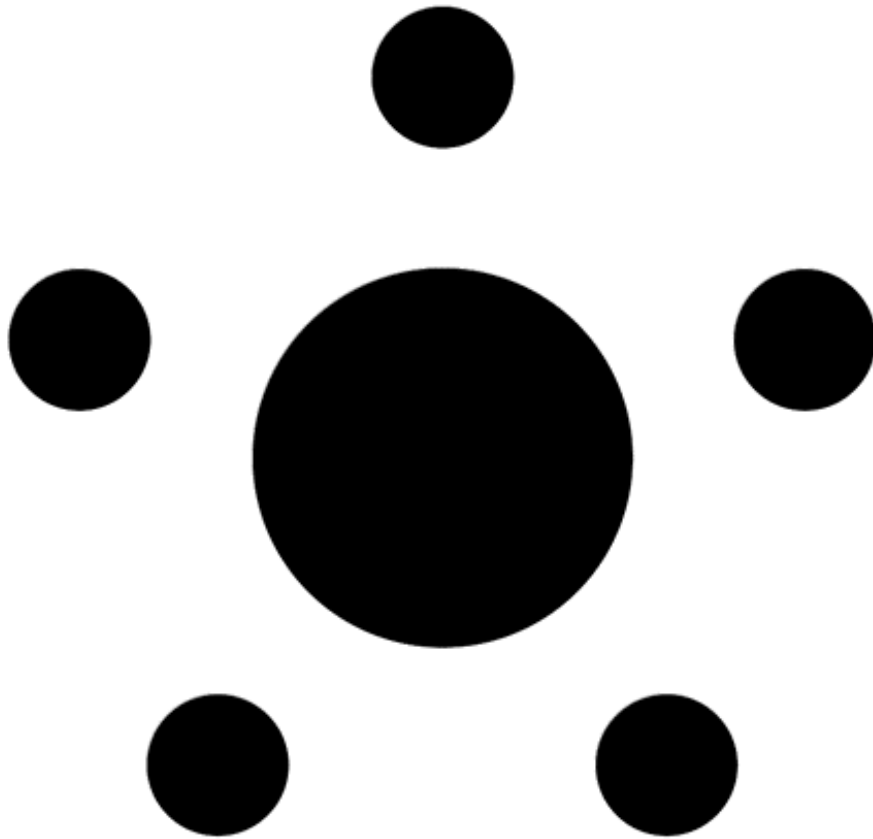


LEGACY



**Book One:
The God of Night**

The author would like to thank the Alpha Coordinator for its extensive involvement in recording and translating the following events.

Prologue

The Forest of Hope

Year 1000 of the Age of Chaos

The five trees, forming a perfect regular pentagon around what had very recently been flat ground, watched as earth and stone slide aside between them. Ripples spread in fractals across the clearing, and a mound of soil emerged, roaring, from the centre as a whale surfaces to breathe. Lines of silver light, gathering in the roots of each dark tree, stretched inwards and climbed the mound until they met in the centre. As they joined they vanished, and following their paths five cracks radiated outward. Suddenly the whole mound opened outward like a flower of dirt and grass, bound by some unseen force. A pentagonal column of stone glittering with a sheen of blue runes, each side almost two metres long, rose from the ground's black maw.

Erea magic was certainly pretty.

Two figures presided over this awesome display, brows furrowed as they wove precise patterns of energy and set them loose to dance imperceptibly between the trees. They crafted spells and counter-spells to fit the age-old magic like a key in a lock, moving their fingers in complex gestures as they shaped the clearing with their minds.

The pillar reached its zenith. The earth-petals fell away as the magic released them, leaving shapes of estranged grass-blades and dirt grains strewn across the ground. Scents of crushed grass and disturbed earth filled the air. Once again the clearing lapsed into silence. The two spellweavers opened their eyes and rose from their cross-legged rest between two of the five ingua trees, each corresponding to a side of the pillar at the clearing's core.

One of the figures was tall and lithe, crimson hair tied back behind a pale red face, where a third eye was set in her forehead. Black patterns swirled across her skin, dipping under her dark green garment.

The other's skin was split equally between green and blue, the two colours melting together and twisting around each other as they danced across her skin. Her black hair fell to her shoulders, framing an oval face above the same green dress. A pair of gossamer wings rested between her shoulder blades. She was stouter than the other, and where her features spoke of fresh awe and anticipation, the other's suggested a calm, almost grim determination, a stark readiness.

An ignorant observer might have assumed they belonged to different species, let alone different families. They were, however, siblings. Both were Erea, and both possessed the same hard, emerald eyes. It just happened that one of them had slightly more of those eyes than the other.

Together they approached the monolith, two sets of verdant eyes sweeping over the glowing runes. After a cursory glance the tall one sat once more, back to the pillar, and let her eyes fall shut and her hands rest on her knees. The other made a close study of the pillar. She lifted a hand to stroke one of the runes, tracing its curves with a cyan fingertip.

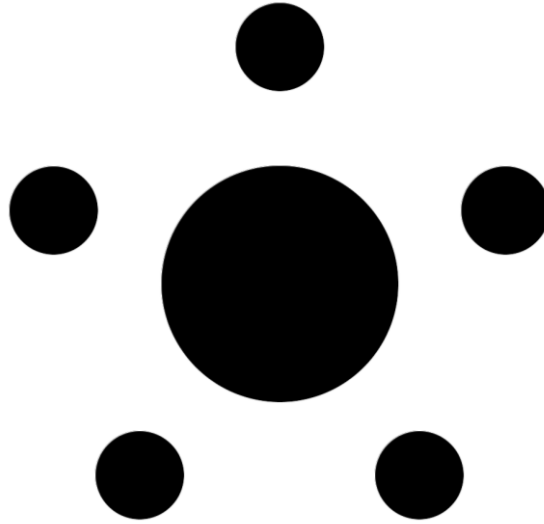
Look at these runes, Tahlis! she broadcast with her mind. *Most of them are the same as our alphabet, or at least similar, but some of them are quite different. You can see how this one is related to ehfe, it's just missing a line - Tahlis received an image to demonstrate – but this one here, I've never seen anything like it.*

Language changes, Ehris, replied Tahlis, not moving from her meditation. *It shifts like the desert sands. This pillar was laid a millennium ago, and since then the language in which it was written has passed through a million minds and mouths. It's not the symbols that matter: it's their meaning.*

The sun was just beginning to appear below the thick canopy of the ingua trees, casting a reddening light onto the trunks of the forest. The five dark, ancient trees were an oddity in the woods surrounding Testament, standing defiantly in a suspiciously perfect pentagon. Ingua were more common to the islands of the west, where a plate boundary and a hot, dry climate assured perfect conditions for the pyrophilic plants. In a forest dominated by eucalypt, their rust-coloured leaves stood out like a bloodstain. Their overlapping canopies blotted out most of the sunlight for most of the day, allowing just enough of a trickle to sustain the grass. But as the suns fell across the sky, green and yellow fading to orange, the sunset reached into the little grove and touched each of the straight trunks. One of them cast a lengthening shadow on the pillar, leaving it with only the blue glow of its runes to illuminate it.

It is almost time, said Tahlis, opening her eyes. Ehris stepped forward to stand beside her, watching the suns sink. A beam of light shone straight through a small hollow in the centre of the shadowing tree's trunk, landing on the pillar. It rose as the suns sank, adding red light to blue as it moved slowly from one rune to the next.

Then Sororius disappeared behind the earth, leaving the green sun Fratus hanging just above the horizon, untinged and pure. A single ray of emerald light fell through the ingua tree's hollow, as it had many times before. This time, though, it landed perfectly in the centre of a mark at the pillar's zenith.



The runes changed from blue to green, as though the sun's rays were bleeding down the pillar. A great groan came from within, like a mountain turning in its sleep. New seams appeared down the middle of each side. The whole pillar seemed to fold away like paper, revealing itself as a hollow shell.

Within lay a wooden sarcophagus upon a stone dais, inscribed with the same mark. Tahlis stepped forward, eyes hardened with purpose. She grasped the lid with both hands and, finding it somewhat heavier than she expected, beckoned to Ehris. Together they pushed it open.

Ehris stifled a gasp as the being within came to life.

"Ma?" he croaked. "Where's... Ma? They said I could ... see her soon."

By the Five, thought Tahlis, shock ringing through her. Out loud, she said "You will, sweetie. But now it's time to sleep." She touched him on the forehead, sending a tingle through her finger. He sighed, and closed his eyes.

Ehris found her voice through the shock on her face, speaking out loud. "But... the script said he was just an infant when he was placed here! Look how he's grown."

The spell weakened. Faded, replied Tahlis simply. The calm in her voice was betrayed by the folds in her face. *This never would have happened to Praesul magic.*

"What are we going to do? That poor little boy. Febregon protect us."

Tahlis shook her head.

"I don't know."

I: Crystalline

The Forest of Hope, near Testament
7th of Rodah, Year 1016 of the Age of Chaos

The stars shone like tiny holes in a dark veil, rippling in a celestial breeze. Adoras turned his looking glass from one to the other. Lying on his back in the grass, he felt the warm breeze flow pleasantly over him. He imagined that it was the same warm breeze washing over the stars, stirring them to twinkle.

He lowered the glass, with some reluctance, to trace the constellations with his finger. The stars themselves were what fascinated him, these distant, mysterious objects shining from the heavens. The constellations just looked like random points of light; but the cultures before him had seen shapes in those points, shapes that spoke of their ways of life. Tahlis was constantly reminding him that he needed to understand the other races and nations, and he supposed this was one way to do that.

He counted the Five Principals from east to west: the Dragon, the Essiloth, the Two-Faced Head, the Great Ant, the Threat. Each of these symbols had sprung from a different society; the Dragon was thought to have been named by a Ridoru tribe from the Ocean Spine; Essiloth was an Essilor word for a family of large, warm-blooded reptiles, of which there were few species remaining; the Two-Faced Head was a Ractanos name, coming from the legends surrounding their god and her disciples; the Great Ant had sprung from the Austium peoples' respect for other insect-like creatures; and the Threat was a mysterious, foreign being derived from Ancient Nullartus mythology. Neither historians nor astrologists could agree on the original shape of the Threat, only the stars it encompassed. The myths from which it drew its name had long been forgotten, along with much old Limbless culture. His culture.

Thinking of the Nullartus drew Adoras' thoughts back to the ground. For a moment he lowered the looking glass, eyes following his disembodied hand as it fell to his side. His culture, by rights.

Adoras had never known any Limbless beside himself. It was no secret that he had been adopted: as soon as he was old enough to understand the concept, Tahlis and Ebris had told him the story of discovering him, wandering alone, through the Forest of Hope. They had no idea where he had come from or who his real family was.

Ebris had told him as much as she could manage about his people, but she only knew stories and what little she could understand from the rare books about the Nullartus. He himself had consumed every tiny detail of the Limbless contained in Testament's library, combed through every book that might have even a tangential relationship to his species. There was little more than vague conjecture and outright fiction. At first he had believed everything he read, until the book that mentioned that Nullartus were three heights¹ tall and could summon thunderbolts from the sky. That exact wording. Not lightning bolts, "thunderbolts". The only common theme had been

¹ One height is approximately two metres.

that the Limbless were skilled warriors, respected as the protectors of the ancient world.

"Am I the only one? The last Limbless?" he had asked Ehris once, when he was quite young.

She shook her head with a kind smile. "I don't think so, honey. We have had some contact with Nullartus remnants in the last few centuries. But lately they have withdrawn even deeper into themselves. We've heard nothing from the Limbless in more than five years, but they're still out there. Sometimes I see one or two in Manifold, when I visit."

Suddenly burning with excitement, he had said "Can I come with you? I want to see them!"

He seemed to remember Tahlis entering the room as Ehris' face furrowed. "Not yet, young one. When you're older."

Returning his gaze to the sky, he moved the glass to the moons, one after the other. Veurtoss was full; although the darkest of the moons in colour, it was also the closest, and its scarred surface was easily visible against the stars. Its fullness wouldn't last the whole night; by morning it would already be shrinking. The blood-red Saross was a waning gibbous, decaying from a full circle. Febross hadn't risen tonight, but on the other side of the world it would be a steadily swelling sickle of white. Atross would have just climbed above the horizon, but Adoras couldn't find it. It wasn't that much bigger itself than a star in the sky, and with its deep blue colour it was only visible when it passed in front of something, even at its brightest. Later, when it travelled through the Bone, the milky-white streak of stars that stretched from horizon to horizon, he might be able to spot it.

"Adoras!"

A high voice sang out in his mind, and arrived at his ears a split-second later. Adoras climbed quickly to his feet, which was an interesting sight to see. His hands, feet and head were visibly disconnected from his body, floating free of his torso in the absence of arms, legs or neck. They moved, however, as though they existed at the end of invisible limbs. "Yes?"

His adoptive aunt, Ehris, was approaching from the direction of their home, holding a sphere of white mage-light above her head. It cast the surrounding trees into saturated contrast, with shadows that edged away from her as she emerged. Only Ehris knew that this was his favourite spot to be alone. During the night, it was far enough from Testament to block out the lights, and during the day the clearing was filled with birdsong and light to read by.

"What are you doing all the way out here?" she said with a smile. "Tahlis is having a fit. Apparently you're supposed to be studying." She laughed at the sheepish expression on his face. "I'm not here to bust you. That's her job." She tilted her head back in the direction of Testament. "Come on. Tahlis has something to tell you."

The two of them started walking, Adoras carrying the looking glass gingerly in his hands. "I'm glad you're getting plenty of use out of that, anyway," Ehris smiled. The glass had been a gift from her, crafted from Nuntium designs with the best Erea lenses.

Adoras and Ehris strolled back together along the animal trail that led from the clearing. The greasy clench of anxiety held his insides ransom, constricting the pleasant summer night. Ehris seemed to understand and let the walk relax into comfortable silence. They picked their way carefully through the woods, illuminated by Ehris' light. Unseen animals, disturbed by the light, fled noisily from the path.

The sprawling, crystalline structure of Testament emerged gradually from behind the forest, glittering in the moonlight. It spread out for several kiloheights in eight-sided radial symmetry, building gradually up from the outer edge until it drove into the sky as a tower at the centre. He had once heard that if all the Erea in Testament were spread evenly throughout it, they could live for years without ever meeting each other. As it was, they were concentrated in a single corner of the great construct.

Ehris and Adoras emerged from the trees next to the outer tendrils of the city. They entered through one of the main archways, stepping onto the roughened glassy floor of a major corridor. Glowing crystals lit the path and the doorways of the corridor's various branches. It was more of a street than a hallway. A few scattered Erea were going about their last business of the day, nodding friendly to Adoras and his aunt as they passed. Some had tails or wings; others had extra limbs, or walked on all fours; several were covered in fur or had pointed fangs. The Testament Erea numbered only a few of thousand, so Adoras recognised some of them. Their bizarre features certainly made it easier to tell them apart. Most had grown used to the sight of Adoras by now, the lone Limbless among the Erea, but some still stared. He'd gotten used to it as well.

Tahlis was waiting in the Core's chamber. It wasn't the true Hall of the Core, which was a vast room at the exact centre of Testament, but it was where the Core was kept when it wasn't in ceremonial use. Testament was too big for the Erea to watch over all of it, and keeping their most precious cultural artefact a full two kiloheights from where they all lived was a bad idea.

Ehris left Adoras at the entrance with a sympathetic nod. Tahlis stood overlooking the northern reaches of Testament through a panel of transparent crystal. At the centre of the room was a dais, jutting from the floor to waist height. Upon it stood a mystical object, like a great sphere of shimmering glass. Light passing through it bent around itself and came out at strange angles. A secretive glow shone gently from its heart, like light collected from the night stars.

Looking for anything to delay Tahlis' ire, and maybe lessen his shame, he walked quietly over to the Core. Adoras pressed his hand towards it, enjoying the strange sensation of repulsive force emanating from the sphere. It wasn't strong, just enough to resist his push. He let his hand hover just above the Core's surface for a few moments.

"It's about time you returned." Adoras withdrew his hand guiltily.

Tahlis turned around. All three of her green eyes pierced straight into his two. "Where were you?" She was shorter than him, but she still dominated the room. Averting his eyes, he stared at the ground. "Stargazing."

"I suppose that the stars are going to help you in the entrance exam?"

He didn't respond. She continued her lecture, revisiting a structure refined successfully for over a decade.

"You have a duty, a duty to this world. The Nullartus are revered as the benefactors of the old world. You have to take advantage of that. You have to live up to your full potential."

He nodded silently, hoping she would burn through her arsenal quickly. Luckily, her heart didn't seem in it tonight, and she ran out of steam before she got any further. She sighed. Shadows were growing under all three of her eyes, and her normally bolt-straight posture had slumped almost imperceptibly in the last few weeks. "You've heard it all before. I won't bother to say it again. But we need you to keep working, Adoras. We need you to try your hardest."

"Yes, I know," he nodded, still avoiding her eyes. She sighed. "That's not what I had to tell you, anyway. I received word just a couple of hours ago from the University. I went to inform you, but imagine my surprise when I found your study empty and your books closed."

He perked up. "Is the examiner coming?"

Tahlis shook her head regretfully. "The bandits are too thick on the roads this year, so the University is refusing to send an examiner. This is despite my repeated offers of a full guard of war sorcerers as an escort." She frowned deeply.

Adoras didn't have shoulders, but the rounded muscle where they would be slumped. "So... I can't go to the University this year?" A tiny, irrational voice whispered that Tahlis was punishing him for not studying hard enough, but he quelled it with a flash of annoyance at himself. To his surprise, she smiled. There was just a hint of anxiety to the curve of her mouth.

"Yes, of course you can. But you and the other candidates will have to make the journey early, and take the exam at the University itself."

Adoras' face lit up instantly, splitting into a grin. "Really? But that must be soon. The semester begins in less than a month!"

Tahlis' smile remained, but anxiety had collected in the corners of her eyes. "Yes. You must leave this week. The day after tomorrow, in fact."

Adoras' grin broadened even further, and he threw himself at Tahlis. "Thank you!" he said, pulling her into an armless hug. She responded by pulling him close; the hug broke just a little later than it should have. When they pulled apart, her expression was stern again. "That means you have to study hard tonight and tomorrow. You won't have time to do much more after you leave."

He nodded again. "Ok!"

He left the room wondering why Tahlis seemed so tired.

When Adoras had gone, Ehris drifted into the chamber. "You're too harsh with him. You know he does his best. Everyone needs time to themselves, and he can't study every minute of the day. He deserves more of a break."

Tahlis was rubbing her forehead. "We can't afford that. Adoras is our best chance of making peace. He can't be just another adolescent."

"It's impossible to put all of your hopes in a single person."

“As you’ve told me again and again. Yet here we are.”

“You’re expecting too much from him. He really is working hard. And he is so excited to go. He loves learning. You just have to let him do it at his own pace, or he’ll burn out.”

“He doesn’t love learning about the right things. He needs a firm hand to push him in the right direction.”

“I hate it when you talk like that. ‘Right direction’. Adoras isn’t a ball of clay that you can shape however you want.”

“Be very careful, Ehris.” Anger had entered Tahlis’ eyes now. “I think you and I both know that we’ve shaped too much to leave the rest to chance.”

Ehris shook her head. “He’s a person, Tahlis. Please don’t forget that,”

Tahlis stepped back as though Ehris had slapped her, her mouth open. Then her eyes narrowed. “Leave.”

Her sister did so.

Some sheets of paper were on Adoras’ desk when he entered his room, printed with news items from elsewhere in Proesus. Tahlis encouraged him to take interest in foreign affairs, so she delivered one of these whenever she returned from outside the Council. One day soon, when the telegraph line to Manifold was finished, residents of Testament would be able to receive up-to-date news daily. For now, their only sources were messengers travelling by elari and travellers like Tahlis; the dedicated telepathic Messengers were generally reserved for matters of vital importance. A lot of what she brought him was dry economic stuff, like the fact that the postwar boom was experiencing a temporary downturn (sure to even out soon). But some of the items were quite interesting. Penumbra, one of the warlords who had carved himself a piece of the former Austium States, had just seized control of an important port in the Jaw Sea, which was bound to have an impact on trade; the Order of Febregon was launching another Inquisition to crack down on “heresies” in the eastern cities in Essiloreth; Sightings of the Nightmare Legion, dismissed by the writer as bunk, had risen exponentially without obvious cause; and a cell of extremists in the Ractanos Desert were continuing to eat foreign envoys.

After browsing through the most interesting stories, Adoras tried going back to his studies, but his head was too full with thoughts of University. He rationalised that he was going to have to pack anyway, so it might as well be now. The time tomorrow that he would have spent packing, he could spend on study instead. An internal voice knew that it probably wouldn’t work like that, but he pushed it down.

Adoras was limited to one box, so space was at a premium. Because there were unlikely to be any Nullartus clothes for sale in Manifold, most of that space was reserved for his garments. After agonising for almost an hour, he had finally narrowed his pile of books down to two (a book on astronomy and a Common translation of *The Pieces of Time*, his favourite novel). After a minute’s thought (Will it break on the way? Will it be stolen there?) he wrapped his telescope in a shirt and put that in the chest too.

The longer he went without studying, the guiltier he felt. After packing he tried sitting at his desk with a stack of paper and his politics textbook, but his mind was buzzing too loudly for him to do any more than stare blankly at the printed words. He moved from idly sketching on his paper to experimenting with the percussive qualities of the desk and his fingers to daydreaming about Manifold and more distant destinations.

He had read quite a lot about the city and its University. It was not the only university in Proesus, or, indeed, the city, but it was the most well-regarded, especially for Diplomacy. As Diplomacy happened to be his degree, and Manifold was the closest university to Testament, it was the obvious choice.

Finally, besieged on all sides by boredom, an inability to sit still, and excitement, Adoras gave in and decided to have an early night. His subconscious had other ideas, so instead he read a book, one of the failed contenders for the box. It was several hours before he finally managed to nod off.

The leaving ceremony was more subdued than previous ones Adoras had attended. It had been pushed forward without much warning, so the normal crowd of Erea hadn't had time to gather from the settlements scattered around the rest of the Council. Still, the parents of all the hopeful students were there, lined up along the walkway to the Hall of the Core. Most of them were smiling, some with the exhaustion of an unexpected journey from the outer towns. A few were crying. Ehris grinned warmly at him as the column of young Erea, with Adoras in its midst, marched between them.

They entered the Hall of the Core, a vast, eight-sided room at the very centre of Testament. Crystals enchanted to glow shone blue light from the walls and the vaulting ceiling as the column approached the Core. Above the Hall's centre, the ceiling curved upwards suddenly, becoming a chute that went all the way to Testament's highest point and opened to the sky. A series of cleverly positioned reflective crystals gathered the sun, no matter the time of day, and cast it down so that the Core basked in a beam of sunlight. Somehow, it wasn't outshone; if anything, it seemed to glow all the brighter.

The chatter broke off as the Erea stepped up, one by one, to pay their respects to the powerful object. The Custodian of the Core, flanked by Tahlis and a third Council member, wished them good fortune one by one. "'Bout time I got the respect I've deserved," muttered Ahmet, Adoras' best friend. Adoras gave him a kick in the shin, calculated to shut him up without toppling him. This was one of the few semi-religious customs left in the Council of the Erea, which was officially agnostic. The ceremony seemed to remain mostly out of reverence for the cultural and magical significance of the Core and to enhance a feeling of oneness between those leaving and their homeland.

Finally, it was Adoras' turn. He climbed the dais and placed his hand on the Core, gazing into its depths again. "Adoras Obertr  ," said the Custodian, a surprisingly young-looking Erea with dreadlocks and three legs. "The Council of the Erea wishes

you well on your voyages. May you return soon, enriched in mind and body. And may your actions reflect and spread the Council's wisdom."

Adoras nodded deeply. "Thank you, Custodian."

He stepped out to receive a lapel from Tahlis, which she pinned to his shirt. Each Erea received a unique one upon leaving; his was a circle inside five smaller circles, matching the birthmark on his chest. He grinned at Tahlis as she fiddled with the clasp, and the corners of her mouth twitched upward. He thought her eyes might just be watering, but her stern face betrayed nothing else.

Joining the line of Erea graduates, he spotted Ehris in the crowd. She made a hideous face at him, simultaneously performing a shrugging gesture with her wings. He drew a sharp look from his mother as he snorted, striving vainly to bury a laugh. Ehris made an even worse face at Tahlis' back.

Adoras' aunt was bluntly critical of Tahlis, in the way that only close family gets away with. Adoras remembered a night after school when, Tahlis having been away, Ehris had spoken openly about her sister's politics.

"Do you know what kind of political system we have here in the Council?"

Eager to show his knowledge, he had replied "Yeah! It's an elected parliament."

"That's right. But do you know its social policy?"

"I'm... what do you mean?"

"Are you aware that it's a fusion between socialist and capitalist ideals, with a focus on the welfare of its citizens?"

"Oh, yes, of course! We learnt what that means, we studied socialism last week. We learnt how pure socialism is the only path to true equality, and that the Council is striving closer to it every day."

"Hmph. It sounds like Tahlis has been meddling with the syllabus again."

He was surprised.

"The Council was a totally socialist state once before, you know."

He hadn't known that, this fact having somehow slipped through the cracks of the syllabus. "What happened?"

"There was a revolution. There usually is, of one kind or another."

"You mean it's... not a good system?" At this age the idea of school lying to him simply didn't compute.

"It's a perfect system. But this is not a perfect world. It never worked well in the Council and it certainly wouldn't work on a larger scale, as much as Tahlis wants it to. The problem is idealism. Such a system relies on every single person in it having the best interests of every single other person at heart. It also relies on everybody agreeing on what those best interests are. Even in a settlement of less than a million, it simply isn't true.

"Our current system strikes a good balance between pure socialism and pure capitalism. The rich are taxed more than the poor and assistance is granted to the less fortunate. Our people get what they need while still being free to choose their own path. What Tahlis wants is to make the transition *back* to a pure socialist society, regulating the economy absolutely, as was the original plan when the Council was founded. It's been attempted several times throughout our history, and in other

countries across Proesus, but Tahlis seems to forget that not once has it succeeded as envisioned. Measures have been too strict and elicited revolution, or corruption has spread through the government, or the economy has simply failed out of mismanagement. The eventual aim under Churilina's teachings is the elimination of central government entirely, with the assumption that small communities will be able to self-regulate. This stage has never been accomplished, not once in the six hundred or so years since Churilina wrote her treatises. It's a tantalising idea, but one that simply doesn't work in practise.

"Now, at the other end of the Council Chamber, there are those who want the opposite. They wish for the economy to be totally deregulated in favour of a totally open market. I think that's a bad idea, too. Proponents claim that a free market allows greater personal freedom and freedom to innovate, and builds a more constructive environment. It allows the poor to get rich on their own merits, by pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, so to speak. To a certain extent I agree. Somehow, though, it always seems to be those who are already wealthy who benefit from such a system. Deregulation always results in exploitation of the poor by the rich; the majority of wealth tends to collect in a small percentage of society, which rapidly stratifies. The rich get richer, and the poor get poorer."

Adoras continued eating his dinner, mulling over Ehris' words. She relented slightly. "Of course, both socialism and capitalism are a drastic improvement over life in a dictatorship or a feudal society. The problem is that a pure version of either system usually leads to a dictatorship emerging and calling itself democracy."

Chapter II: The Roads

Tahlis wasn't there to see him off the next day. Only Ehris stood among the tear-stained parents. He was quick to cover his disappointment, but Ehris didn't miss it. "I'm sorry, Adoras. She had to leave again this morning, for Essiloreth this time."

Adoras nodded, putting on a show of nonchalance. It didn't last long. "That's not true, is it? She could have waited."

His aunt's face became unspeakably sad. "You... you know how she is, Adoras. She doesn't know how to process things like this. It's no excuse. But we'll come up together to visit you soon, I promise."

He smiled without humour. "Assuming I pass the entrance."

An involuntary laugh escaped her mouth. "Are you kidding me? Adoras, you're one of the smartest people in your year group. You've been studying like a maniac and you know everything you need. The only way you're coming back in these wagons is if the city is whisked away by sorcery before you arrive. Here." She slipped him a package. He looked down to read the label, written in Common. It was a packet of magical contraceptives, which would block sperm production for a day when applied. Magical practicalities like this were one of Testament's primary exports. "Just in case you run into any other Nullartus," she said with a wink. He blushed as she grinned broadly. "Come here, you," she said as she wrapped him in a fierce hug.

Adoras climbed into the third carriage to see Dana Evenis, a short, feminine Erea, sitting on the far side. She shot a quick, surprised smile at him, then looked out of the window.

He briefly considered finding another carriage, but the ever-tone-deaf Ahmet was nudging him forwards. "What's the hold-up?" Adoras reluctantly slid his wooden box under the bench and took up the window seat opposite Dana, not wanting to appear strange by leaving an awkward space. He regretted it almost immediately, as her face now appeared in his field of vision no matter which direction he looked.

Dana had been an interspecial love interest of Adoras' for quite some time. He had once had powerful feelings for Dana, of the urgency and magnitude that only adolescent hormones can produce, and still felt a twinge, an echo of an aftershock, whenever he saw her.

Erea were hermaphroditic, which meant that any individual with functioning reproductive organs could reproduce with any other individual. Biologically, there were no male or female Erea; however, most Erea did identify as one gender or the other on some psychological level, and their morphs usually reflected this. Others were located somewhere else on the gender spectrum, identifying as intergender or nongendered; this was less common but considered normal, and didn't present any reproductive difficulties given the species' single-sex nature. There was just as broad a range of sexuality, with some Erea attracted to the opposite gender, some to the same gender, some to neither, and some to both. In Erea society, there really was someone for everyone, except, of course, for adopted members of another species. Nowhere on this broad array of accepted sexual behaviours were interspecies relationships to be found.

Despite all his common sense (and the biological impracticalities), Adoras had often found himself attracted to Erea, in some cases to the point of near-obsession. Dana was one of those. He didn't understand it, and it made him feel a little freakish. When he asked Ehris about it, she had comforted him, saying that it was normal to have such feelings and that it was probably just because he didn't have any other Nullartus around that his hormones selected Erea as their target. "I'm sure it will change when you meet other Limbless," she had said. But he was sure he had glimpsed an anxious hint in her green eyes.

Dana and he had been close friends for some time before he confessed his feelings to her. To his utter surprise, she had admitted to reciprocal emotions; but they had confused her, too. For the better part of two years their relationship went through a strange tug-of-war, alternating between amiable friendship, guilty, fervent admissions of feeling, and periods during which Dana avoided him at all costs. The whole affair had been painful and bewildering. Finally, after a particularly long episode of aversion, Dana had told Adoras that they couldn't stay friends any longer. Very soon after, she had found a boyfriend of the same species. Heartbroken, Adoras had respected her wishes and had never attempted to rekindle their friendship. And he truly did miss her as a friend, not just as a pseudo-girlfriend. It was just less painful to stay away.

The caravan was composed of ten wagons pulled by elari, along with about a dozen guards, also mounted on the large, flightless birds. Six of the wagons were filled with the hopeful students, and the other four belonged to merchants who were travelling to sell in the city-state. Adoras, Ahmet and Dana were in a carriage with four other hopefuls.

Adoras gazed around as they withdrew from the crystal city, trying to etch the details of his home into memory, and waved with a disconnected hand to match Ehris' enthusiasm. A eucalypt scent and an aural haze of insect chirps hung in the air. They began to make their way along a string of small towns, one strand of the poorly-planned spiderweb of villages that surrounded Testament. The towns grew smaller and further apart as they went.

When he looked back, he could see Testament thrusting like a symmetrical, purple mountain from the deep green of the forest. It was totally out of place and yet somehow absolutely at home, as though it had grown out of the stone mountains around it.

"When was Testament built?" he had asked Tahlis, once.

"Um. The exact date is murky, but its growth is believed to have begun as long as eight thousand years ago."

"Growth? You mean it wasn't built?"

Tahlis smiled. "Testament isn't just a building. It was grown from Praesul crystal, over the course of thousands of years. There are actually many such structures across Proesus, but none as large or spectacular as this one. It has not grown for fifteen hundred years, but only because the secret of inducing the crystal was lost. At one time it's said to have grown as much as a height every year, in perfect radial

symmetry. Artisans guided it carefully every step of the way using arts that have been forgotten.”

Adoras sat in silence for a moment. “There must have been many more Erea back then.”

Tahlis looked at him quizzically. “Why do you say that?”

“Because otherwise why would they build – sorry, grow – such a big city? Today Testament is a fraction full. And it’s still the largest concentration of Erea population on all of Proesus.”

Tahlis smiled. “Good deductive reasoning.” She sighed. “But that’s still not quite right. You’re correct in saying that there were more Erea; but there were still not enough to fill Testament to capacity. This place was not grown by my race.”

This surprised him. “Then who?”

“Another species, long gone from this world. They are the ones who discovered the way of cultivating the crystal.”

“What happened to them?”

“That is a story for another time.”

As he gazed back at the single, city-sized chunk of crystal as that he had called home, it struck him for the first time how incredible it was.

On the second day’s travel, they were approaching the northern border of the Council. Sororius was beating down on them at her summer height, and by late morning it had rendered the air in their cart stifling. Eventually Ahmet grew fed up with the heat and, with a little muttering and waving of his hands, summoned a breeze to flow through the wagon from window to window. Unfortunately, he wasn’t much of a mage and wore himself out pretty quickly. The other Erea picked up the slack with approval, and took turns from then on to cool the wagon.

Almost all Erea knew a little magic, although their skill at it varied wildly. Some studied for years at Testament to master the arcane, while others learnt only a few simple techniques. Magic came easily to Erea; not so to Nullartus. Adoras had often begged as a child for Tahlis or Ehris to teach him some magical powers, but they laughed it off, explaining that biological differences between the two species meant that he could not. They had not ever provided a truly satisfactory explanation as to what those differences were.

The caravan passed fields of cloudwheat and pastures containing herds of grazing elari, herd-beetles or gambuks. Although their export economy was based on magic, the Council undertook a fair bit of farming for its own people.

At one of the outer villages, the caravan paused to rest. A group of villagers, led by a multi-armed official of some kind, approached the halted carts. The passengers piled out to stretch their legs and relieve themselves in the public toilets near the village green. Adoras had no need to do so; what small amount of waste Nullartus excreted was eliminated constantly through the pores. It meant he had to bathe every day to avoid smelling of uric acid, but since he needed to anyway, to absorb his supply of water, it wasn’t much of a stretch.

So he watched as the villagers talked quietly with five higher-ranking guards. He strained to hear what they were saying, but they had moved away from the rest stop. The leader seemed calm, but the others fidgeted and glanced occasionally off into the trees. The guards listened to what they had to say, nodding along. When they were done, the leader shook the hand of each of the four guards in turn.

As the caravan rolled out again, Adoras noticed, from his window, four of the five guards peeling away into the forest on their mounts. The remaining guard stayed with the convoy. Occasionally he dismounted and walked briskly beside the wagons. He had a broad-shouldered, two-legged morphology and exuded an impression of calm strength. His skin was a very deep brown, almost black, with thin, green patterns tracing across his exposed arms and neck like vines. While most of the other guards were carrying weapons of one sort or another, he did not. He seemed strangely familiar, but Adoras couldn't place him.

Adoras nudged Ahmet with his hand, pointing him out. "Check that guy out."

Ahmet responded with an exaggerated sigh and a rolling of his eyes. "Now, I can think of two reasons why you would ask that question, both of which are stupid. The first is that you are excited to see the Earthguard accompanying us, which for some reason you only just noticed, and that you assumed I was as unobservant as you. The other reason, and I really hope this isn't true, would be that *you* actually don't know who that is and you are asking me."

Adoras smiled quietly, and Ahmet barked a laugh. "Sometimes I think you're ignorant on purpose. Yes, of course I know who that is. It's Duros." Adoras was clearly meant to recognise the name, and it did conjure a twinge in the recesses of his memory, but he didn't recall why. Ahmet's eyes rolled so far that it was a wonder his optic nerves didn't snap. "I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt and assume you're joking. He's the Earthguard. One of the Elemental Guard. The others are here too." He ducked his head out of the window to look around. "Or they were. I haven't seen them for a while."

The Elemental Guard were celebrities in Testament. Each of the four Guards was a master-level sorcerer who specialised heavily in the manipulation of their respective element, to the point of exclusion of any other magical techniques. Adoras had never actually seen one of them in person, but now that he thought about it he did recognise Duros from mage-images (one of which, he now recalled, had spent several years pinned above Ahmet's bed).

"The Elemental Guard is kind of a misnomer, isn't it?" he asked, knowing that getting Ahmet started on alchemy was a sure way of passing an hour or two. Saying the word alone was enough to trigger a tirade on how the modern term was "chemistry".

The Erea sighed. "Yeah, it's an old name. Fire, earth, water and air aren't elements at all. People used to think everything was made out of a combination of those four substances. We know that isn't true anymore." Adoras, who of course knew all of this, nodded on and let his gaze slip out the window.

"Fire isn't even really a substance, it's a type of chemical reaction; water is a compound, and breathable air is made up of about four different gases. There are all

kinds of materials in earth; Duros definitely has the hardest job. The Guards have a really deep understanding of the components and properties of their – uh – elements, in quotation marks.”

A detail had just occurred to Adoras as he gazed at the clouds. “So, who trains them? Like, where does the next Fireguard, or whichever, come from?”

He could’ve sworn he could hear the wet friction of Ahmet’s eyes rolling in their sockets. “Seriously, how do you not know this stuff? I know you Limbless are stupid, but I didn’t think you were that dumb.”

“Yeah, well, you can’t expect us to have the same obsession for useless trivia as you Erea vermin,” Adoras retorted cheerfully. This kind of casual specism, expressed in insults appealing to outdated and exaggerated stereotypes, had been a regular part of their relationship for a long time, ever since they had learnt that there was, in fact, a difference of species between the two of them. Neither actually believed that the other’s race was intrinsically inferior (every single person Adoras knew was an Erea); it was just an edge in their frequently immature banter.

“When they’re ready, they take an apprentice from the best magic-students in the Council. They train them at Testament, and when the apprentice is ready – this takes years of practise and study, by the way – they start taking them on missions. Finally, to become a full Guard, the apprentice has to discover something new in the mastery of their element, a refinement of technique or a deeper understanding of some property. Then when the apprentice’s master is ready to retire, the new guard takes their place. I think Duros is the only one with an apprentice at the moment.”

“Then where is the pupil? Aren’t they good enough to go out on missions yet?”

Ahmet cocked his head. “Good question. For once. I thought she was ready by now, but maybe not.”

As the convoy moved on, and the road began to get rougher, Adoras took more notice of the Earthguard’s activity. As he trotted along at the head of the column of carriages, the road seemed to grow smooth of its own accord. Humps, stones, and potholes visible in the distance vanished by the time the carts got to them. Once, at a particularly deep gully cutting across the path, presumably formed by the recent summer rains, the Erea dismounted and placed his hands to the ground. A tide of soil, moving like water, flowed slowly from the trees and stacked itself in the gully, forming a mound. Duros stood again and made a sharp gesture. The mound flattened itself swiftly, throwing a cloud of dust into the air and forming a continuous surface with the road. The convoy then proceeded over the newly-compacted earth. Duros noticed Adoras watching him as the cart rolled by; he winked, and said “You would think they would have paved this road by now.”

III: Bumps in the Roads

The caravan soon came to a point where it needed to pass through a north-eastern arm of the Forest of Hope, which extended like a tentacle from the central clump. Adoras noticed an atmosphere of reluctance in the caravan’s members as the carts passed from the grassy, hilly farmland across the forest boundary. He found this

strange, as they had already passed through a significant amount of forest on their way from Testament. But there was no doubt that there was tension among the merchants and cart drivers.

As night fell, they pressed on a little longer than usual. Duros finally called them to a halt at a roadside field, cleared deliberately for just this purpose. The passengers tripped over each other in their eagerness to stretch their legs. Adoras took the opportunity to bathe in a nearby stream, returning to find that several campfires had sprung up.

As the cluster of students waited for their rice to boil over, lent a little extra heat from the aspiring magicians in the group, one of the merchants came to sit with them. His name was Telohrer; Adoras recognised him as the supplier of several stores in Testament.

“First journey to Manifold, kids?”

They mostly nodded, except for one or two who had visited the city before.

“Boring trip, ain’t it?” he opined as he sat down on one of their logs. “The Council is in talks with Manifold to build a railway between Testament and the city, which sure would make this trip a lot quicker. That’s not for a while though. The Council gets pretty uptight about ‘impinging on the beauty’ of its capital. Fair enough, I guess, but it would save me a lot of time.”

Adoras pictured a great mechanical vehicle steaming through the forest, setting the air ablaze with noise. He had to admit it seemed out of place in his head, but the idea of that kind of rapid transportation, available to him, was quite exciting.

Telohrer was still speaking. “One day we won’t even need that. They’ve got these motorised carriages, now, that –”

A brutally loud crack split the night air. As he and his friends jumped, Adoras saw, in the corner of his eye, one of the armoured Erea guards fall backward, clutching his shoulder.

The reaction from the other guards was immediate. While the students and merchants remained frozen, Duros committed a series of sounds and gestures that raised a wall of soil instantly around Telohrer and the students. Cracks and shouts and explosions floated over the wall, telling a tale of unexpected battle.

Ahmet looked at Adoras. There was fear in his eyes, of the kind that makes people do stupid things. He shrugged and climbed the wall of earth, digging his feet into the sides, to peek over the top in spite of Telohrer’s hissing admonitions. Adoras followed suit, against his better judgment, wondering at the chances of a stray projectile hitting him in the head.

The Erea guards were behind earthen barricades of their own, while a similar tall ring of earth a few heights away presumably contained other merchants. The barricades were taking fire from the treeline; as Adoras watched, a slim, bipedal figure stepped from behind a tree with a long, thin metal tube raised to its shoulder. There was a flash at the end of the tube, another ear-splitting crack, and the tube’s wielder stumbled backward. Adoras realised he was looking at one of the powder-based weapons he had heard of, a rifle. The bandits seemed to be members of different

species; he could see some Essilor and maybe some Austium shadows darting around in the forest.

The Erea were giving as good as they were getting, ducking from behind cover to launch beams of light or cast explosions at the bandits. A couple of the guards had crossbows and were using magic to guide the bolts more accurately. One guard cast a spell that caused one of the trees to snap at the base of its trunk and topple onto the bandits with a splintering crash. And then there was Duros, opening holes that swallowed bandits up to their necks, casting rocks at high speeds, propelling waves of earth to knock them from their feet. He was like an army himself.

The bandits seemed to have bitten off more than they were expecting; they pulled back into the forest against a rain of magical retribution. Several of them lay dead or wounded at the treeline. As they retreated they lay down a suppressing fire, keeping the Erea trapped behind cover.

Then, without warning, a wall of fire seemed to spring into being before them, illuminating the battlefield suddenly and intensely. The bandits screamed and some ran the other way, back toward the camp. Powerful blasts of wind knocked some to the ground, while streams of water rose from the grass to snake around the feet of others before turning to ice, tripping them.

An Erea with broad, bat-like wings soared overhead, casting balls of fire at the few bandits that remained standing. She landed against the backdrop of the flames, her wings creating an impressive silhouette as she leapt into the forest. Three other Erea were with her now, moving among the trees to disable the disorderly enemy. Adoras hadn't seen where they came from. Duros strode from behind cover to march toward the action, which now less resembled a battle and more a mop-up. One bandit sprinted straight toward him, rifle above his head like a club; Duros ducked under his wild swing and delivered a punch to the gut. As the Essilor's body folded, Duros took hold of the rifle and kicked the bandit in the chest, wrenching it from his hands. Earth enclosed the gasping Essilor as Duros walked onward.

One of the four sorcerers who had just arrived emerged and spoke to Duros as the other three, who Adoras now realised must be the Fire, Water and Airguard, left in pursuit of the remaining escapees. "Damn it... can't hear what they're saying..." Ahmet muttered.

"Here," said Dana, who had climbed quietly up beside them during the battle. She muttered a spell and suddenly the voices of the two sorcerers spoke as though next to them.

"We tracked them to their camp, but they were already on their way here. We followed their tracks to the road and – well, you saw the rest," the younger sorcerer – Duros' apprentice – said. "I'm sorry we didn't get here sooner."

"It's fine. You can't have known they were already gone."

He turned toward the students. "You're going to want to get down from there," he said in a low voice, which they wouldn't have heard without magical amplification. The students scrambled down from the earth wall as Duros lowered it.

Several of the guards were wounded, including the one who had taken a shot to the shoulder at the battle's outset. Most of the injuries were minor, as they had

known of the possibility of attack and cast defensive spells in anticipation. One of the guards was dead. Adoras tried not to look at the body, which had a bloody hole in its head, but Ahmet couldn't seem to look away. His face was blank.

Duros assembled the incarcerated criminals, buried up to their heads. Most of them seemed to be Austium or Essilor, but there were at least two Erea among them. The anger in his voice was unmistakeable as the Earthguard condemned their actions. "You disgust me. What creature could be brought so low as to place their wealth above the lives of others?" Their earthen gags precluded any response to this apparently rhetorical question. He shook his head. "You have committed your crimes in Council land and so will stand trial at Testament."

(The bandits were soldiers in the Industry War, fleeing the turmoil of their country)

Duros spoke to the caravan's Messenger. "Are we in range of Outer Serraton?" The Messenger looked distant for a moment, then nodded.

"Good. Inform them that the company that has been causing them so much grief has been neutralised and that they are awaiting collection half a day's travel along the mountain road."

All Erea could communicate in thought-speech, using their telepathic organs. Messengers were particularly powerful, trained telepaths able to broadcast and receive thought-speech over large distances.

Telohrer was examining a rifle dropped by a bandit. He picked it up and presented it to Duros. "We'd turn quite a profit with these in the Manifold underground. Can we take them?"

Duros shook his head. "No. These weapons are illegal there, as they are here."

"That doesn't mean there isn't a market for them."

"No! I will not have you violating the goodwill between the Council and the city-state for a few dollars. They will be taken to Testament."

"Well, at least don't give them to the Council. You know that they won't do anything with them. They've been arguing back and forth since the War over whether to reverse-engineer them."

"That is for the Council to decide, not budding capitalists. They go to Testament."

The merchant's eyes flashed. Then he backed down, handing the gun to the Earthguard.

The caravan continued on its way north-east, until it reached the eastern mountain range that stood between the coast and the highlands. They followed the road as it snaked its way through a pass and, winding back and forth, descended the tree-laden mountainside. The mountains were not terribly impressive, and the sides weren't overly steep, but caution was still necessary as the travellers picked their way down the pass. Once clear of the mountains, they turned north and joined the coastal highway. It wasn't long before the scent of salt was in the air and they could hear a

distant rush, which at first could have been wind but grew too loud and persistent, echoing toward them. With the wagons parked on the roadside, just before it gave way to sand, the party took their next break on the beach.

Adoras stripped down to the essentials and waded out into the water without hesitation, ignoring the shock of the cooler liquid, while the others poked cautiously at the shallows with their toes. When the water was above his waste, he dove in, stroking along the bottom, then pushed off and launched himself back to the surface.

Adoras floated on his back. He enjoyed the light of the sun with the taste of the salt in his pores. The water was rehydrating him despite the salt. Broadband osmoregulation is a biological trick that few living things master, maintaining a viable salt balance in both saline and freshwater environments (let alone species that drank through their skin), but Nullartus, like mangrove trees, were among them. He could stay in the water for days if he wanted to.

He twisted and dove underwater again, propelling himself through the liquid with his hands and feet. He could see quite clearly, although the salt stung his eyes a little. As he was gazing at the sand, buffeted from above by waves, his eyes fell upon an unusual shape in the sand. He squinted, trying to make it out: examining it closely, he found a pair of slit-pupilled eyes staring up at him from the sand. With what almost seemed like a shrug, the sand surrounding them changed colour, causing Adoras to jump in surprise. He suddenly found himself looking at an enormous, red octopus, lounging on the sea floor. The thing was at least a height and a half across the tentacles. Adoras started to paddle backwards nervously, with the troubling thought that it could probably drown him if it wanted to.

The octopus raised a tentacle, pointing at him. Then its skin shifted again and a black shape appeared on its mantle. It looked almost like a symbol or character, but it wasn't any alphabet that Adoras recognised. When nothing happened for several seconds, the octopus shrugged again and faded back into the sand.

Suddenly a dark, sharp-finned shape loomed toward him from the deeper water. Adoras scrambled backward, his eyes wide, and pushed up to the surface. He was ready to bolt for the shore when a second black shape cut in front of him, the tip of its dorsal fin just barely slicing the surface. The first animal nudged him in the back; he spun and pushed its snout away, but it shook his hand off and dived beneath him. *Sharks don't hunt in packs*, thought a part of his mind that was detached from the adrenal panic flooding the rest of his body. That's when one of them broke the water with its head, drifting lazily past him while watching him with one green eye. It had a long snout-like beak filled with small teeth, but otherwise it was shaped much like a fish. Relief supplanted Adoras' panic and his body relaxed. "Chireks," he said to himself, smiling. The chirek clattered its beak in appreciation of the relief on his face, then chirped loudly. Suddenly he found himself surrounded by a pod of the creatures. Some were nudging him investigatively, while others ignored him in favour of racing along the waves and weaving around each other. They were coloured a very deep, near-black green and ranged in size from a quarter-height in the children to almost two heights long. One breached the surface and blew a gust of wet air into Adoras' face from the blow-hole on its back, with an accuracy that could only have been

deliberate. The chirek chirped and danced around him, wagging its tail happily from side to side. It drew alongside him, inviting him to stroke its dorsal fin.

On the shore, the others were yelling in appreciation, watching the pod play. Ahmet was giving him a thumbs-up. The chireks quickly lost interest in him, apart from the one that had sprayed him, and went to chase fish in the shallows. Chireks were mistaken by many for fish, but they were actually warm-blooded reptiles. Lacking gills, they had to surface for air.

Adoras lost track of time, stroking the animal beside him. It turned over, allowing him to scratch its belly. It clicked in pleasure. He looked up when a call came from the beach: they were leaving. Regretfully, he pulled away from the animal and stroked towards the shore.

Adoras was about to finish *The Pieces of Time* for the ninth time when Ahmet shook him to gather his attention. Adoras looked up with reluctance, but it was immediately obvious why he had done so. The first hint of the skyline of Manifold was appearing, peering over the horizon with eyes of glass.

It wasn't like the city had a sharp boundary. Buildings appeared in a trickle, which built into a stream, then a river. They didn't cross any line, but at some point Adoras realised that they were deep inside the raging flood of Manifold.

It was a bizarre pastiche of cultures. The city had been there for over eight thousand years, but it had never really been one city. Generation upon generation of architecture were cobbled together, the new built on top, inside or hanging off of the old. They passed squat churches of sandstone alongside new 'skyscrapers' of glass and steel, sprung up in the postwar economy; they passed the ruins of ancient crystal structures and wooden houses with thatched roofs; they passed elaborate improvisations that seemed to defy all structural and architectural logic in their bid for living space. The streets were tangled around one another in an unplanned mess, but luckily they were on the one road that seemed to cut through it all, an artery running from one end of the city to another. Teeming through the streets were the people: reptilian Essilor, insectoid Austium and spindly-legged Paluchard; less common, but still quite present, were Erea and hulking, night-skinned Ractanos. Adoras even spotted a family of Nuntium in a rooftop nesting box, and one or two Margana traders plying their wares in the markets. Every side there was a new wonder.

The city was bigger than Adoras had thought, and the afternoon stretched on as they made their way through. As they passed around the harbour, crossing a river by way of stone bridge, they bore witness to an incomplete steel skeleton climbing its way to the sky. The two sides of the huge, distant bridge, flanked by stone towers, strained towards each other from opposite banks, trying to form a single arch.

"The New Harbour Bridge," commented Telohrer, talking over the city from his cart. "The Old one is still under the water somewhere. It had a good run, not that I ever saw it. They reckon this one will last even longer."

Finally, they arrived at the sandstone gates of the University. Adoras suddenly remembered his nerves.