

Code Black Magic

Free Preview

Chapters: 5

Pages: 34

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Code Black Magic

Dedication:

To my family

To my friends

To writers

To lovers

To dreamers

To explorers

To Rhea

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1 - Quitting Time

Ren didn't hate his job. Being a power auditor for the largest arcane energy distributor on the continent has its perks. Ren thought so at least. The Wizard Association has been good to him. They provided paid training in the arcane arts as well as many other benefits. Ren took quick advantage of the training, but what Ren didn't like, was that everything boiled down to how to better serve the company. He sighed at the thought and prepared for his final scan of the night.

"Everything alright there Renny?" Carson lifted his head above Ren's monitor.

"Don't call me that." Ren growled.

"Easy now. Ren." Carson replied. "These are not the qualities of a wizard who aims for the Tower."

"What do you know of my aims?" Ren inquired.

Carson paused for a moment at Ren's reply. Ren refused eye contact and continued tapping on his crystal to appear busy, what Carson couldn't see was that Ren was only shuffling around his crystal's various windows to kill time while the scan made progress.

"Every wizard aims for the Tower Renny." Carson scowled.

Magic was far from a hot commodity these days, as almost everyone was using the raw energy of the universe to perform menial tasks like their laundry. Being a wizard meant little in the grand scheme of things.

Ren, along with most wizards, lived in the city of Novos. The capital of the advanced world. Arcane technology spread its way across the continent like a cancer. Centuries have passed since the days when sorceries were hoarded and kept hidden from the world. Once the secret techniques were broken down and formalized,

anyone with a bit of patience could learn the ultimate art of creation and destruction. Those who did were called wizards.

Carson was about to speak once more when a shrill voice cut through the drone of the small room, “Carson! Where’s that report?” Carson jumped back from Ren's desk and left without another word.

Ren looked up to see his supervisor, Stephen, impatiently waiting for Carson. Ren's attention returned to his work. The scan was nearing completion, no anomalies in Ren's sector. Ren cracked his neck and stretched out his back. It was almost quitting time.

“Well I’m done for the night.” She spoke directly to Ren. “Sector 7 is all clear.”

Ren turned to face Julia. She was smiling at him.

“So, that’s it then?” Ren sputtered out.

“I’m afraid so.” Julia smiled earnestly. “I’m gonna miss it here.”

“No you won’t.” Ren laughed. “The Wizard Tower is gonna be great. You’ve earned this promotion.”

Julia blushed, “It’s just reception.”

“It’s your foot in the door.” Ren countered.

“You might get your own foot in that door soon.” Julia added.

“I don’t know, I’m happy here.” Ren replied.

“Yeah, sure Ren.” Julia laughed as she glanced towards Carson and Stephen on the other side of the room.

“I am, you know.” Ren encouraged. “The Tower is... Too much responsibility...”

The Wizard Tower, the headquarters for all of the Wizard Association. The Wizard Association unofficially controlled the city. There were biannual elections for the city’s chancellor, but even if the people voted in the chancellor, the flow of energy was directly tied to the flow of power.

The Wizard Association provides free energy to all citizens of Novos on one condition; The energy cannot be used for code black

magic. Magic is divided into several coded styles, each linked to a colour. Black being any of the immoral stuff like killing people or raising the dead.

The usage rates were tracked directly by the handheld catalytic devices known as crystals and the whole system was monitored by auditors, like Ren. If any abnormal patterns emerged the auditors launch an investigation to determine the source of the anomaly. Fighting off any non-cooperatives if necessary.

It wasn't a glamorous job, in fact most citizens had a high degree of disrespect for any auditors. It was a reasonable reaction considering if an auditor was coming for a visit it usually meant that you were in trouble.

"Ren." Julia pointed towards his crystal's window.

Ren turned to see the alert, the one and only, "I should get that."

"You should." She said.

They shared a silent moment of uncertainty.

"Maybe I'll see you around."

"Maybe."

Ren turned his chair back. Julia walked away.

Ren didn't mind the work or even the public's hate. It was the busy work he needed and company like Julia's made the hours bearable. He would miss her.

"Let's see what we got." Ren said to himself. He channeled a spell on his crystal to check the signal. "Fuck." It was a big one, not alarming, but not small enough to ignore either.

"Probably just some minor black magic." Ren rolled his eyes. Officially code black magic was criminalized to protect the people, and in the extreme cases that was true. But being an auditor Ren knew that unofficially, anything that could interfere with the Wizard Association was classified as black magic.

Ren placed a hold on the signal and stood up. His supervisor Stephen was on the other side of the room, Carson stood nearby while Stephen read over the report on his own crystal. Ren called out, “Hey, Stephen.” Stephen’s attention was grabbed without a response. “I got a small one in sector 8, I’ll check it out on my way home and call in if I get anything.”

“That’s fine Ren.” And Stephen was back to work on Carson’s report.

Without another word Ren selected the signal again, copied down the details into his crystal and filed it as resolved. He collected his things, canceled all active work related spells on his crystal, and got up to leave.

Ren couldn’t be bothered to wait for the lift, so he skipped down the stairs, three flights to the ground floor and exited through a side door. The night air was crisp, Ren cherished the sensation on his skin.

The Wizard Tower loomed over the city, arcane power flowing upward from its structure. It is uncontested as the largest structure on the continent. Ren stood in awe for just a moment. No matter how many times he’d seen it, the Tower had a way of capturing his attention. There were several orders of magnitude of difference between the Wizard Tower and Ren's office. Ren took a deep breath of fresh air and began walking.

He went the usual way home, along the busier streets filled with glowing arcane signs. Ren dared not to wander too much at this time, or anytime for that matter. The city hungered for action and Ren didn’t want to be the fuel to that fire. Novos was his home, but Ren knew not to go looking for trouble. The capital city had grown a great deal in a short time. Ren learned quickly that most folk were better off avoided.

Although he was a Wizard, many could make the same claim. An auditor was one of the safer jobs for a Wizard, but Ren had more than a few close calls regardless.

The sun had set and the nightlife of Novos was just getting started. As Ren walked, the streets were full of folk busy with their own lives. Some were leaving parties, others on their way to parties. Nearly everyone had their eyes fixed on their crystals. A tool of such power being used for the most trivial of tasks left a foul taste in Ren's mouth. Novos was a hard city. Barely any signs of nature were around except for very few ratpigeons. There was also the occasional Arborian, if you could count them as nature.

It was the promise of free energy that brought so many to Novos. It had been overcrowded years ago, and has since continued to grow in population. Now more than ever people had all the power and technology they could ever need, but they've been cut off from each other, from community. Drugs were rampant, killing thousands each year. Theft, murder, rape, and kidnappings were at an all time high, but most barely batted an eyelash. A cold city.

The rest of his walk home didn't take much time at all. He was almost home when he made an off-shoot to check out the source of the signal. Ren hoped it would be a false alarm.

It wasn't too uncommon for one of these anomalies to be related to black magic. Usually only minor situations like someone trying to curse a neighbor or revive a dead pet. They knew it was illegal, and they could be cut off from the power supply or worse, but people still tried to get away with it. Resurrection was of course the big one, and you couldn't even attempt something like that without a huge amount of power. It rarely worked when attempted anyway.

Many wizards will tap into the city's power supply to perform greater feats of magic. The smart ones try to hide their presence, only using a small amount of energy at a time to not be caught by

the auditors. The not-so-smart, or maybe desperate ones sometimes go all out; drawing as much power from the grid as possible to cast their magic as quickly as possible. This usually ends poorly.

As Ren approached the source of the signal, he noticed the small tree on the front lawn, not much taller than himself.

“The house with a tree, really?” Ren joked. “At least it’s not a cat. Probably just one of those brain fried green mages.”

Cats caused a large majority of the false alarms. For some reason, the energy flow is just weird around cats. They don’t have to do anything except be near the machinery to cause an issue and usually they did more than that.

Ren crossed the street to get a closer look at the building. Although the tree was small, Ren was still pleased to observe it. Trees were a rarity in Novos. He examined it carefully, and grazed his finger along its trunk.

It shocked him quite fiercely in return. Ren shook his finger, grimaced, and moved on. A little less impressed with the tree now.

Ren checked around the house and scanned the power meter with his crystal. There didn’t seem to be a constant intake, nor was there any suspicious manifestations in the area. That led Ren to the conclusion that this was indeed the work of a green mage. “Damn herbalists.” Ren said, “I bet they have a cat too.”

Ren turned away from the house and began heading home, his dwelling beckoned to him and his hobby awaited his attention. Ren felt as though he had done a good job as he walked away unaware of the peering eyes watching him as he went.

2 - Life Of The Party

They all laughed. Even Chloe was laughing, but not on the inside and she suspected the same was true of her company. She excused herself, to the dismay of the duke's son. His eyes had been all over her this evening. She wore some tight lacy dress that her mother had bought her. It itched and tugged at her. She just wanted to get it off and get away from this party.

The hall was immense and brightly lit with dozens of colours of light. They moved and danced along with the music and when Chloe finally emerged from the doorway she felt as if she could breathe once again. Although her breathing would be better once she removed this monstrosity of a dress. But the fresh air would suffice for now.

She looked back towards the party. Sighed some relief to be leaving and made note of all the fumes pouring out of every opening in the duke's mansion. Mostly it was atmospheric fog for the occasion but Chloe wondered just how much of it was residual smoke from the whetgrass. She only rarely partook, it made her too quiet for these kinds of events.

Onward towards the gate she hailed a coach. It didn't take long for a passing carriage to pull over for her. The whirl of the floating vehicle made it hard to hear the driver, or maybe it was the blaring music of the party, regardless she climbed in.

Once inside Chloe ripped at the buckles on her shoes. High heeled jeweled things. Uncomfortable. She looked up. There he was again, Sebastian, the duke's son. Out in the courtyard looking for her, asking people if they'd seen her. The third group he asked pointed her way.

“Driver.” Chloe commanded. “Let’s move.” The coach began to roll out into the night. Chloe pulled off her gloves and undid her hair.

“Uh. Miss?” The driver asked. “Where we going?”

“The Rendal estate.” Chloe answered, awaiting his next question.

“Which one?”

“The big one.” Chloe sighed. “Some privacy?” She could see his eyes in the mirror.

“Right, Miss.” He said as he rolled up the privacy screen.

Chloe began removing her gown. Thankful to loosen her prison of clothing. The rest of her ride was quiet as she drifted through her thoughts.

Chloe was snapped back into the present when she overheard Bernard’s voice.

“This is a private residence.” The butler spoke loudly.

Chloe gathered most of her clothes and opened the coach door.

The driver was in the middle of explaining himself when Bernard caught sight of her.

“Just pay the man Bernard.” Chloe smiled, as she exited the the coach she was barely wearing anything at all. The back of her dress was open revealing her scar among other things to the driver now behind her.

“Of course.” Bernard replied as he handed her his jacket and proceeded to pay the driver.

Chloe continued walking up the long path to her home. The path was lined with gold that glowed in the night, lighting her way. The path was long enough to give any guests time to revel at her family’s wealth. The Rendals were not known for their modesty.

Bernard caught up to her, “That wasn’t very smart Chloe.”

“He won’t say anything.” Chloe replied.

“Yes he will.”

“They won’t believe him.”

“Maybe not.”

“So what’s the problem.” She huffed away the frustration. The long walk home was precious time. Time in between her many roles as a Rendal, when she could be herself. “Sorry.”

Bernard smiled at her. “So how was the party?”

“Perfect as usual.” She replied. “Not a thing out of place.”

“And Sebastian?”

Chloe rolled her eyes.

“Right.” Bernard agreed. They’d finally reached the house, it was several stories tall and twice that wide. Secluded among many tall trees to not be seen from far. From within the clearing at the front of the house, it stood aloof to an expectant awe, Chloe had none for it, and it stood aloof to that as well.

“I can take the rest of it for you.” Bernard held out his hand.

Chloe wiggled her remaining clothes off under the housecoat and handed them to Bernard, “Burn them.”

“You mother paid good money for...”

“She has more money.” Chloe rebutted. “I’m going to read.”

“Shall I see you to your room?”

“I’ll be in the study.” Chloe smiled. “Long night ahead of me.”

“Call on me if you need anything.” Bernard spoke earnestly.

“I will. Thanks.” Chloe smiled and then found her way upstairs aiming to avoid her parents.

Later that night Chloe was sitting in the candlelight among many books, reading absently. She was in her favourite housecoat and sitting in her home’s study room. The study was a simple room with most of the walls covered by bookshelves. The fireplace in the corner wasn’t lit. The night was warm enough without the extra heat. Chloe felt a tug at the back of her hair.

“Just a second Fleabite.” Chloe responded. “I’m nearly done with this chapter, then we’ll go.”

The dustsprite floated around to Chloe’s front side and smiled with its eyes. It had been months since Chloe and Fleabite started spending time together. Yet the little dustsprite was still a marvel to behold. Fleabite looked like nothing more than a floating ball of dust and soot with a pair a dark eyes.

Chloe noticed the creaking out front of the door and shoved Fleabite under the table and held him there. The door was opened quickly, as if to catch someone in the middle of mischief. Bernard poked his mustached face into the study with a wide smirk, “Chloe dear, will you be needing any snacks this evening?”

Chloe’s eyes were wide trying to think of a response while trying to hold Fleabite under the table. “No Bernard, thank you though.” She said. “I’m about done here and I’ll be heading to bed soon.”

“Very good.” Bernard replied, “Big day tomorrow, being well rested is just as important as being well learned.”

Chloe rolled her eyes and smiled. “Thank you.”

“Goodnight.” Bernard said as he retreated slowly from the doorway. Then he added abruptly, “Oh, and Mr. and Mrs. Rendal have already retired to their chambers. In case you were curious.” He winked and then left.

Chloe chuckled and then let up on Fleabite. “Sorry buddy. Bernard is cool and all, but he’s still a little too loyal to my parents.”

Fleabite squeaked in protest.

“I know, but if all goes well tonight, we won’t ever have to come back here.” Chloe turned back to her textbook and finished reading the last few pages as Fleabite breezily floated around the room.

Chloe’s studies kept most of her waking hours occupied. She was enrolled in the prestigious Aberfont Academy. All the women in her family had attended and graduated from the Academy, so of course

she was also expected to continue this tradition. However the Aberfont didn't teach anything practical in Chloe's mind. The school focused on politics and history. They abhorred the notion of training one's inner energy to use magic instead of relying on the grid system, but that didn't stop Chloe from seeking out old tomes and learning a few tricks for herself.

"Alright, let's get a move on."

Fleabite squeaked with joy. Chloe nearly squeaked back with excitement but then centered herself in the moment. A few deep breathes, just as Jak had taught her.

Chloe crept into the hall, and pulled out her crystal. The perfect palm sized sphere of enchanted glass was for the most part colourless but as Chloe concentrated a purple luminescence was emitted from within the orb.

She selected a spell and waited a moment for her crystal to charge. It pulled the energy from within Chloe instead of using the power grid provided by the Wizard Association. She was taught that when using unsavory kinds of magic it was best to pull from her own energy pool rather than risk being detected by an auditor. She also found it fun to practice and got excited over her steady improvement. She could now cast spells previously too draining and maintain them for longer periods of time.

Once this spell was fully loaded the luminescence of her crystal peaked. The energy inside silently emerged from the crystal and circled around her fingertips like slow moving lightning. It flowed up her arm and then all the way down to her feet. Encircling her totally for just a moment.

Chloe loved to feel that energy surround her, it was like an ecstasy. The sounds all around her and specifically of her footsteps were suppressed as she walked down the hallway from the study to

her bedroom. She return her crystal to her pocket as she passed her parents quarters but the effects of the spell remained.

Chloe could see the faint glow of torchlight through the door cracks. She was not concerned about them actually hearing her even without her magic. Her parents were often too engrossed in their own crystals to notice each other. The magic was more for fun and practice. Chloe pushed away any thoughts of concern for her parents and she continued her run down the hallway. Fleabite followed her joyously bobbing as he went.

She reached her room and entered slowly. Checking back to make sure Bernard hadn't been around watching her. She released the energy from her magic and closed the door. Her bedroom was a fabricated image of the daughter she ought to be. The room itself was lush with pillows and girly things. She didn't care at all for the decor, especially the arrangement of dolls that were set up in a display case as some form of shrine to her early years. She had never cared for the dolls as a child and now she found them downright creepy.

"Fleabite, would you mind?" Chloe asked.

Fleabite smiled and floated towards the far wall. Chloe followed him slowly, the tall window shed some wonderful moonlight into her room. It was a great tall window that stood much taller than her and nearly three times as wide. It had two frames in it that opened and several more that didn't. The moon was full, that was not by chance. Tonight was a special night for Chloe.

Fleabite flew swiftly into a small crevice in the stone wall as he had done many times before. From inside the wall he navigated to that familiar space and began pushing. The little dustsprite had a disproportionate amount of strength for his size and weight. He began bashing his core against a specific brick repeatedly. Slowly Chloe could see it moving. Bit, by bit, by bit. Until it was far

enough out that she could grasp the edges with her fingers and pull it out the rest of the way.

Fleabite looked tired, but happy to be useful. Chloe patted him gently, "Thank you."

Chloe didn't want to waste anymore time. She found herself accessing this hiding spot more and more lately. It was a small compartment, that was just big enough to house a set of clothes and a few tools. Chloe removed the clothes one article at a time. Everything was neatly folded and placed precisely to maximize the small space. Underneath the clothes lay a small metal tin. The tin had a simply design. It was flat black with a white inscription of her name. Inside the tin was a ring, a small bag of powder, three knives, and a set of tools in a small, well designed pouch.

Chloe removed her crystal from her pocket and then removed her housecoat. Her pale skin was clear of any blemishes except for the large scar on her back. She picked up the protective undergarments first. These briefs were unlike those ridiculous lacy things that stretched and pushed her body into false shapes. These undergarments were sturdy and built for support.

She reached for the leather pants next. They were designed for mobility of the highest order. Her mother would practically faint if she knew her daughter was out in public sporting anything but the most flowing of skirts or dresses. The undershirt was light and comfortable, the jacket was another work of leather, very fine quality. The light padding was useful in avoiding any bumps or bruises. She wouldn't hear the end of it if she damaged herself, but that no longer mattered, she could be bruised and cut all she wanted now.

Chloe was the prize of the Rendal family, she wouldn't simply be given to marry any prince that came along. She would be used as a bargaining chip to gain something from someone at some point. The

duke's son, Sebastian, was the most promising candidate, but Chloe hated him.

"How I've missed this leather." Chloe reminisced. She felt as though whenever she wore these clothes it was as if she had shaken off the dust from a dull dream and awoken to the hard and fast reality of Umbra, her chosen name. Fleabite floated around the window looking out with excitement. "I'm almost ready." Umbra reassured him. She knew Fleabite missed Jak. She missed him too.

Umbra was nearly fitted for her excursion. She wrapped a light scarf around her face just below the eyes, covering everything down to her neck. The scarf was a wonderful material that was easy to breathe through. She lifted her hood and tucked her long hair out of sight.

She slipped the ring onto her middle finger. The ring got a little stuck on it's way down her finger, but with a bit of effort it found its way. She felt instantly relaxed and limber. She was not exactly the most athletic girl growing up, since her parents didn't care for her doing anything boyish. But this ring had the power to make her as limber as a veteran dancer. Useful for all the climbing, jumping, and running she expected to be doing tonight.

Umbra holstered her knives, and pocketed her tools. She then took the small bag of powder and opened it. It was foul smelling powder, the result of some witch's stench not a quality of the product itself. The powder was a pale orange and very fine, almost dust like.

"I guess that's why they call it Dust." She noted.

Umbra pulled down her scarf enough to reveal her mouth. She wet her finger with the tip of her tongue and dabbed it into the powder. A tiny bit was all that was needed, she followed the instructions she'd been given to the letter. The substance would help her immensely but not without risks.

Umbra lifted the powdery finger to her mouth. She took a final glance around the room, making sure everything was in its place. She noticed her crystal still sitting on her housecoat. She reached out with her free hand and slipped it into her tool pouch.

Finally over towards the door, she listened for just a moment to reconfirm her parents' lack of lucidity. No sounds. She would be fine. She licked the powder off of her finger, the taste was quite pleasant. She was surprised, especially considering the stench it gave off.

"Huh, orange." Umbra laughed. But it didn't take more than a few seconds after she spoke for the substance to kick in. At first it was frightening, as if all her senses were exploding with stimuli. The room was as without stimuli as she thought it could be, however Umbra's senses were expanding, her awareness opening up to all the relative sensations available to her. The initial fear quickly left as she became accustomed to her new and improved senses.

Fleabite gave her a look of concern.

"I'm... okay." Umbra was transfixed. This was her first time on Dust. The substance worked exactly as advertised. She could now clearly hear her father snoring in his bedroom down the hall. Her mother lay beside him with the light on, reading a book on her crystal. Umbra could hear the tapping of her mother's finger on the crystal every few moments, she figured her mother was reading another fashion story, or some other literature with more visual information than language.

The dark corners that used to be in the room, seemed to vanish. Umbra was clearly able to see in the dark, she wondered how dark it would have to become for her to actually see nothing at all.

She could feel the air move around her, like little waves crashing onto the sands of her body. It was so obviously clear to her now that her room was full of drafts. The smallest of drafts that even the

most skilled builders would miss, but she could clearly feel them. She could even pinpoint the locations of all the little cracks in the stone bricks. But the biggest draft of all came from her large bedroom window.

As she looked towards the window she nearly became flooded with stimuli again. The view of the city had always been magnificent, but now it felt as though she could see farther and more than ever before. The one thing she loved about her bedroom was the stunning view, she would miss it, but she would be in the city from now on, instead of a prison looking upon it.

She moved to the window to see more clearly and a small tear dripped from her eye. She calmed her mind once again, using the techniques Jak had taught her. She wiped the tear away and opened the window. She looked down to the ground from the fourth floor. Her head was calm now, and she saw the familiar pathway down in a new light.

Fleabite followed her outside and buzzed happily.

Umbra sighed, "Freedom." She smiled at Fleabite and stuffed the bag of powder into a pocket, making sure it was secure. This was a valuable tool, she could see that already. Umbra looked back into the dark room. Everything was so clear to her now. She turned away and began her journey to the ground.

Her new life was about to begin.

3 - Wood For Brains

He finally did it, he had created his newest mobile tracking device. The small creature was mostly made of wood and powered by a crystal at it's core. The creature looked up into Beedel's dark eyes. Beedel looked back at his creation. The bright red orb eye was the centerpiece of the bug shaped machine. Long legs spread out along the table, they began to twitch.

"Easy now." Beedel smiled. "You're not quite ready to move around yet, I need to confirm that the start up process didn't fry you."

The creature shook its whole body in protest. Beedel laughed, his creations often had personalities of their own, that was the most unpredictable part of his craft.

"Just one second." Beedel gestured a single twiggy finger up in the air and jumped across the room. His workroom was spotless and masterfully organized. Beedel paused looking at his storage space and then opened a drawer. "No..." He continued looking. "Not here either."

The automaton was beginning to stand while Beedel was away, taking in their first few moments of existence slowly and trying to process the world. Beedel opened a small hatch in his desk, "Yes that's it." He twisted back towards his newest friend.

His creation was standing, not elegantly, but standing nonetheless. The small container Beedel had pulled from the desk slipped through his wooden fingers and tumbled along the floor.

"How are you doing that already?" Beedel asked.

"..." The creature moved as if it was responding, but not a sound came out.

“Right.” Beedel knelt over and picked up the container he’d just dropped. It wasn’t dented, but Beedel felt a tinge of anxiety as he opened it, knowing the fragility of the contents.

“This was my grandfather’s.” Beedel pulled a small green crystal out of the box. It was dulled from time, but had an inner brilliance to it. “I don’t know if it still works, or if it did before I dropped it.”

Beedel walked over to his creation. The creature looked up at him, hopeful and bright eyed. “Let’s find out together.”

Beedel gestured to his wooden friend with the crystal in hand. The creature’s torso twisted around and opened up with the fluidity of any well oiled machine. But Beedel’s creation was far from any machine, these automatons could learn and grow. The creature leaned forward to meet the crystal in Beedel’s hand. The small green crystal fit perfectly as the creature accepted it into its being. It spun again in the reverse process and closed itself up.

“So?” Beedel asked. The creature looked up at him. “Can you speak?”

“...” The creature tried, but again nothing came out.

“Shit.” Beedel sat down in his chair next to the desk. He looked over to his creation and wondered if the crystal was broken or if he had made a mistake. He reached toward the creature. “Alright then, let’s have it back.”

A shake of protest from the automaton.

“Fine.” Beedel retracted his grasp. “You can hold onto it. More importantly we’ll need to deal with our visitor from earlier.” Beedel got up and began stretching out his limbs. The automaton mimicked Beedel and began doing the same, now with a bit more stability in its movements. Beedel looked over and observed his creation. This one was moving around with much more efficiency every time he looked at it. A world a difference from his last attempts.

“You’ll need a name.” Beedel thought about it for a moment. “BugBot.”

BugBot gave him a wide eyed look. Beedel thought that was a yes.

“Good. I’ll need you tonight. Are you ready?”

“Eee” BugBot emitted some noise.

Beedel smiled. BugBot leaped from the table to his shoulder. Beedel was startled but he began to grow accustomed to BugBot’s rapid growth. He pulled on a book in a shelf near the only exit and one of the walls on the other end of the room began to slide away. The thud had startled BugBot, sending him reeling backward. BugBot tumbled to the floor but shook it off.

Once Beedel confirmed that BugBot was okay his attention returned to one of his most prized possessions. It waited for him in the darkness of the hidden room. The tall suit of armour was made mostly of metal, unlike most of Beedel’s creations. It needed to be, this power armour had all the latest arcane integration and even a couple of aftermarket mods. All that power coursing through the system would fry all but the highest quality woods, and being in the city didn’t give Beedel much selection of plant based materials.

The armour was twice as tall as him. When Beedel approached it in the darkness, it began to whirl and glow. It recognized his soul-signature, as Beedel had designed it to.

“Pretty cool, huh?” Beedel gloated.

“Eee. Eee.” BugBot agreed.

He tapped a trigger on the side of the torso and the armour began instantly shifting and moving in on itself. The torso completely opened up to reveal a cavity full of switches, monitors, and apparatuses. Then a small step ladder ejected itself from the waist of the armour and connected to the floor.

Beedel swiftly hopped into the familiar seat and strapped himself in. The ladder retracted and the chest plates began covering Beedel inside the suit. In a moment everything except his grainy face was covered by steel and technology. The suit began to whirl louder still with him in it. The glow of energy from within began brightening as Beedel focused his own energies into the armour.

Beedel took a few breathes. "Alright. We can do this."

BugBot looked up expectantly at Beedel.

"Don't worry you're coming too." Beedel placed a few quick commands inside his armour and it responded by extending an arm down toward BugBot and pointed to it's back with the other.

"C'mon up. Best seat in the house." Beedel laughed.

BugBot obeyed his creator's command but not before cautiously tapping at the metallic fist of the armour. Then he scurried his way up the arm and found is home directly behind the neck plate in Beedel's back.

"It might be a little early but, we don't have much time left." Beedel said. "Your first mission..." Beedel paused, "Is to track the intruder from earlier. Can you do that?"

"Eee." BugBot proclaimed.

"I need to fix your damn voice box."

4 - The Night Crowd

The night air was that perfect mixture of cool and dry that made for the best outings. Umbra was adorned with all of her favorite gear and she was hungry for some action. Novos was her home and it was massive. It was as big as the next 10 largest cities combined. Her hometown was nestled near the rim of Novos, where land didn't cost your firstborn's soul. Still a good distance from the center, but with the light rail, travel didn't take much time at all.

Umbra was headed in the direction of the rail station. She'd already snuck passed all her families guard and scaled the outer walls. Every step of her journey increased her excitement. Her destination being the most exciting of all.

But before that a quick stop. Umbra couldn't leave without a stop to her favorite local tavern. Jak's, as it was known by most, was a quaint little pub. She had been warned about places like these as a child. Among other useless jabber such as don't talk to strangers. However for a young girl a tavern like Jak's could be a dangerous place to stumble upon. Maidens went missing with far less effort.

Umbra walked briskly along the streets now, excited to see familiar faces. Jak's wasn't far from her current position and she felt she could almost hear the laughter from within. The crowds were out, heading to and from gatherings. Some of the wealthiest people lived in this area. She could make out a few faces, but none dared try to make out hers.

"Pardon me..." The man had knocked into her as he turned away from a shop eyes fixed on his crystal in hand.

Umbra pushed forward without a word or a second look.

"Well then." The man scoffed.

She smiled and muttered to herself, "That's right, don't mess with me."

Finally she reached Jak's. To Umbra, it was home. The first time she ran away from home she had gotten lost on the streets. Jak found her, but not before she'd been harassed and handled by a group of thugs.

Jak had saved her and tended to her. Jak listened, as she cried her life story and once she was done he calmly and sternly told her, "No one but you, controls your destiny."

Jak's words stuck with her even now. Umbra confidently strode through the doors and towards the bar. Jak met her gaze as he slowly wiped a draft mug clean of any water spots.

"What'll it be." He asked from across the bar as she approached. Jak was wearing his white stained apron. His fiery red hair stood up, shaggy and unkempt. His matching beard had begun showing traces of grey, but it only made him more attractive. Umbra felt a familiar stirring in her lower regions.

She was still under the effects of the Dust, and it was making all of her sensations more powerful. "One of the good stuff." For a few moments there had been silence, there usually was whenever Umbra walked through the door.

Jak didn't break his gaze while replying, "That'll be 3.50."

"How 'bout I pay you when I get back?" Umbra had the money, but this was all part of the game. Every syllable was exaggerated just the way she knew would get Jak's blood moving.

Jak was in no way weak willed, but that just goes to show how well Umbra now knew how to get under his clothes. "And what if you don't come back?" Jak was usually quite stoic, and to any outsider this would have seemed like a coy joke playing along with her game. But Umbra was sharp, especially with the Dust's enhancement, she saw his insecurity.

Umbra began, "Don't you worry, I'll be back before..." But she was interrupted.

“Umbra, where you off to?” His stench thickened the air, his voice was hoarse and dry from too much smoking. Thugg, was his name. Almost everyone in Jak’s had a nickname. Thugg unfortunately did not.

Thugg continued to assault her eardrums with his lack of volume control, “We’ll be missin’ you here, miss Umbra. Don’t leave us, we can change.” Thugg wasn’t relatively speaking a bad guy, just more than a little annoying and difficult to be around for anymore than a few seconds.

Umbra replied, “Thugg I’m just going on a little trip to the city, I’ll be back before you know it.” She winked to Jak.

That seemed to work, although Jak added a quick addition for good measure, “Go upstairs and lay down Thugg, Free room tonight...” Jak shot a sly glance to Umbra, “Umbra’s treat.” Then Jak hit her with a full smile. It drove her near mad.

Thugg proceeded to wander off, “Have fun Umbra, bring us back a present from the city!” Slowly up the stairs he went. To most it might have seemed like an early night, but Thugg’s schedule worked a little differently, he was plenty drunk and much past his bedtime.

Umbra checked the time on the old wall clock. Almost time to go. She looked towards Jak as if to say, where’s my drink? Jak understood. By now they had a sort of telepathic connection. Always able to know what the other was thinking, finishing each other’s sentences, that sort of thing. Jak poured her a shot of his homebrew. He kept it under the table, but in close reach. It was a fairly popular choice. Just another of Jak’s many talents.

She took the glass and sipped it, with some haste. She learned to savour the good moments of her life. So she savoured it, knowing that her night was not without risk.

Jak asked, “Do you remember your training?” It wasn’t a condescending question, it was almost Jak’s catch phrase. What’ll it be, was actually his catch phrase, but this was a close second.

“Of course. I had a great teacher.” Umbra looked Jak up and down, she tipped her glass, smiled, and took another sip.

“Good, you’ll need it. The spot is in the middle of the city, if things go south...” Jak paused thinking of the words he wanted to use.

Umbra interrupted, “I know the spot well. I’ve got this.” Suddenly Fleabite stuck his little face out of her cleavage. The dustsprite smiled at his old friend.

Jak returned the smile, “Looks cozy in there.”

“It is.” Umbra replied. Fleabite popped out and scanned the room. Jak waved him to his bowl. The tall glass bowl on the counter used to house a fish or two, but Fleabite has since taken it as his home. The water was gone but all the contents including a small toy castle remained. Fleabite floated along into his home and rushed into the castle.

“Good to see you too.” Jak laughed.

Umbra laughed too, “He’s in a mood a guess.”

They both took a moment to drink in the chatter of the tavern.

“You remember your spells too?” Jak broke the silence.

“It’s not like you to be so nervous.” Umbra responded.

Jak rolled his eyes, trying to look aloof.

“I know the place like the back of my hand and it’s not heavily guarded.” Umbra reassured him. Her confidence was sky high, playing Umbra always helped her feel so sure. The Dust was also helping.

“Good.” Jak smiled as another thought crossed his mind. Umbra could sense it on his face and she didn’t need the Dust to do it. She’d almost forgotten she had taken it. She was now so

comfortable with the effects, which is exactly what worried Jak. Umbra didn't understand why he was worried. She would describe it as being the most awake and sober she's ever felt, how could that not be a good thing. She was completely aware of her surroundings. She knew, for example, that Thugg had retreated to a room, and was now snoring peacefully in bed. No one in the room could even scratch their nose without her knowing about it. This would help her tonight and many nights henceforth.

"I'm good Jak." With her eyes she told Jak that she thought this was just wonderful. With her lips she told him what she wanted to do to him.

Jak had to admit her confidence was sexy. He truly loved her. Umbra didn't know this yet, but they both felt it. Their relationship was still young. Jak had learned that being too eager could scare a girl off, especially a caged bird like Chloe, who longed for freedom.

"Listen Chl... Umbra." Jak caught himself before accidentally uttering her real name. None in the bar knew it. But the slip up distracted him from his previous thought.

They shared a gaze.

He continued, "Don't get hurt." It was tough for Jak not to say how he felt. But he was confident in her skill. The setup was also ideal. He relaxed a bit remembering all their planning.

"I know this will end well for us, Jak. Have a little faith. I'll be back before you know it."

"I know it." Jak was all about the lame jokes. She liked that about him.

Umbra finished her drink, knowing she needed to hurry. She pulled her scarf up covering most of her face. Placed her glass down on the counter. She mouthed the words, I love you. Jak couldn't see it, but in his heart he felt happy. He waved her out.

The rest of the night was business as usual at Jak's Place.

5 - Late Night Visitor

Ren was sitting in his workshop tinkering on his latest project. Bulletsmithing was an long forgotten craft that had been passed down to Ren from his father. The workshop was out back behind his house. Ren owned them both since his mother's passing and his father's disappearance.

The house itself was modest, one of the smallest on the street. What made the property valuable was the workshop. It was almost as big as the house. Ren remembers many nights spent watching his father work his craft. Ren learned a lot just by observation. Even more when his father finally agreed to teach him.

Ren smacked his cheeks in unison to jolt himself awake. It would be another long night. His latest design was giving him some trouble and he had a hard time resting when his mind was fluttered with ideas. Ren held his tools and observed the bullet through a magnifying lens. A nearby monitor was connected to his crystal and it displayed some plans that Ren had previously drafted. It's glow and the light from a small spot lamp where Ren worked were the only sources of light in the room. Ren began to slowly etch runes into the bullet. He would then need to fill these runes with liquidized crystal, but he needed to focus on the etching first, any small mistake would mean wasted materials and time.

The shop was set up into three separate rooms. The first was mostly for storing supplies, metals, gunpowder, magical components. Ren had also turned it somewhat into this living space. There was a bed in one corner and a small kitchen in another. He rarely went into the house anymore if he could avoid it.

The second room was the forge. Real hot, all the time. Shelving along every wall, filled with more supplies. The forge was set up right in the middle of the room. Large exhaust shoots leading up

through the ceiling. Ren tried his hand at forging knives, swords and other tools with some success. But in his line of work these mundane blades were considered no better than a butter knife. At least his bullets could pack a punch if need be.

Any audit that turned violent would need to be resolved with magic. Everyone and their grandmothers had a crystal these days and auditors had to be prepared to fight off all kinds of spells. Although generally the low level wizards like Ren never had to go into any real danger. That was reserved for the higher ups, another reason Ren didn't mind staying away from the Tower.

The night went on and Ren continued to work, he scrapped a couple bullets but his success rate for etchings was over fifty percent. Ren's work desk was a large U shape that covered all three doorless walls. The room itself was rather large, but it appeared smaller due to the clutter. Ren hadn't kept things very organized, but he knew where most things were. That or they'd turn up eventually.

Bulletecraft was Ren's true passion. Nothing else in this life made him feel alive. When he got into that special zone of focus, he could work for hours without even realizing that time was passing at all. To observe him in this state was akin to watching the waves hitting the beach, or the clouds rolling over the sky. He was totally immersed into the universe, in a trance like state. He loved it, he lived for it. Testing out the bullets at a range was fun, he'd even sold a few off once or twice, but for Ren nothing compared to the craft.

Ren found peace in simply making the bullets, infusing them with magical properties, using his creativity to design new and powerful bullets. He could create bullets that bounced off surfaces, or bullets that exploded on impact. Some bullets could turn round corners, others could disappear only to show up later behind the target.

Some of Ren's favorite bullets were his elementals. The ice one in particular tickled his fancy.

The materials were rare, he found himself searching dark shops, and interacting with questionable characters just to get leads. Ren may have been cowardly when it came to auditing, but his courage shined when he was looking for new components. He used old alchemical texts for inspiration, witches' journals, hermit scrolls, you name it. Ren could extract formulas and ingredients from various spells and potions to create nearly any kind of effect he imagined. He was surely talented, his father had told him many times, and Ren's results confirmed it now.

However despite all his talent and experience, he could never recreate the greatest bullet of all; The Golden Bullet.

Ren was told that these were legendary magic bullets created long ago and that he should protect them at all costs. The Golden Bullets were famous in the bullet crafting world and to an extent a portion of the general population too as myth or legend. Wars had once been fought to obtain a single one, and now Ren supposedly had three. His father had left them behind when he disappeared. He hadn't decided if he believed that these were the real deal or not, but years have passed since then and he has yet to test even one of the bullets. He didn't know what they did, just that they were supposedly world changing.

It was a quiet night, the cries of the city had already begun to lessen into slumber. Ren was rolling one of the Golden Bullets between his fingers, contemplating new ideas. Sketches and notes littered the table in front of him. He was lost in the zone of focus, staring at everything and nothing all at once.

Suddenly there was a knock on the door at the far side of the workshop. Ren wasn't entirely sure he had actually heard any knocking at all or if the drowsiness was playing tricks on him. Ren

wasn't expecting company, he never expected company, especially not at this hour. He hadn't even considered getting out of his chair yet, when he heard a terrible sound of a smashing of a door, his door. Ren's eyes widened and sprung into action, that door was still two rooms over, he had time.

He fumbled for some of the bullets lying around his work table. He could hear heavy footsteps, they shook the whole workshop with every step. Ren found the bullets he wanted very quickly, but not his gun. He would have cursed his lack of organization but the sound of a second door bursting open made him lose that train of thought, and regain focus on the present danger.

Ren's fear immediately rose and he remembered that the inner door hadn't been locked. "The bastard didn't even check!"

Just then Ren noticed his gun belt hanging off the side of the work table. He leaped toward it, tumbling to the floor. He grabbed his gun out of the belt, then popped the revolving cylinder open. It had three slots and Ren's hands nervously began loading in bullets. He dropped several in the process, but managed to get two in fairly quickly.

He could hear those powerful footsteps, approaching methodically. The steps sounded metallic against his concrete floors. They stopped right before the final door.

Ren noticed he still had the Golden Bullet in hand. A thought came to his mind that this may be his last chance to find out if these things were real or not. He loaded the Golden Bullet into the final chamber and rotated it to be his first shot. When he flipped the cylinder closed, he suddenly became calm.

He felt powerful, could it be the Golden Bullet or maybe just the adrenaline rush kicking in. Ren didn't have time to decide. Ren lifted his arm towards the doorway, he was still on his ass in the corner of the room but he was ready for whatever might come

through. There was a moment of silence. In the distance he could hear the train zooming by. The door knob jittered.

“So now he tries the door.” Ren scoffed and then he cocked his gun, ready to see what the Golden Bullet had to offer.

Ren wasn't too shocked when a hulking suit of armour came bursting through the door. At first Ren wasn't exactly sure what he was looking at. It looked like some power armour he'd seen before but it was heavily modified. The intruder had two swords at his side. Although both the armour and the swords were of a modern design, Ren still appreciated the craftsmanship.

Ren's attention snapped to the present when he realized that he had spent too much time gawking at the craftsmanship, he shouldn't have given the intruder so much time to act. He stabilized his hand and aimed his gun at the intruder's chest.

The intruder however seemed to be frustrated. Ren cocked his eyebrow trying to understand what he was seeing. The suit of armour, and the intruder inside it, was stomping its feet and shaking its fists, one of which was still holding the door knob. The door had been shattered and the pieces lay on the floor, but it looked as though that wasn't the intruder's intention.

The armour was nearly two meters tall and covered the entirety of the intruder's body. But these newer models still allowed for the optimum mixture of mobility and defense. The adrenaline was still pumping hard in Ren's brain. He could barely think and he couldn't stop himself from standing up and shouting, “Get the fuck out of here! I'm warning you.” Ren's gaze was strong, but his hands were weak. The armour stopped mid stomp and turned slowly to face him. One arm began moving up towards the intruder's head.

Ren yelled another warning, “I said stop!”

The hand continued calmly upward and then tapped a button at the side of the helmet. The face plate lifted upward, collapsing and

then resting on top of the intruder's head. The face inside spoke to Ren calmly with a dry and high pitched voice.

"No, you told me to leave, not to stop." It was the voice of an Arborian. His short green foliage-like hair would have given it away if the bark-like skin hadn't already. Ren hadn't interacted with many Arborians. On the rare occasion that he did see one they always seemed to be so reserved, not unlike everyone else in this city Ren supposed.

"Umm, yeah... I guess." Ren's confidence was fading quickly and he lowered his gun. He was still ready to use it, but somehow the tension had faded.

The invading Arborian looked at a monitor attached to his arm and spoke once more, "There's no black magic." He seemed genuinely surprised. Arborians had a hard time being anything other than genuine. "But that doesn't mean we are in the clear."

Ren suddenly remembered that this was still an intruder situation and pulled his gun upward again. "Why are in my shop?"

The Arborian stopped looking around for a moment and seemed to notice Ren and the gun pointed at him for the first time. His eyes lit up with excitement. "Woah man, does that thing shoot bullets? Classic!"

Ren was lost for a few moments. He steadied his aim with his free hand and regained his resolve.

The Arborian raised an eyebrow. "You don't think that a simple metal slug can penetrate this armour do you? Do you know how power armour works? It's more than just metal, it's infused with the arcane. It'll stop any simple projectile."

Ren cracked a smile, the Golden Bullet was no simple projectile. But if they weren't real he'd be in big trouble. His magic bullets could do some damage to modern power armour, but rotating the

cylinder now would make him give up his advantage. Failing to kill this guy would only make him mad.

Ren's mind wandered for a moment when he realized this must have been the tallest Arborian ever, usually they don't get far above a meter at tallest. He didn't dwell on it, and tightened his trigger finger. "I don't want any trouble, if you leave now we can forget all about this." He was hoping he still looked at least somewhat threatening.

"I'll be asking the questions here, sir!" The Arborian really exaggerated the last word and it hit at Ren's funny bone. Something about the voice's pitch rising even higher. "Now tell me what you've been up to, sneaking around my property, being all suspicious like."

Ren quickly realized just how mistaken he had been earlier. It wasn't a green mage that lived in that house, but a craftsman like himself.

"Oh geez, man. I'm sorry, I'm actually an auditor. I was checking out a power spike at your place on my way home from work. I assumed you were just a green mage from the tree out front."

"Oh, you liked the tree? Some of my finest work, it's actually a guardian." The Arborian had dropped most of his caution and the armour started to whirl and buzz. Bolts spun, plates shifted and the whole chest cavity began to open up revealing a normal sized Arborian inside an over sized suit of armour.

The magical arrays surrounding the intruder's arms and legs inside the armour vanished as he hopped out of his seat. A little step ladder ejected from the waist to the ground, serving to prop the power armour. Presumably he was supposed to use the little ladder but his agility was far beyond that.

Ren questioned, "Wait that tree is a fake? It looked so real."

The Arborian responded, “You haven’t been around many trees I take it? It’s actually somewhat based off of real genetic material and created as an exoskeleton for my sensory equipment to keep it hidden and protected.”

Ren thought this was a genius idea, but had other questions. “I really wasn’t expecting to see an Arborian. Let alone one covered in power armour. Aren’t you forbidden from using our technology?”

“That’s a normal misconception. Most of my people follow the old ways and refuse this new magic. That’s why they all live out in the shitty woods.” Beedel replied as he looked around the shop in awe. “But I love the stuff.”

“I had no idea.” Ren commented.

The Arborian continued, “Most humans don’t know much about us, but uh, sorry about your doors. I thought you were trying to stop my research. I’m Beedel by the way, Beedel Circuitwood.”

Ren sighed some relief. “I’m Ren and I can fix them later. Do you drink tea?”

Beedel was well on his way snooping around the workshop. Ren didn’t mind, his fatigue was setting in now that the adrenaline was fading.

Beedel casually responded “Yes, Honey Leaf, if you have it.”

Beedel followed up with a compliment, “Your shop here is quite a wonder to behold.”

“Thank you, I spend most of my time in here now days.” Ren felt some pride to be complemented. “Is that a Phoenix MK4? But modded right?”

“Good eye, most don’t recognize it anymore.” Beedel responded as he continued looking around. “I’ve swapped out the thrusters from an old 67’ SunDevil.”

“Shut up. That was my Dad’s favourite Armour.”

Beedel smiled, “The man has good taste.”

Ren felt prideful as he walked to the doorway. It had been so long since he'd thought about his father fondly. "Milk or sugar?" His hand instinctively reached for the knob that was now laying on the floor and then he paused, gazing at the knob for just a moment before moving on into the other room.