

The *Soul Lands* appeared long before the clouds parted enough to reveal them. From the cockpit of the transport sloop, Ismyrili watched the jungle change beneath them. There was no wall marking the boundary, no fortress line, no trench, no batteries turned outward toward the world. There had never been any need.

The distinction was older and considerably more absolute than fortifications. Settlements became sparse, then vanished altogether. Roads narrowed into ancient paths winding beneath the canopy. Here and there, stone markers rose between the trees, weathered almost smooth by centuries of rain, each bearing prayers whose meaning every Atrapoi knew even when the words themselves had fallen from common use. Beyond them lay the *Soul Lands*.

The transport banked gently, its enormous wings beating against the humid morning air with slow, ponderous strokes. It was an ungainly thing by the standards of the starfaring powers now filling Atrapos' skies, its long armoured fuselage tapering into a narrow tail and its hull layered in overlapping plates of dark metal scarred by years of rain and jungle grit.

Two great articulated wings stretched from either side, membranes drawn across lattices of spars and mechanical tendons. Each downward stroke sent a shudder through the craft, followed by the hiss of pistons and the heavy clack of gears resetting for another beat. Smaller stabilizing vanes flickered constantly along its flanks, correcting every gust and crosswind with nervous precision. There was something alive in the way it flew, not graceful, exactly, but predatory.

Its forward hull narrowed around the cockpit like the head of some immense jungle beast, while beneath it sat the housings where weapons would ordinarily have been mounted. Today, they were conspicuously empty.

Ismyrili had insisted upon that. The High Marshal of Atrapos would not carry weapons into the *Soul Lands*, and neither would his guards.

The sloop descended through the last veil of cloud, wings spreading almost motionless as it glided toward the sacred portal below. Two pillars of black stone rose from the jungle floor, supporting a lintel so ancient that roots had grown through its carvings and emerged again on the other side. Beyond it, a broad processional road disappeared beneath towering trees into the mist-shrouded interior. Pilgrims crowded the approaches, servants carried baskets of offerings between shrines, and robed attendants moved among them with censers trailing thin ribbons of pale smoke.

Standing across the gateway were the Soul Sentinels.

Ismyrili frowned. "Circle once."

The pilot glanced back. "High Marshal?"

"Circle."

The sloop banked again, and Ismyrili leaned toward the window as they passed over the portal. There were too many of them. The Soul Sentinels had always guarded the entrances. They were servants of Themlykos before they were soldiers, entrusted with maintaining the sanctity of the *Soul Lands* and keeping the quarrels of the outside world from crossing their borders. Their ceremonial spears were as much symbols of office as weapons, long, ornate things carried openly and used in earnest only in the gravest circumstances.

Ismyrili counted perhaps thirty Sentinels around the gate. He saw only four spears.

"Land."

The great wings changed rhythm, beating faster and shallower. Dust, loose earth and fallen leaves exploded outward as the sloop settled heavily onto its landing struts before the portal, its engines winding down beneath the diminishing thunder of its wings. The hatch opened and Ismyrili stepped into the heat, his bodyguards following behind him. None carried so much as a knife.

Pilgrims moved aside immediately. Some bowed, others simply stared. Word spread through the gathering in hushed clicks and rattling whispers as the High Marshal approached the sacred gate, but the Sentinels did not move.

"High Marshal Ismyrili," one of his attendants announced. "He seeks audience with the Spirit-Seer Themlykos."

Nothing. Ismyrili's lips twitched. "Inform him that I have come."

The Sentinel standing foremost lowered his head respectfully. "You may not pass."

For several seconds, Ismyrili said nothing. Behind him came the final metallic ticks of the sloop's cooling engines. "Perhaps you misunderstood."

"I did not, High Marshal."

"I have not asked whether the Spirit-Seer is receiving pilgrims."

"No, High Marshal."

"I said that I have come."

The Sentinel remained perfectly still. "And you may not pass."

One of Ismyrili's bodyguards took a step forward, but the High Marshal raised a hand and stopped him. Only then did Ismyrili properly look at the Sentinel before him. Something black protruded beneath the folds of his robes. At first he mistook it for some new badge of office. Then he saw the trigger guard.

An autoslugger. Compact, short-barrelled and loaded.

His gaze moved along the line. One. Three. Seven. Nearly every Sentinel carried one, and hanging from their belts beside them were blades—not the ornamental knives sometimes worn outside the sacred territories, but broad fighting weapons whose dark metal bore the unmistakable dull sheen of worked cortosis.

His bodyguards had noticed as well. The atmosphere changed instantly. Ismyrili's voice became quieter. "You stand beneath the Gate of Souls carrying weapons."

One of the High Marshal's entourage gave an incredulous clicking hiss. Another stepped forward before catching himself. Ismyrili stared at the Sentinel.

Nobody moved. Beyond the gate, servants had stopped working. Even the pilgrims had fallen silent. Ismyrili took one deliberate step closer, and several Sentinels shifted. Hands did not quite reach for weapons, but they came close. His bodyguards reacted immediately, spreading behind him despite having nothing with which to fight.

A Sentinel officer finally stepped from the line. He was older than the others. His ceremonial spear remained in his hand, but a cortosis blade hung openly across his back and an autoslugger rested against his thigh. "High Marshal."

"Explain this."

The officer hesitated. "Please." Something in that word stopped Ismyrili. Not defiance. Fear.

"The Spirit-Seer is ill."

Ismyrili's anger faltered. "How ill?"

"We do not know."

A long silence followed before Ismyrili asked, "What happened?"

"Three nights ago, the Spirit-Seer became fevered. He spoke little. What he did say made..." The officer searched for the word. "Little sense. Yesterday, he ceased recognizing several of his attendants."

A distant rumble rolled through the jungle. Thunder, perhaps. Ismyrili thought of the Adzes, thousands upon thousands of them abandoning their hidden places beneath the canopy, treeskimmers torn from the sky, reports arriving from settlements hundreds of kilometres apart all describing the same madness.

"Then I have even greater reason to see him."

The Sentinels stiffened. The officer did not. "His last coherent command was given to us directly."

Ismyrili waited as the officer swallowed. "He told us to stop them."

"Stop whom?"

"We don't know."

"Me?"

The officer's silence was answer enough.

Ismyrili turned toward the gate. Beyond it, the sacred road vanished beneath trees older than cities. Somewhere beyond those trees was Themlykos.

He looked through the gate. He could order them aside. He was High Marshal. There were soldiers within signalling distance, fleets moving through the skies, entire divisions that would answer his command. Thirty zealots standing beneath an old stone arch could not keep him from anything he truly intended to reach. His gaze settled on the autoslugger at the officer's side, then upon the sacred spear still clutched in his hand, the old symbol and the new necessity, side by side.

No. Whatever had seized Themlykos, Ismyrili would not answer it by spilling Atrapoi blood at the entrance to the *Soul Lands*.

"Very well."

Relief flickered across the other's face, but High Marshal Ismyrili stepped closer until only a pace separated them. "You will send word the moment he speaks coherently. I do not care whether it is morning, midnight, or while the stars themselves are falling from the sky. If Themlykos says another word, I hear it."

"You will."

"If the Ca..." A shriek echoed somewhere impossibly far beyond the gate. Not loud, not near, yet every Sentinel turned toward it.

Ismyrili did not finish. For a moment nobody moved, and then the jungle was quiet again. He looked past the armed Sentinels, through the ancient portal and into the mist beyond. His anger remained, but the worry was worse.

"Keep your gates closed," the High Marshal said as he turned back toward the waiting sloop. "And keep the Spirit-Seer safe."