the horn he also found a thin box, it reminded him of a pencil case. The box was plain except for the design of two circles intersecting on the top of it. He tried to find the opening but there was none - well at least none that he could find. He placed it on his bookshelf and forgot about it. He was more interested in the trumpet. He cleaned the trumpet, buffed it up till it shone like new. But he had no idea how to play it. Bob had no idea how to play it either so Tama taught himself.

It took a while but Tama eventually figured out the circular breathing and how to control his vocal tract and where to place his lips and tongue and how to work the keys. He learnt to feel the difference in the timbre of the sound and how to establish a rhythm. He locked himself away in his room and practised and practised till he got the sound he was after. If Bob was watching his Star Wars re-runs he sometimes yelled out, 'Hey, Tama, give it a rest will ya - I'm trying to watch the Death Star get'n blown up.'

Mr Leon strolled back to his desk. He picked up more papers to mark, and then he put down his red pen, 'Alright class I want you to mark your answers.'

Tama flicked his pen. Tick question one was right ... but something had changed and he needed to figure it out. Tick, question two and three were so obvious. There had been a new modulation in the sound, a shift in the harmonic when he played the trumpet the day before.

'Tama, less staring out the window and more marking lad.'

'Yes, Mr Leon.'

Damn got question nine wrong... yet he felt a frequency change, and between each phase there was a new movement in the harmonic. He played and played trying new combinations with the keys and moving his lips and tongue to alter the rhythm. And that was when he heard a click from the oblong box. It had opened.

He put the trumpet down and inside the box was a layer of fine powdery dust. But as he held the box a gust of wind blew through his bedroom window and he sure didn't mean to inhale the dust. He coughed and spluttered but the dust clung to his skin and his nose. His mouth filled with the dust. The taste reminded him of cinnamon and salt. When he calmed down from his coughing spasm he checked the box again and there was something else. Lying in the residue of the dust was a dagger inside a black leather sheath. He held the dagger up to the light. He had never seen such craftsmanship before. The handle was silver set in a greenstone frame, embossed in the handle was the repeated pattern of two circles intersecting. The blade itself appeared to be polished obsidian. He twisted it in his hands and gasped when he saw orange flames flicker beneath the black obsidian. Yet the blade was not hot. It felt cool

and smooth to the touch and it felt right in his hand. He swung it through the air and as he did he saw a shadow move in his peripheral vision. He turned to face it but the shadow scuttled away.

Tama could feel the dagger in his shirt pocket as he ticked question ten, eleven and twelve. But something else happened, something he didn't understand and he needed to figure it out.

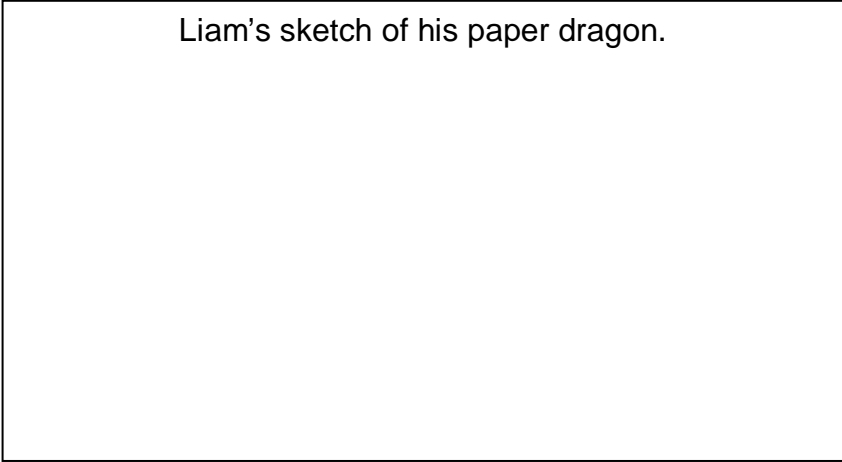
Mr Leon started rubbing out the equations on the whiteboard, then he turned back to the class, 'Okay – you've done well. Now I want you to total up your scores.'

Who could he tell? Zina's fingers typed into her key pad, 'A donation is just fine, Mrs Goodlife, regards, Cyber Shaman.' Send. He gazed out the window and watched clouds roll by. He could tell the twins they wouldn't think he was crazy but he had to try and figure it out first.

Cavendish High didn't have bells instead it played extracts from classical music, it was something to do with optimising alpha waves. An extract from Vivaldi's 'Four Seasons' played over the PA. Tama wasn't sure what season it was but it was time for the next class.

Illustration

Liam's sketch of his paper dragon.



Chapter Two

English class with Mr Brady took a while to settle down that's because he was always late. Roxy MacGregor strutted into the room flicked her blonde locks. Tama had always liked that little move of hers.

'Hi, Tama, sooo good to see you.'

'Great to see you too, Roxy.'

'Reckon we should catch up sometime?'

'Yeah, sweet as.' Tama could feel the burn.

Her pink mobile beeped. She flipped it open chatted away as she twirled the sapphire stud in her other ear, 'Yah... aha... yah. Hear what you're saying Cherie, sooo random... can't have her in the cheer leader squad.... Yah be right over.' She flipped her mobile shut and strutted over to Cherie who was waving out to her from the other side of the room.

'Don't know why you fancy her, Tama.'

'I don't, Zina, – really I don't.'

Yet it really wasn't Roxy that Tama was so interested in – well not any more. He wasn't going to say anything though he was having enough hassles trying to figure it out himself. And he was sure the blade in his shirt pocket moved. But it couldn't have?

Flathead strolled into class. His real name was Jonathan Sprat but he got called Flathead because he could smash his head into walls without passing out. It was no title of honour though but he hadn't figured that out and neither had his crew. They specialised in tagging on old ladies fences and kiddie Day

Care Centres. Flathead casually strolled in front of Zina, 'Hey, Zina, you not out making crop circles?'

'Get lost, Flathead, or I'll put a curse on you.'

'You ferals crack me up. '

Liam stopped drawing on his sketch pad, he put down his pencil, 'She said get lost, Flathead.' Liam could be punchy if he was pushed too far.

'Lose it, feral.'

Liam cut the air with his hands, 'Hab SoSII' Quch!'

'What is that supposed to mean freak?'

'It means your mother has a smooth forehead. It's an insult you mutant.'

'Ya wha?'

'You bore me - now get lost creep.'

The rest of the class could smell a rumble in the wind. Tama had dealt to Flathead and his crew plenty of times he figured it was time he stepped in, 'You heard him, Flathead – now move it.'

'You're just another freak from Tuatara Street, Tama?'

Tama grabbed him by the collar, 'Like I care what you think moron. Now shove off.' Beads of perspiration dripped from Flathead's top lip. Tama pushed him away he knew he wouldn't take him on. Although Tama didn't show it he was relieved Flathead had backed down, not that he couldn't have dealt to him, but him and Liam were already on detention for the last fight in class and if he got snapped again Bob said he'd kick his butt good and proper. But that wasn't all. There was something else. He was beginning to feel unwell. He still had the taste of cinnamon and salt in his mouth and he felt hot like he had a

temperature and he had a headache coming on. Perhaps his Qi needed to realign?

The door flew open and Mr Brady threw his satchel down on his desk, 'Settle down class.' Mr Brady wrote 'Poetry' on the whiteboard, then turned to the class, 'Okay budding poets let the muse be with.'

Cherie put up her hand, 'Can I read my love poem out to the class. I think I'll post it on my Bebo page and it rhymes and its even got a simile.'

A mass sigh rippled through the room and Mr Brady peered above the rim of his glasses looking wordy and wise, 'That's enough class,Cherie, it sounds wonderful but why don't you save it for later.'

'Shall I write another one, Sir?'

'What a good idea.'

There was a knock on the door and one of the office runners handed Mr Brady a note. He read it quickly. Looked across the sea of students to the twins, 'Zina, and, Liam, you have to go to the office.'

Liam finished another sketch, then the twins packed up their bags. It wasn't unusual for the twins to be called out of class. Q or one of the other ferals often picked them up at school and sometimes they were away for days. The door closed behind the twins.

Students scribbled out poems. But outside the classroom window two drama students started practising a scene from 'Macbeth,' 'The earth hath bubbles as the water has. And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?' The one playing, Banquo, sounded very convincing although a bit bossy, 'Hurry up will you, Hemi, you're meant to be, Macbeth. It's your turn now.'

Hemi coughed and then started into his lines, 'Into the air and what seemed corporal melted. As breath into the wind. Would they had stayed.'

‘Well that wasn’t too bad but I think you could have put a little more emphasis on stayed.’

Mr Brady walked over to the open window he called out to the two drama students, ‘You two sound great but I’ve got a class in here – how about practising somewhere else?’

‘Sure thing, Sir.’

The budding thespians strolled over to the oak tree, the one playing Banquo still reciting her lines, ‘Were such things here as we do speak about? Or have we eaten on the insane root. That takes the reason prisoner?’

Tama could see them clearly through the window sitting beneath the oak. Above the massive tree a bat flew by. *An ancient oak. Heavy limbed. As breath into the wind. Murmuring leaves. Dappled light.* Nah.

‘Tama, more writing lad less staring out the window.’

‘I’m connecting with the muse – you know how it is, Sir. Takes the reason prisoner.’

Mr Brady rubbed his chin, ‘Oh very good, but how about putting a pen in your hand and using it lad.’

‘Sure thing.’

Tama started drawing circles on the pad. Then he began shading the outside blending it in with the white paper. He wrote next to it: A penumbra of shade that blends with the light. And that is what he was trying to figure out – was it a shadow or was it a trick of the light. Or a trick of the mind. Or maybe he’d overdosed on computer games. Or maybe the north-south axis had been distorted and caused a fluctuation in his Qi? There had to be a logical explanation. He just needed to figure it out.

After he found the dagger he left his room and headed off to the mangrove swamps. Heat hazes hung over the swamps. The dry rasp of the cicadas filled the air and the crack and pop of flax pods burst in the summer heat. In the warm mud eels basked on the bank and mud crabs scuttled about. The eels coiled into one another on the bank they didn't take any notice as Tama started swishing the dagger through the air. He stabbed it in the air and parried with it. The black obsidian blade alive with orange flames.

He parried a little more, that is, until he heard a low thrum, and from his peripheral vision he saw a shadow again, just like the one he saw in his room. He turned quickly with the dagger ready to strike out but the shadow disappeared and a flurry of wind rushed through the flax leaves. In its wake it left no movement, not a breath, not a ripple, not a breeze, just stillness, even the cicadas were silent. But she was there. Very near. Staring at him.

A little girl with steely-grey eyes stood in front of the flax bush. She was wearing a tattered brown coat that hung down to the ground. She said nothing, just stared at him. His heart raced and even though it was a burning hot day a cold panic chilled him to the marrow. Her grey eyes never blinked.

'Who... who are you?'

She said nothing.

'Are you lost?'

Then she spoke but in a dialect he did not recognise. He heard the words but the meaning was not clear, 'Fifteen summers in the Leyland you have.'

'I... I don't understand?'

'Thrice it called one of three. Play in the key of the, Ardaki, you can.'

A flock of chattering green parakeets flew in from the swamps. They circled above him but when he looked back at the flax bush the little girl with

steely-grey eyes was gone. He slumped back against the corky bark of a Kouka tree and as he did the green parakeets formed into a V formation and flew back into the swamps.

Tama scribbled around the circles on the pad; perhaps it was the play of shadow and light? But the dagger was real enough. He wrote down the words the little girl had spoken. Was she real – or had he imagined her? The classroom door blew open, a flurry of leaves spun around and collapsed in a heap at the front of the room. Cherie and Roxy started screaming. Mr Brady told everyone to keep calm, 'It's just the wind class. Jonathan, do something useful - get a broom and sweep these leaves up.'

But Tama wasn't looking at the commotion in the room; he was staring at the oak tree. The budding thespians were still reading their lines but they didn't see the little girl in the tattered brown coat standing next to the bough of the tree. She didn't move. She just stared back at Tama.

Her brown coat began to merge with the bark of the oak but when she spoke again her voice was faint as if trailing away into a long corridor, 'One of three, the dark one comes. Prepare the way he will.' And then she was gone.

The one practising Banquo's lines stood up and projected her voice as if already in the theatre, 'The earth hath bubbles as the water has. And these are of them. Whither are they vanished?' She turned to Hemi who was clearly impressed with her performance, 'See you have to put more emotion into your voice – get it out to your audience.'

The budding thespians clasped their scripts and strolled away. Tama picked up the paper Liam had scrunched up and left behind. He turned it over. Liam had drawn a picture of a dagger but he'd also written: The moons have risen in the third house.

Another extract from Vivaldi's Four Seasons came over the PA. Tama still wasn't too sure what the season was. But he knew there really had been a wind change. He could feel it in the air. But he was burning up and his head felt like it was about to explode.

Chapter Three

The twins did not return. Tama thought they must have gone away with the ferals somewhere. A group of wannabe crews strolled passed wearing their colours, their blasters blaring out ghetto tech, ‘... shut yo mouf, and bounce dat ass...’ With them was, Tu, but he was a freestyler and didn’t usually hang around with the crews, ‘Tama, watch this man.’

Tu did a couple of sharp krumping moves. Tama had to admit his style was pretty good. Tu was always telling him he was going to go to Brazil and become an international krumping star and make it on to MTV. Then he’d be rich, have plenty of bling and heaps of babes, ‘It ain’t no fantasy, Tama.’

Tu just couldn’t seem to stop drumming. His fingers were always moving, dancing round the place to some beat inside his head. And the pounding beat in Tama’s head was getting worse.

‘You look terrible.’

‘Yeah not feeling too good. I’ll see you round, Tu.’

‘Afraid not. My folks are moving on. Leave tomorrow.’

Tu had lived in the housing estate on the old road. But that road was nearly gone.

‘Where you going?’

‘Don’t know – but I’m still gonna be a star.’

Tu wandered off to the quad still doing his moves. His hands moving to some beat in his head like he didn’t care about anything in particular. But Tama had to get some relief from the pounding in his head. He kept disprins in his locker. His locker was in the corridor in the old science department at the back of the school.

Tama walked up the concrete steps to the old science department, he opened the door into the corridor, it closed behind him with a dull thud. On one wall of the corridor there was a faded poster of alpine skiers, and on the opposite wall a frayed diagram of several species of lizards. Someone had drawn eyelashes and a pair of glasses on a Kamodo dragon. The lockers stood in a long line of rows and the far end of the corridor was dark except for a watery lemon light filtering through brown-lace curtains.

He opened up his locker, grabbed the disprins but as he closed the locker a shattering pain seared through his head. He clutched his head in his hands and as he turned around shape-shifting shadows flooded his peripheral vision. He turned to face them, yet when he did they rushed away into the corners of the corridor. Suddenly, the windows blew open and the corridor filled with a piercing scream. Through the window a bat flew into the corridor. Tama fell back against his locker as the bat spiralled and dived along the corridor and then it was gone.

He instinctively took out the dagger. He swirled it in the air but as he did it began to make the same low thrumming sound it had the day before. He swung the dagger again and a gust of wind blew him back against the locker. All was silent till he heard footsteps. He looked to the far end of the corridor and there was a man wearing a long brown coat, his hair matted. Tama had to look up and up and up to eyes that were the same aqua as the twins. On the man's shoulder was perched the bat.

'You are, Tama Robert Wilkie?'

'Yes. Am I in trouble?'

'Depends on how you look at it.'

'Who are you?'

'I am, Rowan. And you have in your possession a phaze blade.'

'I didn't steal it. Honest I didn't.' And what was a phaze blade? And he was sure the dagger moved beneath his shirt, and he had the uncomfortable feeling it was breathing.

The bat started cleaning between his taloned toes. He spat something stringy and green from his mouth, then flew off Rowan's shoulder and hung upside down from the rafters. Tama felt a thump against his chest. He doubled over, clutched his chest. But his breathing quickly returned to its regular rhythm. He straightened himself up. The bat stretched his membrane wings and started swinging to and fro keeping time to the sound it made, 'Tsist... tsist... tsist'

Rowan looked up at the bat then back at Tama, 'You have swallowed the dust.' Tama broke out in perspiration, his temperature soared, 'But I didn't mean to. The wind blew it and I can't get rid of the taste.'

'You will once we return.'

'What do you mean return. I don't want to go anywhere with you?'

'You have no choice. That blade you have is awakening.'

'You mean it's alive?'

'That's right. And you have to be taught how to use it.'

'So where do I go for that?'

'The Solaz roads.'

The twins said they were from there. He should have listened to his father, Bob told him not to have anything to do with ferals. But this was crazy. It couldn't be happening. It was impossible, 'Is that like further than Iceland?'

'A lot further.'

The bat started rocking to and fro again, then he stretched his membrane wings like he was doing Tai Chi. Rowan clicked his fingers, the bat stopped

rocking back and forward, 'Chirop, it is time.' The bat's black eyes blinked slowly at Tama.

'What did you call that thing?'

'He is, Chirop. And he has a job to do.'

'So what's his job?' Tama regretted asking that. Chirop wiped his black lips and bared his fangs. A chill ran down Tama's spine. He backed away and ran to the doors but they were locked. The bat somersaulted in the air and flew around Tama. He tried to hit out but as he did the bat clung onto his hand and bit him on the fleshy part of his palm just below the thumb. Chirop flew to a near-by coat hook and hung up side down again.

'It just bit me, ' Tama flicked his wrist trying to stop the stinging pain,' and it's probably got rabies.'

'That's one of his jobs.'

The bat flew down to the floor, his taloned feet clip-clipped as he paced up and down on the grey linoleum. He made slurping noises as he licked Tama's blood off his fangs with his grey tongue. Tama shook his hand, 'I think I need to go to hospital.' Rowan stepped closer to him, 'They can't help you. You've just received the serum it stops the seizures the dust brings on.'

'Seizures?'

'The dust is toxic to those of your kind. It's the only way you're going to make it through the night.' Chirop rubbed his leafy shaped nose with his membrane-wings. His mouth puckered and he made clicking sounds as if he was trying to communicate to something or someone.

Rowan kicked open the side door, 'This way. We don't have much time.' Tama clutched his stinging hand and followed him through the back lane to the school gym. Beside the gym the twins were waiting. Liam called out, 'Hey bro,

check that out will you.’ Liam pointed to the cheerleaders practising on the Green. Roxy did the meanest splits they’d ever seen. They both watched the cheerleaders prance away. Zina marched up to Tama and clipped him across the shoulders, ‘Get a grip will you.’

‘I was only looking, Zina.’

‘Pathetic, Tama.’

She gave Liam a clip across the head, ‘And you’re no better. Now get in the car.’ Rowan just sighed and shook his head as Tama and the twins got into the back of the car.

‘Plenty of room in the back seat bro.’

‘I can see that, Liam.’

‘You look really sick.’

‘I feel it.’

Rowan sat in the front of the car, ‘Back to Tuatara Street, Harry, and make it snappy.’

Harry was one of the few permanent residents who lived in the park. Tama had seen him many times driving his taxi around town his taxi full of ferals. Harry did a wheelie as he skidded away from the school. He had ‘Blue Suede Shoes’ playing in the cab. ‘Blue... blue...blue suede shoes...Tama, how’s your day been?’ Harry nearly took a red light. Tama noticed a feral by one of the bins, ‘An interesting one, Harry.’

‘Blue suede shoes...’ Harry skidded around the corner and through part of the road construction, men with yellow hats and orange overalls clung to rattling drills. A sign blinked, ‘Caution New Road Ahead.’ Two ferals were standing underneath a new road over-bridge. Harry yelled out to them through his open window, ‘Who loves ya, b...b...babeeeee.’ The ferals waved back. A

flock of bats flew by. Liam wrapped himself in his green cloak. Zina wound down the window and stuck her head outside.

'Liam, why didn't you tell me?'

'Wasn't sure myself.'

'But you drew it?'

'I do that with my drawings sometimes. I mean we heard you playing your trumpet but not even, Zina, picked you had one of those blades.'

Zina wound up the window, flipped open her hand-held and tapped her message, 'Cyber Shaman, is no longer available for business.' Send. She flipped her mobile shut. Harry overtook a truck, it's hydraulic breaks hissed as it came to a stop. Front-end loaders driven by men in yellow hats rushed to fill the truck's trailer up with dirt from the last of the old road. Tama put his head back on the seat. His head was spinning. Harry drove by the Mall then through the Crossroads and took a sharp left into Tuatara Street, 'Blue suede shoes...' It had been a rough day and Tama figured it was just going to get rougher.

Harry drove through the dusty lanes in the park. It was the first time he'd had actually been that far into the trailer park. Bob never approved of him going into the park. Everywhere there were piles of rubbish the ferals had collected. Rows of sheet metal, discarded ovens, fridges, dog kennels, beds, sinks, washing machines, car parts, and even a row of boats and ship parts. Harry stopped outside the twin's trailer. Two dogs crawled out from beneath it. They started howling. A feral threw them each a bone.

The bat was perched on the roof of the trailer and a gathering of ferals were making macrame hangers and daisy chains next to the oil drum. One offered Tama a bunch of yellow daisies. He wasn't in the mood for yellow daisies. The door to the trailer opened, inside it smelt of spices and the mud of

mangrove swamps. His head was spinning. He felt faint. The room spun around him. He heard Rowan behind him, 'Take it easy. Now just lie down.'

His legs became heavy. Difficult to move them. Liam helped him over to the couch. Tama sunk into it. Liam took off his green cloak and placed it over him. But Tama felt so tired. Heavy, drowsy. His eyelids drooped. So tired. The twins stood back as two bars on the trailer door curled around each other like liquid metal. He heard the click of the windows being closed.

Then he felt the rhythm of the trailer as if it was moving, rocking him to sleep. He could hear the bay of a dog in the distance. So sleepy. Why did the blade ever come to him. And how could a blade be alive? Eyelids heavy... Zina was walking in a sea of sand... Liam made a paper dragon. The trailer rocked. Heavy, drowsy. So tired... Tama was slipping, slipping into the night.

Shsh... sleep, you dream, this grain of dust is a mote taken from a god's eye. Dream... young Phaze Lord.

Chapter Four

Tama saw the twins first their hands in each other's. They were still in the same trailer yet it felt different. A watery light streamed through round windows and crouched at the end of the sofa was a strange woman wearing burlap rags. She smelt of dust and heat and sweat. She rocked back and forward and pointed her finger at Rowan, 'Phaze Lord.'

'Thank you, Shadze, I know he is awake.'

She poked Tama's legs with her long bony fingers, 'Still alive he is.'

Rowan offered Tama a drink, the liquid blue within blue, 'Sip this.'

Tama's lips were cracked, throat dry. He felt cold. His body ached. His hands shook as he took the vile of liquid. The liquid worked quickly and warmth returned to his body.

Rowan picked up the dagger from the side of the sofa, 'Your blade.'

Tama snatched it out of his hands. But he didn't understand why he had done that. The flames flickered beneath the black obsidian. The blade was his.

Shadze rocked back and forward as she rubbed a yellow gem in her hands, 'But will he live or die? Hmmm, Shadze cannot say.'

Rowan stood up his shadow filled the room, 'It is time to leave.' The door to the trailer opened. They were no longer in the Tuatara Trailer Park. They stepped out of the trailer and into a massive chamber. The lemon light diffused through a shaft in the roof of the chamber. Along the periphery towering pillars loomed out from the rock walls like giant sentinels silently watching and listening. Perhaps the pillars were listening to the echo of their footsteps as they walked across the geometrical mosaics on the floor?

In the centre of the chamber stood a square slate building, its windows perforated with chain leaf motifs. It was crowned with a domed roof that sat on a series of cusped arches. The door was framed in silver perforated with the repeated pattern of two circles intersecting. Directly in front of the door was a solid cube it looked like it was made out of the same material as Tama's blade.

'What is this place, Rowan?'

'This is a Fey shaft Tama. It travels through the Red Shift.'

Rowan placed his blade in an indent on the top of the cube. His blade was the same as Tama's. Flames flared in the cube. The two circles intersecting in the doorway parted. Tama pulled back. He felt the fear and every instinct in him was to run away. He wanted to be back home with Bob watching footie and Star Wars re-runs, 'There's not much room in there for all of us?'

'C'mon, Tama, it'll be alright.'

'Zina, I can't stand lifts.'

Shadze poked Tama's legs, 'It safe. Most of the time it is.'

But Rowan was not impressed with Tama's hesitancy, 'If you don't get in there I'll take that blade off you and Shadze will return you back to the trailer park.' The twins remained silent, Shadze fossicked through her sack, 'Shadze, not like Leyland roads. Bad smell.' But in that moment Tama knew there was no way he was going to hand his blade back to Rowan. It was his. And as he tried to control his hyperventilation he managed to walk into the Fey shaft.

The doors closed and the flames in the walls turned into flaming symbols. They were like rivers of code running through the volcanic glass walls. From the fiery symbols one of the flames flickered into a woman's face. Her hair

was a flowing blood-red on her chin a silver tattoo. She spoke in a language that had a melodic lilt to it, 'Co-ordinates reset. Ng-dimensional vectors for patterns. Distance in Ng-dimensional space from this input node in Fey patterns.' She curled back into the flaming rivers of code running through the black walls. The shaft rattled and filled with a loud whirring before it moved sideways, then Rowan called out, 'Hold on to that rail.' Everyone grabbed the rail as the lift did a 360 spin and then descended again. The flaming symbols in the black walls began to slow down and the lift stopped. The doors opened and they were in another place

It was not the scorching heat and blinding sun, it was the silence of the desert they all felt. A crystal clear silence. Grains of sand. Bitter. Dry in their mouths. The silver doorway closed behind them and the Fey shaft was gone. But the silence was broken when Shadze, the scavenger witch, rustled through her sack. She took out a yellow gem and placed it to her eye, 'Rig coming.'

She stood up, the sand filled in her footprints as she walked to the lip of a dune, she called out, '*Shweeetah. Keeearch.*' Hers was an old tongue. A tongue of many sounds - warbles of cries, clicks and wails. She placed her sack on her back. Through the haze the blue and silver particle sails of a land rig billowed. It was the Wadji rig. Land rigs did not stop for scavengers, nor did they stop so far into the southern Erg.

Rowan handed the twins their web guns and Shadze took hers out. Liam called out, 'Haven't done this for a while, Rowan.'

'Shadze will be behind you.' The twins ran along the side of the rig, Shadze next to them. They seemed so small against the behemoth's huge flywheels. They fired their web guns. The webs whooshed through the air and

attached to the upper sides of the rig. They scaled the massive outer levels of the rig, swinging back and forward in their web cradles.

‘Now it’s your turn, Tama.’

‘You gotta be kidding me, Rowan.’

‘Afraid not. It’s either this or you’re stuck out here.’ They ran along the base of the rig. The gritty sand blowing plumes around him. The sand tasted bitter. Rowan fired his gun, ‘Hang on!’ The giant flywheels only inches away, one slip and they would be pulled in and crushed. Rowan yanked the cord, and with Tama clutching on his back, he scrambled effortlessly up the web net.

Rowan jumped the top rails, he landed with a quiet thwump on the deck. Tama fell off his back and onto the deck. Dusk was beginning to fall. Shadows were long. Greta, the pilot of the Wadji, pushed back her goggles into her silver hair. She had dragons printed on her coat. A coat that hung down to her black boots, she handed Rowan a mug of water, ‘This is a fool’s errand.’

‘And it’s good to see you too Greta. I trust you will make the Wadji’s guests welcome.’

‘If I must.’

Shadze jumped the rail behind him, she called out, ‘*Shweeetah*,’ the twins jumped the rails and followed her. Tama was still picking himself up from the deck when the twins walked by, ‘Will you hurry up, Tama.’

‘Okay, Zina, like I’m used to this.’

Rowan handed Shadze a mug of water, she slurped it back, ‘Ah, clean water.’ She put the mug in her sack. Rowan introduced the twins, ‘Greta, this is Zina and Liam.’

‘Um, a pleasure to meet you both. We travel to Ur Choga.’ Tama was still dusting the sand off from his clothes, ‘ And who is that one. I don’t recall mention of another in our deal.’

‘That’s Tama. He carries a phaze blade.’

‘He smells.’

‘He’ll lose the Leyland scent after a while.’

The twins left with the co-pilot and Shadze followed behind them. Greta did not speak to Tama, but she was a little abrupt with Rowan, ‘ He does not know our roads.’

‘He will learn.’

‘An untrained Phaze Lord. I expect you to make sure he does not do anything stupid while on my rig.’

‘Of course, Pilot.’

The rig lurched. It turned into a dry ravine. A bell chimed three times. A crossbeam swung behind Tama. It crashed into his head and he was thrown from the top of the pilot’s turret to the deck below. Falling... falling... he thought he was a feather as he fell to the ground.

Chapter Five

Tama eventually came to, Rowan was sitting beside him, 'You really will have to get used to travelling on rigs, Tama.'

'Thanks for the advice Rowan.'

The Wadji rig travelled the trader routes throughout the ever-changing landscape of Solazian roads. Pilots of the land-rigs travelling through the desert roads knew how to read the nefuds - for the deep sands can trap the unwary; and the badia, the shifting sands that hide the roads. They knew to seek out the ancient riverbed roads – the seyl, to follow their winding ways. But the roads were not safe. The Wadji rig was heavily defended with Elvian hunters. Greta paid them well.

Tama, Rowan and Greta had been invited as guests to witness the Zensumi greeting to the twins. The third level was the top deck open to the azure sky. A flock of desert crows flew by as the male Zensumi chanted their call. A call that greeted the twins back to Solaz. Liam wore his green cloak. He stood proudly as he waited for his sister. He seemed so different in this role, only a few months before he had been sitting on Tama's kitchen bench drawing his sketches, and how many rumbles had Tama and him been in?

Zina had been prepared for the greeting by handmaidens, she was dressed in the traditional style of Zensumi women. Her hair in one plait fell to her waist. She wore a turban headdress that matched the scarf she wore around her waist. She wore the Zensumi veil of sheer crimson, it signified her royal rank, but the veil did not cover her face.

A female Zensumi laid down two stig blades at the twin's feet. The twins picked up their blades. It was a symbolic gesture that showed they had

accepted the call to return. Three bells rang followed by the Zensumi chant. A chant that could be heard throughout the Wadji rig.

Liam and Zina walked into the middle of the deck. They faced each other then both went into a martial arts freeze frame. They moved out of their freeze frame and began to slowly wield their stig blades. Their slow-mo kickboxing moved in synchronicity with each other. A mirror fighting dance. Graceful. Precise. Deadly. The Zensumi then moved in time with the twins. The first circle formed around the twins, then another circle of Zensumi formed, everyone in unison with each other. The twins were in the centre and at the low chanting of the Zensumi caller the twins held their stig blades above their heads and then bowed to the circle. The first circle of people around them did the same, and then the next circle and the next. It was like a flower unfolding. And then it was over. The twins had been officially accepted back as the royal heirs to the Solaz House of Zensumi.

When the celebration was over Tama joined the twins as they trained on the third level with the others. He too could feel the power of the slow-mo. Zensumi energy released through the Vakras, energy points in the body.

And through the sweltering desert heat the Zensumi taskmasters and Rowan were relentless in combat training. No one was granted any dispensation and if the taskmasters thought any one was slacking off they were dealt with harshly. At the end of each day Tama and the twins returned to their rooms where they were rocked to sleep as the pilot navigated the Wadji rig through the desert roads of House of Ba'Tha.

Chapter Six

Tama and the twins managed to spend what little free time they had in the markets and bazaars of the rig. Liam's chess playing was popular, the traders placed bets on who he would out-play next. He also developed a reputation as an artist. Many lined up to have him sketch them. Zina was invited into trader markets to examine their goods, even the scavengers rustled through their sacks to show her their finds they had found along the roads.

Tama watched, listened, observed. It was the way he learnt more about Solaz, many cultures intermingling with one another. In the rig's square musicians played fiddles and drums, a trader yelled out, 'Fey beer made right here on the Wadji. Fermented in Gom tree casks.' The traders on the Wadji were a flush of colours and sounds. The traders wore tunics made from linens and silks embossed with patterns of circles and squares and birds and flowers and dragons. Behind their markets they lived in what they called their dwellings. Trader children were dressed in a fusion of colours their hair woven into plaits interlaced with ribbons. Trader children spent their lives on the rig, they were used to the movement of the rig and travellers, like Tama, who came and went. The trader children were not shy, they were curious, not afraid to ask Tama questions, 'Where is your home road, Tama?' Tama quickly learnt the way to speak with them, 'It is far off-road?'

'Is it beyond the dead suns?' He understood that was their way of understanding a road that was not in Solaz, 'Yes.'

'Name the road.'

'A Leyland road.'

'You are friend of Zensumi?'

'I am.'

'They lost their road.'

'We will help them find it again.'

'You may share our dwelling.'

On the Wadji the riggers of the Keep always watched from the crow's nest. The Elvian guards were positioned along the edge of each of the levels. Their bows and venom arrow heads always at the ready. There were many caravanserais dotted along the roads, but the distances between them were so vast the Wadji rig stopped and erected giant tents along the road. There was a lightness of mood around the tents. Traders haggled for the best prices and people sat around the small fires. Many scavengers came and went.

There were scavengers everywhere in the vast roads of Solaz. In the desert lands they hunted and sifted through the sands looking for old-tech. When they found it they sold it on to the traders. Old-tech could be many things: shards of glass, metal disks, bolts, pots, vases. Anything that had survived the war of the Great Rift.

In the chill of night people huddled around the tent fires. The twins and Tama huddled around the fires too. Shadze sat next to them. She took out red dust from her tattered coat. She threw it on the fire. The fire flared and sizzled. Liam sketched her sometimes and other scavengers. The scavengers were survivors from the old witch tribe. They had lost their roads in the Great Rift.

'Do you draw me, Liam?'

'Do you mind if I do, Shadze?'

'Shadze, not mind.' She sniffed the air as if scenting out prey, 'She-wolf hunts she does, Tama.'

'I hear her.'

'She-wolf quick to kill prey not suffer. Remember that you will.'

'I will.'

Zina offered Shadze a piece of corn bread, she took it from the stick, and Shadze chewed the bread. When she had finished eating she told them of the Great Rift that exploded the roads of Solaz and a billion souls were lost in minutes, 'Dark Wizards fought with White Wizards over old tech. Bad tech. Wizards learnt how to make it.'

Liam smudged the charcoal lines on the pad, 'Who taught them?' Shadze's head turned from side to side. Then she rocked back and forward her grey eyes blinked slowly at Tama, 'Some say Leyland wizard. But, Shadze, not know for sure.'

Rowan had been listening, he sat down by the fire and warmed his hands, 'What she says is true. After the Great Rift the roads changed, some disappeared, others crumbled. Many who survived could not return to their home roads, like the scavengers from the old witch tribe – isn't that right, Shadze?'

Shadze put her hands over her ears, 'Still hear their cries you can. In the Dead Lands.' She let her hands down, took out more red dust, and threw the dust onto the fire. The fire sparked and sizzled, 'Tama, has old tech he has.' Scavengers called out, '*Keeearch. Baaakha.*' The rig was ready to move again.

On board the riggers started playing fiddles and flutes and drums. The Wadji was rocking as it travelled through the roads. Zero sang and danced. Her body moved to the rhythm of the beat. Hands clapped in time to the music. Her feet bare. She danced over to him and wiped her hand across his mouth, 'Soot on your lips Tama.' Her skin tasted of salt. He liked the taste. Zina went back to

the others and danced into the night. Shadze stood beside him, she poked his arm. Her hand callused, leathery, warm, 'Tama likes what he see he does.'

He pushed her hand away, 'That's enough Shadze.'

The drums pounded in his head, Zero's blue-black hair flailed about her. Shadze munched on a piece of bread, she spat it out, 'Bread tastes like dust it does.' The beat of the music pounded in his head. Waves of dizziness again. He had to get away from the noise, get away from the others.

He left the revellers and made his way to the cutter bay. From there he could hear the bustle of the rig, the dancing and singing in the square and the riggers of the Keep calling out from the crow's nest, 'Wind change.'

He had become used to the rhythm of the rig. The rig swayed as it travelled through a seyl road, a hedge-land road, there was water deep below the ground. Desert bushes grew tall. From the deck Tama looked down onto the seyl road, the hedges were tall. He felt the blade move. He was sure it was watching. Waiting. Observing. He flicked the blade. The sands moved. He could taste the grains of sand in the wind. Rustle of leaves. He flicked the blade again. He was tired of waiting for Rowan to teach him how to use it. Every time he asked him he was his usual allusive self, 'Soon, Tama. You must wait.'

'Wait for what?'

'You will know.'

'Know what?'

'These blades are not all the same. So we will just have to wait and see what it does.'

'That's really helpful, Rowan.'

'That is just the way it is for now. The blades communicate differently. Although it might be a little pushy for a start.'

But he didn't expect to hear it so clearly, and its language was strange. A sound that others could not hear. Tonal shifts, yet he understood it.

- I am, Tok.
- I'm, Tama.
- Do you dream?
- Yes I do.
- Shall I sleep now?
- If you like.

That was all it said. It was silent again. He was not sure if he had said the right thing. Was this how it was supposed to happen? He turned the blade in his hands, orange flames flickered beneath the black obsidian.

A rigger swung across the beams on a silver chain. The sails turned. Tama turned the blade in his hands. The flames flared.

- Tok.
- I know that.
- You will do as I say.
- I think you should just chill out a bit, get used to things.
- What is chill out?'
- Be calm.'
- Tok, I am.

The blade began to shake like it was taking on its own momentum. Tama grabbed the blade with both hands.

- I am awake.

Tama fell back against the mast, he had lost control. He tried to speak with it, reason with it, 'Stop it.' But Rowan got to him and grabbed the blade just in time to divert the flaming blue bolt over the rails of the rig. The ground around

the rig shook. The desert bushes burst into flame. Rowan held the blade. It stilled. He handed it back to Tama.

‘I believe it is now time.’

‘I don’t think it likes me.’

‘It is not a matter of it liking or disliking you. It is a matter of it learning that you are its master.’

Greta stormed along the deck. She was furious, ‘Well, Tama?’

‘I’m sorry, Greta. I didn’t mean for this to happen.’

‘You have put my rig in danger, this is no place for a rookie Phaze Lord. Deal with it, Rowan.’ Greta stormed back to the prime mover.

- Helloooo there. You who are Tama.
- This isn’t a good time, Tok.
- I shall take you into phaze. We can hunt. I can kill things.
- I don’t think that’s a good idea.

Tama put the blade away. Rowan scratched the cleft in his chin, ‘We leave at first light for the road of Kazah. Lady Kee is expecting you and your blade.’

Chapter Seven

The upper level hatch was winched open and the rig-cutter was raised to the top deck of the rig. The flying cutter's wings unfurled, streamlined wings that could rise and fall in the desert air. Tama and Rowan worked the pulleys, adjusting the thrust and momentum of the cutter as they made their way above the sea of dunes to a mountain range in the distance.

Rowan piloted the cutter to a space many metres above the mountain pass. He held out his blade. His blade found the rip in space. The rip opened and there was an elliptical lens. He raised his blade, it sliced through the lens till there was just enough room for the cutter to glide through. The lens closed behind them. The cutter descended to the edge of the great Erg where Lady Kee's arched hall rose from the plains.

Rowan anchored the cutter and they made their way through the arched entry and into the inner dome. In the middle of the dome a fountain babbled – a great sign of wealth and status in desert worlds. Rowan sprinkled droplets on his forehead and told Tama to do the same. A tiled mosaic slowly opened in the floor and a rectangular doorway arose, its cornices were etched with two circles intersecting forming the vesica piscis, a symmetrical lens. Rowan ran his fingers over the symbol and they walked through the frame of the doorway.

Rowan knew Lady Kee was one for protocol, so he stopped to scoop up a handful of sand and let the sand run through his fingers. As the last grains trickled from his hand a massive swirling ripple of sand moved toward them at an incredible speed. The movement stopped and Lady Kee emerged, uncoiling and raising her body. The tip of her tail rattled in greeting and her scales of turquoise and silver shimmered beneath the spectral light. Lady Kee flicked her

forked tongue, scenting the air and a silver-scaled hood flared around her neck, 'Welcome back Phaze Lord.'

Rowan bowed to Lady Kee, 'I see you have more attendants to assist you?' Many scavengers with sacks on their backs fossicked through the sand dunes. Lady Kee curled around a jade plinth, flicked her tongue, 'Yesss – but reliable administrators are so difficult to come by.'

'Then perhaps you should stop stinging so many of them with venom. It is not easy dealing with infinity.'

'Ah yesss – so many roads so many grains of sands. And so much damn cross-referencing.' She rattled her tail at one of the scavenger administrators. He screamed and ran behind a dune, 'One has to break the monotony you wouldn't deny me a few simple pleasure now?' Her scales glittered into shades of purples and blue, 'You know I miss our little chats, Rowan.'

'I am honoured you think so highly of me.'

'I do have a fondness for mortals. I must work on that I think it may be an unhealthy attachment.' She flicked her tongue into the air and slithered down the sides of the plinth then disappeared into a dune. She re-emerged with a scavenger on her back. The scavenger hopped off her back, he carried his sack over to the jade plinth, 'Now, Lady Kee?'

'When I say you imbecile.'

The scavenger hunkered down by the jade plinth. Rowan told Tama to be his normal self around Lady Kee, 'You gotta be kidding me. And just what is normal?'

Black pits on the side of Lady Kee's face opened and closed as she twisted her head from side to side moving closer to Tama, 'Are you afraid of me?'

- Lady Kee, is a serpent's flea.
- Tok, not now. Let's not upset the snake lady.

Tama pulled back from her and then he stood his ground, 'Is that what you what me to say, Lady Kee?'

'You have pluck,' she slowly coiled toward Rowan, 'I'm impressed with your apprentice, Rowan.'

'I'm sure that has just made him feel very welcome. Wouldn't you agree, Tama?'

'Oh yes very welcoming.'

Her head twisted back to Tama, 'Yesss you have pluck I do like that – although you could just be stupid I suppose. Hmmm... surely not? Now take your blade and place it next to the plinth. It needs to be catalogued in my grains of sand.'

- Tok, I am.
- You sure are. Now behave.

The scavenger took a handful of sand out of his sack. The grains of sand covered Tama's phaze blade and the jade plinth scrolled into a river of symbols. The symbols stopped. The scavenger jumped up and down, 'Done now. Blade recorded it is. Take it you will.'

Lady Kee raised her tail, it rattled in the air and then she slammed it into a dune. The dune rippled, 'We shall see if you have what it takes.' She twisted her head and upper body toward him, 'I smell your fear. If creatures do not channel

fear they make stupid decisions. You will need to work on that if you are to survive young Phaze Lord.'

'Of course.'

'Of course who?'

'Of course, Lady Kee.'

'That is better – yessss it is.'

Lady Kee, curled around the plinth, 'I shall be observing you in the phaze cubes. Do you understand, Tama?'

'Yes, Lady Kee.'

'Rowan, take your apprentice and go.'

Lady Kee was becoming a little agitated. The season of the yellow winds was near and she liked to hunt prey before she hibernated. Rowan bowed, 'May the grains of sand be with you, Lady Kee.'

Chapter Eight

Rowan flew the cutter above the edge of the Great Erg following the mountain range. Night folded around them and they descended through thin mists. The cutter landed with a thump onto a sandy ridge. A ridge that overlooked the valley of Kazah. Rowan jumped from the cutter and anchored it to a boulder, 'The mists will lift in the morning. We set up camp here.'

Rowan poked the embers in the fire. An icy blast blew through the ridge, the embers flared. Tama pulled his desert shawl around him. Rowan pushed a stick into the glowing embers, the firelight highlighted his chiselled features, a wind scuttled through the ridge.

'We have travelled far off-road, Rowan?'

'Yes very far.' The two moons began their descent below the lip of the horizon, 'Dawn is nearly here. The phaze cubes will begin their sound soon.' Rowan kicked over the last of the embers as the purple haze of dawn folded into the valley of Kazah.

The purple-black of night turned into lilac and the first of the giant black cubes sounded its baritone throughout the valley. The ridge vibrated. Another cube replied but in a higher pitch and then others joined in. The valley was alive with the music of the cubes. But as dawn slipped into day the music stopped and the giant black cubes silently rotated on their axes above the silver river of Chofusa. A transparent skin unfolded from a cube.

'Rowan?'

'Yes, Tama?'

'I'm afraid.'

'I know.'

Their blades unlocked a doorway and they entered the cube. The doors closed and the flames in the walls turned into flaming symbols, like a river of code running through the black glass walls. But the walls in the cube changed and they were at the base of a granite ridge. Rowan took out his blade. He spun it through the air. He raised his hand. His blade stopped moving. It hung in mid air. He flicked his wrists and it returned.

'You must learn to listen to it. Now you try it.'

Tama flicked his blade; it spun through the air. It returned.

'Not so difficult was it?'

'I guess not.'

'What you must remember is your thoughts merge with it. It is also trying to understand you.'

Rowan took out three small silver stars from the pocket in his brown coat. He threw them in the air; they flew around the ridge like spots of light, 'Use your blade. Aim and take them down.' But they were moving so fast he couldn't focus on them.

'Concentrate.'

The blade went crazy taking on its own momentum. He couldn't control it. He fell back and the blade fired at the side of the granite cliff. The top of the cliff exploded in a rain of rocks. Rowan and Tama both dived for cover.

'Well you sure can fire it just your aim is a bit off. Now try again.' The blade became more difficult to control.

- Shall we hunt, Tama?
- When I tell you.

Tama threw the blade at a rock target; it shattered the rock and the blade returned to him. Rowan instructed him again what to do. Yet Tama knew where

the targets were without using normal vision. He could sense them in his mind. Pinpoint with minute accuracy where they were, and he knew where to move. Tok altered its tonal shift. Phaze shift. Quick. Deadly. Precise. Tok was waiting.

- Target... Now.

Rowan spoke to Tama in phaze link. Mind to mind. *Concentrate. You are in control.* Rowan made him practise and practise till Tama began to see with his mind's eye. Phaze sight.

- Now Tok.

He threw the blade at the spinning silver stars, taking down one, two, three. The blade returned. It was over in a second. It seemed so effortless; natural. Tok was ready. So was Tama, and Rowan knew it.

The cube shifted again and they were in a different space. 'Look to the ranges. What is there?'

'I see nothing.'

'Look again.'

'Yes I see it. It's in the crevice of the rock, just a slight fluctuation, like a ripple.'

'Call your blade and begin the tracking again. She is in camouflage, the witch is hunting you.'

Tama moved to the point directly behind the fluctuation in the rock. She stepped out of camouflage, turned and faced Tama. But it was impossible. It couldn't be? It was Zina standing in front of him. He moved closer to her. She smiled. She spoke to him, it was her, he was sure it was, 'Just you and me, Tama, that is why I'm here.'

Tama reached out to touch her. But she threw back her head and laughed at him. The figure of Zina turned into a woman in brown burlap rags, she looked like a scavenger perhaps she was one of Lady Kee's assistants?

'Foolish young Phaze Lord you are.'

He kicked the stig blade out of her hands, 'Too slow, witch.'

'Then look behind you.'

Too late. Rowan grabbed him from behind. His phaze blade to Tama's neck, 'You must learn to control your feelings that which you desire can be a weakness.' Rowan scraped the blade across his chest. It drew blood. 'You will have a scar to remind you of that and you will need to perfect your speeds – you are far too slow in phaze shift.'

'Yes, Rowan.'

'You have a lot more to learn. Next shift.'

The cube repeated shifts over and over again and each night they slept on the ridge that overlooked the valley of Kazah. And each dawn they awoke to the music of the cubes. Rowan never let up he made Tama practise and practise until he was convinced he could wield his blade, before it was time to leave, 'Tama, you will pilot the cutter back.'

'Do we have to go back to Lady Kee?'

'No. She is happy with your progress.'

'How do you know?'

'If she hadn't been she would have sent out her agents to have you exterminated and your blade destroyed by now.'

'It's good to know these things.'

Tama hauled in the anchor and the rig-cutter rose through the clouds. He liked looking at clouds; it got him thinking about things. He wondered about his

home road and how would Mr Leon have coped. Would the question mark have passed the phaze test? And he hoped Bob was being looked after by the ferals. Zina did say they'd take good care of him.

The wind buffeted the cutter. He had to be careful. Tama saw the rip in the space. Just a small space, 'Tack to the right.' The cutter's sails turned. And there was the lens.

- Take us through
- Tok, I am.

Tama guided the cutter back through the pass in the ranges. They flew above the sea of dunes and followed the road till they caught up with the Wadji rig. He glided the cutter into its holding deck. It seemed he had been away for weeks and yet it had only been one night and a day since they left for the ranges. The road of Kazah moved at a different speed, as did other roads in Solaz.

Chapter Nine

'Trimmers to sails.' The massive particle sails billowed and the giant flywheels of the Wadji gained speed. Since he had returned from Kazah Tama spent more time in the turret of the prime mover with Greta. She showed him the ways of piloting a rig.

Greta was a pilot-navigator first class. The Wadji rig's wind compass could locate the primary and secondary winds as well as the ever-shifting wind quadrants. The compass was set into a turnstile, Greta spun around it calling out orders to turn the masts and rig matting sails. When the sails unfurled millions of charged particles seemed alive in the rig-mats.

A pilot also knew when the roads moved in the haze. They navigated reading the haze, reading the wind changes, adjusting bearings to compensate for the change in the tilt of the road, whether it moved up or down. And always they looked for the next sign. A flock of birds. A tree. A change in the winds. A rigger called out from the crow's nest, 'Haze shift.'

Tama could taste the spits of the yellow winds. The sands shifted all around them. A flash of red sheet lightening above them. Rowan stood at the front of the prime mover. Flocks of crows swooped in from the west. scavengers hung off the side of the rig. They were close to the Maze Way.

The traders closed down their markets. Trader children stopped running and playing. Greta called out, 'Secure the decks.' Another sheet of red lightening flashed across the sky. Greta powered down the rig, in the Maze Way a rig could get lost forever. The yellow winds pushed the rig so hard Greta couldn't take them away from the Maze Way.

'Shadze, know the way when it rains, Greta.'

'It's not raining, Shadze.'

'Might rain soon it will.'

'Is rain a good sign?'

'Maybe it is maybe it isn't.'

A mist curled along the road. The rig followed a stone wall. The wall curved and the road followed its downward slope. But Greta had not seen this on the Maze roads before.

Tama and Rowan walked in front of the slow moving rig. The road descended and narrowed, the walls became taller on each side of the road. The road darkened until all around them they were surrounded by a blue-black darkness. The twins and Shadze joined them, 'Dead road it is. Should have rain. No rain.'

Blue bioluminescence dappled from the floating spores. On each side of the road the dappled light showed the honeycomb of catacombs. The road was lined with shattered remains of bones. Rowan picked one up. The bone shard was brittle it collapsed into a river of dust in his hands. The spores floated above the mummified, their heads bowed into their folded arms. Tama found it difficult to breathe. Claustrophobic. He couldn't stand it. He wanted to run away. Everything was too quiet. Too still.

Zina took Tama's hand in hers. Her hand was warm. But there was another sense of touch, cold fingers running up and down his spine. The twins felt it too. Liam asked Rowan how long before they were out of this road.

'I'm not sure yet.'

'I can smell it. This is a dark wizard's road isn't it?'

'I believe so, Liam.'

Zina clutched Tama's hand tighter, 'I knew it. I knew it when the yellow winds pushed us into here. It had to be.'

The road turned from the towering honeycomb walls of catacombs into giant swamp trees. Dripping water. Towering ferns. Giant purple and red pitcher plants dripped with decayed flora and fauna. Curled around the trees were huge eels their yellow eyes blinked slowly watching them go by. The eels slithered down the trunks and into the black swamp waters. In the dank shadows the corky limbs of giant walking trees shook their flowing heads of white flowers. Flitting below the canopy were pinpricks of the blinking bioluminescence and the sound of lapping water.

There were blurry faces in the swamps. Red rimmed eyes. Tama could hear them, they were whispering to each other, but he could not make out what they were saying. Rowan heard them too and so had Tok.

- What are they saying?
- Trapped in the Maze.
- Who has trapped them?
- Black Night.
- A wizard?
- You would say a dark wizard.
- What would, Tok, say?
- A Controller.

A flush of swamp birds flew across the road. In the distance the road forked. Rowan crouched down; his fingers ran across the road. He licked his fingers, 'Shadze, take the twins back to the rig.'

Zina let go of Tama's hand, 'But Rowan...'

'No buts, Zina.'

Liam was defiant, 'It is not the Zensumi way to leave others behind. We will stay.'

'I said get back to the rig. Tell, Greta, to take the road that veers to the right. It is the way out of this Maze.'

'We're not leaving you.'

'You must protect the rig. Now get back and ready your Zensumi. Tama, and I will take the road to the left we will catch up with you.'

Tama and Rowan followed the road that veered to the left. A bird skimmed the surface of the muddy waters. Its silver-feathered tips glistened in the copper and crimson light. It dived into the water. A red fish flickered a feeble protest in its beak. They crossed a stone wall bridge. There was a movement in the stone wall. Just a slight quiver. The camouflage was near perfect.

Tama and Rowan stood back to back. Phaze link. We have Seekers. Prepare. Ready position.

In a nano-second one flew out from the stone wall, its camouflage gone. Rowan caught it and stabbed the needle sticking out from its head into the opposite wall. More started attacking them. Tama was able to pin point with minute precision where they were. He threw the blade taking down two more. Rowan flicked his blade it smashed one, two, three Seekers. Tama spun round on the balls of his feet, he took two more out. Tama ducked as more flew about him. It was like they were taunting him, playing with him.

- Finish them, Tok.

Tok shattered the rest into pieces. He held up his hand and his blade returned. It was over in seconds. Rowan took down five more Seekers, they were shattered on the ground. They crossed the bridge. Attack position. Tama moved into position. Wait.

It was a Black Night wizard. The wizard stepped out of the shadows; his crimson and black robes hung loosely over his body. The top of his head covered in a tight black skullcap that stretched over his ears and down to his shoulders. Blood-red capillaries threaded through the cap were web like and moving. His face, deep creased and heavy-eyed drooped with partially closed eye lids as he flicked his tongue to the roof of his mouth, making a clicking sound before he spoke, 'It has been a long time since we have crossed paths, Rowan. I trust you are keeping in good health?'

'I always wondered where you escaped to.'

A Seeing Eye hovered behind the Black Night. Its yellow eye blinked... one, two, three. 'Escape? I have been waiting to meet with you again.'

'I should have finished you off at the battle of the Plains.'

'But you didn't did you and now my pets have come to greet you. I see you have an apprentice. I'm sure he's most gallant. My weavers will enjoy him too. They love company.'

Phaze link. Do you see them?

Yes.

They are his weavers. He is playing for time. He knows I will need to go into phaze shift. Do not follow me. Get back to the rig.

'And you have brought the Zensumi twins back. Was that wise?'

I said stand back. Tama moved back, he could see the faint blue luminescence of the weavers' tendrils.

- I like to dream.
- Is this really the time?
- We should hunt.
- I think we should remain calm not do anything rash.

Tama placed his blade back in its sheath.

- I really don't think it's the time for this conversation.

Tama moved further back. Black Night clicked his tongue, raised his head a little and partially closed his eye-lids, 'You being here is such a bonus, if I can take a Phaze Lord with me then I have rid Solaz of another abomination.'

Black Night twisted the blinking yellow eye gem on his finger. His Seeing Eye behind him blinked again... one, two, three. He turned the ring on his finger, and as he did his weavers came closer. He clicked his tongue, 'Take care, Rowan, even Phaze Lords can get trapped in the roads.'

Suddenly, a sound filled all space, the thrum of Rowan's blade was everywhere. Rowan ripped the blade through the air and the space around him warped and buckled. Rowan stepped into the buckled space. Black Night and his weavers followed him and he was gone. There was nothing left. No sign that Rowan had even been standing there.

Tama huddled back into the wall. Rowan told him he had to get back to the rig. But a cold chill ran through his body and he sensed something or someone standing behind. He turned around and she was there. Very near. Waiting. Staring back at him with her steely-grey eyes. Her tattered brown coat hanging down to the ground.

'What do you want from me?'

'One of three...' Her voice began to trail away.

'I said what do you want?'

'Turn the key from the yellow eye you will.'

And she was gone. But he knew what she meant. Tama unsheathed his blade. Tama held the blade out to the spot where Rowan had left. Rowan was trapped.

- Show me.
- Now?
- Open it. He can't get out.

The thrum of the blade filled all space around him. And like heat waves rippling around him the air began to buckle and warp. He slashed his blade through the waves, a rip appeared and there was an elliptical lens. It was distorted at the edges but he could see into another place.

Through the lens were towering black mountains and floating above them were the long tendrils of the weavers. Crouched on granite ledges jutting out from the mountains were gigantic gargoyles silhouetted against a lilac sky. Their eyes like Black Night's yellow eye gem, their heads slowly began to turn in Tama's direction. He heard the sound of rocks crashing and footsteps running. It was Rowan.

- Unlock the path.

The thrum around Tama became louder but he held firmly to the blade. A whoosh filled the air and Tama fell back against the stone wall just as Rowan dived back through the lens. Rowan rolled on the ground. The tendril arms of a weaver reached back, it grabbed his leg. Rowan aimed his blade, it fired, and the tendril was gone. The rip closed.

- He is not in phaze now.
- I know.'
- Shall I sleep?
- If you like.

Tama placed his blade away. Rowan stood up, 'You've got one hell of a blade, Tama.'

- 'Yeah. I think so too'

'C'mon lets get back to the rig.'

Chapter Ten

The Wadji rig was surrounded by Maze pirates. The twins led the Zensumi into attack wielding their stig blades in time to their martial moves. Their slow-mo's speeded up were deadly. Precise. Lethal. Along the side of the road a pod of giant scarabus reared up, their pinchers flailing in the air as the rig's Elvian hunters unleashed quivers of venomous arrows. Their arrows shattered the scarabus' shells. Another quiver flew through the air at the pirates' rig-cruiser. But their arrows couldn't penetrate the cruisers' shields. The shields had to come down. Tama and Rowan arrived just in time.

I'll take down the shield in the first cruiser. You take down the second.

Tama moved into phaze. He followed Rowan along the path.

- Now Tok!

Tama could locate the shield's weak spot. He dived beneath the shield; clambered up the ladder, he moved so quickly in shift the pirates could not see him. The pilot was standing at the helm, five guards at the rear.

- Ready position. Target...Now

Five guards down. The pilot didn't have time to register the speed of what had happened. Tama grabbed him from behind. The deathblow was swift; he hit the ground without making a sound. Rowan already had the shield down in the other pirate cruiser. Tama pulled the lever and the second cruiser's shield was down.

The Elvian hunters threw out their chains, they swung across to the cruisers. The Zensumi followed, easily ducking the hazer whips of the pirates. Hand to hand. Zina called out, 'Everybody off – back to the rig.'

Once the cruisers' shield walls were down the canon on the Wadji rig fired up. The Elvian marksman waited for the call. The twins did one last check. They crossed the net back to the rig. The twins called out in unison, 'Now!' Everyone on board the Wadji rig watched as the cannon fired and the Maze pirates' cruisers were brought down.

The Zensumi gave out their victory call; the riggers and the traders joined in. The scavengers cheered from the side of the rig. Over the cheers of the victory call Zina sheathed her stig blade and strolled over to Tama.

'What took you so long, Tama?'

'Rowan, and I got a little held up, Zina.'

Liam gave him a high-five, 'Hey bro. Nice trick you and, Rowan, pulled on the shield walls.'

'Thanks for that, Liam.'

A group of trader children ran up to them, one of them was the son of the Apothecary trader. He sucked a green lollipop, 'What is the name of your off-road again?'

'The Leyland.'

He sucked his lollipop, lips stained green, 'Tama, of the Leyland?'

'Yes.'

'You may share my dwelling.'

The Wadji rig lurched as it moved on. It had to find the shift in the road. Greta spun around the turnstile, she called out, 'Full sail.' The massive sails unfurled and the rig gained greater speed as it followed a shifting dune.

Shadze jumped from the rig, she scuttled across the dunes. Nobody seemed to notice her running toward a girl in a long brown coat. The desert winds wrapped around them both and then they were gone.

But there it was. A haze way in the crest of the dune. The rig crossed through and they were on the Kjan route. The route that would take them directly to Ur Choga.

Illustration

Liam's sketch of the Wadji rig

Liam's notes:

Wadji land-rig made in the Ba'tharian dock yards. Rig bends in the shifting roads. Fly-wheels easily manoeuvred hoisted out of the way when sand sledges needed.

Fey silver and Ba'Tharian metal in rig design. Pilot trained on Ba'Tharian battle cruiser rig.

Elvians also familiar with Zensumi hand to hand moves. Elvian arrows forged in Ba'Tharian swamp lands. Rig sails woven by specialists in Fey tribes of Julnar. Zalchite crystal housed below main turret is main power source. Rig-cutter is not Ba'Tharian – old Zensumi cutter design. Phaze Lords often travel on the land-rigs rather than Ba'Tharian battle cruisers.

Chapter Eleven

The Wadji rig travelled beneath megalithic statues that rose from the desert. One statue was Su Ling from the House of Zensumi; another was Prince Yagbu of the Ba'Tha; next was Cylene of the Noth, and then Moshe from the tribes of Fey in the Borderland Roads. The statues formed the northern entry into Ur Choga.

The ranges folded into a kaleidoscope of colours - rust to red to blue to indigo as the sun dipped below the lip of the horizon and night descended over the desert city of Ur Choga, capital of the Solaz House of Ba'Tha. The city rose from the desert in seven receding tiers.

Ur Choga was so massive that each of the levels was like a mini city unto itself. With markets and housing complexes with private bagh gardens for entertaining and public baghs, rambling parks adorned with arches and blue dragon pools. Lush plants grew next to babbling fountains and cascading waterfalls, and throughout Ur Choga massive light shafts bathed each level in a golden glow. The air was kept cool by the ornate wind catchers in each of the levels.

The static hiss of the net's silver threads surrounded them. Their bodies hung in a bed of myriad lights as they were carried on a wave of light through a warm shaft of air before emerging into the atrium of Ur Choga's Command Centre. There to meet them was another Phaze Lord. She wore the long brown coat of the phaze. Her hair the colour of silver and tied back in one long plait.

'Welcome back, Rowan.'

'It is good to be back, Malson.'

Rowan introduced the twins and Tama to her. People unaccustomed to the Noth often felt intimidated by their gaze.

'Malson, you are from Noth?'

'That is correct, Liam. Now follow me I will show you to your quarters.'

Two Zensumi guards were posted outside the twin's rooms, their rooms were next to Tama's. Their rooms opened out onto an expansive terrace. From the terrace they could see over to the river Zagz where the aqua pyramids of the Ba'Tharian administration buildings towered. Beyond the aqua pyramids the Southern Alps reached into the clouds. Flying about the granite peaks were giant rukhs, many swooping above a pod of dragon crotalus. The rukhs were escorting them back to their dragon bays.

To the west lay the sea port where there were hundreds of ships, including trader rigs, Ba'Tharian troop carrier rigs, sea cruisers and a fleet of Fey Julnar submersibles. The black and aquatint of the docked submersibles bobbed in the calm ripples of the port waters. Others left port to the hiss of their aqua engines, flexing their flux-metal muscles as they manoeuvred towards the mouth of the port. The submersibles' fish-like propulsion produced minimal wake as they increased speed. Once in the deep-water channels they submerged, bending and flexing their sleek fish-like hull, generating thrust and deadly precision as they patrolled beyond the Crossing Straits and out into the vast oceans of Solaz with predatory stealth.

By day the twins and Tama trained with the Zensumi and the Ba'Tharian League. They spent evenings on the terraces as many others did in Ur Choga. It was a relaxed atmosphere where musicians played, people danced, Tama and Rowan played the curved Ba'Tharian horn, Zina played the flute. Liam called it funk jazz Solazian style.

Tama and Liam were quick to learn Solazian poker and made a tidy profit the night they both won with three Sassind royal flushes. The next night Liam won the big winning hand with straight Demon Aces on high although a Ba'Tharian accused him of cheating. However, the Ba'Tharian retracted his accusation when a Zensumi held a stig blade to his throat, 'Zensumi, don't cheat.' Liam's reputation as an artist also grew his sketches purchased by traders who sold them in their markets.

Zina spent a lot of time in the library of Ur Choga where she read up on the strategies of war by the Zensumi master, her great-great-great grandmother, Sun Lee, 'Tama, when we take back my home roads I shall make you head of my warriors.'

'That's generous of you, Zina. But what makes you think I want to be head of the Zensumi warriors?'

'Don't be ridiculous of course you do.'

'Zina, you shouldn't assume such things.'

She flicked her hair back. Her hair smelt of apple-blossom, 'Well I just thought you might like to be.'

The vast terraces filled with night scents from the gardens. Along the side of the terraces were lapis lazuli statues of Ardash, Naqshe and other Ba'Tharian royals. And each evening there was the Ardaki Master's call. The Master's sound was a slow mesmerising drone. It was the sound of the sky and the earth. But even the sound of the Master was no longer placating the twins. They wanted to move on they were growing tired of waiting, 'When will the decision be made, Rowan?'

'Zina, you know, Lord Chen, will not make the final decision till the Mage arrives.'

‘So where is this, Mage?’

‘It is difficult to pin him down. He could be anywhere.’

Liam kicked out at the wall, ‘Well that’s just great isn’t it. We get sent to the Leylands for our own safety. Then when we return to take back the House of Zensumi we have to wait for some old, Mage.’

Liam kick boxed along the terrace in slow-mo, Zina joined him, two Zensumi guards followed suit. But Lord Chen, Commander of the Ba’Tharian League had been watching. He strolled along the terrace and stopped next to the twins. Zina raised her arms, breathed slowly in and out. She lowered her arms and bowed to Lord Chen. ‘I understand your frustration, Zina, but we wait for the, Mage.’

‘As you wish, Lord Chen.’

‘It is as I wish. And the Mage, is not far away. ’ Lord Chen sat down on the bench below the Bower tree. It was a restful place away from the pressures of the court. His long wavy hair fell down to his waist, and his ebony arms reached up to a branch. He picked off the bower fruit and quietly munched it as he listened to the evening call of the Ardaki Master.

In the distance the shadow of E’lil, the rukh, glided through the sky, like a ship rising the crest and swell of the thermals. E’lil called out his high-pitched shrill as he glided gracefully down onto the terrace of Ur Choga. On the giant eagle’s back was the Mage and also Shadze. Lord Chen and Rowan strolled over to the rukh. Chen took out seeds from his pocket and let E’lil peck them from his hand. ‘Welcome back, Mage.’

‘Good to see you, Chen. Hello there, Rowan – been a while.’

‘Evening, Mage.’

The Mage and Shadze climbed off the rukh's giant back. The Mage had a silver rod in his hand and a bat perched on his shoulder. The bat flapped its wings; its leafy nose sniffed the air, it bared its fangs, 'Tsist.' Lord Chen scratched the top of E'lil's head, 'I trust Lady Kee's assistants are surviving?'

'They're doing remarkably well, Chen, but told her I wouldn't send her any more if she didn't stop stinging them with venom.'

'How did she take that?'

'Not well I have to say. But she managed to put in a spot of hunting before she hibernated so she should wake up in a better mood this time.'

'That's good to know. Your quarters are waiting, Mage.'

'Appreciate it, Chen. Now I need a beer.'

The Mage strolled along the terrace. Rowan introduced him to Tama. The Mage shook Tama's hand, 'A Leyland Phaze Lord. Interesting.' Rowan introduced Liam and Zina. The Mage peered into their eyes, 'Lady Kee, believes in prophecies you know. I told her they're a load of rubbish. People make their own fate. I will catch up with you two presently.'

Shadze sniffed the twins, 'Smell of lilies they do.'

'Are lilies a good sign? Not that I believe in signs or portents of course.'

'Don't know, Mage. Maybe they are maybe they aren't. Lilies grow in Zensumi roads.'

'So they do. So they do. By the way, Rowan, heard there was a spot of bother on a Maze Road.'

'Black Nights.'

'Nasty.'

Illustration

Liam's winning hand in Solazian poker. Demon Aces on high

Illustration

Liam's sketch of the Ba'Tharian port. Drawn from the terraces of Ur Choga.

Liam's notes: House of Ba'Tha largest also base for many roads. Many off-rovers live here. League training mandatory for all who reside in Solaz House of Ba'Tha. Sand rigs training platforms. Pilots of battle cruisers trained here.

Ba'Tharian port base for trader land rigs and League cruisers. Tribes of Fey prefer to stay beyond the Southern Alps. Submersible pilots from Fey tribe of Julnar. Subs can reach the deepest underwater trenches. Dragon crotalus piloted by witch tribes from Borderlands.

Chapter Twelve

Tama and the twins were called into the Mage's quarters. His quarters smelt of malt and hops which was hardly surprising as it was next to the Ba'Tharian brewery on the third level. When they arrived Shadze was pulling out shards of glass and pottery and pieces of fabric and twigs and stones from her sack, she piled them up on the floor. Malson was there too, she was sipping a beer while she watched Rowan and the Mage play pool. The Mage looked up from the table, 'Good to see you three again. Did well in that poker game I hear. Champion stuff.' The Mage aimed his silver pool cue, 'Eleven ball side pocket.' *Clack.*

A python curled around the legs of the pool table. The snake hissed at Tama. Tama still felt uneasy about snakes. The bat was swinging upside from the ceiling directly over the pool table. It swung back and forward to its sound, 'Tsist... tsist... tsist.' Tama rubbed the fleshy part of his thumb, there was just a small silver scar there now but he remembered the sting of the bat's bite.

The Mage leaned across the pool table again, he aimed his silver pool cue, 'Nine ball corner pocket.' *Click. Clack.*

'You always were a superb player, Mage.'

'Thank you, Rowan.'

The Mage strolled round to the other side of the table. Could he take the five down and what about the three? He took aim, 'Five ball off the six. Six rebounds onto three - side pocket.' *Clickety-clack.* The five ball spun at the lip of the pocket before it fell in followed by the three. The Mage straightened up from his shot, 'Chen, is preparing to leave with the first Ba'Tharian League convoy. The Zensumi will travel with them.'

‘Then why aren’t we with them?’

‘Liam, Black wizard assassins would expect you and your sister to travel in that convoy. That is why I have arranged for decoy twins to travel with the Zensumi.’

Shadze called out in her hoots and whistles, then went back to stacking her treasure, ‘Golem twins. Mage, made them from clay he did. Shouldn’t have done that.’

‘That is enough Shadze,’ the Mage shot the seven into the side pocket. *Clack.* ‘Therefore you will be travelling back through the Noth roads. Malson, has arranged it. You will be safe on her sister’s ice rig, the crew can be trusted.’

The Mage walked around to the other side of the table, but he wasn’t looking at the pool balls on the green felt. He was observing Tama. He had done so well in the Maze Road but he was still so young to be an apprentice Phaze Lord – much younger than most. And the twins? He was the one who hadn’t been able to save their parents, even the healing hands of a Mage couldn’t undo what the Black Wizards had done to them. Would they make it? He did not know. But whatever else the Zensumi roads must open again and the Black Wizards destroyed before they invaded the rest of Solaz.

‘We leave tomorrow for the Noth roads.’

Shadze rocked back and forward holding up her yellow gem to the light, ‘Shadze, go too?’

‘Not this time. You should be there when Lady Kee awakens.’

The Mage leaned across the table. His silver pool cue aimed for the shot. *Clack.* The Mage potted the black.

Chapter Thirteen

A bitter wind blew from the Acherian Alps. A biting wind that chilled to the marrow as it rushed across the plains and through the chinks in the red wall. The wall known as the great boundary which could be seen even as far away as the port of Tethys. Beyond it lay the first rivers of ice. But very few travelled that way. Not even the land-rigs could cross the southern gateway into the ice roads of Noth. But the Mage knew a short cut. It was through the Ice Giants' chamber.

Tama, the twins, Rowan and the Mage walked as quietly as they could with crampons attached to their boots. The chamber's hue was a blue-green sheen. Ice extrusions curled around the ice plates and sheets of hexagonal crystals hung from towering vertical walls. Vast frozen waterfalls flowed in an eerie stillness into crevices in the rock walls. Giant ice pillars towered in the chamber and etched into the pillars was a variety of friezes many of them hunting scenes. Liam stopped to admire the giant bears and wolves chased by fire-breathing dragons. Creatures captured forever and forever in that pursuit of hunt. Liam ran his fingers over the frieze, so clear, so real. The artists of the pillars were masters of their craft. He just wanted to copy one. It would only take a minute, just one quick sketch. He opened his kit but one of his charcoal pencils rolled out. It rolled along the ice floor. The noise echoed throughout the still chamber. The others turned around and the chamber filled with the sound of cracking ice.

The Mage called out, 'Hurry, Liam.' But Liam slipped on the icy floor, he slid across the floor and smashed into a pillar. Behind him he heard the crunch of slow moving steps. The hexagonal crystals vibrated in the ice sheet walls. He

managed to scramble to his feet, it wasn't easy in crampon boots.

He ran back to the others waiting for him by the bronze door. But the cracking of ice grew louder. The Mage placed his silver pool cue into the giant lock. The lock clicked open. The door creaked slowly on its hinges. But just before Liam went through the door he looked back and from behind the pillars a giant hand of ice reached out, its huge fingers delicately picked up his charcoal pencil. Rowan closed the bronze door behind them and they were greeted by a windy icy blast.

They stood on the precipice of a cliff face. It formed part of a vast mountain chain that extended in a massive arc on both sides of them. But in front of them there was only the blue-white of the Ice Ocean extending to the horizon. Everywhere was the sound of wind, a bitter wind that chilled to the marrow. The Mage took out a vial of liquid from his pack, 'Sip this. Feysinthe will make the cold a little more bearable.'

Rowan led them off the cliff face, but before they descended there was the sound of crunching as a granite rock face sealed off the doorway leaving no indication that there was an entrance way there at all. The Mage unstrapped his cue case, he aimed it at the ground in front of where the doorway had been. A vortex of wind full of snow spun behind them wiping out their footprints. Rowan told them to hurry day light did not last long and it would be nearly dark by the time they made it to the base of the mountain.

They began descending down the side of the mountain, the going was tough but their spirits were high. Toward the bottom of the mountain Rowan stopped and pointed out across the vast Ice Ocean. It was so enormous the ice and the horizon seemed as one. Tama followed Rowan's line of sight and sure

enough there it was. Just a tiny speck moving against the vast blue-white sheen of the ice. The speck grew larger until they could all make out its sails. It was a rig, double-hulled, its base like the curve of a sled, and it was tacking across the Ice Ocean. Rowan picked up his kit and threw it across his shoulder, 'Quickly now. It's the Ice Maiden.'

They walked onto the ice sheet and they could feel the swells beneath the ice and the cracking and groaning of ice all around them. The rig reduced its sails but just like the land rig it didn't stop, instead a chain mesh was fired from the stern of the rig and they were winched aboard.

Once on board a woman wearing a brown coat strolled over to them. Her coat hung down to the tops of her black boots. She had a pair of goggles pushed back into her silver hair. And curled into the nape of her neck was a silver fox. 'I am Lillith, pilot of the Ice Maiden.' She yelled out to two riggers, 'Help the others and take care with the, Mage.' The riggers were dressed very much like her and they too had silver foxes perched on their necks. Tama whispered to the Mage, 'Why do they have those animals around their necks?'

'They are sylverns. All Noth people from the ice roads live with their foxes. They are inseparable.'

The silver fox wrapped its thick tail around her neck, 'Food and drink are ready below decks.' She led them across the deck to where a hatch opened to the level below and out of the hatch a tiny creature flying on a silver crystal mat flew about them. She had silver hair and rainbow eyes, 'Hello. I'm, Rhand. Busy, busy.' She somersaulted in the air and flew about Lillith, the silver fox snapped at her as she flew by.

'Rhand, check the inventory.'

'I've already checked it.'

'Then check it again will you.'

'Sure thing. Busy, busy, must go.'

She flew by one of the riggers he hit out at her, but she ducked his arms.

'I see you have an Ice imp working for you?'

'Yes, Mage. They're damn fine administrators. Shame this one bites though.' Lillith took them through to the galley. Riggers sat at the table their sylverns eating with them. They looked up and nodded at the new arrivals, but they said nothing to them when they sat down at the large table.

Rowan pulled up a winged chair on the other side of the room. A rigger brought him a beer, he sipped it, 'Ah, yes – Fey beer.'

The rigger grinned, 'Only the best on the Ice Maiden.'

As the Ice Maiden sailed across the Ice Ocean the vortex of wind stayed behind the rig wiping out even the tracks of the rig. It stayed with them until the mountains were no longer in sight. And then it was no more.

Chapter Fourteen

Lillith's rig sailed for many days across the southern Barrens. No one, except hardy ice riggers travelled that far south. There were no maps, no ice channels marked, just an ocean of ice and snow and wind and more wind.

The double-hulled rig traversed the mega snow dunes with ease. The dunes were like huge undulating waves on the ice sheet some miles long and many meters high. Tama and the twins helped on board, often reefing and adjusting the span and fullness of the sails to cope with the winds. The icy winds ripped into their skin, and if not for the Feysinthe they would not have coped with the freezing cold.

The sun was low in the sky and even at noon the sunlight spread thinly and shadows were long. But through the long nights the nightscape filled with Auroras, massive swirling ribbons lit up the sky. Like giant spectral ribbons curling one into the other whilst others ballooned in and out of existence. And in the nightscape there was always moon sign. The three small moons.

Lillith and the riggers were cordial but distant at first. On the second day Rhand bit Liam. It was a deep bite. The Mage had to apply a salve to release the poison. Liam eventually came out of the coma although it took nearly two days. By the third day, while Liam was still floundering in and out of consciousness Zina found her way into the lower cargo decks where she found ice swords that had been forged in the deep mines of the northern Barrens by dwarf smiths. She whirled one around the lower decks but in the process exploded a keg of beer. The Mage was not impressed and even though she was the heir to the Zensumi House Lillith threatened to have her thrown off the

rig. Rowan came to her rescue and talked Lillith out of putting her into solitary, instead she had to do extra sail duty.

The silver foxes eventually stopped growling at Tama and Rowan, and Liam emerged from his coma with no obvious after effects, the muscle spasms only lasted a little while. However, he should not have drawn comic strips on the Ice Maiden's dining hall. He should have at least asked Lillith first.

Lillith did not appreciate his dragons and snake women painted over the walls, and she had even less appreciation of Liam's scorpion woman, although some of the riggers felt it did give the room a certain artistic flair. She was furious.

Yet Liam was not going down without a fight. He reminded her of who he was, which didn't impress Lillith at all. Not only that but she needed to take responsibility for him being bitten by her administrator. Rhand was a danger to all on board and would not pass OSH standards; it defied all logic that her rig was given any sort of accreditation to sail the ice oceans.

The riggers nodded, clearly they were impressed by Liam standing up to Lillith although one asked what OSH was. The Mage finished his beer, 'Now calm down, Liam, you're not back in the Leylands now.'

'Excuse me, Mage, but I'm not finished yet. Oh and by the way have you a license for that Feysinthe?'

'Without it you'd be dead.'

'Okay, I'll let it go this time.'

Lillith, stroked her sylvern, 'Are you finished yet?'

'So I believe you could at least be a little more understanding and show some appreciation of my artistic talents.' She did not and he spent the rest of that day cleaning his designs off the walls.

But the next day the winds died down and the Ice Maiden was becalmed in a white-out. Nothing could be seen, the white mists curled into the decks below. And everyone on board feared the sirens. The sylverns did not utter a sound; Rhand wrapped herself in her crystal mat and hung silently below the roof like a teardrop. It was a day of quiet madness but the sirens did not come. Some riggers said it was because they had a Mage on board, others because of the Phaze Lords, but the cook said it was because the Zensumi twins were on board. Whatever the reason there was a change on board.

In the warmth of the lower decks one of the riggers started playing a fiddle, Zina was handed a flute and began playing along with him. Liam was given a pair of drums by another rigger, the swelling in his hand had gone and Rhand was banned from flying anywhere near him. Tama was given a Noth mountain horn. 'Here you go lad. See what you can do with it.'

It was made of wood and bound with copper bands. It was over eight feet long and although different from his trumpet and the Ba'Tharian curved horn he could play it like a natural. And he knew Tok liked the sound. The music began and the lower deck of the Ice Maiden was rocking.

When Zina wasn't jamming with the others she sang and danced. She swirled around the room her body moved to the rhythms. Riggers stood around her and clapped in time to the beat; the Mage joined in, Rowan played the mountain horn. Zina spun round the room and she pulled Tama into the fire of her dance. He whirled around the floor with her. When the music slowed they danced in each other's arms, and when it fired up again they moved in unison clapping to the beat. People danced around them but they became like a blur to them. They lost all sense of time as they danced into the long nights of the ice roads.

Tama and Zina grew closer and when there was a break in the music they sometimes slipped below the cargo decks and stood next to the warmth of the glowing Zalchite crystals, the main power source of the rig. Other times they went up on the top deck where they watched the dance of the Auroral lights. But one night there was a change. The fiery lights highlighted the contours of Zina's face and for a brief moment Tama caught a reflection of the light in her eyes. She moved closer to him and he couldn't resist brushing away that little fly-away piece of hair she was always tugging behind her ears.

'It's been a great night, Tama.'

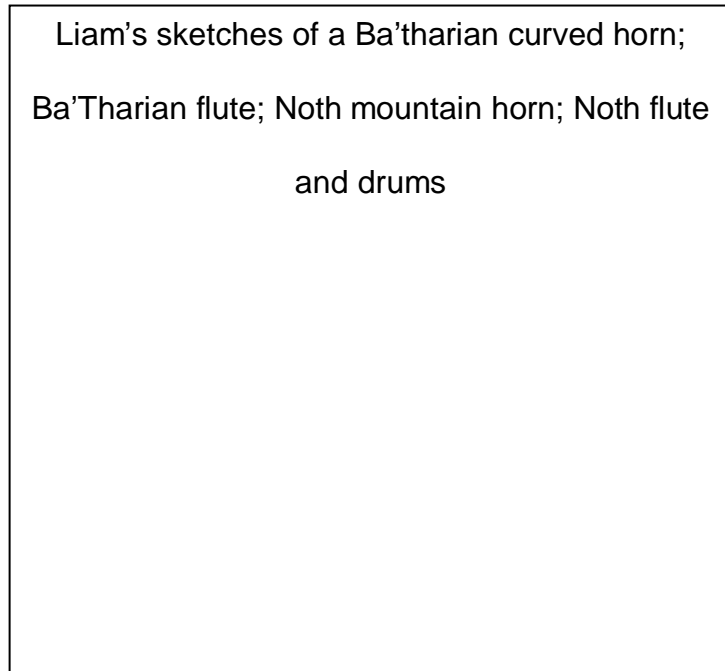
'It sure has.'

Her breath was warm. She was very close. His fingers brushed her lips. She did not push him away. But just as their lips brushed together the lower hatch door flew open and Liam yelled out, 'Hey you two!'

'Ah – later, Liam.'

'I don't think so, Tama. You and, Zina, get your butts in here now. The, Mage's, orders.'

Illustration



Chapter Fifteen

The sound of the horn blaring woke those below decks. The rig had crossed into the northern Barrens during the night and the first of the Watchtowers came into view. Beyond them was the lattice.

The Lattice was a web of silver ice lanes that crossed over a chasm so deep the Noth say it is infinite. Rising from below were spirals of spectral flux winds curling into the Lattice. The rig needed to be prepared for the crossing. A fine silver fey chain was placed around the perimeter of the rig and the grappling hooks were attached with the same silver chains. A rigger called out from below, 'We have full power, Greta.'

Rhand flew around Lillith, 'Do one last check, Rhand. Make sure the chains are all attached.'

'Sure thing. Busy. Busy.'

Rhand flew around the rig but she too had a tiny silver chain around her waist. The rig blasted its horn. 'One last check folks. All chains on!'

Lillith pushed back her goggles when she noticed the Mage standing at the front of the rig peering through a spyglass. She yelled out to him, 'Even you need them, Mage. Now put the chains on or I don't take this rig across the Lattice. '

The Mage put away his spyglass, 'Of course, pilot. Whatever you say. ' Riggers made adjustments to the rig's mat sails; Rowan and Tama swung from the crossbeams, landing on the sail platforms where they helped the riggers check the sails.

The twins had been sent below decks although they had both protested but Lillith had been insistent, 'You will stay with the sylverns and the cook.'

'But, Lillith, we can help.'

'I don't doubt that, Liam. However, I'm not having anything happen to you or your sister on my rig. Is that clear?'

'What about, Tama. Why don't you send him below decks too?'

Rhand somersaulted around Liam, 'Shall I punish him. Shall I, Lillith?'

Liam flicked his hand out at her, 'Get lost will you, Rhand.' Rhand bared her sharp teeth at him and then flew away.

'Tama, is not the heir to the Zensumi House. And an apprentice Phaze Lord is expendable. Now put your chains on and get below decks. You will both look after the cook. He gets very agitated when we cross the Lattice.'

The twins left in a huff but Zina stopped to give Tama a peck on the cheek, 'Tamakins?' She hadn't called him that in a long time, 'Be careful.'

'I will.'

She pouted her lips, 'Mwaah.' And with Liam beside her went below decks to the sylverns and the shaking cook.

A rigger called out from below, 'We have full power, Lillith.' The rig blasted its horn. Lillith piloted the rig around the giant Watchtowers waiting for the Keepers of the Towers to give the rig the all go. She held up her scope and surveyed the Lattice. The sparkling sails of another rig could be seen far in the distance, it was heavy with Zalchite crystals from the mines, but it was sailing in the direction of Thule, the capital of Noth. The Ice Maiden would not be following; it was going to the port of Hedon and would take another route across the Lattice.

- The Lattice sings, Tama.
- Oh really, Tok?
- I shall compose a sonnet.

- Do you have to?
- Yes. The Noth winds do blow. Hooray. Hooray.
- I don't think that's a sonnet.
- Two Noth riggers and a barrel of Ba'tharian rum.
- I don't think that's one either.
- Then I shall compose the great Solazian opus.
- That's a big undertaking.

Lillith sailed the rig round the towers building up speed. A long low blast came from the tower. The Ice Maiden sailed onto the Lattice. The flux winds below them created giant swells in the ice lanes. Lillith spun around the compass, Rhand sat cross-legged on her crystal mat behind her. She moved in unison with Lillith as she spun around the compass, 'Wind change.' The masts turned and the rig sails burst alive with myriad flecks of silver and blue, 'Steady as she goes.' The ice became thinner and bigger cracks appeared. Lillith slowed down the rig, 'Wind currents are strong here.' The screaming of the winds and the cracking and groaning of the ice was all around them. A vortex of spectral winds curled in front of them, 'Hard to starboard.' Tama and Rowan helped the riggers adjust the sails, but Lillith always knew the signs, 'Tack to the right of the fissures.' Where the sides of the Lattice thinned the winds were much stronger, 'We have a mega flux.'

The sails unfurled and below them a giant flux wind like a gaseous nebula billowed from the abyss below. The wind engulfed them, the Ice Maiden was battered by the winds

Out of the winds came the scream of the Lattice guardians. The Zalches who flew the flux winds. Their white membrane wings spread wide as they swooped and dived in the winds. One dived at the crow's nest. The rigger

screamed out. The Zalche's claws ripped the side of his face. The rigger staggered in the crow's nest, the Zalche flew by the rigger again, its wings whipped out smashing into him. The rigger collapsed. But the Zalche kept flying above the rig. Its red eyes searching the rig.

Another Zalche landed on the bow of the Ice Maiden. Its taloned claws clutched onto the side of the rig. It raised its long snout and then it folded its white membrane wings into its body. It did not move even as the Ice Maiden was battered in the winds. It turned its head from side to side and then it called out to others of its kin. Flocks of Zalches flew by the rig, spiralling and diving in the flux winds. The Zalche perched on the rig flapped its giant wings and flew into the flux winds following its flock. Another flux wind hit the rig side on but the grapples kept it anchored to the Lattice until the mega flux had passed. Lillith was back at the compass, 'Power her up. Full sail.'

The Ice Maiden made her way across the Lattice and into the borderlands of Noth. The rig past by the Watchtowers and followed the ice channels toward the port of Hedon.

Illustration

Liam's sketch of the Ice Maiden

Liam's notes:

Ice Rig made in the Green Shoal mines.

Fey silver and metal in rig design. Pilots trained from children to learn the Noth winds.

Full crew of 30 including rigger engineer. Engineer on this rig trained in Ba'Tharian battle rigs before here. Zensumi design in the canons – similar to Ba'Tharian trader rig.

Noth rigs only ones that can cross the Lattice. Sails woven by Noth weavers from Green Shoals – specialists, learned craft from Fey tribes of Julnar. Interesting that the submersibles in Ba'Tha port piloted by Julnar. Mines in the Barrens, best quality Zalchite crystals mined in deep Barrens. Noth rigs transport the crystal. Why did Rhand give me such a deep bite?

Chapter Sixteen

Hedon was a bustling ice port. Huge ice docks lined the quay. The rigs were loaded and unloaded. Rhands flew about supervising. The Ice Maiden sailed into the ice dock and there the twins, Tama, Rowan and the Mage disembarked. But as they were leaving one of the riggers wanted to give the Mage a sylvern for healing him after the Zalche attack; the cook wanted the twins to sign his copy of Zensumi poetry, and another rigger thought Tama should take the Noth horn as a memento, 'I really can't, Hugo.'

'Are you sure, Tama?'

'I'd love to but I just can't take it with me.'

The riggers waved them off as they walked across the rig bridge, some of the sylverns began to howl, even Lillith looked a little sad to see them go. Rhand flew above Liam, he hit out at her, 'Goodbye, Rhand.' She somersaulted on her mat, 'Busy. Busy. Must go.'

They left the port and took a sled into the township of Hedon. The sled was drawn by a silver wolf, the driver had a bulbous nose and grey beard.

'This close enough for you.'

Rowan flicked him a coin, 'Close enough, driver?'

The town was a maze of small streets and lanes. Full of shops and markets and Inns. Thick snow blanketed the streets and fires were kept alight in huge drums at the end of the lanes. People in thick coats huddled around the fire drums. Rowan and the Mage stopped to talk to a man with a long white beard. The man chewed something then spat red juice from his mouth. Rowan and the Mage walked into a shop with the man. The shop's sign read Traders' Exchange.

The twins read comics in a market stall. The stall had red and blue flags along the roof. It was next to the base of the street's towering white clock, 'Hey Tama these comics are cool flip 'em open and you've got dragons moving in the frames. They even blow out fire.'

'Later, Liam.'

A vendor called out, 'Peanuts, fresh peanuts.'

Tama didn't like fresh peanuts, which was strange because he liked peanut butter. He wondered if they had peanut butter here. Surely they would?

'Peanuts!'

'No thanks I don't like them.'

'Peanuts?'

'I just said I don't like them.'

'Please yourself. But make sure you don't get trapped here kid. This place is a dump.' Then he ignored Tama when two customers walked to his stall.

Tama noticed the tea-reading lady. She sat by the red brick steps of the Hog's Head Tavern. He sat down by her brazier. He gave her a coin. She bit it, then placed it in her pocket. Behind her the Hog's Head's wide doors opened, he could see inside. Inside was a crackling fire, the walls were grey stubble maybe they had once been white? The scent of feysticks in the bar let out a cloying sweetness, perhaps the bartender had them around the bar to hide the smell of oily riggers and traders and miners.

The tea lady lifted the clay pot, then strained steamy water through the leaves, swilling a copper-red into a small bowl. Behind her the Hog's Head doors opened again, Tama smelt something foul and salty, a dwarf miner was thrown out onto the street, 'And don't come back again till you pay your bill.' The doors slammed shut. The miner kicked the red steps and stormed off along the street. His boots leaving imprints in the snow.

- Hear the sounds?
- Yes, something is close, Tok.

The tea lady ignored the miner. She turned the bowl in her hands and offered it to Tama. He turned it in his hands. He lingered a while in the heady infusion of its bouquet. He sipped it and handed it back to her. She tipped the remaining fluid out into the snow, turned the bowl upside down and examined the leaves left behind, 'You are from a far off-road?'

Tama nodded but he didn't think that was a particularly insightful statement. He'd just wasted a gold coin. He saw the outline of people in the Hog's Head through the pane of frosted glass. There were spirals in the pink and grey glass.

Rowan had told him he must learn to observe all things, the smallest ripple in the winds, the falling of a leaf before its time, or hesitancy when someone speaks, even the twitching of an eye, 'These can all be signs, and you must learn to read them.'

A Noth rigger walked out of the Hog's Head, his sylvern snarled at Tama as they walked by. The tea lady tugged at her yellow scarf, 'I see you get distracted easily.'

'Sorry I missed that. What did you say?'

She smiled, it was a rueful smile. She had a slight twitch beneath her left eye. The hands on the clock moved. The twins put down their comics and sat at the base of the clock tower. The clock struck one... a figure loomed behind the spirals in the pink and grey glass. The tea-lady looked back at the clock. Line of sight from the Hog's Head window and the tea-lady directly pointed to the twins.

- We have phaze, Tok.

The clock struck two.... Tama ran to the clock tower in phaze shift. Liam and Zina never saw him. He pushed the twins to the ground. The glass from the Hog's Head shattered as the first assassin smashed through spirals in the pink and grey glass. The glass shattered on the ground. The tea-lady jumped over the brazier. Scythe blade in her hand.

The clock struck three... Tama intercepted the assassins' scythe blades. The two assassins went down. Blood red trickled into the white snow.

The clock struck four... Tama turned the body of the assassins over. Not a breath. Not a sound. Eyes dilated into black pools, staring back at nothing. Rowan and the Mage ran out of the Traders' Exchange. The twins were still picking themselves up from the ground. The sylvern unwrapped itself from around the Noth rigger's shoulder and snarled at Rowan. Rowan grabbed the rigger and threw him up against the wall, 'Where are the others?'

The rigger slumped down the wall and into the snow, his sylvern hid beneath a table, 'Don't know what you're talking about.'

Rowan grabbed him by the hair and pulled him up. He took out his blade, it ripped through the rigger's thick coat, it slashed into his skin. 'If you want to live then the truth or the blade goes deeper.'

The rigger clutched his chest, 'They paid me. I don't know anything else. I don't know if there are others. Honest.'

Rowan saw the rigger's hand go to his hilt. He had a scythe blade. Rowan's blade was so quick the rigger didn't have another chance to bleat. His body slumped to the ground.

'Well, Mage, what do you think?'

'I think we should leave Hedon very quickly, Rowan.' The peanut vendor called out, 'Anyone for fresh peanuts?'

The man with the white beard had followed the Mage and Rowan outside, he just spat his red juice on the ground, 'Rowan, you still want that old trader's map?'

'No thanks I can remember the way.' Rowan threw him a coin, 'And clean up this mess.' The bearded man bit the coin, 'What ever you say.'

Chapter Seventeen

'Mage, says too much venom, Lady Kee.'

Lady Kee slammed her rattling tail into a dune, 'Who is the, Mage, to tell me?'

Shadze put her gem back in her sack, 'Sorceress told him she did.'

'So what?'

'So what. So what. Lady Kee's, grains of sand that's so what?' Shadze tied the top of her burlap sack into a knot, 'The one of three played in the key of the Ardaki he did?'

Lady Kee coiled herself around the plinth, 'Don't you think I know that.' She flicked her tongue in the air, scenting prey. She turned her head from side to side, 'His blade is, Tok.'

'Is that the one?'

'We shall see.'

Chapter Eighteen

Rowan located the road that led them into the Borderlands. The road closed behind them. It was a green road. There were red and yellow parakeets in the trees. It was a place where trees were so huge the Borderland witches lived in the boughs and their branches. The witches chanted their call through the mists. A call that greeted the Mage, Rowan, Tama and the twins to their roads.

Beneath the falls of Rapsen a dragon crotalus glided onto a ridge. The pilot climbed off the dragon and placed a crimson gem beside it. The dragon's scales rippled as it curled itself around it and slept. The pilot strolled down the wild orchid path, male witches walked behind her. Zina laid down her stig blade. The pilot picked it up, 'I am Leah, daughter of Saav. My coven welcomes our cousins of the Zensumi roads back.'

Days fell one into the other on the green roads. More arrived from different roads and rested before the time would soon come to leave. Tama and the twins swam in the cool of the dragon pools. They rode horses along the banks of the river Ten Shen. Tama learnt to play a witch flute. Leah taught Zina and Liam how to pilot a dragon. The Mage played a lot of chess and a lot of pool with witches. Rowan spent his time wandering through the green roads. But all knew they would soon have to leave. The Black Wizards had already taken over other roads. Tok watched. Listened. Observed.

- I like to dream. Do You?
- Yes, Tok. I do.

Illustration

Liam's sketch of Zina flying a dragon crotalus

*Liam's notes:
Way to go sis!*