

THE AMBER HEART

BY
URHAN O. TARBOS

*Nashan namaross
Tarhu nakshenar
Masha dalalumar
Pelesh olmalash*

*Irrin himm ol
Shilalum liesha
Tilmartheh*

*Irrin himm
Heshkan
Shashul ashi shashthil
Uinamon halashar*

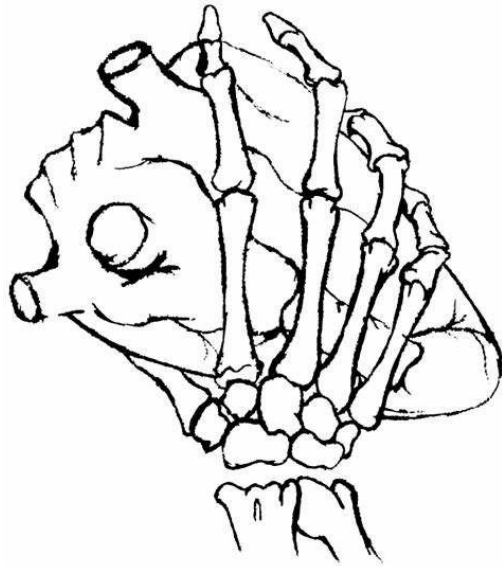
*–Shollakh Namrinesh
Polomar Okhar*

*Come, heart of stone
And break the suns upon
Thy shoulders
As ye bear them to the well*

*Thou fear'st not the water
It holds only new shapes for thee*

*Thou fear'st not
The dark
For there is naught in it
That is nameless*

*–Namrinesh, Empress of Elethedar
The Words of Sorrows*



I.

Fractured light lingers behind every wingbeat, a jagged rainbow carved across the sky. The boy wears a single gauntlet of black onyx on his right hand, clutches to his chest a human heart encased in amber. His sister twists the pteron's reins, urging it westward. The world is a blur ten thousand feet below.

The Guardian has instructed them not to look back. To fix their eyes on the horizon. But they are children, and do not listen.

The boy looks.

Standing at the edge of the riding platform, the Guardian's sapphire armor catches the light of the three suns in focused points of burning azure. His girth shields the small children from the pursuing pterons. Upon them, the Meat King's archers summon their arrows.

A lance of molten light is loosed, singes the crest of the children's pteron. The animal screams, thrashes in the air. The Guardian is thrown off balance, falls to his knee, grunts. The boy cannot look away. Terror welds his gaze to the archers, tightens his grip on the amber heart. The heart vibrates, burns through the black gauntlet, drives thick needles of pain deep into his bones. He grinds his teeth. He does not let go. The gauntlet shivers, splinters, cracks. He does not let go.

Behind him, the Guardian rises, draws back the invisible string of his bow. A faint shimmer becomes a line of solid heat. The Guardian releases. The arrow cries death, catches one of the archers in the chest. Fire leaps from the spaces between his sapphire armor and he falls, burning.

Again, the Guardian draws forth an arrow, releases it. This one strikes a ballista-bearing pteron, punches a glowing hole through the creature's throat. The animal falls, taking five more of the Meat King's soldiers with it.

The Guardian fires again.
This one misses.
Again.
This one kills.
The boy dares to hope, now.

Enraged, the heart burns, rattles, reaches into the boy's blood, tears bloody trenches into his mind. The gauntlet comes apart completely, explodes into so much black sand.

The heart falls.

The boy screams, lunges, catches the amber heart with naked flesh. White heat. Flesh pops and dissolves. Bone blackens. The pain drowns out even the wind in his ears. Momentum carries him forward, into nothingness. He falls.

The Guardian's arm flashes out, catches the child by the ankle, hurls him back onto the platform. The boy lies still for a long moment. The pain in his hand and arm pulls him back to the fray.

The Guardian fires another bolt of molten light. Another pteron falls. Only one remains. Two archers upon it. The boy watches them raise their bows in sinister synchronicity.

"Look!" His sister cries. He follows her gaze.

The gray, lifeless earth below terminates abruptly less than a mile ahead, a jagged cliff lapped by a sea of black water. The opposite shore is hidden behind a dense wall of fog. His sister turns, smiles at him, eyes wild with berserk light. In that light there is love and hope and a sacred and terrible need. In his hands, the heart throbs, its ancient, baleful energy tumbling through him like shards of glass.

Behind them, a scream. An explosion. The smell of singed bone.

A glittering wound opens in the Guardian's right shoulder. Fire licks the air through the blasted armor. The Guardian stumbles backwards. His bow remains clenched in his left hand, but without the use of his other arm, it is a useless thing.

"No!" The boy screams. He crawls toward the Guardian.

"Stop!" The Guardian commands.

The boy is a child. He does not listen. He reaches for the Guardian.

An arrow of hard light explodes into the platform mere inches from Guardian's helm. The boy screams, scrambles backwards. The Guardian struggles to his feet. The Meat King's archers summon another pair of glowing arrows.

Another blinding surge of pain pours into the boy from the amber heart, paralyzing him. He cannot move, cannot scream to warn his sister. The arrows burn holes through their pteron's wings until there are no wings left. His sister screams. The Guardian falls atop the boy, throws his armored arms around him. The world becomes weightless.

They fall. Toward the jagged cliffs. Toward the Poison Sea.

His sister screams again.

The pteron slams into the earth.

Stone and dust.

II.

Pain comes in measures of oceans.

In every bone, all at once, a swarm of biting flies, hot steel, electric fire.

Comes a low voice, deep as thunder. "My lord!"

The boy knows the voice. It is the voice of the Guardian.

Another voice, in a language of hurt.

Take. Me. Back. It is the howl of the amber heart. *Take me BACK!*

Hands shake him. He opens his eyes, stares into the Guardian's visor, into the two glowing white beads behind it.

"He lives," the Guardian sighs.

"Praise the gods!" The girl kneels, wraps her arms around her brother's neck. All at once, the pain subsides into a low ache.

Slowly, he sits up. The Guardian and his sister release him, step away.

The pteron's corpse is a bloody, crumpled ruin at the base of the cliff. The gravel shore, hardly six meters wide, is lapped by the black water of the Poison Sea. The amber heart shivers. The boy winces in pain.

"Damn this cursed thing!"

"Let me take it from you," the girl says, tugging at his hand, throwing back the sleeves of his robe.

She gasps. "Oh, gods..."

The flesh is gone from his hand, burnt away, amber fused to charcoal bone. Skeletal fingers wrap around the heart like a jealous spider.

The Guardian grunts. "Where is your father's gauntlet?"

He shakes his head. "It shattered. The heart destroyed it."

"Are you otherwise wounded?" the Guardian asks.

The Brother shakes his head, stands. Aside from his cursed right hand, he seems intact.

"We have to keep moving," the Guardian says. His blue helm turns, faces the curtain of gray fog that hangs over the black water mere miles from the shore. In it, there is safety.

"Can you contact father?" the girl asks.

The Guardian lifts his hand to the smoldering hole in his shoulder. "Perhaps. But not without rest. My mind is clouded." He looks down at the young girl. With a stoic grace, he says, "I am in pain."

"They'll come back," the boy says, searching the sky. "We have to go."

"Go where?" his sister asks.

He can see terror, pure and thick as tar bubbling inside of her, twisted around the core of her. To a lesser creature, the fear would be crippling. His sister merely shivers once, once, as if a cold wind had blown over her, and straightens her shoulders.

The Guardian grunts. "We have no protection here, and we have been too long in the Burning Lands." He nods at the heart welded to the Brother's hand. "The heart will destroy you without your father's gauntlet, and only one spell yet remains within my blade." The Guardian begins to tremble within his armor. He sighs. "What an evil fortune."

There, pinned beneath the light and heat of the three suns, trapped between the killing black water and the Meat King's wrath, the amber heart's rage boring ever deeper into his soul, the boy shivers. "We have failed," he says. He stares up into the Guardian's glowing eyes and finds no challenge.

The Guardian turns away, walks across the gravel to the fallen pteron, near which lies his silver bow. This he slings over his wounded shoulder.

"We have little time," he says.

The guardian walks east.

Another surge of agony roars through the boy's arm.

It will only get worse, the amber heart sings. Take me back now. My king will grant you mercy.

His sister takes his remaining hand, squeezes it firmly.

Says the heart, *You are beaten.*

Says the heart, *You have failed.*

Through the pain, he smiles thinly at her.

She smiles thinly back.

They follow the Guardian.

III.

The ruin may have once been the base of a great tower, but now, it is nothing more than a pitted ring of gray stone, lapped by black water. From its base, the Black Road stretches away from the shore, a ramparted length of weathered black stone that crosses the breadth of the Poison Sea.

A black pillar several hundred feet high rises from the sea, a warden to the wall of fog that hangs eternally over the water. The boy stares at it, shivers. It is said the Spire was once a marvel of the ancient world, one that reached even to the stars before it was broken during the Battle of Nesrefet, and the dawn of the New Suns caused the seas to rise. Even the Black Road itself is a ruin, the remnant of a great wall surrounding a fortress buried beneath the cursed water.

The Guardian comes to a sudden stop fifty yards from the ruin, lifts his hand. The children behind him go still.

“What is it?” asks the girl.

The Guardian draws his sword. “Fire. Within the tower.” He shakes his head, groans in frustration. “I cannot know how many,” he says. “The power that lay upon this place is too strong. It muddies my sight.”

“Can you see *that*?” The girl asks.

A lone figure stands atop the ruin, gray robes billowing in the wind, arms outstretched.

The Guardian roars, sheaths his sword, moves to unsling his bow. His hands stop mid-reach, frozen.

“No!” The children scream in unison. They think to run to the Guardian, but their legs do not respond. Their limbs, too, are welded in place.

The figure’s outstretched hands curl into fists. The gravel beneath the trio cracks into smaller pebbles, into dust beneath the invisible force dragging them to their knees.

There, the three remain, unable to move. Lashed to the gravel shore.

Four more gray-robed figures exit a wide crack in the ruin's base. They stride lazily across the gravel, laughing as they come. Three of them wield long black whips, their hands sheathed in thick leather gloves.

"Glass elves," the Guardian grunts.

Their flesh as clear as crystal, which renders visible their strange, metallic musculature. Mercurial blood courses through webs of silver vessels. Golden eyes narrow beneath veils of hair like ribbons of glass. Sharp ears, like shards of diamond, glint in the light of three suns. Around each of their necks, fat crimson worms squirm, pulse, bite. The elves pay the parasites no heed.

Upon reaching the captives, the foremost glass elf bares silver teeth, scratches at the crystalline flesh of his neck, careful not to touch the worm itself. "Fortune has heaped so many blessings upon me this day that I grow weary of them."

The others step forth, snap their whips against the gravel. The cords ignite into strings of sunlight.

The Guardian trembles, powerless.

The children want to scream but cannot. They cannot even shut their eyes against the pain as the cables burn holes through their robes, sizzle against their flesh.

The amber heart laughs.

IV.

The captives are dragged across the gravel and into the ruin's interior where an elderly glass elf stands beside a small fire. His flesh is clouded and warped. Tattooed, stained glass arms cross his chest. A small golden dagger the shape of a cat's claw dances in his hand, catches the light of the fire. From the leather belt around his waist, there hangs a small wooden crossbow. Like the others, he is dressed in gray rags. Like the others, he wears a crimson worm around his throat.

"Is it them?" He grunts excitedly. "Is it finished?"

"It is," their captor answers. "All three alive, and the relic intact."

"Let me see it," the old elf growls, lumbers toward the boy. Rough hands flash out, spin him around to face the wall. He can feel the elf's eyes on the amber heart, on the blackened bones of his hand.

"Don't look like much," the younger elf whispers. "Just some dead saint's heart."

"Have the mage raise Oktarrne. Let them know we've kept our end."

The three are pushed against the wall. The burncords have stopped hurting, having already burned through all the nerves they can. For this, the boy is thankful. The elves leave them, take their places around the fire, scratching at the worms around their throats.

"Who are they?" The brother hisses.

The Guardian speaks low. "Prisoners, clearly. From the Oktarrne Penal Colony. It isn't far from here. The Meat King acted quickly. They have clearly been promised freedom in exchange for our capture."

"I see no guards," the boy says. "We can convince them to deliver us to Father instead! Father would grant them refuge in exchange for our safe return, I'm sure of it!"

"No," his sister retorts. "I do see guards. You see the worms about their necks, how they squirm and tighten? If they venture much farther than this, they would be killed. I'm sure of it."

The boy thinks for a long moment.

“Well,” he says. “Damn.”

For a long while, then, there is silence between them. The glass elves mumble to one another around the fire, making elaborate promises about their pending freedom and what they’ll do with it.

At length, the Guardian speaks.

“Children. Listen to me. You saw the Broken Spire from the shore?”

The children nod.

“Reach the Broken Spire,” he orders. “From there, you should be able to send a signal that will reach even your father.”

“What?” the girl hisses. “The Spire is in the middle of the Poison Sea!”

“Take the Black Road,” the Guardian says.

“The waters rise over the road with the tides!” she says, her voice shaking. “And already the Weeping Moon rises! We’ll never make it!”

“You’ll have to.”

Then, the Guardian starts to tremble.

“I have one spell left, my dearest friends.”

“No!” the boy rasps.

“Reach the Spire. Deliver the amber heart to your father.”

“I won’t let you,” the girl says. She thrashes against her burn cords as the air goes electric.

“I love you both.” The Guardian says.

A dome of shadow erupts from the Guardian’s armor, envelops the children. An instant later, a mighty wave of energy explodes outward, coalesces into an eel-swarm of black fire that flings the glass elves across the room. One lands face-first in the fire, screaming. Another flies into the far wall, leaves a firework of mercury tattooed upon the stone. The oldest elf staggers backward, trips over his burning comrade, falls hard onto his back.

The burn-cords around their wrists darken and die like spent fuses. The dark dome dissolves into ash. The Guardian crumbles, steaming to the ground.

The children scramble free. There is no time for grief.

The girl runs to the Guardian’s bow and blade. She hurls the sword as far as her child-strength can manage. The boy catches it with his free hand, leaps across the room, swings the blade in a lethal arc that ends the burning glass elf’s suffering. Glass breaks. Silver blood flows.

The girl lifts the silver bow, aims at the old elf, shaking his head dizzily, steadying himself on his old hammer. She grips the invisible string. The arrow forms. Then, she goes still. Her muscles quiver, but do not respond. Her eyes go wide. The muscles in her neck spasm, a silent scream.

The mage stands behind her in a narrow threshold, arms outstretched, fists clenched.

The girl buckles. An invisible hands pull her to her knees.

The boy lunges toward the fire, throws his free hand into the flames, extracts a smoldering log and hurls it. The elf-mage lifts his hands to protect his face. The spell breaks. The log shatters into sparks against his arms.

The girl, freed, spins, summons an arrow, releases it. At such close range, the top half of the mage explodes in a reeking cloud of mercury. His legs fall away from one another.

A shadow comes over the boy from behind. He turns. The elder elf raises his rusted war-hammer down into the boy's leg. Bone turns to shrapnel. The boy screams. The hammer is raised again. The boy prepares to die, only half aware that he still holds the Guardian's sword, not aware at all that he has thrust it upwards, into the elf's stomach.

The blade enters with the sound of breaking glass. The elf drops the hammer, stumbles backward, catches his heel against a corpse, which sends him tumbling over the low edge of the sea-facing window. His body falls onto the gravel shore, inches from the sea.

The girl rushes to the window to watch him die. She is not disappointed.

The black water surges forth, a seething maw, envelopes the glass elf's body, boils away flesh, meat and bone until there is nothing.

V.

Slowly, with trembling hands, the girl lifts the helm from the Guardian's corpse. Smoke rises from between a blackened skull's teeth, from the empty sockets. With a sharp tug, she frees the skull from the spine.

"We will bring him home," she says, turning to her brother.

"Home?"

"We will walk the Black Road," she says. "We will deliver the heart to Father."

"We..." he grimaces. "We'll be devoured by the sea! Already it rises! You saw what it did to the elf!"

You are beaten, the heart agrees. Its laughter is a knife twisting in the boy's skull like an alligator in the ecstasy of the kill.

"What about my leg?" he asks. "My hand?"

His sister frowns. Her eyes fall to the stone floor, searching. She crosses to the fire, finds the dead elf's crossbow and secures it to the sash around her waist and then she tears long strips of linen from the corpse and she bundles them in her fist and she unslings the silver bow from her shoulders.

"What are you doing?"

"Stay still," she says, laying the bow beside her brother's broken leg. "This will hurt."

The amber heart chuckles. *Good.*

VI.

The Second Sun drifts apart from the Third, saunters toward the horizon.

The Weeping Moon rises between them, drags the black water with it. It laps at the bases of the ramparts, now, where the petrified corpses of dead sawbeaks peer like gargoyles across the black water.

The boy leans on his sister, his broken leg splinted to the Guardian's silver bow. His gaze is fixed on his many shadows, one for each of the suns. In his mind, he counts their footsteps. Each one is a small triumph.

Precious hours pass. The Weeping Moon pulls the poison black water over the ramparts slowly, like sheets over a sleeping lover.

The flesh-eating liquid boils the bottoms of the children's feet, leaves brief footprints of scoured flesh, bubbling blood.

The pain does not matter. The sorrow of losing the Guardian does not matter. All that matters is delivering the amber heart to Father.

Together they limp. Together they burn.

He feels this. All of it. The amber heart's hate and his own dissolving flesh and the bones grinding in his broken leg and the heat of the three suns and the horror of it all and he fears that he will never see his father again, that all is truly lost, that he has failed, that his sister will die. He watches her, crumbling beside him, eyes wide with the agony of every footstep, skin weathered and split by the cruel enchantment of the Burning Lands. Her hair slides down her skull in black clumps, torn loose by the caustic wind. Selfishly, he hopes that he will die before she does. He could not bear it otherwise.

“Brother, look!” She exclaims.

A shadow passes over them. His gaze shoots skyward, expecting to find a pteron, or something worse. Instead, he finds the Spire, its wide obsidian bulk eclipsing the Second Sun.

“We made it,” he says, unbelieving.

The amber heart growls angrily.

A narrow bridge of weathered black glass lashes the Spire’s entrance to the Black Road. All that’s left is to cross it, reach the Spire’s summit and cast their message across the Fog.

You will die, now, the amber heart sneers. *Do you not know? This is where I died.*
The amber heart sneers.

A sudden flash of pain tears through the boy’s body as memory fills his mind, spreads like ink into still water. War. Chaos. Witchfire. Blood. Steel.

The Battle of Nesrefet.

The memory is devoured by something else. A vibration. A rush of cold. Something waking. Something angry. He steadies himself against the ramparts, looks out at the sea.

It is my curse that lay upon these waters, says the amber heart, *my machines that sleep beneath them! And the Poison Sea is deep. It is for this reason alone that you have made it this far. For now, your doom is breaching!*

“Sister,” he says.

She stops, follows his gaze.

The Poison Sea groans low.

“What is it?” She asks.

The black water explodes in a geyser. The boy feels the heart harden, hears it cry through the ether.

Screams the amber heart, *Kill them! Kill them both!*

The thing that rises from the sea is a colossal scorpion of gleaming gold and rusted steel. Pistons hiss. Engines that have spent a century sleeping whine with their waking, a shrill sound, diamond on glass. Poison water slides across a halo of shimmering energy.

So long as I endure, the amber heart growls, *so, too, do all my engines.*

A cluster of blood-orange eyes snaps toward the children, drawn to its master’s call. The machine shivers. Bladed pincers whirl and snap. The many-jointed tail curls and

stiffens and the spiked orb atop it throbs with menacing energy. Air hisses from the jointed legs.

The machine is faster than it looks.

The boy leaps in front of his sister, swings the Guardian's sword. The weapon bounces off the shield-halo, rattles the bones in his hand. The sword falls. A pincer closes around him. Blades bite deep into his abdomen and he is lifted from the road.

"No!" the girl screams. She lifts the small stolen crossbow, launches a white bolt at the machine. The light glances harmlessly off the halo. The tail flashes outward, a lightning bolt of steel and gold. She leaps backward, feels the flesh of her arm blister against the heat that surrounds it. She summons another bolt, fires. The light dissipates, seems to join the halo, strengthen it.

The machine whines, coils its tail, prepares to strike again.

The sister falls to her knees. The black water burns the skin from her legs.

The girl screams, refusing to die quietly.

An explosion, bright, loud, furious, drowns her defiance.

The halo comes apart like parchment held to flame. A second lance of hard light stabs from the sky, reduces the machine to a brief geyser of reeking fire and molten gold. The boy is thrown from the explosion, just another piece of debris. He lands hard on his broken leg, rolls onto his bleeding stomach. The thin layer of black water that lay upon the road melts the flesh from him. He opens what remains of his mouth to cry out as another lance of light slams into the road, blasts the black water into a noxious vapor. Overhead, three jagged rainbows spiral downward in a triple helix. Pterons screech. Silver armor glints. Light shimmers in spear-sized bolts behind mounted ballistas.

The Meat King's soldiers have returned.

"The bow! The bow!"

The boy turns his burnt, fleshless face to his sister. She is pointing frantically at his leg, but he cannot move. Pain pins him to the boiling ground. She lets loose a furious roar, runs to him, the black water kicked before her in a scalding mist. His vision fades, blurs as the droplets find their way into his eyes.

His sister drops to her knees, fumbles with the ropes binding the silver bow to her brother's leg. Above her, the archers summon their arrows.

The bow comes loose. She rises, spins, lifts the weapon as flesh slides from her fingers, from her cheek, exposing gritted teeth. The sunlight caresses the bow's silver, ripples in waves as she wraps her crumbling fingers around the invisible string. She tries to draw it back. She screams at the effort.

No arrow comes.

She is too weak.

“The...fog...” the boy gasps, turns his head. Not more than twenty footsteps from them, the fog wall hangs like a gray curtain. Twenty footsteps. An impossible journey. His sister drops the bow, digs her arms under his shoulders, drags what’s left of them both toward the gray, vaporous wall.

Light crashes into the sea, into the stone, into the smoldering wreckage of the golden scorpion. The Meat King’s pterons beat the air into rainbows. From above, someone, a man, barks a desperate order.

“Gods of Light, men, don’t let them reach the fog! Fire! Fire!”

Sea and stone boil and break beneath the barrage of light. The boy releases a scream from crumbling lungs as a bolt of white heat severs his broken leg at the knee, reduces the bone to ash.

An instant later, they pass into the fog. It is the closest thing to night the children have ever known. The sunlight is diminished to a pale glow, its heat lost behind a soothing coolness.

“S...sister...”

He hears the bones in her feet shatter as she drags him onward, deeper, deeper into the fog.

“Sister...stop...”

Another bone breaks. More flesh slips from her fingers, from her legs, slides out from under her feet. She slips, falls.

They lie there, silent, listening to the cries of the pterons. A single ballista bolt of hard light flies through the gray over their heads.

At length, the girl speaks. “We came...so close...”

The ground rumbles. A one-two rhythm. The march of armored boots on the Black Road, pounding through the fog.

“Farewell...sister.”

Their fleshless hands find one another’s, and their eyes lock onto the gray stillness above them, surrounding them.

“To the...Dark...then...”

The amber heart laughs. *Damn you*, it says. *Damn you both*.

The boots encircle them. Blades and arrows shimmer.

Together, they close what eyes remain between them. Together, they release the fire from their souls into the Dark.

VII.

“Sir!” A soldier cries. “There’s something here! In the fog!”
Another soldier screams.
And another.
Neither scream for long.

The Dark shivers, regurgitates the fire into the children’s’ bodies. Their eyes flicker open. Above them, descending through the Fog, a strange, jagged pyramid, suspended in a ring of black fire.

The archers raise their bows, loose hard light. The arrows strike true, shattering fragments off the pyramid’s surface. The fragments that rain down upon them, they realize, are bone.

“The Bone King!” the men scream in rough unison. “The Bone King is come!” They break their circle around the children, tugged frantically by their terror in all directions. Directionless in the uniform grayness, no small few tumble over the ramparts into the Poison Sea. Those that do not flee back toward their commander, toward their pterons.

The pyramid descends, comes to rest beside the children.

The unliving mass is composed of a score of skeletons, packed and lashed together by a malicious, wonderous will that animates the bones, sends them tumbling around and across each other ceaselessly.

Slowly, more skeletons appear, clad in black armor, wielding silver bows and swords of volcanic glass, glowing with cruel magic.

As the children lie, motionless, a single skull floats to the surface of the pyramid. White light spills from its empty sockets like tears, trickles down the jagged bones.
The Bone King peers down at them.

The children's mouths open together, at once, the last of their strength summoned for a mighty scream.

"Father!"

The white tears pour forth in torrents. "Children!"

Tendrils of black fire leap out from the ring surrounding the pyramid, coil around the children's bones, healing them, injecting them with life. They sit up, beaming at their father. In his presence, the Fog seems to grow thicker, darker.

"Your leg, my son."

The boy looks down at the void below his blackened knee.

"Here," their father says, "Remove those ridiculous disguises."

Bones wriggle loose from the pyramid, drift on black fire to the boy's knee, attach themselves. Slowly, the children rise to their feet.

Ravenously, the children tear the acolyte's robes from their flesh, and then the flesh from their bones. At last, they stand before their father in their true forms, as pure, glistening skeletons.

The girl looks down at the Guardian's skull. She lifts the hard-won thing above her head, drops to her knee.

"For you, father," he says.

The Bone King stares long at the skull without moving.

"It was his sacrifice that called to me," the pyramid says, sadly. "The last spell I gifted to him. I had hoped he would never have cause to use it."

The skeleton horde surrounds the Bone King and his children, unmoving.

Silently, the pyramid wills the legion forth. The black armored bones march around the three like a river around a stream.

From beyond the fog, the sounds of war. Meatlings scream. Skeletons roar.

The boy lifts the amber heart toward his father.

For once, the heart is silent.

The boy's soul smiles. *You are beaten*, he says to the heart.

The heart says nothing.

For a long time, their father does not move or speak.

At length, a single skeletal hand rises from the pyramid, and plucks the blackened hand and the amber heart from the boy's outstretched wrist before retreating into the pyramid. The hand is replaced by another, which crawls down the side of the pyramid and leaps onto the boy's arm.

"Come," their father says.

Together, they drift toward the sounds of screams.

VIII.

The knights are stripped of their meat. Their bones are gathered, added to their father.

Only one is left alive. A large, powerful looking man with a gray beard and dark skin and a face stricken expressionless by terror, by the white-eyed gaze of Death itself. Black armored skeletons drag him through the ankle-deep black water. The stink of boiling meat rises from the spaces in the soldier's armor.

The soldier is held on his knees before the Bone King. The light-weeping skull glares down at her. On either side, the pyramid's children hang suspended, healed by the black fire of their father's will.

The woman scowls up at the pyramid. A single twitching eye betrays her agony. "Behold!" says the Bone King, "Your protector!"

The hand bearing the amber heart re-emerges a few feet below the weeping skull's chin, eye level with the doomed knight. Her eyes fill with tears before he shuts them tight. She whimpers, begins to shake.

"The Amber Heart of Teth the Lightsmith! He who hung the New Suns in the sky, who banished night from the world and my kind into the Fog." Another skeletal arm bursts forth from the pyramid, seizes the woman's jaw, shakes it. She begins to weep openly, now.

"Now, I will turn my will against your savior's heart. It will not be long before its essence is corrupted, before the Suns yield to my will alone." The Bone King's grip

tightens. "I will snuff them out like candles. I will call back the Darkness. I will rain death upon the Free Kingdoms of the Bright Lands!"

The hand unclenches, releases the knight.

Beside their father, the children laugh.

All of this, because of them. Because of their mission. Soon would come the cool and delicious darkness. Soon would come a scouring wind to whip the twin pollutflesh from the world, leaving only the bones of paradise. Soon, the living and the light would be brittle memories, brief wounds upon the world, even the scars of which are doomed to be forgotten, buried beneath the unending breadth of black and beautiful decay that would last unending, until even the youngest of the distant stars had perished, taking the very last of the cruel light with it. Soon, there would be dancing.

"My children it was that delivered your doom to me," he says. "They have travelled far and suffered much. They are hungry."

"Please..." the soldier begs.

She says no more. Black fire coils around her, lifts her out of the black water.

The Bone King watches his children peel away the sapphire armor. He watches them feed upon meat and spirit. All the while, the amber heart remains silent. It knows there is nothing more to say.

When the children are finished, all that remains of the soldier are red bones pocked by the marks of hungry teeth. These are offered to their father.

"Leave them," he says.

He turns and drifts back into the fog, carrying with him the soul of the New Suns and the promise of a better world. His children follow, borne on wings of black flame. Below them, the Poison Sea rises, washes over the Black Road and all that lay upon it. The discarded flesh and marred bones of the servants of light and life boil away until the Road is gone, until there is nothing.