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ABYSSAL THRUM

by Samuel Hall

Chapter One

*"If you smell sulfur or rotten eggs, immediately exit the tunnel and log the location into your tunnel notes. Exposure to certain chemicals can have negative health effects for scouters." - Excerpt from The Scouters Guide on Dangerous Gasses.*

#

Kayah peered into the labyrinth-fringed abyss, but concealed in the dying light, her forged destiny waited, within and without. It was a dark day, but this was nothing new. Never ending gloom plagued her sunless world. The ruined settlements of Old Caechora rested in the deep shadow of the city above. As the megalopolis’ lowest and original layer, it was neither charming nor desirable. Even the ground beneath was fraught with peril. Relentless collapses, flooding and lurking gnot based disasters earned the name Abysm. Together, they made for a dreadful place to live. Those who survived to call it home were just as tough. But despite the dangers, life persevered one scouting mission at a time.

Kayah braced her footing against loose rock. Light reached from behind, fading into the jagged nooks of a downward tunnel. Shadows hid crafted steps of stone with worn edges, turned smooth from time. She opened her tattered bag, revealing iridescent gnots, harder than the strongest metals and smooth as glass. Impervious to decay, dirt, and destruction, they drew an unnatural presence in her bleak world. The largest gnots rested on top of the rest. Any organization failed to triumph over the flow of gravity. Despite the larger gnot's heavier weight, persistence and small size managed to defeat every other strategy. Kayah lingered on the scars littering her arms, trailing up under her sleeves. Even with a winning strategy, picking your fights was the only way to survive.

Kayah touched a gnot, causing an orange twinkling glow. She recognized the closed loop of twists similar in concept to a closed knot of rope. A difficult language to understand, if you considered it a language. Her fingers wrapped around the gnot, wedging themselves into the grooves. Like her, it was small, fitting in her palm, glowing as she held it. Light poured over the coiling sheens deeper in the bag, eclipsing the twists within her fingers. A rainbow of blues, greens and purples shimmered, each waiting to be brightened by a touch. Kayah pulled the gnot out and tossed it onto the ground like a stone. With a heavy thud, it faded to a faint bloom before she grabbed another. They were each unique, like rocks in a bag.

"Are you sure those will stay lit? What if we get lost? And won't the guild want the gnots back?" Timor asked.

Kayah paused her step to keep from tripping on the uneven ground and closed her eyes, rolling them upward. *Imagine if I wasn't stuck with a first-timer. Maybe I should have waited for my normal partner's leg to recover. It takes so long for everyone else to heal.*

"This would be easier if I could scout alone," Kayah said, under her breath. It wasn't the truth, but it wasn't a lie either.

"What?" asked Timor. Kayah watched as he stumbled on a step, trying to shuffle around a sharp rock above. He had height but no mass on his spindly frame. A poor combination for scouting. A well-worn, long-sleeved and still-clean tunic exaggerated his aversion to being a successful scout. Kayah's begrudgement followed the observation, along with the noticeable lack of rust stains and mold plaguing his garments. The tunnel surrounded his awkwardness on all sides, giving her a balanced satisfaction against his cleanliness.

"They keep their glow most of the time." Kayah flung her hand in front of her at the orange light on the ground. The light faded to a constant shimmer. "See. We only need enough for the way back. Anyway, I've never gotten lost before." Kayah stepped over the gnot and continued down the tunnel. "And the guild doesn't care about bright gnots. They want physergy veins first and any other gnots second. They expect us to scout. If we bring something back, that's extra." Kayah decided between a split in the tunnel. "Today feels like a right kind of day. If we stick right, even the dark can’t stop us," Kayah said from over her shoulder.

The sound of excessive rummaging from behind caused her to look back. Kayah slipped her hand into her side pocket. Her full weight balanced on the balls of her feet with a slight bend in the knees. Bathed in shadow, Timor's lengthy arms were clawing in his bag, causing various supplies to drop. He fumbled with a small guidebook as the ceiling forced him to hunch over. He was nearly a head taller than Kayah, which was rare for a boy his age and he seemed gangly like his body couldn't keep up with his bones. Pages flipped through his fingers, forward, then back, forward, then back. "*The Scouters Guide* says that we should move slowly and carefully, making note of all tunnel features and details," Timor said, followed by a loud sniffle.

Kayah sighed and relaxed her body. Timor might be the least threatening person in Old Caechora, but that didn't mean he wasn't a threat. She turned and continued walking. The sounds of Timor scrambling for his dropped items echoed through the tunnel.

"Wait. Where did you go? Wait for me," Timor said.

Kayah and Timor made their way downward. The Abysm wasn't entirely natural; an ancient city blended and buried under titanic landslides left an unexplored maze beneath Old Caechora. Buried spire tops hidden in tiny shadows, waiting to stub your toe. Crushed atriums whose skies turned to falling clay. Some paths opened up into massive caverns decorated with sturdy intricate pillars, art immortalized into the stone. While others led to quick dead-ends. With luck, the tunnels would hold until you were gone. But no matter what, they were always dark. This tunnel's steps grew wide, stretching wall to the wall and deep enough for two paces before the next drop.

"Why did you even come scouting?" asked Kayah.

"I wanted to try something new." Timor tried to walk next to Kayah, but there was not enough space.

A wooden plank sat against her back on the straps of her bag. Wide enough to keep them single file in this tunnel. The surprisingly simple tool had gotten her out of more dangers than she could count.

Timor tried to squeeze up against the wall, but the board kept him back. "This is my first time, and I heard you were great at it."

"It's not about being great. It's about being patient and logical. And it's not like there is an option. If you want to survive, you have to be valuable. We're not all lucky enough to have a family that works in the kitchens." Kayah tossed a gnot down the stairs, causing green light to roll through the tunnel. *We're not all lucky enough to have a family.* "This place will never be my home."

"I think scouting is admirable and brave–"

"Brave?" Kayah turned and shoved a bright gnot in Timor's face. Her board, strapped diagonally to her back, nearly clipped Timor's side. "It's the only thing they'll let me do. They say it's because kids are nimble and small, making them good scouts, but supposedly, they use kids because it is the most dangerous job down here and they don't want to lose skilled workers." Kayah turned to continue down the tunnel. "I'm not strong enough for the mines, which leaves only scouting." Kayah placed a hand on the lifeless wall of the tunnel. "They seem random, but there is some sort of design to them. It's hard to explain, but it's why I've stayed alive." *And avoided the digs.* The inevitable madness from spending too much time in the Abysm.

"In their defense, Old Caechora isn't meant for us. A bad hand doesn't make a bad player, that's what my father always says. There are other things you can do besides scouting or mining."

"Not for people like me and not if you like breathing or having your own bed to sleep in. Have you ever been outside the encampment? Have you seen the cutthroats without the protection from the guild?" Rhetorical questions from the someone lived outside the encampments.

Timor conceded the point.

The stairs ended, snaking the tunnel left. Its ceiling sloped upward, doubling the previous height. Kayah raised her gnot, covering anthodites in yellow light, making a spikey silhouette on the tunnel walls.

"Woah," Timor said, straining his neck to look at the ceiling. Kayah continued walking. "Wait, aren't we supposed to log stuff like this?"

"Let me tell you a secret. They don't care about stuff like that. They care about gnots and physergy, that's it. That's the secret to getting your next meal," Kayah said.

Timor pulled charcoal from his bag and flipped to the back of his guidebook. "Some loose rock, wide passage with some stairs intact, and some small anthodites overhead." Timor mirrored the words as he wrote them.

*"*Nobody calls them that. They're rockcicles," Kayah said.

"*The Scouters Ex*—"

"Shut up about the handbook, Timor."

Kayah hated that book. A fury built word by word from the many times she flipped the pages. Learning to read in Old Caechora was a painful, useless ordeal demanded by Jaxith. As she hungered for more, the few intact books left an increasingly bitter taste.

They continued along the flat path, taking care to step over some fallen rockcicles. Kayah threw a gnot further into the tunnel. The walls narrowed into layers of shadow.

"Dead end?" asked Timor. "That means we can head back."

"No, you see the shadow at the base. It might be a way through."

The shadow was only a few feet wide and its height was even shorter. Kayah kneeled and tossed the bright gnot into the dark. Cracks against the hard stone echoed until the glowing coils came to rest, failing to clear the passage’s end. She tied her bag shut and flung it in before following it into the belly crawl. Colliding gnots rattled from inside the bag. She pushed the bright gnot further with the end of her board and checked the height of the tunnel with its short side.

"What do you see? Is it a dead end?" asked Timor.

"Hold on a sec." Kayah shuffled and grunted, crawling deeper into the tunnel.

"We should just call it a dead end and go back." Timor's words grew distant. "Kayah?"

Kayah writhed in the small rocks and dirt of the tunnel. Clouds of dust lingered in her face from each breath. Her bag compressed under her elbow as she reached her arm forward, board in hand. The bright gnot was fading fast. Its surface was matte, a sign of poor quality. The light stretched further until she saw it. The end of the passage. Kayah spat a mixture of sweat, dirt, and saliva out as she waited for the air to clear. She twisted her torso back and made a cone with her hand. "Come on through. It opens up soon."

Incompressible words came from behind, but Kayah continued forward. She stood up and rummaged through her bag of gnots, looking for a shiny one. A reflective surface caught her eye. A strong red light flowed through her eager fingers. This one felt good in her hand. *A keeper.* Missing bright gnots were low on the list of guild priorities. Rays of red, released from the bag, extending along the ground, walls and ceiling, showing the grandness of the room. Kayah lifted the gnot high above her head, revealing a large circular cavern. Mixtures of ornate columns built into the walls and covered in creeping rock lined the far edges, scattering the shadows. Strong arches curved upward, converging into a dome which features faded into the darkness. After a few steps, the floor dropped and the edge’s mirrored curves disappeared into the cave. She peered over the brink and stared into her own eyes. Water. She plunged the gnot beneath the surface.

"Aaah." Kayah yelped.

"What happened?" Timor shouted from behind.

"It's water, and it's warm."

She turned to look at Timor. Panic smeared across his face as he strained his neck to look up from inside the narrow tunnel. "A water pocket!? The. The handbook was very clear that we need to return and report bodies of water larger than a puddle or muddy earth. Is it larger than a puddle?" Timor dragged his legs out of the small passage. "We should go back."

Kayah stared into the pool's surface as the ripples died away. "Relax. It doesn't look that deep. It's warm. Might mean there's a heat gnot or something else down there. If we can get it, we’ll get extra rations from the guild."

Kayah reached her arm underneath the surface again, nearly to her shoulder. The water kept its secrets. She gripped the gnot with both hands, the water lapping at her nose. The light grew brighter, but failed to reveal anything. "It's a pretty big puddle," Kayah said as she shook the water off her arms, splashing Timor with droplets. The red light faded back to normal as she held the gnot in one hand.

"So, it's a puddle?" Timor asked, peeking around Kayah's shoulder. He peered over the edge and dropped a bright gnot.

"Don't." Kayah failed to catch the gnot. With a plop, it broke the surface and sank. "That won't work. The water holds the physergy. How do you not know that?" She found the blue light and tracked it from a glow; to a point; to nothing. A couple of small bubbles broke the surface, spattering her in the face. *What an idiot.*

"Look." She wiped the water with her hand. "Just make a note in your stupid book, keep hold of your gnots, and let's keep moving." She shined the red light along the walls of the cavern. Narrow arcing paths enclosed the circular pool in the center of the cavern. The silhouette of deep, short steps, like a staircase that had been pulled tight, disappeared after twenty of thirty paces. "What did I say earlier? Right, right?" She rolled a different gnot towards the path on the right, wedging itself between emergent rock and the wall.

Both of them followed the jagged edge, accompanied by their retreating distorted reflections in the water to their left. The cramped curve slowed their progress, but eventually the stairs widened. So wide that they could stand shoulder to shoulder with room to spare, even with Kayah’s board. Her stomach growled, breaking the silence.

"I guess I'm getting hungry. Maybe we stop for a bit?"

"Sure." Timor opened his bag. "My mom helped me make some steamed rolls yesterday," Timor said. Making your own food was an alien concept to Kayah.

Timor flipped his bag upside down, spilling everything on the ground. An extra pair of ragged socks, a small worn blanket, a bundle of writing charcoal spread out on the ground, and the infamous *Juniors Explorers Guide*. In the middle, sat the rolls wrapped in a worn green cloth. Kayah squinted at the sight of the guidebook. However, her stomach pulled her interest to the wrapped rolls. She chewed on her tongue as her mouth watered. Timor unwrapped the cloth and extended a roll towards Kayah. His eyes were kind, but Kayah hesitated, wary of the gift. His mouth made a flat smile before taking a bite of the roll and passed the green bundle to Kayah.

Timor seemed harmless enough, but Kayah hadn't survived this long without keen patience. Too many things didn't add up. Who volunteered for scouting missions and who would freely share food? Her stomach told her these were thoughts for later.

Kayah's eyes widened as Timor chewed. "Pass one over here." She snatched the bundle of rolls and smashed it against her nose. She tossed her board on top of the uneven ground and fell into a cross-legged sitting position. A mobile seat was one of its many uses. The smell of the baked dough was delightful. She stuffed three rolls in her mouth before passing the bundle back to Timor. Maybe exploring with Timor isn't the worst, but it wasn't the best either.

"You said you wanted to leave Old Caechora?" Timor asked as he took a bite from a roll.

Kayah processed the words. Would someone actually ask that question? She swallowed the barely chewed bites. Her wandering gaze followed the looming arches, looking for a way out that didn’t exist. "Are you kidding me? Who doesn't want to leave? I'm tired of the guild, I'm tired of sleeping with one eye open and everything else down here."

"It's just that I've never heard of anyone leaving. At least not with their sanity. This place is a punishment for the upper layers, but it's all we have," Timor said.

Kayah refused the logic of his words. "What? Just because you haven't known someone who has gotten out doesn't mean it never happens." Kayah took another large bite, talking as she chewed. "My dad, I mean Jaxith, says that if you're valuable enough." She swallowed her bite. "The Guild will take you up to work on the Bulwark in the upper layers." Words meant to comfort someone you care about. A lie she let herself believe. Kayah placed her hands on her knees and looked at the ceiling again. "Can you imagine working on the edge of the world? Without something over your head? Imagine what lies beyond. They're supposed to go all the way to the surface. I've heard that you can leave the city whenever you want."

"Yeah, that would be something." Timor fidgeted with the cloth. "It's not that bad down here, though. My parents say that if you can't change it, no need to try."

Definitely the dumbest thing she heard today. How do you know you can't change it unless you try? And if you're dumb enough to say that, odds are you were probably too dumb to change it. It's easy to lose a fight if you've lost it in your head before it even starts.

Timor's genuine, weak eyes wandered the ceiling. "There's lots of stories about people who find rare gnots. I overheard my parents talking about a lighting gnot found a few settlements over. The guild brought special equipment to transport it to the surface. Plus, it's important work we all do to keep the Bulwark strong down here. It has to support everyone above."

"If it's so important, why is my bag falling apart?" Kayah picked her bag up, letting the straps dangle like loose strings. "Or look at your shoes." Kayah pointed at Timor's shoes. "I can see the holes in the bottom and they don't even fit. Everything is always falling apart down here. Everything except the precious Bulwark."

"It does too, but the engineers take care of it," Timor said.

Kayah scoffed.

Timor started twisting his bag straps in between his fingers. "Hey I was thinking, the Guilds founder celebration is coming up in a couple weeks and… maybe—"

"Ewww." Kayah scrunched her nose and raised the back of her forearm to her face.

"I mean. It's not a big deal if you're busy."

"What? What are you talking about? Do you smell that?" asked Kayah.

Timor's face twisted to match the smell that burned Kayah's nostrils. The stench lingered in the air with an unnatural weight. Timor gagged a bit and plugged his nose. Kayah tried breathing through her mouth, but it was worse, much worse.

"What does that stupid book say about terrible smells?" The smell strangled her memory, despite having read the book multiple times. "I have smelled nothing this bad. Ever. It's rancid."

Timor fumbled for the book in his bag. "I don't remember it mentioning smells. Maybe… there's a dangerous gassessection." Timor began flipping through the pages, but the air was causing his eyes to tear.

The smell subsided, giving Kayah a window of focus. She investigated for the smell’s source, bright gnot in hand. A tiny prick of light pierced upward from the depths. The gnot that Timor dropped had activated again, but the air above the water was less rancid and the water remained still. She turned back towards the wall and inspected the crag’s shadows. Hidden away, a skinny fissure divided the rock on a sharp diagonal to the wall. *How did I miss this?* The steep, downward passage was tight, barely big enough for a person. *I wonder if it can fit through here.*

"I found something. It says." Timor blinked rapidly as his eyes watered. "If something smells like rotten eggs, that's bad. Is this what rotten eggs smell like?"

"I don't know. I've never even seen a real egg. Aren't you supposed to be the kitchen apprentice?" Kayah squeezed into the crevice, but her board caught the sides. Wrangling the wood against the stone was no use. She’d have to leave it behind. Half of any tool is knowing when to use it.

"Maybe we should go back. I have a bad feeling about this. What if this is coming from a gnot?" He looked back at the trail of lights tracing the exposed columns. Sections of their lights were close to disappearing.

"I'm never going to get out if I can't even finish exploring some tunnels. If you're afraid, then wait here but I'm going down." Jutting rocks scraped into Kayah's legs and torso as she squeezed into the ominous passage. *More scars.*

Timor took a big breath and plugged his nose with one hand before following her.

The passage was a fissure, long as it was narrow, and sharp edges slowed their progress. Malice saturated the air, crowding what little space remained between their bodies and the protruding rock. As they neared the end, tiny beads of sweat formed on Kayah's forehead and neck. She only had a few more bright gnots in her bag. Only the smallest ones remained, the ones hidden by gravity, now exposed. She shuffled them into her pockets and kept the red one in hand. The pincers of stone opened into a wide corridor. Spongy dirt soaked her shoes. It spread along the floors, walls and ceiling like mold. Thicker sections of murky water pooled on the floor. Kayah tossed a tiny gnot on the ground and it partially sank into the mud. Despite the moist nature of the tunnel, this isn't what caught her interest.

Light stretched from the tunnel's depths. Unlike anything Kayah had ever felt, it resonated with a strange, indescribable sensation. Golden and inviting, it radiated a strong warmth even at a distance. The feeling morphed into the sound of an anvil. Words she couldn't understand scratched at her mind. The rhythm was so perfect it became hypnotic. Entranced, Kayah pressed on, overriding every logical thought in her head. It had a familiarity to it, like going home. Something she had prided herself on never feeling.

It was sublime, the telltale sign of the digs.

Splashes interrupted the dream's hold over Kayah. "This is mud, Kayah. I don't think it is safe down here. What if this tunnel collapses or floods?" Timor said. His breaths were rapid and short.

"Do you hear that? A bit further." Kayah struggled against the deepening mud. "It's not all soft. Use the hard sections on the ground." She tested the ground with each step, keeping her eyes on the golden light ahead. "Once I'm out of gnots, we can turn back. I want to see the end."

"What are you talking about? I don't hear any sounds."

With just a few labored steps forward, mud swallowed her feet up to the shins. A difficult to locate grating voice broke the silence. "Children?"

Kayah's body seized as she could feel all the pores on her skin opening. The golden light pulled away, stretched to silver and disappeared, along with the sound. Her body was preparing for a situation that her mind failed to realize. Her hand had already found her shiv, carved from a splintered femur. She gripped it with white knuckles. Every move Kayah made avoided confrontation, but that didn't mean she didn't prepare for it.

"Is that what you heard?" Timor asked as he positioned his back towards her.

The stench returned, stronger and heavier than before. A hostile intent burrowed inside your head with each breath. It wanted to become part of you. Kayah held her breath and pushed her emotions down, as deep as they would go. They wouldn't help her survive.

"Alone?" The voice was ahead of them now farther in the tunnel. Warm drops of liquid started falling from the top of the tunnel, too dark to see.

Timor tossed a bright gnot towards the second voice, but there was nothing but the dark expanse of the tunnel. "We are scouting for the Bulwark Guild, and this is an unregistered tunnel. Only guild workers are allowed to be here," Timor said as he held his handbook with shaking hands. Timor turned towards Kayah. "It's getting hard to move. Is it a prowler?"

Prowler's, even the worst ones, were incapable of speech, but she didn't spare the seconds to tell Timor. "Cutthroat, maybe." But in the tunnels, attackers never surrender the opportunity of surprise. No, this was something else. Kayah moved closer to Timor. "Everything in my body is telling me to run. We need to leave." She yanked her shoe out of the mud and tried to take a step, but her bag wouldn’t budge. *The wall is too far. There is no way I'm stuck on it.* She reached behind with the bright gnot.

A grotesque arm stuck out of a sunken spot of mud on the floor. The ends of the fingers showed exposed bone, with most of the tips missing. Distinctive ashen flesh covered the tips around the bone. Kayah's bag was locked in its rotten grip. She dropped the gnot and scrambled to detach herself. The straps twisted into a messy trap. She stabbed the arm. It bled a deep red, almost purple, but did not flinch. Outright panic and terror replaced any composure she had left.

Timor found the same horror protruding from the ground. Red light bathed the base of the arm. Their eyes met briefly before he kicked the grisly elbow.

The arm twitched unnaturally, ripping the barely attached straps of Kayah's bag from her shoulder and knocking Timor into a pile of mud. Timor gasped, fighting for the air that was knocked out of his lungs. A muddy quagmire sapped strength from his arms and legs, keeping him from standing.

Kayah froze, staring at the arm as it flailed. Her nose burned from the stench as her body remembered to breathe, snapping her out of the trance. Another wave of hot, rancid air pulsed through her..

"We need to run." Kayah yelled as she snatched the glowing red gnot. Clumps of mud squished in her fingers, drowning the light.

The arm responded to her words and reached out in her direction. The hand found Timor's leg and gripped it like a vise. Timor tried to break free, slipping in the soft earth. The grip tightened.

"Help." Timor reached for Kayah.

Kayah hesitated. She owed nothing to Timor, but she needed to try. The guild incentivized a living scout over a dead one, especially if it was your partner. She dropped the gnot and pulled with all her strength. The mud thwarted their grip, sending Kayah backward.

Timor's face twisted. "Get it off me."

Another arm slithered upward, emerging from the moist ground, placing a monstrous hand on Timor's chest. It pressed the air out of his lungs.

Survival crept into Kayah's thoughts, over buried emotion. *They weren't friends. She didn't have friends. Friends get you killed. I need to run. This was a lost battle.* Timor sank deeper into the sludge. His hands angled upward, unable to find any leverage. The breaths that fueled his screams stopped. The tunnel grew quiet. A loud crack jolted Kayah's senses, and she gave into her fear. Timor grasped at Kayah with the last of his strength, finding the gnot she had dropped. He gripped the unforgiving twists with weak fingers.

Kayah crawled backward until she was running. Time lurched, stacking her heartbeats until wanted to explode from her chest. Her pupils narrowed as the tunnel filled with a bright red light from behind, much brighter than before. She looked for the shadows out of fear of the redness that chased her. Finding the narrow passage, she clambered upward. It felt shorter on the way up as the walls sliced her legs and cut her arms. Many bright gnots sunk below soft earth, but enough remained to guide the way. Frantic breathing and a rapid pulse in her ears exaggerated the pursuing silence.

The domed cavern gave her room to think. Trailing lights between the columns and the water showed the way out. A wave of malice poured out of the fissure, smothering her despite the open space. She moved away from the wall, trying to put her mind at ease. The emptiness made her dizzy. Something traced down her leg, refreshing her panic. She tripped on her board and tumbled into the water. Every ally was just a waiting enemy.

Her arms and legs stung as they splashed, followed by a salty taste that filled her mouth, but there was something wrong with the water. It moved slowly, a texture that was difficult to describe. She spat it out, trying to keep her head above. Patient ripples moved in slow motion, much slower than her movements. She steadied herself, watching the ripples with equal patience.

The warmth of the water interrupted Kayah's focus. It wasn't warm now; it was hot. Kayah's rushing adrenaline was now completed with an urge to sweat. Her dwindling composure commanded that she climb out, but the edge’s height trapped her in the water. Tendrils of panic took hold telling her to swim, but she needed to control it and assess the situation. The slow-moving water made it impossible to see through the surface. Kayah dunked her head, looking for the gnot Timor dropped. Water burned her eyes as they acclimated. She focused into the depths, trying to see any light from the bottom. The prick of light glowed brighter with each second. But there was something else, too.

Many hands and arms of various sizes and states reached from below, dancing in the blue light. Some long, like a bug’s antennas, and others thick with tendons and muscle. Their depth distorted their sizes. They moved together, digging the ground away.

Any coherent thoughts left Kayah's mind as another wave of terror engulfed her. Bitter, oily, warm water filled her nose as she gasped underwater. Panic splashed towards the bright gnots against the far wall. An overpowering fear prevented reason powered by a strange pressure in the air. Her duress confused the light’s distance, causing doubts if that was the way out. She trashed towards her escape, reminded by the blue hue of water served of what dwelled below.

Exhausted from the heat and the swimming, Kayah reached the brink of solid rock near the guiding lights. She reached up but could not grasp an edge. A muggy pressure distracted her. *The water wasn't this low before, I could touch it from above.* The wall was black against a backdrop of light pouring over the edge.

Kayah focused and shut her eyes, trying to feel for something she could use to climb, but there was nothing.Kayah stopped using her hands and tried using her feet instead. "Yes." she said, getting a mouthful of water. Her foot wedged into a ledge and she pushed through exhaustion and reached up. One hand caught an edge. It was sharp, but she pulled hard. The muscles in her hands seized and her skin stung from exposure to the air. Her clothes tore as she dragged her body over the top onto the safety of the hard ground.

She gasped for air on her back. Blood, sweat and water mixed, dripping slowly down her shredded clothes. The humid air kept her body from cooling. She paused. *What is happening? Is this a nightmare?* She rolled back to her knees and looked into the water. Something emerged from the ground, visible through the shallow pool. A hulking body covered in arms with no face. *No, this is real.* She looked across the cavern towards the downward fissure. Darkness saturated the cave, condensing between far columns, peering back at her. With exhausted breaths, she retreated, dragging herself through the tunnel without looking back.

The monotony of the tunnels dragged on her as she took countless lefts. Led on by a sparse trail of still-lit bright gnots, she trudged, heavy with fatigue. Her body demanded rest but she couldn't. Not with the terror lurking in the shadows and not in guild’s control. No. She had to stay conscious until she could hide or find Jaxith. Her healing, her burden, had to be kept secret. As she came to the cold stonework of the guild stairs, her vision blurred and her legs dragged until her consciousness submitted to gravity's persistence.

Chapter Two

A sunny, cloudless sky covered the day in dry heat. Warm rays of light, from a long afternoon, pressed down on the barracks training field. The stage's sandy loam thirsted for ceaseless practice from any who stepped upon its dusty ground. This engine of sweat and blood was the beating heart of the Solidore mercenary estate. A history of less than legal business had fallen off in recent years for the more stable income of military training. In this capacity, it was a humble gear for a much larger war machine under the jurisdiction of the Hoplisogn kindred. And against the ending of the day, the estate continued to wring bits of life from drills, quenching the cracked earth.

Baran slumped, holding his two training swords, one in each hand, with their tips digging into the ground. Dull edged swept hilt side swords, the signature style of the Eastmaw family name. He waited for the word to start the round. Across from him stood his opponent and friend. Their clothes and shield accented with dark purple, an attempt to ingratiate themselves with the estate colors. Dull steel rested against their hip as they adjusted the shield's center grip.

Baran's mind was elsewhere. Today's daydream took him to a place near an ocean. The idea of waves that reached to the horizon seemed calming. He yearned for it, away from the stone and metal of the city. The freedom of the seas and the wind blowing in his face filled his imagination. Freedom from a name that wasn't forfeit. Freedom from the condemned markings.

"Ready?" asked Romek. The training instructor was a large wearkin. With fur bunching at the gaps of his sparring gear, Romek stood a foot taller than most men. The mixed features of a bear and a wolf made him an intimidating sight. Next to him, stood his companion mount, Boro, a steppe rhino from the northern regions of Caesurge.

"Hold on a sec," Rikard said. He was still fussing with his shield straps.

A large horn nudged Romek's arm, catching his attention. The morning monotony affected both Romek and Baran alike.

"Start," Romek said.

"Wait, I was." Rikard trailed into a sigh. He tucked the straps between the shield and his forearm. "Whatever." He raised a tall guard and approached Baran. "He didn't even hear you."

"Doesn't matter," Romek said.

Rikard feinted a sweeping leg strike. In the way your eyes shut when they catch unexpected sunlight, Baran moved to guard the blow, leaving a clean opening on his left side. Rikard shifted his swing and countered Baran's other sword with his shield. The round was over as quick as it started. A solid strike between Rikard's edge and Baran's chest signaled the end.

"Come on, man. It's hot as hell." Rikard leaned closer to Baran and raised the shield to block their faces. "He's not gonna end it till we give him a couple of good rounds."

"I can hear you." The tips of Romek's ears twitched while pointing towards both of them. "Why don't we make today's drills more interesting?" Romek said. He kneeled to unfasten his leather bootstraps. "If you two can best old Boro and me, you can take our place in the mission tomorrow to the Interior with the captain." He gestured to a larger training area behind him. A small field against the rear wall of the estate next to the barracks.

"Fuck that, it's too hot for this shit," Rikard said.

Baran's eyes were wide and awake and he was looking towards Romek. "Are you serious?" he asked, pointing his right sword at the wearkin. Romek replied with a nod. "Gnot's allowed?"

Romek obsessed over his boots, meticulously removing them. Beastly toes wiggled small depressions in the ground. His claws cut as short as they could go. One big unnecessary hassle.

"Doesn't matter to me." Romek placed his boots far away from the sandy soil.

Baran hit Rikard's shield with his sword. "Come on." He grabbed his scabbards from the ground and walked towards a covered arsenal of various training weapons.

Rikard followed for a couple of paces, slowed and stopped. "Hey, hold on." He gave Baran a nudge and tilted his head to another figure approaching Romek. "Who's gonna win? Your gramps, with a permanent stick up his ass, or the wearkin pride we never hear the end of?"

Baran stopped in his tracks to watch his grandfather. He breathed in, filling his lungs, and exhaled through his nose. His left palm blocked the sun while he chewed a hangnail raw in his other.

*What's his problem? Doesn't he have anything better to do than keep me from going on some shit mission? It's not my fault he's washed up and doesn't care about honor. The Eastmaw name became worthless since he forfeited it. Why did I deserve to be dragged down by his mistakes?*

The captain fighter of the estate, Dravius, approached Romek, who was still staring at his feet. He was past his prime, with leathery skin from too many summers in the sun. Along with wide set shoulders, he pulled back to the point of discomfort. Trying to look like some sort of proud soldier. Dravius' stern gaze remained unnoticed by Romek as he marched with a slight limp in his right leg. Nearing Romek, he began gripping his hands together so hard that his knuckles popped.

"Relax, I'm taking this seriously. You know I hate getting my feet dirty," Romek said, rising to a standing position. Now looking down at Dravius from over a head's height above. Romek leaned forward. "We need to liven this up. It's been downright depressing these past couple of weeks, drills day after day. All the work outside the city has left the rookies and those with one foot in the grave. This'll give them focus and if things get serious, I'll put an end to it." Romek smacked a bag attached to Boro with his palm.

"Them or him," Dravius said.

Romek sighed. "He's more than ready–"

Dravius leaned forward, unphased by Romek's height. "It's not your call to make. I'm your commanding officer."

A massive paw-like hand, absent of any kindred markings, grabbed Dravius' left shoulder as Romek stepped past him. "Maybe. But I already took my boots off." Romek now turned towards Baran and Rikard. "Sounds like the deal's on."

Baran grinned and smacked Rikard on the shoulder with the back of his hand. "We're going on that mission tomorrow." It wasn't the ocean Baran was dreaming of, but it was a chance to build veneration of himself and his family name. An abandoned concept to his grandfather.

Romek grabbed Boro's reins, guiding her into the field. "Give me a few minutes to set up the posts and tie off the ropes," Romek said. He tossed a keychain to Baran as he passed by, whistling a faint tune.

"Yo, my shoulder has been bothering me lately. Maybe we can keep this relaxed?" Rikard leaned on a wooden shelf nearby.

Baran unlocked a sturdy padlock and swung open heavy wooden doors, revealing an assortment of gnot based weapons and tools. Their rough quality was superior to alternatives from most legal vendors. Perks of the estate ground down for training exercises. Burden gnots could increase or decrease the weapon's weight. Glamor blades made weapons harder to see, nasty on a long spear. All the gnots were matte as hell though, which meant they chugged physergy. Baran found a round shield and shoved it into Rikard's chest. On the outside, it was a simple-looking shield, but its thickness hid a heat gnot inside.

"Woah careful with that man," Rikard held it back a safe distance.

"You're on Boro with that shield. She doesn't like the heat. It might throw off her focus," Baran said. *As long as he listens to my commands, we have a chance.*

"I know, man. It makes her angry, though. Not really sure what you want me to do when she charges." Rikard swapped his previous shield for the gnot one. "Okay. What's the rest of the plan? You're gonna do everything yourself, right?"

Baran didn't find any humor in the comment. *I probably will.*

With the shield tightened and ready, Rikard glanced towards the field before turning back with a pale face. "Man, she's already watching me."

Baran inspected gloves from a large rack made of comfortable leather with woven steel thread on the palms and inside of the fingers. Tools meant to wield a gnot directly. He inspected them for holes, making sure they fit. The metal weave had a tendency to pinch if it wasn't snug. A reliable tool and a mask that concealed the condemned markings on his hands. This was one of the few legal occasions that allowed him to cover them. Another pair caught his eye. He extended them in Rikard's direction. "Here."

"Nah, I'm good with my normal sword." Rikard gave his sheath a pat. "Probably gonna have to two hand the shield. Plus, it's hard to cool them if they get hot." Rikard swung the heat shield side to side, testing the straps.

*How does he expect to win with a shield?* "Can you focus? I haven't been given a mission for months," Baran said, tossing the gloves back into the rack.

"Haven't been given is a stretch and you know it. It cause we fucked up that last one."

Baran unfastened his training sword scabbards and threw them on the ground. "You don't get it. There are no expectations for you. You don't have the weight of a disgraced name. I've got paladin blood running through my veins." Baran clenched both fists. "And these damn marks banning me from any kindred affiliations. Which is basically everything. No chance for land, blocked from education. I can't even marry out of it."

"Most people don't even get that stuff anyway," Rikard said.

"Yeah, well, I'm not most people. I'm better than everyone here. I need a chance to prove it."

Rikard raised his eyebrows and craned his neck forward. "Your name doesn't make you better than anybody, and those marks don't make you worse."

"Well, if it's a fair fight I am," *An easy thought for someone with clean hands.*

"Alright, alright. We'll give this a go." Rikard twirled a finger in the air. "And when it ends up with you pissed, you're buying the drinks." He flew his finger forward, landing on Baran's chest.

"Cause we have to buy drinks from the estate, right? Or did you mean we'd go out?" Baran's patience for someone from the interior, even Rikard, had its limits.

"Look man, you know what I meant."

Baran smacked Rikard's arm away and continued searching through the standalone gnots. Remembering the different gnots was a pain. Years of practice and mistakes dulled the pain. A sand gnot caught the sun. Baran grabbed it with his gloved hand, along with a pair of goggles. The lenses were smudged, but seeing less was better than seeing sand.

"No, no, no. Not that one. We won't be able to see shit. Last time I had sand in my ass for weeks. And you're gonna make more work for whoever has to clean up. It's not good for anyone?" With a heavy sigh, Rikard adjusted his pants and tightened his belt. "Do you even know how to use it?"

Baran squeezed the gnot, bringing enough physergy through the woven metal of the glove to activate it. The iridescent coils shot swirls of new sand into the air. "I'm going to apply critical thinking and past experience." He released his grip, letting the gnot turn dormant and freshly created sand drift over the arsenal of weapons and tools.

"So no, that's what I'm hearing." Rikard raised his shield toward Romek, who was unpacking a set of vials from Boro's saddle in the training field. "Did you account for that? I saw the red one."

*Those vials shouldn't be allowed.* "It'll be fine," replied Baran, grabbing one of his side swords and shoving Rikard towards Romek with his elbow. "It looks like he's done with the poles."

Baran counted three wooden poles spread across the field. Each was roughly two meters high with thick manila rope wrapped at the centers. All were on raised wooden platforms maybe a meter from the ground. Baran brushed off some sand wedged between the twists of the gnot. It seemed pointless, but he did it anyway. "I'm covering Romek. You need to get the back two and I'll get the middle one."

"Oh, I see. I'm doing most of the work." Rikard motioned towards the estate headquarters overlooking the courtyard from a farther distance. "Do you think she is–"

"Ready," Baran shouted towards Romek and Boro. *If Rikard can stay focused, we have a chance.*

Various members of the estate gathered to spectate from a safe distance. Pruners from the pedal gardens shaded themselves under cherry blossom trees. Headquarter attendants perched from thresholds in the main building. Off duty myrmidons stood like weeds growing from the barracks. The captain's grandson versus the captain's right hand was a rare spectacle. The estate owner appeared from the noise of gathering viewers. Vivian Solidore stood from one of the upper walkways of the estate headquarters with her two kids, Mori and Alby. She gave Romek a reluctant look of approval as the two children held their breath in anticipation, legs dangling through the balcony railings.

"Looks like we have an audience," Romek said. "You two know the drill. Get each rope untied. If you yield or are knocked out, you're out. On the bell." Romek pulled a two handed curved training blade, somewhere between a sword and glaive with an unusually long handle.

The seconds stretched leading up to the bell ring. Boro, already fuming at Rikard's shield, charged with a personal vendetta. Rikard braced for the blow, attempting to heat the shield with his physergy. The metal warmed to the touch, but it wasn't enough to keep Boro from side-slamming the shield and his much smaller body behind it. Rikard flew backwards into a roll to the edge of the training field. A plume of dust trailed behind. Boro was now focused on the closer target.

Baran and Romek postured like a pair of wild animals fighting for scraps. "Your move, kid," teased Romek, kicking some dust with the inside of his foot.

Boro did not spare the pleasantries and charged Baran. In a few powerful strides, the couple thousand pound mass was an arm's length from its target. Baran hated sparring against Boro. Making a rhino yield was a waste of his skill. Even if he did somehow manage it, what was the victory worth to him? What recognition was there from defeating a pack animal? He failed to see the point of it. Baran focused his physergy into the gnot, causing sand to spray out. Baran waved it through the air, enveloping himself in an obscuring cloud, allowing him to dodge the charge. Boro tucked into a sliding turn, confused at the lack of a collision.

"Nice move, but you're gonna need to play offense to win this," Romek said.

Baran could see Rikard stumbling to his feet. *Good. Their difference in skill was noticeable, but Rikard was a living,* breathing punching bag. Forcing him to yield would not be easy.

Baran darted into the rhino's blind spot on its back flank. Striking its rear leg behind the knee with the sparring blade. Even a sharpened blade would have done little against the rhino's thick hide. This fight was impossible to win. The best Baran could hope for is that Boro got bored or tired. Boro led and Baran followed, as they danced with each other in a twirl of dashes and sand. Boro changed tactics and began to buck and flail. Romek attempted to flank Baran, but the dust combined with the rib breaking kicks from Boro made it too chaotic to close in.

*If you can't beat them, make them the terrain*. Baran heard his grandfather's words in his head as he used quick footwork to keep between Boro and Romek. He shook off the distraction, but it insisted. Don't judge a man's skill by his character. Built from years of repetition, the damn advice forced its way in. Even if Dravius was washed up, he knew his profession. A low murmur of applause came from the gathered spectators. Baran's sparring wasn't normally this entertaining, but he could understand the need to acknowledge his skill.

Romek paused, checking on each pole. Loose rope laid at the base of the back right pole and Rikard headed to the opposite corner. The faint orange glow of the shield glistened against Rikard’s sweaty face. Heat shields were a double-edge sword, especially low-quality ones. Searing metal didn't know friend from foe. All flesh burned the same.

Two barely audible whistles pierced the dust filled air from the direction of Romek's outline and a calm serenity overcame Boro. The horned animal stopped flailing and steered her massive body towards the back of the field. Baran struck the back leg again, but couldn't distract the rhino's focus.

Boro, paying no attention to the fly swatting at its leg, galloped out of the dust cloud. Gaps in the sandy cloud revealed the shattered splinters of the back platform. Gasps from the audience followed as the entire platform lurched, becoming a giant ramp with Rikard sliding down right past the tied target. A split-second decision to grab the rope instead of dodging the rhino horn, waiting at the bottom of the ramp, left Rikard out of options. Boro's horn seared as it pinned the shield and Rikard against the slanted platform. The smell of burning keratin permeated the air. Rikard’s arm shook under his own weight as the shield made visible waves in the air. Dripping sweat sizzled against the shield. His elbow burned, blistering the skin.

"Fuck this,"Rikard said, sliding away and tossing the shield. Boro knocked him to the ground and placed a heavy foot on his chest to keep him in place. "I yield, big girl. I yield."

Rikard was out of the fight. An expected outcome. Victory was one rope away. A difficult task, but if anyone could do it; it was him. Romek growled, seeing the second rope on the ground. He did not hesitate, downing the thick red gel from his satchel. Unrestrained instincts of a beast replaced aspects of his former self. His breathing became loud and aggressive. Romek’s eyes and ears hunted for Baran. The dust and sand cleared enough to give an unimpeded view of Baran's new foe. Buried in Romek's shaved fur and the darkened skin, red lines traced his veins. The gel had darkened as it mixed with the host, enhancing each muscle and tendon that it reached. Panic snuck into Baran's thoughts, his bravado gone. He'd seen this play out before.

Baran tossed down his sword and placed both his hands on the gnot. A storm of sand began as he focused all his physergy into the gnot. He couldn't see his own hands now as sand fought its way into his nose, mouth, and ears. A sharp strike cracked the back of his calf, flipping him with ease. The gnot sprayed sand like a fountain as Baran whipped his back against the ground. His eyes found a blurry outline of the middle pole a couple of yards away, with Boro sitting smugly in front, blocking any advance.

A faint sound of static caught the air. Whirling sand grated against metal, slicing towards Baran's neck. He rolled to evade the blow, the gnot still ejecting the matter. Sand reflected off the ground, giving Baran an idea. Gnots defied conventional physics. The gnot didn’t exert a balancing force to counteract the spraying sand, which gave access to free momentum.

Baran held the gnot against his chest. Sand ricocheted off his leather armor. He tried to shield his face with a hand, but he needed both arms to keep control. His muscles strained to match the force from the sand. There was no time. His face was losing the fight against the sand. Baran jumped, pushing the ground away with all of his strength, trading stability for chaos. The force of the sand gave him extra height, enough to clear the small swirling storm. With a clear line of sight, he found his target. He needed an ace, something drastic, something unexpected. Reaching to the top of his jump, Baran let go of the gnot and unsheathed a sharpened blade, tossing it in a high arc. Gravity pulled him down, causing his back to absorb the full force of the ground as a cold sensation touched his neck.

"The fight is over, enough fooling around," Romek exhaled jets of sand from his nostrils towards Baran's face.

A thud pounded farther up the field, causing Romek's ears to twitch. He looked towards the sound as the rope fell away. Romek sighed, staring at the blade wedged in the pole.

"Yes. That's all three. I did it." *There was no doubt.*

"Really man, you did it?" Rikard said under his breath as he poured water over his elbow on the side of the courtyard.

Farther up the field, Captain Dravius' folded arms strained like a cracked dam, ready to burst. He walked towards the middle pole and dislodged the short blade. "A sharpened blade?"

Baran opened his hands in protest. "It–"

"Careless." Dravius pointed the tip at Rikard. "A wounded ally? Selfish." Dravius passed the blade to his other hand, holding it by the sharp end. He approached Baran, arm extended. "But none of that matters."

Baran stood, unearthing himself from the settled dust and sand. He reached for the handle. He'd won despite the odds and it was undisputable. Dravius would finally acknowledge Baran's skill.

"Because you'd be dead." The blade thudded against the ground, grazing the end of Baran's fingers. Baran reached for the blade, but Dravius pinned his hand under his boot. With a slight twist of his foot, Baran fell to his knees. Their eyes locked. "Your ego is going to get you killed. Be better."

Hope turned to resentment. "Better than what? You? Her?" Baran's knuckles grated against grit as he dragged it free. Drops of blood trailing in the dirt. "You're the one who ruined our family's legacy."

"Shows over." Dravius flicked his hand, dismissing the crowd. He leaned in close so only Baran could hear. "It's just a name. Boy."

Baran couldn't hear the words. He didn't even feel the pain in his hand as blood coagulated on the ground. Squeezing the blade in his fist, he took a quick step, throwing a punch at the old man. Dravius turned with the blow, grabbing and twisting Baran's wrist till the blade fell to the ground again.

"Pathetic." Dravius watched the streaks of red form drops on Baran's hand. The markings on their hands matched in design, differing only in weathering. Eyes from the crowd lingered. "Don't make me repeat myself." Dravius threw Baran's wrist away and walked off the field.

Baran stared at the ground. Heavy eyes from the crowd weighed him down with shame. He knew what he looked like. A disgrace, like the rest of his family. The spectators began dispersing back to their daily tasks. Baran picked up his blade for the second time and trudged over to Rikard, heavy with the weight of an unfair defeat. "How's the arm?"

"It'll be fine. How's the hand?" Rikard cradled his arm, red and likely bruised. "I don't know what you expected. You think we'd actually get to go on the mission tomorrow?" Rikard struggled to tie off the last of the bandaging on his arm.

"I…" Baran clenched his teeth but stopped to help Rikard tie off the bandages. "I thought that maybe if we could win, Romek would keep his word. He's always going on about that wearkin honor crap. I'm sick of them and their stories. It's like he enjoyed having a forfeited name in some sadistic way."

"I wouldn't mind some more of Vivian's stories," Rikard said with a sleazy look on his face.

"Hey man. She's basically my step grandma. You're not even her type... or age group."

"What's her type, old and brooding? The old geezer can't marry, right? I just have to bide my time. He's getting older every day," Rikard said as he checked everyone in earshot looking for the captain. "Hold that thought."

The same status was true for Baran. The Condemned marking wasn't a death sentence, at least not the one. Nor did it exile you, but it did strip you of any kindred affiliation. It prohibited land ownership, banned formal education and official titles, and last of all, made marriage illegal. Such things were frivolous compared to the Eastmaw legacy. His family ruled the Bays of Midsea for hundreds of years. It was a name that meant bravery until Dravius threw it away. The marks on Baran’s hands were permanent, branded into his very skin, but a forfeit name was a stain. One that could be removed with a beneficial ruling from a powerful justicar. At least that was the theory. History had given far more to legends, far less deserving, but never had a forfeit name been reclaimed. Some pointless mission felt minuscule in the shadow of the mountainous task of getting the name Baran deserved.

He and Rikard walked around the wrecked platform across the field. Romek and Boro were in the shade under the walkways along the wall. A mixture of saliva, dirt and red goo hit the ground, adding to the muddy spot beneath Romek's feet. The effect of the tincture had worn off, but the residual symptoms lingered. A feeling, Romek had previously described, of being stretched like adolescent growing pains, a bitter aftertaste and a deep chill.

Romek inspected Boro's horn. "You did good, girl. Let me take care of this." Romek pulled out another vial from his supplies. This one had a faint translucent green color and sweet aroma. He poured some drops on his palm and applied it to Boro's horn. The green color quickly faded as it seeped into the horn.

"Romek, ol'buddy. Mind sharing some of that?" Rikard shouted as he emphasized his bandaged arm.

"My tinctures are not for your carelessness, Gatling. Your youthful spirit will do fine," Romek shouted back. Boro shuffled her feet in agreement. Last names meant Romek was at the edge of his patience.

Rikard rolled his eyes and turned back towards Baran. He kicked the air, creating a small puff of dust. "He's not even that old," he said under his breath.

"Older than he looks, they all go back like twenty years."

"Yeah cause you've seen so many wearkins in your travels," Rikard said.

Baran pressed his lips tight and hurled the gnot into the weapon rack. The collision rattled the rest of the gear.

Rikard watched the slow crash and complimented it with a whistle. "Have you ever seen him use that stuff on anyone besides him and Boro? Downright selfish, if you ask me."

Baran organized the disheveled weapons. "There was that recruit a while back that got nicked during training." Baran sliced near his neck with the side of his hand. "Was a real gusher, but the green stuff saved him on the spot. But he wasn't right after it. Had trouble sleeping, I think, and then eventually got kicked out." Baran looked back towards Romek. "I'm glad I don't have to fight him for real."

"Well, the two of them seem to handle it fine. Anyway, back to the topic at hand." Rikard gave Baran a playful nudge but got nothing back. "Why don't you run away if you're so unhappy? You know you can leave, right? I might even be convinced to go with you but I'd have to give up everything I got going here." Rikard raised both hands as he turned. An unintentional insult. "This estate isn't much, but it's better than being back on the streets in the Interior."

"And do what? Work for someone else? I tried, but the kindreds run everything and anyone with clean hands doesn't want the risk. It's like they think it is some disease you can catch. As much as I hate this place, it's my best bet if I'm gonna recover my name." Baran wiped the blood from his knuckles and branded scars. "Dravius needs to get out of my way."

"Aye man, I get it. You don't need to make excuses. It's tough leaving the nest, especially when you have a nest to leave." They walked towards the meal hall. "Now remember what I said before?"

Chapter Three

Itching, healing cuts fought through Kayah's drowsiness. Sleep always came easy and left hard, like an anchor caught on the seabed. Massive hulls floating in clear, restless water, foreign concepts from Jaxith’s stories. The only sea she knew was the ankle deep pools of rusty water throughout the Old Caechora depths. She rolled in place, but it didn't work. The weight of her body pressed on her stomach. She was a rag, a limp body hung over something strong. Cascading stings washed along her arms and torso. The pain reached through her foggy memory. Jagged nails, packed with rust found cloth, twisting it in her hand.

"Kayah. Stop."

The world flipped, making Kayah fall upward. Freeing wounds that had healed into her clothes. She recovered fast, but that meant the scabs grew into anything they touched. It didn't help the scars. Her raw, sensitive skin stretched. Healed enough to not bleed. Her vision adjusted as she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. A melee of senses wrestled in her head. Pain, aches, stress, confusion, each fighting for control. The inside of her mouth cracked as thirst arrived, crowding out everything else. She sat for a moment, waiting for saliva that never came.

"Look at me." The voice came again, familiar and safe. Jaxith's blurry face stared at her. "You need to wake up." A hand clapped her cheek. She shoved at the air. "Good. Can you hear me?"

Kayah nodded, but her eyelids were heavy. Too heavy to keep open. In the darkness, a new sense tore down her thirst. Faceless, disembodied hands swarmed like insects. *Was that real?* She feared that the hallucinations marked a deterioration of the physical hardships of scouting. The digs' impending countdown applied to everyone in the Abysm. A fate worse than death. Sanity’s doomed bastion could only withstand the labyrinth for so long. Further weakened by the endless dark, the backstabbing cutthroats, the restless prowlers and the demands of the guild. They each took their toll, burdens pulling you down. Her scarred body always rose to the beating, always bounced back, but would her mind? It wasn't uncommon for scouters to lose themselves to the digs, for they ventured further than most. The tunnels differed for everyone, but the hammering anvil always beckoned, eventually. Kayah had done more than hear it. She saw it.

"Kayah, focus. We have little time."

Jaxith fiddled with the bright gnot. The pink light drew her out of the slump. He wore his medical clothes, garments for the guild triage workers. A stern, sharp face stared her down. Three thin scars stretched from his forehead, over his left eye, down to his jawbone. Kicking his patchy beard while it was already down. His off-white mantle draped in front as he kneeled. Jaxith's arms had old pale scars against darker skin They differed from hers, set in patterned lines or the brands of force on his hands. It made Kayah feel more at home. If that were possible in Old Caechora. He placed the gnot on a section of the floor and removed the mantle's hood. Specs of rust covered his wild, peppered locks that seemed to steal the hair from the rest of his body.

"Where are we?" Kayah knew half the answer. Cold, lifeless air wafted down the gray, slick corridor of the Rampart. She was still within the domain of the guild, Old Caechora’s garrison guard that traced Bulwark’s base.

"Between triage and mortuary." Jaxith looked up the corridor. "We don't have time. Hide with the dead until you're outside the Rampart and then get back to the storeroom. I'll meet you there. Do not come back to the guild."

"Why?" Despite Kayah's efforts, panic from his eyes infected her. She averted her gaze to her arms and side, inspecting the freshly healed wounds.

"Don't worry about them. Just go." Jaxith yanked Kayah to her wobbly feet as he stood.

A powerful shove flung her down the hallway. She braced herself in a crouch, trusting her trembling legs. Each step made her colder as she followed the path, guided by her hands and the subtle differences among the shadows. Her stomach grumbled, mixing a deep ache with the pains on the outside of her body. She needed food and water, two of the primary currencies delivered by the guild's meritocracy. If there was a payment for her previous scouting failing, it was long expired. Leaving only the third currency, the shelter of the storeroom, despite the wishes of her body.

A weak blue glow replaced the shadows as she approached the end of the path. The mortuary was a large, square room with several other similar hallways leading to darkness. In the center, an enormous wooden cart filled with bodies rested into a lowered section of floor. The wagon’s front stared down a metal gateway, with doors spanning the width of the wall. Rust spread along the edges, densest at the hinges. The cold siphoned each breath as it left her lungs. It cracked the inside of Kayah's nose and numbed her fingers. A danger that did not follow the rules of light and dark. She perched on the edge of the drop-off, bundling her limbs to fend off the freezing air, staring at the corpses.

Another light swayed from behind, swinging between the walls of the hallway. Next was the sound of heavy boots. Guild guards were approaching. *Hide with the dead.* That was all she had to do.

Kayah's limbs creaked as she straddled the space between the ledge and the wagon's edge. Glossy eyes and branded hands littered the wagon among the browns and grays. Scars of crime held their color, even in death. The bodies excluded her from joining them, locked together tight like a tangle of rustroot. The hallway brightened with each second. She forced a way in under a pair of legs, snapping limbs from their frosty grip. The cold gnawed her face as the clothes of the dead softened, leeching more warmth from her body. The guards were close now.

"I can't believe they let a fucking cutthroat unattended. I should have skewered the bastard and dragged him the rest of the way here."

The gate swung outward, screeching and scraping rust. A feeble warmth and the stench of Old Caechora drowned in the muted cold. Kayah peeked enough to see. Two glows meant two spears meant two guards. Both were dregue. A race scourged by the sun. The mutual fate for everyone in Old Caechora didn’t gain them any sympathy. They had gray skin with protruding bones, where it was thin. The result of rooted horn stubs straight into the bone. The jaw, the bridge of the nose, the cheek’s malar to the orbit of the eyes lined in slowly growing keratin. Guards kept their faces ground short with tight coiled horns in place of hair. Between the rigid brow and the general proximity to the Abysm, all dregue held a brooding expression of contempt.

"You know what those scars are, right?" one guard said, propping the gate open.

"What? That hunter bullshit? Getting your face slashed doesn't make you a hunter. Half these animals have gashes on their faces." A crack vibrated through the dead.

"Why do you think the Guild lets that cutthroat work? They know they're breaking the rules. Hunter or cutthroat, that guy is an expert with the needle. You see this? I bet you fucking can't. Got jumped from behind but that hunter patched the artery, two stitches cleanest heal I've had."

"Just push the wagon. I'm freezing my balls off."

Wheels lurched as the sounds of ice flakes shattered on the ground. The mess of dripping death must have frozen along the axle and spokes of the wagon. Creeks from wood squeezed under the massive cart as it rolled out of the chilled room. It sank and sloshed as the hard stone ground turned to mud. The vibration cracked the frosted connections between the bodies. The two spears showered light from behind now, over the desolate stretch of land between the Rampart and Old Caechora settlements. A path of half rotten wood gave the wagon wheels enough grip to reel forward one plank at a time.

Rustroot grew thick and hungry along the border of the settlements. Feeding off the dead and metal scraps of the guild. Hacking away at the horrid beast of coiling copper arms was an endless chore. A task reserved for the encampments, the few allowed to wield sharpened edges in a guard’s presence. The absence of any thinning groups meant higher priorities existed, for the guild did not bend to the cycles of the sun and moons. Running operations nonstop required a constant flow of workers. Salvagers, drainers, and, of course, scouters, kept the furnace of progress burning against the putrescence of the Abysm below. The rainbow of light peeked over the wooden palisade of the encampments, wide on the wagons peripheral, along the Rampart. Relative havens for those without brands of force. An attempt, by the Guild, to keep more workers working. The light held every color imaginable, but together it washed white, creating the constant ambient glow bordering the edges of Old Caechora.

The ride slowed as the planks disappeared, too rotten or too sunken to give traction. A faint orange glow seeped through the barrier of rustroot coming from deep within settlement ruins. An oddity for a place so intimate with darkness.

One guard grunted, sending a futile pulse through the wagon with a heave. The frost was nearly gone, along with the shield protecting them from the decay of flesh. The stench of corpses grew unnoticed at first, like a quiet visitor. One who became vulgar and unpleasant as the cold retreated. Kayah winced at the growing miasma surrounding her. The stale air felt heavy under the slack of thawing bodies.

"This is far enough. I don't want to get the thing lodged in the mud again."

"What the fuck is that?"

"What?"

Kayah's heart choked.

"That light."

"The engineers?"

"No. You fucking blind? From the settlements."

"That's probably him, man." Suctioned muddy steps approached the distant light. "Yeah, that's got to be him. The last shift was flustered good by the new executioner."

"I've never heard of no executioner coming down here. Probably some cannibal shit from those animals. And where is the justicar? Huh? Don't they keep their executioners on a short leash? Shorter and tighter, the better."

"I don't know. I saw the guy briefly and almost pissed myself. The Obsidian Order, that uh, medallion. They said the guy strolled right out of the Rampart into the fucking rust nest. No lights, no help, nothing."

"Then he's as good as dead as the rest of those vermin. Even Kindred Law can’t save him out there."

"No, no, no. If you saw this guy, man. Straps of obsidian shards. A fucking push pistol. The guy's a goddamn death dealing skeleton. The reapers looked and said the juice ain't worth the squeeze."

"Whatever. Help me toss this lot. They're getting ripe."

Heavy stomps beat the front of the wagon until the wooden bed plummeted to the ground. The softened mound of bodies slid down the ramp, rolling over each other. Kayah sprawled, keeping above the tide that tried to swallow her. Her size made it easy. Momentum rolled her away from the pile. She splashed into the warm, rusty mud like a rag-doll, waiting for life to return to her fingers.

"Look at this one. Don't see many locals. If it wasn't for all the scars, she might be your type. She still looks pretty fresh."

The dizzying light bobbed with no pattern, heavy above her head. Adding weight on top of this forsaken place. It blurred her vision even with slit eyes. A reminder that light can rival the dark in its ability to blind. It overloaded her mind, made it hard to think about what came next. Her confidence wavered with the tip of the spear. Doubts crept in. The spearhead was too close to run. She'd seen what surprised guards could do. Stab first and forget. The hard work of finding a spot in the mud was done. Only a quick thrust of a spear remained. She fought the instincts to flee and imagined she was already dead.

"Let's go freak."

The spear staring down Kayah wretched something awful in their throat. "Freak? What does that make these damn animals? At least they lowered the threshold. A shame it still takes two marks. Keep these creatures done and buried with that madness in the tunnels."

A gurgling sound hid behind the fuzzy silhouette of the edge, followed by a glob of mucus close to her body. The swaying spear made her doubt that it was his target. It didn’t bother her much, though. There were worse ways to be wet. The guard was only half right, though. Animals in the dark were just a different breed than their counterparts in the light.

The guards pried the last bodies off the wagon and trekked towards the Rampart. The dark crept in, crowding out the distant glows. It gave Kayah a moment to focus as she waited for the guards to leave. Why was Jaxith so terrified? Scouts died in the Abysm, like food would rot. It only took time. It wasn't even the first scout to die with Kayah. Why did she have to hide? Why couldn't she return to the guild? She struggled with the weight of the questions. If she wanted the answer, she’d have to carry it to the storeroom and wait for Jaxith.

Chapter Four

Baran ground a small sharp rock between his foot and a large paver as the day turned to twilight across the Solidore estate. Waiting for his grandfather was a game for someone with more patience. The tag team of dwindling sun and Dravius' secrets eroded his confidence, but stubborn determination refused to give up on the prize from his stolen victory. Nothing an uninvited inspection couldn't solve, but he needed Dravius gone. Baran valued alone time, but the old man made it religious. A couple hours for dinner, alone? What is he doing?

Romek's shelter was an empty dark and Boro loitered in the nearby garden, sneaking a dangerous, flowery snack. The occasional waft of cedar incense distracted Baran from an urge to fidget. One of arbitrary wearkin tradition's Romek insisted on practicing. The furry brute was probably already waiting for the final check-in tonight with Vivian. Her own business ritual for special missions.

The only curious thing, besides Dravius's recent solitude, was the patient executioner near the front gate. The visiting paladin resembled a proud statue, awaiting the commands of their master, like a good puppet. Baran sized up the fighter inside, underneath the thick defenses of the standard issue paladin armor. A longer look revealed the suit was an older style, heavier and bulkier than the current models, and had side slits to regulate temperature, putting its origin from a humid climate. The executioner moved, breaking his stare.

Baran turned back towards the quiet door of his grandfather's quarters. The old bastard. Brief rumination led to the realization that Romek might brief Dravius in the morning. His grandfather could be asleep for all he knew. Damn. He'd eavesdrop on Vivian's office to know for sure.

A quick stroll brought Baran to the quiet corner of the estate's main building. He eyed the top of the headquarters, like a roofer placing a bid on a contract. The ceramic tiles and the overall height of the roof became pieces of his plan. How much weight could the gutter support? A question an honest worker may ask, but Baran wasn't a roofer, nor did he have the attire of one. Still dressed in the light leather with jammed sand from his sparring match, he loitered between the building and the inner estate wall. The sun retreated across the property until the last light rays climbed the high walls of the cities' Bulwark.

Bright gnots glowed, powered by thick industrial strength physergy cables. The estate's walkways, walls and buildings grasped at the dwindling natural light, aided by the artificial shine. Good lighting was a bedrock of maintaining a strong reputation as a military contractor. An opinion of Vivian Solidore, who decided such matters. Baran admired her determination to build the estate’s reputation. She seemed to be the only one keen on improving her station. Even inferior gnots rivaled quality ones, when powered by enough physergy. Between the estate's bright gnots and the fleeting sunlight, a layer of opportunity grew, nestled in the rooftop shadows.

Baran enjoyed watching the sunset against the Bulwark when he was young and had found the best spot from within the estate was the roof above Vivian's office. An observation that became clearer since his youth because of the office’s wide balcony view. The roof offered the additional bonus of being a prime location to eavesdrop on the affairs within when the balcony doors were open. An obvious conclusion from tonight’s clear evening. Scurrying around as a child drew less suspicion as an adult, which posed a challenge. The only moderately discrete roof access was a wall planter on the eastern side. Climbing the overgrown frames was easy enough. Vivian's love for her gardens would be Baran's advantage and a downfall of her solitude. The hard part was not drawing attention. His fickle relationship with attention never seemed to benefit him. Fortunately, only one guard could see the vertical maneuver. A fellow by the name of Pyke, one of Vivian's myrmidons. Baran knew Pyke’s favorite guard post, a place safe to drink from any prying eyes. The booze gave extra weight to an already weak bladder. This was a simple matter to remedy and a logical deduction given the patch of weeds that failed to grow beneath the planter wall. Loitering nearby, Baran occupied Pyke's go-to spot.

"Hey kid, mind taking the watch for a sec? I need to piss."

Baran nodded and climbed the narrow stairs of the wall two at a time, trading a quick mutual glance of annoyance. What is this guy so annoyed at? He's the one trying to piss on the plants.

"Don't run off. I'll be right back."

Pyke waddled away at a deceptively fast speed until his shadow disappeared around the corner of the building. Leaving Baran alone with opportunity. He scrambled between the stairs and the planter on the opposite side, knocking leaves and stems loose and taking care to avoid the patch of dead weeds. Darkness covered the roof like a heavy blanket. One that now wrapped Baran as he clambered like a half-crab, half-lemur across the roof's ridges. Each foot, each hand carefully placed, testing the tiles as he remembered which ones made the least noise. A reminder of youthful mistakes that received extra chores and lengthy lectures about manners and decency. Close to the edge above Vivian's office, his pace slowed until it became a crawl. He leaned far enough to peek inside.

Vivian's office was filled with rare woods and lavish textiles. All difficult goods to acquire in the city, especially when gnot-manufactured equivalents were often cheaper and more functional. Despite this, the inside walls and furniture were decorated with an imported natural oak, along with a hand-carved table. Underneath the table was a real wool rug with a richly colored flower pattern. At one head of the table, a multi-arched doorway faced westward, overlooking the main training grounds from the second story. The same balcony that provided Baran's vantage point for the ongoing conversation.

Baran identified Vivian's long, dark hair immediately, but she was with someone that Baran did not know, although everything was upside down. He pulled back and focused on their conversation.

"Even if your theory is correct, what consequence is it to me? I've carved a quiet spot of this city out for myself, paid for with sweat and blood. Granted, maybe not my own," Vivian said.

"What consequence? Don't you find it odd that the price for physergy hasn't dropped for over a year? Or that your contracts have an unusual proximity around the northern mines." The visitor had a feminine voice.

"Why should I care if the north and south starve each other for physergy? As long as there is work, I don't care what the pattern is or who is pulling the strings as long as I get paid," Vivian said.

"These aren't normal strings. No one is gaining an advantage," the visitor said. The next sentence was too quiet to hear except for one word- Demiurge.

A word rarely seen outside of tavern tales and children's stories. The first of the adamants, living gods. Those were names worth knowing. Glerra who created the world, raised mountains, carved canyons and filled the oceans. Or Havel and the workshop he used to create the animants. Names of legends known no matter how far you traveled.

Vivian did not share a similar discretion as she responded with a laugh. "You're serious? The Demiurge, gods from nearly a thousand years ago. Sometimes you can win by losing the least. Maybe that is the plan of your mysterious puppet master."

A pause in the conversation begged Baran to peek into the office.

"Don't mistake me for some fool. There is a war coming. An actual war, not some paladin scrimmage or some power struggle between kindred brats." The cloaked woman inspected the bookcase. Dragging her smooth scaly fingers over the book bindings. A brief rustle of bright red feathers caught the edge of her sleeve.

"Then don't mistake me for someone who cares about your politics. This city is much older than either of us, and even if the records are half true, it has been through far worse." Vivian pointed towards one of the packed bookcases. "Some of those books speak of the Flooding, when the big bad Demiurge drowned the city with the ocean. Hell, those dragon-following cunts have a story of some adamant attacking the coasts for each day of the week." Vivian rolled her head back in her chair, staring into the ceiling as her hair nearly touched the floor.

"I've never really enjoyed doing business with you, or frankly, your methods. And I haven't been very successful in digging up your past, which usually means it's mired in paltry. But there is something novel about destitute beginnings. We have benefited from each other. Wouldn't you agree?" The woman made a low chirp. "Havel's guidance. I hope I'm wrong, but if I'm not, you'll have to pick a side."

That chirp was unmistakable. Even behind a hood, Baran could tell she was a ravian. An observation that matched her imperious mannerisms. Their ravian race dominated the kindreds rule over the continent, entwining themselves in every type of business imaginable.

Vivian chuckled at the words. "Skip the humility. It doesn't suit you." She stood as though her body were weightless. "I will not be a part of your schemes, and I've buried my share of conniving fools. Tread carefully to not add yourself to the list."

Their words grew quiet. Baran leaned up to stabilize himself but he slipped, causing a tile to come loose farther up the roof. The conversation stopped as he held his breath, listening to the silence.

Footsteps approached the office door followed by a crash of knocks breaking the tension. Faint whispering returned, too quiet to understand. Anxiousness prevented another glance. More knocks banged on the door.

"Enough." Vivian's annoyance was palpable. "Enough. You may enter."

#

Romek fidgeted with the bindings of his pants, trying to shake loose imaginary sand. Small trails of grit had stopped tracing his steps, but there might be more. There must be more. Imaginary or not, the sand tickled his skin. Dull claws picked at the short fur on the back of his neck, finding a single grain. The relentless chore of fighting a wearkin's natural defenses was endless pain, but made it easy to stay clean. A headache soaked its way through his head and dripped down his spine. Unsure if it was the vial or all the swallowed sand. Probably both. *Damn that kid.* Romek braced himself against the hallway, bombarded by knocking on Vivian’s office. Might as well knock the inside of his skull. *Does he not have any finesse? Guess it runs in the family.* Romek heard hushed conversation from inside. Vivian sounded pissed. Nothing new.

"Ten crosses says she’s not alone," Romek said. He sighed, leaning his forehead against the wall, his snout pointed at the floor. An exaggerated feint.

"Huh?" Dravius's cuirass twisted and stretched. "Can you smell who?"

*Damn.* "Money and feathers, your favorite." Romek dug for sand in his ear. "They did pretty good today." Romek grimaced as Dravius knocked again, louder.

"Enough. Enough. You may enter," Vivian said, behind the door.

The smooth metals of the bolt unlatched, and the reinforced door pushed outward. Rose gold leaves glittered from the office light, pinned into the inside planks of the door in a pattern of swirling gusts. Romek peaked at Dravius, his head still slumped. Dravius curled the ends of his eyebrows. He didn't recognize Vivian's visitor. Or maybe it was degrading eyesight. Dravius was getting old for a human.

"I didn't know you were busy, Vi." Only Dravius’s pupils moved and his expression became softer, but not soft. After a moment his gaze returned to the visitor along with his temporary relaxation.

"My guest is on her way out," Vivian said.

Light footsteps approached the door, someone small. Dravius stepped back and to the side. Tough to tell which moved him, respect for Vivian or apprehension from the guest. Romek straightened his posture and rolled his shoulder. Dusting off more imaginary sand.

Money and feathers were right. Short red plumage accented with orangy down feathers trailed down the ravian's back. Reflective scales with matching tones of her feathers covered her posterior. A neck, with more tattoos than skin, stretched under an ornate cerulean blue dress jacket with wide cut sleeves. Status symbols from the Nomosogn kindred by the looks. Romek didn't recognize her as the justicar for this district. Reptilian eyes soured upon seeing him, splitting her jaw bones beneath tan avian skin. A mouth built to swallow prey whole.

"A shaved wearkin? How peculiar," the justicar said.

She wasn't wrong, but it didn't matter. Regardless of how he looked, she didn't have any right to pass judgment. He was a black sheep, a stormy cloud against the sun. In a wearkin pack, the difference’d be brighter than day. But there was no pack to see it, hadn't been in a long time. Romek prevented a snarl for everyone's benefit except for the ravian. He didn't give her the satisfaction. She circled like a bird of prey, moving into the hallway.

"Why bother attempting to hide your savagery? Embrace the reason you exist, just like every other oddjaw." She moved down the hall with a trailing sinister hiss.

Dravius had already unbuckled his belt and scabbards, hanging it on the arm of a chair he'd thrown himself into. The captain rarely relaxed. Romek and Vivian often joked that he was more likely to die from internal pressure than their lives of violence. Vivian focused over the chaos of papers on her desk, braced by her arms. Romek's list of headaches grew longer. He took a breath. Even in a room full of old friends, the scent of resentment for the ravian visitor lingered.

Romek slammed the door to Vivian's office. "Who was that?"

"One of our employers," Vivian shuffled some papers into a pile.

"Which employer?"

"Just let it go," Dravius said.

Romek didn't blame Dravius for the lack of a fight. A couple of words meant little to him. Condemned markings change someone, especially if you're the one to make the choice. It was probably why they got along, but some days the indifference got old.

"I don't need this extra shit. One of these days, I'm gonna retire and you guys are gonna be in trouble." It was an empty threat. "I've been thinking about picking up pottery. Set up a nice shop in the country. Maybe north of Dawnplate Range. You guys may never see me again."

"Pottery? What happened to gardening?" Dravius said.

"There's no shame in trying something new. We've been lucky, but eventually it's going to run out. Once Baran's training is done, I need a change of scenery." Hollow words, hiding the fact that he needed them. He might be able to convince Dravius they could manage, but Vivian could not be swayed. She'd dragged them through too many dangers to count. They both owned their lives to her. Debts turned to friendship.

"Luck has nothing to do with it." Vivan left the discheveled parchement world on her desk for a pristine realm of glass and liquor. "And to answer your earlier question, her name is Aziza. A pretentious justicar from one of the inner districts." She motioned a glass towards Romek, but the list didn't need to get any longer. Pretentious felt a bit redundant for the title.

Dravius extended his hand towards Vivian, eyes closed. "Don't hold back." A smooth empty glass cut his callous hands deeply.

"I never do." She timed an elegant turn as he realized the absence of liquid.

"What business does an outside justicar want with us? Or was this an unofficial visit?" Dravius twirled the glass as though he was imagining it full. Romek knew the feeling.

"Mainly gossip, part of the job to keep everything running smoothly." Her words carried a firm tone of unappreciation. "Some rumors about Demiurge and puppet masters in the shadows. The interests of those with too much time."

"Demiurge?" Romek paced around the edge of the office. The ravian's smell lingered by the bookcase. But it wasn't alone. Another foolish scent wafted through the air from the balcony. Romek's headache pulsed as his eyes scanned the ceiling. *What's the kid up to now?*

"Mhmm," Vivian took a drink. Romek could sense her eyes watching his puzzlement. *She already knew.*

"What's the update for the mission?" Dravius dredged himself out of the chair to fill his own glass.

"Yes, straight to business, as always, sweetheart." Vivian gave Dravius a playful eye. They kept their affairs discrete, but among Romek there was little point. "Nothing new unfortunately, same rough location, same time window, same fence."

"That isn't much. This is less intel than the last mission and on short notice. Take the time and leave the work. Shit always rolls downhill." Dravius’ glass spilled over the edge as he sat back down. He wiped it on the chair.

"I know you're more than capable," Vivian said.

"It's not about being capable, it's about being prepared. They want to delegate the risk. That's fine, but we should know what we're walking into. Do we have approval to engage?"

"Yes. But do try to keep things subtle. I hate the bureaucracy of messes," Vivian said.

Romek wandered towards the balcony. There was no doubt the smell coming from the roof. "What about the military seals? The two of us aren't a bastion of authority. Especially in the aftermath of a fight." He brushed imaginary sand from his elbow. Dravius chuckled after emptying his glass.

Vivian tilted the end of an envelope, causing two metal seals to slide onto the desk with hefty thuds. "Compliments of our employer." She extended one to Romek. "Can't say they won't cause an issue this time around. I requested two just in case."

Romek's claws clacked against the gold. The seals were mat colored and heavy like coinage. Each one underwent an expensive and difficult process called physerstriction. Flow enough physergy through anything and it’ll restrict the current, hardening the material as a by-product. With enough skill, the process could customize the configuration of physergy currents, turning the seal into means of authorization. A useful tool for escaping judgment from a messy situation, especially the bloody kind.

With the seal in hand, Romek shifted towards the leaf embroidered door. "If there's nothing else, I'm gonna make some preparations for tomorrow. Sounds like we should be prepared for anything." He watched the balcony arches waiting for the kid’s patience to fail. Sure enough, the fool peaked. Romek stared him dead in the eye. Baran yanked back with a startled look. Romek closed the door, chuckling to himself.

#

Twice in one day. Romek sabotaged Baran's plan, leaving him sprawled like a bug on the tiled roof. Claustrophobia pinned him down. Paranoid looks from his shadowed vantage point found no one watching. Baran's breathing recovered. Joke it off or retreat. The choice had its own sting. A discrete exit was best. Reprimands would be unavoidable, probably resulting in endurance training. Problems for tomorrow didn't matter today. He tread lightly, both hands and feet treating the roof like a pane of glass. Oblivious to the ongoings inside the office as he scurried away, ass to roof. He'd nearly turned around when his name cut through the chatter. The tone was about him, not at him. Maybe the situation wasn't ruined. Curiosity got the better of him.

"I get enough shit from Romek, I don't need you on my ass too," Dravius said.

The old man reeked of anger. Not much of an observation, but the bittersweet justice always gave Baran pleasure. Seems the wearkin pride came in handy for once. Romek hadn't snitched. Baran inched back towards the edge above the balcony.

"What's your plan for him? The training has been a long distraction. How do you expect to pass it on if you two can't even have a normal conversation?" There was a long pause. "You don't, do you?"

*Pass what on?* The family name was worthless, worse than worthless. No one could do anything about Baran's markings except himself.

"It's too dangerous. I can't be responsible for more death," Dravius said.

"You're not responsible for what she–"

"I am. The signs were there. I got distracted. That won't happen again. Baran's never going to be ready. He's too obsessed with the Eastmaw name. He's too much like his mother," Dravius said.

Dravius never talked about Baran's mother, Alondra. Nearly two decades of scraping information resulted in next to nothing. She traveled to the edges of the continent, and beyond. Chartering the ends of the world, searching for Pariferna, the land of the adamants. An admirable goal of testing the extent of the kindreds law. Baran understood why and that a child would only hinder success. Maybe he should test their reach, too. Dravius said it himself. He was like her.

"You can't keep him here forever. It's impressive you've been able to keep him here this long. By the time I was his age, I'd torn up a storm in the world. But I had to grow up faster than most, I suppose," Vivian said. A slight creak of wood came from below. "Look, you can either help him grow or you can push him away, and earlier today, you pushed him away. Your remaining opportunities are limited, no matter how much you try to hide her from him. Have you talked to her recently? Maybe–"

"There is no reasoning with her. I've tried. I will continue to try." After an uncomfortable pause, Dravius broke the silence. "I should make preparations before tomorrow."

"Will I see you later?" Vivian asked.

Silence answered, followed by the open and close of the door moments later. Baran withdrew further onto the roof. What wasn't he ready for? Dravius kept any family history buried behind his beating cage of a heart. Glimpses of the past given through the desperate tales and close calls of the band of old friends, Dravius, Vivian and Romek. Baran listened for movement to mask his own. Minutes passed before Vivian spoke.

"How long are you going to sit up there, or did you fall asleep?" asked Vivian. "Baran?"

"Yeah." Baran shifted his weight, pretending to be a tile. But tiles didn't talk. "Should I go down the way I got up, or–"

"Just get down here," she said with a raised tone.

Baran slid to the roof's edge and hung his legs over until he could flip and ease his weight down onto the small balcony.

"Normally, it is polite to participate in conversation instead of hiding on the roof like a thief," she said. "Maybe we should get you some new marks."

"I'm not a… I just wanted to hear about the mission tomorrow, that's all." Attempting to lie to Vivian was a most memorable mistake. One that should not be repeated.

"Hmmm, I suppose you might have heard a fair amount more than that." Vivan leaned back on her desk, hands stretched to the side. "If I'm not mistaken, you're staying put based on that brief bout earlier today."

"It didn't matter what happened, you heard him. I'll never be ready. It didn't matter who won or lost."

"Winning and losing." Vivian stood and walked past Baran out onto the balcony. "That is not the right game. Reality is much more final. Life and death are the terms you must play by."

"What are you talking about?" asked Baran, standing like a lonely tree. The office had a hostility behind the intricate decor.

"You're right, maybe that is a bit hyperbolic." Vivian spun around to face Baran. "Did I ever tell you about the night you arrived at the estate? The night I met your mother."

"I thought Dravius brought me here after getting me from my mom?" Baran said.

"It was a rhetorical question, Baran. We both know I haven't," Vivian cackled. "That would have been something, those two face-to-face after all these years. No, your mother came here directly when my sweet was away on some forgettable mission." Vivian made a square with her fingers and peered through them at Baran. "Step back a bit and to your left."

Baran followed her commands, staring between the floor and Vivian with each awkward step.

"There. She stood right there and put you on that table wrapped in a blanket." She pointed at the table, still covered in papers. "Not the cutest baby, but you were quiet, a blessing on its own. Silence always befriended my life of death. A friend that abandoned me with the two runts. I said this wasn't an orphanage and that I'd throw you in the sewers and let you drown. Or, if you are truly destined for misery, you'd flow downriver into the Abysm."

"What did she say?" asked Baran.

"She told me to fuck off." Vivian pressed a finger into the middle of her chest. "I haven't felt my heart race like that in a long time. Anyway, do you get what I'm trying to say?"

Baran gave a puzzled look and did not reply.

"I'm a collector of broken things, a garden of tools. A piece of glass that can still gouge an eye, a dull blade that can still bludgeon a ribcage, a severed rope that can still strangle someone. But you, Baran, are not broken, which is why you feel so out of place." Vivian paused.

"My name is forfeit. That sounds broken to me," said Baran.

"Look, you've got hopes and dreams and two good feet. It's more than I had. The only thing between you and what you want is the choice to take it." Vivian made a knuckled fist, showing each muscle in her forearm. "If you want to go on that mission tomorrow, you get your gear and tell anyone who tries to stop you to fuck off. Of course, if they try to stop you, show some bite to back up the bark. And who knows, if things go well, you might puncture that tough exterior of your grandfather."

Baran's eyes lit up. A flurry of scenarios started playing out in his head. He just needed to figure out the right one. But despite all the possibilities, the thought of his mother pierced through his excitement. "What else did my mom say when she dropped me off? Is she coming back?"

"I'll tell you, she laughed in my face when I offered her your grandfather's job. I swear she thought about it for a second. A forfeit name is quite the leverage against employees. But she didn't strike me as one to stand in another's shadow." Vivian chuckled to herself again. "I haven't had nearly enough to drink to tell this story, though." Vivian drifted like a breeze to her office door. "How about this? When you get back from this mission, you bring something tasty from the Interior, the stuff that doesn't see the light up here. And I'll tell you everything. And if the mission goes well, we can talk about making you an official myrmidon. Just knock on my door next time."

Baran walked through the doorframe and turned. "You promise?" Vivian nodded and slammed the door in his face. The best feeling in months.

Chapter Five

Kayah pulled herself out of the mud. The guards were gone, and it was time for her to make her exit, leaving the dead to their rest. Her exhaustion pulled the storeroom away. It made the steps longer, despite the short distance. Bad days were the stale bread of Old Caechora, the best you'd get, but this took it to another level. Hunger gnawed at her, relentlessly barraging her thoughts. Half-healed wounds stung from the rusty slosh that stuck to her clothes and skin. Their rawness meant she'd only been unconscious for half a day at most.

Danger creeped through the journey, a companion even with the right knowledge and gear. Missing equipment left her with only half of what she wanted, excluding any food. A bright gnot and board were her daily friends through the ruins of the Old Caechora settlements. Forgotten memories of magnificent cities left to waste away underneath the new world above. More histories from Jaxith. Kayah didn't care for the past and its death, only the present. A perilous place overgrown with rustroot, cutthroats and prowlers. A sleepless churn of survival, just like the guild.

Everything in Old Caechora was a two-step process. Wait, then act. A rule that must be followed. Kayah was well into the second step, mantling through the tangles of rustroot. She clambered slowly from branch to branch, distrustful of the rust layered ground. Without her own bright gnot, it made it impossible to see pockets of quickrust. Copper pools that sucked you in the more you tried to escape. The lucky ones found plunges hiding sharp edges, ready to strip their misery on the way down. Direct light was the only way to reveal the secrets of walkable paths. *Critical information is always near. You have to observe and be patient.* Jaxith’s teachings always had a way of appearing. Too bad this one required more light.

Even the additional glow from the Bulwark engineers wasn't enough. Kayah paused, back to step one. Overflow sewer grates scattered the ceiling of her world like dim stars above the workers toiling away above the Rampart. These weren't residents of Old Caechora, they were workers from the city above. The choice to return seemed unfathomable to Kayah. Yet there they were, fixing and rebuilding, hoisted above the junkyard of settlement ruins with nothing more than some push gnots. Their work lights cast down the Bulwark, flowing over the Rampart into the nearby buildings. Stray beams of light caught the falling drainage as it rained across the settlement. It was quiet now, enough to hear the distant hammering of stonework. It dredged up more memories. The quiet bustle of the engineers made her uneasy, a rhythm similar to the anvil that plagued her mind. Fear of the digs dug deeper as she cleared the thickest parts of rustroot.

The orange glimmers grew from deeper into settlements. It gave speed to Kayah in the form of light. Traversing the dilapidated buildings still required focus. A truth lodged between the darkness and the slick ground. A dampness clung to Old Caechora, maybe harder than the jagged grip of rustroot. It seeped into everything, the porous stone, the soft wood. Pools of gritty wet orangy grime that never dried, swallowing the physical memories of the past. How many lives until the ruins turned to heaving tides of rust and mud? Toppling the stone would take countless lifetimes, proof of a stubborn adversary. One of the few qualities Kayah admired about the ruins. But cracked bedrocks and shattered foundations had limits. Weakness masked by the rotting wood and corroded metal, exploited by the unending dampness.

Without help, how long would it last?

The lack of her board slowed Kayah's movement through the rubble. An annoying reminder of her dependence. A small bridge in the dark kept her feet dryer and unbloodied. A longer arm to feel the end of shadows and avoid pits of quickrust. Finding a replacement was unlikely, unless another one dropped from the air. Her last one fell from one of the Bulwark engineer platforms. It ricocheted far off the rampart outside any of the palisade encampments. Abandoned and left to rot. Kayah saved it from that fate and it returned the favor more than once. That was reason alone to keep it close, but it doubled as a friend to share thoughts with in the dark. She peered through some exposed studs at the workers, tiny silhouettes hovering in the distance. Push gnots defied gravity, levitating them above the darkness. A fact that kept Kayah from ever seeing one up close. Bright gnots, in all their limited variations, were the only bundle of coils she could easily recognize. The workers higher now and the light dimmer.

It was difficult to discern the ruined buildings from the beginning of the streets. Decrepit structures seemed to melt in the street like runoff into a river. Roads were easier to walk in some ways and harder in others. Without a board, though, they were simpler and safer. Shadowed secrets of rubble traded for more mud, rust and sewage. Following roots was a decent option, but if you weren't careful, you would get a mouthful of rust. And that was the best-case scenario.

Her destination resided within the border between criminals and those lost in death. A storeroom tucked into the crumbling walls of a large blockhouse. The nightly journey between the storeroom and the Rampart was an endless topic of argument between her and Jaxith. She understood the logic, but she didn't like what it meant. Deal with danger while you're awake and make sure you sleep where it is safest. Safety was a relative term, but he was right. The cutthroats and the prowlers kept clear of each other, making a lonely stretch absent of enemies. Solitude protected against the more direct dangers of Old Caechora. A worthwhile trade, in his opinion, for the passage through the cutthroats.

The shortest path led towards the engineers on the far side of the Bulwark above, straight over a dense hill of rubble and ruin. Intact roofs provided floating havens in the sea of shadows, but that safety was contingent on her inanimate friend to bridge the gaps. She'd have to find another way, starting with a crossroads ahead. The left granted darkness, while a red warmth flickered opposite, silhouetting the ruins on the right. The light tempted danger but also speed.

Kayah snuck along the edge of the road. Wading through shallow puddles of rust. Concealed between a short stone wall and collapsed rafters. She made sure to block the direct light. In the dark, eyes betray you faster than anything else. Little beacons waiting for illumination. The dimness yielded enough of the path. But the noise among the shadows slowed Kayah down. Creeping masses all moving towards the light. Back to step one. She peered through her hands at the light source and the amassing prowlers. Jaxith’s trick for further sight blocked most of the reflection from her eyes.

Prowlers roamed freely, living shadows of the settlement's deepest parts. People whose bodies kept moving after they died. Left to wander as changing reflections of their former selves. Most were harmless, other than stealing and invading buildings, looking for places to hide. They feared normal people, but light drew them in like moths to the flame.

A narrow bonfire with glowing shards stabbed into the larger planks. Sporadic spurts of fire erupted before lessening to weak crackles that struggled to fend off the dampness seeping up from the ground. Prowlers crawled from nearby ruins, emerging out of darkness drawn to the blaze. Their own shadows cast into the surroundings. Kayah couldn't remember the last time she saw flames. Fire hated the dampness, especially this far into the settlement. The wild wisps of red and orange were mesmerizing, drawing her along the wall. She kept low, being sure to stay hidden and watch her back.

The sound of rapid, rotating clinks began from a tall skeleton of a building close to the bonfire. A strange noise Kayah had never heard. Thin shadows stretched upward into the void of darkness above, making it difficult to see until one moved. Twin ember beacons illuminated at the precipice of a man shaped umbra, slowly emerging in tandem with the revolving sounds. Prowlers took little notice, unafraid of the dark and entranced by the flames. The clinking stopped for a single breath. Six loud bangs ushered the muffled yells of three prowlers closest to the man. Others scurried away, leaving only those screaming with mangled legs. They couldn't talk, as far as Kayah knew, but they could clearly feel pain.

She took a long blink, replaying what she saw. *There was a sound. Nothing seemed to hit the prowlers, but something stabbed them. What were these tricks at a distance? More mysteries, like the storeroom lock?*

The tall figure dragged one towards the fire, leg first. Arms whipping in the grime. Kayah had never seen a prowler move so fast. The blaze caught the man's glossy eyes tucked between a wide-brimmed hat with charred edges and a fraying ash colored bandana from ear to ear. Black shards strapped to his figure splintered the light, reflecting sparks from their searing counterparts in the struggling bonfire, each smooth as glass and cinched along his wiry arms and stretched thighs. His heel twisted the prowler's leg, pinning it in place as he wrestled a toughened glove onto his spindly hand. A jagged black edge unsheathed from his arm, set ablaze with one already stabbed into the wood. The roaring heat awoke it from a deep slumber. Its anger snapped and simmered to a deep red as he held it close, inspecting the prowler's face. Oval shadows crept up from gaps in the bandana covering the base of his eyes. His searching gaze dulled with the cooling shard before he drove the black glass into the prowler's shoulder. Warped screams came from the terror-filled face of his victim. Streams of smoke carried the smell of burned flesh through the air. It smothered the desensitized undertone of rot. The next shard was quicker, hotter, skipping any inspection. And the next, until the prowler went limb.

"Run now, to the flame," the man said. The words matched his absent emotion.

A growing sickness in her stomach overcame Kayah. The smell ebbed between sweet and disgusting. It was thick, almost like a taste that tempted her hunger. For the first time, she was glad that the fire did not take kindly to the damp.

A visceral step one was over.

It was time for step two. Kayah shifted away as the man waded through the street towards another prowler. Those screams would draw attention and this far from the rampart, that meant danger. Fear told her to turn tail and run, but she fought it. The biggest danger was this cindered man. *You can't know where the danger is unless you keep it in sight.* Jaxith's words gave her strength despite the dread emanating from this man. He killed with a disturbing calmness, like someone might treat breathing. She did not want to test his awareness. He seemed eerily serene compared to cutthroats, considering the violence. Cutthroats did terrible things. Cruel things. But it was in their nature and there was desperation in that violence. Blame didn't feel like a fair word. Not in this place. More times than she liked to admit, she wondered if she'd use violence if it was a safer option. The Abysm took its toll on everyone. The only difference was the ways you survived Old Caechora. A place that was impossible to call home.

For those that accepted this fate, there were only three choices of neighbors. The guild, the cutthroats or the prowlers. If you accounted for the fact that the cutthroats didn’t take kindly to neighbors, that left two. And, if you account for the fact that the guild got to pick their neighbors within the palisade, the cooks, the medics, the attractive women. That typically left one, the prowlers. The kicker was the dangerous daily trek through the cutthroats for everyone else.

This man was no cutthroat, though. Even they kept clear of prowlers, either out of pity or disgust. He treated the creatures as less than human. And in some ways, they were. Another prowler squirmed, beached on rubble with its foot caught in a pinch of metal. The cindered man loomed over it, but paused, drawn to something up the street toward the rampart.

"Help, sir. Help. Are… Are you with the guild?" The voice came from a broken archway.

Dragging feet brought a ragged man with tufts of matted brown hair into view. A resident of Old Caechora. *Too dirty to be new. Too dirty to still be stupid.* *The easiest prey is one that doesn't know it's a fight.* Kayah watched the man and his limp. From her angle, she could see something sharp held against his back. A cutthroat's first weapon was deceit. Their second was the closest cutting edge.

"I suppose so. Today is my first day in this district," the cindered man said with words drawn out, stretched, like his limbs. The clinking sound returned, hidden in the shadows of his figure along with his hands..

"I heard screams. I was hiding up the street. My leg’s no good. Can you take me to the Rampart?" The cutthroat noticed the quiet body filled with shards. The fire danced in their reflections. "Did… Did they attack you?" Rusted gears behind his malicious eyes processed the new information.

"Happy to help you on your way. Let me see your marks, both of them." The clinking sound stopped.

"My back. I can barely stand. I need one to support it," the cutthroat said, waving their free hand with marks of the condemned. Marks of force and fraud.

A single loud bang busted the cutthroat's shoulder, dangling the attached arm. He growled in pain and a thin piece of rusted metal splashed into a nearby puddle. The cutthroat thrashed for the weapon with his working arm. Slapping water this way and that. Any semblance of a limp was gone. Another loud bang tore through his leg.

The cindered man strode past the bonfire, pulling one of the red shards in the gloved hand. "Die easy now and we can send you with some company."

The cutthroat found their weapon, waving the piece of wet metal. Their hip splashing, submerged in the puddle. Globs of rust sizzled against the searing shards. "Get back."

"Why?" The cindered man froze, craned over the cutthroat, still as a stone. "I can save him the trip." His bandana twisted over his face. "But he disobeyed an order." Dark shadows overtook his eyes except for the beads of red reflecting from the cooling shard. They seemed to hold their own fire, brighter than the shard. "What about the weapon? Yes, three strikes seem *just*." Tension is the bandana relaxed, and he stood tall. "Apologies. I can't save you the trip, but I can shorten your journey. If you see her, tell her to look for the flame."

"What? See who?" The cutthroat sneered, gasping in pain. The cindered man answered with a bang, tearing into the cutthroat's other leg. Desperate and afraid, they crawled with the last of their strength. Spilling a trail of red into the rubble.

Kayah retreated into the shadow. The man was unlike anyone from the guild she'd ever seen. And a brutal weapon. Incredible strength and speed from sound alone. Maybe Jaxith would know more from before he arrived in Old Caechora. She had lingered too long; she needed to reach the storeroom.

Kayah reached the remains of the building that held her destination. Rafters and metal frames sunk into the rust like the skeleton of some beast from Jaxith's stories. A path familiar as the back of her scarred hand. The secrets of the last stretch laid bare from repetition. Even blind, she remembered the way, not that the dark was far off. Squeezing under a crumbling wall, skimming a cellar swamped with rust, to the final stretch, a stifling hallway ending with an impressive stone slab.

The stonework differed from the ruins and the Rampart. Only the Bulwark and scarce remembrances buried in depths of the Abysm challenged the craftsmanship. Interlocking rock formed an intricate puzzle of smooth, movable pieces. The connections were so compact that even the rot couldn't penetrate it. Grooves ran across the enigma, allowing pieces to be moved, groups at a time.

A cold sense of relief emanated from the stone door. Safety was beyond the solid layer of thick rock and its inner mystery. Kayah rested her head in the pitch black. The situation was dawning on her, but she drove it away. The aches, thirst, and hunger dwindled as a wave of exhaustion overwhelmed her body. She collapsed, bracing herself against the door. Preserving warmth made her small, locking her knees into her eyes as she sat leaning against the door. With a heavy sigh, she accepted the end of the path. Absent light, the puzzle’s configuration eluded any solution. The way was blocked.

Chapter Six

Sunlight crested over the Bulwark to the east, reflecting off the bright stone of the opposite wall that enclosed the military district. The cool, crisp air gathered in the dwindling shade, hiding from the heat. Within the Solidore estate, those awake included only the guards and anyone suffering from the estate's morning tutelage. The day’s vanguard was armor training under the cold protection of the lingering twin moons. Groggy recruits subjected to the captain's morning larks. Drills past their end.

"Sixty-two, Sixty-three, Sixty–" Baran glanced upward from a plank position, arms fully extended. "Four." His training revolved around Romek's schedule, but exercise was each soldier's responsibility. Words of his grandfather. Words of someone who didn't deserve their responsibilities. Saying the count out loud was unnecessary, but he did it anyway. You never know who might be listening.

Baran observed the old watchtower. Expansions in Solidore training services left the structure estranged between the inner wall, which encircled the eavesdropping excursion from the previous night, and the square fortifications of the estate perimeter. It remained functional, namely a working lavatory, in service of cleanliness, another of Vivian's strong opinions. Despite its usability, recent recruit debauchery restricted any access. Rikard kept Baran more than updated on such events against any interest. Only one person had the keys. Baran waited for such a person to pass through the gap between the tower in the inner wall. Dravius and his rigid back appeared briefly before climbing the stairs on the farside of the tower. His goal was the secluded shower on the second level. A not-so-secret secret of the captain's morning routine.

"Sixty-five, Sixty-six," Baran's heartbeat was rising. His gaze locked onto Dravius, now moving along a narrow walkway. Squeaking metal hinges signaled the close of the lavatory door. Baran knocked knees to chest and quickly stood up, ready to pursue. He grabbed a nearby rock in one hand. He nodded to a nearby guard. Silent confirmation to disregard imminent events, as planned. A slight against Dravius was an easy bribe, especially if you weren't on the hook.

The well set stones of the tower stairs swallowed the sounds of any footsteps. Nearing the door, Baran slowed to a sneak. This was the tricky part. Despite his age, Dravius was annoyingly aware. It wasn't surprising from his lifetime of failures. The old bastard’s hearing was an opportunity.With focus, he listened inside, waiting. Growing water pressure creaked and cracked through the pipework. A loud clang echoed through the lavatory as the water burst out of the faucet inside. Baran hid the noisy door behind the tower's plumbing and propped it open with the stone.

Behind the background noise of the water, Baran scrambled for Dravius' gear. "Greaves, helmet, boots, bracers. Where is his sword?" Baran mouthed the words. *Does he really shower with his sword?* Chain mail came loose from his arm and crashed against the stone floor like breaking glass. The sound of falling water sharpened against the hard ground. Baran had what he could get. He bolted for the exit, kicking the rock on his way out. The creaking door muffled the slaps of wet feet.

"Aren't you a little old for pranks?" Dravius knocked his sword against the inside of the door. "Watch your back, kid."

"Enjoy your day off, old man," Baran said, while jogging with the plunder. Dravius Eastmaw and his forfeit name reduced to training recruits, yet too prideful to be caught indecently in any part of the estate. It'd be a couple of hours before the next guard shift stumbled into that bad day.

*I need a quiet place to put this sweaty junk on.* Baran scanned the nearby storerooms, regretting his lack of preparation. A small hayloft in the overflow stable would have room to spare. Baran jogged through the garden, rammed the half door and scampered up the ladder. The captain's gear sprawled on top of the mats of hay amongst the floorboards.

"Whatcha doing?" Little eyes peaked above the rungs of the ladder. Vivian's young son Mori stare was simple, from a world of mischief and everything in its way. Short, curly black hair jabbed in odd directions, like he stood on his pillow every night with his head..

"Come on. Move. Your. Feet," said Alby from further below, Mori's sister. Each word coincided with Mori's bobbing head.

Their chaos startled Baran, nearly toppling him over. "What are you guys doing up so early?" He regained his balance and crouched with wide arms, blocking Dravius's gear.

"Is that grumpy’s stuff?" asked Alby, crawling over Mori's head like it was a mat. "Why do you have it?" An identical twin tornado, except for slightly longer hair that fought her stormy look with extra weight.

"Look, I've got some important stuff I need to do. Can you guys get lost for a bit?" Baran corralled the two children like two escaping cats. He grabbed Mori by the waist and Alby by the ankle.

"You said you would help me with my physomancy today." Mori's shrill words grated in Baran’s ears.

He didn't, but it was a pointless argument. "Alright, alright, be quiet." Baran released Mori. "How about later today? I have to go out for a bit, but I'll be back." Baran remembered when he first learned physomancy. The way he'd beg Dravius to teach before his training passed off to Romek. Memories of youth’s simplicity, a time that asked for less forgiveness. Part of Baran envied the twins and their unmarked hands. A serious risk taken by Vivian. He was not afforded the luxury of a clean slate. Baran kneeled down and laid Alby on some hay. "Remember that fire gnot I showed you guys?"

The two children nodded and held their breaths.

"If you can find it in my room, I'll show you guys how to use it when I get back. But if you mess anything up at all, the deal is off." The room was already a disaster. A done deal before it started. Baran pointed at both of them with his index and middle fingers. "Deal?"

"Deal." The twins careened down the ladder like a whirlwind of limbs.

Now alone, Baran donned Dravius' armor. Sweat dampened the lining of the helmet, making it uncomfortable; the breastplate hung loose in the gut and he had no chain mail but otherwise a good fit. Baran rested a hand on a rafter. He needed a weapon. Two would be better. *I got time for a slight detour.*

Chest out, back inverted, visor down. Elbow so far back, he embodied the pride of a rooster. For once, Baran enjoyed the intimidating presence of his grandfather. Dravius did not dabble in idle conversation, even amongst the veterans of Vivian's myrmidons. Another disagreement to add to the list. How could you build comradery as a leader if you didn't know them personally? Either way, it made the walk to Dravius' quarters quick and uneventful. Baran arrived at the heavy front door, sank his head, shut his eyes and sighed, realizing his mistake. *Fuck. How many things does that guy shower with?* He kicked the door out of spite and it gave way. Luck was on his side today. Events always worked out, even when the world stacked itself against him. Baran scrunched his neck and peered over his shoulder before entering.

Dravius's room, like him, was simple. A cot, a desk, and an usual amount of stored weapons. The Eastmaw name was better than this. It built the castles that guarded the Midsea coast for a millennium. Now it was another room among the myrmidon barracks. Dravius didn't even leverage his honorary status as captain. He shrugged off humble, weak words about leadership from his grandfather. The lack of any embellishment left the room pristine, as Baran remembered during his childhood. Except for a localized mess covering the desk and the edge of the rug stuck under the chair. Chaotic piles of envelopes sprawled out with a well drunken bottle as a paperweight. Baran shook the backwash. Liquor. A weathered map framed above the desk had pinned letters scattered on the northeastern side of Caesurge continent. Many letters stretched into the islands off the coast, shrouded in artistic clouds. He ripped one from the map. It was from someone named Daralon. All of them were. The name was familiar, but Baran didn't recognize it. He stepped towards the weapons, but the drawer caught his leg. A jam prevented it from closing. Blind fiddling loosened a heavy ornate pendant.

Wisps of darkened steel welded around a porous stone like splashes of water. The smooth, hammered texture of the stone was olive and dense, like old bone. Baran's fingers found cracks in the strange object. A splintered piece appeared to be absent and inside, he saw the iridescent gleam of a gnot. The small window showed more crosses than Baran had ever seen, let alone held. He was not stupid enough to meddle with an unknown gnot. But the object begged for physergy. It was in his grandfather's drawer. A family heirloom, perhaps. How dangerous could it be? He wanted to know. Physergy poured through the steel, through the stone, into the gnot.

Nothing happened. He poured more. Surely it must do something.

He moved his hand, testing for anything. Again, nothing. He moved to place it back in the drawer, but a thought stopped him. Why not take it? It’d piss off the old man, making it worth its weight. If his plan failed, he was already in for it. Why not double down? Baran tucked the pendant in his pocket, grabbed a pair of scabbards that felt good, and left his grandfather's quarters.

The sun peeked over the Bulwark, blinding Baran. More light meant more eyes. Eyes that might try to foil his mission before it started. He tossed the visor down and marched briskly towards the main gate, hoping to make up for lost time. Passing Romek's deserted hut confirmed his concerns. Only Talon, another of Romek's tamed beasts, watched over the area. A tetraptor, a creature too intelligent to be controlled. The small beast weighed two pounds, maybe less, but with four winged limbs and an attitude sharper than its claws, which were plenty sharp, it more than compensated. A beady, black eye watched him as the creature swiveled its head from side to side.

A few more steps. The stuffy air baked inside the helmet, a distraction that slouched his rigid posture. Upon seeing Dravius' armor, one of the gate guards panicked to attention.

"Good morning Captain Dravius. You missed Romek. Shouldn't be too far down the road, sir," one guard said.

Dravius wasn't the type for small talk. Baran gave a quick nod.

"Captain?" The second guard spit on the ground, leaning against the gate frame. "Always so prepared? Or you're trying to hide your face. I wouldn't blame you. Not with those brands."

They weren't one of Vivian's myrmidons. Basic Hoplisogn kindred tattoos climbed past their shirt and chest plate. Markings of the pinnacle of kindred's military might, the order of Hoplar paladins. His were simple, not those of a true warrior, but one on their way. The guard slinked upright and shook his own open visor, staring at Baran. "The visor?"

Baran clenched his teeth. *Do I imitate the old man?* He tightened his back and turned his chest towards the questioning guard. He cleared his throat at first, trying to decide how best to imitate Dravius. The gritty phlegm of his fathers self pity stuck out in the toneless words of his grandfather. So Baran changed his mind and uncleared his throat, a strange thing to try to do. *I've got no options I have to try.*

"Sir, please excuse him. They're from the district garrison. I'm sure you already know, but we're understaffed this week." She raised a pleading hand, unburdened by any marks. "No need for checkout. Romek handled the formalities to save you time." The Hoplisogn guard sneered.

Baran gave an exaggerated glare at the problematic guard, to no effect, and nodded to the other.

After a few paces the troublesome guard opened his punchable mouth. "Don't forget those gauntlets, captain."

The comment stung but the law was the law. Faint berating between the guards faded as he shouldered the estate's front gate. Removal of his grandfather's gauntlets occupied both his hands. Boro and a hooded figure waited up the road in some shade from a nearby building. The brown cloak was almost indistinguishable from Romek's shaved fur.

"How'd you manage this, kid?" Romek said.

Baran stopped, still over three meters away. *That far?* "He wasn't feeling well and asked me to meet you."

"You're not one for guile and we don't have time for games. You're going back, come—"

"Please, Romek, you know I'm ready for an actual mission. Give me a chance. If it goes well, I'm that much closer to becoming a myrmidon." A small step towards any goal of renown. A step forward. "Come on, I haven't gotten a mission in months." Baran cupped his hands, begging Romek. The condemned brands reminded him of what was at stake, along with the clotted gashes across his knuckles. Maybe they'd garner a little sympathy too. Baran deserved it. "You can at least supervise me like old times. I'll even pay it forward. You supervise me. I supervise the twins." Romek's face was as still as the Bulwark. "How'd you feel if I ran away one of these days?"

"It'd probably do us both some good," Romek said, as they exchanged stubborn glares. "And I'll strangle someone with the old roots if Vivian pawns those terrors off me."

"You know…" Baran shifted a hand toward Boro, trading neck scratches for heavy snorts. "You and I both know that I won yesterday. If you let me go, you'd be fulfilling the oath you made." Baran made an exaggerated fist of accomplishment.

Romek turned and picked at his ear under the hood. "You didn't beat me. You completed the objective." Boro shuffled, pushing Romek. "Oh, what? Are you on his side now?" Romek gave a sigh of defeat.

"She likes me better than Dravius," Baran continued to scratch Boro's neck, getting into the good spot between the armored pack saddle and her rough hide. Beasts were messy, erratic, and, for the most part, dumb, but they didn't judge.

Romek interrupted the affectionate appeal with his body, checking on Boro's pack saddle. "This aint like any mission you've been on kid. None of that hand holding shit we do with paladin knockoffs. And we're not protecting any snobs so you can't buy your way out of a bad fight. I'd do this myself–"

Boro knocked Romek's arm with her horn.

"We'd do this ourselves, but my charm is better as an accent in certain circles. I know you're twisted about those marks but they do have their own perks in the right situations. Odds are your charade already missed our window and this will be a long day of walking." Romek pointed his snout towards the ground and tapped his foot. "Fine! You'll get your chance." Romek inspected Baran's armor with suspicion. "You kill Dravius or something? How did you get his gear?"

"He's having a spa day in the old keep."

Romek scoffed. "That's good. Good for him. He deserves it. Now get his armor off and in the saddle before you hurt yourself."

"Why would I take the armor off?"

Romek let out a low growl. "Don't test my patience. This isn't some guard posting or escort. You don't know the details of the mission—"

"We're tracking smuggled gnots somewhere in the Interior," Baran said.

Another heavy sigh. "Yes. Now, where in the Interior? Which district, out of the dozens, is our destination? How do we find smugglers? What type of gnots?" Romek berated Baran as he refastened the contents of Boro's large saddle bag. Boro tried to pull away from the wearkin's aggression. Silence lingered before Romek continued. "Well, first we're going to a fence. If we're lucky, we can get the information we need to find the exchange tonight. That myrmidon shit will plaster suspicion all over us. Take it off and keep your hands out of sight. We don't need any extra attention." Romek tugged at Boro's reins.

*I need to blend in. What about the two hundred and fifty pound wearkin that is as wide as the rhino with us?* Baran took off Dravius' armor, tripping over his own feet after Boro. So much wasted effort, unstrapped and tossed into the pack saddle. Baran took care to keep his grandfather's pendant out of Romek's sight. It now rested under his shirt against the skin of his chest. Its relative weight pulled heavy in the armor’s absence. Romek covered the gear and tossed a ragged cape over his shoulder, which Baran caught with his face.

This was Baran's first proper mission. He squeezed his grandfather's scabbards in anticipation. They were going to find the gnot smugglers and stop their plans. The why wasn't important, and neither was the how. Completing the mission is what mattered. As long as Baran played his cards right, Vivian would make him a myrmidon despite any opinions of his grandfather. A critical step to reclaiming his family legacy and make his life a story worth telling. It wasn’t so much critical as it was the only step before him. Baran looked back. A sliver of the estate’s wall reminded him of his life, training him for today. Part of him wanted to include Rikard, but greatness was a lonely path. A friend would understand. Today would be important, marking the beginning of Baran’s rise. The day he proves his worth. And if they were late, he'd add embellishment for the history books.

Chapter Seven

The veil of sleep evaporated along with any distraction against Kayah's deteriorating state. Even her healing couldn't defy the laws of sustenance. Her hunger had grown ravenous. A physical pain ripped any thought, other than food, from her mind. Kayah opened her eyes, waiting for the light that never came. Her stomach birled, checking for any food now that she was awake. Starvation clouded the events that led her to this darkness. Jaxith. The door. Locked. But how long had she slept?

Kayah held her arms, testing the skin. The rawness was gone, replaced by more bumpy scars. A couple hours maybe, give or take. Why was she awake, though? *Your body will notice things you don't. You have to know how to listen.* The idea was strange to her. Wasn't she the same thing as her body? A nuance that didn't matter. According to Jaxith, something woke her body up.

A quiet splash came from the cellar followed by an uncomfortable silence. Maybe the dampness gathered enough to drip, adding to the stagnant cellar water. Maybe her senses overreacted, or the hunger forced her to rise. Another splash came closer than before. No, something moved along the storeroom path. *Why is he always right?*

The situation was simple.

Steps were how you survived in Old Caechora. The trick was figuring out the right ones. Two came to mind. It gave Kayah clarity to act efficiently. She drove the fear out, along with what could happen in the next moments. The emotions about the situation wouldn't help anyone. She read the door, guided by hands trying to piece together the grooves in her mind. A folly attempt. It took days for Jaxith to teach her the secrets with the aid of light. The blank slate of darkness complicated the formation of a visual. An emptiness devoured the space along with her ability to focus. The safety of the storeroom now became deadend trap. Desperate, shaking fingers moved some pieces. The stone answered with a solitude that matched the shadowy void. Another splash came from the cellar, followed by drips in the hallway.

Kayah started the second step. Adrenaline helped fend off the hunger as she crouched. Spare bits of luck were on her side. The Guild failed to find her backup shiv folded into her cloth belt. Redundancy was the glue to success. Her current predicament left her wanting for more. The next best thing was the gift of regret for whatever approached. She lurked against the wall like a spider.

Silence and the darkness concealed everything. Noise rarely penetrated these ruins, leaving a closed, lonely ecosystem within. The wall anchored her; it preventing her from drifting in the nothingness. Until it shifted, like it was tilting towards an infinitely large space. Some sort of distorted gravity pulled her forward. She clenched her teeth, her hand, everything to keep from falling. This was new, a cursed perk of the digs, maybe? Kayah's stomach grumbled, saving and betraying her in one fell swoop. Base instincts care little for insanity.

The sound faded into the impenetrable darkness, but an ephemeral connection with whatever accompanied her persisted. Not by sight, nor sound, nor touch, but by something else. Similar to the feeling when you think you're being watched, but different. A forgotten sense that only surfaces in the absence of others. Unexplained, like the abilities of dragons. Creatures that pushed the boundaries of reality with wondrous and horrific abilities. Jaxith said that when it came down to it, the dragons were flesh and blood like the rest of us. Kayah took it to mean that dragons weren't special according to their insides, but Jaxith insisted it meant that every living thing was special, that a bit of dragon existed in all life. That included herself. It wasn't the worst thought, but it meant it was in her enemies, too. Bitter strength filled Kayah as she prepared to attack the shapeless feeling in front of her.

"Hungry?" whispered Jaxith.

"Yes." The words cracked in her throat. The release of muscles destroyed the dam of her exhaustion, trouncing her hostile posture.

"You were stuck outside, weren't you? I told you to practice in the dark." Sounds of Jaxith rummaging anchored her to the moment. "Let's see." The pause pulled her away again. "You know what? This is as good a time as any."

"I'm starving." Kayah's words trembled more than her body.

"I know. You'll remember it better. Nothing is easier to remember than pain. Chain the memory to it and you won't forget. Come." The slap of stone echoed. "You want to eat? Unlock the door."

Kayah wondered how much damage she could do with the shiv. Wobbly arms stole her accuracy, but the sharpness would give generously. Hunger had a mind of its own. Thoughts that tended toward violence when pushed to the limit.

"Make your decision. We have much to discuss. You can fight me or the door?" Jaxith said.

Kayah clenched her teeth, tucking away the shiv. The defenseless enemy was always the smart choice. It often made an enemy of time; a dangerous foe that Kayah would gladly accept when the alternative meant contending with Jaxith. Challenges like this weren't new. He insisted on teachable lessons at the worst imaginable times. Forced experiences, he called them, the only way to truly broaden your horizon.

"Good. Now just let your body do the work. You’ve done this hundreds of times."

Kayah gave a few frivolous moves. "I can't see the shape. Just open the door."

"You don't need to see the goal to get closer. Move the pieces till they mean something. Your sight has abandoned you. Find another way to see."

She tried to see through her hands. Following the curves of the stone, finding breaks and fixing them. Steps lead to incomplete shapes, dead ends. Two steps forward, two steps back. Each draining her attention until it was as empty as her stomach. "I give up."

"No, you're just sulking." Jaxith grabbed Kayah's hand in the dark and felt grooves with her fingers. Kayah felt the misalignment before he could say it. "That's that last one. You were close."

Kayah swiveled the stone and turned to Jaxith. The muffled clicks of the door's secret locking mechanism released. "Give me the food."

"Opening the door is extra, I guess." Jaxith chuckled and rubbed the top of her head. "Here." A small blob became shape in the darkness as Kayah squeezed the bound leather in front of her stomach, her prize. If she could, she would have put the whole thing directly in her stomach.

Jaxith slid the door gracefully, despite its size and weight. He talked and Kayah listened to her own chewing as they moved into the storeroom. She heard him fiddle with something in the center of the floor. Gentle palms took shape in the dark, tucking an orange bright gnot into a home of gathered glass and crystals, brushed into a small mound. A routine that Jaxith completed with precision, no matter the circumstances. First, he built a small pyre around the gnot before activating it. The light grew until it filled the prisms. Stains in the glass mixed, creating gentle shades of orange that illuminated the storeroom. Jaxith insisted on its perfection, regardless of the time and energy. Hands held to the light meant the task was done. *An old habit*. He'd say occasionally when it was cold, but not today.

The inside of the storeroom was an untouched world compared to Old Caechora. A trove of the past. Masterful stonework adorned with relief carvings of epic battles covered the walls. The grandeur of the larger display eclipsed any chips and smudges in the stone. An elliptical arch sheltered them with constellations illuminated by the refracted orange light. The lifeless imitation was the closest reflection of the world in Jaxith’s stories. Even the dampness failed to penetrate the stone once the door sealed. Mysterious architecture within the walls naturally clean the air. Jaxith suspected the storeroom was a personal arsenal of some ancient commander. A large, worn leather map spanning the continent and a few books on military strategy was all that remained. Useless treasures in a world of dark survival.

"Kayah. Have you been listening?" Jaxith placed her wooden board and a Scouters survival guide on the ground near the light. "I brought you these. It's all recovered from your scouting run."

Knowing her wooden friend made it out comforted her, but the sight of Timor's handbook dredged up the painful memories. "Yes." Kayah swallowed a mouthful of stale bread, trusting her body would know what to do with it. Silence stole her words. She wanted things to go back. The digs loomed like the rotten air but she thought it would come slowly. Something you'd see in the distance. Maybe it had. Maybe it finally became too much to ignore.

"Tell me what happened. I want to hear it from you," Jaxith said.

"It was normal. Everything was normal. We didn't even go that deep. Maybe a couple hours in. The tremors were quiet today. We stuck right like you taught in case the gnots went dark." Kayah shook her head. "Timor was useless, but he snuck in some food. He shouldn't have been there." As she neared the end, her mind fought back. Hiding the memories of what happened behind fear. She gulped some water and wiped grit off of her tongue. "Did Timor make it out?" The answer didn't really matter. She wanted to stall.

Jaxith winced. "You know." He tilted his head to the side with a slight smile. "You look like when I first saw you as a baby at the Guild. I requested they fit you with clothes even if they were baggy." He chuckled. "A rag honestly would have fit better, but you can't grow into a rag very well." A heavy sigh turned into a stern gaze. "I can't help if you don't tell me what happened."

"Okay." There was no way around it. She knew where this was headed. It wasn't the first time she made it back alone. Kayah stared at her hands. "It was a normal scouting run. We found some water–"

"How much water?" Jaxith asked.

"It was too deep to see the bottom, even with a gnot," she answered. She kept her thoughts shallow, hiding from what she had seen.

"And you continued?"

"We were just checking the rest of the cavern for the report. If the run was good enough, we might get extra food. There was this horrible smell and then… then there were these voices–"

"One mission will not make a difference, Kayah." The look on his face made her feel pathetic. "The voices. They were from Timor?"

"No, it sounded old and dry. I guess it was one voice. There was also this light and the sound of metal work. It was strange. There were these hands, and they attacked Timor." Kayah sweated as the horrors of that cave closed in. The sight of her hands strengthened the fear so she slid them between her arms and her body. "He's an idiot, he should have looked out for himself."

"Kayah, Timor didn't make it back. But you already knew that. Tell me about the sounds and the light."

"It was like an anvil from the encampments. But it made it hard to focus, and it drowned everything else out." Thinking of the noise echoed the hypnotic rhythm in her ears until it bled into a fading high pitch ring. "Do I have the digs?"

"It's not that simple, Kayah."

"But everyone who goes into the Abysm gets it, eventually."

"What you saw was real. A world blurred with our own. It's what they built this place on. Animant’s greed and hubris carved into this stone." Jaxith ran his fingers along a nearby wall. "What you saw. What I think you saw was the Forge. And what you heard goes by many names. The abyssal thrum. It comes to people differently and mostly during sleep. Most don't even realize they see it. When you're this close, though, it's consistent. The digs is what they call it here when someone crossing between the bounds." Jaxith sighed. "You're not crazy."

"But the prowlers."

"It's complicated. Life's complicated enough, but death. Well, it's another beast." Jaxith grabbed her shoulder. "But it's not important now. Things are different, plain and simple. The guild saw you heal. It's not your fault, but they're going to cage you."

Things weren't different. The world sought to kill her. Days that blurred together in the eternal night. Now it was more personal, more targeted, but equally dangerous.

"That's what this is about? I've been in a cage my entire life. I did what you said. I destroyed myself to be normal." Kayah ran fingers across the scared texture of her skin. Cuts, scrapes and bruises that she repeated day after day to fake the appearance of slow healing. The exchange for anonymity left her accustomed to pain. "I was too exhausted to stay awake just once."

"I know." Jaxith embraced Kayah with comforting arms.

She wanted to cry, but her body refused to give up the moisture. "Tell me what to do." It took everything to speak. Her instinct to bottle up the weakness kept her from saying more.

"I don't know what to do, Kayah. The Guild is coming with an executioner to find you. I overheard the guards."

"He was killing prowlers. Burning them."

"Alone in the settlements?" Jaxith contemplated, staring into the shimmering orange glass. "That explains the fires and the different prowler patterns. He doesn't know the settlement like us. We have you, the bait." His eyes darted and rolled and he chewed on his lip. Jaxith was in his own head at this point. "I know the place. Don't worry. A man is like any other animal, maybe worse. But you can trap him and kill him with a little planning."

It was the first time Kayah had heard Jaxith propose violence as a solution. He kept the history of his brands a secret, even to her. Kayah imagined the cutthroat anguishing from the confrontation with the charred man, fearing Jaxith would share a similar fate. "Remember what you taught me? Never underestimate your enemy."

"I told you that to keep you safe. I've killed more dangerous things than that man. Things I need to atone for."

"I'm telling you to keep you safe," Kayah said. Jaxith was doing what he always did. Punishing himself for her mistakes. It made her feel powerless, like she was a burden. "We can hide here." She knew they couldn't. They'd just starve, eventually. "I can. What if I just give myself up?"

"You have a good heart, but never say that again. Every living thing has the right to fight for survival. Don’t forget that." Jaxith unpacked the rest of his bag. "I need to get some rest if we're going to do this. You should try to, too."

The fantastical dream of fleeing this hell inverted, warping into a stalking night terror. One that harnessed the malignant energy of Old Caechora in human form. The impossibility of escape mirrored the defeat of such a foe. The charred man, this executioner, imposed an inevitable presence, rivaling depths of the Abysm. She envied Jaxith’s suicidal hope but could not accept that outcome. One person already died today trying to help, she couldn't stand for one that meant something to meet the same fate.

Chapter Eight

Baran reached the eastern edges of the military district in good time. No thanks to Romek and Boro. Past numerous Hoplisogn barracks along the wide, paved roads at the base of Bulwark. Past the network of skinny corridors in the center, too narrow for Boro, let alone her pack saddles. Supplementary weapon smiths, armor smiths and small markets packed tighter than the bricks, away from the crowded thoroughfares. The morning hustle faded the higher the sun rose, waiting to return at its fall. The changing guard was a heart that beat twice a day. Hoplisogn garrisons were the sword or shield of Caechora. Soldiers, vendors and nobodies shuffled through the Bulwark gate intersection, a junction between districts. An oval hole bore straight through the three meters of solid, impenetrable Bulwark, packed to brim with bodies. The top half of the tunnel provided access for the crowds, while the veins of the city ran through the bottom half, beneath heavy stone pavers.

Plumes of gray smoke wafted through the congestion from a nearby corner. The sweet aroma of honey-fried meat came from the Sleeping Salamander. Half a hand could count the establishments free of kindred thumbs in this district. The Sleeping Salamander being one of them. By far the best meal, without cramming through multiple Bulwark gates, even among all the kindred competition. Unverifiable rumors from Baran’s perspective. The owner's clean neck didn't shy away from money, regardless of any marks that held it. And that was all that mattered to him. Drunken brawls and stories of adventurers, past their prime, drew patrons from all walks of life.

"After the mission, not before. Only a fool feasts before the hard part of the day," Romek said.

Baran drove the smell from his mind. Another inescapable training exercise. He slid behind Romek, arms folded in front. Law required the visibility of marks in public and kindred establishments, but it didn’t specify they had to be worn with pride. Invisible shackles imprisoned him in plain sight, keeping his hands from his pockets. He didn't mind that Romek and Boro drew excess attention from anyone nearby. Inevitably, eyes would move to him, by association. But a commotion distracted everyone’s gaze.

"Move. Make way for the Imperator's finest," said a voice from up the street.

A Hoplisogn banner swayed above the crowd, splitting them down the center. The weak wedged apart by the strong. Baran pressed against Boro's saddle, keeping his hands low against her side as the Hoplisogn paladins marched. The greatest warriors Caesurge had ever known. Ornate spears, war hammers and swords, large enough to decimate their enemies. Thick steel encased the warriors in impenetrable armor, decorated with personal achievements and commendations. A defense that served a dual purpose of protecting any suicidal attacks from the outside and negating the pressure of Havel's strength within. Dangerous gifts that would crush any normal animant. Each legendary fighter, a symbol of the kindred resolve against the immortal adamants. At least that’s how the stories went. They looked the part, no doubt, but Baran's grandfather proved that greatness was not intrinsic to blood. The thought tightened Baran's chest.

A silent raised fist from the head of the squad stopped the march in its tracks. The two columns pivoted to face outward, towards the crowds. The crash of their sabatons stomped in unison. The fist relinquished its command and grabbed at the air as a massive sword drew itself over the paladin's back. Despite how the blade moved, the paladin did not hold it, not directly. A subtlety that wasn't lost on Baran. The hand jerked, tossing air as the enormous blade jumped towards the crowd. It landed on nothing, a razor thin tip slanted down, hovering only a few feet in front and above of Baran, slanted with its hilt down. The crowd scurried further away, distancing themselves from the floating weapon, but the sword tracked like a shadow. The trajectory of the paladin's heavy step and the floating sword made the target clear for everyone.

Baran stumbled backward into Boro as the ominous weapon turned down towards his face. *What the fuck?* The animal part of his brain yelled at him to flee. *What did I do? I only have forfeit marks, and they're the most respectable ones. Maybe it's after Romek?* He felt more and more alone as the crowd sacrificed him to the sword. The simplicity of the weapon drove Baran sideways until he met a paw on his shoulder.

"Looks like this is the end, kid," Romek said.

Baran swallowed his tongue.

"I'm kidding. Relax, control your emotions. You have nothing to hide."

Baran wobbled as the reassuring grip shook him. Breath failed him. He tried to become hollow, removing everything from his thoughts. His chest closed like a vacuum of space.

"The weight of heresy lies within you. Kneel to await judgment," the paladin said, louder than the distance required.

"He's a kid with a lot of angst. You know how it is when you're young." Romek took a slight step between Baran and the oppressive edge, but not enough to fully block it.

"This is not a conversation. This is a decree." The paladin walked with a viced grip until he was under the sword’s hilt. An abrupt release fell the weapon straight into the same hand.

"He didn't complete his training before he got branded. The brands were the previous kindred decree. His grandfather was Dravius Eastmaw." Romek shuffled through his shirt. "We have a seal."

*What training? Why is he lying?*

"A surrendered heretic's spawn." The paladin's helmet kept their eyes shrouded, but Baran could feel his gaze. "The weight has lessened. Make sure that control is maintained."

The paladin moved the massive sword without touch again, bringing it to rest in a large scabbard on the back of their armor. Heavy steps, the only sound street, returned to the head of the paladin group, commanding the group forward. The column's march shook the ground, waning as they moved into the distance. The stretched crowd healed in their wake. Any hope of being invisible faded as every pair of eyes judged Baran. A set of marked hands carried the burden that he didn't deserve. A burden that he had half a mind to cut off.

"What's got you all worked up? I've never seen them respond like that to someone," Romek said.

"Nothing." Baran dug his fingers into his palms. "What did you mean by training?"

Romek scratched his neck and sighed. "Paladin training. I stretched the truth a bit to explain they were sensing from you. You must have managed to do it naturally." Romek took notice of their audience, moving Baran between him and Boro. "I’m not sure Dravius can say the same. Relax. Shake it off. You should feel proud. You did that with no training, but we need to keep moving. Try to keep your emotions under control."

The brief sense of pride eroded as Baran reasoned his way along that chain of thought. Another grievance to add to the list of how Dravius ruined Baran's potential. Baran imagined what he could do with training if he was a natural. The ego numbed the crowd’s ire as people moved about their day.

Past the oval shaft, the three traveled through several districts on the surface layer of Caechora. Despite their purpose or affiliated kindred, all the districts of the Exterior held a similar aesthetic of cold white stone and engineered metal. The city's pride, expressed through architecture, glistened in the sun. Multi-storied buildings with open roofs and terraces unafraid of the sky. Keeps connected by long stairs climbed the Bulwark like vines on rock, supported by trellis' of sturdy steel brackets. The foundries of the Interior fed the growing city ever upward. Some stairs reached high enough to find the Skyway. An elevated boulevard along the top of the Bulwark.

Baran did not care to look up. He jumped between the faces of the crowd. Their quick glances at his hands showed how little his face mattered. Their looks made him uneasy. Frail bystanders saw the marks differently than people like him. He understood the disdain, the contempt, the disrespect from fighters. Hell, he shared their opinions more often than not. It was the knives of fear that wounded him. He looked at the ground, his best defense. His future was downward anyway, into the Interior.

The Bulwark zigged and zagged in Baran's peripheral vision. "Aren't we supposed to be going down? We've passed like three gates already."

"Come on, kid, use your head. Would you go through the front door if you're trying to break in? It's like footwork." Romek lumbered side to side. "You want to know what your opponent is going to do, you watch their feet. The city is no different. And?"

Baran regretted his question already. "You move where they're not looking." It made less sense the more he thought about it.

"Good. Smugglers closely monitor the crowds around military districts. We can't risk spooking them, so we're taking a detour. Climbing through the window, so to speak," Romek said. "You're not the only one who knows how to climb."

"I don't think you're fitting through any windows."

"We'll have to send Boro through." Romek chuckled to himself, interrupting his own attempt at deadpan humor. A sharp turn in the road brought them to another junction. "This is the one." Light crowds jostled near the downward ramps into the heart of the city, the Interior of Caechora.

While the surface layer clung towards order and a more spacious ascetic, the Interior was busy and cramped. Bygone buildings of intricate stonework, similar to the ones on the surface, lined the exterior of the district. These bustling establishments drew most of the foot traffic. As the streets converged towards the center of the district, the buildings grew smaller and denser. An area reserved for small homes to house the residents. Two things set this layer apart from above.

The first was the makeshift extensions and modifications to the sturdy stonework. Metal and wood extruded off large buildings and the Bulwark itself, filling every space. Entire streets permanently closed to connect buildings with remodeled additions. This district bore the hallmarks of the Emporosogn kindred. A district filled with more merchants than goods to sell. The smell of textiles and food weighed heavily in the air, almost visible among the collage of vibrant colored fabrics and a backdrop of endless barter.

The second was lighting. Being hidden below Exterior and away from the sun posed a challenge for a thriving market. The solution, permanent scaffolding stemming from the Bulwark. The massive shelves supported paths and even small boutiques as they covered the walls in a varying hexagonal pattern. This alone was not unique to the Interior as engineers required reliable access to maintain the Bulwark. What stood apart was the web of steel cables strung above the buildings. Vendors managed bright gnot lanterns and several reflective surfaces above their shops to attract business. Banners for various goods and services hung as well, resting in the still air. These provided an index for anyone looking to barter on the ground streets. In this district, light had a simple meaning. Open for business.

Romek pointed to the district’s far side. "Where backtracking now, through that gate."

"Should we go along the shelves? It might save some time." Baran traced along ledges protruding from the Bulwark.

"Best to stick with the ground layer. Unnecessary gamble with her size." Boro ignored their comments as she descended the ramp, staying flush with the Bulwark, diverting any crowd away from the wall.

As they navigated the district and its markets, a tucked away shop caught Baran’s attention. Shimmering light reflected off an assortment of liquids in various jars and bottles.

"Hey, where would I find something tasty down here? Like liquor or grog."

"Tasty?" Romek pried at Baran with his eyes.

"It's not for me," Baran said.

"Who's the lucky lady? Or man?"

"It's not like that either." Baran sighed. "It's for Vivian."

"Vivian, eh? Shooting for the stars on that one. I've got to say Baran… Well, who am I to talk? We've all been there. But besides the obvious reasons. Being her availability and your… inexperience. She's not the type of woman you can woo. She's a man-eater and a lady-killer, a bit out of your league." Romek scratched his chin while he inspected Baran.

"Stop. Not like that. It's for a favor."

"A favor? I see." Romek looked around, noticing the tucked away shop. "That would do. She'd go for that in there. Sure. But." Romek grabbed Baran's far shoulder and pulled him close into a huddle. "If you want to surprise her, look for mersh weed liquor. It's made from a plant that pulls up nearby metals through the roots." Romek grasped at the air and pulled upward. "The plant itself is barely edible, but boiling it gets enough of the essence. Distill it enough and you can taste the chrome. Comes from the south, so you'll have to look in one of the industrial districts. Which, lucky you, is where we are headed."

"Sounds disgusting."

"Oh, it is."

Chapter Nine

A thick heat from the furnaces and smelters roasted the outer edge of the Technosogn district. It baked the air, made it sweat. Melted iron poured through castings of every shape. Gears, pipes, machinery, tools and gadgets for any problem. The technosogn kindred looked upon society as a nail to slam with a hammer of industry. A hammer of liquid metal and cast iron. Romek struggled to keep clear of the sparks. Fire and fur did not mix, no matter how short the hairs. Sparks arced into the street, controlling the flow of the dwindling crowd. Ceaseless trudging made it feel later than it was, but some rays of daylight cast down the ramps to the Exterior. Afternoon by their eastward orientation. If the intel was solid, the fence was nearby. Romek steered Boro to a reclusive section of the street. A haven from the pressing heat and bouncing spray of fire.

"What's the holdup?" The words were stern, a mirage of a younger Dravius.

"The fence is supposed to be around the corner," Romek jerked open a pocket on Boro's saddle.

"Why did we stop here?" And like that, the mirage disappeared.

Romek fought the urge to lecture. His own words goaded him, maybe as much as they annoyed Baran, maybe more. Despite the idiotic look on the kid's face that said otherwise, Romek remembered all the times he repeated himself. Damn repetition, a teacher's double-edge sword. The results varied somewhere between perfection and insanity. A question that only time would answer. A question that was asked twice, for student and teacher, alike.

"We stopped here so that I can talk to the fence. Alone." Romek closed his eyes and prepared his ears.

"Alone? What's the point of me coming on the mission?"

The urge overwhelmed Romek. "First. You weren't supposed to come on this mission. Second. Missions aren't all guts and glory. Every fight is a chance to die. The best way to live is to minimize the chances." Words he'd wished he heard when he was younger, wondering if he could have listened. Remembering close calls made him feel uneasy, like when you're standing on a height with your back to the edge.

"Who said anything about guts and glory?"

"You didn't have to. It's plastered all over your arrogant face. I'm not gonna let it get me killed."

Romek watched thoughts rattle in Baran's head as the kid disengaged and glared into the district. Maybe he was too hard on him. Mirky reflections of Dravius warped their relationship between teacher, friend, and brother. The resemblance was there. On occasion, Romek saw it, heard it, even felt the presence. The fool had potential, just like his grandfather. He wondered how similar were they at this age? A complicated, unanswerable, and most of all pointless question. Romek was still curious, though. How old was Dravius when he accepted that pendant? All the scoffing and vowing to bury that curse meant little against the clock. Death would force the inheritance upon Baran. Which meant someone had to finish the kid’s training and give him a good head for it. The hours weren’t getting any shorter, so it only made sense to let experience do the heavy lifting.

"Fine." Romek's instincts submitted. "Just think before you talk. Think before everything, actually. For the old roots just don't fuck this up." Romek watched the advice ricochet off Baran's shit-eating grin.

"Yeah, yeah. Of course." Baran huddled close to Romek and Boro. "So, what's the plan? A shake down? Some interrogation?"

"No, we're going to pretend to be sellers."

"Of what?"

"Dragon chill."

A salt grown by mountainroot. The biology of the plant gave the crystals a unique composition and the natural physerstriction made it much harder than normal. Ground down to powder, it became easy to ingest and easy to mix with other drugs. Pure and uncut, it was a potent stimulant that gave a hell of a kick and the afterglow of an icy breeze.

Romek shuffled his gear around, removing his cuirass, rerebraces and vambraces. The result was a much less intimidating outfit. The only weapon he carried was a kukri sidearm attached to his belt, a staple of wearkin tools. Baran's initial judgemental confusion flipped into his own puzzlement until he realized he should do the same. Romek gave a sigh of relief, then inhaled a breath towards perfection.

"What happens after we get the fence to buy the chill?"

"They won’t buy the chill. Remember what I said about… Nevermind. We want to know where their seller is located, so we've got to tease that information out." Romek unpacked the dragon chill. "Now, the fence doesn't know us, but chill is expensive stuff. Profitable stuff. So if they think we're legitimate, they'll want to get their hands on the crosses by pulling us into their network." Romek cupped his hands like a salivating merchant.

"What if they have multiple sellers?"

"Good, you're using your head." Romek patted Baran's shoulder. "They will have multiple sellers. We need to find the ones that are in or near the river districts. We know the deal is happening tonight by boat, but the Interior rivers snake throughout the city. Too many to guess and too many to watch all at once, at least with the estate's resources."

Baran chewed on the plan for a few moments. "So we need a plan or a story to get them to tell us a buyer near the river?"

"Right idea and normally we can, but we will need to do it on the fly. Our base is that we're out of Solcut. It's a major hub for dragon chill. It's pretty normal for sellers to splitter to nearby cities, especially along the Cut. We don't know what the fence will propose, so we may have to be creative with plausible restrictions. Now, your hands will be useful. It will immediately give us some credibility." Romek balanced a bit of dragon chill on one of his claws. "I, on the other hand, have to make a more authentic performance."

Romek snorted the dragon chill in one go through his snout. It burned first, before it dialed in to a warmth. His sight and hearing kicked up. The sparks brightened and the pitch of metals sharpened. It started- the chill. The feeling spun from his chest in spirals to his extremities. The warmth faded to a slow blizzard around your bones. For a moment, his temperature balanced between the baking air and the inner chill. Like a breeze the balance hit and left, leaving nothing but the cold. It settled in, snug in tight with his marrow.

"How are my eyes? Frosty?" Romek pried an eye wide with his claws.

"Uh. Yeah. I guess."

"Good. Come on, let's go." Romek squeezed Boro's horn. "You know what to do."

The chill was well on its way. Romek's nose was running like a faucet slowed by the fur beneath his snout. He kept wiping it every couple of seconds. His tolerance, from the vials, turned the kick into a tickle. The chills came no matter what you cut the salt with. Phantom symptoms that began with shaking hands. He knew it was in his head, but it changed nothing. He saw his breath, his mind attempting to make the trick a reality.

Romek rolled his shoulders. Loosening up for his upcoming performance. He dredged up old memories from a past life of desperation, one of the few. Close calls and living day to day buried any worthwhile lesson. Getting your fix on top of being a wearkin was a nasty mix, especially on the doorstep of the plates. At least he was more familiar with kindred culture. The cities, the people, civilization they call it. The precipice of animant progress. They weren't wrong, in his opinion, but not for the same reasons.

The shop was orderly and open. A controlled mask of metal and stone for unfamiliar patrons. Towering, narrow windows lined the confined L-shaped stretch of the shop. The glass rested behind patterned steel, barring any access from the outside. Metal sheet shutters, a second layer of protection, opened inward into the shop. The size of the building dwarfed the street side facade, leaving a large area of the business hidden from prying eyes.

The presumed fence was a dregue of medium build. He wore a nice shirt with hooked suspenders. Short bone fins stretched from his forehead to the base of the neck. Capped with hammered bronze, along with similar ridges on his jaws, cheeks, and nose.

"And the return policy?" a slender human woman asked, the store’s only customer.

"All purchases are final." The dregue eyes tracked Romek like a predator stalking prey. Hope of nonviolent success evaporated with each second.

"I'll have to think about it, I suppose," the woman said, oblivious to the shop’s rising tension.

"Undoubtedly, I would advise no other course," the dregue said.

The woman gathered herself, still deep in thought about the pending purchase. A startled face greeted Romek when she subconsciously looked up. He returned a flat expression to the woman's honest reaction.

"Good day, gentlemen. I should remind you that this is a kindred establishment." The shopkeeper searched Baran with his eyes.

"We're looking for a buyer," Baran said. Abrupt, but nothing that youth wouldn't excuse.

"Might I suggest a store of your own? Unless that is difficult for some reason." The owner moved to the far end of the shop and began closing the metal shutters, one by one. "I'm sorry for my manners. We seemed to skip introductions."

"Let's save the names and get to it." Romek shook his wrists and squeezed his hands. Fake symptoms meant little if they felt real. "Words brought us to your shop. We're out of Solcut, our old market ran cold, so we're looking for a new setup." Romek gave a condescending look at Baran. All part of the act, of course. "Including a buyer."

"Words you say?" The dregue evaluated Romek for a while.

*Yeah, yeah, give me the look over.*

"I was looking forward to closing shop, but business never sleeps, does it? Let's move somewhere more private." He gestured towards the shop’s back door. "Can't say I have much business out of Solcut. Who gave you these words?"

"Not out of Solcut. A chill seller in Caechora." Romek shimmied through door’s frame, leading the way for Baran.

Their discussion moved to a cramped warehouse in the back of the building. Mounted tracks covered the walls and ceiling, supporting many elevated metal cubes in creative configurations. The rig held lines of crates from the wall and ceiling. Near the door was a mechanical panel against an empty section of wall. Thick cables rambled from behind the control station throughout the room underneath the tracks.

The dregue took the helm at the panel, causing crates to slide, release, and lock into new shapes. An orchestra of metallic noises conducted by a composer. "A custom creation of my own. A couple of force gnots can do wonders. With the correct licensing, of course." The chorus of metal configuration drowned out his words as a constructed wall enclosed the three of them and a table. The owner turned as the last crate confined their meeting to a much more personal space. "But enough about me. Explain to me why you would ask a chill dealer for another buyer?" The dregue's tone was heavy with suspicion.

"We didn't. We asked for a general fence. Like we said before, we're looking for a new setup." Romek had to make a bluff. "If chill money is not worth your time, we'll find someone else." He nodded at Baran, towards the door.

"Wait." The shopkeeper made one last connection on the panel, causing the bottom row of the cubes to come forward off the wall. "Do you have a sample?"

Greed was the slickest way to open doors. It left violence and baggage outside. Keeping it open long enough to get through was a different matter. Romek pulled the package of chill from his satchel and placed it on the table. The dregue opened one crate and pulled out goggles and a custom physergy lamp. In place of the normal gnot casing was a long tube of crystal glass. After he tightened the goggle straps, he placed a physergy cell into a notch on the end of the lamp and a white light illuminated the interior of the tube, focusing the line in a thin light.

"Custom lamps too?" *The guy's a damn hobbyist. Why's he bothering with fencing?*

"Trust is paramount to a functioning business." The dregue inspected the dragon chill, being sure to never touch it. "Regarding this product, you must understand my suspicion. When money walks in off the street and tries to put itself in my pocket, I have to wonder why? And so I ask. Why?" Romek spoke, but the shopkeeper’s palm silenced him. "With respect, my furry friend, I want an answer from this gentleman." He gestured towards Baran.

The kid's face bent in weird shapes. Confusion, constipation, bewilderment mixed, settling into a firm grump. "Why what, exactly?"

Romek kept his eyes on the dregue, watching both of his hands. *Not bad, the kid's buying time to think.* Romek smirked at the idea of Baran realizing his similarity to Dravius. The feeling quickly soured, though, as a lump of doubt wedged into Romek's chest. Fear that the question was genuine.

"Why are you trying to put money in my pocket?" The dregue angled the lamp upward, causing the light to slice across Baran's face.

Reflexes brought Baran's hand in front of his face. *This guy is good.* A game of tag started between all of their eyes. The pit sank deep into Romek's stomach, spreading a wave of regret. He shouldn't have brought Baran.

"To put more in ours. Isn't that how it works? You have to pay to play. Right?" Baran said. For once, that ego helped more than it hurt.

"Hmmm. And your hands? The ones you've been hiding. Forfeit. And by the looks, when you were very young. What got you these?"

"My grandfather," Baran said, with that indignant tone.

"I asked, what, not who." The dregue turned and unlatched a different crate. This was going south fast. The dregue found a weak spot and was pushing hard.

"What does this have to do with our business?" Romek stepped closer to the dregue and the table.

"Everything." The dregue stepped back, matching Romek's steps, bringing him to another closed crate.

"Some skirmish between the Emporosogn kindred and my family. Ended in surrender," Baran said.

"And the name?"

"Eastmaw."

"Eastmaw. Eastmaw." The dregue rolled his finger on the closed crate. "Yes, the Fangs of Midsea. That is quite the name. So what business does a paladin have dealing chill?"

"I'm not a paladin. It was before my time," Baran said.

"Let's see, some twenty something years back. That tracks with your age and explains the lack of dermabrasion on your hands. Stuck with the bill and none of the goods, so to speak. Quite embarrassing. Yes, that's right, I remember now. Once the boot of the Hoplar Order was on the Eastmaw's throat, they surrendered rather quickly. Splinters joined some mercenary group." The dregue wave his hand at Baran’s life and waited for him to fold. But the kid kept his mouth shut. "Well, I stand corrected. What business does a mercenary have dealing chill?"

"Mercenary's live for money and you're asking why we want more?" Romek's temper was shortening, maybe from the chill, definitely from this assshole.

"Everyone lives for money. Mercenaries just deal in death, so they think they are special." The dregue’s focus moved to Romek. "And you? Are you one of the lost cubs from the south?"

They couldn't afford to get caught in a lie. "I haven't been called a cub in a long time. No is the answer."

"Interesting. Quite the sight to see a northern wearkin all shaved up proper. Which clan are you from?"

"I'm not part of a clan," Romek said.

"Two peas in a pod, aren't you? I said from, unless you're saying, a northern wearkin was born outside of the ridges."

"Naga."

"The foot of Dawnplate ridge. So close to home. Do you visit often?"

Romek answered with predatory eyes, weighing the steps to the dregue against his better nature.

"Good. Now that we know each other, I want to understand this proposition. Which supplier out of Solcut did you say again?"

"I didn't," Romek said.

"Well, I understand anonymity. I truly do. I have a buyer in this district that I believe would be best for all of us." The dregue crossed his arms, straining the sleeves of his shirt.

"We're bringing in our goods by boat," Baran said.

"You and most of the city. What is your point?" The dregue opened the crate, but the lamp cast a blocking shadow.

"Do you have a buyer near a river district?" Baran asked.

A painful pause lingered. The kid meant well, but he blundered that question.

"Unfortunate." The dregue turned, reaching into the crate. "I think it is time for both of you to leave."

Romek moved into the fence's blind spot. They'd have to salvage the situation with force. He snuck a hand to unsheathe his kukri.

"Not so fast." The fence heaved a strange device, bracing it with their hip. Romek recognized the scorched muzzle even on that kludge job. A trigger squeeze belched a wisp of green fire over the table.

"Is that a flamespitter?" Baran asked. A stupid question, but who could blame the kid?

Another burst of viridescent flame singed Baran's face this time. "One of my newest inventions. I can touch up those brands." More spurts of dripping fire gurgled from the contraption, spilling on the table. The dregue swiveled to Romek. "I wonder how long before you'd feel the burns with that chill in your veins."

*Of course it'd be fire.* "We'll leave, nice and easy." Romek commanded a look of retreat, and the two left the shop. Baran led the way with hunched shoulders and sunken spirit back towards Boro.

"Baran."

"I know. I messed up."

Romek pondered whether it was better to be a teacher or a friend? The kid was already beating himself up over it, so Romek settled for both. "Everyone stumbles. What's important is you keep stepping forward. Keep pushing the ground away. Keep fighting against gravity. Step by step."

"When he brought up my marks. I just…"

"There is always going to be something, your marks, my fur. The world has a way of finding your weak spots, eventually. I can tell you to make it a tool, but it'll only go so far. The best way to fight it is not to let them see it bother you. Don't give them the satisfaction." Romek didn't have the heart to tell him life was learning to live with your mistakes.

"We left the chill," Baran said.

"That we did." Romek laughed and wrangled Baran's neck, trying to shake off his introspection as they turned the corner. Boro laid down waiting for their return. She jostled the pack saddle, making it a counterweight to help herself stand.

"So, is the mission over?" Baran asked.

"We'll see. I'm gonna go talk with our friend again. I want you to stay here, though. Enjoy the break while you can cause either way, we have a long walk back. Just don't do anything stupid." The joke didn't land right, though. Romek hesitated to say more.

Baran paced away. A brooding air hung over him, stewing in his own head. The lack of back talk was unusual. *No need to waste it.* Romek swapped back to his normal gear. He gave Boro some well-deserved pets. Her eyes looked at him, filled with regret. Unsure if it was her eyes or his own reflection. "Gravity always wins in the end. Isn't that right?" He spit on the ground. A useless attempt to expunge the chill. "Just like old times, I guess." Romek grabbed his weapon and headed back towards the shop.

Romek tried the front door, but it was locked tight. The barred windows weren't gonna do the trick either, not to mention it was on a public street. Romek walked the perimeter, sniffing for an entrance. Small windows lined the building’s side. *Damn fool was right.* The back had two doors. A small portal and an adjacent large roller door for cargo. Romek smelled the fence inside, so he found a stone jut of the foundation on the hinge side. This conversation would be quicker than before, more to the point. Gravity always pulled old habits back down, no matter how hard you tried to toss them. Shaking hands lit one of Romek's wood tips with a small fire gnot. The warm honey taste cut the edge of the chill. One poison to dull another.

Romek let the smoke rise out of his mouth, grateful for the pause. A moment of peace and quiet. Enjoying the breaks when they came got easier with age. He remembered when his boiling blood took the steps and threw the punches, never asking for anything in return. Waiting was worse than death in those days. Now it was the opposite. Digging up that urge was getting harder. A hole that deepened every day. The shovel-fulls seemed trivial until you’re staring up a pit trap with walls too high to climb. Hopefully, you tricked some other fools into picking up a shovel. Footsteps cluttered the inside of the door. Romek tossed the smoke and grabbed his weapon as the heavy bolts released the lock. Time to get back to work.

Chapter Ten

Baran fumed, clicking his two scabbards together behind his hips, in an attempt to match the nearby furnaces of the Technosogn district. He paced next to Boro, building up pressure with each lap.

"What was the point of this mission? A bunch of walking?"

Boro snorted at Baran as he turned in place.

"That's not what I meant. I mean, somebody has to carry all the gear, but what am I doing? Huh?" Baran took the high road after his mess up. Honor demanded he shut his mouth and go to the sideline. He knew the drill well. Romek was going to do it, anyway. Baran spared himself from a lecture, but actual introspection seemed unnecessary. It was the circumstance more than his own fault. Baran stopped, looking towards the fence. *Romek could probably use some help. I can't imagine there will be much more talking and that fence seemed keen on roasting them alive.*

Boro blocked the path like she had read his mind.

Reprimands from a rhino hurt his ego more than anything. "Fine. But I'm not gonna wait here while Romek cleans up my mess." Baran picked the nearest street, plowing through people in between him and the center of the district. "I need to run an errand, anyway."

Shops were harder to find among the smelters, furnaces and general industry of the Technosogn kindred. Of those that revealed themselves, various gnot based gadgets and raw and processed metals dominated their wares. Some had liquids. Chemicals that would probably melt you from the inside. Acid, they call it. But then again, Romek's description of mersh weed liquor was far from pleasant. A dark ale spiced with a hint of cinnamon was his idea of a good drink. His mouth watered, reminding him of the lack of a proper meal since this morning. The blanket of synthetic smells made it easy to forget, though, replacing his hunger with a mild headache.

He yearned for a gust of fresh air from the Exterior. He stared at the large windmills made of slivered sheets of metal. Their subtle humming ambience was supposed to circulate air through the lower layers of the city through large hefty vents that snaked along the Bulwark. The Exterior took serious efforts to cover their ends of such eyesores while the Interior prioritized efficiency over aesthetic. Baran imagined clean air from the vents washing over him like a breeze. A sudden change in warmth, soured the spell.

Baran scanned for a culprit. He searched for a parting crowd or an opened door, but there was nothing. A windowed display twinkled down the street. Stacked rows of various bottles, skinny, curvy, tall, square. They couldn't all be acidic, so he investigated further. With his marks behind his back as he inspected the assortment. Soon realizing he did not know what mersh weed liquor looked like. The storefront did not appear to have any kindred affiliation.

Upon entering, the owner of the shop crouched into a cupboard. She was a dregue woman. Her face bones were filed down flush with her light gray skin. Even the bones under her shirt were smooth against the curves of her shoulders and neck. Segments of etched keratin cylinders draped from her head, chained together like dreadlocks. The braids rattled as she turned to Baran.

"Just a moment." She gave the cupboard a violent shake. "The thing has been stuck all day. Anyway, welcome. What can I help you with?" Technosogn kindred marks covered her hands and wrists.

*Damn.* "Nothing." Baran turned, placing a marked hand on the door.

"They say the eye is the window to desire. Something must have drawn you through my door." She squinted at Baran's hand. "I see. Yes. Leaving would be best."

Discouraged and hungry, Baran drifted further into the district. Formal buildings, the kind with four walls and roof, shrunk until streets became the rooms and the building became the walls. They were strangely absent from any doors, at least that Baran could find. The boundary between the shop, street and building became fluid. Worthless oddities plagued his path, literally getting in the way of his feet. Baran asked around for anyone who sold mersh weed, distracted by the increasing amount of knockoffs and phoney gnots. A push pistol baited his eye until he realized the entire thing was a continuous solid piece of metal and the force gnot inside was missing. Sold separately, of course. Any garnered hope from shops willing to barter with a condemned buyer was pilfered by the merchandise quality.

"You. With the forfeit brands. Over here." A hobbled man with a prosthetic metal leg beckoned Baran towards a small alcove in the street.

Baran approached with a momentum of disappointment.

"Not often you see brands of the forfeit." The man grabbed at Baran's wrist.

*Damn cripple is faster than he looks. But not fast enough.* Baran withdrew a fisted hand. "Do you have a point?"

"You got a story for those?" The man craned his neck, pushing against the curve of his own spine. The light caught one eye as it swiveled up and to the side. A fake.

Why was it his job to explain the marks on his skin? "I was born."

"Aren't we all?" The man hacked his lungs in the street.

Baran held his breath and covered his mouth. *This was a waste of time.* Baran turned with indecision, trying to make sense of which way he was headed.

"Wait. Wait. Mersh Weed? Yes?" The man tugged Baran's shirt.

"Get off." Baran swatted the arm away and stared at the man, squinting until it nearly shut his eyes. "I'm interested." He stood tall, placing both hands at his hips, but one of his hilts blocked a clean execution. "In liquor form?" Unsure if there was any other.

The man's eyes aligned over his nose, before the fake dashed sideways. "Yes. Yes. This way."

The squeaking leg escorted Baran to stairs, delving into the innards of the district. More of a hole than a staircase.

"Is this sanitary?" Baran asked, stepping back in case the cripple fell down. A space big enough to clear him of any blame.

"Yes, yes. The water runs. See. Away from here."

Baran waited for the man to reach the bottom before following. Each step placed him deeper into the cauldron of the rising smell of sewage and falling fumes from the district. His shirt failed to shield the stench from his nose and mouth. Slick stone steps took his full attention all the way down. *Sewage would dampen even the best of days.*

"Where did you run off to?" Baran listened for squeaks as he kept his eyes moving, fearing what he might see if they lingered too long. Faint light from a grate along the edge of the main sewer channel caught his eye. He peered over it, trying to get his eyes to adjust. The dimness was coming from an arc of whitish light from far below. The Abysm, an apt portal to the sewage of the civilized world. Even at this distance, a woeful draft covered Baran. He stretched every inch of separation between himself and the ominous window. *Out of sight, out of mind.* Tiny screeches came from behind, oiled by smug air. Baran turned, stepping on a spongy mound that he refused to look at.

"Mersh Weed. Liquid. Yes?"

"Yes." Baran said, questioning the choices that led him into a sewer with a half blind cripple.

"50 crosses."

*This guy is trying to buy back his leg with that price.* It was too much. Baran started coughing. Each compulsion drew in more putrid air, cascading into full saturation with the sewer environment. "25." He barely got the words out.

"For a better story, maybe. 'I was born.' Bah. 50 crosses."

*If you can't beat them, make them the terrain*. The words took a literal meaning with each gasp of sewage stench. "Fine." Baran gave up his meager savings for a bottle of some foul-looking liquid. "This isn't piss and shit, is it?"

"No. No. Mersh Weed. Liquid. Yes?"

"Yes," Baran said, questioning the choices that put this bottle in his hand. The poor light kept the contents hidden.

Baran scrambled for freedom out of the Interiors’ rotten bowls. He walked a couple of paces, swirling the sediment at the bottom of the bottle in better light. The sewer’s daze subsided and the viscous liquid prize was now in his hand. A ticket for information about his mother. The bottle's neck wafted a sour aroma. *It has to be spoiled?* Baran pulled, but the cork resisted, like a swollen ankle refusing to relinquish the boot. Repositioned yanks and twists led to a rivalry between Baran and the bottle. He had the upper hand, and no blood left in his fingers. Victory was in sight until a woman's yell interrupted the duel. His fingers slipped, slamming into each other, driving the cork deeper than before. *A damsel.* Saving a woman in need was the pinnacle of heroism, regardless of your marks.

Baran realized his search brought him to an area with much fewer eyes. A frail man unloading purchased supplies into the back of a shop. A ravian couple down a stretch of alley, bathed in a greenish cloud from their own smoke. And of course that faked eyed haggler, who was probably washing his new fortune in sewage. Hardly a lot worth remembering. They didn't even seem to hear the scream. He'd have to make up for their inadequacy. You never know who might be listening.

Guessing as best he could, Baran jogged towards the pleas for help. Passing under awnings and around shops that spilled into the street. Distracting shouts from vendors joined the chase as he stumbled through displayed goods. *If you don't want it stepped on, don't put it on the ground.* A lesson that he gave freely. His breath caught up with him, confined and polluted by the market. It was no use, though. This place was a maze. Everything looked the same and different, an infuriating combination. The lack of sound blinded him. Maybe he was too late. An instinct pulled him to *double back. Distant yells came from behind proving his theory.* These cramped alleys and their tricks were beyond bothersome. He doubled back twice as fast. Some displays didn't learn their lesson the first time, so Baran was more than happy to teach it twice. The fresh path brought him closer to the noise and far from any bystanders. A final pivot through a draped cloth revealed the source of distress.

A few misaligned, neglected wooden crates scattered across the dingy alley. On one side, the building leaned, nearly kissing the other at the top. It dimmed the figures, three by Baran's count. The damsel’s heels scraped the ground as she struggled to stand, pinned against the base of the wall. One assailant held her down by her shoulder, talking down to her. The second leaned against a box, taking notice of Baran's intrusion.

"Stop. Get away from her," Baran said.

A sneering face stared him down, with a split jaw of crooked teeth. A high-collared coat with tight rolled sleeves hugged scrawny shoulders and weak looking arms. Condemned marks for sure, but Baran couldn't identify which. Realizing the liquid ticket was still in his hands, he placed it on the ground, delicate and slow. Heroic pride gripped his scabbard, prioritizing strength over finesse. The strap flicked open ready to aid in his noble pursuit. Baran would only need one. He went to draw the blade but met a crowded wall with stacked wooden crates that blocked his elbow.

"Big blade for a small alley. I'll take those odds." The ravian grinned. "It ain't too late to turn around." They pulled a weapon from their cuffs. The thin blade was hardly a serious threat. "You wanna get stuck."

A whimper from the woman reminded him it wasn't too late. Maybe it was too late for the life he deserved. And too late for the Eastmaw name. But not for a chance at redemption, if nothing else for himself. The forfeit marks on his hands filled him with rage. It was up to him to bring back the Eastmaw's former glory. He didn't know how many lives he'd have to save, but he knew it needed to start here. Baran took a step forward. He didn't need a sword to beat these lowlifes. With the training and superior reach, it would be beneath him if he lost. Baran raised his arms, matching his sword style. One forward and the other lateral at a high angle. His brashness took the ravian back.

"Don't be stupid now." The high collar tossed the pigsticker from side to side, thrusting at the air with empty threats.

Training kicked in. Baran watched the ravian's boot, tied tight up to the mid shin. Close together. Weight on the heel. Not good for anything except getting knocked on your ass. His hands showed clear marks of fraud, still tossing the knife. Baran waited for the ravian to fling the blade into his left hand. Baran rushed forward, unarmed. A calculated move, timed for when the left hand held the weapon. A guess based on the fact that they had drawn it with their right. The risk paid off as the thug braced with a back-step on his dominant foot, leaving the knife arm to defend the tackle. An easy target to grab and twist. The blade clinked against the cobblestones.

A tangle of arms locked them in dance as the ravian eyes shrank, focusing on Baran. Hissing breaths in his face that smelled worse than their smile. The muscle memory of any drills quickly faded, leaving Baran to improvise. This was a proper fight, not an exercise that ended with a tap out. With this range and occupied arms, one move came to mind. A crack of skulls sent the ravian ass first into a crate. Baran swallowed his own bit of aftershock from the blow before focusing on the second assailant. His job wasn't over, the damsel still needed saving.

The second figure failed to defend, distracted by the woman’s thrashing. A quick jab connected knuckle to jaw, followed with a kick in the waist, causing them to stumble over.

"Are you okay?" Baran extended a strong hand to the woman.

They exchanged blank stares. Baran smiled. She wasn't pretty, but she wasn't ugly either. Chestnut hair flowed over her ruffled, pale shirt. No sign of kindred marks on her neck or hands. Clean hands sprawled on the ground of the alley. She looked like a mess.

"Behind you." Her eyes widened, looking downward to Baran's left.

A thrusted dagger came from behind. Baran dodged the strike, tripping the ravian with his own leg. The blade steered with pathetic form until it lost control. Momentum brought the sharp edge into the woman's gut, causing her to shriek. The ravian careened diagonally, cracking into the side of the alley.

Things slowed down as Baran's adrenaline surged. His mind churned for options while he watched the woman flail, trying to run from the knife in her stomach, held in place by the wall. The second figure grabbed Baran from behind, pinning his arms to his side. The shrieks and struggles quickly turned to quick labored breaths as the woman clenched her stomach.

"Look what you did," sneered the ravian as he pulled the blade from the woman's body, bracing himself with his boot on her leg. He wiped the wet blade on his pants. Bloody mucus dripped from his broken nose. "Let's see what color you bleed."

Baran fixated on the blood that poured through her fingers blooming red on her shirt. The damsel was dying, along with any heroic outcome. He leaned back and drop-kicked the ravian with both heels, causing all three to fall onto the ground. Baran wrestled the closer figure in a whirlwind of limbs until he got on top. His fists beat the goon's face like a drum.

"Baran."

His knuckles ached and the more they hurt, the harder he punched.

"Baran!" A firm grip caught his arm at the wrist and pulled him off. "What the fuck are doing?" asked Romek. He tossed the high collared ravian at the pummeled face of a person on the ground. "Get gone. Now."

Baran stabilized his breathing and leaned his back against the side of the alley. He felt the cold stone ground on his ass, unsure if he slipped on some broken boards or if his legs gave out. The woman slumped, blood now spilling through the grot in the pavers. The man he'd beaten laid motionless. *No.* The space around Baran closed in. *Please keep breathing. Please be alive.* The ravian propped up his beaten friend. Attempts to stand resulted in a mess of loose teeth coughed on the ground. The high collar opted to drag their friend. Both of them hardly seemed much older than Baran.

"I told you to take a break and don't do anything stupid. This looks pretty fucking stupid!" Romek kneeled next to the woman and put pressure on her wound.

"Is she dead?" Baran expected a twisted face of pain, but her face was relaxed. A warm sensation pulsed in his fingers between an undertone of increasing pain. He closed his fist. Nothing was broken. It made him sick to stomach.

"Get me a green vial from the saddle, quickly"

Baran rushed to Boro, who was providing a blockade into the alley. She gave a loud humph as Baran rummaged in the saddle. His fingers were swelling, fighting against the leather. He switched to left hand. "It wasn't my fault." The lie made it worse.

"Give me the vial and your belt." The woman's eyes drifted close as Romek applied a generous layer of the green gel. He pushed it into the wound, causing blood to gush out. Romek ripped her sleeve off and balled it up. "Hold this on the wound." Romek fastened the belt around her stomach and over the torn sleeve, cinching it tight. He carried the woman to Boro and covered her in a blanket. Baran lingered in the alley, staring at the smeared pool of blood, the scattered teeth on the ground and finally his hands. The brands contrasted against the blood and the swelling. He'd done nothing to deserve them. Until now.

The swelling was getting worse and wrapping it was illegal with the marks. The best he could do was to squeeze it between his elbow and side. Baran tried to get smaller, but tiny alleys robbed the space. Silence walked with him a couple of paces behind Boro. Drops of blood spattered the ground every couple of steps. Drops which Baran avoided stepping on. Avoided looking at. Avoided thinking about. He followed as Romek navigated back streets to avoid the unnecessary attention.

After a couple of corners, they came upon a doorway with a trisect symbol above it. Romek gently lifted the woman and draped her against a wall. He pressed his finger to her neck. Her face was white against Romek's brown fur. Two quick, heavy knocks on the door and they were gone.

Time skipped until Romek grabbed Baran and shoved him against the wall. "Are you having fun?"

"What did you want me to do? Let those guys attack her?"

"When you take action, you take responsibility. That blood is on your hands."

"I didn't stab her. And you left her on some doorstep. What if she dies there?"

"We have a job. I'd grow gray if I had to clean up every mess made by a kid with a tantrum." Romek smacked Baran’s head. "Here's your first lesson of the real world; heroes aren't real. You can have the best intentions, but if things go wrong, you'll be remembered as the problem. You think anyone in that alley wanted that outcome? Sometimes it's better to put your head down and swallow your ego."

"If I was stronger–"

"If you were stronger, you probably would have killed someone today. Second lesson, one I learned the hard way. Plenty of people deserve to be killed, but you make sure they do before you make it permanent."

Baran couldn't look at Romek. He looked down. Choking the wrist of his right hand. A useless attempt to stop the swelling. He knew he deserved it, but he couldn't stop himself. Everything was going fine until the woman distracted him. Her weakness was as much to blame as his lack of strength.

"Hey." Romek grabbed Baran by the shoulders. "I'm not telling you to not do the right thing. I'm telling you to be smart about it, otherwise you'll cause more harm than good."

"Do you think they'll live?" Baran asked.

"Yeah, I do. Let's go, we're still on the clock and some distance is our friend right now." Romek pushed Baran into a haphazard walk.

Maybe Romek was right. Baran didn't need strength, although it wouldn’t hurt. He needed more admiration. A Hoplisogn paladin wouldn't have failed. Their presence gave the meek a strength to be better. They demanded it. But marks of forfeit prevented him from ever joining their ranks, despite how much of a natural he was. The power he needed required a different path. Once he found it, his skill would do the rest.

Chapter Eleven

A strange balance pulled the darkness toward the inner ruins. At a distance, its silhouette seemed to shift, like a detached hill adrift in shallow waters. The subtle sway infected your step within a sufficient proximity, along with sinking miasma which pulled heavy on the surrounding structures. The light seemed to float away; the only prisoner allowed to escape from the heavy shadows. A crown of towering turrets exuded a grandeur from the ancient palace stronghold, even through the inevitability of decay. Collusions of time, rot, and gravity failed to topple the ominous masonry. Under Old Caechora's thickest gloom, Kayah and her lonesome survivors gathered resolve and a few breaths.

With her board and bright gnot in hand, Kayah practiced step one. An excuse to let a plan catch up with her instinctive choice to flee. Running had always worked for dangers in Old Caechora and the Abysm. A flooding tunnel, a forecasting tremor, a perilous cutthroat. Despite their differences, they shared a common solution. Impersonal dangers required that Kayah simply remove herself from the situation. This felt different, though, from the impersonal, the senseless disasters and distractible threats. The executioner was coming and for her alone. It wasn't the strange weapon or the rambling that she feared. It was the fires within those cindered eyes.

Instinct drove Kayah to hide. Away from the trending glow that haunted her since the storeroom. It felt like a worthless endeavor to understand the mistakes she left. It couldn't be her smell. The stench of rusting rot covered everything in a dense, invisible fog that blinded the nose. Scarce clumps of earth cracked atop her feet thanks to the help of her wooden friend. Maybe she left a few muddy tracks. Was that enough to follow her? She had done everything Jaxith taught to cover her trail. Nevertheless, every passing moment drew the wavering orange wisps closer, brighter.

"What? I know. He'll deal with it," Kayah whispered to the silence.

At least Jaxith was out of danger. If any other samaritan offered, she'd fainly accept their bloody cost. Regrettably, none existed in Old Caechora, at least with honest intent. Jaxith's favors laid the foundation of Kayah's burdens. Debts that stacked faster than she could ever repay. Broken bones set by his hand, spare food from his work, and an ever-increasing list of useful skills. She wondered if she deserved the help. An increasingly amplified thought from the impending conclusion of her time in Old Caechora. But the list of teachings had grown so long that they contradicted themselves, giving Kayah fake confidence in her choice. One from the military tomes seemed apt. *Conditions dictate strategy.* These conditions seemed simple enough. She was doomed. So why drag him to that fate? But Jaxith wouldn't surrender easily. He was likely awake, stroking the fires of his fury. A tempered, cold judgment of disappointment that sought her out. A regretful hope that he might track her too, but the borrowed bright gnots would slow him down. His drive gave her strength in the face of ever converging paths. She needed time to reach the inner ruins. A place feared by everyone except those lost in death.

Heaping shadows lingered beyond the stronghold's main entrance. They drew close to the threshold, breaching it with hunched backs and misshapen bodies. Monsters past a sunken, half-buried drawbridge across a trench of quickrust that encircled the entire palace, behind jagged splinters of ancient wood hanging from corroded hinges. Remnants of some forgotten event that ripped gate's former glory apart. It opened the way for what cast those shadows. Some unknown affinity gave corrupted strength to prowlers this far into the settlements. Jaxith's recent words of death and beasts floated to the top. Were the words abstract, or was this the beast of death literal? She'd always accepted prowlers as the physical reflections of wandering souls, warping the bodies of human, ravian and dregue alike. Their hatred and fear personified into the flesh. Characteristics that demanded avoidance and the inevitable reason cutthroats failed to establish dominance within the stronghold's domain. Murderous rumors of some twisted gigant occasionally spread as an excuse for cutthroat weakness. Kayah had never seen the myth, let alone any gigant.

The front gate opened with a welcoming darkness, but it wasn’t the only ingress. Kayah knew of one other. Time had exploited a weakened wall. Heaved it into the rust filled moat, leaving a scattered path of rubble. A product of stupid rebellions against Jaxith's guidance. Back when they were strict and brief, demanding that she never venture into the palace walls.

"Enough waiting. Let's go." Kayah's board agreed.

She observed the grounds beneath her perch, a friendly seat between two steel rafters. More darkened shapes clung close to the ground along and inside the building's perimeter. The abnormal grouping around the sinking foundation arrived after she did. Maybe they shared her desire to avoid the executioner's pursuit, driven back to the stronghold. She scampered across the ribbed ceiling with the support of her board. Her path followed the palace moat from the ramshackle ruins of anything still standing nearby. She reached the curved walls of a crumbled keep far from the amorphous herding shadows. The location of the alternate entrance eluded her memory in the darkness. A muffled light tempted her to free the bright gnot from its tightly wrapped cloth. A flash could reveal a full stretch of wall, but the benefit paled against the risk. While the palace contained despicable, twisted prowlers, its contrived boundaries did little to enforce that observation. The cloth's subtle phosphorescent glow would have to suffice.

Kayah's observant state of mind couldn't help but notice the straggling prowlers that seemed to trail her path along the palace borders. They moved like a gas might spread, ebbing back and forth, but their center of mass showed their path. Maybe her light was brighter than it appeared, guiding them unconsciously through the gloom. She masked it further, tucking inside her waist. It failed to dishearten her followers in any noticeable way. As she continued to bridge the gapped ruins, a plan emerged. The executioner didn't know Old Caechora. Jaxith's own words. Even now, the glow veered towards her new trajectory despite the absence of any tracks since the stronghold entrance. If she could put the palace gate between herself and her pursuer, then that might force the executioner straight through the treacherous threshold. Simple prowlers proved no match for the cindered man's fury, but maybe the misshapen wretches would fight harder. Maybe rumors would fight her battle for her. Together, they could kill him, or at least wound him enough to open the door for other possibilities. The plan’s success hinged on the discrete path through the subsided fortifications and Kayah's ability to avoid palace dangers. Survivability was the one competition she might be able to win against the cindered opponent. Second only to her endurance for pain.

The palace perimeter changed direction at a consistently arbitrary angle. Kayah wondered what shape it would reveal from a higher view. A needless distraction for someone familiar with the cramped tunnels and small places of Old Caechora. On the third section of the wall, the battered crenulations finally surrendered to an opening. Inspection of the darkened outlines betrayed her memory, for the fissure in the wall seemed much smaller than she recalled. She couldn't have grown large enough to account for the differing size. Had more stone succumbed to the time’s relentless weight, creating new entrances? Maybe the terrors of her previous visit imprinted a disproportionate size to the memory. *Pain is a great teacher but also a great liar.* More words that were not her own. Kayah drew half a breath towards asking her board, but they hadn't met yet. She resisted the self doubts and focused on the goal. She needed swiftness to lead the cindered man through the palace gates.

Kayah stared at ruins nearest the rusty channel, letting the shadows build enough to discern the terrain. Smooth contours of ornate stained stone lay stretched perpendicular to the moat's copper hues. A broken feathered arm and smashed split jaw clued the statue's massive remains. Textured marble turned to broken plumage upon the growing realization. The trepidation of looking upon buried hands kept her from searching the separated pieces further. Kayah maneuvered to the large statue foundation, noticing the deep-set carvings in a plaque. The gilded gold was the only intact piece of the original statue. Its rust-filled memorial read as follows.

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*Remember those nameless many, for we could not challenge the adamants without standing on the shoulders of history - Grand Cross Paladin Raxar of the Pistogn Kindred*

#

Kayah's survivalism remained unphased by the trivial memento as she made it a step stool for progress. Vigilant and focused on a cracked shoulder of the massive ravian, she scampered up the statue's broken body. Atop the rough, abrasive stone, her feet found a better grip, enabling her to map a course. The disjointed fragments of the ravian's hardened figure led along a bridgeable path, straight to the quickrust moat.

"Sorry, but you have to go first."

Kayah plunged the board through a thick film of rusty dirt settled above a liquid too murky to be water. A few submerged inches later, it struck a solid object. She wiped the excess sludge off her wooden friend and stretched her foot into the mess. Cold grit seeped up her ankle, down into her shoe, as she gently probed the sunken object, testing dangers and supportability. It seemed stable enough to balance her weight between the statue and the shallow step. Her wrapped bright gnot illuminated the stretch between her engulfed ankle and the wall's cracked base. The thickened sheet of rusty mud swallowed every ripple, leaving a reddened, spongy surface with a stillness that rivaled the dead.

A tremor pulsed through the statue. *Bad time for a quake.* Kayah recoiled from the submerged foothold as the statue lurched, sloshing further into the moat. At the moment Kayah fell towards the shallows, she passed by a simple yet dire thought. *That's not a quake.* She braced the fall with her board, sparing a few brief seconds as she sank into the quickrust. Muddy globs drowned the pathetic light that fought through the bundled gnot. Even in the dark, amongst the stony limbs, a hulking, shadowy figure huddled against the ravian's cracked torso. Slamming its enormous form into the stained marble. Each shove carved the ground, giving the moat a means to drag the statue further with swampy, entrenched arms. Massive ripples tore through the viscous depths, revealing the immersed path of the shattered wall even in the waning light. Kayah committed to her plan, wading through the muck. She stumbled and slipped her way forward until she was waist deep. The metallic smell of rust drew suffocatingly close as she used her board to navigate the sunken rocks. The ripples faded in strength and frequency as she progressed to the moat’s opposite side. Thick trails of gritty goop fell away as she emerged, sapped of strength but safe from the monstrous prowler. She searched the far bank, but the shadows concealed the culprit. The stillness of the moat’s surface returned, content from its ancient ravian meal. Kayah pondered what scraps of humanity or fear resided within prowlers for them to respect the quickrust barrier, a thankful protection that now doubled as a prison.

Chapter Twelve

Sporadic vibrations reverberated through the Bulwark. Faint, tiny pulses drifted closer, too subtle to detect. By the time they reached any conscious awareness, the rhythms permeated through Caechora Interior. A slow, causal cadence resembled some gargantuan beast stomping in an adjacent district. Baran searched for explanations in nearby surroundings, an annoyed attempt to get his bearings. The jostling crowd now dwindled after the afternoon's Hoplisogn guard change. Noise from the Technosogn's industrial workshops didn't carry an adequate weight to justify the faint drum. Even Boro's footsteps, a few meager paces away, failed to explain the sensation. A result which scaled the magnitude of the distant patterned thuds.

How do you know? Despite the mysterious source of vibrations, this was the question that plagued Baran. How do you know when to help? When to take responsibility? When to do the right thing? The belief is his original decision fought against the festering doubts. Did the bystanders idling in the street, ignoring a woman’s screams, deserve recognition? Did he deserve marks of force for attempting to help? Lost in twisted logic, he opted for a simpler distraction.

"What is that?" Baran coughed, clearing his throat from the lack of conversation. The events of the alley left idle talk scarce.

"You'll see soon enough," Romek said.

Tension lingered in the wearkin's tone, proof of the recent scolding. An urge to ask about the mission bubbled up, but shame bit Baran's tongue. The district’s narrowing, arc-shaped layout provided a simple deduction that they were nearing the edges of Caechora. The curious observation was a satisfactory answer for now.

Baran's attention bounced between the painful aches from his swollen hand and the distant beats. His reddened knuckles failed to change the pigment of his marks. A cruel irony that added to their visual contrast. Injuries were an acceptable excuse for wrapping marked hands, but increased the chance of kindred attention. A risk which dissuaded Baran, leaving the swelling to run its course. Traveling through the Bulwark's oval portal drew Baran's notice back to the pervasive rhythms, a welcoming change. Strangely, the vibrations lessened and a refreshing chill flowed from the district ahead. A perplexing petrichor smell filled the air. Another piece to the confusing puzzle that was their destination. Upon exiting the tunnel, the reverberations carried a tangible force through the district, one that pulled Baran's gaze above the steep rooftops.

"There we are." Romek spread his arms wide. "The Dry Locks." He seemed to feign enthusiasm. A gesture which Baran didn't appreciate.

The mystery's unsatisfying conclusion discouraged Baran further. Above the district warehouses, artificial blocks cascaded down the Bulwark. Caechora's eastern water hub connected the Interior's waterways to the cities' outside bay with a series of large, cube-like chambers, similar to the way a lock joins different aquatic elevations. Each topless container could carry entire cargo ships from the Cut and transit tremendous amounts of water in the process. The structure, while impressive, lacked the impact Romek attempted to express, at least compared to the few childhood visits Baran remembered, especially from a depreciated angle. Baran's inability to guess their destination added to his sullen assessment.

"What?" Romek gave a forced-looking grin. "I know you've seen it before, but what about from below? That overflowing water crashing down makes you feel small, eh?" He delivered a smashing fist into his palm, then closed his eyes, breathing in deeply. Romek's insincerity seemed to leave with his exhaled air.

"What's the point of the detour?" Baran asked.

"Who said it was a detour?" Romek placed his hands on his hips, still staring at the Dry Locks. "Well, it is, I guess. We have some time, and I think we deserve a meal."

"Seems a bit out of the way for some food. Is it any good?" Baran's doubtful intrigue often carried the inevitable kindred association, and the industrial settings added little confidence.

"Who do you think you're talking to? The freshest fish you'll get in Caechora, right here." Romek jabbed a finger downward before heading to the pier at a brisk pace. "It's been a while, but there used to be a meal cruiser that docked here for nights. Little things get away from you as you get older, but not today. We were in the neighborhood and I'm starving. I know you are too, whether you’d admit it."

They navigated the pier's hustle, dodging shipping crates from both sides. Baran and Boro lagged behind Romek as he searched, a head above the increased density of the dregue workers. The sunset must have passed while they traversed the Interior, freeing the nocturnal side of Caechora, a group largely dominated by the dregue population. Waning light poured down from the dusk sky as proof; a subtle difference from the enclosed ceiling from the Exterior's underside. The recollection matched previous visits despite the inferior perspective. In this district, the upper layer resembled a glorified balcony; the surveyable expanse expressed a limited, artful side of the hub's vertical transit chambers and stretched, arcing district. A sight which differed from below. Block induced wakes and the shouting workers aggregated a noisy, chaotic and overwhelming experience. Moonlight peeked over the Bulwark's staggering double-layered height. The breath-taking site imposed a grandiose that abandoned you at the bottom of the world, a reluctant admittance on Baran's part.

Massive sightless splashes started commotion ahead. Chatter turned to shout as full disarray erupted, separating Romek from Baran and Boro. Able bodies shuffled towards the pier's edge where a large cargo container boat was unloading. A fast moving edge led to another massive splash, and the crowd pulsed backward. The clamor pulled a layer of workers off the warehouse side, exposing the building's inner workings. It was what you'd expect. Large reinforced crates pried open. Sprawled bagged and boxed goods trailing to wheel transport on land and smaller boats on the boathouse water lanes. A third sparse grouping of imports was stacked near a large open drain, and those containers had been opened further. Between the few workers who remained on their original tasks, Baran saw produce being tossed. Spoiled goods delivered fresh.

"That's two men who aren't getting paid, unless you wanna explain why everyone's getting a cut." A rigid shoulder checked Baran from behind. "Watch it."

Baran exchanged annoyed stares with two stout looking dregue.

"You stealing? Open em," said one of them, motioning to forfeit hands.

Baran showed his palms, more out of reflex than obedience.

The one that asked gave a congested snort. "Well, if you are, do us a favor and get the shit that's at the bottom of the wharf."

Their backs gave Baran the queue to leave. He caught up with Boro's steady progress and a few warehouses later, the shouts were drowned out by loud, consistent splashing. A whistle penetrated the thundering crash of water rolling down a cluster of permanent smaller chambers landscaped into an artificial waterfall. Overflow from the Exterior layer created a semi-regularly stream of water down the built stone. It doubled as a winding, rain-filled staircase between the layers. Boro received the command, changing course towards the climbing stonework beyond the rows of docked cargo ships. Baran followed in her wake as she patiently steered through the harbor workers. The signal brought them to Romek, who waited, marooned on a lengthy pier that joined the base of the waterfall stairs.

Baran refused to soak the day's misfortunes. He shrugged at Romek, avoiding any attempt to shout over the water. Boro's obvious apprehension of the pier's edge kept her even further back. The wearkin refused to budge, continuing to beckon Baran with aggressive swats.

"What?" The waterfall stole Baran's words from his mouth. Damn his stubbornness. Halfhearted leaps between dryer sections of the pier brought Baran an arm's length from his increasingly wet mentor. Despite the short style of grooming, Romek's mane absorbed the random splashes, leaving it drenched.

"Put your hand out." Romek's words sounded faint despite the recognizable visual of him yelling, a stained image from countless training sessions.

Baran cupped a hand to his ear, feigning deafness.

"It's bad luck." Romek swatted a tame water flow next to the stairs in Baran's direction, splattering his boots.

"What is?" Baran said, reaching his hands toward the pouring stream. He hated these incomprehensible lessons worst of all, but the easiest way was through. Baran flexed his battered hand under the cold water, hesitating from the pain. The stream siphoned any feeling from his hand, along with the last remnants of dried blood, a washable mark of his failure. Baran focused on what couldn't be washed away. The backdrop of swollen pink behind his marks. Their stubbornness refused to alter as the water sapped the pigment from the rest of his skin. The cold or the noise must have distracted him because next thing he knew Romek was whistling from piers’ warehouse side, next to Boro. Baran's wet sleeve and waterlogged boots were exactly what he wanted to avoid, but the pain had turned numb. A worthwhile trade.

"Better right?" Romek said as Baran approached.

"I guess. What was that about luck?"

"Bad to eat without cleaning spilled blood. Running water works best." Romek gestured at the waterfall while flicking excess water off his fur.

"But that's water from the channel. Hardly seems special." Baran stared at the meek ripples disappearing from the end of the pier. The artificial waves swallowed them whole as they shadowed the whumping Dry Locks.

"You sound like some clan elder fool trying to justify past beliefs. It's not just about where the water is from, it's about the flow. A belief that, in their opinion, ends when the Solumn river joins the Cut. In my experience, water doesn't forget when it mixes, so you're at least getting a diluted effect from the real thing. If you believe in superstition. Now come on, time to get that food."

The meal cruiser was a dinky ship tucked in the shadow of a large Emporosogn transport. Its fifteen foot hull carried two hanging bright gnot lanterns on the bow and stern. The dueling light scattered over aromatic smoke rising from vents atop the main cabin. A small group of dregue idled nearby, accompanied by their curious suspicion, presumably waiting for their food. They kept a prudent distance as Romek strolled toward the cabin's sliding door with an eagerness that rivaled Vivian's restless twins on a boring day. He must really be hungry. Baran dragged behind, pulling the chains from the morning. Missing links left him to extrapolate the whereabouts of Dravius. A strange stalking aura distracted Baran, clapping him like a crest of water slapping the piers' sturdy dock. One that withdrew with a swiftness and finality that rivaled the undertow beneath the Dry Lock's manufactured waves. What the hell was that?

"First time?" A ravian said, with a pressurized focus within the cramped boat kitchen. Sizzling fish ebbed with discrete bursts of air fueling a wood fired grill. The ravian's unusual attire included a head wrap braided around their gray-blue plumage and a sleeveless shirt with frayed edges that left the dorsal feathers in full view along up their unmarked arms.

"Does it come with a deal?" Romek asked, bracing himself on the large gangway.

The ravian remained determined on the food's preparation, refusing to spare a single glance. "No, no, you tricked me once. You think I've forgotten." With a final sizzle, the ravian juggled the dinner into a series of custom bowls. "Order up." The nervous group of harbor workers tiptoed around Romek to reach their food. "It's been a while, you never thought to write? Where is the love, my friend?"

"Ozo, I didn't know you could read," Romek said.

"Who do you think wrote this masterpiece?" The ravian kicked the cabin's inside wall in a spot aligned with a childishly written menu of one item: Fish Seered.

The menu’s spelling and simplicity undermined Baran's confidence in the food's quality.

"I'm not one of those coastal savages. They don't know a good cut of meat from their own tongue," said Ozo, the ship's presumed captain. If true, the ship’s size did not warrant the excessive title. "What's up with this one? You're not a seasider, are you? You have the look but not wear."

"I'm from here," Baran said, realizing Ozo was pointing a pair of cooking sticks at him.

"I have not seen you around here. But here is a big place, filled with much urban scum." Ozo spit into starved embers beneath the grill. "They mistake a piece of charcoal for a good sear."

"Hey!" One of the recent customers heard the insult.

"Not you, of course, my friend. Those lazy sun-kissers, my unfortunate brethren. Who think good work necessitates management. They should be paying us for the luxury of our company and hard work, but instead they bleed us dry." Ozo's long ravian neck pulled back, and he shifted to a more suitable volume. "I speak in relative terms, a delicate balance between the raw and the burned. You'd think the goon's in Solcut would know what I mean, but they are the worst. They'll take anything." He spit in the fire again. "And say they like it all. No taste worse than one that does not care. The harbor waters connect all the poor tastes in this sorry world. A truth I have to suffer eternally. A service for my loyal customers. Servants to the king. Here, here, give me your dishes."

The predatory gaze analyzed Baran, fixating on his hands. He was too slow to shift them out of sight. The captain lacked any apparent kindred associations, no symbols on either the measly boat or its owner.

"A man without a dish is lost. This much I know. It seems his origin is only skin deep," Ozo said.

"Give him a break, will ya? It's been a day." Romek passed a wooden bowl filled to the brim with pyrography. "His is in mine."

Crosses rattled below the cabin window as the ravian poured out the payment. "Ahh I see. One of those. Do not fret, you can borrow a dish. Only once." Ozo thwacked the cabin window with their cook sticks. The attack seemed eerily similar to a physical scolding from Baran’s youth, but struck upon the boat instead of his head. "But do not mistake it for your own. Maybe you'd enjoy something nice to wash it down for a little extra?"

"Fuck," Baran said under his breath.

"What?"

Of Course his damn hearing. "I left the mersh liquor in the alley." Baran clenched his swollen fist as a self-inflicted punishment. "I spent everything I had for it."

"Ah." Romek turned back to Ozo. "See what I mean."

"Day's like today make the good ones stand apart, my young friend." The chef’s attention shifted to Romek's burned patch. "You're looking rough yourself."

"The cost of business."

"This I understand. These lift rates are killing me slowly. Take, take, take. Maybe not so slowly, even. It used to only cost on the way up, but now they charge for gravity, it seems. And for what, half their goods arrive spoiled, so they trash them and charge double. Huh. Maybe I should change businesses. Go into management. You interested in my trade? You'd have to keep that hunger in check, though. I can't have you eating the profits." Ozo pointed his cooking sticks at the large wearkin.

"Careful now, you know I might take you up," Romek said.

"I can see it. Your eyes are much longer than your teeth. Take a vacation for both of us, will you? Off away now. Let me focus." Ozo sprinkled gray powder, altering the fire by whitening its color. With mumbled words too quiet to hear and too jumbled to understand even if you could, Ozo held the bowls over the silver flame.

Romek turned Baran by his shoulder, giving the captain's boat a wide berth. "So, are you gonna ask about the mission?" Romek avoided eye contact, staring at the Locks.

The question didn't seem worth a reply. Romek would tell him or he wouldn't. Keeping his mouth shut seemed to be the best option.

"I got that asshole to sing. Unfortunately, I took him up on that offer to take a little off the top." Romek pulled back a sleeve, revealing a large patch, larger than the captain had seen. A sweeping streak of irritated skin and fur tufts. "Should have seen it before I got back to Boro. Fucking chemical burn gizmo shit. Anyway, I got some good information. Deal is happening in a drain district not too far off. Probably means the same for any number of spots along the city's eastern edge."

"Drain districts?" said Baran, with a sour expression. How far down is this day going to go?

"I know it's not my first choice, either. In fact, damn few choices below it. None in the city at least, that's for sure. But I'll take the sewer over that wasteland sun. Unnatural when the sky cracks the ground. Anyway, sewer means we're dealing with the Solum Nocturnus. Have you heard of them?"

"The Night Soilers? I heard the jokes. More shaft than wheat as far as criminal enterprise goes."

"They're old, kid. I bet they're not much younger than their damn home in the pipes. Listen, watch out for longevity, especially in an environment that wants you dead."

Baran didn't see the difference between rats. If they stopped hiding and stood their ground, they wouldn't last long. Suffering through a gross existence doesn't mean they're entitled to fearful respect. He bit his tongue. Best to keep confrontational opinions in check given recent events.

"Isn't that the mission, then? Night Soilers are the sellers." Baran started a completionist clap, forgetting his swollen right hand. The first slap rang with pain and stopped the second. Baran glanced at Romek, preparing for a look of pity, but Romek still watched the Dry Locks.

"Maybe. Unusual for them though, unless they're expanding somehow. I can't imagine there's much worth selling in a sewer. Might be part of a larger move. More pieces on the board, so to speak. Explains why the kindreds are interested in all the involved hands. Either way, we have enough to continue the mission."

"We?" Baran glimmered with hope. "Shouldn't we be preparing to scope out–"

Romek flicked a hand at Baran. "Don't get carried away. I'm going to scout the sewer alone. Engaging is off the table when I'm solo, which means recon only."

"If I go–"

"Don't rush it. You got more experience today than you realize. Let it sink. You busted your good hand, so don't even start with that egotistical shit."

Baran squeezed his wrist, choking the blood from his hand.

"Hey. Get your head on straight." Romek gripped Baran's shoulder like he was a small child or some scoundrel. "A stumble like today can carry your life forward, if you let it. You can use it to be better or let it fester."

The revelation lacked originality, but hearing it out loud brought a surprising impact. What was a little more hard work? Practice till it hurts. He knew mistakes were opportunities to improve. Baran flexed his good hand, simulating an enervated sword grip. He found solace in knowing Romek was scathed in the exchange with the fencer. The thought gave him pause. Was the comfort sinister or the simple comradery from mutual injury? That damn thudding from the dock mechanisms distracted an answer before the present pulled him out of his own head.

"Baran. Grab your food," Romek said.

Captain Ozo held out a weathered ceramic bowl with a pair of lizards devouring each other painted around the sides. "A loan, ya hear? Not a gift."

Inside was a simple meal. A consistent golden-brown sear across thin filets of some deep colored fish and fried cabbage. A garlic lemon zest cut the sweet smell of caramelized meat and vegetables. The savoring steam battled his sour attitude and turned his stomach against him. Baran brooded over his bowl of fish, picking slow bites. Forcing himself to eat with his swollen hand eased his conscience. The self-inflicted pain and bothersome harbor commotion cooperated in muddling the ruminations from the alley incident. He subconsciously rattled cutlery across the worn scratches covering the cook's ceramic bowl, adding to the chorus of chewing and heavy breathing from the entire group. Romek finished first with a ponderous sigh into his empty dish.

"Rikard might have the right idea about leaving the city." Romek corralled the last grains of seasoned rice from the bottom of his bowl for a last bite.

"What?"

"After that match yesterday."

"You heard that?" Damn that hearing. Baran replayed the conversation, but the memory was too hot to recall specifics. You never know who might be listening.

Romek nodded, swallowing and licking the sauce from his utensil. "I had my share of running when I was younger. The more I think about it, the less different the reasons seem to be. Sometimes the world you grow up in doesn't fit."

"Why'd you leave?" Baran leaned into his sincerity, hoping to change Romek's mind about the mission.

Romek looked up at the cascading staircase, one hand on his knee, letting the empty bowl slack in the other. "You should see these falls on the northern side of the Dawnplate ridge. Hundred foot drops all the way down, pools barely deep enough to survive the drop. And the view. The whole trader's coast in one span. Plenty to miss, but the reasons worth staying left before I did."

Romek never shared his clan's history, so what changed? Baran couldn't shake the ploy's chastising nature, but his curiosity triumphed. "Where are they now?"

"One is long dead, the biggest exit of all. The other didn't leave so much as changed." Romek paused, gripping his bowl. "But that's some semantic bullshit. He's as good as dead, too." He gave a painful sigh.

"Maybe you should take your own advice and find that vacation."

"Huh?"

"My hearing isn't so bad either," Baran said.

Romek searched his vacant bowl, eventually nodding at a discovery. "If you decide to leave, find a friend. The road is lonely, especially when you're trying to find yourself. Rikard is an idiot, but he's a good kid." Romek stood, drawn to the chamber rising against the Bulwark. "Don't sneak off like some rat in the dark, either. Let me know, maybe I'll be ready for that vacation. Give you a tour of the coast, show you what I can of that waterfall. The clans don't take kindly to strangers."

Baran had no plans to run or sneak away from glory, but doubts gnawed at his ambition. If he couldn't defeat a couple of criminals or save a single damsel, how distant was the erasure of his marks and the reclamation of his family's honor? The harbor's waves painted a brief mirage of the ocean. Maybe the path to admiration led through the land of his ancestors. Would anyone be able to help him achieve his goals? The world overflowed with bystanders and opposition. The latter qualified Dravius and Vivian, unduly obsessed with their own designs that seemed to thwart his own. Maybe Romek was more than their shadows. The right people, useful people, could accompany his long journey ahead. Was a similar conclusion reached by his mother? Did she leave because this place called home held her back? The question left a strange pressure on his chest.

"Quit daydreaming. We are still on the clock. Get that dish back to Ozo unless you want to see a real bad day."

Chapter Thirteen

Tenebrous auras haunted the palace garden. Within these crenulated walls, the grounds found sanctum from more than light. Tendrils of petrified, ashen roots, long since dead, coiled from large, hardened stumps along the ground. Many were separated by natural offsets, but a few lay splintered by unwieldy force. Unlike the rustroot that engorged itself upon the metal and the breathing, these plants were lifeless; their rooted tips forever locked in search of an escape. Paths over the settled bastions of stone surrounding the stronghold failed to conquer the height, while others doomed themselves upon the outer curves of the palace structure. Asymmetrical rounded towers painted a lightless silhouette against the glowing dark of Old Caechora. Arched bridges connected the spires and a much wider, shorter cracked dome into an intimidating midnight web. Even rust, in all its persistent forms, was strangely absent from the palace's domain, except for that which was delivered by unwelcome visitors.

Kayah scraped excess reddened mud on nearby roots. The whitened grays repelled the contrasting blends of orange and red, a sensation which she often desired. A yearning for a body that resisted the stains of Old Caechora, a pointless spite against her copper-hued scars. The impossible wish for the golden indifference to her rusted world left a bitter taste.

She revisited her plan, breath by breath. A hasty crossing deprived her of the first and most important step to success, but the slogging feat brought progress. Without knowledge of the hidden path through the moat, her chaser would have to suffer the guarded palace gate. Survival was her remaining goal. Kayah took another prideful breath. Losing your patience was a lethal mistake in the dark.

Her limited vision struggled to penetrate the new found darkness. The bright gnot had dimmed beyond use and she feared reactivating it without knowledge of her surroundings. So she waited. She delayed for the human limits of sight's dark adaptation and her forgotten memories of this solemn place.

The glow of her cindered pursuer breathed down upon the palace wall, pressing against the thicker gloom within. The haste of her enemy now halted at the cracked defense beyond the sunken path. But at least she was inside. The wavering light matched her stillness for a short time until curiosity sacrificed her acclimating vision of the palace garden.

Across the motionless rust-filled ditch, a single source of light hovered in the void of the collapsed statue. A shard-like object, engulfed in flame, sat above trenches of rust water clawing the shore. The flickering fire bobbed occasionally with no discernable pattern as simple prowlers gathered beneath its light. Kayah could not explain what string or contraption hoisted the shard, nor what caused the subtle sways. No doubt it was a strange lure waiting for her investigation, a ploy to abandon her defenses. The cindered man lurked outside the fire's reach. She could feel it. Familiar tactics gave her false confidence. A complacent understanding of this battlefield that dulled her reaction to what came next.

The blazing shard bounced, soundless and abrupt. It departed the moat's far side, returning it to shadow. As the flying fire traveled with a shallow trajectory, the absence of any logical support dawned on Kayah, enthralling her with its mysterious movement. With an almost unperceivable hissing, two more swift skips across the nothing brought the burning shard directly above her head. The flame drowned her in wavering orange, appearing as a harmless, bright gnot from below. Half-dazed and half-blinded, she wondered of the fabled sun Jaxith had spoken of from his time before Old Caechora. Against his wisdom, she stared directly into its center. The glare overwhelmed her dilated pupils, strengthening the darkness as it mesmerized her with a reddened core and flaming aura.

A sudden bang shattered a stone set in the crumbling wall, mere inches from where Kayah crouched. Pieces of small rocks exploded, barraging her face and body. The combined violent sound and concussive force snapped her back into the moment. Taking cover, she flattened herself between two deadened roots, each the size of her leg. Her weight squished the rusty grit, like mortar between stones. Any explanation for the flaming shard above became irrelevant compared to the observation that the strange weapon could miss its target. One mystery traded for many more. Presumably hidden, agitated silence returned, only to be dragged away by labored breathing from further within the palace garden.

Kayah peeked from her petrified cover, revealing her repressed memory. Terraces bordered with short, sturdy masonry created distinct garden levels. Among the earthen shelves, more statues waited, smaller and adorned with desolate, lifeless roots that covered most of the grounds. The stoic figures, broken and worn, stood among shifting outlines. Loose rock fell from shadowed ledges hidden throughout the domed towers. The daunting number of subtle, blinking, twinned reflections among the garden filled Kayah with dread. The rapid beating in her chest rivaled the scraping steps and crunching roots. An impulse to scurry into the nearest dark compelled her to move, but she fought back. Kayah knew that choice meant death. Evading simple prowlers was achievable with speed, but the encroaching enemies had rumored strange and unnatural attributes. Desperate tales spoke of their uncanny speed and crushing strength, leaving plenty of reason for the residents of Old Caechora to fear the inner ruins.

As her options dwindled and a buried part of her accepted an end, two loud bangs shot from outside the stronghold walls. The broken wall remained intact despite expectation. A stretching pause left her grasping at miraculous hope until the burning orb yanked itself from side to side, thrashing the light and its cast shadows. Another thud sounded as the flaming shard, the beacon drawing the dull reflection of twisted eyes ever closer, bounced away, swift and silent as its arrival. In the fleeting brightness, the tenebrous auras returned with vengeance, saturating Kayah's constricted pupils. That blinding moment drove her to act, trusting that however unnatural the surrounding creatures were, they remained imprisoned to the physical laws of their former selves.

"Time to run." Kayah mouthed quiet words to her fearless wooden companion.

She lunged with teetering steps, attempting to avoid the roots. Holding her board sideways, she shielded herself from the garden's darkness and let the curved wall guide her path. The struggling breaths and crunching roots, the only sign of her unfriendly hosts within the black void, closed in. A powerful thud, like a falling boulder, smacked her board's left edge. She spun over tangling roots and, as she crashed into the petrified coils, a seismic force slammed against the palace wall perpendicular to her path. The ancient stones creaked under their tired weight, leaning inward until the cornerstones surrendered. One side of the cracked entrance toppled in the garden's gloom, dragging down large chunks of the connected wall.

Kayah wedged herself between more thick roots, placing her board diagonally to cover most of her body. The futile attempt to block the heavy rocks prevailed with luck as she breathed in dust from the debris that littered the garden. Larger stones failed to find her, leaving fist-sized rocks and smaller pebbles to batter her rooted defense. She shook off the daze and gravel, scurrying between the larger carved blocks that had rolled from their stacked slumber. The cindered shard's ambient light, across the quickrust, poured through the destroyed wall, pushing back the palace darkness. Frantic paces of breath holding and dodging the disarrayed grotesque shapes brought her to a strange crisp stream trailing the base of a terrace.

It had a natural liquidity that was foreign to the Old Caechora dampness. Only now did Kayah realize, in the settling smoke of the wreckage, that the palace air held a pleasant dryness. Despite the life-threatening dangers lurking steps away, she pinched the liquid, sliding it between her index finger and thumb. It was smooth, gritless, and clean. A peculiar urge to drink the water cracked her parched lips. The simple pleasure of quenched thirst halted her surging adrenaline. Kayah had never seen water this clean. Liquid free from rust, mold and all manner of unidentifiable smells. The odd potential last wish sprung a new question. Where did this trailing water lead?

The question wasn't a plan, but it delivered a new path. One that she followed, crouching close to the short wall. The garden's rooted veins, thick with brittle strength, hung over the terrace above, protecting the tranquil water. The stream crossed a wide, shallow channel crafted of sunken stone. Wooden tendrils disappeared underneath the terrace into a carved box-like tunnel, and others coiled along the runnel, reaching for the expansive palace grounds. Sharp, cornered shadows invited Kayah, offering protection within the mysterious, subtle sloping path. With a determined gaze, she peeked over the terrace, past the limbs of stone and monster. Revealing the palace's domed towers. Inspirited with any destination further from the cindered man, she squeezed into the small corridor, removing herself from immediate danger. She wondered if the roots failed upon a similar goal. Even if they did, any other option ended in violent death. The cramped space prevented her larger, more urgent assailants from a direct invasion. Thin layers of liquid rippled around her waterlogged shoes, diluting her red stains. Kayah's nerves settled, giving her time to indulge beneath the garden's rumbles. She propped her board against the gutter edges and roots, creating a makeshift dam for the weak trickle of water. Once it pooled and the board's rusted grit had settled, she cupped the crisp liquid and held it close to her face. The sweet smell of nothing gave her approval to drink, nourishing her dry mouth. Unexpected but much-needed, the refreshing sensation traveled through her body, revitalizing her spirit. She marveled at the natural, drinkable water, an impossibility in Old Caechora. The endless streamlets rinsed her body and clothes, still soaked from wading through the moat.

Kayah unwrapped the bright gnot, grasping it with clean hands. The iridescent ridges glowed orange, creeping through the tunnel. It started with a tiny window, easy to miss if you blinked, where the light manifested barely beyond the gnot's coils, on the side furthest from her palm. The bright spread in a mirrored reflection of her grip until it became indiscernible from any logical pattern. She struggled to keep it focused, the way Jaxith could control resplendent hooded rays with nothing but his hand. The uncontrolled glow found various levels of water stained stone trailing into the darkness. Heedful, she kept the rays of light from reaching the garden by pressing it against her chest as she faced forward.

The tunnel's visible space brought room to process the puzzling bangs. Kayah prodded around her thoughts, reluctant to approach the only plausible explanation for her underserved luck. What is Jaxith getting out of this? Kindness in Old Caechora is never free. Pressurized anger was the only sensation that escaped. Through clenched teeth and cold eyes, she hit the pooled water, her fist finding the hard stone. Dust from the ceiling floated down, catching the surface of the water and her by surprise. The stone above creaked from shuffling weight. She took a breath and held it, waiting for it to settle her nerves.

The clear, crisp streams taunted her with a teasing hope; a nagging, dwindling scenario that gave her cindered pursuer a dark and painful end. The manner of one's death rarely concerned Kayah, but all things being fair, she preferred quickness over slowness. A mercy for everyone doomed to Old Caechora. But her partial sympathy applied to impersonal dangers, not intimate threats. For the executioner's death, she wished for pain that matched what her body endured. Every scar tempered into a violence that pushed the limits of non lethality. She wanted the cindered man to realize the inevitable end before it came. As the streams continued to pool, eventually pouring down and through the cracked roots, her dreaming abandoned her. It left her alone in the rigid tunnel that lurked underneath the garden. She knew better than to linger on hopeful outcomes. The only conclusive action was to find a vantage point among the domed palace and see for herself whether the cindered glow had perished.

Kayah followed the slight upward slope until the spindling ashen roots discarded their search and only the tranquil, thin stream remained. The tunnel's monotony finally yielded to a distant, shadowed square. Her guiding bright gnot prevented stealthy exploration, so she re-bundled the glow and left it far from the expected exit. Nothing announced an entrance more than an approaching illumination. After waiting for the diminished light, she explored the water's source.

The artificial stream pulled from a reservoir that stretched around the room's edge. Kayah peeked from the water's bounding lip of stone, absorbing her new setting. The arcing pool broke upon a rubble pile below a collapsed section of the spherical ceiling. Weaker dark from beyond the breach gave the room minimal visibility. Curved geometry dominated the solemn chamber, exemplified by the bending arches, the panoramic wall and the endless edge of a magnificent table. A roundtable was large enough for an entire ten person physergy mining crew and room to spare. Void of metal or wood and constructed from mortared stone, the space proved almost immune against decay. Water stained impressions trickled between carved figures protruding from the wall. The minute erosion divulged the structure's ancientness in the same way rust penetrated metal. As Kayah's eyes adjusted further, shadows revealed foreboding, unidentifiable shapes lurking above.

Mountainous footless legs supported a massive peak, whose jutting contours resembled a woman's shape. Sierras trailed behind her, like a gravel cape against the horizon. A bodiless storm churned the stone, reaching down the wall with lighting whips. Four cruel crescent wings lured prey within a carved inferno of claws and teeth. Strange beings filled the wall, itching at forgotten stories. But one strangled her subconscious gaze. A dread-filled sweat and quick breaths surrendered to frenzy as she looked upon the wall. A legless, headless, bodiless terror sprawled across the wall. Countless arms upon arms, obtruded from the stone, like an uncoiled knot. She had heard its mouthless words. Kayah fought against her own shallow breaths. It's just stone. It's just stone. Her racing heart slowed enough for her to stave off outright panic. She pushed it out like the crushing screams of collapsed tunnels and the relentless torrent of black rapids. Step one wasn't only for the world, it was for her own sanity. She hugged her board and remembered the name of these beings. The Demiurge.

Babbles of water pulled her back with a much needed distraction. Ignoring the shaped stone as best she could, she looked higher. The shallow ring of water, from which Kayah crouched, pulled liquid from spouts that seemed to match the outside spires, in both quantity and spacing. A coincidence that alluded to the strange flow of continuous water. Kayah doubted the guild would have left water gnots, but then again, even their jurisdiction feared the abnormal prowlers and their strange orbit to this forsaken place. An orange shimmer yanked her from the unnecessary distraction of running water. Against all hope, a faint cindered glow spread along the jagged arches of the defeated ceiling.

Confident that none of the carved Demiurge were alive, Kayah stepped along the circling ledge, striving to balance on the thin rock edge to prevent the water's agitation. A dual effort between her wooden companion and Jaxith's teachings helped her balance. The brisk narrow path connected to the mound of surrendered rock strewn against the wall. Even destroyed, the domed chunks kept their curves as the pile tapered into the table's perfect circle, sparring for a few stranded cobbles that sat atop and around the large centerpiece. Faced with the aggressive incline of the rubble's peak, Kayah ascertained the room's true size despite the waning light. Dwarfing the storeroom and the largest Rampart structures, the dome's crown and width must have been nearly thirty feet. Only the caged ceiling of Old Caechora and the largest Abysm caverns rivaled the hemispherical room, even with the partially collapsed cupola.

Reaching the intersection of the gaping ceiling and the top of the buried arches of the chamber entrance, Kayah searched the outside palace grounds from a superior position. A crenulated border divided the stronghold gloom from the Rampart’s ambient illumination. Invasive light pried through the same fissured wall as she entered, along with an oppressing flame that lay siege to the main gateway. Fear grasped her as she witnessed a slender profile stroll across the submergent drawbridge. A darkened silhouette with sharpened edges along the limbs and narrow tattered cloak that hung heavy in the windless air. Undaunted and unflinching, the cindered man approached. The act itself stunned Kayah, leaving her to watch the inescapable fire that drifted above her impending captor.

As the flaming shard breached the gateway's threshold, the prowlers, veiled in shadow and clustered near the wall's fissure, shifted towards the encroaching light. Kayah's unfolding plan boosted her confidence as she witnessed the confrontation. A cindered stare snapped to her, locking her eyes and shriveling her strengthened poise. Even drowned in the blazing flame above, his gaze held tiny searing embers. The shivering exchange froze her with fright.

Swallowing her rising fear, she watched her first defender assault the executioner's arena, a rooted stage showered in fiery light. The prowler's disproportionate upper appendages held an eerie similarity to the cindered man's arms, despite their shorter stature. The general resemblance of something that was previously human leaped with an erratic bipedal gait between broken statues and heavy bricks, flinging them with relative ease in the executioner's direction. With each heave, frantic strength ripped stone from the stubborn root's hopeless escape. Kayah's pursuer sidestepped a cracked headless torso while the other stony limbs and carved blocks missed their target, rolling through the gate or ricocheting off the wall's foundation.

Unusual guttural chirps, from behind and above the intact dome, startled Kayah. They dredged primal fears of aerial predators buried deep within her subconscious. Cobbles rained down on the curved roof, coupled with whipping sounds through the air. The shard's flame fought against the gusts of loosely feathered wings. Stretched and weakened, the ravian’s patagium struggled to keep the obscured ravian bodies airborne. The larger of the two shoved clawed feet towards the cindered man as it succumbed to its own gravity. A lightning quick flick and a loud bang responded, followed by another dodge. Muffled cracks folded into a lifeless heap from the prowler's momentum as it plummeted to the ground.

The cindered man's stance switched to offense as he fired four booms with a raised arm, revealing the strange weapon. It resembled a small metal tool adorned with gear-like objects and lacked any discernible cutting edge. Cracks echoed from a hardened surface across the palace grounds, missing all the visible targets. The still-breathing long necked ravian, previously distracted by the floating flame, snapped its ravenous maw. Wide jaws packed with teeth sank into the cindered man's shoulder, forcing a disheveled grunt. Annoyed by the chomping fiend, he torqued his body, dragging the coiling ravian neck and its winged embrace. The flaming shard mimicked the motions of the twisting, violent dance.

Kayah watched nature's course with bloodthirsty eyes. In the dark, numbers counted twice. A rule unchanged by strange weapons, unnatural fire or even one's resolve. Increasing chaos, hurled from more ape-like prowlers, joined the fray. She begged unknown adamants that the rocks would find his face or knees, despite the tough target buried within the thrashing wings and limbs. It was the first time she'd admit to asking for help. Time switched sides, betraying her cindered enemy and aiding her with the fury of this nightmarish garden. Stripped of sympathy, Kayah watched the haunted lives descend upon the executioner.

Shifting debris pulled Kayah's attention to the destroyed wall. A deformed outline accelerated towards the fight with alarming speed. At first, her mind fabricated a shadowed statue overflowing with roots; a folly grasp at an explanation of the jagged contour. The fiery light unveiled the barreling object. A rampant tangle of sharp bone from a former dregue.

The creature, covered with horns and tusk-like spikes, collided with a human prowler mid-toss with sickening cracks and tears. The impact failed to slow the monster's course, still fixed on the cindered man grappling with the prowler's hungry maw. Wide-eyed and breathless, Kayah watched the attack that would smother her pursuing flame. The executioner swiveled dastardly, using the tackle to peel the winged maw away. Pointed bones punctured the ravian's patagium, stretching it like a wet cloak across the tangled bones. The atmosphere around the executioner changed; a difficult sensation to describe. Meer inches from the flesh-blinded, raging tusks of the dregue prowler, the cindered man concealed his weapon and drew a black shard without direct touch. Kayah watched in bewilderment as her hope turned to ash.

The floating shard above the executioner dropped next to its newly kindled twin, both hovering near the cindered man. Quick thrusts impaled the winged body to the mass of horns and muscle, using the searing obsidian as crude nails. The cloak of winged flesh transformed into a blanket of fire that consumed both prowlers. Their distorted yells trailed off as the mound slumped to a stop, engulfed in flame. Another two shards were drawn and lit by no explainable logic or contact. Rapid movements from the pivoting executioner mirrored the haphazard leaps of the blazing obsidian splinters as they each wedged into cracked ashen stumps. The erupting fire ravaged the lifeless roots and fed the hungry flames. The air seemed to give the snaking infernos an anger and speed that covered the entire garden in seconds. Fleeing a burning demise, the few remaining prowlers rushed past the cindered man towards the only escape, the half-submerged bridge. They each met a swift death, dealt by yet another pair of ghastly obsidian edges, mirroring the executioner's weaponless slashing.

Kayah withdrew from searching flames that climbed the domed structure's exterior. From within, gaps in the eroded mortar glowed orange like the gridded bars of a molten cage. Shadowed breaks in the hemispherical prison played cruel jokes of freedom as plumes of black smoke billowed from the irrigated tunnels, shrouding the lifeless Demiurge. Watery eyes watched the encroaching flames smother the last light from her bright gnot and with it any chance at escape. Defeated, she descended upon the stone table's center, dragging her wooden companion along the jagged debris. The furthest point from the guild's reach wasn't far enough. She tried to rid herself of reality by drowning her senses. Kayah shut her eyes, covered her ears and held her breath, fearing the smells of burned flesh. No matter what she did, she couldn't outrun the temperatures sweltering her skin and symbolized her failed plan.

"Are you alive in there? It's warm out here. " The cindered man's ragged voice seemed to mask his own pain. "Is it warm in there?" Boots approached the collapsed rubble archway, muffled by crackling snaps of hungry fire. "I know you are." The footsteps stopped. "In there, that is. I can feel you. Ringing like a bell." Unpleasant metallic clangs came from beyond the threshold on fallen rock. "Alive? Well, that is what I intend to find out."

Chapter Fourteen

A crude stench ruled over the drain district, a rubicon between the inevitable excrement of shaped cities and the idealization of the civilized world. Like most foul truths, it existed within. An inseparable part that could only be quarantined at best and at worst spread like rotten, clogged veins of hosed iron. Meritocracy kept that garbage buffered below the Caechora's Exterior level to the furthest possible extent allowed by physical constraints. But such places required entrances for the workers and so-called professionals. Entire careers dedicated to making sure the feces flowed smoothly seemed overly indulgent when a giant sump in the ground would suffice. Whatever moronic logic led to the creation of the over-engineered mess of pipes transporting stormwater and sewage flowing ever downward was undoubtedly old. Ancient ducts, crafted by excess intelligence, proved this along with their enduring crooked myths that weaved straight to the fringes of the horrid Abysm.

As Baran pondered about the crap packed pipes winding beneath his feet, the malodor became more potent. Even if someone didn't notice the not-so-subtle aesthetic differences between this district and the countless others that shared waterway access, the pungent flavor would spark unasked questions in even the dumbest of minds. With renewed patience from his recent meal and mixed luck influencing events, Baran traced the cast-iron pipes with his eyes. They snaked along the ground, the buildings and the Bulwark, bridging between the gaps with splits that narrowed as they climbed higher. The unpleasant truth that he lived near this network connected to glorified buckets of shit bothered him greatly. But the following deduction that everyone in the city shared a similar burden lessened his own. His agitated boredom gave rise to a simple game of finding a pipe that stretched from the clustered storm drain ducts, emerging from the ground, to the plumbing that escaped through the district ceiling. Unnecessary turns, access segments and dead-ends made the childish game not entirely mindless, but eventually he found a pipe that fit the mark, an earned victory. Splotched amorphous stains on the paved stone took his notice next, leaving him to wonder about the risk of falling sewage from the steel arched canopy above. With a strained neck, Baran followed more pipes, looking for any suspicious bolts or stressed conduits. Tiny scratching steps bounce around the curved world from scurrying rodents who rattled deep set wall anchors, teasing their sturdiness. Baran’s nearly dried clothes weakened his confidence in the pipe's structural integrity, resulting in a worrisome glance that sought any shelter in a worst-case scenario. None existed in the loading area between two large depots, where they waited under an indecisive brightness from a failing street gnot lamp.

Boro seemed unphased by the possibility of toxic showers. Animals held a certain indifference to the natural order of cleanliness subjected to all living things. That simplicity released her from the chittering rats, haphazard splashing of drains, big enough to swallow you whole, and in every detail of their sewer-adjacent surroundings. But failed to spare her from the physical pains of a tenous day. She shifted with a restlessness that sought a familiar bed. At least, that was Baran's interpretation. The dredging hours dragged on her tired joints as she laid against a warehouse wall amongst abandoned shipping crates twice her size. Each attempted reposition stretched her pack awkwardly, pinching the straps along her softer belly skin.

Baran accepted the septic risks for the moment to provide aid by unfastening the heavy cargo. He crouched, keeping everything other than the bottom of his boots from touching the ground and pried at the loosest strap with his good hand. "Easy, let's get this off you've been carrying it all day."

It took one pressure relieving buckle before Boro took serious notice of his goal. She lurched, shockingly propelled by her large body, and toppled him back. His uncommitted posture stole his balance, forcing him to catch himself with his swollen hand. A half-opened, distended fist skidded against the disgusting ground from a failed attempt to take the weight. The support bearing pain was the least of his worries compared to the disease ridden liquid now stuck in the crevices of his palm and fingers.

"What was that?" Baran scrambled to an awkward half crouch, ready to use his already tainted hand for balance if she continued to shove him. She waited, staring at him with a matched grumpiness.

"Well?"

Boro rotated her head with a slight sideways movement. One of her more polite ways to say no.

"Fine." The damned beast of burden was more stubborn than Romek. "You think having that saddle on when Romek gets back is important? You're just waiting. What difference does it make?

Boro jostled back to an uncomfortable position against the reinforced frames of the massive shipping crates. Her unbearable vigilance nagged at Baran like a debilitating leg cramp. While she refused to relax, he noticed his search for a useless distraction. It exposed his brooding over gross sewer disasters and the cradling of his bad hand for what they were. A waste of time. His chest ached as a reluctant thought creeped into his mind, influencing his culmination of previous choices. What would Dravius do in his side-lined position? Ignoring that he wouldn't be in such a relegated role, he would probably scout the area. A low-risk task to gain situational awareness that avoided disobeying any direct orders. The words grated inside his head, but a begrudging dullness from within his chest knew they were correct. The brief lingering sensation caused a tremor of panic as Baran worried about his heart. The number of times his chest had bothered him today eluded an answer but it wasn't normal. Maybe that seared fish was bad? He pressed his unhurt palm against the left side of his ribcage, nudging the forgotten pendant hanging from his neck. A steady thud of a strong heartbeat reassured his health and goal. No secondary missions, no damsels, nothing that could go wrong. The nauseating dungeon repelled the idea of feminine attraction, anyway. Baran failed to fathom what undeserving damsel would be found in this literal dump. But his herosim harkened for any opportunity. You never know who might be listening.

Baran attempted a discrete exit matching the slow dwindle of the street light but Boro noticed immediately, standing again with a lumbered step that slid a nearby container a few inches along the slick pavers. Baran's helpful gesture caused the teetering pack saddle to pull harder on her left side.

"Look, you got your job. I'm trying to be useful. No trouble this time, I promise." Baran dried his bad hand with a regretful flick as a sharp pain pierced his wrist. The instinct to explain himself to the domesticated animal added a layer of demeaning salt to his wound, but she needed to stay put for Romek's return. Not to mention she would draw more attention that would inevitably focus on his marks.

Boro stood with a stoic indifference to Baran's explanation, so he slid a foot backward and watched as she matched it. He tried another, testing the previous fluke, as the two performed symmetrical locked steps, like some tuneless dance.

"You know I could duck into some alley and ditch you, right?" Baran motioned to massage the bridge of his nose with his dirty hand, realizing his mistake at the last second. "Fine, try to stay out of the way."

Unlike other waterway districts, which restricted canals to locations with stronger support from the Bulwark, the vast majority of drain district streets allowed for aqueous travel. The trade of weight for utility was held by the unfathomable layers of ductal supports underneath the Interior. But despite the usefulness of a potential waterway, most of them remained starved of water and instead held society's overflow. People and trash mixed in the empty channels, although Baran wondered how the two differed at this particular conjunction. Most of the inhabitants were dregue, not because they were uniquely susceptible to poverty but because the sun remained their most important threat and limited their choices of residence. The dregue were not alone in this foul setting. A couple of humans and hardskins loitered in a small group stoking a fire. Marks of fraud dominated the group. One had marks of faith and a few others were free of such hardship. Ravian's seemed expectantly absent from the curved city canyons. Maybe it was their blood that drew them to sun and success. They seemed to have an uncanny resistance to societal misfortune. Something other than their routinely stated created purpose must be tipping their scaled skin. Their vestigial wings, that could do little more than glide, seemed to exist to fly their ego's above everyone else. Finding sunbathing dregue was more likely than experiencing a ravian's humbleness.

Baran and Boro continued along a wide sidewalk that lined one side of the canal. The drain district's, lop-sided walkways and narrow metal overpasses seemed unnecessarily complex. Huffs of rhino breath followed Baran, tight on his heels as he patrolled an unknown path. Old cobblestones sat precariously near the edge, as if they were drawn to the artificial paved streambeds below. Occasional snaps from toxic barrel fire's, with their greenish hue, echoed upward. Cluttered chalk graffiti painted the channel side's in unorganized patterns, bleeding into the grime that grew thicker and wetter towards the bottom. Peripheral glances made it seem like the wall's were slowly melting and at certain angles the chalk seemed to glow but Baran wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or the gross sheen that grew thin on the curved canal walls. In aesthetic terms, the irregular artwork would be the biggest loss in the event of a flooded channel.

The colorful pit fire fumes started to give Baran a headache so he moved further from the canal's edge. The spacing of the street lamps wasn't helping. Their inconsistent qualities and crooked poles created well-lit bubbles of varying sizes and dark gaps between. An experience like walking through multiple days and nights in a single stretch of street. The entire ordeal left Baran queasy didn't help distract from the unending mission.

A drain worker on some sort of break leaned against a warehouse further up the street. Their anonymity hid behind an airtight helmet, a glorified sack, which extended into a full body leathery costume. Layers of shoddy buttons lined the side, attempting to quarantine the wearer from the toxic environment. Breathing was facilitated by a circular metal gasket on the upper right of the chest, clearly meant to connect to an additional device. This individual held what looked like a dangerously overpacked homegrown smoke in one hand and wafted gray streaks from the lit end into the exposed hole. They turned away as Baran approached and although the tinted glass from the sewage mask goggles blocked their eyes, Baran felt the aversion to his marks as though he should join the scraps in the canal. Passing their streak strained back, he heard a subtle wheeze of airflow in and out of the suit.

Every couple intersections, the underbelly granted direct access to the bowls of the sewer via decayed and broken metal bars. The cheap gates did little to dissuade any motivated persons from entering the depths of the septic domain. Whatever simple-minded intent the sewer sought to achieve had devolved over many corrupted years into access hubs for Caesurge's fowlest criminal refuge, the domain of the Solum Nocturnus.

Baran finally nailed down his feeling of unease. It wasn't him, it was this district. The suspicious vibe was stronger than the neighboring districts. Search for an explanation led to the latent realization. A forgotten verbal lesson that the larger criminal organizations mired themselves in legitimate business. It was more of a note than a lesson for it was common knowledge that any illegal activity that carried a vast general recognition held unofficial associations with at least one or more respected or indispensable enterprises. The Dog Rail Dancers drove deep spikes into the railroad industry, the Jack Wilds won their unlimited capital from the Chrimogn kindred and the Boutineers, in all their northern authenticity, stood atop a high horse of fine imports that rivaled the peaks of the Dawnplate Range. The Solum Nocturnus was no different, except where others dealt in goods, they dealt in services. Both respect and indispensability were not required, which meant that, while lacking the former, the Night Soiler's legal partnering business was a necessity. A truth even Baran conceded. Specifically, the truth of working drains and the prevention of erupting sewage. The gentle draining chokehold against every piped building in the grand city of Caesurge and the septic enclave with its intrinsic piped fortification had protected the Solum Nocturnus for hundreds of years. Like rats, they proved to be an inseparable infestation to this world.

Baran loitered near a trifurcated intersection. "What do you think? The left seems better lit." A blessing or a curse depending on your vision.

The converging waterways shared a broader walkway that covered the entire intersection compared to the skinny mid-street overpasses. Boro peered at the feeble grates connecting their path to the rightmost channel sidewalk and shook her head.

"Alright then, lead the–" Mid step from the corner, Baran stopped.

A figure emerged, moving away, on the lower path from underneath the grated platform. They slid through the barreled firepits, the soggy garbage hoarded in unorganized mounds and the restless vagrants. Like a snake in tall grass, they slithered with low steps. Despite their lengthy gray trench coat, this person drew a salient aura. The way a quality gnot might catch your eye amongst useless trinkets. The concealing hooded coat, while tall and dull, failed to dissuade Baran's curiosity. Glimpses of copper heeled dark brown boots appeared under gliding tattered coat tails. A couple of distant steps connected Baran's recollection with a satisfying mental click. What was the likelihood the fence sought the destination extracted from Romek's interrogation? The chance was high. So high as to conclude a certainty. The wearkin's sparse details about his confrontation with the shopkeeper left little to cross-examine except for an acute sting of mistrust, but Baran was determined to act professionally despite the day's failures. Nothing remarkable had stood out since entering the drain district, excluding himself, Romek and Boro; an observation that contradicted this mysterious traveler. The evidence, however limited, stacked against a random chance encounter of styled footwear wading through such a disgusting place. That must be the fence.

Similar to the day’s previous surprises, this one brought nothing but trouble. The fence was headed rightward. Already halfway through the channel, they'd be at the next intersection within the minute and out of sight a second after..

"Hold up," Baran said as he scrambled for a decision.

Still on the paved sidewalk and with a darting gaze that mirrored his thoughts, Baran caught a second surprise splashing through the cesspool sheen on the channel bottom. Far closer than the fence, this stranger moved underneath the metal grates. Initially, Baran retreated, afraid that he or Boro might be spotted, but when it appeared they were obscured, he indulged his latent boredom. The latticed floor failed to conceal the figure's general outline. Absent the telltale ravian neck and the apparent masculine build, the deducible options for an identity shrank. Twice the shopkeeper’s width and half that for added in height, the second man was a fighter. Bruiser might be more appropriate given their build, unless they were wearing armor. Their size alone made the veiled figure strikingly apparent at such a close proximity. A wisping blanket of a coat covered their entire body, distracting the lowlifes from their small worlds as the ominous threat marched with the control and precision of a soldier tailing their mark.

Boro's impatience built as she took increasing notice of Baran's odd behavior. She shifted laterally, attempting to turn around.

"Relax," Baran said, resting his good hand on her neck.

Still enthralled by the situation and pressed by a dwindling window of opportunity, Baran rushed through the scenarios. Romek matched the size but complicated the rest of the setup. Why would he be trailing the fence? No, the fence is most likely en route to the intercept. That conclusion created its own set of additional problems and failed to account for the newest threat. The conservative assumption was to identify both as potential enemies, stacking the risk for Romek. Baran knew the answer, the same as he knew the orders he’d disobey. Pursue without engaging, that was the play.

Baran scratched Boro's neck, an attempt to garner sympathy before abandoning her on the street. Once he reached for his second sword, she became defensive.

"Woah now. I know. I know. You see those figures?" Baran pointed towards the rightward channel, but the fence was already out of sight. Only the block-like silhouette remained, marching away with a calculated swiftness. "Fuck, they're moving fast. Look, I need to tail them in case Romek needs help. Nothing dumb this time, I promise." Those chemical burns put Romek at less than perfect. They were all fighting the day's stress but the second stranger bothered Baran. He couldn't quite place the feeling. Even with his bum hand he needed to act.

The half truth was a die roll. One learned through failure. Pairing with new recruits was often harder than not having a partner. Erratic unpredictable decisions combined with a need to defend your fellow fighter were a nasty combo that usually ended in defeat. While Baran handled decisions logically and factored in the conditions, he clearly lacked the sourness of real world experience compared to Romek. The doubt gave him pause until a pressure built in his chest. The familiar sensation beckoned him to follow the second figure against his better judgment. Baran obliged.

Boro gave a heavy sigh and stopped shifting.

"Thank you." He unfastened his second weapon, grabbed a spare cloak, and darted across the grated crosswalk.

Chapter Fifteen

"Do us a favor and stand clear," the executioner said from the outside of the main palace chamber. "I intend to bring you back alive."

Kayah ignored the request. Instead, she ruminated on the unaccounted shots from the cindered man's weapon. How Jaxith’s rescue hung upon the mysterious distraction. Would he save her from her failures? What if he had already tried? The possibility brought pain too raw for her worst-case world. Even the monstrous, tortured creatures of the palace lay smoldering and crushed throughout the terraced garden. Stacking deaths paid for her failed attempt to flee. She did not budge from the table’s center, which rested a few paces from the steep rubble that crowded the collapsed archway. Unsure if it was dangerously close or safely far, the answer meant nothing at that moment. With an uncomfortable swallow, she wiped away brimming tears held captive by stubborn eyes, unsurprised by her growing list of inadequacies.

The heaviest rocks, broken and trapped at the bottom of the pile, ground against the threshold. High-pitched scrapes jarred Kayah from her wallowed thoughts as wedged stones shot out. Propelled by the overwhelming weight of those above, they tumbled. The aggressive catalyst triggered a rockslide that flowed like water. The largest pieces of rubble moved the least, filling the gap between the table and the circular walls. Followed by the smaller pebbles and cobbles, which flowed into crevices and spilled onto the table. Cracked sections of wall, held in false sturdiness, fell away without the support of the ruinous foundation of broken history. Kayah sat on her heels, unmoved like a boulder in a river as the loose rock bunched around her threadbare shoes. The fresh debris revealed a distant glimpse of the archway's lost grandeur. A rubble stage for the ominous silhouette which stood against the glaring orange glow of the flaming havoc outside.

A lingering stare of tiny twinned suns erupted into a geyser of primal fear within Kayah. The towering, cindered presence stood less than ten paces from her now and with him came a piercing dread. An instinct to protect her eyes from irreversible damage snapped her out of self pity and forced her back, tripping amongst the loose rock. She threw herself off the table and pressed her back against the stone wall, like an animal running to the edge of its cage.

The executioner blundered over the wreckage. He swayed against the backdrop of airborne embers. Cindered eyes evaluated her frenzied panic before he descended with cautioned steps. "There are easier ways to die, girl. Although I see this world has tried before."

"Stop." Her lips cracked, breaking the prolonged silence since she trapped herself in this domed cage. The grit-filled smoke urged her to cough. She fought through it, mustering a biteless bark from her trembling body. "Leave and say I died here."

"I hear you're an oddity. Death and departure are your futures. Only the when and how remain to be chosen." The cindered man averted his masked, shadowed face. "Control yourself, girl. That ringing is insufferable at this distance."

"What?" Kayah squawked more than spoke.

"You. Your fear. Control it."

Terrified to meet his glowing eyes, she closed her own. *Control it.* Danger filled her life, and death was an inevitability. Thoughts that challenged the executioner's fearful hold? Violence? Death? Nothing new. She'd seen a Demiurge and lived. What more could the executioner do? Her breathing calmed a little, and she noticed the cold curved marble blocks against her arms and her stoic wooden friend in hand.

"Good."

*Good?* Why listen to this cindered man? And why, above everything else, was she doing what he asked? She opened her eyes and looked into the pinpricks of dying fire. Their unnatural command faded until human eyes, absent of their eerie glow, stared back. Her conviction waned, turning into self destruction. *If my fear is his discomfort, I'll give him my nightmares.* The thought was braver than the reality. A truth she found as she untethered her distress. Shallow, animalistic fears hungered at the chance to swarm. The scars from repeated pain and the starvation that clawed upon waking from vulnerable sleep. But those superficial facts of life fell flat amongst the day’s events. Genuine fear came from the unknown. Things that held disregard for any understandable causality. The mind-melting digs that beckoned her to a deceitful home, the rotting hands which lurked in the Abysm shadows and the smell of charred demise that wafted through the dry air. She welcomed them past years of entrenched mental defense, nothing more than an instinctual metaphysical callus.

"Ah. Clever girl. Poor choice of words on my part. But what's that now?"

Kayah focused, sifting through her fears in excruciating detail. But structural cracks emerged within her subconscious, revealing what lurked deeper. The truth that surpassed even death. She didn't dare to trade that cost for any advantage. She buried her emotion, driving her nightmares away and meeting the cindered eyes with reluctant strength.

"I've seen many eyes filled with many fears to know when something hides out of sight. Don't worry, I'm not offended."

The executioner swept away rock and rubble, clearing a spot on the table's edge for two items. Fingers of leather and bone placed a tiny, intricate gnot and his other tossed the strange geared contraption. The metallic crack exaggerated the man's flinching contours as she imagined a grimace underneath his obscured face. *What was his game?* While the coils of the gnot eluded her, Kayah recognized the weapon. The tool of her defeat was within her grasp.

A hoarse breath matched her own silent one as he peeled his shredded coat from his upper left shoulder. "Argh." The rough noise brought a brief glimmer of hope that a surviving prowler prepared for attack. As the sound trailed off, the hard truth of their isolation set in. Kayah watched with a disturbing eagerness as the executioner tended to his wound. Caught in wavering light from the burning palace grounds, exposed muscle and flaps of skin gushed with blood against pale skin as he inspected his wound behind a twisting, masked face. "Proud, are you? What a strange choice of friends." The cindered man torqued his shadowed face upward and to the right. "Huh?" His silhouette paused, still dark, jagged and full of secrets, like one of the Demiurge concealed in smoke. Red drops leaked upon the table's subtle marble swirls, stretching the seconds until he responded to himself. "No, it's not serious."

A weave of charred roots snapped outside, falling in a plume of embers past the gaping archway. Aimless straggling sparks, caught by a strange gust, rained into the domed room like a blizzard of flaming snow before sizzling away.

Kayah noticed the irregularity of her breathing as she hung on his next move. Aware of her unintentional trance, her attention shifted back to the weapon laying on the table.

"Fine."

"Are you mad?" asked Kayah. The typical delusions of Abysm workers or cutthroats didn't seem to match the executioner's strange behavior. His delusion stifled Kayah with apprehension.

The cindered man replied by unstrapping a short shard from his left arm. Red ignition from within the glossy black reminded Kayah of how a bright gnot kindled. The distant, tiny light grew, dredged from an unknown depth. The glowing warmth reflected within the glass's dark shine until the entire fragment glowed a dull bright. Unbound, the searing obsidian light expanded, creeping over a spidery hand that gripped the empty air mere inches away. The molten light expanded an atmosphere that painted shades of orange.

The executioner inspected the monsters, hidden in the billowing smoke. "I see we have an audience." An eager, sneering grin pressed through the executioner's mask. "Madness or that pecking birdy? Not long now till that voice dims."

The difference lost itself on Kayah as she stood frozen by the continuing realization that she was still alive and unattacked. Unforgiving marble against her back reminded her of the lacking options for escape.

The heated fang jerked away towards the gnarled gashes in the executioner's shoulder. Kayah managed a heavy, soundless sigh of relief before it seared his bleeding flesh with a savage hiss. Not from the tending of his wound, but from the self inflicted evil he dealt to others. The cooperative silence between the Demiurge, the cindered man and Kayah exaggerated the flames' avaricious cauterization until another distant flurry of embers snapped in the garden, too far to reach the dome's prison.

"Ask, girl. We have the time."

Ask? Ask what? What existence deserved to be hunted, like an animal? Sought for prized tusks, velvet fur, or a mysterious all-curing tincture. Jaxith spoke rarely of such inequities, for they came accompanied by his sour mood. Whether a dangerous shift or repressed hate made the first blow, it was unimportant. This reckless pursuit, the price of holding back death's door, was coming due for her. The unpaid cost of avoiding the diabolic collusion between the rustroot and the maidens that stole countless lives before their time. But Kayah's healing staved off a simple end from disease and infection, despite her negligence. That curse is all the executioner wanted. A part of Kayah wanted to give it and rid herself of its weight. The same part that sought an end to her misery in her darkest moments. No. This question was pointless.

Maybe. Maybe she was ready for an answer about Jaxith. Kayah pondered what the revelation would mean as the executioner teased his torn jacket back over his shoulder. Every response, ranging from life to death and every uncertainty in between, brought mourning. She withdrew. The wall kept her body in place, but inside she bundled up tight from the tormenting fires outside. A frivolous attempt to hide from an answer that was locked, trapped like her in a cage of unmovable stone. She reached for false comforts, falling through branching thoughts until she snagged a glimmer of hope. Maybe Jaxith's senses drove him clear of the afflicted miasma that haunted her steps. The thought of abandonment hurt, but that pain dulled the others. With a fragile embrace, she distracted herself from a definitive answer. No. That question was too painful.

Cindered eyes grew taut as they watched Kayah mull over the question. The man's posture gathered in preparation to speak.

"How are you doing that? The." Kayah blurted with a trembling voice. "That rock."

The practical question might buy a few more minutes to discover an escape. Or at least enjoy the pathetic freedom that was offered between the curved wall and the table's edge. Smoke rose from the shelf of irrigation tunnels, obscuring most of the domed ceiling. Nothing remained of the trickling water. The sere air now leached the dampness from blurs on the porous stone, leaving a bitter sadness that the destructive, careless flames had broken the mystical source of water from the palace's upper keeps.

The executioner leaned close to the floating shard that illuminated their conversation. "This is no mere rock. You can feel it? Hear it?"

Kayah's intrigue betrayed her gaze with darting sideways glances.

"Hmmm." The interjection lacked smoothness, matching ravian's guttural chirp more than any human sound. "Let me answer with a question then. Do you hear the subtle ringing in the silence? A sound not of this world, but from within. Does it fade before the fear sets in that your ears might forever be broken? Can you hear your own thrum?"

Kayah refrained from a nod.

The executioner continued with a tempo slower than ripples through thick quickrust. "Let me be more direct, since I must limit the remaining pleasantries in your life. This *rock* is not of this world. It's from a place referred to as Obsinius. A hell of sorts offered for troublesome souls. A paltry haven for those deemed unworthy but not worthless." The man's demeanor flushed with anger that simmered to wishfulness. "This trick." His slumped posture leaned on the sharp angle of his right elbow, his forearm vertical. Shadows, cast by twirling fingers, jumped between the rubble's secrets, matching the cadence of the glowing shard's wobbling dance. "It requires thrum from that place. Abyssal thrum. For you see, things can be connected by more than touch. A bond that lets you hold what cannot be felt."

With each rasping word, Kayah's confidence grew. Not from anything said, for the situation lacked a certain desired foundation of trust and half of his riddled words originated from madness. No, the vulnerability came from his action. The weakness of the executioner's humanity gave her an idea; not from sympathy, but from limitation. Everyone succumbs to the finite. An object too heavy, a concept too complex, and in this case, a reaction too slow. The more the cindered man crawled through his words, the more defeatable he appeared.

A fumbled grip cheated his sleight of hand as the shard cracked against the unyielding tabletop and burned tiny specs of broken rock. Small trails of smoke joined under the gathering cloud above. A devilish chuckle sent a shiver through Kayah's spine. "My fingers are not quite what they used to be, it seems."

Kayah used his moment of belligerence to investigate the geared weapon at a distance. The tool’s favorable position put it far from her opponent compared to the gnot and the shard, but that was half the problem. She hated improvisation, an excuse for failed planning. The executioner’s previous attacks veiled any insight to wield the strange device. A constraint that forced her into an irritating predicament. *In the dark, a blade's sharp end is worse than no blade at all.* The advice didn't account for being trapped with your back against a wall of Demiurge.

A weakened sputter of embers came from the garden. Too low to be seen except for a subtle flash of light. Kayah couldn't help but imagine the burning hope of the ancient roots that never found their escape.

"So our civilities draw to a close. Remember my intent, girl. This isn't personal." The executioner's posture straightened like a rearing snake.

Kayah pressed her palm's flat and wedged a heel against the base of the wall. The winner of this fight would be determined by the geared contraption. A fact that kept her from drawing her shiv in the stifling seconds. Cindered eyes already tracked her movements with renewed intensity.

A brief flare of fiery light from beyond triggered her to fight. She sprung from the wall, every muscle launching her towards the strange device. Limbs rolled onto the table as she used her board to sweep the bunched rocks from the collapsed rubble. Her flailing catapulted a chaotic arc of stones and pebbles toward the executioner. His widened eyes realized her strategy quicker than she planned, but not quick enough to counter.

The maneuver relied on a couple of rocks. Many slid off the scorched stonework but those important few collided with the searing shard, the gnot and the weapon, setting them on distinct paths. Kayah pounced after the device, carried by her momentum. The obsidian splinter stopped with an unnatural abruptness while the executioner's good arm grasped for the gnot. His crooked fingers skimmed the iridescent coils as it clattered to the floor beyond his reach.

Familiar knocks of gnot and stone led to confusion. Her blurring opponent dashed not with her but opposite, towards the trailing sound. The rapid moments before she grabbed the weapon summoned an uneasy doubt from an unknown mistake, but she had to stay the course. With her target in hand, Kayah fumbled the gears and cylinder, struggling to find the correct way to wield the violent power. Chance helped her fingers find textured grooves in the metal object. Despite the oversized hand hold, she seized it, wringing like it was the executioner's neck. A strained two handed grip mangled a mechanical lever. Pulls, pushes and provoked shakes did nothing except expand Kayah's incertitude. Beyond the grand tabletop, across the field of marble, the man rose with grave indignation and rekindled ember eyes. His hands held the searing shard and the enigmatic gnot. His victorious aura filled the room.

"Maybe in another life."

The cindered man clicked the gnot on the table's stone. Once. Twice. And in a third graceful tap of gnot and stone the entire table, the battleground which Kayah took for certainty, splintered. The brutal crack cleaved the table in half, releasing a lance of chiseled duct. A wave rippled the air, shoving the choking particles and Kayah back against the wall. The sound, if you could call it that, rang her skull, disarming her of the useless weapon. In this moment, escape was hopeless.

"Let me show you how that works." The executioner traversed the fissured table, straddling the jagged division of stone.

Kayah's double vision recollected itself in the haze of dust and smoke. Dizzy from fear and force, she clambered for the collapsed archway. A last mindless attempt to flee.

"Meager."

Kayah's distress attacked the debris. Blurred by tears, she clawed the broken pieces, tossing them backwards or yanking herself farther up the shallow pile. The small stones were much heavier than they appeared. Each open mouthed breath choking on the cough that came before. Unable to escape the fine chalk coating her tongue and teeth and the stinging smoke of ancient roots.

The rubble she pulled hit the ground louder than expected. A surge of adrenaline could achieve impressive feats, but this was different. A rock hit her lower back. Or was it two? From above? Was it before or after the sound? Her right arm slipped, unresponsive to her panicked commands. Did the shockwave cause further damage to the domed ceiling? A warmth bled around her waist, seeping downward and growing uncomfortably close. Her leg shook away with no control, slipping on the pile as the surge of fear powering her ascent left her abandoned. Gravity raked back her pathetic progress and a draining numbness left her splayed atop the cluttered entrance.

Why wouldn't her body listen? Her ringing ears muffled the shuffle of rocks from behind, each group closer than the last. A flap of fabric gusted over her legs.

"Let's see. You bleed normal. If you're half of what she said, you'll pull through."

Kayah waited for the pain that hid behind her unresponsive arm and leg. She waited for the death that loomed, breathing down her shoulder. Was she stabbed? No. That nerve cutting agony was slow. It pulled you into the moment's painful embrace. Kayah knew the miserable feeling from both sides, the grip and the blade. This was different. Her body knew something was wrong, but didn't quite know how to respond.

"Yes. Twice. Hmmm. Hold still now."

The cindered madness reinforced the futility of bargaining with death. The best you can do is run and make it tomorrow's problem. Maybe that was the speechless beast Jaxith spoke of; a beast whose instincts and motives were unfathomable.

A splintering chill and a familiar sickening sizzle drowned out the subtle drone still echoing in Kayah's head. The paradoxical cold tapped twice, first, on the side of her upper leg and second, near her shoulder. Each stole the localized warmth that clung to her tattered clothes to her skin. She wrenched the taste of vomit from an empty stomach. The sour acid watered her eyes and her body realized the inflicted damage. Pain seized her face. A lifetime of hiding smothered any shouts of pain.

A boney vice gripped Kayah's upper back, indifferent to shirt and skin. She walked with elbows and knees from the limbs that would listen, carrying fractions of her own weight. Most of her futile effort attempted to stave off the rubble's jagged edges, but no matter the tactic, the trade was pain for pain. The rubble’s peak was the worst. Sharp edges caught her knees. They cut rough as her dragged body pushed aside small debris like a human plow. Down was better until she reached the garden of smoldering embers. Kayah closed her eyes, but before she reached the graying coals, the executioner yanked her up to reset his grip. Kayah could feel blood return to her neck and the adjusted hold meant she hovered out of crisping range. She released a grateful breath. *Could exhaustion keep you from breathing?* Her body wheezed like a mindless machine. With it came baked air and traces of that nauseating sweet.

A face full of dirt knocked the wind out of Kayah's lungs. She winced, expecting to be burned, but she had landed on a barren patch of garden. She turned her head, coughing dirt. Bitter and salty, she spat out bits of ash. The urge for cleaner air gave her a burst of strength to prop herself up on one elbow. The palace gate frame loomed within reach, maybe five or ten paces. Lifeless prowler corpses reminded her of unsuccessful escapes. *Where is he?* It hurt too much to look back, so she pushed with her right leg. Despite the shifting dirt that toyed with her, she kept pushing. *It's so close.* Wood splintered from behind.

"Be still." A stomp popped joints in her spine, backed by rib-flexing weight. It felt like a boulder had pinned her spine to the ground. Kayah couldn't breathe.

A thud of fabric hit the ground next to her as the executioner unraveled four loose strands into a diagonal cross. The boot lifted, releasing a vacuum that sucked in nearby gritty air. Then her bruised back twisted as she was flung sideways on top of the bundled cloth. A dull edge pinched the skin against her ribs.

"Inhale."

Her body didn't need the command. Conscious thoughts strained as her body demanded rest. Her body sought healing, like it knew what unconsciousness brought. She fought it. The cindered man tied the four strands behind her back squeezing the already painful expansion of her lungs. It hurt at first, but the possibility of being hoisted instead of mangled gave her distraction.

Against the odds, the executioner walked away. One step turned to two until he was almost at the gate's threshold. Kayah tried to smile, but she wasn't sure if her face could. A deliberate breath released the stressful tension as the distance between them grew. Then his hand raised.

The dull edge beneath Kayah dug into her abdomen, lifting her upward. The tight straps held it firm against her torso. Layers of fabric prevented it from sliding right through her body. One upward lift propped her limbs on the ground, like a tent. A second draped her limbs, like a sheet. The pain against her lower ribs acclimated as she drifted through the air, her feet and hands hovering high above the ground. Brutalized corpses littered the palace entrance as she glided in the executioner's wake. A warmth on her chest confirmed that her fate rested upon one of those infernal shards.

Chapter Sixteen

Romek kicked a polliwog, dislodging the beast from his waterlogged boot. The damn tadpole believed he was the king of the world. The fucker slipped and slid on the sewer grime like a slimy turd. Two back legs launched the armless ten-pound mouth towards its personal feast of tied leather. Once the toothless chomp was tight, the polliwog gave an audible blink and pulled its four buggy eyes back into its head, sucking on for dear life.

Romek pondered why he lacked the courage to rid himself of the nuisance. It was more than his occasional soft spot for critters. He welcomed any distraction from the instinct to cut his losses and punt this supply-chain mystery to another fool. Ramifications of half-assed intel and his looming retirement from Vivian's myrmidons clouded his ability to indulge selfishness.

Life’s circle looks good from a summit. A sight best viewed from a mountain apex; both paws clawing that unforgiving curve between whopping gusts of wind. The delusion that inspired the ascent whispers to enjoy the view. Up there, the horizon halves this world. The cloudless blue atop the terretrial grays, greens and browns stand clear in the sun, but at night, everything looks the same. Orientation on the curve holds a similar mystery. Most animants know their place and their destination. That ephemeral death-defying drive grown into everything between the primordial ooze and the natural top of the food chain. Mortal design gives a front-row seat to the bottom half of the circle at some point. No amount of ravian hubris or wearkin pride could avoid that inevitability.

Maybe a circle was all wrong. A helix gives that sweet delusion. A framework which includes the dragons and the adamants. Compress the spins and a simple mind could enjoy the circle below and ignore the chains above. The creatures that don't seem alive in the killable way. A helix leaves the biggest fish, the Demiurge, to enjoy the all-you-can-eat buffet.

Apprehension painted the sewerage. A dormant feeling underneath the fluorescent muck, climbing the walls. It exaggerated the wrathful graffiti drawn throughout the piped architecture. Old world myths, Havel's resonating hammers and his golden maidens, attendants of the forge and shepherds of the dead. Cold bitches unseen since the sun dimmed half a millennium ago, unless you believe the conspiracy that the kindreds captured them in their weakened state. Rumors carry distortions of the truth, but it's hard to believe any logistics of that shit except for the motive of immortality; the same blunt ambition that drives the dragon poachers.

Caechora's past turmoils bled into the sewer water, giving it a strange glow that shimmered as it reflected upon every surface. Nothing but a trick from the fluorescent dyes they used to track water flow. They held a deepness to their past, one that gave Romek an appreciation for the punk artwork lining the Interior. Old fears smears by sewage didn't bother him, what bothered him was the new hands keeping them fresh them.

Romek dazed his new appendage with a quick stomp before flinging it off his boot and into a nearby lagoon. Loose from its salivating grip, the polliwog thrashed through the shallow, murky water. The tenacious menace took a couple rolls before it remembered which way was up and, more importantly, its interrupted dinner.

A flurry of sewerage rain forced Romek to shelter in the opening of a large pipe. He took the respite to light up, a precaution against the inevitable wet. His claw rolled over four rolls, each dry and snug in their small metal bed. Luck demanded he always take the smallest. Incessant, thick drips plopped nearby as he tried to catch sparks on the wood tip.

With an ignition, he inhaled, holding the honey smoke in his lungs until he grumbled a cough. With closed eyes and the nudges from his annoying sidekick, Romek imagined the jungle canyons between the Dawnplate and the Duskplate ridges, the expansive wilds from his youth. Consistent heavy throughfall throttled by the tropical canopy above a maze of hollowed trunks, half-decayed and half buried in the detritus. Trees thicker than the ignoble Cobabar, the hooded serpent dragon. And branches thicker than its tusks. The sewer's pipes and the entire city, for that matter, had an uncanny similarity to mountain jungles given the right mental distance. The smoke brought philosophized musings of the unstoppable causality between the trivial actions of animants and the momentum of civilization, natural or artificial.

Did the sucker on his foot grasp the stakes of steering these smuggled weapons away from unnecessary bloodshed? Of course not. He envied the polliwog's mindless selfishness over the calamity steering the hubris of his wearkin blood. What's the point?

Romek gently bit his smoke, canines bared. Slop air mixed with a mouthful of the past. He exhaled the tainted remembrance out of his snout as he rummaged through his satchel. An extra delicate grip retrieved a frayed schematic. A souvenir taken from the fence, Lelios.

The shopkeeper's second name wasn't worth the pummel taps on either end of the deal, but interrogations have to start from a sensible understanding. Between the dregue exobones and the perceived invincibility of youth, her toughness revealed nothing except another identity and a vendetta against the kindred plight. Romek envied her youthful ignorance, a blinding lens which saw societal flaws as things to be fixed instead of a manufactured survival-of-the-fittest. Despite how much kindred folk gag when beasts tear each other apart for food, territory or sometimes fun, they think they’re free of nature’s instincts. An arrogant step up in the food chain, but the kicker is when they realize their drive for order and control manifests the same unstoppable ferocity. At least the wild has the dignity to give an enemy to fight for your survival.

Lucky for the fence, wearkins are known for their wisdom. A bit of ransacking and deduction dodged more violence and pinned the illegal logistic to a missing link under this drain district. The schematic pulled a decent lift towards navigation, but time drifted the symmetry between the sewerage on record and the sewerage in reality. A difference measured in pipes.

Pipes inside pipes.

Pipes over pipes.

A goddamn cluster fuck of pipeception.

Romek sucked a sour breath through his teeth and inspected the cloth. Skillful folding kept most of it concealed from random drips. With his cable lantern and the schematic together in one hand, he traced the presumed corridors with his index claw. The device provided an adjustable beige light from a bright gnot encased within a metallic frame. Its power flowed from physergy cells in Romek's backpack via a thin cable. He paused and pointed the lantern upward into layered webs of pipes, exhaling smoke that further obscured the unidentifiable mess.

"None of this is right." Romek spit bits of bark into the lagoon.

The mission straddled that gray area between success and failure. Without the critical piece of this puzzle, hiding somewhere in the bowls of this drain district, the interrogated evidence was a shit-covered double-edge sword. Poor bystanders still endure the aftermath from when the Chrimogn kindred and the Solemn Nocturnus locked horns roughly eight years ago. Those couple of months taught the mighty city of Caechora that weaponized plumbing should be classified as a thirteen-cross tier threat, one just below an awoken adamant.

That dispute was over money, the Chrimogn kindred's weapon of choice; specifically, the lack of taxation from smuggled goods. Solemn Nocturnus' fresh blood sought to expand by utilizing their peculiar infrastructure system beneath the city. The slash in funds triggered the standard legal fines and disputes, but when the Chrimogn kindred's normal tactics didn't work, they put bounties on less than legal intimidation. The honest brawls turned nasty when the Dog Rail Dancers took the dispute personally. They unleashed their crude creativity on a drain district with industrial amounts of molten metal. An unfortunate end for those poor bastards, trapped like rats between a super-heated storm and the Abysm. That chatter spread further than the Bulwark shadow. A timeless debate over the worst deaths fought new contenders of being melted, steamed or drowned in a sewer maze. Didn't matter if you were a glass half-full or glass half empty kind of twisted. Things went quiet after that tragedy, but jungles regrow even after the strongest fires.

Ripples grew across the artificial lagoon that filled the center of the floor. The sewerage throughfall was gaining volume that stretched any definition of rain. Globs of water fell from shadowed shafts, adding to the chaos. A faint whooshing perked Romek's ears from the pipe to his back. He tightened his lip around the wood tip, wrinkled the schematic in his hand and pivoted around an emergency metal rung, soldered to the duct's inside wall. The abrupt maneuver swung the cable lantern's beam of light, refracting off the heavy downpour. From the pipe's blind spot, Romek pressed his free hand through the grime, feeling the cold metal vibration. A loud shout of water burst out, enveloping the falling sewage until it settled to a steady flow. The flurry of waves traversed the lagoon, dispersing across its many paths. Ripples rolled back, overflowing the lagoon onto the maintenance path.

Damn. His smoke caught a drop along the way. Romek's nose wrinkled from a whiff of the smoldered end. With a flick, he tossed it into the pool.

"This shit isn't worth drowning over."

A contour in Romek's peripheral shifted, matching a clink of metal. He turned focus towards a gap, looking for the source between sparsely laid gnot fixtures strung along the sewers tunnel. His hand prepared for the worst, finding his short-gripped glaive.

Nothing moved.

The pollywog's occasional suction marked the tension-filled seconds. Romek snuck the schematic into the satchel and flicked the cable lantern towards whatever alerted his lower mind. A kneeling wretch stared up at the light, a hackle raising sight. Romek approached the human man, blade drawn, to confirm his suspicion. The prowler's washed out pupils left the lost rings of iris' looking back. Some blood came back to Romek's fur covered knuckles.

A discovered prowler was far from the worst outcome. Docile beings who resembled disease more than a person, like a decayed tree supporting hungry branches, unaware of its own death. Smarter minds sought questions and answers, but ignored the toll on the cities. A commonality to all displaced problems.

The prowler panicked at the beast behind the light, their signature delay that shadowed the present. Metal rattled against the ground from a heavy iron chain shackled to its ankle. Clinks trailed down a passage of the main tunnel. Its lighting was worse than bad. Romek directed his lantern into the darkness. A sobering pause observed ten more prowlers, men and women, human and dregue, chained to various maintenance rungs. Romek patted his side pocket and sighed. He counted three more smokes.

Romek brought the light back close, attempting to hide the new knowledge. He slid his blade into the scabbard and approached the nearest prowler, driving it to the limit of its freedom. The chains explained the extreme malnourishment and the ankle scarring indicated this was a permanent residence. He covered his fresh smoke as sparks stung the soft pads of his paw. An unnecessary precaution against the sewer rain, which had returned to the annoying backdrop of trickling water. After a couple of big breaths, the poison calmed his nerves.

There was one other observation, which Romek ignored. The severe soft tissue damage on the man’s inner elbow looked fresh. The oddity was the injuries state, not the injury itself. Overdose and non-violent deaths leave the body in a receptive state for anything looking to breach the Shallows.

At least they still had their clothes. Even tattered and soaked, it was better than the alternative implications. The typical urges of pleasure and violence didn't seem to fit. A lack of injury and a ghostly paleness suggested neglect. Maybe. Maybe this is someone's best effort. Romek pondered sewer work, inspired by the polliwog who remained oblivious to the prowler's starving eyes. The nuisance inspired the analysis of a career shared with prowler infested ducts. The prevention of unexpected bumps in the dark was logical. And any alternative to the problems of body-clogged pipes seemed reasonable as well. The best counter was the mercy of death, but that required a strong stomach and a certain flavor of sympathy.

Romek had nearly convinced himself that chained sewer prowlers were a sensible solution when a high-pitched squeak penetrated his smokey cloud. Old steel hinges bounced from the cleanest sections of sewerage from ahead, an unseen drop-off further up the tunnel.

With swift thriftiness, Romek unsheathed an inch of blade and sliced off his wood tip burning end. Next, he disconnected the physergy supply to the cable lantern. The lack of power suffocated the gnot as he withdrew into the shadows of the sewer, hiding behind a large extruding pipe.

Dampened steps neared, changing to muffled squeaks that ascended the ladder rungs. A soaked sack flumped up over the ledge. Its contents ballooned across the ground under the bag's weight. A gasmat suit followed, mantling the ladder and carefully slinging the load back over their shoulder. Sparse sewerage lighting showed glimpses of the approaching individual. Their cautious steps and fidgeting seemed more focused on the wall's oozing grime and rippling lagoon than the sewer prisoners. A sleeve-covered hand pinched their suit's sealed side while the other held the sack slung over their shoulder. At the junction, they rolled the bag off their back. A second hand stabilized the maneuver, giving pristine white fabric an opportunity to peek through the buttoned gaps. Impractical clothes itched at an epiphany.

Romek racked his head, but the quality threads weren't indicative of a single conclusion. The appearance of power was every kindred's first weapon, a characteristic often mistaken for their ostentatious displays. And for less legal dead-ends, the Jack Wilds and the Boutineers both enjoyed wearing their money on any and every occasion. Chains rattled, in search of an answer, as he watched with one unhidden eye.

"Disgusting. Unrestrained beggars. These chains are your tutelage for a life lacking dedication," said a male voice.

The grumbled words carried a palpable tone of elegance which outshined the man's inner threads. His cloth bundled shoe found the nook of a prowler's neck and shoved it, forcing the hungry fingers to fall short amongst continued clinks of chains.

"Twin jacks, two hands in a row. Cheating dogs, the lot of them. Don't even have the decency to lose proper." He eased over the sack, hinging his back at the highest point. Their head, fully covered by gasmat leather, craned upward, far from the bag's opening, despite the fact that the intake air valve was directly above the wafting stench.

Their lungs revolted with a brief gag, forcing the man to rectify his mistake. He stood erect and stretched the gasmat gasket a few inches towards the piped canopy. "In what cruel world do you scum eat better than me?" A couple breathes later, the tinted goggles turned towards Romek's direction.

Romek responded with two minds. One that was calm, practiced and aware of the surroundings. Vigilance closed his eyelids to a sliver and trusted his stealth. A fixed silhouette was more important than being visible. The other mind was primal, aggressive and equally automatic. Fast fingers searched for his sling.

The gasmat's tinted goggles and sewer shadows helped both, but it traded vision for defense. An obscured head and torso challenged any attempt with a deadly weapon.

The man's vague outline slowly surveyed their surroundings. Prowlers ravaged the bag without impediment. Faint drips, rattling chains, and the sound of gorging mouths held a heavy stillness. Without apparent cause, the man left, leaving the ransacked bag behind. His stride was determined, unbothered by the sewer filth like before. Footsteps faded to metallic hinges.

Romek reattached his lantern and turned to leave.

*Fuck. The contents.*

The sack was forty feet, twenty to and twenty back. Half that if he stopped wasting time. Another thirty to the door, maybe? Plus the ladder and the gasmat suits. What if the help didn't wear suits? It wasn't worth the risk, but it didn't matter.

Romek sprinted towards the bag. A slimy slide, braced by a well-placed heel on a prowler's side, peeled the scavenger pair from the potential evidence. Shallow breaths prepared for a horrid stench but found nothing except spoiled food. Undistracted, Romek pilfered through the rot, looking for any discernible clues. Fibrous strands resisted against his buried fingers, unlike the soaked moldy bread or decayed fruit. He confirmed his suspicion by unearthing remnants of <fruit>, a red root native only to the northeastern regions of Caesurge. The delicacy's presence in of itself was a rarity, one that made its decay an outright travesty. Despite the root's physical resistance, its desirable properties quickly diminished without nutrients from a specific fertilizer. This dependency, along with the fertilizer's secretive ownership, made transit an arduous process and the only acceptable excuse for spoiled <fruit>. Only a few production lines carried the red root and they all rolled up to the same intertwined trunk, the Emporosogn kindred and its illegal decoration, the Boutineers. Romek flicked the filth off his hand and pondered the chances. His gambling vice pitted against his potential retirement and wearkin altruism.

A tide of cold water overflowed from the lagoon. The ripple splintered into smaller waves that traveled offset paths, while the majority disappeared over the ominous ledge in silence. Stressed metal creaked from the tangled pipes looming overhead. The duct network cracked open a cloudburst that made the earlier downpour seem like mist. Romek met the sewer rain with snarled fangs.

A torrent of water burst from a large upstream pipe. Another ripple crested down the tunnel, stacking more height to the previous overflow. Romek grabbed a service rung to withstand the waist-high wave and watched the spoiled food float off the ledge without a sound. Left with a frothing muck that covered his ankles, he jogged with high steps, each one dunking the pollywog still attached to his boot.

Chains rattled, fighting against the water. Half-hearted moans drowned in foam, leaving Romek with the ear-deafening drum of crashing sewage. Water-filled chokes were a bad way to go, but given the circumstance, it wasn't without a definitive positive. The worst prowler rumor suggested you'd ride the bottom half more than once.

More pipes flooded Romek's escape route. The closest gushing spray refused to stop. Inch by inch and pound for pound, the rushing water challenged Romek's wearkin strength. Kindred clothes made a poor substitute for an undercoat, but his thick skin covered the difference. Even cubs tested their mettle against the raging froth of mountain rivers, but this was different. A shoreless ride that had a one-way ticket to beyond that ledge.

Chest-high water stopped Romek's progress. The maintenance rung was a lifeline, his own personal chain. Dull claws bruised the base of his palm. Muscles held a rigid frame, hand to foot, until something soft and solid stole his balance. It whipped him like a stormy flag. The fluorescent froth glowed in hues of chartreuse, fed by sewerage grime and history. Light fixtures shone one last shimmering spectacle that faded under the rising foam.

Wearkins struggled with submission. Nature pruned anyone who disagreed. Those that tasted it wore prideful wounds that never healed. Traditional clan shit kept survivable failures focused on inner growth, unless it involved a ravian. A hubris that choice and strength of will prevailed against every adversity. Romek squeezed those believable, foamy lies through his teeth. His decision for decency left quick seconds to sift through regrets.

Wasted smokes took a close second to dying alone.

Numbness let go, defeating choice and will. Romek rode the current. Gasps for air received mouthfuls of sour froth. Numb hands shielded his head as he crashed through the sewer. Dull metal snagged his waist, gifting darkness before the fall. Weightless, Romek found breath. He straightened his body and hoped the waterfall didn't land in the Shallows.

Chapter Seventeen

A whistle caught the windless air.

Kayah's consciousness slanted toward hazy as she hung from an obsidian fulcrum. Her arms, too heavy to lift, floated across the ground. Her fingers became eyes when they touched down. They saw the damp earth, the grit between skin and stone and the cold of rusted metal. Her toes dragged, seeing everything, sometimes for a second time. Muted reflections through the unworn tops of her shoes.

This wasn't enough to keep her from falling into the unconscious realm. The flux between stale air and pain teetered on the warm edges of the bundled shard. It fought her ribs for every breath. When her lungs prevailed, the wounds on her back attacked from the opposite side. The imbalance would settle, finding an endurable amount of both types of pain until sleep shifted the scale. Readjusted grips were the worst. Jolts of agony that stole the air and lingered through a slow retreat with a weightless pause in the middle.

At moments of pain induced sobriety, she mustered enough strength to lift her neck. A few degrees of vantage revealed the bottom half of her captor. A silhouette against the steady orange glow. Beyond that was a blur of Old Caechora. Shapes followed her, eyes in the darkness, but she wasn't sure they were real or her imagination.

"Stop," said a shadow. The sound came from nowhere.

*I can't.*

Kayah forgot she had a mouth to move. Her pain made it hard to hear. A thud answered from above. No, it came from ahead.

"I said stop."

The dream-like voice spoke with hope. No matter how much is sounded like Jaxith, she distrusted any judgments from her stupor. He called the sensation convolution, but his experiences never quite matched. A slight buzzing, Jaxith's description, was more than an understatement. Kayah's experience was like being a viscous liquid poured through sandy earth. Sometimes it reversed, and she was sand while something poured through her. More than often, she felt both. It wasn't painful, but unpleasant enough that she'd usually surrender to her body’s demand for sleep. Fighting it, as she failed to do now, left her in a catatonic state.

"Bone arrows." The executioner's words slurred together behind Kayah's drowsiness, but she caught the end. "Come into the light."

#

A rhythm tolled across the dark, beckoning it closer.

In what memory remained, it had been lost. Adrift in depthless tides of damp earth and rusted metal, it drowned in the loneliness. A reflection trapped behind ownerless eyes. A tightness which crawled the skin. The mind fractured beyond self recognition.

*Who am I?*

The answer was submerged within its physical body. Past the splintered nails and starved fingers wading in a shadow cast across the Shore. The rhythmic sounds of an anvil resonated its flesh, enticing it to approach, but a burnt being stood guard. A lightless fire wrapped the humanoid shape like the man's clothes. They covered a frail body with a collapsed chest and an eyeless face. Between patches of glowing embers, the corpse’s skin was charcoal black. Wisps of smokey fire spurted from one shoulder. Even at a distance, the residual suffering permeated the air, penetrating its ephemeral existence.

"Come into the light," said the ember corpse. Near the being’s waist, the guiding star floated on top of a searing blade.

Haggard lungs seized its body. In an attempt to speak, it forgot how to breathe.

"Leave the girl. Or the next one is through your throat," said a different voice, a man obstructed by shadow.

"Why do you care? Is it redemption that you seek? An attempt to balance the scales of your guilt. Is this place not enough?"

The voices fought each other as the starlight flickered. The rhythm, which was previously sublime and pervasive, now slowed. Starlight dimmed, abandoning any hope that it'd remember an existence past this physical prison.

"I won't repeat myself," said the unseen voice.

"Empty threats. Attack and I will incinerate the girl. We can test her ability to heal through fire?"

"You will not make it back."

"Why is that?" asked the ember corpse, brittle skin cracked around their mouth.

"The days down here are long. You can't count how many it's been many since the last riots and that adds extra to the toll. Killing the fiends at the palace drew a lot of attention. Pent up rage itching for a spark and you gave them an inferno. Rampart's far, through streets you don't know. Ruins hiding every single cutthroat who's thinking the same thing. They're at the top of the food chain now."

The corpse's smoldering body responded with silence.

"Add the wound you’re hiding means you're running dry. I bet you already requested reinforcements, but Abysm guards have that fickle annoyance of self preservation. Maybe your justicar can twist the arms of a few who have more than themselves to lose–"

"I'll burn the girl." Three fires burst from the standing corpse. Two filled eyeless sockets, and the third roared in place of a heart. A charred arm shook the fading star. The agitation rekindled the rhythmic ping and awoke the hypnotic pull that whispered promises of rebirth.

#

"I'll burn the girl," said the executioner with a reckless abandonment.

A readjustment stressed Kayah's ribs. Flexed abs prevented fracture, but bloomed a deep pain within her shoulder and side. The ground beneath her brightened and warmth pressed down from above.

"Do not speak to me of loss, hunter. And do not test the limits of what I'll do to save her."

*Save me?*

What did the executioner mean? Small cracks formed along Jaxith's rigid distrust of the kindreds, seeding Kayah's doubts. Maybe he was wrong. Maybe the executioner was freedom. A way out of this forsaken place.

Kayah fought delirium, weighing a new cage against the old. The confrontation required challenging Jaxith’s instruction, which meant challenging the closest thing she'd ever have to family. A bond built of shared misery. He refused to touch subjects that fringed his past, but so did everyone with a history beyond Old Caechora. Real lives, beyond the gloom, became offhand remarks and frivolous details. Advice, hate, dreams, but nothing tangible, nothing that filled the void of a world beyond this prison. In truth, they made it worse.

"Spare the girl. She doesn't deserve this." The shadow's voice carried kindness, but exhaustion preoccupied Kayah's mind.

"No one gets what they deserve," said the executioner.

The shadow did not speak again.

"Wait," said Kayah, a wasted breath before her conscious mind surrendered to her wounds.

#

Sleep pinched eyes, and a desiccated mouth wrung moisture from Kayah's body. Her tongue was a dry towel. The familiar churn of an empty stomach was the first and neutral sign she'd healed. Slow warmth grew, localized to her shoulder and side. The harbinger of another sign that skewed negatively. It turned into a deep itch, one that tempted digging through your own skin. Lacerations and broken bones were the worst after first sleeps. Apparently, itching signified slow healing, a steady, bearable sign of recovery. The described tingling sensation differed from her own experience. Kayah received a gnawing burst that spared no agitation. In fact, she got extra because itching doesn't add right and she was ready to win that argument with anyone other that Jaxith.

The unfamiliarity of awaking lost brought its own sting of failure. If there was one lesson she’d never forget, it was the first. *Sleep alone and sleep safe.*

Jaxith ignored the details of composite rules. Hidden healing meant controlling when and where she slept and, most importantly, who was nearby. Despite the itching, the hunger and the complete failure of that lesson, she felt lighter. Instead of self disappointment, she relished the freedom from that burden. Whatever her future brought, she knew the first lesson would remain in the past.

The slow, rough writhe of a rustroot tendril nudged the underside of her arm. Its mindless wiggle narrowed the possibilities of her unknown location in a broad sense. Of the three settings Kayah had ever been, only one contained rustroot, Old Caechora. She would have settled for anywhere new, even if it included rustroot. The possibility of a fourth teased at her imagination. Never had the chance of sleep carried the excitement of escape.

*What if I had woken up to the sun?* Darkness stole that chance, pressing Kayah facedown against the ground.

"Where'd he go, now? I hit him good, I think, rat bastard." A woman wheezed from Kayah's right. Damp steps rummaged in a faint, moving light. "Look for that hunter's girl."

Kayah's right arm lagged behind her left as she positioned them at acute angles, ready to press off the ground. A breath of earthy rust powered her push, both hands gripping rustroot branches. The attempt buzzed her itching wounds, but she did not move. A second breath, more of a cough, pulsed a wave of panic through her body. She pressed again, struggling against the bundled obsidian shard anchored to the ground. Her legs squirmed for leverage.

She couldn't move.

The instinct to feign death was automatic. It was the best worst option against cutthroat thriftiness, but that wasn't the only concern. *How many times could someone fake death before it became real?*

"Here.. Keep that light low," said a voice that gargled rocks for fun. "This her?"

"Boss said so. Scarred up good. She dead?"

Quick kicks tested Kayah's side.

"Nah, she moving. I saw it." Strong fingers yanked Kayah's left shoulder, torquing her entire torso. "Heavier than she looks." Fingers wrapped around the front of her throat. "What are you playing at?" The rough hand squeezed her neck.

Robbed of breath, Kayah thrashed, fighting every word, but strength wasn't enough. Disadvantaged and outnumbered made for a losing strategy.

"What’d the boss say to do with her?" The disgusting words wafted past her ear.

"She didn't. Pick her up."

Without breath, Kayah pushed with the cutthroat's callused hand which attempted to peel her from the ground by her neck.

"I told yah, she's stuck, like a sunken rock." The cutthroats grip released from her throat.

The slim space between her face mixed her breaths with rustroot soil. Kayah spat bits of grit to her side, looking for a chance to speak. "Cut the cloth on my back."

"What was that little mouse? Sounds like mischief," said the man, his palm ground her head against coiled ground.

Clinking metal rattled. The revolving sound elicited an impending violence, an imperceivable storm brewing above Kayah. Resistance was a waste of energy.

"Quiet. You hear that?" said the woman.

"It's his weapon. Get rid of the light," said Kayah with a cheek pressed into rustroot branch.

The low light dimmed, and steps shifted around her. Boots wedged themselves between the rustroot and flat stones, one on either side of her body. The force from her skull lifted, returning her limited ability to swivel her neck. Heavy boots flanked her amongst a background of increasingly agitated rustroot, bathed in darkness.

Light searched for the sound, finding stone obelisks instead. Their deep etchings darkened the stone in the weak light. Time broke and buried most, save for a strongest. Those few stood tall, stabbing upward into the eternal night. If there was a pattern, it was lost in the rustroot gorging upon the ruined expanse. Through the gaps of an enormous tangle were the remains of a massive gong. In defiance of decay, the remembrance of the embossed metal penetrated the rust. Kayah knew this place. A thrumonic sanctuary of reverence for the artisan, Havel. Rustroot ignored such concepts. To the plant, the structures served nothing but a frame for growth.

Two hands scratched through Kayah's shirt, finding firm grips around the cloth harness. Stress twisted the fabric, hitching the weight to both sides of her abdomen and her trapezium. Warm pain reopened the tender wounds on her shoulder and side as the shard lifted off the ground. The cutthroat grunted, fueling a powerful heave. His casual voice of loose rocks became a rockslide from the exertion.

"Quiet," said the woman.

The clinking stopped.

A bang matched a shake, which pulsed through the taut harness. Tension released, setting Kayah down with a short plop. One boot slid down to a knee, pinching the side of her back. The rest of the limp weight cascaded diagonally over her anchored body. Despite the warmth, Kayah knew the feeling of dead weight.

"Fuck was that? Hey. Get up." Shoves jostled the limp, heavy body.

A bright knot blinded Kayah from the end of a makeshift baton.

"What'd you fucking do?"

The baton withdrew, leaving a vacuum of light that delivered a powerful crack against her head.

#

Yells riled Kayah awake.

Instead of the ground, an abundance of space met her through heavy eyelids. The sound of a shrieking rung across the dark. Screams channeled her focus and helped gather her bearings. Smoke stung her lungs, adding haze to the dark and obscuring mounds of coiled rustroot. Whatever energy her body could spare thirsted for adrenaline. She counted the confusion by tone instead of direction. An unfortunate perk to a trained ear. Some were tired, ready for an end, while others carried a shrill sense of panic, but all carried a signature of rustroot terror.

The ground stirred nearby with hungry quivers, signs that the weed had discovered flesh instead of metal. To the uninitiated, the nuance would pass by like layered shadows. An unremarkable variation in their mindless search for sustenance. To be forewarned wasn't enough, for understanding the subtle difference required a personal experience. The lesson could be suffered in a few ways. Most learned from the screams of someone being eaten alive. Those few who witnessed the lesson by sight, unshielded by Old Caechora's gloom, earned a certain unenvied deference. However, for anyone close enough to hear rustroot squelch as it gorged upon flesh, the mind would summon interpretations that rivaled any seen truth. However, the worst experience belonged to the unlucky few who survived a direct, visceral lesson.

Kayah sat upright, back against a cold obelisk that receded into the darkness above. The harness' knot jammed her spine when she leaned hard against the stone. Kayah checked the rest of the cloth. It remained tight, wrapping her against the shard with damp hues of red and orange. Shades which were bright for rust alone. More rest had weakened the localized itching around her shoulder and side. The few times Kayah had lost consciousness, the circumstances shrouded whether she healed in such an event. Now she knew the answer.

She gripped the tapered ends of the obsidian shard through the cloth. "I like my board better."

"You getting attached?"

The voice made Kayah's heart skip a beat. It was close, above and behind. She scrambled an inch before the shard pulled her back against the obelisk.

"Don't get any ideas. You'll regret screaming."

"I don't scream."

"Makes you bad bait," said the executioner.

Painful shrieks filled the gaps in conversation.

"How far are we from the rampart?"

Kayah didn't reply for a moment as she mulled over a response. The obelisks were roughly halfway between and the Rampart and the palace. The shortest paths between did not cross both points, which meant the executioner struggled with a direct path. "Far," she said. Her hands pried at folds in the harness, looking for weakness.

"I'm keeping an eye out for your hunter. What's his name? Jaxith."

"He's alive?" Kayah contorted her neck, searching for the executioner's facial cues, but deep shadows obscured his face.

"Hmmm. Unfortunately, I need to thank him for riling up this hornet's nest to save you. Not a bad distraction. Between the fiends, the prisoners and this weed." The cindered man stomped a thick tendril of rustroot. "I'm tempted to break protocol and toss you back."

"Thought I was bad bait," said Kayah.

"Huh? No, the girl is awake again. No, she doesn't scream. Her words."

Kayah tried to decipher the comments. *Was he talking to the weapon?*

Between the wails, the executioner's madness and the fluxing pain in her wounds, Kayah stitched the information together, piece by piece. The shadow was Jaxith and not her imagination. That means he survived when he distracted the cindered man at the palace. She scoured her memory, combing through the fragments of conversation between Jaxith and the executioner. One comment eclipsed the search. *Save her.* But it wasn't Jaxith who said it. It was her captor.

"You said you were trying to save me?" asked Kayah.

"Save you? When did I say—" The executioner released a heavy breath. "No, I don't give a shit if you live or die. In fact, I'd prefer the latter, but my superior has taken an interest in you. And so here we are, fertilizing this plant."

Faint glows orbited the screams. One remained shrill and energized, while the closer one turned into a slow wail.

"You're superior? You mean the guild?" asked Kayah.

The Cindered man’s smile crept through the shadows. "No, a justicar. I suppose the world beyond this place is an enigma to you. Nothing but stories from your hunter. Your father, perhaps?"

"I don't have a father." Her words snapped like a tendon reflex.

"Hush. Control your volume. Everyone has a father, just as everyone has a mother. That it, unless you're suggesting Havel crafted you with his own hands."

Kayah's unknown father was only half of her parental void, the other half was a dead mother. Rumination over her past was useless in her current situation. If she was going to survive, she needed information.

"What is the justicar going to do to me?" she asked.

The executioner fiddled with the weapon, wiping rust from the movable parts. "The justicar? Nothing. The kindreds, however, will do what they do best. Control. In your case, I'd wager they'd vivisect your boon. Innate thrumonic regeneration in a mortal animant is more than rare. I've never heard of it and I have seen many things that wade in the Shallows. Add your tune, a peculiarity which is oddly derivative of the forge, and you have an incomparable specimen."

Kayah dredged through old memories. She had heard thrumonic regeneration before. Jaxith had mentioned it when he explained the first lesson. A rare effect for anyone infused with thrum different from their own. With compatibility, it restored the flesh. Without compatibility, he warned of torsional strain and madness.

Kayah's mind sparked between thoughts. Did thrum cause the executioner's madness? Could he heal like her? Her questions arrived at the one word which she had not heard before.

"Vivisect. Was does it mean?" asked Kayah.

"They want to see how you work, mechanically. While you're still breathing."

"Is it lethal? Can I survive it?"

"Tough to say. I'm not welcomed in those circles. Unlikely, I'd imagine."

"And after?" asked Kayah.

"After?"

"After they get what they want. What happens to me? Would I be free?"

The cindered man shifted, crouching close, where Kayah could feel the warmth of his weathered face. "There is more to freedom than where your body ends up. But." He inspected Kayah's arms in silence. "You have no kindred scars. If you help me reach the Rampart, you would never come back to this place."

Kayah's unconscious mind had mulled over the obvious. Present thoughts drifted closer to the path against Jaxith's advice. One that willingly went to the kindreds. She weighed the slim chances of escape and found the difference in method, not result. An opportunity to postpone the deaths of anyone who defied the Cindered man. Any risk from vivisection seemed worth it for a chance to see the sun. Her debts to Jaxith were impossible to repay, so the least she could do was to protect him.

"I can get there faster on my own," said Kayah.

"You take me for a fool? Did your healing strip the memory of your own actions? I will not restrain my rage if I catch you a second time." The executioner swayed for a moment. "No, no, no. This is not a ruse. You're serious. Desperate for an end of this dead end life. Desperate enough to trade for the unknown."

After a long labored exhale, he knelt down, bringing level with Kayah.

"You're braver than most of those kindretorian fools who hide behind fake righteousness." The executioner tilted his head upward. "The girl wants to go it alone."

As before, he froze, like a statue. "Yes." The executioner stood, and specs of glowing embers emerged from the depths of his eyes, staring down over her head. "Can you do it in your state?"

*The state you did to me for running?* "I've avoided cutthroats my entire life."

"And the hunter?"

"I can avoid him, too," said Kayah.

"Can you now? But do you want to? Let us bind this deal with a knotted promise." The Cindered tucked the weapon into some type of holder and tore a strand a burnt fabric from his bandaged arms. "If you flee from the kindreds, with or against your will, I shall hunt down this Jaxith and send him to the depths of Obsinius." As he spoke, he tied the blackened cloth into a knot. "He will cross slowly by my hand. Then I shall drag you back from wherever you hide. These words are now tied in this knot. With a justicar as witness, this promise carries kindred authority. To unbind, unmake, or unfind is to forfeit yourself and your descendants. Upon the knots return, the promise will be fulfilled."

"Forfeit myself?" asked Kayah.

"Kindred scars that limit your prospects."

"No, I won't come back here. You said—"

"Forfeit scars alone are not enough to condemn you, besides you'd have the choice to serve or sacrifice your hands. What’s important in your agency is taken."

Kayah clenched the knot with one hand while the other squeezed her pant leg. She mulled over the promise and its ramifications. If she failed to escape, they'd add kindred scars to her already scarred hands. A bit more pain compared to a future of darkness was a simple decision. But what about Jaxith? How could a drawn out death compare to the chance at seeing the sun? If she succeeded, Jaxith would live and she could feel the warmth of sunlight. Those facts eclipsed any doubt about the choice.

"Untie me. I accept," said Kayah.

The Cindered man's face twisted into a smile, and he obliged.

Chapter Eighteen

Vagrants argued in the middle of a drain district channel. Baran counted three males as he stalked along the bowed wall of paved stone, still in pursuit of his target. Others might be hidden, but discerning those asleep from the trash was impossible by his assessment. The men huddled around a barrel’s sizzling flame. Crackles drowned their voices until the altercation spiked with harsh shouts and a garbage tumble. Baran's fingers wrapped around his hilt. Words between the shouts mentioned forgettable blame over lost shoes. He wasted a downward glance at his hand. Shaken nerves worried him more than the tussle.

Baran ignored both and stared past the bent and broken bars of a large pipe. The end of the drain district's lower channel and the start of a sewer path. A barrier of varied steel and iron suggested historic conflict over this entrance, one measured by aged grays. The last skirmish left a door-sized oval of damage outlined by twisted metal. With proper metalwork knowledge, the result would have been embarrassing. Baran imagined a heat gnot softening the bars enough to be stretched apart by individual strength. Stained tips of tapered metal aged the job. A murky stream trickled through the gaps of proper welding along the pipe's bottom curve; the imperceptible slope was a secret only water knew. The remnants of scrubbed chalk leeched into the runoff, dying the liquid shades of sharp pastels.

Best case, reprimands waited past this excuse for a door, but what about the worst case? Beyond the disobedience, the spectrum of failure ranged from detection to capture. Superior fates than the pathetic future as an instructor for those less deserving than himself. A worthwhile life demanded action and success.

The public confrontation escalated. More attention meant more street eyes. Ones that would wander until they lingered on Baran's hands. Each hesitated breath increased the odds of that outcome. He detested the judgment. A slow mull over whether he was one of them. They wouldn't see the countless early mornings or the sweet and blood blisters, only his marks. Baran grabbed the front of his belt, enduring the pain of his swollen hand. Time stole the luxury of caring what lowlifes thought. He needed to be ready to support Romek if something went wrong. A conclusion reached by a prospective myrmidon.

A few paces in, the visibility within the circular corridor lost to the darkness. An occasional hand teased the damp iron tube, steadying any residual tremors, while an acute ear listened beyond. The absence of light ahead suggested his target could navigate the blackness. He wondered whether the stranger was dregue or human, a difficult difference to detect from silhouette alone. The dregue's natural affinity for the shadows prevailed as the conservative assumption. In either case, the best course of action was to stay hidden and silent. A confident assessment bolstered Baran's focus as he followed the quiet echoes of wet steps.

Sewerage condensed the nuance of tailing the stranger into a game of follow the leader through the man-sized pipe. Smaller ducts fed into a growing water flow, none of which were large enough to fit either target, leaving twos route, one for the brave and one for cowards. The pipe's twists and turns challenged the concept of horizontal progress; downward slopes, on the hand, were constant. Slivers of light peeked through cracks and poorly welded fixes. Beyond illumination, their utility ranged from tripping hazards to makeshift steps for the steepest sections. A wide stance kept Baran's feet dry as he dusted cobwebs from Romek's tracking lessons. A precaution against an environmental complication at the end of the pipe. Wearkins don't tail or stalk, they track. That was the first pointless lesson in a jumble of childhood memories. Knowledge of terrain was the next to be tossed aside. The sewer's simplistic layout differed from managing sight-line gaps through changing terrain or how to ride the currents of a crowd. The linearity of the pipe left that principle unusable instead of useless, a pointless difference.

*Where was the next one?*

Somewhere buried in many boring months spent practicing survival across the central countryside of Caesurge, no doubt. South of the Cut, the terrain rarely changed compared to the clustering of people. Past the multitude surrounding Caechora and the less inhabited areas beyond, pockets of nature grew in the enormous expanse of stone vestiges, the results of unregulated construction from past centuries. The southern landscape spread with an atmosphere of distraction. The feeling was more than physical age; it was like a fog, heavy with unfinished dreams; an ancient kicker to the earliest memories of his youth.

Baran may have been young, but he wasn't an idiot.

Childhood memories always felt rushed, squeezed of individuality. Vague ocean recollections blended into blurred images of his mother. Instead of tangible memories, he had an incoherent soup of life before Caechora. Travel to the first city sharpened his recollections, to the distinct point of arrival. The ruined countryside was a dream that awoke to a morning in the shadow of Caechora's Bulwark gates and by sunset he'd passed under them a second time. Under the night’s starry sky, he was back on the road with a nerve rattling beast and his grandfather's introductory scowl stained into memory. Dravius' reaction to his arrival was a wall of personal resentment that surpassed the Bulwark. An impressive feat, considering it was the tallest thing he'd ever seen. A response that hardened with time into an avoidant pattern, shunting any familiar responsibility to Romek.

The wearkin started as an enigma. A mess of superstition and attitude that appeared equally annoyed at the predicament of Baran's arrival as Dravius. Over the weeks, tension shifted and, sometimes, relaxed. Observation answered simple questions like what was a wearkin and did they eat children? What they were doing out in the ruined wilderness took more contemplation. Definitive answers to those questions remained elusive. Attempts to probe Romek condensed the mystery around the abruptness of their departure and the conditions of return. An unremovable answer which waited back in Caechora.

When weeks turned to months, quizzical motivations drove Baran to test the new limits of his world by venturing north in search of the road he traveled with his mother. It was impossible to miss. Quality stone paved a road so straight the ocean salt reached the Caechora Bulwark. It wasn't true, but the thought was nice. The eastward direction was an obvious decision, away from his brisk Caechora welcome. At the moment, the slapdash idea to cross the Cut seemed advantageous.

He evaded the wearkin, using his newly gained tricks against him, but the wilds were different. Land and vegetation decided the paths, ones that eventually steered away from the Cut's guiding edge. Dense jungles stretched upwards towards the southern tips of the Dawnplate and Duskplate ridges. Monstrous trees that hoarded the sunlight. An environment predisposed to making kids lost. Baran and docile beasts accepted a mutual avoidance, except for one that found him at the end of his first day of freedom. It didn't attack, but it kept an uncomfortably close distance. In the leftovers of daylight and repeated encounters, he realized the creature was Romek.

Out of food and clean water, elements battered Baran down enough for him to regret his decision, but Romek remained distance. A child’s yearning for his mother became a lesson of survival as he attempted to track Romek back to any known world. He imagined preserving through the wilderness, specifically the look of recognition he would give Romek, but that wasn't what happened.

After a few hard nights of hunger and struggle, Romek carried Baran back across the Cut. The wearkin’s first words, after days alone with his own stubborn thoughts, cut through memory’s fog.

*You won't always have someone to show you the way back.* Back was, of course, a relative term.

The mistake’s rawness healed and left tough patience that sought to return the favor, but a lost Romek was hard to find. Given the chance, Baran pondered his delivery. The same line perhaps, or a clever improvement?

A two-way pipe lacked the complexity of a jungle, but mustered the sense of independence from his childhood excursion. Baran sifted through the vague months for another lesson. *Think like the target. If you know how they think, you don't need to follow them.* Baran gave a silent scoff. Hyperbolic wisdom didn’t cover the transitive properties of tailing a tail, if such a thing existed. Either way, useful insight from the fence or the stranger's outline was nonexistent. The conclusion of rummaging through his past was simple. Baran would have to rely on his own skill to succeed.

A trail of splashes faded against a backdrop of flowing water. With each distant step, a low crescent glow formed around a broad bend in the pipe. Baran waited longer than was needed, letting patience befriend his nerves. The light ebbed and flowed in a way that was reminiscent of how Caechora’s throttles power to districts during a physergy blackout. Something about the rhythmic light settled the residual shake in his hands.

Around the turn, the iron tube ended with a circle of receding light. His eyes struggled to adjust as it fell away. In the light’s wake, a large torrent of water flowing from a pipe on the far wall; a pipe similar to his own. Baran’s hand sought a brace, but the curved enclosure forced him to settle for cold gripless metal.

Downward jets of water dominated the cylindrical room. Baran crouched on the maintenance shelf built a long step below the pipe. Waves of light followed exposed sections of physergy cables downward, throttling his ability to scan the chamber.

Baran measured roughly ten meters to a similar shelf on the far side. Each pipe watered its own little garden of slimy growth on balconies of loose rock held in place by mesh metal frames. By his measure, the ceiling was a story or two below the drain district's ground level. Over the edge, stronger torrents carried enough momentum to pour the water down the center, free of obstruction, while weaker runoff trickled like rain under the rocky balconies around the perimeter. The walls were inconsistent. Countless nooks and remodeled structures disguised what seem to be the interior of an old tower. Flowing water deafened his ears and hid any easily detectable movement, forcing patient observation for either of his targets.

A humanoid shadow flickered near the bottom. Baran focused on the narrow gap between waterfalls of sewage, waiting for the next oscillation. Growing light exposed the stranger's low crouch. The movement was rigid, downright pathetic and, above all, suspicious. A skepticism, not from skulking through a sewer, but from a familiar nature. Older fighters were neither rare nor common, but that observation sparked a new thought. Within the mission’s context and the agitated temper of his grandfather's disrupted routine, what were the odds that Dravius' old ass was trying to salvage the mission? The bastard should know when to accept defeat and save his dignity, instead of blindly following the target into the sewers.

*What is he thinking?*

The pseudo Dravius was recklessly close to the fence, probably from his bad hearing. Even the fence's pompous indignation would notice the old timer's clumsy steps.

Baran turned around to a whimper from the coward’s direction of the pipe. Partially settled nerves flared, waiting for the next band of light. A glowing wave revealed nothing except the tube's subtle bend, too far to be the source of sound. He trusted his ears and that his mind had never faltered, but reality disagreed. The prospects of the stranger’s identity must have flustered him.

*Damn waste of time.*

The growing distance between him and his grandfather and whatever tricks the dripping water played on his ears left Baran carelessly far, with no plan to descend the catwalk-connected ledges. As he perched, planning a course, Baran perused the idea of surveying his grandfather in action, like one of those kindretorian recruiters. He'd remember every detail, every imperfection. The report would knock Dravius' reputation into the mud, where it belonged. What if an opportunity to save him arose? Baran was lucky, but not that lucky. An unbeatable argument to smear his patronizing face into the dirt against every future critique. The prospect riled Baran's blood as he pursued the old man.

Trickles and torrents drowned the audible spectrum, even the squeaks and rattles of Baran's rickety path. He traded speed for caution, a gamble based on the hearing limitations of the closest target and the distance to the furthest. The journey of loose bolts and stressed metal joints appeared to be half the height of a normal district. How deep did these sewers go? Some answers couldn't be taught or read, only explored, like most practical skills. A truth that exposed his lacking experience of anything below the Caechora Interior.

A third of the way down, a muffled high-pitch noise achieved the impossible, penetrating the drone of splattering water. Heavy hollow thuds clanged behind ramshackle stonework on all sides of the cylindrical chamber as Baran scampered down the middle third. Pipes creaked. Trickles grew quiet. Weak streams became strong. Water gushed down the chamber's center, swelling into a single massive deluge. Rhythmic light broke the aqueous column into slow-moving chunks of raging sewage. Baran stared, transfixed, upon the slow plummet of an illuminated broken waterfall. At the bottom, a wave of light landed, revealing the presumed to be Dravius gawking at a heavy door, thigh deep in sewage. The artificial tide sloshed against the chamber's old foundations. Submerged steel remained locked, resisting entrance and blocking escape. An arced ripple disrupted the water's natural chaos, encircling the vertical river that battered the ground. The environmental change distracted the stranger, enough to expose their identity. Dravius' distraught expression validated Baran's suspicion and evoked a vicarious sensation of sheared metal. It wasn't weakness; it was something more dangerous.

Panic, an emotion which contradicted his grandfather.

Gnot light ebbed underneath an already submerged floor, leaving nothing except the water's dark contours. The gap between waves of visibility exacted Baran's mixed emotions. On one hand, malicious tendencies reveled at the sight of his grandfather. The scornful shadow over his life floundering in the bottom of the human fish tank wasn’t how he imagined it, but in a way, it rhymed. Baran fought the weakness in his character. A strange duality between foreign and familiar clouded the honorable response. He couldn’t focus. Some infectious hesitation gnawed at his heroic core. Baran convinced himself that the thunderous amount of water kept him from shouting, but regret lingered like a low fog over his mind.

He was better than this.

If there was a window of opportunity, it passed with the next flow physergy dispersing through the unseen sewer. A gaping void replaced the previous abnormal disturbance in the water. A mouth which guzzled the incredible torrent of sewage in silence. Physergy powered light spread wide at the threshold. A single thought emerged from the hungry darkness.

The Abysm.

A labyrinth of darkness beneath the city. Sunlight justified an existence above the city’s source of physergy and gnots, but those prospects shriveled in the hungry depths of that bottomless pit.

The fresh quiet reinforced Baran's reluctant thoughts. What could he have done, stick an impressive landing and join the futile fight against the water? No, against the void. Was a shared fate better than the gooey pit stuck between his stomach and throat? Baran clenched his injured hand, holding back an urge to hit the stone. *Damn idiot. Where'd all that bullshit about composure and tactics go? Down the fucking drain?*

Hollow thuds returned, a command bellowed by the sewers to stop the attack. The colossal deluge broke into weaker torrents and the leaky downpour resumed. Baran spread the clumped rag attached to his shoulders; a wet cloak could still delay the artificial rain.

Between oscillations of visibility, the yawning breach bared fangs, tips of faded metal from the chamber’s outer wall. Triangular tips grew inward from the edge, closing the threshold. Columns of water cascaded upon the teeth's narrowing gaps in search of the bottom. Each transient snapshot of light restored the floor, erasing any sign of the void.

Baran paced. Turns outnumbered steps on the cramped shelf. Not for any reason except to react. *Was Dravius dead?* His restless mind needed an outlet; a distraction as he processed the situation. *Was he finally free?* It wasn't the thought he expected. Plans for besmirching his grandfather tasted bitter in hindsight.

The coward in him whispered to run, to forget what he'd seen. He'd return to Boro, wait for Romek, and never speak of it again. No one would know. An external obstacle replaced with an internal secret. The imaginary lie festered in the wafts of rotten air. He clung to the wall's disordered mess of stone.

Baran could report the information to Romek. No. That decision, despite any correctness, would infect his reputation with distrust. What honor existed for someone who abandoned their own family? Fear and weakness would be the only believable reason. He'd rather die than give an inch of truth to his cursed hands. His grandfather’s fate was Baran's linchpin to a future past his marks of forfeit.

Metal squeaked through his mental turmoil from a shelf above. Baran hid intimately against the rock wall, like a piece of mold. Steps crunched against the loose gravel overhead. The ledge’s frame did not jostle, as others did under his own weight. Baran held still in the lingering silence, his hand brushing his weapon's hilt. The oscillation of light came slowly, casting twin, mirroring shadows that broke upon the falling water and irregular architecture.

Baran held his breath, pinned by the gnot light on either side. His own shadows teased past the edges of the shelf above.

"Fucking idiot," said the feminine voice.

Baran teased his blade from its sheath.

More gravel crunched, ending with another squeak. Then stillness.

Baran managed of breath of respite. At least he was right about identifying the fence. Previous deductions of his own character had left only one path, but this new revelation added an opportunity. He'd pick up his grandfather's failed mantle by tailing the fence and investigate the missing information Romek mentioned from the Dry Locks. Two birds with one stone was the antiquated term.

The next wave of light gifted a series of footholds to reach the shelf above. Baran looked upon the floor that swallowed Dravius moments ago, one last time. None of it felt real yet, but if he turned back now, he'd never escape his marks. He leaned his shoulder down into the handle and, with luck, it opened.

#

Each turn of the sewer, proved more unremarkable than the last. The hallway, with its stabbed pipes and pooling shadows, would have allowed a child to follow the fence undetected. In one particular long stretch, Baran noticed her right shoulder droop. The way a body favored one side after an injury. Did he fail to notice it before, or was she concealing it when she knew she was being followed? Perhaps a lesson from Romek, a trade for his burnt arm. She didn't seem like a fighter, too clean and formal. Her slender body wasn't built for brawling, but walking off a wearkin knuckles argued against that opinion.

The repetitive nature of follow and wait stripped any excitement of tailing the fence. A realization that was further dampened by the incessant drips of every sewer crevice. Baran imagined the end of this pursuit. If he had any hope of saving his grand–

He stopped mid step, challenging that thought before it could finish. He zoned out, staring at runoff from a pipe. Bits of bread spun, stuck in a whirlpool of splashing sewage. They bopped below the greenish surface many times but remained trapped in the ripples.

Baran couldn't finish the notion. To keep his honor, he'd have to understand how to work the sewers. Even for him, that was a high ask without another angle. Help required talking, and talking required negotiation of some sort. Whichever type the fence was, she wasn't the generous one, which meant confrontation. Their injuries leveled the competition a bit, but he'd still have the advantage. An off-hand stance to press her weak side made the most sense. What if she resisted without a weapon?

The alley came back to him in fragments. A bashed face, a pale face and his own marked hands covered in blood. He would not let his actions justify his marks, which left the stabbed woman an anomaly of his past, not a pattern of his future.

Baran adjusted his belt to put his sword further out of sight.

Grapples could work. They were his least favorite fighting style, not for any lack of skill, of course. With her, maybe it wouldn't be the worse. Add the fact that most people don't know how a defense against the wearkin techniques. She might even be impressed.

*Know the target.*

Gadgets were her thing, based on their encounter in the shop. *Hard to counter that.* She could hide anything underneath her clothes.

*What the fuck am I thinking?*

Besides a momentary doubt about the fight's outcome, why was he drawn to her? Baran's chest felt tight again. *It must be nerves. Overcome them, they don't control you.* Odds pointed the responsibility of his grandfather's unknown fate at her feet. The same ones staining his memory like a deep bruise. His choice to delve further, against Romek's orders, was to save face, a coward’s choice.

No. That wasn't right.

Despite Dravius' utter inadequacy as a parental figure, his potential death, the potential death of an Eastmaw, deserved retaliation. Honor demanded it, and Baran would comply. He had to be careful, lest he be flushed down a similar void as Dravius. The strike against his intelligence would probably hurt as much as the fall, assuming it was survivable.

The fence halted, out of step with her normal cadence. Her gaze darted backward, but redundancy of this poorly designed sewer system, not luck, gave Baran a nearby pipe to hide behind. Thoughts of confrontation bounced behind his more vigilant thoughts.

Her inquisitive face scoured for something against the sewerage. What'd she expect to find in the corner of society's pooling backwash? Her observation stopped, and she turned valve. Baran pondered what importance that one held over the countless valves left in their trail. A benign one jutted from a sheet of partially rusted steel next to his boot. A metal trisect and stem that bore through the wall. He looked around for any logical indications of what this valve controlled, but deduced the nearest pipe as an answer. The same one which provided his current cover.

Across the channel, a flow of sewage weakened. The water steadily decreased until the greenish growth along the bottom lip settled with an annoying drip.

Baran heard steps upon wet stone. She was on the move again. Pins brushed his skin before he realized the sound was advancing, not retreating. He glanced behind, recounting the dimly lit terrain from memory.

A channel of sewage, a variety of differently sized pipes, all extruding from the wall, and a tangle of iron ducts above. There were no doors, no side paths, no nooks to hide. Nothing except a backward path. Noise would betray him if he climbed into a pipe, and if not, the fence would surely notice a shifting silhouette against the oscillating light. An idiot would hug the wall and hope for the best. He needed space. He needed options. The clarity of her steps sharpened through the trickles of sewage. He was running out of time.

*Why am I running?*

He held the advantage. She was stuck in this disgusting corridor with him, not the other way around. A lateral surprise attack would end the fight before it started.

A skipped step moved the sound of her feet to the far side of the corridor. She was so close Baran heard her breath. The realization made him hold his own. From behind her, the fluxing light projected her dark reflection on the sewer floor. Shadowed arms fiddled, commanded by the gaps between oscillations. A new brighter light banished the last remnants of her shadow. The metallic sounds of her stride returned, echoing in retreat.

Baran peaked, catching the tail of her shadow along the pipe. The one which she turned off. Combat instincts subsided. Tremors overtook his hand as he unclenched his fist. The nerves were worsening. He tried to relax his hands, and they twisted against his will. His surprise let the shake return, masking the loss of control.

*What the fuck was that?*

He experimented again, and nothing happened. The fumes must be playing tricks on his mind. A redundant reason to avoid this place.

The singular path, still tailing the fence, led through a trick gate. One-way hinged bars that yielded to force. Bends in the pipe grew brighter, showing the sludge's receding stain and iron's bumpy interior.

Against unsurmountable odds, this mundane pipe forced a complimentary thought from Baran's mind. One of undeniable discretion that ended with an exposed ladder ascending upward through a cramped metal chute. He slid the ball of his foot back and forth, dislodging the damper layers of sludge. Baran debated adding patience to his list of skills as he waited for his lonely turn to climb. Specifically, the ones which he excelled at, despite the lack of enjoyment.

<synopsis of rest of scene - Baran finds smuggler hideout, realizes he can't do anything alone and retreats with information. He hears a damsel in distress again and tries to help. It leads to a dead end and no women. He feels insane and hears a voice in his head say "behind you" before getting knocked out.>

Chapter Nineteen

*Quiet.*

What were less than single word thoughts?

*Instinct.*

Romek was nearly there.

Dried sludge cracked along the pits of his arm and legs as he crawled up what must have been a small hill. Each step sank. His hand perforated the ground, looking for support. The grime was unavoidable. Clothes betrayed him, inviting the muck close. Even his fur failed to keep it off his skin. The sludge was more than an ascetic; it was the terrain, the form of his place.

Stale sludge piled into hardened knolls. Looser sludge gathered into ponds which sprawled out of sight. Against reason, it clumped upon the smooth surface of massive identical pillars, the same way a tide discolored the pilings under a dock. In the dimness, geometric trunks of stone repeated, each darker than the last. The horizon of lonely bastions stood tall, unyielding to the sludge.

Romek stayed low, searching for hope that he wasn't wading through the Shallows. In times of strife, he wished he could forget his heritage. The clans wore death like a badge. For the indoctrinated, that journey was a steep climb between death and rebirth. Stitched reincarnation awaited those with luck, not the dogma of personal strength or the compatibility with past lives. Lies the chieftains force fed cubs after their first breath. Somehow, death meant more and less to the wearkin clans than the kindred world. The hypocritical paradox reminded him why he left and why he'd never return. If this sludge was to be his grave, at least he'd die as himself.

Romek's ears twitched, responding to hoarse breaths and heavy haphazard steps. Each slap upon the ground closer that the last. Low beams of weak light filled the dips of the undulating terrain, ushering a figure that emerged around the knoll's bend, drenched in sludge, weapon drawn.

Steel makes a man bleed. The skin, the fat, the muscle, it all splits against the edge. Cut deep enough and it’s up to the bone to resist the blade. Steel and doom can both destroy a man, but doom doesn’t cut, it tears. And like a bone defying an edge, humor holds a man together against despair.

"Psst," said Romek, half buried in the hillside. No response, so he tried again, louder. "Psst."

The swamp man noticed. He wrangled his desperate breaths, orientating himself towards Romek's hiding spot. A strict cone of light scanned for the sound. Behind the blinding sweeps, the person stood in a peculiar stance for someone with a single sword.

"You sound a bit winded," said Romek.

The light's intensity softened. "Romek? Show yourself."

Clumps of soft blackish ground fell as Romek unearthed himself from the knoll's slope. "Did you bring any flowers?"

"Where is Baran?" asked Dravius.

Romek didn't expect a laugh or a chuckle, but the bastard didn't even smirk. "Nothing? Not sure if it's getting better than that. What took so long? I joked to the kid that must've killed you. I was thinking he actually had."

Dravius shrugged off Romek's jest.

Countless close calls taught how someone reacts under heavy stress. The weight helped penetrate the smallest cracks in a man, even ones in Dravius' hardened personality. A condition to rekindle fool hardy ambition from when they first met all those years ago. The plunge, the muck, their salientian friends. If none of that exposed the true colors of his old friend, then the impediment was thicker than sludge.

Strange croaks bounced off the pillar's artificial geometry. The result squeezed every ounce of energy into a trailing low pitched pattern of noise. Blind to any orientation, Romek settled for volume alone. "Seems you woke them up again. They're coming, fast," said Romek.

"Where is he?"

"You're serious? Are your blind and deaf? Do you see where we are?"

"Tell me."

Romek scoured Dravius's stubbornness for any give, but there was nothing. "I told him to stay in the drain district."

"Was he acting strange?"

"He got a woman stabbed and beat a guy close to death, so—"

"You saw this woman?"

"Saw her? If triaging her wound counts, then yes. I saw her. What the fuck kind of question is that?" Romek shook his head at his own question. "No, I'm not dying for this conversation. We escape, then we talk. That's the order we do this in."

Whatever hearing Dravius still possessed became enough to notice the imminent danger. He looked over his shoulder, sighed and spit, adding a bit of himself to the terrain. "You find a plan in there, or were you just holding your dick waiting for me to save you?

Romek scoffed. "I was waiting for your lazy ass to catch up." He gestured towards the massive pillars. "We follow a row till we hit the Bulwark."

Dravius grunted, a simple sign of agreement. "Maintenance access. That way is brightest." He pointed his sword above the rolling terrain towards the dim backdrop that was marginally brighter than the rest of their distant surroundings.

Romek's ears twitched towards distinct croaks within the enclosing cacophony. "Yeah, but the sound is too close. They'll intercept us unless we take a longer path."

Dravius grunted again.

"I'm looking thin except for a spark gnot and my last smoke." Romek wrestled the polliwog chopping on his lantern cable. Through the mixture of sludge and mucus, the critter’s blotchy phosphorescent body fidgeted against confinement. "And this guy, he started glowing when we fell down here. Might be some sort of pheromone from the sludge."

"You.." Dravius glared at the appendage hanging from Romek's hip. "I'm not gonna bother. I guess it is a last smoke kind of day." He swiveled the light across the slopes furthest from the sounds. "You take the rear. I need your ears."

They hustled through slime gullies, avoiding any pools deeper than ankle height. The simple plan to follow a row of pillars proved difficult. Gelatinous knolls resisted their ascent, draining precious energy and time and forcing detours through the lower trails. Flickers of gnot light guided the way, revealing enough to stumble ten paces at a sprint. When Dravius slowed or dawdled with navigation, Romek imitated the croaks. The crass attempt at encouragement doubled by trivializing the direness of the situation. Dravius was the eyes and Romek was the ears.

Stare long enough and the details become unavoidable.

What started as generic sludge changed to something more characteristic of digested sewage. Starved breath gave an excuse to not verbalize the minority of objects scattered across the landscape. Belts, boots, and mangled bundles of leather that resembled a fruit wrung of moisture. Tough items seemed to slow the digestion. Small bits of worn metal shined back, relative to the dull muck. A buckle, hand held tongs, a couple crosses, not enough for a detour. Everything was personal in a literal way, nothing large, nothing industrial. If there was any built floor, the surface hid it. Humanoid bone clusters gave Romek evidence for his growing theory the sludge was excrement from the native creatures. This repulsive idea paled compared to the louder thought preoccupying both their minds. If they became surrounded, there'd be no chance to fight their way out.

"Falling sewage, front right," said Romek.

Missing pillars added confusion to their navigation. The one-way entrance through the ceiling came in sets of nine. Square sections, three columns long and three columns wide, marked the deep holes; larger bodies of wet sewage that leaned toward a liquid instead of a solid, like a small bog between massive trees.

Romek thanks the odds that let them both survive the fall and avoid drowning, but scorned what it meant. Luck's shadow carried a nasty debt.

A small mound gurgled, vibrating the wet ground. Romek slid into a crouch, knees submerged with a hand braced on the ground. Bubbles of warm gas wafted from the sludge, buttering the putrid air. Phosphorescent flesh breached the thinning slime. A palm-sized eyelid shifted, followed by three more in a patternless sequence. The sludge covering them bunched to one side, making room for four bulging eyes with wide horizontal pupils and pale brown sclera that stared blankly like a fresh born cub.

"That wasn't half bad, but enough with the jokes," said Dravius with a sideways glance.

The creature's eyes twitched with impressive reflexes, fixing all four on Dravius' back. A hole of vibrant pink emerged, launching the thick tip of a tongue faster than Romek could blink. The elastic flesh subdued Dravius' right forearm, yanking him mid stride. Comparable weights and the tongues contraction closed the distance, leaving an odd impression in the sludge and the amphibian stranded between them.

Romek lunged towards the flopping creature roughly half his size. A couple of seconds from a spark gnot activated at full strength would end most organic life but a missed attack meant one last light show before becoming part of the scenery. That requirement was proving difficult. The amphibian's spherical body and secretions were like wrestling an oiled goat. Every attempt to pin the thing down re-coated Romek's fur with a mixture of sludge and pungent mucus. Small limbs and jelly-like flesh evaded the best of wearkin joint locks.

Their combined weight tipped the balance, causing the powerful tongue to pull Dravius closer. He recovered to a crouched stance, pinning the squirming muscle under one knee. "The mouth," said Dravius, half starved of breath.

The words were enough to describe an entire plan. Romek stopped wrestling the damn over-sized frog and wiggled his fist into the pink mouth. The warm flesh pulsed as he drove his arm deep into the creature's body, searching for the heart. Physergy poured into the spark gnot, cooking the internal organs.

The obstreperous reaction grew unwieldy. A risk of collateral damage forced Romek to withdraw his hand. Spasms racked the frog, as its own body sustained the gnot’s activation threshold. The roasting amphibian collapsed, off-gassing a visible tang of roasted butter.

Futility failed to stop the instinct of self cleanliness, as Romek wiped the excess sludge from his body. With the inside of his foot, he dowsed spurts of fire with a cocktail of muck and discharge from their wrestling match. Viscous liquid drowned the heat with a savage hiss. After a few prodding kicks, Romek freed the inactive gnot from the cooling remains.

"Meganura, highly adaptive and territorial. I heard the rumors, but I never thought they could survive down here. Figured the pipes would be too cramped, but seems that wasn't a problem." Romek crunched through the quenched flesh, grabbing the creature’s head by the back of its skull. The two outermost eyes remained loosely intact relative to the rest. "This is the largest I've seen."

"You missed the big ones."

"I guess so. Like I said, my light got snagged on the way down. In the wild, resources and predators keep them in check, but down here it's a never ending buffet of sewage and body disposal."

"I hate being part of the menu," said Dravius.

*Everyone's part of the menu.* Romek suppressed the instinctual verbal jab. "You want to take some for a snack?"

Dravius peeled the placid stretch of muscular tissue from his sword arm. "A bit too much tongue for my taste."

*Was Baran acting strange?* Despite the half combusted amphibian and myriad of smells, the question nagged at the back of his mind. Anything that rattled Dravius deserved consideration. Their past earned that respect, but between the drinking and the over zealous beratement of Baran, that respect was being stretched to the limit.

"A kindretorian knight got in our face this morning. Said they sensed an abyss in Baran. I think… I thought he was peering at his own persona. It's not unheard of, especially for a family like yours. But I don't have all the pieces, do I?" asked Romek.

"Like you said, it won't matter if we die down here." Dravius turned away, scanning the pathways with weak light. "Let's move."

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