

THE KINGDOM BEYOND  
THE WAVES

By Stephen Hunt

*The Court of the Air*  
*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*



THE  
KINGDOM  
BEYOND THE  
WAVES

STEPHEN HUNT



HARPER  
*Voyager*

*La medida del amor es amar sin medida.*

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1

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## CHAPTER ONE

Amelia Harsh wiped the sweat from her hands across her leather trousers, then thrust her fingers up into Mombiko's vice-tight grip. The ex-slave hauled her onto the ledge, the veins on his arms bulging as he lifted her up the final few feet to the summit. Bickering voices chased Amelia up the face of the blisteringly hot mountainside like the chattering of sand beetles.

'You climb better than them, even with your poisoned arm,' said Mombiko.

Amelia rubbed at the raw wound on her right shoulder – like her left, as large as that of a gorilla. Not due to the stinging scorpion that had crept into her tent two nights earlier, but the result of a worldsinger's sorcery. Large sculpted biceps muscles that could rip a door apart or cave in the skull of a camel; a physique that was rendered near useless by that bloody insect's barbed tail. The scorpion had to have stung her gun arm, too.

Mombiko passed the professor a blessedly cool canteen and she took a greedy swig of water before checking the progress of the Macanalie brothers. They were a minute away from

*Stephen Hunt*

the ledge, cursing each other and squabbling over the best footholds and grips to reach the summit.

‘The brothers got us through the Northern Desert,’ said Amelia. ‘There are not many uplanders who could have done that.’

‘You know where those three scum developed their knowledge of the sands, mma,’ said Mombiko, accusingly. ‘The brothers guide traders over the border in both directions – avoiding the kingdom’s revenue men to the north and the caliph’s tax collectors to the south.’

Amelia pointed to the sea of wind-scoured dunes stretched out beneath them. ‘It’s not much of a border. Besides, I know about their side-trade as well as you do, capturing escaped slaves who make it to the uplands and dragging them back for the caliph’s bounty on the slaves’ heads.’

‘They are not good men, professor.’

Amelia checked the sling of the rifle strapped to her back. ‘They were as good as we were going to get without the university’s help.’

Mombiko nodded and clipped the precious water canteen back onto his belt.

Damn the pedants on the High Table. A pocket airship could have crossed the desert in a day rather than the weeks of sun-scorched marching Amelia’s expedition had endured. But the college at Saint Vines did not want the technology of an airship falling into the caliph’s hands. And it was a fine excuse for the college authorities to drop another barrier in front of her studies, her obsession.

‘You wait here,’ Amelia said to Mombiko. ‘Help them up.’

‘If they try anything?’

She pointed to his pistol and the bandolier of crystal charges strapped over his white robes. ‘Why do you think I made sure

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

we were climbing at the front? I wouldn't trust a Macanalie to hold my guide rope.'

A sound like a crow screeched in the distance. Shielding her eyes, Amelia scanned the sky. Blue, cloudless. Clear of any telltale dots around the sun that would indicate the presence of the lizard-things that the caliph's scouts flew. No match for an airship's guns, but the unnatural creatures could fall upon the five of them easily enough; rip their spines out in a dive and carry their shredded remains back to one of Cassarabia's military garrisons. Again, the screech. She saw a dark shape shuffling higher up the mountainside – a sand hawk – and relaxed. It was eyeing up one of the small salamanders on the dunes beneath them, no doubt.

Professor Harsh returned her attention to the wall on the ledge, following the trail of stone sigils worn away to near-indecipherability by Cassarabia's sandstorms over the millennia. Mombiko's contact had been right after all; a miracle the deserter from the caliph's army had made it this far, had spotted the carving in the rocks below. Had possessed enough education to know what the carving might signify and the sand-craft to reach the uplands of Jackals and the safety of the clans. The path between the crags led to a wall of boulders with a circular stone slab embedded in it. A door! Shielded from the worst of the storm abrasions, the sigils on the portal had fared better than the worn iconography that had led her up here.

Amelia marvelled at the ancient calligraphy. So primitive, yet so beautiful. There were illustrations too, a swarm of brutal-looking vehicles ridden by fierce barbarians – horseless carriages, but not powered by the high-tension clockwork milled by her own nation of Jackals. Engines from a darker time.

Her revelry at the discovery was interrupted by the snarling voices behind her.

*Stephen Hunt*

‘Is this it, then, lassie?’

Amelia looked at the three upland smugglers, practically drooling at the thought of the treasures they were imagining behind the door. ‘Roll the door back, but *carefully*,’ she ordered. Dipping into her backpack she pulled out five cotton masks with string ties. ‘Put these on before you go in.’

‘Are you daft, lassie?’ spat the oldest of the brothers. ‘There’s no sandstorm coming.’

‘These are not sand masks,’ Amelia said, tapping a thumb on the door. ‘You are standing outside the tomb of a powerful chieftain. He would have owned worldsingers as part of his slave-clan and would not have been above having them leave a sprinkling of curse-dust in his tomb to kill grave robbers, bandits and any of his rivals tempted to desecrate his grave.’ She slipped the mask over her mouth, the chemicals in the fabric filling her nose with a honey-sweet smell. ‘But you are free to go in without protection.’

The brothers each gave her a foul look, but pulled on the masks all the same, then got to work rolling the door back with all the vigour that only greed could generate. Mombiko drew out a gas spike and ignited the lantern. ‘I shall go first, mma.’

Amelia signalled her agreement. Mombiko had been raised in the great forests of the far south and possessed an uncanny sixth sense. Curse-dust aside, there should only be a single trap in this ancient tomb – the mausoleum’s creators were an unsubtle brutish people – but it was best to be sure.

The door rolled back. Mombiko held the gas spike in front of him, shadows dancing in the dark tunnel that lay revealed behind the stone slab. It was cool inside after the heat of the desert. Crude stone-hewn steps led downward, iron brackets in the wall where lanterns would once have hung.

‘Did you hear something?’ asked one of the brothers.

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

‘Put your gun down, you fool,’ said Amelia. ‘It’s just an echo. You fire your pistol in here and the ricochet of your ball will be what kills you.’

‘If there’s a treasure, there will be something to guard it,’ insisted one of the brothers. ‘A wee beastie.’

‘Nothing that could survive over two thousand years trapped down here without any food,’ said Amelia.

‘Holster your pistol,’ ordered the oldest brother, ‘the lass is right. Besides, it’s her laddie-boy that’s going in first, right?’

Followed by the cold echoes of their own steps, the five interlopers walked down the carved passage; at the bottom of the sloping cut was a foreboding stone door, a copper panel in a wall-niche by its side, the space filled with levers, nobs and handles.

‘I’ve got a casket of blow-barrel sap back with the camels,’ said one of the Macanalie brothers.

Amelia wiped the cobwebs off the copper panel. ‘You got enough to blow up *all* the treasure, clansman? Leave the archaeology to me.’

Amelia touched the levers, tracing the ancient script with her fingers. Like most of the Black-oil Horde’s legacy to history, their language was stolen, looted from one of the many non-nomadic nations the barbarians had over-run during their age. The script was a riddle – filled with jokes and black humour.

‘The wrong choice . . .’ whispered Mombiko behind her.

‘I know, I know,’ said Amelia, eyeing the impressions along the wall where the tomb builders had buried their compressed oil explosives. Surely the passage of time would have spoiled their potency? ‘Now, let’s see. In their legends the sun rises when the petrol-gods sleep, but sleeping is a play on words, so—’ she grabbed two levers, sliding one up while shoving another into a side channel and down, then clicked one of the nobs clockwise to face the symbol of the sun.

*Stephen Hunt*

Ancient counter-weights shifted and the door drew upwards into the ceiling of the passage with a *rack-rack-rack*. Mombiko let out his breath.

The oldest of the smuggler brothers nodded in approval. ‘Clever lass. I knew there was a reason we brought you along.’

The professor flicked back her mane of dark hair. ‘I’m not paying you extra for your poor sense of humour, Macanalie. Let’s see what’s down here.’

They walked into the burial chamber. With its rough, jagged walls, it might almost have been mistaken for a natural cavern were it not for the statues holding up the vaulted roof – squat totem-poles of granite carved with smirking goblin faces. Mombiko’s gas spike was barely powerful enough to reveal the eight-wheeled carriage that rose on a dais in the centre of the chamber, spiral lines of gold rivets studding its armoured sides and exhaust stacks. The nearest of the smugglers gasped, scurrying over to the boat-sized machine to run his hand over the lance points protruding from the vehicle’s prow. They were silver-plated, but Amelia knew that reinforced steel would lie hidden beneath each deadly lance head.

‘It’s true, after all this time,’ said Amelia, as if she did not really believe it herself. ‘A war chief of the Black-oil Horde, perhaps even the great Diesela-Khan himself.’

‘This is a horseless carriage?’ asked one of the Macanalies. ‘I can’t see the clockwork. Where’s the clockwork?’

He was elbowed aside by his excited elder. ‘What matters that? It’s a wee fortune, man! Look at the gems on the thing – her hood here, is this beaten out of solid gold?’

‘Oil,’ said Amelia, distracted. ‘They burnt oil in their engines, they hadn’t mastered high-tension clockwork.’

‘Slipsharp oil?’ queried the smuggler. Surely there were not enough of the great beasts of the ocean swimming the world’s seas to bleed blubber to fuel such a beautiful, deadly vehicle?

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

‘Do you not know anything?’ said Mombiko, waving the gas spike over the massive engine at the carriage’s rear. ‘Black water from the ground. This beautiful thing would have drunk it like a horse.’

Amelia nodded. One of the many devices that stopped functioning many thousands of years ago if the ancient sagas were to be believed – overwhelmed by the power of the worldsong and the changing universe. Mombiko pointed to a silver sarcophagus in the middle of the wagon and Amelia climbed in, pulling out her knife to lever open the ancient wax-sealed coffin.

‘They must have taken the wagon to pieces outside,’ laughed the youngest brother. ‘Put it back together down here.’

‘Obviously,’ said Amelia, grunting as she pressed her knife under the coffin lid. Her shoulder burned with the effort. Damn that scorpion.

‘Oh, you’re a sly one, Professor Harsh,’ spat the eldest brother. ‘All your talk of science and the nobility of ancient history and all of the past’s lessons. All those fine-sounding lectures back in the desert. And here you are, scrabbling for jewels in some quality’s coffin. You almost had me believing you, lassie.’

She shot a glare at the smuggler, ignoring his taunts. She deserved it. Perhaps she was no better than these three gutter-scrapings of the kingdom’s border towns.

‘Her wheels weren’t built to run on sand,’ mused one of the Macanalies. He ran his hand covetously along the shining spikes of gold on the vehicle’s rim.

Amelia was nearly done, the last piece of wax seal giving way. It was a desecration really. No wonder the eight great universities had denied her tenure, kept her begging for expedition funds like a hound kept underneath the High Table. But there might be treasure inside. *Her* treasure.

*Stephen Hunt*

‘There wasn’t a desert outside when our chieftain here was buried,’ said Amelia. ‘It was all steppes and grassland. This mountain once stretched all the way back to the uplands, before the glaciers came and crushed the range to dust.’

At last the lid shifted and Amelia pushed the sarcophagus open. There were weapons in there alongside the bones, bags of coins too – looted from towns the ancient nomads had sacked, no doubt, given that the Black-oil Horde either wore or drove their wealth around. But might there be something else hidden amongst their looted booty? Amelia’s hands pushed aside the diamond-encrusted ignition keys and the black-powder guns of the barbarian chief – torn between scrabbling among the find like a looter and honouring her archaeologist’s pledge. There! Among the burial spoils, the hexagonal crystal-books she had crossed a desert for.

Professor Amelia Harsh lifted them out and then she sobbed. Each crystal-book was veined with information sickness, black lines threading out as if a cancer had infected the hard purple glass. Had the barbarians of the Black-oil Horde unknowingly spoiled the ancient information blocks? Or had their final guardian cursed the books even as the nomads smashed their way into the library of the ancient civilization that had created them? They were useless. Good for nothing except bookends for a rich merchant with a taste for antiques.

The oldest of the brothers mistook her sobs for tears of joy. ‘There’s enough trinkets in that dead lord’s chest to pay for a mansion in Middlesteel.’

Amelia looked up at the ugly faces of the nomad gods on the columns. They stared back at her. Chubba-Gearshift. Tartar of the Axles. Useless deities that had not been worshipped for millennia, leering granite faces that seemed to be mocking her flesh-locked desires.

‘The crystal-books are broken,’ said Mombiko, climbing

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

up on the wagon to spill his light down over the contents of the coffin. 'That is too bad, mma. But with these other things here, you can finance a second expedition – there will be more chances, later . . .'

'I fear you have been misinformed.'

Amelia turned to see a company of black-clad desert warriors standing by the entrance to the tomb, gauze sand masks pushed up under their hoods. The three Macanalie brothers had moved to stand next to them, out of the line of fire of the soldiers' long spindly rifles.

'Never trust a Macanalie,' Amelia swore.

'Finding this hoard was never a sure thing,' said the eldest brother. 'But the price on your head, lassie, now that's filed away in the drawer of every garrison commander from here to Bladetenbul.'

'The caliph remembers those who promise much and do not keep their word,' said the captain of the company of soldiers. 'But not, I fear for you, with much fondness.'

Amelia saw the small desert hawk sitting on his leather glove. Just the right size to carry a message. Damn. She had let her excitement at finding the tomb blind her to the Macanalie brothers' treachery; they had sent for the scout patrol. She and Mombiko were royally betrayed.

'The caliph is still cross about Zal-Rashid's vase?' Amelia eyed the soldiers. At least five of them. 'I told him it was nothing but a myth.'

'Far more equitable then, Professor Harsh, if you had given the vase to his excellency *after* you had dug it out of his dunes,' said the soldier. 'Just as you had agreed. Rather than stealing it and taking it back to Jackals with you.'

'Oh, that. I can explain that,' said Amelia. 'There's an explanation, really. What is it that your people say, the sand has many secrets?'

*Stephen Hunt*

‘You will have much time to debate the sayings of the hundred prophets with his exulted highness,’ said the officer. ‘Much time.’

Mombiko looked at Amelia with real fear in his eyes and she bit her lip. His fate as an escaped slave of a Cassarabian nobleman would be no kinder than her own. It would be little consolation for Mombiko that he did not have a womb as Amelia did, that could be twisted into a breeding tank for Cassarabia’s dark sorcerers to nurture their pets and monstrosities inside. One of the Macanalie brothers sniggered at the thought of the fates awaiting the haughty Jackelian professor and her colleague, but when the smuggler tried to move towards the ancient vehicle, a desert warrior shoved him back with his bone-like rifle butt.

‘What’s this, laddie?’ spat the eldest of the brothers. ‘We had a deal. You get these two. We get the reward and all of this.’

‘And so you shall receive your reward,’ said the caliph’s officer. He waved at the ancient wagon. ‘But *this* was not part of our arrangement.’

‘You have to be joking me, laddie. Listen to me, you swindling jiggers, there’s enough down here to share out for all of us.’

The caliph’s man pointed to the leering bodies on the totem-pole columns. ‘There will be nothing left to share, effendi. These bloated infidel toads are not of the Hundred Ways, they are idols of darkness and shall be cast down.’ He gestured to one of the sand warriors. ‘Go back to the saddlebags and bring enough charges to bury this unholy place under rock for another thousand years.’

‘Are you out of your skull, laddie? There’s wealth enough here to make us all rich! We can live like kings, you could live like an emir.’

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

The officer laughed with contempt. ‘The caliph has lived two-score of your miserable lifetimes and if the hundred prophets be blessed, he shall live two-score more. What need does he have for the unclean gold of infidel gods when he has countless servants in every province of Cassarabia labouring to offer him their tribute for eternity?’

Amelia looked at Mombiko and understanding flashed between them. Mombiko would never again be a slave, and Amelia was jiggered if she would be used as a breeder, or allow herself to be handed over to a Cassarabian torture-sculptor to twist and mutate her bones until she was left stretched out like a human oak tree in the caliph’s scented punishment gardens.

‘He may be hundreds of years old,’ said Amelia, ‘but let me tell you a few home truths about your ruler. One, the caliph is too boring for me to listen to for a single hour, let alone a lifetime of agonized captivity. Two, he’s not even a man. He’s a woman dressed up as a male, and a damned ugly one at that. How she continues to fool all of you desert lads is beyond me.’

There was an intake of breath at her blasphemy.

‘And three – next time you try and sneak up on me, bring your *own* damn lamp!’

Mombiko killed the gas spike. With a hissing sputter the chamber was plunged into absolute darkness. Amelia kicked down the lever alongside the carriage’s steering wheel and the hisses from the spring-mounted spears decorating the wagon’s prow were followed by screams and shouts and sickening thuds as the steel heads found their mark. This was followed by a crack of snapping glass. One of the collapsing desert soldier’s spindly rifles splintering its charge, providing a brief gun-fire illumination of the carnage in which all the professor noticed was Mombiko sprinting before her towards the exit.

*Stephen Hunt*

Someone tried to grab Amelia and she heard the rustle of a dagger being slid from its hilt. She used her left arm to shove out towards where her assailant's throat should be, and was rewarded by a snap and a body falling limp against her own. Amelia vaulted the corpse and found the stairs out of the tomb, nearly tripping over a speared soldier.

One of their treacherous guides was screaming for his brothers, something about trying to scrape up the gems inside the sarcophagus. Groping inside the panel-niche Amelia reversed the levers and the door started to lower itself with its *rack-rack-rack* rasp. She had brought herself and Mombiko a couple of minutes as the caliph's survivors, left in the dark, tried to locate the door release wheel she had spotted back inside the burial chamber. Amelia panted, taking the stairs three treads at a time. Damn, the steps had not seemed so long nor so steep on the way down. And her rifle – a trusty Jackelian Brown Bess – was not going to be much good to her one-armed.

‘Professor!’

‘Keep going, Mombiko. Beware the ledge. The caliph's boys might have left sentries outside.’

She pulled out a glass charge from her bandolier, cracking it against the wall so the two chambers of blow-barrel sap nearly mixed, then, still sprinting, bent down to roll the shell along the stone floor behind her. A wall of searing heat greeted Amelia as she left the tomb, the sun raised to its midday zenith. Thank the Circle, the ledge was clear of desert warriors.

Mombiko peered over the cliff. ‘There are their mounts. No soldiers that I can see.’

Amelia glanced down; sandpedes tethered together, long leathery hides and a hundred insect-like legs: the ingenuity of this heat-blasted land's womb mages unrestrained by ethics or her own nation's Circlist teachings. Amelia let her good

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

arm take the strain of the downward climb, aided by gravity and the rush of blood thumping through her heart. Crumbling dust from the scramble down coated her hair, making her cough. Her gun arm was burning in agony. She had accidentally thumped it into one of the cliff's outcrops and the scorpion-poisoned flesh felt like the caliph's torturers were already extracting their revenge from her body. They were near the bottom of the cliff face when an explosion sounded. Someone had stepped on her half-shattered shell, mixed the explosive sap in the firing chamber.

Amelia dropped the remaining few feet onto the warm orange sands. 'I do hope that was one of the Macanalies.'

'Better it was one of the soldiers, professor.' Mombiko had his knife out and advanced to where the caliph's men had picketed their sandpedes. The creatures' legs fluttered nervously as he approached them and reached out to slice their tethers free. Mandibles chattered, the sandpedes exchanging nervous glances, only the green human eyes in their beetle-black faces betraying their origins in some slave's sorcery-twisted womb. Too well trained, they were failing to escape. Amelia picked up a rock with her left hand and lobbed it hard at the creatures, the mounts exploding in an eruption of bony feet as they fled the shadow of the mountains.

Cracks sounded from the top of the peak, spouts of sand spewing up where the lead balls struck close to Mombiko and Amelia. The caliph's bullyboys had found the chamber's door release faster than she had hoped. Sand spilled down Amelia's boots as the two of them scrambled for their camels, the creatures whining as the soldiers' bullets whistled past their ears. There was a grunt from Mombiko, and he clutched his side in pain with one hand, but he spurred his camel after the retreating sandpedes, waving at her to ride on. Amelia urged her camel into an uncustomarily fast pace for the heat of the

*Stephen Hunt*

day. Luckily, the ornery beasts were skittish after seeing the unnatural sandpedes and only too glad to gallop away from the mountainside's shade.

Once the pursuit was lost behind the boundless dunes, Amelia drew to a halt, Mombiko sagging in his saddle. She pulled him off his camel and laid him down in the sand, turning aside his robes to find the wound.

'It's not too deep, Mombiko.'

'Poisoned,' hissed Mombiko. 'The soldiers hollow out their balls and fill them with the potions of their garrison mages. Look at my camel.'

His steed was groaning, sinking to its stomach on the sands while Amelia's camel tried to nuzzle it back to its feet. The creature had been struck on its flanks by one of the soldier's parting shots. Mombiko pointed to a protruding wooden handle strapped under his saddlebags. 'For the sun.'

She took it down and passed it to Mombiko. The umbrella had been her gift to him when he had started working at their university. Such a small thing in return for his prodigious talents. He could learn a new language in a week, quote verbatim from books he had read a year before. He had told her once that his seemingly unnatural memory was a common trait among many of his caste.

'The forest way,' said Mombiko.

Amelia nodded, tears in her eyes, understanding his request. No burial. From nature you have emerged, to nature so you shall return. The desert would blow over his unburied bones.

Mombiko reached out for Amelia's hand and when she opened her palm there was a cut diamond pressed inside it, the image of one of the Black-oil Horde's gods etched across the jewel's glittering prism.

'Sell it,' rasped Mombiko. 'Use the money to find the city – for both of us.'

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

‘Are you an archaeologist’s assistant or a crypt-robber, man?’

‘I am Mombiko Tibar-Wellking,’ said the ex-slave, raising his voice. Sweat was flooding down his face now. He was so wet he looked as if he had been pulled from the sea rather than stretched out across a sand dune. ‘I am a lance lord of the Red Forest and I shall take my leave of my enemies – a – free – man.’

Amelia held him as he shuddered, each jolt arriving a little further apart, until he had stopped moving. His spirit was blowing south, back to the vast ruby forests of his home. But her path lay north to Jackals, the republic with a king. Her green and blessed land. A home she would in all likelihood never see again now.

Amelia closed his eyes. ‘I shall be with you in a little while, Mombiko Tibar-Wellking.’ She took the water canteen from the dead camel and left her friend’s body behind, his umbrella held to his still chest for a lance.

The stars of the night sky would guide her true north, but not past the water holes that the Macanalie brothers had known about, nor past the dozens of fractious tribes that feuded across the treacherous sands. Amelia Harsh kicked her camel forward and tried to fill her mind with the dream of the lost city.

The city in the air.

One foot in front of the other, the last of her empty canteens trailing behind her boot on its leash. Too much energy required to bend down and cut the drained canteen’s strap. Dark dots wheeled in front of the furnace sun. Even the cur-birds knew she was dead, a few hours away from being a meal for the gardeners of the sands. Every time the worn leather of her boots touched the burning dunes they seemed to suck a little

*Stephen Hunt*

bit more of her life away. Amelia had been whittled down to a core of determination, a bag of dehydrated flesh lurching across the Northern Desert – no, use its Jackelian name – the *Southern* Desert. Towards a goal that might as well lie on the other side of the world.

Through her dry, sand-encrusted eyes Amelia glimpsed a shimmer in the distance, sheets of heat twisting and snaking over the dunes, sands bleached white by the height of the sun raised to its midday zenith. Another mirage of a waddi sent to tantalize her? No, not waters this time. The mirage was a girl of about fourteen walking out of a door, following her father into a garden. There was something familiar about the scene. The parched passages of her mind tried to recall why she should recognize the girl.

‘What did that man at the table mean, pappa, when he said that the title on the house wouldn’t be enough to secure the debts?’

‘It doesn’t matter,’ said the girl’s father. ‘Just commerce, a matter of commerce and coins and the merely mundane.’

‘But he was talking about the sponging-house?’

‘That’s not a word to use in polite company, my sweet. I’ve visited a few of my friends in debtor’s prison,’ said the girl’s father. ‘Good people. With some of the hard days those in trade have seen this year, it’s a wonder any of my social circle have lodgings anywhere outside a debtor’s jail. It doesn’t matter.’

‘I’m scared, pappa, those men who came to the house yesterday . . .’

‘The bailiffs can’t get what doesn’t belong to you.’ The father glanced back towards the sounds of their dinner guests still drifting out of the doorway and pulled out a battered old mumbleweed pipe, lighting a pinch of leaf with the pipe’s built-in steel flint. ‘That’s why your aunt came to visit last

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

week and left with a fair few more cases on top of her carriage than she arrived with. The antiques I've collected over the years and the books, of course. You always have to save the books. Enough to pay for your education to be finished.'

'You're not going to be sent to the sponging-house, are you?'

'Perish the thought,' said the girl's father. 'Nobody should go to such a place. We tried to amass enough support in parliament to abolish the wretched places last year, but it was no good. Too many who still want the example set, and set harsh with it. The guardians have forgotten there was a time in history when the existence of such a place would have been unthinkable, when destitution was unheard of, when the rule of reason was the only monarch people bent their knee to.'

'You mean the lost city?'

The girl's father puffed out a circle of mumbleweed smoke. He appeared almost contented. 'A lost age, my sweet. An entire age of reason. Those elusive Camlanteans. Almost as tricky to find in our times as it is to locate their noble ideals among the benches of parliament today, I fear. Most people don't believe that age even existed, but we do, don't we, my sweet?'

'Yes, pappa.'

'We'll find the ruins of that place one day.' He pointed out to the sky. 'Up there, that's where we'll find it. And when we do, we'll bring a little piece of it down here to Jackals, you and I. A little piece of sanity to calm an insane world. You go back inside to the warmth, now. I want to spend some time by your mother's grave.'

'Don't let pappa go,' croaked Amelia at the mirage, her hands clawing at the sand. 'Can't you see the bulge in his jacket? Stop him from going into the garden. He's been upstairs to his desk, the bloody gun's in his pocket.'

*Stephen Hunt*

The report of a pistol echoed out, the heat-thrown vision collapsing into an explosion of feathers as the cur-birds that had been inspecting her from the top of the dune fled to the sky on the back of Amelia's unexpected howl of fury.

Amelia rubbed the crust out of her dry, swollen eyes. Not even enough moisture left in her body for tears. According to parliament's law, debts couldn't be passed down from one generation to the next. But dreams could.

From the fortress-wall of heat shimmer another blurred shape emerged, solidifying into something – a figure.

'Go away,' rasped Amelia in the direction of the mirage. 'Leave me alone to die in peace, will you. I've had enough of the past.'

But the figure wasn't going away. It was getting more defined with every step. Oh, Circle! Not a vision this time. She reached for her rifle, but the Brown Bess was no longer there. Amelia couldn't even remember having discarded the weight of the cheap but reliable weapon. She had kept her knife though, for the stalking snakes that slid towards her at night, drawn by her body-heat. But the knife seemed so heavy now as well, a steel burden she could not pull free from her belt.

The part of Amelia's brain that had not yet shut down recognized what she saw coming out of the heat shimmer before her. The water-filled hump on the stranger's back was unremarkable for the desert tribes – most of whom possessed the same adaptation. Red robes flowed behind the small woman and a train of retainers followed her, each one turning and twisting in a private dance.

'Witch of the dunes,' grated Amelia's throat. 'Witch!'

'It takes one to know one,' cackled the figure. 'I'm not travelling with your past, my sweet. I'm travelling with your future.'

*The Kingdom Beyond the Waves*

The professor pitched forward into the embrace of the desert.

When Amelia woke up she was no longer on sand, she lay on the soft bracken of the upland foothills. Damp ground, soggy from actual rain. Jackelian rain. So, the border of Cassarabia was a couple of days behind her. The witch waited at Amelia's side, the retainers behind her in a silent horizontal line, held in her glamour and little more than zombies if half the tales Amelia had heard were true. There were no camels nearby, no sandpedes to explain how they had possibly travelled so far. Nothing to indicate how long Amelia had been unconscious. Her journey south towards the tomb had taken nine weeks, for Circle's sake.

'Why?'

The witch stopped swaying, the mad mumbling of her internal dialogue briefly stilled. 'Because you are needed, my large-armed beauty.'

Needed? The witches of the Southern Desert were mad, fey and capricious; certainly not given to helping stranded travellers.

Amelia looked at the witch. 'Needed by whom?'

The squat, humpbacked creature dipped down and picked up a leaf with a trail of ants on its blade. 'For want of this leaf, the ant will die; for want of the ant, the stag-beetle will die; for want of the stag-beetle, the lizard will die; for want of the lizard, the sand hawk will die; for want of the sand hawk, the hunter is blinded – and who is to say what the hunter might achieve?'

'There are a lot of leaves blowing in Jackals,' said Amelia. She twisted her shoulder and was hardly surprised to note that the scorpion-stung flesh had been bathed and healed.

'Oh, my pretty,' cackled the witch. 'You think I have done

*Stephen Hunt*

you some kindness?’ The witch’s voice turned ugly. ‘The true kindness would have been to let the sands of Cassarabia suck the marrow from your bones. You have left the easy path behind you now.’

‘Thank you anyway,’ said Amelia. Like all her kind, the old woman was as mad as a coot and as deadly as a viper. Better not to antagonize her. ‘For the hard path forced upon me.’

A mist rose behind the witch. The weather systems of Jackals and Cassarabia collided in the hinterlands and mists were common enough. Usually.

‘Such fine manners. What a perfect daughter of Jackals you are. Thank me next time you see me, if you *can*.’

The witch turned her back and stalked away, her silent retainers falling into line behind her like a tail of ducklings following their mother.

Around Amelia the sounds of border grouse returned to the foothills as the humpbacked creature vanished into the mist. ‘Well, damn. Lucky me.’

Brushing the dew off her tattered clothes – too light for a chilly Jackelian morning – Amelia headed north into the uplands. Deeper into Jackals. Home.