



**ROBERT BISHOP**

**BREAKING INTWA**

# BREAKING IN TWA

A short story by  
**ROBERT BISHOP**

# ACT I - DISCOVERY

*"At the end of our world, another begins."*

"The brink of the world, Michael! Have you ever truly seen such a magnificent place before?" Cassandra stretched her arms out and let the few rays of sun coming through the canopy caress her skin.

Michael looked at the rickety boards below, scared he'd fall through. "I've never truly seen such a place, no. To call it magnificent? I-" He stepped closer to the edge, peering into the massive overgrowth. "I'm not even sure what I'm looking at!"

Cassandra sighed. "This is the underforest!" She stepped onto the very edge of the wooden platform and dropped a rock into the endless pit below. The rock echoed through the branches and roots, falling for what seemed like an eternity.

It never hit the bottom.

"You're kidding, right!?" Michael yelled. "If we were standing in the damn *underforest*, how come there's still a million miles down?"

"Because there's no other name for it, I suppose... This platform used to stretch high into the air above the forest. Years ago, you could see the entire island from here. Thousands of acres, all clad in forest greens!" Cassandra found it hard to believe, herself. She could scarcely remember looking down at the forest canopy, the leaves stretching out beneath the platform. Now it was high above, reaching for the sky.

"What could possibly cause such a rapid growth?" Michael frowned at their surroundings.

"We can!" Cassandra grinned. "That's we need to find what's left of my people!"

Michael looked at Cassandra, her golden eyes gleaming in the shadows cast by the trees. Almost a hundred years alive and she still looked like she was eighteen. A rather plump eighteen year old, but Michael liked curves. He thought about the day they had first met, in a dank cave beneath the mountains of Durum. "The Wheat Mountains..." He thought to himself. Before civilization rushed itself to the brink of extinction. At first he thought her just a chubby human with strange eyes, but time had proved she was so much more than that. He'd seen her naked, once, bathing in a hot spring near the edge of Krast. She wasn't chubby at all, she was four feet and five of the most enticing flesh he'd ever seen.

He slapped his neck, killing a mosquito the size of a grape. He missed the cold weather in Krast, he missed seeing Cassandra naked. He bit his lower lip and ran a finger down his dark brown cheek. "Cassandra," he started.

"Don't. Even!" She turned towards the other end of the platform, a huge wicker basket dangling beneath a red, ugly pile of torn fabric. That red fabric used to be a balloon, and that balloon used to carry them all across the world. What would carry them back? Michael wondered. "I know we're stranded here, and I know it's my fault... But you and me will never happen, Michael... We just won't."

"Stubborn folk, the Twa," He mumbled, trying to make a joke out of it.

"I can only speak for myself," she answered. "But yes, I am!"

"So how the hell do we get out of here?"

Cassandra looked down again. "Before we rise again we have to fall..."

"We can't see heaven when we're standing tall..." Michael continued. He couldn't believe Cassandra actually remembered that. It was something his mother used to say. He had no idea what it meant, but it gave him great comfort for some reason. "So, what's our next move?"

Cassandra shrugged her shoulders. "There should be a bridge down there, somewhere." That was how she'd gotten away from this place, all those years ago, close to a thousand, surely. Sole survivor, what a tragic fate. Maybe she should just mate with Michael, satisfy his

hunger for the flesh of the Twa. She wondered, for just a second, what their offspring might look like.

A shriek bellowed from below, and the entire platform shook. Some of the trees seemed to bend sideways, just for an instant before snapping back.

Whatever was down there, it wasn't small.

"What the hell was that?" Michael grunted, nervously looking through the gaps in the floorboards. Another shriek came, but from further away. "Please tell me there's another bridge somewhere. Up, perhaps?"

"Before we rise, Michael... Before we rise."

His hands ached, his back burned and his shoulders trembled. He was just as fond of climbing trees as the next kid when he was little, but he wasn't little anymore, and this wasn't an ordinary tree. For several hours they climbed, lower with each branch. He still couldn't see the ground beneath them, just an endless loop of green and brown. A small part of him wanted to let go, just to see how far he'd fall, maybe stop the burning in his arms for a few seconds.

"This is it!" Cassandra suddenly yelled out, from somewhere within the green.

Michael looked around, but saw nothing. "Where are you, Cass?"

Another shriek from below. He could see a shape now, thundering past just underneath his feet. He suddenly noticed how thin the tree he clung to was, how fragile it looked. It gently bobbed from side to side, creaking and moaning.

"Cass?" The shape was gone, its shrieks vanishing behind him. But now that he was alert, he could suddenly hear a lot of different sounds, like the forest had awoken from some ancient slumber. Strange birds were calling, chirping and cawing, the wind rustled through the trees and a million small creatures were moving far below. Suddenly, a face appeared in front of him.

"I'm over here you idiot!" Cassandra grinned and vanished again.

"Could've just told me so right away." He mumbled as he dragged his aching body between the trees, hand over hand on the branches. "There's something down there," he exclaimed as he landed on the wooden bridge Cassandra had found.

"There's a lot of things down there," Cassandra answered. "Let's have a closer look!"

Michael didn't know who'd built the bridges, but it most certainly couldn't have been the Twa. From what he'd read and studied, they built almost everything out of stone, and they absolutely hated heights. He glanced at Cassandra.

*Most of them, anyway.*

The bridge went on for miles, suspended from, built through and resting on the trees. Michael was staring at Cassandra as they walked, losing himself in various daydreams. Wet and soapy, soaked in the wet spring. His head dropped and his walk was hunched. Sleep; the ancient enemy.

"Fatigue rearing its ugly head?" Cassandra asked, slapping him gently across the face.

"What?" Cassandra's eyes were almost glowing, an inviting golden shine. It was then he realized how dark it was around them. "Has it been this dark all along?"

Cassandra nodded. "Not much sun coming through a canopy this thick... It feels good, not having the strain on my eyes." She looked around, frowning at various wildlife gathering around the bridge. Birds in every colour, insects the size of her fist, strange creatures climbing the trunks.

"Can... Can we rest a while?" Michael could barely keep his eyes open, let alone see anything through the darkness.

Cassandra pulled out a huge square of cloth she'd cut from the balloon and fashioned it into a roomy tent, using the trees and rope from the bridge as supports. "We need to leave at first light," she commanded.

“First light... How will we even know when that is?”

“That’s when *they* come.”

Sleep would elude him.

“Four days!” Michael fell to the ground. “This isn’t an island, it’s a bloody continent!” Everything was hurting, chafed, broken. He thought the forest floor would be a welcome change of pace, but he was wrong. The terrain was rough and uneven, he could barely see, even with the torch, animals had been attacking them every single day and what Cassandra only described as *they*, were close on their heels.

“Come on!” Cassandra grabbed his arm. “Just a few more days!”

“No!” Michael screamed. “Tell me what’s following us first!”

“You wouldn’t believe-“

“Try me!”

“...”

“Fine! I’ll just stay here then, and *they* can come take me! I’ll take their strange whispering over walking another yard in this godforsaken place!”

A large crash thundered through the forest, and then another. Something was coming towards them, something huge.

“Would you rather take *that* over walking another yard?”

“Shit!” Michael struggled to his feet and stamped after Cassandra, stumbling across the roots, feet slapping against the uneven ground. “Would you at least tell me what that is?”

Cassandra smiled - or, at least he thought she did, his torch stayed behind when he ran. “That would be the *M’ada Hari*”

“Mothers of the earth?” Michael asked. “I thought they were all extinct.”

“You know the old language?” This time, he was sure Cassandra smiled. “Impressive.” She turned around, a pair of giant feet crushing down next to her torch, grey scales glittering in the dancing light. “And no, they’re most certainly *not* extinct. Not in this world, at least.”

Michael looked around, smelled the air, felt the ground move beneath him. It really was another world, completely different from the one he knew, yet slightly reminiscent. If not for Cassandra, he wouldn’t have believed any of it; a long lost civilization, living in the depths of a forest the size of a mountain.

The trees bent and cracked as the *M’ada Hari* ran towards them, a sinister reminder they would soon be flattened. Michael was running as fast as he could, but that wasn’t fast at all. His blistered feet shivered, threatening to break off at even the slightest hurdle in the terrain, and there were a lot of them. Even Cassandra was beginning to struggle, her thick, short thighs burning from the effort. “Please God, help me!” Michael mumbled, glancing up. He couldn’t help but wonder how, if he indeed decided to, God would reach them all the way down there, so far away from the sky. But it wasn’t God Michael saw. There was something else above, feet moving across another bridge. It hardly mattered though, it wouldn’t help them escape.

“Over here!” Cassandra yelled, throwing herself to the ground.

“What?” Michael heaved and wheezed as he threw himself down next to her. “Is this a good place to become a pancake?” He looked up, two enormous shadows crashing towards them. There were fewer branches on the trees here, but he still couldn’t see more than the *M’ada Hari*’s feet.

“Look beside you, idiot!” Cassandra hissed.

Michael turned to see a small skeleton on the ground, resting against a tree. Judging from its size, it couldn’t have been more than a child. *If it isn’t-* “a dead Twa?”

“Yes. Look in his left hand!”

The skeleton was clutching an oddly shaped blade, thicker at the end than near the hilt. It was paper thin, but still dull at one side and sharp at the other. Its edge was slightly rounded, a thatch going out at the dull side, the only way to see which was which. It was glowing slightly, a cool, azure light radiating from within. Michael was completely hypnotized by the glow, enchanted by the sapphire ambience.

"Michael! Now!"

Michael snapped out of it, a scaled foot the size of a tree trunk crashing down between him and Cassandra. He swung the blade at the foot, slicing through it like it was butter. The M'ada Hari shrieked and toppled, the ground shaking. He swung the blade again, blood spewing in every direction, warm on his face and hands.

"Run!" Cassandra sprinted deeper into the woods, vanishing into the blackness.

"Where?"

"There should be a cave around somewhere!"

Michael wanted to stay, to see the M'ada Hari. Just a few seconds, and it would be exposed, fallen. A majestic creature, almost completely unknown to man, surrounded by myth and-

Something grabbed him from behind. Trees, branches, flying. He tried to focus.

Golden.

*Just Cass.*

"Come on you fool! We need to get going!"

"Where?" Michael couldn't see anything in the darkness. The blood in his eyes didn't really help, either.

"Just follow me!" Cassandra screamed, grabbing his hand.

Even through all the adrenaline and fear, Michael felt his body tingle as Cassandra took his hand in hers. The world seemed to slow down for a little while.

Just a little while.

"Oh, you've really done it now!" Cassandra barked, dodging the hanging branches.

Michael wasn't so quick, knocking his head against everything Cassandra dodged. "Done what? You told me to use the... Blade thing!" He looked at it, almost losing himself again. What the hell was it? How do you forge something so thin and sharp? What made it glow like that?

"This forest is like the deep ocean; filled with dangerous predators. They can move through the trees like fish through water; almost swimming in the air." Michael could've guessed the rest. "When they smell blood-"

There was a thud behind them, followed by a low growl. "I get it!" Michael spat. "Just find that damn cave!"

The entire forest seemed to be coming for them, shadows fore and aft. Michael couldn't see what any of it was, but it was hissing, snarling, spitting and growling in the darkness. Coming for them.

Coming for him.

"There!" Cassandra screamed, yanking him by the collar.

Michael fell forward, almost skewering himself on the blade. He rolled down a slope, hands and feet banging against the moist soil. The blade clattered against stone as he stopped, falling into the darkness. Blood dribbled out of his mouth, through broken teeth and cracked lips. "Nice place..."

Cassandra knelt down next to him. "I'm sorry! I didn't realize it was such a steep decent!"

"That's okay, the stone floor broke most of the fall anyways." He slithered forward, rolling around on his back.

"You're well enough to make jokes, at least. You'll live."

He scrambled on to his feet, knees shaking, lip quivering. He touched his face and his teeth.

Only one gap.

"How did you know about this cave anyway?" Michael asked, still sucking the empty part of his gum. The taste of blood was fading now, but it still felt strange.

"This is how I escaped. I think..."

Michael had no idea how she managed to get out of there, and neither did she. A small child, running from what must've seemed like hell. Michael would've sympathized, but his thumping heart was somewhere else. While he couldn't see anything in the pitch black darkness of the cave, Cassandra could. She was holding him by the hand as they navigated the narrow passages, and Michael's entire body tingled. Goosebumps covered his black skin as they climbed a steep slope.

"Do you feel that?" Cassandra asked.

Michael smiled. "Yes! I do!" He said, stepping closer to her.

"It's cold, isn't it?"

Michael's heart sank a little, but Cassandra was right. "Yes it is..." A small draft was coming from somewhere ahead. This was the first time he'd felt cold in days. Months, even. "What could cause the temperature to stoop this low?" He shivered as light started gleaming into the cave.

Cassandra let go of his hand and ran towards the cold, quickly disappearing around a corner. "What we're looking for!" She yelled over her shoulder as she exited the cave. Michael hurried after her, covering himself up as best as he could.

"Whoa!" He exclaimed as the cold, open space greeted him.

They were standing on the edge of a huge valley, stretching on for miles. The ground was covered in brush and undergrowth in all shapes and sizes, like a sea of branches and leaves. And best of all; *normal-sized trees!* Michael smiled a gap-toothed smile, happy to actually see the forest for once. Around the valley though, giant trees reached for the sky once, creating a giant fence,

Michael was ecstatic nonetheless; this was the first he'd seen of open space for many, many days. "We're actually above the forest for once! I can actually *see* some of the tree tops!" Michael looked around, holding his hands out in front of him. "Wait! I can actually see!" He looked up, slowly. "Is that the sky?!" He blurted out, almost falling over.

A giant circle of blue, the exact same size as the valley, bathed the entire place in a cool blue light.

"A welcome after seeing nothing but a few feet of green all day!" He laughed. Now that he thought about it, though; the light was hurting his eyes a little.

He covered them up.

Cassandra peered down into the valley below. She raised her thumb against the far side of the valley, aiming at the endless trees on the other side. She looked up at the circle of blue and raised her other hand. The trees surrounding the valley didn't have long to go before they touched the sun itself, and it was impossible to see the top of them. "Damn it!" She hissed, gazing into the valley again.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked, still hiding his face in his hands.

Cassandra didn't answer, but after a few seconds she turned towards him. "Found it! Let's get down there!"

"Found what?"

Cassandra grabbed his neck and turned his head towards the farthest slope of the valley. "There!" She pointed. "Do you see it?"

Michael removed his hands from his eyes and squinted down at the valley floor. "No."

"Look closer!"

As Michael kept staring, a streak of red seemed to emerge from the trees, like a gentle fire. There was something down there, between the trees. Some kind of metal, he thought. "I see it!" He exclaimed, almost jumping up and down. He quickly gathered himself and turned back towards Cassandra. "So what exactly am I looking at?"

"Well, I think it used to be my city... But just like the rest of this bloody place, it's completely overgrown." She looked at the strange blade in Michael's hand. "At least we have that to help us clear the brush away." She started down the valley side, grabbing branches and trees as she slid out of sight.

Michael sighed. "Can't we just stay here for a few hours?" He yelled into the trees. "I haven't seen the sky in days!"

After a long, silent pause, a pair of golden eyes emerged from the trees. "That's not the sky, Michael." Cassandra grinned.

"Then what is it?" Michael raised his head and looked at the swimming blue colour above.

"It's the ocean."

# ACT II - A STRANGE PLACE

"War, of course."

The joy of seeing daylight was quickly vanishing as they entered the remains of Cassandra's village. There were skeletons everywhere, twisted and torn. Some of them had trees and roots growing through them, limbs embedded in the branches, bones cracked and splintered.

"There wasn't a forest here before..." Cassandra mumbled as she slid from tree to tree.

The trees were completely out of place, growing through stone and metal alike. Beautiful stone houses and towers had crumbled and crashed into the ground, covered in moss.

"This looks like it has been abandoned for thousands of years!" Michael exclaimed.

"Yes, but it hasn't," Cassandra answered, picking up another glowing blade from the ground. "Stupid device," she mumbled under her breath.

"What the hell happened here?" Michael's worry grew as they stumbled through the shattered stone, the silence deafening.

Cassandra sighed. "The device we're looking for. It can be used as a weapon."

"What?" Michael looked at a nearby skeleton, brush growing out of its eye sockets. Another one was crushed under a collapsed doorway. He had his doubts about the device before, now he was certain. "Cass! Let's go back!" He said, desperation dripping from his voice.

Cassandra stopped and turned around, bones cracking underneath her boots. "I'm sorry; you want to do *what*, now?"

Suddenly, Michael felt uneasy. Her golden eyes seemed to bore right through him, stripping him down, reading his soul. "I-"

"You what?" Cassandra hissed.

The glowing blade in her hand made the situation even worse. For a few seconds, Michael wondered if she'd actually kill him if he started to run. He looked at the blade in his own hand. "This device," he said, his voice nothing but a murmur. "It's bad news! Look what it did!" He pointed at the destruction all around them.

Cassandra took a quick step towards him and raised her blade. He nearly fell over as he awkwardly raised his own. "This!" She hissed. "This is what caused all of the destruction!"

"A blade?"

Cassandra took another step. "No, you idiot! Why do you think these were even forged to begin with?" She lowered the blade and grabbed Michael's face. "War, of course!" She yelled, turning his head around. "Doesn't all of this look familiar to you?"

Michael closed his eyes. "Yes," he was crying, "yes it does..." His thoughts drifted back home, to the sandy dunes of Terina, to the forests of Friport, to the thousand isles of Krast. They all looked the same now; war-torn and deserted, crushed and burned. His civilisation was just as lost as hers, he decided. Even if they could rebuild everything, who would live there? Was there even anyone left? The forests were scorched and the water polluted, how would they eat? A world devoid of forests and trees, drained of every ocean, every sea.

He felt like a useless brick upon the shore, the morning after the storm

Michael dropped the blade and fell to his knees, crying hard. "Everything is gone!" He screamed. "We're all alone!" He punched his knuckles bloody on the stone covered ground. "It has to work!" He yelled at Cassandra. "Cass, it has to work!"

Cassandra dropped down next to him. "It'll work, Michael! We'll make it work!"

"Promise me!" He screamed. "Promise me!" His voice echoed through the trees, piercing the great silence. The trees themselves seemed to rattle.

"Michael, you need to--"

"*Promise me!*" He roared once again.

"I promise, Michael! I promise!" She looked nervously into the trees. "We need to move..." She mumbled, helping him back up on his feet.

"Why?" He sobbed.

"They're coming!"

A deafening roar seemed to pierce the sky, then another one from below. The trees were shaking and the ground rumbling. Apparently, this world wasn't quite as dead as it first appeared.

"What are they?" Michael wiped his tears and grabbed his blade, running after Cassandra between the roots, brush and trunks.

"Creatures as old as the earth itself!" She ducked and bounced between all of the trees, running towards a giant, red building in the distance. "What we're looking for should be in there!"

Michael didn't answer, he was far too busy looking over his shoulder, down at the ground and towards the ominous building they were running towards. A million thoughts raced through his head. He couldn't see the animals yet, but they were close and they were huge. The trees swung and broke as they were trampled down, the roars and shrieks intensifying tenfold. The ground they were running on must've been a main street, Michael figured. It was probably beautiful once, covered in lovely stone squares, ornamented and carvings creating beautiful patterns on the side. If Michael had learned anything from this trip thus far, it was that time did not treat stone nicely. As they closed in on their goal, Michael was almost blinded by the building. It was no doubt the sheen of red he'd seen from up above, gleaming in the cool light.

The closer they came, the more it looked like a giant warehouse of sorts. Broken windows loomed in the distance, on the sloped metallic roof and down the sides of the building. A glass corridor, still unbroken somehow, led to some kind of annex; another ominous red building. Michael had never seen a building like that before, and every inch of him wanted to stay away, run somewhere else.

But there was nowhere else.

"Thank god! It's open!" Cassandra cheered as she burst through the doors. Michael reluctantly followed her inside, into the darkness once again. "Find something to block the doors with!" She screamed as the last beam of light was choked.

"How?" Michael replied, unable to see anything. Wherever the windows he saw led, it wasn't here.

"Use the blade!" Cassandra started pulling on some boxes, a gruesome shrieking sound piercing the air as rust ground against rust.

Michael raised his blade, barely illuminating his closest surroundings.

*Rust.*

Eventually, he found a big pile of red and orange crates, some of them toppled over, strange contents spilling out. Others were stacked high towards the ceiling.

Michael grabbed one and started pulling it towards the door, the rust screeching against the floor.

"That ought to do it!" Cassandra said after a few minutes of desperate stacking. They both stood there for a little while, admiring the crooked tower leaning against the door, barely illuminated by their blades. There wasn't a single sound.

"Why aren't they trying to get inside?" Michael wondered, nervously looking around, spotting nothing but darkness.

"I have no idea." Cassandra answered, placing her ear against the door.

All they could hear was a low murmur, like the hissing of a weak engine. It faded in and out, and seemed to have several sources. Michael held his blade in front of his face and moved slowly away from the door, trying to follow the sound. Whispers seemed to enter the room along with a cold gust, sending shivers down Michael's spine.

The murmur continued.

"What the hell is that?" He asked. Then he remembered. "It's them again, isn't it?" He turned towards her. "Okay, I want to know-

"They're the spirits of my ancestors..." Cassandra looked right at him, unflinching.

"The *spirit of your-*"

"Yes!" She interrupted. "It is believed... It *was* believed that when the Twa faced the final ascension, they would take on spirit form and leave this world. Maybe they're trapped here by the same thing that caused them... Us... To face extinction in the first place."

Michael could hear the whispers all around him, fading in and out in sync with the murmur. "You don't really believe that, do you?"

Something fell to the floor somewhere, and the murmur stopped. "What the hell was that?" Michael was shaking, the light from his blade flickering.

"Only one way to find out," Cassandra replied, pulling something out of her pack.

Before Cassandra could light her match, Michael saw two golden lights emerge in front of him. Then two more, then two more, then one. The murmur resumed and the lights came slowly towards him. "I think we just did!" He whimpered, his entire body shaking.

"Crap!" Cassandra exclaimed. "Here! Take a torch, the light will scare them!" They hurriedly got two torches lit, illuminating most of the room. Nothing could've prepared them for the ghastly sight awaiting them.

Around them were almost a dozen Twa, badly mutilated and disfigured.

"Are these your ancestors?" Michael screamed.

"Oh my god!" Cassandra fell to her knees. "The poor things!"

Michael swung his blade and took the first one's head clean off. "What happened to them?" He yelled as he swung at the next one, missing by an inch.

"The machine... It must've transformed them somehow..." She tried communicating with them; talking, waving, jumping, nothing helped.

Michael swung his blade again, nicking one in the chest. It roared and growled, limping towards him. "Some help would be appreciated!" He cried, kicking it back. Suddenly, a hand touched his shoulder, not Cass this time. He spun and reeled, falling to the ground as another mutant clawed at his neck. There were too many of them, and the space was too small.

"Hang on!" Cassandra belted, jumping across the room, swinging her blade. She wounded three of them, and immediately started on another.

Michael watched in wonder as her glowing blade sang, chopping limb after limb after limb. Then she ducked, dodged and counterattacked. Before he even knew what was going on, the mutated Twa were dead and Cassandra stood victorious.

It was a hollow victory though. "My people..." She mumbled, letting the blade fall to the ground. "What have I done?"

"What you had to in order to survive!" Michael grabbed her shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "Those weren't your people, Cass; Not anymore. Now let's get going before more of them show up!"

Cassandra reluctantly picked up the blade again and followed Michael. "They must've been too close to the device when it activated."

Michael raised his torch and looked around. The building was in bad shape, sheets of metal hanging from the walls and ceiling, wooden beams holding the roof up in several places. *Even though it looked so untouched from the outside.* "So what exactly does this machine do?"

"It enhances growth, somehow... I'm not quite sure how... It allows things to grow where it normally can't."

"Like a wasteland or a desert?"

"Exactly..." Cassandra sighed. "Like the current world..."

"But there is some kind of catch, right?" Michael turned towards her.

"I have no idea!" She said, like he was accusing her. "No!" She looked down. "Yes! I..." She walked past Michael, further into the building. "It also accelerates the growth of whatever's there already, I think. That's why this place is obscured by trees a million miles high."

Michael carefully placed his arm around her. "I'm sorry, Cass. I really am! We'll put it back the way it was!"

Michael's words sounded hollow to Cassandra. "But my people will still be gone! I will still be the sole survivor!"

Michael hadn't really thought of that. He'd lost his family to the war, his parents and his two sisters, and more friends than he cared to number. But humanity would still remain when the dust settled, his race would persevere.

He said nothing more.

The facility was by far the strangest place Michael had ever seen his entire life. Devices of every kind surrounded him, some broken, others still working. He didn't dare touch a single one of them though, the memory of the mutated Twa still burning in his mind.

They'd been searching through the endless rooms for several hours, none of them saying a word. He was tired and exhausted, but he knew better than to complain.

The room they just came from contained several sheep skeletons and a flock of long dead birds. The room before that was filled with various crystals in all shapes, colours and sizes. Before that, they'd seen earth behaving like water, floating ice and snow, soft rocks, solid air, cubes, triangles, cylinders, circles made of stone, grass, earth, glass, crystal, gold, silver, copper. Michael felt like they'd seen everything, except the one thing they were looking for. He started to wonder if they'd ever find it. Maybe this whole thing was just a hoax. Then he started hoping, praying. What if everything was just a dream? He remembered the rocks falling from the sky, laced with that vile red liquid. Everything burned, even the water. Villages, towns, cities erased in mere seconds as the call to arms rang. Brand new siege weaponry decimated the denser areas and the countryside alike. He remembered his dog most of all. If not for him, he wouldn't even be alive. His whole family disintegrated in a second, as he stood watching, leash in hand. He'd taken up sword and rifle, like the rest of them, but what was the point? A fire stronger than a thousand suns, scourging the earth, tearing through the very fabric of reality. What could mere men do? Then came the ships, the salvation. The purple emblem of the western kingdom, sent forth to extinguish the golden sun in the east. The siege machines were useless against the aerial fleet, raining even more destruction down from above. In the end, the remedy turned out to be worse than the disease; world domination was the only thing on the king's mind. And why not? The emperor of the east had destroyed half of the world for him, all he needed to do was destroy the rest. Michael fought back the tears.

"I think this is it!" Cassandra exclaimed, her voice followed by an awkward silence as she realized no one had said anything for hours. She ran into a bright hallway, illuminated by daylight gleaming through enormous windows.

Michael swallowed hard. "Are you sure?" He peered out through the windows, into the forest and the village, expecting to see monsters and mutants and all the lovely stuff from his worst nightmares.

There was nothing.

"Well, seeing as it's the most important object in the entire world, I can imagine they built an annex to house it."

Cassandra made a fair point, and the heavy metal doors leading into the annex further proved her theory. "Good call." Michael said, showing her something resembling a smile. He was lost in the world before, thinking about his family, and his dog. *That damn mutt.*

After working through another set of doors, they finally entered the annex. At first, Michael felt safe here. The massive iron doors blocked all entry and there were no windows. Before long though, he started feeling claustrophobic. There was no air, no wind and no sound, the flames from their torches standing perfectly still, slowly choking. The room was over twenty feet tall, but not much wider. On the far wall, almost touching the ceiling was an enormous golden egg, adorned with rubies, painted with various symbols. It was resting in a huge ornamental brazier, complete with emerald coals.

"What the hell is that thing?" Michel gasped, walking towards it.

Cassandra shook her head violently. "The birth of a god..." She mumbled in disbelief. "Michael! Stay away from it!"

Suddenly, the flames were snuffed out and darkness descended on the room. After a few seconds, a strange hum echoed from the floor to the ceiling, followed by a high pitched noise. It all ended in a crescendo of beeps and hums, and silence once again reigned.

"What the hell was that all ab-"

A loud twang interrupted Michael, devoid of any tone or pitch. A pale blue light lit up the egg from below. Then came another one, just as loud as the previous. This light was in the ceiling, shining down on them from above. Three more lights activated, and now the whole room was bathed in a dim azure glow. Apart from the low hum of the lights, the room was completely silent.

None of them had ever seen this kind of technology before, and they both stood there gawping at the contraption. They slowly started to notice wires going into the egg, connected to various devices they had no idea what did.

"Cass; did you say, *birth of a god?*" Michael turned towards her, his black skin almost white from the fear and anger. "What the hell was your people doing down here?"

"Don't worry!" Cassandra blurted out unconvincingly. "It's just superstition and bedtime stories."

"Really? You know that eggs have an uncanny tendency to *birth* things, right?" Michael stepped towards the egg with his blade held high.

"Well, it's not birthing anything right now, is it? So let's just find the machine and get the hell out of here before it has the chance to!"

Michael shook his head. "No! I want to make sure!" He cut a few of the cables on both sides of the egg and walked back towards Cassandra, a cocky smile covering his face. "That ought to take care of-"

Another twang made the entire room shake, this one louder than the ones before. The egg started vibrating, and a large hum made the ground tremble. The blue lights turned orange, giving Cassandra's eyes a sinister glow as they narrowed on Michael.

"You. *Idiot!*" She spat, slapping him across the back of his head as hard as she could.

Michael wanted to apologize, but quickly realized there was nothing he could say. Then he saw it. "Oh!" He exclaimed, pointing and waving.

The other end of the cables were connected to a small box, almost resembling a carton of eggs. It was three quarters filled, with stones and crystals in all colours, including ones Cassandra had never seen before. It had a number of pipes and tubes coming out of it, white smoke rising from some of them, black smoke from others.

"Is that it?" Michael yelled, clutching the blade so hard his knuckles turned white.

"I think so!" Cassandra answered, looking at the stones. It almost looked innocent, somehow, like something a child would play with.

"Great! What are you waiting for? Use it!"

Cassandra felt a sinking feeling. Her gut wrenched and her heart felt like it was about to burst. A huge knot blocked her throat and her vision grew blurry; she had absolutely no idea how the device worked. In desperation, she yanked all of the cables out and picked it up. It seemed heavy, yet light at the same time. Smoke still rose gently from the pipes, which Cassandra took as a good sign. "I've got it! Now let's-"

Another twang, another rumble and another change of colour. Black this time.

"Oh, that's almost never good!" Michael screamed, grabbing Cassandra's blade as well as his own. "Run, run, run!!!"

The entire building shook as they squeezed themselves through the heavy doors. The glass in the corridor shattering around them. Michael ignored the cuts and ran for his life. As he neared the end of the corridor, he took a quick glance out through the shattered windows. His heart nearly leapt up his throat as he noticed the purple emblem. It was embroidered on the side of a giant blimp, twice the size of any ship Michael had ever seen. "How the hell did that happen?" He asked no one in particular, running back towards the village, straight for the ship.

Cassandra vanished into one of the rooms they had visited previously, and Michael ran after her. "What the hell are you doing?" He asked, pulling her arm. "We have a possible giant chicken behind us and the army of the last king in front of us! We need to-"

A final twang, then a thud, then a boom and a million crashes. That was it, Michael figured. It was all over. "It's been a privilege knowing you, Cass!" He said as pieces of the ceiling started collapsing around them. Everything twisted and blurred, and tears emerged in his eyes as he thought about his family. Maybe he would finally be reunited with them. He hoped he would see Cassandra as well. Much to his surprise, the killing blow was nothing more than Cassandra's palm against his face.

"The windows!" She hissed. "We're not dead yet!"

Michael could hear violent shrieks and deafening booms coming from all around. *What the hell was in that egg?!* He thought to himself, running slowly for the windows. A part of him didn't want to survive. He was tired now, and Cassandra couldn't operate the device, he could see it in her eyes.

Another boom, another shriek.

Black.

# ACT III - WAY OUT

*"The birth of a god."*

If only the damn dog would hurry! Michael had been standing in the freezing cold for almost thirty minutes, waiting for the filthy beast to do its business. "Damn, but it's cold on this damn island!" He mumbled. The wind was hard as well, blowing right through his skin. He looked up at the cold evening sky, not a cloud in sight. "Pretty..." He whispered as he watched the stars. He wondered if there was anyone else up there, on another world like his, waiting for their stupid dog to do its business. "If you're not going to relieve yourself, would you at least move around some? I'm freezing to death over here!" That was the worst part. The dog didn't even move! Clearly, it had heard something or smelled something Michael hadn't, and now it was just standing there with its tail as stiff as branch. Michael sighed and looked up again. Then he noticed a star on the horizon, slowly gliding towards him. It burned brighter than everything he'd ever seen before. Then, horror filled every inch of his gut.

It wasn't a star.

Everything went blurry. The intense heat melted the snow away in a few seconds, burning and tugging at Michael's hair. Someone screamed. A woman, on fire, trying to roll around in the melting snow. Another star fell from the sky, and the town square was gone, just like that. A sea of fire burned bright in its place, flames everywhere, rising towards the sky. Michael let go of the scorched empty leash and ran. For hours he ran. For days he ran.

Then he was cold again.

"So cold..." He whimpered, the cool air tugging at his lips. He tried to open his eyes, but couldn't. He took a deep breath and started wiggling his toes, first the right foot, then the left. *Nothing broken so far.* He moved his fingers and wrinkled his nose. Buried in the Krast winter, he thought to himself. He would need to dig himself out, fast. He took another breath and realized he was hearing voices nearby, and a loud, constant roar. And he wasn't in the snow, he was lying on metal. "Strange..."

"Hey! Looks like he's awake!" Michael didn't recognize the voice.

He rolled over on his back and slowly opened his eyes. The ceiling appeared to be purple, and wind tugged at him from every direction. Then he noticed rays of sun against the claret, gleaming in the cool air. It was warm against his face, burning in his eyes.

A big, ugly man soon covered it, looking down at him. "Hey there!" The man said, slapping him gently.

"Who are you?" Michael asked, rubbing his eyes.

"Yeah, he's good to go!" The man yelled, lifting Michael after his clothes.

In the haze, Michael noticed the sky, stretching on forever, not a single cloud in sight. "Where am I?" He asked, breathing deep as he was dragged towards the centre of the platform. He was quickly dropped to the ground, crashing against the metal. "It's an airship!" He exclaimed, admiring the hydrogen-filled contraption carrying the platform. He quickly looked to his sides, searching for Cassandra, but she was nowhere in sight.

"So you finally decided to wake up, huh?" Another man was approaching.

The big brute quickly got out of the way and saluted the man. "He's lucid, colonel!" He barked, standing straight as an arrow.

"Good, good!"

"Where's Cassandra?" Michael hissed, sitting up.

He was answered by a swift kick to the face. "I'm sorry!" The colonel said. "I'm the one asking the questions here." He removed his white gloves and unbuttoned his overly medalled

coat. "But; since you seem so genuinely eager to know," he loosened up his fingers and leaned close. "The fat girl is downstairs, trying to fix the device." He lifted Michael up by his hair and sat him in a crooked chair. "In the meantime; you're going to tell me how it works!"

Michael tried as best as he could to hide his fear, but it was hard. "Why?" He spat.

The colonel slapped him again, and again. "Because if you don't," he tipped Michael backwards and forced his head to the side. To his horror, Michael realized he was right at the end of the platform, his chair wobbling over the open air. "You'll fly away!"

Michael swallowed hard as the chair was tipped back. "Please!" He mumbled, tears welling up in his eyes. "I don't know how it works... Something with rapid growth. That's all I know!" The colonel placed his foot on the seat of the chair. "No! Please! That's *all* I know!" Michael squirmed and twisted. "But I can help her fix it!" He could barely breathe. "I can fix it for you! I'm good at that! Please! I don't know how it works! I don't!" Michael started sobbing and shaking, crying uncontrollably.

"What do you think, sergeant?" He asked the big man.

"Well, he ain't lying. And we do need that device if we're going to bury those bastards for good!"

"The colonel tapped his lip and stared at Michael for a long time. Then he finally removed his foot and nodded. "Toss him down to the utility room with the fat girl."

*She's not a fat girl.* Michael thought, but he dared not speak.

The decent into the utility room was a steep one, but Michael didn't need to worry about the stairs. In a second, he was down, another gap in his mouth and another round of pain. The hatch was closed above him and he was left in a tiny room with a circular window.

"Michael!" Cassandra exclaimed.

"Cass!" Michael tried to get up, but couldn't. "Ow! My knees!"

Cassandra helped him up and gave him a hug. Even through all of the pain he could feel a tingling sensation. "What did you tell them?" She asked, releasing him.

"Nothing!" He answered, a little offended. "Why would I tell these idiots anything?"

"Because if not they would've tortured you?" Cassandra almost smiled. Almost.

"Fine!" Michael admitted. "I told them the device has something to do with rapid growth, and that I didn't know anything else. Which is true!"

After a few seconds of silence, Cassandra turned back towards the device and started moving the crystals around.

"Will it work?" Michael asked, looking at the strange contraption, hooked up to various wires and tubes going into the airship.

"Yes!" Cassandra said, grabbing something from her pockets. "Because of these!" She pulled out four different crystals and placed them in the device. "They want me to fix it, so they can use it to destroy the eastern empire, but I'm going to make sure it destroys the kingdom as well!"

"How?" Michael asked, scratching his head.

"The king is aboard this airship!" Cassandra grinned wider than she'd ever done before. "And if I overheard correctly, he wants to be the one to flip the switch!" She adjusted the crystals and pulled a few more wires from a panel on the wall. "Shortly after discharging... Whatever it discharges, the device will explode, taking the king down with it!"

"What about the emperor?" Michael didn't like the sound of her plan. "And what if he wants to set it off in mid air?"

Cassandra grinned again. "They won't!" She laughed and walked over to the tiny window. "I convinced them it would only work on land!"

"Clever girl!" Michael smiled.

"Here's the real kicker, though! They're going to land as close to the emperor as they possibly can, and discharge it there! With any luck, the empire will suffer the same fate as the Twa!"

Michael smiled wider and positioned himself behind her. "And without the king and without opposition, the people will be free. Free to start again!"

"In a new world, and under a new god." Cassandra said, pressing her finger against the glass.

In the distance, Michael could see an enormous flying creature. Giant wings flapped above the sandy dunes and the charred cities. "That's what we set loose in the Twa laboratory?" He asked, narrowing his eyes. "It looks hostile."

Cassandra sighed and looked down at the war torn earth. "Not as hostile as us." She said, her voice determined.

Michael tried to recognize the lands and nations down there, but without forests and with empty oceans it was next to impossible. It didn't really matter, either. Wherever he was, it all looked the same. *Desert, sand and scorched earth*. He turned around and looked at the device, crystals glowing in every conceivable colour.

"Will it work?" He asked again, his face bathed in a million rays. It looked harmless enough, beautiful, even. But Michael remembered the Twa village; the twisted skeletons within the trees, the mutants in the lab, the thing roaming the skies out there.

"I think so..." Cassandra answered.

She didn't sound sure at all.

Suddenly, they could hear a shriek above. Then came the shouting. "Man the stations, man the stations!"

Then came the words they dreaded: "We're under attack damn it! It's that blasted creature again!"

"Kill it!"

Michael looked out of the window, the creature was coming towards them full speed. "Get down!" He screamed, shielding Cassandra.

A huge crash tilted the entire ship sideways and sent both of them rolling into the wall. Steel sang, crossbows twanged and cannons boomed above, the creature shrieking, its wings casting eerie shadows into the room.

Cassandra ran up to the window, looking at it, clawing and biting its way through the platform. "If it goes for the hydrogen, we're done for!" She screamed, unplugging some of the wires going into the device.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked, looking outside. His entire body was aching, but he struggled his way towards Cassandra.

"We can't risk the device getting destroyed! It needs to be activated now!" She tore out a few more cords and moved one of the crystals again. "I'm trying to make sure it doesn't blow up in my face!" She pressed a few buttons, and violent black smog started spurting out of the pipes. "I'm sorry, Michael!" She said.

"Sorry for-"

She jumped towards him and pressed her lips up against his. He was caught off guard, but quickly got used to it. It felt every bit like he'd always imagined, even better once he could feel her tongue, and her voluptuous hips underneath his hands. Her body was firmer than it looked, but soft nonetheless.

"Oh, that's okay!" He blurted out, tasting his lips. The end of the world suddenly seemed less bad. "I'm quite okay with-"

Cassandra quickly interrupted him. "You need to make sure that thing dies!" She said, tears flowing from her golden eyes.

"What's going on?" He asked, confused. He'd never seen Cassandra cry before.

"It's not a god at all! It's a monster!" She pointed towards the window. "That's the real weapon! Don't give them a chance to tame it!"

Michael was at a complete loss for words, his mouth agape as he tried to follow what Cassandra was saying. "What-"

"If I turn into one of those things we saw in the laboratory; kill me!" She said, handing him a wrench.

"Cassandra! No! What are you-"

She pushed Michael into the corner and flicked a switch on the device. A green flash blinded him, followed by a searing red one. A yellow flash burst the window and sent various tools flying around the room, then a blue one made all the hairs on his body stand up. A white one surged through the air, feeling like a snowball to his face, then a black one made everything dark. There was more of them, but he couldn't see, couldn't feel. Hours seemed to pass before his senses returned. He could hear screams above again, and the hum of the engine.

Then he saw Cassandra, lifeless on the ground.

"Cass!" He exclaimed, running towards her. He cradled her head in his lap, stroking her hair, tears flowing down his face. "Cassandra!" He repeated. "Please don't die!" He could still taste her lips on his. "I love you!" The creature shrieked again, the noise almost unbearable through the broken window. "Come back to me, and we'll destroy that thing together!"

"Ungh..."

"Cassandra!" He repeated yet again, overjoyed. His joy was short-lived however. Cassandra's skin started melting in his arms, her bones twisting and deforming. She looked straight at him, but there was nothing but resentment in her once golden eyes. She snapped at him, but he dodged her bite. He could feel the wrench in his hand, but he couldn't do it. "I'm sorry, Cass..." He bawled, running for the hatch. "I can't kill you... I just can't..."

On the deck, everything was complete and utter chaos. Men were screaming and yelling, running this way and that. The beast had killed quite a few, their corpses scattered around, rolling and bouncing as the airship tilted from side to side. Michael struggled to keep his balance, stumbling back and forth, trying to get his bearings. He looked towards the sandy dunes below, but nothing had happened. "It *has* to work!" He screamed to no one in particular, Cassandra's sacrifice fresh in his mind. Another shriek brought him back to reality, but he was unfocussed, and fell to the metal grating. A third shriek made him look up, the creature now covered in various ropes and nets, desperately trying to wrench loose. Michael remembered Cassandra's final words. "Don't let them tame it... Kill it..." He mumbled to himself.

"How...?"

As he stumbled and tried to get back on his feet, he realized he still had the wrench in his hand. He clenched it and stood up, trying desperately not to fall. All around him people were running back and forth, screaming, shooting and flailing. They had the creature ensnared, but they weren't winning quite yet. Then he noticed the sergeant, and the colonel. "Crap!" He mumbled, turning his face away, hoping they didn't see him.

"All right sergeant!" The colonel yelled. "We need to get off this ship! Secure the device and meet me near the escape chute!"

"Yes sir!" The sergeant answered, running towards the hatch. He was carrying an arm-cannon in his right hand, strapped around him with two white belts.

Michael looked up at the gigantic purple fabric above, carrying them all. Then he looked at the creature just below, black and angry, flapping its wings. Hydrogen was extremely dangerous and flammable, he'd learned. "Destroy the device. Kill the creature." Cassandra had said.

"Hey!" He yelled, almost surprised to hear his own voice. "Hey! Sergeant!"

Both the sergeant and the colonel turned around, frowning. "Get him!" The colonel shrieked.

"Catch!" Michael countered, throwing the wrench at the sergeant with all of his might. It hit him straight in the forehead, blood flowing as his skull gave a nasty crack. Michael immediately ran for the arm-cannon, the colonel hot on his trail with a rapier in his hand.

"Stop him!" He screamed to no one and everyone, pointing the sharp end towards Michael.

Michael threw himself over the arm-cannon as the entire crew came running for him. Without even thinking, he rolled over on his back, shooting straight up.

Time seemed to grind to a halt as shades of red and yellow saturated the sky. The hydrogen was ignited instantly, flames spilling in every direction. Michael clutched the platform, gritting his teeth as the searing heat licked his skin. He grabbed on tight as the airship slowly started to plummet, explosions roaring and thundering above. The creature shrieked again, and then it was lost within the hissing flames. The intense heat brought him back to the day it all begun. "Full circle," he thought. "Did it work!?" He peered over the edge, but the world below still looked the same. Another explosion sent ripples of flame across the sky, the metal and steel of the airship moaning and buckling under the intense heat.

The colonel seemed to be the only other man still alive on the platform now, thumping towards Michael with a vengeance. "Stabbed to death on a burning ship..." Michael mumbled. "Not very poetic."

Everything creaked and cracked as the colonel approached him, thousand steel wires and ropes melting away in the fire.

Michael looked up. "The supports!" He exclaimed, grinning. The colonel turned around only to see the last rope give away. The platform dropped a little, causing him to lose his footing. He grabbed a hold of Michael's foot and sliced at him with the rapier, barely missing.

The platform was now hanging from three steel wires, fastened in a purple inferno, soon completely burnt and drained of gas. In the corner of his eyes, Michael thought he saw treetops. "It *has* to work!" He repeated once again, kicking the colonel. The wires twisted and buckled, only a few seconds now, and everything would fall. Not that he would live to see it; the colonel raised his rapier again.

Twang.

The colonel flew up into the inferno with a violent burst. Then the entire purple blaze was left behind as the platform thundered towards the ground. Michael held on for dear life, but he couldn't tell why. "Cassandra..." He cried, making his way back to the hatch.

Cassandra was still there, clawing at the ladder. Michael turned around to take one final look at the decimated earth he'd leave behind, and then he saw it. Everywhere, trees were blooming, shooting up, right from the sand. He could hear the rustling of a waterfall, he thought, or maybe it was just the wind.

He smiled and grabbed Cassandra. Just for a second, her eyes gleamed golden.

"It worked..."