

Trace: a country where magic is dying out. A country at war with itself. A country where the prophecies of the Book of the World have started to come true.

Bligh: a young foreigner, drawn irresistibly to the war in Trace. A man who has rejected religion, yet appears to be possessed by one of the six Lords Elemental.

Bligh thinks he's going mad, but if he is then it's a madness shared by others...

Gritty and passionate, Lord of Stone is a fantasy for the new millennium by the acclaimed author of Keepers of the Peace and the Expatria series.

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Praise for the author's earlier novels

Expatria

"Book of the Month ... highly recommended" (Gamesmaster International)

"a marvellous book" (Nexus) Expatria Incorporated

"a first-class novel" (Nexus)

"brilliantly shows a world in which religious belief is used to secular advantage" (The Times)

Keepers of the Peace

"required reading" (Time Out)

"several years since a first novel has grabbed me the way Keepers of the Peace did" (Locus)

1

'And out of the mayhem the Lords will arise ... '

- The Book of the World, ch.18, v.29.

The ragged people were all around him, staring and shouting and waving their fists. Bligh looked down at the rounded stones lying scattered in the fire.

Had he kicked them there? He did not know.

He remembered hiding in the ruins, looking down at all these people as they performed their calling to the Gods, the Prayer of the Body.

Yet now he was here in their midst and the people were enraged by his incursion.

"No!" he said, again. Nobody moved. The only other noise was the incessant clatter of a small radio, tuned in to a southern music station. "This is wrong," he cried. "You can't do this. It's sick. Do you think that if the Lords were among you they would recognise - " he gestured " - this as anything but a cheap sham? Do you? There is nothing Holy about this charade. Nothing! It's sick ... " He was losing track. He did not know where he had found the words, or even what they meant.

He looked around at the people in their filthy tatters, gathered in the ruins where they were forced to make their home. These poor people were desperate, they needed something to believe, something to give their empty existences some kind of meaning.

As he studied their faces Bligh realised that the time for violence had passed and he was safe, for now. The mood of the gathering was returning to the passionate fervour of before, only now the atmosphere had been subtly transformed.

The people moved away, found their drinks and started to talk and laugh. Lila, kneeling at Bligh's feet, hooked her hand into the waistband of his trousers and pulled him towards her. Her cheeks were smeared with tears and dirt from the ground. Her daughter was there too, pressing a jug of wine at him, small eyes pleading with him to accept it.

He did not understand these people's response. He had wrecked their ceremony but they hardly seemed to care any more. He drank, long and deep, then passed the jug to Lila and watched as she pressed it to her lips.

She paused to touch the corner of her mouth. It was swollen, engorged with blood. He did not remember striking her - had it been him?

Someone turned the radio up louder, its music insistent, shrill. Bligh tried to come to terms with what was happening to him. The steady pressure in his head was frightening, a sure sign that he really was insane. He felt himself to be right on the edge of some mental precipice. It would not take much ...

"I hear voices," he said quietly. He had to explain, had to find the words from somewhere. "My head ... I can't keep track of it all. I see bodies, too. All day, all night. They talk to me." He drank more wine and focused on its heat in his belly. "I'm mad," he said. "Mad."

He drank some more.

Later, the old man started his chant again. Nobody paid him any attention at first, but gradually the people stopped talking and silenced the radio. In their ones and twos they turned to watch, then started to clap out his complex rhythm. Bligh felt no anger now, only a mellow sense of well-being that centred in his gut and rippled outwards.

He did not object when Lila rose from where she had been sitting, head on his shoulder, hand on his thigh. He watched as she found the movements of her dance once again, her eyes locked unblinking on his. He drank some more from the jug of wine.

After a few minutes, she started to wail that twisting note that had reached right inside Bligh earlier in the evening. She wrapped her arms around her body, pulling at her clothes, teasing, and all the time her eyes were fixed on Bligh's.

It crept up on him stealthily.

Sitting, watching, drinking ... then suddenly he was out in the cleared dirt space with Lila, crying aloud, the old man's chant pulling Bligh's body about as if he was a marionette jerked by some mad puppeteer's wires. He clutched at his head, trying to interrupt the pattern and stop, but still his body jerked and twisted and that awful chant pounded through his head. All he knew was the fire, the insane twitching of his body, the undying, timeless rhythm battering the inside of his skull.

At some point - he knew no sense of time - things started to change. A new rhythm, a new chant, supplanted the old. The voices of the people all around, the people with whom he had shared this grim little shanty town. All chanting a single word, over and over again. "Who?" they cried. "Who? Who? Who?"

He did not understand, but he sensed that he did not have to understand.

"Who? Who? Who?"

Somewhere in his head, the pressure, transforming. Rising through the levels of his mind, bursting forth to take over his senses and submerge all that he was, all that he had ever been.

"Who? Who? Who?"

Expanding, a force that would destroy him and know no different. Rising up to take over.

"Who? Who? Who?"

He stood and spread his hands, and then there was sudden silence.

"Who?" said the old man, eventually, his chin glistening with saliva and sweat.

"I am ... " said Bligh, who was no longer Bligh, in a voice no longer Bligh's. "I am the second of the Lords Elemental: I am Lord of Stone." Now, he smiled. "I am," he said, "your Saviour."

1

'A man answers the call of his people ... and so he answers the Call of the Lords.'

- The Book of the World, ch.8, v.68.

They heard the first gunshot as the train pulled into the station.

Bligh's grip tightened on Madeleine's hand just as the shot was answered by three more. Facing them, a woman stared back blankly, her scrawny arms wrapped like honeysuckle around the tall wicker poultry basket resting on her lap. Two young girls by her side giggled and hid their faces when Bligh glanced in their direction.

The train lurched to a halt and Bligh and Madeleine joined the throng by the carriage's door. Movement brought life back to Bligh's legs, numb from an hour or more on a narrow wooden seat. At the exit he realised Madeleine was watching him closely. They had been lovers since the summer yet still he felt a self-conscious heat prickle his skin. He leapt to the cobbled platform and used his bulk to steady himself against the flow as he helped Madeleine down.

"Anasty." They spoke the name of Trace's capital city together and then laughed. The whipcrack of another gunshot sounded - far too close - and they allowed the crowd to sweep them through the station-house and out into the street.

"We should find somewhere in which to stay," said Bligh, his Traian distinguishable from that of a native only by its grammatical correctness.

Madeleine slung her light bag over Bligh's shoulder and kissed him tenderly on the cheek. She flicked dark hair back from her face and turned a full circle to look at the city. "The boarding houses won't be full," she said. "We have plenty of time."

Holding hands, they walked on the pavement, heading in the general direction of the Old Town. Crooked buildings lined the street, three or four storeys high and perhaps two centuries old. Boards covered some of the small windows and bullet-scars and soot marked the stone facades. Here and there, outside shops and seemingly ordinary houses, long lines of people stood resolutely in turn.

They rounded a corner, Madeleine navigating from memories of earlier visits to Anasty, and there they came across their first barricade. Bligh looked immediately for a pennant or banner to identify the militia responsible. They had come from Dona-Jez that morning, a town held by the Landworkers' Alliance. Because of this, there might be problems if their papers were examined by Government troops.

Above the broken line of rubble and sand-bags, a chequered blue and white flag drooped in the sultry air and Bligh said, "Syndicalist, it's okay." The Syndicalists, with their aggressively confrontational history, were at the more extreme end of the revolutionary spectrum, but infinitely preferable to a Government jail.

"You have papers?" said an unshaven guard, somehow contriving to look a fine figure in his shabby corduroy trousers and coarse woollen coat.

Madeleine handed over their train tickets and her employment card, Bligh his passport.

On seeing that Bligh had Wederian nationality the guard beamed approvingly and said, "You like our girls, hmm? In that case you will like Anasty, Friend, you will like it greatly."

"One of them, yes," said Bligh. "I hope to like Anasty, too." There were more gunshots now, but faint in the distance. Still, Bligh searched the rooftops and windows. He found that in some perverse manner he was actually enjoying the sense of danger. He had never come so close to the fighting before.

"Ah, you are in love." The guard's smile grew even broader. "That is very good."

"Is the fighting bad?" asked Madeleine. From her tone Bligh could tell that

she did not find the guard amusing.

"For the Government and the Queen it is," said another soldier, joining them from a nearby building.

"A piece of advice, Friend," said the first, placing a hand on Bligh's arm and standing so close that the smell of sweat and cheap wine was almost unbearable. "If you want to have love tonight then don't go near to the Old Town. That is where the Army are, for now, and there is much fighting. Go there and you might end up in a hospital or in a wooden casket - a young man with the love juices flowing doesn't want a thing like that."

Bligh stepped away and tried to thank the man, but they could not leave without their papers. For a moment, the guard held ticket, employment card and passport aloft and then he brought them down with a grand flourish. "Enjoy our city," he said. "If you find the time."

Bligh retrieved their documents and at last they passed through the barricade. They walked on for some time, easy in each other's silence, nothing to hurry them. The afternoon stretched out ahead.

Then, with no warning, they were fired on for the first time.

They were passing down a wide street with lime trees sprouting from either pavement. Horses dragged loaded wagons along the road, passing with difficulty over the tram-lines cut through the cobbles. A white-haired news-sheet distributor was yelling from the centre of the road while his young assistant worked her way along a queue that led into a bakery's open doorway.

Madeleine was telling Bligh of her trips to the city as a teenager, when the railway line through Dona-Jez was new and her parents had been able to afford the fare. "We would go to the Arena and watch children playing football. Afterwards, one time, I went with a friend to the docks and we ate lobster fresh from the baskets. We - "

A single gunshot sounded with a metal crash and the whistle of a ricochet and in one movement Bligh's arm was across Madeleine's shoulder and he was dragging her down roughly. They hit the cobbled pavement with a jarring blow and Madeleine gave a soft gasp - surprised, frightened. Bligh's heart thudded explosively as, all around, the street scene froze.

Another shot rang out and the queue had suddenly vanished. Women hid in doorways or lay face down on the pavement, clutching children, muttering to themselves and covering their eyes with their hands.

The newspaper vendor had sprinted across the street and swept his assistant down behind a stone water trough.

Bligh and Madeleine crawled over to join them. The trough afforded protection from one direction, at least. Out in the street a horse pulled its abandoned cart, oblivious to the disturbance.

"What are they shooting at?" asked Bligh.

"Who can know?" said the newspaper vendor, casually drawing a section of sugar gum out of his coat pocket and sliding it into his mouth. "See the damaged building across there?" Where the man gestured there was what looked like a shop with boards across the windows and rubble heaped about it defensively. "That was once a Syndicalist hall. They still use it sometimes. Maybe there

are Army snipers shooting at them. Or maybe the Syndicalists are just trying to keep us on our toes, who can know? Maybe someone doesn't like The Voice - you want one?" He thrust a copy of the news-sheet of the Unification Party of the People at Madeleine. Bligh reached into his pocket for some coins. "No," said the man, stopping him. "It is free, to a Friend of the Revolution."

It was now several minutes since there had been any shots. The queue at the bakery had reformed and a man was chasing the horse and wagon along the street. Bligh and Madeleine said their goodbyes to the news-sheet distributor and continued on their way. This time, in unspoken agreement, they stayed closer to the shelter of the buildings.

They had come to Anasty on impulse, perhaps the same impulse that had brought Bligh wandering down into war-torn Trace the previous year. He had been in Dona-Jez for over six months - the longest time he had lingered in one place since walking out of school, six years earlier - but finally one morning, as Madeleine sat astride his prostrate body, rubbing his tight shoulders, she had asked him what was wrong. He tried to explain his need to keep moving, to assure her that it was not her fault, that it was a part of the fabric of his being. "Then lets go somewhere," she had said simply. "We could go to Anasty. You must see it before it's all blown down." Walking through the battle-torn streets, still shaky from the sniper shots, Bligh hoped that they had arrived in time.

They stood on a crowded tram, hanging on to a broken handrail. The tram had been hastily repainted in United Road Haulage colours, the old state livery still showing in places through the two tones of red. Dribbles of paint ran down the few unbroken windows and UPP news-sheets had been plastered across the ceiling and the backs of the seats. Madeleine rested her head on Bligh's shoulder so that he could feel her breath on his neck.

They disembarked at a place called Settlement Square. Here, the cobbled street branched to form the perimeter of a paved rectangle containing two ornate fountains and a statue of a mounted king which had been hauled down and partly dismembered. Bligh remembered seeing a painting of this square, from before the War. They had come here, now, to look for somewhere to stay.

To one side of Settlement Square was a low, imposing building, its windows boarded and its brickwork scarred with artillery wounds and scorch marks. It was the Metropolitan Hotel. It looked to be closed but even if it had been open the prices would have been too high for Bligh and Madeleine.

They walked across to the fallen, partially dismembered monarch and Madeleine said, "I was five when King Elleo died. All of Dona-Jez went into mourning, but that was only show - for the patricians and their police. Behind closed shutters the men got drunk and the women danced on tables and for months the police picked on people for no reason at all, other than to show that they were still in charge."

"And now that is all gone," said Bligh. "The people are in charge and the statues lie broken in the streets. Do you not feel something awakening inside you ... a new spirit trying to break free?"

"The fight isn't over yet," said Madeleine. "There's still more blood to flow."

"Don't you feel the energy of it all?" He did not know how else to put it, the sense of awakening he had experienced as he first crossed the border into Trace. It had felt like some strange kind of homecoming.

He took Madeleine by the hand and led her unsteadily over the remains of the fallen king and across between the two fountains to the street, where they had to slow in order to pass between a tram and a loaded motor wagon. They stopped outside the Hotel Adernis, smaller than the Metropolitan but with a dilapidated air of its own permanence that Bligh sensed instantly was more promising.

Inside, there was a cramped lobby with leather upholstered seats and a worn-smooth carpet. A small UPP banner was draped across the front of the reception desk. The price was reasonable, and Bligh chose not to haggle.

The manager left them in their top floor room with the recommendation of ear-plugs if the shelling from across the river became too intrusive.

By now it was dusk and they stood looking out of the window, across the rooftops to the older quarter of Anasty, where they could just make out the broken top of the Arena. In the dim light Bligh could see what looked like a bank of low cloud but he guessed it must be smoke from fires and the explosions which occasionally grumbled with an insistence that seemed to grab his innards and squeeze.

"Bligh," said Madeleine, softly. He turned to her and she continued, "You're very special."

Awkward, he looked down into her dark eyes, and said nothing. He traced the line of her nose with a finger, then her cheek, her jaw, her neck. They moved together, in the window recess, and held each other for a long time before they kissed.

The bed was old and the mattress sagged towards the middle. Whenever Bligh opened his eyes he saw Madeleine, the bedspread, the walls, all lit up in the gathering darkness by a faint fiery flickering, cast into their room from the battle beyond.

The next morning they were hungry. By the time food had occurred to them the previous evening it had been too late to do anything about it. Bligh could have waited longer for his breakfast, but Madeleine was up and dressing before he was awake enough to persuade her to linger. He rolled over to lie in the warm hollow she had left and watched as she used the chamber pot and then washed at the room's cracked porcelain basin.

Soon, the sunlight flooding in through the window proved too much for him and he clambered out of bed and into his clothes.

"The quiet sounds wrong," said Madeleine, and Bligh realised that there was an absence of gunfire and explosions.

"Perhaps we have won," he said. He realised that he had said we and turned awkwardly away to find his shoes.

Downstairs in the hotel lobby some guests were milling around as two UPP soldiers went through the reception ledger with the manager. Bligh had thought that he and Madeleine were the only guests, but clearly he was wrong. He said a "Good morning, Friend," to one elderly couple but it only provoked a curious look and a muttering of Feorean.

Bligh approached the reception desk and, when he had attracted the manager's attention, he asked about breakfast.

The manager gestured at a tall window to one side of his desk and said, "Our kitchen ... my apologies." He turned back to the two soldiers as Bligh walked over to the window and looked out at the shattered walls and heaps of rubble where the hotel kitchen had once stood.

They went outside.

A small crowd stood on one side of Settlement Square, holding assorted Cooperative and Syndicate pennants over their heads. As Bligh and Madeleine stepped out, a double line of soldiers emerged from a side street, kicking high in the southern style which had looked so comical the first time Bligh witnessed it. The soldiers marched past the crowd, their rear brought up by a single boy carrying a Landworkers' Alliance flag, its pole supported by a sling across his shoulders. In a few minutes the procession had disappeared from sight and the onlookers began to disperse.

Madeleine found Bligh's hand and led him away from the square in search of food. After a short time they came across a knot of people gathered outside a church. A wagon was pulled up in the street and a number of men were aloft, sorting bags and parcels thrown up from the crowd. A short distance away, a horse backed up, kicking at the air as a man clung, determinedly, to its harness. Bligh and Madeleine watched for a while, then as the crowd thinned they approached a gowned priest and asked him what was happening.

"We are collecting for the soldiers," he said, breathing heavily after his exertions in loading the wagon. His face shone with sweat and he rubbed at it with the carmine sleeve of his gown. "There are coats, boots, trousers. There are tins of milk, cheeses ... oat bread that will keep for weeks and then have to be soaked in water to make it palatable. There are books and razors and many other items, too. We collect them for the Unification Party of the People and we pray to the Lords for Their forbearance."

"They bet on both sides," said Madeleine, as they walked away and the priest began the difficult task of harnessing the horse to the front of his heavily laden wagon.

"Hmm?"

"The Church. In Figuaras and Mountsenys the priests will be collecting for the Army and preaching against the Lordless uprising here in the East. Before the LA took Dona-Jez our priest tried to rally the people against the revolution. He tried to strike the fear of the Lords into them. Now he works in the fields and calls the people 'Friend' but they do not forget."

Bligh recalled stories of priests being lynched or driven away, as a succession of towns and villages had been liberated over the three years of the Civil War. Strangely, the churches themselves were largely untouched. There was an echo of this division in Madeleine, herself: her cynicism about the Church could not belie the persistent core of her own faith.

They emerged onto a street that was bounded on one side by a narrow strip of parkland and beyond that the River Ana. On the far bank the city took on an entirely different character: the streets were narrow and treeless, the terraces of stone houses and shops had been lower and more haphazard even before large sections had been ruined by the fighting. Church towers were visible over the rooftops and, silhouetted by the morning sun, the curving outer wall of the Arena dominated one section of the skyline.

"I lost track of where we were," said Madeleine.

Down among the trees, now, Bligh could see gun emplacements shielded behind broken masonry and sandbags. Soldiers lazed in the late summer sun, while their colleagues sat and cleaned their guns or played cards or argued with their friends.

The first gunshots of the day broke the peace, but nobody seemed too concerned. "Breakfast?" asked Bligh, setting off towards a nearby eating house.

Empty stone tables and chairs were scattered across a paved terrace, but a murmur of conversation escaped through an open door and Bligh could see that there were people inside, eating and drinking and reading the news-sheets.

They went in and ordered sweetbreads and anise tea, refusing the horoscope cards the proprietor thrust at them in place of change. The prices were clearly the reason why people chose to queue in the streets rather than eat in places such as this. Later, Madeleine told Bligh that he had only been charged so much because of his Wederian accent. "We will take it outside," said Bligh, smiling at the answering crazy foreigner look on the owner's face.

The fighting started up before they had even broken the first sweetbread. Bligh touched the stone of his seat, the stone of his table, finding reassurance in the cold contact. He looked across the river to where the explosion had sounded so close. There was no smoke or falling masonry as he had naively expected. One of the light artillery guns on the riverside sent a shell across into the Old Town but it failed to explode and the soldiers returned to their lazing, their books, their arguments.

"Tea?" said Madeleine, holding the pot over a cup.

"Hmm. Sweetbread?" said Bligh, breaking the first small loaf and putting half on Madeleine's plate.

There was a machine-gun now, stuttering from the depths of the Old Town, and the Cooperative soldiers began to stir again, wandering back to their positions, firing occasional rifle-shots across the river and into the apparently deserted buildings. Once a bullet ricocheted off the road nearby, but Bligh guessed that it was a misfire rather than an answering shot from the Army. He thought perhaps the Government had abandoned Anasty weeks ago and the revolutionaries were firing at memories. A radio came on, adding to the din of conversation from the eating house and Bligh and Madeleine ate breakfast in their own cocoon of silence.

They returned to the hotel as dusk was settling, their thoughts turning to food again. They hesitated in Settlement Square, wondering where they could go.

"The Metropolitan does a good dinner," said a man, coming down the steps of the Hotel Adernis. He had a haggard face, with short sandy hair and a hook nose that made him appear to squint. His clothes were grubby but made of a northern linen which indicated a sophistication most chose to hide these days.

"I thought it was closed," said Bligh. He recognised the man as one of the other guests from this morning. "The windows are boarded over."

The man shrugged wearily. "Wood is cheaper than glass," he said. He had the sort of nondescript looks that gave no indication of age: he could have been

twenty-five or he could have been twice that. His accent was foreign, but Bligh was unable to place it. "Please. Be my guests for this evening," he said. "Humour me."

"We weren't - " Madeleine began, but the man held up his hands to stop her, then changed his gesture into a wave towards the Metropolitan.

"Please," he said again. "I've eaten alone too often recently."

From the outside, the Metropolitan looked like a ruin, but inside it was as if the War was a continent away. The floor was polished to a near-flawless shine, the chandeliers glittering and complete, the serving staff dressed crisply in dark uniforms.

Bligh and Madeleine sat with the man, who called himself Divitt Carew. Their table was covered with a white cotton sheet, and there was silver cutlery and a slender candle and cut crystal glasses for the wine which appeared soon after they were seated.

Bligh glanced at Madeleine and saw that she shared his discomfort. The streets today had been overflowing with goodwill and egalitarianism. The war had been responsible for shortages and suffering on a large scale but the spirit it had stirred was constantly a wonder to Bligh. All this finery turned his pangs of hunger to nausea.

"So what draws you to the war in Anasty?" said Carew.

'Draw' was a good word for Bligh. "Fate," he said, tentatively. "Chance. I do not know." Somehow it had always seemed inevitable that his travels would bring him here. He had no explanation.

"It's a part of me," said Madeleine. "Whether I like it or not."

"Ah, but you are a Traian, it's your fight. Bligh, here, is Wederian, no?"

"Marish," said Bligh. "But I was schooled with a Jahvean Brotherhood in Stenhoer, so you are partly correct. I do not know. I came here and liked the atmosphere. The people are so welcoming, they are free. It is as if they are waking from a bad dream. That has to be worth something."

Their meals arrived, Carew having ordered for them all. He stuck his fork into a piece of meat and said, "So you've been reading the propaganda-sheets. Are you planning to stay here in Anasty? Are you going to join the fight?"

Bligh felt cornered and he did not know why. "It's not propaganda," he said. He found that his hunger had returned with the arrival of the food. "I have been talking to the people. There was a priest this morning, collecting gifts for the troops. People will queue for hours in the hope of some food, but the very same people give freely to the soldiers who fight for them. You ask a lot of questions," he finished, accusingly.

"You have to forgive me," said Carew. "It's my profession. I'm a journalist, with the Conservative Journal." Carew's paper was one of Feorea's leading national dailies. "I ask questions out of habit. Ignore me. I don't care. Just enjoy your meal."

After a while, Madeleine asked, "Have you been in Anasty for long, Divitt?"

"On and off," he said. "Near to three years, I suppose. But I'm never in the city for long. The Journal can't afford many of us so I have to cover a lot of

territory. You have to forgive my cynicism: I've seen too much of this stinking country. I've seen too much of the fighting for me to believe that it's achieving anything. This war's a racket, just like any other. Some of the people might be happy now, but when the fighting's over and a settlement's reached they'll start feeling the shortages, resenting the queues, mourning their dead. It's just the people who have trying to hang on and the people who want trying to get as big a share as they can. It's an old story."

Bligh shook his head but remained silent, staring into his empty plate. He knew better than that: he had been a part of it, working in the transport cooperative and then, later, helping at the school where Madeleine taught. The spirit of resistance had found a resonance somewhere in his head. He had been infected.

"Look around you," said Carew, leaning towards Bligh and Madeleine, his eyes flicking conspiratorially from side to side. "Go on. Isn't it nice that so many ordinary people can now eat in the Metropolitan Hotel's grand Dining Room?"

Bligh had, indeed, thought it good that so many were now eating so well.

"You're a fool if you think everyone's equal now. Where have all the rich gone? Do you think they've fled? Maybe some of them have, but most are still here. All they've done is dress in rags and stand in queues with the peasants. For insurance they'll all have joined the UPP or maybe one of the more benign Cooperatives. But look around you: where do they eat at night? Where do they meet up with their old friends and talk about better times to come? Nobody actually stays in the hotels other than us journalists and a few foreigners with dodgy backgrounds, but see how the dining rooms fill up in the evening."

Now Bligh felt awkward again, in the finery of the Metropolitan dining room. After a decent interval he and Madeleine left Carew to his liqueurs and cynicism and headed back across the square to the Hotel Adernis.

"He does not see," said Bligh, as they went up the stairs to their room.

"See?"

"Divitt Carew and his kind can chase the shadows all they like, but it only dulls their perception. He does not see that all his complaints only serve to show how important it is that we hang on to what has been gained."

"'We'?" said Madeleine.

Bligh shrugged and smiled as he closed the door behind him. Their room was lit up with the flickering explosions from the Old Town again and Bligh's thoughts had turned to the night before. Somewhere, in the walk across Settlement Square, he had come to a decision, but now there was Madeleine and there was their bed with the mattress that sagged towards the centre and he thought that, perhaps, the world could wait until morning.

2

'See the Lord of Flux, source of all change ... at the heart of all conflict, the heart of all life.'

- The Book of the World, ch.2, v.34.

He had never realised joining a militia would be so difficult. He had been

trying without success since the middle of the morning.

They had breakfasted, again, by the River Ana. The eating house had become a familiar landmark for Bligh amid all the new. "I am going to join up," he told Madeleine, as he broke the sweetbread and she poured the anise tea.

The Old Town was quiet today, only the occasional distant gunshot carrying across the river. The field guns had been moved from their emplacements and now a mere dozen UPP soldiers occupied the ribbon of parkland which separated river from street.

"You don't have to do it for me," said Madeleine, after a long interval. Her food lay untouched on her plate. "Divitt Carew was right: I am Traian ... it's my war by right of birth, whether I choose it or not. You have nothing to prove to me, nothing at all."

"Are you telling me not to fight?"

Madeleine sat, breaking her sweetbread into smaller and smaller pieces until her plate held only a heap of crumbs that scattered in the occasional breeze.

He started again. "I am not trying to prove anything," he said. "I have been travelling for six years and I have never known a country like Trace. I have never known a people like the Traians. I am scared that the revolution might fail. I could not live with the knowledge that ... that all this had been lost and I had stood by because it was not my fight." He was struggling hopelessly with the effort of putting his primitive desire to join with the uprising into a language that was not his own. He had to join up, he realised. He could not conceive of the possibility of doing anything else.

They parted a short time later, Bligh to carry out his mission and Madeleine saying that she wished to see the docks again. She chose her words to make him jealous, he felt sure, and in that she succeeded. The last time she had visited that part of the city she had been taken by Hammad Fulke, the man whose departure she had still been mourning when Bligh first arrived in Dona-Jez.

He decided to head for the Syndicalist hall in the street where they had come under fire the previous day. The revolutionary organisations could be divided simply between the Cooperatives, the Syndicates and the Unification Party of the People, but Bligh knew little of their ideological differences. His choice of militia was therefore a simple one: he knew, vaguely, how to find the Syndicalist hall.

"You've come to the wrong place, Friend," said a soldier, kicking at some rubble outside the building. "Come, and I'll take you to the Speers Syndicate Office on Panglett Square. It's not far. There'll be a recruitment book there, I guarantee."

The Syndicate office proved to be part of a banner-draped library, which had been converted into barracks to house a Company of Syndicalist troops. Bligh felt relieved. It should be easy to join here.

Inevitably, he was wrong. With what he had come to regard as typical Traian disorganisation, no one seemed to know what to do with him.

"Of course, we are delighted that a foreign soldier should choose to honour the Speers Syndicate with his services," said one man, who Bligh guessed was probably an officer although he bore no indication of rank. "But we are not equipped to educate a newcomer - however experienced he may already be - in

the ways of our Company. And then there is the matter of Syndicate membership ... "

The UPP were more organised.

He had crossed a Party barricade on his way to the Syndicate barracks. The UPP soldiers were better equipped than most Bligh had seen, and they were friendly and welcoming when he found them again and explained his position. An officer filled out a form as Bligh stood by. It was despatched with a runner before Bligh had time to comment and within minutes he found himself striding down the street; a list of directions had been neatly inscribed in the margin of the latest news-sheet, with the assurance that a Company allocation would be awaiting him when he arrived at the UPP office at the City Pumproom.

He was nearly there before his thoughts caught up with events and he realised that he felt vaguely disturbed by what had happened. He paused in the shade of a lime tree. A UPP barricade was a short distance down the road. They would probably be expecting him: he could not turn back once he reached that barricade.

Efficiency was not a bad thing, he believed, but in an organisation at the heart of this ramshackle revolution it seemed somehow misplaced. He realised that the chaotic enthusiasm of the Traian people was part of his fascination with this war and that spirit had been absent from the UPP post where he had been recruited.

He decided that he should think about it for a time.

He turned away from the barricade and wandered back towards the hotel. He considered returning to Dona-Jez and helping at the school again with Madeleine.

In a short space of time he came within sight of Settlement Square and then he spotted a small building draped with the banners of the Landworkers' Alliance. He knew people in the LA. It was the Cooperative that had taken Dona-Jez and which ran that small town with an enthusiastic even-handedness that more than compensated for their lack of order.

He stopped and looked at the shabby little building for a long time. Maybe Madeleine would accept his decision more readily if he was with the LA. On reflection, he doubted that, but there still seemed something right about joining the LA.

A soldier peered at him out of an open window and Bligh nodded and advanced towards the building. "How do I join?" he said, and the soldier gestured at the door and beckoned him to enter.

Madeleine was not there when he returned to the hotel room for his few possessions. He did not have paper for a note so instead he left a message at reception. Leaving the hotel, he felt relief that he had been excused a messy show of emotions, but guilty nonetheless. He realised that this would not be easy for Madeleine and he felt it wrong that it should have been so easy for him.

The Mannarkind Barracks were situated on the eastern fringe of Anasty. It took him nearly an hour to find them, changing trams twice and covering the remaining distance on foot. Eventually he came to a cluster of buildings which looked as if they had once been a school. Now, green and ochre Landworkers' Alliance flags flew from the windows and Bligh could hear men's voices raised

from within.

He passed through a passageway between two of the buildings and then paused at the edge of a paved playground. An uneven double line of troops stood along one side, chattering and laughing as two men stood in the middle shouting and gesticulating at each other.

Bligh felt awkward, as if he was not meant to be there. Some of the men wore a sort of uniform: woollen jackets, LA neck scarves and stout boots being the common feature. The sight of these men made Bligh begin to realise what he had volunteered for.

One of the arguing men wandered back to the ranks, muttering and shaking his head, and the other headed straight for Bligh. As he drew near, Bligh realised that he must be an officer and then it appeared that he was about to walk on past.

Bligh raised the hand that was clutching his passport and recruitment sheet. "Sir," he said. "I have come to join up."

The officer stopped and looked blankly at Bligh. He was stocky, with grey hair and a black moustache, and a smile which mixed good humour with boredom in equal proportions. "We are all Friends here," he said. "No 'Sirs'." He took the papers and glanced through them. For some reason Bligh wondered if the man could actually read. "Please, find somewhere to sleep. You are an International now. We train here for a time. Maybe a week, maybe longer. Then we go." He cracked that enigmatic smile again, then nodded in the Traian greeting. "I am Captain Caballier," he said. "I can only wish you well, Friend. Your luck is your own to make and use." At that he nodded sharply again and then left Bligh clutching his papers.

Most of the men had ambled off into the largest of the school buildings. Bligh followed and presently he found himself standing in the entrance to an old classroom. The floor was mostly hidden by mattresses and sleeping bags and scruffy heaps of blankets and possessions. The air smelt of body odours and old food.

"A new recruit, I do believe," said a thin, grey-haired man in as close to a full uniform as Bligh had seen. His accent was probably Wederian and he had large, sad eyes and a moustache that drooped around the folds of his mouth. He held out a hand for Bligh to shake and continued, "I'm Bernie Rayner, International Supporter of the Landworkers' Alliance. Have been for over a year, all told. I'm back here for a breather and to give some support to the new boys. What's the name?"

Bligh shook Rayner's hand. "Bligh," he said. "I've just joined. The Captain - " he couldn't remember the man's name " - said I should find myself somewhere to sleep."

"Is that a first name? A last name?"

"Just Bligh." He had never known the identity of his father; all he had had was the suggestion that he might have been a stone merchant. His bastard status had been one of the reasons for his Jahvean schooling, another being that his mother would almost certainly have been unable to cope with the demands of rearing a child. She had never been the sort of person to make sacrifices. Upon leaving the Brotherhood he had immediately dropped her surname.

Rayner shrugged and said, "You might as well kip in here. There's still a

little space on the floor." Bligh dumped his bag under a shuttered window while Rayner went off in search of some bedding.

He looked around and wondered, not for the first time, if he was doing the right thing. Madeleine would be back at the hotel by now. She would know that he had joined the LA. He wondered where she would eat tonight.

The soldiers queued in the playground to have their bowls filled with a watery stew. They collected lumps of bread at the door and returned to eat in their classrooms. Bligh traded backgrounds with some of the other recruits, learning that most had already been here for several days. Gradually he found that he was beginning to put his doubts aside. It seemed that there was a number of Internationals at the Mannarkind Barracks. The LA liked to keep them together and Bligh was lucky to have been accepted immediately and not put 'on the list' until a workable number had been reached. Some of the recruits had travelled halfway across the world, only to have to wait for two months to be accepted on an International intake.

Many of the men were experienced soldiers, too old for service in their own countries or, Bligh guessed, bored with peacetime soldiering. Others had come because they had heard of the Traian Civil War and had seen it as a real chance for their politics of egalitarianism and socialism to be put into practice. The rest were a mixed group. Most - like himself, he supposed - were here by chance: travelling in the region and swallowed up in the revolutionary atmosphere. He guessed that there must be some with private reasons, too: escape from an unhappy background, criminals on the run, adventurers. The Traians at the Mannarkind Barracks were either here to train the new intake or were fresh recruits themselves, a mixture of ordinary volunteers and those who did not appear to fit elsewhere.

The evening was spent in a huge game of football, a minority sport in the north but a national obsession in Trace. There were at least thirty men on Bligh's side and it seemed that there was twice that number in the opposition. The game lasted until night had fallen and in all that time not a goal was scored.

Bligh found his heap of blankets in the classroom. He stripped down to his underwear and settled himself, as best he could, on the hard wooden floor. He stared up at the walls, half-expecting the flickering light display from the Old Town. He thought of Madeleine, alone in their hotel bed.

Around him, men began to snore and fart and just as he had decided sleep would be impossible under these conditions, he lost track of his thoughts and drifted off.

Training was, in the Traian way, a disorganised affair. The soldiers woke when they wanted, which was early for Bligh but as late as mid-morning for some. They washed at a communal tub of chill water and then wandered off to collect breakfast rations of bread and milk from the playground.

On his first morning at the Mannarkind Barracks, Bligh joined a group of Internationals in one of the classrooms and asked the nearest man about the daily regime. The man was a brown-skinned Irdeshi with glassy brown eyes and a round face. His name was Sadiq Phelim and he had been on Bligh's football team the previous evening.

Sadiq shrugged and said, "What is it that you choose to do?"

Bligh felt slightly intimidated by Sadiq. It was not that he was unused to

dealing with people of a different race - Jahveism was a predominantly eastern religion and many of the Brothers were Irdeshi or Knessidic - it was something particular about Sadiq himself. Bligh shrugged.

"There is no regime here, Friend." Sadiq shook his head. "It is a shambolic way in which to prepare a military. Real training should be a hierarchical construction: it implies the patronising of inferiors by their betters. We do not, apparently, train in the Landworkers' Alliance. We acquire learning by a process akin to osmosis. We mix with those such as Rayner and Ivoriola so that their experience of the fighting will diffuse its way through to us. We debate politics with Caballier or Skett in the wish that we might benefit from their wisdom. Sometimes we will gather in lines in the yard and Captain Caballier will ask us to parade, but if we choose not to we simply walk away or wait until one of the Traian boys decides to argue with Caballier."

Sadiq cleared his throat noisily and spat at a wall. "Training for a soldier in the Landworkers' Alliance is a subtle affair," he continued. "One does not acquire the practical skills of soldiering - for that we would require weaponry and that is in very short supply - it is more a matter of attitude. One enters the Alliance an innocent and one leaves still an innocent, but perhaps one with a vaguely improved idea of what is to come. That is the hope, at least."

Bligh spent much of his first day in the company of Sadiq and Bernie Rayner, in the hope that some of their experience would rub off on him. He learnt quite quickly that - despite his air of wisdom - Sadiq had never been a soldier before, yet he still seemed better informed than many of those who had.

Late in the afternoon, Bligh sought out the first instalment of his uniform: a green cotton neck-scarf which he wore inside his shirt, and a filthy woollen jacket that was too small for one of his heavy build and smelt of damp.

Not looking forward to another meal of militia stew, Bligh decided to head back into the city for the evening.

On the streets he felt self-conscious in his militia clothing. He sat at the back of each of the two trams, but he still felt that he was being watched. He wondered if the part-uniform would mark him out as a more tempting target for any sniper, and for the last part of his journey on foot he stuck to the sheltered parts of the pavements and alleys. One advantage, he learned, was that he no longer had to fumble for his papers whenever he came to a barricade. A nod and an "Evening, Friend," was always adequate. He hoped the Government was not aware of the military advantages of a stinking woollen jacket and a militia neck-scarf.

Madeleine was sitting at the feet of the fallen monarch in Settlement Square. Her head was tipped back so that her tanned face gained full benefit of the evening sun. Her hair hung in a dark cascade behind her and Bligh felt lust taking a rapid hold of his lower body.

Madeleine jumped when she opened her eyes and saw Bligh staring down at her. Then she smiled and said, as if it had not been a day and a half since she had seen him, "There's food at the Adernis, now. They've installed a simple preparation area at one end of the dining room. Are you hungry?"

He realised that he was. He helped her to her feet and then kissed her savagely. "Is that you?" she said afterwards, a playful tone in her voice. "Or the drains?"

He hung his rank jacket at reception.

They sat and ordered a simple seafood salad from the two choices on the menu. Minutes later, Divitt Carew arrived clutching a bottle of wine. "Mind if I ...?" He gestured at one of the two empty seats at their table. Bligh pushed the chair out with the tip of his shoe and Carew sat, placing the bottle in the middle of the bare wood table. "It's the same stuff we drank at the Metropolitan: I bought it from one of their porters. He told me that an ex-mayor of Anasty - some kind of distant relative of Queen Minna, no less, now dresses in rags and dines there. He's going to point him out to me next time I'm there." Carew poured three glasses of wine. "So you've done it then. I knew you would." In answer to two blank stares he pointed at Bligh's LA scarf and said, "Joined up and all that. I hope you do better than a boy I knew a little time ago. He went to fight with the UPP and for his first spell at the Front they sent him down to Caspe ... "

Madeleine shuddered and Bligh realised that Carew must be referring to the massacre on the fields near to Caspe that had been all over the news-sheets and on the radio at about the time he had first crossed the border into Trace.

"That was particularly tactless," said Madeleine.

Bligh watched Carew's face pass through a series of expressions. First, he realised his mistake and then he showed a momentary pang of guilt and maybe some confusion. He settled on a look Bligh had quickly learnt to recognise: a casual sneer that seemed to suggest that no one should take him too seriously. "You have to forgive me," he said. "The boy's getting better now. At least he'll never have to fight again."

The two salads arrived and Carew said to the waitress, "I'll have the same. Please. Landworkers' Alliance," he continued, turning back to Bligh. "More harmless than most, I suppose. Why them?"

"I know people in the LA." Bligh glanced at Madeleine. She was swirling the wine in her glass and refusing to meet his look. "I have friends there."

"Does he have your blessing?" Madeleine looked up at Carew's question, but he cut back in immediately. "No," he said. "You don't have to answer. Just ignore me. I only beg your company, so that I can feel like a social animal again."

"The Internationals interest me," he continued. "The foreign press - my own paper at the forefront - depicts them as a vicious gang of cut-throat mercenaries. That, or a bunch of ineffectual retired military administrators out for a little fun, depending on which propaganda angle we're taking: dangerous uprising or the pathetic flapping of a disgruntled minority. One day, I promise myself over a bottle or two, I'm going to go out to the Front and do a tough little piece on the Internationals. I'll sell it to Broad Cast or one of the radical journals of the Left. It'll bugger my career with The Conservative Journal, but what do I care? I've got my novel to write ... we journalists always have our novel to write."

Bligh had already noticed how little resemblance there was between the revolution and its depiction in the foreign press. "Why don't you?" he said. "Come to the Front with my Company: let the outside world know what's really happening. Maybe some of them will make their governments support us at last."

"It doesn't work that way," said Carew. "The people who read Broad Cast or Left Analysis already have an idea about what's happening. The masses don't

read all that over-intellectual drivel. And whoever heard of a government that listened? Anyway," he added, "there's all those bloody bullets and shrapnel to consider ... "

Upstairs, a little while later, Madeleine was undoing the buttons of Bligh's shirt. "A double bed is cold when it's half-empty," she said. "I wore the shirt you left under the basin. It kept me warm and it had your smell." She laughed and waved at his new jacket, dumped in the farthest corner of the room. "Now I'll need scent of goat, too."

He took her hand and led her across to the bed. The Old Town was quiet tonight.

"Stay with me," she said, after a time. "For tonight, at least."

He stayed until after midnight and then he crept out from between the sheets. Pulling his jacket across his shoulders, he leaned over and kissed Madeleine on the forehead and then covered her with his spare shirt.

Sadiq Phelim was missing from barracks the next morning. Bernie Rayner said he had gone out alone during the night. He had left his possessions, though, so he was not yet considered to be a deserter. "Probably sleeping it off with some little tart," said Rayner. "And where did you get to, my boy? No sooner have you joined up than you're buzzing off again. Getting the wind up already?"

"No," said Bligh. "Some little tart." He felt guilty instantly, but Rayner just clicked his tongue and went off to drag some of the late risers out of their bedding.

Most of the morning was spent marching around the playground, carrying sticks and spades and broom handles. During this Bligh puffed up his chest and tried to imagine what a real gun would feel like, resting against his shoulder as he marched. All of the Internationals took part in this exercise, although they muttered and grumbled about it being a waste of time. A lot of the Traians just stood and watched, or went off to play cards in the school. That brought forth further grumbles along the lines of Whose war was it anyway? The hard feelings came to a head over lunch and the answer was another mass football match, which lasted right through until the light began to fail.

Sadiq returned not long after the game had been abandoned. Immediately he became the centre of attention and it was some minutes before Bligh fought his way close enough to see the thick wad of dressing on the Irdeshi's left hand. "A slight mishap," was all Sadiq would say.

Later, a new tension spread through the school house. Many of the Internationals began to slip away, heading into the city or over to another building where Bligh learned there was to be a game of cards. The excitement was strongest among the younger Traians who remained in the main building.

"What is it?" Bligh asked of Bernie Rayner, who was hovering in a corridor as if unsure whether to stay or go.

"An ancient custom, " he said. "The Prayer of the Body, they call it. They get drunk and they dance and one or two of them will claim to be taken over by the spirit of the dead. It's even more popular here than the football. Have you never seen it before?"

Up in Dona-Jez there had been similar rituals, but after his years with the

Brotherhood he had acquired a deep aversion to all things religious and, even when Madeleine had participated, Bligh stayed away. He had always been uncomfortable whenever he was forced to acknowledge Madeleine's belief in what to him was a nonsensical and primitive superstition; even more so when someone told him of Hammad Fulke's interest in the arcane. Would he never escape that man's shadow?

Tonight, some perverse stubbornness made Bligh decide to stay and watch.

There wasn't much to see at first, except that a number of civilians - mainly female - had been invited. As the jugs of wine were passed round and the atmosphere grew more ribald, Bligh wondered if this was just going to be some kind of orgy. He drank from a cup of wine and exchanged awkward small talk with a plain girl from the city. Occasionally, she would tilt towards him and chuckle intimately. It sounded as if she was trying to clear her throat.

They were standing at the back of the room, close to a door, and Bligh frequently thought about slipping away. The crowd was focusing its attention on an old woman who sat next to a fire laid on the stone floor of the classroom.

He looked at the door, but he could not go yet.

Suddenly, he felt a pulse of excitement surge through the gathering and he saw that one of the young recruits was on his knees before the fire, his hands flat on the floor. He was moaning and the crowd began to mimic him, the sound swelling, heaving. Soon the room was bursting with noise.

"Mama, mama, mama!" cried the boy, as another, older, soldier fell in beside him. "Mama, mama, mama!" they cried together, and then their chant was taken up by others in the room and Bligh felt the sound as a wave of pressure battering against his skull.

He looked around the room at the frantic faces, the pressing bodies. The girl from the city was leaning on his shoulder now, one hand squeezing at his arm in time with the chanting crowd.

Bligh could not understand what was happening. He felt drawn towards it, as he would probably feel drawn to any alien spectacle, but at the same time something inside made him hold back. This ritual, more than anything else, reminded him that Trace was a foreign country and Bligh an outsider.

Just then, he spotted Sadiq on the far side of the room. The Irdeshi's eyes were streaming and his hands - bandaged and unbandaged - were pressed to either side of his head.

Bligh knew that he should go now. No matter how intense the attraction, he knew he could never be a part of a ceremony such as this. After a moment or two to focus his effort, he pushed himself away from the wall. Freeing himself from the girl's tight clutch, he struggled towards the exit.

Before the door could swing shut behind him, Sadiq was pushing his way out too, gasping as if he had just come up from under water.

In an awkward, mutual silence they headed away from the classroom, pausing only when they had emerged into the night air and the noises of the Prayer of the Body were lost to the night. Bligh vowed never to allow himself to be put in that position again.

"What happened?" he asked, breaking their long silence.

Sadiq looked abashed. "I was disenchanted with the lack of weapons training," he said. "And so I took it upon myself to undertake some self-education."

It took a few seconds for Bligh to realise that Sadiq was telling him the reason for his absence during the day and not explaining what had just taken place. Vaguely relieved, he decided not to pursue the matter.

"Last night," continued Sadiq, " I went to a part of the Old Town to where I knew there to be a Section of the LA staffing a barricade. I thought they might let me hold a gun so that I might learn how it felt. It just happened that I chose the night of an assault on an Army stronghold in the Parliament buildings." He shrugged. "I held a gun, yes. I held a stick grenade, too. You remove the safety pin as you approach your target and then, as you are about to throw you remove the second pin. I did as I was told but I did not throw the bomb fast enough, or maybe it was faulty as the healer suggested. I am now short of the middle two fingers of one hand and a great deal wiser in the ways of modern warfare."

They parted at the school gates and Bligh headed for the first of the two trams that would take him to Madeleine.

She was eating with an old couple in the hotel dining room when he arrived. As soon as she saw him, she made her excuses and then hurried across into his embrace.

Gunfire was coming from the Old Town again, and Bligh's mind kept reminding him of Sadiq's bandages as he and Madeleine struggled out of their clothes and tumbled onto the bed. He was like some kind of wild animal - they both were. Suddenly, it was as if they had been parted for a year, not merely a day. With no preliminaries he was inside her, pressing with all of his strength. Their mouths mashed together, teeth drawing blood from each other's lips and gums and almost instantly it was done and Bligh was slumped over his lover, wondering what kind of powerful primitive fear had taken him over for those few minutes since he had met Madeleine's eyes across the hotel dining room.

"I ... " he started, but Madeleine kissed him softly on the lips to quiet him, and then kissed him on the shoulders and across the narrow band of hair on his chest.

They lay for a time with Madeleine's head resting on Bligh's rib cage, and then she spoke. "I can't stay here for much longer. I'm in limbo. You're a soldier and yet you're not and I just wait here and feel like a displaced spirit. I have work in Dona-Jez, my family ... it gives me something."

"The children do not go to school any more. There is a war going on." Bligh was angry, but at the same time he felt a guilty sense of relief. "I am sorry," he added hurriedly. "I understand, I think. But I wish you would stay here in Anasty. Just for a little longer."

After another interval, she said, "A little while, Bligh. I wish we could be together always. I love you."

He knew she blamed him for joining up. It had spoilt everything. "I have to go soon," he said. "To barracks. I will be back tomorrow."

Too late for the trams, Bligh struck out on foot and it was well after midnight before he was within sight of the Mannarkind Barracks.

Lanterns were burning in the windows and he wondered if the Prayer of the Body

was still taking place. He hoped intensely that it was not. He did not feel that he could face that over-wrought atmosphere again, so soon.

At the door to the classroom where he hoped he would sleep he bumped into one of the Traian recruits called Slowly Skett. Slowly was too old to fight, but no one would ever tell him. He had been a political prisoner in Caspe for over ten years before the revolutionary militias had taken the town and set him free. He had volunteered to fight immediately, and now he was looked upon as a father figure by a lot of the local youths who had been recruited alongside him.

"What's happening, Slowly?" The classroom was full of activity: soldiers sorting through untidy heaps of uniform, bickering as they packed their bags.

"Grab some kit," said Slowly cheerfully. "We're heading up the Line at dawn."

Bligh felt a sudden lump in his throat and then he realised why everyone was bustling about and fighting over trivialities. Anything to divert your thoughts. His mind skipped through what news he had picked up in recent days but he could think of no single battle on the scale of Caspe at the start of the year. That did not mean that another large advance was not planned, though.

"Where?" hissed Bligh, but there was no more information. He spent some time completing his uniform with a pair of flimsy-looking boots, a back-bag, a cap and a thick woollen muffler. He argued with a Traian whose name he could not recall. The leather belt had been his - he had spotted it first - but he had to settle for a canvas one when he was distracted by a water bottle on a nearby heap. Later he lay, unable to sleep, until the sky started to lighten and then he hurried out to the office, hoping that the telephone would be available. It was, but a blank buzz indicated that there was no line to the Hotel Adernis. It had become quite light outside and there was clearly no time to go there in person. He settled for leaving a note with Captain Caballier, who was to remain at the barracks, but there was little chance that it would ever find its way to Madeleine. He hoped she would realise what had happened.

They gathered in the street outside, but it was too early for a flag-waving crowd to see them off. They marched, each to their own rhythm, for nearly an hour, some expressing their nerves in chatter and bad jokes, most remaining grimly silent. An old livestock train was waiting at the station and they filed on in the first semblance of order Bligh had noticed in his Company.

After an interminable wait, the train lurched into motion. Bligh looked around at his fellow soldiers. He wondered how anyone could ever think that such a rabble could win a war against a trained, well-equipped Army. The carriage smelt of animals and so the doors had been left partly open. Bligh watched the houses of Anasty rumbling slowly by, his mood sinking lower and lower. This time tomorrow, he wondered, how many of us will be alive?

3

'Now the young man, he heard the distant battle; the voices of the Lords were calling him...'

- The Book of the World, ch.18, v.78.

It was an interminable journey of stops and starts. The train rarely reached any great speed and when it did it almost immediately slowed and then halted for some reason that was never clear. Outside, the houses and ruins of Anasty

had long been replaced by fields and copses, punctuated by an occasional deserted rural station.

They left the train at a place called Amere. The officer in charge was a Traian called Captain Samchat who Bligh had seen for the first time at Anasty station. Now, he waved at the Company of near to a hundred men and indicated that they should clear the platform.

Sadiq Phelim and Slowly Skett joined Bligh as they moved out into the street. "Come on," said Slowly. "Lets see if we can hear what the Captain is planning for us."

They wandered farther down the street and loitered by the small shelter where Samchat was seated with three others. One of his companions was not wearing uniform and Bligh studied the tall, sallow man carefully. A spy or a scout, he thought. Or a journalist?

Sadiq was also watching the man and eventually it was as if their combined stare drew his attention. His eyes went at regular intervals from Bligh to Sadiq and back. He licked his lips nervously and then broke the contact by turning to speak to Samchat.

The Captain glared at the three and with a twitch of his head commanded them to move away. Bligh had frequently seen men arguing with their officers, or simply ignoring them, but he guessed that this was not a time for such a show of democracy.

Sadiq was still staring at the man, and Slowly did not appear to have noticed the exchange. Bligh took them both by the arm and led them a short distance away to where they could rest against a broken wall.

"What was that about?" Bligh asked Sadiq, but it was Slowly who answered.

"Captain Samchat is consulting with a sensitive," he said. "You know: a seer or an astrologer."

More southern superstition. Bligh shook his head. "You take me for a fool," he said.

"We use them all the time," said Slowly, defensively. "Timings have to be propitious, you know. Sometimes the information a seer dispenses can protect against the unknown."

"Why, then, did we distract him so easily?" asked Sadiq.

Slowly had no time to answer because Bernie Rayner was calling them over to complete a Guard of ten men. "Right," he said, when they had gathered. "Fun and games today. Some chappy's flipped and gone on the rampage with a semi-automatic rifle. He'd been complaining of bad dreams for a few days, then he said the Lords were talking in his head and he upped and left. Happens all the time, you might be thinking, except he killed two men and wounded another on his way. Last sighting was three miles ... over there - " he pointed back along the railway line " - and the Captain's seer thinks he might still be nearby, except the poor dear was getting confused by all the commotion, so we can't be certain. Our job is to sweep the fields until we find the fruitcake. Questions?"

After a pause, Sadiq said, "What if the Lords Elemental really are communicating with this man?"

"Wake up, man." For the first time Rayner showed signs of irritation and suddenly it appeared to Bligh that he was hiding something. "If they speak through every fool who flips then there'd have to be an awful lot more than six Lords just to keep up with the workload. Any real questions?"

There were none. Rayner led them back to the station platform where a scrum of soldiers had formed around some boxes of guns which had been unloaded from the train.

Bligh and Sadiq and a blond young Feorean called Erin Panniker hung back uncertainly until Rayner, spotting them, threw a rifle to each. "That end goes into your shoulder," he said, leading them aside, "and that end means business." In a few minutes he ran through the names of the parts of their guns, explained how to load a clip and how to release the safety and then said, "But listen, whatever you do: don't fire it. Of course we'll never find the bugged, but if we do just use your rifle for show. If he needs shooting then you'll be with someone else who can do it." Again, Bligh noticed something strange in Rayner's expression. "When we camp down tonight I'll go through it all again and you can get properly acquainted. Just don't fire the things, okay?"

Bligh looked closely at his rifle. The wooden barrel guard was split along half its length and the barrel itself was badly corroded. There was a bayonet socket but no bayonet and attachments for a strap but no strap. It seemed appropriate, somehow.

Rayner called his men together and within seconds they were jogging along a narrow road that led steeply up a hill and out of Amere. As the hillside fields opened up all around, Bligh wondered what he would do if a rifle-wielding lunatic rushed them, yelling about the voices in his head. He had a vague idea of how to use a rifle but he had never fired one before. He wondered how some of the young Traian boys would cope. They would probably get over-excited and fire at anything that moved. Suddenly he was glad that he was with a more experienced Guard of Internationals.

The day ground on and on. They marched in a ragged, scattered line across the muddy fields, searching walled copses and broad hedges which had once been laid with an un-Traian precision, always keeping in sight of the man to either side. Their pace was restricted by the frailty of Slowly Skett, but it was still an arduous day. Every time Rayner called they rallied together and covered each other as they checked each room of an abandoned farmhouse or cottage.

At one point they found themselves huddled together outside a ruined building, sheltering from a heavy downpour. Rayner was unwilling to settle; he marched around the yard, kicking at stones and staring into the shadows. "How do we know that this is not simply a training exercise?" Sadiq asked, when Rayner passed nearby.

Rayner stared at him, suddenly angry. "You don't," he hissed. Then, more calmly, he added, "The man's name is Emelier Tolhar. He served three years with the LA. He saved my life at Caspe."

Bligh suddenly understood Rayner's unusual tension. He stood, uncertainly, but already his officer had set off, up a muddy lane. The Guard fell in, quietly, behind him, all ideas of rest forgotten.

Some time later, the soldiers were gathered together after a search of a row of peasants' cottages, drinking from their bottles and eating the crusts of bread or cheese some had thought to bring along. Above them, the summer's

beans were still strung up to dry beneath the eaves. Suddenly a rumble of heavy artillery woke up, as if there had been some fearsome monster hiding beneath their feet. Bligh did not know how close they were to the Front but the sound of battle sent his pulse racing. He exchanged nervous glances with Panniker and one or two of the others, but there was a sense of anticipation on the faces of most of the Internationals. Rayner looked as if he had not even noticed the sound of the shell-bursts.

It was dark and raining by the time they arrived at the agreed meeting place, their search having met with no success. Despite the wet, a huge fire was roaring in the middle of a cobbled farmyard and they gathered around it eagerly.

Rayner reported to Samchat and returned minutes later.

"The farmhouse is full," he said, "so we'll be kipping in the big barn. Cold rations to be collected as you enter. So you can stay out here for a while and get warmer and wetter, or you can go in out of the rain. Questions?"

"What about your friend?" asked Aqbar Emmett, a thirty year-old former marine with the light brown skin and ritual scarification of a Tet'qeshi.

"Hmm? Oh, yes. United Haulage militia found him five hours ago, down by Lethera. He took out two of them before they stopped him with a bayonet." Rayner looked evenly at each man in his Guard. He seemed relieved now, more resigned.

In the gloom of the big barn they ate their rations of soaked oat bread and strips of dried meat, then Bligh threw himself and his blanket onto the straw-covered floor and was asleep almost instantly.

The night was broken by the scuttling of mysterious creatures across the barn floor. Rats, Bligh presumed. Once, something cool and smooth brushed past his cheek and it was some time before he could settle again. It might just have been a dream, he decided.

He had not been aware of the smell of the place after the exertions of the day. Now, however, as light began to probe the broken roof, he found it overwhelming. Old food, decay, excrement, odours that reminded him of the week he had spent working in refuse transport up in the Feorean port of Eseri City.

As the light grew stronger he was able to look around the interior of the barn and then he realised why the smell was so strong. What he had taken for straw and wood chippings the previous night was a thick litter of ancient breadcrusts, dried excrement, torn and soiled news-sheets, bones of dubious origins, dead rats, jagged food cans. Feeling sick, he hurried out into the weak morning sunlight. Only later did he discover that some creature of the night had chewed its way through the pocket of his woollen coat in order to reach a scrap of food he had saved from the evening's meal.

As promised, Rayner spent some time with Bligh, Sadiq and Panniker, showing them how to strip their rifles and clean them with a rag soaked in gun oil or, more likely to be available, olive oil. "Most of the cartridges are refills," he said. "They'd jam the best of rifles, let alone the muck we have to use. Oil the cartridges as you load them and keep a clip of your best for when your life depends on your gun not jamming. When you get good you might be able to fire off a clip of ten in half a minute, but I wouldn't try it. The poor thing gets hot, the bolt expands and then even your best cartridges will stick."

Bligh followed the instructions closely, until he felt that he was able to load and clean his rifle with a reasonable proficiency. He doubted whether he would be able to fire it anywhere near a target, but the shortage of ammunition ruled out any chance of practice.

They marched all day, passing through a hellish, wrecked landscape. At one point, they were ordered to stand aside to let by a column returning from the Front. These men were filthy, their faces grey, the look in their eyes one of deathly fatigue. It seemed that every man was limping or bandaged, some with only one leg, others missing a hand or an arm, yet still they marched. At the back, those unable to walk were piled into wagons, being hauled by skeletal horses. Bligh watched it all and then, for some time afterwards, was unable to speak, was horrified when he realised his own steps had adopted that same funereal rhythm.

They came to rest in a small village called Hol, only five miles from the Front. The settlement consisted of a wretched little group of mud and stone houses, huddled around a church with no roof or doors. That evening Bligh investigated the church more closely, finding its interior an impenetrable heap of rubble and debris.

The most important feature of the village was the main road. The job of Bligh's Company was to receive and store supplies in the proper order and make daily deliveries to the Line. They were also, Rayner told them, standing by in reserve, should replacements be required in the trenches.

The next two days were spent emptying incoming motor wagons and loading up the horse-drawn carts which would go on to the Front. The incoming drivers were a fertile source of rumour and gossip: the people's militias had taken towns Bligh had never heard of, the Queen was abdicating or pregnant or dead, Feorea or Wederia were finally coming to the support of the revolution or the Government. The reliability of such stories was always dubious, but they were the only news that reached the 34th Company of the LA so they spread rapidly.

The returning motor wagons were loaded with little but mail from the soldiers. On the second day, Bligh finally found a spare moment in which to write two identical letters to Madeleine. One he addressed to the Hotel Adernis in Anasty. The second, after much hesitation, he addressed care of Madeleine's parents; they disliked him, he knew, but he did not think they would open her mail if she was still away.

The next morning Rayner's Guard was allocated a supply run to one of the nearer trench systems.

It took them an hour to sort out the supplies and then they set out. The first few miles were relatively easy, most of the supplies having been loaded on a horse-drawn wagon. They followed the road out of Hol, skirting the increasingly frequent shell-holes. They passed between fields where the summer's crops lay unharvested, through craggy woodland devastated by heavy bombardment some time ago, the craters grown over, the broken and fallen trees sprouting afresh.

They met a runner from the 12th Company of the UPP just below the crest of a hill and Rayner tied the horse to a stake in the ground. "We're on foot now, my loveys," he said, in an artificially jolly tone. "Load up."

Bligh slung the mail-bag over his back and then heaved a water can onto his shoulder. Beyond the crest of the hill the road lost itself in a broken grey prairie which spread as far as he could see. This was the start of the Great

Plain, once a vast area of grassland spanning central Trace from north to south, now a huge wasteland which divided the country, scene of some of the worst battles of the Civil War. Progress over the rocky ground was slow and they had to stop several times to catch their breath. Some of the Internationals might be experienced soldiers, Bligh noted, but their age weighed against them for work like this.

Ahead, the UPP runner was suddenly swallowed by the ground.

When Bligh reached that point he found that they had come to a trench. One by one the Guard lowered themselves into it, recovered their loads and continued on their way. Now, they were not so much hampered by rubble and debris as by several inches of sticky yellow mud.

The trench led onto another and here they came across the 12th UPP. They looked exhausted, filthy, utterly dejected.

As the Guard dumped their loads and slumped thankfully against the sandbagged walls, Rayner led Bligh through to the entrance of a cramped bunker, a large shell-hole covered over with boards and mud.

"Bernie Rayner, 34th LA, Friend." Rayner nodded his head as a man emerged into the trench. "Supplies and mail."

At this Bligh held out his mail bag.

"Merc Domenech," said the man, accepting the bag. He was a broad man, with long curls of shiny black hair and a thin moustache. His eyes met Bligh's and held them for too long. "Any orders?"

Bligh felt compelled to answer, but was beaten by Rayner's "None."

"My report," said Domenech, handing over a dirty envelope. He turned and retreated into his bunker, his eyes at last leaving Bligh's face.

"You okay?" said Rayner. "Has the smell got to you? Or is it wind up?"

Bligh had noticed the smell of the trenches immediately: it was as if the air itself was rotting. But it was more than that. He felt his head pounding, his senses blurring. He felt hot and sick.

And then he was sitting in the mud, looking blearily up at Rayner's looming features. His mouth was burning with the vomit of an empty stomach. He smiled uncertainly and forced himself back to his feet. "Okay now," he murmured. "Don't know what it was." But whenever he closed his eyes he saw the laughing face of Merc Domenech. He wondered what was happening, what spell the man had cast.

He drank from his water bottle and rubbed his face on the sleeve of his jacket. The rancid smell of wool made him think of Madeleine's reaction to his new uniform and for a moment he was dizzy again. He shook his head in an effort to clear it.

They made their way at a leisurely pace back through the trenches and then out into the open, and it was only as they returned along the shell-scarred road that Bligh realised they had spent most of a day at the Front without hearing a single gunshot.

Bligh was up for most of the night with diarrhoea and vomiting. Some of the

others teased him about getting the wind up, but they stopped after a while when they realised he was genuinely ill.

When he managed to sleep, he dreamt of the foul-smelling trenches, of bodies torn to bloody tatters, of Merc Domenech's terrifying laughter echoing across a deserted battlefield. Eventually, he learnt to feel grateful that the sickness kept him awake and free of the awful dreams for so much of the night.

He missed supplies duty for two days, spending what time he could in sorting mail and doing odd jobs to make the accommodation a little more bearable. All the time, he tried to convince himself that it was only a bug.

He swept the floors and shovelled fresh earth over the latrines to suppress the smell and the flies. He sat outside whenever the failing autumn weather allowed, listening to crakes snuffling from the ditches and watching the mountain swallows wheeling high in the sky. Rayner told him he would have to see it out: he was not ill enough to be sent back. "Everyone gets ill out here," he was told. "It's part of the job description."

Next day they marched eight miles north to where the Line snaked down from the hills to begin its meander across the Great Plain. Bligh walked alongside Slowly, neither of them carrying more than a rifle and a back-bag. It was when Bligh relieved the old man of his bag that he realised he was feeling better.

They met a Manufactories Cooperative runner at midday, but had to wait until dusk before they could proceed. As the light dropped, rifle fire started up ahead. Occasionally a machine gun tapped away in the distance and the metal crash of trench mortars would add to the din. "Twilights," said Aqbar Emmett, marching with Bligh and Slowly. "It's the best time to launch an attack, so everyone is on duty for an hour at dusk and dawn. And so - " he grinned " - it becomes the most foolish time to launch an attack because everyone is scared and on edge and they fire at shadows and animal noises." Aqbar had seen action with the Tet'qeshi marines, before deserting from his ship in Anasty to join the revolution.

As they came around an outcrop of limestone, the plain was suddenly spread out before them. Occasional flickers of light showed where mortars and light artillery were being fired and as they descended onto the field of muddy debris the sounds of fighting rose up around them: gunshots and men's cries and the irregular clatter of trench mortars and grenades.

"The ground that I walk upon, The air that I breathe," said Slowly softly. It was an incantation to two of the Lords Elemental: Lord of Stone, Lord of Air. The Traians used these phrases as an automatic response to any adversity, adapting them to circumstance and personal need. There were others for the Lord of Water, the Lord of Fire, Lord of Flux and Lord of the Soul, enough to cover most situations.

Bligh felt uncomfortable, as he always did in the presence of religious people, but he said nothing.

They covered the remaining distance bent double, nearly a hundred men in single file, struggling in the darkness to keep sight of the man ahead. The shooting had almost come to a stop by the time they dropped into a reserve trench.

One Section of Internationals remained here but the other two worked their way along a communications trench which was barely waist-deep until they were in the front line of the defences. At a junction, they split again.

The trench here was deep enough to allow even Bligh to stand without stooping too much. There was a dug-out watchpost just by the junction and Bligh waited as the MC troops gratefully gave up their positions to the relieving LAs. A second Guard of LAs took over the main body of the trench and Rayner led his Guard of ten down to the farthest end.

"Right," said Rayner quietly, squatting part of the way up a sloping parapet of sandbags and rubble. "We keep our voices and our heads down. We have a row of wire, maybe sixty yards, and then another row of wire before we hit the enemy. Poke your head up in daylight and you're giving them target practice. Make a noise at night and there might just be a patrol a few yards away from you. We're holding ground here and I haven't heard any word that we might be doing any more than that. Questions?"

They deposited their kit and took up positions: three in the post, three back in the trench and four trying to sleep on uneven mud shelves cut into the trench wall.

Bligh was too big for his shelf and he spent some time digging it deeper with a trench trowel he found lying in the mud. Afterwards he lay there, breathing the foul air as shallowly as he could. He was at the Front and he did not know what he should be feeling. Some of the men were nervous and excitable, others gloomy and resigned. He glanced across and saw that Sadiq was curled up on a mud shelf, fast asleep. It was an example he thought he should follow.

Rayner shook him awake some time later. It was still dark and a steady drizzle was falling, making the sloppy trench bottom treacherous and noisy when you tried to walk.

As soon as he was standing, another soldier slipped onto his shelf. He followed the others up to the watchpost and waited for Sadiq and Panniker to complete their number.

Rayner commenced by passing around a clay bottle of some foul-tasting sweet wine that Bligh vowed he would never touch again. Young Panniker drank long and hard and eventually Sadiq snatched the bottle from him with an ill-tempered grumble of Irdeshi.

"Enough," hissed Rayner. He allocated four of the older Internationals to the watchpost and then led Sadiq, Panniker and Bligh to the mouth of the trench and told them he was taking them out on patrol. "The sooner you've had a taste of fear, the better," he said.

They were out and through a gap in the wire before Bligh could really think about what was happening.

The ground was treacherous, a sticky coating of mud over a solid stony base. The rain soaked through his clothing in minutes and his hands soon became so cold that he doubted he would be able to fire his gun if the need arose.

Rayner had mentioned fear, but it felt unreal to Bligh. He just wanted this patrol to be over so that he could cower under some sort of shelter and dry himself out. He searched the darkness as best he could, but the moon was obscured by clouds and he could barely see ten yards ahead. Every few minutes Rayner made them stop and listen but at no time did they hear the sloshing progress of an enemy patrol.

At one point, Rayner halted them. He stooped to gather something from the mud, wiped it on his tunic and then held it out for them all to see. Bligh looked,

puzzled, at the misshapen grey lump. Then he saw that it was part of a human skull. He swallowed and looked away. He understood. They moved on, quietly.

Edging through the night, it took them over two hours to cover a half mile sweep back to the southernmost post of the 34th LA. At the end of it all Bligh and the others were exhausted but Rayner allowed them no break. He marched them back along the trenches, through mud that now came up to their knees, until they collapsed untidily back in their own section of the Line.

Bligh must have dozed leaning against a parapet, because when he opened his eyes again the sky had turned grey and everyone was being mustered for Twilights. He stood with his rifle at a loophole for the next hour, but all the gunfire seemed to be coming from the distance.

Then, just as Rayner was about to stand them down, there was a deep drone overhead and Bligh watched in appalled fascination as a massive black shell soared ponderously overhead, stalled at the height of its trajectory and tumbled nose over tail until his view of it was blocked by the parapets behind. There was no explosion and as Bligh wondered what had happened two more heavy shells hummed over the trench and dropped behind the lines. This time they exploded with heavy booms that shook the ground.

Bligh exchanged a nervous glance with Panniker and Aqbar, and then everyone was diving for cover at the bottom of the trenches as a series of smaller, faster shells blasted into the plain all around.

Bligh had crammed himself into a sleeping shelf, his arms wrapped around his head. In his mind he was reciting the poems of Emeryck Alther, feeling irrationally that death would be a nobler thing with such lines at the forefront of his thoughts.

The barrage lasted for twenty minutes and when Bligh emerged he found that one entire section of the trench had taken a direct hit. He looked at Rayner and then looked away. The man's face was pale with rage.

Bligh started to scoop the soil away with his bare hands, flinging handfuls out over the parapet into no-man's land. Others joined him with trench trowels and buckets. After a short time, his hands sore and torn from the digging, Bligh felt a movement in the soil and he jumped back in fear. Then he saw a hand and he was digging again, calling frantically for assistance, forgetting the rule of silence in the trenches. Within minutes a man scrambled free, coughing and spitting mud, rubbing the dirt from his eyes. It was Sadiq Phelim, apparently unhurt, an insane, terrified grin on his face.

They dug through the day, finding the mangled body-parts of two young Traians. The twenty yard stretch was cleared by nightfall, although the sides would be unstable until enough sandbags could be filled and lodged into place to retain the loose mud.

Bligh, Rayner and a couple of others could not rest even then.

All day the remains of the two dead Traians had occupied the sleeping shelves. They were covered with sheets, but Bligh had never escaped the feeling that they were watching his every move.

Now that darkness had returned they were able to climb up behind the trench and scoop out a pair of shallow graves. Shovelling mud and stones over the bodies, Bligh eventually paused for a drink.

"Right," said Rayner, straightening and stretching. "Time for patrol duty."

'We only part that we may come together again.'

- proverb.

In the six days Bligh served at the Front before the 34th were relieved, he later worked out that he spent barely twenty hours asleep.

There were no more fatalities after that first direct hit, although a Traian and a young Wederian were sent back early with horrific shrapnel wounds from a freak mortar hit.

Once, out on patrol, Bligh came under rifle fire. Out with Aqbar and Sadiq, he was about as far from the security of his own trench as he had ever been. There was an isolated Army dug-out marked on a map left by the MCs, but in all the time the 34th LA had been in control of this section of the Line there had been no sign of activity around this position.

Rayner told them this before they set out, and then he told them not to do anything stupid: it was only a hole in the ground. For once, it had been dry for most of the day and they were able to approach the slight mound of sand-bags without the giveaway sound of boots in mud. "Wait here," whispered Sadiq.

Bligh watched as Sadiq hurried away at a crouch and then slowed to approach the dug-out. Time stretched itself out as he edged forward, sidling up the parapet of rubble until he must have been able to see right into the enemy position.

He was still for a long time, so long that Bligh was on the verge of going after him, but then he crawled backwards for a distance, before rising and trotting back. "Friends," he whispered, teeth flashing in the light of the half moon. "I have just been hearing all about the sexual positions favoured by various members of Queen Minna's Army."

"The post is occupied?" gasped Aqbar.

"It is," said Sadiq. "I didn't dare move."

They hurried to leave, but they had waited too long near to the dug-out already. "Identify yourself," demanded a voice. Immediately, they started to run but a flare plunged across the sky, illuminating no-man's land in an eerie crimson twilight.

Gunshots broke out behind them as they ran, but they did not pause to return fire. They only stopped when Sadiq - running faster than Bligh and Aqbar - yelled out, having plunged headlong into their own protective tangle of barbed wire. After that incident, and his premature burial when the trench had been shelled, Sadiq acquired something of a reputation. Many of the more superstitious among the soldiers refused to stand guard with him. "Things happen around him," they would say. "He makes things happen."

Bligh was not concerned by such fears; there was no sense to them. If pressed he would point out that if things did happen around Sadiq, at least he had survived them.

Upon being relieved, they marched out under cover of the night and made camp in an old chalk quarry about a mile behind the Line. One Section from the 34th was taken away the next day, to act as reserve for a depleted company of the UPP. Bligh, with the remainder of the Company, found himself on supplies duty at Hol. Within a day they were moved again, into reserve to the 16th up where the Ephedreal Hills started to rise above the Comeran zone of the Great Plain.

Here, a little extra altitude gave them all a foretaste of the winter to come. The summer birds - the mountain swallows, the flocks of finches, the ghostly rattling nightjars - had gone now, and what little vegetation remained was wilting and drying up, its life-force retreating into the dormancy of seeds and roots for the months ahead. The days were wet and grey, much as they had been down on the plain, but the nights marked a sharp drop in temperatures. Old black-iron braziers came into use in the trenches and the soldiers were greatly cheered when one of the first supply runs brought them extra clothing and a blanket for every man.

The morning after their arrival they sat around the braziers, cleaning their guns and talking. Bligh was being meticulous with his rusty old rifle, as Rayner had promised that he could have some target practice later in the day. It would be the first time he had fired it.

"It is time we have some time away," said Sandy Brigg, in his imprecise Traian. Brigg was an old soldier from Wederia. He had fought in the Pharic Campaign over twenty years ago and this had been his last chance for a fling before hanging up his uniform, he had told Bligh. He wondered why Brigg did not speak in his native tongue - he knew Bligh had been schooled in Wederia.

"Some leave, do you mean?" said Bligh.

"Yes. Leave. A soldier needs some leave. He cannot be moved all over for all time."

Bligh, too, had been wondering how long they would be moved from one place to another. Would they be treated in this way until the war was over? It was as if there was a vast intelligence behind it all, a creator of strategy that slotted Companies in here, away from there, all to some grand plan. But Bligh knew that in reality there was nothing so precise involved. He had no doubt that some Companies were being shunted from one end of the war to the other, whilst others sat idle waiting for orders, with gaps going uncovered in the Line for days on end. He wondered if this cynicism was something new for him, or if he had always taken the jaundiced view.

He wanted to know what was happening with the war as a whole, but they rarely received more than gossip and old news-sheets whenever there was a supplies delivery. The stories were both fragmentary and contradictory. You could read or hear of a single minor battle down by Seleterra or Haen in different versions over and over from the suppliers or the news-sheets. But what of Caspe or Anasty, or any of the vast sections of the Line that were never mentioned? A paranoid mind could plug the gaps with all sorts of gloomy scenarios: the revolution was crumbling, the loyalist Army was making huge advances with the help of supplies and even manpower from Feorea or elsewhere. Bligh knew that it was far more likely that these numerous tracts of battleground merely went unmentioned because, as on the Comeran Plain, there was little to report. There were occasional, poorly directed artillery barrages, true enough, and a few skirmishes between rival patrols, but in Bligh's experience there was little of significance taking place. Most of a soldier's time seemed to be occupied by standing in the cold and wet on look-out duty, waiting behind the lines for orders, and getting supplies to

everyone while they waited.

He wondered, at times like this, if the war would ever end. It had lasted for over three years, now, and accounted for maybe four million lives. Before joining up, he had seen how it could almost become a way of life for the civilian populace - perhaps it could also become the norm for the military?

He had spoken with the old troops like Sandy Brigg and they all said the stalemate could only be broken by a concerted effort. They were impatient for action, he realised: they had joined up to fight, not sit around waiting.

This was not the revolutionary spirit which had inspired Bligh. It was not the spirit that had taken the people onto the streets in all the cities of Trace, protesting about the Army's moves to force the monarchy into conceding yet more power. For days, back then at the start of it all, the country had seized up in a general strike. Finally the Army had decided to reimpose order and the blood had started to flow. The Monarchy and the Church had swallowed their pride and sided with the Army, accepting that their powers would be reduced but sensing that they would be reduced even further if war broke out. But for once the people had not been beaten back down into submission. They had rallied under the banners of their Cooperatives and Syndicates and the newly formed Unification Party of the People. Now, the west of the vast country was a loyalist stronghold while the east had been liberated - all divided by a bloody ribbon of battlefields.

"Why do you fight?" asked Brigg, suddenly.

Bligh thought for a moment. "For the people," he said, wondering how to do justice to the overwhelming compulsion he felt. "If the Army stay in power, the people will suffer greatly. You?"

"The money is no good," said Brigg. "But I have a skill - it is needed. It is my living."

Finally, relief came and as the angry dawn sky began to lighten the 34th LAs marched away from the Front.

At one point, young Erin Panniker hurried forward to march in step with Captain Elliam. "Is it true?" he demanded. "We're going on leave?"

Immediately the attention of those who could eavesdrop was engaged. Elliam glanced up and said, "I can't say. I believe so, but we will have to find out when we arrive at Comeras."

Comeras was a medium-sized town about fifteen miles behind the Line. It had been free for over a year now. Elliam may have been unwilling to commit himself, but going to Comeras could only mean that they were to get some leave.

Soon a song broke out amongst the dozen Traians who were still with the Company. The words were about a farmer's daughter and what she sold at market and after a few repetitions most of the Internationals were able to join in with the chorus. The road was icy in places and first Panniker and then some others started to skid along it like children on their way to school.

The march was fairly easy, but it was past midday before the weary ranks of the 34th LAs came within sight of the first buildings of Comeras. Bligh felt a tiredness that penetrated every joint of his body. Each step was a tremendous effort, each breath. Yet simultaneously he felt invigorated: there was

something humming inside his head, an energy that was alien to him. Again, he wondered what this war was doing to him. The very workings of his mind seemed to be subtly changing.

The town of Comeras had paid heavily for its freedom. Entire streets had been reduced to rubble and Bligh did not think there was a single place one could stand without being in clear sight of a destroyed building. Glass in a window was a rare sight; an intact, tiled roof almost as infrequent. It was clear which buildings were still in use as they had been patched up with any materials that came to hand: boards, rubble from other buildings, sheets of corrugated tin, tarpaulins, even animal skins in what looked eerily like some kind of return to a barbarism which had died out 5000 years before.

At one point Bligh spotted a wall with an iron loop attached at just above a man's head height. The wall was scarred by bullet holes and stained heavily with blood. Bligh wondered if the executions still took place. He had heard stories of deserting conscripts from the Army crossing into the hands of the revolution. Initially they had been welcomed until stories arose of a Section comprising entirely of these deserters, slipping along behind the Line under cover of the night or the heavy hill fogs and doing the work of the Queen. Nowadays deserters were not so eagerly accepted. It was not uncommon for them to be shot immediately, just to be safe.

The Company split up before Captain Elliam could check his orders, thus ensuring themselves at least a night of freedom. The streets were busy at this time of day, soldiers outnumbering locals by about two to one. There was an atmosphere about the town which was quick to catch: an excitement, an eagerness. It revitalised Bligh and made him look at the place with new, less critical eyes.

He started to head off with Rayner and some of the others, but then he noticed Sadiq Phelim standing alone. He broke away from the group and went over to him. "Come on," he said. "Lets soak away some of this grime."

Sadiq smiled instantly and together they followed the tracks of most of the 34th, along a main street and into a dark-stoned building that bore a sign saying 'Public Bathing'.

In a room lined with benches and wall hooks, Bligh and Sadiq removed their clothes. As Bligh parted himself from each of the layers that had been a part of him since he had left Anasty, he felt as if he was removing his own skin. Night after night he had fantasised about this moment: the cleansing, the chance to remove those infernal burrowing lice that had moved in before he had even left the troop train in Amere.

Standing naked, he was again aware of his own lumbering size and the paleness of his northern skin. The proximity of Sadiq only served to emphasise the latter.

They put their uniforms into laundry bags and followed a line of naked men out along a corridor and into the bath hall. The stench was difficult to bear at first. There was the familiar, trenchly smell of decay and human body odour, but on top of all this there was a pungent reek of disinfectant and the gagging humidity of the air.

They found a bath at the far end that was only occupied by two others and, before he allowed himself to look too closely at the milky grey of the water, Bligh plunged in.

The heat and the disinfectant combined to make him sting all over. It felt as

if yet another layer of his skin was being soaked off. Taking a deep breath, he submerged himself for as long as his lungs would allow. With another breath he repeated the action, hoping that any lice with the enterprise to hide on his head would be killed by the disinfectant.

"Tell me, Sadiq," he said, as they were joined in the bath by another three men, "how did you end up in the LA?"

"It just happened. Like you, I have travelled a lot. The logical conclusion of my journeys seemed to be Trace and so I came."

"And found a war."

"Oh I knew there was a war," said Sadiq. "But that was not my doing."

Bligh borrowed a razor and soap from one of their bath-sharers and proceeded to slice through the growth of beard he had accumulated at the Front. "You had to have a reason to stay here, though," he said. "And one to fight."

Sadiq hesitated. "You will not like it," he said, "because I have noticed how you avoid matters of spiritual significance."

"Go on."

"I had a teacher, back in Ir'hép. Last time I was at home he explained that a recent reading of the Book of the World had led him to believe that we are in the Days of the Awakening. Bligh, he told me that the Lords Elemental will be reincarnated within my lifetime. When I heard of the war in Trace I thought of the passages in the Book that set out the preconditions for the Lords' return: The Earth shall be torn from the Heavens ... Man will reach the brink of destruction and he will hear the word of the Lords and then They will come to stand amongst his kind ... and out of the mayhem the Lords will arise - "

"Okay," said Bligh harshly. His head was hurting from Sadiq's words: he resented the mental grip they seemed to impose. He thought of the relentless evensongs where Brother Benjahmine or Brother Joel would make him recite long sections of the Jahvean Bible until the sentences lost all meaning and existed only as random collections of sound. On the few occasions his mother had visited him at the school, the Brothers had made him recite the Bible to her to show that his education was thorough. She had looked at him sadly, as if she had wanted more, as if she would have given all she could to him if only he had given her something of himself to begin with. All he had given her was a jumble of words from the Bible. He looked at Sadiq and all he felt was the anger he had felt in his last years with the Brotherhood. He had already rejected one faith in his short life, he had no need of its main rival to be thrust upon him like this.

He dried himself on an old sheet and then dressed in clothes that had been fumigated and scrubbed whilst he had bathed. A wash and a shave should have effected a magical transformation on him, after the long days and nights at the Front. Instead, it felt improper to be clean and in clothes which smelt strange, undergarments that itched abominably.

He reached the street before Sadiq and decided not to wait. He needed to clear his head; he needed some way of releasing the pressures that had been building for so long.

He had his back pay in his pocket so he decided to look for a hotel. A night in comfort could do a lot for an injured soul, he believed. The alternative would be a night on the floor of a warehouse Rayner had pointed out as their

sleeping quarters for the night.

He had been wandering for only a few minutes when he spotted a familiar figure.

He hesitated, then started to run, regardless of the staring faces all around. He came to a corner, but she was lost in the crowd around a line of street barrows selling clothing and a little food.

He ran for a short distance, past the congestion, and then he saw her again. It was ... it was Madeleine. He stopped and struggled for breath. He could not believe that it was her. How could she know to be here in Comeras?

He could not believe his senses even when she had coiled her arms around his neck and was kissing him wildly. "How did you find me?" he gasped, after a time.

"Your letter. It arrived at the Adernis just as I was about to leave. The manager showed me a map of where it had come from and Comeras was the nearest town. I came out on an awful, crowded train three days ago from Dona-Jez."

"What about your teaching?"

"They hadn't missed me while I was in Anasty. They don't miss me now. Bligh, I missed you ... I love you."

Bligh held her tight again. He would not let himself think for long of the dangers she had put herself through, just for the chance that she would find him. The journey ... staying in a wild, ruined town like Comeras, so close to the Front. He found that there were tears on his face and he wiped them away with a sleeve before releasing Madeleine from his hug.

"My hotel isn't far," she said quietly. She led him by the hand, along a busy street, across a square and part of the way down another street to a small, battered guest-house.

Bligh was bounding with energy, taking the steps three at a time, laughing as Madeleine hurried up after him. He was halfway up another flight of stairs when Madeleine ran, giggling, down a corridor, forcing him to turn back and chase after her. As he reached the landing again, a door at the far end closed. He ran along and barged in. Madeleine was already stripped to the waist. They kissed and Bligh struggled clumsily out of his clothes. Naked, they fell together onto the bed and in an instant Bligh was lying on top of Madeleine, his face buried in the cavity between her neck and shoulder, his weight crushing her into the mattress. Fast asleep.

He was a mountain. He was massive, from the sheer spread-about bulk of his foothills to the jagged, ice-capped heights of his summit. Ravens and stone cats prowled his rocky surfaces high up; countless birds and animals took over where the forest stretched its woody fingers up his flanks. He felt the immense power, the ability to resist all that could be thrown against him, to pass through all trauma unchanged. He tensed his awesome body and suddenly his view was narrowing, plunging and he was a boulder, falling through the air. He could see the ground approaching and there was nothing he could do to stop. Distant grey turned to a rough, textured surface scattered with the specked green of shrubs and stunted trees ... he could see each stone now, each leaf on the plants ... he was approaching so fast -

He sat upright in bed and someone was murmuring to him, pulling him back down.

His body bore a sheen of cold sweat, his breathing was rapid, his thoughts a messy jumble. He turned to the person, to Madeleine, and buried his face in her chest.

He had dreamt this dream before, he realised, although even now the terrible feeling of being something he was not - having it forced upon him - was disappearing from his memory, as his dreams nearly always did.

Now, he just felt confused. Something was happening to him, something he was not equipped to understand, yet all he could do was lie alone with the fear, and with Madeleine.

Comeras seemed different by morning, although Bligh conceded to himself that it could simply be that he felt less oppressed than on the previous day. There were fewer soldiers on the streets and more of the buildings seemed to be ... if not intact, then at least occupied and in use. It was as if the town was miraculously regenerating itself.

A busy market had started up along one main street. People sold crops scavenged from the abandoned fields, household goods and clothing which had probably been looted, but at least there was activity, signs of optimism.

"It's like we were when we were first liberated in Dona-Jez," said Madeleine. "The people of Comeras are survivors."

Bligh sensed his feelings for the revolution stirring for the first time in days. He saw that there was still something worth defending. He remembered what Sandy Brigg had said about a soldier's need for leave and now he felt that he understood it a little better.

The queues for food were even longer in Comeras than they had been in Anasty. "It fills the day," Madeleine said with a shrug. "The waiting."

Bligh took out a crust of oat bread from his coat and broke it in two. He had some cheese somewhere, too, he thought, searching his pockets. Then he noticed the look on Madeleine's face and stopped. "It's all right," he said. "I intended to share it with you."

"That was my worry." She pushed the bread back into Bligh's coat pocket. "Keep it for when you might need it." Then, with a mischievous look in her eye, she said, "I do have some biscuits we could eat."

"Hmm? Do you have them here? Here?" He had caught hold of her and was running his hands over the pockets of her coat, lingering for longer in the folds of her skirt. "Here?"

She pulled away, shaking her head. "No," she said. "I'm afraid they're back in my room ... "

Bligh checked at the warehouse later in the afternoon, having left Madeleine asleep on her bed.

"And where have you been, with a smile from ear to ear?" Rayner was sitting in the wide doorway, chewing some sugar gum and reading through a letter he had just written. His handwriting flowed elegantly across the page, a clear indication of his education.

"Oh, you know," said Bligh, vaguely.

"Yes I do know. You were seen giving the little tart a body search not four hours ago - don't try and deny it, lovey, I have my sources. Listen to me: you'd better go right back and say your goodbyes as we're moving out at seven. And don't take your time about it, either."

Madeleine was upset that he should be returning to action so quickly. This time Bligh was not spared the goodbyes, and he endured her tears for as long as he could manage. Now, he marched alongside Panniker and Aqbar. He thought he should say something to Sadiq before long. He should apologise for abandoning him at the baths. But not now. He was not ready for that now.

"We're going right to the Front again," said Panniker. The young Feorean was full of enthusiasm, after leave in Comeras. "We've been given an entire sector - we could be there until it's all over if we are careful."

"An entire sector and we're not even a full Company," said Aqbar gloomily. "Correct me if things are not truly as desperate as they appear."

The thought had not occurred to Bligh, but it was true: one entire Section of the 34th had been moved into reserve for another Company back on the Comeran Plain and so now they were down to a little over sixty men, instead of the full hundred.

"Things are being okay," said Sandy Brigg, moving up to join them. "We have Sadiq, do we not? As Bligh says: nothing kills Sadiq. Me, I would become his closest friend."

The march took more than three hours, and it was dark before there was any indication that they were near to their destination. The last half of the walk was an uphill slog and, boosted by the chill night air, Bligh felt the benefits of leave escaping him already.

It was a clear night and the moon lit their way. They were on a track that wound around the flank of a hill, dropping away in a steep scree on one side, rising sharply on the other. Eventually Bligh sensed the bulk of another hill across the valley and almost immediately the Company bunched together as those ahead halted. In a short time word was passed back that they were to maintain silence from this point onwards, as the opposite slope was enemy territory and well within range of a rifle or machine gun.

They had reached the Front, once again.

Ten minutes later they were past this treacherous bottleneck and before long they had arrived at their section of the Line.

1

'Stone is born of the Fire of the Earth ... but by a ring of Stone is Fire contained.'

- The Book of the World, ch.2, v.21.

As the morning light intensified, evaporating away a light hill mist, Bligh saw the layout of Pigeon Ravine for the first time. The land dropped away for a short distance, levelling out to form an uneven valley bottom through which ran a trickle of green water. He could see the enemy defences at his own level about 200 yards away on the far slope. He saw movement and immediately someone fired from nearby. The enemy soldier waved his hand in defiance and dropped out of sight. A good rifle, fired well, might stand some chance at this range,

Bligh thought, but he knew better than to try it for himself.

For lunch they chewed on strips of leathery meat peeled one by one from a thick wad one of the men had produced. The meat was bitter and tough and Bligh was cautiously chewing a stringy mouthful when Bernie Rayner came along the trench and treated them all to his best expression of disdain.

"Try some?" said an old Traian called Roca Fesh, knowing that Rayner was vegetarian.

"I saw enough dead meat at Caspe," said Rayner, softly. "Bligh, you might like to come along with me. I've been studying the map and I want to take a look at the lie of the land in daylight."

Bligh and Rayner were accompanied by Erin Panniker and an experienced Feorean by the name of Oori Champion. Champion was an introspective, stout man in his forties, with lank chestnut hair and the droopy moustache that was popular amongst the older soldiers. Even Panniker had started to grow one during his short time in the 34th.

They stepped out onto the open road and Rayner said, "You'd be unlucky to be hit out here. It'd have to be a stray."

"What would it matter, if the bastard hit you?" said Champion.

They followed a rough track up the hill, leaving the road and the shallow trenches behind and below. Eventually Rayner took a map from his pocket and squinted at it while the others beat their hands against their sides in an effort to warm up. The chill in the mountain breeze went through Bligh like a bullet. He wished Rayner would hurry, so they could move on again.

Instead, Rayner withdrew a clay bottle of the local wine from his back-bag. He pulled the cork with his teeth and took a long swig before passing the bottle to the others.

Suddenly, a dark shape passed between them and the sun and Bligh flinched.

"A lammergeier," said Panniker. "'Old Man of the Mountains', we call him."

Bligh looked and he saw a huge, dark bird coming back for another view of the four soldiers. From the dark plumage of its body a creamy, aristocratic head emerged with a blaze of vivid orange at the throat and furious, fiery eyes that stared and stared as it soared slowly by.

"They scavenge just like the vultures of the plain," continued Panniker. "But if he sees a mountain goat the old man's just as likely to drive it off the cliff."

From the look in the beast's eyes, Bligh would not be surprised if it had been considering doing just the same to them. He had not thought such a large predator could still survive, with all the prey and cover destroyed by the fighting.

There would be plenty to scavenge, he supposed.

They walked for a distance over the rough hillside and then came to a halt on a promontory which loomed out over the ravine. "We passed below here in the night," said Rayner, struggling to regain his breath. "See - " he pointed " - the track?"

Bligh looked down and saw a rough road about two hundred feet below. He hadn't realised in the darkness how they had actually travelled for some time along the valley bottom itself. He looked across and saw that this was the bottleneck they had passed through, shortly before arriving at their sector. The enemy defences were about a hundred yards from the road.

"The Army have never been able to hold the road for long," said Rayner. "Taking it is easy, but there's a UPP emplacement just out of sight across there. Every time they've taken the road, we've just mortared them from the trenches and come up here and dropped grenades on them. They've settled for holding back now, shooting at anyone who dares to pass in the daylight or to make too much noise at night. Apparently their favourite game is to pop off a few mortars to make pot-holes in the road, then listen out for the repair team we have to send to fix the way in order for our supplies to get through."

Bligh felt sick at the thought of what they had innocently passed through the night before. One noise that carried the hundred yards to the Army trenches and he dreaded to think how many men could have been mowed down in reply. He thought of those who had to deliver supplies and he wondered how it had been possible to hold the Line in Pigeon Ravine for so long.

"It's not so bad as it seems," said Rayner, grinning at the expressions on his soldiers' faces. "If they had a good machine gun it'd make life impossible, but out here they're as stretched as we are and they've never tried that one. My suspicion is that they know how isolated they are - there's a kink in the Line here, dictated by the course of the hills. They're surrounded on all sides but the rear and they know that if they push us too far we might just cut them off in retaliation."

Bligh wondered why they didn't cut them off anyway, but he had known even before he arrived that the hill fighting had become little more than a holding operation. Initially, the region had been bitterly contested, but it had not been long before a peculiarly Traian inertia had taken hold and the emphasis had shifted to the battles on the central plains. Bligh had discovered very quickly that there was no real logic to the military tactics displayed by either side in this miserable war. That was probably why it had ground on for so long already.

They spent some time settling into their new surroundings, acclimatising themselves to chill of the newly arrived Winter.

The days were generally dry and overcast. Roca Fesh explained that they were in the rain shadow of the hills: the clouds hit the far side of the range and were driven upwards and cooled, dropping their loads before they reached these parts. By Spring it would be a different matter though, with the Atlan winds bringing the heaviest rain of the year up from the Gulf of Serephes and turning gullies such as Pigeon Ravine into treacherous torrents.

The nights were cold and Bligh knew they would get colder. Worst of all was when a hill fog stole up in the early hours of the morning, a bitter dampness hanging in the air sometimes until as late as midday. Anyone with consumptive tendencies would be laid low in such conditions, and the chorus of phlegmy hacking was often the first indication of fog to a soldier, emerging blearily from sleep in one of the dug-outs.

It was on a morning such as this, a week into his stay at Pigeon Ravine, that Bligh pulled himself out of the cramped dug-out he shared, in rotation, with over twenty others.

He was confronted in the trench by Bernie Rayner, rounding up men for a repair

party. Normally such work would only be undertaken at night, but this morning's fog brought with it an unwelcome extension to the cover otherwise offered only by darkness.

Gathering his rifle and some tools, Bligh and five others set out along the road. "We've got the easy job, today," said Ott Colomman, the young Traian leading the work party. "We're not even going as far as the bottleneck. We'll be almost as safe as we are in the trenches. Just a bit of exercise, that's all."

After inspecting the section of road they were to repair, they set about gathering some boulders to roll and heave into the holes. It was hard work, and soon Bligh was bathed in sweat, despite the chill mountain air. After a short time, with no sign of the fog lifting, Colomman allowed his work party a break.

Over the familiar bottle of brutally sweet wine, the talk was of when they would next be on leave and just how cold it could get up here in the Ephedreal Hills. Changing the subject, Aqbar Emmett said, "Have we all heard of the fellow at the next LA defences up the valley? I have been told he talks to the spirits of the dead."

Aqbar was a convert to Jahveism who found much of the Elementalist religion of Trace distasteful to the extreme. Early on, he had tried to discuss this with Bligh, but had soon discovered a lack of sympathy; outnumbered by Elementalists and non-believers, he had stopped mentioning religion altogether.

"My country has a grand tradition of ghost raisers and possessions," said Colomman, a mischievous glint in his eye. "Or it does if you ask the older generation. Isn't that so, Roca?"

"It is not to be ridiculed," said Roca Fesh, missing the young man's light tone. "Some say this war is the great upheaval foretold in the Book of the World. A man who talks to the dead could be a link to the spiritual realm - "

"You cannot believe that ... that blasphemy," spluttered Aqbar.

"It is only a blasphemy to one who believes not in the divine dominion of the Six Lords but in the abomination of a God who is so remote he sends his son to do all his work."

"Jah'veh is God as he is also God's son. He - "

"Back to work, then," said Colomman quickly. "And keep the voices down - they may not be able to see us but that won't stop them shooting and hoping."

"Crazy fool," he muttered to Bligh, as they returned down the slope to the road. "Doesn't Aqbar know when he's outnumbered?"

Bligh remained silent. The whole question of religious belief puzzled him. He had spent his first fifteen years dumbly accepting the truth of the Bible and the divinity of God, Son of God. But Jahveism was a minority faith, even in Wederia, and as his contact with the world beyond the Brotherhood school had increased so his questions, and eventually sheer disbelief, had intensified. He recalled one lecture from Brother Benjahmine, the intensity of his teacher's speech. "When I first saw you I thought what a fine advocate for Jah'veh you could become," he had said. "There was a spark within you that I recognised and nurtured. You could have been so special ... " At that time, the last thing Bligh wanted was to be special. He wanted to be like the new

friends he had made in town, he wanted radios and train outings to the coast and girlfriends. He just wanted to be in charge of his own life and he could not understand the burning desire in people like Brother Benjahmine to shape and mould the lives of others. He did not want to be special to anyone but himself.

Several years had passed since he decided that God - or Gods - could never be a part of his life again.

They worked on in the damp grey air and then, suddenly, Bligh realised that he could see the road disappearing fifty yards away, around the great crag that marked the tightest part of the bottleneck.

As he stood, he became certain that the fog was thinning perceptibly.

"Okay, okay," said Colomman, hurrying to gather his rifle and back-bag. "Time to go home."

At a quick march they headed up the track, and with the fog almost gone they were chased by one or two shots from across the valley. Roca replied with a string of Traian insults, yelled at the top of his voice and Bligh found the defiance of his tone cheering. He felt that it had been a long day already, and it was barely mid-morning.

They were not too concerned by the gun-shots coming from up the valley - it was not unusual for daylight to be greeted by the release of a few rounds. There was always the chance that a stray might take someone out and many of the soldiers, Bligh had found, were incurable optimists about their skill with a rifle.

They even slowed along the way to spread out over the slope and gather a few scraps of firewood - birch twigs, barbs of gorse, anything that had not already been scavenged. Bligh let off a couple of rounds at a party of rock partridges, which suddenly burst into the air from within a yard of his feet. He was glad that he missed, because they reminded him of the gentleman partridges he had watched as a boy in the fields around Stenhoer.

When the repair party reached the trench it was instantly apparent that something awful had happened. Immediately, Ott Colomman leapt down and hurried in the direction of a moaning cry that Bligh, with a hollow feeling in his chest, thought he recognised as young Erin Panniker's.

At its top end, the trench opened out into a shallow circular pit that had been built up with a parapet of scree stone and mud from the valley bottom. From this watchpost you could see out over Pigeon Ravine, looking slightly down into the enemy trenches, and you could see across the hundred yard gap in the militias' own Line to the first post of the 94th LA where the man talked to the ghosts of those who had gone before him.

Panniker was lying in this pit, his head propped up on the lap of Bernie Rayner. His coat had been cut open to reveal the gory mess that had been made of his left shoulder. Someone was making rapid work of binding his loose left arm to his body, while another held a wad of dressing to the wound.

Bligh felt sick. He did not know what to do. Panniker's face was lined with tears and grime, his eyes jammed tightly shut. He must know he was likely to die. Holding the boy's good hand, Tolway Sench was mumbling a string of prayer. "The air that I breathe, the water that bathes me. The passion that moves me, the constant change that is life. The thoughts that I think, the ground that I walk upon ... "

The Elementalist sacrament touched something within Bligh and he had to look away. It was only then that he saw Slowly Skett, lying on the other side of the watch-post, dead. A bullet had passed through his chest, spilling less blood than poor Panniker's shoulder.

Bligh crouched by the old man and ground his teeth in an effort to hold back the tears.

Sandy Brigg was holding Slowly's hand, but his face showed no emotion. "We were walking out on patrol, under cover of the fog," he said, as if he had to explain how he had survived unscathed. "We went right all the way up to the 94th, then out in a sweep through damn valley. We had listening to enemy trench, and stayed out for longer than we should have been doing ... The fog, it lifts and we are stranded from any cover. Even so, it is some time before they see us and then they shoot and shoot. I carry him back across my shoulders. He was friend."

Just then Sadiq came along the trench, looking around in disbelief. Eventually, he stopped by Slowly, Bligh and Brigg and said, "At least they cannot blame it on me, this time."

Bligh looked away.

They moved Slowly to lie out of sight in the rough ground behind the trench and spent the rest of the day trying to ignore the groans of Panniker. By dusk, as everyone stood Twilights with rifles at the ready, Bligh felt sure he was not alone in being grateful that the boy would soon be taken away.

Supplies came promptly an hour and a half after dark and they set out on the return trip with Panniker on a stretcher that had been constructed during the day.

Shortly afterwards, a group of about twenty arrived from the 94th, their officer explaining that he had heard the 34th were running short and he felt forces should be redeployed.

It took some time to organise the new soldiers and it was past midnight before Captain Elliam asked for some men to bury Slowly. Strangely, Bligh thought - Slowly had been so popular - there were few volunteers. Even Bernie Rayner was not, apparently, going to be involved, other than to send them out with directions.

Perhaps it was not so strange after all: no one out here liked to think of death; Slowly's demise had not been directly referred to a single time in Bligh's hearing.

"I'll go," said Bligh, and then Roca Fesh and one of the new soldiers said they would accompany him. The latter was a Wederian called Wink Hawley, He had acquired his nickname through the fact that one side of his face was a mass of torn, scarred tissue, the lids of one eye permanently stuck together. It had happened in a fire, he explained, as he walked alongside Bligh who was carrying Slowly's feet. Bligh did not enquire any further. He was not in the mood, although he clearly sensed Hawley's need to communicate.

After struggling up a mountain track for some time, they came to the cirque where Rayner had directed them. It was as if some giant had struck the hillside with a mighty hammer blow, leaving a circular dent that was now lined with scree-falls of boulders and small stones. Out here in the hills this was the best way to bury a man, Rayner had said: cover him with rocks to hide him

from the vultures and the stone cats. Bligh wondered how many others were buried in this hollow, how many of the small stones he pushed aside might, in fact, be bones.

They covered Slowly over in silence, then Roca Fesh mumbled a few awkward words from The Book of the World into the cold night air.

"I cannot believe it," said Bligh slowly. "But I can hope that death is not the end for a man like Slowly Skett." He turned away to leave the burial ground, but was brought up short by what Wink Hawley said next.

"Oh it isn't. I can assure you of that. His spirit is free in the valley, just like all the others."

They walked back in an awkward silence until Wink Hawley started to tell them how he had acquired his injuries. It was during an Army shelling of a troop train which had been taking him to the Front for the first time. Most of the barrage had been off-target but a single shell had hit a carriage loaded with drums of fuel.

"The train didn't stop," he said. "The fire worked its way back to us and all the time the train was travelling at a hellish pace. We tried signalling ahead ... one boy tried running along the roof, but it collapsed under him and he was gone. We tried to disconnect our carriage but the linkage was pulled tight with the speed and it wouldn't shift. We ended up jumping clear, but not before ... "

"I'm sorry," said Bligh, extinguishing the scarred man's story. He did not know what was expected of him. He wondered if Hawley felt this urge to explain himself to everyone he met: some self-conscious compulsion to justify his damaged features.

"Oh, don't be," said Hawley. "It saved my life. The train was headed for Caspe. That fire may have killed half my Company, but it saved the other half."

When they returned they had missed the allocation of that night's duties. Perhaps that was Rayner's way of thanking them for taking the burial of Slowly Skett out of his hands.

They huddled around a brazier, trying to reawaken their deadened limbs. Hawley told them about his time in a military hospital. At first he had been so ill that they had left him in the corridor to die, but he had clung on for ten days at the very edge. "I was at a boundary between two worlds," he told them. "I felt malign forces vying for control of my body." He shook his head in the shadows. "The world of the dead scared me intensely," he concluded, "so I made a conscious decision to live."

"You make it sound simple," said Sadiq, returning from patrol.

Hawley just stared into the flames, until Roca Fesh changed the subject. They spoke sporadically, Hawley a new factor in their attempts to stave off the relentless boredom of trench life. Bligh found that he liked the Wederian, although not when he spoke of his ghosts, as he did the following morning. "They don't like your friend Sadiq," he said. Bligh knew what would follow. "The spirits," Hawley continued. "He must be aware of that. They think he's dangerous - do you sense it too?"

The new recruits from the 94th gave Captain Elliam the opportunity to

rearrange the Company into three Sections again, and this meant that a regular rota of leave could be established. Four nights later, Bligh set out on the three hour march back to Comeras. It was well after midnight by the time he hammered at the door of the small guest-house where Madeleine had been staying. He felt tired and bitterly cold. He had not eaten since the previous day.

Eventually a man came to the door, cursing and glowering at Bligh in the light of the candle he held. The cursing grew louder when he learnt that Bligh was only looking for Madeleine. The man went back inside and a few minutes later returned with a fold of paper. "She's gone," he said, and slammed the door.

Bligh had not considered the possibility that she would not be here. He squinted at the note in the moonlight, finally deciphering its content. My love, it began. I have a job. My room is at 23rd Foundryman Street. Come to me, please. There followed a set of simple instructions which Bligh followed across the centre of Comeras.

He passed through the open door of a house, as instructed, and went up a set of narrow stairs to the locked door of her room.

"Darling, darling!" she cried, when she saw who it was. "I was so scared for you. You can hear the fighting sometimes and I think of you every minute." She made him sit on her little bed while she brewed him some anise tea. Then she boiled more water which she used to fill a small iron tub she heaved in from the landing. She mixed herbs into the water and then pulled the clothes from his body and cajoled him into the tub. It was so small he had to sit with his knees drawn up to his chin while she scooped the scalding, sweet-scented water over his body.

Mixed with the herbs, he recognised the scent of disinfectant for the lice.

Madeleine scooped and splashed and rubbed his skin and all the time he wished she would just stop. He had been at the Front. He had buried one friend and for all that he knew Panniker was also dead by now. He had discovered extremes to existence he had never even dreamed of before.

"Please," he said eventually. "Please stop."

He took a towel and dried himself, wishing she would stop staring, resenting the tears in her eyes. Feeling sick, he threw himself angrily onto Madeleine's bed and wished he had waited until morning to find her.

He must have slept for a while, for when he opened his eyes he saw that the bath had been emptied and Madeleine was curled up in a broken old chair. She was not asleep because her eyes opened as soon as he moved the covers she had placed over him.

He moved to one side of the narrow bed and lifted the blankets for her to slip in beside him. "It's hard," she said. "I work in a bar that serves the soldiers. I queue for hours for food and often get nothing. I can hear the fighting on the plains and all the time I am wondering if the next soldier I pass will drag me down and rape me ... it happens."

She did not need to add that she endured all this just to be near to Bligh.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I buried a friend this week." He had not planned to mention this - it was too obvious a plea for sympathy - but it was out before he could contain it.

They spent the morning rediscovering their rusty patterns of communication:

the little looks, the expressions, the jokes. Madeleine showed him the bar where she worked, the bakery where she was known and could sometimes avoid the queues by having something put by. They shared lunch while she worked and then Wink Hawley and Sandy Brigg came into the bar and Bligh introduced them. Madeleine was intrigued by Hawley's ghosts; she flattered Brigg for his improving Traian and Bligh felt a surge of pride that his colleagues should associate him with Madeleine. He squeezed her hand as she served them another round of drinks and from her look he knew that he had been forgiven for the night before.

"How a soldier needs his leave," sighed Brigg, and for the first time since marching down from Pigeon Ravine Bligh felt that he could agree.

2

'Around each of the Six, disciples will gather.'

- The Book of the World, ch.20, v.3.

On the last day of his leave in Comeras, Bligh was surprised to hear a familiar voice as he entered the bar where Madeleine worked. It belonged to Divitt Carew. He looked around and finally spotted the journalist leaning down to talk to a table of UPP soldiers.

"Divitt!" he called, and Carew turned and waved and then threaded his way through the drinkers to stand before Bligh.

"So you're not dead yet," he said, by way of greeting. "Is that some kind of record?"

"You've lost none of your tact, I see," said Madeleine, from behind the bar.

"Poor Madeleine never did take to me, did she?" said Carew, shaking his head. "You have to acknowledge that she has standards, I suppose. Drink?" Madeleine was already pouring them: Carew's beer and one of the local ginger liqueurs for Bligh. "A taste I haven't acquired," said Carew, nodding at Bligh's glass. "Tell me, where are you based? Up in the hills? Anything happening up there?"

Bligh had learnt to ignore Carew's questions. "What are you doing here?" he said. "The Army held this town only eighteen months ago - isn't it a bit dangerous for you?"

"Oh, I do my bit," said Carew, casually. "I've seen some action in my time, when it was unavoidable. How about the girl: is she safe here?"

Bligh felt instantly defensive. "Is she safe anywhere?" he asked. The previous morning she had shown him a small ivory-handled pistol her mother had given her when she left Dona-Jez. It looked like a child's toy and Bligh had doubted whether its little .24 bullets would deter any attacker, but he had seen that the confidence it lent might in itself be Madeleine's surest means of defence.

Divitt Carew was wearing his superior smile. "Why have you come?" asked Bligh, parrying.

"I told you before that I wanted to do a piece on the Internationals," said Carew. "The Journal agreed so here I am. I found out that the 34th were up here in the Ephedreal Hills and that rang bells marked 'That Young Fool Bligh', so here I am."

Bligh remembered that Carew had originally wanted to write a hard-hitting piece on the Internationals which would wake up the rest of the continent to the realities of the war. The Conservative Journal was hardly Left Analysis.

"Also," said Carew. "There's been talk for ages about another big push at Caspe." There always seemed to be talk of another big push at Caspe, but Bligh did not point this out. "And Divitt's brain isn't so addled it can't work out that a push at Caspe means it's a good time for me to be out of touch with my editor and a hundred miles away in Comeras ... "

After Bligh had spent most of the afternoon convincing Divitt Carew he was more likely to be robbed in Comeras than shot in Pigeon Ravine, the journalist agreed to come along.

"At least we won't be going anywhere near that nut Domenech," said Carew, as they marched up into the hills under cover of darkness.

Bligh recognised the name and recalled a laughing face; he could not remember when or where they had met. "Why do you say that?" he asked.

"Oh, just the stories you hear. Most of it's probably untrue. He's in command of the 12th UPP, out on the plain. They say he drives his men until they break and he loses them continually. The turnover of personnel is so high, they say the only thing constant about the 12th UPP is Merc Domenech. He's one of these Elementalist types who thinks everything he does can be justified by The Book of the World, and so that means anything can be justified by that damned book ... "

"What happened to all your journalistic detachment?" said Bligh. Carew had never opened up like this before. Bligh had told him about everything - his upbringing, his relationship with Madeleine, his beliefs, such as they were - but he still knew little of the workings of the journalist's mind. He could not see Carew's expression in the darkness, but he sensed a change of mood.

"You have to forgive me," said Carew, returning to his familiar brusque facade. "I came across him before he joined up, that's all it is. First time I came down into Trace, I was doing a piece on the persistence of feudalism in the politics of the country. That's all it was, you know: feudalism in a modern guise. The patrician land-owners were the regional power brokers and they had things pretty much their own way, reporting upwards to the monarchy and keeping the Church and the Army in line with the judicious application of cash. There were all sorts of vested interests and one of them, on the fringes, was the Domenech family. Merc saw what was coming far sooner than most and so, to protect himself, he was in at the start of the UPP. I'm not saying he's a villain, or anything. It's just that he tries harder - he pushes people harder - because he has his background against him. He knows some people see him as having come across from the other side. It would have been a good story if the war hadn't overtaken it."

After a period of silence, Carew continued. "He has race against him, too. This war's a race thing, you see. That's the angle I'm working on at the moment. The ruling classes - the monarchy, the war lords - they're all descendants of the Feorean invasion, two centuries ago. The resentment against that war has lasted all this time and this uprising is the Traians finally counter-attacking. Domenech's a Feorean name so he has that to fight too. It's ironic, really: here are all these Internationals fighting alongside the Traian people, when in racial terms most of them should be on the other side."

As usual, Bligh disagreed with Divitt Carew but he chose not to argue. They were close to the bottleneck now, and silence could be the difference between life and death. Carew started to complain about the cold again, but Wink Hawley explained the necessity of quiet and he stopped instantly.

As soon as they arrived Carew was asking a string of questions of anyone who would listen, including Captain Elliam, who seemed flattered by the attention. "Please, this cannot be attributed to me by name," he kept saying, "but I can tell you this much ... "

There was more gunfire from the 34th LAs that night than Bligh had known since they had first arrived in the hills. A couple of Internationals even set out just before dawn to let off a mortar attack from the heart of no-man's land. No one admitted to Carew that this was not the normal run of things, and that the pre-dawn sortie had cut their stock of mortar bombs by a third. Bligh tried to sleep during the middle of the next day, but occasional salvos of gunfire prevented him. At that point he resolved to give Divitt Carew a real taste of hill warfare. Leaving the dug-out, he found Bernie Rayner and said, "I'm going to take Divitt on patrol tonight, if that's acceptable." Rayner asked him what he was planning and promised he would make all the arrangements.

Carew was squatting by the brazier in one of the watch-posts, questioning Sadiq Phelim about the loss of his two fingers in the grenade incident in Anasty.

Bligh chewed at some oat bread and thought of what Carew had been saying before. After a time, he said, "Divitt, you talk about the war as if it's not a real, living thing: you say it's a racket, you say it's driven by greed and envy, you say it's a racial conflict. Even you can't be so cynical that you can't see the passion that is driving the people on. You must see that the class struggle is a war of ideals, it's - "

"You're rationalising it all after the event, Bligh. This thing found an echo in you and now you're trying to justify it to yourself. You have a vested interest just like everyone else. No, let me explain - it's my job to have misguided theories and dump them on anyone who'd listen, after all.

"So what is it that makes young Bligh X want to fight in the Traian revolution? Maybe it's his upbringing. Yes - his struggle with the Jahvean Brotherhood has inflicted deep wounds in his mind, wounds that are so severe he has spent his adult life unable to commit himself to anything or anyone. Am I on the right track, eh?"

Bligh said nothing. He glanced at Sadiq, who shrugged but also remained silent.

"Now you've got something you believe in, haven't you? Or at least you think you do, although you're not so well versed in the political ideologies people would say were at stake here. The war has found the place where your Jahveism used to reside - that's it, I'm sure - you've found a new source of faith, Bligh. The war is your new religion!"

Bligh had stopped feeling awkward as it became clear that Carew was allowing his fantasy to become wilder and wilder. "Divitt," he said, in reply. "I've just remembered: Captain Elliam has asked that you come out on patrol with me tonight. He says it will give you a first-hand experience about which to write. Sadiq, will you come?"

He resisted the temptation to laugh at the horror in Carew's expression. He imagined the journalist running through every excuse he could think of and finding none that would sound plausible.

"We'll meet at dusk, okay?"

They left the trench an hour after Twilights. The night was dark and there was a light mist in the air. Bligh felt strangely calm, but he knew that before long the wall of pressure would rush up inside his head and swamp his senses, as it always did when he set foot in no-man's land. Divitt Carew had been waiting nervously in the watch-post with Sadiq and Sandy Brigg when Bligh arrived. He watched as the three soldiers smeared their bayonets with trench-mud. "Give the buggers blood poisoning," he said, and they had agreed although the real reason was to prevent the giveaway flash of moonlight or flare on clean metal.

Now, passing through a gap in the wire, Bligh whispered to Carew, "If I die in this war, will you promise me you'll look after Madeleine?"

Carew looked at him and said slowly, "Bugger off, Bligh." Sadiq and Sandy were already dim blurs in the darkness, although only a few yards ahead.

They descended the slope below the trench, Bligh clutching his rifle to his chest and forever testing the safety catch with his thumb.

As he had expected, the tension rose up as the ground levelled out in no-man's land.

He felt exposed. His senses felt muddled and cloudy, just when he needed them to be at their sharpest. Sadiq and Sandy moved on in front and Bligh kept track of them as he made sure Carew did not get lost in the dark.

He wondered how the journalist would respond if they came across an enemy patrol. "Come on," he hissed, taking Carew by the arm and hurrying him along. "Lets stick closer to the others."

He felt as though he was being watched, as though the night was full of prying eyes that were marking him out - Bligh, and Bligh alone - and just waiting for him to make one fatal error.

Eventually they reached a position where the ground began to rise sharply. Bligh could sense the hillside rearing up above them. With a series of gestures, he indicated that Sadiq and Sandy should stay here, while he and Carew proceeded on hands and knees.

They crawled, inch by inch, up the slope, pausing at each dislodged stone. Eventually, they made out voices. Someone said something about a news-sheet story of the fighting on the plain and another said that news stories were always lies. There was general agreement at that. By Bligh's side, Carew had stopped. Bligh reached out and pushed him, then crawled farther up and tried to drag the shaking journalist. Probably scared that they would be detected if he resisted, Carew started to crawl again.

They reached a lip of the slope, and suddenly Bligh could see into the trench, the soldiers illuminated by stumps of candles and the red glow of their brazier. He glanced at Carew and as he did so he tumbled forward into the trench in a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

He wished he could see Carew's face, as the 'enemy' soldiers let out a roar of

greeting and leapt up to haul him down alongside Bligh. In a moment, Sadiq and Sandy had come up to join them and eventually they calmed down.

Divitt Carew was furious. He did not think it at all funny that instead of leading him over to the enemy trench they had led him a hundred yards up the valley to the next LA Company on the Line. When Bligh had stopped laughing, he was able to see just how angry Carew was and that calmed him down even more. He thought of excuses, of the need to relieve the tensions of trench life - this little episode would be repeated over and over for the rest of the war, he felt sure - but he knew they were all inadequate. In the end, he just clapped Carew on the back and said quietly in his ear, "I'm sorry, Divitt," but somehow he did not think that was enough. The affair was not mentioned the next day and then Carew left with the supplies run and Bligh felt gloomier than he had in the entire war.

Eighteen days on, Bligh was ready for his leave in Comeras. Winter had closed in remorselessly on Pigeon Ravine. The fogs had become less frequent but they had been replaced by occasional storms of fine, dry snow and the nights were so cold it was not uncommon for a frost to form on the clothes of a soldier on watch. Illness was a common feature of the trenches, but now the rheumatic fevers, the gastro-enteritis, the dysentery, had been replaced by frost-bite and kidney chills and the ever-present tuberculosis.

The illness, the covering for sick colleagues, the boredom and the hunger, meant nerves were always at full stretch. Arguments over the most trivial items were frequent and at one point Bligh was not on talking terms with Bernie Rayner, Aqbar Emmett and Sandy Brigg, all at the same time.

The prospect of leave had a magical effect and grudges were put aside in anticipation of the day to come. They marched out with the supplies run just after midnight and they reached Comeras in the early hours of the morning.

Bligh bore Madeleine's ritual bathing of him with resignation. He was tired and he had had enough of arguing in the past fortnight. He wished she could simply see it from his side, but he stayed quiet and let her scrub him and pour scented water over him and pick the lice from their hiding places in the seams of his clothing.

Normally Bligh paid little attention to Madeleine's chatter when he came back on leave, but tonight she mentioned Divitt Carew's return from Pigeon Ravine and he asked her how the journalist had seemed.

"He was angry, I think," she said. "Although you can never really tell with him. You argued, didn't you? He said ... he said you were a young fool who didn't know how to repay friendship, but he wouldn't explain. What did happen?"

"Just a practical joke at Divitt's expense, nothing more." He stood meekly as Madeleine dried him, but turned away when she started to kiss him. "I'm sorry," he said. He wanted her like mad, but he was angry at having to go through this meticulous grooming session and so, childishly, he did not want to succumb to her yet. "I've had a hard time," he said. "I'm tired."

He dreamt that he was adrift inside his own skull. He was sitting awake, in Madeleine's little room, but his mind was floating in some dimensionless chasm and his senses seemed remote. It was dark but his eyes had adjusted and he could see everything in great detail. Beside him, Madeleine lay on her back, her breasts exposed to the night air where his movement had dragged the blankets aside, her nipples dark and shrivelled with the cold. He saw all this

and yet he didn't, because it was not him looking but someone else - something else - and he was a mere passenger, receiving the information but simultaneously detached from it all. If this was a dream, he thought, then it was the most peculiar dream he had ever had.

He drifted and focused again and Madeleine was awake and his fingers were probing her roughly. She moaned softly and eased her legs farther apart and whatever was controlling his body made him kiss her breasts, her shoulder, her armpit.

He felt scared, but he did not feel inclined to do anything about it. His head was filled with a tremendous roar, like the wind in the hills, or a train on its tracks. Her thigh was pressed hard against his own, her shoulder grinding against his collar bone. Her hand started to run over his hip, his belly, his crotch, lingering for a second here, a second there, but always moving, moving. She turned onto her side and he dragged her leg up over his hip and he entered her and the roaring grew louder and Bligh, himself, grew ever more distant.

When he found his way back to his senses, he was outside, alone, running naked through the streets of Comeras. Somewhere in the distance, the war rumbled on and lining the pavement there were thick knots of people, dressed in the ragged clothing of the war, their bodies shrunken and emaciated. Their eyes bulged from hollow faces and glinted in the moonlight, all fixed on Bligh as he ran. He sensed the chill of the night on his naked skin, but he was remote from all that and it did not seem to matter. All he could do was run, his feet getting bruised and broken on the rough cobbles. Someone cheered, and soon the sound was taken up by everyone watching. Bligh's breath grew ragged, desperate, and he wondered where Madeleine was - where was her room? - and then he realised that he was enjoying this sensation far too much, this feeling that he was a passenger in his own body and that nothing mattered for him any more. The feeling that he had been taken over by some magnificent presence.

The roar of the crowd swirled around him - within him - and suddenly he struggled to pull himself clear, to reassert himself. He stumbled on the street and the roar of the crowd faltered. He sensed the power he had over these pitiful people and it scared him and that gave him the strength to pull away and he felt himself rising clear, recovering his senses, and he was sitting awake in Madeleine's narrow bed and she was lying by his side. "Thank you," she whispered, before settling down with her hand on his hip, her forearm across his crotch.

"For what?" he wanted to ask, but did not dare.

3

"You talk to the beasts?" said the Fool, to Stone.

"I am innocent," said Stone, to the Fool. "They merely talk to me."

- The Book of the World, ch.9, v.68.

The night march back to Pigeon Ravine was taken over for Bligh by half-memories of his dream, of being possessed. It scared him and he did not know why. It was not so much the possession itself, as the desire he had experienced, the desire to give in and submit himself to it. He had never realised how easy it was simply to give in.

Leaving Comeras, the night was cold and clear and there were people moving

about their business in the shadows. All the time he expected them to turn and look at him, their eyes to shine in the moonlight and one of them to cheer.

The cobbled streets felt strange, under his booted feet, the night air wrong against his clothed body. He felt relieved when they reached the open countryside and he was able to put his leave behind him.

Back in Pigeon Ravine, Bligh was put on guard duty two hours before morning Twilights and because of this he was present when Sadiq Phelim's patrol came back through the wires. "Identify yourself!" he demanded, but he had already recognised Sadiq's hurried shuffle and the voices of Roca Fesh and Oori Champion. They sounded strangely buoyant, compared to how things had been before Bligh had gone on leave.

"What is it?" Bligh asked, as Sadiq dropped over the parapet and into the trench beside him.

"They've gone. They've withdrawn."

Bligh did not understand at first. Bernie Rayner appeared from nowhere and demanded an explanation.

"They've gone," said Oori, the quiet one. "We tried to eavesdrop but there were no eaves to drop."

"We had a look in," said Roca. "But there was no one there: no braziers, no candles, no guards to challenge us. It looks like they've just packed their bags and gone home. Maybe the war is over, eh?"

"How close did you look?" said Rayner.

"We didn't get down into the trenches," said Sadiq. "If that is what you mean. But there was nobody there. I would have known if anybody had been there."

As they spoke, the sky took on a pink glow over the hill to the rear of their trench; around them soldiers stirred for Twilights. Rayner took the three off to find Captain Elliam and Bligh heard no news until it was daylight and his watch was over.

Later in the morning, Rayner took Bligh and two others along to an area where the trench opened out into a wide hollow; there were already a dozen men seated and crouching before Captain Elliam. "I've scoured the area with field glasses," Elliam was saying, "and there's no sign of life whatsoever. I've had men out as far as the stream and they've drawn no response - that's unheard of in daylight. In short, I've found nothing to contradict the report of Sadiq, Oori and Roca."

"There's always been a kink in the Line, here," said Rayner. "Maybe they finally decided that they were too vulnerable in Pigeon Ravine and they've fallen back to straighten the Line."

"That has to be a possibility," said Elliam.

"Particularly if they are planning to redeploy their forces," said Sadiq. "Withdrawal would be a sensible move if the Army is planning an advance elsewhere on the Front."

Elliam looked thoughtful for a moment. "You're right," he said, after a short time. "As soon as we've decided what to do I must send a runner to Comeras to warn Command of the development. Bernie? Can you pick someone?" Rayner nodded.

"Unless anyone disagrees," concluded Elliam, "we move in and seize the position at dusk. Any comments?"

Bligh muddied his bayonet and then wiped his hands clean. He had already loaded his special clip, holding cartridges that had the unmarked look which set them apart from the refills which were more likely to jam in the breech. He had not anticipated feeling so scared for an assault on a deserted trench.

Overhead, a crag falcon cut across the darkening sky, its steely grey plumage giving it the appearance of a living blade. Bligh watched it head down the valley and within seconds it was gone.

Perhaps it was Elliam's caution that was transmitting itself and being transformed into the tension of the soldiers. The Captain was treating this as a full-scale assault, whereas any other might simply have wandered over with a few men to take the trench in daylight.

One Section of twenty men was to stay behind in their own trench. Another of thirty would hold positions in no-man's land, while the remaining thirty would go ahead into the enemy trench and clear it of booby-traps and anti-personnel mines. When daylight arrived, scouting parties would work their way up over the hill in order to determine exactly how far the Army had retreated.

The first thirty men had already moved out and Bligh waited with his Section, chatting idly with Wink Hawley and Bernie Rayner.

"Okay," said Ott Colomman, who was leading the Section. "Time to move."

They advanced slowly across no-man's land. Bligh was alert to every sound, every smell on the air. Again, he felt the unnerving sensation that the night was watching him, and as the wind whistled through the valley he was overcome for a moment by images from his dream: the people in the street, bare stones under his feet, the roar of the crowd. He felt himself drifting away from his senses and it was as if his body was operating without guidance.

He snapped himself back to attention immediately.

It felt as if they took most of the night to reach the little green stream in the cleft of the valley, but Bligh knew it was no more than twenty minutes. They clambered across dry rocks and then spread out and waited.

The silence was terrible once they stopped moving, and at each slight sound Bligh expected a sudden barrage of gunfire. After a time the enemy trench was picked out by the glow of candle and lamp light from within and Bligh knew that the advance Section was in occupation.

The rest of the wait in no-man's land seemed interminable, but it did not matter any more. Bligh wondered what would become of the 34th. They were certain to be moved elsewhere, now that the Line had shifted. He realised that he would miss Pigeon Ravine.

At some point in the night Bligh's Section moved in to the occupied trenches. A number of crude booby-traps had been found and cleared, but it was still important to be wary. Bligh felt bemused, standing in this trench with its perfectly revetted walls and neat dug-out bunkers. This, he felt, must be the standard to which all trench diggers aspire. It put their own defences to shame.

The immediate problem was that the defences faced the wrong way. A high

parapet shielded them from the valley, with loopholes at precise intervals along the trench. The parados, to the rear, was a gently sloping ridge of debris left over from the digging of the trench. It would afford the 34th little protection if the Army decided to regain the position. Already, a number of men were trying to improve these defences, but the sandbags of the parapet were too tightly packed to be easily dismantled and the ground itself, where it was not bedrock, was frozen hard.

Bligh was out of the trench when the trap was sprung.

As the sky began to lighten, he spotted Wink Hawley hovering by the wire and there was something about his attitude which made Bligh nervous. He scrambled up, glad of a break from the endless job of shifting rocks and sandbags.

"What's up?" he said, as he came to stand with Hawley. It was hard to believe that it was a mere twenty-four hours since Bligh had been standing guard and Sadiq had come back from his patrol.

"Surely you can sense it?" said Wink. "I thought you were sensitive to ... "

Bligh felt awkward. "I'm no different to anyone else," he said defensively. "What do you mean?"

"It's ... it's in the air. The spirits aren't settled, over here. They're flitting about like winter midges. They make me dizzy." As if to prove this, Wink clutched at Bligh's arm to steady himself.

"It's just battle fear," said Bligh. He turned away from Wink, as if to return to his work, and instantly there was a flash and a muffled boom from farther up the trench. They flung themselves to the ground, finding cover on the valley side of the parapet. Three more blasts followed, clouds of smoke and dust marking the mines' explosions at regular intervals along the defences.

As angry, bemused voices rose from the trench, heavy cracks of enemy gunfire started up and another mighty explosion shook the ground.

Bligh peered over the sandbags and saw the hillside above them sizzling with the muzzle flashes of Army rifles. Hand grenades joined the mêlée and then the tinny clatter of trench mortars. With a sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach, Bligh saw how carefully the range had been determined, mortar bombs and grenades dropping with frightening precision to within a few yards of the trench. All around them, the trap that they had so dumbly entered was closing up.

He aimed a few shots up to where the muzzle-flashes were most dense and then paused to reach down and give Sadiq a helping tug to get him over the parapet and into cover.

At first, the Army seemed content to hold back and pick off as many of the LA soldiers as they could without risking themselves in open territory. As he watched from his position on the blind side of the parapet, Bligh saw Roca Fesh fall, clutching at his chest, he saw Aqbar Emmett flailing about, his face torn open by shrapnel. He saw others, too, falling in the confusion of the assault. Eventually he felt someone tugging at his shoulder and he turned and Wink Hawley was gesturing frantically that they must retreat.

For a moment, Bligh thought that he should stay and provide some kind of covering fire but then a grenade overshot the trench and landed nearby, the vivid red glare of the explosion making him momentarily flash-blind, its heat and pressure wave pressing tingling, sensuous fingers to his face and neck.

The blast brought him to his senses and he scrambled to his feet and ran for all he was worth, down the slope and across the rough ground of the valley bottom. The stream soaked him to the knees and for the last part of his terrified retreat his boots were heavy with its icy water.

And all the time, as he ran, he thought of how he had been saved by Wink and his ghosts.

"How many more are coming?" demanded Captain Elliam, over and over, of each soldier as he dropped back into the trench.

Eventually one of them - Wink Hawley - answered. "Friend, I'm the last," he said quietly. Bligh looked around and realised that they must have lost thirty or more men in the ambush.

He did not have long to dwell on the matter, as he realised that the sounds of enemy fire were drawing closer.

He struggled back to his feet and dragged his rifle up to aim through the nearest available loophole in the LA's meagre parapet. In the dawn shadows he saw movement in the valley bottom and in a terrible panic he fumbled a fresh clip into his rifle and then began to fire on the advancing soldiers. He could see their neat green uniforms with gleaming buttons and buckles. He could see their faces, their expressions of rage and fear and sheer desperation, and in the occasional lulls he could not believe that he was here, shooting at them, trying to kill them. It seemed unreal.

Somehow, they held the Army off until daylight.

In the sharp winter sunshine it was impossible for the advancing soldiers to find cover and soon those that were able retreated across the valley, dragging the wounded, abandoning the dead to the rats and the vultures. Bligh remained at his position until long after the retreat was over. He did not know what else he could do.

By mid-day it was clear that the Army would not attack again until night-fall at the soonest.

"Where's my runner?" demanded Captain Elliam irritably, striding along the trench and examining the features of everyone he found. "Where's my runner?" The Captain had worked his way through three bottles of wine that morning. "Where's my runner?" Eventually, Bernie Rayner explained that his runner had been lost in the fighting. "Lost?" said Elliam. "What do you mean 'lost'?" He was not making it any easier on his troops.

Bligh pulled himself to his feet and went over. "You need a runner, Friend."

Rayner glanced at him gratefully. "We need a message," he said to the Captain.

Elliam took a pad and pencil from his jacket and spent several minutes trying to compose a report, but finally he gave up and instructed Rayner to do it. "Tell them what happened," he said, wearily. "Tell them our position and request reinforcement by tonight. Tell them ... tell them that I am entirely to blame."

As Elliam wandered away, Rayner turned and said, "You're a good man, Bligh." In his smooth handwriting he wrote a brief note: '34th LA to Command: Lost 33 men in ambush, 4 injured and need evacuation. Request immediate reinforcement

as Army advance imminent at nightfall. BR for Cap. Elliam.' He folded the note and wrote on it the name, 'Captain MW Domenech, Command, Comeras'. "You'll have to go over the hill," he said. "They'll have the bottleneck covered."

Bligh took the note and tucked it into a pocket. Merc Domenech, again. He wondered why he kept coming across the man - it was as if their fates had become interlinked. He stopped himself, disturbed at how battle fatigue seemed to be affecting him.

He struggled out of the trench and made for the track up the mountain side. Within seconds there were two rifle reports from across Pigeon Ravine, but he barely flinched. Such distant shots would only hit him by remote chance and he could not stir himself enough to care about such a possibility. He reached the track and started to climb.

Paths like this one zig-zagged all over the Ephedreal Hills, covering ground that looked at first impassable. The mountain goats would use these paths, if any survived. Once, they would have been used by the goat-herds too.

As the ravine fell away behind him - and with it the braziers and body heat of the trench - the cold closed in. The sky was a clear, pale blue now, and it seemed to be drawing what heat there was from the ground, leaving only frost and little patches of dry snow. There was no vegetation here, so close to the Line. It had all been scavenged long before to feed the braziers. These days, fuel parties would journey for as long as an hour, just to find supplies.

He had not been climbing for long before the fatigue rose up and threatened to swamp him. He had not slept in a day and a half, and even then, back in Madeleine's bed, it had been broken by his vivid, disturbing dreams.

Eventually the track petered out and he had to find his way by keeping the rounded summit of the opposite, Army-held hill behind his back. This course led him towards a shoulder of his own hill; from there he would drop and join the supplies road to Comeras.

He walked up the slope, scrambled over the treacherous footholds of a scree, pulled himself wearily over a chest high disjoint in the rock. He walked on, growing more and more tired. The cold did not matter any more. What did was the ache in his chest, the pain of each deep breath of hill air, the weight of his rifle across his shoulder and back. His head was pounding, pressure building up relentlessly as if his skull was about to burst.

Ahead, the crest of the hill seemed as distant as ever.

He wondered why he was continuing. It was ludicrous to think he could get to Comeras, break through the disorganisation of Command and mobilise reinforcements to get to Pigeon Ravine by nightfall. He might as well just sit down for a while, recover his breath. Maybe he would even make better time if he rested and set out afresh. He did not know if that made sense, he did not care any more. He felt as if he was about to fall apart.

He started to search for a sheltered spot where he could break his journey.

It was then that he spotted the stone cat. It was resting nearby in a slight hollow, its tail flicking idly as if pulled by a puppeteer's wires. It must have measured six feet from head to haunch, its grey-brown, lightly specked body a mosaic of muscle, the embodiment of sheer animal power. Its neck was as thick as its head, the black folds of its lips drooped over a set of even, yellow teeth, and its tiny dark eyes stared at him from beneath the bulging ridge of its brow.

He should have been terrified, to come to stand within a few yards of such a creature, but strangely he was not. He stared back and for minutes the two were locked together by their gaze.

Gradually, Bligh began to see the creature as it really was: the fur matted along its flanks, mud spread up over its hind quarters, its bones jutting from a pitifully malnourished body. He felt its pain, its anguish at being reduced to such a condition. He felt the hunger growl in his belly and then he spotted a dark grey weal on the animal's side, the scar tissue where a bullet or a lump of shrapnel had torn its flesh. Suddenly he felt that he could see the world as it was seen by this beast, he could smell it, taste it ... he felt dizzy, felt a rushing sensation, and then he was looking back at himself and he could see his own wretched condition, the way his large frame now jutted awkwardly from a wasted, weary body, mud matting his clothes, eyes staring and wild. Everything was so sharp, all of a sudden. He stretched and felt the pulling pain as the shrapnel buried in his flank reminded him of its presence. He remembered the feeling of power, running across a valley bottom in the dead of night on the scent of a mountain goat. He remembered the sudden flash and boom and the sensation of flying through the air and landing in a heap, thinking he must be dead and then that awful, terrifying feeling that one side of his body was flapping open and something hard and alien was embedded in the muscle.

Up above, he spotted a lammergeier - he thought of it as the bird with fire for a face - hanging onto a thermal, too distant for the man to see. He tasted the air, the scent of the man called Bligh, and his stomach growled in protest. He had not eaten in days, and then only hibernating insects he had scraped from the trunk of a dead tree. He stood, despite the lightning bolt of pain from his scar. He sensed the power still within his body and he knew that he could kill this man in an instant. He bared his teeth and Bligh felt that dizzy, rushing sensation again and he was back in his own body, stumbling, falling to the ground. He started to cry and through his tears he saw the stone cat as he had first seen it, a mighty beast of the hills, lord of its stony environment.

And then, as if nothing had happened, the stone cat turned and ambled away, its shoulders rolling arrogantly, its tail still flicking. Within seconds it was lost to his sight.

He tried to think about what had just taken place, but he found that he was unable. He could not even begin to understand it, the exchange, the momentary sense of communication, of power, of transcendence.

He thought of the men back in Pigeon Ravine. They were depending on him. He pulled himself to his feet and resumed his trek. The crest of the hill seemed closer now, and his body no longer complained so loudly. He felt that he could make it, deliver his message. He had to.

1

'The Seventh is the Fool, the Innocent.'

- The Book of the World, ch.2, v.47.

Command was situated in a school on the outskirts of the town and Bligh had to repeat his story several times before coming to wait in a deserted corridor. Eventually a door opened and Merc Domenech gestured for him to enter his small office.

"We've met before," said Domenech. "On the plain. When I was in command of the 12th. You brought supplies." Now Bligh recalled his earlier feeling that his fate was somehow linked to that of Domenech.

"I'm surprised you remember," he said defensively. "I was sick for three days afterwards." He felt uncomfortable under Domenech's scrutiny. He looked about the room and saw UPP posters on the walls. One, presumably for the illiterate, showed the Queen's Citadel burning, with drifts of black smoke taking the shape of the icons of the six Lords Elemental. Another urged the workers to unite in a holy cleansing of their nation.

"We could find a place for you here at Command," said Domenech, surprising Bligh. "You would have to join the UPP, of course, but that could be arranged."

Bligh felt suddenly angry. "I'm LA," he said. "I came for support by nightfall."

Domenech shrugged. "That's all being arranged. The Landworkers' Alliance are no longer in favour," he continued. "They are seen as inefficient - this fragmentation of Cooperatives and Syndicates runs counter to the revolutionary current. The UPP is growing and before too long the LA will be integrated. Our seers have mapped it all out, you see. The only way to victory is through unification of forces - it is the only solution."

"And where does all this come into it?" Bligh swept his hand to indicate the posters and the stacks of news-sheets.

Domenech tipped his head to one side and fixed Bligh with a predator's stare. "Religion is a means of unification," he said. "It soothes the necessary pain, it inspires the necessary sacrifices, it convinces those who doubt."

Bligh looked away, still reluctant to argue with an officer.

"Belief is for the individual," said Domenech. "And who is to say that there is no truth in such an interpretation of the class struggle? Perhaps I am merely a tool of the Lords ... perhaps they speak through me."

Bligh suppressed a shudder. Domenech was smiling as if at a joke, but his expression bore the look of a well-practised mask. With a heavy sense of sadness, Bligh wondered exactly what this revolution was becoming and whether he even had a place in it any more.

"Now," said Domenech. "To the matter of reinforcements ... "

As runner, he guided the advance Section of thirty UPP militia men along the road to Pigeon Ravine. Despite hurrying, it was still dark by the time they arrived. They bunched up at the bottleneck as Bligh explained the position to the officer in charge. When they arrived tonight the defences would be almost back to full strength and by morning the rest of the 182nd Company of the UPP would come to relieve what remained of the 34th LAs.

They were as quiet as possible, but the passage of thirty men at night can never be completely silent. As they followed the road down past the crag and along the fringe of no-man's land, Bligh heard an indistinct 'phut' from nearby and seconds later a crimson flare lit up the valley. The Army must have posted listeners near to the road, knowing reinforcements would have to come this way.

A distant thud was followed by the metal crash of a mortar bomb going off

nearby. The reinforcements scattered as another landed in their midst and a clatter of rifles rose up.

Bligh hit the ground and instantly his gun was at his shoulder and he let off two shots at where he thought the listeners might be concealed. Then, as the flare began to fade, he leapt to his feet and ran. The rough ground of the valley bottom was treacherous in the dark, but it would be safer than the road at the moment. In this respect he was fortunate, as the UPP soldiers would have to stick to the track, not knowing the territory.

Another flare went up and the firing, which had abated slightly, came again with renewed vigour. Bligh ducked but continued to run. It was no good firing back: the Army were dug in and Bligh was exposed. All he could do was flee.

It seemed to take forever, but it could only have been a minute or so before he was back on the road, slowing to a jog as it rose out of the valley.

A group of soldiers was waiting a short distance up the road, hiding behind a cluster of boulders, not aware that they were safely out of range. "It's okay up here," said Bligh, struggling for breath. "How many are missing?"

They waited for as long as they dared but when there were still seven men missing they assumed the worst. Gloomily, they continued on their way.

They knew by the sound of gunfire when they were near to the LA sector. The Army must have signalled up the Line that reinforcements had passed through the bottleneck and their colleagues were attacking before they could get established.

They spread out in the rough ground near the trench and directed their fire into no-man's land. Once, a bullet whistled off the rocks Bligh was using for cover and he feared someone had located him by his muzzle flash, but the shot was not repeated.

Eventually, the fighting abated and with a weary sense of victory, Bligh led his reinforcements down into the trench and handed Domenech's orders over to Captain Elliam.

As the rest of the 182nd Company of the UPP arrived in the early hours the survivors of the 34th LAs were told that their Company was to be broken up. After the fighting, Bligh's Guard of ten had been reduced to himself, Bernie Rayner, Wink Hawley, Sandy Brigg and Oori Champion. Along with three survivors of another Guard they were to be drafted in to reinforce the 16th LAs on the plain. "What do they do?" asked Wink. "Are they at the Front?" "I don't know," said Rayner. "Don't even have a precise location for them ..."

A fine, dry snow hung in the air as they marched out and Bligh found breathing painful because of the cold. "I will not be missing this," said Sandy Brigg, waving a hand at the darkness.

Bligh was not so certain. As the road fell away from the Ephedreal Hills, he began to feel exposed and vulnerable. He searched the dawn greyness to either side but could see no farther than a few yards. The snow had turned to a thick misty rain, and the road was topped with several inches of slippery mud. Before long his damp clothes began to chafe on his skin.

At a junction, Rayner halted his seven men and they watched as the rest of the Company took the fork towards Comeras. Bligh thought of Madeleine and her

little room and wished he was going with them. He had no more stomach for this war. The road they followed instead was a muddy track, wheel-ruts incised deeply into its soft surface, obscured pot-holes a frequent cause of cursing. Eventually, Rayner called them to a halt and suggested that they take shelter in a ruined barn that loomed darkly at the roadside.

They waited until full daylight, with water dripping all around and the smell of damp faeces in their noses. The rain had stopped now and they emerged to the wet-earth smell of early Spring. Bligh looked around and saw fields with self-seeded corn sprouting inches high from the mud, a clump of cherry trees breaking into flower, tiny violets growing from the walls of the barn. Some kind of magpie was chattering from the cherry trees, sounding like a child's imitation of a machine gun.

They marched in their ragged manner for three hours, stopping to question suppliers and a Land Party runner of the whereabouts of the 16th LAs. Eventually they were lucky. "The 16th?" said a tall Traian, at the head of a party of suppliers returning from the Line. "That's us."

The 16th were covering the supplies runs for much of the Comeran Plain. Their base was an old farmhouse, complete with roof, window shutters, doors, floorboards. It seemed to Bligh to be slightly corrupt to have such comfortable accommodation so close to the Front. Their commander, Captain Ivoro, knew nothing of his reinforcements. "The orders were hurried," explained Rayner. "Our Company suffered heavy losses at Pigeon Ravine and we've been redeployed."

"Pigeon Ravine, eh? I heard about that. You'd better settle yourselves then. You'll spread the load, I suppose." He grinned, suddenly. "I've even got a job for you tonight: you can take our lunatic back to Comeras and dump him on the healers at Command."

Later, Bligh went to mix with his new Company. He soon found that many were from the region around Dona-Jez and that he knew some of their families. When he mentioned that Madeleine Palmes was in Comeras, Salas Benjennery, a middle-aged man with silvery hair and long-lashed brown eyes, said he had taught at the school with her, before the revolution. "I am glad she has found someone other than Hammad Fulke," he said. "Fulke was healer to the patricians, he visited the Citadel often. He was on the other side."

Bligh wished he could just forget about Madeleine's former lover.

"No, Friend," said another, Alyk Ammar. "He gave it all up when we took Dona-Jez. Even a - " He was interrupted by a sudden torrent of abuse from another room. "You have seen our good Lord?" he said to Bligh.

Bligh shook his head and so the two led him out into the corridor and down to the door of another room. It opened as they approached and a soldier backed out, yelling at someone within. "I told him he's being moved out tonight," the soldier said, turning to Benjennery. "He didn't like it."

"What's wrong with him?" asked Bligh.

Benjennery grunted. "The mental fracture of our times," he said. "He hears voices in his head. He claims that the Lord of Stone, or sometimes the Lords of Soul or Water, are pushing Their way into his head. 'Out of the mayhem the Lords will arise, riding the bodies of innocents, leading mankind to a new Creation.'" Bligh recognised the quote from the Elementalist Book of the World. "He was always simple," Benjennery continued, "but he could at least fire a rifle and serve the cause. He has been this way since last week. Even

when he's not violent he's a burden."

Bligh pushed open the door and went inside the room. He had expected a man his own size, with protruding jaw and bulging eyes - the traditional jibbering fool. Instead, a small man sat on a window ledge, peering out through the gap between the wooden shutters. His hair was straight and unevenly cut, his back slightly hunched. He looked incapable of aggression.

"Hello," said Bligh tentatively. The man turned and Bligh realised that he was a mere boy, perhaps fifteen years old. His face was marred by eruptions of acne and one eye was partly closed and swollen. "I'm new here."

"I'm not," said the boy, staring without embarrassment at Bligh.

"What's your name?"

"Gaspar Sech."

"What were you looking at?" Bligh wandered deeper into the bare room, keeping a safe distance from the boy. Sech's eyes followed him relentlessly.

"I was listening," said Sech. "I'm hungry but they don't feed me any more."

Bligh handed him a piece of cheese from his pocket. Sech held it up to the light and examined it closely before putting it in his own pocket. Bligh felt a terrible weight, seeing how the war could damage one so young. He sensed Salas Benjennery coming to stand beside him.

"You were listening to the Lords, weren't you, Sech?" he said. "Which one was it today? Fire? Air? Flux?" He sounded nervous, as if something was not right.

Gaspar Sech just looked at him. Eventually the boy said to Bligh, "What does he mean? I'm hungry, can I have some food?"

Benjennery turned to Bligh and said, "He's refused food for two days now. He hasn't said anything that makes any sense for even longer. What did you do?"

"I'll get him something," said Bligh. He found the Company supplies in an airy cellar and took some bread and a flask of water back to Sech. The boy ate greedily and then drank the flask dry.

At dusk, Captain Ivoro found Bligh and Bernie Rayner sitting outside on the wood pile. "I was going to send you back with the fool," he said.

"He seems well enough to me," said Bligh.

"That's what I mean," said Ivoro. "You'll win a reputation as a healer if you're not careful. You're taking supplies to the Front instead."

Over the next week, Bligh got to know his new Company a little better. Apart from the newcomers, they were all native Traians. Most came from the north but a few were from Anasty and the coast. Gaspar Sech was soon back on the supply runs doing his share of the work. It did not take long for Bligh's compassion to fade under the onslaught of Sech's favouritism. The boy would bring him pieces of food and glittering fragments of quartz, he would march by his side and recite muddled proverbs and litanies. "The fire that I breathe, the ground that I drink upon, the thoughts that warm me ... " "You healed me," he said one day, "and in return I am to follow you to the ends of all the worlds and I am to serve you and bring you favour and fortune."

When they were put on two days' leave and Sech was left behind with the Company, Bligh felt a tremendous sensation of relief.

When Madeleine saw Bligh with Salas Benjennery, she rushed out under the bar and hugged them both. Bligh wondered bitterly whether she would have kept her distance if they had not already been to the public baths.

"We're serving together in the 16th," said Benjennery later, as they perched on an old stone trough by the town's Assembly House, enjoying the unseasonal warmth of the evening. "How do you cope here, Madeleine? This place is dangerous for a young woman living alone ... anything could happen. You must be careful."

Madeleine glanced at Bligh and said, "I've been here for some time now. I can defend myself." Bligh sensed that there was something wrong, but when he had asked earlier, she would only say, "Later, love. It doesn't matter."

Now, she said to Benjennery, "You're quiet. You were always the romantic one. Back at the school you would tell us tales of magic and wonder. Has all that gone now?"

Benjennery shook his head sadly. "I'm no story-teller," he explained to Bligh. "I am a historian. I would collect anecdotes from the old people of Dona-Jez. In some instances the stories had been passed down for generations: they would tell of healers who could cure a deadly illness with the touch of a hand, of seers who plotted the course of dynasties. Even my parents' generation possessed a greater sense of the wonderful than we do today. There's no room for magic in a modern life, there's no room for the soul."

Bligh thought of the UPP posters and their adoption and corruption of traditional religious symbols. Across the street a queue had formed at a church. He nodded towards it and said, "The people don't seem to agree."

"Salas is right," said Madeleine, and Bligh felt chastised. "Magic is being pushed aside. People no longer believe in miracles, they want motor wagons and radios and cinema pictures."

"It is a modern, secular world," said Benjennery. "And is it not an improvement?"

They looked around at the broken buildings, the shabby soldiers, the people dressed in rags. "This is not how a world without God has to be," said Bligh. "This is only one alternative." But he knew he was outnumbered.

Later, after they had parted company with Salas Benjennery, Bligh pressed Madeleine about what had been bothering her. "I was questioned by the police three days ago," she said. "Not the police we used to have, these were the People's Police of the UPP. They are armed bullies who roam the streets in search of 'agents' and 'anti-revolutionary forces'. They thought my papers might be false. They wanted to know why I was here and not in Dona-Jez, working for the revolution. When I told them about you and that you were in the Landworkers' Alliance, I thought they were going to ... I ... "

They had stopped outside the house that held Madeleine's room. She was crying now, and Bligh held her tight until she had stopped. "What did they do?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," said Madeleine. "Only questions. I'm lucky they didn't keep me - " she laughed bitterly " - I'm lucky they didn't find me attractive enough to

keep."

Bligh felt sick. He kissed Madeleine's hair and let her cry herself out. He felt helpless. "Go back to Dona-Jez," he said, after a time. "Get away from all this." He swallowed. "Get away from me. Before everything goes horribly wrong and it's too late to put things right." He was crying too, now. "Get away from me, Madeleine. Just ... get away." He released her and pushed her towards the door of the house. "Go," he hissed. And then he turned and ran away into the night.

2

'As Mother is to the Child, so Stone is to the Soil, and from the Soil Springs All Sustenance and New Life.'

- from The Lords Give ... aphorisms.

Within days of his return from leave, Bligh's Company was on the move. When told they were to be relocated, Sandy Brigg asked, "Where to?"

Captain Ivoro looked grim. "The Front," he said, and would add no more.

When their preparations were complete, they shouldered their back-bags, slung their rifles and set out. They marched all day, through the interminable rains of the Traian Spring. Arriving in mid-afternoon at the reserve position, they found the trench to be little more than a filthy ditch, half full of yellow water and floating filth. They waited in the open here until dusk, having been informed by the soldiers they were relieving that the forward trenches were no better, the single difference being that here you could sit in the open whereas at the Front you had to keep under cover at all times. "I might take my chances on that," said Wink Hawley, interrupting a long pull from a bottle of fortified wine. "I have a distinct dislike of trench-water - it puts out the fire in the belly."

There followed nearly a month of the conditions Bligh knew were far closer to the norm for this miserable war than had been his time in Pigeon Ravine. On a good day, the water in the trench bottom came to the tops of your boots; more typically it reached your knees or beyond, despite a double depth of duckboards laid somewhere in the depths of the mud. It rained at some time on every last day and the surrounding plain was a sea of mud, broken by occasional islands of tree stumps and broken buildings. In these conditions, at night, a simple tour from one end of the trench to the other - a journey that in dry, well-lit conditions would take five minutes - could last for longer than two hours.

In such an environment even the most basic hygiene became impossible. Diarrhoea and vomiting affected everyone, as did the fiery aches and pains of trench fever, or 'pyrrhexia of unknown origin' as Captain Ivoro insisted on calling it. Worst of all, in Bligh's ranking of his afflictions, was the selective organic decay - starting with the webbing between the toes and then spreading - of foot rot, a condition impossible to avoid in these water-logged conditions.

He dreamt his dream again and again. The one where he was a mountain, immovable, where he became a boulder plunging through the air. Now it would go a stage further and he would be running naked across the slopes of his mountain, there would be people watching him, urging him on. He would feel the weight of their hopes, a burden that bore down on him but simultaneously pushed him on. He felt the power of his position, the temptation, the

specialness of being Chosen ... and then he pulled away and broke loose, the crowds dropped back and he thought he could become free.

All around him the war continued. The sounds of fighting never abated; even the infrequent spells of calm were interrupted by the occasional bored firing of a rifle or a trench mortar or an Army machine gun. Added to this was an experience Bligh had been sheltered from up in Pigeon Ravine: the awful, deafening noise of an artillery barrage. At some point on most nights the screeches and the booms would start, mostly in the distance but frequently at or near to the sector held by the 16th IAs. The heavy 'tumblers' could cause devastation, but more often than not the deep drone and tumbling flight was followed by silence rather than explosion. The smaller shells were less likely to fail. Fired at high velocity the cartridge explosion, the whizz of their flight and the shell-burst were almost simultaneous. The only consolation was that if you could hear one of these shells that meant it had missed. Bligh never worked out how this could be known, but all the experienced soldiers insisted on its truth.

The most terror-inspiring shells were the shrapnel bombs which hummed over regularly at dusk and dawn and exploded in the air with their blast directed downwards at the trenches full of soldiers on Twilights watch. On one grim night, the 16th lost six men to a direct hit and then eight more were wounded by a shrapnel bomb as they cleared up the debris. Bligh barely noticed.

If it was not a barrage that pulled Bligh out of his gloomy cocoon, it would be Rayner or Cabo Dona-Santen rounding up volunteers for watch or patrol.

No-man's land on the plain was an awful place - the mud and water was treacherously honeycombed with shell-holes, but worse, a soldier could never tell if the soft ground his foot was squelching in was the mud or the festering belly of some uncollected corpse. Bligh learnt not to think too closely about the places his feet fell. He knew that if the patrol made it out to almost half way across no-man's land they would reach the levelled ruins of a row of landworkers' cottages. The ground here was higher than by the trenches and the layer of rubble lifted the grateful soldiers' feet clear of the mud. All sense of precaution, all thoughts of their orders, would leave the patrol as this island of dryness came into sight. Shrapnel did not matter, and neither did the bodies or the possibility of encountering an Army patrol. During these snatched moments Bligh could feel the freedom of his dream again, and for a time his old self would be reasserted.

It was on one unusually fine and sunny morning that word spread of relief in two days' time. Bligh and Wink Hawley were sharing an old ammunition box they had dragged out to use as a seat, a short distance behind their reserve trench. Before them, their boots lay steaming in the sun and now Bligh was tentatively approaching the task of peeling the waterlogged bindings from his feet. He did not like to think what his skin would look like after all this time.

"You've heard," said Wink, "about relief?"

Bligh had heard nothing.

"Night after tonight," Wink continued. "Back to Comeras and a dry bed. You going to see that Mada ... Ma ... Madeleine, are you?" Wink had been drinking his favourite liquor again. Alcohol was a staple part of the supplies deliveries, here on the Front. It kept you going.

Bligh stared into the distance and thought he might not answer. "She won't be there," he said, eventually. "Or at least I hope she won't be there. It's too

dangerous. I told her to go."

"Did she say she would?"

"I don't know," said Bligh. "I didn't wait for an answer."

Just as Bligh was about to return to the contemplation of his feet, Gaspar Sech came jogging up from the direction of the forward trenches. He was grinning madly and clutching something to his chest.

He stopped before Bligh and Wink and said, "I've brought presents." His voice sounded like that of a little boy. "Brought them for you, please."

Bligh and Wink exchanged looks and then Bligh put out a hand and said, "Thank you, Friend. But I've told you before that you owe me nothing - I'm no more special than Wink, here."

Sech snatched his handful of gifts away from Bligh's open hand. "No!" he yelled aggressively, drawing alarmed looks from all around. The soldiers looked bored again when they saw that it was only Sech. They were all accustomed to his sporadic, violent outbursts. "You," he continued, pushing them towards Wink. "I brought you presents."

Bligh was surprised. He had given up trying to persuade Sech to stop bringing him tributes of glittery stones and pieces of food. Now, though, it appeared that the message had penetrated. "You've found a new friend," he said to Wink, who looked unenthusiastic in response.

"Bligh doesn't like it when people know him too well," said Sech, talking about Bligh as if he was not there. "But I know about that now and so it doesn't hurt like it did before. I brought you presents."

He thrust his two closed hands at Wink, who had little choice but to accept the gifts. Sech dropped his booty and then turned and trotted away.

"Oh no," said Wink, shaking his head. "He's been collecting souvenirs again." He showed his cupped hands to Bligh and they were full of engraved tinder boxes, rings, broken teeth capped with gold. It seemed that the dry ground of the ruined cottages was not the only reason men volunteered to go out into no-man's land. Wink Hawley stared at his collection of gruesome trophies, and then he retched and his vomit was coloured a fiery liquor-stained orange.

Apart from a furious thunder burst in the early afternoon, the rest of the day remained sunny and dry. Large lakes of mud acquired a pale crust which, by dusk, had developed a tracery of cracks. Dark, steaming footprints cut broken lines across the dried mud, where soldiers had passed in the afternoon. When Bligh woke from the rare luxury of a three hour sleep, sunlight was beginning to lose its grip on the world and the shadows were taking over. He sensed immediately that there was a new atmosphere, here in the vicinity of the reserve trench. The familiar, short-tempered weariness had been transformed into an air of excitement, of anticipation. Relief would come tomorrow evening, he remembered.

He soon learnt that there was more to it than tomorrow's relief. "Tonight we celebrate," said Cabo Dona-Santen. "I have had men out all afternoon, up and down the Line, trading with our neighbours. Now we have some drink, some decent food. There is fuel for a fire."

Bligh had noticed a pyre being built, in the shelter of a broken wall.

"Tonight we celebrate," he repeated dumbly. It seemed a strange idea, more foreign than anything else he had come across in his time in Trace. He looked around at the mud, the decay, the sheer desolation of it all, and wondered whatever could there be to celebrate?

"Can we do it? Can we do it?" sang Gaspar Sech, bounding up to join Dona-Santen and Bligh.

Bligh found his youthful energy intensely irritating. "Do what?" he asked.

"The Prayer of the Body," said Sech, giving him a sly glance before returning his attention to Dona-Santen.

"Oh, we'll most certainly be doing it," said Dona-Santen. "But - "

"I can do it!"

Dona-Santen turned back to Bligh. "We have no priest to mediate the Prayer," he said. "And no sensitive to take his place. Some people wouldn't see the importance, but it does matter. The boy says he went to a Church charity school before the war and that he can mediate for us. What do you think?"

Bligh shrugged. "I'm a lapsed Jahvean," he said. "I'm hardly the man ... "

So Dona-Santen took the decision himself. He put his hands on Sech's shoulders, turned him around and gave him a gentle push in the back. "Go and ask Captain Ivoro," he said.

As he was in reserve, Bligh did not have to stand Twilight duty. Instead, he stood in the open and looked out towards the Line. If he tried hard enough, he could distinguish the boundary between sky and ground. Somewhere over that gentle rise were their own trenches and, a little farther, the trenches of the Army. The field guns were quiet for now, and even the rifles only cracked occasionally. Bligh wondered if it might be some kind of national holiday, still perversely respected in this episode from hell.

He went down to the trench to look for Wink Hawley, and when the two returned the fire had been lit and a number of soldiers were gathered around. "These things give me the creeps," said Wink, "even though I was born an Elementalist and expect to die one."

"You believe in it all?" Bligh had never considered Wink to be a particularly religious man.

"There's more to the religion than mere belief," said Wink. "Especially here in Trace. You go to church, you learn the scriptures in school ... it becomes a part of you whether you believe or not. It's an element of my experience, it dictated a large part of what I could and could not do for the first seventeen years of my life. No, I suppose I don't believe in it - not as a fundamental truth - but it's made me what I am."

Just then he turned to look at Bligh and the fire lit the twisted, scarred side of his face a fiery salmon pink. Bligh looked away. He did not want to think about what Wink had just said. He did not want to apply it to himself.

From around the fire, the soldiers cheered as a cork was drawn noisily from a bottle. There were more men here than could be accounted for by the thirty or so in Bligh's reserve Section. Particularly when many had chosen to stay away, either through religious difference or for their own private reasons. Some of the men had slipped away from the forward trenches, presumably those who were

not actually meant to be on guard or patrol duty. But there were also many faces new to Bligh. Word must have spread to neighbouring Companies, through the afternoon's trading for food and drink.

"It does, however, have its compensations," said Wink, as they went up and filled their flasks from a huge clay wine jug and then helped themselves to some of the bread and dried meat cakes that had been spread out across a tarpaulin on the mud.

After a few minutes of idle talk, the eastern sky flickered and the ground shook with the distant rumble of artillery explosions. "Let's hope they stay clear of us tonight," said Alyk Ammar, a bearded young man with a peasant scarf tied around his head and the fingers of one hand looped around the necks of three bottles of beer.

During one of the lulls in the distant fighting, the gathering's attention suddenly focused on those around the fire. Gaspar Sech was there, flanked on one side by Cabo Dona-Santen and on the other by Madeleine's former colleague, the silver-haired Salas Benjennery.

The boy's face was already awash with sweat and his eyes were glassy and rolled up to show the whites. He was swaying back and forth and humming. "They believed him then," said Bligh softly.

Nothing seemed to happen for a long time, and Bligh grew bored. At the same time, however, he was unable to look away from the fire, the boy, the rolled back whites of his eyes.

Bligh stretched his back and rolled his head and shoulders in an effort to loosen the tension that had seized his unmoving form. He felt angry when Sech mimicked this action. He had not realised the boy was watching him.

He took a drink from his flask and followed the satisfying course it took, across the back of his throat and down, down, to sizzle in the pit of his stomach. He felt the heat expanding within his body and he reached out and touched the cool stone of the wall for reassurance.

For a moment it was as if his hand had merged with the wall and he could not wrench it away. With a grunt he managed to free it and then he stared at his palms, confused. He shook his head, drank some more wine.

The boy was moaning now. The two by his side took up the noise. Dona-Santen looked awkward about it, but Salas Benjennery looked thrilled. Bligh remembered their conversation in Comeras about the death of magic in a modern, secular world. It seemed that Benjennery would do what he could to slow down that process.

Bligh shifted uncomfortably and Wink nodded at him and then said, "Seems pretty intense tonight."

Bligh rubbed his eyes with the back of his wrist. The smoke was making them hurt. Sech suddenly yelped and threw himself down on his hands and knees before the fire. He was still for a moment, and then he started to squirm in the mud, crying out over and over, something like, "Bubububub!" After a minute or so, the crowd joined in with the call and the rhythm became a steady, pounding pulse that seemed to resonate with the very flesh.

Bligh felt the ground beginning to shift beneath his feet and then Gaspar Sech tipped his head up and his eyes rolled back down from under their lids as he looked directly at him.

"No!" cried Bligh, dragging the word out into an awful bellow. "No!"

The ground was snatched from under him and suddenly he was naked, running across the smooth flank of a mountain. Cold night air was cutting across him, making his body hair stand on end, making his genitals shrivel, and his rotten feet slapped painfully on the bare rock, cleansed with each slippery footstep.

From all around, people stared at him, their eyes bulging in their faces, their heads looming over him, voices chattering. With each cat-like bound, he felt stronger, his muscles gliding smoothly over one another. He felt the power, felt the crowd's frenzied need. He felt capable of almost anything and so he ran and ran until he left it all behind and he felt as if he was floating, drifting in a sea of darkness. He felt warm and comfortable. He wanted to stay like this forever.

He was unaware of what was happening for a time that could have been forever, for all that he cared. But then he realised that - somewhere in this sea of darkness - he did care, and he began to struggle, to fight whatever it was that was making him feel this way. The dream had never gone this far before and he thought that he must have become lost in its depths, but then he saw the faces, the mountain, and he started to run again.

He looked up and the soldiers were all around him, pushing and barging to get a better view. Their eyes bulged making them look like the people in his dream and he pushed his way to his feet and out past them, away from the fire and the pressure of their stares. All around, the sky was a flickering horror of artillery fire but he had to run, had to escape.

After another age he found himself sloshing about in the mud and mouldering bodies of no-man's land. He slowed himself so that the sound of his struggling feet would not draw the attention of sniper fire or enemy patrols and he realised that his feet were still bare and he could feel the very essence of the mud and gore with each slow step - the varying degrees of softness and firmness, the lumps that may have been stones or shell fragments or pieces of bone. When he reached the ruined cottages, he scrambled up over their rubble gratefully. Suddenly he was aware of the night air biting into his skin and he cowered down amongst the debris and wondered what he could do now. As he waited, his senses gradually recovered, but his shivering body grew steadily colder.

He wrapped his long arms about himself and closed his eyes and when he opened them he thought he was in the dream again. A gruesome distorted face was peering at him, inches from his own, one twisted side a fiery contortion of flickering flames and scars.

"Wink," he gasped, and then he realised that there were rowdy soldiers all around and he was slumped against a broken wall.

Wink Hawley had a tight grip on Bligh's arm, and when he spoke his voice was tight with tension. "You felt it too," he said.

"Hmm?" Bligh's mind was still unclear. Was this still the dream?

"You blacked out for a moment," said Wink. "But you felt it, didn't you? You heard the calling of the Lords ... They've chosen us, can't you feel it?" There were tears in his one eye and now his grip was hurting Bligh's arm with its intensity.

"I felt nothing," said Bligh. "Nothing."

Voices were raised now, and they both looked across to the fire. Gaspar Sech was being pushed roughly aside by some of the soldiers and he was being subjected to a torrent of abuse. "You're no good," Cabo Dona-Santen told him drunkenly. "You can't do it. You lied to me!"

The boy did not seem to care. He let them push him from the fire and as the soldiers turned away he looked up at Bligh and Wink Hawley and smiled.

When they marched into Comeras the following night Bligh felt terrible. All day he had been suffering shooting pains in his arms and legs and Salas Benjennery told him with a hint of glee that it was most probably rheumatic fever and he would need the attentions of a healer if he was to avoid hospitalisation. Then he had laughed and said, "Of course, Friend, to be healed one requires an element of faith and ... " Then he had clapped Bligh on the shoulder and finished, "Captain Ivoro keeps some aspirin. A poor substitute for faith but I suppose it's your only choice."

The pain-killer had helped and now he just felt stiff. The Company split up when they reached the main street of Comeras and Bligh found himself alone. Everyone was accustomed to not including him in their plans when they were on leave, so now he wondered what he should do. Madeleine would have gone by now, he thought. He could not remember why, but he felt certain that she must have had good reason. Had they rowed? He thought not.

He peered around in the darkness. It was near to midnight now, but there were still people passing along the pavements or wandering down the middle of the street. Soldiers, mainly, and weary-looking women who were probably prostitutes.

Across the road, he noticed one of these women staring at him. He had never been with a prostitute before. He had always assumed that the taint of commerce would steal his passion and make it a waste of time. Now, though, he stared hard at the woman. She was old, maybe forty, but she had held her figure and she stood proudly. He felt himself coming alive for the first time in days.

He straightened and took a step, and then he noticed that it was not only the woman looking at him, but a couple standing nearby. Suddenly scared, he glanced back over his shoulder and just down the pavement a group of soldiers were watching, too.

Instead of moving towards the woman, as he had planned, he stood, rooted to the spot. He felt the blood pumping through his body, thumping in his groin and his chest and his head. He felt dizzy and he had to move in order to avoid falling. Suddenly he was walking, out in the middle of the street. Now others turned to stare and he felt their eyes pushing at him, trying to knock him to the floor.

He started to run and the eyes followed.

Down a side street, across a square, he ran, and the throbbing in his body transformed itself into the heaving of his lungs as he pushed his exhausted limbs ever harder.

When he stopped, he realised that he had come to the little crooked house where Madeleine had rented a room. "Gone," he muttered, unaware that he was speaking aloud. He pushed his way through the door and climbed the stairs. He did not consider the possibility that someone else may have taken the room and

he would be barging in on them, he just wanted to see it again. One last time.

He barged into the door, harder than he had intended, and it swung open with a loud crash.

She was still there. She woke with a stifled scream and sat up, clutching the blanket across her chest. "Bligh," she gasped. "I didn't ... "

She climbed out of the bed, wearing only Bligh's old shirt. "Love," she said, still startled. "I'll put on some water for your bath. You must be desperate."

He reached, dumbly, for her as she passed within reach, but she danced away from his clumsy hands and went out onto the landing for her water. He looked around the room and struggled to straighten his mind. He saw her bag lying on the floor and realised that she had removed her things from the shelf and the top of the chest of drawers. "You're leaving?" he said, as she returned.

"Yes." She poured a jug of water into the iron tub and turned to go for some more. "You wanted me to, remember?"

He did not know what she was talking about.

"And anyway," she continued. "I lost my job." She had not been looking directly at him, but now for a moment she glanced up and he realised she was upset. "It's because you're in the LA," she said. "Mr Caur said he couldn't take the chance. Not with the police as they are. The UPP have been saying the LA is an anti-revolutionary force because it is resisting integration. Oh, Bligh ... I didn't know what to do."

Bligh moved towards Madeleine. She let him stroke her arm, and then she started to remove his clothes. He watched her expression and realised how she was repelled by him when he was like this: the smell, the filth, the lice.

He pulled away and removed the rest of his clothes by himself.

"I'm going tomorrow," she said. "By train. Or at least, I was planning to leave tomorrow. But I can stay, if you want."

He took her roughly and pulled her towards him. "Why?" he hissed angrily. His head was pounding and when he saw the distress on her face he felt a perverse satisfaction.

"Be ... because you ... "

She tried to pull away, to escape his embrace, but as she turned he managed to push her and she tumbled onto the bed. "Bligh!" she cried, as he lay down beside her and forced his mouth onto her neck. "Bligh ... "

Her lips tasted sweet but she kept her teeth clamped tightly together, resisting his tongue. She tried to squirm across the bed, but he had a hold of her arm and now his leg was spread across her hips. Ignoring her soft cries, Bligh rolled over on top and clumsily tried to enter her.

He could not manage it. Despite the angry pounding in his body, he was not stiff enough to penetrate. He pressed against her, nevertheless, in some gruesome pretence at passion.

Pulling back for a moment, he looked down at her tear-streaked face. Her eyes

stared up into his and he saw that she was frightened, and his anger grew again.

The next time he opened his own tearful eyes, he saw that her fear had been replaced by a look of pity. Then she reached down and guided him into the right position and, only partly erect, he was inside her at last.

Afterwards, they lay in the darkness. Bligh felt sick and tired and confused. His anger had retreated but he could still feel it smouldering within. Madeleine lay awake all the time with one hand placed on his heaving chest, staring at him. He wished she would stop. He wished she had stopped him earlier - she was strong enough, he knew. Just at that moment he hated her, with all the intensity his enfeebled condition would allow. But more, he felt that same deep loathing towards himself. He feared what he had become, what he felt this terrible, dark longing in his chest could make him become. And all the time, Madeleine watched him in the shadows.

In the morning, she attempted conversation but soon gave up. She was trying so hard, but it was only having a negative effect on Bligh. Soon, he was out on the street without a word of goodbye. He did not know what had happened last night, he felt that he had been a passenger in his own body for weeks and he did not know where reality ended and his own distorted imagination took over. All he knew was that he never expected to see Madeleine again.

3

'Casper holds our history, Anastasy our vitality ... but what of poor Comeras, eh? Why, the Festival, my friend, the Festival of the Day of the Lords ... '
- The Book of Confirmation, p.273.

Bernie Rayner was the only person at the Landworkers' Alliance barracks in Comeras. Most of the soldiers, with their back pay in their pockets, took hotel rooms or spent the hours of darkness in the town's brothels. Such things were cheap in war-time.

Rayner saved his money and sent it back to his family in Wederia. "It's not much," he had once told Bligh, "but when times are hard ... " Bligh had said something noncommittal about how he must care for his wife. "She died twelve years ago," Rayner said without expression. "Caught syphilis from a Traian diplomat." He patted his gun and continued, "Each time I fire this thing I think of the two of them. I'm probably wasting my time: my guess is the bugger fled five minutes after the first bullets were fired. But I hope, nonetheless. The money's for my two boys, and for my brother and his wife who see to them up in Tandrice. I write the boys letters telling them how wonderful she was - there's no reason to disillusion them. No, my lovely - " he took up his rifle and placed it against his shoulder " - this is where I let it all escape." He squeezed the trigger and a dead click indicated that the chamber was empty.

Now, Rayner was seated in the barracks doorway, writing another letter. He glanced up as Bligh approached and shifted his feet so that he could pass.

Instead, Bligh threw himself down to sit, his back jammed against the wall. It was a cool day, the sun a diffuse white patch on high clouds. He did not want to go inside, alone, but at the same time he did not want company. He felt edgy and confused; his thoughts seemed to be cascading through his head with little coherence. He believed he might be close to breaking down.

"You argued with it, hmm?" said Rayner, as if he was merely passing comment on the weather,

Bligh glowered at him, but felt numbed when the only faint response in Rayner's expression was a twitch of one corner of his mouth.

"It's the smell, lovey," Rayner continued, as if unaware of Bligh's hostility. "When one's spent any time in an army one develops a ... a nose for scent. The shit-decay of the trenches, the sweat-fart-feet of a barrack-room, the booze and carbolic soap of leave. I know you've rowed, Bligh: every time you come back from leave you stink like a whore's bedroom - she uses soap and bath herbs from Anasty, hmm? I thought so. And today you come back, in a foul mood, smelling of the Front and trench foot. I deduce, Friend, that you did not even reach the stage of washing and screwing before she started, hmm?"

"There are posters," Bligh said, seizing the thought. This morning there had been new posters on the walls of Comeras, plastered over those of the UPP and the various out of date news-sheets. Pictures of stone cats and water fountains and scenes of festivities. "What do they mean?" In his confused state, he half thought they held a hidden message for him, a code that maybe Rayner would be able to explain.

"Ah, the Comeras Festival," said Rayner, tucking his letter into an envelope with a fold of fifty shilling notes. "An annual event, held to celebrate the Lords' Day. It happens all over Trace at this time, but Comeras has a certain reputation."

"What does it mean?"

"As much as you want it to mean," said Rayner. "The same as for everything in life. Believe as much of it as you like, lovey. Me? I prefer to read my books and avoid it all. They have animals in the street, for sport. They roast whole pigs and goats - it reminds me of things I'd rather forget." Bligh remembered that Rayner refused, irrationally, to eat meat. "It celebrates each of the Lords Elemental," continued Rayner, seeing that Bligh still did not understand. "There are scent galleries and narcotic smokes for the Lord of Air, seers and whores for the Lord of Soul. There are pontoons and great fountains over the river for the Lord of Water, troughs of fire and caged lammergeiers for the Lord of Fire. There are games of chance for the Lord of Flux, and the stone cat run for the Lord of Stone. And then, there's always the wild card, the Fool, to add spice to the mix.

"But you're wasting your time with thoughts of the Lords' Day," Rayner concluded. "We're moving out tonight and who knows where we'll be posted next? There's not a single chance that we will be in Comeras for the Festival. Not a single chance."

Rayner was wrong.

On the night before the Festival, the 16th LAs marched back into Comeras. They had spent the intervening twelve days holding a sector of the Line a few miles out on the Comeran Plain. In that time, Bligh felt himself coming alive again. It was as if he had been buried to the neck in trench mud and at last he had managed to grab a handhold and pull himself clear.

This sector was only forty yards from the enemy Line. The trench was deep and narrow in order to minimise the chance of a well thrown hand grenade finding its target. The mud and water at the bottom was deep and smelt like an open sewer, but the squalor of the trench was preferable to exposing yourself to

sniper fire out in the open. Life in this sector passed in a state of constant alertness. The Company successfully held off two night-time assaults and failed in one of their own. They lost eight men in the failed assault, none of them from Bligh's Section, which had remained in the reserve trench throughout. Standing Twilights, he had watched as some of the bodies were dragged back to lie festering in the trench until they could be disposed of the following night.

The ceaseless struggle for vigilance - the constant fear for his life - pulled Bligh through.

The talk, as they marched away from the Front was of the latest UPP news-sheet. There were two main items of news, if The Voice could be trusted. The first provoked both anger and dismay. The UPP were saying that some of the Cooperatives, including the Landworkers' Alliance, showed signs of becoming a counter-revolutionary factor. They were resisting moves to unify the forces of progress and there was the suggestion that within the Syndicates and the Cooperatives there were shady figures who favoured a settlement with the Government and a return to the days when Cooperative and Syndicate bosses had 'lived hand in pocket' with the patrician land-owners. It was blatant propaganda, an indication of behind-the-scenes manoeuvring for influence in the coalition of revolutionary factions, and it was clearly done without thought to the effect on the men at the Front.

The second item of news went some way towards softening the blow of the first. Talks had been held with the ambassador of Feorea, Trace's biggest neighbour to the north. Nothing concrete had emerged, the report stated, but the simple fact of the report itself was enough to stir excited rumours of desperately needed arms supplies and international pressure being put on Queen Minna and her Government to concede the defeat which, of course, was inevitable. These new weapons from Feorea - which, as rumour consolidated rumour, rapidly acquired the status of accepted fact - would be enough for the revolutionary militias to launch a major assault on the Government all along the Line. "Who needs Minna to concede?" the reasoning went. "We already hold over half of the country and, with these new arms, it is only a matter of time now ... "

As he marched, Bligh wondered what he would do if he saw Madeleine. The day and a half of his previous leave in Comeras was remote from him now. He could remember some sort of row, something unpleasant that passed between them, but he did not think too hard about the detail. More clearly, he could recall the feeling as he had left her room the next morning: the feeling that he would never see her again. He realised that their relationship had probably come to an end, and that he did not really understand why, or even if he wanted it to be like that.

Before the Company split up, Captain Ivoro reminded his men of the delicacy of their situation and that they should not go out of their way to reveal that they fought with the Landworkers' Alliance. One or two of the soldiers even went as far as to remove their Alliance neck scarves.

With Wink Hawley, Oori Champion and Salas Benjennery, Bligh went first to the public baths, where they lingered in the steam rooms and the communal tubs, telling stories and arguing politics. Later, they went to a bar and filled themselves with liqueurs and wine and the local yeasty sweetbreads.

There was a new atmosphere to the town already. Stalls and marquees were being set up, their support-posts locked into sockets in the cobbles that Bligh had never noticed before. Boards were being put up, too, across any street level windows that did not have shutters already, and a number of side streets and alleyways were being blocked off with heavy tarpaulin screens.

"You're going to be around for all this?" said Wink, at one point.

Bligh did not know what to make of it. When the fairs had passed through Stenhoer in his boyhood they were a strange and mystical world, forbidden to the boys of the school. Since leaving Wederia, Bligh's experience had broadened but he still felt that boyish attraction to the forbidden. He shrugged and said something noncommittal.

"But what about the cats?" said Wink. "Surely you'd stop at that ... "

Bligh wondered what he meant. He sensed that his friend was more disturbed about this Festival than he would admit. "It's your religion," he pointed out.

"That's what scares me," Wink said softly, and turned away to answer a question from Salas Benjennery.

As darkness fell, however, Wink remained with his three colleagues.

Bligh had never seen Comeras so crowded. The air was full of cries, laughter, the clashing, pounding beat of music. The people were dressed in their gayest outfits, their gaunt, half-starved features standing out in stark contrast, making them look like ghosts or gruesome chimeras. Groups of soldiers roamed, singing drunkenly, slouching over their women.

Pontoons were moored in the river, platforms placed precariously across them so that the crowds could walk from bank to bank. Powerful pumps had been anchored farther downstream, flinging water into the air in a series of graceful curves and spouts, all lit by brightly coloured floating torches and beacons which seemed to be magically kept alight despite the water that regularly swamped them. Bligh marvelled at the extravagance of it all, when everyday life in the town was so harsh. He wondered at the sacrifices made for this one night of celebration.

"This is the tribute to the Lord of Water," said Salas Benjennery, as the group paused at a trinket stall in the middle of the river. "The town is divided into the six Astral Houses of the Lords. It is an acknowledgement, a call to the heavens to say that we are ready for Them to walk among us once again. Ready to be saved from the eternal cycle of life and death."

Just then, a soldier who had been scouring the stall turned and Bligh saw that it was Bernie Rayner. He nodded and raised his eyebrows as Rayner joined them.

"You can't get away from it," explained Rayner. "So I decided to come and get something for my boys. Something to show them how even the spiritual and the sacred can be so readily trivialised."

"This is not trivialisation," said Benjennery. "This is the people themselves rising up to celebrate. These trinkets, this coming together ... it is a far higher expression of the human need for the divine than any be-robed priest's judgement or gloomy rote-learning of The Book of the World. This is magic happening. You cannot get more spiritual than this!"

Rayner raised his hands to fend off the stall holder, who had sensed a potential sale. "No," he said. "This is not tacky enough, my dear. I'll find worse elsewhere tonight, I feel sure."

They drank more liqueurs at a marquee set up in a street dedicated to the Lord

of Soul, and teased each other for not going in to one of the many shielded areas to consult a seer or an astrologer or a whore. A little while later, they found an entire marquee devoted to the Lord of Air. Inside, what was called a gallery of scent had been constructed: a series of areas with particular perfumes somehow confined to their own spaces and not mingling and mixing as Bligh felt sure would be their natural tendency. They passed through snow flowers and that indefinable smell of a mountain stream, heady barrages of orchid and musk, and finally the more subtle, almost undetectable flavours of the narcotic clouds which clung to the senses and made you see angels and magnificent birds, numbing blurs and angry colour splashes. Next, they spent some time and many shillings in the street dedicated to the Lord of Flux, losing their back pay on card games and gambling machines, while Rayner looked on and assured them that the odds were stacked heavily against them and Benjennery insisted that it was the mystical workings of chance and flux, @alone, that influenced the outcome.

The atmosphere was quite intoxicating, so much so that Bligh barely noticed the change in Wink Hawley when they reached an open area devoted to the Lord of Fire. A single, central pyre was built up to almost the height of the nearby buildings and around it there were troughs of coloured fire, statues that spouted great gouts of flame at unnerving, irregular intervals. At one of these, a man stood, dodging out of the way as flames leapt towards him, taunting the statues with rude gestures and comical remarks. His partner was working the crowd for shillings and pennies of appreciation.

"How could they?" muttered Wink, as they paused at the far side of the arena of fire.

"They net them at the nest," said Salas Benjennery, misunderstanding.

Before them there was a raised beam and along it, their feet bound to the wood, were twelve huge lammergeiers. Old Man of the Mountain, young Erin Panniker had called them. Bligh remembered another name for them - Bird with Fire for a Face - and he saw how appropriate that was: from a strong, dark body there emerged a creamy head with a blaze of orange - more vivid than any of the fiery displays of the Festival - at the throat, and tiny, black, pin-pricked eyes with irises of the same fierce orange.

"The things can't move," said Wink.

"Come on," said Bligh, putting a hand on his friend's back. "There are worse things than this."

They left the field of fire and stopped briefly at a stall selling meat cakes and pies. "We've seen all but Lord of Stone," said Bligh. "Where's he then? We've got to do them all." He was feeling more than a little drunk by now. Spending most of his time on leave with Madeleine, he had not grown accustomed to the drinking sprees the other soldiers pursued.

"Oh, there is time for that," said Salas Benjennery, grinning.

Something in the way he spoke made Bligh cautious. He glanced at Rayner, who said, "The climax of the night: the stone cat run. I'm not waiting for that, myself. I'm not a one for needless barbarism."

Just then, a shout rose above the general excited clamour of the night and Bligh sensed that something was wrong. Looking around, he quickly saw that Wink Hawley was missing. Remembering Wink's distress at the Fire displays, he automatically turned to look back down the street to where the shouting had arisen. "Come on," he snapped at his friends. "It's Wink!"

They started to run, Bligh wishing he had not abandoned his sturdy old rifle at the warehouse barracks. They rounded the last corner and saw that the open area was in chaos. People were running about, more than could be accounted for simply by the high spirits of the night. As Bligh watched, several great black shapes banked and swooped, scattering people in their path, rising up over the huge pyre and the troughs and spouts of flame. The birds were clearly confused: they were not creatures of the night and so they lingered by the light of the fires, muddled and, perhaps, amused by all these running, shouting people who they could scatter with one graceful stoop.

"What's the excitement?" said Wink Hawley, appearing from the shadows.

"The birds are free," said Rayner, giving Wink one of his knowing looks. "Well," he added, "I'll give you this, my friend: you've really stirred things up tonight." Even as he spoke, the last of the birds disappeared into the shadows of a boarded-up side street.

As they wandered off again, no one wanting to talk directly about what they all assumed Wink had done, Bligh noticed that the crowds were growing thinner and a number of the stalls and marquees were being dismantled. If it had not been for the magnificent effort of creating such a festival in the depths of wartime, Bligh would have wondered what all the excitement had been about. The festivities had been little more than were put on at any number of coastal towns in Feorea or Marland over the course of a Summer.

They entered the main street again, and here Bligh could see where much of the crowd had gathered. A mass of faces was pressed to the upper windows of the houses and shops along here, bodies hanging out over balconies and clinging part-way up the stone frontages of shops. Ahead, there was a crowd, mostly of young men, thronging the street, shouting and cheering and stamping their feet in some shambolic, drunken order.

"Ah," said Salas Benjennery. "Now, we see, it is time for the Lord of Stone ... "

It was impossible to get through the crowd. The jostling and shouting, the heat of the massed bodies, all made Bligh feel dizzy and disorientated.

He did not want to be here, he realised.

He spotted Bernie Rayner forging a path through the mass and, desperate, he followed, knowing that Rayner would not stay for this either, if he could help it.

He kept sight of Rayner for a time, then lost contact in the chaos. Moments later, he spotted his friend's back and lunged, panicking towards him. Gaining ground rapidly, he threw himself forward and grabbed Rayner's shoulder, but the man turned and it was someone he had never met before, yelling abuse at him even as his whole face was lit up with a fervent excitement.

Bligh looked around in growing confusion, sensing that he had moved close to the heart of the crowd.

Bodies pressed against him from all sides, arms and shoulders and heads striking him and knocking him off balance, making it impossible to stand still and get his bearings.

A short time later, Bligh found himself jammed up against a wall. He found a handhold and heaved himself up, using the surrounding bodies as stepping

stones to raise himself above the mass. He managed to hook a hand over the railing of a crowded balcony and now he could look down at the seething mosaic of people. A short distance along the street, there was a platform with a set of heavy cages in place and some men clustered around. Inside the cages were four stone cats; through the shouting and laughter Bligh thought he could hear the hissing and snarling as one of the beasts threw itself furiously at the end of its cage, shaking the entire platform. Bligh felt sick and trapped now. He did not want to be here.

Then he saw why the cat was so agitated: the roof of its cage was being steadily lowered, trapping it against the floor until finally it could not move. The crowd gave a mighty roar as some men on the platform reached in through the criss-cross bars of the cage.

Bligh looked at the people on the balcony and a large woman whose face was jammed close to his own turned to him and smiled a drunken smile. "What are they doing?" he yelled over the noise of the crowd.

She smiled more broadly, and now her eyes reflected the flickering of a nearby torch. "They're tying his balls so he's not so fast," she said, and turned away again.

Bligh looked back to the platform and the cage roof was being raised again. The cat had become quieter, and Bligh could see a leather harness bound across its rear quarters and extending down each of its hind legs. Two of the others already had their testicles bound up in this manner, and the fourth was now being pinned down in its cage.

Someone pushed Bligh and he lost his grip on the balcony. He landed spreadeagled on the crowd and hands reached up and pushed him, bouncing him along on a sea of humanity, until eventually a hand grabbed him and hauled him to the ground.

"Bligh," said a voice he remembered. "I knew you'd be here."

He felt a surge of euphoria on recognising Sadiq Phelim. It seemed that all emotions were amplified to extraordinary levels in the incandescent atmosphere of this crowd. "Sadiq!" he yelled. "What's happening?"

"Everything." His voice was quiet, but Bligh heard it easily. He realised that Sadiq was with friends. "This is Alderas Aldivine," said Sadiq, louder now, nodding to a tall thin man who was being lifted off his feet by the press of the crowd. "And Pozas Cantera." A rotund man, sheened with sweat and looking edgy. The crowd was shifting now, and they had a little more room to move, or at least to hold their ground. "And I understand you've come across Merc," he said, nodding towards Merc Domenech, who stood there with a quiet smile on his face, studying Bligh closely.

"Join with us," said Domenech. "It is about to happen."

"What?" said Bligh. "No ... no." He felt confused, but suddenly he knew he did not want to stay with this peculiar group of men.

Yet still he felt drawn to them, he felt a tingling in his head, a strange desire. He felt that the electricity of the crowd was being channelled through this group, setting his mind alight, sending all sorts of odd, intrusive thoughts tumbling through his brain.

"Come on. We're special - can't you feel it?" demanded Domenech.

"No!" Bligh cried, and turned and started to struggle, bouncing off bodies and pushing angry people aside, fleeing from the beating in his head and the crazed look on Merc Domenech's face.

Just as he thought he might break free, a horn blew from behind and drums started to beat from the balconies and the upper storey windows, a pulse that matched his own pounding heartbeat, driving it to thump louder, faster.

He stopped running as he felt dizziness threatening to swamp him, and then, as he looked back down the street, he realised that the crowd had thinned and the stone cat cages were open.

It took him several seconds to spot the cats in the shadows of the street, and when he found their dusky forms he saw that they had covered almost half the distance towards him. They were running with a staggering lope, but despite their handicaps their pace and agility was frightening. Already, an old man had been swiped with a heavy paw and was being dragged up onto a balcony beyond the reach of one of the cats.

Bligh's senses cleared in a sudden rush. He turned and ran. He was one of the last men here. He ducked into the mouth of a side street and instantly he was floundering against a huge tarpaulin which had been drawn across the opening and bound into place through steel hoops in the walls. Now, he realised why the boards and shuttering had gone up during the day. The cats were being restricted to certain areas of the town.

And so, he realised, was he.

He ran, until each heavy breath tore at his chest and his heart thudded heavily, finding its panicked echo in his gut and his head. As he ran, he was stripped of all thoughts except survival. He became nothing, a machine of bone and aching muscle, a single, isolated unit of fear.

Each side street and alleyway was blocked until, finally, he found a passage that was clear and he darted along it, running with a group of young Comerans, leaving them behind as they lingered to drink from their clay bottles of wine. Every so often he looked behind, but there was no sign of the four cats, only people, running in every direction, playing a game of chance which would have served the Lord of Flux proudly. And above him, all the time, there were people shouting and cheering from their balconies and windows, driving him on despite the doubts in his mind.

He had lost track of time when he came across Domenech again. He stayed in the shadows and watched as Domenech strode around in energetic circles, brandishing a long sword in the air, demanding that he be obeyed.

His group of followers had grown, now, although he had lost Sadiq and the man called Alderas Aldivine. Domenech grabbed someone from his crowd and Bligh saw that it was poor old Wink Hawley, looking bemused and slightly embarrassed. Somewhere in the shadows, the fool Gaspar Sech was prancing about, singing one of his mad little songs until Domenech turned and cuffed him across the back of his head and he ran whimpering into the crowd.

"It's time!" cried Domenech, to Hawley and to his followers. "They're getting tired now: it's time we hunt the beasts that hunt us!" The crowd roared in answer and an echo rose from the onlookers high above. Wink Hawley shrugged Domenech's hands off his shoulders and turned with a muttered curse, starting to run away from the crowd.

Bligh wished he knew what was happening. He wished he could understand the

strange excitement that was threatening to overtake him. He felt that he could be so easily submerged.

He shrank back into the shadows as Domenech led the crowd past him, along the street. Part of him wanted to follow. He felt that he could control these puppets just as Domenech did, he felt the potential of power if only he would use it.

He held himself back, resisted the temptation.

Minutes after Domenech had left, Bligh saw a stone cat dragging itself along in the shadows of the street. Immediately, there were yells from a balcony above, and bottles and stones were hurled down at the distraught animal. The beast was no longer the fierce, skittish creature that had leapt from its cage in the main street of Comeras. Now, it limped along, dragging its hind feet and giving little anguished whimpers as its harness dragged at its balls and its rear legs.

Bligh did not know what to do, but as he dithered there was a cry from a nearby side street and a crowd of young men raced out at the cat, brandishing swords and clubs and broken bottles. Instantly the cat yelped and leapt, twisting into the air, turning as it landed, and raced away down the street, still able in its pain to flee this bloodthirsty mob.

Bligh turned away, unable to watch. He headed in the direction he had seen Wink Hawley take, hoping desperately that his friend could help him.

Some time later, he heard a shout from above, different from all the other shouts. It was Wink, leaning over a balcony and beckoning, Bernie Rayner by his side. Bligh peered up at the group on the balcony and for a moment he thought he saw Madeleine in the shadows, but then he spotted Slowly Skett and young Erin Panniker and he knew that his mind was fooling him. He looked at Wink again, who may not have been Wink, and wanted desperately to grab his hand and be hauled out of the madness of the street, the madness of the stone cat run.

He turned and started to trot away, aware of a dull ache in the pit of his belly, a fire in his groin. After a few seconds, his trot turned into a headlong run and his whole body was alight with pain, but he knew he must run, as every cell of his being was infused with the most desperate animal fear.

He heard the roar from the onlookers in the buildings, the baying for blood. He heard the roar of a crowd behind him and he knew he must somehow run even harder, even faster.

He emerged in the open space where the tall pyre still burnt for the Lord of Fire and the statues still gouted irregular jets of flame. He turned, in the centre of this open area and waved his hands, taunting the crowd. He felt them respond, even before he heard their cheers and cries. He shouted Traian obscenities at them, his use of the language having broadened with his time in the trenches. They yelled back at him and he felt again that he could lead them, control them. He felt it with a certainty that he had never felt about anything before. He could make them do whatever he wanted: they would worship him before he was through, if that was his choice.

He turned and ran again. His feelings frightened him. He felt sure that at some point on this mad night he had finally crossed the boundary into the land of pure insanity.

Off another wide street, Bligh found an angled shutter, an access point to the

cellar of a drinking house. He pulled at the hasp with no sense of hope and one door swung upwards. Surprised, he straightened and peered about himself. He was shielded from the view of the overhanging balconies above. The street was wide here, and he felt sure that no one on the other side would see what he was doing.

He stepped into the darkness, found a foothold and entered the cellar, dragging the door over behind him.

He waited in the darkness for some time, not quite sure what he was doing but savouring the coolness and the calm that was returning to his body. Perhaps he was not insane after all: perhaps this mania overtook everyone who became a part of the stone cat run. Already, his head seemed clearer and his thoughts felt as if they were his own.

All that remained was a nagging feeling that he was being watched.

After a short time he moved back to the cellar's entrance and found that he could see through a gap between the two wooden shutters. There were people in the street again, roaming aimlessly. The night seemed to be dying now, the excitement dissipating.

Then, after a time, he recognised the form of Merc Domenech, still leading his band of followers. They numbered more than forty by now, but their spirits seemed lower, despite Domenech's commands and encouragement. As they drew closer, passing in the street, Bligh saw the sword that Domenech was still carrying aloft. As it glinted in the torchlight, Bligh felt sure, for a moment, that its blade was red with blood. And then they were gone, away down the street, and there were just the small knots of men, trudging about dispiritedly.

Bligh pulled away from his viewpoint and sat on the top step, peering into the shadows, and then he saw the dusky shadow, hunched up by the far wall between two wine barrels and a heap of old rags. Before, he had simply taken it for another pile of rags, but now he could see its sandy, lightly specked coat, the black folds of its mouth, the dark tuft at the end of its tail which it flicked, restlessly, back and forth.

"How long have you been here?" he said softly, but the beast did not reply.

He moved, carefully, down the steps and settled against one wall, where he could keep a watchful eye over the stone cat and wonder what to do. He fell asleep almost instantly, for when he opened his eyes there was sunlight slanting in through the crack between the shutters and the cat had gone.

Now, he wondered if he had imagined it all, but later in the day he discovered that only three of the released stone cats had been cornered and gored the previous night. The fourth had disappeared. "Surprising that more didn't get away," Salas Benjennery told him. "So much of the town has been damaged by the war, it's impossible to block off escape routes now."

Bligh wandered back through the streets of Comeras, feeling shabby and worn. The effects of the previous day's drinking had not taken long to manifest themselves and his head pounded with each pace and his mouth felt dry and rough, like the dusty cobbles of the street.

All around, it was as if it was just another day in Comeras. All that remained of the Festival were the posters and an increase in litter and smashed bottles which did not look at all out of place in this war-battered town.

Back at the barracks, most of the Company was gathered.

Bernie Rayner greeted him with his usual knowing look and brief shake of the head. He was the only one who did not look as if he had been awake and drunk for all of the previous night. "Good morning, my lovey," he said, with irritating good humour. "I think you might need some sleep this morning. We've got new orders. We're moving out this afternoon. We're taking a train, going south of Caspe."

That name - Caspe - sent a visible shudder through all those within hearing. The fields around Caspe had been the scene of the bloodiest fighting of the entire war. It could mean only one thing: that the forces of the revolution were going for another big push, in the hope of bursting through the strong Army lines of the region and storming the heartlands of Trace. Success would win the war, but it was a success that had exceeded their grasp at every attempt so far.

4

'If there is, or ever was, a God of Battles,
We worshipped Him well on this dying day.'
- from the diary of an un-named soldier.

"Orders," said Bernie Rayner tiredly. "It's orders, lovey." They were waiting at the railway station in Comeras for the train which would carry them south. The 16th Company of the Landworkers' Alliance was no more, a result of the orders to which Rayner referred.

Bligh was only one of many to complain about the dismemberment of the Company. His own Section had been switched to reinforce the 6th Company of the Unification Party of the People. Bligh felt somehow responsible for this twist of renaming when he learnt that the 6th UPPs were under the command of Captain Merc Domenech. He felt that the man had some kind of vendetta against him. He felt angry that he should end the war - for he felt certain that this new campaign would end his war, in one way or another - fighting under the badge of a party he had specifically chosen not to join back in Anasty.

He walked away from Rayner, disgusted. The only answer was 'Orders' and no one would argue too vociferously because they all knew that this was the big one, the Grand Advance which could end the war for good. It seemed that Domenech would get his 'unification of the forces of revolution' without even a whimper.

He settled himself on the stone floor and accepted some a sugar stick from Wink Hawley.

"Don't worry," said Wink, after a few minutes. "The fighting won't reach Dona-Jez - Madeleine will be safely at home by now."

Bligh had told him they had argued and he thought Madeleine had returned to the north. "I just wish I could have seen her one last time," he said now, believing it to be true. "Just to know she's well and ... and to know what she feels." He had never been good at talking of his emotions, conceding psychological advantage to his confessor.

"I don't know why I couldn't just take your hand and climb up onto that balcony last night," he added, aware that he was changing the subject, even

now.

"What do you mean?"

"Last night. During the stone cat run. I was in the street and you were on a balcony with ... " He remembered seeing Madeleine and Slowly Skett and Erin Panniker and that made him stop.

Wink was looking at him strangely. "I wasn't there," he said. "I left just as it started, and found a room in a deserted guest house. I had the most fearsome dreams: back on the train, with flames all around. A lammergeier was trapped inside, screaming, its legs bound to a hand-rail with leather thongs I was trying to cut with a knife that was too blunt ... It's coming back now. You were there, Bligh, riding the back of a huge stone cat - more of a lion than a cat - and I did reach down to you because I wanted you to share the heat. You couldn't come." He shrugged and scratched at the dead side of his face. "I don't know what any of it means," he finished, softly. "I think this war has left me just the slightest bit mad."

"It has done that to every all of us," said Sandy Brigg brightly, settling on his haunches by the two of them. "This is the push," he continued. "I have been hearing on the radio of a friend that the capital of Anasty has fallen. UPP troops moved in last night and now we are have the Parliament buildings and all of the oldest town. The end is beginning for the days of monarchs and their allegiances, no?"

Suddenly, Bligh really believed that the war was nearly over. Anasty's Old Town had held firm since the beginning. Now, if Brigg's report was true, the way was open for the revolutionary militias to sweep down the coast, while the defences of the central plains were punctured by the Grand Advance south of Caspe.

The southern and western half of Trace the Government had clung onto for so long would be simultaneously out-flanked and split in two.

"Then this could really be the end," he said to Wink and Sandy Brigg.

Minutes later a locomotive, pulling carriage after carriage, rolled into the station. Bligh had never seen such a long train. It came to a halt with the lead engine beyond the head of the platform, and as Bligh's new Company trudged off the other end and down through the undergrowth at the railway's edge, eventually he spotted another engine at the rear.

They heaved themselves into an old passenger carriage, with windows that were cracked or boarded over and seats that had been stripped and burnt. As the soldiers settled themselves, Sadiq Phelim worked his way through the carriage, exchanging jokes and comments with the soldiers. After the massacre of Pigeon Ravine, Sadiq had moved into the UPP and now he was commanding his own Section. "This is the Final Battle," Bligh heard him say at one point. "We must do what we can." Bligh knew that he did not simply mean the final battle of the civil war: he was referring to the mayhem predicted by The Book of the World, the time of upheavals when the Lords Elemental will stride the Earth again to lead mankind to salvation. It had become standard UPP propaganda, but now it took on a menacing air as it was used to goad the troops, to whip them into the state of mind in which they would sacrifice anything for the revolution.

"Ah, Bligh, Wink," said Sadiq, coming to stand by them in the passageway at the rear of the carriage. "I had hoped to find you here."

Then, with a sudden jerk and a screech of wheels on rusting, distorted track, the train started to edge forwards, away from Comeras, heading for the battlefields of the south.

"Are you prepared for the Final Battle, Friends?" said Sadiq, hanging on to a hand-rail suspended from the carriage's ceiling.

"The sooner this war is finished the better, as far as I'm concerned," said Bligh. "I've had enough. The day when I get on that train to Feorea or Marland will be the best day of my life."

"You think you will leave?" said Sadiq, raising his eyebrows slightly. "This is only the beginning of the revolution - there is so much to do."

"What does Domenech want with us?" said Wink Hawley.

Bligh looked at his friend, surprised.

Sadiq raised his eyebrows again and Wink continued. "I met him before. After I walked out of the train." He touched his scarred face, reflexively. "He was nobody then, but he acted as if he was Queen Minna herself. I got a commendation from General Malatre and he was lapping up the great man's shadow. Afterwards he confronted me and said commendations for special merit had no place in the revolution and that any man would have done the same in my position. I looked at him and I knew he would never have ... have gone back into those flames to drag his Friends clear. I remember thinking that it was people like him who would go far, people like me who carry the burden. Ever since then he has kept reappearing like a curse."

Sadiq was quiet for a moment. "Merc Domenech will go further, yet," he said. "I can tell you that. He is careful about who he selects, who he trusts. We are lucky."

"We?" said Bligh, uneasily.

"He is aware of you and Wink. He has a theory." Sadiq thought for a moment, then continued. "Merc believes that the war in Trace has acted as a magnet. It has drawn certain individuals from across the world - individuals with particular abilities or affinities. He thinks it is a fundamental dynamic of the true revolution that these sensitives should come together for the good of the people. Merc has employed seers and astrologers to map out the trajectories of these individuals and identify them to him." Sadiq shrugged. "It took no seer, I think, to realise that any sensitives coming from afar would end up in the only Cooperative to recruit Internationals on any scale: the Landworkers' Alliance. The Traians would be more difficult to find: what if they were fighting on the other side? But Alderas Aldivine was found, healing the men of his own and neighbouring Companies. And Pozas Cantera came to Merc one day, saying that he felt there was a magical bonding between them and that he should be sent to hospital if Merc did not feel the same."

"What is Domenech's theory?" asked Wink. Bligh stared out of the broken window at the rushing fields.

"We all have weaknesses," said Sadiq. "Areas of the mind which have suffered emotional damage. Wounds heal over leaving scar tissue tougher than that which it replaces - a bone never breaks twice in the same place, as they say. Merc thinks we have each suffered these emotional wounds and the rebuilding process, in the tissues of our mind, has reinforced certain aspects of our being, certain sensitivities."

"We?" said Bligh again. He had no special powers, no emotional scars covering dead areas of his mind. Sadiq's intensity was disturbing him. He wanted to be outside, to be back in Dona-Jez with the war just a distant source of radio news.

"I warn you, Friends," said Sadiq. "Merc believes that we sensitives should harness our powers to the good of the revolution. Anyone who is not with him in this, would be considered to be against him."

"And what do you believe, Sadiq Phelim? Hmm?" Wink Hawley was leaning forward now and Bligh sensed a new connection between his two companions.

Apologetically, Sadiq replied, "I think we might be God."

Strangely, the soldiers around them seemed to find nothing unusual in this fantastic conversation. It appeared, to Bligh, that they must sit next to the reincarnated Lords Elemental every other week in Trace. He shuddered. He did not believe he had heard correctly until Sadiq continued.

"I came to Trace because one of my teachers told me that all of the portents were in place for the Lords Elemental to walk again upon the face of the Earth. I did not, at the time, believe that I could serve as host. I came because I wanted to be close at hand if my teacher's prophesy should prove accurate.

"I have dreams," he said, as if trying to justify himself. "Visions. Things happen around me, Bligh - you know that - it's never long before people say I am a source of good luck, or bad luck, but always that I am a source of change. If I am not being prepared to carry the Lord of Flux, then I must certainly be His most favoured servant."

When Sadiq had gone, Bligh wanted to talk to Wink. He wanted them to share a joke about Sadiq having finally flipped, but he knew they would not.

"I cannot deny that I have had vivid dreams and that I've often doubted my own mental stability," said Wink, eventually, shaking his head. "I even say crazy things on occasions. But this is fantastical ... ludicrous."

A little later, he said, "Look around, Bligh. The myth has its grip. You can see how such fantasies establish themselves in the minds of the desperate. It has a place, even in my mind: I cannot believe it, but we all have room for doubt, for superstition. The framework of my mind was nurtured by the teachings of the Church - I can never be free of the shadows they cast."

Bligh did not answer. Instead, he looked at his fellow soldiers. Many slept, but others were mouthing their prayers, or whispering the litanies of acknowledgement to the Six Lords. Others drank from flasks and clay bottles, or huddled together to read futures from the faces of playing cards.

He wondered what it would be like, to play host to a god. Would you be aware of it, he wondered? Or would you simply black out, your personality wiped out of existence as the Holy Spirit invaded your mental space? Sadiq was still Sadiq, despite his ramblings. Did he believe that he shared his head with a god already, or was he merely prepared to make way when the time was right? Were the dreams and visions he talked of merely a means of preparation, so that he would be ready?

And why Bligh? He did not feel special. He did not want to feel special. He was not ready for any of this.

He was unable to think about it for long. He found the entire concept simply too far outside his normal view of the world: he could never bring himself to believe in Lords Elemental and possessing spirits. Years before, he had lost the ability to believe in the single God of the Brotherhood, and now Sadiq expected him not only to believe in six, but to play host to one of them ...

He tried to sleep for a time, but the irregular stopping and starting of the train and the awkwardness of his position, wedged against a wall at the end of the carriage, prevented him. Occasionally, he would hear sounds of the struggle, a lone gunshot or the distant rumble of artillery.

Later, he stood at the door of the carriage, staring out into the night. The moon was nearly full and Bligh could see some distance from the track, to the dark skeletons of trees and the sullen shapes of abandoned houses.

Now, more buildings began to rise up from the shadows, some of them lit by candles and lanterns from within. The train's progress was interminably slow, but still the length of the journey began to illustrate for Bligh the very scale of the war, the vast spaces that were being fought over, and now he began to understand how so many could have died in less than four years.

Edging along at a little more than walking pace through a ghostly, wrecked cityscape, the train eventually passed a rough stone platform where soldiers stood guard and a brazier burnt, despite the mildness of the night.

A sign loomed up from the shadows and in the low light Bligh could read the city's name: Caspe.

A sick thrill of excitement travelled through his body. At the same time, he felt a sense of ominous tension. It was a little more than a year since the last big push near Caspe, when more than half a million men had perished, all to move the Line a few hundred yards deeper into Government territory.

He looked around, at his sleeping, praying, card-playing colleagues, and he felt a desperate sense of weight across his shoulders. Down the carriage, he saw Bernie Rayner with his face pressed against a window. Rayner had fought here before. Bligh wondered what was passing through his mind.

They disembarked at a small town called Huesja. In this place there was not a single building with more than three walls standing, save for the little huts of corrugated tin and sandbags put up by the militias to serve as stores and a simple command post.

Domenech was already there when the Company arrived, but he was far too busy mixing with the Generals to bother Bligh or Wink. The Company camped down in the rubble until orders eventually came for them to march out.

It was still light as they approached the battleground.

From a slight rise, Bligh could look out over the fields. The ground appeared level from this distance and there was not a single tree or building in view. It looked like some deserted quagmire from one of the Spiritualist paintings of the last century. A swamp which would draw the innocent down into the depths of hell and eternal damnation. But this was no deserted wasteland, Bligh knew. There was not a sign of life, yet hidden in the trenches, the foxholes and the dug-outs, there was a cancerous mass of humanity, just waiting for the order to move.

They stopped a short way down the slope, to let a Company of cavalry pass. Their horses were protected by chain-link armour with steel plates over the

head and eyes. Over it all, they wore fine linen mandilions with tassels and ribbons, all in the red and gold colours of the Unification Party of the People. It was a scene from another age, Bligh thought. These animals and their riders would not last a minute when shrapnel and bullets filled the air. He looked away.

When darkness fell, they marched two abreast, stumbling over the mud and debris and always keeping in sight of the man ahead. It had been a dry day but, almost inevitably, the Spring rains started as they reached the battlefield proper and progress became painfully slow.

Eventually, they came to a halt and word was passed back from Domenech that they were to take shelter until dawn. Bligh settled, as best he could, in a crowded trench, which had been made by linking shell-hole to shell-hole.

During the remaining hours of darkness, Bernie Rayner worked his way round the Section, spreading words of encouragement and reassurance, ensuring that everyone knew that ten minutes into the dawn barrage they were to leave shelter and advance as a second thrust behind the troops of the forward trenches.

"How could we not be knowing that?" snapped Sandy Brigg, when Rayner reminded him of their orders. "It is not the thing you forget, Friend. Not the thing you forget."

Back in Huesja, each man had been issued with 150 rounds of good ammunition and a strap of five hand grenades to sling across the shoulder. Bligh had refused a new rifle; he felt that he knew the foibles of his own, he knew when it was too hot and when it would jam and he was able to load it by feel and memory. Now was not the time for change.

He wiped that old rifle obsessively, terrified that in the rain and the mud he might lose his grip on it and find himself alone and unarmed in the middle of the fighting. Brigg did the same with a light machine gun he had acquired: unlike the heavy trench guns Bligh had seen before, this gun was compact enough to fire from the shoulder, although only for a man of Brigg's strength and experience.

In the distance, the sky became edged with pink and the clouds overhead took on a lighter shade of grey. There was no sign of the rain abating and already the trench was half filled with stinking brown water.

They waited and waited. "It must be soon!" cursed Oori Champion, usually the last man to let his frustration show. But the most propitious timing had been set by UPP seers and so daylight was almost full before, finally, the shelling began.

As if they had been waiting all along for the militia guns to open negotiations, the Army artillery answered immediately and Bligh hugged the trench wall as shells began to slam into the ground all around and burst in the air overhead.

Within seconds Sandy Brigg had caught some shrapnel which opened up his scalp so that his skull showed through. He wanted to carry on, but he couldn't see a thing through the blood and Cabo Dona-Santen managed to persuade him to lie low in the trench until he could be evacuated. Oori Champion crawled over to take Brigg's machine gun and tried, helplessly to follow his colleague's confused instructions. Eventually, Champion dumped it in the mud in favour of his rifle, all the time assuring Brigg that he understood how to use his new weapon.

Bligh checked his watch, sure that the barrage had lasted more than ten minutes.

"Okay," said Rayner and Dona-Santen together. "Time to move," Rayner finished.

Bligh struggled up through the mud of the trench and crouched in the open. His senses were being bombarded from every possible perspective: the light of artillery flashes, the numbing noise of the barrage, the smell of burnt powder and faeces and mud. He looked down and there was a hand protruding from the ground, its skin green and puckered.

"Come on! Come on! Come on!" urged Dona-Santen, scurrying about the Section, slapping men on the back and waving his hands.

Bligh began to move, dragging his feet through mud that tried to suck him down with each step. He covered the thirty yards to the forward trench, but he did not know how long it took. In the distance, he could see the first wave of men advancing. He had no idea if they were meant to be that far ahead or not.

Just before the trench, he came across the first of today's corpses: a body torn almost in two; another with its stomach and chest blown away, the young man's face staring at the sky in apparent confusion. In Pigeon Ravine death was clean, the result of a single, stray bullet. Here it was a fierce, distorting end.

Duckboards had been placed as bridges over the trench and Bligh staggered across, convinced that he would lose his balance and plunge headlong into the yellow water on either side.

He made it, and paused for breath behind the bloated hulk of a dead mule. Just then he heard a sudden whistle and a shell thudded into the ground only feet away. He waited for the explosion, but none came. He moved on, leaping from shell-hole to shell-hole, using the muddy craters for cover from the flying shrapnel.

After a short time, he came across Bernie Rayner huddled in a fresh crater, his face whiter than a sheet of his writing paper. Rayner looked up and recognition passed slowly across his features.

"Have you been hit?" said Bligh, urgently.

Rayner opened his mouth, then swallowed, and started again. "I've got the shakes, lovey," he said, and managed a brief smile. "I'll be all right." Bligh scrambled out of the shell-hole and hurried forward. He never saw Rayner again.

His progress grew more and more slow. Hauling his boots through the sucking mud, scrambling over the fallen, the moaning wounded and the dead. He stopped about fifty yards short of the enemy trenches, trying to ignore the bodies all around. He wondered why the barrage was still going on. If they advanced any further they would be blown away by their own shells.

Ahead there was the burnt-out skeleton of a motor wagon, rising from the mud. He cowered in its lee with two other soldiers and another tangled corpse for company. They waited for several minutes, debating what they should do, and then Bligh saw a section of the enemy trench being stormed by the militia and he leapt from cover and made a ten yard dash for the security of a deep crater.

Peering up from the lip of his shelter, Bligh spotted Merc Domenech a short distance away. He was standing upright in the open, his eyes bulging, and he was waving a sword in the air. All around him there was a hail of bullets and shrapnel, with shells droning and crashing overhead, but he simply stood there, disregarding all precaution. He was shouting, and somehow his words carried through the din. "Come on!" he yelled. "Advance! Advance!"

Domenech took a couple of paces and then reached down into the mud. He dragged a man up by the scruff of his jacket and hit him with the side of his sword. "Advance!" he screamed.

Bligh was incensed. He clambered out of his shell-hole and stood defiantly upright like Merc Domenech. All around, bullets whistled and shrapnel sang. He took a step and then another. Somewhere nearby, a portable radio crackled music incongruously from its resting place in the mud.

Domenech glanced across triumphantly and Bligh felt like a hooked fish. He felt something click inside his head and suddenly he felt invincible, as if nothing would dare strike him down. Domenech turned and charged through the mud, directly at the Army defences.

Bligh waved his gun in the air and gave a mighty bellow and then began to follow.

The next thing he knew was opening his eyes and seeing the world through a hazy red blur. He felt a terrible, dull ache in his left leg and when he reached down he felt the damp heat of his own torn flesh. He had fallen into the shelter of another shell-hole and he realised that his face was half-submerged in the slowly rising water. With an awkward wriggle, he dragged his head clear. He wondered how many men would die out here, not from the battle but by drowning as the shell-holes filled up around them. He did not know how long he had been unconscious, only that the deafening boom of the fighting had moved on into the distance and that rising above it were the anguished wails, the sobbing, the dull moans, of the wounded and the dying. And somewhere, amidst it all, the radio played faintly on.

5

'Disbelief requires a faith at least as great as simple belief.'

- The Book of the World, ch.39, v.24.

The ensuing days were, for Bligh, a disjointed series of episodes. Some of these were dreams, he felt sure.

He did not believe, for instance, that his mother had come all this way to see him, after fourteen years in which she had not shown the slightest interest. But she was there, by his bed, nonetheless. Her eyes were sad and creased, the make-up giving way like a room where new wallpaper has been hung over the old, damaged hangings of years gone by. "My son," she kept saying. Her mouth barely moved when she spoke: she never did more than was necessary. "They've shot my son." Then he would try to speak and she would turn to a doctor or one of the Brothers and say, "No, I'm sorry, Benjahmine. This is wrong. This isn't my son, after all." The Brother would apologise profusely, his mother would stand, lean over, kiss Bligh's brow and then walk away.

The stretcher bearer, he thought, was probably the real thing. He did not know

how long he had spent, lying in his shell-hole in the rain and the mud with the radio hissing in the distance. But when he heard the slosh-slosh-slosh of footsteps passing just beyond the lip of his near horizon, he called out, "Hoy! Please! I'm wounded!"

A head appeared, then shoulders and the upper half of a body. It was a man with a desperately infectious grin and one arm in a dirty grey sling. "Listen," he said softly. "You're not alone."

Bligh's calls had stirred up fresh cries and shouts from nearby. A lot of the anguished noises had quietened down, in the hours - days? - since the battle. Men grew tired, their throats gave out, they died. Now, the sound of human voices had reminded the survivors of the possibility that they might, after all, live.

"It won't be long, now," said his discoverer, over the cries. Bligh found himself grinning manically in return as the man turned and sloshed away.

Minutes later, he heard voices, and then there were men in the mud by his side, examining his injuries then hauling him up into the open and onto a canvas stretcher. He looked up, at one point, and the bearer he could see was the same man who had found him. Now, his arm was free of its sling and he was humming a religious tune as he marched and slipped over the mud.

He left the battlefield propped up in the back of a motor wagon, along with four other casualties of the fighting. He looked around and each of the men was plastered in mud, their eyes and teeth flashing white. All had been struck down by shrapnel or a bullet. Either those who had been more seriously hit had already died as they waited to be rescued, or the medics were only recovering those with a chance of surviving the journey out.

Bligh closed his eyes and wished he had the energy, or the ability, to cry. It never occurred to him to ask the outcome of the battle, or of the war itself. Presumably at least the battle had been won, or he would be in a loyalist ambulance and the prospects of skilled medical treatment would be far better.

A hospital camp had been established in the ruins of Huesja. There were broken walls all around, canvas for a roof, rats and cockroaches for company. There were no doctors or healers, just a few soldiers who had taught themselves to tie bandages and prise the more obvious shrapnel from wounds. The patients were dumped with blankets onto the bare ground and jugs of foul wine were brought to those capable of drinking. There was never a time when the air was not torn by the cries and moans of Bligh's fellows.

A few hours after his arrival, Bligh's wound was examined by one of the soldiers in charge of the medical post. The man was short, with spiky, mud-brown hair and crooked buck teeth. Bligh swore it was the same man who had found him and who had carried him out to the ambulance. Everyone seemed so alike out here. "Three inches higher and I'd be calling you Miss," said the soldier cheerfully, as he poked a dirty bayonet at Bligh's wound.

Bligh refused to yell out, despite the bolts of pain which the inexperienced examination was causing.

"You should have bled to death by now, too," continued the man, as if he was merely commenting on the weather. "You know what we're going to prescribe now?"

"Doc's Answer," grated Bligh, and the man nodded delightedly. That was what they called morphine: the doctor's answer to almost every ailment.

"You're after my job," he squealed. "Hey, Roddy! This one's after my bloody job!" He had a laugh like the yelp of a green woodpecker. "Yek! Yek! Yek!" he said. "You're after my job ... "

That night, it could just have been the morphine. At one point Bligh woke, feeling as if there was a blanket weighing down on his face. It was dark, and for a moment, he thought it was true. Then he turned his head and realised that he could actually see quite well in the murk.

He turned back the other way and there he saw a huge grey rat with its haunches spread over the face of his neighbour. Its snout was buried in the bloody cavity where the man's shoulder had been. He watched, fascinated, not really aware that anything should be wrong in this. Eventually, the rat straightened its tail and a trickle of urine ran down across the man's cheek and into his ear. "Doc's Answer," said Bligh, and the rat turned to look at him, grinning like the stretcher bearer who looked like everyone else around here, or so it seemed.

The next time he woke, it was daylight and either he was in a different place or his neighbour had been replaced by a black man from the Saraja.

The train journey happened, he was sure of that. One time he had been asleep, and he woke to find himself riding on a horse-drawn cart through the flattened skeleton of Huesja. The next time he was conscious he was on a train. There could not be a surer sign that the war was dying out than that the train did not keep stopping in the middle of the countryside for no apparent reason. Bligh was propped roughly across a bench with his head against a window.

They were not all injured men on this train. Sitting opposite him, for much of the time, were three slightly drunk UPP militia men.

"What happened?" Bligh asked them, at one point. Outside, he remembered, was an orchard covered in pastel blossom, and a church with its bell-tower smashed to a heap of rubble.

They broke their conversation and one of them leaned towards Bligh and spoke in clear, spaced words. "You are on a train, Friend. It is taking you to a place to get better." Then, to his friends, the man said, "He didn't understand a word. He's foreign."

"And delirious," said another.

"Or drugged," said the third.

Bligh realised he had spoken in Wederian. Or maybe Marish or Feorean or ancient biblical Edrew ... he was not entirely sure. "Sorry," he said in Traian. "I know about the train. What of the war?"

"Ah," said the first man. "You speak our language." He was still speaking as if to an infant, or an imbecile, but at least he was speaking. "The war is history, it is in the past." Suddenly there was an edge to his voice. "Now we are a unified nation, again."

Bligh noticed that, although the men wore the arm badges of the UPP, beneath their jackets each still wore a Land Party neck scarf. "Please," he said. "I'm LA. I don't know what ... "

"We've won the coast to Haen," said another of the three, sounding weary and hopeless. "We've taken the Great Plain to Figuaras and Mountsenys. And now,

instead of the final push to Harrahket, where we could capture Minna and her Generals, we hesitate and march instead upon ourselves. The UPP took the Citadel of Anasty as a seat for the new Government, but now a whole Division has turned back from the plains and is heading there as we speak."

"They're not alone," said someone else. "They're drawing support from the people as they march. Now they are women and the old, as well as war heroes and the wounded."

Bligh wondered how long it had been since he had fallen on the fields of Huesja. On reflection, he realised that it need only have been a few days for all this to happen. "When history moves," he remembered one of the Brothers saying, "it moves like a panther, or an earthquake. And in between we live as statues."

Just then, a group of UPP soldiers wearing POLICE badges on their arms threaded their way along the carriage and the three men changed the subject to the possible resumption of the football season, broken four years ago by the revolution.

"How many did we lose?" asked Bligh, when they could speak again.

"It's far too soon to know. And will the UPP release figures when they do know?" He snorted. "Only those that suit their purpose. The Land Party says we lost fifty thousand on the coast and another seventy thousand on the Great Plain."

Bligh felt sick - these figures must apply to the LP alone, he realised.

"But we were put into the hardest fights," continued the soldier, leaning forward. "Along with the Syndicates and the Cooperatives. The UPP gave all the orders and saved their own ... " He hesitated now, as one of his friends looked across at him and shook his head. "All I am saying is what I have heard ... I don't know. In the last two weeks Trace has lost maybe a million of its best, along with the same from the Army. And what have we gained?"

Now, his friend put a hand on the man's chest and forced him back into his seat. "We are tired," he said to Bligh. "Please: do not question us."

Bligh suddenly felt as if they suspected him of spying. He tried to protest, but they merely looked the other way.

The train stopped in the early evening in the town of Passerat. The air was still and warm and, as he was lifted roughly down onto the platform, Bligh realised that it was not raining. It felt wrong to be dry and relatively clean.

He was still unable to walk and, for a desperate time as he waited on that platform with the other war cripples, he wondered if he would ever be able to do so again. His left leg felt completely lifeless - no feeling when he prodded it, no muscle that he could persuade to respond to his commands. His right leg would move, but the lack of sensation made him dizzy whenever he tried. His whole lower body was an enormous dull ache, but the feeling had no focus; the Doc's Answer was clearly at work on him still.

Passerat had been held by the Government until a few months ago. The two old men who brought a long motor ambulance for the injured complained bitterly about the shortages that had been imposed since the revolutionaries had come. Bligh was powerless to do anything when one of them spotted his watch and without a word undid its catch and slipped it into his own trouser pocket.

"That's mine," said Bligh weakly.

"Oh yes?" said the man. His eyes refused to look in the same direction and suddenly Bligh realised that one of them was made of glass, like a large white marble with a blue iris but no black dot for the pupil. Bligh stared into his one good eye and the man looked away and spat into the gutter. "You've got to pay your dues," he said, and slammed the doors.

The ambulance shrieked into life and jolted them over the hilly, cobbled roads of Passerat to the hospital. Then the doors were opening again and hands grabbed Bligh roughly and heaved him down and into a wheeled chair and he realised that somewhere he had lost another few minutes, another period of his life that resisted the probings of his memory.

He could have been in that hospital for no more than four days, but he had no way of tracking the time with any certainty. At first, he was put on a mattress in a dark corridor. All he saw were skirting boards, a worn carpet, boots flying by within inches of his face.

At some point a nurse came to inspect his dressing, and a little later there was an old man who squinted at him and tutted a lot, before finally addressing him. "You are a believer, of course?" he said.

Bligh stared up at him. He could see himself reflected side by side in the man's tiny spectacles. "No," he grunted.

"Oh, surely you are." He was a healer, Bligh realised. He would mend Bligh's leg by the power of their shared faith, if Bligh would let him. "You must believe in something, my son. Every individual needs belief."

"I believe in nothing," said Bligh, turning to stare at the wall.

"Ah, but you fear a great deal - am I right?" He paused, but Bligh chose not to respond. "Your leg will recover. I can sense that it is healing rapidly already." The healer did not sound put off by Bligh's manner. "Will you tell one of the helpers a bit about yourself, so we can contact your family, I wonder?"

"There's nobody." It hurt Bligh to say that, but he could think of no one who might care enough that he was here, in this pathetic state.

"If you would just open yourself to me, my son. Tell me what you are feeling. What the pain is doing to you. Give me your trust, my son, if there can be no faith." All the time, he was manipulating Bligh's legs, raising them and twisting them, laying his hands over the dressing which had become matted with new blood since it was last changed. "If you won't cooperate, then it's going to take a whole lot longer." His tone had barely changed, but now Bligh could see him looking along the corridor, thinking already of his next patient. "I'll give you some more of this," said the healer, finally. "Surely even you must believe in the power of the needle ... "

Some time later, there were birds calling from nearby and he could sense the coolness of foliage all around. He opened his eyes and there was blue sky overhead, criss-crossed with wooden slats and white smears, which he realised were bird droppings on a sloping glass roof. Vines twined over the framework of this roof, outside and in, and all about there were potted lemon trees strung with cages of exotic, piping birds.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows and paused as the dizzy swirl of his head

settled itself. He was clear of the floor now, raised on a bed which was in some kind of conservatory. Around him were other beds, packed so close they were almost touching. His neighbour, on this side, was a man with no legs and a surgical collar which held his head in position, pointing straight upwards.

"Can you see the cats?" asked Bligh, for he remembered clearly now that there were cats up there. Big cats, with dusky coats and black folds around the mouth. Cats that could kill you with the single swipe of a paw.

"They eat birds," squeaked his legless neighbour. "The cats. That's why they're in cages. The birds."

"No," said Bligh. "They're in the hills. But you can still see them, if you try." He pushed himself up to a sitting position and now he realised that both legs had responded to his commands. There was little pain now, but he thought that might be something to do with the light, swirling feeling that ran around his body. "Do you know the Fireman?" he added as an afterthought. "He has legs, you'll understand. But only half a face."

"I was a fireman," came the reply, eventually. "I kept the boiler fires in the Duke of Maritz stoked. I was never a cat, though. Not even a cat you can't see."

Bligh shook his head. He turned to the man standing at the foot of his bed with one of the nuns who acted as nursing helpers. "Mad," he mouthed at them, and then nodded towards his neighbour.

The man, who turned out to be a doctor - a medical one this time, not a faith healer - turned to the helper and said, "He's still in shock. Is he sleeping at all? What medication is he on?"

Bligh felt a panicky sensation rising through his body. "No," he said. "I'm fine. It's the ... the medication. It's messing my head. Can't think. Can't understand. Keep dreaming. Ask the Fireman, go on."

"It's shock," repeated the doctor to his helper. "The painkillers wouldn't do that to him. He might need restraint."

"No!" cried Bligh, but he no longer understood what it was that he was denying.

The ability to walk returned with surprising speed.

With the beds so close together, he soon learnt that he could support himself with bed-ends on either side and drag his lame leg along as he went.

One time, he found the old healer sitting with his knees tucked up to his chin in the hospital garden. "You're walking well now," he greeted Bligh cheerily.

"I'm not on morphine any more," Bligh said. "I couldn't think straight when I was on that stuff."

"You never were," said the healer, pulling himself to his feet and studying Bligh's progress critically. "You only ever had aspirin here, my son."

"But ... " Bligh was confused again. "The dreams. I was seeing things even awake."

"Hallucinations, my son. You were traumatised by what you saw, and by the indignities suffered by your poor body. The spiritual wound is often greater

than the physical. That is why my colleagues and I have established the profession of healing. Tell me, are you still seeing these stone cats and fire people? Does your mother visit you in your dreams?"

Bligh felt naked before this seeing old man. "I see nothing," he said, trying to close up again. He felt more like himself, in defence.

The healer smiled. "You'll be leaving, I presume?"

Bligh nodded, although he had not given the matter a thought until now.

"You have a lot ahead of you, I think. No! Don't look so horrified: I am a healer, not a seer or an astrologer. I cannot tell you your future, or at least, no more than any other with average talents could. You are a troubled young man, anybody can see that much. Please - " he stepped forward and kissed Bligh on the cheek in the Feorean manner " - let us part on good terms. I am a happy man to have learnt that you have a faith of sorts - no one could recover so quickly without a source of spiritual sustenance. Let us leave it at that."

Bligh watched the old man turn and head back into the hospital. He felt numb. He did not know what he should be thinking.

He left later the same day.

He wandered, without a plan, down the hilly street that led from the hospital. He had never looked up to the horizon before, but now he did and he could see the cool blue of the Cyanic Sea a few miles away in the distance. For a moment, he imagined that he could taste the salt on the breeze, but it was his mind playing tricks again, calling up memories of his first visits to the coast after he had left the Jahvean school. It had been a novelty then, such a vast expanse of greyish blue. He had stripped off his clothes and waded out, marvelling at the steady slope of the sand beneath his feet, discovering for the first time the awesome power of the waves. Somehow, the slope must continue downwards like this, he had realised, and he could almost understand the scale implied by depths of half a mile, a mile, or more, of the great ocean trenches. He had reached little more than waist deep when the sea's power finally grew too great and he was knocked sideways and had to struggle to master his body's buoyancy and paddle back to the shore.

Passerat was different to the small towns of the north of Trace, or the inland ruins like Comeras. The houses were low and moulded to the contours of the land. From one side a house might be three storeys high, from farther up the hill it would be only one. Each had its own garden, with vines and avocados and small citrus groves. Passerat was a sprawling settlement and Bligh had to stop frequently to rest his weakened body. He wondered where the town hid its refugees and its poor, and he realised that it would be a long time before the revolution could ever, really, be won in places such as this.

He thought he might find somewhere to stay for the night, and maybe the next day he would be in a better position to think about his future. He sat on a wall by a deep railway cutting and searched through his pockets. His money had gone, along with his Landworkers' Alliance papers, his passport, the crumpled photograph he always carried of his mother as a gay young thing with feathers in her hair and breasts in danger of spilling out of the flimsy construction of her evening dress. He had often wondered why she should choose such a picture to give to her son to remember her by. It must have said something about how she saw herself, or how she wanted to see herself, but what it was he did not know.

He had nothing.

He did not feel that he could move any farther. Suddenly he felt completely blank, as if he had been stripped of everything that had been him. His mind would not stay still and he could no longer recall that photograph, or the details of his papers. He felt as if his past had been wiped away by the simple actions of whoever had robbed him as he lay ill in hospital.

He looked around but took nothing in. He was an empty vessel, a blank template waiting to be completed. He was no longer ... no longer ... He gave up. He could no longer recall even his name.

He stood and wandered off along the street. He came across a small passenger platform by the railway, with stone troughs which had once been planted with travellers' herbs, cast iron benches overgrown with bindweed, a rusting drinking fountain which he soon found was out of order. The station house was one of the few ruined buildings he had seen in Passerat; two walls stood, almost undamaged, but the other two had been reduced to rubble. He climbed in over the debris. It would provide shelter of a fashion, he thought. He was too tired to look further.

6

'It's written in the tables, so it has to be true.'

- Black Paul.

It was a small train, with only three passenger carriages and a tail wagon loaded five high with barrels. He did not know where it was going.

He sat on a wooden bench and scratched a goat's neck as it nuzzled his jacket and trousers in search of food. "There's none," he kept saying, but the beast took no notice.

His leg was aching and his empty stomach grumbled. He rubbed at his chin, realising that he had not shaved since before the battle of the Huesjan Plain.

The elderly woman, whose goat it was, kept giving him strange looks. It made him feel awkward. He did not want to be marked out by anybody; he was not special - he was no different to any other lame, amnesiac, former soldier with voices in his head.

A teenaged girl seated by the woman ignored him studiously. They must be grandmother and granddaughter, he thought. The girl was dressed poorly, but she had an arrogant beauty: a straight nose, pencil-line thin mouth and long-lashed dark eyes which flashed out from beneath a fringe of auburn hair. Eventually, she turned her fierce gaze on Bligh and he saw that the hollow of one eye was blackened. The grandmother shared the nose, the mouth and - from the whiskers of her upper lip - had once shared the hair colouring, but her eyes were grey and her features loose, as if the years had pared away the spirit the young girl still showed.

He realised he was still looking at the girl and she opened her mouth. The lips parted, her teeth flashed ... it seemed an age before she finally spoke. Bligh expected a scolding for his unselfconscious stare, but all she said was, "Would you like a biscuit for Rorapel?"

He looked out of the window and only his empty stomach replied. There was something in her voice that angered him, a deference which may simply have been pity.

They stopped at several tiny platforms, in villages and derelict towns or in the middle of nowhere. Always there were people waiting to replace those who left the train. The two with the goat called Rorapel were soon replaced by a nurse in charge of four boisterous children and, later, by an old man and his bicycle, none of whom would meet Bligh's challenging stare.

He felt stigmatised. He felt that at every moment there were eyes bearing down on him yet, whenever he looked, people were glancing out of the window, or down at a news-sheet, or were dozing to the gentle rhythm of the train.

At one small station, in a village that seemed to consist of a single long street running parallel to the railway, a group of four People's Policemen mounted the train.

Suddenly Bligh felt scared. He remembered that he had no money, no papers. No ticket. He could not remember getting on to the train, or why he had done so.

The policemen were at the far end of his carriage, arguing with a woman and her basket of hens.

Bligh stood and began to edge his way through the throng of passengers standing in the aisle between the benches. "Excuse me, excuse me," he muttered, as people leaned away, or shuffled aside. By the time he reached the end of the carriage, his left leg was a single, dull ache, thudding to the rhythm of his heart and the heaving of his chest.

When he had recovered his breath a little, he reached down for the handle of the carriage door, irrationally sure that there would be somewhere to conceal himself in the next carriage.

The door would not open.

He stared at the handle, tried it with his other hand. He tried to push, tried to pull, tried to edge it somehow sideways. Then he looked out of the tiny, high window of the door and he saw a wall of wooden barrels, stamped with the words ANASTY: WILLARD and a string of numbers and letters that must have been some kind of excise code or identification mark.

He remembered, now, that he was in the last carriage.

He waited by the door as the People's Policemen worked methodically towards him and the train rumbled on. They seemed to be taking forever, as if taunting their quarry.

Bligh tried to look calm when they reached him, although he could no longer recall why he should be worried.

"What is your destination?" said a man, almost as tall as Bligh, although in his uniform he looked far bigger.

Bligh shrugged, dumbly, and pointed to his leg. He had forgotten that he was wearing ordinary corduroy trousers and so his wound now only revealed itself in his walk.

"Where did you get on?" said the man, his tone hardening.

In a desperate flash of cunning, Bligh answered in Wederian. "I am sorry," he said. "I am a foreigner."

He felt, for a moment, insanely proud of himself, until another policeman joined the interrogation and repeated the questions in fluent Wederian. "And can we see your ticket and papers?" he added, finally reminding Bligh why he had been worried in the first place.

"I fought in the war!" he had cried from the platform. The policemen had simply stared down at him from the train as it pulled away.

"I was hit at Huesja!" But by then they were out of earshot and he had only an audience of embarrassed passengers who had left the train at this station voluntarily.

Now, he limped along a dusty street. They had literally thrown him from the train, despite his protestations, and his whole body had been jarred. It seemed that he was in a large town. Modern terraces of housing, with crudely plastered walls and visible steel skeletons lined either side of the road, taking over from the older shops and the cattle market which had been clustered close to the station.

Occasionally, a motor wagon would thunder past him, but more often there would be bicycles and horse carts, loaded with goods, or rattling along unburdened.

One time, he rested outside a wrecked school building which was vaguely familiar. He peered through the flowers and weeds to a school yard with a rusty water pump at one end. The windows had been boarded over, but when the boards had been damaged the building had been left for the elements to enter.

He shook his head and gave up. He no longer understood the workings of his own mind. His memories were returning in an unfocused jumble, as if they were memories of what he had been told instead of the true record of his experience. He did not know where his own mind ended and the rest of the world flooded in: the boundary was vague, indefinable.

He walked on, and eventually tram-lines appeared in the road. Mindful of his experience on the train, he did not try to ride any of the trams, although they often stopped tantalisingly close and he would have welcomed the chance to rest.

He wanted to stop and give up, but that was countered by a deepset desire, a need to keep moving. That was his own, he thought, it was a feeling he recognised as a genuine part of himself.

He first heard the crowd as a distant rumble which could have been waves on a beach, except the Cyanic Sea never produced big enough waves. Drawing closer, he recognised it as the sound of conversation, laughter, an occasional chanting and singing of religious songs.

He seemed to be walking parallel to the sound and so, when he came to an alleyway between two shops, he went down it. The shade was welcome. He had not realised what a hot, dry day it was. He felt that there must be a lot that he had not noticed. In a moment of clarity, he realised that he must still be suffering what the healer had called the 'spiritual wound' of the war. It was affecting his head in a way which was dizzying, unnerving.

People were standing on the pavement at the mouth of the alleyway, but they were short enough for Bligh to see over their heads. In the street, there was

a mass of people. There were old men and women and children, but the core of the procession consisted of soldiers. They were marching at a good pace, and Bligh wondered if it was some kind of victory parade. But when he looked at their faces he realised that it was not. They were brash and boisterous, but behind the facade these people looked grimly determined. They carried banners with words Bligh could not read and chanted slogans that his muddled mind could not make out. He saw that they wore the arm badges and neck scarves of the Unification Party of the People, and he remembered that he had fought with the UPP, as well as with the Landworkers' Alliance.

Some of the onlookers cheered the march as it passed, but others yelled angry words and shook fists in the air. Bligh did not understand. Was this not the revolution?

He pushed past the people blocking his way and for a moment he was isolated, standing uncertainly in the empty space between the spectators and the procession. Suddenly it seemed that all the angry shouting and grim looks of defiance were turned on him alone and he wanted to be anywhere but where he now stood.

He took a step, dragging his lame leg behind him. Another step, and he was anonymous within the crowd of marchers, straining to keep pace, fearful of being left behind, in the open again.

As his body struggled to find the rhythm of the march, he realised that there was something happening, back along the street. He looked and he saw first one or two, and then larger groups leaving the pavement and joining the march, just as he had done. When the procession reached a kink in the street, and Bligh looked back for the last time, he saw that there were now only a few standing on the pavement and shouting, and the procession was getting confused as so many joined its number.

He first spotted Domenech shortly after he had realised that the crowd was marching through the old quarter of Anasty. The silhouette on the sky-line - rows of stone archways, one on top of the other, the top row broken and uneven - had been nagging away at him for some time when suddenly he realised that it was the Arena and so this must be the capital of Trace. He must have been ejected from the train at one of the many suburban stations he had noticed on his first visit to Anasty. Domenech was in a small group at the head of the march, glimpsed occasionally in the distance.

The column came to a huge square, with statues and empty fountains, along with bomb craters and the black blots left by huge fires. All the buildings, as they had passed through this part of the city, showed signs of the fighting: bullet scars or holes in the masonry or entire buildings collapsed into rubble. The crowd, swelling out behind Domenech's party, filled the square with ease.

They stood and sat, exhausted from the walking. A trace of uncertainty seemed to have overtaken the crowd: the march was over, what next? Before them there was a building with a wide sweep of stone steps leading up to stocky columns bearing heavy stone lintels. Its windows were tall and narrow, like giant archers' loopholes from a medieval castle, and the building spread out along one entire side of the square.

"Storm the Citadel!" someone nearby began to chant, but no one took up the call.

It was then that a small knot of men mounted the steps and, gratefully, the crowd rose up and closed in on them, anticipating something Bligh could not

imagine. As he looked, he distinguished the figure of Merc Domenech on the steps, and by his side a dark-skinned man, who he was sure he knew. As the crowd pressed forward, Bligh spotted a youth, prancing about at the fringe of the group and the name Gaspar Sech came to his mind. And there was another next to the man he now remembered was called Sadiq, a man he had seen in Comeras, who Sadiq had called something like All Divine.

He felt his mind twisting, as memories rushed out to grab him and demand his attention. He knew these people, yet still he did not know what they were doing. He felt his vision beginning to darken and he felt dizzy.

The next time he was aware of what was happening, he was heaving himself through the crowd and people were turning and looking at him, then drawing away in deference. He was not in control, he knew that much. His body was working, his mouth spewing words that were not his own, but all the time he was detached, seeing everything from a distance.

He sensed the sheer feeling of power, as people fell away before him and for an instant he enjoyed that experience. Then he saw the look in their eyes and he felt the weight of their demands upon him. He sensed the overbearing mass of their need, their longing for him.

He stopped, and immediately all those faces turned away and the crowd pressed crushingly around him once again.

He was close to the men on the steps now, he realised, and just then, Domenech seemed to sense that something had stirred, momentarily, in the crowd, for his gaze swept out across them. Bligh ducked down, and finally released his breath when Domenech's eyes had danced past his own without a sign of recognition.

He did not know what he had expected, or why he hid. He felt muddled again, confused.

And then, Merc Domenech took a megaphone from one of his attendants and began to speak. "Friends," he said, the word that had rallied a revolution. He hesitated, and Bligh thought that he was lost, struck dumb before such a vast crowd. But just as it seemed he had waited too long, he repeated that word - "Friends," - and a sense of relief and jubilation passed visibly across the crowd. "We have come a long way. We have emerged from the darkest days of the rule of King Elleo and his Council of Fear. We have emerged from the weakness of Queen Minna and all those who took advantage of her favour. We have risen through the fearsome carnage of four years of fighting. Our walk of the last six days is little in comparison with the progress of the people, the freeing of our nation. But Friends - " he raised his hands and turned his head slowly to survey the crowd before him " - the road to true emancipation still lies ahead of us.

"It has been said, in recent months, that this was the Final Battle, the mayhem from which the Lords will arise. It is not, Friends. It is not. The Six will not truly walk among us until the revolution has fully triumphed!

"We beat them in the streets of our holy capital. We beat them at Huesja, Comeras, Enas and Seleterra. We drove them back from the Great Plain until they were begging for our mercy. And then, what did we do? One more push and we would have had Minna and her Generals in our grasp, but instead we stopped. And why did we stop? I'll tell you, Friends. I'll tell you: it was because those who finally supplied us with the arms we had ordered two years ago were frightened. They did not want us to win outright - it might have inspired their own underclass. So they exerted their influence. Now, those who led us to the brink of victory are having talks with Minna and her Generals. Now,

they make concessions to the defeated, on our behalf. Friends!" His voice boomed around the square, so that Bligh thought it possible that he no longer needed the megaphone. Domenech was leaning forward, as if into a wind, and his chin was thrust out arrogantly. He was challenging the crowd, daring them. Bligh found his intensity disturbing. "Friends! We fought the war ... we won the war - " now he punctuated each phrase with a stab of his right fist, and the crowd responded in frightening unison " - and now we must win this bloody stalemate!"

The square erupted in a mass of jumping, chanting humanity. Fists jabbed the air, and firecrackers crackled over the animal roar.

Bligh stood firm, as men and women to either side, in front of him, behind him, danced and shook and screamed in his ears. He folded his arms across his chest, and somehow he did not move. Over the gyrating arms and heads in front of him, he saw Sadiq Phelim and Alderas Aldivine hugging Domenech while the fool, Gaspar Sech, raised his hands to the crowd as if they were acclaiming him alone.

A delegation was coming down the steps from the Citadel's entrance. Ten soldiers in new uniforms with the insignia of the Unification Party of the People, followed by an older man in a more ornate version of the same uniform.

Now, Bligh recalled how officers and men had been impossible to distinguish when he had joined the Landworkers' Alliance militia.

Words were exchanged, on the steps of the Citadel. Domenech looked excited, invigorated; the old officer looked tired and pressurised. They started to head up the steps together, and then Domenech hesitated and said something to Sadiq.

Seconds later Sadiq brought him the megaphone and Domenech raised his hands to the crowd and spoke again. "Friends!" he boomed. "I am going to negotiate with our members of the Transitional Government. I - " he punched the air again with his free hand " - am ... going ... in - ... side!"

The crowd erupted, on cue again, and still Bligh stood firm, arms folded. He felt something beating inside his head. Part of it was fear - he knew that and he was willing to recognise it. Part of it was the personal resentment he had felt towards Domenech before - the man's harsh cynicism, the way he could manipulate his own copious charisma, the way he had singled Bligh out during the war. But there was something deeper. The two of them were opposites. Domenech took visible pleasure in his ability to control people, to influence them, but Bligh found his own thoughts difficult enough to understand: he wanted power only over himself - he still could not understand the impulse to control others.

He was moving with the crowd now. He did not know how long he had been lost in thought and his body working under its own guidance.

He was down in the square and, looking over the heads of those around him, he sensed a new atmosphere to the rally. He smelt fear for the first time since he had been at the Front. Panic.

Bodies crushed against him and he was almost knocked to the ground. Anyone so unfortunate would surely be crushed to death underfoot.

In the mouth of a nearby street that fed onto the square, a convoy of motor wagons had pulled up. From their open backs, troops descended and started

driving their rifle butts into the faces and bodies of anyone within range. Angry shouts responded and Bligh saw a man pick up a piece of rubble from a broken building and hurl it at the troops.

That was when the soldiers opened fire, first into the air, but within seconds their rifles were lowered.

Bligh saw the man who had thrown the first rock bend over double and then look up at the troops with eyes wide. He could only have been twenty yards from Bligh. He toppled slowly forwards and that was the signal for the crowd to finally enter the realm of chaos.

Bligh fought against the surge, but his leg handicapped him and it was all he could do to stay upright.

At one point he was back on the steps, and he saw Sadiq and the others huddled in the entrance to the Citadel, looking down. Later, he would swear that he saw the UPP leader and Domenech looking out from a window in the Government building and that Domenech had been nodding slowly and saying something to the older man.

Then Bligh was down in the square again, hobbling hurriedly away, suddenly in the open and fearful of being targeted by someone with a gun. He realised now that it was not only the soldiers firing from the wagons that he should fear - there had been soldiers in the rally, too, and some were firing back.

He made it to the edge of the square, and worked his way over a mass of debris until he came to a doorway in the one remaining wall at the back of a fallen building.

Out on a small street, he paused to recover his breath and rest his leg. There was fresh blood on the small dressing he still wore. He steadied his nerves and then made himself look at the wound. The damage was not great and he fastened his trousers with relief. He knew that he must get away from this place, away from Anasty all together. He had to keep moving, as he always had. It would give him time to think.

He rode a goods train out of Anasty. Years ago, he had seen children doing this for fun: leaping up onto a wagon as the train left the station, and dropping off again after a few minutes. It had not looked difficult. He watched the first train, as it passed within inches of his reach. It looked much faster, this close, and he could not summon the courage to reach out and pull himself up. He sat in the undergrowth just beyond the station for some time afterwards, cursing himself for his cowardice.

Then there was a rumble and a piercing hoot and hot metal was passing in front of him again. He stood with an arm out, hesitated, and then he grabbed a handhold.

His whole body jerked as the train snatched him from the ground, but he held on. His second hand found a grip just as his foot finally found its target on a small step and his lame leg swung up behind him. He clung on, in that position, for some time, feeling as scared as he had ever felt in a barrage or under sniper fire.

When he opened his eyes the train had picked up speed. He had no idea where it was headed. What if these goods were intended for export, and the train rolled directly onto one of those big Feorean ferries? He stopped himself and focused on immediate priorities: he could not stay in this position for long, clinging

to a hand-rail on the outside of a locked wagon.

He saw that the shelf where his feet were resting extended along the side of the carriage. There were handholds, too, after a fashion. If he could edge about fifteen feet along, then he could swing round to the sheltered junction between it and the next one in line. There was bound to be some more reliable form of support there.

He reached out to his right and grabbed a metal ring that had been rattling against the side of the carriage and then his left hand moved to the position his right had held. With the upper half of his body now tipped towards the rear of the train, he shuffled his feet along the narrow shelf. He waited, for a few seconds, in his new position, and then reached out again for a new handhold.

It was hard work, and he had to stop often to recover his breath and his nerve, but he persisted.

As he drew close to the end of his carriage, he saw that next in line was an open wagon, loaded with crates and all covered with ropes and tarpaulins which flapped in the wind. He would be able to settle there for the journey, if he made it that far.

Just as he reached the end of the carriage and his right hand fumbled around the corner a voice snapped out, over the roar of the rushing air and the train on the track. "What're you doing?" it said. "Just what do you think you're doing?"

The challenge had come from a vagrant perched on the next wagon. Bligh, with no choice in the matter - he could hardly retreat along the carriage side again - found his handhold, moved his left hand and upper body along and then swung his good leg around onto a flimsy metal shield covering the carriage's coupling with its neighbour.

"That won't hold your weight," said the voice. "Not if we goes over a bump."

Bligh looked up at the man. He was probably only in his forties, but his hair had turned a premature white and his face was pitted with lines and dirt. He was wearing a ripped coat, tied up with string at the waist, and he sat with his feet tucked under his legs on an exposed crate, the tarpaulin turned back neatly around him.

With a sudden, agile movement, the man leapt to his feet and then reached down to help Bligh across onto his wagon. "The name's Black Paul," he said. "But they all calls me Black Paul." He grinned a grin of yellow, gapped teeth and sweet, festering breath and returned to his perch.

"Bligh." They were passing through a grove of low trees now, with drifts of creamy blossom and the waxy green leaves of citrus trees. Once, they had been carefully trained along heavy wire supports that were strung between regularly positioned poles. Now, they grew chaotically, although they gave the impression that someone was trying to reassert their authority over the wild, with new yellow ties binding them to the wires again, in places.

Black Paul did not say much; he just kept taking the occasional pull at a small bottle he kept in his coat pocket, turning away from Bligh to do so. Bligh felt uncomfortable, as the silence between them grew. Eventually, he said, "Where does it go? The train?" He did not really care.

Black Paul looked at him thoughtfully. After a time, he said, "You've not been

on the road for long, then? I can tell a man's not been on the road long, see. A man's been doing it for a time, he doesn't jump a carriage half way along it and then tries to climb the side likes you did. A man, he jumps on an open like this, and he looks at a timetable before he jumps, he does. So as he knows just where the beauty's taking him."

Bligh shrugged. "I didn't know there were timetables," he said lamely. "I've never done this before. Last time I went on a passenger train and I was thrown off by the Police. Before then I was fighting."

"Phah!" Black Paul snorted, and then took another pull from his bottle. "Men don't fight, I say. It gets them hurt, it does." He shook his head and gave Bligh a disapproving look.

"It was in the war," said Bligh, humbled by the tramp's disapproval. "I was with the Landworkers' Alliance, against the Government. I was wounded at Huesja."

"War?" said Black Paul, arching white eyebrows and fixing Bligh with crystalline blue eyes. "War, eh? I said fighting gets you hurt."

"The war," said Bligh, helplessly. "The Civil War." Black Paul looked blank, and it was several minutes before Bligh realised that he may have been leading him on, teasing him.

They passed, without talking, through a small town. They did not stop at the station, although the train slowed down and Black Paul waved cheerily at people as they waited for a passenger train to come along. Just as they left the town, Black Paul turned to Bligh and said, "Now we lies low, or it's jail or a kicking, depending on the yard marshal's mood." He reached up for the tarpaulin and pulled it down to cover the two of them and, just as he had finished, the train squealed to a sharp stop.

Voices shouted from nearby and Bligh made as if to pull up a corner of the covers and take a look but Black Paul hissed, "Don't you dare, or I'll bite you real hard, I will." After a few minutes the wagon jolted and moved on the track and then there was a sudden thud that almost made Bligh cry out in fright.

After they had been travelling for a short time again, Black Paul struggled with the tarpaulin and rolled it up neatly, clear of their perch. Now, there was a new carriage facing them and the train was heading in the other direction, back through the station, with the same people waiting for their trains and Black Paul waving at them once again. "If you'd read your timetables," he said. "Then you'd know the stops and when to hide your head."

With a sinking feeling, Bligh began to think that they would end up back in Anasty. He watched countryside passing by that he was sure he recognised. He did not dare ask Black Paul for confirmation. He had not yet received a straight answer from the tramp. Then they passed over a brick bridge that must have been more than a mile long and Bligh knew that they could no longer be retracing their route from the capital. Below them, a flood plain spread out, with shining ribbons of river and tributary, silver in the sunlight, separated by vast reedbeds and islands of grazing meadow or regimented willow coppice.

Without his watch, Bligh had only a poor idea of the passing of time. The sun was quite low when the train pulled into another yard, and Black Paul had covered them with tarpaulin once again.

"It's Pettahrat," he said quite amicably, as they waited in the dark. "As

you'd be knowing if you'd studied your timetables. We waits a while and then they'll be gone."

Bligh surprised himself by sleeping for a time. When he opened his eyes there were stars and a half moon overhead and Black Paul was standing on the track telling him to get down and help fix the covers again. "You've got to be tidy," he explained, as he fastened the last rope. Then he added, slyly, "Even if you're God's son." He cackled and Bligh shuddered as he realised he must have been talking in his dreams and he could not remember a thing.

"No," he said quietly. "I'm not."

"I knows that, see," said Black Paul, and suddenly Bligh felt an overwhelming affection for the man. "Jah'veh only has one Son, see, and when He comes He won't be travelling on no freight wagons with old Black Paul. Not a chance." Shaking his head, he turned and began to walk away. Uncertainly, Bligh followed and caught him up in the street outside the yard. "I suppose you'll be wanting a place to lay your bones," said Black Paul as they walked. "And you'll be wanting old Black Paul to show you where."

Bligh said nothing. Walking by Black Paul's side was answer enough, he felt.

They passed by countless ruined buildings, some of them with walls enough that Bligh felt sure they could shelter within for the night. At one point he said so and Black Paul replied, "Too dangerous, see. Some of them's just waiting to fall down. Move too sudden and you might just get buried before you's ready for it." In the end, they found a church with candles burning in the porch and the door propped open with a brick. By the entrance there was a stack of blankets and a bucket with water and a tray of stale bread crusts. Copying Black Paul, Bligh took a blanket, a wooden beaker of water and a piece of bread and went into the still warmth of the church itself. Outside, it had been turning cold, but Bligh had barely noticed. He was accustomed to the chill and discomfort of sleeping outdoors - he had expected no more.

The central aisle of the church was occupied by sleeping children and adults who could have been their parents or grandparents. Bligh followed Black Paul past the sleeping bodies and lay his blanket on the floor before the altar.

Before sleeping, Black Paul knelt and mumbled a prayer Bligh recognised from his school days. "They may be unholy pagans," Black Paul said afterwards, when neither could sleep, "but this is a church, at least - it's holy ground. It has the Lord Jah'veh's blessing despite the Elementalist perversions."

Bligh did not care. It was dry, and warmer than outside. That was what mattered.

"People have closed up," said Black Paul, as they waited in the town's small square, early the next morning. "Have you noticed that, then? They don't talk any more, not like you and me. When there was fighting to be done there was fighting talk to be done, too. Do you see what I'm meaning?"

"I remember," said Bligh, thoughtfully. He looked around at the shabby men who waited with them, hoping for work. A few weeks ago these men would have been in uniform, but already they had returned to a civilian life of hardship and unemployment. He had not thought a war could end so abruptly. He had always privately thought that the struggle in Trace would be a perpetual one, killing the men of the land as quickly as they could be replaced. No longer was there optimistic talk of equality and redistribution, no longer did people seem to believe that everyone could have a share of the nation's wealth. Now, what mattered was earning a few shillings and simply surviving. Now, people had

turned away from equality and back to the safe ground of the Church.

After a long wait, a small group of officials turned up, one of them a priest. They looked at the assembled men, as if they were eyeing up beasts at a market. With brief gestures, they selected less than half and drove off, leaving the chosen ones in the charge of three burly foremen.

Black Paul was resigned to this. "About one day in five," he said, as they walked away. "They looks at me and they sees my white hair and they thinks I'm too old to work hard."

They left the town that day. Black Paul had a feeling that they would not be any luckier if they tried again the next day. As they walked out along a dusty road, motor wagons and horse-drawn carriages occasionally passing them by, Black Paul took a drink from his bottle and then, surprisingly, held it out. Bligh felt touched, but he was wary of its contents. Surreptitiously, he sniffed at it as he raised it to his lips, then took a small sip. It was only water. He smiled and returned it to Black Paul.

They travelled together for most of the next three weeks, rarely staying in any one town for more than two or three days. It was a hard way of life, but Bligh felt suited to it and he felt fitness returning as each day passed.

Occasionally they found work and would meet up again in the evening, exhausted but with a few shillings in their pockets. Bligh's first job was in a vast factory, gathering balls of fluff from behind trap doors in the base of a weaving machine that was two storeys high. It was a deceptively tricky job, with the dusty atmosphere, the deafening roar of the machines and the stifling heat all conspiring to numb the senses and induce a mindless sense of automation. After his second day, Bligh learnt that people rarely held that job for more than a month, as it was so easy to let the concentration lapse and lose a finger, or worse, in the machinery. "You lose a day's pay," he was told. "Because they have to close down the line and retrieve the pieces."

He was relieved, that night, when Black Paul grumpily said they should move out the next day. Black Paul had found no work at all in their three days in town, while Bligh had worked clearing rubble for the day before securing the job at the linen factory. "I've read it in the timetables," Black Paul said, "so we've got to go."

Bligh had learnt that where Black Paul was concerned there was no disobeying the timetables. They had become some kind of holy document for the tramp, edging over into his beliefs so that they even entered his nightly prayers from time to time.

One morning, they stood together in the central square of a small town called Abeyat, on the fringe of the Great Plain. Bligh had felt uneasy when he had seen the central plains spreading out before his perch on a goods wagon. He had not wanted to be back in this region so soon after the final battle of the war. It had felt wrong.

The crowd of men was thicker than usual this morning and Bligh held little hope of a day's work. Between them, they had less than two shillings left, unless Black Paul had been lying about his money, as Bligh suspected. To one side of the square there was a long queue waiting for the distribution of bread. Bligh watched, detached, as an old woman bustled to the head of the queue saying she was a war widow with a sick sister and so she could not wait. A young soldier beat her away with the butt of his rifle and sent her to the back of the line to wait her turn.

Nearby, there were children begging, something Bligh had never noticed in Trace before. One of them was a young boy with only one leg. Black Paul tutted and muttered something Bligh could not hear, and then strolled over to the boy and gave him their last shilling and a few pennies. The boy gave a whoop of delight and raced away on a leg and a crooked stick, pursued by some friends and a mangy dog carrying a bone. Black Paul looked at Bligh and shrugged apologetically, but Bligh did not mind. They could always get bread and water at a church, if they became desperate.

As it turned out, he did not have to worry. Two long wagons appeared in the square, ridden by the priests in their flowing carmine robes. "The Lord's work," said Black Paul, as he climbed up onto one of the wagons with Bligh, but he would say no more.

The priests made them sing hymns as they headed out of town. Bligh did not know the words or the tune, but he moved his lips in case his driver should turn around and decide to throw him off for not joining in. Black Paul simply sat, staring out at the countryside. "Nature's jealous of her scars," he said, after a time. "See?" He waved a hand at the rutted, cratered fields, now overgrown with grass and great crimson drifts of poppies and fireweed. "She covers them over so quickly, but you knows they're there."

The trenches were mostly dry now, in the late Spring heat. They were only soft at the bottom, where the duckboards were absent or broken. Weeds grew from gaps in the sand bags and struggled from the depths of the trenches, up towards the light. At first, Bligh thought they grew from the bodies, too, but they were merely forcing their way between arms and legs and through gaps in the torn torsos.

In places, the corpses lay three deep. In others they were buried in mud that had set and they had to be eased out carefully with picks and shovels. Complete corpses were placed in the wagons that had carried the labour gangs to the battlefields. Limbs, heads, scraps of uniform, were put in a large wooden crate marked with the sign of the Six and muttered over by the priests. By the end of the day, they had cleared only a small area of the field and the stench of rotting flesh had become ingrained on Bligh's clothing and on his mind. "There will be more work tomorrow," said a smiling priest, as he drove the exhausted labour gang back to Abeyat. "And the day after ... "

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"It is written," he said, to the slanderers, and the besmirchers, and the corrupt. "My House is the House of Prayer; but you would have it a Den of Vice!"

- The Book of the World, ch.46, v.43.

The corpses of the fields of Abeyat filled Bligh's days, but also, they filled his nights. In total, he spent eight days on the labour gangs, clearing bodies and body-parts. Soon he learnt to recognise, simply from looking at a dried patch of mud, whether it was worth breaking its crust with his pick. If a body lay buried, the mud would be tinged with green, or it would have dried unevenly, or there would just be something indefinable that made Bligh tentatively probe its surface, waiting for the yielding resistance of decaying flesh, or the hard snagging of a bone. He was rarely mistaken. He prided himself on his skills: where some people could divine water, flowing beneath the ground, Bligh could divine bodies. It was an unusual talent, and one, he supposed, which would rarely have been discovered in the ordinary course of a person's life.

On their second day in Abeyat, Bligh and Black Paul were not selected from the men waiting in the town square. Bligh suspected that the priests had learnt to recognise the men's faces and so distributed the work evenly amongst the needy. "Time for moving on, then," said Black Paul, as they retreated from the square, in search of somewhere cool to spend the day.

Bligh had learnt to accept Black Paul's decisions without comment, but today he shook his head. "No," he said. "If we're still here tomorrow they'll give us more work. Or the day after. There's a lot to do out there."

Black Paul looked at him, surprised. "You wants to go out there again? Am I hearing your words true?" The previous day had been hard for Black Paul. Despite his protestations, he was not well suited to hard work and he had been irritable for most of the following evening.

Bligh shrugged. "The Church's shilling is as good as any," he said.

"But the tables," said Black Paul. When he got onto the timetables, Bligh knew there was no shifting him. "The tables says there's a coker through at four sixteen this afternoon. Now cokers is mucky but they's beauties still, they'll keep you moving."

Bligh shook his head. "I don't know what the reason is," he said. "But I'm staying on for a day or two."

"You ignore the timetables, and you're crossing with the luck of the Lord," said Black Paul. "One thing I've learnt is that if you ignores them then trouble's waiting around the corner."

"Sorry," said Bligh. "But they're your timetables, not mine."

"Ah," said Black Paul, "but they's not my troubles."

Bligh was determined, even as he stood in the cutting and watched Black Paul leap onto the rear of a coke wagon and wave his farewell. He realised that he would miss the vagrant. He had learnt a lot from Black Paul: when they had first met, Bligh had still been suffering from the after-shock of the war, but now he felt in command again. He had a lot to thank Black Paul for, if only he had known how to express it.

He spent another night in the church.

After a time one of the under-priests came around, as he had done on the previous evening. He stopped by Bligh and told him that the Church could only extend its blessing for two successive nights. Tomorrow Bligh would have to go out to the shanty settlement on the edge of town and find somewhere for himself, if he was to stay in Abeyat for any longer. Bligh thanked him and turned away in dismissal. He knew he was being rude, but he could not bare to go through the ritual blessing in the Six Elements that he had endured the previous night, while Black Paul, more forthright, had cursed the priest and then ignored him.

The next morning the same under-priest picked him for one of the labour gangs and Bligh spent his second day clearing the fallen from the battlefield. In the evening he wandered through the town, feeling physically and emotionally drained. He paused for a while where the patched-up buildings gave way to a heavily shelled area of rubble which had thrown up a sudden profusion of shelters constructed crudely of wood and stone, and covered with tarpaulins and sheets of rusting, corrugated metal.

Among the ruins, women cooked communally in clearings, their large black pots propped up on glowing stones in the embers of fires. Children chased each other around, or climbed the few standing walls in search of pigeon eggs or vantage points from which to spy their friends. Most of the men were too old to have fought in the war, although there were a few younger men, like Bligh, who carried their telltale injuries or fragments of uniforms.

He did not feel right, here. This was no place for a loner, it was a busy place, a place for coming together, sharing. He did not know if he was ready for that.

"Are you looking for something?" a plump, dark-haired woman asked him, as he lingered uncertainly on the fringe. She was examining him in much the same way the priests examined those waiting for selection for the labour gangs.

He felt awkward and he stared at the ground and said, "I don't know. A priest told me to come here. I don't have anywhere ... "

The woman flicked her hair back and said, "I'm Lila. Come on."

He followed her down into the ruins and listened as she explained the rules. "If you want to eat with my family, or any other, then you share some of your earnings. It's only fair. You want to do it all on your own, then just find a place in the stones and help yourself, but you'll find it easier sharing."

Bligh looked around and for a moment he remembered the height of the revolutionary spirit. Here in the ruins, at least, there was equality of a kind.

Now, Lila was studying him again. "You're burning," she said. "But so are we all. You touch any of us without her say so and we'll nail your balls to the church wall, you hear?"

He ate with Lila and her extended family, handing over most of the five shillings he had earned that day in the battlefield. He soon gathered that, underneath her hostility, Lila was a sad and lonely woman. "My Belahar was killed," she said, when they were briefly alone. "He was a big man, like you. Big inside, like you, too." She had three children, ranging in age from two years to seven. Also eating with them was an old woman who may have been Lila's mother or her dead husband's mother, Bligh was not sure. There was an uncle who could barely hear anything said to him, and who sat in his corner staring at Bligh for the entire evening. And there were others, who were friends and neighbours in the ruins; Bligh lost track of them all after the first introductions.

They played a crackling radio set for a time that evening. It was turned up loud so that Lila's uncle could hear, but from his snores that was wasted for much of the time. They sang along to popular tunes, and then Lila dragged Bligh to his feet and he stamped on his good side while she weaved her stocky body around him in a dance he had never seen before.

He was slightly drunk by the time the radio announcer broke up the programme for 'News from the Department of Information.' Bligh tried to ignore it, which was easy when the talk was of rebuilding programmes and weighty conferences with 'our friends from Feorea'. But then Bligh's attention was snagged by a story at the end of the news report, clearly designed to sound light although its political intent was obvious. "The Good Lord Domenech," said the announcer with a chuckle. "Or at least that's what some would claim tonight. Rumours that Merc Domenech, self-styled leader of the revolutionary opposition, is

really carrying the reincarnated spirit of the first of the Lords Elemental, the Lord of Soul, are being strenuously disowned by Domenech's aides. The story began in a news-sheet pasted illegally to walls around the capital, in a story credited to 'the Fool'." The announcer hesitated, as if leaving a gap for laughter. "Our reporter traced Mr Domenech at his base in the Serenic quarter of Anasty today." Now, the unmistakable voice of Merc Domenech came from the radio. "No," he said. "These stories are not helpful at present. What matters is the continuance of the revolution. The Lords will not walk again among us until the revolution has been won and - " His words were cut off in a clumsy piece of editing and the announcer concluded, "So even the Lord, himself, denies that the Lords will walk again ... Now it's time for us to return to ... "

Lila wanted to dance again but Bligh sat, obstinately refusing to move. Later, as the others retired or went back to their own corners of the shanty-town, Lila came to him more quietly. "You haven't made yourself anywhere to sleep," she said. She sounded nervous now, and Bligh shared that feeling.

"No," he said. "I didn't think ... "

He found her tenderness with him unexpected and strangely touching. A little later, as she lay her hand on the inside of his naked left thigh, he felt its coolness despite his scar tissue. Still uncertain, he kissed her in the darkness, as her children lay nearby. When he was inside her she clamped him tightly with her arms and her legs so that he could barely move, and for a long time she buried her head into the hollow of his shoulder.

Afterwards, he realised that she was crying, and also he sensed that she was somehow disappointed. When later in the night he sensed the same response, he thought that perhaps she was always disappointed with sex.

The next morning he was too late for the labour gang and so he spent the day searching the debris for anything he could use to construct his own shelter. When he saw Lila later in the day, playing a skipping and chanting game with her eldest daughter and some children Bligh did not know, she nodded at him as if he was an old friend. He ate with her family again in the evening, but at night he crept away into his own shelter and slept to dreams of bodies and mud and the ghost echoes of the barrage on the central plains of a distant, alien land.

After that one night with Lila, Bligh was always waiting in the square with time to spare. The priests learnt to pick him for the labour gangs - he worked hard, despite his lame leg, and he had his particular talent for finding the dead. "It's the lie of the land," he explained to a curious work-mate. "You understand the form and consistency of the mud. You understand the differences between hitting a bone with your pick and hitting stone."

The dreams of bodies came to plague his nights, so that by morning, as he stood in the town square, he felt more exhausted than the night before. Somehow, the dreams were more horrific than the real thing. In the day, it was just bones and flesh, but come the night these remains took on new possibilities. A rotting arm, adrift in the mud, could flex the fingers of its hand, a skull could blink, old boots could stamp mud in your face as you stooped to retrieve them.

By the morning of his eighth day on the labour gangs, Bligh realised that he was losing control. He would spend maybe an hour or more at a time with his mind wandering or simply blank, and his body working methodically away. In the afternoon, he recognised that familiar pressure in his head - a dull, throbbing ache that rivalled the one in his leg; the sense that he was being

squeezed out of his own skull - and he hesitated, by the crate with body parts and bits of uniforms. He looked at the hand in his hand and for a time was fascinated by its waxy texture. It had once been part of a man, he realised. Someone who had known friends and lovers, someone for whom things had mattered.

Bligh hurled the hand into the crate in disgust. It was so simple not to think about what you were doing. Now, he was shocked at how easy he had found it to do just that.

He backed away from the crate, away from those hands and torsos and heads, those bones with strips of torn flesh where bald vultures and crows had pecked.

He put his hands up to his face, then snatched them away at a memory of the hand he had just discarded. His own hands had smelt of earth and rotten meat, a smell which had become something he took for granted.

He took another step backwards and suddenly there was an arm across his shoulder, a hand on his arm. He flinched at the touch and a voice said, "Calm, my son. Calm."

Bligh pushed at the priest, who stumbled and for a moment looked at him with anger instead of the customary well-practised compassion. "Calm," he repeated. "It affects us all, you know. I dream of the bodies, and of the violence which spawned such folly. It causes great pain."

The softness of his tone irritated Bligh. What did the priest know of the violence? What did he know of the bodies? All he did all day was ride his wagon and supervise the labour gangs from a sanitary distance.

The priest reached towards him, but Bligh's vision had darkened and his head was roaring and he swiped the man's hand away with a heavy swing of his fist. This time, the priest did a less good job of covering his anger. The priesthood were not accustomed to being treated with anything but subservience. The Church's sympathy was clearly a rationed commodity.

The priest stared at him through narrowed, watering eyes. "You ... " He was panting for breath, so that he had to swallow and start again. "You can set off now," he said. "For a child of violence has no place with the Church. Repent, son, and I will talk to you later. Go! And while you walk, think upon your ways of violence."

It was at least six miles back to Abeyat, and with his limp it took Bligh until the early evening before he saw the houses and the ruins rising in the distance. At one point, he was passed by the two wagons, ridden by the priest and another. They both ignored him so he watched the heaped bodies instead, as they rumbled along the track. Later, the wagons passed him heading back out, empty, and later still they returned with the two labour gangs.

Bligh walked. His anger simmered constantly in the back of his head and there was nothing he could do to control it. The phrase, a child of violence, kept swimming around in his mind. Was that what he was? He did not really understand what it meant. He thought of his mother and the way she had seemed torn about him: what he had taken for love, but also a hostility which had made him think of her as selfish, uncaring. He thought of his travels, and of why he had really joined the Civil War. Had there been ideals involved? Now, he did not know. Maybe he had always had a self-destructive impulse, a wish to damage anything that threatened to be good in his life, a wish to damage himself. Maybe he was, indeed, a child of violence.

He thought he was probably mad.

In a sane world he would be locked away for the good of the masses, but Trace was not such a place, as it struggled to recover from its war.

He needed help, he realised. If there had been a Jahvean church in Abeyat, he suddenly felt that he would have gone there and pleaded his infirmity with the Brothers. Even old Black Paul could have helped. Or the healer in Passerat, despite his Elementalists' perversities.

It was dark by the time he entered the town. The familiar sewage odour of the streets was threaded through with the smell of cooking. He recognised the sweet smell of caprolea, the local delicacy made from goat meat, olive oil, mushrooms and honey. The people of Abeyat ate well, with the money from the Church for the body-clearing and from the railway for the coke supplies the town had appropriated during the war.

He passed the church, with its porch of burning candles, and for a moment he considered spending the night inside. He walked on. He could not bear the prospect of a priest doing the nightly round of the homeless, trying to achieve a spiritual return for the Church's charity.

When he reached the desolation of the shanty town he sensed that something unusual was happening. He hesitated near to the place where he had stopped the week before, and Lila had come to him and shown him around and told him the rules.

Instead of taking the well-worn path through the ruins, Bligh scrambled up over the heaped rubble, careful not to dislodge any debris as he went. He reached a wall and climbed up to walk along it for a short distance, before dropping down again, on the far side. He descended a steep incline, fearful that he might miss his footing and fall, to be buried beneath a cascade of rocks. Sheltering behind another wall, he could look out into a clear area where the people of the shanty town were gathered.

They sat on rocks and on the floor, a radio playing somewhere in the background. Every person there twitched to the rattly drum beat of the music, as if they were all puppets, played by the same wire. The focus of the gathering was a large fire, walled in with a ring of round stones.

Bligh cowered behind the wall and closed his eyes. He could sense the electricity - the magic - in the air, and it made him feel sick, dizzy.

They were performing the Prayer of the Body, a calling to the world of the spirits, a calling to the Gods.

Bligh looked again.

The ceremony was being mediated by the old man from Lila's extended family. Her uncle, he thought. The one who sat through meal-times, unable to hear a word that was spoken, spilling most of his food and always staring at Bligh. Now, he was animated, chanting a rhythmical incantation, holding his skeletal hands in the air with his eyes rolled back so that the whites flickered red with the light of the fire.

Bligh lost track of time, just watching the people and the merry dance of the flames. He only came to his senses when a woman took up the old man's chant, adapting the rhythm and the speed to her own pattern, tipping her head back and forth so that it seemed her neck would snap.

Bligh recognised, with a horrified fascination, that the woman was Lila. Her eldest daughter was clutching her hand, urging her on, crying, "Mama do it! Mama do it!"

Lila was wailing now, a note that reached into Bligh and twisted his barren heart. He hugged himself tightly and closed his eyes as she threw herself to the ground in front of the old man. When he opened them again she was hugging herself, too, and then she began to tear at her hair and her clothes as she writhed in the dirt.

Now, he recognised the word she was repeating. "Belahar! Belahar!" she cried, the name of the man she had lost to the war. "Belahar!"

One hand was pressing at her crotch now, and the atmosphere had changed and there was a new sexual energy pervading the ritual.

"Belahar!" she cried in agony, in ecstasy. "Belahar!"

Bligh felt enraged and, at the same time, terribly frightened and alone. He pulled himself away, withdrew, but then he realised that his body was moving, regardless, climbing up over the broken wall which had shielded him, hitting the ground with a painful jolt which stopped him for a moment.

"No!" he cried, but his mouth did not move and no sound emerged. He dragged himself on, through the twitching onlookers, stopping before the old man and then lunging, pushing him so that he sprawled in the dirt.

He turned and kicked the symmetrical stones into the fire and a great fountain of sparks and smoke rose up. He reached down and caught Lila by the hair and threw her aside. For a moment her eyes held that glazed look of the ritual possession and then it was as if a blind snapped down and she was glowering at him, resenting him.

"No!" This time the sound emerged from his mouth. He looked around as his pulse raged in his ears and the fire roared. "No!" The people were staring at him, but no one rose to challenge him. The old ones, staring, rocking gently in an echo of the rhythm now lost. The younger men, fit and wounded, staring. The women, glaring and seething like Lila before him.

No one moved.

"This is wrong," he bellowed. "You can't do this. It's sick. Do you think that if the Lords were among you they would recognise ... this as anything but a cheap sham? Do you? There's nothing Holy about this charade. Nothing! It's sick ... " He was losing track, suddenly scared and vulnerable and wondering what he could possibly be doing in front of these people. He did not know where the words had come from or what he had meant. All he had was the anger that had overtaken him and now that was receding rapidly.

He looked around at the gathering, once again, and he felt painfully sad. These poor, pitiful people were desperate ... for something to believe in, for something to give their empty existences some kind of meaning. Once, there had been the revolution, but now this was all they had.

He searched the people's faces and a strange realisation came over him. Some were angry and cursing him - the old man, struggling away, kept glaring back and spitting - but they were not going to rise up and beat him, as he had expected. They would not drive him from town.

Lila reached up and pulled at him, gently, her hand hooked into the waistband of his trousers. He looked into her face, her cheeks smeared with tears and filth from the ground. Her daughter was there, too, a seven year old with a jug of wine which she pressed at him, her eyes pleading with him to accept it.

He did not understand these people's response. He felt the anger rising again, but this time it was distant and he knew it would not erupt.

He snatched the wine and took a long drink. Then he passed it to Lila and she drank a little and then stopped and felt her mouth tenderly. Bligh saw that there was blood on her lip. Had he hit her? He did not think so.

People were talking now, and someone had turned up the volume of the radio. Bligh sank to the ground, confused. What was happening to him? The thoughts spinning through his head, uninvited, scared him.

He knew, now, that he was mad.

Lila pushed a piece of greasy meat towards him and watched as he ate for the first time since morning.

"I hear voices," he said quietly. He felt, irrationally, that he had to explain himself. "My head ... I can't keep track of it all. I see bodies, too. All day, all night. They talk to me." He drank some more wine, and felt its heat in his belly. "I'm mad," he said, and Lila rested her hand over his wound and her daughter wiped his brow with the hem of her skirt. "Mad." He drank some more. He thought he had said enough, but then, he decided, he had barely started.

The wine tasted good and the sound of the radio was relaxing him, although he had never liked this new, southern music. He felt comfortable for the first time in months, with these warm people and their wine. Especially their wine.

In the morning he felt awful. This was the first time he had been so thoroughly drunk since coming to Trace. His head boomed distantly and his vision was blurred. Acid kept rising in his throat and his whole body ached. He remembered Lila's wails of ecstasy, but he did not know if they were from the possession ritual, when he had been a mere onlooker, or if they were from later in the night. He had woken with her lying across his chest. He was still wearing his shirt but his trousers had been lying some distance away in the rubble. His memory did not go much beyond kicking stones into the fire and yelling at everyone.

He tried to swallow, but his throat felt as if it was lined with the dry dust of the street.

Now, he stood in the square, waiting for the priests, one amongst many hoping for work in the battlefield.

He knew that it was unlikely that they would pick him, particularly if it was the priest he had argued with the previous day. But Bligh had always been stubborn. He would not give up without at least trying.

He rubbed his eyes and his vision cleared, but that only seemed to make his head hurt more. There were more men today. That would reduce his chance of work, too. There was only so much space on the wagons.

He heard voices across the street and he rubbed his eyes again and looked. Two priests approached, talking with two men in the uniforms of the old State

Police. Where were the wagons? he wondered. The labour gangs could not do their work without wagons to transport them and to remove the bodies during the day.

There was a murmur of interest from the men in the square. Someone complained that they would have to walk to the battlefield today, and another said that at least that meant they would spend less time with the dead. Another hoped that did not mean a cut in pay.

The priests and the policemen stopped before the crowd of expectant men and surveyed them, as they did every morning. Then one spoke. "We want a man who goes by the name of Bligh," he said.

Bligh did not think he had heard correctly. He noticed that a space had opened up around him and now the four were looking directly at him.

"What is it?" he said, although his throat ached when he spoke. "What do you want?"

The policemen stepped forward and seized his arms.

"What have I done?" he demanded, although memories of his argument with the young priest kept flashing through his mind.

"You have been charged with the State crime of Malicious Blasphemy," said one of the policemen. "You are to be detained at Her Majesty's will until such time that a trial can be arranged before a council of the priesthood."

"What?" Bligh did not understand. What had this to do with the young priest, he wondered? "What does that mean?"

A priest stepped towards him and fixed him with limpid green eyes. "It is Blasphemy to defame the Six, or to misrepresent the Book of the World," he said. "But that is not a State crime. It is Malicious Blasphemy to do so whilst claiming to be one of the Lords, yourself ... "

2

'"He is never alone," said Elachim, to Faluch; "for even the Lord must leave a trail in His wake."'

- The Disciples' Story, The Book of the World, 2nd Addend.

They kept Bligh locked in a room in the church's accommodation wing for the next three days.

When the door thudded shut behind him, he felt a terrible sense of anguish. The Brothers, back at the school in Stenhoer, had locked miscreants in a cupboard for punishment. "It will shield you from the influences of corruption," Brother Benjahmine used to say. "It will give you time and darkness in which to repent your sins against God, Son of God." The Elementalists dispensed with such statements.

The room was long enough for Bligh to lie with his head against one wall and the soles of his feet flat against the other. Lying in the middle of the floor, like this, he could touch the remaining two walls with his elbows. There was no furniture, save for a shelf that held a copy of The Book of the World and a dirty cup. In one corner there was a bucket and a small bowl of water; Bligh had drunk the water by the end of his first night but it was

never refilled, despite his shouting and hammering at the door. Similarly, although the bucket filled and began to smell abominably in the close heat of the cell, no one came to empty it.

Bligh spent a lot of his time dwelling on the charity of a Church which locks a man up without food or water or sanitation.

In the wall opposite the door there was a tall slit of a window which admitted a sliver of sunlight that edged its way around the room until mid-afternoon, when it was blocked out by the orientation of the building.

Bligh could see out of this window into the street. He remembered walking past here, new to Abeyat, trusting Black Paul's sense of place, his instinct for finding somewhere to sleep and eat, and the possibility of work. Black Paul had warned him that if he did not trust the timetables there would be trouble in store. Right now, that seemed no more nonsensical than anything else Bligh could summon up to explain his situation.

He thought, hard and frequently, about the night of the Prayer of the Body in the ruins of Abeyat's shanty town. He could not remember claiming to be one of the Lords Elemental. He had difficulty imagining himself doing so. But, then, he could not believe that he would storm into the middle of the ritual and break it up by force, yet he had done just that. He remembered raving about how the ritual abused whatever there was that was spiritual in the world, and he did not know where he had found such words. Later, he had drunk heavily, trying to hide himself from the realisation of what he had done. There was a lot he could not remember about that night: gaps in his memory, confused images of singing and dancing which he could not make fit with that part he could recall.

He did not know what would happen next. The priests had mentioned a trial before a council of the priesthood. He had no doubt about the outcome of that. What he did not know was the likely punishment. He wondered, particularly in the middle of the night as he lay awake on his cell floor, if they could execute him for the crime of Malicious Blasphemy. Even during the day, when he felt he was able to be more rational, he did not think it unlikely that he would be shot or crucified for his crime. He tried to imagine what it would be like to face a firing squad. They would probably do it in the same square where he had waited so often for a priest to select him for work. Somehow, that would be fitting. Crucifixion would be worse, but he knew the method was still used in countries where Jahveism was only a minority faith, and respect for the death of the Son of God was not ingrained. Death on the cross would be slow, but was it mere illusion that a firing squad would be any quicker? Might his life still be ebbing slowly away long after the bullet had stopped his heart - awareness fading gradually to blackness, nothing?

By the time Divitt Carew came to his cell, on the morning of his fourth day in captivity, Bligh was too depressed to even recognise him.

He stared dumbly at the man who stood in the open doorway. His first thought was of water, then food. Had they finally remembered that he was here, he wondered?

Then there was recognition and he almost spoke, but was silenced by the blank look on the journalist's face.

"This is him, I presume?" said Carew, eyeing him warily and sniffing the foul air of the cell. Behind him, a priest grunted in confirmation and so Carew said, "You're to come with me, Mr Bligh. You've been placed in the care of the Wederian Embassy." Turning to the priest, he added, "I like this even less

than you, Father. But we must represent every one of our citizens, however distasteful we find it."

Bligh entered a small corridor and almost before he knew it, he was out in the sunlight and being guided towards a small blue motor car.

He sat in the passenger seat in a daze as Divitt Carew climbed in beside him and did something to some pedals to start the engine. Bligh had never sat in such a vehicle before. The closest thing in his experience was the motor buses of Euardice - short trams, riding without tracks through the Feorean capital - or the motor wagons used in Trace.

He held on to the edges of his seat as the car pulled away. Looking up, he realised that the vehicle had no roof, or rather, that it had a canvas one which had been rolled back. Sunlight, beating down on his upturned face felt strangely unfamiliar. When he looked down again, they had left Abeyat and fields were rolling away to either side. Many of them had been replanted since the war had finished, and now there were uneven lines of green shoots striating the mud.

"Why did they believe you?" said Bligh, finally, turning to Carew. "About the Embassy?"

"I know a clerk there," said Carew, as if wondering how much to reveal. "A nice boy. He's useful for information. And forged letters on official stationery."

Bligh remembered the last time he had been with Carew and the trick he had played. He wondered why the journalist had taken such a risk to free him, but he did not ask. After another stretch of silence, Bligh said, "Thanks, Divitt."

"Don't. You'll make a good story." Carew grinned. "You're already a good story, my Lord ... "

"What do you mean?" Suddenly Bligh felt sick.

"How do you think I found you, eh?" Divitt Carew fumbled in the pocket of his shirt, making the car slew across the road. He withdrew a crumpled news-sheet and handed it to Bligh. "Read it, go on."

Bligh squinted at the tiny, smudged print. His story took up half a column on the front. Much of the detail was wrong - it said he was Feorean and that he had fought with the Land Party - but basically it repeated what Bligh, himself, had been told. He was to be tried for Malicious Blasphemy, for claiming to be the reincarnated spirit of the Lord of Stone whilst simultaneously desecrating the sacred Prayer of the Body.

He checked the masthead of the news-sheet and saw that it had been published in Anasty. He slumped in his seat, and put a hand to his forehead.

Carew reached down into a pocket in the door and then handed a flask across to Bligh, who drank gratefully. "I'm mad," said Bligh, after a time. "You don't want to stay around me. I only hurt people."

"I guessed that much," said Carew lightly. "The madness, that is. I saw that story and I thought to myself, 'Remember that young fool Bligh?' I thought. 'He's flipped,' I thought. It's the obvious conclusion. Do you really think you're Lord of Stone? I need to know for the story I'll write - that's the price of a rescue by the Good Knight Carew."

"No," said Bligh, desperately. "I have bad dreams, I do stupid things like breaking up a Prayer of the Body and arguing with a priest. But I'm not playing host to any damn god!"

"Why claim that you are, then?"

"I don't know ... Sometimes I feel as if I'm being steadily wiped away, as if there's a ... a force, lurking in the depths of my mind, ready to fill the void. I don't know. Someone once told me that we were being prepared to carry the reincarnated Lords Elemental. Somehow that seemed to fit how I felt when I came out of hospital in Passerat. I don't believe it, but I suppose I must fear it. I don't know." Putting it into words helped a great deal. It made him think about things he had been avoiding for a long time.

"If you really are carrying this Lord of Stone creature in your head," said Divitt Carew. "Not that I believe it, you have to understand. But if you are, then the Gods must be in a pretty sorry state right now. Strangely enough, the Church never portrays their menagerie of Gods as pathetic - struggling to assert themselves like you describe. Your Lord of Stone sounds almost human."

Bligh thought of Salas Benjennery. "I had an argument once, with a man who said that magic was fading from the world - maybe, if God is real, He's starting to lose His grip ... "

Later, when darkness had fallen and they had pulled off the road to eat some bread and dried meat, Carew put a hand on Bligh's arm. "Listen," he said. "You need help. It's no good spilling your guts to an old hack like Divitt Carew. You need someone who knows what they're talking about." Bligh looked at him, warily. He was scared. He had managed to talk to Carew, but it had not been easy. "I don't know," he said, shaking his head.

"You keep saying that. Well I do know. There's a healer I've heard a lot about. He's unconventional: before the war he was tried for blasphemy, for the reason that his healing technique never once invoked the power of the Lords. He won a suspended judgement with the defence that, if the Church believed in its own scriptures then one such as himself could not cure the faithful without the influence of the Lords Elemental. He spoke for two hours and he didn't once admit to any kind of faith himself."

Bligh sensed that Carew was missing something out. He waited, and when the journalist said no more, he prompted him, "And?"

Divitt Carew glanced at him briefly. "The healer's name is Hammad Fulke."

Bligh felt dizzy as a rush of memories bombarded him. His small room in Dona-Jez as Madeleine arrived in the rain and the dark, saying she had to be with him and she did not care what her parents said. The two of them, running hand in hand as snipers fired from Anasty's rooftops. Madeleine, clutching him and gasping, whispering words of love to him as they lay in a heap of sweaty bed-clothes.

Bligh had always avoided talking of Madeleine's past. In their time together they could only have mentioned the name of Hammad Fulke three or four times, yet Madeleine had been Fulke's lover for nearly a year.

"I don't know," was all he could finally think to say. Would he never escape that man's shadow?

"You've been wandering across the country," said Carew. Bligh wondered what he was implying. "I traced your progress - the news stories didn't say where you were being held, so I had to do some detective work. I spoke to priests, I found an old tramp who knew the train timetables by heart - he told me, to the minute, every train you'd travelled on, every town you'd stopped at, but he didn't know anything about where you slept, or where you worked.

"You have to understand, Bligh: you were always heading north. It was inevitable that you'd end up in Dona-Jez, whether you knew it or not. Why don't I just make it easy and drive you straight there?"

Bligh did not answer, but he climbed into the car when Divitt Carew started it up.

"Oh yes," said Carew, when they had been driving for a few minutes. "What do the People's Police want with you?"

Bligh looked at him sharply.

"When I was talking you out of Abeyat, the priest showed me papers he had received from the UPP in Anasty. I had to pretend I knew all about it and that Embassy custody would save him a lot of paperwork. I only succeeded because the Church instinctively distrusts the revolution."

"What did they want?"

"They were charge papers," said Carew. "You were wanted for desertion from the UPP militia."

Bligh thought for a moment, before producing an explanation. "In Anasty," he said. "I tried to join them, but I changed my mind at the last minute. They'd written up some papers for me, but I never actually joined."

Carew was not satisfied. "But what have you done to them, Bligh? If they sent the Police after everyone who could technically be termed a deserter then half of the surviving male population of Trace would be locked up. You must have done something to upset them."

Bligh knew the answer. "I think you'd better ask Merc Domenech about that," he said. Just then, he thought madness might be his safest option.

Divitt Carew had interviewed Merc Domenech, only a matter of days after the end of his march on the Citadel and the slaughter of Parliament Square. "He remembered me from four years ago," he told Bligh. "He remembers everything. He did something no one has ever done to me before." Carew shook his head as he drove, a single rubber blade sweeping rain from the windscreen. "I was unable to write about him. I sat down that night and went through my notes, but I didn't know where to start. I didn't know what I could say. I've never known the feeling ...

"He's risen so quickly," he continued. "Now, the Transitional Government faces a new threat, if they're not careful. Domenech has a popular appeal that could even rival support for the first revolution."

"The country's not ready for another war," said Bligh.

"That's what Domenech says, and he'll deny that he's doing anything to provoke it. 'The revolution must be completed,' is one of his favourite lines. But all the time, in the background, his propaganda team is raising the temperature. He thinks he's a God, Bligh. He really does, although he denied it when I

challenged him."

"It is a common madness," said Bligh.

"Is that why he wants you, then? He knows there must be six Lords Elemental - he needs you to fulfil his madness, whether you want to cooperate or not. He's dangerous, Bligh."

But Bligh did not need to be warned about Merc Domenech. He wondered if Domenech really did believe that he carried the reincarnated spirit of the Lord of Soul, or if he was as confused and scared as Bligh. He thought, perhaps, that Domenech might be frightened of him, too, frightened of the alternatives he presented.

They entered Dona-Jez in the early hours of the morning. It was too late to find a room, so they stayed in the car, sleeping propped up in their seats and waking stiff and unrested.

"Where do we find Hammad Fulke?" asked Bligh, but he knew the most likely person who would know.

"I have an old address," said Carew. He grinned. "But this is Trace - it won't be as easy as that." They left the motor car where they had parked it the night before.

Dona-Jez was a small town, spreading around a junction on one of the main routes down into the heart of Trace from Feorea. The older buildings were built of solid stone, but filling the gaps, and spreading around the fringe of the town, there were houses built since the railway lines had been laid, wooden framed terraces with plaster laid crudely between thin wooden laths.

It was strange to be back in Dona-Jez. Bligh felt that if he tried hard enough he could simply blank out the last year and his biggest worry would be the disapproval of Madeleine's parents. But, at the same time, he felt distanced from the place, as if he had never really lived here, never been happy here, never been in love. He knew his first fantasy, of return to an easy past, was no more than an illusion. The wounds of time had changed everything.

He kept expecting to see people he knew, but there were none. Only the streets were familiar.

Divitt Carew led him to a road by the school where Madeleine had once taught. Bligh had often admired the old terraced row opposite the school. There was nothing grand about these houses and flats, nothing too showy, but to live here was a sign of success. He had often thought that if he had been the settling type then a street like this would be an inspiring goal. Also, it was close to the school, and so, when they had just been friends, he would dream of seeing Madeleine out of his window, having her calling in after a hard day for a drink and a chat. Later, when they were lovers, it would have been convenient for her work.

He had not known that Hammad Fulke had lived here. As Divitt Carew told him that this was the place, Bligh's mind was churning with thoughts of how they must have met: Fulke, spying her on her way to work, planning to meet her by chance in the street and seduce her. Or equally - Madeleine had always set out to get what she wanted - it could have been the other way around. It might even really have been chance, he concluded, as they mounted the stone steps that led to Fulke's door.

"What do we do?" he said. He did not want to be here. Suddenly, the prospect

of explaining his illness to a stranger was nothing when set against the prospect of meeting the man who had won Madeleine's love. It terrified him. He had never understood what had bound Madeleine to him for so long - love was just a word to cover ignorance, he had always assumed. The thought that she could share such a bond with another disturbed him.

He eyed the steps, leading back to the pavement, the street.

Divitt Carew put a hand on his arm. "Don't think of it," he said. "You couldn't out-run me, with that leg. And you're a fugitive, remember? I'm going to get you healed, whether you want it or not." He clapped Bligh's arm, and then turned and hammered on the door.

He thought she was a girl, when the door slitted open and she peered at them from the shadows. Her eyes were haunting - almost circular, with small pupils and rimmed with short, black lashes. Her hair was black and tied hard at the back of her bony head. She licked her lips nervously, and said, "Yes?"

Divitt Carew smiled and nodded. "Please, madam, I wonder if I may take a few moments of your time?" His manner had changed totally. Bligh watched him with interest, almost forgetting the reason for their call. "I'm trying to trace a gentleman with whom I hope to do business. Could we come in, for a moment? Please?"

The door edged open another inch. "There's no man here," said the girl. Her eyes never left Divitt Carew. "The previous tenant left in the war." Carew sighed and turned to Bligh. As he did so, the door opened wider and Bligh saw that the girl had the body of a woman. She could have been any age between twelve and perhaps thirty.

Carew sensed the relaxation and turned his head sharply back towards the woman. "We're not police," he said, shedding his smooth manner of before. "We don't want to cause Hammad any trouble. We have a friend in common. We need his help."

"Then go," she said. "Hammad Fulke is dead." Bligh noticed a grimace flicker across her face as she said those words. Dishonesty? Pain? "In the war. You'll only find trouble if you don't go. Please." Her eyes flicked beyond them, into the street, and Bligh sensed that her fear was not simply the result of being confronted by strangers at her door.

He pulled at Carew's jacket and said, "Come on. Let's go." He nodded at the woman and then turned back down the steps.

"What are you playing at?" demanded Carew, as they walked away from the house.

"She was scared," said Bligh. "Couldn't you feel it? She was hiding something. She meant what she said about trouble." He remembered ignoring Black Paul's warnings of trouble.

"Of course she was hiding something! Another minute and we'd have known what." They walked in angry silence for a short time, then Carew said, more calmly, "Just remember, Bligh. I make the decisions - you're the mad one around here, not me."

Bligh laughed. "We're all mad," he said. "Just in different ways."

"You know who we have to ask now?" said Carew. "If she's still living in Dona-Jez, of course."

Bligh looked down at his feet. When he glanced up, Carew was still staring at him. Slowly, Bligh nodded.

They waited outside the school until the mid-day break. The playground filled with children, ranging in age from toddlers to early teenagers. Even the previous year, the school had more pupils than this.

There was no sign of any teachers, so Carew and Bligh walked in, through the chasing children and the squabbles and the ragged games of football. Carew looked at Bligh and raised his eyebrows, so Bligh nodded to a door and said, "They'll be in there."

Carew pushed at the door and led Bligh inside. The classroom held a man and two women, seated on miniature desks as they gestured at a UPP news-sheet and argued politics. Madeleine was not one of them.

The three looked up as the door swung shut. Divitt Carew stepped forward to speak, but Bligh beat him to it. "Salas," he said, to the silver-haired man. "You survived." The two women were teachers Bligh had once vaguely known. One of them, he remembered, had tried to dissuade Madeleine from her relationship with him.

Salas Benjennery looked at him closely and then stood. "Fresh air," he said, breathing deeply. "I feel the need for some fresh air." He ushered Bligh and Carew out before him and would say no more until they had walked some distance around the perimeter of the playground. "You are a wanted man," he said to Bligh. "Remember Simmen Oate? No? He was in the 16th with us, in Alyk Ammar's Section. He was asking if I had known you well, only yesterday. We were in the same Section together, yes? We were friendly, yes? Had I seen you recently? Maybe we could all get together if you come back to Dona-Jez - share some beer and stories of the war? He's in the Police now. Friendly reunions are not in his plans, I think. What have you done?"

"Nothing," said Divitt Carew, quickly.

After a short pause, Benjennery said to Bligh, "You limp, Friend."

"But I live," said Bligh. "That's enough."

"Will you tell me what you've done?"

Divitt Carew gave Bligh a warning look, which he chose to ignore. "Divitt thinks I'm part of Merc Domenech's plans to conquer the world," he said, shaking his head.

"Ah," said Benjennery. "The Lord of Soul is looking for disciples ... "

"No," said Bligh, awkwardly. "Equals, perhaps."

Benjennery looked at him with a half smile on his face. "Remember my little obsession?" he said. "My quest for the fantastic? If the propaganda of Domenech's followers is anywhere close to the truth, then I have changed my mind: the death of magic could not come soon enough to please me. If you need help."

Carew looked up and started to speak. "We're looking for Hamm - "

"Madeleine Palmes," interrupted Bligh. "We're looking for Madeleine."

It did not take much for Salas Benjennery to convince them to hide until dark. They took the car out into the hills and waited by a stream through the heat of the afternoon. Warblers made their scratchy proclamations from the hillside scrub and marbled butterflies of orange and brown skipped through the air. It soothed Bligh greatly.

As they drove back into town, Divitt Carew insisted they were making a mistake. "He'll have told his friend, Oate," he kept saying. "You've made a date with the People's Police, not Madeleine."

"Leave me here," Bligh told him, on the outskirts of the town. "I'll find her on my own. You've risked enough already." They were to meet Madeleine in the grounds of the school, as the bells rang for evening communion.

"You can't go on your own, you young fool," snapped Carew, staring bitterly out of his car's split windscreen. "Look what a mess you've made up to now."

A single figure stood at the edge of the playground as they pulled up in the street. They left the car and passed through the school gates. Bligh hurried as fast as his damaged leg would allow, but he stopped short as Madeleine turned to face him. He could see that she had been crying already and he swallowed grimly. He remembered his own conviction that their relationship was finished, but now doubt fogged his mind. He looked into her eyes, but was unable to think.

He longed for the certainties of the past.

He knew he should speak, but he had no idea what to say. He watched Madeleine's tongue flick at her lips, as if she was about to say something, and then she stopped and was looking past him.

"Remember me?" said Carew, with a false lightness, as he caught up with Bligh and the three stood awkwardly in the school grounds.

Now Madeleine looked from one to the other, remaining silent.

Bligh was out of his depth. He turned slightly, towards Carew, who gestured at him and said, "Bligh's not well, Madeleine. We need help."

"I know," she said.

Her voice twisted his insides. He wanted to flee, yet at the same time he wanted to run to her and hold her as tightly as he could.

He stood, rooted to the spot. He swallowed, with difficulty, and - reacting in his own familiar manner - he clamped down on his feelings.

"We need to find Hammad Fulke," said Carew.

Madeleine shook her head. "He's not here," she said. "Not in Dona-Jez. I don't know where he is."

"Do you have any idea how we could find him?" said Carew.

Madeleine shrugged. "We could start with his daughter, Aline."

'So when the people heard His words, they said, as One, "Hail! The Lord: He is come!" And now they did believe it in their hearts, and in their souls.'

- The Book of the World, ch.19, v.8.

"Follow me," said Madeleine. She dipped her head and walked past Carew and Bligh, hair drifting down across her cheek. Bligh stared at her retreating form and then, as Divitt Carew hurried to join her, he followed.

They paused by the school gates as a group of old men worked their way slowly towards the end of the street. Bligh pressed his head against the wall, cooling himself, steadying his pulse. When the old men had passed, the three approached the house of Hammad Fulke.

"But ... " said Divitt Carew, but he stopped before saying any more.

Madeleine knocked gently on the door and eventually they heard a heavy bolt sliding and the handle turned, the door opened. "Aline," said Madeleine, into the dark crack. "Can we come in? Quickly."

The door swung open and the three entered the house. They paused in a poorly lit lobby and Bligh turned to see the closed door being bolted by the woman they had spoken to this morning, the woman with a child's face who had insisted that Hammad Fulke was dead and that they should leave immediately. "I recognised you," she said as she passed Bligh and led them through to a small room lit by a lantern. A leather-bound book lay face down in a chair, a half glass of beer nearby.

Aline took her seat again and her three visitors moved into the room. "I am surprised you were not seized, walking the streets in daylight. I believe knowledge is widespread of the demand for your attentions." She smiled, but it was merely an arrangement of her features.

"She's right," confirmed Madeleine. Her voice sounded tired. "I report to the Police office every morning. One day I was late and they kept me in jail until the evening bells."

"A wonderful thing, the revolutionary spirit," said Divitt Carew.

Madeleine was sitting in the only other chair. Her skin was unnaturally pale and her eyes kept flitting around the room. When she glanced at Bligh he looked down at the floor.

"You want Pappy," Aline said into the ensuing silence. She took a sip of beer and continued. "It was the truth that he left in the war - I was not lying."

"You said he was dead," Carew reminded her.

"Ah." She thought for a moment. "Perhaps for me. In a metaphorical sense. We were very close for a long time. Now that he is gone it is as if I have suffered a bereavement. There is a psychological parallel between the two forms of loss. We were very close, before. Mother died when I was four, you see. I had been in school for a week when I contracted the Tradonis influenza. Mother nursed me to recovery, so it took her instead. Pappy raised me, although he had help from time to time." Here, she glanced jealously at Madeleine, and it was the first time any emotion had shown on her face.

"Where is your father?"

"He spends time at the Citadel. He is trying to convince Queen Minna that Merc Domenech is unworthy of her attentions. He writes to me, but he is less the man he is on paper."

"Do you have his address?"

"Oh yes," said Aline. "I reply to each letter by the first available postal service. He will not treat you, if you simply knock on his door as you attempted earlier today. He is too busy with the Queen. He loves her, you see, although it is an unrequited attachment. I will come with you. There is still room in his affection for his daughter, I believe. How do we leave Dona-Jez? The Police will certainly be observing the roads."

Bligh had thought of that already. Dona-Jez was situated on the crossroads of two main routes, leaving only four exits to watch. He looked across at Divitt Carew and they both smiled. "Check the timetables!" they said together, and laughed at Madeleine and Aline's puzzlement.

They slipped away from the house of Hammad Fulke by a back entrance. "Can we rely on her?" Bligh had asked, as they passed along an alleyway littered with bins and pieces of wood.

"You'll be gone before you have to," said Divitt Carew. "You can leave the risks to the likes of myself. We might not need her, in any case: she's already told us Fulke is at the Citadel." Then, to Madeleine, he said, "Is there somewhere we can stay tonight?"

"Come home with me," she replied.

"It'll be watched," said Carew.

"No one would dare watch my father's house," said Madeleine.

"Is this wise?" asked Bligh, as they walked. "They never liked me."

Madeleine glared at him, suddenly, and he wished he had remained silent. "They would never betray you against my wish," she said in a steady voice. "No matter what you did."

Carew and Bligh waited in the shadows as Madeleine approached the front door. There was no sign of a Police presence, but they would take no chances.

"Do you trust her?" said Carew, as they waited. "I have to ask, you understand."

"I trust her more than I'd trust myself," said Bligh.

When the door opened, they rushed across and suddenly Bligh found himself standing in that wide kitchen, being stared at by Rourigan and Adernis Palmes. Rourigan had once been a man of similar proportions to Bligh, although now he had hunched and wasted with age. He had the face of a fighter, with a crooked nose and glowering blue eyes and a jaw that jutted whenever the situation demanded. Adernis, too, was strongly built, although by comparison with Rourigan she looked almost dainty. Madeleine had inherited her straight, dark hair and her sturdy beauty from her mother, but much in her bearing came directly from her father.

Rourigan drummed his fingers and stared at Bligh as his wife cut bread and meat and drew a jug of water for the table.

"Thank you," said Bligh, awkwardly, as the two left the room a few minutes later. They were the first words spoken since he had entered the house.

Bligh and Divitt Carew ate ravenously. Madeleine sat and watched, sipping occasionally from a cup of water. "Not eating?" said Bligh, eventually. He wished he could think of something better to say.

Madeleine shook her head. "I've not been well," she said, staring at her water. "Not for some time."

"Maybe we could get Hammad Fulke to heal you," said Carew, over a mouthful of cold ham.

Madeleine glanced up with what might have been fear flickering on her face, but she said nothing.

Later, she showed them through to a set of stairs, and then up to an attic room she said they could use for the night. She waited, as Carew went down to wash in the kitchen, and then she was alone with Bligh.

"You left me," she said, poised in the doorway as if ready to escape.

Bligh went over to peer out of the window. He wished she would at least come in and sit down. He turned back to face her. "The war," he said. "We were posted to Huesja."

There was always a moment of horror, when you revealed that you had fought at Huesja, but this time there was something else in Madeleine's grimace. Understanding. The posting had been coincidence: he would have abandoned her anyway.

"I gave you everything you wanted," she said.

He had not wanted that.

"I know," he said. "I took it."

He felt lost. "Will you come to Anasty?" he asked. He did not want her to say yes. He could not bear the thought of seeing her with Hammad Fulke. He had never met the man, but already he could sense his power, his attraction. The thought of bringing Madeleine and Fulke together again made him feel small and inferior.

"Do you want me to?"

He did not know what he wanted, but he still nodded. The thought of leaving her here scared him almost as much as the thought of taking her to Fulke.

They left as the sun was rising. First, they called on Salas Benjennery, who readily agreed to ride in the car with Divitt Carew. "I offered my services," he said, throwing a few things into a leather satchel. "It will be exciting."

It was a short walk from Benjennery's flat to the railway. The four covered the distance in a few minutes and soon Bligh was crouching in the undergrowth, partway up the bank of a steep cutting. Madeleine lingered, as Benjennery and Carew walked away. "Take this," she said, pressing something into Bligh's hand. It was the small pistol she had carried in Comeras. Bligh stared at it as it lay in his big palm. When he looked up she was already striding away and even if the words had come she would not have heard.

Later in the morning, Madeleine would report to the Police as usual; then she would call on Aline Fulke and they would travel by passenger train to the capital. Bligh glanced at a watch he had borrowed from Salas Benjennery. A goods train was due in a few minutes.

He crouched and waited, but he did not worry as the watch's hands edged onwards. He had learned from Black Paul to trust the timetables. It was twenty minutes before the train appeared around the curve of the track. It would have left the goods yard three minutes earlier, but would not gain much speed until after this curve.

The engine edged past him and he saw its driver working at some levers, his mate shovelling coke into the furnace. Once they had passed, Bligh scrambled down the bank and stopped as the wagons rumbled past within inches of his face. Timing his move with well-learned precision, he grabbed a rail and swung himself up. Breathing heavily, he hauled himself onto the little platform at the end of one of the wagons, then settled down for the journey.

The train kept stopping and starting all the way to Anasty. It was almost like travelling in wartime again. Bligh realised that he was back in the capital when the train slowed to cross the River Ana. The bridge was long and low, its masonry heavily scarred by the fighting. At one point, he looked down between the wagons and saw only track between him and the river. He wondered how much longer this bridge would stand without repair. What, he thought, had become of the rebuilding programme that received so much attention when the fighting had ground to a halt?

Bligh jumped the train, tumbling painfully in the dirt, before it came to the goods yard which was its destination. He had learnt, in his time with Black Paul, that goods yards tended to be kept under guard against black marketeers and the hungry. Now was not the time to risk a beating or jail for the common crime of vagrancy.

He walked the streets, believing himself to be safest in a crowd even though it made him feel vulnerable and exposed. Whenever anyone glanced at him he searched his memory frantically to see if he recognised them. He knew they only stared because he stared back, but that did not make it any easier.

Eventually, he came to the riverside promenade where a strip of parkland bordered the River Ana. This was where they had agreed to meet, but not until sunset. He had most of the afternoon to fill.

He glanced across at the eating house and wondered if he would be recognised if he went for a meal. Divitt Carew had given him a few shillings.

He decided against it. He could miss a meal without noticing. Instead, he wandered down to the river, lost in memories of the last time he had been in this place. Soldiers from the Cooperatives or the UPP had lounged here, chewing sugar sticks and cleaning their rifles. Occasionally one of their light field guns would send a volley of artillery fire across the river, blowing apart another wall or - just as likely - failing to detonate. He remembered a bullet ricocheting nearby as he had broken sweetbreads with Madeleine. "Tea?" one of them had said, as if this was how they normally ate.

He looked up and the face of Merc Domenech was staring at him from a poster, slightly larger than life, with fierce eyes and an incongruous little smirk. OUT OF THE MAYHEM! the poster yelled at him, from where it had been nailed to a peeling plane tree. He had seen other posters like this, urging the people to Win The Stalemate and to be ready to Proclaim A New Leader. Some had been signed by the Fool, one of the fringe characters from the Elementalist

prophecies, but others, like this one, went unsigned.

Divitt Carew had told Bligh, during the night, of the relentless rise of Merc Domenech. "The Transitional Government would have him killed," he had said. "But you have to understand: they, more than any, know the value of a martyr, whether in jail or in the ground."

"Maybe they think they couldn't kill him," said Bligh. "If they believe his myth."

Divitt Carew took him seriously. "Some of them, certainly. It's complicated by his involvement with Minna."

Bligh remembered hearing Domenech speak on the steps of the Citadel, denouncing the Queen and the fact that foreign influence should keep her alive and involved in the broking of her nation's power. Yet now she had become a supporter of Domenech and he had stopped attacking her. Perhaps he saw her as a symbol of the authority he craved, Bligh decided. Or perhaps he thought he could topple her from within. "Does she believe he is the Lord of Soul?" Bligh had asked.

"Hammad Fulke would know about that, from what Aline says. She's obsessed with Domenech, certainly. Maybe they just see exactly the same thing in each other: a route to power."

Now, Bligh stared at the poster. "Do you believe it?" he said. "Do I?"

Now that he was in Anasty, he felt that he was wasting his time. He had not blacked out or erupted violently since Abeyat. He knew that he still dreamt, because he would wake up in the night, terrified and soaked in sweat, but the images no longer recurred during the day, confusing him and trapping him into saying or doing things he had not intended.

He knew he was deluding himself, though. He recognised that pulse, somewhere in the depths of his mind. The pressure, waiting to explode across his senses. Hammad Fulke was exerting his influence already: Bligh's fear of his encounter with Madeleine's old love was tricking him into believing that he might be better, that he did not have to go through with this after all.

He shook his head and turned away. A few hundred yards downriver there was a stone bridge. He had noticed earlier that there was a steady flow of people heading across it and into the Old Town.

He thought of following them, losing himself in the anonymity of the crowd, but he remembered the last time he had been in that part of the city. He remembered being a part of that mad panicking mass of people at the end of Domenech's march when anonymity had been no protection from the bullets of the Unified Army of the People's Transitional Government.

But even as he decided against going with the crowd, he found himself walking towards the bridge. He stopped where it left the river bank and pressed his hand against the stone of its high wall, trying to steady himself. Once, the bridge had been used by wagons and motor vehicles - he could see the tram-lines set into its paved surface - but now it was fit only for pedestrian use. He looked towards the middle, where the wall fell away and for half of its width the bridge, too, had collapsed. At this point of narrowing, the crowd packed together and their progress was slowed. As he watched, a small boy was nearly sent plunging into the grey waters below, but at the last moment a hand shot out and yanked him back into the flow of people.

When Bligh reached the bottleneck, he kept as close to the remaining intact wall as he could. If he was Lord of Stone, he thought wryly, he would have nothing to fear from the drop: the Lords' plans would surely not be defeated by the accidental drowning of one of their number.

He walked more slowly than those around him, letting them pass by on either side. Like a rock in a stream, he thought with a smile. He shook his head to see if his God would answer him, but it only earned him a startled look from a woman to his left.

Fear had become dominant in this post-war Trace, he realised. It was the new orthodoxy of the revolution.

He had once thought the Traians to be the most sunny, open people of the entire world. Now, he wondered how he could ever have reached such a conclusion.

There were more posters, here in the Old Town. They were plastered in great swathes across the boarded ruins of the quarter. Some had been posted upside down, or sideways, forming letters and words so that their message was writ large across the city. He saw the hand of the Fool in that, and instinctively he knew that young Gaspar Sech must have taken that role in Merc Domenech's insanity: he had seen them together in Comeras, and on the steps of the Citadel. The boy's native cunning would be well suited to mad poster campaigns and whatever other chaos-rousing Domenech thought appropriate. Last night, Carew had mentioned a raid on the Feorean Embassy in which nothing had been taken, nobody hurt. All that had been done was the distribution of severed chickens' heads throughout the building, in a gesture nobody seemed to understand but which Carew said had terrified every member of the embassy staff. One version even claimed that the Ambassador had woken to find a chicken head staring at him from his pillow and he had only known that it was not a dream when his mistress had leapt screaming from their bed. Only Sech, he thought, could have thought up such a plot.

A crowd of singing women, dressed in long robes of sack-cloth, caught up with him now. They were singing fervently and smiling with the same expression Bligh had once seen on the face of a man lying in the mud on the plains near Comeras. His body had been blown away from the hips down, but his blood was so full of the Doc's Answer that he thought he must be somewhere close to heaven and that the muddy, exhausted soldiers who would not meet his gaze were angels come to bear him up.

Bligh looked away. "What's happening?" he asked a young man at his side.

"We're going to see the Six," he said. "Or so they say. I'm not as sure, myself, but my girl here - " he nodded to a heavy-breasted adolescent a short distance ahead " - she believes, so I go along."

Bligh thought desperately of breaking away from the flow but he did not. He had guessed earlier that something of this nature must be happening. Confirmation of his fears would not stop him now. How, he wondered, could they be going to see the Six if Bligh was not there with Domenech?

He bowed his head and waited as the tail-end of the procession filed in through one of the archways at the base of the old Arena. He could hear the roar of the crowd inside, booming back along the tunnel, mixed in with the pounding of martial music. He had been to an international football match once, between Feorea and Trace. The sound had been similar, although possibly less intense.

He pushed and jostled his way along the tunnel. The ceiling was so low that it would scrape his scalp if he stretched. Ahead, light broke across the people's heads and all the time the noise swelled like the roar of the sea.

At the threshold of the tunnel, when he could look out across the massed heads and bodies that lined the stadium, he paused and checked his thoughts. The pressure was still there, but he felt secure, in control. He sensed the excitement of the crowd, the air of anticipation, but it did not draw him as he had feared it would.

He let the flow of people coax him into the Arena.

He stood on a banked terrace, leaning back against one of the stone walls which he supposed had been built to retain the crush of the crowd. Around him, the noise was intense. People talked and laughed, they cheered and screamed for no apparent reason, and it all built, relentlessly, up.

The Arena had survived, in one form or another, for close to 2,000 years. It had stood through earthquakes and wars and plague. It was older than Jahveism, half as old as The Book of the World. The Civil War had battered it severely, but it would endure; Bligh felt certain it would endure.

The crowd, waiting to see their Lords, packed the circular sweep of terraces. They pressed down into the arena itself, but were held back by a double line of wooden fencing, guarded by UPP soldiers with Feorean guns. Within the line of barricades there was a circular stage, with seats arrayed to the rear and a solitary podium at the front, with a lectern and a microphone. A man in UPP uniform stood there, gesticulating dramatically and talking in a fierce flow, but the noise of the crowd all but drowned him out. They had not come to hear this man, or the music which had preceded him; they had come for the main act, they had come to hear their saviour.

The backdrop of the stage was formed by a high canvas screen bearing a vast picture of the face of Merc Domenech. The portrait was stylised, reduced to two simple tones, the highlights picked out in gold, the shadows and background a seething red. His mouth was open, as if speaking, and his eyes burned with the fever of his madness. Bligh could not understand how he appeared to be the only one to see through to the base insanity of the man. Bligh had a side view of the stage, and he could see, behind Domenech's face, the scaffolding holding it in place.

When Domenech finally appeared, the crowd had already reached a high pitch of excitement. First, more UPP guards appeared at the mouth of a tunnel, to the rear of the stage. At this distance, they looked like ants, or a child's toy soldiers.

The crowd bayed for their hero. Then, when Domenech appeared, the noise somehow intensified.

Bligh watched him as he marched stiffly to the stage and seated himself just below the podium. He held his hand up in acknowledgement, then turned back to gesture towards the others who followed in his wake. Bligh spotted Sadiq Phelim immediately. Then a young woman who held up her hands to the crowd, and to Domenech. This must be Queen Minna; Bligh had seen her picture before. Next came the man Bligh recognised as Alderas Aldivine - the Lord of Air, in Domenech's scheme of things.

And then came three men, who made Bligh straighten and lean forwards, trying to see that he was not mistaken. The first was a man he was sure he had never seen, although he looked vaguely similar to Pozas Cantera. Next came his old

friend Wink Hawley, his hands behind his back, looking around at the crowd and the guards as if he did not believe they existed. Bligh remembered that look: it had fixed on Wink's face as they had gone into battle, a sheer disbelief that the world around him was real. Back at Huesja, Bligh had envied him of that ability. Finally, there came a man who looked tall and awkward. He had dark hair and a heavy frame, spreading at the waist as Bligh had once done.

As he watched this final member of Domenech's circle, Bligh saw that the similarities between the man and himself were only tenuous but they were enough that, should he join with Domenech, he could step easily into this impostor's place.

Now, as the six followers settled in their seats at the back of the stage, Merc Domenech stepped up to the podium. He gripped the sides of the lectern and leaned forward and his eyes swept slowly across the vast crowd.

"Friends," he said, and paused. "Friends ... we have come a long way together." Bligh remembered Domenech's speech on the steps of the Citadel. He shuddered as he remembered the bullets, too.

The crowd had gone magically silent, as Domenech spoke his first words. "But, Friends: there is a long way to go. Blood has flowed, in the land of Trace. Blood has flowed in our fields. Blood has flowed in the streets of our villages, our towns, our cities. If you follow me, and my council of six, there can be no guarantee that more blood will not flow. Indeed. It is likely that more blood will flow. We have not yet won the battle for our own country. First, we must win our own stalemate, the stalemate imposed by those who we thought of as leaders of the revolution. But there will be blood in other lands, too, as the underclass rises up in every nation on this planet!"

Bligh watched him talking. He watched his grip on the lectern, his gaze sweeping from one side to the other, and always, the giant printed screen behind him. He watched as Domenech stabbed the air with a finger or a fist, to emphasise his words, to stir the crowd.

Domenech used everything he could command to drive the crowd wild in his support. He appealed to their class consciousness, whilst ignoring the presence of Queen Minna, her gaze fixed devotedly on the back of his head. He appealed to their national pride with a hand waving behind him to the Queen. He drew references from The Book of the World, but never did he claim, as the Fool's posters did, that he, Merc Domenech, carried the reincarnated spirit of the Lord of Soul. He left that to his audience, breaking off, near the end of his speech, with his hands spread humbly wide, as they chanted a line from the Book. "The Lord is come!" they yelled. "The Lord is come!"

Bligh looked at the people around him. He saw their mouths, opening and closing in frenzied unison.

"The Lord is come!"

Their eyes stared, bulging in their sockets, their necks strained forwards so that veins and tendons stood rigid beneath tight skin. Their hands punched the air as they chanted each word. "The ... Lord ... is ... come!"

He felt the pressure building inside his skull. He did not want to be here. He did not want this almighty barrage of sound breaking across his senses, pounding him, pushing him down, down.

A man turned to him, his eyes mad, like Domenech's. Others turned, stared.

Bligh could not meet their looks. He opened his mouth, croaked, "Is ... come," in time with their opening, snapping mouths. He saw their tongues flopping, their teeth gnashing. "The ... Lord ... is ... come!" He forced his hands to punch the air, in time with the words. "The ... Lord ... is ... come!" He felt sick, he felt scared. He felt as if he had been reduced to nothing and he was being driven by the desire of the crowd, forced into a shape that was not his own. He felt on the verge of defeat, as if he was about to be subsumed. He knew that it was only his paranoia and the exaggerated emotions of this packed Arena, but that made it no easier.

"The ... Lord ... is ... come!"

Domenech stopped the crowd with his hands held suddenly up in the air, his head bowed. "Enough!" he snapped into his microphone.

His single word cut through the chant, so that its returning echoes rung hollowly around the Arena.

"Enough," he said, more quietly. "I am, merely, a servant." But there was a smug ring to his voice, something that broke, momentarily, through Bligh's panic. "We are all servants to a higher cause. We must, all of us, remember that if you are with my council of six, then you are preparing the ground for the Lords of the Elements to lead us all to a new plane of existence, a new world of equality and peace. If you are against us, then you are against the Lords Elemental. Friends, it is that simple." He raised his hands one last time. "Friends," he said and his was the only voice in the stadium. "Friends, we are the chosen ones."

He stepped down from the podium and his spell was instantly broken.

Bligh looked at those around him and they were normal human beings once again. They no longer stared, they no longer chanted and frothed at the mouth.

"The ... Lord ... is ... come," he croaked, but now they only looked at him, pitying him or merely embarrassed. "The ... Lord ... is ... come."

The crowd filed out, but Bligh could not make his feet move. They had grown into the ground, melded with the stone of the terrace.

He looked down at his heavy grey boots, and he could not see where they ended and the ground began. He tried to lift one foot, but it was like trying to raise a mountain, and he was that mountain.

He lowered himself and hugged his knees to his chest. He felt completely drained. He tried but he could not stand again. He closed his eyes and began to rock back and forth, as if that would stop his relentless merger with the stone beneath his feet. "The Lord is come," he muttered, but he no longer knew what the words meant.

He sensed people around him and he opened his eyes warily. In the grey light of dusk, or dawn, he saw the stone terrace, falling away from where he sat. He moved, and groaned at the stiffness which had settled across him like a heavy mantle.

"Are you all right?" said a man's voice.

Bligh looked to his side and a pair of UPP soldiers were peering at him, their rifles held warily at the ready.

"Did you get crushed in the crowd? Is that it, hmm?"

Bligh shook his head, grunted. "Okay," he said, eventually, when he had recovered the use of speech. "I'm okay."

"Here, don't I know you?"

Bligh shrank back into himself as one of the soldiers loomed closer out of the shadows, his teeth startingly white.

"You look familiar. Here, Roddy, doesn't he look familiar to you?"

"I don't know you," said Bligh.

"He's just got one of those faces," said the second soldier. "You know, one of those faces that looks like you should know him, only you never have."

"One of those faces," repeated the first, as if it was a magical phrase. "I suppose so. Only ... "

"What time is it?" said Bligh. He needed to know, although he was unsure of the reason.

"Ask the time! You're wearing a watch, for the sakes of the Lords."

Bligh looked at his wrist and saw an unfamiliar timepiece. "Evening? Morning?" he asked.

"Evening, for the sakes of ... " The soldier stopped and looked at his friend. "This one's had too much of the heat, or the crowd. Maybe we should lock him in a cell to cool off. What do you think, hmm? What do you think?"

Hands gripped him, pulled at his arms. "No, Roddy," said the soldier pulling at him. His breath smelt of drink. "Lets just get him out into the street. He'll have a home, or some friends who'll be looking for him."

"Friends," said Bligh, clutching at the word. He let the soldiers haul him to his feet and then he stood dizzily, until the world settled around him. "I'm okay," he said, stepping down the terrace.

"This way," said a soldier, guiding him towards the tunnel.

They left him outside the Arena. Which way? he wondered. He took one step and then another. He decided to follow the direction his feet had found. It was now quite dark and he felt that he must be late, although he did not know for what.

He found a street he thought looked familiar, but by its end he was lost again. He smelt spices on the air, and the scent of old cabbage and pod beans. He turned back.

Eventually, he found himself sitting on the broken bridge, his feet dangling over the water of the River Ana. He knew he had returned to familiar territory, but he was certain that he had missed his friends, whoever they were. It was late in the evening now, a time when most people would be in their beds.

He could see the strip of parkland from here, a murky area of trees and deep shadows. He pulled himself to his feet and began to walk. So close, he felt that he must complete his task. He should reach the park, at least.

He left the road and walked through dew-laden grass. His crumbling boots were soaked through within seconds.

A man sat hunched on the wall which fronted the river. His feet were over the water, as Bligh's had been up on the bridge. He flinched, as Bligh approached, and turned to stare at him. "Bligh?" he said, uncertainly. "Is that you?"

"It's me: Bligh," he said, the first time he had spoken since the soldiers had evicted him from the empty terrace of the Arena.

Divitt Carew, the man was Divitt Carew.

Bligh felt relieved.

"Come on," said Carew. "The others have been waiting since sunset. We didn't even know if you'd reached Anasty. What happened? You have to understand that we're risking a lot for you."

"I went to the Arena," said Bligh, following Carew, climbing into his little motor car. "There was a rally. Domenech."

"You shouldn't have done that," said Carew, harshly. Then, when he had managed to fire the engine, he added, "You okay, Bligh?"

Bligh said nothing. They drove off, through streets that held only a few pedestrians and soldiers. "We were stopped," said Carew, after a time. "Leaving Comeras. Salas insisted that he had been travelling with me all along, but I don't know if they believed us. They'd clearly had reports that you were travelling with a companion in a blue car. The priests at Abeyat must have swallowed their pride and reported to the UPP, when they realised that I'd fooled them."

Later, he said, "I spoke with Madeleine this evening. She's not well, Bligh. You should talk to her."

Bligh emerged from the semi-conscious state he had adopted since entering Carew's car. Madeleine? Not well? He remembered her pale face, he remembered eating while she sipped awkwardly at a cup of water. "I've not been well," he remembered her saying. "Not for some time."

"Is it serious?" he asked, his eyes fixed on Divitt Carew.

Carew refused to look at him. He stared at the road ahead. "Serious?" he said. "Oh yes, it's certainly serious."

They stopped at a small guest house on the fringe of the city centre. Bligh followed Carew in through the front door and up two uneven flights of stairs. The journalist unlocked a door and waved Bligh through. Inside, Madeleine and Aline Fulke were asleep in their clothes on a huge bed, and Salas Benjennery was curled up on the floor.

Bligh watched Divitt Carew move a chair and then kick off his shoes and sit with his legs stretched, his feet on the bed by Aline's knees.

Bligh eyed the floor, but there was no room for his bulky frame. He squeezed onto the bed and Madeleine stirred in her sleep. He held himself self-consciously for a moment and then rested his head, tentatively, on her lap. He could hear the sounds of her digestion, feel her body moving beneath his head as she slept. He wondered what had happened to them, why he had allowed a gap to open up between them. He wondered if it was possible to heal

such a wound. And then, finally, they were together in their sleep.

4

'Here is the church, here is the steeple;
'Open the door and here are the people.'
- Nursery Rhyme.

"He's had a bit of relapse," he heard someone say. "Went to a rally in the Arena and cracked up again. We were lucky he found us."

His head was on the mattress now, his cheek pressed against the coarse rustic weave of the blanket.

He opened his eyes and squinted.

Sunlight was seeping in through a torn screen over the room's single window. Divitt Carew was standing and talking to Madeleine, who was perched on the edge of the wide bed. The room smelt of sweat and vomit and the heat.

He moved a little, and they both turned to watch him. Instinctively, Madeleine reached out a hand, but it stopped in no-man's land and fell to the mattress.

"You any better?" said Carew. "You were dreaming."

The images hit him like a cudgel. The crowd, the thousands of eyes, fixed on him, piercing him. The feelings of power: the knowledge that he could utter a stream of pure gibberish and these people would take it up as a chant, acclaiming him as leader, or king, or God. "Jah'veh is dead," he kept pleading. "I am merely his Son." And he had tipped his head and raised his hands in modesty, as the crowd began to chant. "The Lord is come! The Lord is come! The Lord is come!"

Cool hands on his brow, a stronger grip on his shoulder, turning him onto his back, shaking him gently.

"I know some first aid." Divitt Carew's words drifted through his consciousness. "But what good's a bandage or a splint for a complete nutter?"

He opened his eyes and Madeleine was glaring past him at Carew. "I'm ... okay," he managed to say. He reached out and stroked the hair away from her face. "My dream," he said. "Flashing back." There was someone missing, he realised. "Salas and Aline," he said. "Have they taken them?"

"They went a few minutes ago," said Carew. "They've gone to the Citadel to see Fulke. Aline wanted to go alone, but I don't want us to split up. Salas said it would be a learning experience." He shrugged. "He's eager," he said. "But I have to confess that three hours alone in the car with him was hard, even for a trained listener."

"Put him in your novel," said Bligh, heaving himself uncomfortably to a sitting position. "You said you were writing one."

"Did I?" said Carew, thoughtfully. "Perhaps I did. Perhaps I will. Come on," he added. "We must leave here before the proprietor starts wondering why three visitors to Anasty should spend the day in their room. The People's Police pay for such information."

"There's no trust left," said Madeleine. "The world has changed."

"No," said Carew. "It hasn't: it's just Trace that has changed. The rest of the world couldn't care a bit, unless their own interests are threatened."

"Feorea armed the revolution," said Bligh.

"No, they armed the Unification Party of the People. When the middle classes vanished, they mostly pretended to be workers and joined the UPP. The Party was always the least radical, the most pragmatic, of the revolutionary factions. Once the middle classes found their confidence again, they used their foreign connections to win support: Feorea saw faces they recognised and took the opportunity to establish a government less evil than either the Army or the real revolutionaries. I told you the war was a racket, just like any other." For a moment, Carew's brash facade had faltered and he sounded bitter. "Come on," he said. "We have to get out of here."

Salas Benjennery found them at the docks shortly after midday. "Tonight," he said, staring at Bligh. "Tonight, Hammad Fulke will heal you."

Bligh thought he should feel something, but instead he just stared down at the froth and flotsam of the harbour and said nothing. The docks were a part of the Old Town, although most of the existing buildings had been erected since the railway had come at the turn of the century. The River Ana opened out abruptly here, so that the opposite bank was half a mile distant. Gulls squawked and yelped over the boats and from their rooftop nesting sites. Terns skipped along on the breeze, pausing to hover over the shallows and occasionally to dive, emerging sometimes with a silver flash of sand eel in their beaks.

"Tonight," Bligh repeated, finally. "Tonight."

"Where's Aline?" asked Madeleine. It was curious, her relationship with Aline. In age they were only separated by a few years, and there was often a jealous, sibling rivalry between them; but also, at times, Madeleine showed an almost maternal sense of responsibility toward Hammad Fulke's daughter.

"She chose to stay with her father," said Benjennery. "When we arrived, the guards held us until Hammad sent word that he would see us." He shook his head. "They greeted each other like parted lovers. I felt that I should not be present. Then he turned to me with that embracing smile of his - " here, Benjennery glanced at Madeleine " - and said, 'I've just come from the Queen, Salas. I think I have met a challenge worthy of my skills and experience. She is obsessed with Domenech. She is drawn to his danger, his sense of threat, and also to his copious charisma.' Then he smiled and said, 'I think it is the sex, myself, but how can one heal such an illness of the mind? Do you know, Salas?' He says the Queen realises he tries to heal her, and she knows he loves her, but she sees his attentions as a game, a diversion while Domenech is busy elsewhere."

"Where do we go?" said Carew. "To meet him?"

"Hmm? Oh, Hammad Fulke has rooms in an old Government building off Al-Santen Square."

"Is it safe?" said Madeleine.

Suddenly, Bligh sensed a trap. Surely the healer would be watched, he thought,

even if Fulke, himself, could be trusted.

"We've come this far," said Divitt Carew quietly. "If Fulke thinks it is safe, then we can only rely on his judgement."

They approached the building through a service alley to the rear. "Pappy told me," said Aline. "Police watch his house from the front. He thinks it amusing."

It was dark, now, and Bligh had trouble seeing where he was going. The alley was littered with refuse and rubble, which only added to his difficulties. He kept thinking that this must be wrong, but he did not know why. They entered a small yard and he peered at Madeleine, to his side, but he could not see her expression. He felt sick.

They entered the building through a heavy door for which Aline produced a key. They passed along a corridor, up a flight of stairs and then they came to a door with light edging where it rested in its frame.

Aline knocked, then entered, saying, "Pappy, we've come."

Divitt Carew entered with Salas Benjennery, followed by Bligh and Madeleine. Aline was hugging a grey-haired man of stocky build and kissing him ferociously on the cheeks. "Pappy," she said, "these are my friends."

The two separated and Hammad Fulke turned towards his visitors, barely glancing at Carew and Benjennery, nodding briefly at Madeleine, then turning his look upon Bligh. "You want me," he said simply. He fixed Bligh's eyes for a long time and then he snapped his head away and turned to lean his forearms on the mantelpiece of an unlit fire. "I don't know," he muttered. "It's a risk."

Madeleine stepped forward and put a hand on Bligh's arm. "Is he too much of a challenge?" she asked.

Fulke looked at her. "No," he said evenly. "But do you want him damaged?"

"He already is."

They spoke of him as if he was a toy, or a household appliance. "I need your help," Bligh said, shrugging his arm free. He stood uncertainly and waited.

When Hammad Fulke finally nodded, Bligh did not know what to feel.

"We'd better sit," Fulke said, waving at some leather-covered chairs and then sliding into one himself. "Aline and Salas have told me about you. I want to know what you think I can do." Now that he had decided to help, his manner had subtly changed.

Bligh looked at the healer, and now his aggression had gone. He wanted to cooperate, to make things easier for Fulke. He glanced at Madeleine, who was watching them both closely. He felt a flicker of his earlier jealousy, but it was quickly banished. "I've been told that I carry the reincarnated spirit of the Lord of Stone," he said. Somehow, the words did not sound as irrational as they had before, circling around in his head. They were better spoken. "I dream like I never have before. I black out and find myself doing things for which I can find no reason. My mouth speaks words which do not come from my brain ... it feels as if they've been relayed from somewhere distant, like ... like a radio set doesn't speak, it's the presenter miles away in his studio. People stare at me, as if they're waiting for something."

"And Merc Domenech believes you are Lord of Stone, too," finished Fulke. "It is a madness which has convinced others," he mused. "Have you thought ... ?" He raised his eyebrows and paused, a little smirk twisting his mouth.

"Are you suggesting that it might be true?" said Benjennery, in disbelief.

Hammad Fulke shook his head. "I am suggesting nothing," he said.

"Am I mad, or am I possessed?" said Bligh, coldly.

"Madness is a matter of degree," said Fulke. "And before tonight is done, you will be possessed. It is the healing process."

"Excuse me," said Divitt Carew. "But I've read of your trial, before the war. How can you heal without belief? You are not a doctor of medicine: you are a faith healer, aren't you?"

"The Gods have no monopoly on faith," said Fulke. "The human psyche has deep resources for the healer to excavate. It is my function to open paths that have been closed to the user, to clear the detritus of an injured brain. Like a doctor who re-breaks a leg to set it straight, I re-open the wounds of the spirit so that they can heal in a stronger way."

"What's happening to me?" asked Bligh. He did not understand. He felt the calming influence of Hammad Fulke beginning to dissipate, and the pressure in his head rising up. "Why me?"

"It depends on your view of the world," said Hammad Fulke, after pausing to consider his words. "Language is merely analogy to the processes of the world, or the processes of the mind. Words are far from perfect, but they are the tool we use to communicate, and so I must try."

"Let me start with the paradox of my own beliefs: I do not believe in the Gods, but I do not doubt that the Gods exist. They are, I believe, the product of a deeply embedded psychological need. A desire, if you like. These reincarnation myths which haunt you so mercilessly, they are the physical projection of the collective will. If people need magic, if they need the Gods to walk amongst them again - and if their will is strong enough - then the Gods walk. Such Gods are as real as any which could be explained in more conventional theological terms."

"I am God," said Bligh, testing the phrase on his lips. Looking at those around him.

"You are what the people want to be God, perhaps. A vulnerable man, with tremendous potential. You are not possessed by some Holy Spirit, Bligh: you are possessed by the needs of the people, stirred by the collective trauma of this awful war."

"Why Bligh?" said Divitt Carew.

"Why anybody? Fortune, chance, psychological vulnerability ... "

"But myth is dying," said Salas Benjennery. "Magic has died with this generation. We are moving into a secular world. There has been an upwelling of religious longing, since the failure of the war, but if you look closely enough you can see that it is desperation. People fear returning to what they rose from. They fear the return of oppression. Look around you: people hope, but they don't believe. They focus on figureheads, instead, as a substitute

for their own inadequacy. But magic is dead."

"And so, perhaps," said Hammad Fulke, "the Lords Elemental can be defeated."

"The masses call it the Prayer of the Body," explained Hammad Fulke. "You may have encountered it."

Bligh nodded but said nothing.

"Stripped of its mysticism it could be considered a crude form of regression therapy. It is a means of opening up the basic persona to the desires of those around, or to the desires of the spirit world, depending on your view. We must open you up, Bligh. We must expose you to the desires of the masses so that we may examine the extent of your affliction. It could be dangerous for you, although my skills and experience should counter your weakness and lack of fight."

Bligh stared at his hands, clasped tightly in front of him. Such a peculiar arrangement of bones and skin. He ignored Fulke's cynicism and his bragging. All he could think of was that he must get through this awful evening and get away from this place, this city. "Okay," he said. "I'm ready."

Hammad Fulke came and squatted before him. Bligh met his look and refused to blink or look away. He thought that Fulke could be hypnotising him, or reading his thoughts, but still he refused to turn away.

Eventually, Fulke nodded and then placed his cool, dry hands on Bligh's head. "Hmm," he said. "Aline. Come here. Feel his conflict, his heat."

Another cold pair of hands settled on his scalp. He felt foolish, but he did not move. He would endure this for Madeleine, he thought. A mark of repentance.

His head began to sweat, but he did not move. After an interval of what seemed like several minutes, first Hammad and then Aline withdrew their hands. They exchanged a glance but said nothing. Bligh felt excluded, but still he did not allow himself to speak.

Hammad Fulke stood and went to a tall cupboard, from which he produced a number of items. "Ignore the religious connotations," he said. "The symbolism appeals to something far more basic in the human thought process." He placed a black iron bowl in the middle of the floor and filled it with kindling and coals. Lighting it with a match he said, "The Fire is our passion and our anger. It has a special affinity toward stone: it produces it, in the depths of the Earth, but also it can be retained by a ring of stones. It is your closest ally." He threw a few small gemstones into the flames, and said, "Stone gives us our solidity and bears the fertility of the soil, but also it can move and break when the ground quakes."

Bligh thought Fulke was taunting him. He did not know how much of his explanation to believe and how much was disguise for what was really happening. He remembered Divitt Carew telling them that all they could do was trust Fulke. He would try.

"The Air is more tenuous," Hammad Fulke continued. "It is all around us. It gives us life, yet we cannot grasp its essence." He threw a handful of herbs into the flames and their scent burst across Bligh's senses, as the gemstones glittered and glowed with the heat and light. "For our purposes we are reminded of its presence by scent and smoke."

Returning from his cupboard another time, he bore a tray with bottles and fine glasses. "Aline," he said, and she rose to pour liqueurs for everyone. Glass in hand, Hammad Fulke surveyed the gathering. "There are more appealing liquids than water," he said, and then drank from his glass. "And more functional ones, but water is basic to us all, as much so as the air we breathe. It is the symbolism that counts.

"More difficult in such a small, forced congregation," he continued, "is the sense of revelry, of high spirits. The element of wisdom and charisma, but also of depression and insecurity. The Soul of the party. The mood. The tension."

Bligh remembered the times he had been present for the Prayer of the Body. All these elements had been there, but it was the atmosphere which had finally taken over and driven the course of events.

The soul.

"What do we do?" said Madeleine. She was looking at Fulke, leaning forward with her eyes alive and glowing. Bligh could feel the tension rising.

Hammad Fulke moved towards her so that their faces were inches apart. Bligh wanted to leap to his feet. He wanted to tear them apart.

He wanted to cry.

"Laugh!" yelled Hammad Fulke, and immediately he tipped his head back and gave a mighty, booming laugh. "Yell! Cry!" he said. "Create the mood!" He laughed again, and, tentatively, Aline made herself begin to chuckle. The noise sounded wrong coming from her, forced as it was. Bligh had never heard her laugh before.

Divitt Carew and Salas Benjennery joined in, Benjennery imitating Fulke in a coarse guffaw, Carew looking uncomfortable, his laugh metronomic and false.

Bligh looked at Madeleine, saw tears on her face. She smiled and shrugged and then, "Hm," she said. "Hm, hm." It was the best she could manage.

Bligh wondered if he was to try, too. He looked around, uncertain. He folded his arms hard across his chest. The sound was beating at him, but he did not feel that he could add to it. He felt himself withdrawing and then Hammad Fulke caught his eye and held his look.

"And finally," said Fulke, an island in this room of madness. "The sixth element must be added. Flux, the source of all change and vigour."

"How?" hissed Bligh, through the laughter, and the shouting.

Hammad Fulke smiled. "Flux is present at the climax. He is change, he is the element of transformation. Of possession."

Bligh felt sick again. He realised that everything was in place and it all depended on him. He did not know what he should do, whether he should try to focus his mind, try to open it, to relax or to centre on the tension of his friends.

He looked helplessly at Madeleine, her tear-streaked face, her hair hanging forward as she rocked back and forth. But she only laughed at him, a manic cackle that stirred some primitive fear in him and made him turn away.

"It's wasted," he said, helplessly, to Hammad Fulke. "It isn't working."

Fulke looked at him, skewering him. He shook his head, slowly. "No," he said. "No, Bligh, it is not wasted."

He swept a hand sharply through the air.

Suddenly Bligh was falling, tumbling away through the layers of his mind. He was on the mountain, running, naked. Cold stone pounded at his feet, but still he ran. He was on the torn plains of Huesja, Domenech ahead of him in a hail of shrapnel and bullets. Their eyes met and Bligh knew that they were bound together. He stood upright, like Domenech, and then blackness descended as a bullet plunged into his thigh.

"Who are you?" A voice boomed through his barriers, broke across his mind.

He ignored it.

He was back at school and Brother Benjahmine was giving him The Lecture. "Your duty is to God, Son of God," he said. "Your vow is one of abstinence and virtue. Your punishment is the Lord's gift to make you strong." The birch cane whipped painfully across his bare buttocks for the sixth time. "Your duty is to God, Son of God. Your vow is one of abstinence and virtue." He had been caught selling sugar sticks to his friends, breaking the Order's Codes of Commerce, and Indulgence. "Your punishment is the Lord's gift to make you strong." The cane struck him for the seventh time. Later, he watched from the dormitory window as his mother walked away across the school yard, having been informed of the reason he had been forbidden to see her. It was the first time she had come to him since the previous year. He could not believe this sad, drooping figure was the same gay young thing from his one photograph. He never saw her again.

"Who are you?"

He did not know what to say.

And then, he felt it rising, the presence that he suddenly knew was so familiar to him. It was a form, or a shape, something that spread out to occupy larger and larger volumes of his mental space, pushing him aside. He tasted the temptation of surrender. He wanted to sink back and give up struggling.

It would be so easy.

"Who are you?"

He felt the muscles of his mouth, his neck, working, but he did not know what they said.

Images seeped into his awareness and he knew that his eyes were open. He was standing precariously by the dead hearth.

Madeleine stared at him, her mouth open a little. Salas Benjennery watched, fascinated, appalled. Even Divitt Carew looked shaken. Nobody was laughing any more. He looked across to where Aline and Hammad Fulke stood, clutching each other, little smiles playing across their features.

Those smiles.

He felt angry. He felt it rising, more powerfully than anything he had known

before. Those smiles. What game were they playing? Whose side were they on? What were they doing to him?

He forced a sound out: what started as an infernal bellow emerged as a whimper.

He swung a hand and knocked china ornaments from the mantelpiece. He swung again and a picture flew from the wall.

The Fulkes were cowering now, but the others had not moved.

He kicked at the black bowl of fire and gemstones and herbs in the middle of the room. Hot coals flew, settling on furniture and carpet. One must have hit Aline Fulke, because she screamed and clutched at her bare leg.

He made a sound and this time it was a roar, as people scurried about, trying to smother the fires he had started.

"Who are you?" demanded the voice.

"Bligh!" he cried back. "I'm Bligh."

"Who are you?"

"Bligh."

"Who are you?" shouted Hammad Fulke.

"Bligh," he said, more quietly now, subsiding onto a leather-covered seat, exhausted. Fulke had deceived him, he realised. The healer had brought out his madness and offered it freedom. If he had told him this would happen, Bligh would never have agreed.

"He had already gone a long way toward curing himself," said Hammad Fulke to his daughter, analysing his case history already.

Bligh did not feel healed, but then, he conceded, he no longer felt as vulnerable. He had won, he realised. He had offered his madness freedom and then he had risen and knocked it back down.

"I can control it," he said, still gasping for breath.

"You could always do that," said Hammad Fulke. "You just needed convincing. As I said, it was merely a matter of - "

The healer stopped and tipped his head to one side. "Visitors," he said, after a pause. "Quickly." He tugged at Bligh's arm with an unforeseen strength. Bligh stood and allowed himself to be pushed towards the door.

The others were there already, filing through, as voices rose from the bottom of the stairs.

Divitt Carew looked down the stair-well and came running back. "Police," he said.

"Peresh will delay them," said Hammad Fulke, but just as he finished speaking a single pistol shot made him flinch and then feet thudded on the stairs.

They hurried along the corridor, through a storeroom and down another flight of stairs. Bligh felt so disorientated that he wanted to stop, but now he knew

that he must not. He pushed Hammad and Aline ahead of him down the stairs, so that he was the last to descend.

The voices were getting closer behind them, as the Police closed on their quarry.

"Out here," hissed Hammad Fulke, pushing at a floor-length window, then cursing when it would not open. He barged it with his shoulder but it still refused to move.

Salas Benjennery dragged him aside and then threw a chair through the glass. It shattered and suddenly there was a voice from the doorway. "Don't move!"

Bligh dived at the policeman, knocking him back into his colleagues in the cramped corridor. He struggled clear and turned back into the room. "Go!" he yelled. "Go!"

He saw Madeleine staggering into the darkness of the back yard, Aline Fulke clutching at her hand. Salas Benjennery made it into the shadows, waited until Divitt Carew had joined him, then moved out of sight.

But Hammad Fulke stood, hesitating, in the frame of his broken window. If he fled, he would be a fugitive, Bligh realised, and he would never see Queen Minna again. But if he stayed ...

Fulke took a step into the darkness and then there was an explosion and he stumbled, fell to his knees. The gun fired again and the old healer slumped forward onto his face.

Bligh stopped, horrified.

A hand grabbed his hair and jerked his head back. A knee or a foot slammed into the small of his back and his feet went from under him. "This is him," said one of the policemen. "This is the one." Someone fired off another couple of rounds into the darkness, but no one went in pursuit of the others.

Bligh lay amongst the broken glass and looked at the still body of Hammad Fulke. "What now?" he said, but nobody answered. "What happens now?"

5

'There is no sin in temptation, the Seer decreed; but when a man succumbs ...

- The Book of the World, ch.31, v.60.

The smell of the prison reminded Bligh of his time in the trenches. Faeces, body odours, mouldering food, the damp earth of the hard-packed floor. The limestone walls had a gleaming, creamy surface where water ran down from the condensation of the prisoners' breath on the ceiling. The only light came from three small, barred openings set high up one wall. Through these windows you could see the booted feet of soldiers and policemen striding past, and those of a black dog with one white foot which kept trotting to and fro, occasionally pausing to poke its greyed snout through the bars. Thin sunlight swept over the men's heads, highlighting their scraggy hair and the flies and motes of dust in the air.

The cell was about six full paces by twenty, Bligh estimated, although it was too crowded for him to test the accuracy of his reckoning. It held more than a

hundred men. Those who were able to stand, whilst the ill and the beaten slumped or lay, taking up more than their share of the floor. Nobody begrudged them this extra space, for a strange sense of camaraderie was in place for most of the time, now that Foul Jake had been subdued.

When Bligh had been thrown in and the heavy wooden door slammed behind him, all eyes had turned on him immediately. "Kick your balls in, eh?" said the heavily built man who Bligh had stopped himself against.

Bligh had been clutching at his injured thigh. "No," he said, straightening and trying not to breathe the cell's foul air too deeply. "It's a war wound."

"I'm Foul Jake," said the man, offering his hand formally for Bligh to shake. "What have you done?"

"Bligh." He shook. "Nothing," he said. "For Merc Domenech my crime is to exist. I am a figment of his madness."

"They'll have heard that," said Foul Jake. "They listen all the time. They have listening devices which burrow under the floor and lie beneath our feet, picking up the vibrations of our voices." He squatted and spoke to the slimy mud floor. "Do you hear me? I said, 'Murderer Domenech is stupid.' Down with the UPP! Long live the Queen!"

He grinned up at Bligh and then straightened again. "They keep records. They know all that we say."

"The Queen supports Domenech now," said Bligh. "She shares his bed."

And so Foul Jake had lunged at him, his hands pressing hard around Bligh's throat, his entire body trembling with rage. He was dragged off by other prisoners, but not before Bligh had felt the ferocious power of his grip.

Now, he fingered his bruised neck tenderly and watched the dog at the bars, sniffing the air and scratching the ground with its front paws.

He jumped, startled, as a hand fell on his arm. He thought it was Foul Jake again and he wondered desperately if his fellow prisoners would come to his aid quickly enough this time.

But the grip was light and was not followed with a disabling kick to the back of the knee or a punch to the kidneys. He looked down and saw that the skin was too dark to belong to Foul Jake.

The middle two fingers were missing from this hand.

"Sadiq," he said, without turning. With a final scratch at the metal bars, the dog jerked its head up and scampered away from the cell window. "I've been waiting."

"I must apologise," said Sadiq Phelim. He had his shoulders raised in a shrug when Bligh turned to face him. Six soldiers were at his back, keeping the curious prisoners pressed back against the walls and against each other. "Administrative confusion," he continued. "You know how it is, here in Trace. Your contact party was supposed to deliver you to the Citadel, but instead they put you in jail. They have been disciplined, of course."

"Of course," said Bligh. "Can we go?" He realised, now, that he desperately wanted to feel the sun shining down and to have clean air in his lungs again.

"Come." Sadiq guided him to the doorway and the soldiers fell in behind them.

They were only in the sunshine for a few seconds, as Sadiq had a big motor car waiting with its engine running; the driver was drumming his fingers on the steering wheel until he saw them and sat upright, to attention.

They settled themselves in the back, with the windows open to blast them with warm, moving air as they passed through the streets of Anasty. Sadiq sat sideways so that he could watch Bligh. "You have been difficult to find," he said. "You have been running away."

"You set the Police after me," said Bligh. "Did you expect me to wait for them?"

Sadiq shook his head. "Trace is undergoing a far-reaching upheaval," he said. "The People's Police is the only agency through which we could communicate."

"They held charge papers against me for desertion. The 'contact party' you mentioned killed Hammad Fulke, and probably the man who answered the door to them. There are other forms of communication."

"We live through chaotic times," said Sadiq. "Error is inevitable. These two were obstructing the Police."

"So was I," said Bligh. "But I wasn't shot."

"That would have been counter-productive." Sadiq smiled. "And anyway, you carry the spirit reincarnate of the Lord of Stone. Even if we had wished you dead, a bullet could not have stopped you. We can become the Gods, Bligh. These other matters are trivial, in comparison."

Bligh suppressed a shudder. "You've been possessed, then?" he said. "Should I call you Sadiq, or Flux?"

"Sarcasm is an easy - but incomplete - defence, Friend." Sadiq lowered his eyes. "I have not been totally submerged, although I have undergone several periods of possession. I feel that it is close, but the time is not yet ready. One can only open oneself up to it, and be prepared."

"When does the time come?" Bligh was intrigued, despite his cynicism. He wanted to know what was intended for him.

"It comes when the Six are together, in union. Now, we have five, Bligh. We await Water, the universal fluid of the living."

"Pozas Cantera," said Bligh, remembering the short Traian from the Lords' Day Festival in Comeras. "So he has evaded you, too."

"It will not be long," said Sadiq. "He is in Anasty, now. Like you, he cannot resist the call. We will establish contact with him shortly."

Bligh had only seen the Citadel from the outside before: the low stone facade which made up one side of Parliament Square. Sadiq explained, as they passed through its entrance and into a series of wrecked courtyards, that it spread back five times as deep as it was wide. "Here, there are the offices of Parliament," he said, "with ministerial residences and administrative quarters." If anything, the architecture was more grand here than seen from the Square. The fine buildings had clearly been ransacked during the war, yet somehow the smashed windows, the toppled and broken statues, the fountains

that were dry or sprayed askew, all added dignity to the spectacle. Sadiq waved a hand vaguely and continued, "The Palace is over there, a wing once occupied by royalty but now home to the leaders of the People's Transitional Government. The Queen lives in the Council section, now, with the rest of us."

Bligh saw how it was possible that, despite his opposition to the new Government, Domenech had been able to establish himself in part of the Citadel. Its scale allowed space for such rivalries, but also, his presence must lead the Government to feel that they retained some influence over his actions. It was a precarious arrangement.

They found Domenech in a long office in the heart of his headquarters. Bligh sensed his presence immediately, like a storm cloud just beyond the horizon. He tried to shrug the resulting sense of doom aside, but it was difficult. For the first time since Fulke had cured him, he sensed the presence lurking inside his head.

"Ah," said Domenech, rising from a seat and spreading his hands wide as if to embrace Bligh. Their eyes met and, briefly, locked and Bligh felt an answering surge of pressure inside his skull. "At last," said Domenech. His curly black hair was longer than when Bligh had last seen him, and waxed ringlets cascaded over his forehead and cheeks. He had the same, thin moustache, the same arrogant manner. The same glimmer of madness in his eyes. "Bligh," he continued. "Welcome to the Council of Six."

Bligh nodded warily, and said, "Domenech." He kept his tone neutral. He did not know what was to happen, but was ready for any kind of trap to be sprung.

At that moment a side door opened and a young woman entered the room, fracturing the heavy atmosphere. She smiled at Sadiq and at Domenech, and then her gaze flickered curiously towards Bligh.

"Minna, dear," said Domenech. "This is our friend, Bligh. We found him in the night."

So this was Queen Minna. She was dressed in a simple cotton dress, which swept to the floor, and a jacket of some light, drifting material which Bligh did not recognise. Her hair was an undistinguished brown, pinned in a loose bun at the back of her head, and her skin was an un-Traian paper-white. Her manner was dignified but unshowy, more that of a gentleman's wife than of royalty.

She seemed insignificant, somehow, unworthy of the war which had so recently been fought over her. "I am pleased that you have come," she said. It was only in her tone that her true status exhibited itself.

Bligh nodded and turned back to Domenech. "Would you mind explaining ... ?" he said, and settled back on the soft couch Domenech had indicated. A servant came in with a tray of savoury pastries and drinks and Bligh helped himself.

"I wanted you here," said Domenech. "We thought it was best."

"Who?"

"The Council, and my advisers. You're not the only one with followers, Bligh. While your disciples are journalists and blaspheming healers mine are seers and political strategists. Oh, and of course, my Fool. Look around you, Bligh. Couldn't you settle to this? Wouldn't you find it easier to promote the revolution with all these facilities to hand?"

"Is that the Lord of Soul speaking?" asked Bligh, holding his sweet liqueur

poised at his lips.

"I have never once claimed to be the Lord of Soul," said Domenech, adopting a well-practised expression of innocence. He smiled, briefly, and Bligh felt a sudden tightness in his chest. "I am a tool of the revolution, that is enough for me.

"The war created people like you and me, Bligh. Either it triggered something within or it just allowed us to prosper and come together. Either way, we are here, with our potential to assume the lead in this revolution."

"You're using it, aren't you? You're exploiting the desperation of the people." Bligh looked at Minna and Sadiq, but they were not touched by his accusation.

"Political power, religious power ... what difference is there?" said Domenech. "It is the change you instigate which finally matters. It's not only Trace: we can lead the whole world into a new state of being, a new political and religious order. We have converts in the Wederian Congress and Presidium. Yesterday a rally closed down the centre of Euardice, delaying the special recall of the Feorean Legislature. We have the power. It is only a matter of time, now."

"Why me?"

"Why any of us? You, because my seers say you are a chosen one, a member of the Six. They have been right so far - I would not contradict them. If they say you are Lord of Stone, then why should I argue? I suggested alternatives but they were adamant. The Council of Six will be unstoppable."

Suddenly Bligh saw the pit that Domenech had dug for himself. He was abusing the prophecies and myths of The Book of the World. He was using them to haul himself to the top, to a position of supreme power. But at some level, Bligh was sure, Elementalism still had a hold on his superstitions and he still believed. Domenech was suffering the madness Bligh had suffered and he was scared that it was true. He was bound by his cynicism and simultaneously by his superstition. He had no choice but to woo Bligh, because somewhere in his mind he was scared to go against the advice of his seers, and the teachings of his infancy.

Bligh had been through all that. He had been ill, but he had been cured. He held a tactical advantage in his disbelief. He looked into Domenech's eyes, pleading through a facade of arrogance. He smiled. "What if I'm the real thing," he said, "and you are not?"

The flash of fear across Domenech's face was proof enough of Bligh's assessment. He settled back in his seat and ate another pastry. He could enjoy this, at last.

"There is no question," said Domenech, recovering his composure immediately.

Bligh glanced at Queen Minna, then asked Domenech, "Why did you have Hammad Fulke killed?"

"What?" gasped Minna, before Domenech could reply. She turned on him, and said, "Is this true? What happened?"

Domenech put his hands out and pushed her, gently, back into her seat. "These things happen," he said. "He struggled with an armed policeman and a gun went off. No! Sit down. We'll talk later."

Minna slumped in her chair and said no more.

"You're the fifth," said Domenech, calmly, to Bligh. "And the most troublesome yet. I expect to hold the first full meeting of the Council of Six before the week is out."

"You've found Pozas?" said Sadiq, eagerly.

Domenech shook his head. "We're close. It won't be long."

"And what will you charge Pozas with?" said Bligh. "Desertion? Breathing without divine approval?"

Domenech looked at him coldly. "Don't be bitter, Stone," he said. "You betray your potential. You are worthy of far better."

"You'll be staying here in the Citadel, of course," said Sadiq. "The facilities are beyond compare. Far better than that decaying little guest-house your friends are using." Sadiq smiled, clearly enjoying revealing the extent of his knowledge.

"Why didn't your thugs take me when I was there, then?" asked Bligh.

They had left Domenech and Minna in the office and were now ambling along an airy corridor. Bligh hoped the two were now arguing about the death of Hammad Fulke. He would like to have stayed to listen, if that had been possible.

"Ah," said Sadiq. "I will admit that you were still a step ahead of us, until last night when you were observed near Fulke's residence. A suite is ready for you. We can prepare rooms for your followers, too. You might like some company at night, no? I remember your Madeleine well."

"Is there a suite for Pozas, too?" Bligh was determined not to let Sadiq get the better of him.

"Of course. Here. We can provide anything else that you should feel necessary."

It was more like a small house than a suite. The lower floor held a living room, with a bar and a small swimming pool and furnishings far finer than any Bligh had seen before. It was lit with a beautiful, dreamy light that filtered in through tall windows with curtains of feathered silk. Upstairs, there were bedrooms, an office with two smiling secretaries and a ringing telephone, and a bathroom that was full of sophisticated equipment and fittings.

"I'd like some fresh clothes," said Bligh, his mind racing.

Sadiq stepped into one of the bedrooms, past the wide, circular bed, and flung open a set of double doors. "Shirts," he said, flicking through the contents. "Jackets. Trousers." He eyed Bligh's crumbling LA boots and added, "Footwear," with a light chuckle.

Thumbing through the wardrobe, Bligh selected a plain shirt, some corduroy trousers, a pair of comfortable-looking shoes. He stripped, before Sadiq, and said, "I'm going to wash." Sadiq watched him through the bathroom doorway, an amused expression on his face. Suddenly Bligh registered what he had said about inviting his friends to stay here. "I can leave?" he asked, surprised. "I'm not a captive?"

Sadiq shook his head, then came in to show him how the controls for the pressure shower worked. "No," he said. "Of course you are free. There can be none freer than the Six. You have seen us here - your fears have been dispelled. You have no reason to flee any more."

Bligh gasped as hot rods of water pounded his tired body. He realised that what Sadiq said was true: he would not run away from this. He was no longer scared of Domenech's traps. He was a free, healthy man and he had learned, finally, how good that felt.

Sadiq left him at some point and he dressed alone. The fine clothes felt strange against his skin but, he had to admit, they did not feel wrong. He looked at his dirty old clothes and went through their pockets before dumping them on the landing.

He followed the sound of voices along a corridor and across an open, paved courtyard into the relative shelter of a vine-festooned verandah.

"Stone's here! Stone's here!" sang the Fool, Gaspar Sech. He looked older now, a patchy tan obscuring some of his acne scars.

Bligh smiled at the boy. "Responsibility suits you, Gaspar. That is, if being a grown man's toy is a form of responsibility."

Sech just laughed at him and said, "He's still scared of us, hah hah!"

Also seated in this area, with the acolytes and servants who seemed to litter the headquarters of the Council of Six, were Alderas Aldivine and Wink Hawley.

Wink was seated on a low wall, with his back to a pillar; a small orange and yellow bird sat twittering on his hand. He noticed Bligh, after a few minutes and smiled. "I thought you were running with the cats," he said. "But they always catch them in the end, isn't that the case?"

"Not always," said Bligh, surprised at how pleased he was to be with his old friend.

Wink blew a kiss at his bird, and said, "Will you ask them why I'm here? Do you know, perhaps? They only prevaricate and obfuscate where I am concerned. Perhaps if I had run, for a bit, they would have taken more trouble with me."

"Does the Lord of Fire have to ask?" said Bligh, settling close to Wink. He looked at the bird now ... and then had to look again, startled by its features: on one side an eye that could have been human, but for its size; and on the other, a mass of pink scar tissue.

Wink shook his head. "That's what Domenech says. I tell him he has the wrong man, but he won't believe me."

"Do you believe you're the wrong man? Aren't you mad, like the rest of us?" The bird. Bligh had to keep looking at it until, now, it paused in its song to look back and then its human eye winked.

"Me?" Wink Hawley grinned. "I've never been saner. Here - ask King Elleo." He clapped his hands and the bird flew away, startled, to perch amongst the vines. "No, not the bird, idiot. The King - here." He gestured at the thin air in front of him. "He talks to me all the time, you see. Can't you see? Oh dear, perhaps you are mad then, after all."

For a moment, Bligh thought Wink was teasing him, but as he looked at him he became unsure. Up in the hills, Wink's ghosts had seemed a clear mark of insanity, but now they just seemed sad. Bligh glanced at the bird as it perched in the vines. Just an ordinary songbird. He shook his head and left his friend with his ghost of King Elleo. Alderas Aldivine was seated on the floor, surrounded by young men and women, all taking it in turns to sniff from a small gold dish they were passing around.

Bligh returned Aldivine's nod, but refused the bowl when it was held up to him. He wondered if the narcotic fumes had pervaded the air all around, affecting his senses, and his mood. Talking to Wink had deflated some of his good feelings and now he returned across the courtyard.

It was late in the afternoon when he emerged on the steps that led down to Parliament Square. He set out through the Old Town, hoping that he could still find Madeleine and the others. He realised that he could have taken an official motor car, with a driver who would probably know exactly where his friends would be found. He was clearly new to this life; ordering people around was something he had never had to do before.

He climbed onto a tram and people looked at him. He realised it was his clothing that drew their attention, not so much its quality as the fact that it was all clean and new. He tossed a coin to the driver as he left, several streets before his stop. Perhaps walking would be better for him, after all.

He felt strangely nervous, mounting the steps inside the small guesthouse they had used as their base. He had spotted Divitt Carew's car, tucked away around the corner, so he knew that they had not yet left.

He heard voices coming from the room, and he paused outside the closed door. He licked his dry lips.

It seemed wrong to knock at the door of his own room, so instead he bumped against it and opened it noisily so that he did not startle his friends too greatly.

Three faces stared at him as he stood in the doorway. Aline Fulke sat on the bed, wearing her usual impenetrable expression, and Divitt Carew stood by the window, his mouth open as if he had been cut off in mid-speech. Madeleine sat at the foot of the bed eyeing Bligh suspiciously.

"They caught me," he said, struggling to think clearly. "I was in prison."

Carew looked at his clean clothes in disbelief and said, "And?"

"And then I was taken to Domenech." What more could he say, he wondered?

"Hammad is dead," said Carew, bluntly. "I went back with Aline at dawn. I thought you would be too, by now."

Bligh saw Madeleine shudder and he felt a tremendous sense of relief that she had finally shown some kind of reaction. "I know," he said. He looked at Aline, and continued, "I never had the chance to thank him."

She turned her near-circular eyes on him, now, and he felt mesmerised, as if she was a snake about to strike. "How much more damage must you cause?" she said in a low, quavering voice.

He resisted the temptation to look away. "How much will it take?" he said, instantly regretting the brutal tone he had adopted. "Where's Salas?" he said,

turning back to Divitt Carew, breaking the eye contact with Aline. "If he was captured I'll have him freed."

There was an expression on Carew's face that made Bligh uncomfortable. It was a knowing look, one of resignation. "He's with some old friends from the Landworkers' Alliance."

"That's illegal," said Bligh quickly. What he had meant to say was that such a meeting would be risky, with the Police surveillance they were almost certainly under, but it came out too quickly and it only served to deepen Carew's sad expression.

"I'm leaving," said Carew. "You don't need us any more."

"Don't," said Bligh. "Don't abandon me now." For a moment, he felt vulnerable again and he saw Carew study him closely and then nod once.

"Come along, Aline," said the journalist. "I'll show you the docks." In a short time their steps had receded and Bligh and Madeleine were alone.

"You've changed," said Madeleine, from the far side of the bed.

Bligh looked down at his clothes. They were already dusty from the streets. She meant more than that, though, he knew. "I'm cured," he said. "My wounds have healed over. I'm a better man now."

"What did Domenech say to you?"

"Nothing that I didn't know already. He helped me understand things a little better, that's all. What about you, Madeleine? Have you changed?"

She smiled a little and he wondered what she was thinking.

"What's wrong with you, Madeleine? Can you tell me?"

She shook her head, chewing at her lower lip and it was then that he realised. He looked at her, suddenly, as if for the first time: her red eyes, her puffy cheeks which he had put down to stress, the way her loose dress hung across her torso.

"You're pregnant," he said, scared by the sound of the word. He had never considered that possibility before; he had avoided thinking about it, assumed that Madeleine knew what to do. There were means of preventing it, he knew, but he had thought them a woman's preserve until now.

She looked at him unhappily, confirming his suspicions.

"When?" he asked.

"I have five months to go," she said. Her voice was firmer, now that it was in the open. Bligh thought she looked better already.

He swallowed. He did not know how to begin thinking about something like this. "What do we do?" he asked, not knowing why he did so. "What do you want?"

"Do you love me?"

She had never put it like this before. A simple question, but still one that he had difficulty grasping. It was an issue he had never learnt to understand, one he had cynically dismissed or, more often, avoided altogether.

"I don't know," he said, finally. He had to put it into words, whether it hurt her or not. He could not avoid it. "I don't know words for what I feel. I don't understand it." He could see that was not enough. "I can try," he added, and wondered if that would be enough. "I can try."

He walked through the corridors of the Citadel in a daze. He thought he had somehow said the right thing. Madeleine appeared to understand that he was attempting to be honest. Expressing his feelings had never been easy for Bligh, at least partly because usually he did not know what they were. And then he had said he was returning to the Citadel. "You're not going back to that place, surely?" said Madeleine. "You can't!"

But he had to. "Isn't that what you want?" he said. He had never understood how such an intelligent person could cling to the ancient Elementalist superstitions, but he at least thought that she would understand the part he was to play. For several seconds they had simply stared at each other, confused and angry, and then Bligh had left. For a short time, back in the hotel room, he had thought things were working out, but now he had even less idea of where he stood with Madeleine than he had before.

He heard raised voices coming from the verandah and he headed there, without thinking. "He can't be!" cried a man. Merc Domenech, Bligh realised, as he came to stand in an archway.

Domenech was standing with his feet apart and his hands in the air and his rage was having a devastating effect on the officer of the People's Police who stood before him. "He can't be!" he cried again, his voice breaking slightly over the last syllable.

Bligh looked at Wink Hawley, who was standing nearby, and raised his eyebrows.

"Pozas Cantera," whispered Wink, moving closer to Bligh so that his voice did not carry. "He's been found." A little, mad smile played around his mouth, and then he added, "He's been found dead, hanging by a rope under a bridge over the River Ana."

Bligh was horrified by the news, but at the same time fascinated. One of the Lords was dead! One of the Lords, themselves! How would Merc Domenech explain this, he wondered, as he watched the desperate look on his enemy's face and smiled. How, indeed?

6

'And so the Lords died, that they might live again when the need returns.'
- The Book of the World, ch.86, v.20.

They brought the body of Pozas Cantera into the Council quarters a short time later. Bligh watched as the stretcher was carried across the verandah and into a small room which suddenly took on the air of a chapel.

Domenech had disappeared, but now he came back out of his office as Minna watched him anxiously from the doorway. "It's not him, is it?" said Domenech. His voice leapt and jumped in a vain attempt to sound light and his emotions seemed to be overflowing, so that they twisted the whole atmosphere. "It's not him."

Gaspar Sech pulled the blanket away from the dead man's face and leapt back, sniggering madly.

Bligh had only seen Cantera from close quarters on one occasion. He did not know if this corpse was his or not. Men always looked different, dead. He leaned forward to get a better view. The man was shorter than average, with blue-tinged, leathery skin and thinning brown hair, flecked here and there with grey. His head was tipped to one side so that his chin rested awkwardly against his shoulder and black friction burns were exposed on the near side of his neck. His eyes were open and they stared out across the small room, their line slightly crossed as if trying to focus more clearly.

"It is Pozas Cantera," said Sadiq, softly. He put a hand on Domenech's arm, but withdrew it as Domenech flapped angrily.

"But it can't be him," said Domenech. "This is a trick, a plot!"

Bligh looked at the body, laid out on the table. He should not have hung himself from a bridge, he thought suddenly. Surely a more fitting suicide for the Lord of Water would be to throw himself in to the River Ana? He looked at Domenech, whose lip twitched as he tipped his head towards a whispering Queen Minna.

Bligh decided to say nothing. The overwrought atmosphere was doing strange things to his head. Suddenly, he had to get away. He backed out of the room, crossed the verandah and then he had to stand for a time to regain his breath. His long arms wrapped themselves around a stone pillar and he recalled the end of the rally at the Arena: his feet melding with the stone, anchoring him to the spot. Now, he felt the stone blocks of the pillar merging with his flesh, and he knew that his madness was still close to the surface, ready for the first faltering of his defences.

And then he sensed a presence somewhere close. He felt it as a pressure wave, a sudden expansion of the air around him. "Domenech," he said, without turning. "So it's all over."

"Stop toying with me," hissed Domenech, pulling at his ringlets. "When will you understand the truth?"

"Truth?" Now, he turned, moved away from the column of stone.

"That we are the physical embodiment of the prophecies contained within The Book of the World." He had said it at last: he believed he was God.

Bligh smiled sadly. "You're ill," he said, feeling for the first time some degree of sympathy with the man before him. "You need help."

He turned to go, but for some reason his limbs would not move. He tried again but his legs, his arms, were fixed solid, each muscle locked against its neighbour.

Then he saw Domenech's expression: an intense frown of concentration. Bligh heaved at his muscles. His foot moved an inch and as it did so Domenech's expression wavered.

Domenech was blocking him! By some mental feat he was fixing Bligh to the spot.

Bligh struggled.

He fought for control until the sweat ran from his face. He closed his eyes and hauled at his limbs with all the strength in his body.

And then he paused, and looked again at Domenech's expression, the outward display of the immense effort it took to exert such a hold. Whether it was some kind of magic or a mere hypnotist's carnival trick, it was clear that Domenech would not be able to sustain it for long.

Bligh started to laugh and instantly the hold was broken. "Magic is dying," he said. "We're moving on: we don't need the old beliefs any more. When will you understand the truth?"

Bligh turned and walked casually away, trying to imagine the expression on Domenech's face. He made it all the way back to his quarters before, suddenly, his legs buckled beneath him and the rich carpet was inches from his face, his stomach heaving uncontrollably.

Sleep was not easy that night. When he succumbed, he dreamt of madness once again. Only this time, he was not running over his mountain, being watched by a desperate, yearning crowd. This time he was high above it all, watching the pathetic figure of a man bounding from rock to rock, as a huge crowd pressed together to watch him, to touch him. And then he was back at school, showing his mother - not the weary mother of experience, but the gay young thing of the photograph - where he slept and where he worked and then, mischievously, where he kept his illicit supply of sugar sticks. She smiled at this and laughed and, just before she went, she asked him if he could manage to love her, despite all the grief she had caused him. "Of course," he said, wondering why she needed to ask, and he looked into her eyes and realised that they were just like his own. Then he felt the world around him skip and he was looking at Madeleine and she was saying, "Of course, love. I've been unwell for some time, now."

He opened his eyes and, for a moment, he wondered where he was - who he was. Then it came back to him and he thought that the time had come to leave this madhouse and try to forget it all, but he knew that was impossible: experience, and guilt, cannot simply be erased at will.

He went out, past a secretary who smiled and greeted him as if she had worked in his employ for years. He plunged into the pool, shocking free any last vestiges of sleep.

The verandah was crowded this morning.

Wink Hawley was there, talking to his birds and his ghosts. Sadiq Phelim and Alderas Aldivine were chuckling over a pipe belching a creamy smoke which smelt of pepper and pervaded the whole atmosphere. Domenech and Minna were standing in the doorway, looking on into the small room where Pozas Cantera lay at rest. And all around were the followers and sycophants. Men and women stood and sat, consulting occasionally with a member of the Council or with each other or one of the many who came in and out of other offices and corridors.

"What do you think, Bligh?" said Sadiq, snagging Bligh's sleeve and thrusting the pipe up towards him.

Bligh put the pipe to his lips and breathed in deeply. Instantly, he was submerged by a wave of energy, a rushing of sound and colour, a sense of excitement and anticipation. He passed the pipe on to the Fool, who had just come out from one of the offices. "I think of many different things," he said

in a patronising tone. "And sometimes I try to think of nothing at all." He felt his senses beginning to settle again.

"No, you misunderstand," said Sadiq. "Alderas has an idea. A way of spreading the revolutionary message. I think it's misguided."

Alderas Aldivine grinned at Bligh. His eyes were glazed and his lips moist and, for a startling moment, Bligh was reminded of the look on the dead face of Pozas Cantera. Then he spoke. "We should paint the city red and gold. We should imprint it with the mark of the Unification Party of the People. The revolution could not lose, then. Don't you think?"

Bligh realised that Aldivine was right on the edge. He wondered what Domenech would do if another member of his Council opted for suicide, or found his end in some other way. He shook his head.

A man, who had been sitting with them raised a hand. He was one of Domenech's seers, one of his disciples. "It would be somewhat impractical," he said. "Although the spirit of the suggestion is admirable, if I may say so."

"No, no!" said Aldivine. "We would do it in stages, of course."

"Of course," Bligh said, and turned away, but Domenech was there, his eyes fixed on Aldivine.

"It would be a gesture," he said. Bligh stepped back. This morning, Domenech's air of madness was more powerful than ever before. Bligh recalled his last encounter with him, and the aftershock of fear; it made him feel vulnerable this morning. "It would be symbolic," said Domenech. "Fool!" His voice was suddenly harsh and he looked around the verandah, searching for young Gaspar Sech. "Fool. Come here. Air has a plan. Look into it immediately."

Sech came trotting across obediently, but there was a hint of resentment in his expression, Bligh thought.

Domenech straightened, looking momentarily lost.

Bligh spoke before he had time to wonder if now was the right time to push Domenech further. "What do we do about Pozas Cantera?" he asked, in a conversational voice. "It really is a bit of a drag, isn't it?"

Domenech turned on him, but Sech spoke first. "I've been hearing voices," he said. Bligh had to admire him: he never stopped trying. "Voices in my head. Sounds like a big, big voice is booming down at me, trying to tell me something." He smiled, as if he thought he was being clever. "Do you think it might be me?" he asked. "Do you think the Lord of Water has chosen me?"

Domenech looked at the boy, and then, in a sudden movement, he slapped him across the cheek with the back of his hand. "You blaspheme!" he snapped. "Enough." He looked at Bligh and continued, "I know what you're doing, but it won't work. There can be no divisions amongst the Six. Not when it matters. Your mischief may amuse you, but it is insignificant."

Bligh felt as if Domenech had slapped him too. He touched his cheek and it was throbbing, numb.

"Water will return," Domenech continued. His voice was growing calmer as he spoke. He was pulling himself up from the edge of insanity in a process Bligh knew well. "It was always possible that one of those chosen to carry the spirit of one of the Lords Incarnate would prove unworthy. I am surprised it

was not you. Events are unfolding already, though. Lord of Water will not be far behind. Last night I established a panel of seers to seek Him out. Any possible candidates will be brought here to the Citadel, so that we may be ready."

"And if they should resist?"

"The right man will not resist for long - you are evidence of that." He chuckled. "And anyone who tries to interfere with the process will be shot. There is a lot at stake."

"Oh yes," said Bligh. "Of course."

Domenech started to leave, then paused. "Don't forget," he said. "Tomorrow's first meeting of the Council of Six will proceed as planned. History does not wait on the uncommitted."

Bligh had forgotten about Domenech's meeting. He was surprised that it was still to go ahead.

Domenech marched away to talk with two of his advisers. Bligh turned to Sadiq and Alderas and beckoned for Wink Hawley to join them. He noticed Domenech watching them curiously and he stopped himself from smiling with satisfaction.

"What is it?" said Wink, lowering himself to sit cross-legged on the floor. "What do you want of the old chap, eh?"

Bligh looked at each of them in turn. "It's close," he said, after pausing to build their anticipation. "I can feel it growing."

He had their attention now.

"What do you want us to do?" asked Sadiq, who was studying him closely.

"We push," said Bligh. "Let ourselves be submerged. Taken over." He saw the fear on Aldivine's face, the confusion on Wink's, the cynicism on Sadiq's.

"Why now?" said Sadiq. "What game are you playing? Why have you changed your attitude?"

Bligh met his look and nodded slowly in acknowledgement. "Can't you feel it?" he said. "I don't claim to like any of this." He jerked his head at the people around them, and noted, in that instant, that Domenech was still watching the four closely. "And I don't claim - like some - to know what is coming. But I do know that it must be preferable to whatever Merc Domenech has in mind."

Sadiq was still watching him, still cynical.

"We should let the Lords decide," Bligh concluded. "And not Merc Domenech."

Domenech left, with Minna and his advisers, but not before Bligh had seen the apprehension on his face. He looked at the other three, but they were less affected by what he had said. Sadiq still thought he was playing games, although Bligh felt that he had penetrated his barriers a little. Alderas Aldivine was so intoxicated that he would grasp anything anyone said and believe it with all his heart, but a minute later it would be gone. And Wink Hawley ... Wink was talking to his ghosts again, too lost in his madness to help Bligh undermine what Domenech was trying to create.

He stood and headed out across the courtyard. He did not know what he had been trying to do, other than to stir doubts and conflict, but he knew he had failed. He did not know why he was here any more, except that he was unable to leave while Domenech's madness drove him on to ever greater heights of perversity and ... and evil.

Bligh lowered his head as he entered a passageway which led from the courtyard out to where the official cars were parked. He did not see Gaspar Sech until he had collided with him and they had sprawled against opposite walls of the passageway.

"Uh," grunted Bligh. "Sorry," he said. "I ... " He saw the brief flicker of hostility in Sech's look, followed by the manic, lop-sided grin and shrug. One side of the boy's face was reddened where Domenech had struck him and there was a spot of blood where a jewelled ring had broken the skin. Bligh instinctively put a hand to his own cheek.

"He's using you," he said, desperately, to Sech. "Can't you see that he's just using you? Like he used the crowd in Parliament Square at the end of his Six Day March - you're expendable, Gaspar. He doesn't care. When he's bored with you he'll find himself another Fool - Trace is full of them."

Gaspar Sech just watched him through slightly narrowed eyes. The idiot grin never left his face. "Don't worry," he finally said. Bligh was startled by the tone of pity in the boy's voice. "Don't worry so much, because Domenech could like you just as well as he does me and Sadiq. You shouldn't be so angry at him all the time - you just have to trust in him."

Bligh was left speechless, leaning against the wall of the narrow passage, as the boy nodded at him and then trotted back along to the courtyard, humming one of the little tunes he used to hum in the trenches when everyone else was trying desperately to be quiet.

Bligh took an official car to the small guest-house where the others had been staying. He felt awkward, issuing his instructions to the driver, but it was the quickest means of transport. The sense of relief, when he spotted Divitt Carew's motor car in the street was as intense as any feeling he had known. He leapt up the narrow staircase, three steps at a time, but the room was empty.

He tugged at a wardrobe door to make sure that their bags were still there. They were. He peered down from the window, but saw no one he wanted to see. He sat on the bed, his head in his hands, and wondered what he could do now.

Seconds later, the door burst open and Salas Benjennery stood with soap over half of his face and his razor thrust forwards into the room. He saw Bligh and straightened, self-consciously. "I heard someone," he said. "I thought ... "

"I know," said Bligh. "I hoped you were still here. I need your help."

"What is it?" said Benjennery, smearing the soap across his chin with the back of his hand and then fumbling in a bag for a shirt to wipe his face clean. "I promised that I would do whatever I could. What is it?"

> Before leaving the guest-house, Bligh had asked about Divitt and Madeleine. "They're with Aline," Benjennery had told him. "Madeleine promised to show them an eating house where the two of you had once eaten. By the Ana. Do you know the one?"

Bligh had nodded and left Benjennery to his unfinished shave.

He tried to think, as he walked back through the edge of the Old Town towards the eating house. He tried to work out if what he was doing could possibly be considered right. Around him, horse-drawn wagons rumbled by, loaded with sacks of flour or crates of dried meat. Men sat on top, with rifles cradled on their laps. The shortages were still severe, for the ordinary people of Anasty. It was easy to forget, in the sheltered confines of the Citadel.

He paused on the narrow strip of parkland. He did not know what was right any more. It was too much for him to handle. All he could do was rely on instinct, but even that could be wrong, he supposed.

He saw them, seated on the terrace where no one else would sit, back in the time of the Civil War. Only he and Madeleine had dared.

Now, people sat about at the stone tables and benches, laughing and gossiping. Old men sat over their cups of anise tea, staring solemnly at those who were now quite open about being able to afford the price of real food at eating house prices.

The three sat to one side of the terrace, over steaming cups of tea and a news-sheet which Divitt Carew had folded neatly down the middle. Aline spotted him first, and she lowered her head and spoke to her two companions.

Madeleine looked across instantly. Carew took a steady drink from his cup before turning slowly to study him.

Bligh stepped over a low wall and sat on the bench opposite.

"We've decided to leave Anasty," said Aline, breaking the silence. "Madeleine and I will take the train this afternoon."

Bligh looked at Madeleine, but she only stared into her cup. He looked at Divitt Carew instead.

"Oh no," said Carew. "I'm staying. My work is here. I'm a journalist. I could come up with an interesting story, you know. A man who threw away everything when he became involved in the scheming of a mad dictator. Sounds familiar?"

"I'm not involved," said Bligh.

"No? Then will you go back to Dona-Jez with Aline and Madeleine?" asked Carew. "No? I didn't think so. I was wrong about you. No commitments has always been my motto. I should have stuck to it. I don't like being wrong about people."

Bligh began to panic. He looked at the three, desperately, separated from them by a stone table and three steaming cups. "Can't you see?" he demanded, trying to think how he could put things, how he could explain himself. He had hoped that Madeleine would have had time to think, overnight, about what he had said, and that she would make things easier now. "Why must you all tell me what to do? Can't I make my own choice this time? Can't I?"

Now, Madeleine looked up. "Oh yes," she said. "And so can we." She stood and waited for Carew and Aline to join her and then they walked away from the terrace, away from Bligh.

He watched them go, confused and distraught. Had he not explained to them? Did they not understand him, even now?

He met Salas Benjennery and his friends from the Landworkers' Alliance as planned the following morning. "They didn't understand me," he said to Salas. "I tried to explain but they wouldn't let me start." Benjennery clasped him by the arms and embraced him cautiously, as if it was an unfamiliar gesture. His caution was not born of embarrassment, though, it was a more primitive reaction than mere social nicety. Salas Benjennery was simply being wary of the wedge of high explosives strapped to the side of Bligh's rib-cage. It was a sensible precaution.

"I'll do all the explaining for you," he said. "They will remember you as you are and not as their grief coloured you."

"You'll provide for Madeleine ... ?"

"Friend." Benjennery smiled. "For what you are about to do the whole world will provide for Madeleine and your child. But yes, I will be their protector. Of course I will do that."

He thought, as he left Benjennery in the small basement the LA were using as headquarters, that he could never succeed. He was scared and he kept wondering, Why me? Why me? But as he walked through dusty street after dusty street, and the wagons passed him by and he saw the children playing in and out of their houses, their parents looking on ... as he saw all this, he grew calm, resolved in his purpose.

The bomb would explode fifteen minutes after the first meeting of the incomplete Council of Six was due to start. "Use a trigger," Benjennery had urged him. "Something you can control."

But Bligh had just shaken his head and said, "I couldn't. I could do it to Domenech, I could do it to myself. Quite easily. But the only time I can guarantee being close to Domenech is at this meeting and there will be others there - Wink and Aldivine, and even young Sech. I'd never be able to release the trigger. This is the only way I can do it."

Benjennery had shrugged, and pressed him no more.

He entered the Citadel and the guards let him through, as they had been ordered to do. He nodded back at them. He felt calm now. He felt as if everything was over already, and he was simply going through the motions. He hoped that Madeleine, and perhaps Divitt, could be made to understand, but he no longer cared any more. He was blank, a machine. He crossed the courtyard one last time, and there he came across Sadiq, seated on the ground with his hands clenched together and his eyes tipped upwards. Bligh stopped and stared and eventually Sadiq's eyes rolled down and he looked at him. "I'm nearly there," he gasped. "Nearly there. I spent all night in a dream like none I've ever known. I can feel His presence, I can feel His touch!"

Bligh shook his head. Sadiq was as mad as any of them. "Have you ever considered the possibility that you might be wrong?" he asked.

For a moment, Sadiq looked as if he had been wounded. "You said ... you said we should push, to let the Lords take hold. You said ... "

Bligh saw the torment on Sadiq's face. He knew what he was going through, he knew how much it hurt. "Push if you like," he said, and walked away.

He waited on the verandah, watching the time drift away on a clock that stood

in the room where Pozas Cantera still stared miserably into empty space. Eventually, he made himself stand and head for the chamber where the Six were to meet.

He passed Queen Minna in the corridor and something made him stop and nod in greeting. He thought of Hammad Fulke and instantly he felt a kind of sympathy towards her. She had lost so much. She seemed too young to bear such a heavy weight.

"What?" she said. "What do you want?"

Away from Domenech, she still carried the authority of a born leader. Bligh shook his head. "Stay away," he said. "Just keep away from the meeting."

She looked at him strangely and he thought she had understood. Then he glanced along the corridor and saw the Fool, hovering in a doorway, watching the two of them with his lop-sided, boyish grin. Bligh looked away. He felt that things were beginning to slip away from him, but he did not know why.

He entered the council chamber and went to stand by a tall, leaded window. Wink Hawley tried to speak to him, but Bligh refused to respond. You cannot get to me like this, he wanted to cry, but instead he stared at a blemish in the glass, moving his head to see how its distorted ripples changed in the light.

He sensed the change of atmosphere when Merc Domenech entered the room. He glanced at his watch before turning. It was a few minutes before the meeting was due to start, a few extra minutes for him to endure.

Domenech was staring at him, smiling, as Queen Minna passed behind him and made for a chair near to the head of the table.

When two soldiers entered the room in Minna's wake, Bligh realised that his plans were in ruins.

"It's time for your games to end," said Domenech, and everyone in the room turned to look at Bligh. The soldiers had their rifles trained on Bligh's chest.

He looked at them, and at Domenech. "What ... ?" he said, faltering. "What do you mean?"

Domenech walked around the table and came to stand before him. He stared into his eyes and it was as if Bligh's blood had been replaced by ice. "What games?" he managed to repeat.

Domenech reached out and patted Bligh's arms, his hips, his trouser pockets. Then he moved back up and his hand stopped over Bligh's chest. "What's this then?" he said, and Bligh knew that he no longer had any chances left.

But instead of reaching inside Bligh's shirt to examine the pack of explosives, Domenech's hand slid into the pocket of his jacket. "I thought so," he said. "I thought so." His hand emerged with Madeleine's small pistol cradled in his palm. "Such a small weapon," he said.

Bligh was stunned. Did he still have a chance, after all? "But enough," he said, harshly. He stepped forward, and as he had hoped, Domenech shoved him back with a firm push to the chest. As Bligh sprawled against the wall, Domenech turned away, waving the little gun in the air.

"Who told you?" said Bligh, his mind desperately working to produce ways of delaying Domenech, keeping him within range. "Was it the Fool? Hmm? Did the Fool tell you?"

Domenech looked surprised. "The Fool?" he said. "No, it was Minna, of course. It was very gallant of you to try to warn her, however clumsy your attempt. But Minna - " he glanced at her now, with a tender smile and a flash of the eyes " - Minna has learnt where her loyalties should lie. Some," he added, "still have that lesson to learn."

Domenech stepped forward, the pistol still resting in his palm. "As we're talking about the learning of lessons," he continued, "I am not beyond discovery, myself." The madness in his eyes was a pulsing, living madness now. Domenech leaned forward and Bligh saw that his whole body was trembling. He thrust the pistol into the pit of Bligh's stomach so that metal ground against his ribs and he gasped as the air was snatched from his lungs. "Do you want to know what I've discovered, Bligh? Shall I tell you?"

He waited, until Bligh had grunted his agreement.

"It was Pozas Cantera who taught me my lesson," he continued. "He demonstrated that one who carries the Holy Spirit is still a physical being, with weaknesses and failings. But if the carrier dies, the spirit of his Lord will always endure and come back to walk the Earth in another form, another body. Perhaps the Lord of Stone would be more effective if He was pushed into a different host. What do you think, Bligh? What do you think?" He ground the gun harder into Bligh's stomach and waited.

Bligh looked into his eyes. "I think," he said. "I think you're madder than you've ever been. I think you're sick. I think you're a stain on the human race."

But Domenech merely smiled at him. "You're unworthy," he said. "I think you should go now."

And then there was an almighty crash and for an instant Bligh thought that his bomb had detonated early. Domenech threw his arms up into the air and turned as Gaspar Sech rushed into the room with a rifle in his hands. "Lords!" the Fool cried. "He wants to kill you!" He fired his gun across the room, and Bligh threw himself to the floor.

There was a gleeful madness in Sech's eyes. He was saving his master, he must have thought. He was earning his place at the table of the Council of Six, he must have thought. He fired again and then his expression changed to one of surprise as a soldier charged him from behind, knocking him to the floor.

Bligh looked around in confusion and then he saw Merc Domenech, lying nearby. Domenech was staring at him, accusingly, and a trail of blood came from his mouth, ending in a small pool on the paved floor.

Chaos had descended on the chamber the instant Sech fired his first shot. Now people rushed about, soldiers waving guns and shepherding Minna and Wink and Sadiq out to safety. Bligh closed his eyes in fear as one of them squatted next to him. "You have to get out," the soldier said. "He could still be dangerous." The soldier gestured towards Gaspar Sech, who was writhing on the floor, pinned down by the weight of three more troops.

Bligh looked dumbly up at the soldier and then accepted his helping hand. He looked at his watch and then, suddenly he remembered the bomb. He tried to stay calm, as he left the chamber and passed along the corridor, crowded with

worried advisers and soldiers, awash with confusion. He hurried his pace as he drew clear of the chaos and finally, as he emerged on the steps at the top of Parliament Square, he broke into a loping, uneven run.

He had no time, he was sure he had no time.

He looked around and everywhere there were people, pressing close, staring at him. He ran down a side-street but had to dodge heaps of linen and tall baskets and stalls with food and all around him, people turned to watch.

He felt like a stone cat on Festival Day up in Comeras. Running like mad, but always there were more people around each corner. He could not get away.

As he ran, he worked at the tape beneath his shirt, loosening the binding that held the bomb in place, but still he could find nowhere to dump it, nowhere that was without people to be damaged.

At last, he reached the docks, the harbour where the River Ana opened out into a deep bay. He pushed his way through the crowd, more people than he could ever remember seeing here at the docks. He pushed and barged and all the time he worked at the bomb's bindings.

Finally, he collided with the railings and ahead of him there was only water. He heaved the bomb from his shirt, arched his aching back and threw the device as far as he could, out over the churning water, past gulls that squawked and yelped, out into the waves of Ana Bay.

He crouched, arms wrapped around his head, but nothing happened. He straightened cautiously, always expecting to hear the blast. Eventually, he checked his watch and he saw that the bomb should have detonated more than ten minutes ago. He looked out at the waves and the gulls. He remembered the failure rate of the Traian artillery during the war and he shook his head slowly in disbelief. Was it over now? he wondered. Was it all, really, over?

1

'When all affiliations to false Gods and Idols have been repent, then shall the true Saviour, Jah'veh, God, Son of God, be reborn to walk among His children.'

- The Holy Word of Jah'veh, bk. 5, 1.184.

Bligh sat on the terrace, looking out across the abandoned valley which had become their home. Already, the cold winds of winter were coming and the streams had dried up as the upper reaches of the Ephedreal Hills froze dry.

Dona-Pasja was a magical place, in a world without magic.

Natural caves, dissolved out of the limestone hills over centuries of seepage of groundwater from above, had been tamed and sculpted by the Traian people, more than five hundred years before. The village had grown, since then; when the supply of natural caves had run out, new caves had been excavated, their interiors cut square with the straight walls and angles of modern living.

Bligh preferred the older cave-houses, like the one he sat before today. From the outside, they looked the same as the newer ones: the cave-mouths had been filled with shaped rocks and local lime mortar until only a doorway and a few narrow windows remained. The walls were so thick that the temperature inside stayed constant throughout the year. Each room in the older dwellings had walls that curved, polished smooth by generations of bodies brushing past, until only the ceilings retained the roughness of the original stone. Seats had been carved into the walls and fresh water flowed through channels that linked each house of the village with its neighbour. It felt an appropriate place to settle, Bligh had thought, when they first arrived here.

Through the open doorway, he heard the voice of Aline Fulke but her words were unclear. He did not stir to find out what she had said.

Salas Benjennery had chosen not to leave Anasty. "Things are changing again," he had said. The Landworkers' Alliance was still technically illegal, but it was re-emerging as an influence in Traian politics. "I have to play my part - you must understand that." Bligh had.

Divitt Carew had driven them up here into the hills in an Army truck he had requisitioned amidst all the chaos that followed Domenech's demise. But he had chosen not to stay. "I'm not the worthy type," he had explained, just before he left. "And there are stories to be written all the time - this could be my big chance."

Bligh looked up from his reverie as Madeleine - so statuesque at this stage of pregnancy - came out to join him. She smiled tiredly and sat nearby.

"Are they all right?" he asked, and she nodded. Inside were the three survivors of the Council of Six. They had been here for over two months, but little progress had been made. Sadiq Phelim had been virtually catatonic for the entire time, unable to cope with the shattering of his illusions. Alderas Aldivine was an enigma, apparently rational at times, but unable to talk about anything that had happened; Bligh thought Aldivine might be the sickest of them all, but he knew he should leave such judgements to Aline. Wink Hawley, at least, was happy. He had his caged bird and his ghosts for company; that seemed to be all he needed.

Bligh knew that it would be, like so many things, a matter of time. He had been through what these three were enduring: he knew that they at least had a chance of recovery. They needed to be taught how to conquer their possessing demons. He would stay here with them until they had learnt.

Eventually, Madeleine spoke. "Couldn't you have trusted me?" she said.

He knew immediately what she was referring to, and he was surprised that it had taken her so long to ask him. "I tried," he said. "But I couldn't tell you what I planned. You'd have tried to stop me and you'd have succeeded. It would have been selfish of both of us."

She nodded slowly.

Bligh stood, feeling awkward again. "I have to see how they are," he said.

"There's no change," she told him. "I'd have said."

He looked back, at the doorway of the cave-house. "They're all alone, now," he said. "We all are. All they have to do is recover."

He remembered Divitt Carew's last theory, as he had driven them up into the

hills. "In a way," he had said, "all the myths and prophecies are coming true right now. We're fulfilling them, in our own strange manner. The Six arose, out of the mayhem of the war, and now the world is changing and mankind is moving into a new phase, a brand new secular world."

"You're sounding like Benjennery," said Bligh, as they jolted over the rough track into the hills, but he had understood what Carew meant.

"Things are getting better," said Carew.

"I don't know," said Bligh, shaking his head. "At least they're not getting worse so fast."

Now, he saw that Madeleine was looking at him and for a moment he was unable to move. Finally, she said, "You're special, Bligh. Now you really are."

Bligh shrugged and smiled at her. "We all are," he said. "We all do what we can." And then he went inside.

~ the end ~

Author's note

If you've reached this far you've either enjoyed Lord of Stone or you're a sucker for punishment. Or maybe you're one of those people who always reads the last page first...

If you have enjoyed the novel, maybe you'd be good enough to make my efforts worthwhile by:

letting me know, and,
making a donation to charity (Oxfam or Greenpeace, or any similar humanitarian or environmental cause)