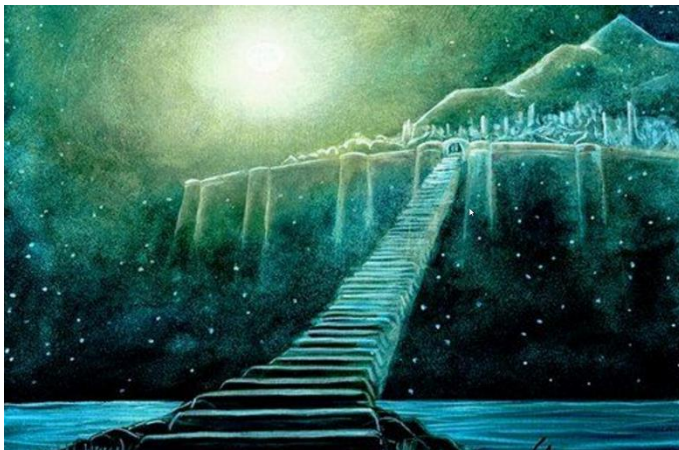


25. Terror in Tir Na'Nogth

They arrived at the short set of stone stairs below the ghostly image of Tir Na'Nogth just as the vast bulk of the Abyssal Horror loomed over Amber.

The mass of roiling tendrils blocked the sun, casting a huge shadow over the city.



The shimmering image of Tir seemed even less substantial in this unnatural twilight, than it had done on their previous nocturnal visits. The true moonlight was still another 6 or 7 hours away, but they had to make the attempt anyway.

Cassie, still encased in the ruby glow of the Jewel of Judgement, stepped onto the stairs and seemed to Aleyn to have become translucent.

From her perspective it was Aleyn and the two soldiers who had faded, and the shimmering steps leading up to a solid, but mist-filled ruined city, had become real.

The Horror turned away from Amber the moment she set foot on the stairs and began to drift in their direction. Cassie reached into the Jewel of Judgement and conjured high winds to delay the thing.

Aleyn, still in his demon-form as the giant gnarled dwarf, followed her up as the two soldiers (Hennion and Massius) crouched below the stairs sheltering from the hurricane.

Unlike their previous visits, the ruined city appeared real as did the surviving townsfolk (cowering in the rubble). They hurried on through the rubble-choked streets, ignoring the suspicious and hate-filled stares until they reached a breach in the castle wall close to where the great stairwell would lead them down to the Pattern Chamber.



In the inner courtyard, Julian stepped forward to prevent them approaching. When they had last seen him, he had been battered, bloody and exhausted from the battle in Arden. Now his white plate mail glistened, and he made a few practice swings with his white longsword as he approached.

Aleyn leapt for him, circling around to draw him away from the inner doorway so that Cassie could slip past. Their weapons clashed, soulblade blocking the thrust of Julian's pattern-etched sword. The heavy dwarf rushed Julian, knocking him over and he chased after Cassie, down the long stairs.

They could hear Julian in pursuit, but plate mail is not ideal for running down forty flights of steep steps, so they were well ahead as they approached the multi-coloured glow of the Pattern Chamber.



Aleyn cursed as he saw what lay between them and the Pattern. It was Benedict, flourishing a long slim sword in one hand and a wicked dagger in the other. "I know not exactly why, but I sense you mean the Pattern harm, and I cannot allow it. Turn back now or be accounted suicides."

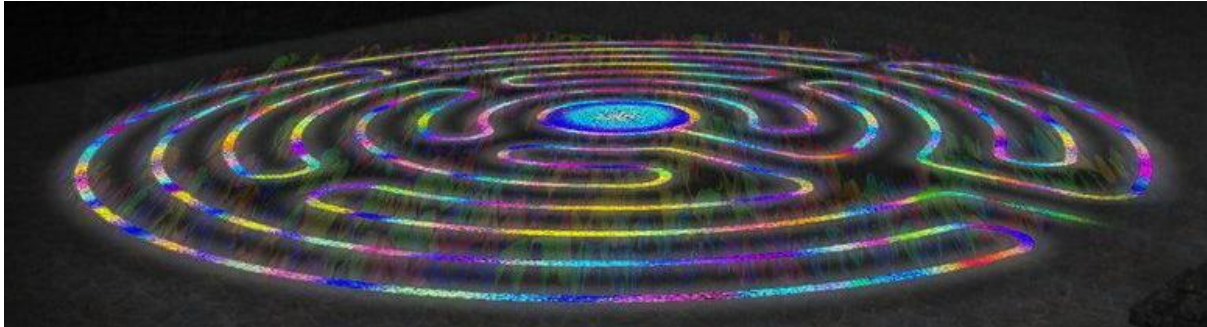
Not wanting to delay (and let Julian catch up with them), Aleyn leapt from the stairs, to knock Benedict aside and rolling to a halt at the edge of the Pattern. The tall slender Benedict, dodged aside with worrying dexterity, regaining his feet instantly and with both weapons raised between them. As he clashed with the dwarf, Cassie leapt past and onto the Pattern.

Unlike Julian, Benedict had no helmet, and it was clear his face was twisted, skin semi-translucent and showing gaunt skeletal bones in the eerie light cast by the Pattern. He was clearly a Pattern Ghost, a shadow cast by the warped and broken Pattern of Tir Na'Nogth.

While Cassie strode along the burning curves, re-writing the warps and breaks with her ruby aura, the two men clashed and circled. The dwarf's greater strength just matching Benedict's skill and confidence.

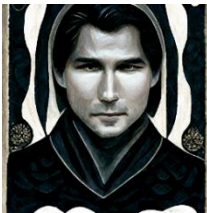
Before Julian could join the fight, he was struck from behind by a huge tendril descending the stairs behind him. As he sprawled into the chamber, he scrambled to his feet and turned to face a dozen such tendrils that writhed after him.

Benedict seemed torn between possible targets, but stepped to Julian's aid and they both began hacking at the never-ending tide of tentacles. They would soon be overwhelmed, but Aleyn joined their line and they held for precious seconds. Julian was crushed against a wall and died, evaporating into rainbow dust. Benedict and Aleyn fought shoulder to shoulder to hold back the Horror. Both took terrible wounds but fought on.



On the Pattern, the resistance grew with every step closer to the centre.

Strange images arose in the sparks to each side of Cassie – mere distractions.



An image of the man who might be her Father (Corwin), happy in his Shadow, without a care in the world.

An image of Diedre in a cell below Rebma, head in her hands, weeping.



The Gates of Amber, under siege by a horde of Skaven, but at least the Horror had passed them by as it turned towards Tir Na'Nogth.

Pushing the distractions aside, Cassie pressed on, although it cost her great effort. As the last of the distorted Patterns, it seemed to be fighting against her, determined to cling to its own existence, its own individuality. The multi-coloured flames rose higher with every step until it seemed that the last step would be TOO HARD. She slowed, almost driven to a halt.

What is she willing to sacrifice to push through? Her life? Her Sanity? And even then, the moment Pattern is FIXED, the Horror will be destroyed and Tir Na'Nogth will cease to exist until the true moonrise – another six hours! She MIGHT reach the centre and teleport away, but Aleyn...

Aleyn was bleeding from many wounds. Benedict had been smashed and crushed and seemed to be still fighting by will alone. They were being pushed back to the edge of the Pattern. The tendrils were burning as they touched the shimmering curves, but although many blackened, others pushed forward over the mounds of burning flesh.

Aleyn realised he was going to die and his only hope of survival lay in walking the Pattern. He turned and swung at Benedict. As they had been fighting side by side and there was no warning, even Benedict's legendary awareness couldn't prevent this and the man's head flew from his body. The Quickening flashed immediately, lightning driving back the tendrils for a few seconds and the energy flowed back into Aleyn's body and the dwarf staggered back onto the Pattern. As he wasn't immediately destroyed, it seemed the Pattern Imprint he had gained from slaughtering Marque de Callais all those centuries before was enough to make him Family.

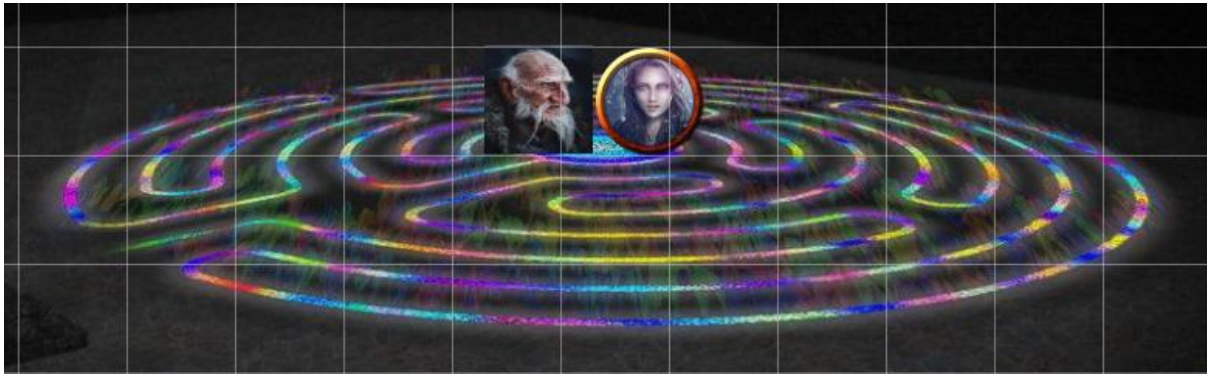
But even with the stolen energy from Benedict's Pattern Ghost, each step was FIRE and PAIN. It was easier now than it would have been before Cassie and the Jewel had burned it back into alignment, but in his weakened state, it was still harder than anything he'd faced before.

Cassie saw him start the walk but could wait no longer. She determined to finish the repair, get to the centre and teleport away then try to Trump Aleyne before he fell from the sky. It took a massive final effort [GM: Permanently Sacrificing some aspect of her Character – a permanent loss of FATE] but suddenly it was over, she staggered into the centre, but felt ALL the Pattern Energy that usually flowed into her at the end was spent in the act of the Pattern's re-alignment. There was no energy in the Pattern to teleport her away.

Tir Na'Nogth vanished instantly and the Pattern hung alone in an endless void of darkness. She at the centre and Aleyne making his slow and painful way around the outer curves. She could feel the slow build-up of power as Aleyne moved forward. When HE reached the middle, he should have generated enough energy to teleport away. But it didn't look like he was going to make it.

Cassie tried to will the Pattern to lower the resistance. Aleyne tried to force himself forward just a few steps from the final veil, but he was wounded from dozens of cuts and realised he was not going to be able to take another step. His flesh began to burn.

Wrapping herself in the protective aura of the Jewel, Cassie stepped back into the Pattern, grabbed his arm and pulled him to the centre. They both collapsed exhausted. The Pattern hung there in the void. Aleyne hadn't completed the Walk, but realised that he probably could manage it if he hadn't been injured and spent before he started.



They examined their Trumps, but all were unresponsive – images misty except for each others. Maybe when the moon rose in Amber, reality would re-assert itself?

Aleyne slept while Cassie stayed awake, praying for the Pattern not to suddenly cease to exist.

Finally, the walls of the chamber swam into ghostly view. Tir Na'Nogth was back. Their Trumps were operational again.

After a brief debate about who they could contact and who might have enough energy to pull them through the Trumps, Aleyne contacted Trellys in House Jeseby in the Courts of Chaos and Trellys pulled them both through to safety.

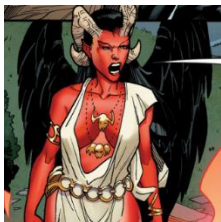
At The Other End Of It All



Trellys explained that the last day or so had been very eventful in Chaos. Skaven troops from the Abyss had been attacking several of the Great Houses but suddenly the apparently endless stream of enemies had come to an end and the war seemed to be over. The Abyss seemed to have returned to its former state of inactivity.

Reports had been coming in that Shadow Storms were wreaking havoc across the Universe.

The folk of Chaos (with their Logrus-based Shadow-walking powers and their Ways) had lost access to about half of their Shadow Worlds! There seemed to have been a huge shift in the universal balance towards Pattern.



Empress Dara, who had rallied the Houses and led them to victory, was on the verge of declaring all-out war against Amber.

The High Priest of the Serpent (Bances of Amblerash) had revealed that the Logrus itself was damaged.



Aleyn and Cassie decided to give Trellys their potion of Logrus Booster so she could pass it on to Bances and he could use it to help "fix" the Logrus using the other "Eye of the Serpent" (the Logrus equivalent of the Jewel of Judgement. This apparently worked and universal order was restored (Chaos re-gaining access to their half of the Shadow worlds). More Shadow Storms rage as the universal poles re-align.

House Jeseby are now owed big-time favours by Amblerash and by Empress Dara.



Duke Mandor of Sawall contacted Trllys, asking for transport to House Jeseby and a promise of Hospitality so he could talk to her "guests".

Only Aleyn and Trellys met with Mandor. Cassie preferred to remain in her rooms.

Mandor expressed his gratitude for their help, assured them of his good intentions and that he would be happy to repay them at some future time. He gave Aleyn a Trump in case they ever need another friend in the Courts.