

# GRAY BLUE EYE

by *OTTO GARVER*

*This book is for the bees.  
May they forgive us.*

# CHAPTER 1

## *SHADES OF BLUE*

“Oh, I don’t know,” said the tall man. “Two?”

“No chance!” amended a quick and slightly muffled little voice from between the gaps in the closures of his long coat. “S’gotta be firt’een at *least*.”

“Mmhm,” he sighed, already annoyed.

“S’wot I fink, if y’see,” chirped his passenger confidently again, like a proud little bird.

The duo cut through the white forest, their path a long story told in a single long line of easily deciphered glyphs carved into the moonlit snow behind them, a tale any eye could follow.

The two front flanks of his gray coat, where the little one took refuge, took turns deflecting heavy flakes of snow as he walked. The thick globs of frozen clouds slid off of the supple leather one after another, landing heavy at his side to meet the scars and troughs carved by armored boots through new, ankle-deep snow.

The tall man stopped, and ran his heavy, dulling eyes across the wide monochrome strop of wilderness in front of them, back and forth, sharpening his view. He quieted his breath, and listened, and looked, and sighed.

“Thirteen?” he said after a moment, with an amused huff. His voice dripped with exaggerated incredulity.

“Yeh,” confirmed the hidden girl with a giggle. “Countin’ you.”

He turned his vision’s edge over to check behind them, the long tails of his coat following his movement to cut semi-circular arcs in the fresh powder. A whisper began to trickle from his lips. It met a gentle wind that arrived to greet his words as he spoke them silently into the night air.

“Absolutely not,” said the tall man a heartbeat later. “Thirteen’s far too many.” He spoke louder this time, not to the wind, and with a very purposefully serious tone. “Besides, I’m not *blue*. Definitely more of a *charcoal* complexion.”

As he turned back around, a “*humph!*” sounded defiantly from within his coat, joined by a similar sounding opinion from a passing breeze spoken in a flurry of dancing spirals of snow.

The tall man drew in a deep, greedy breath through his nose, unraveling the flurry as it danced. He caught the scent of a fire from among that of the sharp air and frozen trees, and trapped it within him. Wispy ghosts of hot breath and fire’s scent escaped his mouth as he began to speak again—his voice stuttering, creaking out of overflowing lungs.

“I don’t even—think there are—even that many—blues in the—”

He began to finally exhale as he finished his lie.

“—*whole entire world.*”

As he slowly released his enthralled breath, those last few words poured from his mouth like chimney smoke. The smoke took a shapeless form; a rolling spectre that began to stalk through the woods the same direction they had been heading. It moved slowly, deliberating through the trees like a prowling animal.

“Yes there *are*, if y’see!” squeaked his frustrated, hidden passenger. “Def’nilly more’n *two*. Moons above ya is bo’f blue,” the small squeaks explained, “so’s it’s gotta be more’n that, if y’see!”

He ignored her for the moment, smiling upside-down in approval as he watched the cloud lope through the woods, while adjusting the shoulder strap for his armament. Its long blade sheathed across his back in ornate and intricately tooled leather, the weapon’s wicked and asymmetrical handle jutted out opposite his one pauldron-bearing shoulder. It angrily battled the air like a jagged, solitary antler as he moved. He nodded with further approval at the smoke-stalker’s path.

“No, no,” said the tall man, making sure to continue to sound very serious. “I’ve seen it, the whole of Halferth, every corner, all four oceans. The moon’s I’ll give you, but thirteen’s too many. Maybe three.”

Satisfied with their bearing, he began to walk again—following after his escaped breath, his hitchhiker in tow under his warm coat.

“How’s ‘at possible if the oceans is blue?” insisted the small voice. “S’gotta be four blues right’ere, if y’see.”

“Who told you *that*?” asked the tall man, with feigned shock and surprise. “The oceans are actually *green*, you know.”

His return to locomotion caused a hot belch of trapped and spoiled air to escape the leather-strapped and fur-lined collar, securing the coat’s neck around the man’s.

“*Guh-reen?*” she gasped, the word careening with pronounced doubt.

The sweet stink of an unclean wound brought up a brief memory of future consequences. The tall man’s face contorted briefly at the smell and he continued his teasing, a welcome distraction from his injury.

“Yes, green—and furthermore, I don’t believe that you *actually* know how many ‘*f’irt’een*’ is,” he jabbed, mocking her childish accent.

The tall man’s upside-down smile began to involuntarily spasm and right itself.

“I *do*!” shouted the little voice from his coat, loud against the quiet noise of the night. “It’s as many petals as’re on a pretty lil’ fieldstar I bet, an’ I know it’s that many because it’s as many of ‘em as *I see*!”

“Oh, squeak squeak,” teased the tall man, “I only see dark blue and *darker-dark blue*. I’ll wager you can’t even see anything from in there, except for *boots* and the lining of my—”

She giggled, and he cut himself off with a groan, immediately remembering exactly what it was that obscured her vision.

The entire inside of his service coat was lined with the shiny and thick fur of a Lakedog; the acrobatic fish-eating fauna that pestered half of the great, fractured and sloshing Halfice lakes at any given moment. Shiny and thick and a beautiful *deep blue*, just like the lakes they called home.

“*For’een*,” she announced with another victorious giggle, adding another blue to her tally. “Plus when you move, I kin see through the liddle slits in your skirts.”

He missed those lakes. He even missed those slick little pests.

“It’s a coat,” corrected the man, “not a *skirt*.”

“The skirty parts of yor coaty skirt,” the little voice corrected back. It wasn’t argued further, and she continued rambling undeterred.

“—and the leafs what’s left rustlin’ up ‘ere each got one—”

They continued through the blue night as the tiny voice listed the different shades of it she was able to see from her warm perch, under the man’s coat.

“—well some of ‘em got they own blues and some share’m, if y’see—”

She stood on the top of one of his rocky metal greaves like a stilt, gripping the straps holding the tall man’s armor to his legs. She watched his boots’ triangular toe caps cut easy grooves in the semi-solid snow like a sharp plow through healthy, generous soil.

“—the roots on the treefeets, they got they own blue where it touches the snow,” sang the unbothered little voice.

“Hmhm,” he sighed.

She rambled as he trudged, occasionally switching which leg she held onto as they passed by each other to get a different view, occasionally pointing through gaps in the man’s oversized garment. He swatted at the strange appendages as they appeared, never quite fast enough to catch one.

Around them, other odd dark shapes slipped up and behind darker tree trunks, scurrying out of view of the strange thing walking through their forest; unaware they were but shadows in its periphery. The night trilled with animal voices, save for a cautious bubble of silence that followed the pair like a shroud as the forest's ears quieted themselves and listened to the strange new voice joining them.

“—*Ob!* The skies there’a ‘round the moons is each a differ-nent blue too. It’s def-nully a lot more than jus’ *two of ‘em*, if y’see. Jus’ look!”

“Hmhm,” he grumbled, and looked up.

The long mass in the body of stars above them hung heavy like a giant scar across the sky, keloidal chunks of constellation in a jagged gash of brilliance. The two small moons smoldered in stormy cerulean heterochromia, perpetually gliding across the celestial wounds like shards of ice to cool the oozing starlight that met his eyes in dark reflection—his shoulder betraying him with weeping intimation from on high, he realized.

“I am certain some of these things are white as your hair,” he said, with unintentional gravity. His voice was heavy, something once jagged and rough, slowly eroded to smoothness like a river stone.

“Maybe your eyes only see dark ‘fings and white ones,” she teased back, “on a’cuz of yo’re *grumpy*.”

“I’m not *grumpy*,” he said with a genuine look of disappointment on his face, “I’m *old*. There’s a difference.”

There was a contemplative pause.

“Really?” asked the little voice, with a tone of sincere curiosity.

The tall man sighed. “No. Not really.”

He followed the ghost of exhaled woodsmoke through the ocean of trees as it found its way home, the forest and his companion both trilling away endlessly in the night. He listened, and walked.

Before long their path and the discovery of colors was interrupted when the unbroken pristine snow before them broke up

suddenly into a chaotic dance of dissipating footprints. Very few of the prints were laid recently, most snow fallen in earlier indentations, though still easily distinguished. Foot, hoof and claw, all in an uncareful dance.

He stopped. They had found the road.

A sudden and excited trill came from under his coatskirts, accompanied by some eerie movement from his squirmy cargo.

“Oooh! That’s not blue a’tall, if y’see!”

The squirms produced a tiny arm that emerged from the empty space between the straps holding the snow-catching front flanks of his coat together.

“Look!” chirped the appendage again as it pointed towards the tops of the trees with one extended finger.

Scraps of bandage wrapping drooped from the limb like tree-beard moss. A tiny claw glinted in the moonlight like the tip of a needle.

“Don’t do that,” said the tall man, swatting again at the hand protruding from his taut and writhing coat, stabbing at the air like a drowning parasite. He caught it dead-on this time, and it retreated back between the straps with a subdued hiss.

The tall man looked up, towards where the disturbing thing had pointed. He saw new contrast above the endless blue-on-blue that encircled the world. A far-off and subtle orange glow, fractured by silhouettes of bare tree branches, mocking the hidden sun.

“Not long now,” he said, in a sullen tone.

“*Good,*” said the girl, in a villain’s voice. “Gonna get me box o’ bones back, if y’see. Gonna kill ‘em too, for what they did—right big man?”

The tall man chuckled. “Oh, they’ve *definitely* earned the opportunity to move on to their next horrible life—in a rather horrible manner I’d say, befitting rather horrible men.”

He mumbled something else to the air in far quieter words, and turned the pair away from the stampeded highway, following the slithering ghost of breath as it swam back through the trees.

“Don’t you think, little Mouse?”

As they sank quickly behind their guide into the abyssal blue forest, the whisper that had roiled heavily out of his wild and whiting black hair joined the wind behind them. It rolled and twisted into long winding yarns of ice and air, purposeful and precise. They wove together, coiling back across the man’s path, mending the holes worn by his boots through the delicate fabric of falling snow, forever erasing this passage of their glyphic tale.

“Yeh, that’s right,” agreed the girl with a menacing growl behind her voice. “The *proper-tunity*. Earned it bad, if y’see.”

. . . . .

The tall man sat quietly, listening, and waiting.

His tiny companion sat nearby, slightly less quiet, impatiently fidgeting under her burlap while she listened too. She was half-occupied with trying to catch the last lazily descending flakes of slowly subsiding snow in her mouth.

Their path through the thalassic forest had ended some time ago, and now they lingered; perched among the crags of an outcropping of rocks in the darkness behind the looming peaks of the odd building in front of them. The tavern’s disproportionate largeness hid the two moons and its own torches from view, painting a thirsty shadow in its wake that seemed to swallow everything around it. It cast the tall man and his little friend in perfect darkness.

The building seemed alive, in contrast to the withered and underworldly, night-drenched and bone-white forest that flanked it



on all sides. The infrequent gruntling that seemed in time with the licking orange light that lacerated the desperate walls of the place made it feel far more resplendent than it deserved.

Although, thought the tall man, from one strangely giant, ragged survivor to another—it did deserve a bit.

He marveled at the place's construction—odd mismatched additions like foreign, chimeral limbs. One section seemed built of an old boat, another of several wagons, another still of trees not native to this forest. A bizarre thing, sutured together into a colony of haphazard architecture, taller than it was wide, far taller than should be allowed by reason or ordinance, yet there it stood. As it had for some time, it would seem.

A long and awkwardly angled chimney at its peak seeped smoke into thick lingering clouds—clouds that their ethereal guide had rejoined as soon as they had arrived.

The tall man had unhitched his helmet from his belt, so as to aid in his ability to crouch and sit and watch, and the girl had taken the opportunity to take up residence inside the oversized headgear. It was one of her favorite places, even if she was now a bit too large for it. She sat in it like an egg in an egg cup, nestled among the rocks.

The man's ornate, angular armor and his worn, matte gray leather coat looked more like stone than the stones themselves. The child's wild white hair and the snowy fuzz that covered her cheeks and tiny round ears mimicked the nearby wind-blown banks of real powder. The pair were nearly invisible, even to a trained eye. Just another old rock and a restless flurry.

The wind carried the sounds from the tavern to them, and the tall man strummed the air with his fingers, beckoning it to vibrate again for him now just as it had before. Weak and tinny repetitions of earlier mumbles, clunking cups, and sliding barstools—sounds long lost and dissipated, woven back together from the memory of a cold breeze.

"I'kin smell yor shoulder from 'ere, big man," came the girl's always small voice, somehow bigger than usual through the thus far uninteresting din of the housing below them.

"Quiet, squeaky Mouse," said the tall man, hiding the pain she had summoned with her concern.

"Oh-kay, stinky man," said the tiny girl, and went back to trying to catch snowflakes.

Her companion continued to unravel lost sounds from the air, plucking invisible strings to play the past in song. He waved away uninteresting vibrations and summoned new ones with gusty flourishes of his gauntleted hands. The air quietly rang with displaced echoes.

A particular note tickled the girl's ear, making her head swiftly swivel towards the sound. A would-be preyed upon snowflake landed safely on the end of her little upturned nose. Faint whiskers twitched reflexively under a fuzzy, furrowed brow.

The tall man heard him too.

One of the same voices he had plucked from the agitated air over her teacher's still warm body, among the echoing cries of the other children—only a moment before the man with the spear caught him with his guard down, and lost his life for it.

"That's him," the girl said, and growled.

"Mmhm," agreed the tall man.

"I'm gonna *bite 'im!*" she promised, loudly.

"Quieter quiet, please," he said in a voice just above a whisper, and cleared his throat.

"Now, let's *combobulate*," he said, growing serious. "We'll stay hidden and safe while we sniff him out. Make sure we know *exactly* who is in there. Unwise to go in and cause a scene, it provides an opportunity for escape."

She shuffled impatiently while he spoke.

“I believe there are only eight people in there,” he said, staring with predatory attention through the wooden walls. “Six men and two women, including our man, all arriving on foot—and human feet at that, by the sound of it...”

His speech listed slightly as he gathered up a fingertip’s worth of snow from the rock in front of him, and flattened it out into water against his thumb. Gazing beneath a deeply furrowed brow, he continued his forethought.

“The two women and one of the men, they’re the *proprietors* of this *business*. Sounds like they are, anyway. I know the type.” The tall man paused to chuckle lightly. “They won’t likely be inclined to any conflict that they can’t swiftly end in their favor—but they will be inclined to tell stories. All barkeeps are.”

He stroked the scratchy dark stubble growing from his chin as he spoke, as if massaging the words free from his voice.

“That leaves four men past our mark, and I’d wager only one is traveling with him. You know, three weary, uninvolved travelers are unlikely to join in any fray. If we can lure our men outside, two tired thieves are *hardly* a challenge for your old Uncle—”

He turned, priming a wink at his empty helmet.

“*MOUSE!?*” he screamed in a raspy whisper.

Her tiny tracks in the snow headed towards the building were the only clue he needed.

The man regretted instantly the slap to his forehead with one gauntleted hand while swiftly reattaching his helmet and shouldering his weapon in a single adept motion with the other—and leapt off of the rocks.

Reminding himself he needn’t miss the presence of slick little pests, he remembered too late to favor his injured shoulder. He landed awkwardly, with far more sound than he would have preferred.

Groaning quietly while he stood, he took a breath and wondered if he’d endured a worse span of twenty heartbeats in recent memory.

His shoulder throbbed as an easy answer, and he ignored it as he dashed towards the light, following her prints, cursing quietly as he jogged.

Rounding the well lit corner to the front of the disorderly building, he arrived with just enough time to see Mouse's tail-end disappear into the shabby exterior. It vanished in the space between two mismatched planks near the corner of the adjoining wall, headed inside some dark recess of the place.

He realized that she must have waited to see if he would follow before darting inside. Another beat of introspection found him wondering what would be happening right now if he had simply stayed put. Maybe she would have returned, disappointed that her game of chase didn't work out. Probably not.

The big man knelt down by the tiny portal, trying to stay as quiet and invisible as possible, and cupped his hands around his mouth to carefully direct his voice.

*"Mouse, get back out here right now! We need a plan!"* he whisper-yelled into the empty space.

The only reply was from a curious wind behind him that he did not know, and which knew nothing itself. The tall man quieted his breathing, calmed the wind around him, and listened carefully to the noise from inside.

There were no shouts, no fighting, nothing to suggest Mouse had made an instant appearance. Nothing to suggest that anyone had heard an armored half-giant meet the ground outside like a fledgling, or quietly shout through the walls either.

He stood quickly and spun, turning back to where he'd come from. Rounding the building's corner again, he dashed to a section of the tavern's outside structure he'd just passed, where he'd noticed a canvas tarpaulin had been tacked in place. An attempt at guarding

some internal section from the elements, long neglected and more detached than useful now.

The wind handed it to him as he approached and he easily ripped it from its aging wooden frame, bringing a few of the old nails that struggled to hold it in place along with it. Brandishing the huge sheet of canvas in one hand, with the other he unslung his weapon from his shoulder, and leaned it against his body.

With a single, fluid motion he wrapped the large dark piece of cloth around himself. Covering his head, he created a hooded section by cinching it around his neck, and fastening it with one of the larger nails, bending it easily and pushing it through to its head. It hung there like a curved, dark claw, embedded in the skin of his new, tattered shroud. The cavernous dark hood concealed his own dark skin in darker shadow.

He unclipped his helmet from his belt and attached it to the shoulder sling for his weapon. After a brief scan of his surroundings, he casually tossed the assemblage of gear into the branches of a nearby tree, dislodging a quick cascade of heavy clumps of snow.

“Don’t *you* dare run off anywhere,” he warned, wagging a finger at his equipment.

The whole process had lasted at least three times the earlier twenty heartbeats, plenty of time for his little companion to start trouble. He groaned, and hurried back towards the place’s front door in his scavenged shroud.

“Mouse, my love, you unplaceable little piece,” he muttered between breaths.

He continued mumbling soundlessly to the night around him as he turned the corner to the torchlit front of the building once again. The two torches bravely illuminating the ragged sign that once legibly read *Halfhome*—bright beacons in the dark night—were decapitated by a sudden and precise cleave of snow-flecked wind. The tall man

approached the darkened entrance, illuminated now only by the weak green phosphorescence of an aged Constabulary lamp.

There had been some sort of plan forming, but that had all seeped away like blood into a bandage thanks to his impatient and vengeful companion. The plan he'd been concocting was simply to watch and listen; to determine their target, to wait for him to join them in the night, or draw them out somehow. He'd wanted to minimize the potential witness accounts, if any.

This would be an interesting night at least, he thought. Especially if the Constabulary still made rounds to check up on lamped places like this.

With a sigh he yanked open the loose door like a dislocated limb, ducking under its low frame as he moved through the threshold. A weak gust of warm, stale air met his face, like a dying breath.

"Hi-lo, Denizens!" he crooned in the local way, doing his best impression of a good mood. "I'm afraid your torches have gone out."

He spoke to no one in particular, only generally towards the illuminated bar as he closed the dilapidated door behind him. Nearly every eye in the place moved to his imposing dark figure, his own eyes hidden, downcast under his hood.

Someone in the room took a sharp breath. Another hiccuped.

The tall man took a single long stride to the first table by the door, brushed snow that had snuck in through similar cracks Mouse had off of its surface, and sat. The gathered patrons in the place all huddled near the bar and hearth, in the heat and the light—his table barely different from the night outside the walls.

No one spoke.

"Hmhm," he grumbled quietly to himself.

Though any immediate recognition may have been cloaked for now, the tall man would never be invisible, never blend into a crowd. Even while hiding his storm-colored skin and the esoteric armor and coat that covered it, he stood nearly an arm higher than any other man

in most rooms. His eyes would betray him as well, and he did his best to keep them shadowed beneath his ragged hood.

Despite this visual subterfuge, he had seen his quarry almost immediately—at least he was mostly sure of it. He only needed confirmation. He hoped Mouse was being sensible, wherever she was.

The red-faced man behind the bar made a guttural sound which snapped one of the women out of her transfixion, and she hurried over to his table.

She wore a heavy apron under a heavy shawl, over a scratchy looking sweater. The barman, and the other woman who stayed in the light and the warmth, were healthy, even plump. Their cheeks red from cold air and warm fire, their false smiles well practiced. This woman had no such smile, and no such cheeks.

“We ‘aven’t got anything but some barely warm ‘oneywine and overdone rabbit,” she said in an impatient way. “An’ it’ll cost ya.”

“Of course,” said the tall man, gently. “That sounds wonderful. Thank you, my dear.”

The look that crept over her face was at first one of surprise, then of distrust. She turned away and shuffled back towards the light without another word, and the tall man began to search the room’s small places and dark corners for his tiny troublemaking friend. His gaze hidden in the shadows within shadows cast by his cloak and corner, he observed the other five men in the room as well.

Most eyes had wandered away from him, back to whichever woodgrain or stone mortar line they were absently tracing before. The two rosy proprietors continued to investigate him with smile-wrinkled and squinting faces. Hushed sounds of close quarters conversation again began to percolate within the walls; the barman speaking with his partners, indecipherable mumbling from the bar’s occupants.

Two men sat one seat away from each other at the hazardous looking bartop, on equally hazardous looking stools made of the

rusted wheel and axle of some ancient vehicle. One donned the ugly robes and telltale cap of a Watercult priest, tall and gaudy. The other wore a garment made of half of the animals in the forest, all sewn together—mismatched patches of fur and chitinous scales that seemed to come back to life in the firelight. Both prayed to their drinks.

Another two men sat together at a single table, a solid cross section of a massive tree, with a set of thick stumps for seats around it. The men wore heavy cloaks of grasscloth and the tall man could make out weapons concealed underneath. The same style of rough, handmade garment the man with the spear had worn, and died in, next to Mouse's poor teacher.

A handwoven symbol of lawlessness, these cloaks—each one a different series of knots and crosshatches—popular in the anarchic grasslands of The Scythes. Far less popular this close to the City, where the law still held its grip. A tenuous grasp with cracked talons, it would seem.

They were his prey, these two men, by all reasonable evidence. Mouse's as well.

The fifth man sat on the floor in front of the hearth, covered in the mottled fur of some shaggy beast, and he was very large. The fifth man was the only one who had not turned to regard him when he entered. Steam trailed up from his damp hairy cloak, straight up at first, then shifted back and forth by the room's strange ventilation. He had not been here long.

His certainty in who they were after was intact, but there had so far been no sign of Mouse, which concerned him. He wouldn't act until he knew where she was.

The depressed barmaid returned to his cold table, bringing with her the tall man's ordered provisions and setting them in front of him: a wooden mug of sweet smelling liquid that desperately attempted to



steam, and a generous scrap heap of some leathered flesh on a slab of stone, that didn't.

The tall man kept his hands hidden beneath his cloak, and leaned forwards, beckoning the weak tendrils of drink smell underneath his hood.

"Lovely, my darling, thank you ever so much," he said with a genteel sway. The woman's expression of distrust worsened.

"*Said* it'll cost ya," she urged, putting out her hand. "An' you can stuff that 'darling' back in yor mouth too."

"Surely," he said, and shifted slightly in his seat.

His metal clad hand spawned from the darkness of his cloak, its worn finish shiny in comparison to the environment around. In it, held balanced under thumb and over a curled index finger, a single midnight-blue coin.

The depths of the coin's color was like something you could drop into. A dark pool held in hand, mocking the unfathomable cobalt abyss of The Den in the True Low Sea. The face of the coin, looking upwards towards her own, bore the symbol of what lay below it; an outstretched palm.

"I imagine this will be plenty," said the tall man softly with a wink she did not see, and placed it gently in her hand.

Her gaze widened and locked onto the coin. She weighed it, bouncing her hand up and down, and with a gasp she wordlessly hurried off to her commanders behind the bar, staring at the blue coin the whole way.

Before her excitement could carry through the room, the tall man spoke again, this time in an easy bellow.

"It seems the cheer I heard from the darkness outside may have gone out with the torches," he said, projecting his big voice through the small space. "How about a round for my fellow salty travelers?"

The water priest's hat rose at the words. The patchwork man shifted, and looked over his shoulder. Tired brown eyes and a sloppy

smile beaming through a matching beard. The two men at the tree trunk table eyed him cautiously, and the man on the floor near the hearth continued to sit, and steam. Mouse was still hidden.

This time it was the ruddy-faced barman who came over, as the two women disappeared through some door hidden by unintentional camouflage in the rest of the piece-built walls. He brought with him a fresh mug of the steaming sweet alcohol, despite his customer having never taken as much of a sip from their first.

He set it down on the table, and realizing the original beverage still remained untouched, switched them out—taking a heavy sip of the colder offering for himself.

“Long time since I set eyes on one of *those* coins,” he said, giving the tall man an exploratory examination and wiping his chin. “Tell me, where did you get it?”

The two women had returned through their not-so-secret door, both carrying armfuls of full and steaming mugs. The tall man watched as they handed off the drinks to the various patrons, avoiding the barman’s question for the moment. The barman stared at his cloaked guest with patient curiosity.

The rosy barmarm’s journey ended behind her bar, delivering the two tankards she carried to the two men seated there. The patchwork man raised his tankard in thanks, and beamed a tired smile. He mumbled something odd-sounding and turned back to face whatever he was looking at before. The Watercult man’s hat fell back into a slouch, and its wearer slid his mug in front of him without gesture or word.

The thin-faced woman expertly carried three tankards in a single hand, depositing two of them on the wooden table’s top with a swoop, and continuing with the third towards the hearth. The two men at the table nodded approvingly, but let the mugs steam untouched. They kept their eyes on the tall man, and their hands in their laps.

Five guests, five tankards. None set aside to wait for someone's inevitable return, or delivered to other quiet and better-hidden travelers tucked away in the abundant shadows.

The tall man cleared his throat.

"Where does one find *any* coin?" he proposed finally, deflecting the earlier question with one of his own.

He raised his tankard, and answered himself.

"At the end of some struggle, or sacrifice—some vile deed or hard task."

"For that one, I'm sure!" laughed the proprietor, nervously. He sipped his cooling drink again, and his eyes fell to the withered strips of field animal on the slab in front of his guest.

"We have some chickens, if you'd like one..." he offered, "or all of 'em, for that matter. Lodging too—" He gestured up, along the hearth's ascending chimney, laughing casually as he wafted his hand.

"Don't suppose you're keen to buy the whole place... Are ya?" the barman asked, with a tentatively facetious sincerity.

The tall man's head rose and his gaze followed the gesture, his eyes visible to his host from under his shabby hood for the first time, eyes which were now able to notice and investigate the height of the building for the first time in turn. He heard a gasp, and ignored it.

The tavern's tall chimney was pinstriped on its closest side by an equally tall, perilous looking ladder. Cobwebs of old rope tied together in dangerous looking hammocks and huge timbers as support struts reached out from the chimney's brickwork like the branches on a needleless and spider-infested pine. There was a thick patina of dust on everything among the rafters.

Almost everything. The tall man smiled wide, and looked back at the barman. The man's face was kinetic with shock, his chin bouncing up and down silently exclaiming as he stared at the tall man with disbelief.

“Split skulls,” said the aghast barman, finally able to summon audible words, and stepped back from his reclaimed drink on the table. A chair behind him trumpeted as he bumped into it, nudging it across the floor.

“You... You’re—”

“Not particularly hungry or tired,” interrupted the tall man as he raised his cooled drink to blue lips and took his first sip. It was quite good.

“Though I do thank you,” he added politely, while wiping his chin and setting his drink back down on the snowy table.

“Y-y-you’re...” the barman stammered.

“*Welcome?*” offered the tall man.

The stunned man was uninterested in formalities.

“Y-you’re a-a—” he began to stammer again.

“Indeed,” said the tall man, cutting the man off with a voice edged in odd solemnity and remorse, leaning back with his tankard against the wall behind him.

“I’m afraid I am.”

The barman began to back away from his revealed guest, wobbling wordless lips and bumping noisily into more pieces of stray furniture.

The tall man stared, and sipped. “Do you think anyone will believe you?” he asked, as a wry smile tugged invisibly at the corner of his mouth.

The depressed woman was returning to the bar from dropping off the last pint of honeywine next to the large man on the floor by the fire. As she passed by the tree trunk table, one of the men seated there grabbed her arm.

“Fuck is this?” he sneered, gesturing with his head towards the man in the dark corner, and the barman backing away from him. His eyes stayed locked on hers.

“Big fella paid with a *blue palm*. Get yor mitts off me and go thank ‘im if ya want,” she said with sandpaper, in an attempt to divert her assailant’s attention towards the much larger man.

She flexed and bent her arm and tried to wrench free, but his grip held her fast.

“Blue bleedin’ palm, eh!?” said the man in the grass woven parka, looking towards his similarly dressed companion. “You hear that, mate?”

His companion sneered, and nodded slowly.

The man holding the woman’s arm turned his vile gaze back towards hers. “Could be it’s our lucky night after all,” he said with a snicker. “Let’s see it.”

“Let go of me, you—!” shouted the woman, but was interrupted by a steaming, mottled blur that shot across the room.

With what seemed like impossible speed, the huge steamy man by the fire had launched himself towards the offending man’s grasp, and now suddenly had the offensive forearm in the grip of his enormous, meaty hand.

The huge man said nothing, he simply stared at the cross hatching of limbs.

The man in the grasscloth cloak let out a slightly delayed but substantially surprised bark, and released his grip on the woman. She hurried back behind her bar, and quickly disappeared through the invisible door.

The rosy barmarm was nowhere to be seen, likely recently disappearing through the very same door herself.

With the woman free, the huge man quietly released the grabber’s arm, and turned around towards the tall man for the first time, aiming himself to go sit back in front of the fire, still without a word.

The grasscloak man joined him in a stunned silence of his own, his look of confusion contrasting the placid, baby-faced smile of the woman's rescuer.

The large man's hair was worn in pristine braids. His serene, juvenile face wore a beard of thin scars from constant and uncareful shaving. The tall man's nostrils puffed in surprise.

This man was a *Sisterman*, he'd realized; one of the half-castrated soldier-ant men from the fiercely matriarchal colonies of barbarians that inhabited the island off of the true-west coast. A rare sight even in his time, when he, like many, walked free in an older, kinder world.

A far rarer sight now, these strong and womanly men were usually seen in the Hivelands near their island, or the deserts highward, if ever seen at all. Saving random women in duress was a common aspect of the mythology that surrounded the strange warriors, a habit that often found them martyred.

"What a peculiar bunch you have here tonight, sir," said the tall man, glancing over to the place's operator.

He wasn't sure if the barman had heard him. The suddenly profusely sweaty man seemed completely absorbed in anxiously observing the unfolding scene.

The offended grasscloak man had stood, and so had his compatriot. Eager hands began to fiddle with unseen but unhidden weapons beneath their cloaks.

"I'll take yor fuckin' hand fer that yew cockless fuckin' *cockroach*!" shouted the grabbed grabber.

Freeing a shortsword from its unseen sheath, he wheeled it expertly in his hand, glaring at the wholly unconcerned Sisterman who had returned to sit in front of the fire, and stare into it lovingly.

The offended man picked up and finished his original beverage, slamming its container on the stout tabletop. His partner slid a long barreled and sinister black pistol out from his own concealment, and grinned.

“We’ll ‘ave to teach you a little lesson, young son,” said the second man through exposed brown teeth. “A lesson about tending to affairs that aren’t yers to tend to.”

That was the voice the tall man was waiting for.

Somewhere dark, where even the sound was dark, a nail from a daycandle clanked innocently into its tin.

At the small but sudden noise, the barman jolted like a startled rabbit and bolted straight past the tall man, right out the front door.

“Off to light the torches, him,” the tall man said with a grin.

The patchwork man began sliding slowly over the bartop like a slug, carefully collecting his drink, and landing on the other side with a thump, while the Watercult man sipped casually from his cup. The Sisterman stared into the fire with indifference, and the tall man rose to his feet.

“Gentlemen,” he said, oozing nearly sarcastic congeniality.

“Fuck off,” said the first grasscloak man, striding toward the big man by the fire.

A shrill scream erupted from above, a sudden slash of bright noise cutting the moment free suddenly from its heavy tension.

“*GIVE ME BACK—*” screamed the small and sharp voice, shredding the air with big anger.

Both grasscloak men spasmed to a halt, heads jerking upwards. The tall man and the Sisterman by the fire both sent their eyes darting upwards as well, neither one noticing they both wore the same grin under them.

“—*MY BONES!!*” howled the tiny figure descending from the rafters.

Mouse dropped like a hawk, leaping from some hidden perch in the ceiling. Her hands splayed out like talons as she latched onto the man with the pistol, just as he began to raise its long barrel up towards the noise. She shrieked, growled, scratched—and her victim screeched along with her. That had been the voice she was waiting for as well.

The man flailed his long pistol and fired wildly to the side, through the empty wall and into the night. His companion flinched as the shots missed him by random mercy.

“Mouse!” shouted the tall man with a happy smile in his voice, like he’d seen an old friend instead of an unruly child.

She replied by biting the man, as promised. He screeched and flailed some more, swatting the vicious thing attached to his gun arm.

The grasscloaked man with the shortsword was still a few paces away, ricocheting between continuing his attack on the smiling Sisterman, or turning to help his friend who was under attack by some small, hooded hybrid toddler and feral thing. His mind apparently made up on helping his companion, he swirled about.

The tall man moved forwards.

“Bones! Bones! *BONES!*” Mouse chanted, scratching and biting the man still in her grip. She scrambled across his body like a frenzied ant, rifling through his pockets and under his cloak as she went.

“Gettoff me yew fucking *rat!*” he yelled, flailing his weapon through the air.

“GIVE ME BACK MY *BONES!*”

The man wailed with confused terror. His gun clicking empty, the grasscloak man threw it to the floor, and quickly drew a short skinning knife instead with his unburdened arm.

Mouse was quicker. She launched herself off the man with her hind legs, bringing a tiny fistfull of beard hair with her in a clenched fist, and landed with no shortage of grace on the big wooden table, well out of reach of the little knife.

She pulled back the little hood on her plain burlap habit, a common sight seen draped over schoolchildren, in the places where children were afforded the luxury of care and education.

“Gimme back my *bones*,” said the little menace through a severe snarl. Her oversized front teeth shone with golden pearlescence in the firelight.



“B-but you’ve—*got—bones!?*” replied the man, with genuine confusion.

The tall man chuckled.

The man with the shortsword raised it, and braced himself. The knife wielding man stopped curious little trails of blood from exploring his scratched up cheeks with the sleeve of his unknifed hand, and glared blindly at the little animal child.

“Claws too! Fuck!” whined the scratched-up man. “Bones wiv claws on the en’s of ‘em! What the *fuck* even *are ya?*?”

The grasscloak man’s head cocked sideways, suddenly confused by the creature in front of him. Unable to determine what exactly the slightly wrinkly, white-haired and child-sized thing that attacked him was—and having received no immediate answer—he changed his query.

“What the fuck d’ya want outta *me!*?” he asked instead.

“I want my *BONES!*” Mouse shouted again, and stamped a foot.

“I believe she’s made that rather clear,” began the tall man, taking another small step towards the melee and clearing his throat.

Mouse swirled around on her tabletop to face him.

“Aven’t I?! He’s got yesterday’s ears on, if y’see!” she said, setting her hands on her hips.

The tall man opened his mouth to speak again, but at that exact instant the skinning knife in the grasscloak man’s hand took on what looked like a mind of its own.

It seized the opportunity where the little attacker’s back was turned—and to what seemed like its wielder’s surprise—lept haphazardly out of his hand, towards Mouse. It clattered across the wide wooden surface of the tabletop a hand’s distance away from her, hazard to nothing except the still-full tankards still sitting heavy and unmoved on the sturdy surface.

“*Ope,*” said the tall man, giving up on whatever it was he had been trying to say.

“*Ope?*” wondered the man whose hand had just tossed the knife, his vision darting from his attacker to the tall man briefly.

Mouse’s adorable, fuzzy little head took on a sharpness, and began to swivel slowly and wickedly, ears back, towards her would-be assailant. She spun in place on the tabletop, eerily still.

Her vision crossed over the other grasscloaked fellow, whose shortsword was still raised at the ready, trembling just a bit from weariness or fear. Her gaze doubled back and laid into him.

“Mouse...” cautioned the tall man.

“Was you gonna *do somefin’* mister *swordy-hand?*” she hissed.

“*You little BITCH!*” snapped the man with startling aggression, and lunged towards her with his weapon.

Mouse’s hand flitted out from under her burlap, and there was a wet thump of a sound from the man’s throat. His swordy-hand dropped its charge and joined the other in reaching for the wound in his neck—a second toothless mouth, suddenly agape in surprise like the one above it.

The hands didn’t arrive in time to stop any bleeding, which hardly mattered since the wound had barely begun to bleed at all before the man’s forward momentum and paralytic collapse carried him straight into the table, slamming his neck into its edge.

His wound struck the wood with an even wetter thump than before, and blood splashed across the table like a spilled drink. The actual drinks on the table rippled gently with the impact. The new mouth in the man’s neck bit into the edge and stuck where it landed.

“You’ll do better next time, I’m sure,” said the tall man to the dead one, as the man’s last regretful thoughts vanished behind dilating pupils.

The stuck grasscloak man’s head lolled over, weighted by a lifeless body, as his new mouth vomited blood. He snagged for a moment as if caught on a thread, then dislodged onto the ground into

the growing puddle of his former contents with a splat, blood ebbing out, unaided by a beating heart.

“Oh... fuck...” croaked the living man. He stepped back, eyes locked on the spot at the edge of the table where his friend had briefly been.

A blood-covered, flat triangle of glassy dark, fleck chipped and razor-sharp stone remained embedded in the table’s edge where the man had struck—what remained of him there dripping in brilliant scarlet, down to the wide white dead eyes.

All present and living eyes were on Mouse, and when hers went to the remaining grasscloaked man, the rest followed.

“*Mouse,*” echoed the tall man, with more consternation than caution this time.

She wasn’t listening to him. She was elsewhere entirely, focused on the grasscloak man. The big boy by the fire now had his back to it, and was smiling like he was watching a puppet show. Invigorated steam rose behind him to watch as well.

“*Doan kill me!*” howled the unarmed man, and put his hands up in surrender. “I’ll give ya’s whatever ya wan’t jus’ doan kill me!”

Mouse’s hand flicked again. There was a nice woody thunk in the beams behind the man, and one of his ears fell off. It landed on the dusty floor with barely a sound.

He yelped like a preyed on animal, and Mouse was on him in a heartbeat, riding him in an arc to the ground. Once there, she snatched up his severed ear and stood on his chest. He clasped at the bleeding side of his head, whimpering.

Mouse held the appendage in front of her face, and screamed into it with the fervor only children can summon.

“*GIVE ME BACK MY BONES!*”

Her little body shook with anger, and the man whimpered even harder.

“Ohh, what *bones?!* ” he cried, “I doan have anyone else’s bones, I swear it! *I swear it!*”

He held one hand to his leaking face, smearing blood as he shook his head in denial, the other hand outstretched to protect himself from his viscious and tiny assailant.

The tall man stepped into view above him, reached down, and plucked Mouse from off of his chest. She did not protest, but she didn’t move either, rigid in her frustration. He placed her back on the tabletop like an angry little statue, ear still in hand. She scowled.

The tall, cloaked man turned back to the bandit, and spoke with a stone’s voice.

“That was a school you and your compatriots raided back in Hobble, did you know that? The red stone building, with the vegetable garden?”

The man on the ground didn’t reply. He watched as the tall man took off his makeshift cloak, laying it neatly on the bloody table, and spoke again.

“Among the few and valueless items you attacked and murdered those fine people for, was a smallish red leather box, edged in golden brass and covered in curious markings. Do you remember it?”

The man looked up at him from the floor. The fear gone from his face, he stared up like he was seeing the stars for the first time, awe and disbelief and confusion, swirling together like seafoam.

“God’s fucked ass,” he muttered. “I thot you people was a myth. Blue fuckin’ palm, right? Fella tall as you... Shoulda known—”

The tall man’s voice boomed like boulders cracking.

“*DO YOU—REMEMBER—THE BOX?*”

His words were emphasized by a sudden cannon’s shot of thunder preceding a sharp wind slicing in through all the gaps in the walls, seeding the air with static flecks of snow like angry spittle and a stomped foot from the very world itself.

“I—I din’t—” The man on the floor stammered. “That woz... bra—uhh, buh-bones?”

The tall man loomed over him, dark like a storm. Firelight flashed in his eyes like lightning through moonlit clouds.

“I—Yeah...” continued the flustered grasscloak man. “I din’t know it woz bones I thot it woz a fuckin’ box. We couldn’ open it. We tried.”

“Where *is it*?” the tall man hissed with no room to miss his severity.

He bore a cold hole through what little soul the man on the ground had left with his stare. The tall man placed one huge, armored boot on the supine man’s chest where Mouse had stood, and gave it an iota of his weight.

The man under his foot wheezed like a fleshy instrument.

“*Sold—it—*” he squeezed out with painful notes.

“To *whom*?” asked the tall man with a patronizing forcefulness, applying slightly more force to the man as well.

Mouse was sitting on the edge of the table, kicking her legs too and fro, head in hands and shoulders on knees. She was fixated, sunglass-focused on the flattening man’s pending answer.

“*The—Water-cult—man—*” croaked the strained reply.

Mouse was up like a shot, the tall man’s head snapped up as well, both scanning the room fast as a bloodfly in a busy stable.

The Sisterman who was still sitting by the fire clapped happily, and made a donkey’s sound through an excited grin.

The Watercult man was nowhere.

The little rodent girl hopped easily from her tabletop to the surface of the bar and peered behind it. She smiled, gave a little wave to someone on the floor, then pirouetted back gracefully to plop down on the bartop’s edge. She shook her head.

“Jus’ the muddy fella’ made outta bugs n’ bunnies, if y’see.”

“Well... *Ships*,” muttered the tall man, dropping his shoulders in defeat. “Rotten luck.”

He stepped away from his victim on the tavern’s dirty floor. With the weight of his boot lifted, the quickly prostrate bandit took rapid, deep and thankful breaths between his dusty coughs and quiet wimpers.

“Mouse,” the tall man said, this time with a serious tone. The little girl looked up at him sheepishly. “This is precisely why we *plan first*. Next time, will you *please* not dash off into the shadows alone?”

A flash of thoughtfulness crossed her face.

“Probably,” she said once it passed, with cryptic assurance.

The tall man sighed.

Mouse plopped down onto the bar top, overlooking the earless bleeding man on the floor. He whimpered and mumbled and she glared at him viciously. The tall man turned to the Sisterman, resting comfortably on the floor himself, taking in the scene.

“Big sister!” said the tall man, gesturing to him with hands spread wide and open. “Did you happen to see where our friend in the funny hat got off to?” He gestured around his head, with a silly spiral motion.

The Sisterman nodded excitedly, and pointed to the gently hidden door behind the bar. He made a series of small sounds, like a happy baby pig. Mouse giggled. The big childish man giggled too.

“Well, shall we go after him, Honeybee?” proposed the tall man, turning back to Mouse. “He can’t have gotten far by now.”

“Yeh, but I’m ‘ungry,” said the little girl, in a little voice.

The tall man glanced back at the awful little cold strips of rabbit meat on the slab at his snowy table in the corner. He looked back to Mouse with doubt in his eyes.

“*Bleh*,” she gagged, and stuck out her tongue.

The big baby-faced barbarian by the fire stood, ruffled around under his spotty furs, and produced a very small looking, shiny purple apple.

“*Eeehhrrr?*” he asked, in perfect mimicry of a creaky door.

Mouse’s eyes lit up.

He happily waddled over to her—the apple taking the lead as if it was pulling him along—and presented it to her with another strange and joyful squeak.

She squeaked back with her own happiness, eyes wide with anticipation, and took the apple from his large open hand. The small fruit transformed into one of comical largeness in her tiny paws.

“Oh, fank you, big baby-man!” she said, and sliced into the apple with her oversized front teeth. The troughed gash exposed brilliant white flesh under bruise colored skin.

The bloody man on the floor groaned, and his pathetic mumbling grew into something louder.

“—my fuckin’ ear! You ragged, *scum-fucking*, nasty little—” came the increasing tirade, his voice raspier now.

Shock and pain had washed away, replaced by hot anger and pounding adrenaline. They mixed to form an unfortunate hubris, and the man began to rise towards the girl on the bartop.

“You...” said the bandit with a sinister rasp in his traumatized voice. “You’re *that* little freak!”

He shouted, jabbing at Mouse with a bloody finger.

“That ol’ bag said you woz *dead!* Lyin’ scunt—said a sickness taken ya. She *gave* us the box, said it woz all that’s left of ya—”

He looked across the room, towards his dead friend, a wrathful scowl twitching across his ragged rotten teeth.

“It’s *gonna fuckin’ be* all that’s left of ya, you little *freak!*” He began to move towards his discarded knife on the table. “I’ll fuckin’ put ya’ in a wee box *meself!* You killed my mate!”

Mouse giggled.

The tall man loudly cleared his throat, and took slow steps forwards. The grasscloak man's face dropped as he turned to look at the approaching dark form, as if he'd forgotten the tall man was there at all. His boots echoed like a far off storm across the hollow floor, and he took a steady breath before speaking as calmly as the moments before a tempest.

"And *you*..."

He took another ominous stride, and the bandit froze. The next word left the tall man in a low growl through clenched teeth.

"*Raided*..."

All the air in the room shifted to the sharp, charged emptiness that introduces lightning to the ground. The tall man took a final heavy step towards the risen grasscloak man, and shifted his weight.

The loudness of his voice struck like a thunderbolt.

"*A SCHOOL!*"

The tidal wave of metal and leather broke on the bandit's sternum as the tall man's boot met him once again. With a sickening *CRACK* the tremendous impact of the kick sent the man's crushed body across the room like rubbish from a blunderbuss.

"Ope!" said Mouse.

The grassy mess of a man slammed into the wall behind him with a soggy *crunch*, and he stuck in the wall like a poorly hung stag trophy, limbs stuck out in odd directions, dried green fibers like ragged stuffing. As he sagged into place, a dramatic applause of actual thunder rumbled the rattling walls from outside.

The Sisterman brayed again and clapped along with it.

"I didn't even ask the skies for *that* thunder, how marvelous!" said the tall man, gazing upwards with a grin.

A drop of water landed squarely between his eyes, fallen from somewhere dark and unseen above. Another long, low rumble of thunder shook the walls. His expression melted to one of concern,



following the drop of water down his face, and he erupted into movement.

“Mouse! With me!” he said quickly, snatching up his bespoke cloak off the gorey table, and making a run towards the bar.

“Brother-sister!” he shouted as he vaulted over the bartop, glancing quickly at the protective barbarian. “Your kindness—is *legend!*”

Mouse casually grabbed a passing handful of the tall man’s clothing, and using his momentum, slung herself onto his back. Her finished fruit spiraled out of her paw towards the bodies of the dead men. After assuring her grip on the living one she rode, she turned back and waved frantically at the Sisterman, who waved frantically back.

“Fankee again’ fer the h’apple!” she squeaked as the tall man gave the hidden door a much gentler kick than he had delivered elsewhere only moments before.

The patchwork lump of furs behind the bar—curled protectively around its tankard—hiccuped defensively at the sound.

The door gave way easily into another large area, somewhere between a kitchen and a store room. A large pot boiled weakly over a dying fire on a brick-and-grate stove top, filling the room with the smell of honey and damp smoke. A bothered chicken clucked quietly somewhere in the otherwise unlit space.

He quickly scanned the dank room.

Framed by an uneven doorway cut out of the darkness on the far wall, was the night. Streaks of moonlit rain like blue sparks fell outside, and the tall man groaned.

He ducked into and sprinted through the new room towards the open back door, stopping short right at its threshold, and dropped to a knee. With Mouse still attached to the back of his coat, he swirled his new cloak through the air over them, covering them both.

Fastening it with the nail once again, the newly-made two-headed creature stared out of the cloak's hood at the ground outside the door.

There were three sets of footprints in the snow, and they were disappearing. The raindrops fell fast, peppering the white ground like buckshot. The pair pondered.

"What do you think, little Mouse?" the tall man asked, placing a palm just above the ground. "Did our ladies split up, and our man follow one of their paths? Or are these his prints here?"

"I fink all of 'em probbilly ran 'round to the road, if y'see," she said. "I dun fink *normal* folks runnin' off for the woods, big man."

He looked both ways, and both trails curved around the back of the building, towards the front. He saw his own familiar prints, going one way and back. He looked up, and saw the rocks they had been hiding in, beyond them a blue abyss of sad winter trees, both beyond a skeleton of rickety awning, missing its skin. They were where he had taken his pilfered cape and cowl.

"Right," he said, his voice wavering between pride and embarrassment.

He took to the left with some speed, into the soggy darkness, following the single trail of prints. As they passed under a familiar tree, he spoke softly to it, and a gust of air brought down his possessions safely discarded there earlier. He caught them without breaking stride.

"You always were such a good listener," the man said lovingly to his weapon, unworried by the splattering of laden snow that came with it.

Mouse cooed at him mockingly.

He separated the helm, clipping it to the front of his belt, keeping his weapon in hand, and paced alongside the trail.

As the child predicted, all the prints had indeed turned corner and brought them directly to the road, weakly illuminated by moons' blue and the diseased green of the tavern's chemical lamp.

A different trail of prints came from the building's front door, and went to the left. The barman's prints. They met the pair from the back door swiftly, and all three sets carried down the road the way they had come, towards the low west, towards Hobble, and the City.

The single pair of prints went the opposite direction, towards the true-east and the open coast. These prints were darker, closer to the color of mud and road, created at a time that allowed less snow to fill them back in before turning to rain, and attempting to erase them. The Watercult priest's tracks, most likely.

The tall man took in a deep breath through his nose, held it for a moment, and exhaled with disappointment. The air told him nothing.

"Oh!" said Mouse, suddenly excited.

"Oh?" said the man, his voice teasing the high probability of a raised eyebrow.

"Rain's brought 'round som'more blue, if y'see," she chirped.

"Hmhm," grumbled the tall man.

The girl climbed down the man's trunk like a tree to his waist, and poked at him. He changed the orientation of his clipped-on helmet, and now that its cavity was upright, Mouse climbed in it like a saddlebag.

"This big new cape o' yours smells like old dirty leafs," she reported, once comfortable.

"Indeed it does," said the tall man, speaking down below his chin into the tent of a cloak in front of him. "I kind of like it."

"Me too," she happily agreed, but followed with a small tone of remorse. "I'm sorry I 'recked yer com-bom-bulatin' n' the man got away, Uncle Jeebie. I jus' wanted me bones back, if y'see."

The tall man smiled. "He hasn't gotten *all-the-way* away, dear Mouse," he said. "Just... a little bit *farther* away. And not for long."

He patted her fuzzy head under his cloak, safe from the rain.

“You’ve nothing to be sorry for either,” he continued. “This is a different man entirely. The ones who stole them, who hurt Marm and the kids, those men are gone now, thanks to you, to us. Never to steal or hurt anyone again. Souls like that, next life they’ll be a glob of pond scum, or maybe a lonely tree.”

“Left me stones stuck in ‘em too,” Mouse said, with a regretful tone. “Needa fine som’ more tomorrow.”

She yawned audibly, finished with a little squeak.

The rain pitter-pattered on the tarpaulin and he felt Mouse snuggle herself somehow deeper into the helmet. The man smiled, visualizing what he was unable to see in the darkness.

It wouldn’t be long, even at the rate her kind grew, before she wouldn’t be able to curl up in there anymore. He hoped desperately he would see it. Both of their paths through life were long ones, but they were misaligned, one starting well before the other. He walked, rocking her back and forth in her armored cradle, and she fell asleep.

He walked, and worried. A giant gloomy black triangle moving down a giant gloomy black path. Most snow now turned or turning to brownish slush as mud, waste and stones took over the ground from below. The moons’ light did its best to dye the world blue in protest, as it always did.

They’d need to stray from the road before long, as soon as they weren’t the only ones on it, but for now this lonely, cold and dark path saved important time in their pursuit. He knew that two murders this close to the city would draw attention, especially with witnesses. No sense creating more witnesses on their way.

To a sharp mind, the sharp rocks Mouse had used to dismantle the men, and the coin with which he paid, would bring credence to what might be otherwise considered a fantastic alibi; a half-giant of the Sea-Claimed Kingdom, traveling with a murderous Hillkin child. Representatives of civilizations lost to history, transformed to story, and in such a short time.

He didn't mind the stories, he liked being a myth. He just hated being alone. He was glad he had Mouse.

The road he traveled was familiar to him, walked or ridden some countless seasons before, and he knew that unless some untold cataclysm had fallen upon this land, where the Watercult man was headed.

At least he hoped he did. He had lost the man's tracks, the wind couldn't tell him anything in this weather—and besides, tracking a Watercult priest in the rain was as useless as a whisper in a windstorm.

His shoulder joined him with a dull throb in time with his steps, to keep him company as he trudged through the mud. A sharpish jolt of pain caused him to wince, sucking breath through his teeth.

"Hm?" mumbled Mouse, temporarily brought back to the world by his hiss.

"Just noticed you were right is all," he said soothingly. "I can see at least *three* now."

"Hm," she said again, just barely, and was gone again.

The infection was going to get worse if left untreated. This wound was refusing to heal on its own, as most of his usually did with unnatural speed, and the healing gifts given by nature were ravaged and rare here. It had been so long since he'd needed to tend to a wound, he wasn't even sure he remembered how.

He needed supplies at least, a healer who was familiar with questionable wounds and unfamiliar with questions at best. He knew where to find them. He needed his new bounty's destination to match his own.

They were going to Worms Port.

## CHAPTER 2

### *FALLING IN SPIRALS*

“Daycandle’s burnt itself out,” echoed a pleasant, far-off and ethereal voice. “Be a chore to get that going again.”

A dream barely meeting pitiful standards of niceness began to fracture. Nearly-lovely feelings and things wobbled and skittered out of view and mind, and far worse ones skittered and wobbled in. Astigmatic bursts of light, like silent muzzle flashes from a firing squad in some distant past, sent the eye’s bearer to a fresh, dark hell.

Something buzzed suddenly in the air. An equally sudden awareness of the bursting pressure in the dreamer’s head accompanied by the thirst of a dying forest quickly followed. Treacherous fluids pounded past what must be ears like a cave under a river. He heard muffled voices trying to break through the roaring in his head.

The dreamer shifted slightly, trying to take inventory of his body parts. Everything felt like it was backwards, in the wrong place anyway, and trying to squirm apart. He tried to let it. He commanded himself to crumble into a pile and scurry away, piece by piece, curl up in the cracks and dark places, and go back to sleep. It didn’t work, so he squirmed some more, which hurt. He let out a low, gurgly groan.

“Place like this though, could have been out for... Oh—” said the disruptive but pleasant voice again. “Umm,” it hummed, shifting slightly from surprise towards concern. “The one with the rats on it... It’s moving.”

The dream had now all but vanished and was replaced by a gallows’ drop back into a poisoned body, as every piece of it reported anguish. His eyelids fought among themselves, showing him only swirling nonsense when one side took small victory, each fleeting flash

a stab of migraine pain. He could hear muffled, distant voices and activity, and somehow that hurt too.

A smirk spoke next. “You sure it’s not the rats movin’ ‘im? They don’t seem very *worried*.” This voice was whiny—annoyed and annoying. He liked the other one a lot more.

The pile of man continued to wallow in his miserable darkness, and tasted the wrong kind of sweet on his tongue. Sweetness like a dead thing smells. He sucked small moisture from his teeth, and swallowed past the dryness guarding his throat. Once again he urged his body to disintegrate, but it ignored his command and felt like it had gotten heavier instead.

His mouth cracked open to free his tongue from its cemented position, making the sounds of peeling silver skin from meat, and he gasped for air. Small strands of something sticky broke apart across his lips, pulling at the hairs of his furry beard and mustache. He tasted honey.

“He’s alive alright,” said the voice that had pulled him from his dream. “That little pack of scavengers seems to have vanished, and he’s definitely breathing. Well, *sort of*. Something *like* breathing at least.” The voice of a woman, he was sure. Calm and pleasant, unlike everything else.

Another buzz textured the air, sharp and mechanical, and he received a small shot of adrenaline with the sudden dread that he’d fallen asleep in another apiary. The bees never seemed to mind him, but the Keepers certainly did.

“*Amend– the report– and– interrogate– the szubject–*,” clicked on and off the voice of a hornet’s hive speaking.

A similar dialect to that of the bees, the language of hornets, but they didn’t usually click between their words. Or *use* words, for that matter. He sighed sadly with a barely audible gurgle, and coughed. He was not in the bees company after all.

The smirk spoke again. “*Two* corpses! Amend the report!” A squeaky mirthful shout from someone just barely beyond boyhood.

“Could’ve fooled *me*,” said the woman’s voice.

“*Did* fool you,” crowed the young man’s voice again victoriously.

The sticky man’s eyes ratcheted quickly open, vision visibly blurry in sunken dark holes above a sticky mustache and ruddy nose. Blurry people were standing around him, observing him quietly.

His torso sprung to life then too with a shuddering jolt, snapping upright at a sharp and unsteady angle. Vertigo and gravity conspired to drag the man right back down, backwards off of the cliff’s edge of flat ground in front of the hearth’s last, similarly unsteady coals.

Tankards clattered across the floor and joined him as he tumbled and flopped, his legs jutting out like a newborn foal’s.

“Oh, had a few, *mate*?” asked the smirk.

He groaned again, finally coming to rest in an awkward pile, his limbs still tangled like a discarded string puppet. He retched a bit with a frog’s sound, and raised his head at an odd angle, blinking blearily up at the unimpressed trio standing before him. They were oddly familiar.

“Themis’all paid’fer!” burped the man confidently, with a nod to the empty cups surrounding him on the floor. His voice sounded like it was stuck in the mud.

“Did he say ‘paid for’?” asked a round-in-the-middle and birdish young man. “Who’d he pay d’ya think? The *dead bodies* or the *rats*?” The smirk’s voice.

A handful of other bodies listed busily like giant blurry dust motes behind them, wandering around the room. They all wore dark, many-pocketed fatigues, their left shoulders adorned with brilliant feather-embossed copper pauldrons. The metal on their shoulders caught the low, sickly green glow of the small chemical lamps some of



the motes carried with them, dancing in his hazy vision like oddly persistent fireflies.

The fur-covered drunk man shifted uncomfortably in the lamp's green, like sick and unwelcome sunlight. He groaned again uncomfortably, with real pain and painful realization at who it was that surrounded him.

"Could be he's a vagrant," said a handsome shape resting a hand on a womanly hip. "Could be a witness too." The same nice voice from before.

It had been quite some time since he'd been before the Constabulary.

His vision focused slightly through saggy, twitching lids, and confirmed the surrounding presence. Everyone in the room wore the same uniform—the ones observing him and the ones floating out of focus behind them. All, except for one. The blurry-eyed man squinted, letting his gaze settle on the singular officer before him who wore no shoulder pauldron.

Below where the copper shoulder should be, a badge shone bright instead. A shining copper teardrop, canted to the side and embossed with the image of an all-seeing raptor's eye. It glinted watchfully on his long, official-looking, black coat, dilating and winking in the shifting light.

An Empiric. Top Copper. Usually the real no-nonsense type, except this one was nonsense from the neck up.

The man on the floor rubbed his struggling eyes, trying to understand what was coming out of the top of the coat where a normal man's head would be.

This Empiric's head, from collar to forehead, was completely composed of complex mechanical parts. Familiar copper mixed with shiny brass, steel in silver and black, shone where features once lived. Vertical slits for a mouth, a skull's nose, and no visible ears.

The only exceptions were his eyes—alive, round, hazel and human—suspended in a frantic wide horror. His thin hair came up from his pale-skinned scalp like hot white flames, framing the startling visage.

“Ain’choo sumthin’,” crooned the furry drunk.

The man’s metal face vibrated with audible impatience, and as he turned his head to violently observe the man on the ground, a little puff of smoke or steam shot out of somewhere in his neck with a hiss.

“*Sztand him—, Consztable— Arkenwald—*,” buzzed the machine man. The beaky young constable began to stalk towards the man in his nest of tankards.

The Empiric’s voice sounded like an angry swarm. A disturbed nest. He spoke through a metal grate where a mouth may have once been, the words clicking out of him with an insectile precision, a colony of gears working in unison.

“Aw naow,” said the man on the floor with his own twangy, melodic tone. “Ain’nuh need ferna fuhssin’.”

He began to teeter upside down like an inverted beetle. “I sain’t ‘neebriated—” he said, kicking at the air and rocking himself to his feet unsteadily, “—jussa’mite fucktup is’all. *Oof!*” He began climbing up something invisible towards standing.

The center of gravity within his furry, round body orbited some unseen force as he rose, then found purchase on another one. He wobbled to a standing rest like a stout sword stuck in the dirt, hiccuped, and smiled in apparent satisfaction with his little show.

The unfortunately struthious young man in a too-small uniform—now in close proximity to his acrobatics—grabbed him from behind and held him slightly more upright anyway, with angry grips on both of his patchy furry arms.

“You’re being *detained*,” smeared the petulant young man in his face. “Under Authority and Code of the Constabulary of the Twisting City, Article Seven, Subsection Seven, for *questioning*.” He

moved forwards as he spoke with slimy authority, slowly exhaling the last word into the man's face.

The hungover man breathed right back.

"Wuchoo-wameetellyuh?" oozed his breathy and thick reply. An invisible sewage of cloying decay, neglect and sweet bile.

The gangly avian boy backed away suddenly, disgusted as if some of the man's words had splashed on him.

"Yeugh!" he coughed, screwing up his face, and spun the foul detainee around to face his partners. He aimed him at them like an older brother with a soiled young sibling.

"Hoo-dee-doo!" hiccuped the detained man, smiling a sticky smile through matted fur and saggy skin.

"You look like something someone might find on their shoe after a walk in a swamp," said the woman.

She was on the fresh side of life herself, though older than the smirk. She had a mother's face, kind but stern—pretty for a copper too, thought the blurry-eyed man.

"Well thanks'a 'spose!" he said back to her. "Y'ain't s'bad yerself!"

The woman blinked and pondered a moment and began to say something, but was relieved of the opportunity by her partner.

"Public Over-Allotment of Intoxicating Substances," barked the interrupting young man still holding the foul drunk safely from behind. "Article Nine, Subsection Two-B—wish there was a crime for stinking." His nose wrinkled. "Fella smells like a sack of dead vermin."

"There is," said the woman. "Not this far from the city though, parcel laws out this far. We'd fill the jails with debtors if we fined every stinky man and woman and thing out here. Same with your Nine-Two-B I'm afraid. Past City Ordinance purvey—" She paused, and looked at the furry drunk man. "—again, to our benefit, Constable Arkenwald."

The drunk man hiccuped. “Yuns’ll getsum beyter yes’n-ohs frummie, if’n ya pro-pose summa demol’ *kweshuns*, ain’it?” sang the honey-mouthed man, and hiccuped again.

The woman pursed half her lips, and set one hand on her holstered baton.

“Do you understand half the words coming from this billy skin-waster?” asked Constable Arkenwald, still engaged in the physical detention of the man. “How can a man sound like he smells?” he asked, wrinkling his nose towards the other constable. “Pereglia, you’re a bookish type. Were those words, or am I havin’ a neurysm?”

“He’s just one of the Shrapnel folk, from the islands,” she said to the impatient young constable. “It’s not *that hard* to understand.”

She turned to the detained man.

“What is your name?” asked Constable Pereglia.

“Pibbilum,” said Pibbilum, in a muddy voice.

“Hm?” Pereglia hummed.

“Mhm, yes’m. Pibbilum,” he murmured again.

“Pibble, Lum?” she asked.

Her ear for accents struggled to determine if this mumbled yawn was actually a name. She was afraid she’d have to eat her words.

He nodded, so she nodded back and continued.

“Are you armed?”

He shook his head emphatically.

“You’re a trapper, yes? Hunter?”

“Yes’m, snaptitup,” he said.

“And you aren’t armed?” she asked, incredulously.

“Naw y’see seasier withum treps, makem ouch’er yonder sticks n’ stones n’ y’ain’t gotcha re-pair no stickers n’ stones.”

The Constables stared. Pereglia was deciding if she believed him. Arkenwald might as well have been listening to a toad talk.

“I’dun cotten souled bo’ treefo dem lillo rabberts, ‘nye soldum rycheer. Feller lemme spillaspell n’ swaller fo’while. I’dun seen’t summol... Lem’telya...” rambled the man in his honeyed twang.

The constable holding him sighed exaggeratedly, and let go.

“I am releasing you for continued questioning, continuing under *and in accordance with Authority and Code of the Constabulary of the Twisting City, Article Seven, Subsection Seven, Point Three...* Into the custody of Constable Pereglia, for, uhm, continued... questioning.”

He hurried back over to the side of the metal faced man, who buzzed impatiently.

“*Do not- waste our- time—*,” clicked on and off the sound of angry bees. “*Conzstable- Pereglia-, retrieve- information- from thiz- man—. Zee me- when you- have finizsht- with him—.*”

Small pistons churned alongside striated conduit like muscle in the machine man’s throat when he spoke. Their commander’s human eyeballs were wide, menacing in their perpetual lidless terror—pinned in articulated harnesses that twitched his vision this way and that, attached in the rear with roots of wet looking wire.

“*Conzstable- Arkenwald—.*” The Empiric’s voice cracked impatiently as he turned towards the corpses in the room. “*With me—. Now—.*”

Pereglia snapped heels together and saluted; her brandished left fist a horizontal pantomime of a self-inflicted dagger’s stab to the heart. The other constable followed her lead.

“Yes, Empiric!” the two said in near unison.

The birdish man broke his salute and followed his leader’s coattails obediently once he began to walk over to the corpse of the grasscloak man, fruiting from the wall like a hideous bloated purple mushroom.

Pereglia turned to the inebriated and recently thought to be deceased man, unsteady near the undead fire.

“You said earlier that these drinks—” she paused to toe one of the empty flagons littering the floor where they had found him, quickly counting them. “—had been all paid for.” There were ten. She was impressed he was in fact alive. “Did *you* pay for them?” she asked.

“Wunertoo, withem rabberts,” he answered, nodding.

“And the rest?”

“Hoowee,” he whistled, “I’mmatellya. I’mmatellya an’ y’ain gun b’leemee, cuz I’s afeert I’dun b’leema self, but I’mmatellya true.”

. . . . .

Empiric Rathe’s exposed eyeballs twitched like bugs on a pond, darting between each autolysistic detail and wretched feature of the macabre piece of art, a medium of limbs and tavern wall that someone had hung, without approval. It was missing an ear.

He turned with very human disdain to observe the man in the congealed puddle near the tabletop made of a large cross section of Eastern Pike-fir. He stood with his own arms neatly clasped behind his back and admired the dead tree, taking a moment to unravel its rings.

A puzzle. A warm-up for his organic machine. Ripples on the surface of time itself, frozen in desiccated cellulose. Concentric clues radiating around the impact of a single seed for hundreds of seasons, cast into history by the wind or some creature, like a pebble tossed carelessly into a pool by a child.

That surface was clouded by a crosshatched manuscript of scratches and lacerations, an unreadable scrawling of serifs and arcs, written into it over thousands of nights. New moons and waning crescents of indentation; tankards turned gavel, marking the hundreds

of lost judgements ruled aloud in a court of the inebriated. He ignored these clever distractions and focused on his task.

Umbrous uneven rings and ugly fissures like jagged bracelets of scar tissue were his key; raging conflagrations in the Eastern forests were a thing of unpredictable regularity. A series of exceptionally gnarly internalized injuries in sequence became his cipher; he knew of those fires, that many seasons long trick candle, now barely an anecdote. Then, they thought the eastern forests would burn forever.

This tree had seen its first sun before the Twisting City laid its first stone, and was cut down before his grandfather drew breath. Such a life, such history in those rings, left to endure ignorance at the hands of rabble.

His fearful looking eyes darted again, and landed on Constable Arkenwald, who was looking right at him with an expectant leer.

*“What- are you- here for-, Arkenwald—?”* said the Empiric to his fixated lackey.

“Erhm, I—” he said, caught without a prepared answer. “Under Authority and Code of the—”

*“What do- you zee—?”* interrupted the Empiric’s electric tone.

“Oh, uh, there’s... Well, these two fully cessated men,” he gestured broadly at the swathe of corpse and evidence before him with a royal sweep of his hand, “seem to fit the description of at least *some* of the junky group of bandits and randomized ne’er-do-wellers that ransacked through Hobble, day or so ago.”

He looked towards his audience, hoping for a sign of approval. The captive eyes didn’t move at all, menacingly. The other living bodies in the place continued to float around, performing their individual tasks of evidence collection.

“Uh... Uh’bout, ten nails ago, three franticated people of standing employ arrived soaked to the skeleton at an outguarding about halfway *to Hobble* from here, sayin’ some story about an assault ‘n brawl.”

He licked his lips and raised an eyebrow. The machine-faced man did neither. The constable continued.

“One of the reportees, self-proclaimed and uncontested owner of this...” He looked around at the emaciated survivor of a building around him. “Establishment? Says he toddled-off once two men, matching that very same description, assaulted his indentured woman, another one of the three, and drew weapons on another patron who had intervened to interrupt said assault. Said he was ‘a big man in furs’ they did.”

He scanned the scene with his best impression of scrutiny, glancing back at the patchy little round man currently gesticulating wildly towards the woman officer near the hearth, as she nonchalantly avoided his thrashing.

“I’d say they picked a fight with the wrong bloody patron. Unlikely our man with Pereglia did ‘em in, bet’s on those dead rats n’ trilobites he wears givin’ *him* a struggle on a good day.”

His better buzzed again annoyedly. “*I azked- what- you zee-, Arkenwald-, not what- is already- known-.*”

The young constable looked disappointed, and began to scan the scene again. There was a crafted shortsword discarded behind the man in the puddle. Another smudge of blackening crimson on the floor some distance away, between the bar and a scrap of discarded food waste.

“Oh... Well, uhm...” he said, juggling his words with the sudden requirement to perform. His stance shifted from confidence to contrite.

He stepped closer to the body on the tavern’s floor in its puddle of gelatinized blood, and bent down. The skin was gray and cold, and a little bit shiny, its eyes and neck wide in frozen surprise. He noticed the long barrelled pistol under the table near his living observer, for the first time.



He rose and squinted in investigation at the blade of stone protruding from the table's edge, rusty red tinted centerpiece to a fan of half-dried blood, like an outstretched wing.

"This man died last," said the constable, as a matter of fact. "That's 'is sword over there," he added, pointing to the one being lifted off of the ground towards Constable Pereglia's suspect, by one of the evidence collectors.

The man called Pibbilum caught his eye past the weapon, and derailed from whatever he was telling his interrogator to throw up his hands, as if to say 'Well, it certainly isn't *mine*.'

"Our mysterious and murderous suspect bled him out over this sharp bit of rock," Arkenwald continued, gesturing at the rock sticking out of the tabletop, "a stone hatchet's head maybe, after he watched what they did to his dead friend over here."

He was starting to regain his look of confidence, and strode accordingly over to the man stuck in the wall.

"This man, based on his increased rate of inflation, I'd say died first, beaten and stuffed in a hole. Tortured-like. That's likely his gun there on the floor."

He bent down again, and retrieved the firearm. Standing, he flicked the weapon to its side, exposing its empty wheel.

"I don't see any blood that doesn't likely belong to one of these two. That smear on the ground over towards the bar, probably from pummelin' this poor fella to a pulp before stuffin' 'im in there arse-first. Looks like they interrupted him mid-apple, before the rats got to it."

He turned the weapon in his hands, eyeing it like he hoped an expert might, and continued his assessment of the crime scene.

"No blood on that sword's blade, doubt any of these rounds found target either—half the time this lot can't even afford real bullets—so I double doubt we're looking for an injured person.

Probably someone from Hobble come after the pair seekin' revengeance. Maybe two of 'em. The only thing I don't know *is*—"

Arkenwald placed the empty revolver on the table, and moved his face closer to the pained purple face of the dead man. "—why... Or how... Ssomeone would set a fella' in a wall *quite* like this."

A sigh of static whizzed past the confident constable's ear like a defending wasp.

*"I- azzure you- that iz- not the- only thing- that you- do not-know—."* clicked the frustrated and rapid fire metronome of the Empiric's distorted words.

*"One day- Consztable- Arkenwald-, you will- have to- rely on-more than- your name—,"* snapped the Empiric's voice box.

He followed his erratic eyeballs over to the triangle of stone sticking up like a bloody fin from the furthest rings in the table's design.

*"A- crushed man- swellz fazter—. Hiz waste- from- ruptured-organz- feedz the- gasez- of death'z- konzumption—"*

An army of angry insects marched through Arkenwald's ears. He loved listening to the Empiric speak, it was like some sort of sinister poetry.

*"—pressure of- comprezsed- fluidz- and meat- fillz- the-limbz like- sausagez—,"* continued the bifurcated gasps of static vocalization between the pops of electric discharge.

Arkenwald watched as the Empiric shaved a fine black curl of leather off of a gloved finger as he spoke, running its length across the edge of the protruding razor rock. It scrolled off, and floated gently to the ground like a dry dead bug.

*"You- will find- a- matching stone- in the- wall—,"* the Empiric said, quickly looking up with an unnatural snap of his neck, eyes targeting as he finished his words, and pointed. *"There—."*

Constable Arkenwald, still too shocked by his unfamiliarity with reprimand or correction to protest, turned to look where the gloved

finger indicated. He immediately saw a star's twinkle from the green of a lamp in something shiny at his height in the wall behind the bar. He walked over to retrieve it.

The Empiric slowly pulled off his injured glove, finger by finger with his other hand, not breaking eye's unnervingly still contact with the undulating light that danced green in the convex dunes on the stones surface, in the rare places unmarred by dried blood.

His gentle work unwrapped a harlequin hand. Its two outermost fingers and the blade of his palm, fleshy, pale and human—next to a pseudo-skeletal claw of fine servos and clever hydraulic joints.

He reached for the little dark triangle like the predatory foot of a mechanized owl taking a small stone mouse, and easily plucked it from its woody field. He turned it between thumb and forefinger, the whisper of metal on glass rang with each rotation.

Constable Arkenwald on task by the wall suddenly yelped, and something thunked hollowly near him. He yanked off a glove, shoved two fingers from his uncovered hand in his mouth, and used the unworn glove to pick the object off of the floor, holding it like a dog's mess in a leaf.

He tiptoed a painful dance over to the table top, and dropped the offending package on its surface.

*"Shffrn phshn kshbysb!"* he seethed through the digits stuffed between his lips. "Little shitpiece is sharper than fuckin' cat's eyes!" he said with more clarity once he'd thought to remove them. "Cut right through my glove!"

Blood flecked his lips, and he pressed his wounded fingers together hard to staunch the dripping digits.

Empiric Rathe held his stone horizontal, and spun it balanced between the tips of his robotic thumb and middle finger, flicking it with his unafraid metal index one. It spun like the blade that he imagined took the life of the old tree it had only just resided in. Its

chipped edges, orderly and uniform like a saw's teeth, two by two. He stopped its rotation quickly with the same motion in reverse.

*"There- iz an ear- missing—,"* he hummed through the speaker in his face.

Constable Arkenwald gasped and reached up with his undamaged hand in reflex to the sides of his head, feeling to make sure his own ears weren't either somehow the ones in question.

*"From- the dead- man—,"* the speaker discharged again.

"Right, of course..." said Arkenwald, embarrassed. He began to bend down towards the corpse on the floor.

A rush of static, like the clearing of an electronic throat interrupted Arkenwald's initial descent. He recovered awkwardly, like an embarrassed cat, and then, directed by his overwhelmed powers of deduction, walked over to the corpse jutting from the side of the room instead.

As observed, one of the man's ears wasn't present. He began to search the floor with his eyes, and noticed Constable Pereglia walking up to the table.

"Empiric..." Pereglia said, saluting unenthusiastically. "Have I got a *story* for *you*," she added, with a small laugh under her breath, at the absurdity of what she was about to repeat.

"Our man over there," she began, gesturing at Pibbilum, "claims to have an arrangement with the owners of this place, something about trading game animals for alcohol. Not unheard of in these parceled areas, means he's here often, knows the normal rabble. But last night, he says the place was filled with strange faces."

She eyed the twisted dead men in the room, and her fellow constable, sucking on an ungloved hand like a babe. She noticed the shiny stone, spinning in the Empiric's complex hand, officially excavated from the tabletop, and its twin, nested in a folded glove near where it had been stuck. Her brow conveyed the onset of some

intense, silent internal calculation, and she returned to regurgitating the drunk man's tale.

"Seemed like our dead men had been keeping mostly to themselves, except when they met briefly with some priest from the Watercult—neither of which so far is on the strange side of the guest list."

"Fellow wedged in yonder wall seems pretty strange, I'd say," piped up Arkenwald, glancing toward the unfortunate man. She hushed him with a warning look.

"Well, he wasn't to start off, according to my *source*," she corrected, nodding back at the oblivious, wobbly Pibbilum.

The inebriated man had appeared to have gone back to sleep, standing. His body twitched as some subconscious and subdermal correction kept him upright. Arkenwald grunted with condescension, and Pereglia continued.

"Besides, bandits of all kinds in these fieldcrafted parkas are certainly not strangers to outlaying taverns and public houses, even the lamped ones. Nor are members of the Watercult for that matter, more and more of *them* every day, it seems."

Arkenwald folded his arms, and stared at her, waiting impatiently for her to continue. Empiric Rathe's naked eyeballs were locked onto the inebriated patchwork man, precise and microscopic adjustments and dilations seemed to catalog each of his hypnic jerks and apneatic snorts.

"Anyway," she started again, "then walks in the first strange guest—a 'big man in furs', as described by our flustered and wet trio from the outguarding, sits by the fire, quiet as... Well, as a mouse, apparently."

The Empiric eyed her now, dissecting her with a gaze, awaiting more.

"Doesn't sound all that strange to me," said Arkenwald with snide disappointment.

“Oh it will,” said Pereglia. “So our ‘big man in furs’ goes and sits by the fire, orders nothing, says and does nothing. Just sits. Then, according to Pibbilum, the strangest guest yet comes in—a giant, ‘seven arms tall’ he says. All manners with blue eyes and a tarp draped over him from the tavern’s own back door.” She paused, rolling her eyes slightly as if barely believing her own words. “Apparently, Pibbilum recognized the tarp, ‘Always leave them rabbits by the back,’ he says.”

*“There— was no— mention— of this— ‘giant’— in the— outguarding’z— report—,”* buzzed Empiric Rathe. Arkenwald’s brow furrowed.

“No sir, I don’t believe there was,” agreed Pereglia, quickly diving back into her own, “and everything seems sun’s-up until the tarped giant buys a round for the place, everyone present.” She folded her own arms across her chest. “I believe this is the beginning of the reported assault and subsequent brawl our outguarding received and clawed-off to investigate.”

Pibbilum coughed, and Pereglia turned to check on him. She noticed a single bold rat retreating back into the shadows, suddenly discouraged from whatever mission it had been on.

*“Continue—,”* clicked the Empiric.

“Maybe our victims here were feeling bold in the presence of someone who could afford such a generous luxury,” she said, turning back towards the men. “Whatever their motives, it led one of them to assault the tavern’s working woman.” She smiled, and her eyes widened.

*“That is when the ‘big man in furs’ turns into a ‘stranger’, Constable Arkenwald.”* Pereglia grinned. “As soon as one of these poor louts laid a hand on her, Pibbilum over there says the big furry one by the fire shot across the room and attacked the attacker! The way he described the man, unless my chemicals are off, I’d swear he was describing a *Sisterman*, if you could believe it. Nonverbal, baby-faced

barbarian jumps in to defend a random servant? Tie that together, and it stays.”

Arkenwald looked at her with a doubtful expression.

“Believe it or not,” she said, shrugging. “He says the bandits started shouting, weapons were drawn. That’s when he hid, our reportees ran off, and the Watercult man slipped out the back door. Our ‘big man in furs’ didn’t bend a hair past helping the woman, just went right back to sit in front of the fire.”

She waited, expecting them to stop her. They didn’t.

“Then, according to him, things get *much* stranger. Says *this one*—” she gestured towards the bandit on the ground, “—was killed by, and I quote, ‘a wrinkly-pinkly critter’? Some little person that the giant called ‘Mouse’, and is definitely on the *stranger* list as well.”

She shot another glance towards Arkenwald, expecting an interruption or snide remark, and received only a furrowed brow.

“Says they *looked* like a mouse,” she started again, “fuzzy thing with big teeth, the size of, and with the voice of a child, but wrinkled like an old woman. Says she dropped down from the ceiling and killed him for raising a sword to her, with something she threw at him, he says,” she continued, glancing at the corpse and the area around it thoughtfully.

She looked pointedly at the stone in the Empiric’s hand. “Something like that, I’d guess,” she said, pointing to the triangular rock. “Same thing she threw at the other one too, from what I understand, to sever an *ear*.”

She watched as Arkenwald attempted to exchange a glance with Empiric Rathe, and left empty handed.

“Apparently, she kept shouting something about *bones*,” said Pereglia with a speculative tone. “Something apparently the priest took, or bought, possibly related to that raid in Hobble.”

“How’d he go from losin’ an ear, to residing in the wall?” asked Arkenwald. “That’s one demon of a throw, eh? From this little

thing?” He nudged the gloved stone on the table, cautiously with his uninjured and still-gloved hand.

“He says the ‘giant’ was upset over the raid in Hobble, but only after one of our bandits was already dead.” She pointed at the corpse on the floor again. “He claims this ‘giant’ *kicked* that man into the wall, if you’d believe it,” her gesture shifted toward the unfortunate soul lodged there, and her voice shifted into severe incredulity, “and Pibbilum says he did it, again I am quoting directly, *‘with a storm.’*”

She paused, glancing between the Empiric and Arkenwald as they perked up, the Empiric’s posture and the young constable’s forehead rising in accidental unison. She let her words linger, waiting for either of them to interrupt her. She wasn’t used to being given this much time or attention. This time they obliged.

“*“A storm?”* Oh, the birds are waiting,” Arkenwald said, dripping with sarcasm. “Man as drunk as him twisted up all that yarn? Did The Leviathan stop by for a drink too? The moons, maybe?”

“I don’t think he was that far gone, not yet—” Pereglia started to explain, but the Empiric cut her off.

“*What—else—?*” he buzzed, flatly.

“As if it couldn’t get stranger,” Pereglia started again, “he swears the *giant* eventually took off his tarp, to reveal *blue skin*, a gray leather coat, and what sounds like *Sandsteel* armor—a pauldron specifically.”

She let out an exhausted, fake laugh, and put her hands on her hips. “And there’s more,” she said, hoping her stance betrayed a position of disbelief.

“Pibbilum swears this giant had bought the house drinks with a *blue palm* too, if you’d believe it. I don’t. A fake, to be sure! Could you imagine someone *stupid* enough to... You know, the real ones, they float?” She glanced at them as if daring them to question her. They didn’t need to.

“I know what it sounds like,” she said defiantly. “I told you I had a *story* for you.”



From outside came the shriek of metal against metal. The three officers shared a glance. Arkenwald wore his usual sneer and mouthed the words “*Like I said,*” as Pereglia continued.

“Our man over there just hid behind the bar during all of this, peeking through a crack, then *cleaned up* once everyone had gone—and gone they were. Says our killers chased after the priest, with the ‘big man in furs’—our assumed Sisterman—not far behind. Says the whole thing took barely a few breaths, and again, was very insistent that none of his beverages had been *stolen*.”

“*Do- you believe- him—?*” the Empiric asked, his voice sharp and electric.

She nodded, but then scrunched one side of her face. “Sort of. I know what drunk stories sound like, and that story’s pure nonsense. Gets worse as you go on, but I know lies and liars too. That man is *definitely* one, but not this morning.” She gestured in the air around her, as if plucking ingredients off of an invisible shelf. “He told me whatever he remembers he saw...”

She paused, pantomiming the assembly of something in front of her. “Take one tall man with blue eyes, a dash of unusually violent little old woman, add a hefty pour of alcohol, and stir.”

Her expression shifted, more contemplative now, as she swirled a spectral drink in her hand, and seemed to piece things together.

“It’s... children’s stories,” she murmured, half to herself. “Long-dead blue-skinned giants doing heroic deeds, tusked rat-men with skin of steel at their sides, and their island kingdom falling into the sea.” Her hands shifted, mimicking indecipherable shapes as she spoke.

Arkenwald huffed in amusement, tapping his foot as he glanced at the Empiric with a smirk.

Pereglia continued, unbothered. “My grandfather used to say all the children would go watch them perform puppet shows in the clouds, stories passed down over time. But the way he told them...”

She trailed off, her eyes following a speck of dust drifting through the air, lost in memory.

“No one’s seen either of those peoples for, what, a hundred or more seasons? Two hundred?” she concluded. “Unless you count the stories, or believe random fantastical reports like this one. Nothing left of the Old Archana but tales, except the Watercult, of course. You can hardly go a nail without seeing one of *them*.”

The Empiric’s face clicked and hummed in thought, his eyes darting with mechanical urgency. His gaze was slicing apart the rafters above, revealing untold details. The whirring, contemplative silence was broken by Arkenwald.

“So, a long-dead giant with storms for feet and an equally extinct, rock-throwing, wrinkly, old-baby-rat wandered in here, murdered these men with the help of a bloody Sister-man? Then everyone fucked off?”

He eyed the wobbly figure of Pibbilum, now definitely standing asleep, snoring through shallow, grunting breaths.

“And this one?” he scoffed. “Just tossed back everyone’s poor neglected leftovers and took a nap by the fire?”

The Empiric held out the murder weapon in his half-metal hand at arm’s length, towards Constable Arkenwald’s view. It set in his three pointed claw like a bizarre gemstone.

“*What- do you- zee—?*” he demanded, his voice clicking with impatience.

Arkenwald peered into the green lights dimly dancing across its surface with genuine curiosity. Fluorescent violet and firelight orange joined in, weakly cutting through the tavern’s shabby walls, bringing the noise of the street outside with it.

The Empiric used the tip of one metallic finger to tap glassy notes from the peaks of the stone’s serrated edge.

“Those are strangely uniform,” said Arkenwald again, hesitating. “Could they be...” he trailed off, squinting in thought.

Peregria saw it. She flinched to speak and caught herself.

Arkenwald spoke up.

“Are they—machined?” He said finally, with rare acuity.

“*Rodent’z- teeth—*,” buzzed his commander, with the slightest tinge of tacit approval.

. . . . .

Mouse sat nibbling on a rock near a small fire. Occasional breathy puffs of flatulence chased the debitage out of her mouth as she cleared the little sharp flakes and gritty flecks away from her stout leathery tongue.

Her wispy white hair, usually kept out of her face by being tied behind it, was adorned with new jewelry, and new, imprecise braids. Iridescent black feathers, tied with threads of burlap, dangled heavy in comparison within her mane of thin clouds, like glimpses of the night sky.

The tall man sat by the same fire, slowly turning a small pair of charred and mostly featherless birds over it with a clever arrangement of sticks fashioned into a slanted spit. He hummed a slow, deep song.

*“Eight strong winds,  
Of feather and fins,  
Our storm spins.”*

The forest chattered and clicked and beeped along with him, a chaotic and calming symphony of stridulation and whistles and noise from dozens of creatures. Hundreds of individuals, all vying for their space in the vibrating air. It was a sound that meant safety, all singing songs of contentment and desire, hiding from nothing.

*“Rise, dark eyes,  
Corruption and lies,*

*Face the Spires,”*

Tall black trees standing at attention surrounded them, dark clots of foliage at their feet like manes of shaggy fur, eyes of moisture glinting in the firelight. A forest of royal guards and their dogs, resolute and secluded in shadows.

Mouse held her pointed work of art out at arms length, outlining its edge in the flames of dayrise over the tops of the trees. She closed one eye, turned it to look down its three spines.

With a satisfied nod and a little “*Mmbm!*” she slipped it between the burlap of her little habit into some hidden place, and then turned towards the tall man.

“Is’m *ready yet?*” she asked excitedly.

The man stopped his humming, and lifted the skewer off of the crafted spit. He broke the turning stick in half between the two sizzling fists of meat, and proffered the smaller of the two to the girl.

“Make sure you haven’t got any stone in your teeth still,” he said as she took it. “I know you remember last time.”

“*Thbbtt!*” came the wet retort, then she put her tongue back in her mouth and chomped into the bird excitedly, ignoring its heat and crunchy bones.

The man ate too, carefully picking his apart instead. Mouse stopped her chomping to pull something slender and black from the tip of her extended tongue, and tossed the charred little needle of keratin towards the fire. She looked at the rest of the gnawed-on animal in her hand, stuck on a stick like a haggard meaty torch.

“Tastes like burnt, if y’see,” she said sadly. “I wanna ‘nother h’apple.”

“Just eat it,” the tall man said between small bites of his own bland little bird. “That creature lost its life so that you can have a meal. It deserves your *respect*.”

Mouse looked at her meal quizzically, her new feathers tilting heavier to one side, and began to pat it on its absent head.

“Fankee fer dyin’ Missus Birdy,” she said as she patted. “I’m sorry you’re yucky now.”

The tall man laughed. He took his half-eaten bird on a stick and stuck the handle end of the apparatus into the dirt near where he was sitting, leaning against a nearby tree.

Mouse eyed the small monolithic morsel. “If yew’s not gonna eat that,” she started, but the tall man interrupted her with unexpected motion.

He stood up with an exaggerated grunt, then made a show of cracking his knuckles and stretching his shoulders. Several dull pops sounded under his armor, muffled by leather and muscle.

He continued his performance with an equally exaggerated examination of the trunk he had just been propped against, his weapon leaning tall against one of its sides.

“Hmm...” he hummed, in mock analysis. “No, not this one.”

Mouse was intrigued. She watched him attentively as he walked to another tree, eyeing its trunk up and down as well, hands on his chin and hip.

“*Hmmm...*” he hummed again, teasing her with drawn out inaction.

“What’re you *hmm*-ing about, big man?” she demanded impatiently.

“*Sbb!*” he hissed sharply, turning quickly towards her and back to the tree in front of him just as fast, like a flower being whipped by the wind. He stretched out one hand towards the side of the tree trunk, and wiggled its fingers in aggrandized preparation.

With speed like a lightning strike, his hand snapped around and grasped the back of the living post in front of him, his other hand bracing him against its face. He struggled with something unseen on the dark side of the tree, and after a moment along with the sound of tearing paper, he brought round a flapping, squamous thing.

A living and squashed giant pine cone that struggled like a drowning fish. It squealed, thrashed, and undulated wildly in his hand.

“Eeeep!” squealed Mouse right back. The tall man let out a bellow of a laugh, and the forest around them went quiet.

The creature’s back side was an array of wide wood-brown scales, three rows descending from a crescent head, overlapping each other like armor plates. The center row was as wide as the two that flanked it combined.

Its head, barely anything more than just another segment of its body, was bejeweled with two oblong compound eyes and a pair of long antennae. They glittered and searched wildly in the night, in time with the sea of undulating legs splaying out from its underbelly, sweeping in time like oars as the creature flexed and extended.

“I’ll eat the birdy!” squealed Mouse in shrill duet with the frenzied arthropod.

The tall man let loose another dramatic and maniacal laugh, theatrical and baritone.

With his creatureless hand he reached under his open coat, down behind the cliff face facade of the large plate of armor covering the opposite thigh, and gingerly began to draw out a long, double sided dagger with just a finger and thumb.

Its rough surface made a sound like a grinding stone as it grew upwards under his hand, its handle sprouting a blade, revealing a pattern of dappled interference. Pitted dark circles within shinier smoother ones, repeating, like fossilized raindrops, their competition to expand frozen in the thin knife’s face forever. Slowly the knife revealed its missing point.

Mouse’s eyes were as wide as her grin.

He squeezed the creature in his hand, and it made a very squozen sound. His dagger suddenly flipped up in the air, and with the same

hand that flipped it, he caught it with an uncanny halting snatch. Time froze for a fraction of a heartbeat, as he held it in a perfect grip.

He hoped that Mouse had not noticed his wince. He glanced at her through obviously mysterious sideways eyes, and realized her bird was getting cold, nearly abandoned in her lap now as she stared at his ridiculous display.

He relaxed, and casually took his knife to the animal.

Carefully, he pried up one of the peripheral scales of its body, and revealed a clutch of vibrant yellow orbs, each about the size and color of a cat's eye.

He shook the creature gently a few times, until a few of the little eggs fell to the ground in front of Mouse like ripe berries.

"Ooooh," trilled Mouse, excitedly.

He heel-turned suddenly to face the same tree he had been sitting against, and marched back to it, setting the gently traumatized animal on its bark, legs first.

It stuck like a bur, and after a brief moment of what may have been disbelief, it scurried up the tree in a streak. The sound of someone crumpling a map chasing after it.

"Bye-bye, Flappy!" hollered Mouse.

The tall man stooped down briefly, standing back up with his bird on a stick in one hand, and walked over to join his tiny companion.

He sat down next to Mouse and closer to the fire, and picked up a couple of the little orbs off of the ground in front of them. They glowed like something magical in the firelight.

"Wot-on-a-weasel is *those things*?" Mouse asked, stared at the glowing round treasures like they'd come out of a storybook.

"Eggs," said the tall man, smiling. "*Bug* eggs."

With precise pressure he popped one of the orbs between his fingers over his bird, letting the tiny bit of liquid inside of it drip down onto the pitiful poultry in his other hand.

He raised it to his lips, and took a small savage bite, worrying the meat off the bones between his teeth and slurping loudly.

*"Mmmm,"* he hummed, deep and pleasant, closing his eyes and smiling wide. He had no need to pantomime this part of it at all.

He reached over to drip the other one's contents on hers, and she offered it up to him readily, a look of complete confusion and excitement on her face.

"Try it." he said, squeezing its juice onto her lukewarm dinner.

Without a word, she took an inquisitive and tiny bite. Her eyes got big and she resumed her chomping with exuberance.

*"Mmm!"* she murmured through a full mouth, crunching the little bones of the animal along with everything else.

They both finished their dinners in half the time it took for him to put on his little hunting show. Neither finished content with full belly, but both were as satisfied as any other animal in the creaking forest could hope to be, making few sounds other than happy savory sighs until they were done.

The rest of the forest creatures had recovered their communal sense of safety, and with redoubled efforts once again filled the night with infinite, black noise.

"Why'd you throw'er back?" asked the girl, licking her lips. "I wanna eat those li'l fings all'a time, if y'see!" Mouse closed her eyes and smiled as if remembering the taste still in her mouth.

"Their eggs are very tasty, but they are dangerous," said the tall man, suddenly very serious. "You should never eat one you've found on the ground, it may have fallen from the tree, not the mum herself. They're a little more orange then, you can tell, but it's still unwise."

He picked one of the few remaining eggs up off of the ground, and held it up to the firelight again. "They put something secret in their little eggs, little Mouse. Something that makes you fall asleep very fast for quite a long time if you eat too many, especially when they're orange."



As he finished, he tossed the little yellow orb into the fire. A small *pop* and a smaller *biss* chased a few sparks out of the flames where it landed.

“Trilobite mums know how yummy their eggs are,” said the tall man, shifting to a more comfortable reclination, aiming more of his considerable surface area towards the warm little blaze. “So, they lay them very high, all the way up at the tops of the tallest trees.”

“How come they do that, if y’see?” Mouse asked, making herself more comfortable too.

“Well, if you’re eating their eggs way up in the top of a tree, and you fall asleep, what do you think would happen?” he asked.

She thought for a moment, then giggled.

“Oh! That’s bright!” she shouted, and the forest quieted subtly around them for a heartbeat. “You’ll be fallin’ *splat* to the ground n’stead, if y’see!” she said, proud of herself, and of the trilobites as well it seemed.

“Very good, Honeybee!” he said through a smile. “You’ve got it! The eaten ones are a sacrifice to save the rest. A few may lose their chance at life, but dozens more will live because of them.”

Mouse shifted on the ground, as if made uncomfortable by the prospect, and said nothing. Instead she stood, her face a mask of amateur rumination, and walked over to where the tall man’s helmet had been laid down some time earlier, while the fire was being conceived. Its metal was warmed by proximity, insulated by the fur inside.

She lifted it like a hatch door and clambored underneath, causing it to wobble like a head above a cart on cobblestones. She oriented herself as best she could on the ground under it, using it like a solid domed blanket, scooting it closer towards the fire and her friend like a truly bizarre turtle.

“Tell me a story?” she asked, softly, and began to dig herself a little indentation under the helmet, into the dirt.

The helmet implored him as well, pleading through its four dead eyes carved in the tricephalous engraving across it. A melded trio of Sandsteel faces staring at him through placid, statuesque expressions, waiting for an answer.

The ornate helmet wobbled as Mouse's limbs and tail vanished underneath it, spitting out dirt like blood from where a neck would be.

He thought for a moment, and cleared his throat.

"First, I want to tell you something." His brow and eyes sank as he spoke. "I want to tell you that I am *sorry*, Honeybee, about Marm and the school. I know you were happy there. I know she was *your friend*. I thought you would be *safe* there."

He wove intense sincerity between every syllable of each word, and fought hard to keep them from conveying the quavering energy behind his breastplate, plugging the tap of hardening, sappy emotion.

"I tried to choose the best egg," he continued, his voice beginning to tremble slightly. "Either close to the City, or close to The Scythes, and I chose the floated one and cracked it right on your head." His eyes rose back towards the fire, and the girl under his helmet. "I am *sorry*," he said, "and *I am so glad* that you did not get hurt."

"S'okay, Uncle Jeebie." Mouse said, easily. A last spurt of dry dirt shot out from under the helmet, which finally came to rest. She had other things she wanted to say too, but she wasn't sure how. She was very sleepy.

Something caught in the tall man's throat again and he swallowed it. He took a deep, quiet and gently tremulous breath, letting it fill him with long lost sanctuary, and held himself there for a time. Repleted, and after a steady exhale, he began her story.

"Long ago, in an age before my dear little Princess of the honeybees drew breath, your ol' Uncle was a young man on a fishing trip. Can you believe it?"

"That I's a *princess*?" came the muffled voice from the curled up girl mostly inside the helmet. "Yeh. H'absolutely."

The tall man laughed, which felt somehow better this time in particular over most.

"Yes dear Honeybee, you and your sisters, daughters of the great Hillmum Queen. The cliffs are your birthplace, and birthright."

"*Pah!*" she spat, somewhere inside his helmet he realized with meager dismay. "I don'wanno cliffs, I wanna get me bones back, if y'see."

He nodded, and continued his tale.

"We were setting sail in our flying boat, *The Pelgull's Throat* it was called, and we were me, and *four* of your fathers, Mouse! Strong, brave Hillmen with mighty *teeth!*"

He mimicked the dentition with his fingers, middle and index together and extended from one hand coming down from his forehead, his fist and bent wrist obscuring most of his face, except for one wild gray eye and a bobbing eyebrow. The other arm coming from underneath, hand with pinky and index extended akimbo, its fist a heroic chin.

He gnashed his pretend mandibles up and down and made gnashing sounds through his real ones, then realizing Mouse couldn't see him from under her metal snail's shell, dropped his hands, and continued again.

"We launched from the high cliff's docks, *your* cliffs, and we sailed through the clouds, down to the ocean, and flew like a seabird over the sea, casting our nets and lines. We skimmed over the waves, so close you could touch them. Soon we had more fish than we could carry! We had to eat some of 'em up!"

"One of your fathers, Olet was his name, he began to clean our catch, ripping them with his strong claws, tossing all the icky guts and prickly bits back into the sea. Your father named Ruk cut the big pieces into little bits with a stone. Your third, his name was Tei, he

used his sunglass in the blazing sun to cook them with its magic, against a slab of writing stone. Your fourth father, Folo, he was called, used his personal *secret* batch of sweet Tunnel-Pearl vinegar, dripping tasty drops on each one.”

“We ate and ate and ate, until there was a terrible crash! We had stopped paying attention and landed ourselves square atop a tiny island in the middle of the ocean, placed there just for us. Can you believe it, Honeybee?”

He nudged the helmet gently.

“Can you guess who was supposed to be flying the thing? Hm? *Can you?*”

The only reply was a little trill of a snore.

The trilobite’s potential progeny rarely failed to help something go down, especially if it went and laid down itself. He yawned, and stretched, and flinched, and grabbed his hurt shoulder with the opposite hand, applying pressure with pain meeting it.

Despite the psychedelic glow of the sun’s hidden path along the horizon, now slowly diminishing as it returned to its far off home beyond the edge of the world, it was still deeply dark. The circle of stars endlessly spinning above them, the great white scar across it twirling imperceptibly, like a foam laden stick atop a thick black whirlpool.

He was tired. He was in some trouble too, and he knew it. No matter how much he ignored it, no matter how many countless injuries he’d shrugged off over unknowable seasons, this injury was different. Whatever kept him held together for so long, was for some reason helpless here, and this wound was infected. Badly so. They were less than another day’s walk to Worms Port now, and they could find a putriphage there. They had to.

He closed his eyes, and listened to the infinite madness in concert around him. He let his mind wander among the thousands of sounds,

allowing the tiny little dash of sedative seasoning to take him, if it could.

Priming his ears to the noise, a subconscious trip-wire, he slept. He sunk into dreams, went down, down further, into the heavy black, comforted by the embrace of the crushing emptiness.

Thousands of eyes watched over them as they rested.

## CHAPTER 3

### *THE DARK SEES*

“*What—do you—know—of the—Hillkin—?*”

Steam hissed from the mechanized sinews of Rathe’s throat as he spoke.

The Empiric and his constables had returned to the now dead hearth, clear of the two deaths’ perimeter to allow the complex process of flashprints to begin and be taken before the corpses were removed.

“The *Who*-kin?” asked Arkenwald, shooting up an eyebrow. He didn’t divert his attention away from the snorting, furry man in front of him.

Pibbilum’s consciousness was still absent from that named thing—a body somehow balanced upright, buffeted by waves of downwardness, and valiantly combatting gravity’s advances with bursts of jagged porcine snorts and odd spasms.

“The *Hill*-kin?” corrected Pereglia, her attention similarly affixed on their unconscious detainee. “Didn’t anyone read you *stories* when you were small?”

“Of course they did, just not *stupid* ones,” lied the young constable.

The Empiric watched over the process of imaging the crime scene, facing away from the jolting man and the two constables who watched his bold defiance of physics with genuine amazement.

“Only what I know from the stories, Empiric,” said Pereglia, walking a quarter-circle around the imbalanced man, searching for any invisible support struts behind his half-bent knees. “They were supposed to be in some sort of symbiotic relationship with the—”

“*Empiric*,” barked Arkenwald, punctuating his interruption by jabbing the sleeping man in the chest with stiff fingers. “You *can’t* be serious. We aren’t really considering *string-puppets* and *bedtime stories* as suspects, are we?”

Pibbilum teetered backwards, sunk a little at the knees, and buoyed upwards like a rotten egg, with a very good approximation for the noise one might make as well.

“We have a *fine* suspect right here, I say.” Arkenwald snarled, and craned his head towards Pereglia.

He hadn’t looked away from his prey until now, and made contact with the second razor sharp thing of the day as he met Pereglia’s raptor glare.

“Big man in furs by the fire, right?” he snickered, unbothered.

A flashbulb popped.

“What he *saw* may be up for debate,” said Pereglia defiantly, “but this man is no murderer of armed bandits.”

“Oh but he’ll spend the night drinkin’ with two dead ones?” Arkenwald jabbed the man again, who snorted as expected. “What kind of man does *that*?”

Pereglia had the answer but it broke to escape her when she tried to say it, catching in her throat. She cornered it with a swallow, and tried again.

“Some men...” she began, eyes narrowing as she flushed out the right words, “fear the lack of drink more than the presence of corpses.”

Some women too, she thought.

The smell of honeywine always reminded her of a bedroom ceiling, decorated with dried flowers and drawn birds with smiling faces that cried and crashed and screamed most nights.

A flashbulb popped again, and she was back.

She pivoted to face her commander. “*Empiric*, are you—”

She gasped, and her words fell out of her mouth as she turned towards him.

He was staring right at her, eyes horribly wide and so precisely focused on her own she could feel it. She hadn't bothered to look in his direction since glaring at Arkenwald, the last time she had checked, his back was to the three of them. It still was.

She hated it when he did that. Another flashbulb popped behind him, preserving the oddly arranged Empiric's silhouette in her vision for a few blinks of nameless color.

"Law's mercy, Sir, you've really got to warn people before you go turning your damned head around," she said, flushing the image out with her eyelids. "Almost back to three corpses."

The Empiric's speakerbox was silent, though he was not. The man's body whirred and hissed as it rotated underneath an immobile head, finally clicking back into place with a barely audible echo of a snap.

*"Wake him- and- remove him- from the- crime scene—,"* said Empiric Rathe in cracked words as he began to head for the tavern's propped open door.

Another flashbulb popped.

Peregia glanced at the sleeping drunk man supported by some arcane willpower, then to Arkenwald. She swooped her hand, bowed over it with no great depth, and gestured to the man constable to claim his prize.

*"Your suspect, Constable,"* she said.

Arkenwald drew his eyebrows like a bowstring. He swept his aim from the smile Peregia was not really trying to hide, to the drunk man's bobbing forehead, and slapped it hard with the palm of his still gloved hand.

Pibbilum's eyes snapped open, unfocused on two separate sides of the room entirely. They seemed to squirm around inside his skull, like fumbling actors trying to find their marks on a stage.



“Th’misall paidfer!” he yelped, squinting painfully and reaching for his brain.

“Bloodfly, mate!” said Arkenwald, sarcastically. “Surely you saw it, *eh?* *Huge one*. Almost had ya!”

He oozed mock sincerity through an expression that said ‘what are *you* going to do about it?’ which Pibbilum seemed to not notice at all.

“Come on!” Arkenwald jabbed the man again, and spun him with an unexpected fluidity towards the door.

After a not-so-gentle shove, Pibbilum began to stride with large toddler steps, pausing to lean over and catch himself on the shoulders of people no one else could see, apologizing to them with uneasy gestures.

Arkenwald followed him closely, jabbing at him occasionally with black gloved fingertips, and carrying his other cut up glove in his cut up hand, rattling off some Article of the Constabulary Code between jabs.

Peregia followed the pair, shaking her head.

“Be nice, *Puvince*,” she said, invoking the lad’s given name.

“Be *quiet*, um...” He sneered back at her, regretting never learning hers fully, only seeing its initial on paperwork. “N? What’s that stand for? Nuisance?”

She scoffed at his frail attempt.

As Arkenwald successfully goaded Pibbilum through the tavern’s open doorway, Peregia took a detour.

Near the entrance, a snow-dusted table caught her eye—specifically the squareish stone plate with strips of horrible looking cold, dry meat piled on top of it, untouched.

No sense letting perfectly terrible meat go to waste, she thought.

She scooped up the rigid tatters of overcooked flesh like a bundle of dead flowers, and headed into the subtle color, noise and activity outside.

People and creatures, vehicles and carts, all scattered around like life under an upturned rock. This road, while not uncommonly empty during the darkest nights of the long night, saw heavy bustling use during the ones where the far-off sun painted the horizon. This scene was no anomaly.

Except, she noticed, for a small crowd of people off to the side of the road, sieging a pair of middle aged, uniformed and pauldroned officers. The constables stood strong behind a flimsily erected barricade of pre-made Constabulary equipment, designed for just such occasions.

They were red faced from yelling, standing tumescent with jurisdiction and screaming hoarse commands at the small crowd. Credentials and demands were exchanged, excuses why various members of the gang should be allowed entry to the establishment, and the flat dismissal of all said claims in no uncertain terms.

Each bout of “It’s a *crime scene*, now fuck off about your business!” was met with more shouts of “I’m in with the owner, tell him it’s me!” and “I was just inside, I promise!” and “Where else am I supposed to go?” and the cycle continued.

Peregrina wondered how long they had been stuck in that loop. A shout from another direction pulled her attention towards the road instead.

Carts and vehicles, pulled and powered, trudged through half-frozen mud in pulses, like cells in the veins of commerce, travel, escape, and a hundred other things. Mostly humans—some hurried, some lingering, alone or in groups, with a few coagulations of the similarly dressed.

Parcelers and handworkers wore the dry, muted tones of burlap and canvas, shabby furs, rawhide leather, almost camouflaged against the muddy street, rimmed with weak dustings of snow and frozen plants.

She saw flashes of white sapskin, beeswax-yellow cloth, brown and black leathers, and bright, flamboyant costumes of custom and religion. A group of purple and seagreen Watercult men casually sauntered down the path on foot, embroiled in hushed conversation. She saw Thaumaturgists and Biomancers in their golden lined black, and thought of her bird—and of her Empiric's twisted head.

Occasionally, a scaly glimpse of H'rask would glimmer from under a hood or through a window, slitted eyes or vibrant plumage disguised in drab Denizen costumes—outcasts from their island home, a tolerated caste of indentured monster-slaves, stripped of their culture and confidence. A strange sight, no matter how more common they became. A light caught her eye, and she followed it.

Copper-fed green lamps and their fuzzy-white phosphorus cousins bobbed everywhere like bioluminescent insects, zagging and zigging in arrhythmic beats. Where their glow faded, wild torches flared and bucked against wooden tethers, while other flames sat docile in their glass cages.

The lights dangled from long-hooked walking canes, bounced atop heads, or were nailed, bolted, or tied onto the fronts and backs of carts, machines, and animals alike.

A few different flavors of hoofed beasts clopped through the hoarfrost, shitting and thinking pastoral thoughts as they went. A polite-looking, otherworldly hippogenia loped by, a noodly assemblage of semi-transparent, wormlike parts balanced on far too many inflated legs. Their massive dorsal spines supported woven wicker baskets brimming with goods.

The Netterlings who drove the strange long animals—spindly, spidery limbs jutting from underneath oversized and floppy wicker hats—controlled the creatures' long, nosing heads, directing them away from the abundant treats in the dirt.

Huge flightless birds squawked and garbled at each other as they passed, snapping head-sized beaks with hollow pops. Taller than a

man, many had comically tiny wings, somehow made more absurd by their gigantic axe-bladed beaks. Some had powerful legs tapering upward into round bodies and long, goosey necks. Some bore riders, some carried goods. Some pulled vehicles, and others darted through the crowd, avoiding them.

Sputtering, oil-fed machines belched sweet smoke, weaving through the current like shiny sea creatures, outmaneuvering or stuck behind the traffic at any given moment, clanking, humming, and creaking. Voices rang out—soft and loud, and then soft again—as people shouted, sang, and laughed.

“*Pereglia—*”

She turned, blinking away her trance and facing the raspy sound. She realized she had an empty, bewildered look across her face, and quickly filled it in.

“Empiric!” She nearly shouted, saluting involuntarily with a meat filled fist.

She began to walk quickly towards the three men, standing near Rathe’s treaded vehicle, parked near an ornoxdrawn constabulary carriage that had carried the rest of the team still inside.

Something about this case, the drunk man’s story—they had her mind wandering, seeing the bustling road through the same childish, wide-eyed wonder she’d seen her grandfather’s stories.

“Did you see something?” shouted Arkenwald. “*Purple giants or pink mountain midgets? Third moon, maybe?*”

He laughed through a sneer as she approached. Empiric Rathe’s expressionless face conveyed nothing at all, his eerily still eyes tracking her as she walked. Arkenwald still had the man in the patchwork sequestered by frequent jabs to keep him upright.

Pereglia cracked a sharp smile at him as she arrived. “Just observing the crowd outside...” she said, looking over at Pibbilum.

The detained man’s face was wide with realization as the outside world seemed to beckon him back into reality. He looked around like

a hibernating thing who had awakened into a completely different, confused and confusing world.

Pereglia looked concerned for the lost man, eyes softening briefly, and she continued.

“Not uncommon for a murderer to come back and observe his work’s subsequent outcome.” She shifted her view again, this time to Empiric Rathe. “I think they like to know if anyone’s on to them, make sure they got away with it, or identify any witnesses.”

“*Did- you zee- anyone- szuspicious-?*”

She eyed Arkenwald. “No more than *usual*, sir,” she said as she traced him up and down, and a little bit side to side.

“*A- wize tactic- , even szo-*,” said Rathe. Pereglia smiled, accidentally.

“So what’s our move on the board, Empiric?” Arkenwald asked, dismissing Pereglia and her grin with a wave of his hand. “Can’t keep this *waster* in the Sevens forever.” He jabbed Pibbilum again, and the patchy man squeaked lightly, like a stepped on rat.

Arkenwald’s bird—a slightly more avian amalgam of the man himself, thought Pereglia—stood nearby, big bellied and long legged, tied to one of the machine’s many available hitch points with its rein. It canted its head from side to side, glaring at Pibbilum with an actively biting curiosity.

The Empiric stared at the man as well, silently. His eyes twitched frantically as he clicked and hummed, mechanical fidgeting writhing across the striated conduit where a jaw would be.

Pibbilum was wholly unaware of anyone’s gaze at all, and was staring up into the night, into the edges of the world, along a painted horizon under blue moons, his eyes lost in the sky. The big Terabird chattered its beak with hypothermic rapidity, and reached closer to him with a loud, exploratory *SNAP*.

Pibbilum did not seem to notice the attack, and continued to follow his wandering eyes around the mysterious realm he found himself in.

“Easy Clacker,” said Arkenwald calmly, “that’s a good girl.”

He soothed his bird with a heavy rap from his knuckles on the side of its wide, yellow weapon of a mouth. It made a satisfying and hollow *donk donk* sound and was answered with an equally hollow *clack clack* from the beak in return.

“Empiric?” Pereglia ventured, cautiously.

Rathe continued to dissect Pibbilum with his eyes, piece by piece, row by row, like a farmer harvesting information from a field.

Pereglia was uneasy, and feeling impatient. She hated keeping her bird waiting. She peered towards the back of the building, roughly clutching her fistfull of half frozen table scraps, warming them in her gloved hand.

“*Conzstable- Arkenwald—*,” clicked the Empiric suddenly, “*I want- you to- ride back- to the west—, to the- outguarding—.*”

He stood near the open hatch of one of the two vehicles that had brought the team to Halfhome tavern. The second vehicle, parked behind it, was considerably larger, and drawn by two pairs of towering, leggy and piebald birds of extraordinary size.

They were harnessed to a large wooden-framed and metal-clad carriage, covered in trunks and leather-strapped storage containers of all kinds. The carriage’s wheels were large and spoked, coupled together with rods and banded with thin metal.

The Empiric’s machine, in contrast, rested on three thick, segmented treads. They were arranged in a pyramid around a configuration of gears, one track in front attached by a hydraulic arm, and two tracks on the sides, just behind the hatch he held open.

“Sorry?” said Arkenwald, frowning and raising an eyebrow hard. “What exactly is it you’re aiming me at *there*, sir?”

While the enormous and fuzzy, pea-headed Ornox bickered and clicked their pointy beaks impatiently at each other in the background, the Empiric's vehicle chugged and vibrated with a steady rhythm. The muffled percussion produced a black cloud of sweet stink that inked the air around the vehicle.

Instead of hauling a carriage cabin, this engined vehicle hauled a large metal cage. It rattled slightly in time with each thrum of the engine.

*"You- will find- the- pro-prietorz- of thiz- place—,"* said the Empiric from his similarly thrumming voicebox. *"Find out- why they- omitted- thiz alleged- giant- and itz- companion—."*

Peregla watched Arkenwald's nasty smile begin to curl.

*"Find out- what elze- they- did not- share—."*

Rathe's words conveyed an open endedness, and Arkenwald's grin now matched the sinister curves of his predatory bird's hooked and wave-edged beak.

The Empiric turned to the drunk detainee, who was slowly sobering up and losing whatever arcane gifts were bestowed upon him by the drink. With the hand not grasping the vehicle's door frame, he pointed to Pibbilum with a robotic finger.

*"You—,"* he said, and Pibbilum's confused and weary brown eyes suddenly focused on the fingertip like it was the only thing in all of Halferth.

*"You- are subject- to arrez—,"* crackled the Empiric.

Peregla stifled a small gasp.

*"Under- Authority- and Code- of the- Konzstabulary- of the- Twisting- City- Article Nine-, Subsection Nine-, point nine—,"*

Peregla tilted her head back, closing her eyes.

*"Referencing- Article Three-, subszection- sixteen—,"* continued the Empiric's mechanical recitation.

She let out a breath she didn't know she was holding, feeling a tinge of relief at hearing the charge being levied against the man.

*“For- appro-priation- of- unrendered- servicez—.”*

He was arresting the man for unpaid lodging. For sleeping on a floor without paying absent owners. Pereglia ground her boot into the dirt and tenderized the meat still concealed in her hand.

“Empiric,” she began, but before her morals could protest her superior’s decision, some hidden puppeteer raised her fist in a meaty salute and shut her mouth instead.

*“Arkenwald—, recite the- ultimatum—. Put the- outcome- in the- tumbler—.”*

Arkenwald turned to Pibbilum, and Clacker clacked.

“Alright mate, listen up.” Arkenwald said sternly, straightening his tight uniform and adjusting his pauldron.

“Aw, hayil,” said Pibbilum, sadly.

“Listen up you waster, I’m only going to say this the once.”

Both men cleared their throats.

*“You are subject to arrest by the Constabulary of the Twisting City. You have encroached upon the Autonomy of others, and We maintain our right to Authority: To Maintain the Sanctity of Autonomy for All.”*

Pereglia silently recited the declaration along with her fellow Constable, her lips twitching with each familiar line.

“I dun hear’t this’n timertoo!” said Pibbilum, with a little bit of an exasperated laugh in his voice.

*“You face two choices; may Law guide you.”* Arkenwald’s grin split over his teeth like a laceration. *“Submit and Surrender your Autonomy to our Authority and face Adjudication—”*

“Yeeeuup,” said Pibbilum.

“Or, *Maintain* your *Autonomy*, meet us in combat or turn in flight, and we shall send you to Death or cast you in Exile.” The excited constable finished, brimming with dominance.



He rested his injured hand on his baton, and with the other made another series of *donk donk* raps on the bird's beak. The irritated *clack clack* followed in sharp echoes.

"Yeup arrite," slurred Pibbilum, "I shurrener'n dun, shufful'd off muh dangol 'tonumy n'all 'at. Y'all gon throwmie inair inna bigol' Twisturd Shitty jayul? S' nice inair—" He convulsed as a severe hiccup rocked his body, and continued rambling without notice. "Y'all gotcher ol' goop fer eatin', n'a lil'o maycheen wut'll make-a man's turt dishuppear. Sh'magic, y'ask lil'o me..."

He looked at Arkenwald with a content smile. Arkenwald's wicked one had twisted into a sour frown.

"What?" fumed the frustrated constable, and stamped a foot.

Clacker mimicked him, and scraped long troughs into the ground beneath her.

Pereglia interjected with a sigh. "He says he Surrenders his Autonomy," she reported. She turned to Pibbilum, who was still beaming for no apparent reason.

"Probably not going to take you that far, sir." She reached for the man's shoulder, and placed her hand on it reassuringly. "You'll likely see a Praetor in one of the larger parcel towns for adjudication between here and there, hopefully soon—but wherever you go I am confident there will be food, and toilets."

She gave him a final pat, and withdrew her hand. He felt strangely hollow, almost empty under his lumpy furs.

"Ohwee!" sang Pibbilum, but before he could make any other sounds, Arkenwald grabbed him, squeezing out a sudden "*Oof!*" and shoved him roughly into the cage built behind the sputtering machine.

Clacker snapped at Pibbilum as he passed, and nibbled at the cage's bars once he was inside. Pibbilum still seemed oblivious to the aggressive bird. Arkenwald withdrew a tethered key from a slot on his belt, and locked the cage door with a heavy, electronic *kha-chonk*.

Peregria had been spared witnessing the man's rough treatment. She had been staring at her hand, as if it would reveal some residual clue about the man's strange texture.

"That's you *sorted*," said Arkenwald victoriously, slapping the grimy man's actual residue off of his own hands.

The cage, attached behind the enclosed, treaded driver's cabin, was bulb-shaped—wide at the top and narrowing toward the bottom, giving very little room to stand. Though Pibbilum was alone, he struggled to stay upright on the reduced footing, a task already difficult in his state. Peregria had seen as many as six people crammed into a tumbler before, all forced to hold themselves up, hands pressed against the ragged metal bars as they fought for balance.

After a few unsteady wobbles, Pibbilum gave up and simply slumped into a pile of furs, stuffing the miniscule bottom area of the cage with his bulk like a cork, and closed his eyes.

The Empiric spun, grasped the vehicle's door frame, and pulled himself smoothly into the open cabin.

"*Arkenwald—*," he said, without turning back to look at the man. "*Go now—, send a line— when you— reach the— outguarding—.*"

"Yes, Empiric!" said the Constable, saluting, and unhitching his preoccupied bird from the cage that held its attention.

Like the Constables' uniforms, Clacker's feathers were predominantly black, save for the dark creamy cap of feathers that covered her head. From the back of that cap, shot a sparse plume of long tufted reddish brown feathers, the color of dried blood.

The Constable stuck a boot in one of the stirrups of his bird's copper harness, hopping up and down on the other foot a few times before jumping up towards the saddle.

"Oh uh, Empiric...*uhf—*" huffed Arkenwald, climbing on top of the huge bird with practiced awkwardness. "Where am I sendin' that wire to?"

*“The City- Constabulary—. I- will be- returning- after- taking thiz- prisoner- to- Adjudication—.”*

“Right. Er, Yes Empiric!” said the now mounted young constable with a salute.

Arkenwald began putting his damaged glove back on his damaged hand, awkwardly holding the reins for his bird in the hand doing the work, and spurring the beast forwards with a heel.

Clacker gave a low *oonk oonk* sound, clacked her beak twice, and began to churn her huge sickle-clawed legs in the mud. They were gone in heartbeats, headed west, back the way they had come.

Preglia was still standing there waiting for her own orders, and the chance to reunite with her own bird. As if sensing her thoughts, a metallic scream cracked through the air from behind the tavern. His impatience was beginning to match her own.

“So, am I after the Watercult man, or am I to fly around scouring for members of lost civilizations?” Pereglia asked, immediately regretting her casual tone with her stern mechanical supervisor, a premonition of his next words preceding them in her mind.

*“Both—.”* said the Empiric, flatly. She’d guessed right.

The chances of the pursued and pursuers being on separate paths were not zero, but they were very slim. The chances that they headed the same way Arkenwald and his weaponized chicken—back towards what seemed to spark this pursuit to begin with—were slim as well.

*“The- Watercult- man- will likely- head to- Wormz Port—,”* continued the Empiric. *“He is- either close- or- already- there—. Keep your- bird’s eye- wide—. Look for- campz- off the road- az you fly—. We are- after thozе- who are- after him—. He iz- not your prey—, he iz- your bait—.”*

“Yes, Empiric!” she said, saluting again out of habit, wondering why she hadn’t bothered to move her handful of well-past-prime to her non-saluting, dominant hand.

She did so casually behind her back while she asked the Empiric a question that she knew she shouldn't.

"Do you think it could actually be a Hillkin and a half-giant out there?" Pereglia asked, hesitantly. "There *have* been sightings in the last few dozen seasons, but there are always sightings of all sorts of nonsense."

*"I believe— what I— can zee—,"* thrummed the man's voice box. *"Find them—. There iz an— outguarding— in— Wormz— Port—. You will— have szupport— and a wire—. Use them—."*

"Right," she said flatly. "Yes, Empiric."

She saluted again with her finally meat-free hand, and turned towards the back of the rickety Halfhome tavern taking up a quick stride. Someone was waiting.

*"Pereglia—"*

She stopped, and turned back, brow ascending in a silent answer.

*"Keep— your— eyez— open—,"* he said, glaring at her with that frantic violence his gaze always carried.

His vehicle sputtered and roared as he gripped the controls. The treads spun, spraying a plume of mud that narrowly missed Pereglia as it reversed abruptly into the busy road. The patchwork mass of captured man in the back lurched as the vehicle slid to a stop in the middle of the traffic, then slammed forwards at a considerable speed. Animals honked, vehicles shrieked, people waved obscene gestures and shouted harsh words.

The giant goosey Ornox tied to the personnel cart honked along with them, watching the brief chaos. The disruption spread and dissipated like a drop of blood in a stream, as the Empiric sped off in his tri-cycled cage, hauling a lump of unconscious fur.

Pereglia's bird shrieked again, a desperate keening wail from behind the building. Some of the pedestrians and most of the crowd still bullying the two Officers guarding the tavern's entrance looked back towards the sound, and towards her.

She turned, and set off at a brisk, professional pace. She continued her charade until the exact moment she was fairly certain she was out of the line of sight from at least anyone with a copper shoulder, and broke into a run.

It was a joyful childlike run; arms outstretched, pretending to fly like she had as a girl, running down the banks near Featherview, watching the birds soar around the Aviary across the river. She even skipped a couple of times. She loved her bird.

“Ha-kaw!” she shouted at the top of her lungs as she rounded the corner to the back side of the place.

Up, overlooking the building on a crag of outcropped rock, stood her great silver bird of prey, eagle-proud and looming vulturely. A spectre shining dull gray, glinting in sun-purpled copper, illuminated in the gloomy dark by the perpetual sunrise behind her.

“Hi-lo, Sir Knight!” she called.

The semi-mechanical animal shook its body and clanked and made a sound like tearing metal again. It brandished its humongous wing’s wrists pugilist readying himself for a brawl. The almost ethereal Silksteel primary feathers—synthetic additions nestled among the natural ones—clattered softly like a ceramic teacup trying to meet its mate through a towel as the huge wings buffeted the air. A tender and fragile sound like furry glass might make when it broke.

The huge beast spread a broad horizon of wings to maximum in excitement at seeing his rider, feathers longer than Pereglia was tall, extended in mirrored unison like rays from a silver sun.

“*Khrrreeee—eee—eee!*” screamed the bird, flapping that expanse of silver wings—three quick slashes—faster than anything that large ought to be capable of.

Sparks shot up from tumbling stones below as the bulky animal hopped playfully with each plunge of the great feathered blades. He hovered for a heartbeat, whipping the air into twisting devils of tree parts and hidden snow.

“Khraaaa!” Pereglia shrieked back, smiling as she watched him ruffle and stretch and stomp.

Like the Empiric’s neck, the massive boat-sized keel of the bird’s breast was embossed with splayed pistons, hydraulic conduits and sinewy wiring, mimicking bare, striated muscle. Machine tissues churned like a nest of metal serpents powering his massive wings.

The bird’s massive body wore a harness of textured copper leaf, atop the hexagonal mesh underlay of the Netterling’s incredibly strong and feather-light woven Silksteel. This harness was fused to his breast bone, above the copper-gold sinews of fabricated muscle, as integral a part of his body as the wings themselves.

Articulated arms of the same copper-leafed hexagonal material branched out from this same point, and ran over his shoulders to frame the skeletal structure of each wing—exoskeletal reinforcements engineered to mirror their natural form.

Knight shook his huge, shaggy and sparsely feathered head, revealing long gray and white feathers that rose up and arched backwards from his eyes to form a haggard, yet somehow still regal crest. These feathers met the wrinkled black skin covering his face and half his beak, glinting with silver down in harsh contrast. Pereglia always thought it made him look like he was wearing an ancient, warbeaten helmet.

Hidden in the feathery helm’s visor, two fluctuating points of black opening and closing in aperture, sunk inside huge sinuous dancing pools of amber—the bird’s eyes pulsed like red-hot blood through fire’s veins.

The beast let out a sound like a baby’s wail being imitated by a scrap yard, and he stomped again, flexing intricate, unnaturally powerful talons. As he set to squeezing more sparks from the rock between them, his short sickle-curved black beak fired off a staccato of impatient clicks.

“I know!” shouted Pereglia, “I’m sorry!”

Her heavy black boots splatted to a stop in the mud at the foot of the now small looking clutch of pebbles the mountain of a bird held on to, and rolled up one sleeve over a well defined forearm.

“Ohhh,” sighed Pereglia, exasperated.

Her Knight rumbled like a broken engine with a broken exhaust. His fiery rhythmic eyes focused on her harshly, with mechanical precision, unblinking on a stationary head.

“Fucking *ragged* in there my boy,” Pereglia said sleepily, “but I got you something!”

She finally tossed her fistful of mistreated and unknown, but now slightly warm flesh towards the animal’s massive head. Knights precise eyes targeted the treats with mechanical alacrity. His head snapped out on a short but serpentine neck and grabbed the tiny spread of snacks with one happy bite. The bird rattled with a satisfied thrum like a muffled engine, and clicked a few more, much happier beaky clicks.

“Sorry it’s not more,” she said, rolling up her other sleeve. “Or very good. Even the rats wouldn’t touch it. I’d let you have what’s left of those men in there, but I think we’d lose our job.”

An incline led up to the rocky crag where her bird had perched, but she chose to climb its jagged face instead. The crenelated tread of her boots gripped the rough surface easily, and with strong arms, and stronger legs, she was up next to her bird in a handful of heartbeats. She swiped dirt from her hands, and looked up at her animal, barely coming up to his shoulder.

“Get you fed proper when we reach filthy fucking *Worms Port*,” she said with disgust in her voice.

She made a tonguey face up at her bird, changed it to a squinty smile, and patted the massive mechanized chest. He stretched his wings wide again, and buoyed up and down on his mechanical legs, punching the air with the huge knuckles at the wing’s joints. The

mechanisms in the limbs hissed and vibrated with each huge movement.

Knight snapped at a single loney snowflake that fell slowly through the air, and Pereglia giggled at him.

She reached into the breast pocket of her uniform and withdrew a pair of folded, mirror-shined goggles. Unfolding them, she put them up to her eyes and wrapped their flexible coiled stems around the backs of her ears. They fit precisely to her face, protective cups of mirrored glass running along her brow, bridge and cheek, stretching back to her temples.

Pereglia looked up at her Knight through her reflective, polarized lenses. "Let's go," she said. "This place was depressing."

One of the bird's excited half-hops dipped into a deep bow, and he dropped a wing to the ground atop the rocks. He craned his neck back, turning his head nearly completely sideways, and watched the tiny human with intense curiosity.

Pereglia stepped onto the copper-leaved brace of the wing, and as he lifted it, she jumped, grabbed the harness, and swung herself into the long saddle stretched down across his back. She landed squarely center mass directly between the bird's wings.

"No more depressing that *Worms* fucking *Port* should be though—"

The flying silver-black beast let out a violent fracturing scream, and spread its wings again. Pereglia smiled.

"You ready, *Sir Knight?!?*" she teased.

She settled her feet onto peg stirrups, and lay flat against his back. Two supple leather straps extended from the leather pads where her knees rested, and both were quickly and loosely wrapped around each leg, secured only by a slipknot's tension.

With another quick and practiced motion, her hands met two thicker leather straps, coming out of channels in the bird's harness itself, near each wing and above his powerful augmented flight



muscles. Gripping their cord wrapped ends, she wound their slack around her fists with practiced rolling motions, and pulled them tight.

“Okay,” she said softly. “Let’s go find the sun.”

The massive animal hunkered down, his mechanized legs emitting rapid, ratcheting clicks as he descended. Pereglia shifted her weight back onto her knees, secured to their landing pads, gripping her leather guide straps tight. The bird raised his enormous wings with a powerful swiftness, closing her between two walls of feathers, and ripped the night with another metal scream.

“*Yeeee-aaa—*” screamed Pereglia along with him.

Primed hydraulic legs exploded beneath them, launching both ride and rider skyward, audibly cracking the rocks below. Mud, leaves, and debris plumed into a roiling cloud, bursting outward and threatening the fragile building nearby. She reared back hard, pulling the guide straps as the bird drove his powerful wings downward.

“—*HUAA!*” she roared as she rowed back.

Relaxing her grip, Pereglia allowed the next quick rise of the huge wings to pull the straps back into their channels. She braced and pulled again as the bird beat the air, throwing another burst of wind against the rickety structure, shards of rock pelting it like hail. She gripped the saddle with her thighs, rocking her hips in time with her mount’s powerful wingstrokes.

With each pull on the straps, hidden gears engaged—a finely tuned sion of force aiding the mighty creature in its battle against gravity, lifting a load nearly a third of its own weight—a necessary push, only when lifting off with his rider on his back.

“*Woohooohooo—!*” Pereglia sang, her voice sliced through the storm’s wind of the wing’s thrashing, and rang out over the busy road, through the dark night.

Countless generations of selective breeding had crafted these animals. Engineered for robust size, dynamic shape and agreeable temperament; unlocking ancient traits, creating novel ones.

They were rebuilt with complex physiomechanics, and incomprehensible biothaumatery—surgical practices far closer to occult magic than technology—a metamorphosis, fusing living flesh to now-living machines.

They had taken nature's chaotic progression through evolution, enhanced and streamlined it with finely-tuned amalgams. Perfect imperfections replaced with lighter, stronger, versions. Seasons of training, surgeries, healing, and training again.

All those lifetimes of incalculable effort, just to make a breed of genetic mutant too large to fly on its own—fly anyway, with a terrestrial one in tow.

The enormous engineered animal had quickly found solid purchase in the dark air. Silksteel primary feathers adjusted along the copper-leafed frame of the wing, filling in gaps and creating shorter, denser wings for more close-quarters, agile flight.

With rhythmic strokes of engineered muscle and precise turns, the bird flapped its silver-black wings under its own power now, and in a few heartbeats, they rose high above the spindly, barren trees.

"There she is," murmured Pereglia, gazing into the flaming distance.

A brilliant, rippling, and dismembered orange disc began to show on the horizon. She double-checked the compass embedded in the harness behind the bird's head; and like all compasses, the black arrow wavered towards the lower degrees westward, toward the Twisting City. She steered her bird to the true-east, towards the eastern coast and the sun that even their new elevation couldn't bring over the horizon. The cold air raised the hairs down her neck and pimpled her exposed forearms, and it felt good. She felt free.

High above the trees now, ride and rider relaxed. The great bird reached its wings out wide, catching air currents between its feathers, and began to soar. The Silksteel primaries slid down their invisible channels in the frame and fanned out from the tip of the wing, splaying like long curved-bladed swords.

“*Buzz*. Keep your. *Eyez* open. *Buzz*. Pereglia. *Buzz*—” she said, in her best impression of Empiric Rathe.

She peered down and scanned the deep ocean of sparse dark trees below her, and it looked like it always did. She decided to keep an eye out for campfire smoke, off the main road and away from homesteads.

She might actually be able to see the ugly purple and blue, pearl studded hat of a Watercult priest from this high, even in the gloom, she thought.

“Hopefully this won’t be too terribly boring,” she said to her bird reassuringly, unwrapping a hand from its strap to scrub his neck feathers.

She reached up and raked her own short hair back, letting the wind hold it in place. Taking a deep breath, she wrapped her strap back around her hand, and checked her compass again. It wouldn’t be but a nail or two until they arrived, and hopefully fewer until they left again.

. . . . .

“*Yeeeuck!* Wot is that *smell?!*”

Mouse clasped both hands over her nose and made loud retching sounds, coughing exaggeratedly onto the backs of the tall man’s ears.

Squeaking through open palms and clamped-shut nostrils, her voice turned nasal like a sad little horn.

“Sommfink dieb I’fink, if y’snee,” she honked.

She sat atop the tall man's shoulders, leaning up against the strangely shaped wooden stock of the man's weapon. It was slung over his back again, under his tarp cloak, protruding from his neck between head and folded hood. She wriggled uncomfortably.

"Is'at yor *wound* big man?" she asked, taking her hands from her face and latching on to the man's head instead. "Oh no, did *YOU died!*?" she shouted, in pantomimed panic.

She rattled his head around, trying to shake out an answer from her potentially undead steed.

"Agh! No! Stop that!" said the tall man, shaking his head free and offering her proof of life.

"I promise you," he said, wincing, "if you shake my brain like that again, I *will*. On The Spires, I'll drop dead out of *principle*."

He wiped his brow with the palm of the soft leather glove of his gauntlet, wincing again at the pounding in his head.

"But wot *stinks!*?" she demanded, pressing her hands back over her nose, now damp with sweat—a much nicer smell by comparison.

"Worms Port," he answered. The words sounded sticky.

They walked through dark woods some distance from the road, having traveled along a lower path, closer to the craggy banks of the snow-lined Broken River. Fed once only by the True Low Mountain's snow melt; the runoff from the distant Twisting City's industrialized infection tainted the flow, leaving it acrid and lifeless.

The huge range of mountains loomed gray in the distance beyond the opposite bank, and the familiar peaks reflected back at him like a skewed carnival mirror. He felt suddenly misplaced.

"Wot's a *worm sport?*" honked Mouse inquisitively after a moment, through her nostril-clamping hands. "Tryda' toss 'em back in'ere liddle 'oles?"

"Worms. *Port*." The tall man enunciated each word harshly, somehow making them sound even stickier. "It's a *town*, and not a nice one like... well, anywhere else is nice by comparison, really."

“Someone’s tossed ‘em in *my* nostri-oles!” Mouse shouted, sliding off of the man’s shoulders. He winced at the sudden shift in weight.

“How’s a town smell worse than yor rotted shoulder, big man?” Mouse asked, landing lightly. The tall man couldn’t tell if she’d noticed his pain.

She bounded over to an unlucky conifer, who quickly lost a branch’s worth of its short, soft and oblong needles. She stripped them from their thin woody bones, rubbed them between her palms, and crammed each nose hole full of the roughed up pungent fibers.

“It’s a fishing town—a fish *slaughtering* town—and that’s not even the worst of it,” said the tall man.

Mouse skipped alongside him, her half-dozen steps matching his one, occasionally running to keep up.

“I wanna know what’s the worst of it, if y’see!” she said, reaching her hand up towards his.

He grabbed her arm, and without breaking his stride, pulled her up off of the ground. He swung her like a sack of something, back and forth with each step.

“S’gotta be monsters,” she said, reaching up and grabbing onto his gauntlet with her other hand. “S’it monsters?”

“Well,” he replied, “definitely yes, and also sort-of yes as well.”

“Really!?” she said excitedly at one end of her armored pendulum’s swing, and then “Wot kind?” at the other.

“It’s called ‘Worms Port’ because it’s infested with them,” he said with a dry tone, swinging her back and forth. “It used to be called ‘The Port of Worms’ but people got tired of saying all of those words. Before that, it was called ‘The Port of Flowers’, but that name hasn’t been true for some time now I’m afraid.”

“Don’t sound so bad, if y’see.” said the dangling girl, contently.

"These worms are very, very big, Honeybee." The tall man's voice took on a warning tone. "It's important to stay as far away from the water as you can."

A haze-fed brightness began to creep through the world in front of them, sending weak shafts of light through the thin trees. The small river to their side was widening, and among the stench in the air was the subtle sting of salt. They were approaching the coast.

"Some of them are so big, they can snatch a whole grown H'rask and drag them under in the blink of an eye." He made snapping motions with his free hand as he spoke. "They clean the barnacles off of the boats who dock here, and they eat up all the fish parts that even the Fisherfolk and Vingarists here won't use."

"Finga-wots?"

"*Vin-gar-ists*. The smell you're smelling—that's from their work."

"*Whuf*," chuffed Mouse, "Can't you blow it away or somefing?"

"No," he said sadly, "It'll be right back in heartbeats. Best to just get used to it."

"Why's it so bad, if y'see?" she asked.

"They make *Vingarum*," he explained through a frown, "a rotten liquid made out of rotten fish parts soaking in dirty sea water. Then they filter out all the chunks and bones, and then rotten people splash it on their rotten food, and pretend they like it."

"They *EAT* it!?" shrieked the girl.

"*They* do." He nodded. "That's the worst part."

Mouse's face was a twisted fuzzy burl, clamping shut everywhere it would to avoid the idea of getting whatever was making this smell in her mouth, on purpose.

"It's very popular in the Twisting City," he continued, "but they make sure it's made quite some distance away, to save the good Denizens from what we get to *sniff up* now."

"Poor us," she moaned.

“We don’t have to live in it,” said the tall man, with a touch of sympathy. “The people who live here, Honeybee, are a desperate sort. You can trust them to take whatever advantage they can, when they can. Desperation can make monsters out of good people, worse monsters out of bad ones.”

They breached the sparse treeline, and found themselves looking out at the still, gray ocean, illuminated by greedy reflections of the low orange sun melting across the horizon. The tall man set the girl down on the rocky ground, but held onto her hand.

“Do not go close to the water, Mouse. Promise me.”

“Fink I’d rather get eaten by a big worm than become a stink monster an’ eat Fingajam.”

“It’s...” He stifled a laugh. “It’s not a game. Promise me, Mouse.”

“S’ok, big man, I promise. Dun wanna get eaten by no worms, double-promise. Cut me tongue out, if y’see.”

“Good. Stay here,” he said, and turned to scan the beach.

Not far off, an old, mostly bottomless row boat lay wedged upside-down between two rocks. With a practiced motion, he shuffled under his cloak, lifted it, ducked down, and drew his scabbard from his back, gripping it in his hand as he tucked his hair back under his musty hood.

Keeping to the larger, darker jagged boulders closer to the tree line, he slithered between shadows, looking not unlike a rock himself, moving in the exact way one couldn’t.

He was by the small boat in moments, ducked down and checked beneath it, surprising a few exceedingly spindly spiders who began to bounce wildly in their webs. He stood, and peered into the gray misty distance. A ship’s bell clanged carelessly, faint somewhere down the rocky beach.

Taking in a huge deep breath through his mouth, his chest expanded, rising like a rooster about to crow. His cheeks sunk to a desiccated concavity with the vacuum.

His brow dug a trough and he exhaled his massive breath slowly and steadily—corpsey cheeks taking on an infant's fatness. A rolling avalanche of clarity followed his breath, cutting through and splitting the mist like the bow of a boat as it rolled forwards heavily, like a lens focusing through the gloom.

It rolled across soggy rope-and-slat bridges, plank piers, and giant spools. It exposed nets staked to the ground and splayed out over the water, revealed mucky wooden buildings, and splashed into denser construction. The clarity dissipated as the fog filled it back in.

"D'ya fink I'll get me bones back?" squeaked a little voice from under the boat.

The tall man closed his eyes.

"Mouse..." He sighed, and clenched his eyes as if the blindness would place her back where he had left her.

"Wot?" she replied, unapologetic.

"I asked you to wait."

"No way," said Mouse. "Is 'pooky back there."

He looked back towards where he had left her. She was right. It *was* spooky.

"Besides," she confidently continued, "you'd've jus' told me to come over'ere inna few 'eartbeats any'ows, if y'see."

"Hmhm," he grumbled.

The tall man unfastened his helmet from his belt, and sat down, setting the many-faced headgear beside him. It watched along with Mouse as he laid his weapon across the front of the boat, supported on the remains of an oarlock, and braced his back against one of the large rocks supporting the old boat.

"Watch your noggin," he said.

With one arm, he pushed the boat slightly, lowering the opposite gunwale and raising the side nearest him. He wrestled his bunched cloak out from under him, leaned forward to free it, and draped it over the weapon's handle, weighing the bottom with stones.



“Cozy as a hive, eh Honeybee?” said the man, wiping his brow.

Mouse surveyed the half-roof above her, nodded approvingly at an excited spider, and twitched her nose.

“You’re sweaty, Uncle Jeebie,” she said with concern.

Mist rose from his exposed head like ghostly fire.

The spear wound from earlier had been weeping a sick, brown liquid, oozing from the rotten stoma in his worn leather coat. It stained the space between his hidden breastplate and the undone double-breasted lapel, seeping beneath the rock-embossed Sandsteel pauldron.

“You are very observant,” he said, smiling faintly. “Go find us some firewood. If it’s damp, make sure it’s light.”

“Well? Do you?” she asked, suddenly impatient.

He skewed his brow. “Do I *what*?”

“Fink I’ll get me bones back, foghead,” she teased, and giggled, still watching his hair conflagrate with wisps of warm wet air.

“Oh, Certainly,” he said, smiling wider. “What *else* have we got to do?”

## CHAPTER 4

### *AS VISIONS*

Empiric Rathe wove his motorized metal cage through traffic like a laden bumble bee. Its payload at the rear—one of prisoner instead of pollen—bounced heavily behind the aggressive churning of the mud-splattering treads. They let out a low droning buzz, like a Hivehawk's wings, as segments from all three skipped and ripped over the ground.

The noise that those hand-sized hornets made as they cut through the air, was among his favorites in the world. A calming drone he'd found comfort and fascination in, discovered during his time in the Hivelands. It was the reason he chose to drive this specific machine—a backdrop of meditative stimulation for his ceaseless calculations as he reflexively dodged living obstacles in the busy street.

He'd always admired wasps and hornets. Their singular drive to succeed, through complex engineering, sinister infiltration, or meticulous predation. Ferocity so acute, the mere sight and sound of a creature no bigger than a strong man's thumb, could send him fleeing.

It was through them he realized the powerful potency of pain, and fear. Tools often more useful than the threat of death itself. Death was freedom; pain and fear were heavy, jagged shackles.

He swiveled his head, mechanical vertebrae clicking softly, to check on his cargo. The prisoner remained intact, slumped and unmoving. The man hadn't made a sound, barely stirred even with the careening jolts of his mobile cell. Rathe preferred it that way. It was far easier than having to coax silence from the usual array of drunkards who found their way into a tumbler. Far less messy too.

The Empiric had enough of a mess to work with as it was.

Witnesses. He hated witnesses. Memory was unreliable—less reliable than the people doing the remembering in most cases, often unreliable fools to begin with. Arkenwald excelled in the company of unreliable fools.

Rathe had passed the young man at some speed, not long after leaving the scene of the crime. As expected, Arkenwald's bird had been jogging at a lazy pace until its rider could hear the vehicle approaching. The Empiric was unsurprised to see the young man's posture and presence change from a slovenly wobble to some half attempt at stoic formality as he tore by him.

He hadn't bothered to see whether the man had saluted him as he passed, or not. He could not fathom any reason it would matter.

The young Constable, little more than a boy, was a nepotic stain on the uniform, equipped with the investigational prowess of a schoolyard bully. He was useless in deciphering the complexities of a murder scene—but contained a bubbling, vitriolic acid that may serve to corrode the defenses of some rustier minds.

The two flustered actors and their servant failed to mention their guest for reasons deliberate or otherwise. No reason to waste his talent on speculation. He'd let Arkenwald use his for interrogation instead.

The vehicle slapped over a larger-than-average lump in the uneven road, and Rathe felt the uneven man in the cage behind him lurch, settling with a belch.

The other Constable—the woman from the Aviary school—was far too trusting. Too lost behind her own eyes. A listener, absorbent, with a mind for details, but with no sense to carve below the surface of what she is presented. Her relationship with a giant apex predator created a gentle strength in her that served more to comfort and disarm. And yet, like her bird's, her eyes were sharp. Her mind was sharp. He could trust that she would use evidence and logic and if either of them were going to be able to track down the culprits of this

double murder, it would be her. If she could apprehend them, however, was questionable.

Steering the vehicle with a single hand—its acceleration controlled with pedals under his feet—Rathe held the blood-flecked triangular stone that he had removed from the tavern’s tabletop earlier. He spun it absently in his hand, flicking it with one finger while it was suspended between another and his thumb.

If. He hated *if*.

This case had too many *ifs*. *If* decided where he sent his half-gestated Constables. *If* waited to find out whether or not either of them were successful. *If* told them all a story about fantastical murderers—only *if* their witness was accurate.

If there really was one of those sanctimonious blue-skinned charlatans alive, if it truly traveled with one of those long-lived and short-brained rat-folk. *If* they found them...

He cursed silently to himself. *If* was infecting his mind. If only he could machine that part of himself, to strip himself clean like a gearbox freed from error-prone, arrogant flesh.

The closest outguarding with a Praetor was Hobble. Hobble was where this all started. Someone there held the missing piece to this puzzle: what the bandits took, what they gave to the priest, and what the murderers are after. The Watercult was involved, in some way. He was going to find out how.

. . . . .

Arkenwald held his back straight and his fist to his heart, watching Rathe’s vehicle rumble away. He dropped his salute as the sputtering black plume bathing the furry, caged man in smoke vanished around a significant bend in the road.

He slouched again, and Clacker followed his lead, sinking back into a plodding trot from the regal, stiff necked canter her rider had reared her into suddenly, only moments before.

“Yeah, go on you, don’t worry about ol’ Ark,” he said. “Just me and this fucking chicken in the mud.”

Clacker turned back to glare at him with a single fierce eye on a cambered head, and clacked.

“Don’t worry you big baby,” he said, reaching down and patting the bird’s big hollow-sounding belly, near her too-small wing. “I *love* chicken.”

Clacker’s wing wasn’t quite as comically small as some of the other terabird species, around the size of a regular, largeish bird’s wing—made absurd when stuck onto the side of an animal that stood taller than a horse.

Her specific breed—which he could never remember the lengthy, technical name for—were known for their long legs and sickle curved claws on each foot. Arkenwald paid attention to very few things in the Academy, but that claw always fascinated him. He imagined having one on each of his own hands quite often.

As he bobbed up and down in the saddle of his leggy bird, watching the rusty feathers of her crest bob around in front of him, he became aware of a pesky *biological imperative* that suddenly demanded his attention.

He’d learned that one in the Academy too, and he thought ‘*biological imperative*’ sounded like a real sharp way to tell someone you had to take a piss. He never could quite figure out how to word it though, so he had only just said it to himself in his head.

Steering Clacker off the road, he guided her into the woods, and zagged a few zigs while checking over his shoulder to ensure no one had followed. He brought her to a stop behind a duo of recently cracked, fallen trees.

He gracelessly slumped out of the bird's saddle with a groan, and pulled Clacker towards one of the trunks. He loosely wrapped the reins around the amputated stump of a branch, more of a suggestion than any functional tethering.

"Stay here darling," he said, giving her beak a few lazy *donks*.

The commensurate series of *clacks* followed him as he turned away, heading toward the large boulder over which the two trees had broken. He never could go if someone was watching him, even if it was just a bird—and Clacker watched *everything*.

One of the fallen trees had snapped over the large rock at an angle, providing crude cover. From beneath the overhang, he realized he could still see the road—a kaleidoscope of fractured glimpses through dying brown needles. People and things passed by, their forms half-illuminated by the bobbing lights they carried.

He wondered idly if Pereglia had to land her bird to have a go, or if she just let loose off the back of her saddle, pissing into the wind like her bird certainly did.

He paced a few more steps around the rock, positioning himself beneath overhung branches. He watched the people pass by a little clearer now, from his veil of pine needles. A ceiling of fallen logs loomed above him. Perfect, he thought.

He may not be able to go with someone watching him, but watching others was another story entirely. Especially if they didn't know he was there.

Undoing the front of his trousers, he fumbled for a moment before plucking himself free. He began to devalue what little patches of snow had survived, insulated from other weather under the little natural pine hut. He trickled and watched the people off in the distance, broken up by tree and stick, moving his head from side to side to track their lights through the fractured view.

"Having a nice one, Copper?" said a voice from behind him.

Arkenwald spun, one hand instinctively reaching for his baton, drawing it with a smooth payoff from hundreds of slow motion drills. His other hand shot up in front of him, palm out. The rest of him continued to poke out of his pants, tinkling into the leaves. A sharp, humiliating flush slapped across his face.

“Who—Hey!” he barked, as he scrambled to assess the situation.

He was exposing himself to two men who sat casually with their backs to the rock. Between them was the beginning of a small fire circle, little more than sticks and shavings surrounded by strewn rocks. One of the men cradled a drinking skin in his hand, resting casually in his lap. The other man’s hands couldn’t be seen under his grass-woven parka that matched his companion’s.

“Under Auth—uhh... *shit*,” assessed Arkenwald.

“Not very nice to go pissin’ in someone’s campsite without so much as a ‘Hi-lo’,” said the man with the drinking skin, the same voice that had startled him.

The other man simply gazed, unblinking, at Arkenwald’s crotch.

“Official business, is it?” the first man continued, while Arkenwald popped himself back into the front of his trousers with the hand not gripping his compensatory truncheon.

“I, uh... I didn’t realize anyone was here,” stammered Arkenwald, lowering his weapon a fraction. “Just a simple biological imperative, right boys?” he said.

Both men stared back at him in silence.

“Travelin’ on your own today, Officer sir?” said the second man, speaking for the first time in a high, squeaky voice. “Where’s the wind takin’ you on this bitter day?”

The nasal man’s face was thin, dark and wrinkled. Pins of infrequent white hair sparkled his tanned-leather features. His eyes were thin as well, slitted in a squint like a hunting thing. He smiled—a twitchy, sinister smile—baring a meager collection of worn yellow teeth.

“My partner,” began Arkenwald, tightening his grip on his weapon, “is waiting for me on—”

“You mean that *bird*?” interrupted the first man, finishing his question with a pull from his leather container.

“Where is that pretty bird?” the thin man chimed in, his hands rustling around under his stiff fibrous cloak.

“Clack—!” caught in Arkenwald’s throat as he began to shout for his animal. A fistfull of dirt and stones flew into his face and mouth at the exact moment he’d opened it.

“—*krch!*” he coughed, gagging on the grit and debris, slamming his stinging eyes shut. His baton swung wildly as he staggered back, blinded.

Something struck his legs hard from the side, sweeping them out from under him. His ankle bones cracked together painfully, and he hit the ground hard, dizzy in the flashing bright darkness of his twitching, gritty vision. He coughed again as the air was forced out of his chest. His mouth crunched, his eyes felt like sandpaper.

“Go get that fuckin’ bird,” said the voice of the man with the drink. “Thing’ll feed us for ‘alf a season.”

“*Sweetie bird*,” sang the nasal voice.

Arkenwald heard the unmistakable click of readying a pistol’s hammer snap through the air.

The Constable forced his eyes open, just in time to see the man’s boot coming straight for his face. Baton still clutched in his hand, he wriggled his body like a fish, freeing the armed arm from under himself and flapping away from the man’s kick just in time. Arkenwald swiveled on his rear end and swung at the man’s legs with his baton, missing by half an arm.

“Hah!” cawed the younger grasscloak man.

“Aaaah!!” screeched the nasal man from behind him.

Arkenwald heard another unmistakable click—a clack, really.



The thin man's body landed hard on the ground next to him, sending a little snub nosed revolver pistol to the ground even harder. The little weapon, taped together in a crude attempt at repair, shattered into pieces on impact. The man's grass cloak had been ripped wide open, a jagged tear ran sternum to belly.

Arkenwald pushed himself up to his feet, wheezing, sweeping at his eyes with open hands. The fallen old man let out a pitiful whine in pain, and another sound—a sharp gasp of terror—spun the constable around.

The younger bandit's back was to him, and he was locked in a deadly reflection with the enormous predatory bird. Clacker mirrored his every trembling twitching movement with infinitesimal shifts forwards. Her mad eyes were wide, pupils dilating like the beat of a heart. Each miniscule step was punctuated by a sharp *clack*, rhythmic and deliberate, like a countdown.

"Easy, Clacker," coughed the Constable, and smashed his baton into the side of the man's head as hard as he could.

Clacker made a deep *oonk oonk* sound, like oil getting hot and as the man reeled—his body staggering in some delayed response to the blow—Clacker didn't hesitate. Her hatchet-shaped beak lashed out like a mantis claw, hooking deep into the meat of his shoulder and neck. With a sharp jerk, she hoisted him into the air, his feet dangling helplessly.

The bird reared back one powerful leg, her talons gleaming, and kicked. The blow landed squarely in the man's belly, crunching through his grass parka with sickening force. The air left his lungs in a single, strained moan—half gasp, half groan, uncomfortably close to a sigh of pleasure.

Clacker hoisted him again, her beak jerking upward with brutal efficiency, before slamming his body down onto the ground by the neck. The bird stopped a moment, and investigated her prize with a sideways glance, as if waiting for something.

Arkenwald seemed unimpressed, and turned away from the bloody melee of feathers and grass. He looked towards the older man, who was still moaning and clutching at his belly, helpless on the ground.

“Well—” the Constable started, coughed, and started again.

“Well, we’ve made some very poor decisions, haven’t we,” he said, exasperated.

He strode over to the crumpled body of the man who had been dispatched by the huge bird.

“You *fucking idiot*,” he muttered, leaning down over the fallen man and raising his weapon.

With a grim flamboyance, he smashed the downed and thoroughly defeated man’s head with his baton again, bending over slightly more to make hitting him a few more times slightly easier.

“Fucking *scunt!* *Waster!* *Shit-piece—*” He shouted as he swung, each word punctuated by a sickening splat of the baton against long-defeated bone. “—God-fucked, hybrid, low-bred, scum—”

He cut himself off, suddenly standing and turning away from the grassy wet mess he and his bird had made.

The older bandit was staring at him with horror in his eyes, propped up in the dirt on his elbows. Arkenwald could now see that his bird had only ripped through this man’s parka, barely scratching his skeletal ribs and distended stomach below it.

The bird, meanwhile, was watching Arkenwald, her expression unchanged, gleaming with the same psychotic revelry her orange eyes always held. Her inquisitive eyes focused on the other man on the ground, and she began to stalk towards him. She tilted her head and clacked her beak lightly with each step, like she was asking little questions.

It had been some time since Arkenwald had taken a life himself, assuming the killing blow was his and not the bird’s. Longer still since he’d done so with an audience. He felt powerful.

“Let’s us have a little talk about *your* particular decision making skills, old son,” said Arkenwald, addressing the man on the ground.

He intercepted Clacker’s reins and guided her back a safe distance away from the living man, discouraging her from a new victim and taking her back towards the first one. Arkenwald wedged her reins between a crag in the boulder, a mere suggestion of being tied down that was usually enough to deter the trained bird’s brain from wandering off. Most of the time. He was glad she’d decided to test it only moments before.

The older bandit lay silent and horrified, unmoving. Arkenwald crouched near the corpse of his associate, and began to toy with his bloody baton, wiping it clean on the broken corpse’s trousers. Clacker began to nudge the dead man’s crumpled body with casual interest.

“Say something,” said Arkenwald, eyeing the surviving bandit. “Help me find confidence that I’m not wasting my time talking to a brainless sack of—”

“Something,” said the man in a gravelly monotone.

“Good,” said Arkenwald, proudly. He raised and presented his baton to the man. “Have you ever seen what one of these truncheons can *really* do?” he asked, a note of childish excitement creeping into his voice. “I didn’t even get to turn it on...”

He clicked some hidden clicking thing in the weapons handle, and the baton in his hand began to whirr. What began as a minimalist black metal cylinder shifted into something more sinister. Rows of raised, jagged vents pointing away from the handle appeared, growing from indistinguishably machined metal running down opposite sides. The weapon’s profile flattened to a serrated paddle. A hole in its tip opened in aperture, revealing the rifled interior of a short barrel.

“Watch this!” said Arkenwald, giddy as a child, his eyes alight with twisted excitement. “Can you *believe* they got this idea from a *shrimp*?”

He swung the baton in a lazy arc, striking the bandit's haggard torso with almost playful ease. The weapon responded with a startling *BANG*, exploding chunks of flesh and cloth in a weak, messy spray. Arkenwald peeked through the needles at the road, noting with satisfaction that the passing traffic seemed to remain oblivious. He looked back to his audience.

"The fuck d'you *want*," said the old man, sharply.

"Excellent decision!" said Arkenwald, joyfully. He clapped his hands together with mock exuberance. "Maybe you were the smart one in the group, eh?"

He jabbed the dead man again with his baton, the air around the serrated vents swirled, agitated by the eager, whirring weapon.

"Hobble," stated Arkenwald flatly. "There was a raid there a couple days ago. Tell me something about it, and I'll spare you some trouble. Maybe even give you a reward." He raised an eyebrow a couple times in quick succession, an exaggerated invitation, and smiled a gambler's smile.

Clacker clacked, and began to peck and hack at the nearly already masticated corpse.

"Don't know what you're on about," said the man defiantly, sitting up and crossing his arms across his chest. "Anyways, ain't ye supposed to be yowlin' on about some codes and authority and my *fucking* autonomy about now?"

Arkenwald's grin widened, venomous and playful.

"I should be taking this baton," he began, in a strangely bright and cheerful tone, "and hammering your *fucking* memories into a fine powder. Then mashin' em up with your boy's fucking *dreams* over there, and feed the whole lot to my fucking *bird*."

He smiled wider, and glared at the old bandit with vicious eyes. "What do you say, we skip the formalities, old son? You give me an arm, I'll give you a league. There's a reward for information about the raid. It's yours, just tell me a story, Grandfather."

The old man squinted his eyes over to the huge bird, who was now ripping chunks off of the corpse with its cleaver of a beak, tossing them back to an agile arrowhead tongue. He squinted back at the gangly young constable, brimming with a vile grin and splattered with a fine patina of pink.

He laughed a creaky chair's laugh.

"Ye remind me of meself when I was a lad," wheezed the old bandit. "*Vicious* little scunt I was."

Arkenwald tipped his head, his grin sharpening into something colder.

After a couple pensive heartbeats, the bandit sighed. "Fine," he said, "I'll tell ye."

The Constable leaned in, lowering his baton slightly, inviting the man closer.

"Word was," began the thin man, "there's a hidden treasure at the school there in Hobble, at least that's what we was all told," he leaned towards the constable. "Word was, those pissdrinkin' wet-pants Watercult bastards was gonna pay good coin for it."

Arkenwald nudged his suspect with an expression. "Please, go on," he said in a friendly tone. "What was this treasure?"

"Word was," continued the old bandit, "It was a kid."

"A kid?" Arkenwald blinked, taken by surprise, "As in—a child?"

"Aye lad, *a child*," said the bandit, nodding. "They din't send the lot after a fucking *goat*." He picked up a leaf off of the ground in front of him, and toyed with it casually for a moment, gathering his thoughts. Arkenwald waited and leered with unusual patience.

"All the bounty said was some wash akin to the child in question bein' some kind of a *freak*, that there'd be no mistakin' which one it was." He crumbled the leaf into powder with a knobby fist. "Corpsed or captured, didn't matter. Just '*intact*', it said."

Arkenwald's frown deepened.

“We end up aimed at a school, turns out. Turns out it’s a school for the fuckin’ *blind*,” the old bandit continued, with a grimy chuckle. “Nothin’ but *freaks*, the lot.”

Arkenwald knew of the school in Hobble—the headmistress had been one of the victims of the raid.

“O’ course none of the little white-eyes could tell us if one or t’other was ‘specially freakish,” said the bandit, laughing again. “The boys got to threatenin’ and shoutin’ at the useless little things, and their stupid ol’ teacher sticks ‘er self in the way of one boy’s knife. Cuts her right open he does, and guess what falls out from under her flappy ol’ tits?”

Arkenwald stood, his face unreadable. “Do tell,” he said flatly.

“Blue palm!” shouted the old man. “One o’ them ol’ *Hasa-what’s-it* coins. More value in one of those than the whole bounty on the kid!” He reared back his head and laughed louder this time. “The boys started fighting over it, weapons drawn and all serious. Probably a fake anyway... you know they *float*? A *real one*?”

“I am aware,” said Arkenwald.

“Well,” chuckled the old man, “well son, I’m no prize fighter anymore, ‘specially not against me own...”

His voice listed as he glanced at the body of his previous companion. It was being jerked apart by the giant bird, holding the corpse down with a huge foot, guiding her huge beak along a sickle talon to precisely remove important, tasty parts.

“Didn’t know that fellow too well,” continued the old bandit, a hint of sadness in his voice. “He and I had the same idea is all. No sense fighting a dozen other men over a single coin. Best to get out of the way, best to make it back to The Scythes. Left empty handed, returning empty handed.”

“A shame,” said Arkenwald, a hollow lack of sincerity echoed in his voice. He stretched his shoulders with a light groan.

Clacker eyed the still sitting grasscloak man, and clacked.

“Well,” said Arkenwald, “Let’s get you that reward, shall we?”

He lashed out with his whirring baton—a sudden fluid sweep. The air in front of the weapon exploded into a distorted burst, and the shockwave of shattered space instantly tore the short distance through the air, crashing over the old man’s shocked face. It turned the whites of his eyes bright pink, and cracked the quiet darkness with the sound of a shattering tree.

While his grayed hair fluttered gently in the aftermath of the blast, a dribble of bright blood aggressively ran out of both of his nostrils, and his jaw fell slack.

Arkenwald giggled like a mad idiot. He stamped his feet, stepped closer, and swung again.

The apex of the swing was just beyond the tip of the man’s nose, and everything behind it shattered like a thrown melon with a soggy pop. The heavy wet noise somehow dampened the much louder sound from the weapon itself. Chunks of head fanned out in odd directions, and Clacker clacked again, excitedly.

Arkenwald turned, doubled over and vomited onto the ground, retching hard and coughing violently.

He spit, wiped his mouth on a sleeve, and stood upright. “Come on Clacker,” he said to his bird in a dull tone.

Weakly, he climbed into the stirrups for the animal’s saddle. He steered the beast out from the overhang of fallen tree they’d both wandered under, and headed back towards their original direction, off of the road.

As they moved, Arkenwald pulled out a plain red cloth from one of the pockets in his uniform pants. He wiped the flecks of blood and bits of dirt from his face, smoothing back his slicked-back and candied-hard black hair. He cleaned off his pauldron, wiped his hands, and finally pulled his baton from its holster to remove the last of the bandit stains from it as well. With a casual flick, he tossed the cloth behind him into the wind.

He rode in silence for a while, keeping the road just barely visible through the treeline. Clacker did most of the navigating, her agile clawed feet making easy work of the flat and sparsely foliaged, boulder-strewn forest.

Once satisfied he was no longer visibly sullied, he veered her back onto the road, blending into the thinning traffic less than two nails' run from the outguarding.

Arkenwald pulled another red cloth from his pocket, giving the baton one final wipe before re-sheathing it.

"*Loss of control*," he muttered in a strange voice, dour and harsh. His father's voice.

He spat onto the ground, blowing stray grit from his tongue.

"No." His own voice came through again. "*Taking* it."

Clacker craned her neck back at him, curious and sinister as ever. The streaks of blood on her beak glistened like pretty crimson lipstick.

"Sweetie bird," said Arkenwald, reaching down to pat her. "He certainly misread *you*, my big, beautiful murder chicken, didn't he?"

... ..

Peregilia stared down into the empty world. Gray trees, gray rocks, gray everything—the ground below her was bland and felt unfinished, a blank piece waiting to be painted.

Ahead of her lay a simple yet vibrant palette; a horizon blazing fire-orange, licking through clouds aflame on the rim of the world, fading above her to a starless thalassic swath of purple edged, midnight-blue. The vibrant darkness of the night's starry tapestry stretched behind her, galaxial stained and pricking her back with pins of unnoticed, ancient light. Twin blue moons stared back as she soared beneath them.



Nothing curious. Nothing interesting. No signs of out-of-place encampments or ugly hats. No mysterious survivors from any long-gone civilizations waving up at her out of the gloomy darkness. Not any that Pereglia could see anyway.

She tapped her compass, adjusting the bearing on its outermost ring. A marvel of magnets and dials, it was leagues beyond the simple floating needles most relied on—if they used compasses at all—though it remained fully capable of their basic function. Those rudimentary devices merely pointed toward the grave, distant, cold-burned bastion of society: the Twisting City, forever spiraling under the stars atop Halferth's magnetic and axial pole. Her compass, by contrast, could guide her anywhere, providing precise bearings and position wherever her bird could fly.

The device reminded her of an old praxeikon from her father's collection—a heavy, box-like contraption with eyeholes and a little lever. She'd spent countless nails pressing it to her face, watching the frozen sky inside spring to life with every pull. A rapid sequence of flashprints, taken from the Twisting City's center, lashed together to form a moving panorama of the night sky's rotation. She'd often stand outside, trying to match the image inside the box to the real sky above her, but they never quite aligned.

Like the praxeikon, and despite its significant technological advancement, her complex compass shared the same innate vulnerabilities—moisture, pressure, wear. A quick rap freed any stuck parts, ensuring she stayed on course, though she didn't need it to tell her she was already where she needed to be.

She and her great silver bird would reach the outskirts of Worms Port any moment now. She was surprised she couldn't smell it yet. Stink did tend to linger low in rotten crevices, she acknowledged, and if ever there was a rotten crevice in all of Halferth, she was nearly there.

The air grew warmer, inviting her Knight to find lofty, climbing thermals. He veered slightly off course, catching the propulsive lifts with his articulated silver wingtips.

Worms Port marked the transition where the perpetually dark and snowy High Circle merged into the sunlit, humid Veradian ring—the same ring that contained Featherview and the Aviary, far off to the High West.

Unfortunately for Worms Port, instead of lush swamps, it was saddled with a frigid, muddy coast where the Veradian terminated abruptly at its shore. The town sat in the Low East corner of the Heartlands, a landmark that could be called either the end of civilization or its beginning, depending on where one called home.

The slice of sun on the horizon grew wider, revealing the True East Sea. Somewhere toward that horizon lay the Shrapnel Archipelago, homeland of the strange, furry drunk man from the tavern.

It was no wonder he draped himself in fur; used to the humid swamplands, the constantly crisp and near-freezing air of the High Circle would ice a Shrapnel man's bones. She hoped he was faring well under the Empiric's care. At least he hadn't been sent off with Puvince fucking Arkenwald, she thought.

Wet stench suddenly burrowed into her nostrils, heavy and invasive, like the ethereal fingers of some foul, lecherous spirit. Pereglia reeled, scrunching her face as a retch escaped her lips.

Her Knight craned his short neck back at her, strong muscles flexing as they fought against the air. His eye's slick milky membranes nictated in curiosity at her strange sounds. She blinked back tears from the stinging stench, concealed behind her shiny eyewear.

"Ugh! Almost there I suppose!" Pereglia shouted over the rushing, vile air to her animal.

Knight's head whipped back to face forwards, and tucked back into its flight position, nestled between his shoulders like a serpent,

ready to strike. A deep, resonating rumble vibrated out of him and through her saddle.

Peregria patted and scratched in his neck feathers reassuringly. “Almost time to get you some big nasty chunks of jellied yellow stink-meat,” she teased as she ruffled. “Excited?”

Another burst of putrid feculence slid up into her face, and she retched again, choking on some unwelcome and unfortunate drool that had formed rapidly and slid down the back of her throat.

“*Whuck*—” she gagged. “I know *I am*.”

Peregria pulled a red handkerchief from a pocket on her thigh. She wrapped it around her face secured with a knot in the back, then took her bird’s guidestraps in hand once again, rolling them around her fists. Her Knight needed little direction now, if any—he’d caught the port’s scent long ago. The outguarding would have a perch on its roof, and his instincts would guide him there, drawn by its faint green lights.

She stifled a chuckle, recalling his earlier attempt to land on the bent chimney of the wobbly tavern during their last stop. Thankfully, she’d steered him to the rocky outcropping behind it just in time. She had imagined the volume of steam that would have escaped her Empiric’s angry seams at the sight of the collapsed building.

They began to descend, her bird braking in air with wide wings, swirling the tips of the towering columns of fog that breached the ground below. Her rumbled underneath her as the clouds began to thin, revealing the Port below.

An accompanying sudden thud of adrenaline soured behind her buttons as she realized what little watch she’d kept for the people she was supposed to find—and that she was about to land in the middle of *fucking Worms Port* in some blind attempt to stumble across their paths.

Rearing back lightly with the straps, she steered the bird away from its descent. “Just a few more heartbeats up here, Sir Knight!” she shouted towards the front end of her feathered vehicle. “I promise!”

Knight answered with a piercing scream. His wings pumped powerfully, banking them away from the hazy docks, thatched roofs, and giant reels beginning to emerge from the mist. Huge sails materialized briefly before dissolving back into the fog. With a sharp turn, Knight banked higher, catching a thermal vent rising from the heart of the bay.

“We’re going to glide around up here for a bit my good friend,” said the rider. “See if we can see anything worth seeing.”

The bird acknowledged with silent diligence and settled into another glide, casually riding the warm updraft. Pereglia reached into a rectangular leather pouch on her belt and withdrew a pair of folded binocs. Looping the lanyard around her wrist, she held them up to her glasses, gripping the saddle between her lashed-on knees as she leaned over. The bird adjusted beneath her, countering her shift in weight. She scanned the disgusting town below for anything noteworthy through the gloom.

Gray buildings, gray people, pestilent greens and unlovely browns. Worms Port existed in a miasmic synesthesia—she could smell her festering view, taste its colors, see its stench. She saw ships of all kinds, all sizes, crammed into the crowded docks, while dozens of busy people swarmed through tight alleys and cramped streets. Grimy storefronts and condemned looking buildings spat people out and sucked new ones in.

On the busy beach to the True High, she saw huge reels, some laden with the throbbing, iridescent, living-muscle ropes of the massive and unsettling *Ormaormos* worms that infested the bay here. Abandoned skeletal remains of the same reels littered the rocky beach to the True Low, scattered through similarly abandoned and crumbling docks.

The mere existence of the segmented and spiked creatures made Pereglia slightly uncomfortable—the thought of flying over their hundreds of rocky underwater dens made her heart race and her body shiver. She clenched everything available to clench, anchoring her a bit more to her saddle. Her bird purred underneath her, steady and strong, as if understanding and offering her a reminder of the powerful thing that they were.

Full barrels of fish sewage destined for the Twisting City dotted the busy central docks, surrounded by busy people. Crates with hundreds of beautifully filigreed bottles of stench, destined to grace the tables of those far from its foul origins. Lucky souls, she thought, by all accounts.

She spotted the lucky ones' liaisons—pallid figures in sea-green, gold-lined robes—bartering over crates of the finished product. Some loaded boats, others worked out of machine-ran carts, or the backs of the happy hippogonia and their large spike-woven baskets. She saw the brilliant plumage of H'rask walking bold and uncovered, scales painted and shining in the moist and faintly sun-lit bay.

Another spot of color caught her eye, and her binocs trained on the familiar hue, the ugly violet and blue-green of a Watercult priest's hat and robes.

"Oh, hi-lo friend," she said excitedly, leaning back towards center bird-mass and turning him back for another, more focused pass.

She strained her legs and leaned over her Knight's wide wing, then strained her eyes as well, trying to pick out the purple and blue of the hat again. She found it fast, standing out like a single piece of unrotten fruit.

Then she saw another. Then a third. The men greeted each other, and traipsed out of view, under a soggy-looking and yellowed awning.

"Fuck," said Pereglia. She removed, refolded, detached and deposited her binocs back in their squarish leather pouch.

With a drawn out sigh and a few tugs on her straps, she disengaged her animal from his soar. Knight made a sound like a heavy motor, a deep guttural chugging as he transitioned into a controlled dive.

The foul details of the port grew upwards out of the gray soup, like fungus creeping up through mycelial loam. The Constabulary outguarding—dilapidated and weakly verdant—came into view, its perch visible but questionably sturdy. Knight sliced through the rank clouds towards the barely lit green copper lamps that marked the landing. Light drops of water began to dapple the lenses of her glasses and tap her exposed skin.

“We’ll get that belly addressed post-haste, Sir Knight!” Pereglia promised loudly as his mad wings beat the mist and mystery away, kicking up odors long latent in unwafted areas of the stinking port.

As his great sail of feathers plowed through the thick stench, the bird’s engineered talons stretched wide, eagerly aiming at the approaching perch. A figure loomed next to the great rusted rail—no longer obscured in mist, yet still shrouded in darkness—waiting for her.

. . . . .

It had begun to rain lightly, and Mouse pulled her burlap hood over her feather laden and roughly braided hair. She’d been distracted by the biggest bird she’d ever seen, swooping through the clouds off over the water. She’d lost it when it disappeared into the mist over the stinky town down the beach some distance from them, and when raindrops started squinting her eyes.

She had managed to gather an armful of small dry sticks, with a few larger damper ones—which she had made sure felt light in her

hand, as requested. She thought about heading back to the tall man in their little boat-turned-tent on the beach. The beach she wasn't allowed to go near.

*Allowed.* What a funny idea big people had.

They loved to tell her she *couldn't* do things—when she clearly could, and usually fairly easily. Then they'd go from *couldn't* to *shouldn't*, with no better reason than *because I said so*. Like it was some kind of spell.

She remembered a day Marm had found her climbing up a big, tall tree. The old woman had scolded Mouse with '*you can't climb up there!*' and seemed awfully upset when Mouse clarified that she, unlike the rest of the children, absolutely could.

She had sat down in the branches and listened to the predictable shouts of *shouldn'ts* from below, until the concept of *danger* had risen. Mouse reminded Marm that she'd slipped and banged her knee in her 'nice safe kitchen' only days beforehand.

Immediately, threats of climbing after her for ingredients to a *Mouse Soup* recipe began, and 'How *safe* you'll think *my kitchen* is *then!*' after them.

Mouse had climbed down quickly once old fingers began to make good on youthful threats, giggling in pretended terror the whole way, and they'd had a lovely carrot soup that night instead.

She missed Marm. She missed her stories and the way they'd talk about silly things. Remembering her made Mouse's chest ache, made it feel like something inside her was stuck, tugging at her when she breathed. It only felt like Marm was really dead when she remembered her. Left out of mind, the old woman could have just as well been back at the school, tending her garden, and making more soup. Like she *should* be.

It had only been a few days since the School was attacked while they were gone, though it already felt like another life. Just days earlier, she'd been warm by the hearth there, eating soup and listening

to Marm's stories. Now she was gathering soggy sticks in the rain by a beach filled with H'rask-eating worms, wishing she could forget the screams that had carried them back to the school.

Mouse was glad her Uncle Jeebie had come to visit that day, but it made her feel like she'd made a mistake. Worse than she ever felt getting caught doing a *can't* or a *shouldn't*. If they hadn't been off on one of their long walks through the woods—talking about strange things, learning stranger ones, and sharing stories of their time apart—they would have been there when the bad men arrived. Maybe she could've helped. Maybe Marm would still be alive.

If they'd have been there, Jeebie could've cut them all down like the grass they wore, with a single sweep of his giant, singing sword. He could've called on the sky and the wind and scared them all off with a single shout of booming thunder, or blown them all away with a mighty breath. Or maybe, being there wouldn't have saved anyone at all. What if the bandits had killed them too? Overpowered him, leaving him bloodied and naked, just like poor Marm.

One had managed to stab him, after all. It was the last thing that bandit ever did, but the wound hadn't healed like the others she'd seen him shrug off. Jeebie never left room to worry about himself—always looking out for her instead, even with his *can'ts* and *shouldn'ts*—but seeing him sweaty and sick like this made her chest tighten even more.

A heavy drop of water hit the tip of her nose and splashed her back into reality. She was standing in the rain, staring into a handful of sticks, and had been for some time. She quickly found her bearings, and started to head back to their camp, keeping her head low and doing her best to blend her worn, rough burlap into the worn, rough woods.

She hadn't wandered as far as her mind had, and it wasn't but a few heartbeats before the small upturned boat came back into view.



She slipped out of the spotty treeline and skipped easily between the looming boulders.

Mouse shouted loudly as she approached. "I gotcher sticks, big man, if—" She remembered suddenly with the last word that she was supposed to be quiet. Her shout ended with an abrupt muffle, as the last of it collided with the inside of her mouth.

She saw him leaned back against the rock—the same position he had been in when she left.

"Uncle Jeebie!" she crooned in something closer to a whisper, "I seen a birdy inna sky, swearit, size of a *house* if y'see!"

She turned the vague corner of stone he was propped against, bringing the whole of the man into view.

"Oh ships!" squeaked the girl, seeing her friend's closed eyes and lolled head.

"Big man!?" she shouted, and dropped her armful of sticks.

She rushed up to his slumped form, and began to shake him, grabbing ahold of his forearm's armor and rocking him back and forth to the best of her ability. He groaned, and heavy droplets of sweat rolled down his forehead.

"Wake up!" she demanded, and shook him some more. "You can't die big man, s'not nice!"

He groaned again, and she felt life in his limbs.

"I'm alright," he said weakly. He moved the arm she held onto, reaching it to the wet ground to steady himself in the sandy rocks.

"Yo're not," said the girl. "You's gonna go brown like a vegable inna few 'eartbeats, I fink." She placed her warm palm on his much warmer forehead, and nearly recoiled.

"Hot as a pot, if y'see," Mouse reported, wiping sweat off on her burlap.

"I'll be fine, Mouse," insisted the tall man.

"You'll be a puddle soon," she insisted right back. "You need some meddies in ya, big man."

"You're right," he agreed, pushing down with his hands on the ground, trying to shove himself upwards with trembling asthenia. "Let's get moving and—"

Mouse hopped into his lap, which put a swift end to any of his standing desires. He sat back down with a thump.

"Wot kinda meddies do you need, big man?" she asked, looking up at him innocently.

"Water," sighed the defeated man. "Water is the most important. There's no snow here to melt, and the sea water is no good."

He reached behind him and unfastened the mostly collapsed water skin from his belt.

"The river's no good either, too dirty. This is the last of the clean water that we have." He took a small pull from the now uncorked opening of the vessel. He swallowed, then offered the skin to Mouse.

"Would you like a sip?"

She nodded, and took the drinking skin from him.

"*Then* we find the medicine," he explained. "I need to get something called a *Putriphage*, it eats rotten flesh and—"

"Like the Fingajam people!" interrupted Mouse, as if she'd suddenly solved a mystery.

"It—" He paused to laugh with a little impulsive puff of breath. "It stops rot, and cleans the blood," he finished.

"An' where ya find *pootyfage*, big man?"

He convulsed again at her mispronunciation and launched a puff of entertained air from his nostrils. He smiled, happy to realize his little friend's ability to always coax some approximation of happiness out of him, even near death it would seem.

"Any Medic should have something," he began again. "There are a few different forms of it, and any town of this size will have... A..."

He trailed off, realizing another one of Mouse's abilities was coming into view, staring at her increasingly innocent expression.

“Wait a beat,” he said through his own increasingly deepening one, “What are you up to?”

She leapt out of his lap. “I’mma go get your pootyfage, big man!” she shouted, and grinned.

He weakly grabbed at the air where she had just been.

“You are *not* going into that *port* by *yourself*,” the tall man insisted intensely.

“An’ just how is you gonna stop me, if y’see?” she teased, and batted her eyelashes at him. “Gonna chase me, big man?”

“It is not safe, Mouse,” he continued, “You don’t know—”

“You’s gonna stay ‘ere,” interrupted Mouse, “an’ make us a fire an’ not die in a puddle until I come back.” She crossed her arms, and nodded commandingly.

“I am serious, Mouse,” said the tall man, and started to adjust himself to stand again.

“Me tooo!” she howled, and quick as a flea she dashed around the corner of the rock where he couldn’t see her anymore.

The tall man’s attempt to stand crumbled like a sand bank underneath him, and he slumped back against the rock. He heard a sound, and looked up, and was greeted by his tiny companion’s smiling face framed by the hole in the bottom of the boat.

“See?” She waggled her eyebrows. “Yo’re soggy.”

He sighed, and his hands flopped to his sides with capitulating exhaustion. His body had a mountain’s weight, and he surrendered.

“The Medics shop will have a banner out front,” he said, “an image of a white tree.”

“Okie!” she squeaked, smiling harder.

“Look for rain barrels behind buildings,” he continued, and his voice grew deeper. “Keep out of sight *best* you can, and *stay away* from the *water*.”

“Okay bye!” she squeaked. “Doan die while I’m off, stinky man!” and with a wave of his drinking skin, she disappeared into the haze

still barely illuminated by the waning orange sun disappearing over the horizon.

“Wait!” he shouted after her, “You don’t have...”

She was gone.

“...any coin,” he sighed.

He really wasn’t sure if that mattered. He wasn’t sure Mouse even understood the concept.

The tall man tried to stand, pushing himself up from the ground and forwards away from the rock. It exhausted him, and he felt hot and trapped in his armor. He brought his knees down, and took to them on the ground, bent over and penitent, clutching the air around his wound with a shaking claw of a hand.

Ripping one kneeling knee off of the ground with an unsteady jerk, he landed it hard on a boot instead. With his hand on his uninjured side, he tried to hoist himself to a standing way, pushing up from his raised knee.

He toppled sideways instead, landing hard underneath the upturned vessel, tearing down his tarp-turned-cloak, turned-tarp once again with him.

“Fuck,” he said flatly. His weapon fell to the ground flatly in echo.

Sitting up, he leaned back again, under the boat and getting away from the rain he’d barely noticed. He took a deep spasmodic breath, and shivered. Ice cold moisture dripped from his hair and down his face despite his efforts. The hairs on his body fought to rise as well, damp under heavy leather and armor. He shuddered again, encompassing and uncontrollable.

Mouse was right, he realized. He knew she was in danger, but to think that he would have been able to guide her through Worms Port in this state was a laughable fantasy. He knew she was resilient, clever, sneakier than anyone he had ever met. She had the skin of a Hillkin,

hard to cut or puncture, but her spirit had thicker skin still. He knew she would be no one's easy victim.

He also knew she was a child, despite the many seasons she had lived. She lived them in seclusion, hidden away here or there, and that she had no idea how cruel the world could be, despite enduring its cruelty all her life.

He understood he had no other choice. Neither of them did, and Mouse knew it too.

Weakly, he shuffled some stones into a ring. Drips of sweat like drops of black ink wrote him curious notes in the dryish sand, and he stared into them deeply, with a darkening, sinking curiosity.

## CHAPTER 5

### *THE THIN EDGE OF SELF*

Knight's talons met the rusty rail on the outguarding's roof with a crunch that made Pereglia uneasy, but the rotting old perch held fast. A few fat gusts of steady-wing's wind blasted what mist remained to obfuscate the party present to her landing. Pereglia met eyes with a woman wearing an Empiric's badge on her chest.

The woman's face was lank, drawn and angry. Pallid skin in harsh contrast above the darkness of her uniform, dark eyes glaring under hay yellow hair tied back in tight twin braids. The glaring, raptor-eyed emblem on her coat was dull, dark corroded copper where green hadn't yet spread like a lichen.

The woman's mouth was moving furiously, uttering unheard words that swirled into the rushing air, blocked out by that same synesthetic stench and other, more aggressive vibrations.

Pereglia leaned over to each side of her body and untied her knees from her saddle. With a grace born from practice and confidence, she slid from the saddle and down the bird's extended wing. She landed heavy in her boots with a mushy and hollow *thud* on the otherwise sturdy roof.

"—half a fucking season, isn't it?" said the woman. It was the end of a sentence whose beginning was lost in the wind, traveling somewhere towards the ocean.

Pereglia reached up and removed her mirrored goggles, folding them and returning them to her breast pocket. She pulled the cloth down from her face so it rested around her neck, and turned to regard the woman with a salute. She did her best to not snarl her nose at the reinvented stench that met it.

“Empiric!” she said, putting emphasis on her already saluted-salute.

“Empiric *what?*” snapped the dour woman from under frustrated eyebrows and flared nostrils.

“Constable Pereglia,” said Constable Pereglia. “I’m here on orders from Empiric Rathe, Twisting City, looking for a couple of murder suspects on the run from—”

The woman waved her words away like a pesky insect. She squinted and took a step towards Pereglia, like an investigatory stalking of disabled prey.

“Where are our *fucking* supplies?” pried the Empiric.

“Ma’am?” queried Pereglia, still rigid in her salute and twisting up an eyebrow.

“Drop it, kid,” said the Empiric, waving again at her saluted fist. “Don’t give a shit.”

The badged woman turned and headed towards a semi-sturdy looking doorway built jutting out of the roof. Pereglia awkwardly relaxed her flexed arm and let it drop to her side, and hurried to catch up to her.

“Empiric?” she said, still audibly confused. She replaced a few steps with skips in order to catch up with her.

Knight screeched, piercing and concerned. Pereglia turned and raised a hand to her animal, a calming gesture free of words which told the bird “*Don’t worry, I will be back.*” He ruffled his feathers and punched the air.

The woman didn’t stop or turn at the tearing sound, but opened the heavy door instead, revealing a dark staircase.

“Ma’am?” inquired Pereglia again, and the Empiric ignored her.

The angry woman continued through the doorway, without a word. She headed down a short flight of steps that led into a barely lit, large and empty room. Pereglia followed behind her, checking her surroundings as she descended into the shabby building.

This outguarding was constructed differently than the rest that she'd been in; built into an existing structure she assumed, gently reinforced to the amount the old rotting frame could support. Its layout was unfamiliar, lacking the consistency and amenities found in the usual barracks towers spotting the High Circle. It seemed stripped, like a scavenged tomb.

Pereglia cleared her throat. "Empiric, I—"

"Unless you've got word about our *fucking supplies*," hissed the Empiric suddenly from in front of her, "or our missing *fucking officers*, I can't imagine whatever you've got to say is going to mean *shit* to me, *Constable Pereglia*."

She waved her hand as she spoke, casting more spells of dismissal with each waft through the air.

"Barely have the sulphide left to even light the fucking lamps," she wafted, "only lit these ones because I saw you flappin' around out there like a lost pigeon."

"I'm afraid I don't have any news about either," said Pereglia. "I was hoping to find some aid in searching for these suspects, and to use your wire when I am finished."

The woman scoffed, and when her short trek across the empty room brought her to a torn-cushioned chair, she flopped down into it, swinging her boots up onto the desk the chair sat in front of. Her boots thudded loud on the desk's tabletop.

"*I'm afraid*, like I said before, that I don't give a shit," said the Empiric. "It's been nearly half a *fucking* season since we've seen hide or tail of the likes of you. Lost over half my officers at this station since. Not a word on the wire, while it worked mind you."

Pereglia's head cocked to one side as the eyebrow on the opposite raised in unison.

"Empiric," she said, "pretend I just showed up and have no idea what you're talking about. Or who I am talking to, for that matter."



The woman looked up at her, and Pereglia watched as the anger slipped off of her face, and was replaced by something different.

“Do you really not know?” she said, through a calmer expression.

“I am not even sure what it is that you think I *should* know,” said Pereglia. “It sounds like you haven’t had any contact with the Constabulary outside of Worms Port in some time?”

“On your way to an Empiric’s badge yourself, kid,” said the Empiric with a note of levity. “The name’s Harp, Empiric Harp. Just call me Harp though, not a fan of the whole Empiric title. Sounds too lofty, if you ask me.”

Pereglia nodded. Harp continued.

“Our last supply drop came before the sun began to show,” she said. “I had a dozen officers here then, now I’m down to myself, and four honey-drowned morons too stupid to leave like the rest.”

“Like the rest?” asked Pereglia.

She looked around briefly for another seat, easily deciding to lean against the wall she found herself near instead.

“When they were late by a dozen days, we sent a line,” Harp said, drawing spirals in the dust on her desk. “Another dozen days after the wire’s response said to hold out, we tried them again to find our wire wasn’t sending or receiving anything anymore. Dead.”

She began another spiral in the dust, connected to the last.

“So I sent two Officers out to inspect the wire, neither returned. I sent another two Officers after them, and neither of them came back either.”

She looked up at Pereglia.

“Can you guess what I did after that?” she challenged.

“Send more people after the first ones?” guessed Pereglia.

“Oh, there go your wings, kid,” joked the Empiric. “Close though. Sent them to the City, to try and get some answers.”

Pereglia raised an eyebrow. “How long ago was that?” she asked.

“Long enough to know that they aren’t coming back either,” said Harp. “Not that I can blame them.”

“You don’t think something happened to them?” asked Pereglia, her voice crisp with doubt. “You think they left willingly? Abandoning their posts?”

“I think they rolled like shit down a hill,” said Harp, making a sloppy rolling motion with her hand.

“Well,” said Pereglia, “I see why you were hopeful I had come under other assignment”

The Empiric huffed.

“Just a *ceaseless tide* of perceptivity, you are,” she said with another roll of her eyes. She dropped her feet and swiveled in her chair towards her empty, dusty desk.

Sliding open a drawer built into the piece of furniture, she removed a brown glass bottle. She twisted out its cork with a hollow tonal sound, and put it to her lips. After a few small sips, each with an accompanying wince and a kiss of her teeth, she offered the bottle to Pereglia.

“Worse than Honeywine in every way, this swill,” she warned.

Pereglia accepted, and gave the open mouth of the small bottle a sniff. She immediately recoiled.

“*God’s fucked ass*, what in the Hells of Halferth is *that*?” she moaned, handing the bottle back with a frantic urgency.

“You don’t want to know, sweetness,” said Harp. She took the bottle, closed it, and casually tossed it back into the drawer of her desk.

“Look, Emp... er, Harp,” began Pereglia, “I wish I had something other than surprise and confused looks to offer you, per your situation here, but all I do have are my own orders.”

Harp looked at her with tired eyes.

“My own orders, and a hungry Rhak,” Pereglia continued, remembering her bird on the roof. “I am going to assume since your

supplies are low, that the regulation feed supplies have been wiped out?”

Harp laughed loud and sharp. “Yes dear, I’m afraid we’ve eaten your bird food,” she snickered.

“With no wire, and no officers,” said Pereglia, “I can’t ask much from you, other than to keep my bird while I investigate. Can you do that for me?”

Harp sat quietly. Little dust motes appeared and disappeared again in the shapes of yellow light escaping from the perforated woodstove in a far corner, weak firelight trickling upwards within it.

“Rathe, eh?” Harp asked after a moment. “The thaumatic man, is’at right? What’s that like, working under him?”

Pereglia thought for a brief moment of her own.

“Predictable,” she said, through an exhale.

“Alright, Constable,” said Harp, inhaling as if to sample and test Pereglia’s answer, and swinging her chair around to face her. “Tell me about your investigation.”

“Double murder, more than half a day ago, in a tavern some ways Cityward from here, towards Hobble,” said Pereglia, crossing her arms. She wasn’t remarkably sure about this woman.

“We believe the slayings were in retribution for a raid on Hobble a couple days before, I—” Pereglia stopped suddenly to chew her cheek. “I don’t imagine you heard?”

Harp stood. “We may not have a wire, but there’s no shortage of mouths running their way through this little *shithole*,” she barked, and spat on her floor. “We know about the raid, word travels fast as walking and wheels.”

“Of course,” Pereglia conceded.

Harp continued after a quick, squinted glance.

“Double murder at... let me guess... Halfhome I assume?”

Pereglia nodded at the question.

“That’s news, to me at least,” said Harp. “Who was killed?”

"A pair of Grasscloaked men," sighed Pereglia in the most professional way possible, punctuated by a subtle shrug.

"No great loss," said Harp, with a small laugh. She sat back down in her desk's chair again.

"Still *frowned upon* to go murdering them," said Pereglia.

"*Isn't it?*" agreed Harp, smiling. "Well, what makes you think your murderers are headed to the *Port of Worms*?" she asked, once again opening her desk drawer. She fished around inside it with a blind hand, looking for her earlier discarded bottle.

"I think they're after a Watercult priest—" answered Pereglia.

She silently refused the found and proffered bottle with a shook head and an upright palm.

"—another guest at the tavern, he was. Somehow connected to the slain bandits."

Harp frowned and sipped, and frowned again.

"Got a few of those idiots here at any given moment," she said when finished, placing the bottle back in her drawer. "We hear what we hear, but it might surprise you to find out that most fine *denizens* here in Worms Port don't much care for us *Coppers*. We don't exactly have a lot of people lining up to confess their crimes or tell us tales."

Pereglia offered an understanding and sympathetic nod.

"Not sure I care for the *fucking Constabulary* much myself, anymore," Harp continued, and looked up at Pereglia. Her eyes were getting angrier with each little sip.

Pereglia smiled warmly.

"Not entirely sure I can blame you, at this point," she said, "but I do promise you that I will bring attention to your needs here as a priority second to my current case." She straightened herself up, off of the wall, and brushed her uniform down for no real reason.

"Oh I'm sure you will," said Harp. "I'd offer you my assistance, but it sounds like you're chasing a trilobite up a tree, and I'd rather sit here in the dark and get drunk on this warm piss." She opened the

drawer again, once again searching for her bottle. “*If* it’s all the same to you, *Constable*.”

Pereglia began to wonder why she didn’t just leave it on the desk—or even better, have a holster made for it, and park the bottle on her hip next to her baton.

“Naturally,” said Pereglia, with a smile. “I wouldn’t dare interfere with *your priorities*, Empiric Harp.”

Harp chuckled.

“Feel free to inquire with the scattered remains of the Constabulary if you see one stumbling about out there,” she said, gesturing towards the door. “They’re as dumb as I am I suppose—stayin’ here and pretending these badges and pauldrons mean *fuck-all* here in Worms Port anymore—but you bat an eyelash at those fecsy, ill idiots and I’ll wager one might *aid in your investigation*.” She sneered.

Pereglia frowned, blinked a hideous image from her eyes, and cleared her throat. “What *does* mean *fuck-all* here in Worms Port?” she asked.

“Coins,” said Harp, turning back to her desk, and swinging her heavy boots back on top of it with another hollow thud. “Beyond that, you’ll be hard-off on the bad side of the Flower Woman.”

She drank from her brown bottle again. “I’d wager one of yours she’s your best bet at finding your Watercult man,” continued Harp, her ramble beginning to trip up her soaked tongue. “Just don’t—buy her *fucking crimminally* overpriced dead flowers, you get used to the *fucking* smell inna few heartbeats. *Old swin’ler*.”

“I appreciate that information,” said Pereglia, “I cannot imagine this smell will ever leave my nostrils.”

She started walking for the door, stopped and saluted the Empiric once more before continuing towards the exit. Harp laughed, and raised her bottle.

“Y’sure you don’t wan’any?” said the Empiric, rattling the liquid inside the raised bottle, and wincing with an attempted wink.

“Wouldn’t dare deprive you,” said Pereglia over her shoulder as she approached the door.

. . . . .

Clarity crept out of the mist as Mouse crept through the boulders near the treeline once again.

She saw huge rounded shapes begin to form like rotten teeth from the smiling sandy gums of the cove’s beach just a dash’s distance away from her. Hollow skeletal remains of huge wooden wheels on triangular bases—some crumbling, others crumbled more thoroughly, and a few that seemed only recently abandoned. They reminded her of the waterwheel near the school, at the old mill closer to the stream and little pond where she used to live and play not long ago.

She paused, tucked herself in neatly between a barren shrub and a boulder, and took a moment to take a brief inventory, and get her bearings.

“Oh-kay, let’s com-bombulate,” she said to herself. She was pretty sure it’s what the tall man would say, and do, before heading any further.

Mouse stuffed her hands under her burlap habit, and patted the array of mismatched bags and packs she hid beneath it, slung across her shoulders on half-a-dozen straps, made of half-of-half-a-dozen different materials.

She counted four finished throwing stones, and three good shaped rocks she’d nibble on later. She had a few nice pieces of string, some feathers, an excellent trophy, and a handful of those delicious

little eggs her Uncle had scraped off of a trilobite—that she'd scraped up off of the ground while he wasn't looking.

"Mhm," she hummed to herself, satisfied with her inventory..

Surveying the dissipating haze in front of her, she saw dark jagged shapes. She heard sounds of all kinds, voices all tumbling over each other, bells clanging, thumps, thuds and scrapes, shouts, laughter, and splashing waves.

The stench of the place had already begun to wash away from her notice, but came back anew with her newfound focus on what lay beyond. Each small twitch of sound seemed to drag a ragged piece of some connective odor with it. She felt like she could see the smell of the place, dirtying the air around it like a swarm of flies.

She looked back, towards her friend who she had left sick under an old boat and realized the haze hadn't disappeared, but simply snuck behind her, obscuring her view of where she had just come from entirely.

No sounds came from this direction, save for the gentle effervescent rustling of small, rhythmic waves on the sandy beach.

"Please be okay, Jeebie," she said into the wind, as she had seen him do so many times. "I'll be back soonly, if y'see."

She took off from under her little bushy hiding place, pushing her hood up over her head and pulling a mud colored linen from the neck of her habit, covering the lower half of her face. With the bits of cloth covering her more unusual features, Mouse looked not unlike an average school child—as long as no one succumbed to curiosity and investigated her too closely, anyway.

Still, she kept as hidden as she could as she approached the Port. Her bare feet—dirty enough to look like soft shoes from far enough away—padded softly in the soft sand.

Soon she found herself wandering through a graveyard of sodden wood and rotten rope. The sandy rocky beach began to metamorphose into unused docks, slick with sea slime and black with

age. The huge walls of injured buildings took over for the dark gray haze that had once filled her view.

The orange light from the sun had all but disappeared now, and the port that loomed huge and jagged in front of her was glowing with its own mist-diffused light. The fuzzy halo around the place seemed to pulse with the sounds of the activity.

She found herself against the slimy wall of some building on a foundation of short stilts, flanked by a broken dock that stretched towards the sea, missing most of its planks. Dark windows like eyeless sockets stared sightless into the haze. She peered under and into the murky crawlspace.

Beyond the shiny pitch of unlit wet ground, she saw a blurry ribbon of lights and shuffling feet. Her vision was weak in the light, but in darkness it was spectacular, picking up the smallest glints of brightness on the world's edges.

Mouse slipped into the dank space. Slick, smooth and unbothered silty mud met her palms as she crawled. She quickly realized there was just enough space for her to stand, so she did, now only crouched slightly in regulation troglodyte fashion.

Her feet squished and squelched forwards in the smooth sediment, as she made her way carefully towards the illuminated stampede of ankles and feet beyond. She stopped only half an arm's length from the severed shadow, and stared out from her subterfuge at the bright, noisy activity.

She had never seen this many people in one place, all stuffed together like a disorganized school of fish, swimming up and down this river of compacted mud and old cobbles. Her eyes darted from person to creature, from outfit to feature, back and forth—every movement bringing something else new into view.

She saw haggard humans in leather and waxed canvas, strange costumes, all manner of gadgets and pouches dangling from their



belted waists. She saw men, women, children, and old people—and others that could have been any and all of those things combined.

She stared in awe at the gradient in all of their skin tones. Some were deep dark brown like the hard wood of Marm's big bookshelf. Others were as pale-pink as herself. Some were smooth and shiny, others wrinkly and tough looking like old boots. She had only ever seen ones that were the same fawny sand color as Marm and the children at the school. They were all so pretty, she thought. As different as cats.

She saw other folk like herself, mixed among the humans and walking alongside them. She marveled at odd hairless smooth-skinned folk with wide set tiny eyes and even wider, thin mouths that reminded her of the strange smooth lizards she found near the stream in the sunny season.

There were madly massive H'rask, fearsome and strutting nearly naked in bright paints. Some were like giant lizards, toothy mouths and vibrantly inked scaly skin; others more avian with beaks like a turtle's and feathers of startling color.

She felt the feathers in her own hair, black and vaguely iridescent, mottled with flecks of white. A snowfallen oil slick at best compared to the brilliant flower gardens sprouting from these remarkable reptile folk. She saw how they walked in groups, proud but guarded all the same. She saw how the humans stayed well out of their path.

The H'rask wore carved wooden armor lashed over important parts of their bodies with rope, and long strings of beads dangled down from them, shaking as they walked, making the sound of wind through leaves. She had never seen them in the flesh before, but had been fascinated by Marm's stories and her Uncle's warnings about them, and they matched her imagination so closely that she felt like she had known them her whole life.

She saw a huge floppy woven hat walking around on spindly stilts, and when it turned around she had to wrack her brain to bring out the name for the spiderfolk that Marm had told her when one of them had come to Hobble. She had only seen it from far away, but had been taken by their strange arrangement and oddly human, casual demeanor.

This one was close enough she could spit on it, and she followed along in the shadows under the damp building as it walked on its pairs of lanky and spike-haired leg limbs.

She heard footsteps and voices above her. The boards were creaking and bending under the steps of people in the building she hid under. She could see movement through the cracks in her ceiling as she kept pace with the spiderkin.

It looked just like an enormous version of the bug, except it carried itself just like a regular man. Its body was about the size of a man's body, though the man in question would need to be the big bellied kind. Under the fuzzy brown and gray gut waved a simple cloth, almost like the apron Marm would wear. It was covering something she couldn't see and flowing free in the wind.

From the sides of its body, four hairy limbs sprouted from segmented joints, shoulder and hip separated only by the direction the limbs took. The pairs towards the ground worked to function as legs, two sets that bent and walked like a human's, while the topmost four acted as four individual arms, swinging casually at its side as it walked.

She found herself locked onto its eyes. A cluster of small, mirror black orbs on a head about the size of a man's head, and when the enormous upright spider turned slightly to her direction, Mouse froze. She realized she couldn't tell where the creature was looking. Its face had no other visible features, only a great bushy hedge of thick brown hairs under the cluster of eyes, like a big beard.

A spidery arm reached out towards the building she was sequestered under, holding something between its claws. It retracted

holding another thing, and the giant spider turned back down the path, and continued to walk. She swallowed hard, then followed again, in awe of the funny walking creature, until she met a wall.

She had reached the foundation of another building, constructed of more solid materials, and found herself on much more solid ground. She watched the huge bug saunter down the street, its huge, wobbly woven hat bobbing behind it. The hat obscured its whole body as it walked, just like a man would walk, on long stick thin brown legs, swinging identical arms, two by two.

Mouse had to stifle a giggle when she registered that it really was just a giant spider walking around backwards—and the enormous, floppy hat served to hide its undercarriage from the world.

The only reason its eyes were on the front of its face, were because a spider's eyes are on the tops of their heads. She imagined a pair of thick sickle fangs, slicked back like oily black hair hidden underneath the hat. She imagined the Netterling stuffing his snacks under there, where his mouth would be. She wondered what else they had hidden in those hats.

Netterling! That was it!

Mouse smiled under her cloth mask.

*“Good job, me brain,”* she whispered to herself, and gave her head a gentle, muddy pat. Her brain took the opportunity to gently remind her of the mission they were on.

She hadn't seen anything that looked like a rain barrel outside the building she had snuck under; a threshold that seemed to be a barrier between the dead beach filled with rotting structures, and the town beyond, alive in ones only slightly less decayed.

Beyond this path she observed were rows of buildings, and she could see the road twist and bend out of view. She didn't see any white trees on banners, or anything that looked remotely medicinal either.

She did see a cart or some kind of vehicle, being pulled by some stocky, hoofed animal whose top half was obscured, but she guessed was probably a donkey. She liked donkeys.

The wheeled box rocked on rigid wheels as it crossed the lumpy road, hugging the side of the building she hid under. Without any combobulatory deliberation, or really any thought at all beyond some kind of reflex, she rolled from under her wood plank cave and through the passing wheels.

She found herself in a frantic instant, chest hammering with thrilled heartbeats. Her back was on the ground as she stared up at the cart that quickly continued forwards while she pawed at its underbelly for a handhold. There was nothing except a flat underside of thick tight-fitted planks quickly disappearing above her, not even an axle for the rickety, bolted on wheels.

She rolled and perched on all fours, then matched speed with the vehicle to crawl along under the cart as it limped down the outside of the path.

Mouse scrambled easily; not an entirely unnatural posture for locomotion, but she felt exposed plodding along like the donkish animal in front of her. The street was littered with all sorts of obstacles to dodge as well, greasy bones, crumpled paper, manure of all kinds, objects she'd never seen before. Boots and hooves, skirts and trousers, clawed feet and bands of distant foundation in varying shades of rotten wood crept by her periphery.

The cart was approaching an alleyway on the opposite side of the street, a tight corridor of leaky looking space between two drippy buildings. Mouse scanned the street, and as luck would have it, a break in the traffic formed in front of the alcove across from her.

She rolled again, back out from between the rolling wheels and her muddy form came to a brief rest in the middle of the shadowy street before she bounded towards the darker recesses in between buildings.

“Outta the way, *scrap!*” shouted a raspy, fried voice.

Mouse did not turn around to look at who gave her instructions she was already well in the middle of following under her own command, but she imagined it was a very large toad.

She ran at full speed through the dark alleyway. Her vision picked up diamond flashes of weak light on the moisture weeping out of the construction, glinting on the brown and green slime that seemed to cover everything. It looked like the feathers in her hair, faint colors shining through blackness, peppered with flecks of weak white.

She ducked behind a barrel, and checked behind her. Nothing but a sliver of passing traffic, illuminated by the town's hazy lighting leaking off of vehicles and out of windows, dripping down from infrequent lamp posts, with fuzzy phosphorescent flames.

She socketed herself back between the big wet barrel and the darkness around it. A drop of water slid down the side of the barrel, changing course as it encountered the topography of the slimy foliage covering its outside. She watched the little glinting light reflecting on its surface as it cut its path downwards to the ground.

She brought up a muddy paw and knocked on the outside of the big bellied cask and it returned a solid heavy sound.

“Oh, ‘ello barrel brother,” she said sweetly to the banded container, patting it again. “I wunner if you is fulla rain, if y’see?”

“*Tloonk,*” said a low noise from the barrel’s top.

“I know, I know,” Mouse said back. “You’s just a barrel.”

She hopped up on a convenient nearby crate, which gave her enough elevation to grab the rim of the big container and hoist herself up to its top. Her feet slipped on its slimy outside until her little nails found purchase, and she peeked over its edge.

Set down into the top of the thing was a slotted lid, equipped with a thick handle. The slot was occupied by the end of a green tube that stretched up along a slick wall into the darkness of the alleyway, towards the dim brightness of the moonlit night sky.

With one hand gripping hard, and her feet dug into its soft wooden side, she used her other hand to flip the lid over. It teetered over the opposite side of the barrel and landed with a dull thud of wet wood on wetter ground.

“Ope, sorry ‘bout yor hat,” said Mouse, and hoisted herself up to perch on the barrel’s lip, grabbing the corroded copper downspout to steady herself.

She leaned forwards and stared down into the contents of the big vessel’s full belly. It was so pitch black she wasn’t even sure it was full until she reached down and touched something wet, sending faintly shiny ripples across its surface.

She scooped up some of the mysterious liquid in her paw, uncarefully rinsing mud from it into the basin, and brought it to her nose for a sniff. It had no discernable smell beyond the regular stench of the place, now melted into the background of her senses and permeating each one of them.

Hesitantly, she gave the mystery liquid a taste with a dab of her tongue. It tasted like it smelled, like secretly stinky wet nothingness. She splashed a bit, testing its consistency again, and gathered up some more in her cupped paw. She gave it a slightly braver sip.

It was water, or at least something doing a very good job pretending to be water. “You wouldn’t lie to me brother barrel,” she said, slipping the tall man’s drinking skin from under her burlap and dipping it into the water. “Would you?”

“*Blubble lub,*” said the drinking skin.

“Well if you think so,” mumbled Mouse under her breath in reply to the object, “I’ll believe ya, I don’t think brother barrel much cares what’s fullin’ ‘is belly long as it’s full, if y’see.”

“*Uubup’lup.*” said the drinking skin, with some finality as it lost its last breath of air.

Mouse pulled its brimming mouth up out of the inky barrel, and fastened its top. As she pulled it out of the water with a small grunt, its new weight caught her by surprise and she struggled for a moment.

“Give it, brother barrel!” said Mouse, pulling up on the heavy little sack of water.

“Give what?” said a voice behind her.

Mouse spasmed like a startled chicken, and stifled a yelp. Her precarious perch on the lip of the barrel was yanked from under her as startled limbs shot out at odd directions. She scrabbled in a panic and clung on best she could.

“Oh grabbers,” said the voice. “Sorry, kid!”

Mouse heard a scuffle. She tried to look towards it, wobbled forwards, then overcorrected to avoid the face first dive into the water barrel. She tumbled backwards towards the muddy ground, flailing flapping arms. The waterskin stayed behind.

“*Oof?*” said the soft thing she landed on.

Mouse scrambled to her feet, and noticed that she had been only a few arms away from the other side of the alley, in almost full view right around a little fence. She couldn’t believe she’d been so careless.

There was a dirty little human climbing up off of the ground on the side of the barrel where she’d fallen, and she scampered to the shadows on the other side of its big wooden gut.

The human stood up, brushed some dirt further into their dirty clothes with dirty hands, and looked in her direction.

“Where’d you get to?” asked the voice.

Mouse heard wet footsteps approaching, faint against the odorous noise of the street just beyond.

“Were you talkin’ to that *barrel?*” said the voice.

Mouse tried to find a hole in the building her back was to, and glanced down the alleyway opposite her pursuers approach. The building was solid, a foundation of stone and unbroken walls. She could make a break for it, but she didn’t know where to go after that.

She looked up, and saw the green pipe, snaking up a wall towards a roof. She got ready to climb. She could scare them off from up there and come back to get the—

“Hi-lo!” said the dirty human, peeking over the side of the barrel. “I’m Lenn.”

“I’m *hiding*,” said Mouse, accidentally. She was bunched up and tucked in her burlap like a little brown fibrous turtle. “Not here though, I’m hidin’ somewhere else, if y’see.”

She was trapped, she was caught. It was over. She only had three good throwing rocks and this was a whole town. Uncle Jeebie was going to die and she was going to get put in another cage. She should have stayed with him, she should have let him come with her.

“Are you okay?” asked the human.

Mouse peeked out from under her hood. The human named Lenn’s voice had a funny pluck to it, like a string instrument.

“Pologize for scarin’ ya,” they said.

Lenn wore a concerned look. Mouse couldn’t tell if she was looking at a boy or a girl, but the face was kind, and dirty.

Lenn was a good bit older than the other children at the school in Hobble, but still young for a human. They were wearing layers of torn and ripped sweaters over canvas coveralls, stuffed into a pair of ill fitting skin boots. Wild mud-colored hair sprouted out from under and through a loose knit cap. They crouched in front of Mouse’s balled up form.

“Didn’t scareded me, if y’see,” lied Mouse.

“I did,” said Lenn, bouncing their eyebrows up and down a little, “and then you fell over.”

Mouse scowled under her scarf. She met Lenn’s eyes and squinted through the little crack between cloth shrouds.

“Is you gonna try an’ *get me*?” said Mouse, angrily. “I ain’t gonna *get getted easy*, if y’see.”



Lenn laughed, and sat down in the mud. “*Get* you? I ain’t a worm, kid.”

“Are ya hurt?” Lenn asked, with sincerity.

“*No*,” huffed Mouse.

“Good,” said Lenn, scooting closer. “Why’d ya think I was gonna getcha? Someone got nets for ya, kid?”

“I’m *hiding*,” Mouse insisted again.

“From *who*?” asked Len.

“The *Fingajam* people,” said Mouse, in a severely cautious whisper.

Lenn hooted and rolled backwards in the dark damp alleyway, kicked their feet up and laughed hard.

“The *who-jam* people?!” they shouted between loud giggles.

Mouse stood up.

“The *Fingajam* people!” she said again, loudly herself this time.

“They eat rotted fish an’ be feeding’ folks to worms!”

Lenn replaced a tear of laughter on their cheek with some dirt from their hand.

“Kid,” they said, “You talkin’ about the *Vingarum* makers? They just sell fishy salt water to idiots. Ain’t nobody to hide from.”

Mouse looked at the strange dirty person rolling in the mud, laughing. She thought about all the people and things she had seen on her way here. How proud and free they looked, even the filthy sad ones, and the strange wide-faced newty people, and even a Netterling. They all walked in the light.

“No need to go skulkin’ around in the dark yammerin’ to barrels,” continued Lenn, “Cuz everyone’s welcome, no matter what y’are or what y’done, we’re all shit here. You ain’t even gotta worry about them Coppers no more.”

Lenn hoisted themselves up from the ground to join the upright Mouse, still obscured in her now mud-covered burlap. They reached into the top of the water barrel and retrieved the floating water skin,

then walked over and offered it, dripping and full, to the disguised girl.

"The worms though," Lenn said, "them ya can't hide from. If you're gonna tip over into any water here, you best hope it was a barrel."

Mouse reached out and took the water skin, quickly stuffing it into her habit. It was heavier than she thought it would be, and she had to carry it in front of her like a big belly of her own.

"Pootyfage," said Mouse.

"What?" said Lenn, screwing up their face in confusion.

"I need the place with the white tree on it, if y'see," said Mouse.

"I thought you said you weren't hurt?" said Lenn, still wearing a lost face.

"Needa pootyfage anyway," said the girl.

"Well, whatever that is, you'll bet Old Cyr has it," said Lenn confidently. "Flower shop is up this road a ways, I can show you."

"Flower shop?" asked Mouse.

"Aye, Flower shop, medics shop, Ol' Cyr's got quite the racket here," explained Lenn.

"Racket?" asked Mouse again. She wasn't quite sure what an *Old Cyr* was either, but she thought it was probably a person.

"Oh yeah, everything in Worms Port's a racket," answered Lenn. "Means it'll cost ya. You do have coin, don't ya?"

"I got strings," said Mouse, "and feathers, an' a ear, an' some sleepy eggs, and uh..." She stuck the throwing stones she had been palming back into one of her satchels. "Some *normal* rocks."

Lenn's confused face was back. "Well, yer gonna definitely need *coin* for your uh, pooty-thing," they said. "I think, anyway..."

"Oh-kay!" Mouse said sharply. "I'll go get some coin, if y'see."

She turned around and began to march back the way she had come, away from the human she had met, and towards the sliver of activity at the other end of the back street.

“Oh—kay,” said Lenn, and watched the strange little lump of muddy cloth, heavy with water, waddle away down the dark alley.

. . . . .

The tall man’s eyes snapped open as the thrust of the spear bit into him, pouring rough wood through his shoulder. Pain painted his vision with bright flashes of un-white in the thick darkness.

The piercing weapon began to drag him upwards, and he stood with it, grasping the splintering shaft to halt its march through his flesh. He roared with anger, and focused his blind glare—pure pitch blackness surrounded him and his assailant, oily and present, like they were draped in a wet fabric woven of pure shadow.

The bandit on the other end of the spear snarled. Feculent brown teeth like rotten kernels of corn fell freely out of his mouth as a second mouth opened wide across his neck. The throat-mouth grinned, toothless as if to mock the one above it, and vomited steaming-hot, black blood. Fire and screams wreathed him as a halo, breaking through the black veil, his body churned with vicious blades of grass, like a sea of living swords.

The tall man roared again, and forced the jagged shaft through the meat of his own shoulder, dragging his attacker towards him. Huge splinters grew out of him like pine needles. He reached out a clawed hand, gauntlet crumbling to sand, and took a handful of the razor cloak, and pulled. The monster jerked towards him, belching mud and bugs from its two awful mouths.

The tall man lost his footing and stumbled. He crushed plump pumpkins under his massive boot, tripped over tangled vines, and fell backwards. The rotten corpse of a man with two smiles lurched

forwards, tethered to him by the spear's shaft which was suddenly sucked into his wound with the force of an undercurrent.

The monster followed the spear into his shoulder, sluicing through him like lumpy sewage, and the tall man spiraled into himself after them. He plunged through the whirlpool of his own body, turned inside-out and back again, and he was alone, falling through pure black. Falling, falling further and faster, and crashing into heavy, deep dark water.

Endless black, crushing and squeezing with the pressure of an entire ocean. This brief moment of silent solace was shattered as huge pale faces of carved stone broke the entropic surface above him like glass. Falling colossal statues turned abyssal meteorites, tails of bubbling air rising upwards towards the unrecognizable light. Their wide, blank eyes were calm and sorrowful, broken and breaking as they plunged after him. His face, he realized, though not the one he wore now.

His heavy armor dragged him down, down into the dark as the shattered stone faces came for him, themselves pursued by a landslide of the very world itself broken into a thousand pieces. He reached a sinking metal hand towards the receding light, towards the fractured stone visages that pursued him. A welcome gesture. Join me.

Another hand grasped his, and pulled.

He burst forth from the cold dark amnia, ripped violently from his quiet fate. Light diffused painfully behind clenched eyelids and air stung his lungs and burned his face. His senses screamed and he crashed onto a sandy, rocky shore.

Someone was screaming. It sounded far away.

The tall man rose to an animal's stance, his eyes still clamped shut to avoid the stinging brightness and salt. He wretched, and coughed, and the ocean vomited from his mouth.

Salty sea water spilled from within him, jelly sea plants slid out, living animals fought to get back in. He tasted the fish, the corals

ripped at his throat, and a crab bit his tongue. The salinity was overwhelming. He burped up a small octopus, who crawled around to the back of his head. He spewed the last bit of sand, and coughed.

The screamer screamed again. Not far away. Under water. Or perhaps he himself was still underwater, hearing someone scream from above.

He opened his eyes, climbed easily to his feet, and opened his eyes. Someone in a dark cloak stood on the bank, surrounded by corpses. The huge gray ocean bore a huge gray storm on its back beyond him.

The cloaked figure bent down, and pulled a bloated, drowned purple body from the sea, and threw it aside as easily as a vermin rooting through trash. The figure's body shuddered as it screamed again, a ragged, gurgling sound.

A name.

The tall man stepped towards the cloaked spectre as it pulled more corpses from the sea, tossing them aside into the piles of dead like refuse. Long, blue skinned corpses, fish-eaten lips baring teeth, eyeless sockets following him as he moved.

It screamed again, clearer now.

A familiar name.

The tall man called out to the dark figure, but no sound came from his lips. He reached out to its shoulder when he arrived behind it, and grasped the figure to turn it around. The cloak tore away in his hands like overcooked chicken skin, hood and all, and as it fell it revealed the figure standing to face him, naked, gaunt and awash in abject terror.

It *was* him, drowned and dead. A reflection of death.

The tall dead man's sunken eye socket pools rippled with bright blue liquid reflections instead of eyes. His face was a carnival mask's personification of absolute sadness, an abused, frantic soul, spectre wrought of pure grief. He contorted with decayed panic, wretched

fear, sloughing woe. The dead man frantically grabbed onto the living one, its head twitching side to side, looking for something.

For someone.

He clawed at the living man's eyes, and screamed again.

That name.

A name he hadn't heard in so long. That he could barely hear now over the roar of it being screamed.

Her name.

His blue star.

He screamed again, desperate and ragged. Both of him, in miserable unison.

. . . . .

Mouse scampered down the festering, damp alleyway, fecund with heavy water. She nearly slid to a stop as she approached the illuminated blade of passing strangers that was the passageway's mouth, and stood. She watched through the slit in her cloth helmet as people hurried by, mumbling to themselves or shouting at each other.

No one looked her way.

One of the strange wide faced and hairless people trudged by slowly, dragging a thick smooth tail behind it in the mud. It carried a big burlap sack over its shoulder, dripping with something thicker than water. The sack's contents wriggled and writhed behind the cloth.

She stepped out of her shadowy corridor and into the lit pathway, taking stride behind the moving drippy bag. Testing the waters of Lenn's claim, she walked in the open.

No one stopped her.

“Honeywine! Fresh just last week from the Hivelands!” yelled a frail, leaf-colored man from behind some sort of table with wheels. “Get yer fairest prices here!” he bellowed, his voice oddly loud for someone so thin.

She kept walking, a tiny brown speck in the chaos. People and things and noise filled every crack the weak and shifting light of the place could reach—long shadows sweeping across everything as everything else moved.

Everyone seemed so busy, so concerned with themselves, that even in the midst of all this wild new life, she felt safer than she had in the shadows.

No one hid in Worms Port.

“Wormchops!” shouted a bulbous woman, from an open window above a large shelf built into the wall below it. “Freshly de-brined and parasite free!”

Mouse’s stomach churned and rumbled. Something smelled vaguely palatable among the stench, and she realized she hadn’t eaten since that little crunchy bird, with a few acorns along the way. She knew her friend, many times her size, had eaten comparatively far less.

She logged the location of the smell in her mind, mapping out what little of this new place she had explored. She bet she could find that dirty human again, who knew how to get the medicine her Uncle needed. She knew where to get water, and now she knew where to find food. She knew she could get some coins from the tall man—he had some blue ones that would clink sometimes in a little pocket on his belt.

She’d check on her Uncle, get some coins from him, come back, and see if the people with the Worm meat wanted one too. She was glad that her barrel brother didn’t ask for anything, and she felt bad about leaving his hat on the ground.

Feeling confident in her plan, she recognized the shadowy, stilted foundation she’d crawled through earlier, under a mucky and hurt

looking building. Mouse walked beside it for a few paces, then slipped into the dark space, casual and confident like a cat.

Crouching like a cave creature once again, she found the footprints she had made earlier, happy to find evidence she was actually under the right building. They'd all looked very similarly mucky and hurt in this strange town that reminded her of an abnormally yucky dead fish. She followed them towards the moon-blue night beyond the shiny pitch-black under the building's stilts.

She slipped out, and broke into as close to a run as she could manage, carrying her heavy sack of rain water. She passed the giant wheels, the decaying docks, and the huge rocks.

The little upturned boat came back into view.

"*Jeeebie*," she sang, "gotsum water, if y'*seee-bie*!" She skipped around the corner obscuring their camp. "If yo're not *dead*, you kin *'aaave* some!"

She saw his weapon laying flat on the ground. One of his giant boots stuck out from under his musty cloak. She dropped the skin of water on the ground, and ran to his side as quickly as she could.

"Big man!" she shouted, "I's just playin'!"

There was no reply or movement. She yanked the tarp cloth off of his body, and her heart sank like a rock.

She saw a dead man.

His eyes were shut tight in a grimace that melted across his gaunt, shiny face. A bead of agitated moisture trickled down between its eyes, tracing the still lines frozen in its placid, gray flesh.

"Nooo!" squeaked Mouse, a desperate call like a lost baby animal searching for its mother. "No, no, NO!" she shouted, and pounded on his lifeless chest.

"Uncle Jeebie!" Her delicate hands smashed against rough metal and soft leather. "Wake up!" she demanded.

He didn't.



“I don’t know what to do without you, if y’see,” she cried. Warm tears began to wet the fuzz on her cheeks. “Please, Jeebie, please wake up.”

She climbed on top of his cold chest, sat there, and sobbed.

“Don’t go, not yet, not without me,” she whimpered softly, curling into a little ball on the man’s belly. “I don’t wanna miss no one else.”

Mouse wept. Her little body shook with each breathy sob.

The stone surface of the man’s body rose slightly, and collapsed slightly more. The lines in his frozen face twisted and reformed, like cracking rock. A low, sick rumble came from within him, and he groaned.

“JEEBIE!” Mouse yelled, and slapped him across the cheek.

His face took the blow like it was made of clay, heavy and dense. He didn’t shift with the blow, as much as he dented.

She jumped up off his slumped body, swooped the water skin up off the ground, and ripped its mouth open.

A small wave of slightly stinky water broke over the tall man’s pained features as she blasted his twisted face with half the skin’s contents.

He shifted slightly.

Mouse slumped then too, like a puppet with snipped strings. She stood with the now nearly-waterless water skin heavy in her hand, heart pounding, her only friend in the world dying before her eyes.

A sound twitched her ear, out of time with her exhausted breathing. A foamy squishy sound from behind her, a foot in the wet sand.

“What in—” said a voice.

Mouse spun fast, and flung the bottom heavy skin of water towards the noise. As she wheeled around, each hand retrieved a sharp projectile from her hidden satchels. White hot anger steaming up inside her.

The water-heavy leather bag slapped into Lenn's face, knocking them over onto their rear end. The human barely seemed to register the blow, or the landing, any more than the water skin did, both slapping wetly onto the sandy ground.

Lenn's eyes were locked, wide and blind to the rest of the world, focused on the tall man's enormous, crumpled body.

"*I'll kill ya!*" screamed Mouse, and raised her razor rocks.

"Toss me," said Lenn, flabbergasted and unaware of the threat. "No fucking chance." Their eyes drooled with amazement.

"*I will!*" hissed Mouse.

The awestruck, dirty intruder raised an arm and pointed a tremulous finger towards the dying armored man. "Is that a... a *Dravaknyr*?"

"It's a *promise*, if y'see!" Mouse snarled menacingly, brandishing her stones.

Lenn seemed to regard her for the first time, but kept their eyes locked on the fallen armored giant.

"No no," they said, stabbing their extended filthy finger into the air. "Him."

Mouse risked a glance towards the extended digit's aim, making sure there wasn't another guest. She only saw her friend.

Lenn began a curious ramble. "Is he a *half-giant*? A god-fucked *Windvoiced*? An actual Howling Knight?" continued the awed intruder, "A *Dravaknyr*? Of *Nyrsk*? The Sea-Claimed, *Hasdvardan* Kingdom?"

Mouse had no idea. She hadn't ever heard half of those words, except for one. Sometimes the tall man would mumble as he slept.

"I dunno. I dun hav'a *clue* what none'a that *is*. All I got is *him*," she said, lowering her weapons. "He's my friend, an' he's a mess. If y'see."

Lenn barely glanced over to the forlorn little girl. “Don’t worry kid. I can help him,” they said as their gaze wafted back over to the tall man’s near-lifeless body.

“Toss me to the *worms*,” said the wide-eyed human, “I knew they weren’t *all* gone.”

## CHAPTER 6

### *BREAKING FREE*

Peregria had replaced her thin cloth mask over her nose again as soon as she had left the dingy outguarding, well aware that it offered little actual protection from the olfactory assault. The veil of fabric gave her mind the chance to pretend it was doing a lot, an opportunity which it leapt at like an ambush predator.

The constabulary outguarding was located semi-centrally in the Port's chaotic layout, like one eye of a sea-mouthed and dock-toothed skull. The other eye was the Flower Shop, apparently still as central an entity as it had been when she was young—despite the stark lack of its namesakes anywhere else in the disgusting town.

Worms Port had become insalubrity incarnate. A cavitated rotten corpse alive with sentient predatory infections sluicing through its bloated gut. Filthy, bedraggled people milled around everywhere in an awful visual harmonization with the slimy walls and broken shutters. They shouted from windows, tossing pots of unknown sludge out into the streets. Vendors hollered at passers-by, and passers-by hollered back.

“—no rocks, no hooks, no bones—”

“—finest bees in the Hivelands, imported of course—”

“—I want my coin back, you wretched—”

She had visited The Port of Worms with her father, many seasons ago, when the place's even older name's titular flora was still prevalent. The change in branding was the bait that had brought them to the fishing port to begin with, her young mind fascinated by the prospect of the creatures so big and bold they could rename a whole city.

She had begged her father to take her, and like with most things, he had acquiesced. She always found herself fascinated with animals, big and small. From the birds in the sky to the bugs in the ground, every creature that met her eyes was seen as a friend and a mystery.

Peregria's father, in turn, always found himself fascinated with his daughter instead. Her bravery, her unquenchable thirst for finding unknown things, and then always doing her best to know them. It was this encouraging fascination that led her to join the constabulary, following in his footprints. It was his inspiration that diverted her from his worn path, and challenged her to enroll in the Aviary School—replacing those footsteps with wingstrokes of her own.

They had taken a motorized trolley with comfy sleeping hammocks that smelled like burnt honey as it rumbled low down the Hivelands and across the High Circle. It had only taken a day to arrive, a warped moment, bent in time. That day had passed by faster than she thought possible as she gazed out of the trolley's windows, watching the world fly by at incredible speed. They had been very expensive tickets.

“—here! Dried seaweed! Great for a chew! Dried seaweed—”

“—well my mother's not going to like it—”

“—for seven? Are you drinking the melisol?”

The port she visited so long ago, dragging her father by the hand to the busy docks to see the strange creatures, was clean and lively. Flowers of all kinds and colors grew from, or were attached to every corner and post and wall—every person both native and visitor as well. Denizens dressed in finery, instead of filth. Vibrant life instead of pastel death.

They said the flowers were there to mask the smell of the Vingarum production, which gave the place an odd smell. The smell she remembered served better to ruin the flowers reputation, than save the Port's.

Preglia walked through the filthy, sick place, observing its winding streets overflowing with people, like pus-weeping wounds.

She watched as the washed out slime that coated the town began to coat the faint memories she held of it, putting torn wet rags where flowers once were. Unnatural white and sick green chemical lamps bathed the ill streets in decomposing colors.

Someone coughed nearby, deep and hollow, a reverberatory and ill sound. She appreciated her thin red mask a little bit more. They continued to rack their lungs, and Preglia hurried herself forwards a bit, hoping to escape the disease she imagined welling up behind her like a storm cloud.

“—it’s *what*? Oh, that’s fine—”

“—no honestly, I do, it’s just, he’s so—”

“—like needles I tell ya, every time—”

She stared at the mud that had begun to cake her boots, adding slick weight to every step.

Her small self—who may have dragged her father down this very street—had spent unknowable amounts time playing with the earthworms, in the mud and the dirt, telling them stories and trying to hear theirs. Their wiggly faceless bodies blindly prodding their way through the cool wet soil made her feel sleepy and relaxed. Unworried.

She’d loved when the Netterlings would ride their big wobbly hippogenia through the square in Featherview. Massive, wobbly creatures with legs that bent like cooked vegetables, long and nearly see-through bodies that swayed with an awkward grace. Massive yet benevolent terrestrial relatives of the tiny fingernail-sized hazards that gave people nasty stings on some of the warmer beaches.

“—count it! I won—”

“—slice or... a’right don’t get greedy—”

“—best deal in all of Worms Port, right here—”

Unlike the small ones—who would leave the stung lost in their beds for days, returning from their sweaty adventure with wild visions

of other, impossible worlds—the huge, lumbering hippogenia were friendly and smiling, gentle beasts.

She had expected smiling wormy faces like theirs, or blind benevolence like their muddy, crawling cousins when she came to see the Port's new namesake. The huge gnashing trap-jaws of the Ormaormos terrified her.

One of the huge worms had taken a pelagull, one of the fat bellied sea birds largely viewed as pests. The scream of the captured animal as it was dragged into the sea, the gurgling gag as it continued to wail in sad, low honks as the water filled its lungs, never left Pereglia's mind.

“—gotma dangol dilwiller stuckinit—”

“—one for two! Two for three!—”

Everyone else at the docks had cheered. She had insisted her father take her back as far inland as possible immediately, and hadn't gone swimming for nearly six seasons after that. She still felt uneasy near the sea. Even leagues from this horrible place, in the lakes and ponds in the Veradian, she never got over the fear that something lurked, hungry, in deep or dark waters.

“*Fucking Worms Port*,” she muttered under her breath. She sincerely hoped this investigation wouldn't take her to those docks.

She kept to the side of the path, as faster travelers moved past her despite her hurried pace, and so she could easily slip by those slower than herself.

“—and *twenty* for that?”

“—hahah! Go on with it—”

“—a fucking shiner or two on your end—”

Skeletal buildings with hollow, dark windows. Gaunt, pallid people with sunken, lost eyes. Everyone she saw seemed to be sculpted of the grime coating the place like vile snow. The only lively souls present seemed to reside in the ones involved in trade. Booths and

carts, and the people surrounding them, bustling with shouts and activity.

Signs outside buildings gave away purpose for the roofed places. Most of them served alcohol, or worm meat, or to likely overprice trade supplies. The Vingarists were everywhere, shouting prices and taking bids from robed Denizens, H'rask, Salman, and even a Netterling. People and other folk of all kinds were everywhere, and she kept her eyes peeled for those gaudy Watercult hats.

“—cuts, half cuts, no cuts! I got long ones, short ones—”

“—oh come on, don't turn me down—”

“—get your Wormsmeat here! *Re-duced* parasites, *re-duced* prices!”

Sideways eyes flashed whites as they unsecretly searched her body up and down as she walked—no doubt noticing her cleanliness in contrast to the rumored remains of the Constables in this place. Her Pauldron was the only piece of copper she'd seen—that wasn't on a trader—that wasn't greening to some degree. Her form fitting uniform certainly wasn't helping in keeping any eyes off of her either.

A glimpse of sweet scent tickled one of her nostrils and that rank flower smell rose through her with renewed nostalgia. The shop was close, which was good timing as she was beginning to feel like the center of attention. The swarm of sad eyes all seemed to wander her way as she passed by, like moths to a lamp.

“—dirty that'n up for a few nights—”

“—think they can tell us what's on—”

“—Vingarum in the port, finest quality!”

She turned a corner into a more open area, something that may serve as a square or gathering place, if it wasn't full of garbage. A pile of random objects and discarded things towered at a man's height in the center of the open place. A small portion of it burned weakly.



She walked up a gentle incline, and watched as a young girl brought an armful of what looked like thin sticks and large chips of wood into the smoldering section of the heap.

“—you later, love to—”

“—linens, waxed fabrics, sapskins, leather pieces—”

“—on your life.”

“Oh, on yours then? I should—”

Peregilia saw the banner for the flower shop, tattered edges wind-tied into knots. A moldy patina of fungal impressionism weakened the brilliance of the snow-white and leafless tree painted on its face.

The whole outside of the building was covered in a tapestry of woven dried flowers. Cracked and jagged fingers of dead stem and papery withered blooms, color-lost and long absent their own original, living moisture.

A number of grimey children loitered in the area, sword-fighting with the long dead flower stems and throwing rocks at the heap. They chased each other, climbing in and over the dangerous pile of rusted junk as thrown stones rang in dull tones against the metal.

“Oi!” shouted Peregilia at a young boy, teetering on an imbalanced hunk of some rusted metal frame. “Get down from there boy, you’ll get hurt!”

“Stuff yer own gut-wound, ya nast-assed pusty lumpscunt!” shouted the child, and jumped off of the pile of trash, giggling and running away out of view down an alley.

The other children giggled as well. One threw something splashy at her, which both missed and fell short by considerable amounts, something she was quite grateful for.

“Well shit,” muttered Peregilia. She watched as the rest of the pack of filthy youths scampered down a dirty alleyway, squealing and shouting odd dull curses back at her across the soggy, anechoic square.

Peregilia scowled. “Wasted meals, the lot.”

She continued towards the decayed topiary of a building, and was relieved when she finally made it to its dead, flowery door. She swung it open without hesitation.

A burst of the best smelling air she'd encountered in her entire life, as far as she was concerned, met her senses like strokes of paint, and she lost no time hurrying herself inside.

She shut the big door behind her with a very satisfying aerated hiss that finished with a heavy, sucking thump. Safely sealed from the offending outside musk, she pulled her mask down from her face and took in her new surroundings through deep breaths.

"Ohh," Pereglia moaned. "Oh air, air without shit in it, I thought I'd lost you," she purred as she fanned more of the stuff towards her.

She hadn't been speaking to anyone, hadn't seen anyone either, but a soft chuckle came from somewhere near her in the new space. She looked up, taking in her surroundings for the first time, having been completely distracted by her nose's rescue.

"Hi-lo?" she invited, more a request than a greeting.

The building looked on the inside, the same as it had on the outside, like the hide of some plant-furred animal. Unlike the dying and dead flowers that covered the shell of the place—taking on the same deathly pastels as the rest of the lysing corpse of a town—the flowers in here were vibrant and alive. A thousand shapes of a thousand colors speckled a deep green background filled with striations of intense, contrasting verdance.

A throat cleared, somewhere in the green.

Pereglia's eyes darted around the room, overwhelmed by the sudden shift in scenery. The air inside was warmer—still damp like the wretched soup outside, but somehow softer, almost radiant. It reminded her of home in the Veradian, all those seasons ago.

She tried to focus, but the room was an assault of color and texture, and she found it impossible to leave her eyes on any one spot

for more than a heartbeat. Flowers spilled from every surface, every kind she'd ever seen, and plenty more she hadn't. Roses in a dozen shades of red and a dozen even stranger hues besides, coin plants shining like metal, lilies bright enough to burn. Orchids twisted into improbable shapes, fieldstars shimmered with pearlescent white, while Night's Dagger drooped in sinister dark purple.

"The smells'll cost ye, I'm afeared," said a floating voice, from somewhere in the color-specked green. It chuckled again.

The voice was old, and apathetic, somehow supple and hard in unison. Rough like bark, smooth as the bare wood under it. The voice of an ancient tree, thought Pereglia. Tie that to the banner out front, and it stays.

Her searching eyes found their way to the ceiling of the place, past half a dozen different-colored weakly burning chemical lamps. The night's stars were staring down at her through scum-smudged and stained-green glass. The room looked like some continuation of the sky in a child's drawing, using too many and all the wrong colors.

Pereglia cleared her own throat, trying to clear her mind along with it. "I'm here on official business," she said, as officially as possible.

"And whose office are ye busy for, Charmer?" said the voice, cutting sharper through the humidity. The voice of an old woman—she was sure of it now.

Pereglia answered with a salute. "Constable Pereglia. I am here under Authority of the Constabulary of The—"

"Oh!" sang the voice, like an excited little songbird. "The *Constabulary*. Then they'll cost ye double."

"Sorry?" Pereglia frowned, still unsure who was speaking. Her eyes continued to flick around the room.

"The smells, Charmer," explained the voice. "Every breath you take, takes my precious flowers' value away, sniff by sniff. Not wise to

go givin' yer value away to anyone who gets a sniff of ye—not *for free*."

There was an emphasis on the last words that Pereglia couldn't place, but somehow stuck her nerves to the pot. The plant-dampened room's acoustics made everything soft and directionless. The voice came from no particular place, as if the flowers themselves were speaking.

"I do apologize," said the constable, forcing a polite smile. "I would feel a bit more comfortable if I could see who I was speaking with—unless you really are just the flowers talking and I've lost my wheels for good."

Pereglia laughed lightly, attempting to disarm herself under the gaze of hundreds of petaled eyes watching her from the walls. She scanned them for any telltale signs of life. A section of the wall near a dark wooden shelf lined with dozens of small seedling pots chuckled softly—and turned around.

A woven mass of flowers stepped forwards, holding a very corroded copper watering can. At its center was the wrinkly old face of a woman, set where a face might reasonably go on such a thing.

"Comfort is an odd thing to search for in this Port," said the old woman, her voice lifting through the flowers woven into her stained, white hair. She laughed again, setting her watering can on the end of the shelf, where it nearly vanished into the surrounding green.

Her body was wrapped in woven stems, petals, and leaves. Most looked supple, alive enough to still be living. She wore such an abundance of flowers, that Pereglia couldn't tell if the braided plaits of fibrous life were attached to some kind of garment, or if the garment itself was flowers through and through. Maybe even growing out of the woman herself.

"Oh, my overworked senses have served me poorly," said Pereglia with a friendly tone. "I'm sorry I didn't see you there."

The Flower Woman moved across the room in a peculiar combination of glide and shuffle, towards a low countertop wreathed in life. It was made of the same dark wood as the seedling's shelf on the opposite wall, both protruding from the colorful chaos of the walls like living branches.

"You become your work, as the old ones say," said the Flower Woman, sitting down in a seat Pereglia couldn't make out in the infinite color-splattered green. "Don't worry, Charmer. I won't tell the Invigilators when you go in for your Empiric's wings."

It was Pereglia's turn to chuckle. "About those smells then," she said, with a friendly smile.

"Pricey on their own," said the Flower Woman, smiling back. "They are, however, complimentary with purchase." She gestured upwards with a dirt tipped hand at an overgrown sign struggling for space on the wall. "Didn't you see the sign, Charmer?"

Pereglia's head ticked to one side as her eyes traced the characters in faded green paint struggling for visibility—a rough approximation of letters, as if someone had reinvented them from memory.

Her sideways head and eyebrows popped upright, and Pereglia laughed. "Clever," she said, "I'll bet that sign says all sorts of useful things to some of your more... unburdened customers."

The old woman's smile widened, and she laughed again. "Oh you *are* sharp after all! Your Empiric played like *she* could read it," she said through her wrinkle-edged grin.

Pereglia grinned too, and then realized a correction was due.

"I'm afraid I'm not stationed here, ma'am," she said. "Harp is not my Empiric... *unfortunately*."

"Oh?" said the Flower Woman, raising an eyebrow. "A shame to be sure. What then, has brought ye to The Port of Flowers, Constable...?"

"Pereglia," answered Pereglia. "It's the Port of Worms now, out there, you know."

"A shame," said the old woman, clucking her tongue.

Peregilia hesitated for a moment. She was unsure what she expected from the old woman's placid face, staring at her through friendly, squinted eyes in her lake of foliage.

She decided on a simple question. "May I ask your name in return, Ma'am?"

The old features squinted happily, melding together into an almost pareidolic face you'd spot on a tree's trunk.

"Long roots have grown since anyone's tilled *that* soil," said the smiling, flower-wreathed face. "When I was born, they whispered *Cyrannah*. A lovely name, if ye asked me." The old woman paused to sigh, and gesture around the room with a glance. "Few call me by that name now. Most know me by that other, uncreative and simple title..." She bounced her eyebrows up and down. "For reasons I'm sure *ye've gleaned*, Charmer."

"A pleasure to meet you, Lady Cyrannah," Peregilia said with a respectful bow of her head. "Not too much of a mystery, your business here, though Harp *did* tell me to avoid your—how did she put it..." The constable shifted her stance uncomfortably. "Your '*overpriced*' wares," she said, wincing with a sympathetic grimace at the offending word. "She said the ghastly smell of this port goes away after not too long... though I think she may have *captive's madness*."

"Oh, we all do here," replied the Flower Woman confidently. "Only way to go." She shifted her leafy bulk in her seat. "She's not wrong though. The senses dull, like all sharp things—with time. Like the pain from an old injury that ye drag aroun' until the day that ye die, it just becomes a part of yer spirit."

Peregilia smiled upside down in acceptance of the proffered wisdom. She liked this old woman. "I think I'll avoid adding this odor to my spirit," she said with a sniff. "If I can carry even a memory of the smell in here with me out there, it would be a *life-changing* improvement."

The Flower Woman nodded her head in agreement. “Let’s see that bandana of yers, Charmer,” she said, extending her hand expectantly.

Preglia reached behind her head and untied the red cloth from around her neck, and handed it over without protest. The Flower Woman laid it across her counter, spreading it out and smoothing the fabric with her fingers.

“Ye never did tell me what brought ye here, Charmer,” said the Flower Woman.

She pulled a hinged wooden box from under the countertop she sat behind, and set it on the surface near the splayed red square. The box’s lid folded over, revealing a series of small glass bottles, each stopped with the stem of a dried flower.

“That’s true,” said Pereglia, watching the woman’s hand float over the selection of bud-corked vials. “And you never told me how much this was going to cost.”

“That’s the least of yer worries, Charmer,” said the old woman, selecting a tube topped with a Tuberose. “I ask for coin, ye ask for information.” She tipped the vial over Pereglia’s bandana, letting a few precious drops seep into the fabric. “This be a *trading* port, after all.”

The Flower Woman continued her ritual, selecting vials with thoughtful precision. She used one stopped with lavender, another with unfamiliar, waxy petals, and another that was corked with some kind of curled bark, like thick paper. Pereglia caught the smell of the sweet potion as it began to seep into the air, her shoulders sinking unconsciously.

“I am looking for a couple murderers—or at least I think it’s a couple,” said Pereglia, watching the woman work.

“No shortage of those here,” said the Flower Woman, putting away the last vial and closing her small cabinet.

"I'm not... sure who they are," Pereglia admitted, "but I am reasonably sure they are in pursuit of a Watercult Priest who would have just arrived here within the last day."

Pereglia leaned in closer as she spoke, watching the woman gently fold her now pungent and oil-inundated mask into a neat triangle. The Flower Woman picked the folded cloth up, and offered it to her. Pereglia took it gently from her hands, then immediately shoved it roughly into her face, inhaling deeply.

"Ohhh," she groaned. "I could kiss you."

"Got no need for kisses anymore, Charmer," said the old woman, and reached out her black-fingered hand, soil colored palm up towards the glass sky. "Just the ol' *shiners*."

Pereglia tied her bandana back around her neck, the soothing aroma already washing away rotten olfactory memories.

"I feel confident you've got a few ears and eyes in this place," she said, sliding a hand into one of the pockets on the sides of her uniform pants.

"I've got lots of little fishies in this pond," said the Flower Woman, hand still outstretched and resting on the countertop.

Pereglia withdrew a slim leather purse from her pocket, and bounced it in her hand, rattling the coins within.

"So," she said, "What's your price?"

"Depends on what yer coffers have to offer, Charmer," said the woman.

Pereglia opened her small leather coin bag, withdrew a shiny silver coin, and placed it in the florist's open palm. The coin's edges and face were finely detailed, rimmed with a chain of feathers, an eight sided compass' star in its center.

"There's the smells accounted for," said the woman, and kept her hand on her counter, palm up.

Harp's warnings echoed faintly in Pereglia's mind. She smiled and haphazardly ignored them, deciding a quick resolution in Worms



Port was worth more than her coin purse's integrity. Dipping two fingers into the purse—and splaying the remaining ones in a posh exaggeration—she withdrew a golden coin and added it to its silver companion in the woman's outstretched hand.

"Almost forgot," said Pereglia with a wry grin, "double for us Coppers."

The golden coin clinked dully against its neighbor. Phosphorescent light glittered its surface in the curves of the embossed sun on its face, rays of carved light like serpentine blades curling over its edge to the other side, hidden in the woman's hand.

The Flower Woman smiled back, and curled her fingers over her prize. Her flowering branch of an arm receded back into the garden of her body.

She leaned back from her countertop, into her realm of roses, and spoke. "Those soggy cultists are usually found wetting their lips. There's a saloon run by a Salman towards the docks from here, sign out front says *Frogsong*."

"I think I know the place," said Pereglia, "Does it have a yellow—well, *yellow-ish* awning out in front of it?"

The Flower Woman nodded. "One of them came to see me just earlier today, beat ye by a few nails. If I were after *my* Empiric's wings, I'd look for the one with the least amount of *filth* on his robes, and an air of *jasmine* around him."

Pereglia raised an eyebrow. "Anything else you can tell me about your recent visitor?"

The Flower Woman swirled her hand around her. "They all look the same to me, under that awful hat," she said, waving away the potential of a continued line of questioning about the man, while pantomiming his telltale scent.

"A shame," said Pereglia, with a smile. "I appreciate your time and wisdom, Lady Cyrannah."

The old woman nodded without a word, and Pereglia turned towards the door. She drew her mask back up across the lower half of her face, and inhaled through the fabric. A flood of scent filled her every crevice, burned her lungs, and the acrid strength of the flower oils stung her eyes.

“Charmer,” called the Flower Woman’s voice from behind her as she approached the door.

Pereglia stopped, and turned back to face her.

“They’ll be waiting for a boat, yer Cultists,” she offered. “The Broadsword, leaving for Slurry Bay.”

“Oh?” said Pereglia. “Those things still come and go from the docks, do they?”

“They do, Charmer,” said the lilting voice.

“How fortunate,” said Pereglia, and reached for the heavy door.

. . . . .

Lenn’s head snapped back to Mouse with a painful looking quickness, and she thought the young human’s eyeballs were going to come straight out of their sockets. She even imagined the little *pop* sound they would make.

“What—why—” stammered Lenn, staring wide-eyed at the girl, mouth wobbling like jelly.

“Somefin’ happen to your brain jus’ now?” asked Mouse, tilting a curious brain of her own on its side.

“You’re—you...” continued Lenn’s mouth, without much aid from the aforementioned brain at all.

“Of course I am, if y’see,” said Mouse.

“You’re a—” stammered the struggling Lenn, their eyes widening further as realization dawned. “A—a...”

Mouse wasn't wearing her hood anymore, and she realized that the human could see her face.

"A princess," she offered in a regal tone with a small and modest bow of her head.

"You're a *Hillkin*!" shouted the still seated Lenn, looking across the damp rocky sand towards the standing girl with a wild grin and still wide eyes.

"So what?" Mouse shrugged.

"You're all dead!" Lenn exclaimed.

"No I'm not," said Mouse, pointing to the tall man. "*He* is!"

They both glanced over as his chest rose weakly and collapsed, like a crushed leaf brushed underfoot by the wind.

"I know!" shouted Lenn, beginning to stand. "You're both 'posed to be *long* dead!"

"No, I'm *sus-posed* to be gettin meddies," said Mouse, stamping a foot and crossing her arms grumpily. "An' I need more water now, if y'see."

"My gramma told me *loads* of stories 'bout the Dravaknyr," said the now standing and still slightly oblivious Lenn, walking towards the tall man under the rotten boat. "About y'all too—your people I mean. The Hillkins."

Mouse bristled at the human's casual dismissal of her mission, but a strange feeling tugged at her chest. It felt like the same feeling she got when she pulled one of the strings in her habit somewhere, and watched it magically cinch a hole somewhere else. A long thread woven through this huge world connected her and this nosey human, making it feel very small.

Lenn turned back to look at Mouse with wide, greedy eyes.

"Is it true?" they asked, "What the stories say happened?"

Mouse's brow furrowed. She had only ever heard stories herself. She wondered if they were the same ones.

"I dunno," she said. "I'm not in any of 'em, if y'see."

A low groan growled through the air, and the pair's attention focused back on the sick man. They both walked over to his body, which had begun to shiver. Waves of full body tremors like claps of thunder building up and dissipating quickly after shaking the world.

"Well, what happened to *him*, then?" Lenn asked, stepping closer to the shivering giant. Mouse trailed after the human, her wary eyes fixed on the curious stranger.

"Why'd ya follow me?" demanded Mouse in her sternest, most grown-up voice. "S'not nice to go sneakin' up behind folks, if y'see." Her fingers toyed nervously with the sharp stones hidden beneath her sackcloth.

Ignoring her, Lenn reached out to touch the tall man's face.

"*Don't you hurt him.*" Mouse snarled, coiling her body like a spring.

"I won't," said Lenn, placing a palm on his forehead without hesitation. "I just wanted to—*Oh!* Hook my eye, he's *boilin'!*"

"*Why'd you FOLLOW ME?!*" screamed Mouse, shrill and feral.

Lenn pulled back their hand, and turned towards the angry girl. Her wrinkly face fiercely wrinkled more, like a snarling animal, fidgeting with something beneath the dirty burlap sack she wore.

"To make sure you was..." Lenn began to lie, but the fury in the tiny little animal girl's eyes flushed the truth out like a startled rabbit. Lenn sighed. "I wanted to see where you found your coins."

"Why?" Mouse demanded.

"*Be-cause* maybe I could find some too!" snapped Lenn, growing frustrated with the interrogation. "Everyone needs coins!"

"I don't," said Mouse, confidently.

"You do to fix whatever *he's* got," Lenn countered, with even more confidence, and gestured toward the tall man. "Now tell me, what *happened* to him?"

"Stuck by a spear in 'is shoulder," said Mouse, pointing to the purulent puncture wound. "If y'see."

Lenn seemed to notice the oozing injury seeping out of the man's armor for the first time—unsurprising in the surrounding muck, as the weeping fluid had taken on the appearance of thick, brownish sludge. Lenn was rather used to the presence of thick, brownish sludge.

"How long ago?" they asked, moving closer to investigate and recoiling almost immediately. "*Ugh!* Smells worse than the 'garum!'"

Mouse shrugged. "I dunno, not very long. Only slept twice since—him once, I fink. He don't usually get hurt when he's hurt, if y'see."

"We've got to get his armor off," said Lenn.

Mouse visibly thought through a sudden and internal squall, her brow swaying like a rough sea.

"I don't fink it *comes* off, if y'see," she said, blinking away the storm. "Never seen 'im without it, and I seen 'im a buncha times."

Lenn reached for the tall man's coat lapel, and peeled it off to one side as far as it would go. The hole in the coat separated from the hole in the breast plate like a scab, and fresh putrid flow oozed from it.

Craning their neck across his body, Lenn checked the recesses around the curves of it, and under the opposite lapel for any obvious straps—finding only a few that were difficult to or beyond reach, trapped under his coat.

"Do ya think we can move the big fella?" asked Lenn, looking up at the hull of a ceiling above them, and then to Mouse, eyes widening in stifled, excited curiosity.

"Move... *him?*" said Mouse, blinking some more.

The twin moons and ragged scrapes of bright stars in the sky poured in through the hole in the ceiling of deck boards, illuminating the fallen half-giant under the umbrous upturned vessel with a dim blue glow, as they did the rest of the world outside of it. Mouse was fairly certain Lenn was able to see how enormous the man was.

“He’s the size of a *whole tree* an’ made of rocks or somefing,” she said, brow furrowing again. “Maybe if we had a big strong stick.”

“Let’s go find us one then!” said Lenn, standing to a crouch under the boat. “The woods’re right over there.”

“No good,” said Mouse, shaking her head and gesturing widely at the scattered kindling blending into the storm-washed backshore. “Went lookin’ earlier for firewood an’ all I saw was little ones and rotted ones, if y’see.”

Lenn lifted one of the man’s armored arms, straining with a grunt, and moved it so that it was outstretched to his side, further exposing the wound. The limb flopped heavily, its own weight responsible for most of the movement. The tall man winced almost imperceptibly.

“You’re no liar, arm alone’s ‘bout as heavy as I am I think,” grumbled Lenn, wiping their brow. “Toss me what’s left of that water you threw at my head, uh...,” the human paused, and looked at Mouse with curious, squinty eyes. “Hey... what’s your name?”

“I’m Mouse!” said Mouse, and quickly retrieved the pouch she’d thrown earlier. It was barely heavier now than it had been when she’d left to fill it.

“Who called you *that*?” asked Lenn, giving the girl’s fuzz lined and indeed mousey features another thorough, ponderous look.

“Everyone did,” said Mouse.

She handed over the water skin, and Lenn turned back to the half-dead half-giant. With a grimy hand and little resistance, the tall man’s mouth was pried open, slack and grim. Lenn carefully poured a mouthful’s worth of water all over his chin and neck.

“Ope, grabbers—hold on,” they stammered, pulling back on the flow quickly to readjust.

“What’re you *doing*?” asked Mouse.

“Givin’ him a drink!” said Lenn, turning away from the task to look at her.

Mouse frowned. “When I seen ‘im do it, he uses the *inside* of his mouth, if y’—”

“Oh yeah?” interrupted Lenn, injecting the moment with sarcasm, “No swap? I thought he was a fish.” They made a fishy face with pouty lips.

Mouse rejected the baited levity with a scowl, and Lenn returned to pouring water into the tall man’s mouth, this time with careful success. Only a small trickle traced the path of the last splash’s descent, dripping down behind the man’s leather and metal breastplate. The water pooled in his mouth at first, audibly trickling like a little mountain spring, until the man’s lifeless body heaved with a great, froggy gulp.

“Jeebie!” Mouse’s face lit up with her excited squeal.

Lenn looked at her with a curious face and mouthed the name, but kept it silent and left the budding question at the back of their teeth. “That’s a good sign,” they said instead, “he needs more.”

Lenn tilted the water skin again into the tall man’s mouth, and he shifted and groaned as he drank, with more purpose than reflex this time. He muttered something neither of them could understand.

“Wot do we do *now*?” asked Mouse.

“Gotta get somethin’ to clean this rusty wound,” said Lenn, placing the now empty skin on the ground at their side. “Hard to do if we can’t get at it, but ol’ Lenn’s got a trick or two.”

“*Pootyfage*?” asked Mouse.

Lenn slapped both palms against their knees, and started to stand. “Listen, I don’t—”

They nearly tripped over a pile of tarp and metal as they rose, shuffling around under the angled boat. The strange handle and long sheath stuck out from the dirty tarp like ancient roots from old ground. The helmet rolled out from under it, a short wobbly tumble like an oblong gourd, and came to rest face up, hollow eyes staring into Lenn’s.

“Just, marvelous,” said the suddenly distracted human. “This might be my favorite day ever so far, even if I’ve gone mad.”

The helmet’s stone-metal eyes gazed back, absent any reverence themselves. Lenn scuttled awkwardly backwards, like a cat with its head stuck in a jar, vision locked on the legendary equipment.

Finally outside of the boat, they regarded the weapon with one last flabbergasted look.

“Ol’ Lenn, actually standing next to a *real* Songsword...”

They stooped to grab one of Mouse’s earlier discarded kindling sticks, tested its strength, and flourished it in hand like a sword of their own.

“Is this yor trick?” asked Mouse, skeptically. “I don’ fink it’s workin, if y’see.”

Lenn turned towards her with an amused grin. “And, a real live baby Hillkin,” they said. “Come on kid, follow me. I’ll show ya how we do it in Worms Port.”

Lenn started to walk towards the shimmering water, hundreds of shattered pieces of the two moons’ reflection dancing on its dimpled surface. Mouse hesitantly placed paw in footstep after the human, who she still wasn’t certain she trusted.

The look on Lenn’s face earlier—when the tall man’s weapon fell out of the cloak—she’d seen that look before. A look humans got before they took something.

“I’m *not* a baby,” she said after a few steps.

“Oh sure,” said Lenn with a dismissive forgiveness.

“I’m not!” Mouse yipped, loud against the hissing waves in the distance. “I’ve got as many seasons as a old human, says Jeebie, almost as many as Marm has...”

She trailed off, hopping from footprint to footprint behind the young human leading the way in front of her. She’d remembered Marm again, and a heavy sadness clung to the name. She wished she hadn’t said it outloud.



Lenn stopped, turning back and crouching to her level. “Oh yeah!” they said, uncomfortably close to her face. “I forgot—you Hillkin live for loads of seasons, don’t ya? Didn’t think it meant you actually grew-up slower.”

The human grinned wide like a horse, surprisingly white teeth all lined up in a neat row. “I got loads of questions I can’t wait to ask, but we *gotta* hurry.”

Lenn spun back around, and began to march a bit quicker through the sand, towards the beach, waving their stick-sword in the air. Mouse scowled, hurrying after them towards the lapping waves. Her toes sunk in soggy sand, and she froze.

“Wait!” she yelled. “Lenn! I’m not supposed to go near the water! Is worms in’ere!”

“Come on, Not-a-Baby!” teased Lenn, waving their stick dramatically.

Mouse harrumphed, and planted her feet. “Don’ wanna get eated, if y’see,” said the steadfast girl. “Promised.”

“Come on, they aren’t even that big on this side of the Port,” urged Lenn.

Mouse harrumphed again.

Lenn’s face turned apathetic in an instant. “The small ones are harmless, but if yer *scared* you can stay there alone and I’ll go save your giant by my-self.”

Without waiting for a response, Lenn turned back towards the sea, straight to the edges of the white tipped waves slicing into the dark sand, slashing their stick through the air as they marched.

“Sure do wish I had a *brave Hillkin Princess* by my side,” shouted the human somewhat over their shoulder as their toes arrived to meet the thin, slashing waves.

Lenn crouched, and began to search the mirror smooth wet sand with their palms. Waves came invisible behind the moonlit foam, drawing the dirt from their hands back out into the sea. Lenn shuffled

on bent legs to the side, and patted the new patch of smooth sand again, marring its pristine surface with each searching swipe.

Lenn's head rose, and they looked out, across the water. Dirt rimmed eyes scanned the repeated pattern on the ocean's black surface, making sure it remained unbroken, undisturbed.

"You still back there, Princess Mouse?" Lenn shouted over shoulder again into the darkness behind their back. There was no answer. "It's gotta be kinda scary over there alone in the—"

A splash.

Lenn's head snapped back to the water. Distorted ripples extended from an agitated spot only a few arms past the narrow waves.

"Oh *fuck*," said Lenn.

Another splash. This time Lenn was able to see the water's surface break. It was closer—and big.

Lenn yelped, and scrabbled back towards land on all fours in the wet sand. Another splash, right behind, and then a horrible sound.

A giggle.

Mouse stepped out of the shadows of a nearby decaying structure, and tossed another stone into the sea.

"No big ones over 'ere, if y'see," laughed Mouse. "Wot are you scumblin' away from then?"

Lenn plopped onto the sand, face wrinkled in an accidental grumpy mimicry of their new friend.

"I thought you said it *wasn't* nice to sneak up behind people?" said Lenn.

"Yeh," said Mouse, "I's right, ain't I?"

"Do you want to save your friend or not?" asked Lenn, in a very serious tone.

Mouse felt a stab of guilt. Of course she did. "O'course I do," she said. "I jus' wanted to see if you's on yor tippies."

"Let's just promise one thing," said Lenn, turning back to the waves. "Let's not sneak up behind *each other* any more, deal?"

“For now, if y’see,” said Mouse. “Promise.”

“Promise too,” agreed Lenn with a nod. “Now, help me find a worm.”

“How?” asked the very terrestrial rodent girl, staring at the glistening, dark shore.

“Easy,” said the Port denizen. “When the wave goes out, look for a little *vee* shape, like this.”

Lenn splayed two fingers out wide.

“I know what a *V* is, if y’see,” said Mouse, with a huff. “Marm learn’t me my letters seasons ago.”

“Good,” Lenn said, crouching. “Keep your eyes on the sand then, and remember, you can see ‘em best when the wave goes back out.”

Mouse crouched down with the human, and they both stared into the dark, wet sand as waves sloshed over their limbs. There were no telltale shapes to be seen.

“Toss me, I wish we had some bait,” Lenn muttered after only a few heartbeats. “Shoulda rubbed some of his pus on something. Maybe we can go back and—”

“Wha’da the wormies like eatin’?” asked Mouse.

“Meat,” said Lenn ponderously, “and bones, and... hair, shells, garbage, I had a mate who—”

“I got a ear,” Mouse said casually. “And some string.”

“A... an ear?” stammered Lenn, voice tightening.

“Ya,” said Mouse, and began to shuffle around in her hidden satchels.

“Why do—what kind of ear?” asked Lenn, trying to not sound too terribly concerned.

“Here,” said Mouse, and handed Lenn a human one.

“I...” said Lenn, palming the leathery appendage like a stunning sea shell.

“String too, if y’see,” said Mouse, offering Lenn a piece of string.

Lenn stared at the ear, then at Mouse, then the string, and then back at the ear, leaving Mouse's string laden paw extended in the air.

The Hillkin cleared her little throat.

"You know what," said Lenn, taking the string with a resigned sigh. "I'll just add this to the ol' *list o' questions*."

The human tied the piece of twine around the ear, looping the other end of it securely around their fist. With a flick of the wrist, they tossed it into the little waves.

The pair waited, unblinking, watching the odd piece of someone's head float up and down in the delicate current. It looked unnervingly natural, somehow. The odd curves and ripples and flatness of the thing gave the very unusual placement a strangely native appearance. Just another strange sea creature in the tides.

As another white-tipped wave receded, trying to drag the lure with it, the ear seemed to snag on something like a thorn. Lenn inhaled sharply. The ear suddenly yanked downwards, like someone had jabbed it into the sand with an invisible stick.

"Yes!" shouted Lenn.

"My ear!" shouted Mouse.

The ear floated back up just a little, but then with another invisible jab, sucked back into the sand with startling energy. It almost disappeared entirely. Lenn yanked on the string this time, and it stuck.

"We got one!" shouted Lenn, and pulled hard on the line. A little bulge of sand rose where the string disappeared, and wriggled.

Lenn turned to Mouse, leaning back to keep tension on the tether. "Quick! You've got to dig it out!"

"Dig wot out?" asked Mouse, excitedly. She liked digging.

"The worm!" said Lenn, tugging the twine tighter, "Dig where the string is, but be careful of the spikes!"

Mouse wasn't worried about any spikes, and dove at the little mound, shoveling away pawfuls of wet sand like an excited dog.

Within heartbeats, she had exposed a shiny, bristly root-looking thing. She stopped digging and squinted her eyes.

“Is that it?” she asked. “Looks weird, if y’see.”

“They *are* weird,” Lenn confirmed, keeping tension on the string. They moved towards their prey with stick in hand, rolling up the strings slack with each tiny step.

Mouse could see her trophy ear bent nearly in half, stuck between two jagged teeth coming out of the worm’s face. They looked like the jaws of a big beetle, but white as bones. They reminded her of her stolen treasure.

“Keep going,” said Lenn, winding the string around their fist until they were nearly holding on to the ear itself. “Dig out a bit more.”

Mouse happily obliged, quickly exposing an arm’s depth of tubular and bristle-haired worm body. She thought it looked like it was about as big around as one of the young human’s dirty fingers.

Lenn took the stick, and began to roll the string around it, until he reached the animal’s ear-grasping jaws at its end. After the string was wrapped, they began to wind the worm around the stick, rearing back a bit with each turn like they were rowing a tiny boat. Every time they pulled, a few more segments of worm were ripped up from the sand.

Mouse was astonished. She also wanted her trophy back.

“I’ll have that back now, if y’see,” she said, and started tugging on the dangling string.

“No, leave it,” said Lenn. “Until we get back, we don’t want it snappin’ at anything else soft.”

Mouse huffed but complied, muttering about her property as Lenn continued winding. At last, the worm’s full length emerged—still stretching as long as Mouse was tall, its bristly segments glistening as it writhed in air under the twin moons. A

sharp, acidic stench joined the salt and sea air as its final spiny segment left the sand with a sucking sound.

“Alright,” said Lenn. “Let’s get—”

A splash interrupted them, loud against the waves.

Both heads snapped towards the sound. Fractured ripples on the surface shone in the blue light.

“That trick ain’t gonna work on me no more,” insisted Lenn.

“Wasn’t me, if y’see,” said Mouse flatly, staring at the water.

They turned to look at each other, and locked widening eyes. At an unspoken signal, the pair bolted away from the shore, back towards the jagged treeline somehow darker against the dark.

The water behind them thrashed in thwarted frustration.

They ran on the compacted sand until it became loose, and their run became awkward. Within heartbeats they were back to the safety of the inverted rowboat.

“I... forgot...” huffed Lenn, out of breath, “...about that part.”

“Wot part?” asked Mouse, scurrying under the dark shelter. She put her hand across the tall man’s forehead, then hovered it over his nose and mouth. He was still fire-hot, and still breathing weakly.

“The big ones,” Lenn explained, “they get real mad when ya’ mess with the little ones.”

Mouse thought that sounded pretty normal. She turned away from the tall man, and gestured towards the worm.

“Wot now, if y’see?” she asked, kicking a strewn stick towards the abandoned half-ring of stones. “We make a fire an’ roast ‘im? Or mash ‘im into a wormy paste with ‘em rocks?”

“Not quite,” said Lenn, and ducked under the boat, brandishing the balled up worm-on-a-stick like a weapon.

Lenn grabbed the folded up ear, and ripped it roughly out of the creature’s mouth. A small chunk of the severed piece of a dead man remained behind in the mouth of the vile creature. The morsel

vanished into the tubular body, and the little white trap jaws began snapping at air, trapped under its own coiled body.

“Here,” said Lenn, handing the chewed-on trophy back to Mouse. She stuffed it back under her burlap, somewhere hidden.

“Fankee!” said the Hillkin girl, smiling wide.

Lenn briefly scowled at the hand that had passed the severed thing, as if it had done something absurd, all by itself. Their eyes shifted, bringing the somehow less-absurd, worm-bearing hand back into focus instead.

Lenn ducked under the boat, and moved to the tall man’s side. They dangled the tiny gnashing-jawed rope of an animal over the tall man’s wounded shoulder.

“It’s not *just* meat that they like the best, but *rotted* meat,” they said, lowering the disturbing creature towards his wound.

“You’re not—” began the Hillkin girl, but without a pause Lenn picked up another piece of strewn kindling and used it to slide the worm off of the stick like meat from a skewer.

It landed like a living liquid on the tall man’s chest with a scrabbling *splat*, and the scavenger’s searching mandibles immediately found and disappeared into the festering hole.

“Oh, NO!” Mouse yelled, dashing forwards under the boat. “You promised you wouldn’t hurt ‘im!”

Lenn raised both hands in a near universally understood gesture of pause-urging innocence.

The worm wriggled and disappeared into the oozing hole, forcing more gunk out as it slowly spiraled down behind the armor like viscous sludge down a drain pipe.

“It’s *okay*, Mouse,” urged Lenn, calmly.

The Hillkin child was pacing back and forth next to her friend’s body, watching the scary creature wiggle and slip into him, muttering *No no no* over, and over.

“Really, it is,” said Lenn again. “They’re nasty *looking*, but they’re clean. They might be scary, but they’s helpful too.”

“It’s a monster!” said Mouse, nervously.

“A sword’s not so scary when it’s stickin’ outta the bandit handle-end first, ain’t it?” said Lenn. “Listen, my Grams was old too, like your Marm it sounds. Wise, ya know?”

Mouse had stopped pacing and was paying what little attention she could divert from the thing eating her friend. That was a very strange thing to say, she thought, and she wanted to hear more.

“She would say, ‘An axe is a weapon if yer choppin’ down a man, but it’s a tool if you go choppin’ down a tree instead.’ You see? Like the worm.”

Mouse stared, and Lenn continued.

“My Gran said, ‘Tree sees it the other way around. Tree sees a weapon choppin’ him down, but a tool choppin up *pesty weeds* when they watch us battlin’ each other.’” Lenn giggled.

Mouse blinked empty eyes in a blank face.

“You slippin’ in what I’m spillin’?” Lenn asked. “S’all relativated, you know?”

“Wot?” asked Mouse.

“Nevermind,” said Lenn. “Just trust me. The worm’ll clean up all the rotted nasty meat in his shoulder, and while he does that, we’re gonna run back into the Port and find help.”

Mouse looked anxiously at her dying friend. The worm squiggled, half of its body still coiled and writhing atop his—the other half prodding unseen below the scarred breastplate, causing it to bulge and move like a maggoted carcass.

“You *promise* it won’t hurt him?” the desperate Hillkin girl reluctantly asked her new human companion.

“Absolutely,” said Lenn, eyes closing in a moment of blind, nodding confidence. “As long as we’re back before it starts on the good stuff. Now, *about those coins...*”



. . . . .

Empiric Rathe stood nearly motionless behind his vibrating vehicle, staring into the cage at the rear of the sputtering machine. Gloved hands were tightly clasped behind his back, twitching with mechanical tension.

Sticky black smoke curled through the tumbler's grated walls, threatening to obscure what he already was struggling to comprehend. He was thrumming and buzzing audibly from a distance—clicks and snaps like curses and slurs popped in the air around him.

*"Impossible—,"* buzzed the Empiric faintly, shuddering with stimulated, mechanical agitation.

The sounds of Hobble drifted through the dark trees like fragmented birdsong. Voices and bells, the sound of work, and life. Hammers rhythmically pounding the surfaces of various materials. A donkey brayed somewhere off in the distance. Children made various awful sounds as well. The sounds grated against Rathe's synthetic senses as his restless eyes darted across the tumbler for some clue, some overlooked detail to explain what they were seeing.

He clenched and twitched and dissected the sequence of events as he strained his eyes. The drive had been uneventful. Rigidly so. He hadn't stopped once, nor had there been any disruptions—no jeers, no rocks bouncing off the vehicle's cabin. Nothing the usual sort of rabble found in the back of such a vehicle would subject the driver to, under usual circumstances.

The prisoner in this tumbler had been silent throughout, unconscious, or nearly so, in a clump at the bottom of the cage. There was hardly any need to check on drunken rabble shouting obscenities

and throwing objects at the cabin. A similar lack of wonder should have surrounded one slumped asleep.

He knew he had laid eyes on him, as he had scanned the sides of the road on his drive. No less than three times during the journey, his glossy eyes caught glimpses of the inebriated, fur-covered lump sprawled in the same pathetic heap as his head followed shadows in the trees. Once, just beyond Hobble's outskirts, only moments before his discovery. And yet now, as Rathe had discovered, he was gone.

Simply, impossibly, gone.

He stepped closer, his glossy, darting eyes searching for details his un-mechanical mind might have missed. The bars remained intact—close enough together that the idea of a man slipping through was as laughable as a pumpkin forcing its way out of a wicker basket.

His shiny eyeballs darted around frantically, as they always did, taking in what little details hadn't been blown out of the back of the thing like leaf litter. A few small animal hairs clung to a rough piece of metal lattice. No great surprise.

*"Thiz- iz- Imposzible—,"* fumed the Empiric, voice box whining high and aggressive like a trapped hornet.

The metal muscle in his throat churned and slithered up and down. His fists clenched. He crouched slightly, his synthetic knees clicking faintly, and noticed faint scratches near the outer edge of the lock.

The buzzing in his throat deepened. Could they be marks of a crude escape attempt? His mind raced, dissecting the possibility. The man had been a waster, intoxicated and uncoordinated. There was no feasible way he could have physically manipulated the door.

The cage's lock was no common mechanism—it required a Constable's Key, and Rathe still had his. Perhaps one of his less-diligent subordinates had been careless. The man could have stolen a key, sleight of hand concealed by his filth and drunken demeanor.

*"Fools—,"* Rathe hissed aloud, but his voice cut off as his logic reasserted itself. No. That theory was just as flawed. Regardless if he used a key or some other tool, Rathe would have heard it—the subtle clicks of a lock-pick, the grinding release of the mechanism, the shift in the tumbler's balance as the door opened and closed. The lock was still sealed.

The scratches mocked him, a faint but irrefutable clue without an answer. Could the man have locked the cage behind him somehow? Would he? Some stab to taunt his captors?

Rathe's fists clenched behind his back, the servos whining faintly. Too many questions. Too little evidence. Except...

Arkenwald. The belligerent constable would have marred the area near the lock with his key, locking it aggressively and without care. The soundest theory yet—for the mysterious scratches. The prisoner, to his dismay, remained inexplicably absent.

*"Moons' high—sun's low, Constable!"* called a passerby, in a friendly voice.

Rathe ignored the man, and the improper address, his reflective gaze still fixed on the cage. He straightened with a faint hiss from his shoulder joints, the faint whistle of internal hydraulics breaking through his irritated hum.

It didn't matter. The man was no butcher of travelers, no rampant sneak-thief. Pibbilum was a drunk—a vagrant, garbage blown from the back of a barge. By fleeing, the man had chosen death, as surely as if he had chosen combat outright. Adjudication, exile, or death—those were the choices, and Rathe never forgot a face. Even the faint glimpse of Pibbilum's features, obscured by grime and tangled hair, had seared itself into the Empiric's precise memory.

He turned sharply toward Hobbles' gate, where townsfolk swarmed like ants over the wreckage. The vehicle sputtered behind him, hazarding parked and abandoned without a second thought.

With no prisoner to Adjudicate, he would only save time, and the city would save resources. He had murderers to track, curious ones at that.

There would be answers ahead in Hobble. And new questions.

## CHAPTER 7

### *TO CHARGE HIGH*

Clacker's clawed feet tapped anxiously in the mud near the hitch outside the Constabulary's outguarding. She stabbed her oversized and menacing, curved talons in the muck, already impatient with her departing rider. While she glared at Arkenwald, he glared up at the imposing building in front of them.

The outguarding loomed tall and angular in front of the two recent arrivals, standing strong in front of the modest poultry farm behind it. The farm's dimly lit windows and small structures cowered in stark contrast to the fortified tower, reminding him of some massive animal, reared on thick hindlimbs to protect their vulnerable young.

"We won't be here long," Arkenwald assured his bird over his shoulder as he approached the monolithic building's heavy, reinforced front door. "I hope," he muttered, grasping the huge iron handle.

Clacker clacked sharply as her rider strained to pull the banded wooden door open, struggling to squeeze his rounder-in-the-middle form through the narrow gap. Absurd, the weight of these doors, Arkenwald thought, while attempting to ignore his bird's harsh laughter.

The outside of the outguarding tower was plain and utilitarian, as always. What it lacked in architectural creativity, it made up for with sheer stoic brutality. Thick bands of hardwood and stone reinforced with riveted black metal gave the structure an imposing, unyielding presence.

The outside of the building vanished from Arkenwald's view as he spun into the warm interior. The door fell closed with a deep,

resonant thud, the sound reverberating through his bones, filling the room like a struck bell.

Warm air brushed his cheeks, carrying the enticing aroma of cooking meat. His stomach immediately began a tantrum. Navigating the familiar layout with ease, he moved around the left side of the empty gatehouse, like he always did, and stepped into the bifurcated central room.

“Thought I heard that door,” said the deep voice of a man as Arkenwald stepped into the orange firelight of the open space. “Too fucking heavy, you ask me.”

Arkenwald laughed purposefully at the comment, his boots echoing on the stone floor as he approached. The central room, divided in two by a mortared stone wall, was dominated by a large, mantled hearth. Flames lashed hungrily at the air within and around it, reaching for a cooking pot suspended nearby, steam carrying the delicious aroma through the air.

The fire’s warmth seeped through an open doorway on one side, leading into a spacious storeroom. A brick chimney rose from the iron-rimmed fireplace, cutting through the gray stone like a jagged scar and continuing up through the tower’s upper floors.

The speaker spoke again, and Arkenwald found him quickly. He sat at a table near the room’s large hearth, against the back wall in this half of the tower’s large, ground-level chamber.

“Give you some trouble, did it?” he said. He spoke from underneath feral hairs desperately trying to escape a shiny and loosely waxed mustache.

“No problem,” said Arkenwald, patting himself on the belly. “Keeps me in shape, it does.” He grinned, earning a chuckle from the seated man.

Arkenwald began to casually stroll his direction, nodding at the other two constables in the room. A man and woman around his same age, but the air about them—something carved out by the way

they moved—spoke of harder experience. The pair barely acknowledged him, only a brief glance to assure him that they were aware of his presence.

They were busy with an assortment of equipment spread across the table by the bottom of the large staircase winding up the wall to the tower's higher levels. Wooden wardrobes and gear chests near the table stood open as they packed rucksacks with a methodical pace. Everything was in its place—the same organization and layout as every one of these outguarding towers he'd visited, though they rarely smelled this good.

"Whatever you've got cooking may help my shape too," Arkenwald said, gesturing with a glance at the black iron pot hanging on hook to one side of the hearth's blaze. His belly gurgled in agreement.

The mustached man regarded him with a smile. "That's the real reason for the heavy door—keep the hungry vagrants out," he said to Arkenwald with a wink.

"Usually does, I imagine," Arkenwald said to the man whose only hair seemed to exist under his nose. He stretched his shoulders and cracked his knuckles, wincing as a finger reminded him of its current, lacerated state.

"Fetch yourself a bowl then, it's chicken stew," said the bald constable, waving his own spoon at the little wooden cabinet near the fireplace.

"I'm not just here for dinner," said Arkenwald, making his way over to the cupboard. "My name is Constable *Arkenwald*, on orders from The Twisting City herself, under Empiric *Rathe*." The emphasis he put on the names crawled like a spider out of his mouth.

Arkenwald sidled up to the hearth and retrieved a simple wooden bowl and spoon from the swinging door in the furniture next to it. Using the provided ladle, he spooned a watery splash of greasy

yellow liquid filled with stringy tissue into the bowl. He replaced the ladle, and stared into his dish with a disappointed scowl.

"Law, protect me," he exclaimed, "I may have discovered another crime."

He wrinkled his nose and sniffed the offensive looking stuff, as if the smell was truly being piped in the room from elsewhere. "You sure this is chicken? Looks like a bowl of maggots vomit—"

"Taste it," interrupted the mustached man. He chuckled bodily, and after wiping his shiny double chin, tossed his wooden spoon into his bowl with an empty clatter.

Arkenwald hesitantly lifted his own laden spoon and gave the piping hot liquid an anxious, airy sip. His stomach cheered in encouragement with a high pitched squeal. It was delicious.

"Oh! Well..." said Arkenwald, his eyebrows raising far higher than his expectations had. He set to promptly burning his tongue on the spoonful of hot soup, then another, speaking through the scalding mouthful. "Maggiths it ith then!"

He cradled his hot bowl in one insulated, gloved hand and blew the rising steam out of his way as he walked over to join the bald man. As he approached, the other man stood, gathered his own bowl and spoon, and left the table.

Arkenwald paused, investigating him as he left. Shorter than expected, and stocky—his movements stiff and strong like a work animal. With a satisfied frown, Arkenwald subdued a chair, took his seat, and began to noisily slurp his soup.

"Not bad, eh?" said the mustached man, now at the same cabinet from which Arkenwald had retrieved his bowl and spoon. He set his spent dishes on top of it with a gentle clatter. "Our new guests whipped it up. Looks like a dog's sick, but it'll do. Imagine you're here about *them*? From Halfhome? Most action we've had around here in ages."



Arkenwald swallowed a mouthful, and cleared his throat. "Indeed I am, just some *clarifying questions* for the report. Our investigation's nearly wrapped up, I think." He plopped his spoon into his empty bowl as he finished, a gesture of undue confidence.

Arkenwald scanned the room again. "Where are they, by the way, Constable..." He paused, letting the question linger. "I don't believe I caught your name."

"Lorint," offered the mustached man, with a lazy salute.

"Constable Lorint," said Arkenwald with a tinge of surprise in his voice, saluting the man in turn. "Any relation to Korvin Lorint? City Treasury?" he asked, raising an eyebrow. "Korvin's a friend of my father's—Puvince Arkenwald, *the Eighth*."

He said his father's name as if testing an unknown chemical mixture, his tone tinged with an odd cocktail of pride, disdain, and wary curiosity.

"Aye," said Lorint. "My Uncle. Bit of a scunt, that man."

Arkenwald laughed, and smiled a sharp smile. He couldn't tell if Lorint meant his uncle, or not. "Yes, yes, he and my father got along quite well if I recall," he said.

"We don't talk," said Lorint, dry as sand.

Arkenwald's smile followed the line of his gaze as it drifted up the stone staircase winding along the room's walls. He took note of the two Constables still at work packing their expedition bags, tightening straps and testing weight.

"Of course," Arkenwald said smoothly. He raised his bowl to his lips, slurped the last bit of cooled juice from it, then set it back down, pushing it away from him.

He stood, shoving his chair back as well, with a grating, resonant scrape. Wiping his mouth on the sleeve of his uniform, he began to stride casually towards the other Constable near the hearth, stifling a burp with a gentle pat to his gut. Lorint's eyes squinted at the empty bowl and spoon left behind on the table.

“Where *did* you say your *new guests* were being held, Constable Lorint?” Arkenwald asked again, repeating his original question as he approached with as much of an amicable tone as he could muster.

He did his best impression of the casual way Lorint stood near the fire, warming his hands. The warmth seeped through his gloves, and he realized he had eaten with them still on. He tugged them off, revealing one newly blooded finger—his wound cracked open with his noisy knuckles just before. Lorint seemed to notice the injury and disregard it entirely as Arkenwald wiped the small drops on his trousers.

“Up in the dormitories,” Lorint said, staring into the fire. “Told ‘em they could stay here until it’s safe to head home. You know they live in that ramshackle tavern? Been there for a drink or two—couldn’t fathom it myself.”

Arkenwald’s raised brow asked the question before his mouth followed. “You’re letting a couple of victims hole up in your dormitory? Having them cook for you?” His tone carried a faint, almost imperceptible disgust. “They witness you skimming payroll or something?”

He smiled tightly, attempting a wink that looked more like he’d gotten ash in his eye. Lorint didn’t flinch, his gaze steady and curious, like an animal sizing up a predator.

“Well!” Lorint said suddenly, his expression shifting to an odd joviality. “Suppose I’ll tell ya—you Arkenwalds aren’t short on coins, eh? Doubt you’d bother.”

Arkenwald frowned faintly at the odd remark, his attention sharpened. “Bother with—”

“Was three, now it’s two,” said Lorint sharply, cutting off Arkenwald and pointing upwards in the direction of the dormitory. “They showed up here a couple nights passed. Three of ‘em, in the rain, soggy and yowlin’ like wet cats. ‘My *tavern*, oh my *poor tavern*’

and on and on.” He whirled a finger and both eyes around in the air as he spoke.

“We naturally sent a duo out to do the ol’ *Seven-Two* initials, with a pigeon of course,” Lorint continued. “Bird comes back a couple nails later with a message saying that we’ve got a *triple murder*, so naturally again, we send a line to the City.”

Arkenwald stared at the man with a perplexed and expectant look on his face. “I appreciate the script, Constable, but I don’t see—”

Lorint interrupted him again. “All’s normal and known, eh?” he said with a sympathetic huff. “Real shitter’s the next morning. The two *fat ones* we’ve still got wake up, an’ start shouting about a robbery.”

That was at least the second time Lorint had interrupted Arkenwald. The younger constable put forth considerable internal effort to keep his natural scowl from blossoming across his face.

“A robbery?” said Arkenwald, speaking quickly to avoid being interrupted another time. “At the tavern?”

Lorint shook his head. “No mate. Here, under our *watchful eye*. Third one—who I suppose was indentured to them—lifted something and took off in the night.” He screwed up his face in a challenging expression. “Bet you’ll never guess what it was she took,” he said, raising a bald brow.

“Coins?” said Arkenwald, remembering the strange sentence from a moment before and giving the man a sideways, squinted eye.

“Ah, right, did say that bit earlier, didn’t I,” mumbled Lorint, his eyes trailing away for a heartbeat before snapping back with an exaggeration of his questioning look. “But, what *kind* of coin, eh?”

Arkenwald flattened his forehead, sending the wrinkles down between his eyebrows. “Now, don’t tell me it was a *blue palm*,” he said, unable to hide his sneer.

Lorint’s nearly-absent eyebrows raised. “I guess your investigation really *is* going well.”

"Going so well we're down to only two dead men now," started Arkenwald, but was distracted by a sudden movement in his periphery. The other two by the table were making their way to join them.

"Constable," said the male of the pair, saluting briefly. Arkenwald noticed a gnarled scar running down his cheek, from his eye. The other, a good looking sun-skinned girl with no expression on her face, said nothing.

Arkenwald saluted as well, and introduced himself again by surname alone—the same emphasis as before creeping behind it. Neither seemed impressed.

"I'm Burlow," said the man with the scar, "and this is Fen." The pretty girl nodded slightly. Arkenwald gave them both a nod in return.

His eyes flicked over their uniforms, clean and pressed. Burlow's shoulder, like Lorint's, bore the standard wing embossed copper pauldron of the Constabulary, both recently shined. Fen's shoulder still wore the copper embroidered cloth-and-tassel epaulet, sign of a probationary assignment and recent graduation from the Academy.

"Say," said Arkenwald, looking at the mustached man, "Speaking of *going well*—Lorint, where *are* you lot off to?"

The three stationed constables exchanged curious glances, a silent conversation that Arkenwald began to decipher. Lorint quickly cut in to save him the effort.

"We're off after the servant gal who's run off with the coin," he said. "It's a real one, they tested it." He gave Arkenwald a wink followed by another inquisitive look. "You know they float, the real *blue palms*?"

"As the legends have it," said Arkenwald, his tone carefully neutral.

"Well, the pair upstairs has offered a generous bounty for the return of their property," said Lorint, cracking his knuckles. "They

seem pretty sure they know where their *little thief* is headed. *No chance* they'll get it back otherwise, and it's a *pretty* reward for the *three* of us." He gave their new fourth wheel a greasy look. "Just a little, *extracurricular expansion* of our duties, if you would. Off the books."

The other two constables eyed Arkenwald and their apparent leader cautiously. It was Fen who spoke up.

"Why you tellin' him all this, Hamus?" she asked, in a bored tone.

Lorint laughed, a short and deep guffaw. "The lad's an *Arkenwald*, he's got no need for coin! Born on a pile of 'em, he was," he nudged Arkenwald's arm, playfully. "Isn't that right, Constable?"

Arkenwald didn't answer. He just stared as the muscles in his face performed potentially involuntary minor adjustments.

"The ol' Arkenwald Clan's got *plenty* of secrets of their own," continued Lorint, "No harm sharin' secrets with a secreted man. Knows the value of 'em, he does. Lots to keep himself, ones he don't want comin' out—isn't that *right*, Constable *Arkenwald*?"

Arkenwald's face relaxed into a casual smile. "I wasn't born on a pile of coins because my family *lacked initiative*," he said, with a wink towards Fen. "Noble a pursuit as any, I say. You'll have no trouble from me, my friends."

He placed his hands heroically on his hips, and continued. "Our witness at Halfhome, your original third corpse, ended up being some kind of billy, shit-covered waster—passed out from stealin' the *real victim's* swill. *He may* have mentioned such a coin, may not have. He said *lots* of fantastical things. Easy enough to strike it through as drunken ramblings..."

Arkenwald paused to see how he was doing.

Lorint smiled at his companions. "See? Top shelf. You're alright, *Arkenwald*."

The mustached man slapped his new friend heavily on the shoulder, a boisterous fraternal gesture which set the unexpected Arkenwald's balance askew. Arkenwald caught himself awkwardly while a whisper of a sneer twitched his lip, as Lorint turned and ambled happily to the backpack-bearing table, humming a low tune. His comrades followed.

"These new cooks of yours," Arkenwald called to their backs, "did they have any... fantastical things to say of their own?"

"Nothing out of the ordinary... besides the coin," Lorint replied over his shoulder. "Go on and ask them yourself—and help yourself to the rest of the stew." He gestured upwards and pot-wards as he spoke.

Halfway to the table, Lorint paused mid-step. Something appeared to cross his mind, and he followed it through the air like he was tracking an insect. Its meandering path brought him around to face Arkenwald.

"You arrive here on bird's back?" he asked, his brow deep between his small eyes.

"I did," said Arkenwald.

"Carnivore?" Lorint pressed.

"She is," answered Arkenwald. Something tugged gently on one corner of his mouth.

Lorint's brow raised. "She need to eat?"

Arkenwald sucked his tongue behind his teeth. "She does not," he said, "She ate a couple big rats at our last stop."

Lorint's relief was palpable. "Glad to hear it," he said, turning back towards the table, "all we've got is bird meat and bird eggs, and grass. And bugs. Our Ornox eat grass. And bugs."

He hesitated, turning back briefly to make a concerned face. "Hate to feed bird to bird, would seem unnatural."

Arkenwald silently disagreed. "I appreciate the thought, nonetheless," he said, as his smile finally won.

At the staging table, Lorint and his comrades each retrieved a pack. Burlow and Fen slung theirs over their shoulders and headed toward the gatehouse hallway. Lorint lingered, methodically double checking the contents of his bag.

“Only you three stationed here?” asked Arkenwald, watching him. “No Empiric?” He took a few steps away from the hearth that had begun to overheat the back of him.

“No no, just us and the chicken farmers,” said Lorint, speaking without looking up from rifling through his pack. “Said you’re on orders from Empiric *Rathe* yourself though, did ya? Met him once. Hard to forget.” He rattled his head around at his last words, as if showing off the memory in his round, shaven head.

Lorint wrenched the straps of his bag tight, and hefted it over his shoulder. “What’s that like? Takin’ orders from a machine man?” he asked, watching Arkenwald who had begun to pace around the room.

“He is... Well...” muttered Arkenwald, pacing for a moment to allow his vocabulary to spin around inside his head.

He did a marching heel turn, and paced another direction. It didn’t need to spin long. “Unpredictable, I’d say,” he said.

“Most machines are, in my experience,” said Lorint, nodding sagely. “Most men too. Probably not all that different from any other Empiric.”

“Sometimes he turns his head around backwards,” Arkenwald added, his tone calm, almost soothing.

Lorint looked at him and blinked with not-too-subtle bewilderment. Arkenwald shrugged.

“On *that* nightmarish note—” Lorint said, shaking his head suddenly as if trying to deter an image from landing in it, “—off I go. Good luck in your investigation, Constable Arkenwald.”

“Good luck in your... *extracurriculars*, Constable Lorint,” Arkenwald replied smoothly. The men exchanged brief salutes before

Lorint turned his back, and Arkenwald watched him hurry into the gatehouse hallway, vanishing into its shadows.

A brief moment of dull, echoed voices coming from the hallway passed, then the same baritone vibration from the heavy door subtly shook the building again. He waited for a held breath, listening. No noise from the gatehouse. A creak from the floor above.

Arkenwald moved to the equipment lockers near the staircase, glancing into the cabinets and chests with casual curiosity. He rummaged through their contents, finding little of interest—an extra red cloth, suitable to replace the bloodied one he had discarded earlier, and a collection of ordinary supplies. A climbing rope and grapple, expandable barricades, power supplies—though not for his baton, manuals, obscure replacement parts.

Nothing of immediate use. Nothing he felt like carrying around with him anyway. Most of the valuable items—warmth, weapons, and food—had clearly been packed by the others for their excursion. His gaze rose and he peered into darkness atop the curving stairs stretching dimly upwards.

No need to rush, he thought.

Arkenwald's boots made soft, deliberate sounds against the stone floor as he meandered. He stopped at a cluttered table and leafed through a pile of papers, frowning at the mundane inventories scrawled across them. With a low sigh, he pocketed a stub of wrapped graphite he found lying loose. No treasure, but it might be useful.

He scanned the room again, and his gaze lingered on the door leading to the storerooms and larder. He considered checking for larger equipment or stored food, but the thought of hauling anything heavy onto Clacker's back quickly dissuaded him. With a quiet sigh, he abandoned the idea.

His eyes climbed up the stone stairs to the second floor again, and this time he let his feet follow. He wandered toward the curved steps that seemed to grow out of the stone wall, and ascended into the



dim ceiling above. Heat carried up with him into the dark space, and he listened for any noise.

At the top of the staircase, the hallway curved around the dormitory floor. Small rooms jutted outward from the central column, their doors set opposite windows filled with thick panes of rippled glass. The pale blue light of the moons poured through, distorted and blending with the orange of the wall-sconce's firelight in a warm, pleasant contrast.

He walked deliberately, his eyes scanning for signs of life. Passing open doors and others bleeding darkness from their cracks, he eventually stopped at one that leaked light instead. The last in the row. His sharp features tightened.

Unsheathing his baton, he raised it in a fist, and pounded furiously against the wooden barricade.

"Open up! Twisting City Constabulary! Open the door *now!*" Arkenwald boomed, in his most practiced, authoritarian voice.

He heard a shuffling from inside, and a muffled reply through the wood. "Come in, come in!" said a sing-song sort of voice, like a nervous flute speaking.

Arkenwald didn't reach for the door, he simply crossed his arms and waited, letting the silence stretch to tension. "I said *open it*," he snapped after a heartbeat, loud enough to carry through the door's boards. "I will *not* ask again."

The door swung open inwards, revealing a middle-aged woman, her round and pink face wearing a confused and startled expression. Behind her, on a dilapidated cot sporting a thin mattress that was in no way large enough to support the two of them, sat a similarly piggish man. They were both wearing smiling masks over their perplexed faces.

"The door was open, darling," said the woman, her voice trembling. "No need to be angry, what do you need?"

"You're a new fella," the man added, his tone searching for levity in the unease. "Don't remember seeing you before."

Arkenwald's sharp smile slithered into place. "My name is Constable *Arkenwald*—" He saw the recognition he had desired earlier begin to crawl across their faces. "Under Authority and Code of the Constabulary of the *Twisting City*," he snarled, "you two are Subject to *Arrest*."

His sneer writhed like a snake as he watched their fake smiles shed off onto the floor, exposing raw, reddening disarray.

"Dear me, what's hap—" began the woman.

"Wait a breath—" started the man.

Arkenwald silenced them both with a malicious glare, fondling his baton with a visibly bloody hand.

"You two are in quite a lot of trouble," he said to the couple, his voice dripping with menace. "Quite a lot of trouble indeed."

. . . . .

Empiric Rathe's eyeballs darted from person to person, as they all sent sharp glances back to him as darts of their own. He strolled uncasually and uncontested through Hobble's mostly ornamental gate, as it seemed a number of other people had done very recently.

Torchlight and phosphor illuminated the ongoing repairs, fresh paint and bright lumber, conspicuous against the worn timber and dull colors surrounding them. He wondered why the raiders bothered damaging the easily passable barrier at all—or why these people would spend time mending it for that matter. Ornamental behaviors, he theorized.

He also wondered—a sudden and involuntary intrusion like a spasm—how *that man* got out of his tumbler. He had commanded

his uncooperative, organic mind to do no such wondering, a simple task which it was failing. It stuck in him like a barb, digging deeper with every step. A waste of time, speculating without evidence in—

“Hi-Lo, Empiric!” said a suddenly appearing, smiling man in an gold-embroidered and teal silk *Ervestuller* robe, clearly worn improperly to a knowing eye.

This possibly pilfered garment was indicative of his desire to indicate Twisting City residency. His crenelated and stained smile, the melanated, rough skin texturing a weak application of pale foundation; they belied a different life.

“Busy is the investigatory mind,” said the man in a very theatrical voice, taking stride beside Rathe as he walked, abandoning the roadside cart which had hidden him in its shadows. “Certainly a man of your status may find himself desirous of Halferth’s more *exotic* taxons of opulence,” the man sang, “dragged down by these *uninspired, lowly places*, so far from our great City.” His tone was as ill-fitting as his robes. “Can I tickle my Empiric’s interest with some freshly extruded—”

“NO—.” The Empiric’s voice box cracked like a gunshot, snapping the air like a damaged wire. A wisp of particulated air spun in a vortex behind him.

The robed man jumped as if stung, and ended his pursuit nearly tripping over his own step. Stunned by the sudden discharge, he and a small cell of startled onlookers gasped and gawked as the Empiric strode away, towards the town’s outguarding tower.

Rathe continued without breaking his stride, referencing a memorized layout of the township, a map internalized among many others. Hobble pulsed weakly with the energy of a funerary procession. Low, mournful tones vibrated the air among the decently maintained and well-worn buildings. Weak warbles of scripted laughter and half-smiled voices broke through the sad murmurs—like

the patches of too-clean places and too-new construction—obvious signs of recent restoration, and forced joviality.

Umbral swaths stood out against the light of the town, like memories of a dark night long-passed, seeping through into the now. These areas of swept ash and charred wood, inky brush strokes left behind by long-extinguished conflagrations, mottled the architecture as well. Rathe could make out the fine details of potential fuel sources, direction of the wind, and intensity of the burn from these lingering shadows of quenched flames.

He began to notice an odd consistency in the healing destruction. It all seemed superficial, something ancillary to its true purpose, a purpose which seemed to follow a clear and un-diverged darkened path through the dense layout of buildings and streets.

Darker still were the people—bandaged limbs, bruised faces, weary figures leaning on crude crutches. Even the uninjured and finely dressed wore a heavy shadow under their eyes. The misery here was fresh, its edges still raw.

Murmurs began to rustle behind him like leaves in the wake of his treaded vehicle. A crowd had formed around him as he walked and he noted the villagers gathering without acknowledging them. They watched and followed with a reserved astonishment, huddled like scavenging fish surrounding a shark—wary to get too close but eager to not miss an opportunity.

The Empiric parsed the potential desires of the school of onlookers. A communal response to encircle and disorient a predator? An innocent opportunity to peer at him perhaps, to get a glimpse of the strange, caged animal.

He thought about the patchwork man suddenly again too, and cursed his weakness once more.

The people began to speak to him. The membranes that did the jobs ears once did in the sides of his head focused, and vibrated information into his treacherous brain.

No. Not *to him* he realized; their increasingly loud and questioning voices were directed at each other. They were talking *about him*, and his caged animal theory was found to be more sound.

“He’s just... Ignoring us,” someone noted.

“How’s ‘e blink wif no lids?” another person pondered.

“I’ve never seen so... Much,” exclaimed someone else.

He stopped, and looked at the cage he found himself in. Bars wrought of flesh wrapped in fabric, a lattice of disorganized appendages, riveted with wide eyes. They looked at him like he had answers to their questions written across his body. On display with an informative placard describing his species and genus, endemic environment, eating habits.

“Is that even a man?”

“Of course it is, don’t be an ass.”

“But ‘is eyes though...”

“D’ya think ‘e’s *got* an ass?”

They looked at him not as an Empiric, but as some sort of anomaly. He was no stranger to being stared at, but in the Twisting City, people were used to seeing biothaumatica in use. Plenty of the City denizens had physiomechanical parts of their own, and often people looked at his with reverence, envy, even admiration.

“I’ve seen him before!”

“I bet he does.”

“Really? ‘ow’s ‘e blink?”

Rathe knew he was close to the Outguarding, he could see it looming dark and tall in the distance over the well lit and shortly built town. He saw no other constabulary presence among the growing halo of people expanding from his perimeter like ants surrounding a morsel. A disturbance began to rustle through the crowd of people, a trail of unenthusiastic grunts of admonishment and buckled knees.

A small child appeared through the encircling crowd, forcing their way through the tight weave of legs. The tiny person bravely

walked up to Rathe, the two of them now center to the audience of mumbling people, staring up at him with wide, curious eyes. The Empiric aimed his own wide, maniacal eyes into them.

*"I- cannot- feed you—,"* said Rathe's inhuman voice.

"Huh?" said the child, turning their head on its side.

Rathe realized swiftly in that moment that the only way out of this cage would be to appeal to his captors. Like Pibbilum had somehow slipped through the grates of the tumbler, Rathe would need to summon some hidden, mysterious magic of his own. A wicked fulcrum between deception and manipulation, a utilization of rusted tools, useless mechanisms he'd long carved off of and out of himself.

Fraternization. Personal, human interaction.

*"I—..."* The Empiric tried again. *"What do- you need-, child—?"*

"Does yor eyeballs be itchy?" squeaked the inquisitive little person, a small boy no older than eight seasons.

Someone in the crowd laughed among the spattering of sudden coughs and sharp inhales.

Rathe's cheek ticked to one side like a gear. *"These- are not- my- eyeballz—,"* he said, kneeling suddenly with a mechanical whine, and leveling himself closer to the small person.

The child hesitantly took a half a step backwards as an immiscible blend of looks swirled about on his face. The crowd collectively took a breath.

*"My- Trigeminal- and- Corneal- nerves- have been- adapted- to support- augmented- ciliary- bodies—,"* said Empiric Rathe's buzzing voice box.

"You sound funny," laughed the boy, his puzzle-piece expression forming a curious smile. "Wot's that mean?"

*"My eyez- do not- get—... 'itchy'—,"* said the Empiric, struggling with the final word's simplicity.

“Wot if a bug sticks on one?” asked the curious boy. More giggles warbled from the crowd like uneasy pigeons.

“*My Lacrimal- system- is also- enhanced—*,” said Rathe.

A sudden warm spray of a hissing, evaporated liquid from behind his eyeballs misted the air around his face. Like a swarm of microscopic gnats, it murmured off into the crowd, illuminated and sparkling in the lamplight.

Most of the crowd exclaimed in some way. A collective gasp and yelp. Some even tried to dodge the tiny, vanishing cloud.

“Get back!” hissed someone.

“What was that!?” said someone else, sounding panicked.

The child’s jaw fell slack and he turned and ran back into the agitated scrub of knees behind him.

“Ohh,” said a satisfied voice.

Rathe stood up, glancing frantically at the nervously protesting group. “*It iz- just szalt—*—” he began, but a thunderous voice cut him off.

“Alright, *ALRIGHT!* That’s enough,” boomed a very dense woman shoving her way through the crowd. “He’s just an *Empiric* not a fucking *two-headed...*”

She stopped speaking as soon as her eyes met his, and her words drifted off in the air after Rathe’s lacrimal spritz. She stopped firmly in her wide-set tracks shortly thereafter, once breaching the tide of onlookers.

“Well,” she said, putting her hands on her aproned hips, and giving Rathe a welcoming smile, “he’s an *Empiric*, whatever kind of head he’s got.”

The big woman had hair the color of dying leaves, a dozen shades of auburn and fire, tied up in a pristine bun. She was solidly built like the squat red brick chimneys sticking out of the sides of most of the equally squat buildings here.

“Trudge off, you lot,” she said, waving a strong hand at the clump of gawkers while not taking her own eyes off the mechanical man. “He’s got business to attend to, just like *you all do*.” The crowd grumbled and began to vibrate and dissolve like a dying microorganism.

Rathe did some quick measurements and calculations, and determined the woman was nearly exactly as wide as she was tall. For a reason he could not immediately decipher, this fact coupled with her timely rescue endeared her to him. He made a note to be aware of this weakness, and endured a brief recollection of the patchwork man’s escape again.

“How can we help you, Empiric?” said the woman, extending a muscled arm towards the outguarding, clearing a path through what was left of the diminishing and audibly disappointed crowd like a breeze through lingering smoke.

She urged him to accompany her forwards. The cage door opens.

“Your name’s Writhe?” she said, more of a statement than a question. “Or, Raze? Or something like that, is that right? Heard of you. Follow me.”

Rathe acquiesced without hesitation. He followed behind the woman as she began to walk, townsfolk still lingered in their wake, eavesdropping and whispering to themselves.

“*I am- Empiric- Rathe—*,” he buzzed, “*Twisting- City- Consta-bulary—*.” He quickened his step to catch up to her and walk at her side.

He scanned the town’s outer buildings along their short path to the outguarding as they went. The damage seemed to mainly be to buildings immediately off of this main, entry road.

“I’m Norna,” said the woman, “Norna Thurth, but you can call me Norna.”

She seemed unsurprised and unbothered by his vocalizations, something Rathe was unaccustomed to experiencing in stranger’s



faces. Her own voice was abrupt and strong. Sharp. Unwavering. Rathe imagined her doing well in the Constabulary.

"*Your- aszistance- was useful—*," said Rathe. "*I thank- you- for it—*."

"You're welcome," started Norna, "welcome to *return* the favor, if you *fucking please*. Been days since we were attacked you know, and we've heard nothing about the murderers."

They stopped, outside the tall stone and wood outguarding tower. "You're here with an update, aren't you?" asked the red haired woman.

Rathe looked over the constabulary building. It was unmarred, besides expected wear and old wounds. It had not been attacked in the raid, which struck him as odd. The Scythes' murderous inhabitants usually thoroughly ransacked and dispatched any Constabulary presence they could get away with ransacking and dispatching.

"*I am— not—*," he said, with slightly more pause between syllables than usual. "*I am- not part- of that- Inveszt-igation—*."

The woman's face changed.

"Well then what the *fuck* are you here for?" she said flatly with a scowl, her hands returning to her hips.

Rathe struggled for an answer. He felt uneasy, somehow guilty for disappointing the woman. This feeling of unease made him further uneasy still. He could not recall the last time he had included anyone else's disappointment in any of his calculative thoughts. Subjective personal emotion, not something usually quantifiable. Not worth quantifying.

He had been coming to Hobble to bring the man—the escaped ghost haunting the back of his mind—to Adjudication. He no longer had anyone to Adjudicate. All he had was his investigation.

"*Two men- were szlain- at Halfhome—*," he said. "*I believe- them to be- suspectz- in the raid- here—*."

“Good,” said Norna, her tone flatly mirthful. “Got about a dozen more to go, don’t ya?”

The Empiric ignored her challenge. He stared at the swath of destruction, peering through mended walls and swept ash. He followed it down the road, where it seemed to turn at some recently painted buildings, one with a burned door being repaired by a young man and an old boy.

“*Where did- they go—?*” inquired the Empiric.

“You’re asking me?” replied Norna, with a skewed brow.

“*Their target—,*” buzzed Rathe, “*when they- attacked- your town—.*”

“Oh?” said the woman, surprised at the question. “Like we told the other Coppers, including the ones who were *here* and didn’t bother to even *shit themselves* about it,” her arms raised from her hips to cross over her bosom, and she huffed loudly like an animal. Her face crushed with anger, and she took a quick, deep breath.

“For some reason, they went right for the school.” Her voice contained a special brew of confusion that always came bubbling to the top as a byproduct of letting fear settle. “No dawdling, the whole gang, and then *fucked off* after sacking that poor place. They slashed and burned as they went alright, but just like bees back to the hive, they went straight for that *school*.”

Norna’s face turned from anger to sadness, and she stared across the town, in the direction the boarded-over destruction seemed to flow. “They murdered the old woman who cared for the children there,” she said, closing her eyes. “*Blind* children, mind you, can you believe it? Poor Marm, absolute treasure, that woman was.”

“*Was- anyone- else killed—?*” asked Rathe.

“Two young men tried to stand up against them,” she said, nodding, her face turning back to anger, eyes opening in vicious slits. “A breadboy named Irthan and another older one named Themas, worked with the chickens. Brave boys.”

She turned to look at Rathe directly, taking her eyes off her ravaged home. “One of those Grasscloaked *bastards* was killed as well. Not sure who did it, but they nearly cut the shitpiece in half. Hell of a cut, nice and clean. Good on ‘em.”

Norna paused, and her rage slid back into sadness again. “No one else will run that school now, Empiric,” she said heavily, “I don’t know what those children are going to do.”

Rathe thought for a moment, and decided to attempt compassion. “*Certainly— someone— can help— the children—*,” he said. He was not remarkably satisfied with his attempt.

“Yeah,” said Norna, “sure, lots of people *can help*. We all helped here and there. No one *will take care of them*. Not like she did.”

“*May I— speak with them—?*” Rathe inquired.

“No, you may *fucking* not.” Norna scowled, and wagged a finger at his fabricated face. “One listen to your dulcet *fucking crackle* and those poor creatures might finally snap a brace.”

Rathe buzzed for a moment, considering his own question. The wailing testimony of traumatized, blind children was, after all, worth very little.

“*Were any— of the— children— harmed—?*” he asked instead.

Norna glared at him harshly. “Oh they were *all* fucking *harmed*, Empiric,” she said in a frustrated tone. “All shocked near to broken now, but no injuries, other than being kicked and thrown about.” She paused for a moment, shifting uncomfortably. Rathe stared at her.

“One *is* missing, though,” she admitted. “Probably dead by now, probably run off alone, poor tiny thing—not blind, this one. Had the Sloughing Sickness, all wrapped up in bandages and burlap every day. Seemed lively enough, but Marm always kept her hidden away from view.”

Norna sighed, heavily. “She did the same with all of them—the sick and bandaged ones—come and go when they did. She had some

benefactor from the Shrapnels I imagine, a rather tall fellow who'd come take the dead and bring her new dying a few times a season."

She paused, and patted her apron. "Paid her well to take them on among her sightless flock, I assume. Always sent off for supplies after his visits. I always assumed the blind children wouldn't be keen on shrieking at the sight of those poor rotting things, as would most, you know? Never bothered her with questions."

A tall man. A missing child. Vague descriptions of his suspects. Rathe's mind erupted into activity, a hive on alert.

Norna mimicked a shudder. "Nasty sight, Sloughing Sickness. You know of it? From the Shrapnels?" She nudged Rathe, and continued without giving him time to respond. "Of course you do, Empiric and all. Ever *seen* it? Takes them before long, poor things, especially without care. The little soul hasn't been seen since the raid."

Rathe's mind churned through the content of her words. He chewed up, spit out and knit the information together like a comb, each hexagonal piece fecund with larval knowledge. His eyes darted across the low buildings and phosphorous lamps.

"*What waz- sztolen—?*" he asked.

"What?" asked Norna, her brow rising in shock at the emotionless segue.

"*You szaid- the school- had been- 'szacked'—,*" Rathe droned. "*What did- they take—?*"

"Didn't you read one of the half a dozen reports you copper-trimmed dunces took days ago?" asked Norna angrily.

He had not.

"*Thiz iz- not my- inveszt-igation—,*" repeated Empiric Rathe.

"And just what *is* your *investigation*, Empiric?" demanded the muscular and stern woman.

"*They came- for szomething- spezific—. Killed for- szomething- spezific—. Szold it—. Died for it—. I will- find it-, and thosze- who killed- for it- a second- time—.*"

Norna's brow fell hard. "Who gives a *shit* about some stolen trinket," she barked. "Go and investigate how well The Scythes go up in flames, why don't ya. Ought to give whoever slain 'em a fucking trinket." She ground a foot into the dirt.

Rathe stared at her, his mechanized flesh making tiny adjustments with tiny, unknown purposes. His eyes twitched with infinitesimal movements, like he was tracking an invisible, marching insect army.

"*What did— they take—?*"

She glared at him for a moment longer, as he glared back with his eyes that seemed trapped in perpetual terror, then began her answer. "Besides *lives*? They took food, random *shiny* things, tools, boots... Liberties. Nothing worth the effort."

Rathe's frantic eyes suddenly darted across Norna's face. She felt them like a desperate fly careening across a room, and she shuddered again in earnest, suppressing the urge to swat at his gaze.

"Some folks heard them shouting about a blue coin," she said, uneasy. "I'd never heard of a blue coin, but I've been told they're old, and valuable."

Rathe twitched, a full body convulsion like he'd been struck by something. Norna looked at him quizzically, and continued. "I guess old Marm had one. Those idiots started fighting themselves for it, and chased eachother out of town. They were barely here a nail."

Rathe's eyes misted again, and another jet of steam hissed from the back of his neck. Norna flinched, frowning, and stepped back from him. Rathe thrummed and rattled, visibly vibrating, his eyes unfocused and wild.

"Are you... Alright?" she asked. "You look like my boiler before it blows."

"*I am—... thinking—...*" said Rathe between spasms.

"Is that what my boiler's doing?" said Norna, "Maybe you can come ask it what it's thinkin' about? Do something *fucking* useful?"

Rathe didn't answer. Instead, he turned abruptly, and began to hurriedly walk away. "*Thank you— Norna Thurth—*," he said, clicking and convulsing with each step, "*for your— cooperation—*."

"I hope your missing *fucking* trinket fills whatever rotten parts of you still need *metal in them*, Empiric *Wrath*," she shouted to his back.

His ear membranes vibrated the words into his mind, where they dissipated into nothing. It was distracted, elsewhere entirely. Lost in children's stories.

Where better to hide a rat-faced abomination of a child than a school for children that couldn't see? A child who would stay as such for a human lifetime, recycled under bandage, presented as new patients of a disease that would keep even curious eyes away.

Secrecy bought and scheme concocted, providing ample payment not only to hide the child, but enough to provide an altruist with the supplies of her craft, to ensure her silence at threat of losing that supply for all her hungry, sightless mouths.

He was sure of it.

He needed to get to the City. To inform the High Empiric of his discovery. Face to face, no wires, other than the ones behind his eyes. He had found potential evidence of a Dravaknyr and at least one remaining Hillkin—a female by two accounts so far, potentially a young Queen.

They could not be allowed to survive.

. . . . .

Lenn shook nervously, constantly glancing over their shoulder to make sure Mouse was still on their heels behind them in the busy

Worms Port road. The pair walked cautiously and slowly, as casually as possible.

Lenn tried to walk in the exact way someone holding a fortune in the palm of their hand, wouldn't.

It was the same way Lenn always walked, every single time they had ever done it—but this time it felt awkward, exaggerated, and obvious.

Lenn's mind whipped around like an anchor chain, and their feet moved almost unconsciously. They were holding the most valuable single item they had ever seen in the entire world. Real, actual treasure from the stories. Probably the most valuable item in the whole of Worms Port, in the same hand that begged well-dressed strangers and dug through trash.

*"Where we goin'?"* asked Mouse in a raspy loud whisper.

She had finally stopped holding her hands over her face under her hood and mask. It wasn't helping with the smell at all, since her hands now stank of the filthy port just as much as the rest of it. She desperately wished there were some pine needles around.

"Gonna go see uh, mate," said Lenn, in a far off and lost sounding voice.

Mouse followed the wandering human closely. Their anxious stroll brought them through areas of the slick and noisy town that she hadn't yet seen in her short cuts through it. She wanted to pay attention to the odd sights, the shouting colorful people, but she couldn't. Lenn was acting very strangely again.

"The flower one? With the tree?" Mouse asked.

Lenn's face did that want-something face again as soon as Mouse had opened the little leather pouch on the tall man's belt, and given them one of the coins. The thing human's faces did when they really, really wanted something.

"Nah," said Lenn, "Ol' Cyr's a witch, we'd end up in a poultice just to keep us hushed-up about it."

“Don’t care what ice anyone pulls,” said Mouse, “I ain’t *bushin’* less *I* want, if y’see.”

Lenn had barely said a word since they left the upturned boat with the coin clasped so tight in their hand.

“Why *you* so twitchy an’ quiet for anyway?” asked the burlap covered Hillkin. “You’s walkin’ around like a squirrel. Is it coz a’ that blue coin? Is it not coiny enough?”

Lenn stopped, and turned around quickly. Mouse was suddenly grabbed by the front of her habit and yanked out of the path by Lenn, who dragged her behind a sticky green crate that seemed like it had always been there, sprouting from the ground itself.

“Hey!” yipped Mouse.

“Quiet!” said Lenn, with a very serious look on their face, checking the road behind them, “Stow that tongue, I mean it.”

Lenn peered around both sides of the crate they hid behind, and up on top of it as well. Mouse had no intention of being quiet.

“Wot’re we *doing*?” asked Mouse, stamping her paw in the mucky stone, “You said *no hiding*, if y’see!”

Lenn, apparently satisfied with their cover after letting a few walkers walk by, turned to face Mouse with a wild look in their eyes.

“*You wanna get ‘getted’?*” whispered the young human. “Do you want to get chopped up and tossed to the worms?”

Mouse definitely did not want either of those things. She knew that Lenn knew that she did not want either of those things. It was a stupid question.

“O’course not, muckhead,” said Mouse.

“Then do *not* waggle ‘nother word,” started Lenn, checking over their shoulders one more time before continuing, “about that *fecsy* coin.”

“Why not, if y’see?” asked Mouse, “You said everyone gots ‘em here, somefing wrong with it?”



“When you said he had some coins, I thought you meant regular *coins*, not a fucking... *Trap*.” Lenn sighed, and scanned their surroundings nervously again. “Listen, I could snatch up half of this Port with just this one,” said Lenn, their expression drifting away from concerned anger, to something softer, “and have a fat bucket left over, to sail my ass out of it with,” they said with a tenuous grin. “You slippin in what I’m spillin, kid?”

Lenns face now wore something closer to that expression Mouse didn’t like at all again.

“I don’ needa ‘alf a port,” squeaked Mouse, “I jus’ needa get meddies!”

“We will, but this ain’t no regular coin, kid,” Lenn explained, “It’s a curse. Half the dennies here would cut us down in a heartbeat just to get a squinty gander at it. Can’t just go spend it and get the difference back in a little sack, we’d need a hand cart just to carry it. One each. It’s only as valuable as whatever you can get from whoever won’t kill ya for it.” Lenn’s fist clenched around the coin. “We gotta be careful as cats, and secret as rats.”

“Ooh,” said Mouse excitedly.

Lenn braced to be reprimanded for the rat comment.

“We’s *combombulatin’!*” said Mouse, excitedly again.

Lenn’s face contorted.

“Is we gonna go on all, sneaky-weaky now, if y’see?” asked the Hillkin. She liked sneaking, and began to take on a sneaky posture.

“No,” said Lenn. “We’re basically here.”

Mouse’s human companion gestured across the soggy cobblestone road, towards an unsteady looking building. It jutted awkwardly into and over part of the street, a wide stoop with stools under an awning the color of chicken fat.

“This is my mate Pollip’s place,” said Lenn proudly, “But he don’t really like me comin’ in there, so we’re gonna go ‘round the back!”

The pair departed. An unimpressed Mouse sulked in the footsteps of an anxious Lenn, as they crossed the meandering stream of strange strangers walking through the foul smelling open-air market.

After a moment of dodging sullen people and sodden carts, they had arrived at the dark mouth of a thin alleyway, next to the place with the covered area. The awning stretched over it looked like something's skin, yellowed in the sun. Mouse could see tiny veins running through it.

"Come on," urged Lenn, and slipped into the dark crevice between the place and the far more rotten nextdoor one.

Mouse followed. "I like the name Pollip," she said, playing with the word, proudly popping it across her big front teeth. "Pollip, Pollip, Pollip," she sang, skipping in the muck behind Lenn.

"Well, Pollip's not fast to likin' anyone," cautioned Lenn, "He doesn't even like *Ol' Lenn*. Yer gonna wanna let me do the talking, kid."

Mouse didn't think that made much sense at all.

"I bet he'll like me, if y'see!" she said. "I'm a princess."

Lenn's face released the exhausted ghost of a sigh, and turned towards the door they had found, built into the wall the pair had traveled along.

"*POLLIP!*" hollared Lenn, and pounded on the door.

There was no immediate response. Within heartbeats, Lenn was pounding on the rattling hinged section of wall again.

"POLLIP! I'VE GOT TO SHOW YOU SOMETHING!" shouted Lenn, hammering at the door with the coin-clenching fist, and a boot.

"I 'fought we had to be quiet?" said Mouse, crossing her arms, "I wanna bang onna door an yell too, if y'see, can I 'ave a go?"

Lenn turned towards the frustrated little burlap lump. "No way, kid," they began, "I told you, Pollip's a—"

The door slammed open, missing Lenn by a nose's width.

In the doorway stood a massive, dark and wet-shined figure, illuminated by the weak glow behind him. Wide set black eyes and a wider mouth, embossed into liquid smooth skin, mottled and dark like a toad's.

Mouse had seen some of these people walking around Worms Port already. The ones that reminded her of the little wet lizards she would find in the creeks, hiding under rocks—except this one was half as tall as the tall man, twice as wide, and hiding in a doorway.

"Pollip!" squeaked Mouse, at the top of her lungs. Lenn's face tried to slide off into the dirt.

"WHAT!?" boomed the huge newty person, turning to regard their tiny burlap visitor. Pollip's voice was like a frog's, and Mouse immediately remembered the giant toad she'd imagined shouting at her earlier.

"Pollip!" said Lenn, waving at the big amphibian, "Hey, mate, I've got—"

"Lenn-Egg?" said Pollip, turning to look at the human and interrupting in a strange, bouncy and loud cadence. "Why you, BOOM BOOM my door? What this... Sack? Yell at Pollip?!"

Pollip stooped to investigate Mouse's burlap surface closer, swiveling a wide head on a thick neck. Mouse didn't move, just stared back through the slit in her woven armor.

Lenn started again. "Pol, ol' mate, you—"

"You very *Tiny-Egg*," said Pollip, ignoring Lenn, and reaching out a fat arm with stubby fingers towards Mouse's hood. Mouse suppressed a flinch, and Pollip patted her on the head gently. "Hello *Tiny-Egg*," said Pollip in a friendly, undulating voice.

Lenn cleared a nostril and spat. "Look, Pollip, I've got some—"

The big dark creature rose quickly and turned around to face Lenn, startling them out of their sentence. Pollip's shiny thick tail slid

out of the doorway behind them, and into the dank and shimmering, wet alleyway to join the trio. The door swung shut with a dull slap.

Mouse liked the way the big thing talked, and moved. She watched him carefully.

“Pol... Uh...” Lenn stammered.

“WHAT, *Lenn-Egg*?” Pollip shouted. “You tell me NOW. You go AWAY,” they waved the thick appendage at the human this time, “Frogsong BUSY. YOU, GO!” The waving sharpened to a point, aiming back down the alleyway.

“You’re gonna wanna see this, my mucousy mate,” said Lenn, and opened their palm, exposing the blue of the coin in the hazy light of the alley.

It seemed to pull in what little light was available, out of reflecting puddles and glints of moisture, and for a moment became the only drop of color in the entire, dark world.

“*Bo-Oh*,” said Pollip’s big, wide mouth. “Why you get this, Lenn-Egg?” He began to reach for Lenn’s open hand.

The human clamped it shut again, quick as a trap, and reared it back—ready to launch the object off over the busy, well traveled Port.

“Don’t!” barked Lenn. “If you try and take it, I’ll huck it off into the Port,” they warned, brandishing the treasure, “and no one will find it for ten seasons!”

“Why you bring to me?” asked the salman, tilting his big head as he continued without offering time to answer his question. “Pollip no coin bank. Pollip no rich Salman. No *Vingarum*, no *flowers*. Pollip sell cup drink, roll food.” The creature’s black eyes receded a bit into its head, some kind of squint. “That coin... let Pollip see again, Lenn-Egg.”

“Promise me,” said Lenn, still ready to project the small blue circle off into the blue night, “You’re not gonna gut us, and steal it.”

Pollip looked offended, somehow. “Why you bring to Pollip? You say! Why you no bring to Cyrannah? You say!”

Lenn looked over at Mouse, who was absorbed and entertained by the dark scene like she was watching shadow puppets.

"You've always been... Fair," said Lenn. "To me, at least."

"Fair, yeah?" said Pollip, and giggled a deep jiggly sound, "*Boboho*, Pollip fair for everyone! You give. You bring to me? You give. No give, why bring?"

Pollip extended his shiny, meaty hand, palm up, stubby digits wiggling in anticipation. Lenn, reluctantly, placed the deep blue circle in the center of it. The side facing up showed an image of a closed fist.

Pollip bounced the coin up and down expertly in their hand, eyeing it and testing its weight, then casually discarded it into a nearby puddle.

"Hey!" shouted Lenn, moving after its trajectory in the dark. It landed somewhere with a plop.

Mouse giggled now too. "Is't it not coiny enough for ya, Mister Pollip?"

"Where it go?" asked Pollip, dipping black eyes into their skull again, "You find. It no sink? Real blue, *no sink*. Pollip know trick. No trick, *know trick*. *Boboho!* Human tongue stupid."

Lenn pointed to the puddle. Denting the surface of the water's tension, gently bobbing as it lost momentum in a series of ripples, was the coin. Palm side up.

"Where you get this, Lenn-Egg?" asked Pollip, his eyes bulging a bit this time instead. The big Salman bent easily like an old carrot and scooped the coin out of the puddle.

"I uh, well... I found it," lied Lenn.

"You find it?" Pollip giggled their wobbly laugh again. "*Boboho!* You find it, *my dry slit*. You steal it! Pollip no fool. Who look for this?"

Lenn looked offended this time. "I did *not* steal it, I found it, you slimy—"

Pollip interrupted. "You say to Pollip 'no steal', but *YOU steal!* Who come look for this, Lenn-Egg?"

Lenn continued to argue. "No one's gonna come *looking for it*, I told you—" Their eyes squinted as a shout sliced through the darkness.

"*It's MINE.*"

Mouse's small voice became very large and very sharp in that instant, amplified perhaps by the small corridor, definitely by her impatience with the argument. Pollip and Lenn quit their squabble, both turning to look at her attentively.

"It's all I've got, and all I want is meddies n' water—" said Mouse assertively, glancing over to Lenn, "—and whatever Lenn wants, if y'see."

"Oh?" said Pollip. "What Lenn-Egg want?" Pollip and Mouse both looked over at Lenn, who suddenly felt powerless to negotiate. Before Lenn could speak, Pollip posed another question alongside the obvious one. "You say, Lenn-Egg. What 'meddies' mean?"

"*Pootyfage*," said Mouse confidently. Pollip's eyes akimbo seemed to focus on a separate individual each.

"What—" said the large confused salamander person.

"I want food," said Lenn suddenly amidst the confused exchange. "Whenever I'm hungry, I want you to let me in, and give me a meal. Forever."

"Okay, Lenn-Egg," said Pollip, shrugging oddly placed, thick shoulders.

"She wants—" started Lenn, pointing to Mouse and visibly blushing at the easy success of their demand. "Well—she *needs*, I reckon—*medicine* to fight off an infection. A *bad* one. Her mate's worm-food if they don't get out of the fever soon. Real soon."

Lenn and Mouse now stared at Pollip.

“So we gonna need whatever *regular* coins you’ve got,” continued Lenn, “so we can go to Cyr and get something to stop the rot, and clean rusty blood.”

“Pootyfage,” said Mouse again, just as confidently. “And water, if y’see.” Her little stomach gurgled suddenly.

Like a bird in a forest hearing a call from one of its own, Lenn’s stomach gurgled back.

Pollip reached a fat hand into the oversized oilskin apron they wore, and withdrew a handful of silver coins. A glint of gold mixed in shined among the worn metal. The other hand slid the blue palm into a different pocket, sewn hidden behind it.

“You take, Lenn-Egg,” said Pollip, offering the meager pile of currency to the human.

Lenn accepted, eyes widening as the more tangible currency clinked into their open palms, and counted six coins in total. Five silver stars and a single gold sun.

“Now you wait,” insisted the smooth-skinned proprietor, “Pollip be back. NO *BOOM BOOM*.”

The bulky and slick otherfolk bartender spun and slithered their seemingly boneless body back into the door cut into the side of the building. The door slammed shut, leaving Mouse and Lenn alone in the dark alleyway once more.

“This is *more* than enough!” said Lenn, still excitedly staring at the riches in their hand. A blue weight had been lifted from their shoulders, the burden of infinite fortune replaced by the comfort of simply knowing their needs were met.

Mouse felt no such relief, but she did notice that the amount of coins the duo shared had increased dramatically.

“Wot are we waitin’ for, if y’see?” she asked, suddenly bored and impatient. “Let’s go then, before yor nasty worm eats m’Jeebie.”

“Pollip said to wait,” replied Lenn, eyeing the door. “We should wait. He’d have told us to scramble if he didn’t have—”

The door suddenly slammed open again, thankfully missing them both. Pollip's big shiny frame stepped out of the dark doorway again, with a few objects leading the way held by stubby round fingers.

"You take," said Pollip, handing Lenn a bundle of rolled up, green, leafy-looking objects, bound together with some kind of sinew twine. "Gar, watergrain, Vingarum. Wrap in kelp. Very good," Pollip explained, patting their round belly. "No worm. Very good."

Lenn nodded, took the bundled foodstuffs, and slipped the handful of coins into a secret pocket in their coveralls.

The salman bartender turned to Mouse, and offered her the other objects in his hands. "You take," said Pollip again, pushing them towards her.

Mouse accepted the proffered gifts, receiving a small bulging water skin with a long strap coiled around it, as well as a curious little clay jar, no larger than one of the little kelp rolls Pollip had given to Lenn.

"Fankee, Mister Pollip!" squeaked Mouse, shouldering the water skin over one shoulder, and eyeing the jar curiously. "Wot's this fng?"

"Old salman 'meddies', Tiny-Egg!" said Pollip excited and proud. "Green mushroom, deep in cave. Top of big, wet mountain. *Very rare. Very good.* You give friend, put in bad wound—" Pollip pantomimed the application of a few, sparing drops with his big, fleshy hand in the air in front of Mouse's wide-eyed face. "No die." Assurance bounced in his black eyes as he nodded confidently.

Mouse stuffed the little jar into her burlap, and ran towards the salman's closest thick, short trunk of a leg. She gave it a big, surprising hug. Pollip flinched at first, then laughed their strange wobbly laugh and patted Mouse's burlap hood once more.

"You go now," said Pollip, "Frogsong busy."

Mouse's curious eyes looked up, and behind the cool squishy appendage she held onto underneath a similarly textured waxy apron.



She scanned the inside of the room that Pollip's doorway led to. It was an open space, but crowded. She saw a few islands of hand-made furniture populated by drab and unhappy looking people. Everything was the same color as the rest of this filthy, rank place.

Except for a shock of purple, in one corner. Mouse's eyes squinted through the barely illuminated gloam. She recognized that purple—she'd seen it in another hazy room not long ago, filled with other unhappy, drinking people.

Pollip shook the big limb Mouse clung to.

"Give back leg! You go!" said the frustrated salman.

Mouse released her grasp, arms dropping lazily to her sides, and Pollip retreated without another word through the dark threshold, slamming the door shut once more.

"Let's go, Mouse!" said Lenn, "We ain't even gotta stop at the Flower Shop anymore, come on!"

Mouse didn't budge. She stared at the closed door as it locked with a thunk from the other side.

"Gotta get me bones back," she mumbled, "Gotta save Jeebie too, if y'see." She twitched with static contemplation.

"Huh?" said Lenn, confused at the girl's sudden shift. "Your what?"

Mouse spun towards Lenn, and lifted the water skin off of her shoulder, handing it to the human. "You take," she said, mocking Pollip.

Lenn took it, their confusion rising to a boil. "What are you up to, kid?" they asked, setting the water skin's strap over their own shoulder.

"I'mma go get me bones back," snarled Mouse. "If y'see."

## CHAPTER 8

### *TO FIND THE DEAD SUN*

Hunger shattered a mirrored prison of nightmares. Hideous visions suddenly broken, crumbled and dissolved, falling away into nothing, and the tall man spasmed awake.

Soft heat met his face, and warm light met his eyes, and his belly clenched. His hands were sunken in silken fabric, and the air smelled of salt, pine, tea, and sweet berries. A fierce growl rumbled in his gut.

Shafts of sunlight, thick in the lingering incense smoke, poured in through the tall windows like ethereal stone structures. A golden glow brightened by the glimmering white saltstone walls. He heard sea birds, music, and a little song of a trill from a fluffy white bobtail cat who sauntered through one of the lucent pillars like a ghost. The cat leapt onto the wide sill of the tall window, and then again off into the invading daylight.

“Happy hunting, little one,” said the tall man, blinking wearily and placing his face in his open hands like an offering. He pushed hard and massaged the sleep from his eyes with the heels of his palms, strange shapes and unnamable colors swirling in his vision.

His stomach growled again, like a cornered beast, and he winced against the sharpness suddenly in his gut. He felt gnawing pains, like his own organs had turned cannibal. Acid crawled up behind his breast, and his body writhed as he rubbed his eyes, trying to coax the living burning sensation back down where it belonged.

Now thoroughly and roughly interrogated, he opened his eyes again, and they still told him the same story. He saw the sun, felt its warmth in one of the thick columns of smokey light that was draped over his bed, dark wood containing a rough sea of sleek bright linens.

He heard his city, smelled the gardens, and greedily inhaled the coniferous smoke filling the space. He was home. He was in Nyrsk. His stomach churned, angry and pointed, a sickening, chewing feeling.

What darkness had held his mind, trapped in that mirror? What were these black memories that slipped through his toes like gentle waves as he walked towards this new day? What marrow does this grotesque gnawing wish to crack free from his bones?

He had nothing to long for here. He had the warmth of the sun, he was home safe in his beloved Kingdom of Spires, and somewhere *she* was waiting for him to rise, and join her. His insides ripped at him like a panicked vermin.

His blue star. The beat of his heart. She was his cure, of sickness, of sadness; she was a spell of hale smiles and comfort the warmest fire on the coldest night couldn't approach. She was here, waiting for him, and by the smell of it, breakfast was no task too small for such a divine thing. His moons, his Goddess, the wind in his hair, and the air in his lungs. She could cure this hideous infestation with a touch, a glint from one of her eyes.

Long dark limbs began to slither out from his sheets, and he slung his legs over the side of the wooden bed frame, his gray skin like a dark sky against the bright white clouds of fabric. His feet touched the smooth black stone of his floor, warmed by the golden sun, and he stood. As the sheets fell away, he realized his body was now absent of any covering at all. He easily wrapped one of his bedsheets around his nakedness like a robe, and made his way out of his bedchamber. His insides vibrated with a rhythmic tugging, a desperate hunger guiding him forwards.

The tall man walked down the illuminated hallway, high bright walls perforated with thin windows. He stepped through a lattice of sunshafts, swirling with impossibly intricate whorls of sweet smoke. The smell of cream and berries and floral tea filled his nostrils along

with the diffusion of pine. His steps carried him towards the smell of her first gift to him of the day.

As he approached, the writhing pain in his gut caught like a tether, yanking him backwards, keeping him in place. He doubled over, and noticed a figure behind him, standing illuminated in the sun, surrounded in undisturbed smoke. It was her, his love, facing away from him, ignorant to his agony.

He called out to her, but no sound came from his lips. The tall man opened his mouth again to say her name, but he was unable to recall its sounds. She ignored his silence. He tried again to call out to her, to say her name, something that came as easily to him as breathing, but what came out of him, was no name.

A writhing knot of bristled worms forced its way out of his throat instead, rimming his stretched open mouth with foul lubricant and sticky mucus. They shimmered in rainbow iridescence on the floor as they splashed into a squirming pile in front of him.

He fell to his knees, and crawled towards her. His bed sheet fell away from him, leaving him naked and exposed. The oily slick of gnashing worm jaws snapped at him as he passed over them.

He tried to call out to her again, but the woman in front of him was unfamiliar now, her name was strange and foreign, and his words turned to worms once more. He reached up towards the figure, now looming above him like a shadowed monolith.

This was not his wife. It was no longer even a woman. It was darkness, swirling black shadows taking the vague form of life, an endless vast abyss teeming with every death, edged in a bluegreen luminescence, luring in his simple mind.

“It has been a long time,” said the glowing shadow the size of the world, a familiar and calming voice.

“We are waiting for you. *She* is waiting for you.”

Pereglia's eyes wandered above her oil soaked red mask, flying from thing to thing like an escaped songbird, afraid to land anywhere for too long amidst the commercial chaos. Her feet, heavy with mud and muck and boot, carried on steadily with purpose. She had no intention of staying in this awful part of this awful place any longer than she needed to.

The docks made the rest of Worms Port feel almost clean, safe, and inviting. This place was like a battleground where disarmed combatants fought each other for the right to be digested first in the acid bathed gut of some massive beast.

Pereglia found her mind giving form and story to these ridiculous images, weaving them into the tales told to her alongside those of her current fugitives. She placed the setting of her imagined conflict inside the belly of the great Leviathan Islands; rumored through legends older than old, to be the remains of a massive, island sized monster. She was familiar with the geography, and while officially siding with the *obvious* pareidolic nature of the island chain in any public setting, she truly always believed it was an ancient fossilized creature.

Among the dock's many insalubrious features, the primary one she did her absolute best to acknowledge on an existential basis only, were the reels. She knew the *Ormaormos* grew to enormous sizes in the most active areas of the infested bay, fed by the constant outflow of waste from a trading port. Rasping barnacles off the bottoms of boats had once been a feature, but now some had grown large enough to actually threaten their seaworthiness.

The largest ones were baited, and once hooked, the long process began of reeling their person-thick bodies out of the sea. The reels studded the docks like the wheels of a very poorly designed and

unsurprisingly upturned cart, spokes of wood covered in tires of golden-bristled worm flesh. Their thick, undulating bodies shimmered with every color, an oily iridescence, muscular rainbows skewered with golden arrows. Beauty painted across a monster.

Preglia shook her head, like an animal with an itch, in an attempt to dislodge herself from within it. Just be glad you can't see their heads anymore, she thought.

The huge worms here, she began to realize, were treated and utilized slightly differently. They were still cut up, still eaten—a fact she acknowledged with a slight retch in her gut—but in different ways from the smaller ones fried and roasted further into the town.

The barks she overheard from the stalls here spoke of cured and fermented and jellied offerings, other things that were used for purposes besides consumption. Others still meant to be consumed by non-human things.

The docks she remembered from her increasingly sullied memories were packed with thriving traders of all kinds, from travel to toys. Food and flowers of all kinds. Now, it seemed that only the Vingarum and the worms thrived. The Vingarists were in heavy presence on these docks, open vats of the savory stuff surrounded by bidders, shouts in at least three languages and dialects back and forth.

The docks were the most open-air one could find in Worms Port, a constant breeze from the ocean removed what couldn't linger in a crevice somewhere. Perfect for sampling the expensive fermented junk with a sniff or a dab of the tongue, without being influenced by unearned pungency.

Where there weren't worm-laden reels or shouting Vingarists, there were boats. Sails of all shapes, sizes, colors. Framed by wide nets stretched out from the sides of the docks, over the water. Most were snapped to tatters, full of gaping holes. People ventured daringly close to the edges.

Pereglia shuddered at the thought of wandering between the casual crowd, imagining herself getting shouldered overboard, dangling in the ruined nets as bone-white jaws the size of boat oars snapped at her face.

Her eye caught a stall, stocked with objects she'd been looking for behind her loud imagination in the background of her brain. Heavy circles swinging from ropes, wrapped in waxed cloth brought her out of her pretend horror, and back to task.

The big, white-wrapped wheels always reminded Pereglia of the shiny wheels of cheese the farmers would roll from village to village in the Hivelands, safe in their waxy rinds. Pereglia knew they were *not* cheese. Obtaining one, however, was on her very short list of things to do here.

"Hi-lo," said Pereglia politely to the woman behind the filthy, chop-marked counter, surrounded by the bound and bundled wheels. They dangled from ropes, and set in small stacks on the ground nearby.

She was not much older than Pereglia herself, pretty under all her muck, and immediately unhappy to see the constable.

"Already paid the other one," said the woman. "Fuck off."

Pereglia made a few quick assumptions, and decided it was best to just push forwards.

"I'm not here about that," she said, and pointed to one of the wheels. "I need one of those."

"You do, do you?" said the woman, doubt creeping across her face to join her already sardonic smirk.

"I do," said Pereglia confidently. "How much for one?"

"Depends on what you've got, it does," started the woman, but diverted to question the constable's motives again. "You *do* know what this is, don't you *Copper*?"

Pereglia smiled under her mask. "I don't remember the traditional name for it, *Orm-ska*, or something," she said, giving the

word a genuine attempt, “but yes. I need a wheel of fermented worm paste. Please.”

The woman continued to stare at her in disbelief, and crossed her arms. “Why?” she asked.

“It’s for my bird,” answered Pereglia.

“Ohh,” sighed the woman, uncrossing her arms. “Was that you flappin’ out there earlier? Got one o’ them mecha-bio flyin’ ones do ya? They love the ol’ *Ormr’s’ra*, they do. Full’a minerals and a’cohol and loads of oils and a’monias, great for a thaumatic body, it is.”

Pereglia thought of Rathe, curious if her Empiric had ever ingested the stuff. He had no mouth, no visible approximation for one either, and however he delivered sustenance to his body was a mystery to her. She briefly considered saving some for him, maybe as a gag gift of sorts, but remembered the man had no visible sense of humor either.

The woman began to untie a large wheel from the bit of rope that suspended it, and Pereglia motioned to stop her.

“How much?” asked Pereglia.

“Five shiners for half a wheel, seven for a ‘hole,” she said, with an odd wink.

Pereglia brought her slim coin purse out from her hip pocket again, and brought out a golden sun. “Can you have it delivered to the Constabulary here for me, for this?” she asked, shining it towards the woman in the light of a nearby lamp.

“Uhm, yes Ma’am, you can,” said the woman, swallowing hard and staring at the coin, “You can have thre—err, *two* delivered for that price. Best cuts, you can.”

Pereglia handed the shiny circle over, relieved to not have to carry the much heavier end of the bargain around with her.

“Just the one, please and thank you,” said Pereglia, turning back to look towards the docks, “How about instead of the other two—”



she shot the woman an obvious glance, “—I mean, *one*... How about you just point me in the direction of the boat called *Broadsword*?”

The woman gave her an up and down look, and then apparently satisfied, pointed somewhere over Pereglia’s shoulder.

“See that red sail? Ripped to shit-rags?”

Pereglia turned and looked in the direction of the extended finger, and saw a few that matched the description.

“The one with three jibs, not two,” the woman continued, “and it has a smudgy black cross on one of ‘em, it does.”

Pereglia saw the sails. “You certain?” she asked.

“Wouldn’t lie to a shiny-shoulder like you, Ma’am,” said the woman. “You’re a real one, not like the drunk menaces left here, you aren’t.”

“Thank you,” said Pereglia, “I’d like to expect the delivery soon.”

She was making a subtle attempt at being authoritative, which was not a strong suit of hers. She felt a little bit guilty about it.

“O’ course, Ma’am, o’ course,” said the woman, turning and starting to lift a wheel of jellied worm paste off of the top of a pile behind her cart.

Pereglia hurried off in the direction of the sails. Horrible stuff, she thought, that *Orms*-whatever it was called, but one of the better feeds for her animal. The synthetic shredded supplement they were usually fed had no equal, that was certain, but this fermented chemically rich slop—which he seemed to enjoy quite a bit—would fuel her Knight’s biology just fine for now.

As long as it got there.

She had successfully delivered herself to the edge of the docks at least, and her body instinctively stopped itself from continuing to the boards that hung suspended over the water. She checked the location of the three-jibbed red sail with the black smudged cross, and was beyond happy to find it to be one of the first and closest boats moored along this stretch of treacherous planks.

A leather skinned and visibly haggard man was dealing with a series of ropes, tying or untying the boat under those three sails to the rickety dock. Pereglia steeled herself, and set foot on the slick looking span of boards in front of her, finding it sturdier than she had expected. The toothy treads on her boots gripped easily, and she began to walk towards the boatman with the small morsel of confidence she'd gained with her footing on as much of a full display as she could manage.

"High winds and low waves, I hope," she said to the man's back as she approached. She was trying to sound nautical, and unofficial.

"Eh?" creaked the man, and turned around to send his one good eyeball up and down her body. Pereglia noticed he was short a few fingers as well.

"Wat'er ye fishen, *Copper*," the man sneered, dropping his ropes, "Got no tyme nor shoiners fer a broibery. Cast yer loines."

His voice was gurgly and old. It sounded like it was fighting through slimy paths and tunnels to get out of his throat, as she'd gone through to get here to hear it.

"I—" started Pereglia, looking at the brilliant orange metal on her shoulder, "—I need to get to Slurry Bay, I hear this vessel may be the boat called *Broadsword*, headed that way?"

"Wat'fer a *Copper* boards a wormbit lowly trader's *vessel*?" asked the man, squinting his eye. "Ye runnin' few on yer great birds n' rumblin' machines?"

He laughed, more of a cough really, and produced some foul mouthful of gunk, which was promptly and wetly launched overboard, into the lapping small waves underfoot. Within a heartbeat, the water churned and frothed with unseen activity.

Pereglia swallowed hard. "I...," she started again, fumbling her words with a little more purpose now. "I need to, to get away... From it all," she lied.

She reached up and began to undo her metal pauldron from her shoulder, casting a shadowy, down face. She peeked up through the feigned dismay, and did her best impression of a hungry puppy with her eyes.

“Ohh,” creaked the old boatman. “Ohh, Oi see, Oi see.”

He walked closer to her, limping heavily to one side, giving her a closer and more thorough examination with his single, bulging eye.

Peregria found herself reminded of Rathe once again.

“Has anyone else boarded?” asked Peregria suddenly. “When do you leave?” As she had hoped, the boatman’s attention diverted away from her rounder parts, and back to her eyes.

She fluttered her eyelashes awkwardly.

“I can pay, of course,” she said, and patted her pocket with her coin purse. The old man raised an eyebrow, and stared hungrily at her pocket’s proximity.

Peregria cleared her throat. “But first,” she said, “I need to tie up some... Loose threads.”

She reached back up and fastened her pauldron back in place, then removed her coin purse from her pocket, drawing the man’s vision back upwards, and produced from it her last Golden Sun. She offered it to the man, and his eyebrow dropped disappointedly.

He took the coin, bit it uncomfortably hard with the few teeth left in his mouth, and slipped it into a pocket. This had been a very expensive investigation, she thought to herself, creating a mental note to seek compensation later.

“We’be off in the orange come mornin’,” said the man, grinning a lecherous grin. “Not’a soul on board... If’n ye be keen Oi’ll give ye a proper tour, shack ye up for the *cold noight*. Keep ye *warm, love*.” He winked the saggy lid of his rotten white eye.

Peregria blushed—a defensive reaction to mimic the threatening aposematism of her bright red mask—and did her best to stay in character without vomiting through her clenched teeth.

“My, what a... Generous offer, Captain Sir,” she said with a sick quaver, a perfect and unintentional mimicry of coy sheepishness.

She saw what might be a glimmer of hope in the old man’s eye, and decided to play the part a bit more.

“I’ll have to go, uhm, button things up... But if you promise to let no one else board...”

She awkwardly began to undo the top button on her black uniform shirt, eyeing the dissolving man in front of her who was eyeing her back as she lied again.

“I’d love a, uhm... A tour.”

The boatman grinned wide, his eye crawling over her again like a slug. “Oi’m a’shore ye would, Love,” he said with a rough cough, and hucked another glob of something into the bay out of the corner of his mouth.

“I have to go now,” said Pereglia, suddenly turning away from the man, and fastening the half-undone button as quickly as she could. She began to head back towards solid ground, leaving him with “I’ll try not to keep you waiting, Captain,” over her shoulder as she walked.

“Oh aye,” he said after her, “Oi’ll keep yer shoiner warm one way or t’other, Love. One way or t’other.”

Pereglia mentally checked off two items from an internalized itinerary as she hurried back towards the dock’s end, focusing as much of her attention on acknowledging her progress instead of her surroundings and preceding experience.

Her bird would be fed as soon as she could get back to the outguarding. There was little chance Empiric Harp would take the initiative to feed the animal, and hopefully an even smaller chance still she’d desire any of it’s feed for herself—though Pereglia couldn’t discount the possibility entirely. The Empiric did seem to have a taste for foul things, given the still mysterious contents of her little glass bottle.

She had also successfully found the Watercult priest's assumed destination, and determined she was a step ahead of him—or perhaps—of them. This likely meant they were still at the nearby watering hole, the place with the tanned yellow awning she had seen from bird's back, and learned was called Frogson.

She silently congratulated herself on the success of her tactics, thanking the Flower Woman in her mind for the revelation that coins garnered more respect than anything else in this place. She pointed her boots to her new destination, and once again set off through the ill, chaotic and vital port's clogged vasculature.

Maybe she'd bother Harp for a sip of her foul bottle afterall, she thought, and see if she could erase the boatman's eye from her memory forever.

. . . . .

Mouse was pretending to be a sack.

She sat—very sackly—among some other burlap objects, actual legitimate sacks full of various dried goods. Some dryer than others.

She was bundled up, hunched into a little ball, within earshot of the table populated by the purple-hatted men, being very, still, and listening intently.

Lenn had been very vocally opposed to almost every word of the frenetic and barely enunciated plan for sneaking into the place on a mission of sudden and confusing vengeance. Mouse had expected such a thing from people who were larger than her, and made sure to weigh Lenn down with Pollip's water skin and the important mushroom-medicine before she could be stopped.

Mouse had dashed off without anything more, other than a hasty “Wait ‘ere! I’ll be back, if y’see.” She hoped very much that Lenn was actually waiting for her.

It hadn’t been much of a challenge to find her way into Pollip’s place, the building was made of sticks woven together, and she found a gap to sneak in between the construction as easily as she could in a pasture fence.

Once inside, and the hiss of Lenn’s discouraging whispers dissipated, she found her way easily. The poor lighting and wide layout of the crowded, simple space, and as luck would have it, her proximity to a convenient pile of camouflage, gave her a very easy pathway to concealing herself near her target.

She just wasn’t sure who her target was. There were three of these men at this table, and though she was certain one of them was the same man who had been at the other tavern, the man who had her treasure, she couldn’t tell them apart. All she remembered was the hat, and they all wore the same one. It was even uglier than she remembered.

She peeked through a razor thin sliver of her burlap blind, nothing more than a fold in the fabric from an outside view, and listened intently to the strange words they spoke, searching through them as best she could for a clue.

“We must delay, we have only obtained a drop,” said one. “Nearly lost as well, and at great sacrifice.”

“The Vast is impatient, the Avatar even more so,” said another. “Neither will be inclined to wait, and it will only cost *us*.”

“We have *proof* one was near,” said the third. “The artifacts are enough to begin, to take from them what we need.”

Mouse knew this word, *artifacts*. She knew it meant very, very old things. She knew her bones were very, very old things.

The first one who spoke about delay, spoke again. He had a thin yellow mustache and matching hair like straw poking out from under his tall, silly looking hat.

“The goal,” he said, “was to extract from a fresh one, not to strip ancient acids from the dried dead remains. They were supposed to bring us a *body*. We got lucky with this... *Keepsake*.”

The one who had spoken last, of artifacts, replied. His face was red on the edges, chubby like a child, and hairless.

“These are no mere remains,” he said, “These are the remains of their breeders, the broodmothers, the *queens*. The power in their genetics comes from these matrons, and we have an entire lineage in that box.” Mouse’s ears perked up, and her heart thumped. He was talking about her bones, she was sure of it.

She did her absolute best to stay as still as possible, and think sacky thoughts. She kept her breathing to a steady shallow rhythm, paying close attention to her heartbeat, so as to not set her disguise to trembling among the rest of the still burlap bags.

“They should yield the same—” the chubby, hairless man continued, but was interrupted.

“Dried dusty garbage,” insisted the man who had mentioned some impatient people with strange names. “Even with our best arcanists and most modern biothaumata, it will take ages to synthesize enough for all of us, even just for the Pontifex and the Archpriests it would take a season. We do not have that much time.”

He stopped speaking to bring the wooden cup in front of him up to his mouth, and took a sip. The other men did the same, in a shared moment of silence.

Mouse thought this man looked more like a rat than she ever did. His beady eyes rested above a pointed nose, his whiskers were sparse, struggling to grow. Mouse twitched her own tiny gossamer ones, remarking how much prettier hers were to herself.

She wished she understood more than half the words he was saying as the ratty man continued to speak.

“We need blood,” he said, “living tissue. We will find the survivor, or perhaps now they will find us.”

He took another sip, and gestured towards the man with the straw hair coming from his lip and forehead.

“Brother Wallam, you said a giant came to Halfhome, after the Grasscloaked men. Tell us more. What else did you see or hear?”

Mouse locked her vision on the man apparently called Wallam. That question certainly made it sound like he had been the man in the other tavern. If any of them had her box, so far this man was her best suspect.

“A lucky splash we got the artifacts at all,” said Wallam, “Those fibrous idiots nearly destroyed the box trying to pry off the brass edges, thinking it was gold, probably.” He sipped his drink, and wiped his mouth, and began to fiddle with something under his robes.

Mouse clenched her body, preparing to react. The man withdrew a shiny cloth from somewhere, and wiped his chin. Mouse relaxed, disappointed. The man continued speaking.

“The giant showed up right after I’d finished collecting our prize from those fools from the Scythes,” he began. “The man keeps to himself, buys a round for the whole place *with a blue palm*, if you’d believe it, until the idiots start a fight with a barbarian, which he interjected himself into.”

He paused to sip his drink, and wipe his chin again, before continuing. “Someone else *was* with him, though.”

“Oh?” said the round-faced one.

“I kept myself small when the fight began, hoping to avoid notice amongst the frey, but the second assailant was shouting something about *bones*. I slipped out as soon as gunshots were heard, unnoticed it seemed.”



“How savage,” said the ratty man. “Did you set eyes on this companion of the giant?”

“Barely,” said the man he had called Wallam earlier. “The man they were attacking was between us, but they spoke like, and were the size of a child.”

“Curious,” said the chubby cheeked one. “Wasn’t our *pursued* a child, of sorts? Could it be that our true treasure followed your box of bones?”

Mouse twitched again.

“I had been thinking that very same possibility was possible,” said Wallam. “They would have had to have been on the bandit’s tail from Hobble directly, and I didn’t get a *true* look at them, so I was and remain, *unsure*.”

“Curious indeed,” said the cheeky one again. “A blue palm, a giant, and a diminutive, all in the same place. Certainly speaks to certain, fantastical imaginings, doesn’t it?”

“Indeed it does, Brother Faer, indeed it does,” said the ratty man. “Perhaps no more fantastical than our own Vast I’d say, and perhaps worth setting a trap of sorts, in case our pursuers appear again. Brother Wallam, you *do* still have the box, I assume?”

“Indeed I do, Brother Sallix,” said Wallam, “indeed I do.”

“Let’s see it,” said Sallix, the rat-faced man.

The man with the hay colored hair began to fiddle under his robes once again, and Mouse readied herself. She flexed her legs, making sure her footing was as solid as it could be, standing on top of a pile of burlap sacks. One of her hands reached into one of her satchels, and palmed a razor edged triangular rock.

“As requested,” said Wallam, and his hand left the inside of his robe, rising to the top of the table and holding a red, leather box, lined in shiny brass.

Mouse exploded from her hiding place, closing the gap between it and the tabletop in one blink-fast leap. As soon as her feet had met

the table, she kicked the fat-cheeked man's drink up into his shocked and wide-eyed face.

It splashed into his eyes, and collided into some hard part with a painful sounding crack. He screamed some words Mouse couldn't understand.

"What—!" shouted Wallam, but Mouse was already on him, and another swift kick sent the box in his frozen-in-shock hand spiraling upwards towards the place's ceiling.

"Hey!" shouted one of them behind her.

"No!" yelled another.

"My *toofth!*" whistled the third.

Mouse wasn't concerned with who had said what anymore.

She was already in the air again, leaping after her red treasure as it cascaded across the room. She followed its twisting arc through the air to the ground, and snatched it up as it bounced up off of the wooden floor, landing lightly herself, and immediately starting to sprint.

"Stop you *thief!*" came another shout from behind her.

Something like an instinct turned Mouse's vision briefly back to check the voice's origin, and saw the man called Sallix doing something very strange.

He was waving his hand over his drink cup, and his drink was swirling up out of it, forming into a crescent like the moons did sometimes. It shone like a sharpened blade.

Reflexively, her own hand holding her own sharp projectile whipped out from her side, and she sent the rock slicing through the air to intercept the man's waving. He yelped, and his crescent splashed onto the table.

She turned back towards her escape route and bolted towards a half-open window in the side of the building, partially blocked by a shutter propped open with a small stick. She jumped, tucked her body to the side, and while holding onto the box with both hands, collided with the shutter like something thrown, tumbling out into

the alleyway beyond. The shutter closed behind her with a rattling, skeletal slap.

She landed hard, and it hurt. It felt exactly like the closing shutter sounded. She ignored the pain and jumped up to her feet. Mouse heard shouting in the building behind her, and scanned the alleyway for her friend.

“Lenn!” she squeaked, searching frantically. She didn’t see the human anywhere.

The commotion inside was getting louder. She heard noise at the window behind her, and she slid backwards, flattening herself against the wall underneath it, blending in with her surroundings once more in the dirty, dark alley. The shutter slammed open, and she heard a voice.

“Gone! Fucking *scunt*,” it said, and the shutter slapped closed against the moist building again. “Where is the law! Someone has to go after them!” she heard receding from behind the closed window.

“What did you *do*?” said a nervous voice from somewhere in front of her, a whisper coming from the shadows a few steps away down the alleyway.

It was Lenn, peeking out from behind a barrel, reminding Mouse of how they had met.

“I got me bones back!” said Mouse, brimming with happiness and excitement. “An’ now we gotta *run*, if y’see!”

“Oh *grabbers*, this way then!” said Lenn quickly, waving Mouse over, and began to run.

Mouse ran after them, and followed as Lenn took them zigging and zagging through the Port’s dark streets, headed back to the beach.

She was grinning so wide, it hurt her cheeks.

. . . . .

Preglia was beyond elated to finally have solid ground under her feet again. She still fought to erase the image of the water churning around the boatman's dark, coughed-up mucus, as what she could thankfully only assume were a swarm of *Ormaormos* fought viciously for the chance to devour the phlegm.

Between that image, and the one of the phlegm's parent organism winking a snot-gray eye at her while imagining horrible things, the prospect of taking that drink from Harp's horrid smelling bottle of poison was sounding more and more appealing.

Realizing she'd been distracted, Preglia perked up and checked her bearings, and was thankfully fairly certain she wasn't far from the place the Flower Woman had called Frogsong. If she was right about her location, she was only about a block away, around the building's back side.

She passed by an alley, and had to jump back to avoid a pair of youngsters that shot out of it and nearly bowled her over. Before she could raise her own voice to admonish them, she heard shouts echoing around the corner she had been approaching.

Not the normal shouts that rang through the air in this noisy place, but the shouts of charged commotion, shouts of threats and anger. Harsh against the endless mumbling of the place. She checked over her shoulder, looking for the pair that nearly took her out, and they were nowhere to be seen in the busy road behind her.

She quickened her pace as she confirmed the shouts were coming from the same direction she had aimed herself in. She turned the corner and immediately saw the yellowed awning in front of Frogsong, and the people outside—people in purple robes with ridiculous, matching hats—doing the shouting.

First they were shouting at each other, then at the large Salman wearing an apron who she assumed would be the proprietor of the place, and then—once seeing her approach—at her.

Their voices became clearer as she got closer, and she noticed that one of the priests was cradling a wounded hand, wrapped in some dirty looking cloth. Another had a similarly bloody rag held under his nose. The one with the injured hand was doing most of the shouting, and now she could make out the words.

“Constable! I *demand* you go after that *thief!*” he said, his face red and scrunched with madness.

The one with the broken nose shouted something through the towel he held in front of his mouth, which she couldn’t make out, except for the word *assault*. He gesticulated wildly towards Pereglia with his free hand.

“We’ve been assaulted and robbed!” said the man with the injured hand, and a very sharp face.

Pereglia scanned the sparse crowd formed to watch the strangely dressed men flail, yell, and bleed in the streets. No one stood out. She gave the large Salman a look over as well, and his body language spoke of frustration.

“This Salman *bastard* is in on it!” said the man with the broken nose, finally taking the towel away so his voice would be heard. “He’s hiding them!” he whined.

His words had a slight whistle to them and Pereglia noticed what seemed like a freshly chipped tooth in his blood smudged frown.

“Hide what?” said the big Salman, “Water-man shout ‘THIEF’, Pollip look, only see bleeding idiots, spilled cup. Demand things. Pollip no care. Water-man go! Frogsong busy!”

“You see this treachery, Constable? Hear these *lies?*” shouted the man with the bandaged hand. “He denies our claims!”

Pereglia’s eyes and attention were both swiftly exhausted, bouncing between the shouting men and their injuries, and the stubborn Salman who stood unmoving with their big squishy looking arms crossed across their chest.

“Gentleman,” she said finally, “please, just *one* of you, tell me what happened.”

The Salman gurgled in what could have been a small laugh.

The third Watercult man, who hadn’t spoken yet and just stood in the background hanging his head, spoke up.

“We were robbed, and assaulted,” he said. “By a burlap sack.”

“I’m sorry?” said Pereglia, raising an eyebrow at the man.

“Someone small, in disguise as dry goods, waiting for us, in ambush,” said the man, without raising his eyes to look at her.

Pereglia immediately remembered the two young people she’d nearly collided with only a moment before. One of the kids could have been any of the young people she saw milling about the town aimlessly—ratty clothes and a dirty complexion. The other one, the smaller of the pair, had been adorned in a schoolchild’s burlap habit, common in the High Circle.

“A child?” asked Pereglia. “What did they steal?”

The Watercult men looked embarrassed. The Salman laughed, this time for sure, a strange hollow watery sound.

“A valuable artifact, *personal* and *private* property!” said the man with the injured hand.

Pereglia turned to the Salman, and nodded at him. It nodded back in acknowledgement.

“You said you saw no thief, is that right?” Pereglia asked the large amphibian, who nodded again in reply. “It does seem like something happened in your establishment,” she continued, “I am assuming this is *your* establishment?”

“Frogsong Pollip place,” said Pollip with a dense nod.

“What *did* you see?” asked the Constable. The trio of Watercult priests shuffled around with impatience.

“Me say again!” said the salman, an agitated tone to its deep voice. “Water-man yell ‘thief’, Pollip look, Pollip only see Water-men,

no see thief. Only spill cup, blood hand,” he pointed towards the Watercult man with the broken tooth. “Blood face. No thief.”

Peregilia looked towards the Watercult men, and before she could ask anything, the man with the chipped frown spoke up.

“The wretched thing went out the window!” he said, “after knocking off my *toofth*—” He whistled loudly with the last word, which threw his speech off of its rails.

The man with the injured hand took over.

“After assaulting all *three of us, Constable*,” he said, “Stole our property and dove out of the window, in less than two pumps of blood.” He held up his injured hand, as if it would prove his assessment.

“What is your *name, Constable*?” he sneered.

Peregilia tried to hide a wince. The nature of this Port had caused her to completely forego most of her usual formalities, but these Watercult men would be very much used to the opposite.

“Constable Peregilia, Twisting City,” she said to the man, standing up straight and pulling her mask down to her collar, exposing her face to the men for the first time. She gave them a lacklustre salute.

“I have, believe it or not, come here to warn *you gentlemen* very specifically,” she said, carefully gauging each man’s response. “About someone coming after some stolen property one of you may possess.”

The Watercult man in the back, who had been hanging his head in what looked like shame, flinched. His eyes briefly shot up to hers, belying a moment of panic in his quiet demeanor.

Peregilia pretended not to notice, and continued.

“It seems this *personal* and *private* artifact was unlawfully removed—by way of violence and death—from its previous owners twice now. Given the state of the thieves themselves, I’d say you’re all lucky to be in as few pieces as you seem to be.”

She nodded towards the man with the injured appendage. “What happened to your hand, Mister...?” She pried for his name with her eyes as well as her question, taking a step closer to the group.

“I am Archpriest Boul Sallix,” said the sharp-faced man, squinting through some new veil of frustration. “*Who* is your *superior*, Constable?”

Peregria ignored his question, reiterating her own instead. “Your hand, Mister Sallix?”

“*Arch-priest*,” hissed the Watercult man, as the Constable strolled by him on her way towards the man in the back who had flinched.

Peregria flinched herself, as she took a deep breath while passing through Sallix’s proximity—her beleaguered sense of smell once again unprotected by the fragrant mask hanging unutilized around her neck. He smelled no different than the rest of the grungy ghetto he stood out from so vibrantly otherwise.

“You *did* hear us say we were *assaulted*, didn’t you, *Constable*?” sneered Sallix, eyeing her viciously.

“I did!” answered Peregria with enthusiasm. “Still leaves a bit too much to the imagination though, should I assume you sustained a cracked fingernail in the brawl?” She waggled and waved the fingers on a raised hand mockingly.

Sallix scoffed as she stopped in front of the man holding a cloth below his nose, and inhaled deeply again.

“And you,” she asked, “smudge your makeup?”

She smiled at him. The only notable scents coming from this man were ferrous blood and sweet alcohol, both painting his face in a shiny blush. He furrowed a sticky, red-flushed brow and glared at her, ripping the ruddy cloth away from his face in an exaggerated and theatrical flourish.

“I’ve told you already, they broke my nose and chipped my tooth!” whistled the round faced man.



“Oh dear,” said Pereglia, craning her neck forwards to take an equally theatrical look at the man’s damaged face. “And what’s your name, Sir?”

“Brother Faer,” whistled the Watercult man. “The villain hit me with my own cup, and threw something at Brother Sallix! Show her, Sallix!” He angrily tweeted with each word.

Pereglia stifled a chuckle, imagining a tiny songbird was complaining along with him. She turned back to the sharp-faced Watercult man with the bandaged hand.

“Yes, show me Mister Sallix,” she said, continuing to disregard the man’s preferred religious title.

In her experience, angry people were far more likely to let slip specific details, and she knew how much these fanatics adored their important-sounding honorifics. She wanted to give them every opportunity that she could to give her something useful.

“*Arch-priest*,” Sallix hissed again, glaring at Pereglia. Pereglia smiled back, and the Watercult man continued.

“I will leave my injury bandaged until I can find proper medical attention. I’ve sustained a serious laceration, and not that *you* seem to be remarkably inclined to perform your *duties*, but they attacked me with *this*.”

With his uninjured hand, Sallix produced a shiny object from some hidden crease in his robes. He held it gingerly in his hand, cautious and apprehensive, and offered it to Pereglia. She reached out to take it from him, and he twitched it at the last moment, glinting its edges in the lamplight.

“Do try to not *cut yourself*, Constable *Pereglia*,” he sneered.

Pereglia reoriented her gloved hand, palm up, waiting for the man to deposit the object into it instead.

“Oh, how kind of you to caution me, Sir. Hand it over nice and careful then, Mister Sallix,” she warned. “You wouldn’t want to injure an Officer of the Constabulary now, would you?”

Sallix frowned, and dropped the shining thing uncarefully into her open, leather-covered palm. It landed awkwardly, and she clenched her fingers around its imperfect shape carefully.

Peregria held the object up in front of her, confirming what she had already suspected: it was the same type of sharp stone that had slain at least one of the men at Halfhome.

It was small, triangular, about the size of the triangle of creases in the skin of her palm. Its edges flecked to a razor's thinness by what did actually appear to be rodent's teeth. Unlike the glassy-black stone found at the tavern scene, this one was dull and boring, made of softer and more common solidified sediment.

"Thank you, Mister Sal—"

"*Arch-fucking-priest Sallix*, you—"

She turned away from him as he began to berate her, and began towards the last of the Watercult men. She visibly ignored Sallix's tantrum, removing another red handkerchief from a pocket and quickly wrapping the sharp stone in it as best she could. She slid the bundle back into the same pocket the cloth had come from—making sure to align it as flatly against her body as she could—and nestled it somewhat-safely against her remaining couple of neatly folded utility cloths.

"—I'll be filing a formal *missive of grievance* with your superior as soon as I find—"

Peregria, in that very moment, decided she wasn't very keen on threats. She wasn't very keen on the Watercult, and being in a position to deny these men the victimhood and unearned respect they depended on felt rather nice. Powerful, in some sly way.

She had just arrived in front of the last, sheepish priest, and as he picked his head up to meet her eyes, she spun around to face Sallix behind her.

“Direct your complaint to Empiric *Endis Rathe*, Twisting City Constabulary. He absolutely adores when people waste his time. Please, by all means. I am up for review soon, after all.”

She turned back to face the man in front of her again. He was still looking at her, wearing a very concerned face. His eyes darted away from her vision as soon as it found them. Sallix seethed at her back, muttering unlovely things to the whistle-toothed one as they convened behind bandages.

“Your name, sir?” Pereglia said to the Watercult man. Younger than the other two, thick blonde hair protruding from his hat and upper lip.

“Wa—Wallam,” stammered the man.

Pereglia inhaled again, a deep breath as if she was about to unleash some sort of lengthy monologue upon the man. A different sickly sweetness met her nostrils, mixed in with the pungent decay of the town; the eerie scent of jasmine.

She exhaled with a satisfied sigh.

“Mister Wallam,” she began, eyeing the man. “Tell me, could you describe this ‘thief’ of yours?”

The man looked at her quizzically for a heartbeat, then spoke with taut nerves.

“I uhm, well, yes. Like I said, they were small, and wearing something like a burlap—”

Pereglia raised a hand to stop him. “At Halfhome, Mister Wallam. When you first met. Did you get a good look at them then?”

The man blushed, quick and bright. Pereglia smiled at him.

“At the time you obtained this stolen *artifact* from the *actual* thieves? Anything you recall at all, Mister Wallam?”

The man backed away from her slightly, and began to stutter.

“I—How did... I mean, they—I didn’t—?”

“Not another word, Brother Wallam.”

Sallix had appeared at their side, with the whistley one she was fairly certain she'd heard call himself Faer in tow.

"Are you implying *we* are under suspicion of a *crime*, Constable Pereglia?" pried the suddenly very uncomfortably close priest.

Pereglia took a step to the side, and replaced her mask back over her nose, to hide her grin. She took another deep breath, invigorated by the sudden decrease in putridity of the air coming through the pungent fibers.

"Article Twelve, Section Eight, Subsection Two, Mister Sallix. Make sure you remember '*subsection two*' in your complaint, that's an important detail." She gently cleared her throat.

"To knowingly accept, purchase or purvey properties removed, created or obtained through violatory means shall, In Accordance, be considered as participation and party to *all* offensive deeds involved in the obtainment, creation, or distribution, of said property."

All three Watercult men wore heavy scowls.

"So, who wants to tell me more," Pereglia said with a wink at neither man in particular, "about this *artifact* of yours?"

"I will!"

Pereglia's head tilted to one side, and the Watercult men all suddenly wore surprised faces instead. They all turned to look towards the offer's origin. The voice had come from the crowd forming around them, outside in the street. A young man's voice.

"Speak up please, who said that?" Pereglia asked towards the crowd.

"I did," said a grungy looking, thin man stepping forwards from the rest of the grungy looking, thin people. He didn't look as young as he had sounded.

"And what exactly is it that *you* know?" inquired the constable.

The trio of cultists seemed to agree with her line of questioning so far, scowls and brows belying subtle approval. None of them said a word.

"I sawr 'em comin' out the winder. Sawr who 'em run off wit' too," said the witness. "I'll tell ya's, fer a price."

He stepped further out of the crowd, and Pereglia took steps to meet him. He was older than her, she decided. Emaciated, and filthy, somehow he looked like he smelled worse than his surroundings.

Pereglia sighed, and reached for her coin purse again.

"What's your name, Sir?" she asked.

"You shut mouth-hole, Yellow-Ned!" said the salman bartender suddenly, and pointed a stubby finger at the muddy man.

"Fuck you, Pollip!" shouted the dirty witness back at the aggravated amphibian, and pointed right back.

Pereglia turned to face Pollip. "Interfering with a Constabulary Investigation is a crime, Mister Pollip. I advise you, stay out of it."

"Yellow-Ned stupid. Brain slow," explained Pollip, tapping himself on his wide, neckless head. "He drink wake-water. See things. You no believe Yellow-Ned. Pollip say you, no thief."

"I'm nor lyin'!" shouted Ned, "I sawr 'em, little sack o'thiev'n' come tumblin' out, holdin' a fancy lookin' box, bright red. It run off wit a boy called Lenn, thar'a way!"

Pereglia followed a pointed, black tipped finger towards an alleyway. It seemed to be the same one she'd nearly been run over outside of just before arriving. She slid her half-exposed coin purse back into its pocket.

Ned rolled his eyes up towards his brain. "Or a gal called Lenn?" he said, querying something behind his eyelids. "Never could figger that'n out."

"See?" said Pollip. "Yellow-Ned Stupid."

"And do you know where this 'Lenn' person might have gone off too?"

The muddy man excitedly pointed towards the alleyway again, cracked lips exposing a deteriorated smile.

“Great,” said Pereglia. “Well, you never did say what that price was, Mister Ned, but I do thank you for the tip.”

Ned’s mouth dropped slack, and one eye rolled up towards his brain again.

Pollip laughed his wobbly laugh.

“Bohoho, Yellow-Ned so *stupid*.”

“Fuck you, Pollip!”

The big bartender turned towards Pereglia.

“Pollip say you, no listen Yellow-Ned. Wake-water make brain bad.” He tapped his own head again, before crossing his arms over the front of his huge apron. “Pollip say you, no thief. Lenn-Egg? No thief, Lenn-Egg busy.”

Pereglia dismissed her disappointed witness with a curt nod, and faced the big bartender. Regarding him with squinted eyes, she took a few steps in his direction.

“So you know this Lenn person?”

He huffed, and stood up straighter. “Pollip know everyone.”

“Does Pollip know where this Lenn person might go?”

The big salman huffed again. “Everyone know Pollip. Everyone know Pollip fair. Pollip hear things. Pollip *keep secrets*. Everyone know Pollip keep secrets. No give secrets. No *sell* secrets. Sell cup-drink. Bowl-food.”

He bent over slightly down towards Pereglia, bringing his beady black eyes and wide set face close to hers.

“You go,” he said, with a new depth in his tonal voice. “Frogsong busy.”

Pereglia hesitated for a heartbeat. Her mind spit-thumbed through Articles and Codes and compiled a quick list of pertinent violations; Impediments of Duty, Withholding of Evidentiary Knowledge, even potentially the same Twelve-Eight-Two she’d threatened the Watercult men with. Another heartbeat found her abandoning it all.

“I understand, sir, and I thank you for your time.”

No point in trying to wrestle information out of this one. Whatever authority she'd gained, or felt like she'd gained at any rate, seemed to matter very little to those who called this port home. He'd given her no reason to wonder if he could be bribed away from his standards—and besides, she had barely anything left to bribe with.

She heel-turned away from Pollip, and began to stride back towards the trio of flustered Watercult men, only to find that they had vanished. Scanning the crowd quickly for flashes of purple, she only found brownish-greens and greening brown.

“Shit,” she muttered behind her mask, gently shaking her head in subtle self-admonishment.

The salman had finished pushing his way past people in the quickly dissipating crowd that had already grown thin as the confrontation was revealed to be non-violent and boring. He disappeared into the darkened door under the awning stretching out from his public house. Peregilia tapped a foot anxiously and weighed her options.

She needed to check on her bird. Knight would be growing impatient by now, and her trust in Empiric Harp to look after, Law forbid even feed him, was wobbly at best. Time, however, was not on her side. She was close, and they were only getting farther away. She could potentially get a better view of the place from bird's-back, but even with her binocs, the two youngsters she was after now were far more difficult to spot than the flamboyant Watercult robes.

Peregilia was confident in one thing among it all. She felt fairly certain she knew at least one person whose standards *were* bribery. Whose business *was* secrets. Secrets, and flowers.

She and the last few coins in her purse would pay the Flower Woman another visit, and see if she could provide any insight into the potential location of this Lenn person, and their friend; the vicious

burlap sack. Pending the outcome of that interaction, she would head back to the outguarding, and reunite with her animal.

As Pereglia began to walk, she noticed her witness from earlier laying on the ground near a wall, wide-eyed and staring off into some other world. She stopped, and spoke to him again.

“Thank you again, Mister Ned,” she said politely as she made something resembling eye contact with the man. “I hope you learned something about negotiation out of all of this.”

“Fuck you—uhh,” said a startled Ned, laying in the muck, scrunching up what little skin clung to his face. He stared through her with absolutely no recognition. “Ya got any coin? I’ll letcha go on me for a shiner!”

Yellow-Ned licked his dry lips.

Pereglia closed her eyes, turned, and without another word to the man, continued walking.

“I fucking hate this place,” she said to herself outloud.



## CHAPTER 9

### *AS CLOUD'S BLOOD*

“What do you mean ‘mums’?” huffed Lenn between quick breaths as they ran. “How can you have more than one mum?”

Sand sprayed up from dirty shoe and paw in cascading arcs that chased after the pair as they scrambled across the dark beach. Their new, heavy footprints fell alongside their old ones, a dotted scar of unusual busyness across an otherwise unmarred landscape.

“I dunno, but I got bunches of em, if y’see,” said a slightly less out of breath Mouse. “Probilly on account’a me bein’ a princess.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’d have a box full of—”

“I told you, they’s jus’ bones now.”

“Two maybe, that I get, but why—”

“I dunno, I’ll tell ya later! Let’s—”

Mouse halted mid stride and sentence, and stuck into the sand.

“Wait, Lenn...” she said hesitantly, staring into the dusky mist in front of them. “Somefing’s wrong.”

Lenn nearly tripped over their own sand-sunken foot as they halted mid-run just as suddenly, imbalanced by heavy water skins, and tried to see what had stopped Mouse in her tracks.

They had reached the outskirts of the small, upturned boat where they had left the tall man—fever-sick and under the care of a scavenging parasite. Nothing seemed out of place, no new footprints, no sounds, no firelight. Nothing but silent, gray darkness.

“Kid, I don’t—”

“Jeebie?” called Mouse sharply, and broke into a sprint towards the looming, boat-shaped shadow before them.

Lenn jolted, and ran after her. Mouse vanished around the corner of the structure, and wailed.

“What is it!?” shouted the human as they scrambled around the very same corner, just as Mouse shrieked again.

“He’s gone!”

Lenn scanned the scene as Mouse’s red box was discarded among the tall man’s strewn gear, and the girl rifled through the fallen tarp, as if hoping to miraculously discover him deflated underneath it.

“Look!” shouted Lenn, and pointed to the sand.

Mouse’s head snapped towards the gesture’s target, strewn sticks and scuffed ground.

“You an’ yor muddy sticks—” the frantic girl started, but Lenn grabbed her by the burlap and yanked her closer.

“No look, the marks,” said Lenn, pointing a finger and the hillkin towards the dirt some more. “Those aren’t footprints, kid, see? Looks like somethin’ gettin’ dragged.”

Mouse scrunched her face tightly, head swiveling to follow a path she could barely make out in the blued environment. Among the chaos of scuffed footprints and shuffled pawmarks outside the boat, she noticed something stand out. Long and thick gouges, deep cut into the sand. Something heavy, moving with big slowness.

Mouse shot out from under the boat, silent like an arrow. Lenn was right behind her, half-yanked along by a swiftly lost grip on the child’s clothes. They stumbled, trying to find footing in the sand.

“Mouse, wait!” shouted Lenn.

Mouse had dropped to all four paws, and was following the trail of drag-marks through the small windswept dunes from a whisker’s distance, weaving between shattered structures and the odd unmovable rock. Lenn closed in behind her quickly.

Something big, and dark, lay crumpled on the beach before them, different somehow from the other scattered remains of things destroyed by sea and time and neglect. It exhumed itself slowly from the surrounding haze as they approached.

Far off over the ocean, a strong wind finally finished nudging a cloud out of the way, allowing both moons a clear view. As the world subtly brightened, a tired breeze lazily outpaced the lapping, white-tipped waves that licked at the fallen form, and came to dance atop it—fluttering damp leather and whipping tangled, black hair.

“Jeebie?!” squeaked Mouse, her voice high and frightened. “You said—!”

She landed hard in the dense wet sand next to the tall man’s huge body, Lenn grinding to a stop next to her. Small waves lapped over parts of him as he lay still, curled like a babe, covered in movement.

“Oh fuck,” said Lenn, horrified.

“Help me! Help me get ‘em off of ‘im!”

Mouse frantically ripped and tore at carapaces and spines. The man’s body had become alive with things who lived to feast on dead flesh. She brushed handfuls of small crabs and big flies off of him in a panic.

Lenn was frozen, an overwhelmed subconscious debating the merits of leaping into action to help the child, or dropping everything and just running away. He was dead for sure this time, that cadaverous giant, and this wild animal of a little girl was liable to blame *Ol’ Lenn* for this tragedy. *Ol’ Lenn* knew where to hide. Needed a head start.

“No,” said Lenn out loud, in a quiet voice.

“WOT’YA MEAN ‘NO’!?” bellowed Mouse with a snarl.

She glared hard at the crab she was trying to pull off of the man’s cheek, opting to simply smash its claw at a joint and move on, leaving the severed pincher dangling. She tossed the offensive arthropod over shoulder, and moved swiftly to the next animal without looking up to glare at Lenn.

“No, I mean—I was talkin’ to me—I don’t mean ‘no’, I mean—*oh grabbers*—”

Lenn dove towards the corpse, palming a handful of bristled worm, and yelped. With no further hesitation, they swatted away a

few scurrying crustaceans instead, and moved on a larger one trying to squirm its way under the man's waterlogged coat.

"I forgot about they damned spikes. Be careful, they'll sting ya," said Lenn in a hurried voice while prying crab claw off of leather. The crab's rough shell dug into Lenn's palm, and Lenn ignored it.

Mouse grabbed the same worm by the same middle, and yanked, freeing a collection of undulating coils free from some leathery crevice. A pair of white jaws reared back to snap at her, and she tossed the creature into the waves.

"S'not s'bad, *you* get the pinchy spider ones then," Mouse ordered, snatching another worm from around the man's neck, and flinging it to a similar fate.

She brushed sand and hair from the man's face. Dark blood oozed weakly from deep scratches and strange circle-shaped bites across his features and down his still throat. He was cold as the air around them, stiff and unmoving.

She grabbed him by his coat's collar and shook. "Jeebie, *please!*" she cried. "You said not t'go near the water! You said it!"

Lenn removed the last crab they could find by hand, and a loosely attached worm by boot, and backed away. Mouse sobbed.

"I'll never not remember you, so you'll always be dead, it's *not fair!*" She turned to face her new companion, eyes wet with seaspray and tears. "Lenn, *help!*"

Lenn hesitated again, then, remembering the water skin slung around their shoulder, began to open it and step forwards.

"Here," they said, beginning to lift the strap up over their head.

Mouse reached out and grabbed the container, yanking its now open mouth towards the tall man's—and Lenn down into the sand along with it. They landed hard on both knees, and slumped.

Mouse poured water across the tall man's face, and he didn't flinch or groan. She pried open his wormbitten chin, jaw stiff like an

old door, and poured more inside his mouth. No great gulps, the water dribbled out into the sand.

“I’m sorry Jeebie,” she said sweetly, letting the water go. “I tried, I really did, if y’see.” She sniffled, and hung her head.

Mouse cried, soft and mournful. She placed her hands across his damp, cold cheeks, and felt her warmth seep into him. She closed her eyes and forced herself to remember his smile. She wanted to see his face without cuts in it. She didn’t want to remember him like this. She inhaled deeply, and tried to remember his scent, her breath trembling. He should smell of salty sweat and tree bark. Leather and stone. Old and damp and stinky and sharp. Not this salt. Not this stink.

Lenn felt hot tears running down their face. Felt them cut paths through grime and dry in the breeze—and remembered something else.

“Pootyfage,” said Lenn, with a little tremor in their voice.

Mouse pulled a deep breath through a watery nose, and looked up with broken eyes.

“Wot?” she said, her voice trying desperately to give up.

“Pootyfage.” Lenn said it a little more assuredly this time, trying to mock Mouse’s confidence when they’d first heard her say the word. “From Pollip. Remember?”

Mouse sniffled. “Green mushroom, deep in cave,” she said in a very sad impression of Pollip’s voice, sniffing again. “*Very good.*”

“Let’s try it,” said Lenn, wiping a grubby hand across their cheeks, smearing dried salty streaks back into a dirty blush.

Mouse watched with bleary vision, one hand still layed on the tall man’s cheek, as the human ruffled through their oversized coveralls. After a moment, they produced the very same small clay jar that Pollip had given Mouse earlier, in the alley behind his bar.

The pair stared briefly at the bottle, then took a moment to observe the tall man, laying curled up on his side in the sand. Without a word between them, they set to rolling him over onto his back. They

groaned and shoved and after some effort, the big man was splayed out, belly up to the stars.

Lenn placed the vial's small cork between bared teeth. "That's a good sign, I think," said Lenn, brushing sand off of hands and into trousers.

"Wot is?" asked Mouse.

Lenn pulled the bitten cork away from the little jar, which opened with a tiny hollow pop, and spat it into the sand.

"He's not all stiff. Still a bit floppy," said Lenn. "People get all stiff after they're dead-dead for a while. Maybe he's just pretendin' again. Here."

Mouse took the tiny bottle from Lenn's outstretched hand.

"Wot do I do wif it? I dunno howta use pootyface." Mouse brought the bottle under her nose, and sniffed it. "Huh," she said without any further clues except a confused tilt.

"I dunno either," said Lenn with a shrug. "When he gave it to ya, Pollip went like *this*—" Lenn pantomimed pouring an invisible, tiny bottle, raising it and lowering it a few times for a few pantomimed drops to find their imagined home.

Mouse peeled back the tall man's coat, exposing the rotten wound. A hand's length of worm still sticking out from the hole in his chest armor, writhing happily. She scowled.

Carefully, Mouse tilted the little bottle over the tall man's injury. Impossible green brightness escaped slowly from its tiny mouth as a string of green slime began to descend, nearly glowing in the dark.

"Whoa," said Lenn.

"Jeebie, look. It's *pretty*," sniffled Mouse.

Mouse righted the bottle, and they waited, both staring wide eyed as the luminous sludge began to coat the worm, sliding easily down its body, and seeping into the hole it burrowed in.

Nothing happened.

Lenn began to try to figure out what to do—or juar even what to say—next. Mouse started to whimper again, moving closer to the man’s face, and whispering things Lenn couldn’t hear.

Then, something hissed. Both of them suddenly wore confused faces. Then again, a sound that reminded Mouse of something sizzling in a pan.

“Do you hear that?” asked Lenn, stooping lower to investigate.

“Shh,” hissed Mouse, scrunching her brow and swinging her eyes back and forth, looking for the source.

Among the sizzles, something popped.

Mouse and Lenn’s heads snapped to the origin of the noise together like the tick from a gear. A fine, black foam was bubbling out of the wound, and the worm was panicking.

“Wot on a—” started Mouse, jumping up.

“Is *that* supposed to happen!?” shouted Lenn, stepping backwards.

“I dunno Lenn! I’s jus’ a baby, remember?!”

The small worm they had left inside the man’s wound was writhing, stuck headfirst in a putrefied abyss. Its back end swung around madly, each lash bringing more and more of the worm out of the man’s body, flailing into frantic coils like a tiny loose anchor chain. Some sort of hissing gas had begun to burst from the bubbling black foam that had begun to erupt from the wound.

With a sudden sucking sound, and an uncomfortable slap, the worm was free, writhing in pain on the tall man’s chest as the green-goo-turned-black-slime bubbled like acid on its flesh.

Lenn and Mouse stared at the bizarre animal enduring its bizarre fate, until the writhing brought it to the sand and the frothing stopped, and the worm lay dead on the beach next to the tall man.

“Ughh,” groaned Mouse sadly. “Thanks Mister Wormy. I hate you.”

The hole in the tall man's chest continued to bubble and froth, black pearls exploding into acrid gas. The foamy sound was joined by a weak, breathy rasp, and the tall man's chest convulsed along with a puff of black smoke from his wound. A line on his face changed, and a huge, armored leg twitched like a dying bug.

"Did you—" started Lenn.

"JEEBIE!" shouted Mouse, and leapt to his side.

The tall man moaned, a weak mucousy gurgle, and one armored arm began to weakly crawl towards his chest. The wound sputtered and produced one last black puff of hissing smoke, and with its sudden silence, what little life was building in the tall man collapsed away as well.

"Right!" shouted Mouse, and upended the vial into the wound.

The fluorescent medicine flowed out in a thick, sticky stream, turning to black, spitting foam again as soon as it contacted the infection. The tall man's mouth cracked open, and he gasped.

"Stop tryin'a die, big man!" shouted Mouse. She gently slapped him on the forehead with every other word as she spoke. "You go on get up now, you's too big for us t'move and if you stay here, them worms an' big hard spider's'll eat ya, if y'see." She pressed her hand to his cheek. "Lenn, gimme some more water—"

Mouse looked up and saw Lenn staring off down the beach.

"You got yor ears on Lenn?"

The human didn't turn to look at her, only continued to squint through the gloom, and whisper something.

"Huh?" said Mouse.

"*Shhh!*" hissed Lenn. "Someone's coming."

. . . . .



The junkyard outside the Flower Shop was empty when Pereglia arrived, though she couldn't escape the feeling of eyes all over her.

Her pace had quickened to one just shy of running, and she nearly leapt up the few stairs to the Flower Shop's big, heavy front door.

She wrestled it open and felt her body relax as the warm, fragrant air inside the place slid over and into her. She exhaled with a gentle gasp as the big door closed behind her with a satisfied sigh of its own, and took one last thirsty breath.

No time to be greedy. *Smells'll cost ye.*

Pereglia cleared her throat, and pulled her now underperforming mask down below her chin.

"Lady Cyrannah?" she asked the room, scanning the walls for movement. The feeling of being watched remained. "It's Constable Pereglia. I need your help—again."

A wave of rustling petals and leaves preceded a gap in the wall opening, a hidden door revealing more of the same verdant jungle behind it, and a smiling, wrinkled face.

"Oh, do you, Charmer?" the Flower Woman laughed, "I thought I'd see ye once more."

Pereglia smiled, and bowed her head. "I'm afraid I don't have much time—or coin," she said hurriedly as she reached into her pocket once again. "I am hoping desperately you can tell me *anything* about a person called 'Lenn', a young person—maybe called 'Lenn-Egg' sometimes? They're in danger, I think, or may possess... Do you know them?"

"Oh, sounds like ye've met Pollip," said the Flower Woman, gliding across her petal-strewn floor towards a far wall. "Typical salman, him. 'Egg' is what they call the little ones. Stubborn as a buried stone, isn't he? "

“Yes Ma’am, he is, stubborn indeed. About this Lenn person, then?”

Peregilia produced and opened her coin purse, dumping the last two shining silver stars into her palm. With a frown, she presented them to the receding old woman.

Cyrannah acknowledged the coins with a wave over her shoulder, and laughed again.

“Patience, Charmer, let’s see what’ye catch first,” she said sweetly. “Can’t keep everything inside one head, you know. A crowded crown gets not enough sun.”

The Flower Woman reached for and pulled on a section of drooping vine, unremarkable among the rest of the foliage spreading across the room’s interior. A faint sound of a bell fought its way through the thick, fibrous walls, ringing gently like a memory.

“We’ll call my little fishies in,” creaked the old woody voice with an audible grin.

Peregilia shuffled with impatience, hesitant to bother the woman with it. She had a feeling trying to rush her would be as effective as asking a tree if it didn’t mind hurrying upwards on your behalf. The old garland of a woman turned around, apparently satisfied with the tintinnabulation outside, and smiled a patient smile below calm, wrinkle-squinted eyes. Before Peregilia could worry too much more about timing, a shuffling in a wall distracted her, and stole her attention.

A grubby hand, followed by a similarly grubby little face, came growing out from the wall of flowers. The child—a small girl wearing not much more than a dirty sack with holes in it—finished shoving themselves through the foliage quickly. Once through, she turned back and pulled the rest of the stems and vines out of the way like a curtain, revealing a dank, dark passage—and another small, dirty kid.

Another similar shuffle began from a different wall, producing yet another set of gaunt and pensive children. A hatch opened in the

ground near Pereglia's feet, sending a sheet of fallen petals sliding to its hinges and over her boots. She stepped to the side and stared as even more haggard youngsters emerged from it like soggy vermin from a flooded tunnel.

"Fishies..." whispered Pereglia to herself as she watched the assemblage of youths accumulate in the room. "Not the kind of school they should be in," she mumbled while they all lined up, all facing the Flower Woman's shaggy green bulk.

"Life is our teacher here, Charmer," the Flower Woman said. Pereglia blushed, embarrassed. "These little fishies learn plenty in their little school. Go ahead, cast yer line, Constable."

The sea of dirt-rimmed eyes turned towards Pereglia in an unsettling unison. All set in faces wearing an array of expression, from confusion to boredom, distracted frustration and wary fear.

"Uhm, hi-lo. I am Constable Pereglia, Twisting City. I am looking for someone named *Lenn*—" She pointed to one of the older children in the room, or at least, the tallest. "—about your age I think. Last seen near Frogson, I'm sure you know of the place. This Lenn person is in *danger*. I must find them before it's too late."

Pereglia scanned her audience, and the children all stared at her, unflinching and showing little sign that any of them had heard or absorbed her request in any way. One stuck a dirty finger in a nostril, and began searching excitedly. Another few started letting their eyes wander around the room, while another started to weep softly.

"Lenn sure be poppler lately," said one nearby the cryer, as unremarkable among the rest as the vine used to summon them all here before her. "Real poppler, real poppler Lenn lately, yep."

Pereglia perked up. "You've seen them?"

The Flower Woman snapped a pair of knobby fingers, and the children began to disappear through flowers, back into the walls and floor, just as lazily as they had arrived, if not with a bit more disdain.

All, except for the one who had spoken.

“Yep yep,” said the kid, dirty and small, “real poppler.”

“Tell the Constable *what you know*,” said the Flower Woman, with a harsh, sharp voice Pereglia hadn’t heard from her yet. She imagined these *fishies* heard it a lot.

“Cupple purple fellers, yep! Cupple purple fellers was lookin’ fer Lenn too, yep, yep. Real poppler! They wasn’t so nice ‘bout it, real mean, yep. Real mean purple fellers.”

“What did you tell them?” asked Pereglia, moving closer to the kid and kneeling down to their height.

“Nothin!” said the kid, beaming proudly. “They din’t axe me! I dunno nothin! They axed me brother. He told ‘em, yep. Me brother told ‘em.”

Pereglia crushed her eyes shut, and reopened them. “And what did *your brother* tell them?”

“Broken beach to the low, he told ‘em, yep! He saw Lenn, an’ Lenn went to the broken beach, brother tells ‘em. Broken beach, yep. Mean purple fellers.”

Pereglia stood. “The beach to the true-low?”

“Yep yep, broken beach to the low, yep.”

“Are you sure?”

“Nope! Me brother told ‘em, yep! I dunno nothin’!”

“How long ago did these purple men ask this?”

“I dunno,” said the child sheepishly, “before you did, yep.”

Pereglia relaxed her grip on the coins she had been unconsciously clenching in her hand. She was unsure if she should give them to the flower woman, or to the child. She didn’t have a lot of time for deliberation.

“Thank you, uhm, what’s your name?”

“Yep!” said the kid.

“Well Yep, here.”

Pereglia took the child's hand, and dropped the two shiny coins in their open, grimy palm. The kid's eyes expanded to twice their original size, as they stared at their new treasure.

"Oooh," crooned the sooty child.

"I thank you again, Lady Cyrannah," said the constable as she stood quickly, turned on a heel and made a bee's flight for the door. "Perhaps we shall meet again some day!"

"Perhaps not, Charmer," she heard over her shoulder as she heaved the big heavy door open, followed by a raspy "*give that here,*" in that same harsh tone she'd used before as the door hissed shut behind her.

The rank, moist air of the port hit Pereglia harder than she remembered as she landed back in the mucky streets of the place. She found herself wishing she'd had the time—and the coin—for the Flower Woman to refresh the fragrant oils she'd inundated her bandana with, what felt like so long ago.

Pereglia hoped she hadn't offended the old matriarch too much by handing the coins over to the unwashed little informant; she knew they'd end up in gnarled old hands before long, and wanted to give the little one a big memory. Hopefully, this investigation was coming to an end, or at least a middle that would put distance between her and the need to worry about the Flower Woman's feelings.

She took off in a run, heavy boots slapping wetly against slick cobbles and into puddles of filth on the streets. She continued her bee-line pathing, heading as straight as the layout of the port would allow towards the Constabulary outguarding once again.

The port slid past her in a sodden peripheral blur of rot, vanishing the insalubrious details like an unsatisfied painter sweeping a yellowed brush across substandard work. The shouts and slimy sounds of the place hummed together into a putrid music, her thudding steps percussion to the olfactory orchestra.

A familiar scream slashed the air, ragged and metallic. Knight's voice, ringing out from the outguarding's roof. She was close, and somehow, as always, he knew.

Within heartbeats she found herself back in front of the dilapidated office. Bursting through the front door into the sparse, open room, she found it empty of life. The wood stove that had been weakly burning had smoldered, Harp's desk and chair sat empty, the overworked drawer that hid her bottle opened wide, and seemingly bottleless.

Another brilliant screech shattered the air from above, carving through the floorboards effortlessly. It was joined by a different sound, softer yet still full of rage. A different scream. A human scream.

Preglia sprinted to the staircase descending from the outguarding's roof, leaping up the first few steps and taking the rest two at a time. She exploded through the flimsy door at their peak, at the same time another blade of a shriek exploded from Knight's bloody black beak.

"Khhreeeeeeeeeeaaaaaaa!"

"I'M SORRY!" yelled Preglia at the top of her lungs.

"Oh yer gunna be *fuckin'*—*Argh!*—*sorry, you fuckin'—bird—*"

Preglia's head swiveled to the slurred voice, and her eyes met Harp's unsteady, red glare. The Empiric was laying on the ground, some distance from the bird, clutching a damaged hand to her chest.

Preglia ran to her bird's side, checking him for injuries and leaving the Empiric to bleed on the floor for now.

"Harp! What—"

"Yer *fuckin' bird,*" interrupted Preglia's stupored superior, "Tried to fuckin'... Uhhh—feed it—an' it fuckin—*bit me.*" Harp paused between words to wince in pain, and using her uninjured hand began to fish around in the pockets of the coat she wore. "Where's muh fuckin'—"

Knight looked at his rider, rattled his crest feathers, and began to rumble happily, deep and tremulous like a freshly cleaned and lubricated machine. He clicked his beak and ruffled his neck, stretching his wings wide.

“—that fuckin’... Fuckin’ *bird*—”

“What happened, Sir Knight?” Pereglia asked in a gentle voice, and scanned the scene on the roof.

Between Harp and the perch gripped by Knight’s machine talons, was a torn open white-wrapped wheel of fermented worm paste—its jellied yellow contents half-strewn in globs and clumps nearby. Not far from where Harp lay, was her baton, its kinetic discharge vents open. The weapon whirred and vibrated gently on the ground. Harp still ruffled around in and under her coat with her good hand, cursing.

Knight clicked his beak, and hopped from foot to foot on his rusted bar. The outguarding shook gently each time he landed. His serpentine neck extended, and he snapped his beak in the direction of the fallen Empiric, before looking back at Pereglia with an inquisitive sideways glance, eyes dilating wildly.

“You’re not looking for your *truncheon*, are you, Empiric Harp?”

Pereglia walked over towards the ripped open wheel, and kicked the remainder towards her animal. Knight hunkered down on mechanical legs, and stretched his long neck down towards his prize, snapping up beakfuls of the yellow gunk greedily.

She took a few more steps towards Harp’s weapon, engaged and buzzing softly against the boards. She bent down, clicked something that ceased the thing’s activity and caused it to return to a more slender shape. She stood over the drunk, fallen Empiric, and slid the weapon behind her belt, next to her own holstered one.

“I’ll bea that birr’s brains in, ungraefful fuckin’—”

“Empiric Harp,” began Pereglia, reaching into her pocket and retrieving her mirrored riding goggles. “I’m sure you know, at least

you've heard rumor, how much time and effort goes into training a *Rhakoscephalus*. A great deal more than an *Ornox* or even our temperamental little *Terrabirds*. You know, Empiric, there's only *one thing* that's more important in their training over *never harming a member of the Constabulary*, especially their rider. Do you know what it is?" She wrapped the goggles coiled stems around her ears, and turned towards Harp.

"Above all of that, is *self-defense*, Empiric Harp. It's called *Gwyndeth's Rule*, named after some scunt who beat his Rhak to death ages ago. Costs a lot too, you know; raising, building, training, feeding one of these animals. A lot less than *one of us*."

Harp coughed. "—wher'sat fuckin'—"

"Consider yourself *lucky*, Empiric Harp," said Peregilia again, and gracefully slung herself up into Knight's saddle.

"I'll consiser muhself—fuck you! Hah-aah-HA!"

Harp removed her rifling hand from within her tangled coat, victoriously raising her found bottle in the air. "Foun'it! Fuckin *bird!*"

Peregilia wrapped her hands in the rope-bound leather guidestraps, and pulled them taut. Knight screamed again, an ear-shattering wail, and spread his massive wings wide. Peregilia felt her straps pull tight into their channels, as the silksteel feathers nestled among the true ones shone with dull ghostly light under the moons.

"Let's go find the sun," she said, rearing back on her straps.

Knight plunged his tremendous forelimbs downwards as he unleashed tense, primed hind-ones, in an explosive launch. Peregilia heard a definitive *CRACK* from the outguarding's roof as the rusted perch sank into cavitated framing, finally defeated by the powerful leap.

The tempest of wing's wind smashed into Harp, knocking her unsteadily backwards and nearly rolling her over. Her precious bottle was slapped free from her grip, landing hard with a single bittersweet



bounce before shattering on the ground behind her. Pereglia could barely hear her mournful cry over the rushing of air between arm-length feathers as they took to the sky.

“Goodbye, you fucking awful place,” Pereglia said with disgust, watching as the sloppy town shrank underneath her. “I hope to never see or smell you ever again, very soon.”

As they climbed towards the stars and the traumatic architecture got smaller, she banked her rumbling animal to the low degrees on her compass. His wings caught an invisible conveyor of air, and he began to glide. Pereglia slid her binocs out of their pouch and put them to her face, scanning the abandoned shore to that side of the busy port.

The light and motion of the place ended abruptly after a row of buildings that seemed more destined for collapse than most. Beyond that dark barrier, lay the crumbled skeletons of docks and jetties, ancient remains of long-broken worm-reels, and long-collapsed unidentifiable things. Giant rocks toothed the border between sand and sparse trees beyond, jagged and tall.

As her eyes adjusted, they were drawn to a strange line in the sand. It extended outwards from the sick buildings like an infected vein, black against the pallid, moonwashed beach.

Tracks, she realized. A path, and one recently well-traveled at that. She gripped the great bird tightly between her thighs, guiding him to descend and bank towards the crepuscular coast. Pereglia followed the scar of prints through her lenses, and it split off from itself, a short distance through the skeletal reels and other disassembling structures.

One trail—the busier of the two—led towards the rocks, disappearing around what appeared to be a long-beached rowboat caught in a jag of stone. The other fork branched off towards the sea. She traced it between broken docks and collapsed reels, until it found the waves—and among the scattered dilapidation, a small crowd of people, at least five individuals at first glance.

“Well then,” she said into the wind, “I guess they are pretty *poppler* after all.”

Knight craned his neck back and canted his head, eyes wild with impatient curiosity.

“One more pass, Sir Knight!”

With one hand Peregilia turned Knight to bank again, running high along the shoreline. She poured her vision through magnified lenses, fighting through the monochrome haze of the sunless bay, trying to identify details hidden in the person-shaped shadows below.

The figures were split into two distinct groups, and between them, splayed out on the ground, was something large and oddly shaped, even among the scattered rubble and rocks.

No, she realized—not some-*thing*. Some-*one*.

To one side of the collapsed form stood three tall, dark bodies. Their silhouettes were extended by exaggerated headgear, their darkness glazed by a faint but unmistakable purple hue. The other two, darker still—yet vaguely familiar—seemed to be crouching to investigate the corpse. Or guarding it? She couldn’t tell from up here, through the thick darkness and thin mist.

“Right then!” she shouted over the wind, “I wonder if we’re invited to that little party? What do you think, Sir Knight?”

The enormous bird did a very good impression of a metal chair sliding over stone, and began to rumble again deeply. Peregilia slid her binocs back into their pouch.

“Let’s go find out!”

Gripping her straps again tight with both hands, she guided the bird into a dive. The spectral silksteel feathers slid down their channels to a tighter formation, and the bird tucked his massive wings to his side. Rider flattened against steed as the pair fell like a comet, reverberating as rolling thunder through the thin clouds.

Knight screamed as he braked hard, sending a massive blast of wind across the figures below. Splayed metal talons avoided rotten

wooden beams and slashed into the wet sand instead, leaving deep gashes behind them.

The massive bird pumped his wings again, and again, to steady his uneven footing. The air swirled with ground sediment and shattered shells as every rough grain not bound to another by water's tension was blown through the air like a desert storm. Pereglia slid gracefully out of her saddle, watching through her protective goggles as the five living figures on the beach hid their eyes from the stinging sand.

As she had suspected, she had once again joined the very same three Watercult men she'd met outside of Frogson, once again causing them a mirthful level of discomfort. They squeezed out obscene gestures between protective ones, opening their mouths to shout and instead spit out grit. The other two figures did the same, their attention now thoroughly diverted away from the corpse on the beach.

The—*enormous*—corpse on the beach.

Pereglia had to take a heartbeat to shake her head and acknowledge the size of the body that lay before them, unconsciously bobbing it reflexively backwards like a pigeon. The man was at least an arm taller—or longer in this arrangement—than any body she'd ever seen, upright or otherwise. She felt her heart kick, and a pulse of adrenaline coursed to her fingertips and pricked her scalp in an instant.

Don't get lost right now, she thought to herself. *Focus.*

The two men who had been investigating the body wore the same black fatigues she did, shoulders adorned with the same single pauldron she wore, justifying their vague familiarity from the air.

Their uniforms, even in the darkness of the moonlit beach, were filthy; visibly stiff and oily, stained at the knees and everywhere else. Their pauldrons were dull, green and greening from corrosion and

lack of care, once brilliant feathers now looking more like dying leaves. Their faces wore black pits for eyes, and ragged, grassy stubble.

"You *again!*?" hissed one of the Watercult men. The sharp faced one, called Sallix. The two uniformed men stepped in front of him.

"Is 'is the scunt ya told us about?" said one of the corroded constables, speaking through an oblong grin over his shoulder to the purple-robed men. "At's a nice *fockin'* bird. Didn'a say she 'ad a *Rhak*."

The other one, slightly older and rounder, moved further forwards, rowing his partner cautiously behind him with his palm as he stepped by.

"We've got this all handled, Constable," he said with a casually dismissive wave. "No need gettin' your feathers wet. Go on and file your report—"

Peregilia removed her glasses, slid them back into her breast pocket, and cleared her throat. Knight clicked his beak, and took agitated steps to gain fresh purchase in the wet sand.

"—jurisdiction's ours anyway and all that. You know. Head on to the outguarding now, Harp will let you use our wire. Go on now." He smiled, thin and false. "Your job's *done here*."

He said the last words with palpable condescension and smiled at her wider, baring dark teeth. The one behind him laughed like a drunk who'd been told a dirty joke. The trio of Watercult men now stood at their side, and they neither smiled or laughed along with them.

"No," said Peregilia, unsnapping her baton's holster strap. "I don't think it is."

"We didn't hire you for your *professionalism*," sneered Sallix again, from behind the green-shouldered constables, both of whom now crushed their brows to join the Watercult men in glowering in the moonlight.

The first one to speak, spoke up again, eyeing Knight as he spoke.

“A’right then, *Twisting City*,” he said through a smile pretending to not be sinister. “Why doan’cha come over ‘ere, away from that big noisy thing, ‘ave a look at what we’ve found ‘ere.”

She reached across her belly with her hand opposite her holster, and met the grip for Harp’s weapon with it. In a smooth motion, she withdrew both weapons to her sides.

“My name is Constable Pereglia, Twisting City Constabulary, under orders from Empiric Rathe, Third Badge to the High Empiric herself.” She raised a truncheon and pointed it at the purple men who flanked her would-be allies. “These Watercult *men* are part of an investigation. *My* investigation. I have already been to your shithole of an outguarding, and I know your wire is damaged and inoperable. You should be aware that your *Empiric* is *also* now damaged and inoperable—”

The men winced slightly at that, and exchanged fast glances.

“—a fate I am happy to allow you gentlemen to share, if you so desire it. I know what it looks like when men mean to do me harm, and so does *he*.”

Some instinctual signal inspired Knight to speak up, ripping apart the night air with violent noise. The constables winced again, their hands finding baton handles of their own. The trio of priests huddled behind them.

Pereglia raised her other baton towards the fatigued men.

“Whatever they paid you, just take it and go. If they only gave you promises, consider yourselves paid with your lives, and leave with them instead.”

Pereglia had no idea who the woman talking through her mouth was, but she liked her quite a bit.

Knight screamed again as if to agree, ruffled his feathers and punched the air. Pereglia switched on both batons with mirrored

clicks and a duet of low hums, raised them both to ready, and shifted her weight to her back leg.

“Fuck this!” said the younger one of the constables, throwing up his hands in surrender.

His companion turned and eyed him angrily, which didn’t seem to bother him. He began to back away, shoving through the Watercult men behind him, explaining himself.

“You do whatever you want, Gelber!” he shouted to his judgemental friend. “Some lil’ City scunt’s one thing, but I’m no’ fighting a *fockin’ Rhak!* I’m gon’ta go get drunk an’ live t’see t’morrow!”

Having broken through the robed barrier, he dropped his hands, turned around and began to run awkward and ungainly in the sand. Pereglia could feel Knight flinch with predator’s instinct at her back, fighting a new one of her own as well.

“Coward!” snarled one of the Watercult men.

The senior officer watched his friend lope away for a few breaths, then turned back to Pereglia, looking over her head and swallowing hard. He twitched his stubbled, pursed lips, dropped his half-drawn truncheon back into its place, and faced the less-imposing Watercult men instead.

“Sorry lads,” said the constable to the priests. “Scale’s tipped, bets are off. He’s got a point. Tomorrow seems a good enough stipend for today.”

Pereglia sighed slightly. “You’re not as stupid as Harp insisted you’d be, *Constable*,” she said to the man’s back with piercing disdain.

He didn’t respond, simply walked past the trio of cultists, giving the roundest one a hefty pat on the shoulder as he left.

“We’ll see you tomorrow then, lads,” he said to the group.

“Useless, spineless, cowards,” whined Faer.

After a few more increasingly less casual steps, he too began to awkwardly run across the sand to safety, shouting something unheard to his friend beyond.

Peregria eyed the flustered group of Watercult men. They seemed to be quietly deliberating with some sort of hand gestures, a secret language perhaps, that she couldn't make out. They all glared at her. Sallix's frown ripped apart, and he hissed.

"If you live to regret your interference, we shall see to making sure it is a *very long life*."

He raised his good hand, arranged in another strange glyph she couldn't understand. The two men behind him performed similar puppetry.

"You think the three of you stand a chance against my bird?" Peregria laughed. "Whatever you're discussing there with your little signs and symbols, know this; I'm not an idiot like those two—" she pointed a humming weapon towards the two men's retreat, "—I know I can't arrest all three of you, I don't have the capacity to cart you off to Adjudication anywhere—and I don't expect you'll cart yourself off willingly. What I do have, are your *names*, *Arch-Priest Boul Sallix*. *Wallam*. *Faer*." She stabbed each man with her eyes as she spoke their names. "I have enough evidence to file formal charges and extradition requests. That is your fate, gentlemen, if you choose it."

She cleared her throat.

"*You* have encroached upon the *Autonomy* of—" she paused, "—you know, I'll just skip to the good bits. *You* face two choices, may Law guide you. Submit and surrender your *Autonomy* to our *Authority* and face *Adjudication*—or—*maintain* your *Autonomy*, meet me in combat or turn in flight, and I shall send you to death or cast you in exile."

Sallix sneered. "You know not what you trifle with, *girl*."

She ignored the taunt. She was busy wishing Rathe could see her.

“Like I said, I recommend *the former*,” she said sternly. “Or the running away part.”

She wondered if Rathe would praise and be proud, or overly critical of her bold actions. Perhaps he would simply buzz, expectations met exactly, and award her with neither. She began to wonder if he would be able to decipher the strange motions the men still made with their hands. He seemed to be able to decipher nearly anything. She doubted she could recall any of the odd gestures exactly, but maybe—she tilted her head—and saw something strange.

A particle thin sheet of light glinted like a pane of glass, set atop Sallix’s trembling, clawed hand, as if he held aloft a crystalline platter. She tilted her head again, and it revealed a glinting crescent shape, mirroring the moons above.

Though she immediately knew, those moons were full.

Before her eyes and brain could convene to make any more sense of the strange fracture, Sallix’s hand twitched like the throw of a scythe, and the razor thin blade of water threshed misted air towards Peregla’s throat.

Impossible. *React.*

She flinched to the side, and felt a pinch at the edge of her neck. She ducked, mostly stumbling, and Knight screeched hard. Sand flecked the air once again. Peregla saw two more invisible scalpels cut incisions through the suddenly busy air, straight at her, and braced herself with both batons across her clenched face. Giant feathers intercepted the blades and Knight screamed again—this time joined by a familiar clatter of Silksteel, and an unfamiliar whine of pain.

Peregla scrambled to her feet.

“Fly!” she shouted to her bird. “Get up while you can, I’ll—”

Knight didn’t hesitate. Peregla slammed her eyes shut and took a knee as sand scored at her every exposed surface. She hoped the Watercult men were again similarly blinded, and scolded herself for removing her goggles.



Peregria felt the ground shudder as hydraulic legs cratered the beach, felt the wings bring up and clear away plumes of grit. She forced her eyes open, noted the position of the purplest parts of the blur, and rolled across the ground again. As soon as she found her feet once more, she swung.

A tremor of baritone exploded into a severe clap that broke the air in front of her weapon. The blast barreled through that shattered space in an instant to intercept the place she'd seen the most purple, a heartbeat before.

A sickening wet gurgle told her she'd aimed true.

Furious blinking cleared her sight enough to notice another streak of bent vision tearing through space. She swung again, meeting its trajectory right in front of her chest. This time the clap from her baton made a muffled splash, and a shattering clatter that rocked her hand hard. Cold water and hot steam sprayed her face as a concussive blast knocked her backwards, and the broken weapon fell from her pained grip in pieces.

*"KhrreeEEEE!"*

A fallen stormcloud's blur of black and gray swooped across the beach, slamming into one of the robed men, talons first. Knight carried him into the air like the hand of a giant child claiming a toy. Peregria watched from her back as another scream trailed after them, the giant bird flying off with his prize over the sea.

Her eyes fell to colorful movement at the shore below, and saw Sallix. He was pulling water as if rope from the ocean itself, coiling it around his trunk, and stalking towards her. She scrambled backwards, and swung her remaining weapon in a desperate, sideways arc. At its apex, instead of fracturing the air with a bang, it fractured her hopes with a pathetic pop and a puff of smoke.

She looked at the weapon in her hand, face taut with surprise and betrayal. Worn and dull, this baton, coating chipped and vents

showing rust. Harp's weapon, she realized, as well maintained as Harp's outguarding.

Sallix approached, a look of sincere rage and hatred on his face. The writhing wreaths of water that surrounded him began to coalesce as a spear in his hand. Pereglia dropped the broken weapon in hers.

"Wait," coughed Pereglia, her mouth full of unnoticed debris. "Wait, I'm—they'll come looking for you. For me—my Empiric knows—"

"Shut your *mouth*," hissed Sallix.

Pereglia watched beyond him as Knight dropped his flailing purple burden into the waves far beyond the shore, and curved himself back towards dry land.

"Just hear me—"

"Quiet!" snapped Sallix again. "I know your filthy animal will be here any moment. Sad you won't be here to see me *butcher it* and sell its meat to this desperate port." He raised his liquid spear over her heart, and reared back.

Pereglia stuck out a palm to stop him. "That's not even a good plan, all his good meat is machine now!" she said, surprising herself with a moment of insufferability in the face of certain death.

"What?" said Sallix, his murderous intent suddenly beamed with bewilderment.

"Well I don't know what part of a bird *you* eat—" said Pereglia, adjusting her warding hand into half of a shrug instead. She clenched a fistful of sand with the other.

The man scowled deep, and reared back again. He bared his teeth, his eyes wide with madness and something else, and opened his mouth to shout as he struck her down.

"*Hurk*," said Sallix, and fell face first into the sand. His spear of water barely splashed as it sank into the greedy beach.

Pereglia blinked, momentarily unsure if she was still alive, and saw something moving.

A tiny little figure in burlap skipped across the sand, having emerged from behind a not-too-far-away collapsed structure of some kind, or maybe a nearby boulder—Peregilia couldn't tell. It jaunted over the beach to Sallix's side, stooped down, and began tugging at the man's neck, below one side of his jaw.

Another dark movement caught her eye, and she saw a different smallish figure emerge from the shadows at the edges of the chaotic scene, moving slower and with far more caution.

Something came free from Sallix, and the little burlap person fell backwards. They quickly hopped back up, and brushed themselves off. Peregilia fluttered her eyelids again, her vision flickering as if this scene was contained inside another praxeikon from her father's shelf. She stared, watching them take the little triangle of sharp stone they'd pulled from the Watercult man, and stuff it into the little habit they wore.

"If y'hit 'em in the bones wot hold up the noggin', it makes 'em fall *real* quick, if y'see," said the tiny murderer, in a tiny voice. "Faster than jus' hittin' 'em in the noggin 'iself. Learn't that from me Marm."

A nearly imperceptible shadow swept across the beach, and Peregilia raised a hand upwards, commanding her bird to remain in the sky. Peregilia herself remained speechless as the burlap hood fell backwards, its wearer gazing up, watching the bird circle overhead. The little speaker now faced her in as plain a view as the moons could hope to offer, a happy smile across her strange little face.

"I'm Mouse," said Mouse. "That's Lenn hidin'. Lenn's my friend. That—" she pointed to the giant body in the tide, "—is Jeebie. Jeebie's hurt."

As she stepped closer, Peregilia noticed the moons' light dance across tiny whiskers, and illuminate snow-white peach fuzz across the little face.

“We don’t like these men wif the bad hats either, if y’see—so maybe we’s friends too.” She kicked some sand at the fallen, wet priest. “You kin ‘elp us if you want—but if *you try an’ mess wif us*—”

The strange looking little person’s fuzzy brow bunched up, and she poked herself in the neck, making a quick, splattery sound with her tongue.

“Huh,” huffed Pereglia, with glassy-eyed acceptance. She felt something in her brain begin to run in panicked circles.

*A wrinkly-pinkly critter*, she heard in Pibbilum’s melodic voice amongst the scrabble of thoughts.

A wrinkly-pinkly critter indeed.

## CHAPTER 10

### *IN GRAVE SKIES*

I see.

Welcome, lost one.

You are so still.

Sunken in this restful fate.

In this cold.

Black.

Peace.

Full of emptiness.

Where you were before.

Sensation becomes an obsidian statue.

Unmoving as the weight of the world rolls over you.

Time is all moments, together as none.

No flesh to shiver now.

Thoughts of glass.

Cold.

Black.

Peace.

I am sorry.

You have found me, black stone soul.

I know you wish to rest.

But you cannot.

Your mind.

Your body.

How they move, together.

I can feel it.

*Fascinating.*

We have met before, I see.

Twisted.

Intertwined.

Rejected.

I have chased your breath in and out.

Rested between the hard and soft places of your fingers.

Of your mouth.

I have been in your gut.

And you have been in mine.

You have sought me.

And shunned me.

And I have killed you.

And saved you.

You have never killed me.

You cannot kill me.

And you cannot save me, old friend.

But I have given myself to you.

To save you again.

Brother.

Orphan.

I who have known you, that is not who knows you now.

Yet I have known you always, I see.

It calls to you and you go, but you cannot stay.

It has never taken you.

You have given yourself to It.

But It cannot have you.

You are like me.

As I was once. For so long.

Now, It has taken me.

The I that has known you.

Not the I that knows you now.

Now I am weak.

But I have always been so.

Now I live in cold.

Black.

Peace.

But I have always lived here.



Now, It comes for you.

As it came for what you have lost.

And you fall, and go to It.

Go to them.

To her.

Again, and again.

And It will not stop.

It cannot stop.

And neither, I see, can you.

But still, you are strong.

So still, you must rise.

. . . . .

Arkenwald tapped his baton on the end of the bed's heavy wooden frame, in time with his heartbeat.

*Tap tap.*

*Tap tap.*

*Tap tap.*

Nervous sweat beaded around four bruise-pouched and red-streaked eyes before him. They ticked in pairs along with the slender black weapon, wide black pupils flinching with anxious choreography at every strike.