

*turning and turning in the widening gyre*

They have made it to the fortress, but she knows that it will be only a brief respite from the onrushing tide.

"I think we should head up the coastline," says Amaranth, "to Archangel; from there we can get on a boat, if we're lucky, and do the rest of the trip by sea - which should be much safer - don't laugh, you can all swim, right?"

"Where do you think we're going?" asks John Essen.

"To Alkyon," she says. "Providence offered you a church there, remember? And I think it's going to be about the best place to wait out the storm."

They leave it nearly too late, of course. The scent of burning air and molten rock chases them as they slip out of the back of the fortress, much of the Confederate force determined to square up to the swirling vortexes of lava and fire: standing with Illyes, who will not abandon what he has built here.

The Inquisitor has no such loyalty, thankfully, so they have good company on their long trek.

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*the falcon cannot hear the falconer*

There are scattered messages that reach them, along the way:

the Confederate remnants falling back, heading for the walls of Archangel themselves, caught up in the second volcano set just to the north of Draxholt, down whose slopes they had only just escaped;

the destruction of Beartstadt in towering mountains of flame, told by survivors heading in quite the other direction, in any direction;

and on the dockside of Holy Archangel, rumours drifting across an entire continent - that Port Havoc was consumed in volcanic devastation also, the two bastions of Havocstan sharing a single fate.

They find someone that the Inquisitor and her retinue can partially bribe and partially threaten into letting them charter their vessel, and set sail.

It is strangely peaceful, away from the land, out on the wide ocean; if there are any great monsters of the deep that remain, or any hunting pirates roaming the waves, they do not consider this one ship significant enough for them to attack.

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*things fall apart; the centre cannot hold*

They take a wide arc around the area that used to be known as Gnollish waters.

From the crow's nest, Daybreak watches the warships flying ragged banners, crudely stitched with the symbols of the Fallen.

A small patrol looks like it might detach itself to intercept them, but as she looks on - giving a running update to the resigned and weary crew - a gleaming fleet

with Sacuza New World Trading's banners pours out of Malathian waters and engages the enemy.

She surrenders the watch to someone who has actual skill in keeping track of this kind of thing, but hangs over the side of the ship, watching the drama unfold.

It does not touch them, and they leave it behind as they sail onwards to Alkyon.

Above them, setting out from Malathia, an airship passes in the sky; so far away, so far removed from the struggles playing out across the face of the New World.

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*mere anarchy is loosed upon the world*

As they attempt to pass through Mill'enese waters, they are finally flagged down by a patrolling fleet.

They are not in any trouble, or under any suspicion, the small squadron that inhabits the galeass that finally pulls alongside reassures them; they just might like to know that their journey might be rather longer than they anticipated, if they had planned to sail onwards down the coast.

The sailors describe the great Plateau of Gaia which has extended itself into the sea from Alexandria, as far into the ocean again as the heartlands of the Flembic colony extended southwards.

The Inquisitor is quite happy to put in at some Mill'enese port, and Amaranth remembers that she did have something of an obligation remaining in Androgene, if no-one else had successfully cleared it out by this time; but she does not want to give Essen an excuse to follow her there.

They dock at Porto D'Henri, to take on supplies; but seeing the generally pleasant and stable atmosphere that persists within the Golden Nation, their ship's captain and his crew take their opportunity to entirely take their leave of them.

It is not all sunshine and flowers. The residents of Porto D'Henri credit their continued safety to the Domes of the Maelstrom here and at Baugherstadt, and the large patrols operating out of Engelstadt, Baugherstadt and Bernsteinkuste, although they are much reduced from their previous strength.

Everyone seems to know someone that they have lost in the great battle being spoken of as the Expulsion from Kettering, where endless waves of Gaia's Ambassadors directed by an order of martially-inclined golem mendicants had driven back the great Golden Eagle.

(Golden Eagle had, after having thoroughly destroyed RS2, been attempting to search the rest of the previously Flembic lands for the second Maelstromic Restoration Device. This did not exactly align with Gaia's insistence that her forces would be the only armed force within a decent march of her Cornerstone at Alexandria...)

There is a great battle apparently ongoing to the south of Engelstadt with the undead who destroyed Androgene; they would have been no match for the previous strength of garrison, but the current forces are unable to make serious headway out of their fortified areas.

Naturally, Essen insists that he needs to complete the repayment of the undead for the losses at Androgene; so as the Cruciatorium set themselves up at Porto D'Henri's Church of the Teacher, Amaranth finds herself travelling deeper into the Golden Nation.

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*the blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere*

Daybreak - the form Amaranth has taken in these chaotic days - and Essen report for duty at Engelstadt; at approximately the same time, the undead forces of maybe six hundred husks are reinforced with a great cascade of varied undead and native forces - and twisted abominations of sorcerous power raised up from the animals of the land, or torn with theurgy from the energies of the Maelstrom itself - emerging from the old lands of the Rat Tribe.

The only saving grace is that they seem strangely reluctant to go around the side of Engelstadt by way of Pouchard Angouleme; so the remaining armies of Mill'en manage to funnel a good many of them between Engelstadt and Baugherstadt, and it is at the point between those two great cities that the hideous battle is joined.

Closer to home, the only saving grace is the lack of priests of the Merchant in the area, combined with an abundance of devotees; John Essen is suitably distracted in the very slightly less dangerous pursuit of laying the dead to rest.

Daybreak does not allow herself second thoughts; she returns easily - and often - to the theurgic cathedral in Engelstadt, which while having only a fraction of Brigadoom's power, clearly is keeping at bay some of the most egregious sorcerous and theurgic abominations which are arrayed against the people of Mill'en.

It is not the kind of battle which is decided in one pivotal day, or even over the course of several weeks. The enemy forces might be literally inexhaustible. The Mill'enese forces are still highly trained and superlatively equipped, and those few stragglers of the enemy that break through the lines are easily mopped up against the walls of Grande Phillippe.

She fights, as if in a trance; she dons scales and she heads through the blasted lands that were once the Hive of the Wasp, and comes across the enemy camp from behind, but there are few secrets to be had and plenty of suspicious theurges to avoid - they are simply using the great force they can bring to bear with their endless supply of magical constructions; she has a slightly more successful time rooting out fifth columnists in the cities themselves...

The front widens; Bernsteinkuste pins the coastline on the other side, but all beyond that triangle is laid to waste by the devastating hordes.

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*the ceremony of innocence is drowned*

As winter draws in, Amaranth takes a long walk out through the borderlands of the Hive of the Wasp, towards the place that had once been the People's Republic of Southern Kamakura.

She isn't sure what she is expecting to find. What is left of Prosperity's Offspring,

perhaps, run wild and over-extended without Jeshur's careful oversight - but perhaps they have found a new Jeshur, although she does not expect they would find one as cunning as the one they have lost.

The Great Wooden Wall has been torn down. The People's Republic is no more. She reaches what she recognises as Tenizidi territorial markers, and turns back.

In the distance, great mountains rise; the peaks of Gaia's wrath which fell upon the Teca lands, a scar across the world.

There is something of a conflict going on here, too, she notices, although it is much more subtle than the endless grinding battle that surrounds the edges of the Golden Nation.

The Twilight Embassy and Prosperity's Offspring are locked in a game no less deadly, but much more patient, than the unliving and the monsters against the heartlands of Mill'en. Territorial markers; the great ordered circles of the Azarch, with their grazing colonist and ophidian remnants unwittingly propagating their pattern, brushing up against the graceful Tenizidi warning signs.

A pack of Prosperity's Offspring converts approach and attempt to recruit her, dressed as she is in the body of an Amun-Sari wanderer. She laughs and brushes aside her tassles for them, and apologises that she has no need of their services.

Then she traces her steps back around the edges of the much-expanded Twilight Embassy, and suddenly she realises - she is much further north than she thought she was. What is left of the Azarch hive has shifted significantly, flowing around the determined Tenizidi incursion, taking the place of the People's Republic, whereas the extensive Twilight claim extends across the whole of their original hive area.

But there is no clear safe passage to a trading pit of the Tenizidi, and where they end the shattered rocky scar that was the Teca lands begin, and tracing them to the north, where they end, the Plateau of Gaia begins.

She looks up at the cliff, and considers laying down her halberd and approaching the face of it; but she does not want to know what she will find there.

So she traces the cliff back towards the Golden Nation until she is set upon by monsters and devoured.

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*the best lack all conviction, while the worst*

She finds John Essen again out on the battlefield, or he finds her. After the usual accusations and recriminations that she has been gone for a long time, he says that Providence had come to speak to him, and that he is sick of this place - that this is just turning into yet another endless war, and he has had quite enough of those to last a lifetime - "perhaps forever".

So they return to Porto D'Henri. Apparently the coast to the west is beset by storms, but there is little preventing passage towards the Plateau, although they are warned that no-one has returned. John has picked up quite a few 'donations to the church' from his work on the battlefield, and they can easily find a ship and crew for which that is sufficient inducement to have them agree on a journey to Alkyon, something that many seem to be interested in finding an excuse to

attempt in any case.

The greatest expense is the large quantity of salted meat they need to take on, traded illicitly from Onontakhan tribes, as there is no other reliable source of the preserved food they will need to see them around the coastline; some of those setting out have planned to rely on the resurgent fish stocks, but these are, after all, still *Flembic* waters.

It is a long and uneventful journey around the Plateau. An incredibly refreshing change from the wearying battle, and even from the fairly eventful wandering by land. But the supplies of food and more importantly of fresh water gradually dwindle away; Jennah - the wemic form that Amaranth takes around him - does not need to eat, but her salt-matted fur is still not something she can easily change, knowing she is very unlikely to return to a particular boat in the middle of the ocean.

The fish are definitely back, though, although they do not alleviate the water situation very well.

At a point which they desperately hope must be at least half-way around, they are met by a small unattended boat made entirely of talismanic stone. It speaks to them directly, asking their purpose, offering to let them put in to shore if it can first confiscate any tool of war aboard their vessel.

They politely decline, but Gaia dimly recognises Amaranth from her earliest days... and offers to resupply their vessel, which they gladly accept.

Refreshed with new supplies of water and a little extra food, although Gaia has nothing that will not swiftly perish, the rest of the journey is much less fraught; they round the edge of the plateau and rejoin the original coastline, twisted as it is by the devastation that reached to the coast at Abu Malikari.

They mean to put in at Eboneyrie, with the Basilica that Providence inherited in life - the Monument To The Majesty Of The Great Leonhardt And Our Patron Too, from a sect of Merchant faithful long departed these shores - and the First Church of St Otto Eype.

But as they leave behind the shattered mountains of Abu Malikari, there is no feature remaining along the coastline, save for dense and twisted forest reaching down to the shore.

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*are full of passionate intensity*

In the depths of the Alkonian forest, the new expeditionary forces of Hive Unity fight with claw and flame against the encroaching trees; bolstered by the remains of Havoc and the Gerosans fleeing from the burning ruins of Port Havoc and the crumbling coastline of Maya, and steadfastly ignoring the small Freiboden remnant holed up in Freiholme, the dryads of the Great Forest are the next major threat to their community.

And - while the Gerosans build their ports on the old Merisusi and Freeport coastline, the area broken by the native incursion and no match for the Havoc armies, and hope to re-establish contact with the Golden Nation over the other side of the continent - threats to the community must be faced, and eliminated.

Jannah and Essen dock at the natural harbour of Old Man's Covenant, which has been thoroughly cleared of its intended occupants, and consider their next move.