

1. THE DEPARTURE

'Vasa's Curse, what's the meaning of this, girl? Come and look. Quickly.'

Maara was sprawled on a straw pallet on the floor of the Mariner cottage she shared with her uncle down by the harbour of Shoogmunimera.

She was admiring the bruise on her left arm, where a Conqueror guard in the palace kitchen had pinched her that day. He'd been furious because she could not perform culinary miracles with the meagre ingredients she'd been given for cooking the palace meals for his leader, Udus the Reformer.

'Huh? What?' She snapped out of her daydreaming and realised her uncle was calling her. He was standing at the cottage window.

'Get up, girl. Over here. Now.'

He was certainly agitated. Maara scrambled to her feet and ran across to the window.

She gasped. 'What are they doing?'

Open-mouthed she stared at the stream of soldiers passing by their door in the fading evening light. Conqueror soldiers, the terrible army founded by the tyrannous father of Udus, Shoog the Awesome, who had invaded from the Land Beyond and taken the city by force a hundred years ago.

'I heard rumours at the palace that Udus had ordered them to assemble on the shore. They must have been true,' Maara muttered, half to herself. 'We thought it was just kitchen tittle-tattle.'

Her uncle only shrugged.

'But why?' she persisted. 'And where are they going now?'

'Maybe some military exercise,' her uncle said.

Maara shook her head. She scarcely dared to believe what her eyes were telling her. 'It looks as if they're leaving,'

'Don't be ridiculous,' her uncle replied.

'But they must be – look.'

They watched in stunned silence.

At first came the cavalry. Even the horses looked old and half-starved, ribs protruding through emaciated bodies, eyes sunk deep into their skulls. The skinny horsemen astride them were mere reflections of the arrogant, stocky slave masters that had whipped the people into compliance that very afternoon. Their hairless heads, once cosseted in elegant, plumed fur caps, were exposed to the bitter winter wind and the usual grey-green of their skin had taken on a painful-looking red glow.

After them came the infantrymen, heads bowed and dragging their feet as if every step were a colossal effort. Their crimson uniforms were worn and faded. Golden buttons were tarnished.

Maara's head was filled with confusion. There had been no warning to the people of the city, - no siren, no bells, no proclamation. As evening wiped away the incandescence of another cold, pestilent day it appeared that the Conquerors were simply marching out of their lives.

Hour after hour through the night endless streams of soldiers clattered along the seashore.

'What's going on?' Maara whispered again and again, but her uncle shushed her, an uncharacteristic look of fear in his sea-blue Mariner eyes.

'Why don't we go out and follow them?'

'Are you mad?' He glared up at her. 'Pity your brain couldn't keep pace with your body.'

Maara shrugged. She was used to snide remarks from other Mariner Folk about her height, which was the only way in which her appearance differed from theirs. The girl, who wouldn't stop growing. Her uncle, who knew the truth, was usually protective, but when he was angry he sometimes lashed out too. Maara did not blame him. She knew she could be wilful and demanding. She

marvelled that he had not put her out onto the streets long ago. Not every uncle would have given a home to the newborn child of his dead, misguided sister in such dangerous times.

Maara tried again. 'I could run up to the Trumpeters' house. They will know what's going on.'

He did not react. He seemed transfixed by the scene outside.

'Uncle?'

He gestured angrily to her to keep quiet and not interrupt his vigil. Maara saw her chance. She backed away leaving him standing like a statue at the window. Silently she threw on her worn old cloak. Then she slipped silently out of the cottage.

It was still dark, although midnight had passed hours ago. Keeping to the shadows in the moonlight, thrown first by the Mariner cottages, and then, further on, by the tall, half-ruined houses of Timekeepers and Scribes, Maara darted up the hill, flitting past endless rows of stumbling foot soldiers. If they noticed her, they showed no sign. They seemed intent only on keeping their tired bodies moving. Still, she kept a wary eye on them and made sure she stayed out of sight as far as possible.

She stopped outside a Scribe's crumbling brick home, palatial in size compared with Mariner dwellings and much larger than other Scribe houses, but even so, smaller than the Timekeeper's massive abode next to it. She glanced around and listened. No sound emanated from the buildings. Maara sensed the watchers behind the shuttered windows of the Timekeeper's house. The big Scribe house, that she knew so well, exuded only emptiness.

Its door pushed open easily as the lock had disintegrated long ago.

'Hallo,' she called softly. 'It's me, Maara. Where are you?' She ran from room to room of the cavernous house, lit only by moonshine, but found no-one. The Trumpeters were not at home. She ran back outside, into the path of the slow procession of soldiers. Looking at them she felt something akin to pity, not fear. They were a pathetic sight. They were incapable of doing any more harm.

Pulling herself up to her full height, she called to one of the men.

‘Where are you going?’

‘Home,’ the soldier replied weakly. ‘Home to the Land Beyond - to Cartethia.’

‘What has happened?’ she asked.

‘It is over. Our time has come.’

Maara walked alongside, keeping pace with the soldier as the army clattered past the last of the tall houses and entered the old-town, where the huddled, stone homes of Anvil People crowded together on either side of the cobbled main street. On and on they stumbled, traversing the whole of the old-town, until eventually they reached the far side of the city, pouring out of the Northern Gate without a single backward glance. From a vantage point on the old-town wall Maara watched for hours in the night as the parade filed out, row upon row. She thought it would never end. But just as the first daylight smudged a pastel glow across the sky, the last stragglers disappeared into the mountains that separated the city from the Land Beyond.

Not a soul was to be seen on the sea front, or on the street that wound past Maara’s home when she returned to it. She let herself in. On the straw pallet that served as their seat during the day and her uncle’s bed at night, he had fallen asleep after his long vigil.

She peered out of the frosted window. The sea was restless beneath the pale winter sun. Ugly grey waves splashed uneasily against long-abandoned fishing boats drawn up on the sand. The silence, apart from the occasional soft snore from her uncle, was eerie. So different from the dreaded daily morning sound that had punctuated the fourteen years of Maara’s life until today.

For the past century the hideous wail of sirens had ordered the citizens out of their beds and onto the streets each morning. Some would head for the factories and furnaces to manufacture weapons for the enemy. Others made their way into the surrounding countryside. Here they were harnessed to the plough for eighteen hours each day to till the soil and grow crops for the occupying

troops, whilst their own people starved.

Maara struggled to understand what had happened. Was her torment really over? From the age of three she had been a palace kitchen-girl. The other Mariner children of her age were forced to clean farm and foundry machinery inaccessible to larger folk. But Maara was too tall. Instead she worked alongside captured child-slaves, taken from their homes when their parents had fallen foul of the Conquerors. The slaves were marched to the palace daily from their prisons in the Child Improvement Centres. Maara counted herself lucky. Her uncle had managed not to offend the Conquerors, so she had been allowed to live at home.

Lately she had been beaten frequently for failing to create sumptuous meals from the dwindling supplies. Meals that she was forbidden, on pain of death, from tasting. But today no siren ordered her to leave her uncle's house and hurry up the hill and through the old-town to the palace.

'Did I dream it?' Maara turned from the window as she addressed her uncle. But he slept on, unaware that she had returned. Unaware, probably, that she had even been away.

Then she decided to do what she always did, when she felt alone and confused.

She slipped back out of the cottage and made her way to the quay. There she wandered along the deserted jetties to a small sailboat hidden amongst the Mariners' fishing boats, away from the eyes of the Conquerors. Her uncle had made it for her when times were less harsh and there was wood to spare.

Maara clambered on board, the little craft swaying in the water, rocking her uncle's neighbouring fishing boat. She settled on the wooden seat, tucking under her the folds of her coarse, brown goat-hair tunic - the garb issued by the Conquerors to the slave-citizens of Shoogmunimera, and the only type of clothing that most of them now owned.

Bending down, she tugged at the floor plank in front of her. After a few moments' struggle, it yielded, and she pulled it up, resting it against the seat edge.

She reached her hand down into the bowels of the boat, and pulled out a wad of rough, yellowing, curling papers. Blowing the dust off them, she settled back in her seat. It was a ritual she had followed many times. She ran her fingers lovingly over the top sheet, recalling the painstaking way the paper had been made, seven years ago when she was still a little girl: how she had secretly helped the Trumpeters mash old scraps of worn out clothing in great tubs of water, until the fibres floated free. Then they had sieved and beaten and flattened and dried them until at length a wonderful square of heavy paper resulted. Maara had never tired of the process.

She remembered how the Scribe, Arolan, had sat for hour after hour at the great stone table in the Trumpeters' house, writing with a quill-feather pen in his marvellous, swirly Scribe script. And finally and best of all, when each page was completed, Maara remembered with pride how it had been handed to her, and, hiding it beneath her cloak, she had hurried down to the harbour and added it to the cache already hidden in her boat.

'Remember, Maara, Scribe history is in your hands,' Arolan had told her. 'The Conquerors will not suspect you.'

'What will they do if they find out?' she had asked, a sense of adventure banishing any fear.

'They must never find out, my child. You are very special, Maara. A child with three blessings. That is why we have entrusted this great work to your care, although you are so young.'

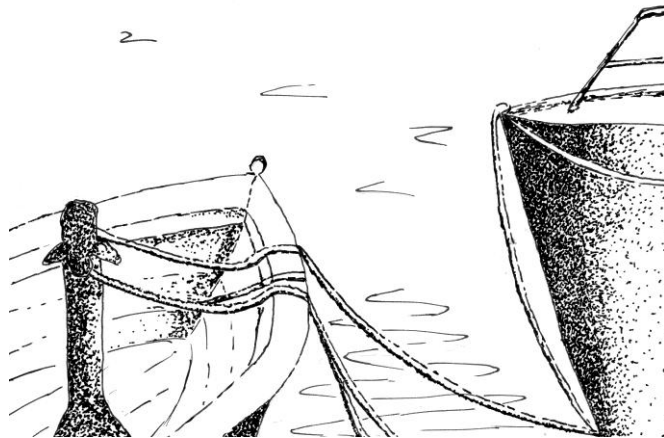
Arolan's words made no sense to Maara, but she liked the idea of being special, and of having three blessings, whatever they might be.

'May I read the story, Arolan?'

'Yes, Maara. You alone, among all the Mariners, know the secret of reading. Use it well, and learn the story of how the Scribes came to Shoogmunimera, which was called Ambamar before the time of the Conquerors. One day it may save your life, and that of others.'

Now, after an incomprehensible night watching the Conquerors

leave her land, Maara tucked her feet under the seat of the skiff and began, as she had done many times, to read the fantastic tale inscribed on the yellowed pages.



2. CARTETHIA

The Story of the Scribe People.

As written down secretly by the Scribe, Arolan, during the Occupation.

Even in the far distant days of the Anvil queen, Selme, all peace-loving peoples were in constant fear of invasion from the Land Beyond. Many turned to the Scribes, asking for their help. It was hoped that if the Scribes could teach them the habits of peace, by making them take pride in their laws and their people, the bellicose rulers of the Land Beyond would forget their aggressive ways.

There lived, in those days long ago, a Scribe called Aban. He was very brave as well as learned. For this reason he and the ten members of his family decided to venture into the Land Beyond and offer their services there. Accompanying Aban were his wife, son and daughter, as well as Aban's brother, Oran, with his wife and five children. It was a daring plan, not without risk, although hospitality to visiting strangers was an unwritten law among all mortals, therefore they did not feel in fear of their safety, only of rejection.

They arrived in Cartethia – which is what its inhabitants called the Land Beyond. Wisely, and as a matter of precaution, they had hidden the chest containing their most sacred scrolls and quills, as well as box full of gold, rubies and other jewels, in a hill-cavern some distance outside the main city. If all went well, they would come back for them later.

When they entered the city Aban and his family were surprised to find it quiet. The few people on the wide streets walked head down, casting fearful glances around. Cartethians were smaller

than the Scribes, grey-faced, the men hairless, the women's heads roofed by a thin coating of dark hair. They did not seem to notice the Scribes. Aban stopped a Cartethian woman clutching a child. Her clothes hung from her shoulders in dirty, ragged strips. It seemed that the rumours Aban had heard were true. The people were kept in poverty, living in mud huts on the city outskirts and in damp caves in the hillsides.

'Good lady,' Aban said, 'can you tell me the way to the palace?'

At once the woman raised her head, her lavender eyes flashing fear. 'Palace? No-one ventures there. Keep away from that place, friend. Especially today.'

'Today? What is afoot?'

'Have you not heard? The king's son is sick.'

At that moment the party was surrounded by three Pixilian slave-guards in black, shining armour, with pikes and daggers. Like Cartethians they were slightly shorter than the Scribes, but bronzed, wiry and powerful. Aban had heard of them. They were a formidable sight. Now he could see why the king employed them as his guards.

The Scribes were taken – nay, dragged – by the guards to the king, Gomerad the Gruesome, in his castle, which was called Everlasting. It had been built in ancient times by captives. Gomerad's magnificent palace was in stark contrast to the poor dwellings of his people. Only the guards strutted about the streets displaying their privileged status and instilling fear into the hearts of citizens.

The Everlasting Castle was immense. Built in a patchwork of great blocks of black marble and granite, its interior walls were encrusted with rubies, emeralds, diamonds and many other jewels stolen from distant lands. The Scribe family was propelled through sparkling rooms until at last they stood in the throne room, made even more spectacular by shards of mirror covering the ceiling, creating a shimmering kaleidoscope of colour. The king sat on his golden throne, fanned by slaves with peacock feathers. His Cartethian baldness was covered by a magnificent golden crown,

studded with jewels. His robes were of crimson velvet edged with the soft white fur of rare forest hares. He leant forward and peered at the pale, dark-haired Scribes in their long black woollen tunics, with obvious disdain.

‘What are these things?’ His question was addressed to the guards. ‘Who presumes to bother the king on such a mournful day with such filth?’

‘Sire, these are Scribes.’ The slave-guard leader spoke in trembling tones, far removed from his earlier bravado. The change was not lost on Aban. ‘They say they have a great gift to offer Your Majesty.’ He bowed so deeply that he was practically doubled up.

The king did not hide the sneer on his face. ‘These? Presume to offer a gift that is worthy of your mighty ruler?’ He laughed out loud, the sound echoing through the room. Then he addressed Aban. ‘Well? Speak, trash. What have you to say for yourself?’

Copying the guard, Aban bowed low. ‘Your Majesty,’ he said in the language of Cartethians, for Scribes have the Gift of Tongues, ‘my people and I have come to be of service to you. We are teachers, recorders of history and law. We offer to create for Cartethia an eternal book of the story of your people, and an account of the great and noble laws of the land.’

Aban raised his eyes to meet those of the king, and recoiled. The pitiless, icy expression on the king’s face struck horror into his heart. He suddenly understood that their mission was doomed. He thought of his family. Stay calm, he told himself. For them, you must persevere.

Keeping his voice steady, he continued, ‘We offer to teach the skills of reading and writing to your people, so that their hearts will swell with pride and love for their king and country. In return we ask only for shelter and sustenance until the work is complete.’

The king exploded with anger. ‘We are all powerful, the greatest ruler on this earth,’ he cried. ‘What need have we of such tricks?’ He scrutinised the Scribes, his eyes narrowing until his black bushy eyebrows met. Then a gleam of inspiration spread across his features.

He turned his attention to the slaves-guards. 'How dare you bring purveyors of the dark arts into my palace. Now I understand why my son has the ague. They have brought a curse into my kingdom. Take these infiltrators to the execution field. Destroy them so that the prince may recover.' He flung open his arms, knocking the peacock fans out of the hands of his slaves. The three Pixilian slave-guards sprang to their feet.

'Get along with you, scum.' The slave-guards pushed the Scribe family, who were shocked beyond reaction, out of the king's presence, prodding adults and children alike along by the sharp points of pikes. Aban managed to whisper to his wife. 'Keep faith, all is not finished. These guards live in terror. A little bribery may yet win us our freedom. Whatever they ask, obey without fear. If I am right, no harm will come to us.'

The guards herded them out of the city through the South Tor. Aban had heard of this notorious gate. He'd heard that it was only used to lead prisoners to the place of execution. At the far side of the gate they found themselves in a muddy field surrounded by high walls. Aban knew at once that the rumours were true.

The lead guard, who could not speak the language of the Scribes, gestured the family onto their knees facing a wall. Slowly and with dignity they began to kneel, Aban's wife clutching a child in each arm. But Aban remained standing. As the lead guard put out an arm to force him onto the ground, Aban looked straight into the man's eyes. The guard stopped short. He seemed uncertain, as if he sensed that the Scribe had seen the slavish fear beneath the outward brutality. Aban saw his chance.

'Wait,' he said, speaking in Pixilese, the language of the guards. 'Hear me out.'

The guard was so taken aback at being addressed in his own language that he stared, open-mouthed at Aban, who continued, before his captor had a chance to react.

'You Pixilians may be privileged slaves, but nevertheless you are slaves.'

This angered the guard. He shoved Aban hard. 'Kneel, scum!'

But Aban stood his ground. 'You live in fear of displeasing the king. You have even been forced to execute your own kin, if they fall out of royal favour. For all your posturing you know that you might be next to feel the blade on your neck.' He leant towards the guard and whispered, 'I can give you back your freedom.'

The guard lifted his pike to strike Aban, but then lowered it slowly. For a moment he stood eyeing Aban uncertainly. Then he moved his gaze beyond the Scribe's face. 'Speak,' he said.

'I have riches hidden in a safe place. Rubies, diamonds, coins of gold. One of my rubies will buy you a camel. One diamond will keep you in food and clothing for a month. A single gold coin will buy you a roof over your head.' Aban paused and watched the guard digest this information. 'Let my family go. Your reward will be freedom.'

'How do I know you are telling the truth?'

'Let them go, and I will take you to where I have hidden the treasure. If I lie, you may kill me.' It was risky, Aban knew that. The guards could easily take the jewels and kill him anyway. But at least his family would have a chance to get away.

The leader glanced round at the other two guards. They were standing over the kneeling family, pikes pointed in threat, but ears tuned to the conversation between Aban and their leader. The exchange had been too quiet for them to follow, but a word or two had filtered across to them – Aban had made sure of that. He had raised his voice when he had spoken of riches, rubies, gold and diamonds.

The lead guard pushed Aban again. 'Face the wall. You move and you're a dead man.' Aban did as he was told and he heard the man scrunch his way across the mud to the other guards. Incomprehensible murmurs drifted across to Aban. The debate went on for several minutes.

The leader came back to Aban and ordered him to turn round. 'We all go. They too.' He nodded his head towards Aban's family. 'If you speak the truth, we will let you go. If you lie you all die.'

Aban shook his head. 'Oh no. My family goes free now. We

wait until they have disappeared from view, then I take you. Otherwise no deal and you can carry out your dirty deed. We are not afraid. Remember the words of the king. Scribes have knowledge of the dark arts. The Great Spirits will wreak revenge on our killers.'

It worked. The slave-guard gestured to his underlings to raise the Scribe family onto their feet. He pointed to an old wooden gate in the wall facing the South Tor. 'Open it.'

Then he addressed Aban's family. 'Start walking. Do not look back. Go.'

The Scribes looked around, confused. 'Not without Aban,' his brother Oran exclaimed.

Aban called to them, speaking in Scribe tongue. Visibly reassured, they slowly filed out of the execution field. Aban and his three captors watched until they had climbed over a distant ridge and were beyond sight.

The Pixilian guard prodded Aban. 'Now you. Go.'

In silent single file, Aban led his three captors away from the city walls, through the gate and away from the field of execution.

'Make haste,' the leader said. 'If we do not return within the hour with proof of your execution they will send out a search party. By then we must be well away from this land.'

They walked on for some twenty minutes, which seemed like a day.

'Over there.' Aban pointed to a rugged outcrop of rock rearing like a torn sail from the flat landscape. Forest surrounded it and soon the little party plunged into the pinepear trees. These were close together, too close for vegetation to have taken hold on the forest floor, but the ground was thick with fallen needles, which were soft under their feet and slowed them, and a heavy odour of rotting pinepears made breathing difficult. The guards were getting agitated, glancing around them fearfully, now that the view back to the city was impaired.

At the foot of the hill, Aban turned to the guards. 'So. Now we climb.'

For another eternity they clambered and hauled themselves up the sheer rock face by their hands until they were all exhausted. When they reached a wide ledge, the guards collapsed on the ground, panting, staring down across the treetops to the city. All appeared quiet.

'You're looking in the wrong direction.' Aban's voice was loud in the still air. 'Our destination is in front, not behind.' The guards glanced round. Still some way above them a huge fissure gaped like an open jaw in the face of the rock. The guards gave a howl as if they had seen a ghost and scrambled backwards towards the rock edge as if to put as much distance as they could between themselves and the black hole. Aban smiled inwardly. The rumours that circulated generations of Scribe gatherings were true. Pixilians did have a horror of caves.

'Something ails you?' Aban asked in mock innocence.

'I ain't going no further,' one of the guards growled. 'There's evil abounding, that's for sure.'

The leader threw him a livid glance. 'Go back then. Throw yourself on the mercy of Gomerad. 'Tis all the same by me if you'd rather get yourself piked. More riches for the rest of us, eh?' He poked his other comrade with his elbow. The fellow looked fearful but held his tongue.

The first one spoke again, fighting to control his tremulous voice. 'That ain't what I meant. I thought, see, if we all go into that hole, we'll be fair game for Gomerad's troops creeping up on us. I reckon one of us ought to stay here and keep watch.'

'That's true,' echoed the second guard, too eagerly. 'I'll stay with him. Four eyes is sharper than two.'

'By Holy Pixilius you won't.' The slave-leader's eyes flashed. 'You'll damned well do as I say. I'm in charge here. You'll bring out the riches while I keep watch.'

The first guard still cowered on the edge of the rock face. 'Now look here, Rastus, there ain't no leaders no more. We're all equal away from that place.' He jerked his head back in the direction of the city. 'And there's two of us what says we're staying. So unless

you want to fight the both of us, you're going.'

Aban glanced at the lead guard and saw the dilemma written on his features. He'd lost face, he was fearful of the cave and yet, it seemed he had no option but to let Aban lead him into this place of terror.

'Cowards,' he sneered, as he struggled to his feet and started after Aban, who had resumed his climb.

By the time they reached the cave mouth Rastus was visibly shaking, though he was trying hard to disguise this, by wrapping his black, guard-leader cloak closely around him. Aban watched him scouring the rock-face.

'Only one way down. And that's the way we came up. No way you can avoid your friends.' Aban's voice betrayed his amusement. 'Come on then, Rastus.' He said the leader's name with the impertinent glee of one who knows the balance of power has shifted slightly in his favour. 'Let's go inside. Only watch your step. It's wet and slippery.'

The guard took a reluctant stride after Aban towards the cave.

'And dark,' Aban added. But still Rastus followed. Damn the fellow. This was not meant to happen. He was meant to be a coward, like the other two. Aban hadn't banked on Rastus agreeing to go into the cave.

'Take care,' Aban called loudly as he clambered into the cave-mouth ahead of the slave-guard. His voice echoed through the vastness around him. Take care, take care, take care...

Rastus, hard on Aban's heels, grabbed hold of the Scribe's arm. 'Wait,' he said. 'I ain't going to trust you that easy. Know your sort. Bound to try and give me the slip in this blackness.'

A shallow excuse to disguise his fear, Aban reflected. It was dark but the cave entrance lent a little light, even as they made their way to the back of the huge cavern. Their eyes quickly learnt to pick out dim shapes. Stalagmites rose from the floor like miniature volcanoes and stalactites draped elegantly down from the roof.

The slave-guard's grasp tightened on Aban's arm. He felt the

tip of the pike between his shoulders. Rastus was too strong for him to fight. In any case, what did a Scribe know about fighting? There was no escape. Aban cursed silently. He had no alternative. He would have to give Rastus the Scribes' treasure box. All of it. Now he'd have no chance to slip a few bits and pieces behind a convenient rock before taking the box outside and handing it over to the guard, who should have been waiting there. Aban resigned himself. At least his family's lives were safe, even if Rastus had a mind to kill him.

They stumbled on, ever deeper into the cave. The light grew fainter. Now the shapes loomed up suddenly like ghosts. The noises started. Distant moans. Distant but echoing. Aban could feel Rastus shaking, but the guard spurred him on. Aban could not help but admire the Pixilian's courage. The promise of wealth, it seemed, was enough to overcome the greatest of fears.

'Over here,' he told the guard, leading him behind a series of stalagmites. There he stopped. In front of them, in the faint light, was water. Impossible to gauge its depth or its extent but it was as still as a void. Only a distant drip, drip, drip gave it away and sent the occasional shudder across its surface. A white mist rose from it in patches like low clouds. Pervading the air was a sharp, sulphurous odour.

Aban crouched down, the guard hovering above him. The Scribe was not afraid. He knew that if Rastus took it into his head to push him into the pool, he would not only forfeit the treasure, but would also have to find his own way out of the cave.

Plunging his hand deep into the icy water, Aban felt around until the sharp edge of the box jarred his hand. It was not a very big box and he pulled it up easily.

'This box holds my family's treasure,' Aban said as he straightened up and faced the terrified Pixilian. 'It is yours as promised, though I don't suppose, in your mercy, you would see fit to leave me a small part of it?' He almost added I have the key. No-one else can open it, but thought better of it.

'Give that to me.' Rastus tore the box from Aban's hand. 'Give

you part of it? We'll see about that – outside. Now make haste. This place stinks of evil.'

Aban no longer had any doubts. He had sensed the loathing in the Pixilian's voice. Rastus meant to kill him as soon as they stepped foot outside the cave. He would probably go on to dispose of the other guards too, eventually. The Pixilian was brave, strong and scheming. This was no ordinary adversary. Not even the horrors of the cave had defeated him.

He led Rastus away from the water and around the barrier of rock formations, after which the cave entrance once more came dimly into view. The guard's hand was still clenched tightly around Aban's arm. The distant light made the immediate surroundings appear even blacker. They stumbled forward feeling their way on the slippery rock floor.

At that moment, a terrible howl exploded from behind them. It echoed around the cavern, getting louder and louder, supplemented by more howls from the bowels of the cave. It was as if some monstrous wolf was chasing them. Both men glanced back to the source of the sound. In the darkness they made out a shadowy form flitting in and out of the rocky outcrops, getting nearer as they watched.

'Holy Pixilius!' Rastus dropped Aban's arm. 'The spirits! Move, man, move!' He prodded Aban with his pike. Aban gave a cry and stumbled. He lost his footing and fell heavily against a stalagmite.

'Get up, fool!' The Pixilian was screaming now. 'Get up and get me out of here.'

'I can't,' Aban gasped. 'My robe is caught up between these rocks. You must cut me free. Hurry.' Quietly he felt around on the ground until his hand lighted on a large stone. He closed his fist around it.

Rastus cursed and began to bend over Aban. He seemed to be fumbling in his doublet for his dagger with the hand that was not clutching the box.

Suddenly the howling sound grew louder as if it had jumped through space and was almost on top of them. The Pixilian sprang

back, gave a roar of terror and rage, and lashed out at Aban with his foot. 'Stay there and die, damn you,' he shrieked. Then he spun round and lurched down the cave towards the entrance followed by howling shadows.

Now it was Aban's turn to curse. His plan to overpower the Pixilian had failed. The fellow was athletic and fast. By the time Aban had struggled to his feet it was too late to set off in pursuit. Rastus had got away with the treasure box. He would not be able to open it, but that was hardly the point. It was lost to his family. Now they were totally dependent on their writing tools, which were also hidden in the cave.

As soon as Rastus disappeared over the cave's lip into daylight silence returned. Aban did not move. He stood statue-still. Some moments later distant raised voices penetrated the cave from further down the mountain. Then a horrible scream. Silence again. So, Aban mused, at least one of the three had been pushed off the mountain.

Aban waited a few more moments before speaking quietly. Still his voice echoed softly around the cave.

'It's safe now.' He brushed unseen detritus from his cloak.

Nearby a light flared. Someone had lit a torch. In its glow Aban could make out the face of Oran, his brother.

They embraced. Aban was distraught. 'Will you ever forgive me?' he said, clutching his brother to him.

'Nay, 'tis I who needs forgiveness, not you. I meant to scare the creature into clinging to you, not making off like that.'

'Tis my bungling that caused him to follow me into the cave in the first place, brother. I should have scared him more.'

Aban's brother gave a bitter laugh. 'You did not scare him enough and I frightened him too much! What a pair of conspirators we've turned out to be!'

Aban smiled broadly in the torchlight. 'Scribes were never meant to be soldiers. We've proved that now. Come on, let's get the writing chest and find the family. Where did you leave them?'

'Other side of the mountain, on the road out of this cursed Land

Beyond. They're hiding in an oak forest, but they'll be hungry and worried by now.' As they talked they moved towards the cave entrance. Just inside, to the left behind a pillar of limestone, they had concealed a heavy trunk. Grasping a handle each they pulled it out and staggered back out onto the narrow ledge in front of the cave. They did not attempt to manoeuvre their burden down the sheer rock face. Turning right they followed the ledge round until they reached the back of the mountain, where a steep but easy pathway led down to the base.

'I told the Pixilian there was only one way up and down,' Aban said, laughing at his small victory...

Maara lowered the page. Her eyes ached from the strain of reading in the half-dark of a murky dawn. She blinked a few times and yawned. After a night without sleep, and all the accompanying excitement, exhaustion was catching up with her. She tucked the Scribe papers back into their hiding place and dropped the decking back into place. Then she slid onto the planks and, wrapping her cloak around her, fell asleep.

