

**THE
DEVoured
EARTH**

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BOOKS OF THE
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THE DEVoured EARTH

Sean Williams



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I. Title.

To Rachel Yeaman, because
sometimes words failed me.

What does it mean to be human? It's more than the right number of arms, legs, fingers and toes, the ability to talk, and walking upright. It's more than the Change and the art we make. It's more than all of this, and less.

We follow a path through the realms that makes us uniquely different to any other creature. Not all the realms, for there are more than we can imagine, of every possible flavour and logic. We inhabit just three, and they define our character as surely as a fish is defined by the sea or a snake by the earth.

That's not to say that we can't aspire to transcend the limitations of our environment.

We are dreamers, we humans, and what lies outside has always held a fascination. But we must remember that the achievement of that dream carries a high price. Sometimes the boundary is too easy to cross. We should not lightly set aside our humanity, because it's not always possible to get it back.

A SCRIBE'S BOOK OF QUESTIONS



Out of the darkness, something came — something as alien to the human mind as it was to the world humans inhabited. It passed through realms as easily as a beast might cross a stream, yet it was not, by nature, a wanderer. It possessed desires no earthly being had ever imagined; it craved satiation in ways beyond description.

It *hungered*.

But it told itself to be patient. Its time was nearing. Soon, the waiting and watching would be over, and the human world would know its face.

Then its need, finally, would be fulfilled.

THE BREACH

*‘What is the shape of the world?
The answer to that question depends entirely on
where you are standing.’*

A SCRIBE’S BOOK OF QUESTIONS

Everything hurt. Skender could barely move without confronting that grim reality. From the pounding of his temples to the chill biting at his toes, not one part of his body had been spared. His appetite was nonexistent, he was unable to sleep, and when he stood up too fast his head spun like a top. The tea brewed by Griel and his two Panic balloonists to ward off the worst of the symptoms of altitude sickness filled his bladder faster than ordinary tea, so he spent much of every day wanting to take a leak.

He refused to say anything, though, and not just because he knew everyone aboard the blimp was feeling the same effects of the staggered ascent as him. The memories of Chu’s dismissive, even rough, attitude when he was water-sick while sailing the flooded Divide were still fresh. That she

was also sick this time around wouldn't stop her exploiting an opportunity to needle him.

He felt her watching him even as he concentrated on Mage Kelloman's suncatching charm. Opening one eye a crack, he saw her standing at the fore of the boat-like gondola, near Griel. Her black hair glowed with mahogany highlights in the sun. The skin of her cheeks was as golden-brown as the wooden instrument panel before her.

Dressed in a heavy woollen overcoat and gloves, she had swivelled slightly to look back at him. A faint smile floated on her full lips. His whole body tingled in response. Although the blimp was the biggest he had ever seen and the balloon supported an enclosed gondola roomy enough for thirty people, he had never craved privacy so much as he had during every moment of their journey so far. Barely had Chu told him her heart-name than they had been whisked out of the Panic city and taken to Milang, where Marmion had coordinated the expedition to the top of the mountains, the biggest ever undertaken according to local records.

Since then, the only moments Chu and Skender had found to be alone came very late at night, when everyone else was asleep, or during brief mountaineering expeditions while the blimp was moored to a jagged cliff face. And even then, with altitude sickness clawing at their guts and skulls, there was only so much they felt like doing.

Hana, he whispered to himself. *Hana, I think I —*
'Eyes on the job, my boy,' said a gruff, high-pitched voice from beside him. 'Eyes on the job, or you and your friend will never get a second's peace.'

Skender clenched his eyes shut and ignored the red-hot flush rising up to fill his cheeks. He hadn't meant his thoughts to wander so much, let alone leak to the point where Mage Kelloman could pick up the details.

'I'm sorry,' he said, clutching at the shreds of his concentration, and his dignity. 'I didn't mean —'

'Don't get your tights in a tangle.' Mage Kelloman's slender hand touched his shoulder. 'We're all tired and impatient, easily distracted. But the end is in sight. By this night's fall, we could finally be on level ground. Think of it — so much stone and bedrock to explore! None of this scavenging for the sun's meagre rays. We'll have real power then, boy. We'll be in our element.'

'What's that, Mage Kelloman?' came Sky Warden Eisak Marmion's voice from the fore of the gondola. 'Is the strain proving too much? We could pause and allow you a breather, if you'd like.'

'I certainly would not,' the mage said, his tone artificially crisp. 'I was merely remarking to my young friend here that we could provide a little more lift. If you can handle it, of course.'

Marmion tilted his head. 'More lift, not less? Are you sure?'

'As sure as eggs. I, for one, am keen to stretch my legs.'

'You speak for us all, I suspect.' A rustle of agreement swept through the gondola, from Griel and the Panic tending the balloon's stays and control surfaces to Lidia Delfine. Even the twins, so often caught in their own private world, nodded.

‘Very well, then. One final push and it will be done. Thank you, Mage Kelloman. When you’re ready, we’ll put your extra effort to good use.’

Kelloman bowed with exaggerated dignity, giving the body of his host — a young woman whose mind had long since fled — gravitas far beyond its years.

‘What do you think you’re doing?’ Skender hissed to him. The wardens returned to charms made by Panic Engineers and reinforced by foresters in Milang. ‘We’re stretched too thin as it is!’

‘Quiet, boy.’ The mage made a minute adjustment to the pattern scorched onto the wooden floor of the gondola at his feet. ‘We have work to do.’

‘But —’

‘*Work*. This isn’t a holiday, you know.’

Skender swallowed his irritation and sought the still centre required to shore up the mage’s effort. Their job was simple: to draw energy from the sun and channel it into the balloon’s many charms. Griel, Chu and Marmion ensured the charms were employed against thinning air and strengthening winds. Skender felt, however, that Kelloman was putting too much emphasis on their end of the deal. Yes, he was the only mage for hundreds of kilometres and, outnumbered on all fronts, correspondingly determined to make his presence felt. But that didn’t justify nearly killing them both in the process.

Forty pinpricks made him jump as the mage’s pet — a tiny brown-furred bilby with pointed ears, big eyes and sharp claws — leapt into his lap and climbed onto his shoulder. He patted it, encouraging it to settle.

‘Concentrate, boy,’ the mage growled through his borrowed lips. Skender willed himself to stop thinking entirely, so that through the Change and his link with Kelloman he dissolved into the charms enveloping the skin of the blimp. As well as being larger than any other balloon in the forest, it was easily one of the most complex machines he had ever seen. From the glowing rotors thrumming outside the gondola — two each to port and starboard — to the web of charms maintaining everything from elevation to insulation, the blimp required constant attention to make sure it functioned as required.

A strong gust of wind shook the blimp, making his stomach lurch. His eyes opened automatically, just for a second. Chu was at the controls, helping Griel adjust their flight. Beyond the windows was nothing but blue sky to the west, black and grey everywhere else. The monstrous mountain range still loomed over them, even as they approached its summit. And Kelloman wanted to turn the situation to his advantage! Sometimes that thought made Skender want to laugh. Other times it made him want to turn tail and hide.

Instead, he simply crossed his fingers and hoped for the best.

They had left Milang six days earlier, ascending into the clouds three dawns after fire had nearly burned the forest city to the ground. The mission was a cooperative venture: everyone caught up in the awakening of forces from the previous Cataclysm had joined together to find out what was to the north-east, where the twins assured them the greatest threat lay. No one knew quite what to

expect. Skender didn't take any encouragement from the floods, murderous wraiths, earthquakes and man'kin invasions that he and others had already endured. With no seers remaining to peer into the future, all they had to go on were a smattering of hints from prophecies old and new, plus their own wits.

A series of delicate soundings taken, firstly, at Milang, and then at several points along their journey, unveiled the shape of the mountain range beyond the region known to the Panic and the people of the forest. It was in fact several mountain ranges — at least seven — converging on a central point like a giant starfish with limbs reaching across the plains. At the intersection of those limbs the earth bulged up in a mighty rupture. This, the highest point of the mountain ranges, was the mission's primary destination. Kelloman's soundings weren't clear enough to tell what exactly lay there, but he spoke in guarded terms of a circular patch of elevated land several kilometres across, surrounded by peaks that shook and rumbled under the influence of forces Skender could barely imagine.

When the balloon had reached the limits of the foresters' geographical knowledge and then flown beyond even the charts of the Panic, they relied on Kelloman's soundings to find their way through steep valleys and broad fissures, rising further and further with every hour.

On the second day, they had punched through the uppermost layers of the permanent cloud cover hugging the lower ranges and valleys to find themselves flying for the first time in clear air. From

then on, navigation became somewhat easier, but the daunting mass of mountain looming above them reminded them not to become complacent: vast shelves of snow and ice lay ahead, just as dangerous in its own way as the cloud. The balloon could not fly continuously, and safe docking points had become harder and harder to find. The whining sound of chimerical engines echoed off sheer rock faces, occasionally triggering avalanches of stupendous proportions.

Yet, despite the hostile conditions, there were signs of life: streamers of smoke rose from small communities huddling in sheltered niches; paths crisscrossed several more accessible regions, linking caves that were almost invisible until the balloon came directly alongside them. Once, when surmounting a broad spur and coming into view of the valley beyond, the travellers had been confronted by a vast, flat roof large enough to cover two Milangs. Canted at a steep angle to prevent snow from piling too deeply, it sheltered nearly a third of the valley below. Exactly what it protected was unknown to either Panic or forester, and was likely to remain that way, for nothing and no one came to stare at the intruder in the skies. Very few people had emerged from any of the places they had seen, made cautious by the events of recent weeks.

Everywhere they went Skender saw evidence of the flood. Deep channels that diverged and joined traced complex paths down the side of the mountains. It soon became clear that the torrent that had filled the Divide had taken many routes from its source. Several of these channels had

played havoc with the region's struggling communities, sweeping away animals, crops and homes. Some of the channels were still carrying water that roiled and foamed as it fell. One waterfall dropped so far that from its middle Skender could see neither top nor bottom. For an enchanting but unnerving hour he could pretend that the flow was endless.

By the fourth day, he had begun to wonder if their journey, too, might have no end. Upwards and upwards they strove, snatching every metre of altitude from a reluctant sky. The cloud level dropped away and the vista of jagged, twisted stone below and beside them had become even more terrifying, yet the summit, visible only as a dark line against the sky far above, seemed to come no closer. The strain on the balloon's mingled crew increased the higher they went. Altitude sickness took a severe toll on minds and bodies that were already fatigued.

Nowhere was that more obvious than in the rivalry of Kelloman and Marmion. The air had always been tense between the two men, both of them ambitious and masters of their very different disciplines. That tension was now manifesting in the form of fierce battles of pointed politeness. Skender — caught up in the ongoing campaign because he was nearly a mage himself and therefore the only ally Kelloman had — found himself becoming impatient with both men. What was the point of expending so much energy on pointless one-upmanship? It only made the rest of the crew more uncomfortable than they would otherwise have been.

A long, sustained shudder rippled through the gondola, bringing him back to the present and sending the Panic crew scurrying about, checking instruments and adjusting control surfaces. One opened a hatch in the ceiling and slipped quickly outside. A wave of bitter cold swept through the interior to where Skender knelt at the back, doing his best to concentrate. He shuddered, despite the thick layers of thermal underwear under his black robe. The caulking around the gondola's joins and seams was far from perfect, allowing hair-thin, knife-sharp breezes to slash past his ears, so he knew going outside would be colder still.

He stole another peek forward. Marmion had joined Chu and Griel. All three peered up and out the pilot's window.

'That looks promising,' Skender heard Chu say, 'and about time too.'

'Fifty metres to the summit,' the warden announced to the crew in general. 'There's a pass near the top. We're aiming for that. Once through and out of this wind, the going should be steadier.'

So close! Skender thought, but it still seemed another world away. He remembered something the twins had said about the Second Realm being next to the First in the sense that one second was next to another; they occupied the same space, and yet were quite separate, and crossing from one to the other could be incredibly difficult. That was how he felt about the top of the mountains. It was there, and always had been, but getting to it was proving far from easy.

'Would you like to rest before the final push?' asked Mage Kelloman without either opening his

eyes or moving from his meditative posture. ‘If the wind is problematic —’

‘That won’t be necessary,’ said Marmion with a faint smile. ‘In fact, I thought we might increase the pace. There’s no point holding back now. The sooner we get to the top, the sooner we can rest.’

‘Why not?’ Behind Kelloman’s nonchalant reply, Skender sensed exhaustion and determination in equal measure. ‘I’ll give you all the potential you need.’

‘Right, then. Let’s get on with it.’

Someone groaned. Skender couldn’t tell who, but he echoed the sentiment. Not for the first time, Skender wished Sal were there to help them. With his wild talent behind the push upwards, the journey would be over in moments. But Sal had his own quest to pursue.

Mage Kelloman resumed his concentration on the suncatching charms. The gondola’s engines throbbed at a deeper pitch, casting a golden light on the cliff face as the blimp continued its upward journey. Fifty metres didn’t sound far; Skender could have walked it with no effort at all. But flying was a different matter to walking, especially as they were now very close to the theoretical limits of powered-balloon travel. Every metre was a challenge.

‘That’s the way,’ Marmion said. ‘That’s the way.’ He ran a hand across his bald scalp. The last of his hair had fallen out on the long journey, leaving his head as smooth and round as an egg. ‘One last push and it’ll be over.’

‘You’re in entirely the wrong field, you know,’ said Chu. ‘Have you ever considered midwifery?’

Marmion didn't rise to the bait. The blimp seemed to be hanging dead in the air, its upward drift was so subtle.

'Mage Kelloman, a skerrick more oomph if you wouldn't mind. The charms are at their breaking point.'

'A skerrick? Why, certainly.' The mage's voice was frostily formal, and he did find extra potential from somewhere within himself.

'That's the way.' Marmion breathed again.

The words became a mantra Skender clung to as the metres slid slowly by. He lacked the perspective of those at the front of the gondola, but he could make out the cliff face through the nearest window. It *was* moving, slowly but surely.

The blimp swayed above them, rattling the gondola's occupants like nails in a tin.

'Hold fast,' Marmion encouraged them all as he moved down the gondola's central aisle, brushing shoulders reassuringly with his one hand. The other arm hung close to his gut, wrapped in the folds of his blue-clad sleeve. 'We're almost there. Almost ...'

Skender closed his eyes tightly and put everything he had into the final stretch. He saw nothing but the complex curves and axes of the suncatching charm; he felt nothing but the sun's potential as it swept through him and into the interstices of the blimp. Kelloman's mind blazed feverishly beside his, a shining example to follow. Yet there was something dangerous about that blaze, as though it could swiftly turn on itself and consume the mind that stoked it. If Kelloman's concentration faltered for a second, if the sun's output changed even minutely ...

Wind struck the blimp from an unexpected direction, prompting a new series of rattles and creaks and a rising mutter of voices. His eyes flickered open. He blinked to focus them. The gondola hung near the cliff face. Through the window nearest him on the starboard side he saw the bottom of a massive cleft in the dark stone. As though a giant sword had hacked a notch in the uppermost ramparts of the mountain, the sides of the cleft were steep and jagged. Its V-shaped base was clogged with dirty snow. Wind rushed down it with a sustained roaring sound, making the blimp sway as it came closer to the opening. The vessel shook as individual concentration failed and charms flickered. It held its course, just.

Wisps of cloud wreathed the sides of the cleft. Skender strained to see through them. All he could see was the cleft itself, snaking off into the distance like a high-altitude version of the Divide.

‘Well,’ said Marmion, ‘it appears we still have some way to go.’

‘Forward will be a welcome change to up,’ Chu said, prompting a chorus of agreement from human and Panic alike.

‘Indeed it will. Mage Kelloman, I thank you for your hard work and suggest you conserve your strength through this section of our journey. We have enough potential in reserve to fly some distance. Let us take the burden from here.’

The mage looked for a moment as though he might argue, but exhaustion won out over pride, for once. ‘I — yes, thank you. I will rest for a moment.’

Skender helped the mage’s borrowed body to its

feet and eased him into a chair. He was surprised as always by Kelloman's slightness.

'The way looks clear of obstructions,' Marmion told the others, 'but the winds are going to be tricky. Keep it steady as we go. We haven't come this far to crash.'

And get stuck, Skender added silently to himself, *at the top of a mountain so far from home.*

The propellers whirred at a deeper pitch than before, turning the blimp around to face nose-first into the cleft. The deck rose and fell beneath him with a steady rhythm as they slid gracefully into the cleft, rocked by air currents. Skender peered out either side of the gondola, energised despite his altitude sickness by their finding the summit. Lidia Delfine and her bodyguard-cum-fiancé, Heuve, did the same. Muddy snowdrifts as thick as houses lay below, hugging folds and wrinkles the pallid sun couldn't breach. Nothing but granite was visible between them, black and forbidding like ancient stained bones.

The twins felt they had spent far too much time staring out the windows at the endless grey cliff sliding by, interrupted by ledges, ramparts, shelves of snow and mighty fissures. Rock was rock. In their original, earthly life they had been used to landscapes where time and nature had flattened the land like teeth worn down by grinding. They hadn't seen snow or mountains until their disastrous trip to Europe. There, Seth had been murdered by the agents of Yod in order to bring the First and Second Realms together. There, the old world had died, taking all its time-worn vistas with it.

The eyes of the Homunculus, the artificial body in which they were now confined, glazed over as the walls of the cleft slid by. The twins' earlier disconnection from the world had faded at last; there was no hiding now from its complexities and perils. The same was true of themselves; their memories had cleared as though a curtain had parted. Where unwillingness or uncertainty had shielded them from the worst of their pasts, now nothing protected them from both sets of memories. The feel of Locyta's knife stabbing into Seth's chest; the draci straddling Hadrian; the confrontation with the Sisters of the Flame . . .

In Sheol, under the guidance of the Sisters, they had each explored their life-trees, the many-branched tangle of possibilities that revealed every conceivable event in their lives from the perspective of the Third Realm. Only in one world-line — one long, tapering branch — had they seen a chance of escape from their fated deaths at the hands of Yod. Hadrian had followed that world-line to the point where it suddenly diverged into possibility again, and there he had stopped. There he had seen a chance that Yod would fail. That had been enough to give him hope.

Both of them now wished that he had gone further, to see what *actual* chance awaited them. How would Yod be beaten? What did the twins need to do to ensure their survival? Of those who had helped and hindered them since their arrival in the new world, who would live and who would die? Skender, Marmion and the others had been strangers once but were no longer. They mattered too.

Either way, Yod was back, rattling at the bars if not yet fully free. It had devoured the Lost Minds in the Void Beneath, gaining strength for ... something. With every day's ascent, they felt its presence growing darker and stronger, looming deeper and more ominously. Now, with the end of their journey so close, Yod sucked at them like a black hole, tugging them onward and inward to their destiny.

Reflected in the window facing the dark cliff, they saw the silhouette of the Homunculus staring back at them. A shadow with hard edges, it had no recognisable features: no eyes, no nostrils, no wrinkles, no personality at all.

Who's an ugly boy, then? whispered Seth into Hadrian's mind.

Hadrian felt absurdly like laughing — but the impulse had gloom at its heart as dark as the Homunculus's aspect. *I reckon we've lost weight.*

Something glowed with a faint silver light deep in the reflection. They leaned closer to the pane of glass in order to see more clearly. The Homunculus's face seemed to swallow the entire view.

What's that? Hadrian asked. Low in his view was a shining cross where his chest might have been.

Not a cross, little brother. An ankh.

Hadrian understood, then. In the Second Realm, Seth had confronted eight godlike beings known as the Ogdoad. The ancient sign they had marked him with had enabled them to survive in the Void Beneath when so many other minds had not. Seth had taken the mark for granted all that time, and

Hadrian had had no reason to think of it. Only at that moment did they realise what a great boon it had been.

It stopped us from dissolving into the hum, Seth said.

So we thought. But we know now that the hum was Yod itself, which means —

The ankh protects us from Yod, Hadrian finished. *Does that mean Yod can't kill us?*

Don't get too excited. Maybe it just stops Yod from noticing us.

Hadrian leaned away from the reflection, and his brother came with him. *Still, it's something.*

It is indeed.

The twins pondered their new understanding as the blimp traversed the cleft. The Homunculus was immune to altitude sickness, but they slept more and more the higher the balloon took them, sometimes as long as three hours a night, and their dreams were spectacular. In one of them, Yod had taken the form of a giant clown whose mouth was the entrance to a glittering fairground. Rows upon rows of people queued patiently and filed inside. The clown's eyes grew redder and darker, filling up with blood, until finally a flood of crimson tears flowed down grimacing cheeks and swept the twins away.

Skender came and sat next to them, pulling his black robe tightly around himself in order to keep the draughts off his stockinged legs.

'What do you think?' he asked them. The white-skinned young mage wasn't looking at them or his girlfriend, for a change; his attention was firmly fixed on the dark edifices visible through the windows.

Only then did Hadrian realise that they had almost reached the end of the cleft. People peered and whispered excitedly among themselves at glimpses of their destination. His first impression was that a whole other range lay in the misty distance — as though they had crossed one barrier only to encounter another just as large beyond it. Then he realised that the northern and southern ends of that range curved westward to form a giant circle.

‘A crater,’ Seth said. ‘Like a volcano, only much bigger.’

‘I’ve read about volcanoes in *The Book of Towers*,’ Skender said. ‘They’re mountains that vomit fire, right?’

Seth nodded, studying the far side of the crater with a sense of unease. The jagged peaks were white with ice and snow as though dusted by a giant baker.

‘A volcano with a lake in it?’ asked Chu, overhearing and pointing ahead and down. Just coming into sight was the shore of a mighty body of water. The crater was flooded, filled halfway up its steep sides with run-off from the surrounding peaks.

‘How could there be a lake up here?’ Skender asked. ‘Why hasn’t it frozen over?’

‘Both good questions,’ said Warden Banner, seated not far from them with a crutch held tightly in her hand. Since breaking her leg during the attack of the Swarm on Milang, she had been confined to light duties. ‘Here’s another: are those houses down there?’

Sure enough, on the southern shoreline of the lake huddled a cluster of low, black-roofed

dwellings, perhaps forty in all, with a long, narrow pier protruding into the water.

No, the twins told themselves on a closer inspection. Not into the water. The shoreline had dropped precipitously in recent times, by the look of the frosty mud caked below its original high-mark. Now the houses stood twenty metres back from the shoreline and the pier led to nothing but more mud. There were no boats visible anywhere.

‘Who would live up here?’ asked Griel.

‘Maybe no one, now,’ said Marmion, and Seth could see his point. No smoke issued from the houses; no people walked the village’s narrow streets.

Skender looked disappointed. ‘I was expecting something grander, I’ll admit.’

‘Be careful what you wish for,’ Hadrian told him. ‘I’ve had enough excitement for one lifetime.’

‘Two, even,’ Seth added.

‘True, true,’ Skender said. ‘Do you recognise anything? Is any of this familiar to you?’

Hadrian shook his head.

‘Look at the lake,’ said his brother, pointing with one black finger. ‘They’re not islands.’

Attention shifted from the village to the centre of the lake. Three broad columns stood out of the water, dozens of metres high and as black as jet. One loomed higher than the others, its top truncated as though sheered off by a giant knife. The light caught it and radiated sickly gleams.

‘Tower Aleph,’ Seth said. ‘That’s from the Second Realm.’

‘So you *do* recognise something?’ Marmion asked, peering as closely at the twins as he was at the distant structures.

‘What Seth’s saying,’ said Hadrian, ‘is that these are the tops of three towers Yod was building before it made the big leap. They were supposed to act as bridges across Bardo when the Cataclysm took effect. We stopped Yod in its tracks, of course, so I guess these got stuck halfway too.’

‘I’ve never heard of them,’ said Skender. ‘You’d think they’d be mentioned in *The Book of Towers*.’

The twins had no opinion on that, just a similar, nagging feeling of being left in the dark. Skender glanced at his girlfriend at the other end of the gondola and the Asian-looking miner from Laure winked back at him. Embarrassed, the twins looked away. The mutual attraction between the two young lovers reminded them of cold nights in Europe and an unhappy ending in Stockholm, long ago ...

Something moved in the corner of Hadrian’s eye. On the already receding flanks of the cleft, a long-limbed grey figure broke cover and took a running leap across the space between it and the gondola. The twins barely had time to recognise the terrible shape before another followed. There was no mistaking their intent. The two hideous creatures leapt with limbs flailing and steel-grey teeth bared. Long-bladed scissors opened and closed where hands should have been.

‘Watch out!’ Seth yelled.

Then all was breaking glass and shrieking wind, and the terrible clash of blades snipping at everything in reach.



Devels? Here? Impossible!

Seth ignored his brother's mental protest and pushed Skender behind him. His hands went through the young mage's back until Hadrian added his own impetus to the shove. They forced their way up the aisle to where Panic and wardens struggled with this new danger. Both groups were exhausted from the long ascent. Any reserves of strength they possessed would be sorely tested.

Seth and Hadrian pushed through with necessary brusqueness. The two scissor-handed devels lunged and snapped at anyone within reach, issuing terrible, ear-piercing howls. One of the balloonists fell back with her throat fatally cut.

A roar came from one side, where the forester Heuve slashed ferociously back at the nearest devel. The bodyguard looked almost grateful for something to do, but the expression was soon wiped off his beardless face — almost literally when a pair of blades barely missed his nose. Only a wild lunge backwards saved him. A skilful parry from Lidia Delfine defended his exposed stomach from another slash. Together, the two of them drove their adversaries back to the fore of the gondola, where Marmion and Chu were guarded by Griel. Seth shouted at one of the devels and lunged to keep its attention firmly on him. While it was distracted, Griel rammed the point of his hook deep into its spine and twisted. Black blood sprayed in a thick arc across the inside of the gondola, befouling the air with a potent chemical stench.

The second creature slashed a hole through the ceiling and leapt outside. The twins snatched at its heels too late, and clambered after it, wary of the

blades that instantly snapped at their emerging head. The creature snarled at them, prompting memories of crossing Bardo to the Underworld. Then, a creature identical to the one he was following had taken Seth by surprise and cut off his hand. The hand had grown back almost instantly, restored by the persistent impression of himself that was more important in the Second Realm than actual flesh and blood — but that hadn't lessened the shock and pain Seth had experienced.

The memory gave him an idea. As the blades snapped at them again, he raised his right arm and thrust it deliberately between them.

The blades bounced off his skin with a shower of sparks, repelled by the Homunculus's rock-solid maintenance of his sense of self. The devel shrieked in frustration. Seth twisted his arm to free it, and lashed out with a clenched fist for the creature's face.

It recoiled with a hiss. Together, Seth and his brother slithered out of the gondola, mindful of their footing on the ice-rimed wooden exterior. Three metres above them, the giant bladder strained and rocked, held down by dozens of thin, charm-strengthened cables. Strange geometric shapes raced across the balloon's light brown skin.

The remaining devel raised its scissor-handed arms and faced the twins. Wind snatched at them as they planted their four feet wide and held their arms high.

'Who sent you?' Seth shouted. 'Culsu? Yod?'

Grey eyes blinked at them. They didn't doubt that it could understand them. They had seen enough of the new world to know that Hekau worked just as

well as it had in the Second Realm: anyone who wanted to be understood *could* be understood, regardless what language they were speaking.

For a second they thought the devel might reply. It hesitated, tilting its head to one side as though wondering who or what they were.

Then it reached out with both arms and began snipping cables.

‘No!’ The twins jumped forward, knocking the creature flat on its back. It didn’t retaliate. In its brief moment of consideration it seemed to have decided to care less about its own life than bringing down the gondola. Even as it sprawled across the slippery roof, its scissor-hands snapped at every cable and wire within reach. Each sharp twang sent a nail of fear through the twins. How many cables could snap before the whole contrivance unravelled, sending the gondola tumbling down to the unforgiving rock below?

The balloon shuddered. Its angle of flight steepened upwards. The twins threw themselves bodily at the devel, knowing they had to deal with the threat quickly.

The roaring of propellers grew louder as the twins wrestled with their assailant, tumbling from side to side through the forest of cables. With a snarl, the creature slipped free and lunged for a dense knot near the rear of the balloon. The twins caught it in a flying tackle, sending it skidding across the slippery gondola. The points of its scissors struck off splinters of ice as it sought to find a grip. The attempt failed. Emitting a high-pitched cry, it slipped over the side and was sucked into the balloon’s rear-port engine.

Propeller blade and scissor-creature met with a powerful explosion. The twins ducked instinctively. Shrapnel whizzed past them, ricocheting off the gondola and arcing into open air.

When the echoes of the explosion faded, they raised their heads to inspect the damage. All that remained of the propeller and its chimerical engine was a smoking black stump. A high-pitched whistling came from several jagged tears in the balloon.

‘Crap.’ Seth drove them back to the hole in the gondola. Griel needed to be told about the damage. The balloon shook and rolled, already destabilised by the severed cables.

‘I know, I know. I’m doing everything I can,’ said the Panic soldier as they dropped into the gondola’s chaotic interior. The pilot console was emitting a persistent chiming sound; needles dipped and shuddered on every gauge.

‘Is there anything we can do?’

‘Just hold tight. I’m going to try to bring us down safely.’ Griel tugged at levers and pushed buttons. The balloon swayed giddily.

Seth filtered out the sound of people shouting in order to concentrate on what lay through the shattered windows ahead: the crater lake and its dark ruins.

‘I’d be happy to land in one piece,’ said Marmion, gripping a black-stained wooden pole for balance.

‘Give me space and I’ll do what I can.’ Griel waved them away. Chu pressed forward from where she had been standing with Skender. The twins noted her shaking hands and ashen skin. The cold air

rushing through the gondola was taking its toll on those less hardy than the Homunculus.

‘If there’s anything we can do,’ Hadrian started to say again.

‘There is,’ said Marmion, pulling them towards the rear of the shaking gondola. ‘You can tell me what those things were, just in case there are more waiting for us when we land.’

The balloon shook and canted downwards. The twins did their best to ignore it. ‘It’s a devel,’ Seth said. ‘They lived in the Underworld before the realms were jammed together. These particular devils were ruled by a minor dei called Culsu.’

‘A dei?’ The warden’s expression was simultaneously worried and puzzled. ‘Is that something like a god?’

‘Someone probably worshipped them at some point. I don’t know. Their job when I knew them was to cut up the souls of the dead as they tried to get to the Second Realm. The remains would be given to Yod to eat.’

‘So ultimately they worked for Yod.’

‘Yes.’ Seth watched black-spattered Lidia Delfine focussing an eyeglass on the lake’s dark shoreline. It was growing visibly closer. ‘I guess they still do.’

‘Do you think there could be more of them?’

‘I’d be amazed if there weren’t.’

Griel had taken a measure of control over the balloon. With a discernible effort, it was turning towards the nearest village. Seth swallowed his misgivings. There might still be people around, huddling for shelter from the cold and the devils. They might need help as badly as the expedition when it landed among them.

‘Take your seats,’ called Griel from the front of the gondola. ‘We’re going down.’

‘And by that,’ said Chu, ‘he means, “Hang on tight. We’re going to crash!”’

The balloon lurched and tilted so steeply that even the Homunculus’s four legs had trouble keeping purchase. Seth was dismayed to see how quickly they had fallen in such a short time. He and Hadrian helped the others to safety, then took a position of their own towards the rear. Through the cracked window beside them, he could see the black scar left by the destroyed engine and the slopes of the crater rising up to meet them. There was no sign of more levels — or anything worse.

If the towers are here . . . Hadrian began.

Then Yod might be too, Seth finished. *We’ve known it would be around somewhere. Doesn’t change anything.*

It changes everything. It’s not a computer game or a dream. It’s right here, right now. Everything we went in the Void for is about to happen.

It’s much too late for second thoughts.

I know. I’m not having them. I’m just —

Terrified. Yes, me too.

They clung tight to the seat as the icy earth came up and, with a deafening crunch, the gondola bucked beneath them.