

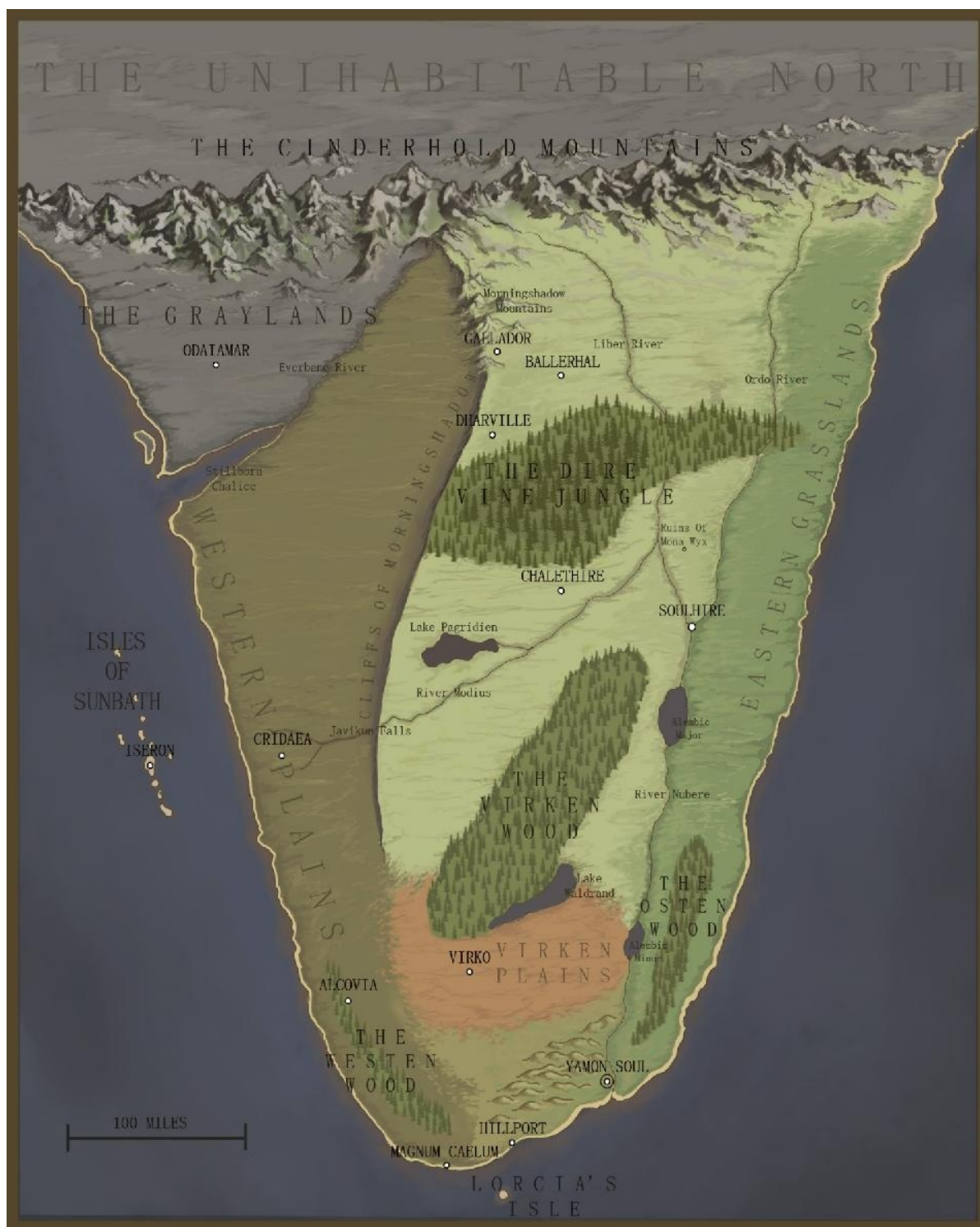
The World of Voulhire

While the country of Voulhire will develop organically for the casual reader, the curious may take note of a more in-depth gaze into Voulhire at their leisure. The link below will take you to further readings on Voulhire, as well as the multiverse in which it lies.

[EXTENDED READING](#)

WE ARE VOULHIRE

A New Arrival under Great Skies



Prologue

It was an ordinary night until the portcullis shattered, and Castle Hillport's foreyard rang with the metallic scream of swords unsheathing. The guards shouted warnings at the intruder, their hounds barking in kind. But soon the barks turned to whimpers and the guards were shouting in fear.

The head servant emerged onto the high porch. She didn't need her lantern to see the guards and their dogs circling about the yard as though caught in a violent storm, their armor catching the light of the full moon.

The servant rushed back inside, ordered the guards to bar the doors, then ran to find the captain.

The eight guards in the main hall dropped the bar at the very moment an unseen force caused all the wood under the archway to rock. One of the guards was thrown off his feet. The sergeant noted the doors had blasted outward, as though they had been not slammed by some ram, but rather pulled from the outside.

The doors shook twice more in rapid succession.

All eight guards surrounded the door, their swords pointed at it.

The captain's boots came clanking down the stairs. "How many are there? Did anybody see them?"

"No, captain," the sergeant replied. "But there's magic involved."

"You're certain?"

The room of stone rumbled as the doors, with one final pull, exploded from the castle, their splinters scattered to the starry void. But the bar remained, undamaged, across the open archway.

Archers from the roof came rushing down along the mezzanine, trained around the main hall. Their bows strained in loud creaks as they knocked their arrows, all heads pointed at the doorway.

The night went quiet once again as the splinters fell slowly over the yard, and upon the tall staircase of the porch. A breeze picked up, and the main hall was

suddenly drafty, but the guards remained watchful, the captain poised behind his shield and mace.

The silence was broken by footsteps, a soft beat climbing the porch stairs.

The guards and captain tightened the hold on their weapons and shields; the archers tightened the strings of their bows.

The footsteps were slow but unnervingly constant, their pattern an inexplicable portent of something unrelenting, something without mercy.

At the horizon of the porch, a figure rose: a blue robe decorated in black triangles. The man who wore it crossed the porch and the threshold, passing beneath the unbroken bar, and came into the main hall. Though his hood was behind his back, his countenance betrayed no apprehension; he did not even acknowledge the forty arrows trained upon him. They all recognized him, however, the fair skin, distinct jaw, and hair as black as the sky behind him.

“Magistrate...” the guard captain uttered, stepping forward, then reigned in his befuddlement with a timbre of authority. “What is the cause for this?”

The blue-clad magistrate stopped into the middle of the hall, still refusing to acknowledge his surroundings or the damage he had caused.

“Take me to Lord Orlin.”

The captain lowered his shield and raised his mace. “You’re going nowhere but to prison for vandalism and assault!” He looked to his sergeant. “Arrest him.”

The sergeant paused, then looked to his guards. “Men, escort the magistrate into town.”

The guards gingerly surrounded the man in the blue robe. Two of them stepped alongside him, each reaching for one of his arms. The moment they touched him, the steel of their gauntlets went hot, blood-red and steaming. They struggled to pull them off as the heat spread through the rest of their armor.

“Loose!” the captain commanded.

All forty of the archers on the mezzanine released their arrows, their bowstrings snapping almost in unison. The arrows swished across the room toward the center, but never reached their target; every one of them vanished within inches of the man in blue. None of the archers had time to witness this trick, for they all were struck dead by their own arrows, some falling over the railing to the stone floor.

The two arresting officers lay helpless as their armor melted upon them.

Six standing guards, including the sergeant, escaped the castle through the open archway.

“Cowards!” the captain cried out after them.

The fleeing soldiers were met on the porch by a little man in black, who landed there from above the portico. He dispatched two of the guards with his bare hands, breaking a neck and crushing a throat. The guards who made it on ahead were met by another man, this one standing seven feet tall, storming up the porch steps, swinging an eight-foot sword. One swing ejected three legs from their stumps, sending their owners tumbling down the steps. A quick sidestep and another swing by the giant cut another cowardly guard almost in two. The last guard was picked up by a single giant hand and flung against the bar that crossed the open doorway, breaking his back.

The magistrate, so still that not even the hems of his blue robe answered to the draft, looked ahead to the guard captain.

The captain threw his mace and shield aside. He wound up a spell of luminous orange in the palm of his hand and cast it at the magistrate. But instead of projecting, the spell was forced back through the captain’s arm, illuminating his veins, then exploded out of his eyes. He collapsed like a straw mattress.

The magistrate looked to his two allies on the porch, the giant with the even bigger sword and the small martial artist. He said to them, “Guard the entrance.”

The bigger man stepped forward and took his sword to the solid wooden bar, breaking it in half.

The smaller man sneered at the act. “Oh, look at me, I can chop some wood!”

The magistrate proceeded through the castle to the stir of yet more guards; he didn’t break stride as he flung them against walls and crushed their bodies with their own armor.

The last twelve guards retreated to a corridor on the third floor, at the end of which stood the iron-studded door to Lord Orlin’s chambers. They pointed their swords and halberds at the approaching magistrate; one of them was trembling.

Without so much as a twitch of his eyelid, the magistrate pulled the men into a straight line, crushing them into a battering ram of flesh and steel. The block they formed was so tight that blood dripped from it like a wrought sponge. The human ram flew straight through the lordly chamber door, chunks of stone and flecks of mortar following the frame. The ram of flesh dropped to the floor with a splash of blood, and the magistrate entered. A gentle fire gave light to a room with a table and a chair, both of which cast long shadows. Seated in the chair was a pudgy, middle-aged man, his round face ensconced in the bushy collar of a fur robe. Standing beside him, her feet locked in a battle stance, was a woman in boiled leather armor, a dagger in each hand, glaring with loyal savagery at the

intruder.

Nevertheless, Lord Orlin regarded the magistrate with fear. “Meldorath...” he said. “Why are you doing this?”

The magistrate stepped into the room. “You have been found out, my lord.”

Orlin tilted his head. “What is this, you say?”

The magistrate answered, “All of those dinner parties and overnight stays once seemed so charitable, to give the common children a taste of nobility. But whose taste was the true object of those frequent occasions, my lord?”

With a gasp, the lord drew back against his chair.

“I’ve guarded this man for years,” the leather-clad woman asserted with a scowl as sharp as her daggers. “Everyone in this castle knows he’s never touched a child.”

The magistrate looked at her. “Everyone in this castle will be remembered for abetting him.”

“I loved those children!” Lord Orlin protested. “I invited them to my home and we socialized as equals. No one understood them as I did! It was I who have aided them in matters they would never have discussed with the adults of this town, even their own parents!”

“They’re not afraid anymore,” said the Magistrate. “Several of them have already started speaking, speaking about you.”

Lord Orlin’s round face went cherry-red. He growled, “What witchcraft is this?”

“I am no witch, and you are no longer Hillport’s lord. In the name of King Wilhelm, and by my authority as magistrate, I seize your assets, including Hillport and its holdings, your titles, and your freedom.”

The lord’s bodyguard lunged across the room with speed that impressed even the magistrate. All the same, he projected her against the ceiling, disintegrating her with blinding luminosity, until all that remained of her was a shadow on the stone.

In a panic, Lord Orlin jumped from his chair, scampering past the magistrate.

And the magistrate let him go.

Frantically, the lord ran through the hillside town in the dead of night, slamming on doors, shouting in the streets, traversing even the side streets of dirt, professing to the moon that he had harmed the child of no one, until finally he was arrested and held on charges of undisclosed perversion.

Through the following days, the town was curious, then the evidence came to bear.

It wasn't a week later that the small-town jail was stormed by the people. Lord Orlin was dragged out and set upon. Only the smallest circle of the mob could have known if he was still alive when his body was brought to a pit outside of town and burned. The same mob might have acted against the king himself, if His Majesty did not confer lordship of Hillport upon their heroic magistrate, who single-handedly closed this unspeakable chapter in their town's history.

* * *

Three months later, a woman came to Castle Hillport. She entered that bedroom on the third floor, the one with the table, chair, and fireplace. She wore a robe of green hemmed black, her hood pulled back over hair of blazing red.

"Lord Meldorath," she said. "You are under arrest."

His chair facing the fire, the lord turned his head halfway to her and calmly asked, "By whose authority?"

There was fear on the face of this hardened mage-commander as she answered, "His Majesty, the king."

"And the charges?"

"You know the charges," the commander replied. "We do not live in the Lands of the Princes; people are not toys."

"Am I to presume there will be no trial?"

"It is the king's wish that you come quietly, my lord."

"He means to execute me quietly."

"Think what you wish. Half the Eastern Army surrounds this castle, and I am not the only mage among them."

"Yet you stand alone now."

The commander swallowed, and nodded. "The king commanded that I act respectfully."

The hint of a smile appeared on one corner of the lord's mouth. "I wonder if his friendliness was for the sake of me, or for the sake of you?" He regarded her for another moment, drinking her fear. Then, slowly, he stood. "So be it, woman." He pulled his hood over his eyes. "Do unto me as your liege commands."

He followed her quietly out of the room, where ten soldiers of magic were

waiting, their leather armor tucked under black robes. They surrounded him as the commander guided the procession through the castle. Other soldiers, who were positioned along the halls, mages and swordsmen alike, retired their posts as the procession passed them. By the time the lord was stepping out onto the porch under the afternoon sun, a hundred soldiers were leaving with him, and there were many more waiting in the foreyard. All exited the castle's property and a procession formed, then marched down the hill, through the central street of Hillport, toward the harbor and the great ocean before them.

Townspeople of this lower-class speck on the Voulhirian shore came out to see the solemn procession. It may well have been every soul who lived there watching as the lord made it to the docks, to the ship that awaited him. All made way as Lord Meldorath stood before it on that bright, late-summer day. Every soldier, whether they wielded magic or steel, kept their good distance, but watched him well. Most of them were sweating under the sun, but none dared wipe it from their faces.

Before he boarded, Meldorath turned his shadowed face to the arresting commander, the red-head in green and black who stood behind him, and saw the eyes of every citizen and soldier that watched him. For a moment, he had something to say—a final message for the king of Voulhire—but thought better of it. Instead, he turned back to the ship, ascended the ramp, and disappeared within its lower decks.

A team of mages brought a wind that pushed the ship gently away from shore.

The soldiers, commanders, and townspeople all watched quietly until the ship faded into the blue horizon.

I am Galen, from the Lands of the Princes

Once, there lived a wise and wicked ruler of a vast and powerful nation. Throughout the world he was known as the Emperor of Lullabies. An innocent name, I know, one almost childish. But the people who gave him that name, my people, we were innocent... once.

The Emperor of Lullabies had four sons, each with a legitimate claim to the ultimate inheritance, each with the desire to run his hand along the arm of the towering opal throne, replacing all prior fantasies with swift and fervent innovation for the whole world; we humans could only guess what was stopping their father now from darkening the Splintered Sea and taking all the isles of men, or, perhaps the more foreboding, what admonitions against their power lay beyond uncharted oceans.

One day, the emperor came to suspect that his sons had resolved their differences in a quiet conspiracy against him. Together, the emperor believed, they planned to parcel his continent equally among themselves once he was overthrown, like good brothers.

“With time,” said the emperor to his generals, “the waves of desire will always flatten the sands of the Earth.”

And with that, he arrived at a decision.

The emperor removed the four princes from his land, giving each of them one of a small chain of islands off the mainland of his empire, in our Splintered Sea. He also gave each of his sons a small army and an arsenal of weapons for the defense of their holds against invaders, for the humans who spanned the countless islands of the Splintered Sea were a restless lot, not to be trusted, and these four particular islands were beautiful and prosperous, and the princes were happy for a time.

But the emperor knew that these sons of his, the true restless ones, would soon enough vie to hold all four of the paradise islands, thus becoming the sole heir to their father's empire.

And to the emperor's satisfaction, it was so.

Within two years, his sons were locked in civil war, using the human natives of these four islands as their soldiers. The geography and natural resources of the islands, as the emperor had planned, gave each prince no advantage over the

other. Thus, the war dragged on, like fingernails cracking in the dirt, for years.

For decades.

As a human on any one of these four principalities, if you were not a business owner or merchant, or in some way contributing directly to the economy, your life was spent in grinding poverty among the diseased and starving. But if you did hold such a fortunate career, then you spent every day of your life looking over your shoulder, because the princes targeted you above all: you, who gave strength to their brother's holdings.

In the Lands of the Princes, it was death by the sword, or a slow starvation.

When the opportunity came for my escape from the island called Blackrose, I didn't even consider the details. I ran for the docks. Like a hunted deer I bolted through an evergreen forest, down a hill, arrows smacking into the trees I passed, chipping the bark.

I broke from the trees and reached the shore as the sun fell behind the land at my back. I was lucky enough to find an unlucky crab in my path and scooped it up without stopping. I reached the dock, where a ship was anchored. I ceased my pounding stride against the ramshackle wood only when I came within speaking distance of a lofty man who guarded the ramp. I think he would have split me in half with the silver axe on his back had I gone a step further.

"Are you to commandeer my ship with that cheese cutter, boy?" he asked with a slow and basso voice.

I looked down at my hands: A struggling crab in one, a dagger in the other. I looked up at the captain, "It's for crabbing, sir..." I turned my head around at the beach and the tree line. They were coming.

The guard looked past me at them. "Whatever trouble you're in, I can't help you."

I'd been running from them all my life, but now it was either this boat or my death.

"Can I speak to the captain?"

"You already are."

I threw my knife and my crab into the water and pulled the papers out of my bag, papers which had been left for me by a stranger. I knew what the papers said, but I didn't know if it would change the mind of this resolute bulwark.

The brawny captain looked over these papers with heavy regard, then glared at me. Finally, he sighed. "I guess this makes you my problem, after all."

The wood of the dock began to shake as they came charging.

The captain stepped aside for me. "Onboard."

I walked past him, only looking back when the captain was standing between me and those who came for me. In contrast to the captain, my five pursuers were disheveled, armored in torn leather and rusted iron.

“That’s a dangerous criminal you’re harboring,” the foremost pursuer said to the captain.

The captain replied, “The only thing I am harboring is my ship.”

“Then stand aside.”

“I cannot do that,” said the captain. “This man is a citizen of my country. It’s my charge to deliver him home.”

“He’s tricked you!” said the sniveling soldier.

“I’ve been tricked before,” said the captain. “The world yet spins.”

The face of the man in torn and rusted armor was consumed with helpless hate. “If you knew what this man was capable of, you’d stand aside and forget you ever saw him.”

The captain replied, “Whatever he is, he is one of ours now.”

Three of them drew an assortment of makeshift weapons. “We will burn that ship of yours to the ground.”

The captain raised a brow. “You mean to the water?”

“You got ten seconds.”

The captain rubbed his chin. “Can you count so high?”

Before the one in front could start counting, or maybe answer the captain’s question, he and his companions were splashed with a dozen arrows. Three of them went down. Two of them lunged forward with their weapons and their rage.

One of them was beheaded by the shining axe fresh off the captain’s back, and the other took the silver axe into his thinly armored chest with such force that the reflective blade almost fully disappeared. In fact, the axe favored its new lodging so much that it broke free of the shaft and followed the dead man over the edge of the dock into the choppy green water.

“I knew I should have rebinded that damn thing!” the captain roared as he inspected the now bladeless shaft.

Someone from the ship called back, “If you had, you would have went right into the water with him!” He laughed. “You would have drowned trying to pull that stupid thing back out!” Other members of the crew laughed as an impression was made of the captain desperately prying his axe out of a corpse.

“It was sterling silver,” the captain grumbled back as though in defense. He returned the shaft to the fixture on his back, then noticed I was still standing there behind him. “What did I say?”

I quickly walked the rest of the way to the ship.

“See the good in everything, and the best of it will find you.”

My grandmother used to tell me that. I wish I could say this opportunity came because I always followed that advice. The truth is, I hadn’t brought the words to mind since I was a child, watching the elders bury her. But as I stepped up onto the deck of that ship, as darkness came to the sky, the words returned like a blow to my head, and I swore I would never forget them again.

Those papers were like magic in my hand. Could I have done this before, just walked up to such a vessel and declare citizenship? How difficult could it have been to write my own papers?

But it wasn't even worth thinking about. I was here now, and I was happy.

I was soon ushered down below.

The crew was an eccentric bunch. They stared with big eyes and laughed at seemingly random times. That isn't to say I should have expected anything else from those who would brave the waters of these islands. I was grateful to them for that.

As for the passengers, some of them looked even worse off than I was.

The ship rocked and creaked as I huddled with a blanket in the depths of the lower level, where the rafters above us leaked onto the splintered boards beneath us. This open level of the ship, which we shared with stacks of crates and barrels, was lit with a few twinkling lanterns.

A man sat on a crate next to mine, sniffing over a wooden bowl of pork-fat stew. He looked around for something, then looked up at me.

“Got a spoon or somethin’?” he asked.

I shook my head.

The room rocked slowly back and forth as I sat on that broken crate. I was told the voyage would take a week or maybe a little longer than a week.

I wasn’t thinking about how I was going to pass the time or how I was ever going to sleep on this swaying ship. I thought once or twice about the integrity of the incessantly creaking vessel but even that thought soon drifted away.

I couldn’t reason at the time why I was so afraid of death in my homeland yet so accepting of it here on this unstable boat. Looking back on it now, I think it was because I finally had hope. It almost didn't matter if the hope panned out. It felt so good just to have it.

Presently, the sullen heads around me rose like an alley full of stray cats. Their voices heralded the arrival of a fiery man with a long white beard and big eyes. He had a bounce to his step as he danced into our midst with the silliest moves I

had ever seen. But they were fun, and I could tell by the look on his face that he was a man who loved to entertain.

Of course, I had no idea who he was, but some of the others recognized him, gleefully and energetically applauding this strange man of advanced years as he centered himself among us.

“Good evening, boys and girls of all ages!” the fiery man called across the room. His high-pitched voice sounded as old as I would have expected, but it was full of life and gently commanding, like a wise but silly granddad. “We have a long journey still to come!” His face turned to address my side of his tiny audience. The lantern cast harsh shadows on his face—a face every bit as fearsome as it was reassuring. “That should come as little comfort to those who have been with us for so long already, but don't forget...” he gave a smile that was bright and optimistic, “You're going to Voulhire!”

“Tell us again about Voulhire, Old One!” one of the passengers called out.

The other passengers loudly expressed their approval.

At first, I was struck with grief for the man whose distant juniors elected to call him *old*. I don't know exactly what it was that made me realize I was wrong—maybe it was the solemn tone of the delivery, maybe it was the way their eyes beheld him with wondrous rapture. All the same, I saw that they were honoring him. As soon as I did, I realized that the word had so offended me because of my homeland, where *old* was a title apportioned to those who could neither fight nor bear children for the endless war: a person forgotten, deserving of neither good things nor bad things, a person whose fate bore no consequence at all.

It seemed there were places where this was not so. Perhaps Voulhire was such a place.

“Tell you about Voulhire?” the old one replied to the crowd with a teasing grin. “But I've told you already! And there's so much else with which to entertain you before you see the place for yourself!”

“This one hasn't heard!” one passenger called, pointing at another who had boarded from the same dock as I. “He just got here!”

“Aha!” The old man regarded the passenger with open arms like an incantation. “Tell me, man of the Princes' Islands, for what part of Voulhire are you bound?”

The passenger replied, “I'm going to a town called Virko, Old One.”

“Virko!” the old one echoed loudly for all to hear. “A dark city, but so prosperous! You will find good fortune there, no doubt at all!”

Then he turned his big eyes to another countryman of mine, sharply

recognizing each new face in this dim lower level. “What about you there, with the spectacles, for what wonder are you bound?”

“I’m taking a river ferry up to Soulhire, Old One.”

“Soulhire!” the old one shouted up at the leaking ceiling. “The capital of Voulhire! A most exquisite gem of history! Be ever observant, young one...” He shook his finger sternly at the man. “Don’t get too distracted by all its politics, and you will learn much. And you, you there!”

A man in the corner looked startled, as though it were a crime to use the tiny candle in the lantern to warm his backside. “Oh...” He looked around sheepishly. “I’m going to take my vows in Yamon Soul.”

“A man of faith!” The old one held his hands together in prayer. “Unless you are merely smitten by paintings of the ancient gardens of Holy Yamon Soul! The place itself is ever the more intoxicating than any likeness you’ve seen, I promise you all!”

Then the old one turned to me, welcoming my presence with his bright eyes. “And what about you, young one?” He stepped closer until he was hovering over me. “What good city of Voulhire has the honor of delivering you from a lifetime of war?”

As respectfully as I could, I uttered, “I’m disembarking at *Magnum Caelum*, old man—er—*Old One*.”

He gasped. “Did you say... *Magnum Caelum*?” Then he reached to heaven and cried out as though to the throne of God, “*Magnum Caelummmmmmm!*” Then he went silent. His eyes dimmed. He scratched his head. “Never heard of it.”

The passengers around me laughed loudly.

I looked down.

Then the old one gave a small and genuine laugh. He stepped even closer to me, so that he could whisper and be heard. “But I knew you first, didn’t I?”

“I... I guess so.”

“That means you’re the important one, doesn’t it?”

“I...”

“Tell me then...” the old one propped his foot up on the crate I was sitting on, “what does this *Magnum Caelum* have to offer such an important man as you?”

I swallowed hard, shortening my neck in the presence of the towering old man. “My great uncle owns a forge there,” I replied hesitantly, but I was sure he wanted to know more than just that. I added awkwardly, “He didn’t even know I existed until recently. Now he’s dying. He might be dead already, I don’t know. His executor labored to find an heir for his business...” I looked down at the

documents in my hands. “His papers found their way to me, and here I am.”

I was ashamed at how vague my story was, but it was everything I knew.

The old one lifted up his features in a small but unbreakable smile. “I sense great depth in your journey.” He put his hand on my shoulder. “May you uncover every detail. But don't forget...” he held a finger to my face, “you are the teller of your own story!”

Then he turned outward to address the audience, many of whom then moved closer to him, bringing along the few scattered lanterns about the place, and a circle of light was formed around a tighter congregation, casting harsh shadows against the old one's gaunt countenance. He produced from his robe a thurible filled with the salvation of incense, which seemed to ignite on its own.

“Once upon a vague interpretation of time, there lived a boy.” He swung the lantern gently about himself—not like the priests of ancient orders who swung them solemnly in funeral rites, but with an upbeat rhythm, almost a dance.

“His parents died when he was barely old enough to stand. But this was a strong boy!” His big, old eyes scanned each of us in the front row.

“With determination and luck, he grew ever stronger despite the chaos around him. He wandered alone through dark places. Monsters came for him, and many times the boy was afraid. And many times the boy was sad, for he walked alone through the hostile dark. But he walked on. Every monster that came, every threat that crept alongside him, he defeated it.” His lantern of incense ignited into a blaze as bright as the sun.

“Now this boy is slowly becoming a man. But through the darkness, he finds himself lost inside his own heart, struggling to discover who he really is. Now that he has conquered the road on which he stands, he must decide in which direction he will go. This, my children, is Voulhire, a land unique to all the nations of the world! In this special kingdom, where all the tools are provided to build a perfect world, you will stand as a firsthand witness to what people do when they have no excuse to fail. This, my children, is the magnificent and terrifying kingdom of Voulhire!”

I am Wilhelm, King of Voulhire

Scores of nimble dancers and thunderous musicians endured in the long parade over the cobblestone streets of Soulhire. The drums and trumpets bore down on the many onlookers with a rhythm of hypnotic authority. Every move of each dancer was impossible to predict, yet not a single move failed to complement the taut performance.

And the tens of thousands of onlookers were carried up into it.

Accompanying these talented entertainers was the magnificent sight of knights and war heroes, respected governors and mayors, lords and ladies, famous singers, actors, and a score of honorable guests whom nobody recognized but were nevertheless cheered upon for the hell of it.

“Look, honey!” said a mother in the crowd to a toddler in her arms. “It's the king!”

The final float in the long parade was carried on the backs of fourteen black stallions. Upon it stood a single man. He too was dancing; not with the same skill or energy as the youthful professionals before him, but with the same affection for those who looked upon him; and indeed, it was he for whom the crowds cheered loudest, making their love and gratitude known from the streets beneath him to the windows above him.

The crown of ivory and black glass sat on the chair behind him, and his graying brown hair lay exposed to the raining petals of howling sapphire, which came down from happy hands all around him. He didn't bother to brush away the ones that stuck to his hair or his neck or the black fur of his overcoat, for they only kept on raining down.

On calendars throughout Soulhire, the 96th and last day of summer was regarded with more excitement than any anniversary or birthday, for on that date the kingdom celebrated the Feast of Human Hands. Travelers came from the kingdom over to celebrate the year's prosperities and to pray for a prosperous future. Anyone in the capital who had set this clear, cool day aside for relaxation

or study surely saw the folly in that now, for there was not a quiet place in all the city. Every street was taken by the music, which sank into the ground, collecting in the deepest cellars.

The particular intensity of this year's celebration was inspired by the official declaration that the kingdom of Voulhire had entered a golden age. None of the wisest scholars, economic or agricultural, stood to question it.

And the people looked to their king as the icon of this success, just as they would look to him for hope in darker times.

The king's platform entered the White Square, and the music descended to silence. The dancers stopped dancing, proceeding in solemn prayer. The crowds were quiet, and the final petal fell slowly to the ground. The parade came to a gentle stop, and all made way for the king, who now stood still upon his float.

Among the buildings around the open lot, the celebration carried on, a silent call from all around. But here in the crowded square, every mouth was shut and every eye was locked on the king, whose float advanced slowly, played on only by the echo of hooves on the white marble. It passed through the parted parade, traversing a purple carpet of a hundred yards, sprinkled with those petals of howling sapphire. He came to the center of the square, to the great marble statue: it was the likeness of Saint Idus, Voulhire's holy founder and first king, whose legendary dynasty fell to its own humanity after seven hundred years spent crushing Voulhire's enemies. Two great dynasties followed, but neither one compared, nor had ever any king compared to King Saint Idus.

The float came to a gentle stop at the feet of the saint, who stood humbly, his sword in its sheath, his hand outstretched in welcome of the future.

Several priests, draped in vestments of black and white, stood at the base of the reverent statue; among these holy men stood the eiodi himself, the head of the Holy Church, silent and still in a heavy purple robe.

King Wilhelm Arcolo, separated from King Saint Idus by a succession that spanned just over two thousand years, stepped down from the royal float. An attendant came with a feather-duster to sweep the petals from his coat and hair.

There were a hundred thousand people in that square, yet the only sound was the muffled celebration in the surrounding distance, and the sound of the king's feet tapping their way up the marble stairs to the base of the towering statue.

He came before the eiodi, whose red-tinted glasses lay dark in the shadow of his hood.

"Your Majesty," said the eiodi, his silken red beard swaying in the breeze as he bowed low.

"Your Grace," said the king with a bow of his own.

Both men then turned to the looming statue.

His eyes affixed to the eyes of his ancient predecessor, the king of Voulhire took a knee, and the head of the Church did the same. Court mages took their places nearby to carry the sound of his voice over all the people who surrounded him.

"Holiest of kings," his voice came back to him from the ends of the great square much louder than he'd expected, "upon whose head my crown once sat, hear my prayer in the name of God... Guide us, Idus, who set us free, who unified us as Voulhire, who gave us the strength to find this day. Ferry us through every night and lead us unto dawn again."

And the crowd of a hundred thousand replied, their one voice softly moving the ground:

"For the essence of the saints flows ever through us all."

Then the king, still on his knee, his head to the stone beneath his feet, took the hand of the mages close to him, who then took the hands of the guards, who took the hands of the people alongside the statue, who took the hands of the people around them. The web of linked hands spread across the silent mass to the ends of the square, filling the spaces between every man and woman. As the web spread beyond the square, the cheering and music spilling in from other parts of the city faded, and soon all the capital fell into silence. They were all connected—the pious to the secular, the paupers to the gentry, the king to conspirators and revolutionaries.

The king turned his eyes up upon the statue once again. He called out, louder and deeper than before, "I, King Wilhelm Arcolo, before the holy host of my long succession, do attest that we, Voulhire, after these many hundreds of years, remain as one."

With that, he rose. The ivory crown was placed back on his head, and the square returned to life with cheering and music. The people returned to drinking and dancing, and the parade returned to form.

Another hour on display, and his platform was crossing Javikun Bridge over the Liber River into the wealthy Garden Quarter.

The city of Soulhire, the capital of Voulhire, was a circular metropolis centered on the point where two rivers, Ordo and Liber, met to form the River Nubere. The Garden Quarter stood between the two joining rivers in the shadow of the palace.

Nobles and ladies down all the way from Ballerhal stood outside their lavish

apartments, presenting barrels of the kingdom's finest wines, fattest animals, brightest vegetables and richest oils both edible and fragrant. Merchants from the west coast flocked to the king's platform with gifts of silk and tobacco—products of the kingdom's finest plantations. They laid all these things on the platform, for was it not their king who had led them to such wealth?

King Wilhelm smiled at them in thanks for their gifts, and his platform crossed the courtyard that stood in the shadow of the palace, and came to the Sire Wall.

The gates parted.

Half-a-mile down the colorful sea of rare flowers and foreign orchards of the royal garden, Sundergrove, stood the Palace of Cathidien, the central and tallest object in the city, the seat of Voulhirian power, the home of the king and all of the closest relatives of royalty.

The celebration was more docile here. Smaller numbers of people in fine clothes applauded in smiles as the parade passed them, and then followed as it gathered before the steps of Cathidien.

The Mianoran knights, whose white armor and bleached white garbs shone on top of massive stallions, took their place at the foot of the staircase. Beside them came the Chaletirian knights, with their golden armor clothed in red garbs. Front and center came the royal guard, with black armor and purple garbs.

Drumbeats reverberated inside of every skull and trumpets startled the most stoic of clergymen as the king ascended the stairs. At the uppermost landing, he turned outward to face the crowd, and gave one final wave.

The tall doors of the palace were opened.

In the lobby, dozens of lavishly dressed guests applauded his return. These were the most distinguished elites in all the kingdom, the ones who were either invited on merit or paid handsomely to be here to enjoy the royal feast in company with King Wilhelm himself.

Wilhelm was greeted by his chief advisers, Lucius Nartik and Dustin Mendleson. They followed the king, who had not broken stride through the lobby.

Nartik spoke up, though muffled, "Dustin thinks the Riva Rohavi is up to something new."

Wilhelm scoffed as he acknowledged friendly greetings from the crowd. "It would be a shame if they nicked my belt and dropped my pants in the middle of the banquet, wouldn't it?"

"Oh, who knows?" Nartik chimed in. "Once your pants are down, maybe

you'll feel different."

"There were sightings in the northwest," Dustin insisted as he stepped to within intimate proximity of his liege, whispering as quietly as he could. "Large war parties bearing the feathers."

"The feathers!" Nartik shouted. "Not the feathers!"

"If there are forces such as have been reported," Dustin continued, "they could cause trouble for the food supply across the countryside, not to mention the mines around Virko."

"The Riva Rohavi will not be back in any form for years," Nartik argued dismissively. "Meldorath made sure of that during his tenure."

There was silence then, but not to the surprise of Nartik, who knew the subject was sensitive; nevertheless, he spoke his mind when he knew he was right, which he probably was.

Perhaps it was no coincidence that this subject arose as the royal entourage was passing a particular painting—a tall fresco depicting the Battle of Sopecnakrev. An unwieldy thing, the pointed stone rose to an imposing nineteen feet in the frequented lobby. And why not, for what a battle it was!

A thousand years ago, the Riva Rohavi held base in the black citadel high on a slope couched deep among the Cinderhold Mountains. Per the fresco, and countless bards across the centuries, outflow of lava lit the slopes and the pass into which it flowed. Warriors of the Riva Rohavi cheered alongside these deadly rivers, for it was they who had released them from a chasm beneath the citadel. Mianoran knights retreated desperately to the opposite slope, where King Maksim Maxima stood among his soldiers on a ledge, his arms outstretched. Vilendrians of the holy order held back the fiery surge with their cosmite powers, bringing up walls of rock from the ground. But behold, as the Riva Rohavi had exhausted that magma chamber beneath their citadel, the impregnable fortress of Sopecnakrev was already sinking into the mountain. The battle was over before anybody knew it.

Wilhelm was never the fool to believe in the utter accuracy of this glorious depiction, yet the spirit of its amplification never lost its hold on the weary king. The Council, the Church, the Crown, all working together to bring down the house of Riva, finally doing so through sheer endurance. Indeed, artistic license aside, it was one of the finest moments in Voulhirian history.

The finest of the Modius Dynasty, anyway, King Wilhelm mused.

The entourage took to a side hall, putting the cocktail crowd behind them; this was the king's roundabout route to the banquet hall. He grumbled lightly when

his crier stopped him at the door.

"Just a moment, my liege," the crier said, then stepped inside. A trumpet was blown, and the several hundred attendees inside were attentively quiet.

"Lords and ladies," came the sonorous voice of the crier. "Your king, Wilhelm Arcolo, first protector of Voulhire!"

Applause stormed as the king stepped into the cacophony.

The throng of well-to-dos filled the center of the banquet hall, where minstrels, bards, and dancers would soon perform for the tables around it.

On the far side of the room, a wide staircase rose to the great dumbbell-shaped table where the king would eat with Voulhire's most powerful men and women. The table was so large that, through the center of each circular end, a cherry blossom spilled its pink leaves over the dining space, down the stairs and sometimes across the room, if the draft was just right.

King Wilhelm began his journey of wading through the mess, stopped pervasively by a vivacious lady or some northern lord's uncle who wanted him to hear a joke. When he had almost reached the stairs, the trumpet blew again.

Oh no... he thought as he grumbled quietly. At least let me sit first...

He turned.

"Lords and ladies," the crier announced. "Northerners, southerners, merchants of esteem and all of our most decorated men of the sword: I give you Voulhire's first knight; the chancellor of chancellors; second protector of our glorious kingdom. I give you Lord High Chancellor Midius Maida!"

Wilhelm quickly turned back up the stairs as the people around him cheered; but he knew that the scanning, watchful eyes of the man they applauded were soon to land on the back of his head.

"I see my liege is already eager to find his seat!" a shrill, elegant voice called out from the other side of the generous crowd. "I hope he saves some pig for the rest of us!"

Wilhelm stopped halfway up the stairs to the table, and turned.

Ambling with casual pomposity through the crowd was Midius Maida, lavished with his multi-layered robe bleached whiter than the crown. His short black hair was pressed with heavy oil to his forehead, stopping just above his tended brows and subtle eyeliner.

A celebrated veteran of the Mianoran Knights and now head of the Mianoran Council, Midius Maida was locked in a political tie with the king for power over Voulhire.

The Order of Mianora was established centuries ago by King Saint Baellont of

House Idus. It fell on the Mianoran Council to confirm or deny the heir appointed by the king, thereby protecting the royal succession from false claimants, feuding heirs and otherwise disastrous princes whose dangerous faults the father was too blind to see. Over the centuries, the Council managed to turn its civil-war-preventative responsibilities into power that rivaled the king himself. One of their greatest excuses for such power was their eons-old oath to put an end to the violent insurgents who called themselves the Riva Rohavi.

An eons-old oath, and an eons-old failure.

Wilhelm could see Chancellor Maido's eyes from across the echoey banquet hall, and among all those shifting faces. They were piercing, invasive eyes of desire and disdain, like the man could see everything in you—all that he hated and all that he wanted. Even his most baleful of scowls came always with a drag of the tongue across his upper lip.

"My lady!" Maido smiled, crossing a pretty southerner. He held out his hand and she kissed it.

Smiling, giggling faces surrounded Wilhelm, who found it difficult to reciprocate, especially when the crowd parted to allow Maido's advancement toward him. The king stood awkwardly and waited for the chancellor to climb the stairs to meet him.

Walking alongside Midius Maido was his taller, older, and much wiser vice chancellor, Indara Nightla. Indara was twice Maido's age, yet second to him, just as she was to Maido's late father and predecessor Calum. Her face, though wrinkled, held firm, her eyes more focused than those around her, including her superior.

Smiling at the attentive crowd, Maido reached the king's step. His hand came down with a firm thud on Wilhelm's shoulder.

He could smell the gloss on Maido's freshly filed fingernails.

"You didn't plan on starting without me, Your Majesty?" said Maido.

"Only while he still has his appetite," said Nartik.

Maido's eyes barely, perhaps mistakenly, acknowledged the advisor. "Are you as clever as he, Your Highness? I never can tell where your words end and his begin."

Wilhelm smiled at the vice chancellor. "It's good to see you, Lady Indara."

She bowed her head in response.

Chancellor Maido looked out to the crowd, saying, "Given my honored place beside our great king, many of my critics have taken to calling me the queen."

The crowd laughed over their wine.

Maido smacked his hand on the king's back. "Unfortunately for dear Wilhelm, I can't be the queen in every regard."

The crowd exploded in laughter.

Maido continued, "But having lived in his house for so long, I have learned that the sooner you find your place, the sooner the food is served. So come, let us sit!"

The crowd applauded and started to move. The king and chancellor walked side-by-side up the stairs to the table. They were seated by two servants, facing out to the shuffling crowd of rich and powerful Voulhirians.

Maido sat back, holding up his glass for the passing servant to pour him wine.

He looked at the king. "Where's the boy?"

"He's feeling ill today." Wilhelm watched as his own glass was filled. He smiled gratefully at the servant.

"Hungover, you mean." Maido smelled the wine. "Is he still running around with that new-money slut?"

"I don't know."

Dinner was served in yet another overdrawn parade. Servants carried salads in massive bowls of silver, steaming soups in crystal tubs. Guests gasped and clapped when the bull, still aflame, was carried in by twenty strong servants. The head chef, dressed in red silk, guided them up the stairs to the table, where the beast was placed before the king.

The king raised his glass in gratitude to the men.

"Somebody tell Lord Lorus his wife's on fire!" said Maido to someone on the other side of him. Whoever it was, he found the joke hysterical.

A servant took a ladle and poured the king some broth. Another took a knife and cut a few slices from the belly of the beast. The king thanked them, and they stepped back.

"I prefer the belly myself," said the man on Wilhelm's left. "Plenty of fat!"

"Not the healthiest choice," Wilhelm replied, "but the tastiest."

A silver bowl of colorful fruit landed in front of them. A grape fell off and rolled over the edge of the table.

"I'm not sure if you've heard of me, my liege," said the man beside the king. "I'm Carlyle De Borta. I paid a lot of money to sit at your side this evening!"

"How attentive could I claim to be, never to have heard of you!" said Wilhelm, setting down his silverware for a moment of acknowledgment. "This country owes a debt to its entrepreneurs."

"I am but a humble fisherman at heart, my liege," the man replied with a hand

over his heart. "In fact, I've just returned from a visit to my hometown of Hillport. My netters return from sea having counted twenty-nine frigates surrounding Lorcia's Isle!"

Wilhelm returned his eyes to the food. "Well, I have to put them somewhere. Lorcia's a beautiful little island. It does the men some good." He looked with concern at the celebrated entrepreneur. "It hasn't been of any trouble on your fishermen, has it?"

"None whatsoever, my liege!" the man answered with cheerful assurance. "But my employees, some of whom have naval experience, have insisted that it looked like the ships were in... barricade formation..."

The king shrugged as he brought an oiled leaf of lettuce to his lips. "It's not for me to tell the captain how to herd his ships. Well, I guess technically it is, but as king I try to keep management on the macro side." He smiled as he chewed. "As a business man, I'm sure you understand."

"I can keep a secret, my liege," Mr. De Borta leaned in. "After all, the people would all join Riva if they knew how much of their taxes were allotted to the imprisonment of one man." He smiled innocently. "And that would be bad for business..."

"One man? Imprisonment?" The king cut off a piece of meat and dipped it in his broth, joining it on the fork with a few more leaves of lettuce. "I'm sure I don't understand."

"My liege," De Borta seemed anxious, "the rumors have gone bubbling across the kingdom for over a month now..."

The entrepreneur tried to speak low, but Wilhelm could hear the sweet sound of Midius Maida's silence. Indeed, the Mianoran chancellor's pompous smile was melting from his face.

He tried to enjoy that rare and sudden change in Maida's disposition while he continued to stall the persistent entrepreneur. "I'm sorry, my friend, I still don't follow."

Mr. De Borta chuckled nervously. "I understand it's a crime to utter his name in your presence, my liege."

"There is no such law in this land." Wilhelm stared forward over the lone musician in the center of the hall. "Tell me of whom it is you speak."

The entrepreneur leaned in, but Maida could still undoubtedly hear.

"Lord Meldorath."

The king looked at his reflection in the broth. He was no longer cognizant of how Maida was reacting.

He turned his head to Mr. De Borta, forcing a smile. "Lord Meldorath commands a heavy influence. Even now. He commands fear, love..." he pitched his head toward Maida, "...envy." He turned back to his food. "But the man is dead. Whatever rumor you might have heard on the contrary was begun by troublemakers. And spread by troublemakers."

"But of course, Sire." Mr. De Borta brought his head back over his own plate. "Forgive me."

Wilhelm's wry smile turned assuring. "It's right for a businessman to be curious," he said. "But now your curiosity is satisfied."

"It most certainly is, my liege."

The music grew livelier, and a troupe of dancers came to join the lone musician: handsome men and beautiful women with impressive bodily charisma. King Wilhelm watched them through the skeleton of the bull.

"Do you see the brunette in the blue toga?" Chancellor Maida tapped the king on the shoulder.

Wilhelm grumbled quietly. "I'm sure she made you very happy."

"Her mother helped," said Maida. "That's how she came to dance for you here, by the way. She was close to starving when I met her. Yet those tits were just as full as they are right now. I wonder: did I enjoy making her a woman half as much as I'm going to enjoy making your son a man?"

As a king, Wilhelm did his best to leave as much of the judgment as possible to God.

But Madius Maida was a terrible person.

Unfortunately, now that Wilhelm's only son was due for Mianora's confirmation as heir to the throne, the tension between king and chancellor was at its height; so had it been since Mianora's founding.

No matter how great the king, no matter how powerful his dynasty, Mianora was either an ally, or a cosmic pain in the ass.

But as it pertained to the current king with the current chancellor, there was no reason to turn Maida's nonsense into anything more than what it was.

Wilhelm sighed.

The bards all had fine words for the life of a Voulhirian king. All of those flowery sentences stringing all of those tight and rhythmic stanzas. But how much you enjoyed your power depended on how seriously you took it, and on how seriously the people around you did.

While the people chatted amid the soft music and dance, Maida stood from the table and called out, "Where is Prince Darius? Why is he not here?"

The crowd, in their chatter, had not fully acknowledged Maida's question. But the heads were turning, and Maida stood, prepared to amuse himself.

The king braced his mind for a prolonged and personal embarrassment.

But before the eyes were fully set on the man in white, the background music flared to the foreground, the dancers bouncing and spinning like a fast wind had carried them aloft, still in carefully choreographed form.

The crowd's attention turned in a wave to the dance floor.

The king sighed with relief.

Thank God for Lucius Nartik.

Nartik, who commanded the musicians and dancers, jumped into the fray. The guests were inspired to see a man so high in office, and so close to the king, providing quality entertainment.

The music calmed and the dancers cleared a spot in the middle of the floor for him.

Nartik brought a green flame to life like a torch in his hand. He spread the flame into the shape of a mouth above his head, and inside that mouth, an image of their land.

He looked out to his captivated audience and said, "In a world full of monsters, we are a tiny nation not a thousand miles across." The mouth began to fade, but the image of Voulhire remained. "Why is it that this tiny nation is leading those monsters economically and culturally? Why is it that history's greatest wizards and warriors are Voulhire-born?" He pulled the glistening green flames of the image back into his hands. Then he closed his hands, extinguishing the flames. He stepped closer to his audience, his eyes tracing the first row. "Some say it's because the soul finds healthy competition with the body in this land. And both our body and soul find healthy competition with the mind. But how has *this* come to be? What is it about our country that inspires our people to such heights? How is it that this quaint little conversation piece among nations will one day rule the nations?" Nartik let out a younger man's laugh. "The answer, my fellow Voulhirians, is *dance*!"

The music returned louder than before, the performers dancing faster than before. Their moves were too swift and smooth for most to comprehend, let alone dream of emulating.

All the same, everybody tried, even the king. They didn't care that they couldn't move like the pros, they just wanted to dance. And so, with Nartik as their composer, they danced for almost an hour.

In the wake of this much-appreciated show, the vivacious crowd enjoyed

desserts of fruit-filled pies, hot pudding and fresh honey milk.

The king ate fast (he could always have leftovers sent up to his living space), then attempted a quiet exit.

"Attention, everyone!" Madius Maidu slammed a spoon against a plate. "The king fears for his midsection, and must leave us before he overindulges!"

Laughing, the crowd let out a sympathetic "Aw."

At the very least, the chancellor had taught the king to appreciate his solitude.

En route through the sea of revelers to that salvation of solitude far above the city, Wilhelm was intercepted by Judge Eldus Alderman, whom the king had recently selected to become lord of the quiet southern town of Hillport.

"My liege," he said, embracing the king. "I wanted to say goodbye."

"Not for long, my dear friend," said Wilhelm. "If your plans for Hillport are half as successful as all the scholars are telling me, I'll have no choice but to visit soon. Make sure your family gets a good night's rest before the big trip."

"Actually, we're leaving now," said Eldus. "There'll be plenty of time to rest as we're settled. You were quick to choose me, Wilhelm. I want to be quick to show Hillport their kingdom has not forgotten them."

"God be with you, Lord Eldus."

The king embraced his loyal vassal once more, and the two men parted ways.

In the upper quarters of the great palace, Wilhelm found his personal balcony. All of House Arcolo, and those who served it, learned to leave this particular area at peace. Only his chief advisors would bother him here.

The city lights spread out to Baellont's wall. The sun was gone. The normally green landscapes beyond the wall into the horizon were black under a red sky. There reigned a deep purple in the east.

Wilhelm loosened the buckle around his waist and rested his elbows on the marble railing. He looked down the smooth side of the palace into Sundergrove.

"Sire," Dustin Mendleson stepped onto the balcony alongside Nartik.

"It's nice," said the king, looking out over his city, whose torches and gas lamps were coming alight as the sky grew dark. All the ruckus distanced to a soft hum and rumble. "The life-of-the-party routine was always too much for me, but this..." He took a deep breath of the late-summer air. "This is something I could fight for."

"It's a fine day you've given your people, Sire," said Dustin Mendleson.

"Yes, good job, my liege," Nartik added with a sarcastic grin.

A messenger hawk flew down from the dark sky and landed on the railing. It was silent and still as it stared at the king. Suddenly, it squawked so loud that all

three men drew back, although the squawk seemed somehow intended for the king.

"I think that thing just cursed you in its own language, Sire," Dustin was smiling.

"I think it's envious of all the food it smells on you," said Nartik.

"Oh, I'm sure he's just had a long day." Wilhelm stroked the belly of the bird, then produced a morsel of dried meat he had stowed in his pocket from the feast, which the bird was pleased to receive. He removed the pouch from the bird and noted the seal on the tiny scroll inside. "Ah, we were just talking about Lord Venden!" Then, pocketing it, he said, "I'll have to read it later."

"Are you expecting bad news?" Nartik's eyes were focused with serious curiosity.

The king smiled. "Lucius, for such a talented entertainer, you are cynical."

"Respectfully, Sire, you're hesitant to receive news of late," said Dustin. "News used to excite you."

"Does it no longer?" The king leaned on the parapet before him, releasing a long breath into the air above his vast city. "Perhaps not. Perhaps history has told me that twenty-five years of good fortune is already a lot for a king to ask."

"Such feelings are to be expected in times of change," said Dustin. "Even good change."

"They call it cognitive dissonance," said Nartik. "Mages go through it a lot when they're young and training. It will pass, and you'll come out the better for it."

"Yes," Wilhelm nodded, still looking out over the city and to the sprawling lands beyond. Then he turned and started back into the palace. "You're both dismissed. Enjoy the party. Make sure the leftovers are properly stored. Of course, the staff can take of it what they wish."

The city would dance until dawn. But the king would have a bath, finish his book, and go to bed.

Galen

I never complained in those days.

Even if I had such an intimacy with my countrymen as to discuss my frustrations, none of them were ever in the mood to hear such things, and I was never within my rights to burden them. Maybe before the war, when I was little, when I still had a family, when I was too young to understand what happiness was... maybe I complained a little bit then.

Looking back, maybe my life in the Lands of the Princes would have been different had I been a little more envious. But I wasn't there anymore, and tallying all I didn't have was as senseless now as it ever was.

I was on that boat for over a week. My own supply of food had run out within two days of the voyage, and I ended up eating mostly fat that bobbed up and down in bowls of lukewarm water. I worried about my health, especially as my sinuses began to feel like they had dried to dust, and several of my fellow passengers gave in to seasickness as the boat rocked mercilessly over the sea. But my heart was far from bitter; I saw the discomfort as the price for my arrival.

In fact, I remember being surprised when the journey was over, in a way disappointed, like I hadn't endured enough when the boat finally stopped.

"Magnum Caelum!" one of the crew members called down to my level. "Voulhirian port of Magnum Caelum!"

With haste to match the urgency of the announcement, I grabbed my bag. I stepped up the ladder onto the ship's mid-level, then up another ladder to the upper level, and then a final ladder to the upper most hatch. It was lifted for me as I climbed, and I was exposed to a purple night sky, with air so intoxicatingly fresh it almost knocked me back onto the floor.

Yes, I definitely felt like I had dastardly swindled fate itself.

"Ya comin', or am I sendin' ya back to the damn Princes?" the crewman who had lifted the hatch shouted down to me.

I shook off the high and pushed myself upward, into the fresh air, until that shimmering nightshade sky surrounded me.

Like a fool in love, I stared up into it.

"Plenty o' time to look up once you're down on the ground," said the sailor. "Got plenty other people wanna get off this bucket been on way longer than you!"

"Of course," I said. "I'm sorry."

As capricious and strange as the crew of that boat were, I was glad that they cared about everyone.

I climbed up onto the deck, looking ahead as I crossed the plank to the dock.

A small town lay before me. It was like a collection of little stone houses neither disparate nor regimented, with rooftops of varying color spread across a gentle incline. The grassy land carried the town up to the base of tall hills with rocky peaks, which cut sharp between the stars like towers watchful in the peaceful night.

It reminded me of a painting; but where I had come from, even the paintings weren't so lovely; even dreams weren't so audacious.

I wasn't two steps up the dock before the ship I left behind started rocking, then moving away.

Where the docks landed, at the end of a fifty-yard walk, I was embraced by the colors of this *Magnum Caelum*: So many lights of white and yellow shining off of walls of wood and brick, but mostly stone. The rooftops were often blue, but sometimes red, sometimes green, sometimes brown. Smoke was rising from the buildings, but not in a bad way, and the burning smell of wood was not harsh and foreboding, but pure and inviting.

I was spooked by the sound of a door opening, and gasped when I spotted a man emerging from a shack that was connected to the dock. After the first glance, he didn't appear hostile; he was slow and deliberate in his movements. He wore a thin white shirt, with loose trousers held up by red suspenders. He plucked at one of the suspenders and brought a mug to his white whiskers. As he sipped, he regarded me like he knew me.

"Yeah," he said as he lowered the mug and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "I know those eyes." It almost sounded like an accusation. "That must mean that ship out there is sailing off with our import tariff."

I looked at the man blankly. I was confused, and not versed in the matters of which he spoke.

The man gave me a bug-eye while he took another sip from the mug. "Don't

they got a sense of humor where you're from, boy?"

I blinked a few times. I hardly had the energy left to think of an answer, but perhaps enough to make it look like I was thinking.

"I guess not," said the man. "Well..." he took a final sip and set his mug down on a post. "I'll go wake the mayor."

"Thank you, sir," I said as he started toward the town.

The man didn't turn, just lifted his hand in acknowledgment as he proceeded into the town.

I stood for a long time under that star-bright sky, before that colorful town. I don't remember if it was ten minutes or twenty or thirty. I just remember looking up into that great sky, thinking...

So... you're Voulhire. Greetings, Voulhire. I'm Galen Bray.

"Lo there, wayfarer!" A man in an open robe greeted. He arrived alongside the older man, holding out a bright lantern.

I pulled my eyes from the sky and regarded this man. I uttered back, "Greetings..."

The robed man approached and held his lantern up to my face. "Ah, you were right, Artie!" he smiled at the inspection of my face. "Those are the eyes of a blacksmith!" He set the lantern down and shook my hand. "Your great uncle was a great man. All the town is still in mourning."

"Thank you, sir," I said. My eyes fell toward the grass. *He is gone, then...*

I failed to mention that I had never even met my great uncle, or else I feared they might recall the ship that brought me here and send me back.

"I'm Malcolm," said the man in the robe. "I'm the mayor of Magnum Caelum." He glanced at the older man who had first greeted me. "I don't suppose ol' Artie here properly introduced himself?"

"I'm sure he figured it out," said the older man, taking his cup back off the post on the dock and drawing from it once again. "Says it right there on my door."

So, it did: *Artie Eichel, Harbormaster.*

"Right then..." The mayor picked the lantern back up. He smiled at the harbormaster. "Thank you, Artie." Then he turned to me. "Come! I'll show you to your new estate!"

"Yeah," Artie muttered as he scratched his neck and headed back for his little building.

"Uh... thank you, Artie..." I said.

Artie raised his mug in acknowledgment as he opened his door and walked

back inside.

"He's actually hysterical in the mornings," said the mayor.

I smiled. "Oh, really?"

"No, not really."

The mayor took me up a cobblestone road among these small but beautifully constructed homes. Some of the windows were lit from the inside. I saw an older couple sitting at a table eating supper, a woman in another house reading while her children played quietly on the floor, and a younger couple next door talking by a lit fireplace.

I felt so sneaky peeking in like that, but I couldn't help it.

"We're not as rich as we appear here in Magnum Caelum," Mayor Malcolm said as he looked around, though not with the same pointed interest as I. "We're just talented and hard-at-work. The rocks on yonder hill are rich stone. Neighboring villages can't afford them, Virko doesn't want them, Yamon Soul has all the embellishments they could ever need, and everyone else is just too far away. So, we used them to build a life that we deserve for our hard work. And behold, most of the stone remains just there on those hills!"

We walked a little further, my eyes ever aghast by the sequence of pristine homes and unblemished landscape, before I realized I should say something.

"It's a beautiful town, Lord Mayor."

Mayor Malcolm glanced at me as though taken by some sudden sympathy. "Are the Lands of the Princes as bad as they say?"

I hadn't a clue how to answer; "I don't know what they say, my lord."

The mayor laughed. "Indeed. By the way, I am no lord. Malcolm will do just fine."

"Of course, Mayor Malcolm."

We passed most of the buildings of the town, continuing uphill toward an isolated property on the green grass that covered all the land in sight.

"And here we are!" Mayor Malcolm held his lantern out toward a modest house with a larger building behind it. The yard was well-kept: only a few bushes rose from the otherwise uniform cut. A thin stone path led from the street to the front door, which was painted red.

I couldn't believe this was mine.

I was eight years old when the War of the Princes began. All I'd known in the twenty years since was hurt. All this time... if my great uncle had only known, I could have been here with him... in this house... under this sky.

This whole time.

But I couldn't let myself think that way. I was here now. I had survived with the lessons I'd learned from the life I once knew. And now that life was over.

"Your great uncle had a healthy cache of gold saved up," said Mayor Malcolm. "I'll show you to the bank tomorrow to pick it up." He added with a wink, "I suggest you learn the forge before you spend it all." Then he looked me up and down. "You seem fit enough for a good head start. Anyway, this is yours..." He handed me a set of bronze keys for the property. "And here." He handed me a few gold coins. "It's a bit late, but they're still serving supper at the local inn. You look overdue for a hot meal."

I looked at the little gold coins, watched them slide in my hand, making a brief study of their engravings: the likeness of a crowned man encircled with a simple sentence...

We are Voulhire.

I was struck by a burst of emotion, and I threw my arms around the mayor.

"Oh!" Mayor Malcolm laughed. "You're welcome, son. But say a prayer to your honorable uncle! His dying wish was that you be found. And his executor, well... we almost lost him getting you out of there."

"Where is this executor?" I asked with urgency, looking around as though the man in question might have magically appeared in our midst. "I must thank him immediately!"

"He's somewhere around," the mayor said with passive certainty. "He still has to go over some things with you. I'll introduce you to him tomorrow after we collect your inheritance, or at least hand over the accounts to your name." He put his hand on my arm. "But rest now. Eat, drink, do what you must. We'll speak more in the morning. Good evening, Herr Bray."

I was compelled to thank him one last time.

And one last time, he turned to me as he was walking away. "You're very welcome."

I stood there in the cool of the night, moving the keys around in my hands, which were warm from Mayor Malcolm's pocket. Then I looked up at the blue pitched roof under which these keys would grant me access.

I felt a compulsion to go inside, but an even bigger evasion. It was just... too soon. And I had other things to do. As the mayor had instructed, I should go find something to eat, and perhaps get to know a few of my new neighbors. So, I set my travel bag down on the property, behind one of the bushes to keep it safe, and made my way into the heart of town.

* * *

Magnum Caelum's first and only inn was called the Tipsy Trollop. Light and music and laughter reached far across the streets from within the house-shaped business.

I stepped up to the porch and knocked on the door. I knocked again. I was curious as to how anyone inside was expected to hear incoming visitors for all the joyous bustling inside.

"Where the hell are you from?" said some man who sat in a chair on the porch, gesturing with a tall, empty mug. He slurred his words as he laughed, "This guy's knockin'!" He pointed at me. "Look at him, he's knockin'!"

I wasn't sure what that meant until a minute passed to the tune of his rising laughter, and I began to surmise that perhaps I was not expected to knock at all.

The man was red in the face and teary-eyed with hysterics by the time I gathered the fortitude to push the door open, albeit slowly. The sounds and light of the inside and the smell of fresh beer and hot food enveloped me.

Everyone was smiling in here. Some of them were laughing as hard as the man on the porch.

I was startled when one man shouted from my left, but he was only calling to someone on my right.

Another man called from right to left.

I had heard on the boat that this is a common scene among Voulhirian taverns: rooms full of laughter inspired by silliness, a different kind of laughter than I was so used to back home. Even upon seeing it, I couldn't believe that it was true. I couldn't believe that I was here. When I remember how my tears clouded my vision and my throat started to hurt, I get misty-eyed even today.

My first night in Voulhire.

I happened to be looking in the direction of the large innkeeper lady, who was feverishly mopping the floor with her thick arms.

From behind the counter, close to where she was mopping, a young man's head popped up, locks of brown hair falling over buzzed sides and thin brows. With a long smile that spanned the breadth of his sharp jaw, he jumped out from behind the bar and smacked the innkeeper on the rump.

"Rowan!" The innkeeper flicked her head in a stifled fit. Her face had already gone red by the time she reached for the bucket of soap and water, hurling it in the direction of the offender. It hit the wall with an alarmingly loud slam and

some of the water splashed a drunken man in armor. He and many others applauded.

The atmosphere was tamer on the right side of the tavern, where sofas surrounded a great stone fireplace. There, older men tolerated the neighboring cacophony while they smoked pipes and sipped brandy and sometimes tried to speak to one another. One of them was somehow managing to get a little reading done, his spectacles casting a glare from the steady flame before his rocking chair.

I approached this area to sit and collect my thoughts and take in the scene around me. There was so much to reduce and compartmentalize; I couldn't wait to get started.

"Hello." A young man popped up right in front of me as though from a hole in the floor. It happened to be the same young man who had just smacked the innkeeper. He held out his hand. "I'm Rowan." He had a strong voice, but a friendly tone.

I briefly inspected the man's hand, which remained patiently in waiting. Struck by my own rudeness, I promptly shook it. "I'm Galen."

"Galen?" he said. "Like a Galen of water?"

"Um... I guess so, yeah."

Rowan spun on his heels almost like a dance and flung his hand in the air, whistling at the innkeeper. "Hey, Rita! A pitcher of ale for my new friend!"

"Why don't you come over here and ask me a little closer?" The imposing innkeeper had resumed mopping the floor with her big arms.

"Thank you, Herr Rowan..." I said, looking up at him helplessly, "but I shouldn't drink on an empty stomach..."

The young man Rowan smirked. "Who says you can't eat and drink?" He turned his neck back at the angry innkeeper. "Rita, throw on a juicy beef patty!"

The innkeeper snarled wickedly back. "Why don't you just give him yours?"

The revelers of the tavern burst into laughter, and then her demeanor rose slightly from anger into satisfaction at the response she received.

"Really, Rita?" Rowan held his arms outward. "After all the fun we've had together?"

The innkeeper looked as though her anger was spent. She turned to the kitchen, and a flickering hope returned that my chance at a real meal had not been altogether snuffed by my new friend.

"So, are you passing through?"

I looked at Rowan. "I'm sorry?"

Rowan's head was pitched slightly back as he smiled with one side of his mouth. "Are you just passing through this pretty little town on some great adventure?"

I laughed wryly. "A week and a half on a smelly boat and I'm grateful to say my adventure's finally over."

Rowan crossed his arms, his eyes deeply curious, almost suspicious of me. "What are you gonna do now that you're here?"

I was flattered that he was interested. For once I felt like I mattered... at least enough to amuse a man for a few seconds. "I guess I'm going to start by learning the forge..."

"The forge..." said Rowan. Then his brows popped up and he took a step back. "Oh shit, you're Galen!"

I nodded once, grinning. "I just told you that!"

"No, no," said Rowan, laughing. "I'm your uncle's executor!"

"You..." My mind was a mess for a second, like I'd taken a good hard hit to the head. Before the pieces even returned, I fell forward and threw my arms around the man. It must have looked strange to the others, but I could only hope they sympathized when my eyes began to water. "Thank you."

"Hey, it's my job!" Rowan patted me on the back and stabilized me as I stumbled. "Look at this, you're gonna start hammering the wrong ideas into that crazy innkeeper's head! Let's sit down."

We came to a table at a window with textured glass. A few of the lights outside shone through it, making funny patterns on the wood, and on the side of Rowan's face.

"The tables are always nice and clean here," he commented. "Rita does a fine job." Then he called out, "Hey, good job, Rita!"

The food arrived before the innkeeper could change her mind to have it sent to us. A sandwiched patty, whose bread was soaking its juices, stared at me from a forest of spinach and cucumbers. I studied it for a little while, half seduced and half afraid.

"What are you waiting for?" Rowan asked. "I thought your tummy was empty."

I watched him start to eat, then reflected on the logic that my life was not in danger. They could have never sent assassins after me from back home. They had no way of knowing where in Voulhire I was, and these shores were far and away the best guarded among the nations of man. I had to accept that things were just better now, and that my paranoia was something from home that I had

to learn to leave there.

I started eating slowly, but with each bite I went faster.

I think, even if I were used to hot meals, this oversized patty still would have been among the best I ever had. The meat was red from the core almost to the crispy surface, the vegetables were chopped so that what wasn't falling onto the plate fit perfectly into my mouth along with everything else. I was halfway done with the messy monstrosity before Rowan even had the chance to fill my mug with ale.

Finally, I felt myself begin to relax.

"I would have sent you a private charter..." he said, setting the bottle back down. "But Voulhire's immigration policy, you know: it's gotta be *their* ships, *their* records..." He rolled his eyes. "Even in a case of automatic citizenship, which is completely ridiculous."

I shook my head. "I didn't mean to complain. The—" I ceased chewing and darted my sights to the tavern door when it opened. But it was only another man walking in, greeted jubilantly by several others.

"So, the voyage wasn't so bad?" Rowan asked as he handed me a napkin.

"What? Oh!" I took the napkin and wiped my mouth. "The voyage was fantastic!" I swallowed my food and looked at him. "I owe you everything."

"Nah," said Rowan. "Your uncle already paid top copper for me!"

"My uncle..." I mused aloud, my body warm with gratitude to everyone, from the crewmen on the ship to this man who saved me and bought me dinner... and ultimately to my uncle.

I said to Rowan, "May I ask what he was like?"

"Oh, he was a really nice old guy," Rowan replied. "I liked him a lot."

I put my hands on my lap. "How did you come to be in his service?"

"I work for a financial firm in Soulhire," Rowan slowly sloshed a breadstick around in a steaming bowl of red sauce. "Your uncle sent the order over our way for a dangerous assignment, so of course I was the first one they came to." He took a sip from the wooden mug. "Well, nobody else wanted it." He burped.

My eyes traced the grains of the table as I pondered aloud, "This all sounds expensive..."

Rowan nodded. "Top copper, like I said." He bit off the wet end of the bread. "When I got in, your uncle told me he'd been saving up for years. When he got the word he was dying, he sent a big chunk of those savings to my firm. My boss pocketed most of it and sent me on my way."

I'd never thought about how difficult it must have been for the ships of other

nations to make berth in the Lands of the Princes; it was only once every few months that I'd ever notice a foreign ship draw near to our shores. I briefly wondered about what measures the princes might have had in place to ensure their war did not affect the foreign traders and transport ships coming in or passing close... if they had taken any measures at all.

I looked at Rowan, "How long did it take you to find me?"

"Six months." Rowan wiped a bit of sauce from his red shirt. "It wasn't particularly hard work, just time-consuming. The hardest part was negotiating a price to get me out to those islands. Imagine: all the dangers of the sea—those storms and pirates and monsters—and these uppity Voulhirian wayfarers are afraid of a little sibling rivalry."

"...The mayor said they almost lost you."

"The mayor of what, Dramaville?" Rowan scoffed. "*You* put up with that place for twenty years, what's a few days to walk around and ask some questions?" He reached for another breadstick. "I mean sure, I got the hell out of there once I knew where to send the paperwork, but I was getting homesick."

I wasn't so naive to believe the matter was that simple, but I was sure that whatever details I was meant to know would be revealed in time; I had no impetus to press this man to whom I was so beholden.

Besides, I was still curious about my uncle.

I asked Rowan, "How did my uncle end up in Voulhire?"

Rowan squinted in recollection. "I think he was estranged from your family since... something like his mid-twenties?" He dipped another breadstick. "He told me he did some bad things he didn't wanna talk about, and left those lands long before the wars began, long before you were born. He was never able to find out if his little sister survived, or if she ever had children of her own."

Grandma... I thought. I always thought you were an only child...

"When did he die?"

"Uh..." Rowan looked at the ceiling. "You said you were on that boat a week and a half? Your uncle passed away probably right around the time you were boarding. I'm really sorry."

I hoped Rowan saw that I had enjoyed the meal immensely, and that he was not offended by my initial skepticism and sudden haste. I was sure to thank him.

As we stood outside the inn, me with a belly full of food and beer, I said to him, "I don't know what your reasons were for doing what you did for my uncle, Herr Rowan... but I meant what I said: I owe you everything."

Rowan shrugged. "I told you it's my job. There was a lot of money in it."

I looked into the man's eyes and saw things other than what I heard from his mouth. Maybe bad things, as my upbringing had wrung my mind into favoring, but maybe good things. Maybe neither, maybe both. All I said was, "It doesn't make me any less grateful." I extended my hand. "Thank you, Rowan."

He shook my hand. "I'll be around tomorrow to go over the last of your paperwork. Get some sleep. And for the love of God, man, get yourself laid!"

I stepped down from the porch of the lively, lovely inn and walked along the cobblestone streets amid the perfectly constructed houses. I veered my sights away from the windows this time, even though most of those lights were out by now. Now the light source was the high lamps along the streets.

My uncle's forge was an easy place to find again, as it was separated from the rest of the buildings further up the hill. I hadn't noticed the sign before, which hung on the larger building behind the house:

"Onita Steel."

I took a breath and walked the fine little pathway to the red door of the house. My hand was shaking a little as I reached for the keys in my pocket and put them to the lock on the door. I looked around, though goodness knows why. Maybe it felt so silly to be a homeowner. I was afraid someone might see me, and note how silly I looked.

My first attempt at the proper key was the very one that did the trick: I heard the click, turned the knob, and pushed the door open.

The first thing I noticed was a faint smell. I had smelled it before. It was some spice that my grandmother had used to scent her house before the war. It smelled just like her. The rush of familiarity made me dizzy before the emotions even landed, and I became utterly unafraid of the dark corners and closed doors around me. It was mine. It was home.

The light of the moon and stars was plentiful, and there was a window in the sitting area big enough to give light across the space and into the kitchen to my left, though the light revealed only broad details, such as the long counter and numerous cupboards. It was all one big room: a place to eat and a place to sit. The bay window, through which so much light came in, also provided a view of the town, which ran downhill, and the vast ocean beyond.

One item of luxury I had seen in the Lands of the Princes was a gas lamp, although that was a memory deeply faded in my childhood. This memory was activated when I saw one on the ceiling, between the sitting room and kitchen.

I walked beneath it, then reached up and found the tiny black knob, just as I remembered it in my mother's old house. I turned it slowly, and the place was lit.

I could see all the finely crafted furniture, its upholstery, the spacious kitchen and table, and the shiny oak floor.

But I couldn't stop playing with the gas lamp. I kept igniting and snuffing it, dimming it, brightening it, making shadows on the walls with my hands. Finally, I turned it dim and walked through the door in the back of the room.

There was one bedroom in my uncle's home. It was smaller than the front room, but the bed was enormous. Among all other amenities in the home, that was what made me the most excited. The cot on that boat was the one thing I truly enjoyed about my voyage, but this bed could fit three of me! It was so soft, the blankets so thick.

I carried my travel bag from the yard back into that room and sorted through it, all the things I was sure I would need. I found a piece of stale bread I had forgotten to eat before I switched over to the accommodations of the boat. Oh well. There were little pieces of metal I used to use as lock picks... crumpled wax paper for preserving food... worn and dirty bandages, some of which I had used before... a rusty shiv for carving little animals. I think the last thing I prepared with it was a rabbit. I set these essentials on the floor and looked down on them.

It all seemed like junk now, right down to the tattered bag itself, such as to feel silly having brought them, or to still be giving them my eyes even now. They made a mess out of my new, clean home. I stuffed them back in the bag, and stuffed the bag under the bed, planning to discard them the next day.

I felt like a king as I lay in that giant bed, as comfortable as I had been in all my life, looking through the window at the building behind the house, and the sign that hung over its entrance.

“Onita Steel.”

At the High Forum of Law in Soulhire

The floors were polished black marble and the walls were white slate. The ceiling arched high above the heads of spectators dressed in silk and fur; torches illuminated the fine engravings up there, shadows highlighting the stark engravings of Voulhire's most intellectual guardians—Kanderous, Edith, Baellont, Niviad, Idus, and others—dispensing justice across the kingdom. This was one of several forums in the Hand of Equity, a trophy of architecture along the Liber River, one of many such trophies in the Garden Quarter of Voulhire's ancient capital.

A bailiff stepped forward, his rubber-soled boots landing firmly but gently on the gleaming stone floor. He instructed the attendants to rise, announcing, "At the pleasure of His Majesty King Wilhelm, the newly appointed Judge Marcella Helnaeus will hear the day's proceedings."

A young judge with red hair and white robes entered the forum from her chambers carrying a sleeve of papers under her arm. She came to the chair behind the high bench overlooking the attendants and the litigants, but remained standing. The only sound in the room was the light clinks of the bailiff's armor and the soft thud of his boots as he approached the bench. "Your Virtue," he addressed her, "please raise your right hand."

The judge did so.

The bailiff said, "Recite the Oath of Justice."

Judge Helnaeus replied with a stentorian voice as she looked over the spectators, "By my privilege as judge, as entrusted to me by His Majesty Wilhelm Arcolo, I do swear to uphold, always with faith and dignity, the laws of my king and my people, and to commit my judgment to the glory of Voulhire."

All of those in attendance, including the bailiff, solemnly replied, "*May your judgment be swift and your conscience clear,*" then they took their seats.

The judge also took her seat, then looked over the papers she had set before her. She cleared her throat. "Alabaster de Lasette..." She glanced up from her

papers at the convict, a disheveled old man with long frizzled hair and a scraggly white beard. "You are here today because you have been found guilty of public indecency. During your trial, you elected to represent yourself, and were deemed lucid when you told the jury that you would prove to them that you had, and I quote..." she looked down on her papers, "...lost my noodle,' after which time you proceeded to expose yourself to the jury, proclaiming, 'I found it.' Following this event, with consideration of your defense, and careful observation by His Majesty's physicians, your behavior had proved inconsistent with dementia, or any other form of onset cognitive delay. Therefore, a jury of thirteen citizens of Soulhire unanimously passed the aforementioned verdict. Is there any statement you would like to make before I render your sentence?"

The pale and skinny old man's tangled hair shifted over his face as he rocked back and forth, an oblivious smile parting his thicket of a beard.

"Very well." Judge Helnaeus folded her hands together and rested them on the surface of her bench, looking blankly at the convict. "Mr. de Lasette, in a society where the elderly cherish the devotion and respect they receive from the young, you have consistently and unabashedly tarnished that relationship. You have besmirched the aspect of wisdom by which your contemporaries are sought to guide the youth of this kingdom..."

"The doors are swinging open and shut," the old man pondered aloud as he smiled into oblivion. "They're everywhere!"

"Mr. de Lasette, I am speaking to you."

The old man replied, "In happy land, the knobs will be on the same side as the hinges!"

The judge blinked slowly. "Sir, how stupid do you think I am?"

The old man's eyes fell clumsily onto the judge. "I give up!" He smiled with a tilted head and crossed eyes. "How stupid *are* you?"

The courtroom stirred with nervous laughter.

Judge Helnaeus leaned forward on her bench. "Mr. de Lasette, the sentence I render is contingent on the behavior I see before me." She once thought to evoke the old man's history with the disgraced Lord Meldorath, but stopped herself, just as had at his trial. In spite of all that the association implied, it would not be fair.

The old man's eyes turned to the judge. He did not look directly at her, but traced his focus around her. "Yes...?"

The judge was mildly satisfied. "Did you hear what I said, Mr. de Lasette?"

"Why yes, Your Virtue!"

The judge lifted the corners of her mouth. "What did I say?"

The old man turned his eyes upward in thought. "Uh... aha! You were talking about wisdom... and old people... um. Yes, yes! And then you said, 'Oops, I crapped myself.'"

The attendants in the courtroom stirred once more, delightfully shocked by the temerity of this elderly troublemaker.

The judge peered over her reading glasses. "Excuse me?"

The old man locked eyes with the woman above him, and suddenly his sanity was laid bare. "That's what you said, was it not? Was it not what you told yourself? All those times when your bowels proved weaker than the rest of you. Men and women called you weak, didn't they? Did you teach yourself to hold it in? To force it back?" He proceeded to speak in a slow and forceful whisper, "Let me help you clear things out."

The judge's eyes widened and then froze. A tiny gasp popped from the back of her throat. She fell back into her chair, clutching her body. Another gasp, almost like a hiccup. A mild convulsion.

Still glaring at her, the old man's beard parted over rotting teeth in a wide smile. "Tell me, young one, how does it feel when your own healthy young body turns against you?"

The judge shot up from her chair and ran to her chambers.

The courtroom responded with confused silence.

"Someone, help! Help me!" an older spectator called out from the gallery. "My wife is in apoplexy!"

The courtroom, once confused, rushed their attention to the woman beside this man, whose eyes had rolled back, her mouth agape, as she shoved her head backward, gasping for breath.

"She's not in apoplexy," the old convict looked back at the woman's husband. "She's in real pleasure for the first time since you married her."

The courtroom attendees shot up from their chairs, loudly and harshly condemning the old man.

"He's a biomage!" a nobleman shouted with equal parts disgust and fear.

The bailiffs stormed the polished courtroom floor to take the old man, but the old man turned his palms up in a high shrug and the five bailiffs dropped to the floor. Three of them convulsed and foamed at the mouth, two of them vomited uncontrollably.

The spectators panicked, surging for the doors.

The old man's eyes lit up as civilized men shoved women and the elderly

aside. "How fast you run from the touch." He extended his hand, and two men were hoisted up into suspended animation.

"Do you feel it," the old man said, "that odious touch? Do you feel my hands slipping under your flesh? Can you feel my fingers stretching through your veins?"

The panic came to a point of despair as the doorways congested. Horrified faces turned to the old man having lost the hope of escape, grasping now to a feeble hope of mercy.

"It is not the violation you so fear," the old man said to them. "It's having to accept that you are not inviolable."

Some of them tried to shield themselves from his arcane reach, others fruitlessly tried to swat the touch away when it came creeping up their legs. Some clamped shut their mouths while he pinched their tongues, others galloped aimlessly about the room with their hands covering their loins.

With a clean jump, the old man landed on the table and spun around to face them all. "Your minds stand like columns in my house of dance." Casting his spells with fast and rhythmic moves of his arms and legs, the old man pumped his fist into the air. "So, *dance!*"

Several of the frantic spectators, and three of the guards who writhed at the foot of the table, sprung to their feet like marionettes and danced with gusto to the beat of the biomage. Those who weren't dancing or piling at the doors were twitching on the floor or in their chairs, striving to take back control over their own bodies. This battle amused the old mage, who therefore allowed those quiet battles to continue. Bowels rumbled, noses bled, eyes watered. Many of the hysterical spectators coughed violently, some cried out in pain. Biological matter of all kinds dropped from the fine silk dresses of the women and stained the robes and suits of the men. One such robe was made from snow-fox fur, and would surely never be the same again.

Still dancing on the table, the old man shoved his finger at one of his victims. "Uh-oh, we got a green one! Everybody, look! She's spitting moss! Hey, don't slip on that—too late!" He looked elsewhere, roofing his eyes with his hand like a sailor watching the sea. "Oh, is he gonna make it? He's almost there... oh no!"

Then two of the spectators, a man and a woman, seemingly together, dropped to their hands and knees, their clothes pulled from their backs. Their veins rose, unbroken, from their backs, reached out to each other like the canopies of two dead trees, and began to fuse into each other.

"Show me, you gods among men," the old man whispered, "show me your

true potential.”

As sinew and nerves began to join the fusion, the entrances to the courtroom were opened, and those who were still able to move made their escape. Mageguards, twice their number, came pouring in after them. Right away, the old man could see that they were well trained in countermagic.

“No deaths today,” the old man muttered to himself, releasing those who danced and those two who he was fusing. “After all, I’m just a lonely old lecher.”

The ones he released staggered and fainted.

The old man fell to his knees, crying, “Please don’t hurt me! I just wanted someone to play with! I didn’t mean it! I didn’t mean it!”

The mageguards closed in on him.

* * *

“What do we know about him?” One of the prison mageguards muttered to another.

“Well, they say he isn’t senile...” said the guard at the front desk, peering into the holding block. “I suppose it’s hard to say.”

The post of these chattering mageguards overlooked a holding center with two rows of barred cells; only three of the sixteen were occupied. There was a drunk, an unlicensed prostitute, and a disheveled old man who rocked back and forth with an oblivious smile, staring at nothing and everything.

“He hasn’t killed anybody though,” said one of the guards. “Is that right?”

“It is,” said the other. “He’s making trouble for attention. He’s come a long way down from where he was. I was told he used to be a tutor for Meldorath.”

“Are you serious?” the young guard laughed, then lowered his voice. “Where did you hear that?”

“My sister’s husband is a clerk of the high forum.”

“Damn... That crazy old man?”

“It seems he’s one of those who claim that Meldorath is still alive.”

“Ah.” The guard looked back down the hall into the holding block. “Poor old guy.”

“He’s a man of a different time.”

"Maybe they should bring Meldorath's body here for him to see... but then the old man might shit himself!"

The two guards laughed, drawing it out to shake off the weariness of the night shift. One after the other, each guard realized that a third man had joined their laughter from a distance.

They turned and looked down the hall. On the end, the old man was smiling at them through the bars of his cell and the strands of his unkempt hair.

"You don't think he heard what we said...?" One of the guards asked.

"Of course not," the other guard said. "...I don't think so."

"They are aware enough to surround him with an armada," the old man said. "But not aware enough to know that it won't make any difference."

"What did he say?"

"Something about an armada?"

The strange old man kept on smiling.

I am Eldus; This is my Family

God never gave a man a better day to make a new home.

The sun was bearing its love down on quaint Hillport. The smell of fish was mixing with the wine-soaked chips that smoked them. All the men and their sons were hauling in the precious resource, the women baking cakes with their little boys and girls.

The smiling lord walked alongside the carriage, which held his wife and two teenagers, watching this hive of hard-working families who toiled for the appreciation of a good sunset.

"Look around you!" he called to his family in the carriage and his guards on their horses. "These people *earn* their sunsets! Who among the wealthy can say the same?" He knocked on the carriage. "Forget not the words of Saint Idus: *Blessed are they who earn their evening skies!*"

Indeed, the people of Hillport worked to their full potential; all that was allotted them was returned tenfold. The problem was that ten times half-a-copper could nary afford a haircut. But with the efforts of competent leadership—investments from neighboring barons and contracts with local townships—Hillport could become the envy of the Voulhirian coast, even of Virko itself, and this *golden age* on present-day lips would bloom beyond historical reproach.

The carriage and its escort came to the top of the densely populated hill that overlooked the harbor, and stopped before the shining portcullis of the gate to Castle Hillport's foreyard.

"Is this not magnificent!" He knocked on the side of the carriage once more, then smacked it until he was rewarded with the groaning of his son.

It was a two-hundred-and-seventy-mile trip from Soulhire, and the lot was weary; Lord Eldus would have spared them more sympathy had two hundred and fifty of those miles not been spent on a river ferry from the capital to Yamon Soul, where they had spent a night in a suite with silver doorknobs. He rolled his eyes at them, then looked to his guards. Even they hung their heads, the hooves

of their stallions dropping heavily to the ground.

He gasped and pointed behind them, "Look, it's the Riva Rohavi!"

The guards whipped their heads around, hands on their blades. The more experienced guards, who better knew the lord, only grumbled. Then some of the fooled men looked offended. Indeed, it was a joke of borderline acceptability at the best of times to levy such jokes at the expense of a lawful officer.

But Lord Eldus only laughed. "I bet Riva would last twice the journey and still be wide awake!"

It was then that the portcullis was lifted, and running through the archway came the castle steward to greet his new lord. On approach, the steward offered his hand.

"You lucky bastard!" Lord Eldus startled his new steward with a bear hug. "God, I wish I had your job!" He started forward again, raising his hands to the high wall of his new property. "Just look at this architecture! I can't wait to see the inside!"

"Inspiring, is it not, my lord?" The steward caught the lord's smile like a cold, following him onward. "I'll have you know, my lord, that I personally oversaw —"

"Please!" The lord held up his hand to silence the man. "We'll be living together! Call me Eldus."

"Of course, Lord Eldus." The steward bowed in stride. "An early dinner awaits you and your lovely family. Food and drink for your men as well. They look exhausted."

"These men could march straight to Ballerhal this very day if they want to!" Eldus winked at his captain, who shook his head expressionlessly.

The carriage started moving again, and the envoy passed between the two great spires that buttressed the castle gate. Eldus was listening to the steward talk about the new garden in the foreyard when he noticed a stain on the wall inside the gate. Dark and faded, it was almost invisible in the shadow of the arch, and yet Eldus could not have imagined missing it. It bore the size and the outline of a man. Time seemed to slow down, and the lord who loved to smile suddenly stopped smiling.

He approached the stain, put his hand on it, closed his eyes.

"As I was saying earlier, my lord..." The steward swallowed; his voice had taken a somber tone, "I personally oversaw the... cleaning. We fixed everything we could. But some things... Some things just wouldn't wash out."

"I know," Eldus breathed the words out. He opened his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"It's my job." The steward took a quick breath, then spun on his heels. "Right, then. Let's continue. I've so much to show you!"

The new lord of Castle Hillport withdrew his hand from the stain put his smile back on.

Lord Eldus Alderman was formerly a judge in Soulhire. He was well reputed for what the people called *cool fairness*, a reputation the king discovered quickly, promoting him to a high court in the Garden Quarter (which was the king's unofficial bank for potential sovereigns). When the king needed someone to fix Hillport, Eldus Alderman was the first name on his mind. Lord Eldus received it as a personal mission not only of healing wounds, but of turning sand into gold.

The main hall was beautiful; everything was new: a bright red carpet over stone slabs, ferns in stone planters, a steel chandelier. His son and daughter walked straight through. The expedition was on.

His wife, Charlotte, walked in after him, taking off her gloves as she scanned the corners of the hall. Finally, nodding, she said with gravitas, "They did well."

Lord Eldus nodded, empathizing with her well-concealed discomfort. "They did."

She stepped closer to him, attention still on the decor. She tried to sound casual when she asked, "The furniture is all new, I assume?"

Eldus nodded.

"What about the staff?"

Eldus looked up at the chandelier. "I'm told there was one servant who survived. She helped with the renovation, but my understanding is that she plans on leaving as soon as we've settled."

Charlotte sighed. She looked around once more. "It is a lovely home."

Eldus smiled, speaking as gently as he could, almost whispering, "It smells like the chefs know how to cook."

Truly, Lord Eldus thought it would have been easier, coming home to a clean place with nice new things. But in a way, the cleanliness only made it worse. The more beautiful and vibrant a fresh new painting was, the more well-centered and masterfully woven a tapestry, the darker the dye in the carpets, the deeper Lord Eldus became aware of the reason for all of this washing and replacing.

"Let's find our room," his lady took him by the arm. "We can change for supper."

Charlotte had been nothing if not supportive as this whole 'becoming lord' situation unfolded. Not an hour had passed since Eldus accepted the king's offer

before his lady was packing the family's belongings and studying the politics of the southern shore. As a public defender, she was organized and fast on her feet. She understood people, especially the poor. And more importantly, the poor had a way of recognizing this almost immediately, warming up to her despite her wealthy status.

"I'm theorizing that the outside fragrance grows lovelier the higher up we go," Eldus remarked.

"Then let's find the uppermost room," she replied.

All of the windows were opened throughout the castle and the air flowed freely through the halls, carrying with it all the smells of the town and of the ocean. It was both invigorating and relaxing.

The stately couple continued to explore halls and climb stairs, all the while closely tailed by a team of servants carrying trunks of their clothing. Eventually, they happened upon a room with large windows on the fourth floor. Curtains flowed into the room, framing a glorious view down the hill, over the town, down to the ocean, which glistened into the horizon. The rivers of the capital were refreshing, but so confined, framed with railings, laced with bridges and surrounded by buildings that looked down on them. But nothing looked down on the ocean; the ocean looked at you, daring you to share in its freedom.

The room itself was sizeable. A bed was elevated on a stone platform in the corner, surrounded by red curtains. Two pieces of oak furniture with silver handles stood nearby, and a tall shelf stood hungry for books and knickknacks.

Charlotte turned to him. "Everything is new, is that right?"

"That's the second time you asked," he said.

She sighed. "I'm sorry."

"Everything is new," he reassured her. "Down to the curtains. Even most of the fixtures." He smiled wryly. "I might have spilled some optimism on your new dress, though. Terribly sorry."

Troubled as she was, and would surely remain for some time, the lady Charlotte was steadfast. She raised her face to him and smiled. "It's a lovely home."

She walked to the window, a silhouette in the bright and beautiful view. He followed her there, embracing her from behind. They swayed together slowly, two lawyers trying to unknow the facts of their most recent case.

Children look up to their lords, evoking their names in the games they play, in their wooden sword fights and wars fought with action figures. And here he stood with his wife, choosing among rooms in a house where such sacred

reverence was unflinchingly betrayed. Twice.

Eldus lost his thoughts in the smell of his wife's hair. "We have a wonderful opportunity here..." a voice of assurance rose from a heart filled with doubt. "We can help these people move forward."

She took his hand. "I know."

The two stood in silence as the breeze swept unyieldingly over them.

"This room belonged to the captain of the guards," came a voice from the doorway. "I always preferred it myself."

Eldus and his wife turned to find an older woman with wavy hair and a dark apron standing at the door.

"I take it you're the head servant," said Eldus. "Beverly, is it?"

"Former head servant, my lord," Beverly replied. "As soon as I'm sure you're comfortable and have found everything alright, I'll bid you good luck and farewell."

"Oh, I wish you'd stay," said Charlotte, stepping away from her husband. "I can't imagine how unpleasant the memories of Lord Orlin must be, but—"

"It was only after the fact that I came to learn of Orlin's perversions..." Beverly closed her eyes and sighed as though working hard to be patient. "There are men who frighten me more than he, even if it shames me to say so."

Eldus found himself approaching a topic he knew he was going to have to face sooner or later, but not this soon.

"None of Hillport's recent ills can hurt you now," said the lady. "Please stay. We'll pay you double what Orlin did."

Beverly looked intently across the room at Charlotte. "Orlin was not the last lord of this castle, my lady. Due respect, if you are no longer afraid of that last lord, speaking his name should give you no trouble."

Charlotte hesitated.

Eldus cut in abruptly: "Lord Meldorath is dead, Beverly."

Beverly's eyes locked suddenly and fiercely onto her new lord. "Swear it to me, Eldus Alderman. You and your wife, here and now."

"Of course, I swear he is dead," said Charlotte.

"As do I," said Lord Eldus.

The head servant sighed with a relief perhaps tempered with doubt. "I will consider your generous offer, my lord and lady." She stepped out of the room and commanded the servants, who were waiting there, to bring the lord and lady's luggage inside.

"I hoped that subject wouldn't come up so soon," said Charlotte as the

servants poured in.

"I was a fool to hope for the same," said Eldus. "The people are going to want to know. They're going to want assurances. No matter how many times we're asked, we cannot let the question fall in silence. We can't hesitate. By the king's own decree, Lord Meldorath took his own life in shame. We know nothing more about it because there was nothing more to it."

She raised a brow. "Which... is true, is it not?"

Eldus glared at her. If she truly had any doubts in Wilhelm's word, or in that of her husband, he wouldn't confess to anything in front of the servants.

He reiterated, "This comes from Wilhelm, Charlotte. How long have we known him now?"

"Of course," she said. She looked back up through the window. "It is a beautiful home you've earned for us, Eldus."

* * *

Isla Alderman was doing handstands across the stone floor of her newly chosen bedroom. It was high in the castle, a point at which the south-facing view was almost entirely dominated by blue: from the sky of whipped clouds to the enveloping ocean.

"You can almost see Lorcia's Isle from here!" she landed on her feet. "Isn't it beautiful?"

"Yes," said her brother Marshus, who was sitting on the bed. "You can't see a lot of the town though."

"Civilization is so incidental," she said. "I've seen enough of that."

Marshus lifted a brow and raised half of his mouth in his classic expression of mischief. "So, it's not just your way of forgetting what happened here?"

But Isla was wise to her brother's tricks. "Don't be silly! Of course I won't avoid the town my whole life!"

"Good." Marshus's one brow remained high over the other. "Because the things Lord Orlin did weren't done out there, Isla. It all happened right here. Inside these walls."

"Oh, stop it, Marshus." Isla looked at her bed. "You heard the steward. He said things have been cleaned. Besides, everything's new."

A passing servant called in to ask Isla if this was to be her room. Isla said that it was, and the servant rushed off.

"But the *castle* isn't new," said Marshus, looking around at the walls. "You saw that man-stain as we pulled up. There could be other stains, if you look close enough."

"That wasn't Lord Orlin's doing."

"No..." Marshus glared at her with big eyes, "It was someone much worse."

"There's nothing worse than a pedophile," she said with confidence.

"But we're not children, Isla. A pedophile can't hurt us."

Finally, her brother's efforts were beginning to settle in.

"What exactly did happen here?" She turned from the view to address him. "Father can force me into a new home, but he won't tell me anything about it."

"What!" Marshus took a silver bowl from the otherwise empty nightstand and put it on his head, a few scented herbs falling out over his face. "Father never told you the legend of the backwater town that exports smelly fish?"

Isla giggled. "Father tells me nothing!" She sat on the window seat. "I want to hear it from you, anyway."

Marshus took a tall candlestick and waved it around. "Once there lived a powerful mage, more powerful than the eiodi himself, even more powerful than all the kings of House Modius! His name was Dalehei Meldorath. He was King Wilhelm's favorite general, and one of his closest friends—"

"I know this part already!" said Isla. "What happened *here*?"

Marshus flicked his fingers at the wick, and a blue flame materialized out of a bite-sized explosion. "Although Meldorath was ambitious, he was quiet and mysterious. Wielding his legendary powers, he led the king's Southern Army, commanding the devotion of its every soldier, and the fear of the Riva Rohavi itself! Not a single Rohavi attack, not a single feather of the Rohavi uniform, was ever discovered on the southern seaboard while Meldorath was general. Not a year ago, the powerful and respected general resigned, choosing Hillport as his place to settle. The highest position available in this shanty little town was chief magistrate. Meldorath took it."

"Why did Meldorath want to live *here*?" Isla asked. "And as a magistrate?"

"His reasons remain unclear." Marshus twirled the candlestick around, making short blue trails in the air. "But it seems Meldorath spent his time as magistrate experimenting with magic in unethical, perhaps monstrous ways." The blue flames at his command grew brighter, casting harsh shadows about the room. "Orlin, the lord of Hillport, learned of Meldorath's treachery, and blackmailed

him, for Orlin wanted his magistrate entirely under his control. But Meldorath was well aware of Lord Orlin's own monstrosities, so the two cooperated with each other for a time."

Isla looked upon her brother's storytelling and magic with the same awe as when she was a toddler, when Marshus used to take blankets as capes, wielding water and fire in his hands. Her fondness for him was all the encouragement he needed to never stop his comically pompous performances.

She asked him, "What ended their cooperation?"

"This is also unclear." Marshus took hold of the shadows that crossed his face. "Speculation goes only so far as a disagreement between the two men." He pulled the flame away from the candle, stretched it, and then split it like two snakes, twirling them aggressively about each other. "Meldorath arrived one night to this very castle and stormed it all on his own. He flung the strongest of men without even moving—even the most practiced of mages need to move a little to channel such magic with their minds." The candlestick still in hand, Marshus moved in beautiful choreography, the flames flowing like rivers around him. "Some schools of magic teach their students to dance to become in tune with their abilities, and they go on dancing in all practices of magic." Then he stood still as the flames twirled far about the room, entirely under his control. "But Meldorath just walked, controlling the chaos around him in silent stride."

"And then he declared himself lord?" said Isla.

"Only the king can grant lordship on an unclaimed hold," said Marshus. "But the story goes—and this I heard directly from father—King Wilhelm never really trusted Meldorath."

"But Meldorath was Wilhelm's general for years!" said Isla. "You just said he was one of his closest friends!"

"So he was," said Marshus. "And the king always lamented his reservations. But according to father, there were things going back a long time that compelled Wilhelm to fear Meldorath every bit as much as he loved him."

"So, the king denied him?"

"The king *delayed* him. But Meldorath was a clever mage. As the people speculated on what happened in Orlin's castle that night, Meldorath saw to it that Orlin's atrocities against children were brought to light. Stories arose about Orlin's *youth parties*, where he would feed greens to the children in order to hear them pass gas, then choose the one whose noise he found the most agreeable."

Isla winced. "That's vile!"

"Following Orlin's death," Marshus continued, "many children of Hillport

would become bombarded with questions they refused to answer. And so it was that Orlin's corpse was denied entry into his family's crypt. His body was defiled and burned in a shallow pit. Once a vague legend, Meldorath was now a true hero. The people demanded that Wilhelm coronate him immediately, and it was so. The clever and powerful mage-general was now called Lord Meldorath."

"And the king *still* didn't trust him, even after that?" said Isla.

"He did not," said Marshus. "In fact, the king sent agents to spy on the castle. Meldorath never suspected such a betrayal, not by his friend King Wilhelm, who had long been known for his honesty. The clever mage had let down his guard for the first and only time in his storied life. And the agents found things that broke the king's heart."

"So, it's true?" said Isla. "Meldorath was experimenting on people?"

"Even on children, from what I hear." Marshus stood over her with his fruit bowl of a helmet and rusted candlestick of a scepter. "So, can you feel the truth in your heart when you say a mere pedophile is worse than a man who can shake the very ocean?"

Isla lowered her head as Marshus collected and extinguished the flames.

Somberly, and with perhaps a drop of bitterness, she said, "You know how to kill the mood, brother."

"Oh, come on now!" Marshus leapt onto the window seat, his body blackened in her eyes by the light coming in from the ocean view. "Rejoice! Orlin's dead and so is Meldorath!"

Isla moved her face around in unpleasant thought, then looked at him. "Is he really dead, though?"

"Orlin? They found him with half his entrails rolled out onto his shirt. The fire pit by the harbor's still black with the rest of him."

"I mean Meldorath."

The conversation was abruptly interrupted by the arresting voice of an unfamiliar woman.

"Young Lady Isla, I presume?" A pale, serious-looking older woman with dark clothes and hair was standing at the doorway. "Your luggage is on its way."

Marshus stepped down from the window seat, eyes narrowing on the woman. Then they widened. "You're the last servant of the castle, aren't you?"

"Hardly, my young lord," the woman named Beverly wiped something from her apron. "You have plenty."

"Is it true what they said about Orlin and Meldorath?" Isla jumped up from the seat and took her brother's side. "Marshus says one held fart parties and the other

could slay an army without breathing!"

Marshus sort of smiled, sort of frowned.

Beverly stepped inside. She wore a look that was difficult to discern between annoyance and concern. "Do you find these things amusing, my young lady?"

"No, ma'am," Isla looked down. "I didn't mean to offend."

Beverly's stern face softened. She looked at the window, taking a few steps toward it. "For many years, I have been proud to know this castle as well as I do. I know the secret compartments and passageways. I know it all like I know my way through my own mind. To have such intimacy with a place, yet fail to see the evils taking place inside it..." She turned and looked at the young Aldermans. "Do you know what that does to a woman who thinks as highly of herself as I do?" She seemed to make an effort not to sound too harsh.

The young siblings didn't take it as a joke; they looked upon the servant with silent respect, awaiting her to continue.

Beverly looked back out the window. "I even knew where to hide when Orlin and his men came under Meldorath's onslaught. The only thing I could not protect was my ears, which heard so much that night. When the slaughter was complete, I took a mop. I got to work on the floors. What else was there to do? No one seemed to notice me when the new staff took over under Meldorath. So, I just kept on working. But the things that happened under the new lord..." she nodded with shameful eyes. "Those things I *did* know were happening *as* they were happening. I didn't see them... but I heard them. And still, I went on commanding the servants, sweeping the floors, overseeing the preparation of meals. I was never a soldier, a mage, or an investigator. Always a servant. A good one. No one even fought back when I nagged the chefs to make sure the food was perfect, or the maids when I demanded every speck of dust sent back outside." She stepped away from the window and changed her face to one more professional, holding her hands over her apron. "Fortunately, I know that one of those lords is dead, and I have assurances from your mother and father that the second is as well."

Servants appeared with sacks and crates.

Beverly took one last look at the young Aldermans. "Welcome to Hillport, my young lord and lady."

"Thank you, ma'am," they both said in unison.

When the head servant was gone, and others were carrying things inside, setting them up, Isla whispered to her brother, who was still beside her. "Meldorath is dead, right?"

"What? ...Yeah."

Marshus was a good storyteller, but somehow a terrible liar. He made up for this by turning to his sister and looking her in the eye, assuring her with brotherly protection, "If he's not dead, then the king would have put him somewhere he can't hurt anybody."

* * *

St. Lorcía, or Lorcía's Isle, named after the wife of King Saint Idus, was a gem on the sparkling waters of the southern coast. Vibrant green trees forested the land behind the strip of white sand on the little island's shore, a shore licked with waves that shone turquoise under the sun. Little packs of red maple trees appeared here and there amid the dark green forest.

Two structures stood on either end of the mile-wide island: on the east side stood a fort teeming with soldiers; on the west side, a quiet manor.

The galleon of Hillport's new lord sailed into the harbor of Queen's Port, the fortress of St. Lorcía, which resupplied the several dozen ships that surrounded this beautiful island. He landed on one of the docks close to the fort, which stood against the wall that enclosed this beach-front harbor from the rest of the square-mile island.

Lord Eldus was the first man off the boat, rattling the dock under his boots.

The captain, with his thick beard and strong nose, was already on his way to greet him.

Eldus outstretched his arms, calling out, "Captain Barricade-y!"

Captain Barcaedi made no effort to force a smile. "Good one, my lord. And I'm not only saying that because you're my new boss." He reached the lord and shook his hand.

"I thought of it right before I made berth!"

"It's as funny as a stillborn."

"Oh!" Eldus pointed at him. "A dark one, he is!" Then he started looking around the place. "In all seriousness, what's the deal here?" He looked out to sea at the many ships in alignment, then back at the captain with a touch of mischief. "Thirty-something ships under your command and you're not an admiral yet?"

"I hear you have the king's ear," Barcaedi replied. "Let's make it happen."

"We very well may, the job your men are doing here!" Lord Eldus put his arm around the captain and walked him up the dock toward the shore. "Not to backpedal, but a post like this must be a reward in itself."

"It has its high tides," Barcaedi looked up at the sky. "Bass does get a little bland when it's all you eat for a month. We want lobster, and supposedly Hillport is rife with them. Yet and still, we're stuck on bass."

"I know," said the lord. "Business in town needs a little kick in the ass."

"A little?" said the captain. "How hard is it to build a lobster trap?"

"It's logistics and communication they're having trouble with," said Eldus. "Thus, they pull in only enough for themselves, then sell it to the fancy restaurants who overcharge so that no one can afford it. It's... it's a mess."

The two men crossed onto the grassy shore of the harbor. Soldiers were practicing the sword and doing calisthenics across the property of the fort. From somewhere within the stone structure, a kitchen was pumping smoke and delicious smells into the air. On the far side of the harbor was a football field, complete with field goal posts.

"I noticed some of the ships out in the water had their rows out," Eldus remarked as he strolled alongside the captain.

"Every day," the captain answered. "A sailor's no good without his muscles. Each man rows for a few hours every other day, three out of every four weeks."

Eldus nodded in approval.

They came to the gate of the fort, which was overgrown from the outside. Of course, this made sense. Nobody left this fort to explore the forest of St. Lorcia, and nothing from out there came in.

Eldus tried to shake the heavy steel bars. As though they were driven straight to the center of the Earth, the bars didn't budge. He looked up at the fortress walls to the battlements, where men were looking out into the heart of the island. They seemed attentive.

"Good," Eldus said. He looked at Barcaedi. "You're running a fine outfit here, captain."

"I know."

Eldus added with a smile, "Unless they're all just putting on an act for me."

The captain shook his head. "These men care nothing for showmanship. They know why they're here."

Eldus jolted and tripped to the ground when the gate beside him buckled violently. A shrill scream filled his head.

Breathless, he looked up from the sand at the barred gate.

A woman with wild eyes and tattered clothes was grasping the bars from the outside, as though to shake them loose. She was bleeding from long and jagged gashes across her body. Some of her skin was burned black. Half of her face was missing.

"Help me!" White fluid spilled from her mouth. Tears pushed the blood down the side of what part of her face was still there. "Please!"

"God..." Almost panicking, Lord Eldus sprung from the sand and shouted in no particular direction, "Open the gate!"

"No, my lord!" Barcaedi put his arm around Eldus, turning him away from the image. "It's just a trick."

Eldus tried to look back.

"Look away," the captain admonished. "You'll find no evidence of the truth in that image."

Eldus half-composed himself.

It did make sense.

He looked helplessly at the captain. "How do you know for sure?"

"It's always something different, and something sellable," Barcaedi paced his words and adjusted his voice for the screams behind them. "A little boy, a little girl, a pregnant woman, the elderly, the retarded, hot young broad with big tits, whatever might terrify a young soldier."

Eldus stole a final glance at the terrifying sight. The woman was still there. Her ruined body and desperate clinging to the bars that were so perfectly framed in the archway.

"But how can we be sure that none of it is real?"

"Logic and reason, my lord. That's how you weather the storm." Barcaedi led the lord away from the gate while men in dark clothes came from behind the broken woman, dragging her back into the woods. "There's no way he could have smuggled any unwilling participant onto this island, but he does have the power to cast illusions. So, you see? Logic makes everything better." The captain released his hold on Eldus. "Still, once in a while we have a soldier who can't handle it. When that happens, we reassign them. But no one is coming into this fort from out there, and no one in here is poking around out there."

At the lord's insistence, Captain Barcaedi took him to a turret on the wall, where Eldus set his hands on a crenel of the battlements and looked across the lush and beautiful island to the shore on the other side.

On a hill by that distant shore, there stood a dark castle under the bright blue sky.

"He and Wilhelm have one thing in common," Eldus noted as he stared across the mile-or-so plot of wooded land. "They both want the world to think he's dead."

"Then they're both losing," said the captain. "From what I hear, not everybody is falling for that *killed-himself-en-route-to-trial* dragonshit."

"I don't care if the people are building shrines to him," said Eldus, still staring at that castle. "So long as he stays where he is."

"While he's here, he might as well be dead."

Eldus turned gravely toward the captain. "His greatest weapon is our complacency."

"I'm sure it is." The captain's words were not so heavy. "He'd have broken out of here long ago if his arsenal were any more real than that."

"He's more powerful than he lets on." Eldus turned his head back out toward the castle. "These ships aren't here to stop him, captain, they're here so at least a few can escape to warn the mainland if he tries something."

"Oh, not you too!" The captain laughed loudly. "I thought you were the intellectual judge! Tell me you're not lubricating your imagination with these bedtime stories." Then the frustration materialized in the captain's voice as he too turned his sights in the direction of the castle. "Enough taxes are funneling into the king's paranoia. If this man is so powerful, why hasn't he escaped on a geyser of lava? Why hasn't he scattered the kingdom into the ocean?"

Eldus grumbled. "Maybe he doesn't think like we do."

Barcaedi threw his arms up to the passing clouds. "And God works in mysterious ways!" He smiled condescendingly at the lord. "Has it not occurred to you, Lord Eldus, that Meldorath achieved what he did because the king's brain was always a step behind his heart?"

Eldus wanted to feel the same way. "Do you not find the man in that castle the least bit intimidating?"

"Just as I am intimidated by Sloss of Gallador, or Bawler of Odaiamar. But they're only men, Lord Eldus."

"Those men are warriors. This is a mage."

"And he can be brought down by other mages. He's not a god."

Eldus took another gander out at the ships and tried to put some mirth in his smile as he then turned to the captain. "Then I trust you have a few mages in your little rafts out there?"

Captain Barcaedi returned the lord's challenging gaze with narrow eyes, then turned his attention to the grounds of the fort. A mage happened to be walking

along the wall beneath them.

"Lieutenant," he called down to the mage, and beckoned him to rise to the turret where the captain and the lord were standing. "I have an announcement to make."

The lieutenant stood alongside the captain at the edge of the turret, facing the ocean. The lieutenant held his hand before the captain's mouth, as though ready to receive his spit, but Eldus had seen this spell before.

Captain Barcaedi spoke over the lieutenant's hand, and his voice was projected by magic loud enough for a ship passing just beyond the harbor to hear him clearly. "Attention all crew aboard the Javikun: our new Lord Eldus wants to know if we have mages on board any of these ships."

Only a couple of seconds passed before the passing ship was lofted from the water as though by a great hand. It soared through the air just as steadily as it had been sailing, columns of water falling from the bow.

Eldus nodded. He was impressed, but wanted more.

Mages threw themselves off the deck and buzzed in flight like wasps about the ship. One of them dived into the water like a missile and burst out like a dolphin.

Cannons along the ship shot flak in all directions, then focused their fire over the roof of the dark manor across the island, causing a great disturbance there.

The flak soon abated, and Captain Barcaedi turned to Lord Eldus with a soft grin half-buried under his thick black beard. "So, stop worrying about Meldorath, and start worrying about our lobsters."

Eldus smiled. He was satisfied with what he saw, and more than satisfied with this Captain Barcaedi. "You're right, captain." He gave Barcaedi a firm pat against the iron armor that covered his shoulder. "Carry on." Then he started down the battlement steps to the ground.

"My lord," Barcaedi called.

Eldus turned, looking up at the captain.

Barcaedi subdued his expression so as to render any emotion utterly undetectable beneath that neatly cut beard. "It was not my intention to make you think I don't take this assignment seriously. I do." He turned his eyes once more to the distant castle, where the smoke from the flak continued to fade. "It's just that all these stories and legends... all of this worrying... it glorifies him. It satisfies him. And I'm growing tired of having to corroborate that glory."

Eldus nodded solemnly. "I understand. Thank you, captain."

* * *

Evening fell and the sky became a deep black over Hillport. A nebulous purple bruise covered the brilliant white gash of the galaxy, which cut across the sky into the oceanic horizon.

Small flames licked the ends of torches that stood tall over the pavilion, which stood on a level lot halfway up the hill from the harbor to the castle. It was filled with quiet people.

It was clear to Eldus, who stood at a lectern overlooking the pavilion, that the silence was caused by the suspicion and attentiveness of a weary people who were willing to at least listen.

So, the lord spoke to them. He had learned as a lawyer to speak to a crowd as though in a face-to-face conversation with each one of them. It was a skill that took years to develop, one that he was very proud of.

"I know it's strange that I'm here," he said to them. The silence was strong enough to put a wedge in the shortest of pauses. "While I was still presiding over petty crimes in Soulhire, the king addressed me in a very personal manner. He told me that the good town of Hillport had lost two lords in a matter of months, and that both of these lords were cut from different parts of an infectious cloth."

By lumping Meldorath in with Orlin without mentioning either name, it was Eldus's intention to displace any attention to Meldorath that still lingered here, thereby fortifying the illusion that Eldus was no more in the know than they were.

But to Eldus's surprise, and in a subconscious way his shame, the people didn't want to talk about Meldorath. Men and women with unyielding voices called out to address the state of the town during the much longer tenure of lord Orlin.

"Where is the budget for our schools!" a man called out.

Orlin had never, in his eleven years as sovereign lord, passed a desperately needed budget for schooling. He denied multiple offers by the Church to construct a school and hospital with a small subsidy by the town. Instead, Orlin fed all the money over the years into industry to try and emulate the success of Virko.

But industry was not Hillport's strength. These people were fishermen, not artisans; they yearned for the salt of the sea, not the ashes of a smokestack. But Orlin said that he would pull them from that 'backwater mentality.' He set up raw materials to be brought in from Kiten and Alcovia. He had to pay a premium, as

these communities were already in contract with Virko.

"Not only did he set us back," one woman called out from the crowd, "he damaged the whole economy of the south!"

The crowd stirred in agreement.

"I understand," said Eldus. "But I urge you to realize how anxious King Wilhelm is with big plans for our town."

"We don't want big!" a man in the crowd shouted, and the crowd applauded.

"No..." Eldus gave them a moment to quiet, which they shortly did. He looked over them, bringing every person into his periphery. "But I know you're more ambitious than Orlin thought you were. You just informed me you want education for your children: I suspect you want them to have the knowledge to decide if the life of a fisherman is what *they* want. But that doesn't mean this town has to come away from the reputation that it has earned: the gatherers of the sea. This was the very sentiment by which Wilhelm sent me." The statement was true enough for Eldus to make it with a clear conscience. "But I am not versed in your craft, neither am I experienced in trade. But if my words are true to your desires, I have the power to help you."

At this, the people went fully silent. All eyes were focused with open invitation to further explanation.

And while Lord Eldus had that explanation, he weaved it into a dialogue with the people who were gathered before him. He called on a few of them, and asked them what they wanted to see for their town.

"The work we do gets dangerous," said someone whom Eldus called upon. "We need more doctors."

"I have already contacted Yamon Soul," Eldus replied. "The eiodi himself is sending a consultant to speak of funding a new hospital, sending healers who will both tend to the infirmed and train our children to do the same."

"Our town is not large," said another citizen when called upon, "but the roads are terrible in most places. Is there any way they can be redone?"

"Why yes," said Eldus. "I'm in the process of drafting a letter to Mayor Malcolm of Magnum Caelum in regards to their abundance of cobblestone."

The people reacted in particular excitement upon this news.

By the end of the discussion, some of those upon whom Eldus called said simply, "I want it as you say."

When Eldus was assured that they were on the same page, he spoke about himself and his professional background, threading in key details that were relevant to the town, such as his contacts with politicians and potential investors

back in Soulhire.

With rising exuberance, the people continued to offer practical suggestions as to how some of their ambitions might be carried out. They had among them, for example, several master shipbuilders who, with lumber from northern settlements, could construct larger, stronger vessels for harvesting the sea.

In turn, Eldus proposed a special campaign, where all fishermen would be paid an extra stipend by the lord's personal coffers to bring up a surplus of lobster for immediate export. The first shipment to each neighboring community would be free of charge and of the absolute highest quality, thus garnering regional interest in Hillport's delicacies.

At this, the people let out a cheer that must have roused all the sleeping children in the town.

The congregation broke late in the night with far more confidence than when they had gathered. There was lively discussion among the men and women shuffling out. Many of them were smiling. It would be another two hours before Lord Eldus was released by the few dozen citizens who prompted him for conversation.

Fatigued as the new lord of Hillport was, he wondered if his excitement would allow him any sleep that night.

On their lord's approach, guards opened the front doors of Castle Hillport at two in the morning. The golden light inside clashed with the black walls of cold bricks. The smell of food cooking for the night shift guards lingered with savory notes of basil and garlic in the cool air.

In the main hall, the lord was greeted by his son.

"How did it go?" Marshus asked.

Eldus walked past him. "If I said it went well, can you try not to ruin it this time?"

His son smirked. "I didn't realize I was so powerful, my lord."

"I'm relieved to say it went well." Eldus turned his head halfway to the young lord as he kept walking. "There's hope yet for this simple town."

"It relieves me to hear it, father."

Eldus was on his way to his chambers when he stopped. He found one of the night servants and asked him if Beverly was still awake.

"She just retired, my lord," the servant replied. "But I doubt she's fallen asleep by now."

Eldus found the bedroom of his head servant, who had known with intimacy the odious hand of both the lords who came before him.

Beverly answered her door in a robe, her hair done up in large rollers.

"Forgive me, Beverly," the lord bowed his head. "I was told you were still awake."

Beverly gave a pale smile. "What can I do for you, Lord Eldus?"

Eldus felt the hand of exhaustion corrupting his judgment, but still this very matter had to be brought up sooner or later, and it was bothering him now. "I know the timing is odd, but I need to ask if you have any documented information on my predecessors."

"Meldorath's notes are scattered about the castle," Beverly answered. "They are being sought out and gathered as we speak."

"Abridged notes, I trust," said Eldus. "Meldorath would have had time to hide or destroy what he wanted when the king issued the warrant. If anyone knows where the best hiding places are, it would be you."

Beverly grimaced. "You came here to push this town forward, Lord Eldus. There is no reason for you to dwell on the past."

"The people deserve closure," said Eldus.

"The people deserve *peace*," Beverly almost snapped. She had crossed no line, but neither did she pull back from the line she approached. "That will never come by unearthing what was buried with him. I chose to continue work at this castle on the condition Meldorath's death. That deal is forfeit if you intend to resurrect him."

Sometimes, when Eldus was tired, his mind became quiet, like a whisper. And while his judgment was admittedly impaired, sometimes, when he focused through the exhaustion, the answers to difficult questions became clear. He looked at his servant and said, "Beverly, I know the things he did should be damned to silence. And they will be. But I need to be sure that he hasn't positioned his machinations where an apprentice can continue them."

Beverly stood straight, as though ready to concede the point. "Does this intention come from the king?"

"The king intended for me to use my judgment." Eldus maintained the confidence in his voice that he had held throughout the town meeting. "Meldorath is dead. My intention is not to resurrect him, but to ensure that nobody else does."

Beverly stared, begrudging.

Eldus released all strain in his brows and pleaded, "My family lives in this house, Beverly."

Beverly closed her eyes and sighed. Opening them slowly, she said, "There is

something. I don't know if it will help you, and I don't know why I kept it, so don't ever ask."

"Whatever it is, it will help. And I would never question you."

"Come with me."

She took him into her modest chambers, which overlooked the northerly lands: a bare wilderness of shallow green hills. She stepped into her washroom and emerged holding a book. Offering it to Eldus, she said, "This is the diary of Lord Orlin. Perhaps there is information here that Meldorath did not know of. Perhaps there is not. But it is all I have to offer you, and it pains me to even allow attention to it."

The book was a fine, heavy thing with a burgundy cover and cream-colored pages. Eldus was disturbed to flip the pages with his thumb—what details could be conjured into clear visions by this menacingly exquisite handwriting?

He was sure he wouldn't read it, but he wouldn't get rid of it. He looked at his head servant. "Thank you, Beverly."

"Good night, my lord."

Eldus didn't want to wake his wife, so he skipped the bedroom and walked to his study. Crates were still stacked high there, and the books had only just started to find their way onto the shelves before the servants called it a night. It was just as well; the important thing was that his favorite desk chair had arrived.

He sat at the desk, where a stack of documents had been collected and placed in a sealed box. The key was carried only by Eldus and the castle steward.

Eldus set the burgundy diary aside and opened the sealed box. He straightened the papers inside and started to read them, the supposed notes of Lord Meldorath.

The particular page that lay atop the others was in print, torn from some arcane book with which Eldus was unfamiliar.

There are two worlds floating like twin yolks in the egg of existence, the passage read. The Cosmos, the physical world, is only one of these. The other is Caromentis. Simply put, it is the magic world. From an outer perspective, it is a mess: a mass of stars with streams of nebulae. Many answers to the mysteries of magic are held in the countless planes of this universe.

Eldus read on...

There are kingdoms in Caromentis, just as there are in the Cosmos. There are empires.

Most of the inhabitants of Caromentis are indigenous to it, like the creatures of the Cosmos. But it is said that there are those of the Cosmos, with strong

connections to magic, who have found some way to get in. Some in the physical world praise, even worship such powerful men, and claim that they have influence over the Cosmos from their seats in Caromentis, in a way similar to the pagan gods of old.

One more passage...

And just as a superior nation can spill into an inferior nation for whatever reason it may, so too can one world invade the other. Magic itself, after all, is nothing if not an invasion of that universe into ours...

Eldus set the papers back and closed the box, locking it once more.

I am Indara, Vice Chancellor of Mianora

First came the guards into the dank warmth of Soulhire's jail; these were among the elite of Mianora's roster, yet they brandished ceremonial armor, shining white breastplates etched with interpretations of Mianora's most paramount victories and lamentations, entire battles sprawling violently across imposing pectorals and pauldrons. Their closed helms, like the paladins of their brotherhood, were adorned with the halo, a standing ring that attached at the temples. Skirts of silk and chainmail chimed as they strode across the cellblock.

Into the midst of these proud few came the penultimate authority of the Mianoran Order, Indara Nightla. Even if the jailors had been so ignorant as to find her countenance unfamiliar, they would never have questioned the stride of her entourage.

The vice chancellor led these poised elites to the back of the block, where she stood before a wall of rusted bars that parceled the world from a decrepit and lonely old man.

The old man smiled up at her. "I would offer you my only chair, Lady Nightla, if I could but pass it through these bars."

Lady Nightla replied, "I wouldn't take a chair from an old man."

He laughed. "So, have you come to pardon me? Do you even have that authority?"

"*Before* you revealed yourself to be a biomage? Perhaps."

The roguish wizard shrugged. "Subtlety never was my virtue."

"I should think not," the vice chancellor replied. "And yet one such as Meldorath has always favored you."

"Oh, I wouldn't say *always*..." He turned a lazy eye up in remembrance. "Circumstances dropped me into his lap in the beginning. Still, the boy understands the advantages of diversity."

The lady knight-turned-politician glared down upon the court wizard-turned-criminal. "Why have you returned, Alabaster? Why have you seen yourself

thrown in here?”

The old man’s eyes twinkled like waning stars. “You speak as though to one who has accepted some irrevocable consequence. Do you think this cut-rate playpen could hold me if it were forced to try?”

“No more than your pupil’s prison could hold him.”

There was pride in Alabaster’s smile, but also a subdued sense of caution. “Is that what you really believe, vice chancellor, or is flattery your new method of interrogation?”

Lady Nightla smiled only with her eyes. “Men do so love when their gods are complimented.”

Alabaster laughed. “You don’t care why I’m here. You care how my behavior might correspond to Meldorath’s plans.”

“Does it?”

He gave her a nasty grin. “I’m sure it would be the first time that my *whipping-it-out* for a teenage noble could be taken as a prophecy. But would you, my dear Lady Nightla, continue to speak to me as an old friend if you knew I haven’t spoken with Meldorath since he retired from the army?”

“Perhaps not,” said Lady Nightla. “Or perhaps I find you just as dangerous as I find him.”

Alabaster, his grin still fresh, shook his head softly. “I don’t think you believe that at all.”

“You are just as dangerous to me.”

Alabaster rubbed his beard and turned his lazy eye back to the ceiling. “Now *that*, you might believe.”

She added, “Perhaps I would sooner be swallowed up in his revenge against the king than bear myself to your personal ire.”

He chortled. “Now I *know* you’re flattering me.”

Her eyes went cold. “Does he intend to kill the king?”

“Would you care if he did?”

“If he wants only to escape, that and nothing more, I can help him.”

Alabaster’s eyes went cold as well, but not as to match her gravity. In fact, his sudden frostiness seemed out of a loss of interest in the conversation. “It would tell you a lot if I so much as considered that deal, wouldn’t it, my lady?”

“I just want to know if I should be worried.”

His shoulders eased, his head tilted, almost as if he were preparing to be magnanimous. “The Riva Rohavi thinks the Voulhirian government is up to something. The government thinks the Riva Rohavi is up to something.” The old

man's lips curled in a cross between a smile and a scowl. "If only they both knew."

"Knew what?" she asked.

He slouched in his chair. "What do I know?"

The vice chancellor glared at him bitterly for a time, half despising him, half struggling to find the right word that would prompt from him a response that she could use.

"And before you offer to release *me*," he said, "know that I'll be alright on my own. But thank you most kindly."

Fearing another jab that might inspire an unprofessional response, Lady Nightla turned away then from the old wizard.

It was almost a jab in itself that he allowed her to leave in silence.

We are Mianora

These steeds did not resemble ordinary horses; at first glance perhaps, but by no means upon further inspection. Their bodies were triple the mass of any stallion you would find dropping dung in a common stable, and their legs were as thick as the body of a man. They were not as fast as the common horse, but given momentum they could plow through rows of iron-armored soldiers.

These were the Ramshires. And they were bred exclusively for the Mianoran knights.

The strength of these animals was a critical necessity to the knights, who would journey far across the country, encumbering their steeds with the weight of themselves plus another hundred-fifty pounds or more of armor and gear.

The heavy armor of these powerful men shimmered in the sun like a mountain of ice atop their high horses. Their pauldrons made their shoulders look like white wrecking balls, almost burying their heads. Their helms were anchored to their bodies by a gorget of lactic chainmail. The helms of the lieutenants and sergeants were crowned with a shining white halo that looped upward, a proud badge of office and a most attractive display among all citizens rich and poor.

Mounted to the side of their imposing Ramshires were spears jutting eight feet toward the sky. Mounted to their backs were spiked hammers, which weighed less than ten pounds, but in the right hands could punch through steel like it was cardboard. And there were no hands better than these.

The knights who carried swords were dressed in lighter armor: leather dyed white to match the lactic plates of their much larger companions. They were lighter on their feet, but mounted the same powerful, enduring Ramshires.

Debate as to the effectiveness of these two types of knights was ancient, and the Mianoran Council had long held competitions between them for training and morale.

Twelve thousand strong was but a fraction of the Voulhirian military, but the prowess of the Mianoran knights was a match for any standing force ten times their number.

This particular party was a patrol which numbered only one hundred. They had hooked north around the dreaded Dire Vine Jungle, passing the territory of Ballerhal and the almost equally rich city of Dharville. They had endured the

climb down the ridges of the mile-high Cliffs of Morningshadow, and now were headed in the direction of the ashen border of the Graylands, where they would stop and turn back.

Very near to this turning point, the patrol came to a place where a stream once flowed, but had gone dry a few years ago. It used to flow from a low cave to the northwest, too small to enter and survey. It seemed to have come from the Graylands, but that was clearly an illusion. The ash sucked up any water that would have flowed half-a-mile along the surface of the Graylands.

Soon the commander, who led the patrol along their route, noticed an oddity on the dried-up river bed.

"What is that there?" he asked aloud. "Some tattered cloth?"

"No, Commander," one of his men replied, squinting. "They look like feathers."

The feathers were dark and, as the knights drew nearer, quite recognizable.

"Those are of the pheasant, are they not?" the commander asked.

"I believe they are, Commander."

The brutal treatment of the pheasant remained an unfortunate commonality in Voulhire, as though the innocent creatures were to blame for the actions of the Riva Rohavi, who donned these feathers as a perverted badge of their own. Sometimes such cruel actions upon the bird were done in ceremony to herald the arrival of a Mianora patrol.

"What a shame," the leading knight half-heartedly lamented.

"Quite a shame, Commander."

The few feathers here were followed by quite a few more, which trailed a ways up the dry stream.

"They must have done a good number on this poor bird," said another one of the knights as the patrol continued along the morbid trail.

"I believe you're right," said the commander, following the trail ahead with his eyes.

Curiously, at the end of the trail, there lay not the body of the unfortunate animal, but a helmet, shining in the sun on a bed of little rocks and sand.

It was a Mianoran helm, one that bore the halo of a decorated knight.

The commander raised an open hand, bringing his patrol of one hundred to a stop. He dismounted his towering Ramshire and landed on the grassy bank with a small quake. His boots crunched on the tiny river stones as he stepped closer to the curious display.

Lactis armor was very expensive, and there were strict measures of discipline

lined up for any man or woman who lost their gear. Such carelessness was unheard of by one so high in rank.

The commander lifted the helm. It was in perfect shape. He turned it in his hands. The chainmail rattled. Not a scratch. Not a dent.

He opened the visor to check the padding.

Two wide eyes were staring back at him.

The commander gasped and dropped the helmet.

"Is that where they stuffed the bird!" one of the knights called out in laughter.

The commander's heart pounded. He could almost feel it reverberating in his heavy metal breastplate.

He composed himself.

He secured the chainmail so that the head would not fall out, and carried it in a respectful manner toward the men.

He looked up.

On one of the shallow hills that surrounded the dry river, a black figure stood in striking, haunting contrast to the green grass and clear blue sky.

The commander calmly set the helm on the ground. He pulled his hammer from his back.

The knights turned their eyes to the hill. They didn't draw their weapons yet, but they gazed with caution at the black shadow.

Then the shadow began to move, but not in any direction.

It was dancing.

"Riva!" one of the knights cried out.

More figures started rising over the hills around them. A few of them, though not many, fired arrows in their general direction.

The patrol scrambled, scattering in different directions, toward different groups of these black figures with feathered masks. They were unconcerned about the arrows—their armor was more than a match for them. They charged angrily up the hills, their spears drawn down from their fixtures and aimed true at the dark dissenters.

And the dissenters let them come.

The spears thrust forward with the speed and precision of pistons in a steam engine.

But the dark and feathered rebels dodged them, countering with chained weapons that grappled the spears, pulling them away from the gauntlets of the knights.

The Mianoran knights relied so heavily upon set moves in battle: a prodding

of spears, let the spears fall to the ground, then quickly prepare for close-quarter combat.

But Riva subverted them at the first step, and took full advantage of the second-and-a-half it gave them.

For in that minuscule amount of time, the almost naked rebels were hopping up on top of the Ramshires.

The hammers of the knights were useless being so tightly crowded; they had only their armor to protect them while reaching for their daggers.

But that was all the time the dissenters needed to exploit the few weaknesses in the knight's armor. The seams at the shoulders. The waistline. The visor. Some of the Rohavians had even enough time to simply lift the chainmail under the helm while another came and butchered the meat it was protecting. It was especially easy to lift the helmets of the knights with halos. Dissenters on the ground jumped up and grabbed the knights by the arms, holding them in place.

All along these few hills were rows of white armor streaming with blood, their occupants too shocked to fall down and die.

With no momentum to charge, the Ramshires were suddenly frightened by the overwhelming enemy.

The commander remained in the center of the battle, standing in the dry river, watching his proud knights fall one-by-one from their horses, often with their horses. The commander's own Ramshire had run away; it was the only horse to make it out of this little valley alive.

The scene had unfolded so fast, it was almost incomprehensible.

A moment ago, there stood one hundred of Voulhire's finest men of war. And now they were gone. And only their commander remained, still standing, the head of his hammer resting on the ground, its handle clutched in fingers he could no longer feel.

When the last knight had fallen, and only when the last knight had fallen, the victors, all standing on the hills around the commander, looked down on him. Then they started their way down the slopes.

Rather, they danced their way down.

Galen

In a different way, Magnum Caelum was as beautiful by day as by night.

On my first morning in Voulhire, I woke in my uncle's soft and sprawling bed, which occupied its own room of the house. I felt that I had sullied it, having fallen immediately into the mattress without washing myself, covered in clothes I had been wearing for days (I'd only managed to change twice on the week-and-a-half voyage). I knew right away that I should wash the bedding that very morning. This was not a concern: washing clothes and sheets was one lesson in which the Lands of the Princes had not failed me.

But first I had to wash myself, which was not so easy.

It's not that I was accustomed to filth... well, I was, but I understood the value of personal hygiene. The problem was that Magnum Caelum did not have access to fresh water... at least not in the sense that I was used to. I looked around town, but there were no rivers nearby. Instead, Magnum Caelum had what I would later learn were called *springs*.

Here in Voulhire, there were rivers underground!

Some of the houses in Magnum Caelum were situated over these underground waters, and water could be drawn directly to their washrooms and kitchens. But all I saw was a bath with a strange device hanging over it, not realizing that device was a water pump.

I waited until the mayor came to walk me to the bank. I apologized for delaying him, and asked him where the river was. The mayor explained to me their system of plumbing. He showed me how toilets worked.

Amused by my astonishment, the mayor added that there were parts of Voulhire where the water could be turned hot or cold.

"One of the products that makes Virko so rich are parts for steam engines," the mayor explained. "They're all the rage in every major city in Voulhire."

The mayor was good enough to prepare hot water for me over the stove and waited in the sitting room while I bathed and shaved. My uncle had given away

all of his clothes before he died and filled his armoire with clothes befitting a moderately built man of six feet, and they fit me perfectly. Rowan must have uncovered these details as he searched for me in my homeland. The clothes were smooth and clean. I felt important and colorful. I felt real.

I was happy to walk with the mayor through the heart of Magnum Caelum.

In the center of town was a wide birdbath. It sat in a plaza lined with juniper trees that were being pruned by the town gardener. Surrounding this plaza were a few buildings only slightly larger than the average house in town. The largest of these buildings was the church. The smallest was the office of commerce. The second smallest was the bank.

Inside, the room was dim and the people moved slowly. The mayor approached an old man at a desk and gave me some papers.

"Do you..." the mayor asked gingerly. "Are you able to..." He made a motion with his hand. "Can you write your name?"

"Certainly!" I grabbed the pen and wrote my name on each line in the small packet of papers.

"Capital!" said the banker. "All accounts are now in your name, Herr Bray. You can access these accounts during regular business hours or anytime there is a banker on duty."

The mayor asked the banker if he could show me to my money now, and I was taken to a room with many drawers. Within one of them, which bore the name *Onita*, were stacks of gold and silver coins. Back home, I used to imagine Voulhirian coins being as big as my palm; these were the size of my thumbnail and about as thin, but they were many. The more I thought about it, the more I preferred it this way.

"It's... more than it seems," the mayor said apologetically. "Your uncle spent a lot of it finding you. But this should last you comfortably for... maybe two years... if you conserve a little..."

I was shocked that the mayor had taken this tone, and overjoyed to see this money. I withdrew what the mayor advised would last me about a week.

"Your uncle was worried," said the mayor. "But his executor assured him that you appeared more than capable of continuing his work and making a life for yourself. Has he come to see you yet, the executor?"

"Hm?" I looked up. "Oh, I met him last night, but he's coming to see me today with documents."

"Good," said the mayor. "Once his business is concluded, we can at last be rid of that one."

I wasn't sure what the mayor meant by this apparent negativity. I couldn't imagine what enmity he might have had against the one who rescued me, but neither was I going to question the mayor, to whom I was also grateful.

Back outside in front of the bank, the mayor patted me on the back. "If you need anything, Herr Bray, you let me know. You'll be alright."

"Thank you, Herr Mayor."

Then he left me in the central square of Magnum Caelum.

I looked around, my eyes wandering over the fine birdbath and the neat juniper trees and the masonry of the plaza. I felt like the most powerful man in the world. I pondered on the wisest thing to spend my uncle's money on first.

Although I was happy with my shave, I felt this town deserved better than to look at my hair in the state it was in. Fortunately, there was a barber shop right there in the plaza.

I walked into the shop, self-conscious of the obviousness of my need.

There weren't a lot of mirrors lying about in the Lands of the Princes. And there wasn't a lot of time to stand around looking into them. I knew what I looked like, or at least I thought I did. When I shaved that morning, I used a mirror that didn't throw any surprises at me.

But when the barber was finished with me, and she turned me around to look at myself, I almost became afraid. Even though I was looking right at myself, I wasn't sure it was me. It couldn't be me...

I could never really define the color of my hair—it was an odd color and always dirty. But in the mirror, I saw a perfectly trimmed head of dark brown hair, almost the color of charcoal. Eyes of greenish-gray, like the waters I had crossed to get here. My jaw was clearer with a closer shave. My brows swung like heavy levers when I emoted with surprise at the sight of myself.

I walked out of there feeling like a noble.

The first thing I did on returning to my uncle's property was visit the forge, which rested cold in the building behind the house, the building called *Onita Steel*.

The room smelled only of cold dirt. Obviously, the forge hadn't been lit for some time. And to my misfortune, for all the lessons in combat my life had taught me, I'd never come close to a single lesson as a blacksmith.

Where I had come from, common men were not allowed within a hundred feet of places where weapons and armor were made. You had to be a high-ranking officer or a quartermaster for that privilege. Being a blacksmith in the Lands of the Princes was a dream vocation; you made a lot of money and you were

fiercely protected.

Only in Voulhire would such a job be handed to a nobody like me.

But the only thing I was forging at the moment was irony, as I hadn't a clue where to begin.

There was a brick oven against the wall big enough to cook a horse. It was bedded with hundreds of pounds of fresh black coal and connected to a bellows big enough to sit on. I smiled as I pictured my old uncle riding up and down on it.

The weapon racks were all empty. It was only sensible that the old man would have sold them, and I was grateful to him for that. Still, I would like to have seen some of his work.

There were plenty of iron rods though; I reasoned that my uncle had left them for me to practice with. I hoped it would be as simple as reheating the metal if I messed up, as I hated the thought of wasting them. But who knew how long this would take me to learn?

There was more machinery adorning the far wall, which daunted me even further.

I didn't want to start the furnace. I didn't want to waste that coal. It looked so black. It smelled so fresh.

I looked around and tried to think, tried to get a feel for where everything was and what I might do with each thing once that forge was lit.

I was startled by a knock at the door.

"Come in!" I called.

The door opened. My savior Rowan walked inside. He carried with him an envelope and a book. "Ah, you killed the beard? It made you look so tough!" When he turned to close the door, I noticed a sword strapped to his back.

I was excited, but I didn't dare presume.

"Is that your sword?" I asked him.

Rowan smirked. "I think you know it isn't." He pulled the strap over his head. "This is your sword." He held it out to me. "It's a bit basic, but still beautiful. Very well made. Your uncle never cut corners. If you ask me, that cost him more money than it earned him, but it was his passion as much as his job." He stared at me for a few seconds as he held the blade forward with one hand. "So... ya gonna take this thing?"

I reached forward and took the sheathed weapon into my hands. It was heavy.

"It's a broadsword, I think," said Rowan.

I pulled it halfway out. It was reflective. I could see my nice haircut. The hilt

fit perfectly into my hand. Not even pumice felt so assuredly slip-proof.

I didn't dare remove it all the way. In fact, I promptly closed it. The sound of metal cut through the room like the commanding voice of a king.

"Solid steel," said Rowan. "Respectable enough. Your uncle never branched into other metals though. I think it's a shame. He was good enough. Some people just like to keep it simple."

"Simple is safe..." I said, looking around for a place to put the sword.

"There are different metals all over," said Rowan, a hint of persistence in his tone. "There are rumored to be some veins of metal that came from Caromentis."

I spread a towel over a bench and set the sword on top of it. "Who's Caromentis?"

"Oh, I'm not sure what they call it where you're from," said Rowan. "You know, the magic world."

"Magic world?" I said.

Rowan was shocked to silence, but it didn't last long. "They don't teach you guys a lot over there, do they?"

I shrugged.

"You know about magic, right?" Rowan sounded half sarcastic.

"Well, yes... I guess," I said. "I couldn't tell you anything about it though." I turned my eyes up toward him, feeling apologetic.

"Alright, well," Rowan looked around the room, nodding. "Okay." He laughed. "Anyway..." he looked down at the items in his arm. "These are from your uncle. The book is a bunch of notes he kept about forging. The deeds are all here, the business and the house. I got some keys here. And... Oh—there's a letter from your uncle." He handed the envelope out to me. "I figured you might want to start with that."

"Yes, thank you." I walked quickly to him and grabbed the letter, ignoring everything else.

I opened it.

Hello, My Great Nephew,

I hope your journey was as pleasant as it could have been. Thank you for coming to see me.

How I wish I could hold out just a little longer to meet you, but this is to be the last of my failures that my family must endure. Please understand, I've spent the good fortune of my health trying to redeem myself, to create something big, something I could give back to my

family.

I waited so long to reach out to them, who cut me out and sent me away. But I beg you, never allow yourself to believe that I ever took pleasure in what became of the home I left behind. Not for a moment was that ever true. Every night for months I wept as news came in of violent war, and the Lands of the Princes became a term synonymous with suffering.

Please forgive me that I never sent for you sooner, or that I never came back for you myself. I was afraid that my hand would be denied, even if there were any survivors of my family, even if they were desperate. I didn't want to think about what terrible stories of me might have passed down through the generations.

Alas, my nephew, I am a coward. I don't deserve a relationship with you.

But I hope you will partake of the success of this business I have built. Let it serve as redemption to my family for my failures, and for never amending them until now, at the hour of my death.

But let me be remembered in whichever way I will—there is a greater destiny for you! Perhaps my humble business will only be the beginning of your many successes.

I'm sorry I won't get to meet you, my nephew. I'm so sorry. But it is a far greater loss for me. I am told that you are handsome and strong, and I'll bet that the life you had has humbled you such that no parent nor academy could have equaled. Retain it, my nephew. Keep your head low, but your eyes ahead. Keep your mind on earth, but your heart among the stars. May you never feel shame, and always walk among those who love you.

I may have never met you, but I love you with all of my heart.

Thank you for being my redemption.

*Your great uncle,
Galen Onita*

The letter shook in my hand. The emotions returned in a wave of blood to my brain. I became dizzy, and dropped to the bench beside my uncle's sword.

I felt a hand on my shoulder. "Hey." I heard Rowan's voice. "Are you okay?"
"...Yes," I said, dropping a tear to the floor. "I... I wish I could have met this man."

"You would have liked him," said Rowan. "You're both... sensitive."

I looked up at the forge, the beastly thing with a million different aspects.

I nodded at it. "I'm gonna learn this thing."

"Let me help you!" Rowan waltzed over to the forge. "Let's get this barbeque started!"

"Wait!" I said louder than I had intended.

Rowan stopped, turned. "What?"

I hesitated. "Well... the book..."

"The—?" Rowan looked at my uncle's book, still in his hands. "Oh, this is just tips once you get started. It's not like he's wasting pages on how to light the forge!" He set the book down next to me, taking a few quick looks around. "Wow, I didn't even notice this!" He walked to the other side of the room. "A blast furnace!"

I picked up my uncle's book. Maybe I could learn at least a little something by the time Rowan's excitement threw me head-first into the fire. I rested the binding on my lap and split the book open. I read the first thing I saw.

He means well, my nephew...

I threw the book on the floor as I threw my back against the wall.

"What?" Rowan came back. He looked at my feet, picked up the book and looked inside. "Did your uncle keep a nudie in here?"

I took it back from him, thumbed through the pages. With my eyes tethered to every word and diagram, I searched for what I had seen in a glimpse. After a few minutes, I couldn't find whatever it was, or anything that could have resembled it.

"I guess I..." I closed the book. "My mind's just having a little fun with me."

"You're probably still exhausted from the trip," said Rowan. "Come on up, help me out with this!" He grabbed a tin jar from a shelf high on the furnace and poured its liquid contents onto the center of the coal. From the same shelf, he grabbed two flint rocks. I think he almost burned himself when the flame went up.

"There we go," he said, picking up off the floor the flints that he had dropped. "See? We're halfway there!"

Hesitantly, I looked back into the book. I searched the pages closer to the beginning.

One of the first things I learned about forging is that it's important to keep the lights out.

I proceeded to close the shutters on the windows.

"Hey, I can't see..." said Rowan.

And I couldn't read.

I opened the shutter a little to see the pages. Among the pages, I soon found a scale of colors from red to orange to yellow to bright yellow to "almost white."

Rowan took a cloth, dipped it in a barrel of water, and grabbed the metal to pull it out.

"Wait." I looked up over the book. "I think you should leave it in a bit longer."

"But it's red hot," said Rowan.

"It has to be hotter than red," I said. "It has to be white."

As the iron continued to heat, I opened to another page early in the book.

Hammer in sections no longer than the full length of your hand. But do not spend too much time on one section. Remember, you are drawing the blade out. Each section must join the other in the next step toward perfection!

Cautious as a tortoise, I pulled the iron out and put it to the anvil. There, I hammered in accordance to my uncle's word.

Smirking, Rowan dodged the sparks that flew in every direction.

Then his smirk became a smile as he watched me hammer. "One minute in and you look like any blacksmith I've ever seen!"

I had to stop, admitting, "I'm a little winded..."

"So, take a break," said Rowan. "You'll get used to this. Just make sure you use both arms, or you're gonna look like you masturbate too much."

I laughed, and set the hammer down.

As I sat down, wiping sweat from my forehead, Rowan asked, "So do you know what lactis steel is?"

"Uh, I don't think so..." I answered, flexing my numb shoulder.

"It's better for crafting armor, but it's great for swords too," said Rowan. "A good craftsman can forge lactis armor to be upwards of five percent more reliable than basic steel. It doesn't sound like a lot, but it can drive the price up by more than two hundred percent."

"I see..." I said, not fully understanding the math. "How is lactis forged?"

"From white iron," said Rowan. "Pretty stuff, actually. The Mianoran Knights use nothing else, and they're the prettiest knights in the world. All that white catching the sun, it's kind of hypnotic. Especially on the women." Rowan crossed his arms and pondered at the ceiling. "There's nothing like the long

blond hair of a lady in armor, glowing like a seraph."

"Where do I find this metal?" I asked.

"In Alcovia."

"Is it far? How can I get there?"

Rowan smiled. "Get yourself a horse, and I'll show you."

An Old Report

Some years ago, in an attempt to check *the king's new favorite general*, the Riva Rohavi mounted an assault on the small mining town of Alcovia. Success in this would also expose the weakness of Mianora, as the town supplied their forge masters with white iron and lactis steel.

At least, these were the reasons General Meldorath had stated in his final report to King Wilhelm.

The report included the extent of Riva's orchestral savagery, the way their archers gathered in the forested hills around the innocent and hard-working town; it detailed the clear afternoon sky when a cloud closed in from all sides. The hundreds of workers and few armed watchmen hardly realized they were arrows before the closing aperture of their formation changed course. Like a sky full of birds, the cloud of falling arrows shifted, pulsed, rose back into the sky and then, as though caught in a sudden wind, took an entirely new form; now the arrows soared like a great serpent through the sky.

The people of Alcovia rested their picks and hammers as they looked up, bewildered. It can be inferred that those countless rebel archers, hidden on the slopes of those forested hills, were also bewildered, and not a little bit afraid when that serpent of arrows soared back down toward them. It did not land, not yet, but flowed over the hills, tracing the summits while individual arrows separated from the serpent and shot into the trees. These rogue arrows increased in speed and number, striking what seemed like random points in the woods while the greater serpent continued its patrol through the sky around the town.

Then the Riva Rohavi materialized at the edges of the forest. With the familiar pheasant feathers garnishing their studded black leather and warpainted bodies, they came charging from the darkness of the trees, converging from all sides upon Alcovia, whose laborers began to panic. That was when the colossal formation of arrows stretched around the town, giving up more and more of its arrows until the serpent seemed to dissolve, every one of its arrows finding its mark in those crazed rebels. Often the arrows would pull out of flesh only to shoot straight back in, skewering the warriors like meat. By the time the sky was clear of arrows, the ground between the town and hills were sown with corpses.

It was amid the silence and confusion of the townspeople that General

Meldorath and his cadre of battlemages emerged from one of the mines. He led them to the edge of town, among those bodies.

“Take care, my lord,” one of the battlemages admonished. “There are surely some left alive.”

Just then, a hulking man of seven feet appeared before them, as though having blinked through spacetime. He threw at the general’s feet an injured but conscious Rohavian warrior.

“Their captain,” said the hulking man, whom the battlemages were impressed to identify as Siden of Chalethire.

Meldorath went straight to work, flipping the rebel onto his back with a gust of magic.

Immediately, the rebel started laughing. “You think you can keep something like this a secret? Your sovereignty is as pathetic as it ever was!”

“Our iron supply?” the general asked.

The rebel captain laughed again. “You Voulhirians. So clever. So much smarter than us!”

“So much smarter than we,” the general corrected.

These were the details General Meldorath included in his report to the king, with the addition that every Rohavian rebel was killed either in battle or by their injuries.

“You’re letting him go?” one of the battlemages questioned as they all watched the injured Rohavian captain disappear into the woods.

“Not just him,” the general replied, “but whoever else remains among the living in those woods. I would have them return whence they came, unmolested.”

“But why?”

“We’ve been trying to destroy the Riva Rohavi for centuries. For now, I need only their fear.”

The duplicitous final report did not mention that Meldorath had foreseen this assault, as it did not mention that the Riva Rohavi had been interested in Alcovia for some time, sending agents to sniff about, never attacking, only searching. Meldorath himself had perceived something powerful in this town, yet could do nothing about it until receiving the power of a general. When he did, he placed Alcovia under his protection and rooted out the Rohavian spies. An attack soon thereafter was only inevitable.

All the while, King Wilhelm never even knew there was any special interest in Alcovia, his advisers focused on more worldly matters. Even the Church, with

their endless contraptions to imitate true magic, were probably aware of this magical pulse among these shuffling miners and metallurgists. With the town under his protection, which Wilhelm would easily be convinced to make official, Meldorath was sure to unravel this mystery before any of those other stagnant entities.

As for the final report, it would remain at the forefront of the king's paperwork, at first for pride but now, softened and yellowed, as a lone piece in a helpless puzzle, and a commemoration of better days for their friendship.

Lord Eldus

He stepped onto the great porch over the yard ensconced in the castle's stone walls. He breathed the salted air of the endless sea breeze, sucked it down to the floor of his lungs. He stood for a long time, trying to appreciate it all, the tang and the expanse, trying to enjoy it. But there was complicated work in store for this simple town.

His family and two guards joined him in the carriage at the foot of the porch. It was a simpler carriage than the one in which they first arrived at Hillport; that one he had promptly sold—the purple curtains and silver threads were hardly a blend along the ruggedly paved spine that ran from the castle to the docks, the dirt roads it branched into, and the lack of carriages they bore, let alone one so glaringly lavish.

The slightly lesser carriage started its way into town, and Lord Eldus gazed through the window at the honesty around him.

"Hillport is an innocent town," he said. "Young men act with consideration and humility before courting a gentleman's daughter. A gentleman acts with discretion and humility." He shifted his head toward his quiet and restless son.

"You're so smitten by innocence all of a sudden," said Marshus, who broke his pretense of not listening. "As if such a thing never existed in Soulhire."

Before the family's uproot from Soulhire, there had come a cloud of tension between father and son. Young Marshus had used his father's reputation as a respected judge to hem his way up the ranks of a popular reformist movement, spearheading loud demonstrations with his charisma. This movement, consisting mostly of university students, put pressure on the king to start paying for physicians and healers to tend to the impoverished, as if the king didn't have enough to worry about.

Worse than that, the king eventually gave in and sat down with these reformists, including Marshus. The king held a positive, even delighted demeanor. He insisted that he was happy to speak with these young ones and

address their concerns.

But that was beside the point. Eldus had beseeched his patience, imparted the benefits of temperament and subtlety. He even affirmed the Marshus's pursuits, calling them noble, but that all the more could be done if the Alderman family remained in favor with the Crown. Marshus disregarded all of this; if anything, he grew only the bolder. The worst was that it was all sport to him; the boy cared nothing for politics or progress and could barely discuss the first thing about his own assertions. It was attention he craved, the eyes and ears of everyone around him, whatever the cost and whoever the payer.

Eldus remarked, "The capital compels its people down one path; even the simple are oppressed by materialistic ambitions."

"You keep using that word, '*simple*,'" said Marshus, whose eyes set with calm defiance on his father from across the rattling carriage. "It's as if you're making light of something even you don't fully respect."

"*Look!*" the lord thrust his finger through the window. "That young man just gave that pretty girl some flowers! Who does that in Soulhire? Right in the middle of the street in the middle of the day!"

"People are less afraid of their feelings here," said Lady Charlotte, trying to keep the conversation going in the silence of their children.

"In Soulhire, gift-giving has become so... capitalistic," said Eldus, still staring outside. "It's like it has to be a reward. Everything has to have a reason and a plan. Here, it's so impromptu. So simple..."

"Do you suppose reconciliation is as simple here, my lord?" Charlotte replied with perhaps a touch of biased defiance of her own, for she had taken the side of her son in their tensions.

"It's not that they're simple thinkers..." Eldus strained for the right words as he evaded his wife's segue. "They're simple doers. They're not stupid. They're just not ambitious. When they're given that breath, when they're shown all that they can accomplish, the dream begins."

"A Voulhirian sentiment if ever such a thing there was," said Charlotte. "But Hillport is not Voulhire. A piece of it, perhaps, but not the piece we're used to."

"I'm seeing that more clearly every day."

The carriage arrived at The Sheered Claws, a restaurant on the waterfront: posh by anyone's standards, especially Hillport's. Only business owners saw the inside of this place more than once a month.

It was in the lobby of this uncharacteristically regal establishment on the coast of rural Hillport that the lord and his family rendezvoused with Heius Bartrus,

one of the top heius priests of Yamon Soul, who was gracious enough to act as emissary to the eiodi.

"Your excellency," Lord Eldus greeted as he strode across the fancy carpet of red and gold.

"Your Virtue!" Bartrus replied with a warm smile. "What a pleasure this is!" He shook hands with the judge-turned-lord, then immediately turned his eyes to the lord's family. "What fine children your lady brought you!" he regarded the young lord Marshus. "I'll bet you're already studying the ways of leadership and political science!"

"Not actually," said Marshus. "I have a different path than my father."

"Ah!" the priest exclaimed as though remembering something. "Soulhire doesn't have much of a caste structure anymore, does it? Well, that's wonderful! I say let each child pave his own road. Virko has been in talks for a long time to set a similar example for its youth. What road are you paving?"

"I want to become a bard," said Marshus.

"How divine!" said the priest. "What do you play?"

"*Everyone...*" Lord Eldus muttered under his breath.

"I prefer the lute," said Marshus. "I even have some plans to improve the instrument for everyone. I can also sing, and am adept in aesthetic spellcasting."

"How impressive!" the priest laughed reverently. "You sound like a young Nartik! Perhaps one day you too shall play for the king. Perhaps the eiodi?"

"I'll entertain all who appreciate the art of entertainment, excellency."

Then the priest regarded the young lady Isla. He seemed to realize right away that she was shyer than her brother, so he used a low, kind voice when he asked her, "And what about you, my fair lady? Through what environs does your road take you?"

The young lady was indeed shy, but her parents had long impressed upon her the importance of good manners. "I would like to establish a retreat in a beautiful place for the people of Voulhire."

The priest gave a serious nod. "That's a very important thing to give to people. Be sure that you see it through." He then turned and addressed the family. "But I've held you up long enough! I hear you Aldermans are so polite you can forget your appetites for some strange jabberjaw! Please, let's sit down!"

Further along the southern coast in the enviable city of Yamon Soul, his holiness the eiodi was well aware of Lord Eldus Alderman's plans for not only Hillport, but the entire southern coast of the kingdom. He was to make Hillport into the hub of a great shipping network that would span the southern waterfront,

including the holy Yamon District, further enriching the nation. Shipments would then spill up the Nubere River all the way to Soulhire.

They took their seats at a table close to the windows overlooking the sea.

"I swear, the ocean is bluer here than at Yamon!" said Bartrus.

Eldus's plan was not about the money, per se, but bringing prosperity to the poorer southern coast, turning what once was a drawback to Voulhire's boastful economy into one of the very things driving it. Again, this was about the completion of the golden age.

This would start with Hillport's cuisine, which was a shadow of its true potential.

But to help make all of this happen, there were other things Hillport needed: better medicine and better schooling would be a perfect start.

"The eiodi is willing to front the gold for a new hospital," said the heius priest as a waiter arrived with water and a bowl of lemon slices. "I can even talk him into building one big enough for how big this town is *going* to become. We can also send a few missionaries over who are well-trained in education. The oldest and the wisest. All we ask in return is your permission to build a church here, which we of course will pay for in full. This is the very same offer we made to Lord Orlin. He refused us. Lord Meldorath never bothered to meet with us."

Lord Eldus took a lemon slice from the bowl and dropped it into his glass. "When you leave here, tell the eiodi that I apologize on behalf of both my predecessors. His offer is grossly generous and I am humbled to accept."

The priest looked surprised. "Just like that?"

Eldus smiled over his glass. "It's amazing what a little northern practicality can do, isn't it?"

"Well let's celebrate!" Heius Bartrus reached into his robe and produced a handful of cigars. "I was just at a birth in Cridaea, and I got a whole box of Iserons!" He turned to Charlotte. "Do you smoke, my lady?"

"She doesn't," said Eldus abruptly. "Come, I'm overdue for that ocean air."

Eldus closed the glass doors behind him and stood outside. The sea stretched out before them, people moving about their day up and down the busy street beneath them.

Bartrus offered Eldus a cigar. As he lit it for him, he said, "I thought it was fresh air you needed. But if you're smoking, it can't be that."

"It's the smell of the sea..." Lord Eldus puffed the cigar a few times. "I have a taste for it now." He pulled the cigar from his mouth, relishing the residue of flavor in his mouth. "It mixes well with these Iserons."

"Simply excellent, are they not?" Bartrus lit his own cigar.

"It's lucky Iseron doesn't specialize in food; Hillport would be putting them out of business soon."

Bartrus laughed, then his laughter faded to a soft smile. "You're said to be a forthcoming man, Lord Eldus." He brought the cigar to his mouth and put out an especially thick cloud. "Tell me: why have you sought the sanctity of my confidence?"

Bartrus was a clever man. At sixty-five, he wasn't quite old enough to be addressed with the honor of 'old one,' but he could see as far as the rest of them.

The lord of Hillport looked out into the sea with one last puff of the cigar. He had not lied: the cigar mixed well with the salty scent of the sea. Iseron probably knew this when they designed it.

Eldus held the cigar at his side and spoke, "I wanted to talk with you about the man who ruled this town before I."

Heius Bartrus gave the lord a playfully skeptical eye. "Why not let the dead rest?"

Eldus sidestepped Bartrus's baiting humor. "I'm finding strange things in my house. I've found notes describing Caromentis, and how some mages have come to enter that world, becoming gods of their own realms, taking that influence back into our world. Is there any possibility to this?"

Bartrus shrugged. "There's only one way to truly eradicate heresy: Ignore it."

"You've heard of this before, then?" said Eldus.

Bartrus twirled his cigar to round-out the burning end. He walked to the balcony and set his free hand down on it, facing the breeze from the ocean. "It's said that King Javikun left this world with his body to reign in Caromentis."

"I've heard the stories," said Eldus.

"But even a thousand years later," the heius continued, "the nature of Caromentis is lost on us, even on the eiodi."

Eldus stepped up and stood beside him. "If Meldorath was just chasing dragons, that's one thing. But if not, he..." He stopped himself abruptly. "He could influence admirers to cause a lot of damage in the future. Is there any way I can access Javikun's notes?"

Bartrus laughed. "Those documents, if they do exist, are locked in the royal archives. And if the king won't give the eiodi access to such documents, I doubt he'll give it to you, regardless of his confidence."

"It would help to know what the possibilities are..."

"Who knows what happened to Javikun Modius..." said Bartrus with some

levity. "For all we know, he was evaporated by an assassin. It's not the world of Caromentis you should be concerned about, Lord Eldus, it's Meldorath."

Even in the confidence of a heius priest, Eldus was not prepared to confide the whole truth. "If there was any way he could still be alive, King Wilhelm would have appointed an army to make sure he remains where he is."

"That's because the king's mind is aligned with physics," said Bartrus. "All due respect, of course."

"What do you mean?"

Bartrus looked at him. "Even the most powerful warrior can be held down by enough men, even if all of those men are inferior in combat. The physical world is simple: you fight power with equal or greater power. But magic comes from Caromentis, and Caromentis does not work as this world works. You can't quantify magic the way you quantify the prowess of a soldier."

"How do you quantify it then?" said Eldus. "If I can't master this art, at least I can try to understand it."

The priest was sympathetic with the lord's eagerness to know. He thought for a moment, drawing deep from the cigar. He let the cloud flow from his mouth as he looked at the sky, preparing his explanation. "Alright." He looked to the lord. "Suppose you and I were playing rock-paper-scissors." He looked down at the lord's hands. "Throw paper."

Eldus did so, holding his hand out flat.

"Now say I throw rock..." Bartrus held out a fist. "Does it matter how big my hand is compared to yours? Does it matter how many 'rocks' I hold up? No. You are holding paper, so no matter how big my rock is, no matter how fast I throw it, I lose." He opened his hand and gestured with his cigar, making trails with the smoke. "Magic can be performed with raw and untrained talent, yes. Flames can swell from your hand just by being angry. But what's going on beneath the surface of any magic spell is like a game of rock-paper-scissors, except there aren't only three possibilities: there are millions. There are codes to magic, waves and frequencies, most of which are as yet undiscovered. Exploring them to full effect requires genius in this world, aside from being a mage. Meldorath is both of these things, and has devoted his whole life, and the lives of others, to advancing it. And if you're asking me: if everybody thinks he's dead and he's not, that is the perfect situation for him."

Eldus sighed deeply, and finally gave his trust to the heius priest. "The king doesn't want his people to be scared."

Bartrus did not seem to react to the subtle confirmation, one which would send

shockwaves across the nation if placed in the right ears. "He wants his people to feel at ease?"

Eldus nodded.

Bartrus took yet another puff of his cigar, neither a shallow one nor deep. "Sometimes that's a stupid thing to want for someone you love."

The lord raised a brow, "Are you saying we should kill him?"

The priest looked back out into the ocean. "Do you know the old word for execution, Lord Eldus? '*Supranumen*.' Loosely translated, it means 'to go above God's head.' The Church still uses the word. That's why they've always despised any systematic deprivation of human life."

"Then you're saying we should *not* kill him?"

"It doesn't matter," said Bartrus. "You don't have the power to kill him."

"Then by implication you believe we imprisoned him because he allowed us to."

"Maybe," Bartrus nodded into the peaceful ocean view. "Maybe he's playing us all, biding his time."

"For what?"

Bartrus put out his cigar on the balcony railing and broke apart what remained. He scattered the flakes and ashes into the breeze. Then he put an arm on the railing as he turned and faced the lord. "You are known to be an honest man, Eldus Alderman. If you attest to the people that you have seen with your own eyes that there is no trace of Meldorath in Hillport, then the rumors will start to die. That is why Wilhelm sent you here. I, for one, am curious to learn if you would support the king's lie."

Eldus half appreciated the priest's candor and half resented it. "Your words are bordering on treason, heius."

"I don't answer to the king, my lord. I answer to the eiodi."

"That's fair," said Eldus. "But I didn't bring you out here to debate such things. Neither did I bring you here to speculate on the status of Meldorath. Whether he is alive or dead, his influence can have a dangerous effect on the country. I only hope that there does not have to be any competition between the Church and Crown in snuffing out that influence for good."

"I enjoy a good debate, my lord," said Bartrus with an assuring smile. "And I enjoy speculation. I do not enjoy the prospect of Meldorath's causing any more harm than he has. You have my full support."

When he returned to his family at the table, Lord Eldus had rid his demeanor of curious concern as well as his mind. Now that he was somewhat aware of

what was going on magic-wise, he felt more secure about the gentleman living just a few short miles south. Everything that Heius Bartrus told him, King Wilhelm obviously knew when he decided to place Meldorath where he now lived.

Indeed, Meldorath was not the reason Eldus and his family were sent here. Hillport was the reason.

The atmosphere was lighter on the ride back to the castle. This could have been because it was later in the day, and the family was more awake. It could have been that their bellies were full of food. But Eldus liked to believe that they were all starting to focus on their mission. It wasn't just a personal or charitable ambition. It was a family legacy. It was something on which people would look back not at one man, but at a family. Perhaps the family was starting to realize that.

The carriage ascended the hill, passed through the gate and arrived at the tall staircase to the porch of Castle Hillport. Eldus and his daughter stepped out; Marshus and Charlotte remained inside.

"Where are you off to?" the lord asked his lady.

"I have a caravan full of donated books coming in from Soulhire," Charlotte answered. "I promised the head librarian I'd make an appearance."

"Oh, that's right, I forgot."

"I hope they aren't a bunch of dog-eared law books you're bringing in!" Isla called down the steps to her mother.

"You know, you could have helped, young lady," her mother called back up.

At sixteen, Isla was finished with basic schooling. But the king was working on getting the funds together for a university at Hillport. The process was sure to take at least two years, but when it was up, that was where the young lady would be going.

"Help with what?" Marshus called out. "The only books Isla ever read were perfume labels!"

As for Marshus, he didn't need an education to make a name for himself... God bless him. But even a bard needs a master. Eldus would find someone eventually. In the meantime, Marshus had approached his father with plans to help encourage the youth of Hillport to take part in its progress. He made no promises that he would bring them toward education in particular, but he vowed to do everything he could to encourage them to see the value in themselves.

Isla pulled off one of her shoes and flung it down at the carriage. It thumped against the trim on the top and landed on the bottom step.

Marshus stuck his tongue at her as the carriage started off.

"Isla!" Eldus looked up at his daughter. "This is the time in your life where you practice how to treat your future husband."

"Thus, I only threw one shoe," his daughter called back down. "My husband can have the other!"

* * *

Marshus moved his hands in a slow and focused dance. Pebble-sized crystals of ice formed between his fingertips, following his hands as he continued the dance. Conveying the deliberation behind his every move with poise that Isla had long admired, he unleashed the crystals at a crab who was passing by. They exploded around it, but never hit the shell.

The crab faced Marshus and raised its claws.

Marshus gasped loudly. "My sworn enemy has challenged me to a dance! Prepare yourself, sir!" He skipped and jumped in front of the crab, assuming an absurd crouch to pair with the crab, raising his hands like claws. The two circled one another as Marshus focused on his adversary with a comically serious face.

Isla couldn't stop laughing, and Marshus wouldn't break character until she was finally able to speak.

"Why is it always ice with you, Brother?"

"I like ice," Marshus said before bowing to the crab and walking back to her. "You have to know what you like if you ever want to be a mage."

The coastal sands on which the noble siblings stood were in the shadow of a cliff on the eastern outskirts of town. There was a house up there, so the cliff was fenced. But there was no one on this part of the beach, just the ocean and sky, the high sun now on its way down.

"But focus on you," said Marshus.

"I know," said Isla. "I just still don't know what I'm supposed to be focusing on."

"It's hard to describe," said Marshus. "It's like learning to—"

"Learning to wiggle your ears, I get it. But that doesn't help me."

"What doesn't help is that you're straining your mind. You have to find your hold." He opened his hand and a star of ice crystals burst into existence above

his palm. “Some mages see spellcasting as a mental explosion.” He let the star fall, then caught it with his mind and raised it over his head, bobbing and spinning it as it glistened in the sun. “Some see it as changing the course of what’s already in motion. I once got father to move a falling leaf like it was blowing in a sudden wind.”

“Really?” Isla’s eyes widened. “*Father?*”

Marshus broke the crystals from the star like petals from a sunflower. One-by-one, they fell to the sand. “There are a lot of people who could be great mages if they learned how to dip one finger into that foreign universe, the one we see only in our most remembered dreams.”

Isla moved her hands through the air, imagining trails of light in the wake of her movement, but no such spectacle was born.

She grunted. “I never had your imagination.”

“Imagination’s only part of it,” said Marshus. “You also need some understanding of this world, because it’s the place you’re affecting with your magic. This understanding can come from books, or intuition, both of which you have. Try correlating these things with your love of the world.”

Isla squinted at him through a breeze from the sea. “Does a mage have to love the world?”

“Mastery requires intimacy. Intimacy requires passion.”

She ran a hand through her curly blond hair as it blew in the wind, thinking on what her brother had said. She looked at his black hair.

“Do you remember what people used to say in Soulhire,” she said, “because we have different hair? The jokes they made about our parents?”

Marshus looked down, kicked a rock into the breaking waves. “Changing the subject already?”

Isla shook her head. “They don’t make those jokes here.”

Marshus sighed. “Once they realize father won’t do to them what Meldorath did, who knows what they’ll try to get away with?” He looked at her. “What’s your point, Isla?”

She pushed a yellow strand from her face. “Maybe I’ll love Hillport. Will that help?”

Marshus shrugged. “Every mage started somewhere.” He looked up at the sun. “I think I’ll get ready for the speech now.”

“You’re going to be great, Marshus.”

He looked at her with playful skepticism. “You’re not coming?”

“Of course, I am. I just want to think here a little longer.”

Marshus nodded. "That's a good idea, while it's all fresh." He smiled at her as he started off. "Don't be late."

"No, sir!"

The southerly wind swept in faster, and a little colder, but not so brisk that Isla couldn't reflect on her brother's words. In a moment, she let his lessons go and decided to listen to the wind.

On the horizon, she spotted the marginal visibility of Lorcia's Isle, where perhaps her brother's imaginative fable about an imprisoned Lord Meldorath would be crushed with the boring reality of a derivative naval base.

Or maybe that would have been a relief. She still had not decided.

Her eyes took her east along the shoreline, where, some hundred yards away, someone was standing close to the water's reach. Whoever this person was, they wore a hooded robe of a color that matched the bright ocean.

Not having seen such a robe among the white shirts, brown trousers, and faded dresses of this town, Isla walked along the water line until she came to this tall, broad-shouldered individual.

"Good afternoon!" she greeted.

The covered head never turned to face her. "I did not know this ground was parceled for noble privacy."

"Not at all!" said Isla. "It is I who have intruded on your good self, sir, but you made me curious."

"Curiosity," said the man. "A valuable gift."

"It's just that I don't often see people spend time on their own in this town." She pushed another strand as she gave a warm smile to the side of his hood. "May I ask what brings you here?"

The man's head seemed to tilt upward from under the hood. "I would look upon Lorcia's Isle from a point where it is barely visible. It helps my mind put distance between the island and myself."

Isla shared a glance at the far-off island of mystery and rumor. "You're afraid of the island too?"

The hooded man let a breeze pass into an almost absolute silence, which was eerie for this otherwise windy shore.

"Fear," he said. "The greatest price for success; our national burden."

Isla tried to sound reassuring. "Our new lord says Hillport shouldn't be afraid anymore."

A far stronger silence ensued. A crashing wave could barely break it. Even a passing seagull cawed only once.

“Your father shields you,” said the man whose shadowed face remained fixed toward that distant island, “just as your king shields his people.”

Isla did her best to see the good intentions of what this man was saying.

“Wilhelm is *our* king, good sir, but I will pass your concerns on to my father.”

The man said nothing.

Although she still had not received the courtesy of his eyes, Isla bowed her head all the same. “Good day, then, sir. Forgive my intrusion, and I hope you find the peace you seek.”

Isla left the stoic man to his thoughts. To his credit, he did seem far smarter than the stereotypes she’d long heard about rural folk of the southern rim, and she was pleased to experience the sort of subtle defiance that often comes with such intelligence. One day this town and the region would prove its value to the kingdom. Perhaps a friendly rivalry would ensue between the southern rim and the industrious heartland, or the posh and intellectual north.

She followed the beach to where it ended at the harbor, standing watch as a small boat came in. Maybe they caught a thousand lobsters and were now rushing to ship it off to Yamon Soul? Soon the eiodi himself would be raving upon Hillport cuisine!

Isla took to the trail among the dunes, where two of her family’s guards were waiting to escort her back to the street. Marshus’s speech was less than two hours away.

* * *

This tiny plot between two houses on the west side of town seemed like a stadium when stuffed with so many people. Marshus had chosen this place as a display of unity with his audience, to be seen as one of them instead of their host in a grand castle or lavishly festooned pavilion. But as he stood on that wooden platform, looking down on ruffled collars and stitched pants with no pockets, he became suddenly aware of the corduroy doublet he was wearing, which was seamed with white threads that shone in the moonlight. In Soulhire, even the poor prioritized their appearance and respected those who did the same. Here, the son of Hillport’s new lord must have looked like an expensive joke.

“I have a question for you,” he said to the crowd, most of whom would be in

university had they been born in Soulhire. “Does anybody here have a birthday today?”

There was silence.

Marshus looked around. “There are three hundred and eighty-four days in a year. I see at least four hundred people here. Chance demands that somebody has a birthday today. If not today, then tomorrow or yesterday.”

In a moment, two guys were pointing to a quiet companion of theirs, who was half smiling with bashful trepidation.

Marshus gestured, “Step forward.”

The crowd made way for the shy man, who followed the path to the platform. He looked up at the noble.

“What’s your name?” the noble asked.

“Sebastian,” the pauper replied meekly.

“Sebastian?” said Marshus. “That sounds like a rich man’s name.” He unbuttoned the doublet and pulled it off from his thin, white undershirt. “A rich man should dress like a rich man, no?” He handed it down.

Now smiling with both sides of his mouth, Sebastian took the doublet as the crowd cheered.

Marshus centered himself on the platform. “Our lord was chosen for this land because he has a son and a daughter your age. The kind of change the king had planned for this town, and for all the towns and villages along the southern rim, relies on people like us. When you and I are tending to our own families, we will also be tending to the sudden change our parents gave to us; we will be standing amid a river of events that even they, for all their ambition, never saw coming. We’ll have to stand here, not only with the knowledge and values they pass on to us, but with the need to answer questions that they never could.”

“Will *you* be our lord when your father dies?” came a voice from the crowd. The tone was calm, but the low-pitched voice carried far, and from no discernible direction. It was also a cynical tone, and Marshus knew right away why the question had been asked, even with such bold insensitivity as to silence the young crowd with suspense.

“I’m happy that you asked,” said Marshus. “You’ve saved me the time to segue into the matter on my own.” He walked in slow circles on the floor of the square platform, keeping his eyes out to the farthest reaches of the crowd. “The king wants progress for his people here on the southern rim, but his methodology led him to make my father lord. Not mayor, not governor, not councilor. My father was granted full ownership of property that your families have worked

since before he was even born.”

“Are you demanding your father relinquish his claim?” That voice again, steady and sure, the maturity of a man far older than the median present this night.

“No,” Marshus replied. “I’m saying I will.”

The crowd stirred with an air of positivity, but not full conviction. It was clear they were not entirely convinced, which came as no surprise to Marshus.

“Try to understand,” he explained as he continued in his slow circle, “much like the king, my father comes from a generation where men, good and bad, feel they need to be in control. For two thousand years, such has been our kingdom.” He stopped. “But look at Virko,” he gestured in a northerly direction, “a city younger than most of you, and by far the most successful in this country, the spearhead of our golden age! Who but a man of progress could have built such a city? There are rumors that Virko’s very founder, Lord Venden, an immigrant to this country, wants to give up control and give Virko to its people. And yes, when the time comes for me to take hold of my family’s estate, I will do the same. I will strip myself of ownership of this town, its holds, and all of its profits, however mountainous my father should build them, and give it to you, so that you will have something to pass on to your children, along with the values that they will use to help drive it all the further.”

This time, the sentiment landed on the audience as more than just words, and about every person around him reacted with an energized applause, even cheers. In his confidence, Marshus had still underestimated their gratitude. It led him to theorize that, not only had the lords of years past never served this town properly, but had never even bothered to lie and say they would.

Once the spirits were lifted, it became all the easier to loosen up and converse with the crowd as a friend, which was a grace, since Marshus had thrown the dice with little more of a speech prepared than what he had already given. For two hours hence, he told his captivated audience stories of his misadventures as the rebellious son of a respected judge in the heart of the capital. The men loved these stories the most, but Marshus could see that the eyes of the women were also transfixed—hopefully for more reasons than his words alone.

The speech, which had evolved into a successful rally, ended with many holding Marshus back to introduce themselves, ask questions, and generally hear more of what he had to say. Many of them were more astute and aware of their country than the young noble would have guessed; he found himself somewhat ashamed to have thought they wouldn’t even have known the name of Virko’s

lord. He was as much a breath of fresh air to them as they were to him.

When the crowd dispersed and Marshus made it away with two of the castle guards, he found his father leaning up against his carriage across the street, as though expecting a conference with the man of the hour.

Marshus walked up to him, greeting the guards who surrounded him.

“Well, my lord,” he said, “what did you think?”

With that charming puss on his face, Lord Eldus answered, “A little hokey with the shirt in the beginning.”

“It would have been hokier to keep it on,” Marshus replied.

“And that man you planted for dialogue?” said the lord. “As lazy as it was obvious.”

Marshus squinted quizzically. “...My assumption was that my lord had planted that man to undermine me.”

The lord’s sour puss was unyielding. “And that situation in Virko was supposed to stay a rumor.”

“Regarding Lord Venden?” said Marshus. “I presented it as a rumor.”

“We’re not supposed to spread rumors.”

Marshus raised a brow. “But it’s not a rumor.”

Eldus sighed. “Anyway, the situation with my lordship is not as simple as it’s been explained to you. Since you’ve chosen to interject yourself so prematurely, you might as well know now.”

Marshus suspended the mirth from his countenance. “I’m listening.”

“If matters go as well for the region as I think they can, the king will declare the southern rim its own hold, and I will be made governor.”

Marshus was taken aback. “Would this include Yamon Soul?”

Eldus shook his head. “Of course not. But it will mean that my post will be subject to an election every two years.”

“Where will that leave Hillport?”

“The king’s design was that I remain its lord. But since I’ll die someday and you’re the one with all the plans, I might as well leave Hillport’s fate to you when the time comes.”

Marshus hardly had time to recover from the shock before Eldus was headed back into the carriage.

“Dad...” he said.

Eldus looked back.

“Thank you.”

“Why don’t you get in, boy? Your mother’s been waiting long enough to dine

with us.”

* * *

Lady Charlotte could barely sit straight after six hours in her husband’s chair—half due to the packed schedule and half due to her husband’s terrible choice of upholstery.

‘At least it looks nice,’ he had offered earlier that day.

She thought several times about ripping it out by hand. Nevertheless, there was but a sliver of work yet to be done that day.

“Did you follow up with Lord Meldorath after your second request?” she asked the grade-school principal who stood before her.

“I did, my lady,” the older woman replied. “But each time I was granted an audience, it was a different man with whom I spoke, and I ended up having to explain all over again what the funds would be used for.”

“I’m sorry,” said Charlotte, coming to grasp the situation. “How many times did you speak with Meldorath himself?”

“I never did, my lady.”

Charlotte almost didn’t believe her. “Never?”

“Not once, my Lady Alderman.” The principal sighed with shaky breath. It was clear she was at least as exhausted as Charlotte was. “Lord Meldorath had attendants holding court for him, most of whom didn’t seem to have any education in finance or law, or good manners. Nobody I know, and I know everyone in this town, has ever received a word from Lord Meldorath’s own mouth.”

The lady was at a momentary loss for words. Truly, she could almost forgive the rest—the summary execution of Lord Orlin’s staff, the experiments, the betrayals—but that he could not deign to confer with his own people, that was Meldorath’s greatest sin.

“The money for which you ask could have easily been granted, even in Hillport’s current state.” With a good breath, Charlotte dismissed her rising anger—it wasn’t worth the migraine that would follow her to bed. She softened her countenance as she turned it down upon the long-suffered educator. “You will have your funding, madam, even if I have to pay it of my family’s own

coffers.”

The principal looked so relieved that it seemed her eyes were about to roll back in a faint. Indeed, the woman did fall, but only to one knee. “God bless you, my lady, and God bless your husband.”

“Your own blessings will more than do,” Charlotte replied. “Good night.”

“Good night, my lady.”

Before her family’s arrival here, Charlotte had no idea how poor this town was. That is, her understanding was intellectual, which often sufficed in matters of law, but she had never been so surrounded by penury. As a judge who often sat in the family courts, she had seen the worst of Soulhire’s impoverished. But in Soulhire, even the poor had their luxuries, even the homeless had their respite. Here, there were no programs to fall back on, no shelters built by wealthy donors. Here, it was rags tied to rags.

But whereas aid in Soulhire was provided by the state, here, people had a tendency to take care of one another.

Maybe Eldus and the king were right, after all.

When Charlotte traversed the streets of Hillport, she was sad at first. But lately, she had felt a rising and refreshing invigoration. With every destitute mother she met, with every exasperated teacher, the lady realized that the eyes of their king were upon them, for so ardent was he in sending his top judge to a town so darkly overshadowed by the riches of the heartland. Indeed, the southern rim was a world unto itself, yet Wilhelm saw only Voulhire. What a pleasure it was to know that such a man had the loyalty of every honest leader in Voulhire.

The next and final case of the night arrived in the form of a tall man in a blue, hooded robe. The robe was decorated with black triangles—an interesting design, such as Charlotte had not seen in this town, especially on a robe so well-dyed and clean. It was the sort of thing a wealthy magician might wear.

He bowed before her.

With curious eyes, lady Charlotte asked, “Do you not remove your hood when you address the court?”

The man stood straight. “I’ve suffered a vicious injury quite recently.” His voice was soft but deliberate. “It would do me further injury to show my face here.”

Charlotte’s eyes yielded empathy. “I’m very sorry, sir.”

“It was not your doing, my lady.”

“Very well, then,” she said. “I would hear your case, sir.”

The hooded man stood perfectly still, his head swaying not once to his speech,

which almost put a disconnect between the sound and sight of him. “Since your family’s arrival, my shepherds have been spooked by nightly sightings.” His voice reached across the room like a whisper in her ear. “They spoke of shadowy apparitions, fearing some ominous superstition. I feared thieves.”

Lady Charlotte turned another covetous eye up and down the fabric of his clothes. “If the wool of your sheep produced that very robe, I would share the same concern.”

“Thank you, my lady, but I no longer suspect thieves.”

“Oh?”

“While on watch yesterday afternoon, one of my more curious lambs had a tour of the country. With an ailing back, I chased the beast down half the road to Magnum Caelum. I stopped for water at an old well. Under a nearby willow, I found these...” He held out his hand.

From where she sat, Charlotte could see what it was that the man was presenting. She gave her nerves to a frosty wave, but instinct and training gave her back to rationality.

After all, they were only feathers.

“Are there no wild pheasants in this part of the country?” she asked.

“There are,” said the shepherd. “But these feathers I found beside a blackened firepit. I dare not conclude, but you will understand my trepidation.”

“Of course,” said Charlotte. “It does seem timely. For all of Meldorath’s ills, he was the one man the Riva Rohavi feared.”

“*Lord Meldorath*,” said the shepherd with sudden gusto. “Please respect the customs of our town, my lady.”

Charlotte nodded. “Of course. And of course I will speak with Lord Eldus about this.”

“That would come as no small relief, my lady. It is my understanding that your husband is the king’s little favorite. I have no doubt his majesty will send what is needed per the word of our good lord.”

As the shepherd left her with cause for all the more anxiety, the lady tried to break through it with an observation.

The man seems well-educated for a shepherd...

She found it often therapeutic, in times of stress, to note and interpret the little details around her.

If Riva were to begin poking around, they could easily hinder progress, especially in these early days. Missing sheep, missing children, arson. The castle guards couldn’t be everywhere at once.

Thankfully, the next person to arrive at court was the Lord himself. Charlotte was ever the more thankful to see him alongside their son.

“My lady,” the lord said as he stood before her. “I hereby relieve you of your lordly duties.”

“Duty never ends,” Charlotte replied as she rose from the chair, wincing at the light sting of pain in her lower back. “Damn you and your chair.”

“It was only the one day,” said Eldus as he took her hand to guide her down the steps of the dais. “If I need an auxiliary again, your son can pick up the slack.”

“You need to send a letter to the king,” she said, stepping down. “Shepherds have evidence of the Riva Rohavi.”

“Evidence of the Riva Rohavi has been emerging for years,” said Eldus, taking her arm into his. “Yet no Riva Rohavi.”

“Feathers were found on the road to Magnum Caelum,” she warned as they followed Marshus into the main hall. “They were next to a fire pit.”

“Riva never leave signs that they had been somewhere,” said Eldus. “They’d actually gotten good at it over the millennia. They wouldn’t leave a fire pit, no less a row of their feathers lined conveniently beside it.”

“Unless they mean to frighten us.”

“It’s restless adolescents who mean to frighten us.”

“All the same,” Charlotte insisted with gentle emphasis, “your subject has requested you make this matter known to the king. And so does your wife.”

Eldus stopped, kissed her. “It will be done as my lady requests. But do heed my word that we remain focused.”

* * *

By now, Eldus’s servants had searched every corner of the castle, finding all of the belongings left behind before his family arrived in Hillport. Meldorath’s notes had piled up to the point where there was no more room in the lockbox, and Eldus’s study had to be kept locked. All of the belongings that sat in there, from abandoned keepsakes, photographs and documents, had come from two former lords of Hillport.

Meldorath’s notes were the most common to find. But naturally, there were

many pages that seemed to be missing. Such pages were probably burned... or perhaps just better hidden...

But these notes were the scrawlings of madness, predictions and presumptions inspired either by helpless hubris, wishful thinking, or both. It was believable enough that Meldorath could be so arrogant as to think he could explain the hidden nature of Caromentis when all he truly had was ego. This, of course, was one of many reasons his empty legacy wasn't even worth the curiosity.

Heresy was to be ignored.

Again, not all of the things in this lonely storage room belonged to Meldorath.

The burgundy book that Eldus had recently placed in his drawer had belonged to Meldorath's predecessor, Lord Orlin, whose memory was reviled for his most egregious of perversions.

But maybe, in spite of that, this man had insights? What if there was just one thing in this diary that could help the people of Hillport?

Loosely covered in his robe after a long bath, Eldus came to his bedside lamplight. His wife was still out at a banquet to commemorate Hillport's burgeoning culture. She probably wouldn't be back for a few hours yet.

The sound of his nightstand drawer opening echoed in the spacious chamber. He looked down on the only thing inside: the burgundy journal of Lord Orlin.

Eldus climbed into bed with the book in his hand. He brought the lamp close and made himself comfortable. With a deep sigh, he opened Lord Orlin's journal.

"Here we go..."

He thumbed gingerly through the first quire of the book. To his relief, this reluctant scan turned up nothing of pertinence to Lord Orlin's penchant for children (at least not yet). Eldus wondered if perhaps Orlin did not want to recount such things out of shame. But perhaps Orlin simply had a better-hidden stash for those details, such as Meldorath undoubtedly had his. How morbidly apt it would be should the secrets of these two men turn up in the same secret place.

Looking more closely at these early pages, Eldus read the details of Lord Orlin's ascent following the death of the old lord of Hillport, an old-fashioned traditionalist ninety-nine years of age. Orlin jotted down notes of the people, what they were like, what they wanted for their town. The term "hard work" came up at least a dozen times in these descriptions.

"The man did his homework, I'll give him that..." Lord Eldus thought aloud. His self-satisfaction with the decision to start reading this unholy thing grew as he delved deeper into Orlin's insights.

There was a break in time with a few scattered events over the course of some five years. Any interest in the town seemed to wane as Orlin became more comfortable with his position. Many of the entries in this part of the book were personal. Eldus found himself somewhat disappointed. Still, thankfully, nothing on children. Not yet.

Then came the arrival of Meldorath. General Meldorath, as he was known at that time. He had resigned his leadership over the southern army and elected to become Hillport's chief magistrate. Orlin's attention to detail returned to his prose.

The great General Meldorath has chosen Hillport to begin his new career... the diary recounted. A curious decision, but an august occasion for the town. I must prepare for him a public feast, and quickly!

Then Lord Orlin sat for a meeting with the famous mage-general.

He was quiet at the meeting. He had some toady named Mestitrio to do most of his talking: an intelligent man, but a little bit mean.

Then Orlin described Meldorath's other companion, Siden of Chalethire.

He's as massive and as frightening as the stories, with a look on his face that shows he can brilliantly implement any of his mountain-rending capabilities.

And then, an interesting theory by the perverted Lord Orlin...

Perhaps this is the secret to the legendary power of the legendary General Meldorath: not some unrelenting breath of magic, but the men with whom he surrounds himself.

A few days passed, during which time Orlin noted some trouble sleeping and a terrible nightmare. He chalked it up to sickness and gave it up to God. But something else was bothering him...

My new chief magistrate is suspicious of me. He's watching me. It's to be expected, I suppose— only he is authorized to arrest me if I were to be found suspect of some crime. I just figured this was more of a retirement job for him— why would he come to Hillport if he was ambitious about civilian policy? Why not take a spot in Soulhire—the king would surely give him one...

But no matter! The man is sure to mellow with time. Soon he will be known as 'mellow Meldorath'!

Eldus scoffed and skipped ahead. He wasn't in this silly book for more information on the 'almighty' wizard everybody already knew. This was about Hillport.

He found a new entry much later on.

I can't stop him... he's everywhere.

Eldus closed the book. He put it back in the drawer next to his bed and lay looking at the vaulted ceiling, pondering as he watched the small shadows in the harsh stone move to the flickering lamp beside him.

Obviously, Orlin had quickly lost interest in the town and his diary had nothing more to offer. But Eldus had still learned a few things from those early days of Orlin's lordship, plenty of things to factor in as his plans for Hillport unfolded.

He leaned over and put out the lamp.

As his eyes fluttered their way to a seal and his mind loosened its grip, skimming the surface of unconsciousness, he felt the sudden sensation of losing his footing and falling. It woke him up immediately.

As he drifted back to sleep a few minutes later, he felt the alarming sensation of losing feeling in his chest, then becoming too tired to breathe. He woke with a gasp of air, breathing heavily a few more times, then relaxed again.

Once more, when sleep was upon him, his mind rang with the screams of that bleeding woman from the fort that morning. It was so loud that it didn't feel quite finished when his eyes popped open. He shot up and looked around the room. He could have sworn he could hear the echo in the silence.

He walked to his door and peered into the hall. Squinting in the light, he asked a passing servant for a glass of milk.

* * *

The tragedy of Hillport was not the first to be caused by magic, which was why Marshus always practiced self-control as a mage. But his father knew nothing about magic, hence why Marshus received credit only for his successes in mundane affairs, which were scant by comparison.

Fair enough that his noble father tended to immediate concerns, but there was still a presence in this castle of Hillport, something residual, like those body stains on the walls outside. It was magical, of that there was no doubt, but was it dangerous?

Like a headless chicken on the run, personal magic was fabled to remain on Earth for some time after death, perhaps clinging to an object or structure, perhaps to the soil of a certain property, perhaps to the very air. Sometimes, in

these fables, that headless magic could be even more powerful than the mage who left it.

Marshus had seldom experienced this peculiar phenomenon, and his descriptions of those vague encounters had baffled every arcane scholar he knew. But this presence, he was sure, bore no other explanation than those speculative fables. Rather than sure, he hoped for it; footsteps only fade if the one who made them is truly gone.

Logic drew him to the bowels of the castle, where dungeons would have surely cloaked the secrets of their former master. But what egresses might have channeled such illuminating darkness had long been bricked over if the dungeons themselves had not been altogether buried.

It may not have mattered, for the footsteps Marshus sensed had all but faded from the lower levels of the castle. If there were secrets buried under the ground, there were even more secrets lofted among the spires.

As the family had not accumulated enough clutter for use of extra storage, and with hardly any militaristic demand for mounted crossbows, the spires of Castle Hillport remained unfurnished and unmanned. But as Marshus stood under the roof of the highest one, with a sprawling view of the southerly ocean and northerly hills, each gleaming with starlight, new thoughts entered his mind, but they were not created there.

In Caromentis, came the thought, it is you who make the rules...

If you suppress the senses of the Cosmos—especially, at least in Marshus’s case, the sense of sound—you could hear the remnants of magic. Rather, you could *think* them. Remnant magic, like fog condensing on glass, collected in the mind, forming thoughts. These thoughts would feel original, and the mind would adopt them as its own, filling in the gaps with its own biases and knowledge. Marshus knew to avoid this inclination, for only by keeping these outside thoughts separate from his own could they expand independently.

In Caromentis, it is you who make the rules, but does this really appeal to you?

In that high room, Marshus closed his eyes to the starlit ocean, focusing only on the silence, and the voice of the invading thought revealed itself to be that of an old man, high-pitched with a calm mischief. Marshus could almost see his face, snarling lips providing dubious advice in this serene and beautiful place.

...For this world comes with its own web of stubborn rules. And you can vandalize them, scandalize them, flip the very mantle of scientific knowledge upside-down upon itself.

Was it Marshus's own thoughts? His desire to uncover the truth combined with his own internal desires? Marshus resisted the doubt, allowing the thoughts to grow further.

You could turn this world into your own little beacon of defiance against the universe!

No. These words had been spoken before, no doubt words of ingratiation to Meldorath himself.

Marshus started his way down from the high spire, trying to keep his mind clear even of the desire that sent him exploring these high reaches of the castle. There could only be silence so that the cloud that haunted these halls could condense in his brain.

In the stairwell, a calmer voice, one more thoughtful.

Wilhelm was the only man who ever saw me for more than some novelty.

Lower in the spire, Marshus passed a cylindrical chamber which he had earlier skipped. The room still smelled of the cedar shelves which ran around the circular room in fine craftsmanship. There were only a few books on them. This was a room which the steward of Hillport clearly put special effort into renovating.

Said the older, shrill voice, *That is all the more reason to realize he will never fully trust you.*

The condensation of outside thoughts exploded in a flash and Marshus found himself on his knees. He could have sworn he had spent that fraction of a second witnessing a man screaming on a table. He did not give in to panic. Instead, he let the panic flow through him, treating the brief nightmare as he had treated everything else: he let it grow.

The image returned to him not as a flash but as a faded memory. Watching over the scene was a man of over seven feet. The face was a blur—they all were—but there was no mistaking this man. It was Siden, the great Cosmite champion of Chaethire and known follower of Meldorath. Another attendant: a short man in dark, fitting clothes; hyper aware, almost twitchy, as of an assassin. Standing directly over the table was a man with a beard like white weeds. The blur of his face was broken by his violent eyes and the mouth which Marshus recognized as that of the mischievous old man. He was looking down, face-to-face with the screaming man, not moving, his expression not changing.

Somehow, Marshus knew that the screaming, naked man was under the violating influence of biomagic, his mind forced into an unyielding hysteria.

Marshus did not know how he knew, but the man being tortured was a mage.

If you keep calling for the craftsman, said the old torture master, though his bearded mouth was not moving, *something else might come answering out of that world.*

Then the younger, calmer voice, from an unseen place replied, *Something already has. The craftsman fears them, and justly so.*

What are they?

Their world has kingdoms, just as ours. Those kingdoms have soldiers.

Can you keep them out?

Yes, at least until our endeavor is realized.

Is there time?

It does not matter. There is no other way.

This could bring an end to our world, Dalehei.

This world was ended before it began.

The tortured mage screamed his loudest, and Marshus finally pulled his mind away from the growing culture of foreign thoughts. Never before had he experienced remnants of magic so potent as to unveil a conversation. He acknowledged his doubt, especially in regards to each individual detail, but it was undeniable that he was standing in the footsteps of a giant.

Still, his imagination had taken the lead on him before, especially in times of stress and fear.

He exited that spire and walked the halls of his family's chambers. He made several passes before encountering his father, whom he had sharply expected to find awake and alert at this late hour.

"A young lord needs his rest," Lord Eldus admonished.

"A young lord needs exercise," said Marshus. "May I ask the older lord's excuse?"

"Old lords don't sleep," his father replied. "Perhaps you'll learn of this one day."

"Do they read?" Marshus asked. "Perhaps about the reign of House Modius and the power they came to wield over the people of Voulhire?"

"House Modius is gone, Marshus, as is the lord who once lived here."

"You mean Meldorath?"

"Who do you think I mean, my boy?"

Marshus had always known his father to despise deception; he seldom told a lie without it sounding vague or uncommitted, even as a lawyer and especially to his family.

"There is a presence in this castle of yours, my lord," the young lord said with

all the propriety of a loyal subject. “All your family feels it. Even your staff is uneasy, or do you fail to realize that as well?”

The lord grumbled, but gave in with an answer that was equal parts assurance and ego. “Have you not considered, my son, that this fear of yours, which you are so fast to deliver to the lord of Hillport, is the very influence you demand I recognize? Do you not realize that the former lord’s petty, scampering little supporters perform their illusions to sabotage our work? Has it not dawned on your educated mind that these harmless tricks are better off ignored?”

Marshus glared back at him. “Then you *are* aware of a presence?”

“I am aware of my work.”

“If Meldorath is alive and you know about it, you are gambling the lives of your family and every person in this town you claim to love.”

Having said this, Marshus studied his father closely for a betrayal of sensitivity—any impulse to defend himself against what had just been said would have spilled the secret like a skewered sack of wine.

Alas, this was either the greatest effort Marshus had ever seen his father invest into a lie, or he was telling the truth.

The lord simply said, “You know I’m not a gambler.”

A scream then rang through that family hall, so loud and lucid that it might have come from either of the men in one another’s company. But both men knew it belonged to Isla and both men ran to her chambers.

Beverly, the head servant, was already there. She was rushing to Isla’s bedside when Marshus and Eldus came to the open door.

“Are you alright, Isla?” said Lord Eldus. “Are you in pain?”

“Give her space,” Beverly said as she drew a cloth from a basin by the window. Drops of water splashed onto the stone floor as she wrang it.

Isla was sitting up, her face red and her eyes glassed with tears.

“Her breathing is troubled,” said Eldus.

“She’s hysterical,” said Beverly calmly, dabbing Isla’s face and neck with the damp cloth.

“Did you have a dream, Isla?” Marshus asked gently.

Isla spent another minute working through fast and shaky breaths. When her breathing slowed, Marshus repeated the question.

“Silence,” Eldus chided.

“I don’t know...” said Isla, still catching her breath.

“Be calm, dear,” Beverly said as she rose to freshen the cloth.

“I couldn’t move,” Isla uttered with fresh tears. “My blanket came down.”

“You pulled your blanket down?” said Eldus, sliding closer to her.

“Weren’t you listening?” Marshus chided back. “She couldn’t move!”

“There was someone watching me,” said Isla.

“Who?” asked Eldus.

“Where was he?” asked Marshus.

Isla pointed at the window across from her bed. “He was old. He was staring down at me with crazy eyes. And he was smiling.”

“It was a dream, my girl,” Eldus said as he took the cloth from Beverly and dabbed her face himself.

Marshus looked at the window. It was no more remarkable than the blackness beyond it. An evening fog had collected upon the glass, forming a light frost around the edges and along the grilles.

King Wilhelm

Three students dead. One wounded. One professor killed. One soldier wounded.

He let the report rest on the glass table beside his lounge chair. The air was still, even for the altitude of Cathidien's highest balcony. A gentle overcast had settled under the afternoon sky, the misty gray sheet opposing the bright green countryside around the city, a prelude to what was sure to be a foggy autumn. But the veil held high above the city, even above this altitude, though barely; one protuberance of cloud briefly obscured the wall about a hundred feet above his head. Yet the visibility was clean—he could see those green hills on the eastern horizon, their grass no doubt wet with the ambient mist. Indeed, for this surprising clarity, the air was rather damp, its moisture clinging to the fur of his coat, changing the way it rubbed against his neck.

He glanced once more at the report, which was already curling in the moisture.

It was a goodwill mission: eleven students and three professors from the University of Menicrity set sail for the Lands of the Princes. They had sought to document the conditions there, thence to bring their findings back home to favor a national argument of open immigration.

Sometime after arriving on the island-principality of Raventide, they were attacked.

The attackers tried to take their ship, but were driven off by the escort, who were able to recover the wounded and the fallen. The surviving academics had now returned home, and were using the tragedy to emphasize the desperation of those lands, as well as to encourage prayer and petition on behalf of those who continued to suffer there.

God bless them, the king said to himself of those steadfast survivors.

Still, there were those who responded to this information, and to the students' arguments, with an articulation of danger in allowing the people of the Princes to

move freely to Voulhire.

The king glared feverishly into the misty sky.

Wilhelm was a young man and a new king when the War of the Princes began. In those days, there was no real immigration policy, and had not been in a thousand years. Even in the immediate wake of the outbreak, there was no inclination to close borders to those in need of refuge. It wasn't until almost a year into the war, when a wave of especially desperate, maddened refugees set chaos across several of Voulhire's cities. It almost seemed as though the Riva Rohavi itself had commissioned the carnage. Indeed, perhaps they had, venomous opportunists that they were. The crimes only grew worse before the young king was forced to close immigration from the Lands of the Princes except under special circumstances.

Despite universal public support, it was among the most stinging decisions he ever had to make.

The same old discussions and debates came swirling amid his thoughts like a gentle but unyielding breeze in the wake of this latest report. Lucius Nartik's pedantic commentaries on the possibility of spies among immigrants and Dustin Mendleson's thoughts on the untrustworthiness of a traumatized survivor.

"Not that I would judge them personally, my liege," Dustin would magnanimously add, *"but sometimes all that can be offered is prayer."*

Wilhelm would have his own rebuttals, which once led to Nartik's darkest admonition.

"Survivors can be reeducated," the chief adviser had said. *"Criminals can be detained. The makeup of those whom we receive is not what concerns me. But if the stories about the emperor and his sons are true, then those people are a resource the princes will not want to lose, and neither will their father."*

"Then you perceive those people as the emperor's property?" King Wilhelm had asked.

To which Nartik replied, *"If ever Voulhire should wield the power to interfere with the Emperor of Lullabies, that time is far from now."*

Since the closure of immigration from the Lands of the Princes, public opinion has continued to back the king's advisers. Maybe it was for the better. But the best thing, at the very least, was that an academic body was bringing new representation to the subject, and there was clearly very little that could dispel their spirit.

A conversation was forming. That was what mattered.

"You sent for me, my king?" came the voice of a wiser, older woman.

Wilhelm stood from his chair and offered the vice chancellor to sit beside him. “You’ve been wanting to speak with me privately for some time, Lady Indara.”

The vice chancellor stepped further out onto the balcony. “And you’ve finally found the time.” She sat. “Or have you finally found a reason?”

Despite her close position to the chancellor (or perhaps *because* of it), Indara would not run to Midius Maidu with everything she heard. Wilhelm trusted her now every bit as much as when Calum Maidu was chancellor. Besides, it was not as if Indara lacked her own secrets.

“I received a report from Lord Eldus this morning,” Wilhelm said, sitting back down. “It had been reported to *him* that certain scouts had been sighted in the countryside around Hillport. He mentioned it only as an aside, but he was sure these scouts were Mianoran.”

“Was he?” said Indara.

“Maidu undoubtedly would love to see Hillport fail,” Wilhelm continued, “but I don’t think he cares enough to reroute his patrols.”

“Heavens no!” Indara scoffed. “Who would accuse Midius Maidu of being petty?”

Wilhelm’s lounge chair squeaked as he leaned toward her. “I know you’ve been asking questions, Indara. In fact, you’ve been so unsubtle about it that I can’t help but think it’s tied to your desire to speak with me. So, speak, vice chancellor.”

Indara turned her eyes to the king. “You didn’t send Judge Eldus to Hillport thinking he would succeed there, did you?”

Wilhelm sat back in the chair. “I worked with Lord Venden to turn Virko into an industrial revolution. If Hillport has half the same potential, Eldus Alderman has as good a chance at bearing it forth as anybody.”

“Then you *don’t* think he will succeed?”

He sighed. “I think he will succeed in my cause for sending him there.”

“Managing the blockade?” Indara laughed. “There are hundreds of military minds holding your old friend on that island. What is it you’re looking for that an honest litigator can help you find?”

Wilhelm stared into the misty sky. “Answers, perhaps.”

“And you think Meldorath might have left such answers bare in that crumbling castle on the hill?”

“Perhaps accidentally,” said Wilhelm. “Perhaps not.”

“Wilhelm, look at me.”

The king obeyed her.

She leaned toward him. “Dalehei Meldorath is an evil man. He was a friend to you because you were good to him. Even the most evil of men would do the same. The second you stepped in his way, as any decent man would have done, the mirage that was your friendship faded into the sand. Stop chasing what was never there. If you’re happy where he is now, then leave him there.”

Wilhelm stirred in his chair, trying to focus on the view. “Do you remember when we met, Lady Indara?”

“Vividly,” she said. “Your affirmation. Calum favored you from the very beginning.”

“Before my coronation... the kingdom understood that my wife had recently passed on, leaving me with baby Darius.”

Indara nodded solemnly. “Of course.”

“It was my first deception of many as king of Voulhire,” he explained. “My wife didn’t die. She left.”

“She... left?” said Indara in a cloud of befuddlement. “She left you? Did she know you were soon to be king?”

“It’s because she knew,” Wilhelm answered. “She was a protective woman. She feared the danger that came with the responsibilities I had accepted, and she knew she couldn’t change my mind. She was gone before I was ever affirmed.”

“Forgive me, I don’t understand,” Indara mused. “If she felt this way, why would she let you bring her only child here?”

“My point is...” he cut her off, then paused. “...Maybe I have abandonment issues.”

“I see,” she said. “Well, no friend wants to endure what Meldorath made you endure, your sensitivities notwithstanding. Perhaps a lack of true friends is Midius Maidu’s singular claim upon competent leadership.”

Wilhelm leered at her. “He also understands that we cannot allow too much attention drawn to Hillport.”

Indara closed her eyes in consent. “I shall withdraw my scouts.” She stood, bowed. “Your Majesty.”

Wilhelm listened to her walk away, then returned his focus up and ahead into the misty clouds, the sentiments of his advisor as stuck to his mind as the moisture to his coat.

Never trust a traumatized survivor. Some of them need God’s comfort, yes, but some of them survive because they’re capable of anything.

Galen Bray

“So... what was it like?” Rowan asked, his ever-present levity anchored by a subtle yet uncharacteristic hesitation.

The mining town of Alcovia was more than a hundred miles north of Magnum Caelum. Rowan's beautiful blond horse and my new black stallion slowed when we came to a line of forested hills on our left. We followed the tree line north at a steady pace, taking the opportunity to know each other better. It was in the midst of such scattered, on-and-off conversations whilst exchanging glances with the blue sky and green country, that Rowan had posed his dubious question.

“What was what like?” I asked as my eyes followed a passing cloud, but I knew what he meant. Something about his form of hesitation bound me to a singular, inescapable conclusion.

“Well, you know...” his mouth was smiling but his voice remained steady, perhaps calculated. “What was it like where you’re from? I mean, you seem like a really nice guy; how does someone like that survive in a place like the Princes?”

“That’s just it,” I answered automatically, “you have to be nice.”

“Ah!” Rowan smirked. “Throws the bad guys off guard, huh?”

I looked at him, smiling, “Now you’re getting it!”

Rowan had said before that it took him six months to find me, but he also implied that a meager helping of that time—a day or two—was actually spent *on* the island of my birth and upbringing. What did he see for himself that prompted this vector of curiosity? What might he have heard, having asked around town and among the hapless little villages, about me?

I wondered how he might react if I smoothly changed the subject.

“It’s no wonder you survived there, however brief your stay,” I said. “You’re a nice guy yourself.”

Rowan shrugged. “I had protection. I’m not all that nice.”

“You’ve been very kind to me.”

"Kind?" he glanced at me. "I'm doing my job, man. I told you, your uncle shelled out a chunk of his life savings for me." He chuckled. "I might have ended up with even more of his gold than you did. I'm not gonna cut out until I've given you your money's worth."

Maybe it was just a job to him, and I was only a client. Nevertheless, it demonstrated no small magnitude of dedication; it mystified me that someone like Rowan could draw any feeling but admiration from his countrymen, let alone cynicism. This was when my mind returned to the mayor of Magnum Caelum.

"Herr mayor seemed to want you out of town quickly..." I let the rhythm of my trotting horse rock my body as I looked ahead and thought of a way to complete that thought. I wasn't sure I should have brought it up at all. "Maybe he was concerned by your time away from home?"

To my relief, Rowan did not become impatient with my question, but instead laughed loudly. "No! He wants me out of his pretty little town because I nailed his pretty little daughter."

"Oh," I said. "He... didn't approve of your courting her?"

Rowan smirked at me. "I didn't say I courted her. I said I nailed her." He looked forward and let his head bob to the trotting of his horse. "She's the one who got it into her head that I was 'courting' her. It was my mistake, really. You never nail the same girl more than twice unless you're gonna marry her. But when you're stuck in a bumpkin patch for six months, eventually you all start eating out of the same dish."

"I see," I said, contemplating his story. "So... you didn't love her?"

Rowan looked at me with a humorous and almost pitiful smile. "Picture this: a highborn girl from a one-tavern, two farm town runs home and tells her whole family she's gonna marry me. Now she's got them all excited at dinner. Daddy comes to see me practically in the middle of the night to ask me if I'm gonna stay or am I gonna take her back to Soulhire, if I can afford the wedding, where we're going to raise the children—Meanwhile, here I am, burning the midnight oil trying to get you out of a warzone! So yeah..." he chuckled. "That was an awkward conversation."

I took a moment to process what Rowan had said.

You have to understand, this kind of thing—chasing women, breaking hearts—it just didn't resonate with my upbringing. I hardly knew what romance was, let alone how to undermine it. I knew survival. And loneliness. In a lot of ways, I wasn't just discovering the people of Voulhire, I was discovering people in

general. I was discovering me.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

"I can't always blame these women," Rowan said with a sudden seriousness into the sky. "Sometimes chasing dragons is better than no adventure at all."

"Chasing dragons?" I said with a burst of curious excitement. "There are dragons here?"

"No!" said Rowan. "It's an expression because they don't exist. It's like saying 'chasing rainbows.'"

"Rainbows don't exist...?" I joked.

I was proud of myself for actually making Rowan laugh.

We rode along miles of these forested hills until we came to sort of an inlet in them. An alcove. Within it stood the mining town of Alcovia.

We were stopped at the mouth of the inlet by a checkpoint of guards in black armor. They asked us what our business was in Alcovia.

"What's the Royal Guard doing here?" Rowan asked them.

"Never you mind, boy," the inquiring guard replied, then turned his visor toward me. "Who are you?"

"I'm Galen Bray, from the Lands of the Princes."

Rowan sighed.

"The Lands of the Princes?" said the guard with some manner of disbelief.

"Yes, sir," I answered. "We're here looking for white metal!"

I could almost hear Rowan's silence.

Two of the guards looked at each other. "Let them through," one of them said. "Tell Bregger's men to keep an eye in their direction."

Another guard waved us through. Rowan and I proceeded through the corridor of forested hills into the small valley that housed the town of small buildings, smoking workshops and scattered mineshafts. Its thematic differences from Magnum Caelum were immediate on sight: it wasn't as bright here, the buildings were all made of wood with little variation in their design, and they were arranged in mostly straight lines. Only a few houses were lined up in curves, and that was only to follow the contour of the wooded hills that surrounded the town.

Lots of people were headed up and down the hills in neat lines like ants. They went up the forested hills with tools and came back down with wheelbarrows.

The people were quieter here. They didn't smile as much. They didn't look miserable, it's just that they didn't seem as... energetic as the people of Magnum Caelum. Their clothes were intact, but plain, except for dirt stains. Most of them weren't especially well-groomed, which wasn't a problem for me of course, but I

once again felt somewhat out of place.

"Alcovia," said Rowan, who didn't seem to care that he looked like a king compared to the rest of the town. "I pictured it being bigger. You read about the metal that flows out of this place and you imagine a city of thousands. Not one thousand."

"I guess so..." I said, sheepishly looking around. "That's a big church going up."

Rowan glanced at it, but neglected to respond. It did seem strange to me, a church of such heft serving so scarce a population.

"Greetings, strangers!" said a man with a blue vestment and a black stole. He approached us with what seemed like an attendant, a younger man in white. "That's a fancy horse for a miner."

"Don't let them bait you into a conversation," Rowan muttered. "We'll never get out of here."

The priest stopped as we passed. "Where are you from?"

He felt too close and intent for me not to answer. "I'm from the Lands of the Princes."

"Yeah," said Rowan, "And I'm a warlord from Kurgia. Don't you have an oversized church to build?"

I looked away as our horses proceeded.

Rowan thought out loud as he scanned our surroundings with a higher head than I. "So, pretty much everything that comes out of here goes straight to the artisan cities. More than half of these mines are owned by some company in Virko. We may have to bribe someone for a piece of the action."

"And what was it we're looking for?" I asked. "White steel, you said?"

"White iron," said Rowan. "Your blast furnace can smelt it into lactis."

He sped up.

Set apart from the neat lineup of houses was a two-floor building closer to the hills. There were a few such buildings like this, situated at odd spots close to where miners were walking in neat lines up and down the hills. Open barrels full of tools and closed crates surrounded them. Some of the crates were being loaded into big metal carriages driven without horses. Rowan explained that these carriages were driven by steam.

"Think of it as a big forge that makes the thing go," said Rowan.

"Yes..." I said, not seeing the connection at all. "May I buy one?"

"Uh, I won't stop you," said Rowan. "But your finances will."

He stopped his horse at the building and tied the animal to the porch railing. I

did the same, and followed him up the stairs to the thin storm door that led inside.

It was a busy place and no one seemed bothered by our presence, except for the occasional Royal Guard. It was like the inn at Magnum Caelum, except no one was drinking or laughing. No one seemed to be smiling, for that matter.

Rowan stepped up to a desk where a man with clean clothes was writing on paper. I couldn't comprehend how one man could hold account of so much paper; there was a whole library on his desk.

"Salutations and good morrow, mister!" said Rowan.

The man at the desk looked sharply up at Rowan. "You can take that *mister* crap back north where you came from, pretty boy."

Rowan smirked. "Forgive me, *Herr* Director. I need white."

The director looked back down. "I need you to go away."

"We'll pay a premium," said Rowan.

The director looked up again. "I have seventeen clients in Virko alone that already pay a fifty percent premium for every ounce of white iron that isn't claimed by the Mianorans."

"We'll pay a hundred percent premium," said Rowan.

The director looked skeptically interested. "How much iron are we talking?"

I stepped forward, cutting in. "Just a single rod, sir."

The director scoffed as his face reverted to its original state. "Will you get your northern asses out of my office before I call the guards?"

I was a little embarrassed as I followed Rowan back out of the building.

"I didn't mean to sabotage the exchange," I said. "I thought he would be less troubled by just a small number."

"Oh, but people around here enjoy trouble!" said Rowan. "They live for it. Trouble stirs up business, rouses competition! That's alright though; preferable, in fact." He started looking around. "It means we're gonna have to get a little innovative..."

As I contemplated the possible meanings behind Rowan's words, I noticed a foreman pull three people from one of the neat lines of miners and started yelling at them, cursing them, belittling them. One of the men had gray in his hair.

Even in a land as terrible as that of the Princes, I had never seen working class men treated so terribly. Where I came from, workers were treated with gratitude. Even the ones who were weak or slow to learn. What I saw now was confusing to me.

Confusing and offensive.

Why would the workers just stand there and listen to that? Was this also a land of cowards?

The foreman shouted about how easily each of these three men could be replaced, how their '*subsidized homes*' could be stripped away from their families. He then spoke to each one in sequence, asking if he wanted to leave. And each worker, with dirt on their faces, just stood there, staring blankly ahead, responding when they had to, pleading when it was expected of them.

One of the workers tried to defend himself, smiling nervously as he made up some excuse. The foreman must have taken this as mockery, and shoved the worker onto the ground. When the worker was down, the foreman kicked him. Looking back on it, it wasn't a beating sort of a kick, just a tap on the thigh, more like an insult than an assault.

No, I can't say *looking back*. I knew it then too. But it didn't matter. Every chamber of my mind, even those devoted to reason, just filled with energy. And heat.

I ran at the foreman, thrust him straight to the ground. I reached under the back of my shirt for the knife and plunged my fist against the man's chest. Five, maybe seven times. I could swear I actually saw the blood before I realized it wasn't there, and could feel the knife before I remembered I had left it behind in the Lands of the Princes. When I realized all this, I almost cried. I almost threw up.

The foreman shoved me off of him. I don't know what he would have done if Rowan hadn't interrupted.

"There you are, my lord!" Rowan came running up beside me. He looked at the big angry man. "Forgive me, Herr foreman, my lord is from a faraway land; he isn't used to such environs. Please excuse him."

"What the hell is wrong with you, boy!" the foreman shouted at me.

"These are grown men you're chastising," I muttered into the ground, still catching my emotions. "Some of them are older than you are."

"I don't know where you pretty boys are from, but if you—"

"Oh, that'll do, foreman!" A basso voice boomed from behind me.

I turned. A broad man was approaching us. He wore a purple robe, a wide hood anchored across his great shoulders. His eyes were barely visible above a thicket of a beard and a smiling mouth. He addressed the foreman first. "Let these poor workers off the hook for today; this is no way to act in front of guests."

The foreman scowled at me, then begrudgingly dismissed his inferiors and

followed them back up the hill.

Then the big man turned to me. "Apologies for the shock, my lad, but it wasn't as bad as it seemed. Everyone understands that if we don't meet expectations, contracts get cancelled and we all starve."

I was unmoved by this explanation. I looked defiantly up at the far larger man and said, "Death lurks at every doorway in the Lands of the Princes. After a while, you learn to defy its influences."

The big man's smile didn't go away, but it did change. It seemed to turn empathetic. "This is not the Lands of the Princes, lad. Here in Voulhire, everyone thinks they're going to live forever. So, they live for tomorrow. This is what drives us forward. It's what's brought this country to where it is."

"What's a mage doing at a mine anyway?" said Rowan.

The big man, who I guess was a mage, looked at Rowan with a mischievous grin. "I would think a mage has better cause for business at a mine than a northern nobleman."

"Not quite noble," Rowan corrected.

"A lawyer, then?" the mage suggested. "A representative of this immigrant?"

"Financial consultant," Rowan replied.

"A next of kin, then." The mage looked again at me. I was not fond of his inquisition, and perhaps unjustly resentful of its perspicuity, but his empathetic countenance and friendly tone had not abated. "You're well-spoken for a refugee, lad. What brings you to Voulhire?"

Rowan cut back in, "His uncle was one of the greatest blacksmiths in Voulhire!"

The mage held eyes on me. "Is this true, lad? Are the flames of the forge alight in your veins?"

I looked at the ground. "I guess so."

The mage turned and stepped toward a nearby crate. With one hand, he slid the top off of it and drew out a single rod of thick white metal. He walked to me and presented it. "If you're half-talented, you can turn this hunk of scrap into something that can buy you a whole crate of them."

Suddenly, my disposition toward the man melted and reformed. I regarded him with surprised and grateful eyes as I accepted his gift. "Thank you, sir."

"Welcome to Voulhire, lad." Then the mage stepped away.

The material was beautiful. It was white, but it reflective, almost like glass, but stronger than steel. "So, this is lactis," I said aloud. I didn't even realize I was smiling until I caught my reflection in the metal. Holding it as though it were the

finished product of a master, I showed it to Rowan with my big smile. "We didn't even have to pay for it!"

Rowan stood pensively. He nodded. "Yeah, I wasn't expecting that..." He looked around.

"So, back to Magnum Caelum?"

"Yeah," said Rowan, still looking around. "But first, I want to know what that mage is doing here."

"The mage?" I looked back at the big man who was now far away. "Why?"

Rowan regarded me with eyes half-buried in his thoughts. "Remember before how I told you some metals were rare, and some of them came from the magic world?"

I nodded hesitantly.

"What if that mage is tracking down a vein of pink iron? Do you know how much gold a single weapon made from fuchsia steel could earn you?"

I shrugged.

Rowan strapped the lactis rod to his back. "Now, let's find some pickaxes."

"We're going to dig?" I followed him toward the forested hills.

"Heavens no!" Rowan scoffed as though assuaging some great concern. "We're just blending in!"

The evergreen trees came over us as we climbed the hill. As we came close to a mine, Rowan took a knee and scooped some dirt off the ground, then massaged it into his face.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"I told you, blending in," Rowan kept massaging. "You heard that mage—I'm way too pretty to pass for a miner. If you hadn't lost the beard, you wouldn't have to do this too." He gestured for me to get down there with him.

Maybe he was right. But I still didn't completely understand why we were getting sneaky to begin with. We had what we came here for, and we got it for free.

But of course, this was a time when I was wide-eyed and compliant. You have to understand, I was never taught to think about what drove people. All I had ever known was survival. All I had ever seen in anybody else was survival. People had different ways of surviving of course, but it all came down to that same goal.

It was simple.

So, I went along with whatever it was that Rowan was planning.

Apropos my simple upbringing and the naive kid that came out the other end

of it, I also hadn't fully acknowledged at the time that Rowan's upbringing was the opposite of mine. He grew up in one of the most complicated places in the world: the capital city of Voulhire. He knew all about people and how to read them. Of course, I didn't realize all that as he scanned the people going in and out of the mines. I didn't realize that he was looking for the ones who knew what they were doing, the ones who were wise to their surroundings.

Finally, he found someone of interest.

"Hey," he put his hand on the back of a middle-aged miner and offered him a gold coin. "Take a break for a second."

The man took a quick look around, then accepted the coin. He looked quizzically at me, and then at Rowan. "What can I do for you fine boys?"

"What's the mage doing here?" said Rowan.

The man looked around again, then looked at Rowan, smiling. "I guess he must be looking for *something*, eh?"

Rowan looked at me.

"Hm?" I uttered.

Rowan laughed lightly. "Give the man a coin."

"Oh." I offered the man two.

"Your parents must have been saints!" the miner said to me, which was nice of him. He looked at Rowan. "One of the foremen shut down a certain part of a certain mine for maintenance. He said one of the supports was compromised, but that's bullshit. A mountain of lead couldn't break the supports in these mines. Maybe the foreman found whatever it is the mage is looking for."

"Where is this mine?" said Rowan.

The miner looked at me with an open-mouth smile.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out three coins, sorting them to make sure they were gold and not silver.

Rowan grimaced.

"Well now I hope it is what the mage is looking for!" said the miner, taking my gold. "You deserve it, sir!"

That was also a very nice thing to hear. I told the man thank you.

Rowan grimaced again.

"The closing can be found in Mine C, just that way. Good luck!"

Rowan led me to where the miner directed us.

"Do you have any money left?" he turned to me.

"Of course!" I said happily. "I still have plenty!"

The entrance to the mine in question stood like a gaping mouth on the hillside.

The evergreens immediately surrounding it had been chopped down, no doubt the very wood that formed the roof, which curved down to the back of the hole like a triangular hood.

Rowan grabbed a pickaxe from a barrel close to the hole, then made his way in. I did the same and followed him.

"Try not to look around so much," he said.

The daylight was quickly replaced by lanterns that illuminated the mine in a harsh red.

With his pickaxe perched over his shoulder, Rowan ambled further in. I put my pickaxe over my shoulder like he did, and stopped myself from looking around too much.

The corridor opened to a spacious chamber that then branched into further corridors. The mere five men who occupied this chamber were standing in the center, looking over a large piece of paper, pointing at it in different spots.

"Which way do we go?" I asked Rowan.

Rowan seemed to think about my question, but didn't answer it. His attention was on one particular tunnel where no one was seen going into or coming out of. It was also darker than the other tunnels.

We were about a hundred steps down this darker tunnel when we encountered an anxious-looking man pacing back and forth with two other men sitting on the ground close to him. They stood when they saw us.

"Can we help you?" the anxious-looking man asked.

"You must be the foreskin of this shaft," said Rowan with a sharp smile. "We heard you had a maintenance issue down here. We're here to help."

"Who sent you?" said the anxious foreman.

"Not the mage, if that's what you're asking," said Rowan. "But he does have his eyes on this very mine, so whatever secret you have isn't going to last much longer."

As far as I could remember, the mage did not have his eyes on this or any mine in particular. But it soon occurred to me that Rowan was lying to scare them. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but it certainly got the foreman's attention.

The foreman spat. "Are you threatening me, boy?"

"Down here, you're the boss," said Rowan. "I know my friend and I won't make it out of here if you don't want us to. But you can't hide whatever it is you have down there forever, and the mage will find it if you try to take it out all at once. But then again, that mage could take a closer look at what you're hiding

and find out it's worthless. Your only choice either way is to smuggle it out of here in bits before the mage finds it all and you come away with nothing."

The foreman scratched his scruffy face. "Whoever that mage is, he's got no legality on anything here."

"Not if he's working for Virko or the king," said Rowan. "But maybe this mage doesn't care for the law. He could be working for Meldorath, for all you know."

"Meldorath is dead," said the foreman.

"Yeah," Rowan scoffed. "And Chancellor Maida's straight."

There was silence among us and I wasn't sure if Rowan was expecting me to say or do something. But it looked like the foreman was actively thinking, so I let him think.

"Supposing I was willing to hand some over," said the foreman. "How much we talkin' in exchange?"

"One gold piece per pound."

The foreman spat again. "That stuff could be priceless."

"And it could be worthless," said Rowan. "And you're the one with the burden here, not I." He patted me on the shoulder. "My lord can always find another side project."

The foreman spat a third time and laughed. He hit one of his underlings on the shoulder. "Go break the kid off a piece o' that rock." He looked at Rowan. "Twenty pounds?"

"Forty," said Rowan. "I'll give you fifty pieces of gold."

The foreman looked at his underling. "You heard the man."

I had time for a closer look at our surroundings. Presently, I noted that a bed of peculiar flowers was growing right from the solid stone wall, close to where I was standing. I walked closer to the wall. The foreman regarded me suspiciously, but he didn't stop me. I inspected the flowers.

They were no bigger than these coins I carried around with me. They were black on the outside with little golden spores in the center. I brought my hand close to touch them, and the flowers moved as though my hand had brought a great wind across them. I drew my hand back, and just looked at them.

In ten minutes, that underling was back with a head-sized chunk of dark material. He brought it to Rowan, who gestured him to bring it to me.

The chunk of metal was black with a bluish hue in the torchlight, like the feathers of a grackle in the sunlight. It was lovely.

"That looks like more than forty pounds," said the foreman.

"We could take the time to weigh it and try again or I can just give you your fifty pieces," said Rowan.

"Yeah, yeah," said the foreman. "Fork it over."

I put the bulky rock into my pack and removed fifty-five pieces of gold for the man.

The foreman looked the coins over carefully.

"Well, lads!" came the unmistakable basso voice of the mage from just before. "That's quite the nose for adventure you got there!"

Rowan and I looked back. Rounding a turn from the network of mines into this quiet shaft was indeed the very man who gifted me my rod of lactis only minutes ago.

"Blackbath," the foreman uttered with a snarl as he pocketed my gold. "What do you want?"

"Oh, nothing but the very thing you've held behind your wee back for just about a week now," the mage, Herr Blackbath, replied with a lighthearted tone. "And aye, what a challenging game you gave to me. My thanks, and my congratulations. I'll be leaving with my prize now."

The foreman's brows remained tight around the bridge of his nose. "Whatever you're looking for, it's not in this shaft."

With a smile shifting his heavy beard, Herr Blackbath put a hand to his ear. "Break a piece off any normal rock and it makes a sound that travels by air. The rock I seek cries in other ways. It cries much further, and much louder. My ears are still a-ringing, and they've led me here." Then his eyes turned to me and the rock I carried in my arms. "And there it is, the very material, cradled like a babe at the tits."

"Hold on there, sir," said Rowan. "This rock was purchased in good faith. In accordance with the Merchant-Consumer Protection Act of—"

"Now, now, lad," Herr Blackbath assured with a calming gesture. "You'll never spot this big ass in the way of a fair trade." He looked to the foreman. "But Lord Venden has granted my client full ownership of the mineral that fits the description on this here document." He pulled a parchment from his robe. "This is the signature of Venden Hrelek, Lord of Virko and its holds, which includes the resources produced by this town. To violate this grant is to violate the king."

The foreman took the parchment from Herr Blackbath. He studied it for a long time. Finally, handing it back, he said, "The intentions of the grant are clear, but I question that mine is the rock you're looking for."

Herr Blackbath never surrendered his lighthearted tone. "Lad, I am both an

established mage and a professor of petrology. I have the authority to know that what is in your possession belongs in my hands.”

The foreman’s brows only grew tighter. “If you were a professor of the law, then you would know that the finder is entitled to an *impartial* opinion.”

The hefty mage’s smile disappeared into the blackness of his beard. “Aye, lad,” he said, nodding into the flickering torchlight. “You are at that.”

The foreman dropped as though he had fallen into a shallow ditch, but his feet had sunk into the stone beneath us. His brief struggle was so ineffective, it almost looked like he wasn’t even trying. Then his eyes bolted with rage upon Blackbath.

“Here’s my impartial opinion,” said the mage, standing over the now shorter foreman. “When Lord Meldorath wants something, you and all the world ought to stand aside.”

Still beside me, Rowan uttered, “Oh, shit.” He hit me on the shoulder. “It’s time to go.”

“Guards!” the foreman screamed.

The other miners retreated fearfully into the further reaches of the shaft, no doubt to protect their treasure while the guards took care of the mage. Rowan and I made our way back whence we had come, but the shadows of incoming guards—the king’s Royal Guards—portended a wall of men impossible for us to break. Soon, six of them were rushing straight at us.

“Whoa, wait!” Rowan shouted to them.

A line of stone spikes shot up between us and the guards.

“They’re mages!” one of the guards shouted.

“We’re not!” said Rowan. “We’re miners!”

Two of the guards pulled batons from their belts. They struck them against the rocks, and a sparkling light appeared at the ends. The guards dropped them at the base of the columns and quickly evaded.

“Down!” I grabbed Rowan by the collar of his red shirt and pulled him to the ground.

Everything shook as two blasts took out most of the columns that were standing in the way.

The guards surged past us, chasing down the mage who himself gave chase to the miners in the depths of the shaft.

In the silence left behind with us, Rowan put his hand to his ear, jiggling it with his hand.

“That’ll pass,” I said in reference to his deafness. I helped him up.

“Hey!” called the foreman, who was still standing a foot deep in solid rock. “Help me out of this!”

I started looking around for a pick.

“Don’t worry!” Rowan called back. “The guards still got plenty of dynamite left!” He glanced at me as he turned back around. “Come on, we’ll only hurt him if we try to pick his little tootsies out of that rock.”

I was sure to let a few passing miners know someone needed help in that shaft as we made our way back through the main network.

“What do you think happened to them?” I asked as our dirty faces met the sunlight once again.

“A few injuries, an arrest, a hefty fine for a hefty mage,” said Rowan. “And I’m sure they’ll bring the foreman’s desk down to him, and feed him three times a day.”

I laughed away my concerns. Hopefully nobody was badly hurt.

I followed Rowan back into town, to the two-floor house where we had tied up our horses. We mounted them and started trotting toward the mouth of the alcove for which this little mining town was named.

“Who’s Meldorath?” I asked as I held pace beside him.

“What? Oh!” Rowan scoffed. “That guy was just name-dropping. Rich people are always doing that in this country.” He looked at me with a grin. “Even my good friend, King Wilhelm!”

I laughed again.

When we emerged from the embrace of the forested hills, Rowan said, “So anyway, if a mage wanted this rock so badly, it must have some sort of magical relevance. If we want to learn how valuable it really is, we need to find an imbuer.”

With a touch of reluctance, I smiled. “I’m guessing we won’t find one in Magnum Caelum?”

Rowan looked at me with a nod. “See, you’re finally catching on!” He turned his eyes ahead, to the southeastern sky. “They’re rare, but the archivists of the Diadem must have a bunch with nothing to do.”

“The what?”

“The Diadem—the palace of the eiodi. It’s in Yamon Soul.”

“The holy city?” I remembered it mentioned on the boat.

“The very same!” said Rowan.

After the day’s adventure, complete with explosions, I was desperate to see Magnum Caelum again. Still, I had plenty of money left and Rowan sure seemed

to understand the path to success. I wanted to do my great uncle proud.

I sped up on my horse to keep the pace with my companion and we put that town and its dubious enterprise behind us.

Before I knew it, the hills flattened and the woodland trees grew short until they were gone. The dark brown soil lightened, then turned a sort of reddish-orange. We were passing through the Virken Plains, about which I had been so curious on the way to Alcovia. The flat land seemed to go on forever, proceeding, like a red ocean, into a smooth horizon.

According to Rowan, we were just out of sight of the city of Virko, but I was excited enough to see the smoke from its factories tickle the darkening sky. To see the fires of its mills in person was an experience I hoped I would someday share with my new friend.

We made camp in the plains on our way to the Holy City. The digestion of a hearty meal brought me to a fast sleep, and I dreamed as the stars crossed over the sky.

I dreamt about the foreman from Alcovia, the one whom I had nearly killed without even thinking. In the dream, I set upon him just as I had that day. But in the dream, my tackle did not bring him down, nor did my second attempt. He didn't even look to see the body that bounced right off of him. So, I pulled out my knife. This time I knew it was in my hand—I could feel it. But when I held it high and brought it down, it was gone. There was only my clenched fist.

I kept stabbing anyway, hoping the knife would reappear. The foreman proceeded about his business as I kept plunging him with my empty hand. The assault was so benign that my wild flailing and barbaric snarling was dismissed by most. Rowan was laughing at me as the foreman treated his workers to the whip. Old men, men with grandchildren, watched as their flesh opened to a singular lash that struck all of them at once.

I wanted to stab them.

Finally, the knife reappeared.

Even still, when I descended on these cowards, my knife, while remaining fully visible, still failed to affect. Stabbing one of the workers, the blade bent like paper. Another worker's skin was far too hard. On the third try, my knife passed through the flesh like a ghost.

"You'll never do it that way!" Rowan's laughing voice advised.

I looked up and Rowan was no longer there, only his shadow, standing tall in the air, looking down on me.

I woke with a gasp. Rowan was heating up what was left of last night's stew.

“You ate too much,” he said as he stirred. “Not good for sleep!”

“I guess not.” I felt the sweat from my forehead.

As I came back into reality, I felt the shame of my dream. But even as the shame of what I had done in the dream intensified, the desire I felt while doing it had not fully gone. To feel the blood of worthless men collect in the pits between my fingers, to feel my blade push its way through the layers of their flesh. To watch their eyes die in fear.

“Yamon Soul is only a few hours ahead,” said Rowan in the silence.

While my friend eyed me with probably some concern, I struggled to remind myself who I was. But realized there were some things I should have left behind along with that knife, and that was something I just couldn’t face in that moment.

So, I gave Rowan my brightest *good morning* smile and said, “Let’s saddle up!”

Lord Eldus

Once more, his ship pulled into the harbor of Lorcia's Isle, into the fort commanded by Captain Barcaedi. The last of the nightshift guards were headed in for bed. The smell of everyone else's breakfast mixed with the oceanic smells sprayed in by the crashing waves. The castle of the imprisoned Meldorath stood against the morning sky like a pretty painting on a rich man's wall. But that looming reminder of distant anxieties was not the reason Lord Eldus was here today.

He was here to be the lord that Hillport deserved.

He found Captain Barcaedi in a familiar spot, perched on the battlements, overlooking the small army of the fort, watching them eat breakfast, run drills and take position across all parts of the property.

Eldus was sure Barcaedi saw him coming, but the captain didn't bat an eye at the lord's approach.

"Captain," said Eldus. "I'm here to talk about Hillport."

"I thought that was your responsibility," said Barcaedi, his eyes still scanning the fort.

"You are mistaken, captain."

Barcaedi turned to the lord from his overview. "I answer to King Wilhelm directly, Lord Eldus."

Eldus kept his tone neutral and respectful. "You answer to Voulhire, captain, as all of us do. I'm not here to give you orders, and I have no intention of petitioning the king should you refuse. I have a plan for Hillport and it's not based on my political ambitions."

"What is it based on?"

"It's based on numbers. And science."

Barcaedi didn't break his stare outward, nor his half-hearted tone. "And what do your numbers and science say you need from a simple soldier like me?"

"Ships," said the lord. "For fishing wharfs."

The captain turned slowly toward the dark and pretty manor across the island. Then he regarded the lord and slowly shook his head.

"You have thirty-two ships surrounding this island," Eldus still kept his volume low and his tone respectful.

"Thirty-three if you count mine... or at least it will be mine once my ten years are up."

"They give you a ship for ten years in the navy?"

"Ten years a captain." Barcaedi pointed out into the harbor. "That big one right out there is mine in two-and-a-half years."

Lord Eldus gave a sardonic look outward into the harbor. Actually, it was a really nice ship.

Captain Barcaedi was still looking at the manor of Meldorath.

"You seemed to regard him so dismissively before," said Eldus.

"He's still a powerful mage, as you said," said the captain. "There's no reason for me to lose a single man should he try anything."

Slowly, Lord Eldus's eyes also turned toward the pretty castle against the yellow morning sky. "Tell me once more of these tricks Meldorath has cast on your men."

"Obvious things," said the captain. "I think he gets off on spooking the rookies."

"Can he cast these illusions across great distances?"

"I doubt it," Barcaedi said dismissively. "But then I hear magic and physics tend to regard each other in unexpected ways, so who knows. Still though, I can't imagine he can do a lot where he can't see." He turned from the view and looked to the lord of Hillport. "Why are you so curious?"

"I don't know, I..." Eldus shrugged, laughing mirthlessly. He was suddenly embarrassed. "I guess I've been feeling a little spooked myself lately."

"Not all of Meldorath's illusions come from magic, you know." The captain took a seat on the battlements. "The man engineered his own reputation as this indomitable demigod to cast doubt and paranoia on his enemies. The longer he was general of the southern army, the less he had to work for his success."

Eldus mused on that for a moment. "I also read a theory that his power comes largely from the friends he takes on."

"That's another good point," said the captain.

Finally, Eldus was starting to feel better. "You would think this is the time for him to start working hard again. Yet there in his prison he sits, casting petty illusions."

"Because that's what he does." The captain kept on staring into the pretty manor on the near-distant hill. "He plays with humanity."

"Has he given you dreams?" said the lord.

Barcaedi scoffed under his breath. "He wouldn't dare. He knows we'd be on to him in a second. The world isn't that stupid and he knows it. He does these childish things and, every once in a while, I have to deal with a soldier who can't handle it. Some of them desert on a stolen rowboat, some end up having an episode or demanding a transfer. Natural selection, I say; the tougher boys are what I'm left with. In this, my enemy becomes my benefactor."

"I don't think the people of Voulhire are stupid either," said the lord, looking solemnly at the house of the man named Meldorath. "But they are scared. Look at how he's playing with our minds. Look at how fear has brought us to bring all of these resources to him when there are thousands of law-abiding citizens who could use them."

A long, quiet moment passed as the yellowness of the sky faded into blue.

The captain sighed. "You lawyers and your segues." He glanced at the lord. "You get *one* ship."

The lord nodded. "Thank you."

Eldus was elated not for the mere acquisition of a ship, which would undoubtedly prove no small boon to the people of Hillport, but that he could at least persuade *someone* to let go of his fear of Meldorath. Barcaedi hid that fear, but his body language didn't lie, neither did his reluctance to give up a single ship. But now the first step was taken. Soon, all that the villains of the world would be able to do was cry in the night, their desperations echoing in their own darkening corners of history.

"Lord Eldus..." said Barcaedi.

Eldus stopped and turned.

Barcaedi's head was half-turned from the view of the dark manor toward Eldus. "In spite of what you may believe, I do care about that crappy little town."

Eldus smiled back. "I would not have spent the time coming here if I believed otherwise. Good day, Captain."

Barcaedi returned his hands to the crest of the battlements, and his eyes back to the manor on the other side of the island.

* * *

Making Hillport a better place required deeper involvement than bringing in more money. Finding outside investors was a future dread, but even more dreadful and far more imminent was the task of helping this town heal.

They wanted to move on. They wanted to forget the pain, the betrayal. As such, parents did not discuss with their children the horrors Lord Orlin had put them through over the years of his reign. Doctors had since come to examine the children physically and mentally. They said that there were no obvious signs of abuse, but that such abuse buries itself deep, and that these children were most definitely altered in some way.

But that was as far as they got, and Eldus knew it wasn't far enough.

Orlin's reign had only ended six months ago.

When Eldus returned to Hillport, he conducted his pre-scheduled visit to three of the town's schools. They knew why he was coming, not that he did anything to hide it. But the people were not as resistant to him as he thought they'd be. Especially the mothers.

The schools in Hillport were much smaller than in the big city of Soulhire, which was why there were a lot of them on this hillside, where thousands of children lived.

But Eldus's people were fast to tell him which schools he should see first, where there were students more affected than others. This information was not in loud circulation, for fear of embarrassing these children, but everyone seemed to know.

These schools, which normally consisted of a few small classrooms, were delighted for a visit from their new lord, and it was easy to build a rapport with them, to let them know that he could be talked to, that he could be trusted.

At noon, Eldus found himself inside an old house which had been converted into a school. It was dark and quiet. A hum of muttering from the closed rooms around him was difficult to decipher, but clearly the voice of a teacher at lecture.

"Hail, sir," came an untrusting voice from the other end of the parlor. "Can I help you?"

Eldus turned and saw a maid standing at the archway into the kitchen. "I didn't mean to intrude," he said softly. "I'm here to speak with some of the children, regarding..."

"Oh, forgive me, my lord!" the maid withdrew momentarily into the kitchen and returned with a dim lantern. "I should have recognized a man so finely dressed!"

"Not at all, madam. I should have given proper notice that I was coming."

"Oh, we knew you were coming, my lord. It's a smaller town than it looks." The maid knocked on one of the doors. "Most of us here are smart enough to know that hiding from a topic won't suppress it from our hearts."

The door opened. A pretty woman in her thirties appeared.

The maid muttered, "Lord Eldus is here to talk about you-know-what."

The teacher looked at Eldus. "Good afternoon, my lord." She held the door open into the classroom of twenty young children aged eight to twelve.

As Eldus entered the room quietly, he made a note to himself to see about education reform for Hillport. This system needed serious organization and there was no reason an eight-year-old should be given the same lessons as a preteen. Perhaps the monks of Yamon Soul could assist with that.

"Class, we have a special visitor today!" The teacher closed the door behind Eldus. "This is the new lord of our town. Everybody, hail Lord Alderman!"

The class replied with a chipper tone, "*Hail, Lord Alderman!*"

"Eldus' will do just fine," said the lord, smiling at the charming classroom. He proceeded to the front as the teacher sat down at her desk.

Eldus thought about his words, then lifted his head to address the classroom. "Children..." He stopped himself, realizing his first mistake already. Young pupils in Soulhire despised being referred to as children. But as Lord Eldus held his pause, he saw that the children didn't seem offended at all. In fact, they seemed curious and interested to know what their lord had to say to them. They held their eyes to him with a demeanor of awareness beyond their years.

Lord Eldus continued, "Students, I came here today to talk with you about an unkind man who ran this town before I came."

"Lord Meldorath?" One of the students called out.

Eldus grumbled quietly under his breath. "No, son. I know certain stories about the past are exciting, but some are not. But even the ones that are not exciting or fun sometimes need to be discussed. So, I came here today to talk with you about Lord Orlin."

There was no significant reaction from the students. For less than a second, he thought it might have been the disturbing nature of the topic. But that palpable silence was not there either. It was like the children were not even fully aware of what had happened, which was strange considering that at least one of their classmates was said to have been affected. But this only made it all the more important for Lord Eldus to have come here today and talk to them.

But where the heck to begin?

He said to the children, "Who can tell me why I am here in your town?"

A student raised her hand, and Eldus called on her.

"You were sent by the king to be our new lord!"

"Very good," said Eldus. "And who can tell me why the king sent me to be your lord?"

The children looked like they were thinking about it; one or two of them looked like they were about to raise their hands but withdrew them to put some more thought into it.

Lord Eldus helped them along. "Can anyone tell me what it means to use someone?"

One of the children raised his hand and answered, "When you pretend to be someone's friend, but you really just want something."

"That's exactly what that means," said Lord Eldus. "And there have been people in the recent past whom the king felt had used this town. People who were very smart, but not very nice. This made the king sad. He wondered why it was that such mean people could be allowed to become lords. And so, he chose me to make sure these terrible things can't happen here anymore. Not just at the hand of a lord, but anybody. Because it is everybody's job to help one another, not to use them."

A child raised his hand. "So, you're talking about Orlin *and* Meldorath?"

Eldus looked down and smiled. "In a way, yes. But as I am here, I wanted to keep the focus on Lord Orlin, whom I have heard..." he almost winced as he strung the sentence together, "...was not very nice to some of you in this classroom. Now I do not need to know who it was, but I do need you all to know that anyone, at any time, can come and talk to me if they need to talk. Even if it's late. Even if it's early. Do you understand, children?"

"You should talk to Stanley Batherus!" A girl with pigtails called out.

"Claire," the teacher leaned forward on her desk in fast admonition of this suggestion.

"Who is Stanley Batherus?" said Eldus.

"He was hurt real bad by the old lord," a stout young man said.

"Children," the teacher admonished once more.

"His parents homeschool him now," said the girl with the pigtails.

Eldus turned to the teacher.

The teacher calmly said, "There was a student. His parents... don't want him to be bothered."

"Where does he live?"

* * *

Halfway down a thin street was a house huddled among others in a tight little neighborhood by the water. Dozens of people were walking this thin street; none seemed to pay this particular house any mind.

Eldus looked around at them, these people who worked so much harder, and lived so much worse than the lords of Voulhire—a lord like Orlin, whose rich life came from the sweat of their brows. For him to harm their children... how can any heart beat with such hate?

Lord Eldus put his knuckles to the rough wooden door and knocked softly a few times. When he started to wonder if he had knocked hard enough, the door opened. A man in his late thirties was looking out from the darkness inside as though waiting for an enemy. He regarded Lord Eldus with suspicion and contempt.

“Yeah?” said the man, as if he did not know who this was.

“Good afternoon. My name is Eldus Alderman. I'm the new Lord of Hillport. I would like to speak with young Stanley.”

The man looked over both of the lord's shoulders. “Where're your bodyguards...” Then he added with a note of defiance, “...m'lord?”

Eldus grinned. “Do I need them?”

“Used to be this very family was lordin' these parts.” The man momentarily lost his focus as he stared into whatever portion of history he was referencing. “Lord Batherus.” Then he resumed his focus on Eldus. “But those were old times no one remembers. Before these fancy mages and judges and whatever the hell that shit pot Orlin was.” The man stared for another moment. “What's a lord doing in this part of town?”

“I would like to speak with Stanley Batherus.”

“What do you want with my son?”

“To speak with him.”

“About what?”

“I want him to know he has my support.”

“I'll pass the message.”

Eldus pursed his lips, trying to be nice. “With all due respect, sir, nobody in this town seems to be passing anything. That's why I'm here. If anyone in this town is suffering, I want them to know from me personally that they can talk to me. I have only your son's happiness in mind. I am here for no other reason.”

A thin woman, also in her late thirties, appeared from the darkness of the house. She seemed to have heard all that had been said.

"My lord," she put her hand on her husband's shoulder as though in gentle restraint. "Please come in."

This concerned mother led the lord deeper into the house, and called up a case of narrow wooden stairs that hugged a paint-chipped wall. A boy appeared and came down. He didn't seem like an unhappy child at all, at least until his mother explained to him who this stranger was and why he was here. Then the boy's head went down, and Lord Eldus started to doubt himself, but he wasn't here for information—he was here for the boy.

Eldus sat with him at the small kitchen table. People passed by outside. A few of them stopped and pointed at the house.

The mother pulled a jug from a cupboard and poured some wine into a wooden cup.

"Oh, I'm sorry, my lord," she said, taking the cup back. She turned to her husband with a scowl. "I told you to smoothen these cups!"

"I did," said her husband, who was standing behind Eldus.

"Look!" she said, shoving the cup into his face. "Splinter!"

Her husband grumbled, taking back the cup.

For a moment, Eldus felt pity for them. He realized he could never spend every day walking down those creaking stairs and eating breakfast at this wobbling, ramshackle table. And for a moment, he hated himself for that.

Could these people even afford to take their children to a physician?

Eldus looked across the table at the boy.

Stanley Batherus, tall and slender, was looking down with his hands in his lap.

Once again, Lord Eldus found himself struggling to find a place to begin. "Stanley... Do you prefer to be separated from the other children?" Asking that question made Lord Eldus hyper-aware of the father's presence.

"I guess..." said the boy.

"Do you feel safer alone?"

"I don't know."

Eldus folded his hands on the table. He spoke slowly. "Stanley, sometimes it's best to be with people when you feel hurt. It's never good to trust nobody, even when some people make it difficult to have faith. And it's often good to talk to someone you love when you feel hurt."

"You don't have to say nothing, boy," the father's voice was much closer behind Lord Eldus than he would have expected.

"Of course, no one is going to make you talk about anything you don't want to talk about, Stanley," said Eldus. "But if you're willing, I would like to learn not what happened, but how it made you feel."

"What good does it do to know that!" the father's voice made the table vibrate.

Eldus answered the father without turning to face him. "Wounds do not heal properly if left open to infection."

"They won't heal at all if you keep pokin' at them neither!"

"Orlin never touched me," the young man raised his head.

Eldus gazed across the table at him, surprised. "He didn't touch you at all?"

The boy shook his head.

"What did he do?" the lord asked.

"Nothing."

"Did he hurt your friends?"

"I don't know anything about Orlin..." the boy kept his head down.

The young man's father came to his boy's side, put his hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to say anything, boy, but don't lie to your father." He looked his son in the eye. "Are you telling the truth?"

The young man nodded.

Then the father suddenly started to cry. He took his son into his arms.

Eldus was also relieved, but there was an important question left lingering in this levied atmosphere. "What did happen to you?"

Young Stanley looked back down. "I saw things..."

"Where?"

"When I sleep."

Eldus glanced at the father, who was once again standing, looking down on his son with relief and a rising concern. "You were having bad dreams, son?"

"They weren't dreams," said the boy, gazing into his thoughts. "Dreams aren't that real."

"What did you see?" said Eldus.

"I can't tell you."

Eldus's eyes narrowed. "Why not?"

Then the boy looked up. He stared across the table at Eldus. His green eyes seemed to shine. "Because he'll know."

Lord Eldus focused on the boy, and he could feel even the presence of the boy's looming father loosen its hold on the room.

Eldus asked, "Who will know?"

"I don't know." The boy looked back down. "I think it's some kind of

monster."

Eldus remained composed, his tone professional. "Can you tell me anything about this monster?"

The boy seemed to struggle as he tried to explain, "Sometimes, late at night, I feel like a monster is watching me. Sometimes, during the day, I feel like the monster is watching with me. Seeing the things I see. Maybe he's seeing through other people too. Maybe the monster sees everything."

"When did this start?" said Eldus. "After Orlin died?"

"No," said the boy. "Before. A little while before."

Eldus sat back, giving an unsteady sigh. "That's enough." He looked at the young Stanley. "You were very brave today, young man."

The members of this family didn't have anything more to say to their lord, and the lord didn't want to call any attention to himself while the parents were tending with copious emotion to their son. He didn't say goodbye, he just stepped quietly back onto the street, where a handful of curious eyes were watching.

Eldus started to ponder the symptoms of hysteria. Individual hysteria. Mass hysteria. He began to ruminate on the control Meldorath had over Hillport. Just like his influence as general, it came on little more than his reputation. His vague legends. It was more than enough to make imaginations run amok.

It was no wonder why Wilhelm wanted his people to believe Meldorath was dead, and no wonder why the people were having such trouble believing it.

Eldus had always shared with King Wilhelm the belief that God alone had the right to kill, except of course for matters of self-defense. As a judge, he had caught flak aplenty for refusing to put to death the likes of such men as pedophiles and rapists, even slavers. But the judge remained steadfast. It was matters like these that brought him to question his philosophy.

But if he wasn't going to let Meldorath frighten him, he certainly wasn't going to allow the insidious mage to alter his beliefs.

He returned home and spent some time gathering his old psychology textbooks from the unopened crates in the castle library. There were several times since law school where he almost donated them, but he always had a feeling they would come in useful when that one particularly tricky case should find its way across his bench.

There had been several classes in law school as to how an arbiter should conduct oneself under extraordinary, large-scale circumstances, such as in times of siege, plague, or an insurgence resulting in government overthrow.

Fortunately, nothing like that had happened for centuries, but it did give rise to the study of mass mentality.

Lord Eldus would unravel the mystery of this hold Meldorath had on these people. And then, he would unravel the hold itself.

But he couldn't let this get in the way of healing the children from the effects of Orlin. That had to be priority one.

Indeed, there was a lot of work to be done.

In the sizeable library of empty shelves and unpacked crates, Eldus sat in a comfortable chair and set a small stack of books on the floor beside him. He put on his reading glasses and a servant brought him a steaming cup of tea. A bright lantern stood over him with a silver chain coming down to adjust the wick.

Why does that thing need to be made of silver? the lord thought with an amused smirk.

Eldus read for about an hour before his eyes began to fail him, but he planned on pressing on for as long as he could. It got to the point where he could almost trick himself into thinking he could read with his eyes closed.

The next thing he could recall was the feeling of someone coming at him, running at him very fast. A bleeding woman with wild eyes. He could hear her feet, wet with blood, pattering on the floor.

She screamed.

She leapt from the floor and hit the lamp, lunging down on top of him.

Eldus gasped into alertness, finding himself awake in the quiet room.

He was so relieved to be awake that he vocalized his sigh and laughed at himself, still feeling the adrenaline. He caught his breath and looked up at the lamp. The light was dim and flickering.

The silver chain was shifting quickly back and forth.

I am Midius, First Knight of Voulhire, High Chancellor of the Mianoran Council

Mianora.

It was a word meant to sound angelic and ethereal. The etymology of it traced back to a similar denotation in some ancient tongue.

Mianora.

He stood in the midst of the two hundred men and women, retired knights of the Mianoran Order, who comprised the Mianoran Council, this most excellent forum assembled in the heart of royal Cathidien, in the heart of Soulhire.

Midius Maido was the youngest leader of the Council in hundreds of years. But times were so different then; kings and eiodis were in their thirties and forties as a norm up until a few hundred years ago. So Midius might as well have been the only thirty-five-year-old to ever possess this most excellent office.

That was the way he regarded the matter anyway.

He looked at all of their faces looking back down on him in the dark assembly room. He tried to read them as though all two hundred of their veteran minds conjoined as one.

They were in the midst of discussing a matter of severe and imminent importance; one of the most critical issues to face the kingdom in decades.

...What was it again?

One of the older of these many councilors spoke up, "It's been nearly five years since we've heard from Riva, my lord chancellor."

Midius Maido, pacing around the central platform, calmly replied, "The Magnificent General Meldorath had his hand in that, I understand."

While delivered with more than its share of sarcasm, the chancellor was aware that his words were also very true. When Dalehei Meldorath was general of the southern army, any activity from the Riva Rohavi in the south was virtually unheard of.

"In the south, my lord, yes," the old councilor replied. "But Riva has been

quiet everywhere. Given this behavior, some of my esteemed colleagues and I have concluded that Riva has attained a new leader at some point between five and seven years ago. There has of course been some activity by Riva in that time, but nothing on a level we can call acts of terrorism. It's more like a series of philosophical statements."

Maido raised a brow. "Does that not constitute terrorism?"

"Of course, my lord, but no one has been seriously hurt: we've seen little more than caravans stopped and all the goods burned on the spot, vandalism, a few sabotaged crops here and there..."

Maido stopped his pace and looked out at the assembly. "It sounds like Riva are finally learning the value of common courtesy."

The assembly laughed.

"Yes." The old councilor nodded with a brief smile. "Unless there lies a deeper meaning behind this behavior, my lord chancellor. Now, we've seen Riva do things purely out of spite, but as far as we can see, this is the first time in history that the Riva Rohavi are demonstrating not only that they shun our riches, but that they do not need them. This gives rise to the question of where Riva is getting their resources, and just how fanatic they are becoming under this veil of silence."

The chancellor pursed his lips and turned his head to the side as though inspecting some leak in the corner of the ceiling. "Riva has hidden resources across the nation."

Very gradually, the old councilor showed that he was getting a little... twitchy. "This is true to an extent, my lord, but if the entirety of Riva's economy is so evenly decentralized, how have our inquisitors found no one who supports them? Not since they've gone quiet have we been able to trace any significant number of citizens to their cause. Most of the Riva sympathizers we have found are poor. None of them could possibly be providing Riva with the capital they need to sustain themselves."

Chancellor Maido's eyes remained as small and calm as his voice. "Can it not be concluded that Voulhire's economic success has subdued the appeal of the Riva Rohavi?"

Some of the councilors seemed to appreciate this idea.

"Not to the point of dissolving their core, my lord," the older one insisted. "Riva is like a den of roaches. The sun scatters them, but there is always a nest somewhere in unseen places. So has it been since the beginning."

Riva generally existed in camps in vacant parts of the nation, sustaining

themselves however they could, mostly by stealing food and supplies from caravans and wandering merchants. In recent decades, Mianora had driven most of them into the northern mountains, where they were weakened by infertile lands and limited access to civilization. Maida would have thought this to be a logical explanation as to why Riva was not an active threat. But for whatever reason, some refused to be satisfied.

"There have been times throughout history where Riva had gone dormant for so long that the kingdom resigned their fears of them entirely," the presumptuous old councilor lectured. "The last time that happened, Riva resurfaced and burned down half of Soulhire."

Of course, that was almost two hundred years ago, when half of Soulhire was made of wood. But the old man wanted to complain. Let him complain.

"Riva always resurfaces eventually, my lord."

These meetings were only growing more tedious as Voulhire continued to grow more prosperous. The Council had no qualms with King Wilhelm, nor with whomever he should decide would become his heir—which was no doubt going to be his son. Riva was a shadow of what they once were. All there was left to do about them was worry like a child over closet-monsters.

Most of these meetings had become technical talk: which knight to promote, increase funding to the order, allocating those funds, promoting squires, appointing new squires, where to move the knights, are they being properly trained, and so on.

Fortunately, Maida did not have to engage with heavy concentration into these frivolous affairs. But he did have to stand around and listen to them.

Maybe old age would bring fascination with the redundant and mundane. But the here-and-now brought other fascinations.

When at long last the meeting came to a close, Maida made his way into the fresh air of the outer corridor with a vexing sinus ache and a head that felt like a brittle stone shell.

He happened on an intern who was carrying a sleeve of documents from one office to another, her little shoes shuffling on the shiny floor, her reflection doubling the length of her legs.

All who labored in any fashion under the auspices of Mianora were exceptionally well compensated. Perhaps not the interns as much as the knights, but try finding another outlet in Voulhire where an intern saw gold, even in this prosperous age.

"Greetings, my lovely." Maida held out his hand.

Many of the Mianoran employees with intern or entry-level positions throughout Soulhire were placed there by favoritism with Maido. This tiny young thing was no exception.

"My lord chancellor! How are you today?" the young lady kissed his hand, exchanging pleasantries with her benefactor.

All of the men were quick to open doors for this lady. Even the older councilors. All eligible suitors bowed so low to kiss her tiny hand.

But for her to kiss his hand, for her to hold doors open for him... how enriching it was.

Still, this little academic was only just a little young for the chancellor. But her potential was practically leaking down those long legs. All she needed was a little more time, when those stars in her eyes began to fade.

She was a humble one as well. There had been so many others ripping and clawing amongst themselves for that position. Many of them were prettier than this one, harder working, more vicious, and a lot smarter. This one should have never had a shot. She should have never survived in a world that demanded so much blood.

But she did survive. And she did prosper.

Because he said so.

As for the others, who worked and fought so hard, they were left to their own devices. Perhaps they gave up. Perhaps they realized all the effort was never going to pull them out of misfortune. Perhaps they came to recognize the uninspiring destinies they'd spent so much energy running from.

The two soon continued on their separate paths.

In his heart, Midius Maida cared nothing for the notion of who belonged where. But he loved that society cared.

'Servants in their place' was the chancellor's practice, not his personal ideology.

Maido loved how unfair the world was, the caste system that condemned and glorified entire lineages without remorse or restraint. He relished how virtuous and hard-working men broke their backs for nothing in return from life, whereas some of the most fortunate men alive deserved none of all they had.

And he loved using it to torment people.

And how sweet it was that those he tormented could have easily been out of his reach had they been born to just the slightest bit different of circumstances.

All of the men and women who tripped and fell into his bed.

Alas, there were the more pressing obligations of the day.

“Chancellor,” came the voice of the king, with all its mirthless authoritarianism.

Maido turned. “Is that my future father-in-law?”

They were in a great hall in the midst of Mianora’s share of Cathidien Palace. It was enclosed in an almost full circle of stairs. In the center of the room, standing higher than the top of the stairs, was a statue of King Saint Baellont: a sword in one hand, a haloed helmet in the other. Maido always saw it as a self-mockery by the men who built it; the haloed closed helm wasn’t designed until hundreds of years after Baellont’s death.

King Wilhelm strode across the open floor with royal purpose. He held a letter in his hand as he stepped just close enough not to have another allergic reaction to the chancellor’s musk. “There are reports of sightings of the Riva Rohavi on the southern rim.”

“Oh!” Maido half-assed an act of shock. “And I assume these numerous reports by reliable witnesses were funneled through a single letter sent by Eldus Alderman?”

“Yes.”

“Oh!” Maido scoffed. “He’s such a queen.”

“He also sent these.” The king presented three long feathers.

Maido smiled condescendingly. “It’s nice to see the pheasant hasn’t gone extinct among those superstitious inbreds.”

Wilhelm let the feathers fall from his hand. “Will the Council ignore them so easily as they litter the floor of these beloved halls?”

Maido sighed slowly. “I truly don’t know how the Riva Rohavi became Mianora’s responsibility, Your Majesty. It is the king’s duty to protect us from insurgence and rebellion. ’Tis my duty to protect us from the king.”

“You could afford at least a battalion to patrol the southern rim.”

“You mean for the protection of your vanity project?”

“In light of how averse you are to vanity, I would appreciate the sacrifice.”

“The only southern rim I’d care to patrol is your son’s.”

The king went silent, but his mustache was pulled up tightly against his flaring nostrils. Soon, the poor thing would be inconsolable.

Maido rolled his eyes. “We have the Riva Rohavi spread so thin they hardly deserve to call themselves anything anymore. Were they to herd every feather they had against a town as small as Hillport, the overworked and underfed farmers would hold the line like a vanguard of paladins.”

“But that’s not how Riva fights, is it?” Wilhelm was calm enough now not to

start spitting all over the place, but still far from elegant. “They stalk, they steal, they sabotage. They turn families against each other, they rape mothers in the shadows. Economically, a few sheep can make all the difference in a town as small as Hillport; psychologically, they need no further grief after what their previous lords have put them through. Even you can see that.”

Maido’s eyes narrowed. “I thought we weren’t bringing too much attention to Hillport. You know... because of that thing we were worried about?”

Wilhelm appeared suddenly at odds with himself. “I said a battalion. Not an army.”

Maido crossed his arms. “Maybe I can route a few patrols along the coast. If it means *that* much to you. But if you want Hillport guarded *properly*, you’ll have to send your own.”

“It has to be Mianora,” said the king. “Or else there *will* be too much attention drawn there. You could install a waystation in Hillport for those patrols. We can make it look like you see the profit in that part of the country as well.” He began to ease, as though successfully having placated himself. “I’ll have to speak with Lord Eldus, but I doubt he’ll protest.”

Maido raised a brow. “I’m afraid Mianora lacks the proper funding at this time.”

“I’ll loan it to you.”

“...I’ll think about it.”

King Wilhelm turned away, no doubt relieved to be done with him.

Maido shook his head. “What is his problem?”

Anyway, yes, Riva. The Rohavi. The Riva Rohavi. The ones who made all these rich and powerful old men so afraid.

How Maido loved Riva.

Thank God for the blindness of these rich and powerful men, who had no idea how easy the Riva Rohavi were to control. They weren’t so bad, so long as someone kept up with them from time to time. Yes, it was probable that they were stirring up some plans for new mischief in their ‘veil of secrecy,’ but they always left the curtain strings just dangling there for anyone to pull.

Galen

From far away, the walled city of Yamon Soul resembled an expensive dish lying in the sun on green lands, close to the river Nubere. The ocean was a thin strip along the southern horizon.

We sat on our horses overlooking the Yamon District, a small county which answered to King Wilhelm only after they answered to a man known as the eiodi, the head of the Church of Destinism.

"Just a bunch of assholes," was how Rowan worded it. "Keep your eyes ahead or they might convert you. First you owe the poor your money, then you owe God your soul, then you owe the eiodi your hiney."

"My hiney...?" I looked at him.

Rowan laughed mercilessly. "You should have seen your face just then—*My hiney?* That was almost adorable."

I looked ahead at the city.

"Hey man, I didn't mean to laugh at you. I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry," I said. "I'm just trying to keep up with everything. This kingdom of yours... it's a lot to take in."

"*This kingdom of mine,*" Rowan snickered. "Just don't be afraid to ask if you're confused about anything. I promised your uncle I'd help you assimilate. Okay?"

"Yes." I gave him an assuring nod and smile.

"Good." He looked back ahead. "Keep on smiling. Laugh a little if you can."

"I will."

As we rode in closer to Yamon Soul, through the lovely little neighborhoods that stretched beyond its encircling wall, I saw that the wall was cream of color with gold engravings spanning the four-hundred-foot height. I asked Rowan if the gold was real and he told me that it was.

"Don't people ever try to carve some of it out?"

Rowan laughed. "Not here, they don't. And it's probably best not to even

mention the possibility once we're in the city." He looked in a specific direction. "You see those guards?"

I followed Rowan's eyes to three figures walking up the road. They wore tight purple clothes with an outer layer of black leather armor, which wrapped around their legs like a heavy skirt. Tight black cuffs capped their forearms and ankles. Their hoods were loose and their masks were made of highly polished sterling silver, so that when you looked at them, the only readable countenance you saw was your own. These guards all dressed the same and walked the same, so that you never knew how they might come at you: with their fists—which Rowan warned could shatter stones—or with magic.

"Those are the Vilendrian Guard," said Rowan. "They make damn sure nobody breaks God's law in this city."

There were four gates leading into Yamon Soul at each forty-five-degree interval. But they looked more like tall doors, which stretched almost all the way to the top of the city wall. They were far too heavy to be opened or closed by hand, so they worked on an internal system of weights and cogs. They remained open every day except for Sunday, when the citizens were given a break from tourism so as to rest and pray.

I looked up as the archway of the high gate passed over me.

Inside the circular wall, the buildings of white stone were tall, some of them almost reaching the top of the wall. The streets were made of slate, which was laid out even prettier than the cobblestones of Magnum Caelum. Men in black uniforms swept these streets of Yamon Soul, placing the sweepings into sacks which were then carried off. Citizens were finely dressed in clothes so clean they almost glowed in the early afternoon sun. I felt silly being so commonly dressed and was particularly conscious about a stain on my right shoulder, having wiped some food there earlier that morning.

Thinking about breakfast made me think about lunch, and I asked Rowan if we could stop somewhere for food.

"It's your journey," said Rowan. "I'm just your guide."

I had never eaten lobster before.

Yamon Soul acquired their marine cuisine from a place further west along the coastline called Hillport. The lobster was expensive as Hillport's output was limited. According to Rowan, a new lord had been appointed there to improve the situation.

I offered to pay for Rowan's meal, but he insisted on paying for himself.

"I have plenty of money," Rowan explained. "You have to conserve until we

learn you that forge. So don't be so damn generous to everybody."

Lobster became my new favorite thing that day. But what I loved most of all was imagining how much more of this world Voulhire had to show me.

In the center of the walled city of Yamon Soul was another walled section. This district was called Val Eve.

While the gates of Yamon Soul were open on all days but Sunday, the gates of Val Eve were open only on Sunday. If you had business in the holiest of districts on any other day, you had to explain yourself to the Vilendrian Guard, who stood at each of the four tall gates into Val Eve.

Each of these gates was a hundred-step climb up a staircase hundreds of feet wide, leading up to a terrace which encircled that inner wall. The Vilendrian patrolled there with a far view of the busy streets of the outer city. Horses were not allowed in Val Eve except under special privilege, which Rowan quickly failed to secure for us. But that was fine: I imagined the walk only encouraged people to appreciate the place more. Maybe that's why they banned them?

Finally, we reached this high terrace and the tall doors leading into Val Eve. Two Vilendrian were stationary there, standing with wide legs and high chins.

"We seek an imbuer in the archives of the Diadem," said Rowan to the silver-faced guard.

The holy guard remained motionless, replying with a dead tone, "You are aware that imbusation is outlawed by the Church?"

"...I thought that was only bio imbusations?" said Rowan thoughtfully.

"Bio magic of *all* forms is outlawed," said the guard. "As are imbusations of all forms."

"Well, at any rate, I'm only looking to have a certain material appraised for its properties and value."

"Present this material," the stoic guard demanded.

Rowan came around behind me and reached into my pack, producing for the guard the pretty rock we'd purchased in Alcovia.

The guard stepped forward, inspecting it closely. He looked over to the other guard, who then joined us.

Rowan held the rock high for them.

"We haven't seen this material before," said the first guard, returning to his proud stance. "It's sensible that you've brought it here. You may enter the district of Val Eve, but do not call any other attention upon yourselves than you must, or it will be *our* attention that you enjoy."

Only one of the two high doors opened, and only enough for the two of us to

slide through.

Among the widely spaced buildings in Val Eve, there were very few that were taller than two floors, and so there were far fewer shadows than in the outer city. The sunlight spread more evenly across the wide roads and even wider parks and gardens.

From the gate, we could see almost the entire district; the road on which we stood ran straight ahead to the center, to the towering and majestic structure that stood there.

"How many times have you been to this place?" I asked Rowan while my greedy eyes sought every wonder around me.

"My parents took me here once when I was little," said Rowan. "I haven't been here since." He seemed amused by my awe. "Pretty though, isn't it?"

"Yes."

I stared ahead at that structure which loomed high over the end of our road.

"Is that the Diadem?"

"Sure is," said Rowan. "'The eiodi's holy eye, pointing up at the sky...' Doesn't exactly look like an eye though, does it? Looks more like something else the eiodi's pointing up at the sky..."

It was a simple walk down that road to the Diadem. I kept looking around at the houses and villas around us.

There were black iron lamp posts along the streets. I remembered seeing these every so often in the towns of the lands I had come from. But most of them had been taken and melted down by the time I left; there would be one or two for every mile of road. But here, there was one every forty paces.

"Maybe when I'm good enough, I can make some of these for Magnum Caelum." I looked at Rowan.

The standing torches of Magnum Caelum were charming enough, but these would have matched their layout more, and given light to their streets through Voulhire's beautiful nights.

"A lot of iron," said Rowan. "For all your uncle brought in, he only had enough to keep his business going. Magnum Caelum is rich only through what it already has. And it doesn't have iron."

"Why is trade so poor there?" I asked.

"Trade is poor all along the south shore," said Rowan. "It's like I said before when we were talking about Hillport. The king keeps talking about fixing it, but nothing's come of his words."

The Diadem was a sharp spire topped with a diamond-shaped structure where

the eioldi held court and observed his city. It was made of magic glass that magnified the view and allowed him to look closely at every street corner, even through windows. That was the rumor, anyway. But Rowan seemed sure that it was true.

"That's what I'd do," he added. "The only difference is I wouldn't care who knows about it. I'd be like, 'That's right bitch, I'm watching you and your daughters undress!'"

Flying buttresses whipped around the base of the Diadem like the tower was rising a thousand feet out of a tangled spider web.

The doors stood atop an even higher staircase than the steps to Val Eve. We climbed them under the many shadows of that web of flying buttresses.

The doors were adorned in a full sheet of beautiful engravings. Among strange shapes were likenesses of stoic and dignified men and women, some of whom wore crowns.

"Who are they?" I asked Rowan.

One of the Vilendrian guards turned his silver face toward me.

Rowan smiled at the guard. "My friend is new to Voulhire." Then he stepped closer to me. "Let's go over the big players here, let's see..." He pointed at the one who covered the seam between the two doors. "That one there is King Saint Idus, who unified the land and founded Voulhire." He pointed quickly at the figure to the left, who was also crowned, and rushed another explanation. "That's King Saint Baellont, who defeated his usurping half-sister, Kistatri Khavel, and founded the Mianoran Council to prevent a civil war from ever happening again." He pointed to the figure on the right; once again, also crowned. "And that's King Saint Niviad, who defeated Baenar Raspaedeus, the only host to ever bring the Riva Rohavi into a winnable war against Voulhire." Once again, Rowan smiled at the Vilendrian. "Can we go in now?"

I hoped the guard was not offended by my ignorance. I was relieved when he opened the doors to the Diadem.

Inside, we were welcomed by a curving lobby filled with more wondrous engravings and statues.

One thing I had heard in stories growing up was that there was a great church in Voulhire called the Diadem; within that church was a chantry; and on the ceiling of that chantry, an artist had painted the face of God. This story had always fascinated me: the controversy surrounding the great painting, from the audacity to anthropomorphize God to the unspeakable nerve of presuming what he looked like.

And I really wanted to see it.

The artist never directly made the claim that what she painted was the very face of God, but she was so determined to paint it that she never even drew it on paper first. What she saw in her head never existed in the physical world until the process of many years began on the ceiling of that chantry, when a famous priest named Bartrus was able to convince the eiodi to allow it.

The mural was said to have a powerful effect on people.

This time, Rowan was following me as I explored the big halls. Finally, I caught on to the signs that led to the chantry. It was right in front of the main doors the whole time.

I was so mystified by the enormity of the room that I didn't even think to look directly up at the ceiling. I looked around at the dark wooden pews and the wide aisles that ran between them. The pews were set up in a curving formation like ripples around the altar at the end, which could have seated a small church all on its own.

Then I remembered, and I looked up at the ceiling.

The first thing that struck me to my knees was his piercing green eyes.

The magnificent portrait that reigned over me like the sky itself had long dark hair that fell behind him in small waves. His face was gaunt and smooth; younger than I had often heard God described, but wise. His eyes were frightfully penetrating, but they were heavily reassuring. They were not the eyes of an enemy, or of some looming judge. These were eyes understanding of the pain in every life, determined to see the world through all of it. They were eyes you knew not to fear, but you knew your enemies would. They looked down on me in a way that seemed so personal that I could feel them, like he was actually looking down from that very spot onto me.

And I started to cry a little.

He held a world in each hand.

In his right hand, he held the smooth, neat orb of the Cosmos, where order was ruled by time and space. In his left hand, the cloud of Caromentis, where order was defined by the madness of every mind.

"She finished at his eyes..." came a voice behind me which echoed sharply across the vacant chantry, followed by the sharp footsteps of heavy boots.

I turned and saw a priest dressed in marvelous black robes and a white stole. He continued looking up as he advanced toward me. "I remember the first time I saw it." Then his eyes came down to me. "My reaction was quite similar to yours."

"Forgive me, your elegance," I rose from my knees, but kept my head bowed before the priest. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"There are no intrusions in the house of God," said the priest. "Unless you are a demon of the Void, but I'll take you at your word if you tell me you are not."

"I don't think I am, your elegance, though I am from far away..." I felt my eyes being pulled back up toward the eyes of God. "Will you tell me about your religion?"

"It would be my pleasure," said the priest. "Simply put, Destinism holds that all sentient life enjoys free will. But God has placed us, knowing who we are, in exactly the time and place that we were born to fit his plan. Every man is free, but plays unwittingly into God's unknowable plan, all of us pushing the world toward its destiny. And one day, we will all wake up and realize that our efforts are complete. The world that once was so scary has now been made perfect."

Presently, I pulled my head down from the ceiling and looked at the priest. "Forgive me, elegance, I was listening."

The priest smiled. "My name is Bartrus. I am one of the heius priests of Yamon Soul. I am at your service if there is anything you need of me. Otherwise, you may stay for as long as you like and pray with us."

"Heius Bartrus?" Rowan approached us from the lobby. "Didn't you build this chantry or something?"

The priest smiled with amusement. "I taste a hint of disingenuousness in your voice, young man. Perhaps you remember the stories better than you let on. But your reasons are your own."

"I know the stories well, your elegance," I said. "You've done this place a wonderful service."

The priest put his hand on my shoulder. "If you know the stories, you know that I could never take credit for any of this."

"Anyway, we're looking for an imbuer," said Rowan. "I know the practice is banned, but we—"

"Say no more." Heius Bartrus raised his hand to silence Rowan. "I only make the rules. I don't enforce them. Follow me to the archives."

Rowan looked at me with a satisfied nod and we followed Heius Bartrus out of the chantry. I took one last look into the face of God before I left.

"There are two imbuers who belong to the Church," said Bartrus. "Just between us, the one I'm taking you to is probably a little better. He's around your age, so you should get along just fine."

"Only two imbuers?" I asked. "In this whole big church?"

"In this whole big city," said Bartrus. "Imbusion is a rare gift. Even the great Lord Meldorath could only envy it."

"Do you think he's really dead?" said Rowan.

"I have faith that God is alive," said Bartrus. "I have faith that Meldorath is dead." He looked at Rowan with a sly grin. "But I'd gladly settle for one of them."

The archives of the Diadem were located above the chantry. It was not a well-lit room, like all the others in the Diadem, but each man who studied here did so with a lantern that focused a strong spotlight on his desk.

But outside of these spotlights, I could see enough to be fascinated by the thousands-upon-thousands of books with bindings of varying color and size. Fortunately, I had already learned to read by the time the princes went to war, but I hadn't had the opportunity to be engaged by a good book in many years. Fortunately, I had my uncle's manual, but this great library inspired my greed. I wanted to read it all.

Heius Bartrus guided us through the room to a smart-looking man in a navy-blue robe of heavy cloth and a vest of matching feathers. The biggest book I'd ever seen in my life was perched casually in his left hand.

"Demetrius," said Bartrus.

"Heius." The young man at the desk looked up and stood, then bowed his head. "You honor me."

The young scholar had harsh eyes. His lower lip was drawn slightly in. He wore shallow sideburns that barely came down enough to touch his jaw. He regarded his surroundings as though with a sense of mistrust, but he was dignified and respectful. I was sure he would be of great help to me and Rowan.

The heius priest brought the scholar's harsh eyes onto me and Rowan. "These young companions have journeyed far in search of a knowledgeable imbuer. So, I've brought them to you."

The young man at the desk gave us a slight bow with his head. "My name is Demetrius Waters. It would be my pleasure to serve you both." He raised his head. "What can I do for you?"

"I'll leave you gentlemen to it then." The heius stepped away.

"Thank you, elegance," I called to the priest before he was out of earshot.

Rowan pulled the rock from my pack and rested it gently on the wooden desk.

Demetrius looked down on the rock. He brought a nearby candle closer to it, looking deeper. I thought those dark eyes of his were about to set the rock alight. He ran his hand over it. "It's beautiful," he said with no discernible emotion in

his voice. "I've never seen anything like it."

"A mage was looking for it," said Rowan. "A whole vein of it was tapped in Alcovia."

Demetrius continued to admire it.

"Can you tell us what sort of magic it contains?" I asked, realizing only afterwards how foolishly impatient I must have sounded.

"Not immediately, I'm afraid," said Demetrius, whose harsh eyes were still entranced by the thing. "Not only have I never known this kind of rock, but I sense depths to it that may take time to explore."

"May I ask how long?"

"...Weeks." Demetrius said, then looked up at us.

"Alright," I said. Then I looked at Rowan. "We're leaving the rock here, I guess?"

"The void we are!" Rowan looked skeptically at Demetrius. "I don't know if I trust these priests..."

"That's convenient," said Demetrius. "I'm a monk."

"A priest with martial arts training," said Rowan. "Now I trust you even less."

"The Church will perform this service for free," said the scholarly monk, returning his attention to the rock. Then he looked at me. "This object is unknown to us. It should be learned so as to be archived, thereby benefitting the community."

"Then we're the ones providing the service," said Rowan. "I'll tell you what: why don't you come with us to Magnum Caelum? You can do your rituals there. You can even name it after your favorite saint."

"What sort of market do you think you're in?" The monk's eyes narrowed on Rowan. "I am one of only two imbuers in this entire city."

"Then they have another one to spare!" I said with a smile, attempting levity as Rowan had previously advised.

But the monk did not seem levied.

"Forgive me," I quickly said. "I didn't mean to be passive. But I too have an important job to do. Not one so grand as can be found in this wonderful city... I'm just a blacksmith... in training. I must return to my work so I can serve my town. Their avenues of income are few, and I wish to repay them my debt for delivering me from the Land of the Princes..."

The monk's face remained hard, his lips in something of a snarl. But he did release his furrowed brow. "I am not a prisoner here," he said. "The Church is grateful for my services, and a monk is free to come and go as he pleases."

I said to him, "I would also be grateful for your services, Brother."

Demetrius looked spitefully at Rowan. "I would require accommodations." Then he turned to me, and his face softened. "I'm behind on my reading. I have books to bring along."

"Would you allow me to read them?" I asked.

Demetrius gave a single nod. "I would."

"Will it bother you to share a horse with one of us?" I asked him. "Though I may be able to afford one..."

"You can't," said Rowan, stepping forward. "And you're carrying the bulky rock, so... I think Brother Demi is riding with me."

"Brother Demi has his own horse." Demetrius turned his head slowly up at Rowan. "And if you call me Demi again, I will lock you in a crushing singularity from which there is no escape."

Rowan seemed to think about it for a second. "Well, I'm not much into kink, but I really want to call you Demi."

Demetrius held his harsh, calm eyes on Rowan long enough for me to start to get scared. Then those harsh, calm eyes drifted yet again in my direction. "Have you eaten?"

"I have," I said. "But if you'd like to stop on the way out, I'd be happy to buy you something."

"That's alright." The monk's eyes returned slowly to Rowan, and I again became afraid. "I'll eat later, when my appetite has returned."

We spent that night in Yamon Soul. Rowan and I were quiet toward one another. He went out into the town at one point to explore, and I spent much of that time reading from my great uncle's manual. My confidence grew with every page and I couldn't wait to get started again.

We met up with the monk Demetrius the next morning, whose white mare was fixed to a cart filled with books and assorted apparatus covered in burlap.

"Sabine is not fond of the cart," said Demetrius, stroking the neck of his beautiful mare. "We should leave immediately and stop often."

Lord Eldus

Frustrating. Very frustrating.

Lord Eldus was alone with his guards on his shaky carriage ride back home. It was late afternoon, and the sun was finally relinquishing its heavy beat on that hillside town.

He had spent all day seeking the children who had been hurt by Lord Orlin and speaking with their parents. The parents were reluctant, but ultimately supportive.

It was the children who proved the challenge.

A lot of them said they could not remember even the broad details of their encounters with Lord Orlin. It was as if the man's face had been bleached out of their minds. Other young victims insisted that it had all been just a dream.

Of course, Eldus dared not challenge the repression. He had seen their faces, and they had seen his. He told them he was there for them, and he had their names. He could get them the help they needed at the pace they needed it. He had plenty of contacts in Soulhire better suited for these matters than he.

When his carriage came inside the embrace of the castle wall, Lord Eldus noted a carriage already waiting on the path that looped before the porch of his castle. But this carriage was not designed like the ones Eldus was used to seeing. This one was made of metal, and it ran on steam. It was a beastly thing that probably could have held off an angry mob for a few good hours, and put a nobleman in debt for a few good years.

A large man with a thick black beard was standing outside of this grand piece of technology. He was dressed in a faded purple robe and looked like a mage. He had a black beard that was even thicker than Captain Barcaedi's.

Eldus's carriage came to a gentle stop and he stepped out, his eyes on this mysterious mage.

"Lo there, milord!" the big wizard had a booming voice but a lighthearted tone. "What a fine day this was!"

Eldus smiled. "It's not over yet." He stepped along the curb and approached the man. "What can I do for you this evening?"

"Why, your delivery, milord!" said the big mage.

"My delivery?"

The mage opened the back of his vehicle. "A special delivery straight from Alcovia, milord!"

Eldus stepped up to the back of the beastly steam carriage and looked inside. There was a pile of large black rocks. The light that poured over them seemed to come back with a bluish hue. Other than that, the rocks seemed unremarkable.

"What are these?" Lord Eldus asked the mage.

"Why, I'm sure I don't know, milord," said the mage. "My instructions were to deliver these stones to the lord of Hillport as soon as there was enough to fill the carriage."

Eldus reached inside and took one of the smaller pieces into his hand. "When was this order placed?"

"I don't know, lord. I just cleared it for departure this morning."

Suddenly, Eldus regarded the rocks with suspicion. Again, he looked at the mage, asking, "What was the name of the lord you were told to bring this to?"

"Oh, I was just told the lord, milord," said the mage. "In fact, I wasn't even told that. I was just told to bring it to Hillport Castle. I had to assume Hillport Castle was the big castle at the top of Hillport. This is that castle, is it not, milord?"

Eldus nodded, his eyes still narrowed with skepticism. "It is..."

The mage reached under his hood and scratched his head awkwardly. "I burned a lot of coal getting here, milord..."

"Of course. Forgive me, I just..." Eldus spun his head around the yard a few times. "Set them over there, if you please. I'll have my servant out with your payment before you're done."

"I've already been paid handsomely, milord," said the mage. "I'll have this shipment unloaded within a half-hour."

"Thank you very much."

This could just as easily have been Orlin inspecting the quality of rocks to use for whatever half-brained get-rich-quick scheme he had in store for the town. But to be safe, maybe Yamon Soul should be contacted, and an imbuer sent to inspect this material. Just to be safe.

Eldus put it out of his mind and started up the stairs and into his house.

The main hall of Castle Hillport was brightly lit at the hour of supper, and the

smells coming in from the kitchen made Eldus forget the stresses of the day. He could hear his family talking in the dining room. In a moment, he realized it made him forget the stresses of his new job, and he decided to join them before tending to his final errands for the day. There would be plenty of time for them after supper.

The dining room was also well-lit, particularly the long table, whose green cloth ran in a narrow strip from end to end.

Isla was the first to see him. "Hi, dad!"

"Hello, darling," said the tired lord. He took the end seat closest to the massive fireplace that looked like it was roasting a small house. "How was your day?"

"You wouldn't know it," Isla said as she plucked a few grapes from her plate, "but Hillport actually has the greatest spa! All of the same girls there keep inviting me to their nightly get-together, but I don't know..."

"Why don't you just go?" Eldus grabbed an apple from a silver bowl. "You have to make friends here just like the rest of us do."

"I know," his daughter replied. "Nobody wants to do anything besides sit around though. There should be a gym here, some place to do gymnastics. And clubs. Soulhire had a hundred of each!"

"Well, talk to your new friends about it," said Eldus. "More importantly, talk to their fathers about it. Maybe I can get a few investors aside from the one who wears a big white crown."

"I guess..." said Isla.

The lord poured himself a glass of wine and turned his attention to his son. "What about you, boy? Wasn't there something you were supposed to be doing?"

"Manipulating Hillport's youth, my lord," said Marshus, leaning his chair back. "Just like you asked."

"Inspiring them, boy," said Eldus.

"Is that not manipulation, my lord?"

Eldus rolled his eyes.

"The job was easier than I thought it would be," Marshus leaned forward. "The people of Hillport are hungry for something more than the toil for survival. Some of them aren't afraid to admit it. I sent a few letters to some of the teachers asking if they'd be willing to confer and discuss more academic unity. But more than that, I should like to see the upstart of sport."

"What sport?" said Eldus.

"I don't know, any such."

"Such as football? On this hilly terrain?"

"Terrain can be levelled," said Marshus. "Perhaps a rink for Puckschlag."

Eldus stared listlessly across the table. "Puckschlag?"

"That's what they call hockey in the south, though they can only play it in the dead of winter here."

"You would pay for the rink, then?"

Marshus took a glass of wine to his lips. "I can afford it."

The lord allowed himself just one more stab. "And I presume you know a mage who can keep the rink frozen?"

Marshus looked back across the table at him. "How about Meldorath?"

There was silence.

Eldus had to admit, he had that one coming, and good on the boy for delivering it, silver-tongued demon that he was. Eldus looked across the room at the head servant Beverly, who was hiding any emotional response she might have had to the ill-mannered joke.

Charlotte spoke up. "Marshus, that's not funny." Then she glanced at her husband. "But your father and I are very proud of you."

Charlotte set a resentful eye on Eldus a few more times over the next several minutes. Eldus didn't see what the big deal was; the boy needed to be kept on his feet. This is what men did: they threw jabs at each other. Evolution had long imposed it. Marshus was quiet as well, ever the victim, a clever act to fortify his mother's ire toward the father. Eldus gestured for one of the servants cut him a piece of the turkey, which sat among dark greens on an ivory plate at the center of the table, perhaps enjoying the discord as much as Marshus.

In what at first sounded like a merciless return to passive aggression, Marshus spoke up once again, "Is everything okay over there?"

Eldus looked up, prepared for another siege.

But Marshus was looking at Isla.

Isla was staring intently under the table. "I think something's burning the floor..."

"Burning...?" Eldus rose from his chair and walked along the table to where his daughter sat. He looked at the carpet, which spread beneath the dining table. Reaching from under the hem across the wood floor were burn marks about the size of fingers.

Marshus joined his father to inspect what had his sister so spooked. When he saw the little burns, he reached down to peer under the rug. "Damn..." he remarked as he looked into the darkness, "It's like someone took a burning whip to the floor."

“Charlotte,” Eldus uttered with a forcefully calm tone, “take the children and finish your suppers in the kitchen.”

“What is it?” said Isla. “Father...”

“Isla, don’t argue,” her mother said as she gathered up their plates.

“It’s okay, Isla,” said Marshus. “You know I’ll find out what this is all about later. You’ll have all the details by midnight.” He took her into the kitchen, and Charlotte followed.

When his family had long vanished from the room, Eldus’s voice gave way to anger. “Get me the steward.”

The steward appeared by the time the servants had cleared the rest of the table. “Yes, my lord?”

Eldus couldn’t take his eyes off the carpet under the table, nor the rising anger out of his voice. “What am I going to find when I lift this carpet off the floor?”

The steward was as nervous as he was confused. “Find, my lord? I can’t imagine...”

“Are there no stains on this floor, steward? Are there no traces of death staring up where my family gathers to eat?”

“Certainly not, my lord!” The steward sounded confident. “I had this floor installed not a week before your family arrived!”

It took twenty servants to lift the dining table from the carpet and set it aside. They returned to the carpet and started to roll it.

Eldus stepped forward, grabbed the carpet and swept it from its place with a single motion.

Framed with near perfection underneath the borders of the carpet was the portrait of a mass grave, painted in char.

The servants went quiet but for a solitary gasp.

Eldus gazed on with a heart as full of anger as sorrow.

The bodies were not burned into the floor with images that suggested they died peacefully: many of them were in fetal position, some of them had their hands up as though shielding their faces from what was coming, and some of the bodies were embracing one another.

Eldus turned his sad and angry eyes to the steward, but the anger softened when he saw that the steward was crying.

“My lord...” the steward said. “The foreman told me he redid every wood floor! I should have checked. I was stupid! I’m so sorry.”

Eldus put his hand on his forehead and wiped it firmly down his face, settling on his chin, thinking.

“Remove the floor,” he said. “I’ll finish eating and I’ll help you. So will my son.” He suspected that Marshus was listening somehow.

The work was mostly done by the time Eldus and his son returned; the steward had worked as fast as he could with the servants.

“It’s almost all done, my lord,” the steward said with haste. “Just a few more pieces to go out.”

Of course, the floor looked terrible, and Eldus knew he would never feel good about himself prioritizing its replacement with everything else going on. He would have to look at that ugly brick underlay for months. Oh well.

“Fine,” said Eldus. “Marshus will help carry the rest out.”

He left the dining hall and tried to put it out of his mind. He rose to his study and got straight to work on letters to some friends back in Soulhire. They were to be sent first thing in the morning. He had in mind a few child psychologists and trauma specialists whom he hoped to bring over, if only for a time.

But to truly understand the darkness that clung to the good people of Hillport, Eldus had to get inside the mind of the man responsible. He had to return to Orlin's diary and actively seek the parts of it that he had been avoiding. Again, he found nothing in the early sections of the written-in pages. Eldus's apprehension peaked as he worked his way into the final entries, entries which would detail the events leading up to Orlin's murder at the hands of Meldorath.

As he read on, Eldus searched feverishly for any reference to children.

Finally, he found something.

Eldus took a breath and braced his heart, then continued...

The children were all seated at the table around me, Orlin wrote. When they were finished with their desserts, I asked them about the things that made them scared. Each of them shared with me their fears. One answered that he was afraid of the dark, but I asked him what awaited him in the dark, and he said he didn't know.

Each child after him tried to be more specific with their fears.

Then I asked the children if they were ever afraid and didn't know why. All of the children had an answer to this question. Some of them told me of times where they felt they suddenly had to get up and leave a room for no reason. They told me of nightmares where they just felt fear, but the fear had no name and no face.

It's silly, looking back at this dinner conversation. I never had children. I never much cared for the thought of having a child, obnoxious and messy little beasts that they are. But the children at dinner tonight were in good form, and I was grateful for that.

Because I'm scared. I'm so scared. And I don't know why.

I feel like a child again.

"He's out there, isn't he?"

Eldus popped his head up from the book. "What?" He looked at his wife. "Who?"

She turned her head to him, the dim light fighting the darkness on her face. "Did you marry a fool, husband?"

The Lady Alderman knew King Wilhelm well enough, and was all-around sensible enough to suspect, if not conclude, that Meldorath was still alive. But Eldus had never confirmed this to her.

"You know what," she said, closing her eyes as she faced the ceiling. "I don't want to know."

"He has no power, my love." Eldus closed the book, staring at it in his hands. "Only his petty influences with which he can barely tickle the king's moustache." He put the book away and put out the lantern on his nightstand. "Our task is rife with greater concerns than faded legends."

I am getting the hell out of Caromentis

At long last, she had found it.

It took generations of work and intercessions of luck, but the project had found its end within her lifetime, at this exciting and frightening moment.

And so, she ran.

Sometimes she had legs to run across a great plain under a sky of colorful stars, sometimes she had fins to swim through balls of water falling through an infinite sky, and sometimes she had wings to fly among towers of magical empires, leaping from cloud to cloud across a sky with gold mountains on the horizon. Whichever realm she needed to traverse, her body found its need: such was the way in the universe that some called Caromentis.

She couldn't travel straight to her destination, or they would figure out where she was going before she got there.

She came to the realm that was ruled by a human man, a conqueror who centuries ago had carved his own little parcel of the magic realm, ruling it to this very day. In his kingdom, islands of cosmic rock swirled around a tiny planet in a blue sky. She descended upon that little green planet, where wild honeyhearts grew. Across the flowered field, she saw the palace of the ancient conqueror.

They came down after her, having chased her from one world to the next in this universe. But that palace held the key to a new universe. Thus, her legs sprung across the field of honeyhearts, her stride lashing the face of this tiny green planet, to the palace which she and her master had long studied, and for so many years sought.

She burst straight through the front doors, and they came pouring in after her.

The conqueror would not stop her, nor would he stop them. If he even noticed this desperate parade, if he even cared, he was either baffled or merely amused.

They chased her through curving halls as she struggled to recall the maps and diagrams her master had drawn for her of this palace. She could have sworn these many sketches were not always consistent with the place through which

she raced her pursuers. She avoided the unfamiliar, never slowing down to second-guess herself, and at last she found it. The chamber. The portal. A metal ring encasing a crisper, more lucid incandescence than she had ever known. She could not make out what this portal revealed, but she could feel it. Like a spell in and of itself, the physical universe called out to her, rousing something inside her, as of a whole new state of being, a powerful new reality.

Amid this flourish of emotion and thought, she only ran faster through the chamber, toward this mysterious temptation. She thrust herself into the new light and fell into a new sky. Time and space collapsed around her. She felt herself change from the inside out and from outside in, passing from the nebulous amalgamation of the world she knew to the world she had been dreaming about since she was little.

But they were still behind her.

She could hear their calls translating from magic across this membrane to the physical, the horrid sounds into which they formed. It was as though the physical had washed away the lies of their clean and harmonious presentation, revealing the ugliness that they carried across worlds.

And the ugliness was racing ever closer.

Behold, straight ahead of her, at a distance distorted by the conflict between opposing realities, a figure: a man in a robe of blue and black. A sudden roar erupted from him, a sound mightier than what came from behind her. She knew it was magic when it hit her like a force, but even that had a new taste. Majestic and terrible as it was, it did not harm her, but purged those who came after her, all of them. He then disappeared almost as quickly as they did, and she was alone again in this membrane between universes, continuing her transition.

She couldn't tell how much of her change in perception was caused by the change within herself, and how much of it was caused by the change of her environment. It was uncomfortable. It was frightening. But before panic took hold, a peace settled in. Suddenly she could feel where her body ended and the world around her began. There was a clarity to this separation such that she had never known in the world from which she had come.

Different realms of Caromentis behaved in different ways. Many of them were so different that your body would change depending on where you were. Since some of these realms were influenced by the physical world, the well-trained Beth knew what it was like to walk on two legs and see with two eyes. But having these features in Caromentis was only an illusion, devices meant to fit the fantasies of each particular realm's overlord.

Here in the physical universe—the mysterious Cosmos—having a body was more than an illusion. Beth could feel the gravity more than simply experiencing it. She could feel her limitations more than just knowing them.

And more than this, so much more than this, Beth could feel her womanhood; not just the sensation of a womb, but the awareness of what it meant, the attunement with one's uniquely formed body. This newfound identity was as dazzling as it was unnerving, inducing euphoria as much as panic.

But soon she had to get her emotions under control, for she did not know where she was exactly. It was a castle in the cosmos, and it was very much lived-in: lit torches on the walls illuminated a clean carpet at her feet.

Beth had seen places like this in the world from which she had come, but there was a gravitas to it here, an assuring consistency. It all appeared so solid, like every brick in these walls mattered, and was there for a reason, and had been placed with great care and thought, and with great effort.

Physical effort.

This was a world where change didn't just come at the snap of a finger; change had to be worked for, had to be planned and properly executed. The mind and body had to work with the world, or the world would not move.

Beth could feel this weight in everything around her. Even in the things that were not so heavy, for even they required some effort to be moved.

A human entered the hall where she was sitting, and she found herself ashamed to be seated naked on the floor. All she could say to the shocked person was,

"I'm cold."

The person, whoever he was, ran quickly out of sight, but was soon replaced with a handful of women who immediately tended to her. They bathed her with soothing hot water, the sensation of which she had never felt so deeply in her skin. They dressed her in fine clothes, then left her in a warm but empty corridor.

There was a feeling of security that came from her environment, but also a feeling of freedom. She wondered if it was the physical world and her newly realized physical form that drew this confident ambition, or if there was something particular about the castle.

She moved her feet and for the first time in this new universe began to explore it by her own volition.

She dragged her hand against the rough stone as she proceeded through the dark halls. Such an unyielding material, so coldly unapologetic.

She entered a great room with a wall of high windows, which revealed a black

sky with countless stars shining down on an ocean, making its small waves twinkle in the dark. But dark as the night was, this room was still darker than it should have been. Based upon all of Beth's studies of the forbidden knowledge of 'physics,' the starlight coming in from those windows, while not intense, should have made this room brighter than it was.

Perhaps she had gone wrong somewhere in her studies.

Oh, but what a magnificent sky that was! So dominant and so real!

In this dark room, two men were having a loud argument. One of the men was small, moving quickly on his feet and gesticulating with the agility of some swift, tentacled beast of darker realms. He wore a black turtleneck that seemed to separate his head from the rest of his body in the powerful shadows that enveloped him.

"The eiodi is a charlatan who sells himself almost as well as he sells his childish fantasies of God and virtue!" He shouted. "The fact that you even want to have this conversation discredits you to your thick bones!"

The man he argued with was monstrous, five times his mass at least. His face and body were stern and his voice was deeper and every bit as loud with half the effort. "If you were half the assassin your masters were, we wouldn't *need* to have this conversation!"

"Enough," came the voice of a third, unseen man. It was a voice so subdued that it was a wonder the two impassioned men had heard it. But they had, and were immediately quiet. They stood as still as rocks, glaring bitterly at one another.

Presently, the smaller man noticed Beth standing there and said, "It seems you have a visitor, my lord."

The calm, unseen man replied, "I know."

The smaller man took another look at Beth. It was a pensive and penetrative look that almost seemed threatening, but there was also a sense of restraint about him, and of intelligence. He soon broke this stare and walked past her, leaving the room. The bigger man followed just as quietly.

The room was then so still that Beth felt like she was the only one left in it, though she knew that she was not.

She stepped further inside, and her eyes adjusted to the dark.

On the far side of the room, facing the tall windows, was an armchair. Seated in the chair, with arms as still as death on the armrests, was a man in a heavy robe. The robe was blue, with little black triangles pointing in different directions. His face was draped with an equally heavy hood. She knew right

away that this was the man who saved her.

She approached him and asked, "Are you the lord of this castle?"

"Such as it is," said the man in the chair.

She strained to discover any part of his face without getting too close. All she could make out from ten feet away was a strong chin. She focused on it as she continued to converse with him. "Why are you in shadow, my lord?"

The chin was almost motionless. "I saw no need to light the lantern."

"Forgive me, my lord." Beth smiled as she took another look about the room. "I forgot that shadows have their own reasons to exist in this world. In my world, shadows are only called upon when there is a reason."

His head seemed to turn very slightly, very slowly toward her. "What kind of reason?"

She looked back at him. "When someone needs to hide, perhaps... or perhaps when someone is ashamed."

The man's hooded head turned slightly and slowly back toward the tall windows. "It must be nice to dwell in a world where everything has a reason."

"In a way." Beth followed his attention to the windows, over the ocean and into the night. There were ships out there on that ocean. A lot of them. "There is a peace to your universe, my lord, one which you may not have realized. In my universe, you can lose control of your mind, and the world goes out of control around you. Here, there are walls to hold on to when your own walls are spinning."

Through the darkness, Beth could feel the focus of attention this man was giving to her. He wasn't looking at her, but she could feel that he was listening with heavy interest to her every word.

Suddenly he asked her, "How is it that you have come to find yourself inside my home?"

She turned to him. "I did not target your home, if that's what you're asking."

His voice softened. "I did not mean to sound accusatory. I apologize."

Beth felt her face soften. She felt badly for regarding her benefactor's question with such cynicism. "It is I who should be forgiven, lord. I was rude when you were kind."

"You've given me nothing to forgive," the dark man said. "You find yourself in a strange place. It is only natural to fear the worst. But you are in my home, as it just so happens to be. I was only curious to know why."

Beth paused as she thought of where to begin, then decided that the most straightforward of explanations might be best. "I am not from your world, my

lord."

"My world?" There was a fakeness to the lord's confusion. "I never realized I had a particular one."

"There is a world that exists alongside this one, my lord. A magic world. Some of your kind I believe have taken to calling it Caromentis, or The Flesh of the Mind."

Once more, the lord's head turned slowly toward her.

Although she could not see this man's eyes, she could somehow feel them boring into her, pressing her for answers. Along with a mild panic, she felt an obligation to explain as much as she could in as short a time as possible.

"My master spent many years studying the physical world, my lord, and his master before him," she said, stammering a little. "But the gateways that form between our worlds are unstable. And we weren't sure if our bodies could exist in the alternate world. At first, I thought a body had to be constructed. Then my master discovered that the body exists already, just as the soul exists in the body. It just has to be realized."

"Calm down, child." There was the smallest degree of levity in the shadowy lord's voice. "What I asked is why it was in my house that you appeared."

She bowed her head. "Forgive me, my lord, I do not know. I came to a gateway through which there was sufficient room to enter... It was consistent and stable... I believe there is one or more powerful sources of magic in this part of your world: perhaps a person, perhaps an object. One of a combination of these sources might have formed some bond with my world."

With his head still trained in her direction, the lord of the castle asked her, "Do you know the way back?"

"I do not, my lord. But respectfully, it is not my wish to go back. I would like to remain in this world to explore and study it."

His tone fell. "That's going to be a problem, not that I myself would ever hinder such pursuits." His head turned back to its original place, staring through the windows at the sea. "Do you see those ships out there?"

"I do, my lord."

"There are thirty-two of them surrounding this island. To keep me and everything else inside this house exactly where we are."

Beth had assumed the ships were his and that this might have been some lord of the sea. But now even his lordship of this castle no longer seemed so enviable.

"Are you a prisoner, my lord?"

The lord was silent.

She asked, "May I ask what happened that begot this sentence?"

It was barely audible, and Beth wasn't wholly sure if she had even heard it, but it sounded like the lord gave a small sigh, though his head never moved.

He kept staring at the ships as he asked, "Is that your way of deciding if you should fear me?"

"I've already made that decision, my lord."

There was silence for a long time. Beth strained to pick up any sound, from goings-on about the home to the waves outside. She heard nothing.

Finally, as calm as ever, the lord said, "I was betrayed by a friend. He feared me, and so entrapped me. He condemned me to this island, and my name to black fables."

Beth was immediately sympathetic, although she realized that she was biased in his favor. "I am very sorry, my lord."

Silence again.

This time, she did not let the silence last long. She did not want him to think that she was put off by his condemnation. "May I have your name, my lord?"

He turned his face to her. This time, perhaps because her eyes had had more time to adjust, she could make out the lower portion of his face, the faint outline of his jaw. "Yes, you may know my name..." The movement of his lips was visible now, albeit barely. "...when it is no longer tarnished by my enemies."

I am Marshus Alderman

The Dire Vine Jungle. Every Voulhirian knew about the Dire Vine Jungle. Every Voulhirian knew to stay away from it. Even the Mianoran patrols refused to draw close to its high canopy. But how it got to be so terrifying, when the country around it was so friendly, was entrusted almost exclusively to fable.

The horror of the Dire Vine Jungle, and the tragedy of the village it used to be, was a centuries-old tale readily available to any Voulhirian seeking the amusement of anxiety. But Eldus's son, Marshus, had studied the event with special care and, of late, with unamused anxiety. It was a lesson to Voulhirians how powerful magic could be when controlled by disciplined hands. Marshus knew this lesson better than most, as he understood discipline better than his father would ever credit him. If it really was, as the story went, that the Wizard Kings of House Modius were the culprits, that it was they whose magic unleashed the Dire Vine upon that valley five hundred years ago, then the god-like powers that Meldorath was fabled to possess was indeed a possibility.

The things Marshus had witnessed had not caused harm to his family or to the people of Hillport, but such was the same at the start of the story of the Dire Vine Jungle.

The village in that valley, built by mages who had scorned the ways of House Modius, realized what was happening to them only when the roots of the beast below rose to take them. But the roots, like so many wrathful mages, slipped in and out with subtlety, tormenting the village as individuals before taking them as a whole.

Marshus had stood several times on the docks of Hillport watching his father sail for that island, the Isle of Saint Lorcia. Lord Eldus's forced optimism and awkward cheer served as a reliable prelude to his plan on "*inspecting the reserves.*" With a wry smile and evasion of eye contact, he would add, "*Those ships might stop an invasion one day, son.*" And then, with even more patronizing mirth, "*Who knows if the Emperor of Lullabies will come for us?*"

Yeah. Maybe.

Or maybe there were bigger problems at home, and maybe dad was all-too aware of that.

Marshus came to the docks the morning after his family discovered that unpleasant imagery burned under the dining table. His father seemed intent on not *inspecting the reserves* today, yet here Marshus was, intent on staring across the water, watching the fishing boats deliver food and supplies to the fort on yonder island. He stepped onto the beach and walked along the shore as the boats made their way over the ridges of the sea toward that scarcely visible bump on the horizon.

When he was gone from the sight of every curious small-town eye, the young noble stepped to the furthest reach of the creeping waves. He stretched out his hand and a solid mass emerged from behind the breaks. Marshus kept his hand toward it, and it came toward him: a block of ice that expanded into the shape of a rowboat. It reached the sand and Marshus stepped in, sat on the cold bench inside. The boat moved, advancing behind those supply boats. But those boats were headed toward the fortress on the south side of the island; Marshus pointed his icy boat toward the castle on the north side.

The air changed, as it often does over sea. The breeze made the air cool, and the ever-rising mist from the heat of a dying summer made the sunlight just a little harder to reach the water.

His boat approached the armada—the impenetrable shield about which his father was so proud, and in which he was so confident.

He held up his hand and built a clear dome of ice to cover the boat, then brought the boat down under the surface. While nervous about his destination, he was excited about the voyage, imagining all of the fish he might see underwater, perhaps an undiscovered colony of lobster for his father's town.

Alas, no lobster. No fish. No life.

Only darkness.

Marshus had come dangerously close to the surface just to see where he was. Thankfully, the ships did not see him, and did not blow him out of the water with their cannons and their magecraft.

He came to the shore at the base of the hill upon which that northern castle stood. He looked around for Voulhirian naval officers, but found none. Surely, even Meldorath had guards—there were plenty of his followers who had gone with him to wherever it was they had gone to “execute” him.

Marshus lit a weak flame in his hand and melted the dome away. He stepped

out and pushed the boat back into the sea. He looked up at the castle and the path that ran up the hill toward it. He took to the bushes and unkept shrubbery, which ran all the way up to the walls of the castle, licking the stones like green waves. Marshus did not feel direct sunlight again before he was climbing through a broken window.

The room in which he found himself was unremarkable. Furniture storage, it seemed, with matching weight in dust. But even heavier than that was the silence.

Marshus cleared his throat just to hear some noise. He turned to the window through which he had just climbed, looked at the sun coming through the brush, and the obscured view of that unbroken chain of ships that were in barricade formation *just because*.

He looked ahead to the door among all the stacked furniture. There were cobwebs on the knob. There was enough light coming in from behind that he could step ahead and approach it. But when he opened it, the light reached no further. He might as well have been staring at a black wall.

“It can’t be completely abandoned...” Marshus muttered to himself.

It would have made no sense. The fort on the other side of the island was new, thrown up only a month ago for the armada. Why would they build that when they already had this?

It could have been a matter of structural integrity. His father, ever the stickler, might have discovered something in the foundation he did not like.

Then again, Meldorath was rumored by Voulhirian high society to be a trickster, that his great feats were illusions cleverly wrought by what was actually lesser magic.

That was, some have said, why he was experimenting on people—he desperately sought the powers he only pretended to possess. Such could have been proven that very day, and Marshus could return home and offer genuine assurance to his frightened sister.

Marshus brought a flickering flame to his hand. He used his Caromentian authority over temperature to bring a ball of fog around the flame, refracting the light for amplification as he stepped through the doorway into a corridor.

A blue carpet ran along the floor. There was no dust, but these halls were sealed from any dirt that might have blown in from outside. The absence of sound was as intense in here as it was in the room of neglected furniture.

“Maybe it really is empty...” Marshus uttered.

As much as he wanted to leave with this justifiable conclusion, Marshus

walked the corridor, each step endowing him with the anxiety of being wrong, but also with the assurance that, so far, he was right.

The uncomfortable silence faded from the atmosphere, but that gave Marshus no comfort. And when he saw the outline of a person standing at the edge of his light, his heart fell.

“Who are you?” he demanded.

“I’m sorry,” a feminine voice replied as the likeness of a young woman stepped into the light. Very young, around his sister’s age. She asked, “Am I not supposed to be here?”

Marshus remained wary, “How did you get here?”

“I...” the girl pondered. “I was running away, trying to escape. I fell. I was brought here.”

“You were captured?” Marshus asked. “Where are you from?”

“You call it Caromentis,” the girl replied. “The Magic World. I believe it was your lord who saved me.”

“My lord? Lord Eldus?”

“Is that the man who rules this castle?”

“Are there others here in the castle?”

The girl looked at him curiously. “Why would you ask me that? Is this a test?”

“A test...” Marshus echoed, then looked around. “Who is this girl, Meldorath?” he called out. “Did you capture her, or did you make her?”

“Please,” said the girl, “tell me what you know. Maybe we can help each other.”

Marshus glared at the girl. “It’s you. Meldorath. Cowering behind the flesh of a child.”

“That’ll do, lad,” came a voice from behind. “What are you doing here?”

Marshus turned to find a broad man in a weathered purple robe. A thick black beard fell from under his wide hood.

Marshus asked him, “Who are you?”

The man sounded patient, but unyielding. “Who I am is for Captain Barcaedi to know, and I was not instructed to welcome guests this morning.”

“Captain Barcaedi?” said Marshus. “You’re with the navy?”

“This is naval property, lad. I think you know that already. Now, who are you?”

“I’m...” Marshus hesitated. “I’m from Hillport. I heard rumors about the island. I wanted to bring my people comfort.”

“Oh, aye?” said the officer. “Yet you hardly sound like a southerner. And to

come to this island undetected would have taken some aptitude in magic, and I know of no magic academies in Hillport. For your aptitude in magic, lad, I congratulate you. For your aptitude in the art of the lie, I do not.”

Marshus frowned. “Very well, mage. I am a personal secretary to Lord Eldus Alderman. He... did not send me, I am ashamed to say. I came out of personal fear.”

The officer nodded, and Marshus could see concern in his eyes. “I’m guessing then that there’d be a heap of bother for you if your lord found out you came here, *mage-secretary*?”

“Yes, there would.”

“Aye, well, you still shouldn’t have come here, but you’re brave to have dared, if you feared that Meldorath might dwell here. I’ll tell you now that he does dwell here. In a way.”

“In a way?” said Marshus.

The officer looked around at the darkness of the hallway. “Meldorath put his hand on a lot of things. After he was executed, these curses he placed all started waking up like roaches in the light. They seem harmless now. Illusions, little torments here and there. But we don’t know if it might get worse. That’s why we’re here, to unravel the mystery of the magic he left behind, and make sure it doesn’t do any more harm than the man already did.”

“I’ve seen some of these things,” said Marshus, “at Castle Hillport.”

“Rest assured, lad, your lord has been reporting them in every detail. We are everywhere. Watching. Have faith in us, young mage. We won’t stop until what stands in our way has been destroyed.”

“Thank you, officer.” Marshus turned around to find what he already suspected: the mysterious young girl he had encountered was gone, another of Meldorath’s posthumous tricks.

We are Riva

In the northwest corner of Voulhire lay the Graylands. It was down through the Cinderhold Mountains that its all-encompassing ashes came, bringing dry lightning in black clouds from the volcanic north. These dry storms spread throughout the northwestern territory, all the way down to the Everbane River and the Stillborn Chalice.

While the storms always passed eventually, the ashes lingered in the sky, turning it from pale blue to navy, like the western waters at dusk. The ashes even broke apart the rain clouds, clinging to the moisture and bringing it down in black rain. It was nigh on impossible to cultivate the ashen hardpan of these lands, nitrogenous though they were.

Which was why the city of Odaiamar was such an oddity.

Deep in these dark and featureless plains was a tall skyline. Buildings made of metal and gray stones broke into the sparse clouds, into the navy sky.

Odaiamar did not welcome visitors; it ran independently and offered nothing of appeal to the wandering tourist nor to the religious pilgrim. The census office and tax collectors of Soulhire did not visit here either. Instead, Odaiamar sent representatives to the capital to conduct these matters. They negotiated to great effect for tax breaks, as Odaiamar was in such a challenging position. And since the city operated on the barter system, all they were expected to offer the kingdom was product. And since they were so far away, what little they could transport was highly limited.

Indeed, very little was expected from Odaiamar. In fact, it was a wonder that anybody could survive in those high, ancient towers.

From miles overhead, the city looked like an iris of dark gray within gray. Set within that iris was not a black hole, but a green oasis. And from that oasis came the vast riches of Voulhire's poorest city.

What the Voulhirian government did not know was that, while the northern mountains sent clouds of hostile ash that sucked the moisture out of everything,

they also sent water. It came through caverns thousands of feet underground, caverns which branched throughout the dry but highly fertile Graylands.

Even Odaiamar only recently discovered this natural wonder. Practically overnight, they went from an almost abandoned ancient city, collecting tainted rainwater from bowls on the rooftops, to a prosperous city as rich on the inside as it was decrepit on the outside.

But even those native to Odaiamar could not take credit for their own success.

Even their sovereign lord was just a mask to show to the king.

For underneath this dark and quiet city was a man who liked to dance, and an army that stepped to his beat.

In a great chamber deep underground where the water flowed, the savior of Odaiamar dashed his feet against a wide, circular stage.

The chamber was lit red by fire treated with lithium salts. The stone floor surrounding the stage was invisible for the many thousands of people who danced to the glory of their host. Their tribute was wild and loud and the assembly was hot and sweaty in their clothes and armor. But they were grateful to be a part of it.

Saint Idus, the king of days gone by, was indeed a saintly man. He was every bit deserving of the love and reverence his people gave him across the millennia. He was a warrior and a unifier. He was everything that gave power to the word “king.”

But he was not perfect.

Of course, those were different winds blowing in Idus's day, when there were such violent rifts among varying ideologies. Idus unified them, but not all of them. Some held on to their own ways of life, refusing to give in to the growing collective that would soon become the Voulhirian kingdom.

And so they became the enemy.

Many of these dissenters were persecuted or outcast. Idus tried to stop this, or so the story goes, but he didn't try hard enough. When it came down to just a few societies who refused to bow to Idus, there came a swift and terrible cull, right down to the infant children of those who refused to accept his new Voulhire.

But just as the reign of Idus was not perfect, neither was he a perfect killer. There were plenty of those whom he and his ilk had failed to silence. And from those survivors came a unifying vow to destroy both Idus and the kingdom he had made.

Now that vow lived on in the Riva Rohavi. And while they had as yet failed to destroy Voulhire, they reigned in the nightmares of farmers and kings across the

nation's history, renowned troublemakers from the moment Idus fashioned his crown of ivory. They came and went over the millennia, but they were always somewhere, in caves, in mountains, in forests, in sleeper cells throughout the nation, waiting for that next opportunity.

In recent decades, Riva had been in decline as the quality of Voulhire's economy and military burst to historical levels. There were still their gangsters and troublemakers, raids and unpredictable acts of terrorism, but the Rohavi had lost its unity and forgotten its mission.

Then one day, a new host came to power, and gathered the scattered fragments of a soon-to-be bygone union. He brought them into the Graylands, this desert of ash, where Mianora and the king's armies would never come to look.

But this new host had studied these lands, and realized their potential.

And so it was that Odaiamar came to tap into the waters beneath their very feet. At the command of the Rohavian host, they demolished the ancient buildings that stood in the center of the city, and cultivated the rich soils in secret. And in secret, the host gathered more supporters and brought them to Odaiamar.

Different hosts throughout Riva's history had wielded the power of these organized anarchists with different motives. Some hosts simply enjoyed their power, others had led the Rohavi to historical acts of terror, others still have adjusted or expanded the specifics of Riva's ideologies. Only one—the legendary Baenar Raspaedeus, in the waning years of the Idus Dynasty—had ever come close to overthrowing the kingdom of Voulhire.

Today, the host was Vidius Crodai. And he had brought something fresh to Riva.

He brought them dance.

Vidius Crodai was in his fifties, but could out dance the spryest of warriors. And these warriors were spry.

Music blared in the acoustically designed chamber. Nine drummers played in partnership with their own echo to sound like a band of hundreds. The army danced with choreography that highlighted their every joint, exploiting the depth of energy in this youthful batch of warriors.

The message of the Riva Rohavi was as much about personal liberation from a demanding world as it was from Voulhire itself. The art of the dance seemed as fine an expression as any to illustrate this message among themselves.

But it wouldn't stop there. Soon enough, Voulhire and all of Idus's worshippers were going to witness the new Riva.

Soon.

Only recently, and upon low-profile targets, had the Riva Rohavi slowly been emerging from their cocoon. Very soon, their legends would return, this time more frightening than in all of their history. Perhaps they would find the same success as under the evening star of the Idus dynasty, and perhaps not. But they would march on, reinvented in this frightening baptism.

On that stage, the host of the Riva Rohavi continued to dance, and his followers danced with him.

Joining him on stage came a slow-dancing fat man.

"Warriors of Riva!" Host Vidius announced without breaking stride. "Your underhost!"

The dancing warriors cheered for their underhost, Bailar Marmodik, who danced his best with limited mobility.

But the dancing army found no humor in this. They found it inspiring. The infamous feathers on their clothes and armor fluttered in all directions as they gave praise to their leaders.

The feathers associated with Riva since the beginning came from the pheasant. And almost since the beginning, no good citizen of Voulhire could be found wearing such feathers.

Pheasants were killed quite readily throughout Voulhire. Sometimes they were tortured first. Sometimes their ruined bodies could be found on display. Some communities made games out of it.

There had been many attempts to end this inhumane treatment of the innocent bird, and the revilement of their beautiful feathers, but such attempts could not overcome the fear and hate that the feathers instilled.

And that was precisely the way the Riva Rohavi preferred it.

Vidius Crodai looked into the faces of his army as he danced for them, rotating gradually so that they could all see him, and he could see all of them. The passion, the raw passion coming into perfect refinement.

Indeed, these burgeoning daisies were almost in full bloom.

But the presence of his corpulent underhost on stage could only mean that the host's attention was required elsewhere. Very well.

Vidius gradually made his way offstage as a senior shaman—a woman of exceptional skill—arrived to take his place in leadership of the dance.

"You know how very much it pains me to disrupt you in your moment, my host," the underhost reveled in the wake of his superior. "But I thought you would want to know of this right away."

"There is not a lot I do not know," said Vidius Crodai. "Any new knowledge should come as a welcome surprise."

"The far-watcher awaits you in your office, my host."

The network of tunnels and chambers deep beneath Odaiamar was ever-expanding. It had taken a year for Riva to reach the water, all the while scouring desperately to provide for themselves. It was a hard year. But once the water was found, Vidius was sure to keep the celebration short—for the work was only just beginning. There needed to be accommodations down here for a military society, while civilians and retired soldiers provided food from up above.

Someday soon, this network would expand into a city of its own, and Riva would beget new cities across the Graylands. On the day when Voulhire should discover their secret, Riva will have long become a nation of its own.

But in the meantime, unfinished floors and dead-end corridors served as constant reminders of how much time and effort yet remained.

The office of Vidius Crodai was as unfinished as Odaiamar. But this was largely for political reasons. A completed, luxurious office would not serve him just yet. Besides, when it came to luxuries, Vidius had a fondness for the basic.

Sitting in a chair before the obsidian desk was the far-watcher, part of whose job it was to receive all messages from Riva's scouts. He stood and bowed.

"My host," said the far-watcher. "I come with news from the south."

"The south, of all places?" Vidius Crodai was excitedly intrigued. "Whatever could be going on down there?"

The far-watcher produced a rolled-up sheet of paper. "Our contacts were given a tip on a rising power on the southern coast. The town of Hillport, to be precise. It hasn't achieved enough to enjoy the army's direct attention, but analysts down there agree it is poised to become an economic power—perhaps as much as Virko, but with food instead of artisan goods."

"How interesting." Vidius accepted, opened, and scanned the parchment. "Whom do we have near Hillport to have made such an insightful observation?"

"The message was anonymous, my host," the far-watcher replied. "But whoever it was, they obviously knew whom to contact on our end. They must be connected to us in some way. Unless Mianora has devised some trap."

"Midius Maidu?" Vidius Crodai laughed joyfully. "I think not."

The mild-mannered and most professional far-watcher flashed a look of nervousness and swallowed hard. "Not to blaspheme, my host, but I was always taught not to underestimate the knights of Mianora."

"Oh, I would never! We've all seen what they can do." Vidius rolled up the

paper and dropped it onto his desk. "But neither would Midius ever commit the resources to giving us the attention we require. Then he would risk losing the bulk of his little army, and there goes his power play with King Willie. The chancellor just likes to be in the know when the people around him are not."

The far-watcher looked hopeful. "Then could this be the opportunity we've been searching for, my host?"

Well, 'waiting for' was probably the better phrase.

But Riva's freshest batch of impassioned and violent youth was only beginning to grasp the purpose behind their training. Focus. Patience. Restraint. That was the only way to properly wield the dangerous weapon of hate.

Still, hatred needed to be fed. And these violent children needed to prove to themselves what they were capable of.

Vidius stepped toward a shelf, which was carved into the stone wall. He pulled out a five-year-old almanac on Voulhire. He thumbed through it to a page where the binding had come slightly loose.

"I've studied the southern coast of our fair land," he said, looking over the next few pages. "It's always been a wonder to me that the potential down there had not, in recent memory, been taken advantage of. Everyone's busy, I suppose. And that region is so... rugged." He snapped the book closed. "But if someone has finally taken the initiative to set them on the path, this could very well break our beloved kingdom through a whole other level of their 'golden age.' And just as my plans were coming into execution. Well, we can't have that at all." He turned to the far-watcher. "Send an agent to Hillport. Verify these facts about this lucky little town."

"With haste, my host."

Vidius smiled. "Maido would never begrudge us a village full of hicks. Not Maido."

"It almost seems like providence, does it not?" said the underhost. "It wasn't half-a-year ago that Hillport and the south were under the protection of General Meldorath."

"Isn't it delicious how Voulhire murders its darlings?" said Vidius with an acute satisfaction for the taste of his own words.

In regards to the southern coast, dealing with the talented Vilendrian of Yamon Soul was costly enough. But Meldorath, the way he trained and governed his soldiers; his ability to see talent in people was equivalent to every resource of Yamon Soul combined. And that was to say nothing of his abilities as a mage, which made him a demigod in his own right.

And Vidius couldn't help but feel that, even then, Meldorath was holding back. But indeed, by fortune almost great enough to found a new religion, General Meldorath was now retired. And banished. And maybe dead.

Maybe.

If not, he probably didn't like Voulhire very much anymore...

* * *

While a raucous party stirred in the depths of the underground network, agents of the Mianoran order were gathering in a lobby closer to the surface.

These men and women were not adorned in the heavy white armor most commonly associated with the Mianoran Knights. Instead, they wore black leather armor, carrying shortswords in rubber sheaths affixed to their thighs, and daggers strapped upside-down to their chests for easy drawing.

Among these covert agents of the Mianoran order were two well-trained telemages, who could transmit thoughts up to a hundred miles away.

Naturally, one hundred miles from this operation, other telemages were waiting to receive these messages. A long distance away from them, another team. That team relayed the message to Soulhire, where an old man sat in a chair high in Cathidien, receiving these messages, concentrating on them as they filled his mind. Like the others who could speak in that silent, magical voice, this old man sported a purple triangle on his forehead, a tradition dating back to the Age of the Wizard Kings. He vocalized these clandestine messages to Chancellor Midius Maidu, who stood beside him. And through this old mage, Chancellor Maidu spoke back across the hundreds of miles between Soulhire and Odaiamar.

Maidu had long suspected the ill-intentions of Odaiamar, the city that reigned outside the shadow of Cathidien, whose population only continued to grow as Riva continued to decline. Indeed, these people built their own little world under the dark sky of those ash-covered lands. Were it not for their poverty, it would have been all too obvious. And behold, Odaiamar wasn't so impoverished after all.

As the agents reconvened in a corridor close to where the mass of Riva terrorists were dancing, they quietly discussed with one another the intel they had gathered, and the telemages relayed the information down the chain back to

Soulhire.

The Riva Rohavi had settled here in Odaiamar five years ago, shortly after coming under a new host, Vidius Crodai, a distant relative of the third great dynasty. There were some reports that indicated the people of Odaiamar might have been reluctant toward Riva at the onset of this enterprise. But if that were true, outlooks changed fast, and now the whole city seemed secretly unified under the auspices of Crodai.

The agents of Mianora truncated the finer details of this report for the time being. There was something far more dire that the chancellor needed to know immediately.

A letter was in discussion by the top leaders of Riva. This letter had come to them from a region on the southern coast. It talked about a town called Hillport, and how the king had reason to believe the place had massive economic potential, and had sent an ambitious and savvy lord to see it through.

The letter also mentioned that Hillport had no significant military presence, as it was not deemed a target for enemy attack.

Through the telemages, who were concentrating in the dark with closed eyes, the words of Midius Maida came back in a whisper: "What interest in the south had sent this letter to the Riva Rohavi?"

"We do not know, my lord," the ranking agent answered. "The letter was unsigned. It was also not addressed to anyone, and not written in a language that explicitly suggested any criminal act. For all we know, the letter was never even meant for Riva."

Maida's response: "Your report is sufficient. Return home."

As the agents approached the black doors that would bring them closer to the surface, the doors burst open, and a large man with a massive sledgehammer walked through. All of the agents recognized him.

"I see you there, Midius Maida," said the dirty, scruffy monster of a man. "I hear you sniffing in the air, taking in the secrets buried under all this ash and dark."

In their minds, the telemages screamed through the airwaves. "My lord, Riva has Bawler. Bawler of the Graylands has joined the Riva Rohavi!"

"It's too late for you here, Bawler," said one of the agents, not even daring to draw his blade. "Our report has already reached Soulhire. Evacuate your people and let us go!"

The man called Bawler smiled down on the agents of Mianora. "But your mission is accomplished. A knight shouldn't cling so greedily to his life. A

knight should face death with dignity when his usefulness reaches its end."

Six Mianoran agents descended on him at once. But the big man disappeared, and in a blink was somewhere close by.

"He's a mage!" one of the agents cried in panic.

"A mage?" Bawler faced the panicking agent. "Don't you know what I am? Even a mage is subservient to physics."

Bawler wound his hammer for a swing, even though there was no one within reach of his hammer. As the hammer fell, he disappeared and reappeared in front of the panicking agent, who never even saw the hammer coming.

The giant of a man repeated this process several times with faster, shorter swings as the agents stormed for the doors.

He stood with his hammer over his shoulder as the last agent alive pulled desperately at the door, crying like a child. The door refused to open.

"Here, let me help you." Bawler came and pulled the door open.

The agent slipped through the doors, but hadn't cleared the way before the door slammed shut, crushing him in two.

Bawler shone a wide smile through his scruffy, dirty face. "Don't let the door hit you on the way out."

Midius Maida

Halfway to the top of Cathidien was still high enough to see almost every rooftop in Soulhire.

In the particularly tall corridors that ran along Cathidien's outer wall at this altitude, the wall opened up, replaced with widely spaced columns. The large corridor began to resemble a great terrace, wide open to the city and the lands beyond. The black marble under his feet was so shiny that the clouds, lit to a gentle beige by the evening sun, cast a crisp reflection across the floor. The edges of the clouds were sharp under his high-heeled boots as they clapped their way along this lovely hall.

So.

Riva had Bawler now.

Riva despised magic because magic gave power to an elite few. But they obviously didn't understand what Bawler of the Graylands was. They obviously did not realize that he too, while not of magic, represented an elite few, even fewer among humans than mages. A mage took command of another world; men like Bawler took command of this world.

Who knew how many more of these people the Riva Rohavi had recruited?

At any rate, it wasn't conclusive if they were going to attack Hillport. It was only a suggestion. For Mianora to act now, it would reveal its possession of knowledge that the king would demand and misuse. And for what? A few stolen sheep? Even if Riva was becoming a little stronger, they were no match for an army of ten thousand Mianoran knights. So let them return to their juvenile torments; should they decide to take up their banner and fight like men, the country would be more than ready.

Maido had planned his stroll well—for he had intended to intercept the young Prince Darius, Wilhelm's only son, jogging around this very hall. And like clockwork, there he was, clad in his tight workout clothes, showing every fleshy curve.

Everybody loved King Wilhelm. Why shouldn't they have? He gave them things. Within weeks of his coronation, some twenty-five years ago, the common man was made aware of the enormous vaults long kept secret in Cathidien. These vaults were emptied of their immeasurable treasures to invest in businesses both large and small across the kingdom. A great deal of industrial Virko's success was credited to this generosity.

Maido was only a boy in those days, when Mianora was headed by his father, Calum Maido, who went right along with every wish the king decreed.

So, of course Wilhelm was a popular king, how could he not be? He knew how to play the game, and all the Council was ready to accept his son as heir to the throne.

"My prince!" Maido called to the passing young man.

Prince Darius was a handsome youth. He didn't have the king's hair, but he had the king's eyes. His black hair was buzzed with a perfect edge all around. His button nose contrasted with the seriousness he tried to cultivate. He stopped and looked at the chancellor with suspicion and disdain.

"What do you want?"

Darius Arcolo was not a popular prince. He was a chauvinistic philanderer; he was a lazy, arrogant nuisance, nonchalant about almost everything around him. And regarding all of it, the prince was as unsubtle as he was unapologetic. Prostitutes had famously reported to journalists about his embarrassing sexual habits. One of Darius's popular nicknames was 'tongue-tail.'

Naturally, Darius cared too little about his image to let such things get him down. Ironically, he found some public redemption for this. For all of his unpalatable habits, the man was not insecure. And the kingdom knew it.

But Chancellor Maido never demanded nor appreciated redemption for such things. In fact, he would normally find it all amusing. He would normally want to endear himself to such a man and scandalize the whole world right alongside him.

The problem was the young man's father. While the king certainly had his sentimental side, he was more than capable of shelving it in favor of pragmatism.

And it had recently begun to dawn on Maido that perhaps—God forbid it, but perhaps—King Wilhelm did not want his son to take the throne.

But Wilhelm was far too smart to ever let Maido know that.

"I've been meaning to speak with you," the chancellor stepped slowly toward the young prince. "The Council will need to inspect and interview you if we are

to consider naming you heir to the crown."

Darius squinted at the councilor. "You've all known me since I was born."

"And a fine young man you've grown into!" Maido smiled and clapped his hands together in an echoing smack. "And wise enough, I'm sure, to understand the traditions of your kingdom."

"Yeah," Darius smiled back, but not with affection nor the pretense of affection. "Or you just can't get over your daddy issues, so you keep on playing games with mine."

It was almost tragically impressive how not stupid this moron often seemed.

And sometimes, every now and then, Maido almost felt that Darius was perhaps responsive to his suggestions of mischief.

So Maido changed the subject for the moment. "Two weeks ago, I spotted a beautiful maid. She was tending to the gardeners of Sundergrove. She was betrothed to a squire of the king's guard, the son of a judge." He walked past the prince, almost brushing against him, and stepped to the railing. He breathed the fresh air as he absorbed the view of the city beneath him. "I wrote a whole story for them in my mind. A story filled with sex and drama and betrayal, based on my studies of these two and their friends. And their families. I actually wrote a story based on how all of them would react under certain circumstances. I sat at my desk one night and wrote it all on paper. And then... I made it happen." He turned from the view and looked at the prince, leaning back against the railing. "I am a fantastic writer, Darius. I could have been a wonderful playwright were I not so preoccupied with my duties here." He stepped away from the railing, closer to Darius. "But you and I can write plays together. And then we can make them happen. Performers just for us, in stories that you and I alone will fully understand."

That trace of a smile on Darius's mouth just then—it reminded Maido that the prince was capable of appreciating subtlety. He was capable of a lot if given motivation.

Darius loved Maido's stories. He had since he was sixteen. But he would never give Maido the satisfaction of knowing it. He was a lot like his father in that way. The two must have been masters in foreplay.

He asked the prince with a quiet, intimate smile. "Do you want to be king?"

The prince shrugged. "Who doesn't?"

"You're not answering my question."

Darius scoffed. "Bitch." Then he continued his jog, quickly putting the chancellor behind him.

The second before the young prince was out of sight, Maida sensed the presence of another, perhaps one who had listened to the entirety of their chat.

Maido turned and behold, there stood the glorious king next to a retired suit of lactic armor.

The chancellor said, "Charming boy, that son of yours."

The king replied, "I think you just bring out the best in people."

"You used to tell my father the same thing," said Maida. "But then, there wasn't as much sarcasm in your voice."

"I'm sorry." The king smiled as he stepped away from the armor and into the center of the hall. "Maybe I'm becoming curmudgeonly a little earlier than I would have hoped."

"It's the price you pay for being so politically perfect," said Maida. "When you become so good at convincing the public that you only want what's best for them, you convince yourself as well. But the truth always surfaces. You grow old and realize you never got what you truly wanted. Perhaps my father's early passing was a blessing, that he should have died before his lies rotted his happiness."

The smiling king raised his brows. "Would you speak ill of your father in the gallery that was dedicated to him?"

"Yes..." Maida looked around the lavishly decorated corridor. "A hallway." His eyes landed on the king. "And what will you dedicate to me when I'm gone from this world?"

The king gave a lighthearted laugh. "I'm fifty years old, Maida. I should hope not to be around in time for such a decision."

Maido shook his finger at him with a smile lending play to a baleful snarl. "You stalk me at your own peril, Your Majesty." Then he walked away in the general direction of the prince's departure.

Riva

They started early in the evening.

There were many horses and cargo carriages in Odaïamar's possession. Once used to freight goods to and from Soulhire in lieu of taxes, they languished in stables and warehouses. But when the sun went down, Vidius Crodai's hand went up, and the fleet of burden was roused once again, bound for a different destination.

Mianoran patrols were never an issue in the Graylands, and that was not expected to change. It was only as they crossed the Everbane River into the Western Plains that they divided into less conspicuous groups, travelling fast across the smooth, grassy lands of Voulhire's western region. By morning, most of them had passed the reach of the Morningshadow Cliffs, where they spread further: most divided in different southerly directions across the Virken plains, others traced along the southwestern coast, some concealing their travels among the trees of the Westen Wood. There were a few groups who held close to Lake Waldrand, riding as far east as the River Nubere, turning back at different points, some from as far south as Yamon Soul. The Vilendrian appeared curious, watchful as they were, but did not extend their curiosity, as the carriages stayed far enough from the city.

Mianora had plenty of interest in Virko and the region that surrounded it, but none of them put a stop to the caravans, as there were so many passing through and around that city. Much further south than Virko, and one would have been hard-pressed to find a patrol of those white knights; it was a simple undertaking to gather the scattered caravans back in one place.

Galen

"So, what is a monk exactly?" I asked Demetrius as I lagged on my horse behind him and Rowan.

"I told you," Rowan called back. "They're priests who know how to break wood with their hands."

We were travelling west along the southern coast with green grass at our feet and sandy shores on our left.

I couldn't take my eyes off of that ocean. I don't know what it was; shores abound in the Lands of the Princes, but here the world just seemed to open up on the coastline. The sky and the ocean and clouds, it all somehow seemed so much bigger here.

Rowan kept his eyes ahead as he trotted on his strawberry-blond horse. He rode alongside Demetrius, whose white mare Sabine seemed moody, her shoulders burdened by the cart at her tail. I felt guilty for her burden. Hopefully Magnum Caelum had carrots that I could buy for her.

"A monk combines the physical world with magic," Demetrius explained. "We spend time meditating on nature, on the beauty of life and the world it dwells in."

"Can you teach us things?" I asked the monk.

I expected a snappy interruption from Rowan, but he remained silent for the moment, his eyes on other things.

"It's like teaching someone how to wiggle their ears," Demetrius explained. "The basics of magic cannot be described. But if you work hard enough, if you sit down and think long enough, it will come to you. Once you've begun to understand, it would be my pleasure to guide you further. And as you develop in your own direction, there are things I might even learn from you."

"Learn from me?" I said with confusion. "I could never teach the most basic of mages anything, let alone a trained monk."

Demetrius looked back at me, grinning a little. "Some of the greatest

knowledge has come from the study of lesser things."

"Yeah," said Rowan. "How do you think we got fertilizer?"

Demetrius dropped his grin with a glance at Rowan. He continued, "Every mage will find himself for whatever reason inclined down a certain series of branches on the tree of knowledge: biases, ambitions, curiosities, unconscious psychological motives. Even if a mage has the patience and the discipline to branch out evenly, no one is capable of everything. As such, the inner tree of every mage is different."

I laughed a little. "I'm sure it would take a decade for me to sprout a leaf."

"It seems you're already learning something there," Demetrius looked back at me once more. "What is that book I've seen you reading?"

"It's the skeleton key to master smithing!" said Rowan. "That man back there's gonna be greater than Siegfried Holden."

Demetrius sighed. "I suppose that was a famous blacksmith or something?"

Rowan looked back at me. "Does your uncle mention Siegfried in that tome of yours?"

I found myself caught off guard. "There are references to other blacksmiths and their styles... I don't think I've read about that one yet."

"The man was a legend," said Rowan. "And he refused to work with anything other than basic steel." He looked back at me. "Imagine what *you* can do with that lactis!"

"Why stop there?" said Demetrius. "There are far more powerful metals in this world. If you look hard enough."

"Or he can forge his own alloys," Rowan was quick to reply.

I sat behind these two on my horse hoping they understood that I had a long way to go before I could even start to think about the kinds of things they were throwing around. If I ever even made it that far.

Gingerly, I spoke up, "My uncle mentioned in his book that some smithies were in their fifties before they perfected their craft."

"They were self-taught," said Rowan. "You've got your uncle's book. That's a big advantage."

"And there are small things that I can show you," said Demetrius.

Rowan scoffed loudly. "What does a mage know about smithing?"

Demetrius answered, "What does a fancy financier know about a mage?"

Among the magnificent landscapes we happened through, we came to pass a particularly large hill that blocked our view of the coast. An old-fashioned castle stood on top of it. I could only imagine the breathtaking ocean view it must have

had.

"Good ol' Hillport and their seaweed specials," said Rowan.

"You can't deny their lobster," said Demetrius.

"Oh, that's Hillport right there?" I said, looking up at the castle.

"Oh yeah," said Rowan. "There's a whole town bustling on the other side of that hill."

"Breaking their backs for a cheap meal," Demetrius added.

"Spending their whole lives doing the same God damn thing over and over," said Rowan.

"Living quietly," said Demetrius. "Dying quietly."

I smiled heartily at their comments as I gazed up at the classy piece of architecture. "I don't know if I'll ever understand you Voulhirians." I turned my eyes ahead to them. "I'm sure I'd relish a modest life."

Rowan and Demetrius both looked back at me like I had an ugly stain on my face.

I shook the awkwardness away with another smile and a weak shrug. I wasn't sure what I could have said to redeem myself aside from risking a deeper hole in their regard for me. And it seemed like the interruption had made the two of them self-aware that they were almost becoming amicable, and they went quiet too for a while.

In a way it was a good thing: I got to focus on the view. Those northerly green hills into the deep blue sky were deserving of more attention than my talk of simple desires.

"Are those traders?" I asked, noticing a caravan slowing to a stop out there among those hills.

"It looks like it," said Rowan, looking out. "Not sure what they're stopping there for."

"Broken down, probably," said Demetrius.

"Should we help them?"

"Nah," said Rowan. "Shipping caravans break down all the time. They know what they're doing."

For a longer time, we were silent again. I held my eyes out against the view. It looked like a few more caravans were coming to join the first.

Beth

“Mankind’s greatest feature is the ability to imagine the unknowable, and to conceptualize the unimaginable.”

Long had her master imparted these words upon her, for long had he sought a connection with this physical world, this *Cosmos*. Now, the master was gone and Beth was living his dream, traversing nature. No less, she did so while enjoying the accommodations of the human responsible for her arrival—a reserved and modest nobleman about whom she knew so little. A man from a kingdom called Voulhire.

She was exploring the shallow cliffs on the shoreline in the shadow of the castle. The sun of the Earth was brighter and warmer than the cleverest of Caromentian contrivances, baking the sand in a way that felt so much more... consistent, reliable. It compelled her to doff her shoes and sink her human toes into that sand. It felt as though not only each grain, but every relationship among the grains was handcrafted to perfection. Just as alluring as it was to feel the effortless manipulation of that soft ground, so too did it satisfy to watch the footprints go unchanged in her wake, for the Earth had not found a reason to allow even the softest ground the slightest change. That is, until water came falling upon it.

It was not of rain, this falling water upon hot sands; rather, it dropped from the hull of a flying ship that had risen from among the armada that surrounded this island. The ship flew over her head, passed the castle, and descended upon its front property.

Beth followed the leaking vessel, the sand under her feet turning to grass, which brushed away the sand that clung to her skin.

In that frontward yard, which had been well-maintained by a dedicated staff, Beth watched as a corvus extended from the starboard side of the vessel. Five men in armor disembarked onto the grass.

While the gardeners continued their work in ignorance, the first to meet with

these men was Mestitrio, a close associate of the castle's lord. Mestitrio was the one who dressed in dark clothes and was far friendlier with the shadows than with people. Under the late morning sun and a sky sparse with clouds, his aspect seemed so out of place. It seemed almost unnatural.

"Your presence is in breach of the king's agreement," the short, dark man asserted. "State your purpose and make it dire."

"We are here by order of Lord Eldus of Hillport," said the foremost soldier. "He is the one making the arrangements now."

"No appointee of the king would be fool enough to violate the privacy of my lord."

The soldier snickered. "You forget where you stand, little man. Perhaps your stature robs you of perspective." He stepped closer to Mestitrio. "This is a prison. Living in a prison grants no man the right to further contravene the law. Eldus of Soulhire is lord now, and your warden. He commands that this prison—and it is a prison—be duly inspected."

Then the big man appeared. This was, in addition to Mestitrio, the other of His Lordship's two closest advisers. Both men were intelligent, though the vector of each man's intelligence was as opposed as their physical appearances. He approached the newcomers, saying nothing. It was the foremost inspector of Eldus Alderman who spoke, uttering nervously.

"So, it's true." The soldier-inspector swallowed. "You are Siden of Chalethire."

Standing still, the beastly man called Siden replied, "Who are you to tell me who I am?"

"You deny it, then?" the inspector asked with some measure of hope.

Siden replied, "I am not here out of concern for what you think you know."

From the inspector's apprehension, a hint of impatience. "The whole kingdom may yet know that the great Siden of Chalethire has thrown his allegiance at the feet of a traitor."

Siden replied, "But the whole kingdom stands not at my lord's doorstep. You alone enjoy that pleasure."

The inspector's budding impatience flared into defiance. "Do you think I will not tell Lord Eldus that I've seen you here?"

Siden replied, "Your lord is a lifelong litigator. He would press you for certainty and find none."

The inspector's defiance held fast. "Summon your master."

Siden remained still. "My master speaks with masters. You are no master."

The inspector scowled. "Go in there and wake the prisoner, or we will."

Siden reached behind his neck and pulled from his back a sword that could part the foundations of the Earth.

With fearful eyes but a poised stature, the inspector said, "You wouldn't strike a Voulhirian soldier."

Siden replied, "That's only if I am who you tell me I am."

"*Whom* you tell me I am," Mestitrio corrected.

"Siden!" came a deep and powerful voice that echoed from the castle walls. Then, the softest whisper that somehow carried just as far. "Yield."

Siden obeyed without turning, and made way for the one who had rendered the command, who came and stood before the Voulhirian soldiers.

The inspector regarded this hooded man in blue with even greater trepidation than he had the sword of Siden.

There was a long silence as the hooded lord awaited the word of his guests.

The inspector, who seemed suddenly unsure how to proceed, said to the lord, "So, that *is* Siden of Chalethire?"

The lord answered, "You seek affirmation as the evidence lies bare before you. Tell me, soldier, do you require affirmation for the identity of me?"

"Of course, I don't," the inspector replied.

"Then I trust you to know the stories," said the lord. "And I trust what you thought to be exaggerated legends were affirmed by countless briefings in some dusty Hillport office?"

"You killed people," the inspector replied. "There's nothing to complicate."

"What about the manner in which I killed them?" the lord asked. "Does that bring no complication to your resolve? I killed a whole castle of men to affect my duties—an action for which I was never charged—what makes you think I will not do the same to protect what was promised me by your king?"

The inspector seemed confident when he said, "My king would see you dead."

"And what is to stop me from crushing his armada and ridding myself of his whims?"

The inspector's confidence flourished. "If you had that power, you would have used it already."

To which the lord replied, "If the king had the power to kill me, *he* would have used it already."

The inspector sneered at him. "You are a charlatan hiding behind public imagination and cheap tricks. The people of Voulhire tell what stories they may, but you have no such power over the Voulhirian Navy."

“The Voulhirian Navy,” the lord echoed. “Far be it from me to stand in the way of such an enterprise.” He stood aside. “Proceed, soldier, and do as your lord commands.”

“Was that so much?” said the inspector, who led his armored entourage past the lord and the lord’s men.

Beth watched as those two men, Siden of Chalethire and Mestitrio of the shadows, facially emoted their disapproval, but dared not vocalize it.

As different as Caromentis and the Cosmos were, one abiding similarity remained...

Politics.

The hooded lord departed from their company and passed Beth on his way to the beach.

She followed him.

“My lord,” she said as the grass transitioned back into sand. “My lord, why do you let your tormentors swarm about you so?”

“Swarm?” said the lord, his face still darkened under his heavy blue hood. “You impress me, girl. Not a full day in our world and already you so casually employ our idioms.”

“There are flies in Caromentis, my lord,” Beth replied. “At least in the realm whence I came.”

“Then I pose this question...” The lord continued his walk, his eyes on the ships out yonder. “Were a fly to find its perch in your chambers, or in whatever corner you apportion yourself for intimacy, would you refuse to undress?”

“I would not.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s just a fly.”

“Indeed,” said the Lord, who now stood before the panoramic sprawl of the Voulhirian blockade. “Just a fly.”

Lord Eldus

The paved road that ran like a spine from the castle to the docks had been peeled off like a dirty carpet. The space that remained was being prepared, as were the dirt roads that branched out from the spine, for a new layout made from cobblestone. The coveted material was on its way along the southern shores from another under-appreciated town called Magnum Caelum.

Fresh new scaffolds were rising over town by the power of machines most of these people had never seen before. Some of the older, decrepit houses had been torn down and were being replaced by better houses funded on a modest loan from the king. Those families who had been temporarily displaced were happily lodged in Hillport Castle, endowed with all the luxuries afforded to Lord Eldus and his family.

He stood on top of the wall, standing directly over the castle gate, watching the construction throughout the city. He expected he would be watching this all day, every day, even into the evening, when the construction was done for the day. Just looking at the scaffolds, listening to hammering and sawing in the distance, the workers yelling at each other. The mounted telescope on the parapet gave even greater oversight of the finer details. Perhaps some of the foremen could make use of it.

Eldus, for one, was looking forward to fixing his eyes on this gradual development for years to come.

But to fully embrace all the good he anxiously anticipated, he acknowledged that there were things he had to let go.

The more he realized he had to, the less he wanted to.

That was psychology at its most basic, but there was a strong urge inside him as he tried to enjoy the construction going on before him. He felt he couldn't enjoy anything unless he went back into his house and destroyed Meldorath's notes. It was like there was a stain on all of his efforts that needed to be washed before it became permanent.

Equally disturbing, and all the more exigent, was Eldus's growing attraction toward the notes, and his not wanting to see them wasted for the trivial, perhaps even superstitious fears they cultivated.

Were they dangerous or were they not?

Eldus walked into his private study and lit the lantern.

Meldorath's notes had been put into a fine portfolio. A few extra notebooks were stacked on top of it. It was all so neat, and perhaps filled with insight ranging from somewhat-useful to lifesaving.

Or were they just the fantasies of an overambitious madman?

Eldus did not know quite what it was that brought him into this study at that particular time. But here he was, looking down on them, preparing himself to destroy them and move on.

The good stuff was probably all censored and torn out anyway.

Still, Eldus knew so little about both the magic and the man. Perhaps a final glance at the compilation before destroying it, just to see if anything caught his eye.

But where to begin?

He flipped one of the two thin notebooks open. There were a lot of numbers and formulas; nothing expository, at least not within Eldus's comprehension, which had been nurtured on utilitarian textbooks of law and worldly order. There was some mention of a virus, but even that quickly spiraled into a language that gave Eldus a headache just looking at it. Who could say how legitimate it was anyway?

The other notebook was similar: writing that seemed more mathematical than magical.

Then he opened the black portfolio, where torn pages had been put back together and set neatly in fresh pages of oak tag.

His eyes ran over one entry:

Time exists in Caromentis just as it exists in the Cosmos. Perhaps with mastery of both the Cosmos and Caromentis, one can master time itself.

Eldus laughed lightly to himself, shaking his head. He flipped through the restored pages and found another passage.

Mastery of the Cosmos is rare among humans. This struck me as ironic at first, but mastery of most things is rare among humans, who are generally more balanced. But the not-too-distant empire, which closes around our seas like the mouth of a whale, they are masters of the Cosmos.

"The Emperor of Lullabies..." Eldus mused aloud.

He turned a few more times, and found a page with only one sentence:

Hail, Lord Eldus.

Eldus dropped the portfolio, which remained open on the floor to that page and the one sentence.

Cautiously, he stepped closer, looking down upon the open book.

Words began to appear on the page as though a pen were actively writing them—Eldus could even hear the scratching sounds a pen would make—but there was no pen.

The words formed a sentence:

It pleases me that you've taken interest in my notes... such as they are.

Eldus glared in a trance at the letters on the off-white page, his eyes and mouth agape. "Can you hear me?"

I can, the words quickly appeared. But I'm afraid we haven't the time for dialogue. I am contacting you at this moment because I owe you a brief explanation.

"A brief explanation?" said Eldus. "Why don't you save your 'brief explanations' for the people you betrayed?"

I understand your emotions, my lord. I can be a sentimental man myself, if you can believe it. If you can, you might imagine how I felt when your king made a monster out of me. Now, it comes to pass that I must show his people that his judgment is not as pristine as he so delicately makes it appear. To do this, I have to kill you. And I am sorry for it. I am sorry you got caught up in this matter. Wilhelm should not have placed this risk on your family's shoulders.

Eldus gazed defiantly at the book. "Lord Orlin wasn't really a pedophile, was he? You made him look like one to take his place."

It does not matter what you discovered while occupying these halls, my lord. In fact, nothing you did while ruling this parcel of backcountry mattered. Doom was the outcome of whatever puppet your king chose for this assignment. No matter how clever. No matter how good.

"I'm not afraid of you."

Fear is an instrument employed for cowards by cowards. Your ignorance is tragic. But perhaps, as you part from this world, you will realize that your folly was not as much your disposition toward me as it was the trust you placed in your king, and the faith you placed in Voulhire. Goodbye, Eldus Alderman. May you leave this world a smarter man.

—Your true benefactor, Dalehei Meldorath

The portfolio flared in a wave of fire that towered from the floor. Then the

room was lit bright as the two notebooks on the table caught fire. All were ash within seconds. The fire never spread and no object but for the three books were so much as charred, not even the old wooden floor.

The room was dim once again.

Eldus looked around the quiet study. He wanted to run, but not into a trap; yet there was no telling what lurked about the walls, what unnatural machinations might have been waiting in this very room, set far in advance by that glorified thug.

Slowly, he stepped toward the door.

The door flung open, and Eldus almost flew back against the opposite wall.

"My lord!" It was his own guard captain. "There's some army approaching the city."

"An army?" Eldus tilted his head. "Of what? Of whom?"

"I don't know, my lord... but they appear to be dancing."

Eldus followed his captain from the study, down the hall to a spiral staircase leading up to the roof. When the fresh air hit his face, he heard the rhythm of a hundred drums beating deep and heavy in the distance.

He stepped to the parapet, looking over the grassy northern hills. Among the hills, a jagged line was closing in on Hillport: thousands of people advancing slowly in dance like a parade running sideways.

Along the line were platforms on short towers. These towers did not resemble siege equipment, but something more akin to a float. Upon each one, a single dancer seemed to lead the army in step.

"I thought maybe you'd have an idea, my lord," said the captain of the guards.

Eldus shook his head. "I've never seen anything like this in my life." He leaned over the parapet and squinted at the army. "Can you make out those uniforms?"

"They're dark," said the captain. "Probably light armor. Maybe leather. Some of them are wearing masks. I think a lot of their faces are painted black."

A short way down the parapet was a mounted telescope, similar to the one overlooking the town. Eldus walked to it and aimed it at the army.

The ones who led the dance on those towers were all wearing wooden masks with angry faces. Feathers spread from the crown of these snarling masks.

Pheasant feathers.

Eldus aimed slightly downward, focused on the dancing soldiers.

They were all wearing pheasant feathers.

He drew his face away from the scope. "It can't be..."

"What is it, my lord?"

Eldus turned to his captain. "How many guards are in this castle right now?"

"Er, fifty? Fifty, my lord. What should I tell them?"

"Send one of them out to warn the town. Tell them the Riva Rohavi are here."

The captain of the guards swung his head outward toward the army, then back at Lord Eldus with a face frozen with horror. "We must get you out of this town, my lord."

"No," said the lord. "Those ships out there don't belong to me. This castle does." He focused on the captain. "Go."

He stood at the parapet and watched the closing army, his mind racing.

He ran to a cage where messenger hawks were awaiting assignment. He grabbed parchment and a pen that were kept in a small pouch nearby, and scribbled a few words on several strips of parchment to the lords of different cities, and one for the king. Of course, no help would arrive anytime soon—all Eldus could do was make it known that Meldorath was behind this attack.

He released the mighty birds, who began their flight toward their set destinations. They flew over the dark army, which was now a lot closer. And from somewhere in that dancing army, arrows came and shot each of the birds to the ground.

Alarm bells rang throughout the town.

Archers of the castle guard—there were only twenty of them—appeared on the roof and came to the parapet. They aimed their bows and launched their arrows at the army.

The soldiers of Riva showed them their backs, where their armor caught what few arrows even made it to their ranks. Then they jumped back into position, dancing forward.

The archers launched another barrage with the same result. And then another. Even when the line came to within a hundred feet of the castle, none of the arrows broke the flesh of a single target.

The hands of the Rohavian bowmen were much steadier, even though their hips still bumped to the beat of the drums. Their arrows came soaring at the battlements like they had sprung from a machine, and the guards all dropped for cover.

Rohavian soldiers on the front line somersaulted toward the castle while feathered soldiers brought ladders up against the wall. The castle guards tried to push the ladders aside, but the tops were perched too low for arm's reach and a dozen Rohavian climbers were already weighing each ladder down. The guards

fired down on them with what few arrows they had left. A few of these did stick to bodies, and two of those bodies fell to the ground.

A hundred arrows from the army below slashed upward through the air. They flew like a spit shot into the chests and faces of the guards who were leaning over the parapet. Some of those guards fell back, dead; one of them just dropped against the parapet, where he lay motionless.

The frightened guards that yet lived backed away from the parapet and the ladders.

Feathers rose to the surface. Black leather boots landed on the roof, and the soldiers who owned them started dancing once again. They didn't stop dancing, even as the guards charged them. They fought back, but never stopped dancing, as if the combat wasn't important enough to break their stride, as if they weren't frightened enough to relinquish the rhythm.

Guards fell. More soldiers rose to the roof, all dancing.

When the last guard fell, Eldus didn't take the time to watch Riva's attention turn to him. He bolted to the roof access door and threw the wooden block down over it. He sprinted down the stairs, almost dragging his body against the tight spiral wall as he descended.

He halted in his tracks and grabbed his head when he realized...

There were more than fifty families in this castle.

He flew down to the dining hall, where many of these families surrounded the big table, and other tables that stood to accommodate all of these people for dinner. They enjoyed their meals calmly, chatting amongst themselves as Riva's drums beat outside.

Standing at the far end of the room, close to the fireplace, was a nervous-looking guard.

Eldus made his way toward him. Almost everyone at the tables acknowledged him as he passed, either loudly or in some subtle way.

He had to ignore them.

A man suddenly stood in his way. It was Mr. Batherus, little Stanley's father.

"Milord..." he said.

"Herr Batherus," the harried lord replied. "I'm afraid I—"

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry," said the man, looking down. He nodded, then looked up at him. "And thank you."

Eldus took a moment to nod back. He touched the man on the shoulder and walked past him.

He stepped up to the guard by the fire, who was too nervous to even

acknowledge his lord.

"Where are the others?" Eldus muttered with force.

"They've barred the doors," the guard whispered back. "They're guarding them now."

Eldus looked at the long table, where a few children laughed as they banged on the wood, imitating the drums outside. He looked at the stained-glass windows on the upper wall of the dining room, and was struck in the back by a sickening chill. "Bring them back here. Now."

"Yes, lord." The guard's armor clanked as he ran across the room.

Eldus turned to the crowded, noisy room. He swallowed hard. "Everyone..."

The poor townspeople turned their attention to him with ease, as though many of them were already watching, noticing his apprehension.

He said as calmly as he could, "We all need to get up and leave this room."

The crowd wore confused and worried expressions.

"Why, milord?" asked the woman closest to Eldus.

Still calm, Eldus answered, "Hillport is under attack."

The crowd was no longer calm, but they did not panic yet.

"By who?" a few of them asked. "By what?"

Eldus strained to make a decision in the seconds he had. Which answer would cause less panic: the truth, or the whole truth?

He answered them, "The Riva Rohavi."

The crowd gasped. Some of them screamed. Many of them shot up from their chairs, but the assembly didn't lose all control.

"Listen to me," Eldus called with a surge of authority. "The Riva Rohavi will not stay long. They want to cause as much damage as they can in as short a time as possible—"

One of the stained-glass windows shattered inward, glass falling onto the big table and into the hair of some of the children.

Then the panic set in. But Eldus's guards were arriving.

Eldus shouted, "Follow me!"

Two guards stayed behind to fight the dancing murderers that came pouring down.

Eldus led his people and his handful of guards through the center of the castle, far from any outer walls or windows.

But the Rohavi came flipping and twirling down from an open spiral staircase.

The people ran faster.

A child tripped and fell. One of the townspeople ran to pick her up.

A Rohavian spearman landed on them from up high, impaling both the man and the little girl.

The spearman looked up at Eldus. He smiled with white teeth clashing against a black-painted face. He shimmied his head from side to side, and started dancing after him.

A squad of Rohavian soldiers came somersaulting at great speed past all the others.

Eldus reached the library. He opened the door and the hundred people shoved their way in. The guards staved off the few attackers who drew near. One of the guards fell almost right away with blood pumping out of his neck.

Eldus slammed the door shut. Five guards held it while others came to block it with a desk.

"Everyone grab books!" Eldus called out. "Stack them neatly, fill the gaps!"

The people did as they were told. They stacked books from the library underneath and on top of the furniture, until there was an eight-foot block of matter holding the door closed.

Then there was silence. Eldus had a moment to breathe and think about his wife and children, if they had their guards at their sides, if they had followed protocol, if they were barricaded as well.

Riva had no reason to stay here. They just had to make their statement... murder some innocent people in the street, then run away laughing.

That was Riva.

"What's that!" A mother holding her child pointed at the base of the barricade. Eldus looked.

Fluid was pouring in from outside, flooding the space around the barricade. It continued to spread toward the other desks and chairs and shelves and books.

"Run!" Eldus shouted.

The liquid flared up in a fast and violent flame.

"Up the stairs! Now!"

The people ran to the upper level of the library as the barricade was consumed and the room filled with smoke. They all started coughing. Some mothers put their clothes to their children's mouths, but it didn't keep the smoke out.

His eyes stinging badly, Eldus looked around, trying to think.

Then the flaming barricade exploded, fiery debris flying all over the room. Rohavian soldiers burst in with goggles and facemasks. The castle guards, blinded and wheezing, didn't stand a chance against them. Then the dancing murderers waltzed their way up the stairs, where the people were cornered and

suffocating.

They never stood a chance either. Especially the children.

And Eldus realized that he had failed.

But he hadn't lost the will to live.

His mouth buried in his sleeve, he retreated to the far back, losing himself in the many shelves amid the thickening smoke. He spotted a book chute, which came from the upper levels of the castle.

There could easily have been soldiers waiting at the smoking end of it, but he had no choice.

Choking and tearing, his throat and eyes swollen almost beyond function, the lord crawled into the chute and climbed up. The smoke was even heavier in this chute than it was in the library. He coughed loudly, but he would sooner die than successfully stifle it.

His fingers sore from clawing at the bricks, he surfaced into an empty hallway on the third floor. He flopped onto the shining marble and coughed until his lungs almost gave out, spraying blood onto his reflection. Then, struggling to get his breathing under control, he stumbled to his feet.

The floor seemed clear. The bedrooms were one floor above.

He ran for the stairs.

A feathered soldier dropped from the rafters and landed right in front of him.

Eldus stopped, evading slowly, terrified but determined to get up those stairs to his family.

The soldier looked at him with wide eyes as if in some overblown performance. He took a choreographed step forward, bobbing his head, and drew a dagger from a sheath on his chest.

Eldus was knocked aside by his son, who came swooping in from behind him. He threw out his hand and froze the soldier's eyes solid.

The soldier stopped dancing. He held his hands to his dead eyes and screamed as loudly as his victims on the lower floor.

Then the young lord Marshus slammed a knife into the soldier's gut over and over until the dancing psychopath fell dead to the floor.

Leaning against the wall for support, his insides still in pain from his chest to his head, Eldus looked up at his son. "I didn't know you could do that..."

Marshus shrugged. "I did tell you I wanted to build a hockey rink."

Eldus started up the stairs. He uttered, "Do you know where your sister and your mother are?"

"They were in your bedroom when I last saw them," Marshus whispered,

following his father up. "There were two guards and a servant with them."

The fourth floor also seemed clear.

Eldus and Marshus looked up at the rafters. Just a few cobwebs.

The two men made their way for the lord's bedroom.

Eldus tried the door. It was barred from the inside.

Thank God.

He knocked. "It's me!"

"And me," Marshus called.

He heard the bar lift.

He opened the door and followed Marshus in, slamming it shut behind him and dropping the bar again. He looked around the room.

The room was empty.

An ocean breeze was lifting the curtains. The drums were no longer beating outside. The door to the washroom was closed.

Before Eldus could start to walk in that direction, his back was on the floor, and the masks of two Rohavian soldiers were hovering over his face, their heads bobbing from side to side to a beat that wasn't there.

Eldus looked beyond them, to the rafters above, where his son had dodged capture by three other soldiers. He was making his way toward the window.

All the lord could do was stare.

Then the soldiers below formed a staircase with their bodies like a circus act. The third soldier ran up the staircase with her sword drawn, and leapt toward the ceiling.

Eldus didn't know how he found the strength, but he threw off one of the soldiers who was dancing in his face and stole a dagger from the other. He stabbed that one repeatedly, until the blades of every soldier in the room came down on him. He never felt the pain of the blades, only the strength leaving his body.

* * *

Vidius Crodai was looking upward at the castle as he climbed the steps to its porch. The front door was still barred shut; breaking it down was never a necessity.

How precise.

The host of the Riva Rohavi met on that porch with his operations coordinator, who had been courteous enough to survive this undertaking to give the report.

Vidius asked him, "How many civilians neutralized?"

"Quite a few, my host," the coordinator replied. "The docks and all of their fishing boats are burning. The same goes for the marketplace and all of their food stores. We calculate that twenty percent of the population was killed outright. More will have to leave Hillport and find a home elsewhere. There will be no great economic undertaking anytime soon in this town, my host."

"Twenty percent is a good start," said Vidius Crodai. "I was going to say burn the homes of the working class, but they all look like worker bees here, don't they? Just let the flames work their way as far as they'll go."

"Yes, my host."

Vidius thought for a moment. "Is Eldus Alderman confirmed dead?"

The coordinator pointed at a spot in the yard where three bodies lay. "That's most of the family, my host. Lord Eldus is the taller one. I'm told the wife and daughter put up a better fight than the father and son did." He smiled. "But then, the wife and daughter were kept alive a little longer... The son took off like a pampered coward."

Vidius was not smiling. He was thinking. Unbeknownst to Voulhire, unbeknownst to the majority of his own Riva Rohavi, he had come here seeking something. He did not know what it looked like, but had perceived it for some time. Now, with frustrating inexplicability, that perception had either failed him, or that which he had sought was now gone. Any theories as to how this was possible ranged from bad to worse. But Vidius was a pragmatist; all there was left to do was move on from this victory, for a victory it was.

"Word of this shouldn't reach Soulhire for at least a day. Still, I should prefer not to linger. It sets a wrong example for the survivors." He looked at the coordinator. "There's time to feed while the survivors run and hide, but do it quickly. We're taking nothing back with us."

"Right away, my host." The coordinator then called out across the yard, relaying the orders to the masked shamans who were standing by. They quickly moved out.

Vidius Crodai started back down the stairs.

I am Lord Meldorath

"Captain!" One of his lieutenants called out, running across the field.

The Captain Barcaedi was standing at the docks overlooking a routine supply, taking report of that vessel's observations over the past day. So far, nice and boring.

"Captain!"

Barcaedi turned to address the excited lieutenant. "What's the matter, marine?"

The lieutenant was winded, but his words came fast. "The manor, captain... Some of the others have seen it too... We heard a deep rumble. The whole building looked like it was starting to move."

Barcaedi grunted. "I turn my back on that stupid house for ten minutes..." He stepped back down the docks onto solid ground. "I'm chasing dragons when I should be chasing my supper."

Of course, it was another illusion, but protocol demanded he check it out all the same. Every time a significant observation was made, no matter what time, no matter what he was doing—working, eating, shitting—he had to wrap it up and babysit that demagogical pest.

He pulled a telescope from his coat pocket as he climbed the steps to the battlements of the fort wall. He stood, looking over the expanse of colorful trees. He focused on the property across the forest, that quiet manor of dark stone.

There came a deep roar, such as the lieutenant had described, except this ran throughout the fort as though from the sky. Everyone in the fort went still and quiet, looking around.

"Captain!" His lieutenant pointed at the manor.

Barcaedi raised the scope again.

It appeared as though a wisp of powerful wind was pulling the shingles from the roof of the manor, spinning them around like a halo over the house.

"What the hell is he doing over there?" Barcaedi wondered.

Pieces of stone came off the walls of the manor, joining the shingles above,

then whole chunks of the roof dissolved into the darkening halo.

Captain Barcaedi kept staring through his telescope, morbidly entranced by the display.

Suddenly, the whole building expanded and broke apart—Its floors and walls, stairs and buttresses, its furnishings, its carpeting—every piece was taken into a swirling ball that replaced the manor, each piece swirling with unstoppable power, and yet with such smooth deliberation that it all might have neatly reassembled at any moment.

Barcaedi focused on the center of the storming debris, where the revolution centered on a small group of people, who at first were standing still. Central within this calm group stood a figure with a blue robe. He and his companions were facing Barcaedi and his fort.

They started walking forward, and the storming ball of chaos moved with them.

Barcaedi spun inward, overlooking the fort and his attentive little army. He roared commands in every direction. A chain of his mage lieutenants amplified these commands across the property and to every ship in the barricade.

"Infantry to the battlements! Artillery to broadside! Mages, drop sails and hoist your sterns!"

On the other side of the island, ships opened fire at the advancing storm of debris. But as soon as the shells of flak slammed against the spinning ball, the smoke and fire were sucked right in.

The ball reached the forest, ripping up the trees, roots and all, which themselves were pulled on course like leaves in a river.

From all sides of the island, and directly over Barcaedi's head, ships came flying in from the water. Under the evening sun, they spread their shadows far across the forest, sailing toward the cyclone of trees and debris; each one launched a swarm of mages who shot like darts, far outpacing the ships toward the storming ball. They circled it, matching its resolution, as though their frail human bodies were a part of it, maintaining full control of their trajectory.

They worked in sync, pooling their strength as though into a single mage of greater power, an ability in which these squadrons were years practiced. They held out their hands as they flew around the storm. As they slowed their revolution around the storm, so too did the storm slow with them. Finally, they stopped, and all of the trees and stone and wood of the once raging mass were frozen in place, down to every leaf.

The blue mage on the ground and his devoted entourage stood once again still

and quiet in the now still and quiet storm.

The ships closed in.

Barcaedi grinned as he stared through the scope at that man in the blue hooded robe.

"I thought I would have to wait a lot longer for this day, you sparkling sack of tricks..." the captain almost growled through his flashing teeth. "But the great Lord Meldorath was no match for a little cabin fever, was he?"

From the great distance between them, the hooded man looked up at the captain.

Through the lens, and under the hood of the distant face, Barcaedi saw his eyes, and stopped smiling.

There was an explosion.

Every object in the briefly quiet ball of debris shot into the air, and the surrounding trees that had not yet become part of the storm were ripped off of their roots to join them. Even the soil around the hooded man in blue was taken up into the column as every tree on the island suddenly bowed to him.

Captain Barcaedi found that he was coming under a heavy shadow.

He turned. A surge was coming upon the fort—a cloud as high as a mountain and as fast as a wave. The wall surrounded the entire island, closing in as the convicted mage kept spewing pieces of the island upward.

The cloud hit, and gusts of ocean water bullied the captain like typhoon winds sweeping the deck. He almost cleared the battlements, but held fast to the jagged bricks.

Water was rushing in from all around the island, over the fort, over the ships at sea, and over the ships in flight. The surge was pulled into the column of trees and land, which soared straight up into the sky. There, the water spread into a thunderhead, which darkened, spreading fast across the sky.

Captain Barcaedi turned his eyes up at that column, and into the blackening cloud.

And he was afraid.

The ships in flight turned away from the column, but were quickly pulled toward it, breaking apart when they reached it. The ships on the coast were taken into flight, and were also carried over the island into the column.

Lightning came down from the expanding black cloud, dividing many times so that a single bolt spread like a claw across the island. Shattered stone, broken lumber, and pieces of men crashed down across the fort and its walled-in property. All of the men stationed there took cover.

A broken ship came down from the sky and shattered against the fort itself.

Trembling in the horizontal rain, Barcaedi looked ahead.

The tornadic column was almost right on top of him, pulling the water into the darkness above. Now the sunlight was gone but for the sickly purple fringes of the sky.

Finally, the gust of water that swept the island ceased, and the column of water tailed up into the black cloud. Now the island was as quiet as it was dark.

Barcaedi released his embrace of the parapet, looking ahead, to where that hooded mage and his companions might have been. But there were still enough trees surrounding the walls—albeit twisted, stripped, and broken—for their position to remain obscure.

Then there came deafening popping sounds from under his feet, like metal bars snapping apart.

"The gate is breached!" Soldiers came running from their cover and scrambled to surround the fort's only entrance into the island.

The captain came down the stairs.

Indeed, the metal bars had been pulled like stalks of wheat from the ground and stone.

Barcaedi took his place among the men. He drew his sword, holding it toward the broken gate. He turned to his left, where a soldier held his sword with a trembling hand. The captain raised his jowls under his beard. He was about to chastise the fool, then sighed. "He doesn't want you dead," the captain assured the young soldier. "He wants you afraid."

The young soldier nodded, returned his focus and his sword in the direction of the broken gate.

Then Barcaedi said to the men, "Prison riots happen all the time." He wasn't sure if he meant it as a joke, but none of them laughed.

From the quiet brush beyond the broken gate, the leaves and branches stirred, and a man stepped out and into the fort, a man whose size suggested superhuman strength. He carried a claymore in one hand as though it were a dagger. He walked casually across the grounds of the fort, his eyes crossing over the soldiers who surrounded him in a semicircle.

The other soldiers didn't recognize him, but Barcaedi did. He was Siden of Chalethire: a former knight of the Chaletherian order, and now a thrall of Lord Meldorath.

"Archers!" Barcaedi called to the men along the battlements.

The archers drew back their arrows, loosed them at the big man beneath them.

The big man dropped, falling straight down into the ground, as though physics no longer inconvenienced him.

Barcaedi and his line of men looked around, confused but alert, almost paranoid.

"Help!" Came a cry from the battlements.

All the soldiers on the ground turned their heads up to a spot along the wall. An archer there was evading the same gargantuan man who had just fallen into the Earth. Archers from other places on the walls and roof launched arrows at the man, but the man fell down into the stone. Then his sword came up, straight between the legs of the archer over whom he had loomed. The archer screamed into the black sky. The sword drew back into the stone floor, and the archer fell dead.

"Everyone be ready!" Barcaedi called out. "He's not invincible!"

Then the captain happened to see Siden appear next to another archer, this time on the other side of the fort. He appeared out of thin air, and whacked his sword against the defenseless man. He disappeared into the air, then reappeared behind the archer to finish the job. Then he appeared behind another archer. He traveled in a chain along the battlements from one archer to the next. Some were killed immediately; others only injured until he returned for them.

Barcaedi and his lineup watched helplessly from the ground.

When the last archer was falling, bloodied, from the roof of the fort, Siden appeared on the battlements close to Barcaedi and his men. They looked up at him. He paced as he returned their gaze, neither smiling nor frowning.

All that the men below could do, including Barcaedi, was await the fallen knight's next move.

Sword in hand, Siden spread his arms, and his body rose from the battlements. He hovered downward toward them.

The soldiers lifted their weapons.

Siden slowed to a stop within yards of them, then vanished, leaving the men in silence.

"Is he a mage?" said one of the frightened soldiers.

"No..." said Barcaedi, looking up at the spot from which the big man disappeared. "Mages can't bend space..."

Another voice from behind him, "Where did he go, captain?"

"I don't know," said the captain.

Then the same voice suggested, "Maybe he's right behind you."

In a stroke of realization, Barcaedi lunged himself around and threw his sword

at the man behind him. But the man disappeared.

He reappeared in front of another soldier and cut his throat.

He reappeared behind a lieutenant and stabbed him through the neck.

He stopped for a moment as the soldiers swung their necks and bodies in all directions.

He reappeared.

All the soldiers ran at him, but they didn't make it there before Siden split a young man's head in half.

The soldiers scattered, hysterical.

In a barrage much faster than he had felled the archers above, like strokes of sadistic lightning, the fallen knight slaughtered the rest of them, leaving only Captain Barcaedi.

Then he disappeared.

His sword held outward, Barcaedi turned in the silent darkness of the ruined fort.

"Where are you!" His voice echoed from the walls. He spun in all directions, surrounded by the bodies of his men. "Slaughter me like a dog, you traitorous coward!"

Then his eyes landed on the gate. Siden was standing there; this time, he was not alone. He stood among an entourage of varying age and gender, all of them calm.

Standing in the center of this group was the man in the hooded blue robe.

Focused on this man, Barcaedi put all logic and reason aside. He mustered what remained of his energy and charged across the sandy ground, dodging two fallen bodies, closing on the poised mage.

The poised mage uttered, "Mestitrio."

Barcaedi was intercepted by a thin man in a black turtleneck, whose foot dashed across the captain's face in a display of almost unnatural agility.

But Barcaedi kept his focus on the man in the blue robe, who stood fewer than twenty paces away.

The captain lunged.

The thin man remained locked alongside him like a bird of prey, stopped him again, this time with a blow to the back of the head.

Barcaedi swung his sword around, and the thin man dodged it, coming in close and landing a foot on the captain's jaw.

The captain recoiled, then swung again.

The thin man struck him with perfect landings in several weak points in his

armor. Then a final blow to his neck.

Barcaedi fell to the dirt, wheezing for air, the companions at the gate just looking on.

Slowly, he rose to his feet; though he trembled, he refused to employ his sword as a crutch. He stood straight, raised the sword, pointing it with an unsteady hand at the man in blue.

"Everybody knows you need your thralls to fill the gaps you never could," he called out to the man. "This world will never spin on your finger alone!"

As the hooded man stood motionless, a linear force slashed across the ground from him to Barcaedi at the speed of an arrow. A line of dirt and sand was thrown into the air and Barcaedi along with it. He landed hard on his back and gasped.

But before he could acknowledge the extent of his pain and the damage to his body, the hooded man was standing over him. Once again, Barcaedi was looking into his eyes, which almost disappeared into the darkness of his hood, which blended into the blackness of the sky.

The robed man said, "It is not this world that I am interested in."

From the blackened sky, a ship came down. Tempest-tossed and full to collapse, it landed upright in the water with a gentle splash.

The man in the blue robe stepped beyond the incapacitated captain, and several others followed.

But Siden and the shorter, slender martial artist named Mestitrio remained behind for the moment, looking down on the captain.

"Are all the soldiers dead?" Mestitrio asked.

"They're called marines," Siden replied, "and yes." Before Mestitrio could follow up, he added: "Yes, I'm sure."

Smiling down on Barcaedi, Mestitrio said to Siden, "Are you going to lecture me on how this glorified drill instructor deserves an honorable execution?"

Siden took his sword and lopped off the purple badge affixed to the captain's breastplate. He then looked to Mestitrio and said, "Now he's just a man in armor."

Mestitrio stepped beside Barcaedi's head. Raising his foot above the captain's neck, he said, "Send our regards to Lord Eldus."

* * *

In the harbor of Hillport, the ship appeared like a bowl of rubble that just happened to drift into perfect alignment with one of the docks.

A ramp was drawn, and a small number of people stepped out, one after the other. There were secretaries and coordinators, a dozen servants, a young woman named Beth who was fascinated by all that she saw, and there was Siden and Mestitrio.

Finally, there appeared a man in a heavy blue robe which seemed to bear down on his broad shoulders. His hood was down and his face was smooth and handsome under a flawless cap of raven hair. He was not an old man, as the uninformed often assumed him to be. Indeed, at forty-three, Dalehei Meldorath was young for a mage as powerful as he was.

The moment this final passenger stepped onto the dock, the vessel of his passage broke apart and sank right there in the harbor.

* * *

Beverly, the proud head servant of Castle Hillport for many years, stood atop the steps of the castle entrance, looking over the yard beneath the dark sky.

Nighttime had come earlier under the heavy veil of hostile clouds.

Once again, she had survived. Her knowledge and wit had saved her from a sudden and furious siege. She knew just where to hide while the family she served was butchered, and now their bodies lay burned in the yard, off to the side, on display but out of the way.

A carriage passed through the gate and stopped at the foot of the stairs on which she stood. It opened and several people emerged. Most of these people walked right up the stairs past her, ready to return to work as though nothing had happened.

Two of them approached her: a slender man and a brute. Beverly was well familiar with both.

The slender man, who wore a black turtleneck and an angry face, asked her, "Is the castle cleared out?"

But Beverly was not attentive to the slender man. She was looking at the man behind these two: a man in a blue robe, who was staring blankly back at her.

He was inside her, that man in blue, inside her in a way more intimate than

intimacy. The virus he had fashioned had spread across the town and who knows how far beyond. Through that virus, which made a host out of every living thing, he could enter whatever mind he wished. She was there when she made it, she had helped him concoct it. Somehow, in spite of that, he kept her alive this whole time.

At that moment, she could feel his prodding at pieces of her awareness, knowing what she saw, knowing what she felt, perhaps analyzing her feelings in ways that she herself could not. It was like her very being no longer belonged to her. It belonged to him. Perhaps she was still alive because he knew she would never do a thing to betray her fear.

She tried to control her shaking.

"Woman!" A finger snapped in her face and her vision was taken by the countenance of the angry man in the black turtleneck. "You are still alive because His Lordship admires your adaptability. To disappoint him is to disappoint me and I am not such an admirer."

Beverly stared at the angry man, but she could not speak. She could not string a thought to form a single word.

Finally, Meldorath spoke, his voice strong but soft, "She is in shock. Let her be."

Beverly listened to his boots tap the steps above her.

He stopped and she heard him ask, "Didn't the Aldermans have two children?"

"Perhaps the boy escaped," was Mestitrio's suggestion.

"Good for him," was Meldorath's reply.

Beverly turned on the stairs to face upward. Meldorath was standing on the porch, looking out over the yard, his pensive eyes affixed to the far corner.

He turned to a young woman, pretty little thing. "Do you recognize that material down there?"

Beverly realized that the lordly mage was looking at the pile of dark rocks which had been shipped here under mysterious circumstances only yesterday, as though he knew he would be here today, staring down at them.

The young woman focused on these objects. "It's hard to see from here, my lord, but I... I feel them. If those rocks are what I suspect them to be, it's a surprise to see them here. Such ore is difficult to find in Caromentis, let alone here in your universe."

"Then you can teach me about its nature?"

"I can, my lord."

Meldorath and his companions turned into the castle, leaving Beverly alone on

the stairs to process what had happened. Then, once the carnage had been processed, she would adapt. Just like she always did.

Just like he knew she would.

Galen

I had only known Magnum Caelum for a night and half-a-day, but when I returned from my little journey about the southern countryside of Voulhire, I felt like I was coming home.

My uncle's house was still waiting for me, right where I had left it.

Demetrius released Sabine from the yoke of the cart, and she immediately seemed in better spirits. I only wished the yard was big enough for her to have some fun in.

"Do you need to tie him?" I asked Rowan as he roped his blond horse to the inside of my uncle's fence.

"They sleep standing," said Rowan. "And Keiser likes to sleepwalk."

I hoped Keiser didn't get too envious of the freedom Demetrius and I gave our horses.

I struck a flint and lit the lantern in the corner of the front room, which had a cushioned longchair and a large bay window overlooking the town and the ocean. I gathered some logs from the forge out back and brought them to the hearth.

"Oh no..." I said, standing up from the slow-spreading flames. "I should have bought food back in Yamon Soul." I looked to Rowan. "Will any of the merchants be in business at this hour?"

"Give me some silver," said Rowan. "I'll flag down one of the couriers and send him to the tavern for a little piggie."

Rowan did as he said and was back in a few minutes.

Demetrius sat by the bay window, looking up into the darkening sky, his body half lit by the brightening flames. I sat with him as Rowan walked over and stood by the window, looking out into the ocean.

I enjoyed the peace we shared for those few minutes that followed. Nobody felt the need to speak. We just enjoyed the view of Magnum Caelum's ocean and sky, the crackling flames beside us, and one another's company.

But as host, I couldn't just sit around.

"You can take my bed for as long as you have to be here," I said to the scholarly monk, who sat pensive in my uncle's armchair.

"What?" said Rowan, leaning on the corner of the window. "Can't we at least take turns?"

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I thought you were leaving?"

Rowan's face changed. He was confused, even shocked and maybe... offended?

I was confused as well, and somewhat worried. "Well, yes. You've done so much for me, I thought you would stay the night and soon return to Soulhire. Of course, I couldn't expect to keep you here for too much longer..."

My words were returned by Rowan with falling eyes and mirthless lips, and a reaction as if to say, 'Wow, okay then.'

And I realized that I had hurt him.

He shrugged. "If there's nothing further I can do for you, I have plenty to do back home."

Then Demetrius gave a small smile with his distinctive lips, a smile which I did not like. I tried to reserve judgment, but it seemed as though he enjoyed that Rowan was hurt.

I vowed to remedy whatever pain I might have caused.

But in the presence of the mysterious monk, I sat in awkward silence.

Then the monk spoke up. "My initial estimation of several weeks to analyze that stone may not have been accurate. It may take a month or more."

"That's quite alright," I said, trying to avoid further tension. "I'll cover any accommodations you may need."

"I'll watch out for the food," said Rowan, walking to the door and stepping out of the house.

I saw this as a perfect opportunity to speak with Rowan alone. I asked Demetrius to excuse me for just a moment—I had a feeling he wouldn't mind the brief solitude.

"He's up to something," said Demetrius as I rose from my uncle's longchair. "I'm not sure if you realize."

"I don't understand..." I looked down at the monk. "He's my uncle's executor."

"As you have explained," said the monk with a single nod. "Thus, his duties as executor ended the moment he handed you the deed to this property. What his motives are now, I do not know. But they are not the motives of an executor." He turned his head back out and up to the sky. "As your temporary employee, I feel

obliged to make you aware of this."

I wasn't sure how to feel about Demetrius's bold suggestion, especially after his display of malice a moment ago. But for now, I could only assume he meant it well.

I stepped out into the cool, late-summer night and stood with Rowan.

He looked at me. "Hey."

"Hi..." I said. "Rowan, I'm so sorry to have put you out, I didn't—"

"I'm just looking out for the food." Now Rowan sounded chipper.

I struggled for the right words. "I said the wrong thing to you..."

"I'm not mad, Galen." Rowan laughed a little. "I just didn't think you'd find your footing that fast. If anything, I'm glad. It means I did my job."

I didn't know how, and I hated to be judgmental, but somehow I knew he was lying.

So, without removing the apology from my tone, I persisted, "I thought I was holding you back from your home. You're a good man to have obliged yourself to my family. I didn't want you to feel you had to do more than you have, especially with all you have going on in Soulhire."

"In Soulhire? Yes." Rowan nodded as he looked out over the small town. "There's always a lot going on there. Divisive politics and personal drama that could satisfy the gossipers for life. Thieving, prostituting, spying. The science and the magic. And the money." Rowan slowly shook his head. "You should see the money that flows through that city, Galen. You should see how much that city has to boast about from behind their walls."

I smiled at the possibilities. "The more I hear you talk about it, the worse I feel about keeping you from it."

Rowan turned from the small town and looked at me, his eyes almost pleading through the dark. "What if I don't want to go back there?"

Surprised, I answered him, "Why ever not?"

Rowan looked back ahead and shrugged. "I'm just saying what if."

I felt disappointed for him at his feeling so detached from a place that sounded so wonderful, and I was saddened that he wouldn't tell me why.

For a second, my mind brought me back home, the one I left behind. It was plain to see that Voulhire was a better place, but who was I to tell Rowan he had any less a reason for wanting to leave his old life than I did?

I said to him, "Where I come from, people can't even look you in the eye when they say 'thank you.' They can hardly say it at all. If they have to, they chirp it under their breath. It's a sign of weakness, you understand. Gratitude."

When I came here, I swore on my family's memory that I wouldn't bring that with me. I brought only optimism with me. I chose to trust people. But I'm not so naïve that I don't realize how lucky I am that it was you who found me."

Rowan laughed. "Okay, man, don't get all weird on me." He turned, looking down on me from his two-inch advantage. "But we're definitely on to something with this forge business... I'd like to see where it goes, make sure you don't donate all your startup funds to charity or something."

I chuckled. "If you stay, I know there's so much more I can learn from you."

Rowan smirked. "You bet your outlander ass there is!"

Presently, a courier came running up the street with a burlap sack and something wrapped in paper.

"Pardon the delay, my lords," the courier handed the items to Rowan. "The innkeeper didn't have a ham. I ran to the butcher and he was nice enough to slaughter one of his piglets."

Rowan reached into his pocket for extra silver before I had the chance to.

I took the pig from Rowan and quickly brought it inside to get it started. From the burlap sack, Rowan poured a whole forest of greens and vegetables into a wooden bowl he found in one of the cupboards.

"Do you know if we have any spices?" I asked as I fixed the little pig to a little spit in the fireplace.

"Yes, we do," Rowan reached into another cupboard, producing a few thin jars and setting them on the hearth beside me.

Demetrius, still sitting by the bay window, no longer had his eyes to the sky. Now he was looking on us. He looked like he was deep in thought as he regarded us.

"Oh, there's rice in here," said Rowan, producing a solid bag. "Should we make it?"

"Definitely," I said as I sprinkled sage onto the roasting pig.

Suddenly, Demetrius spoke up, "Do you know how to make rice cakes?"

"I always wanted to try those!" I exclaimed. "My grandmother talked about making them for me, but... it never happened."

Demetrius rose from the armchair. "Do you have a mortar?"

Rowan looked quickly around. "Yeah..." He pulled a tall stone bowl from one of the lower cabinets. "The pestle's missing though."

"I don't need it," said Demetrius. He stood at the counter next to Rowan and poured the rice a little at a time into the stone bowl. He held his hand over it. In a series of small blasts that projected bits of grain into the air, the rice seemed to

crush itself.

It was the first time I'd ever seen magic used domestically.

"Tell me more about imbusion," I said as I turned the pig over the fire. "How does it work?"

Demetrius poured some more rice into the bowl. "It's like giving blood to an inanimate object." He held out his hand and continued the grind. "Except instead of liquid blood, it's the essence of Caromentis. The object becomes a passageway to a specific part of that world, like a mage finds these passageways inside himself to cast spells. But the object is static, bound only to the spell with which it was imbued, activated by the will of a living hand. Effectively, anyone can pretend to be a mage with enough of these objects. Or with one object tied to many different parts of Caromentis, but that's practically impossible."

I poked at the surface of the little animal on the fire. "You mean one object can't have multiple imbusions?"

Demetrius poured the rice flour into a larger wooden bowl. "The process of connecting an object to one part of Caromentis, thereby imbuing the object with a magical property, can drive a weaker mind mad." He pulled some eggs out of a preservative basin and broke them, whipping them inside a wooden cup. "Imbusion often takes days of extreme focus and concentration. It has been compared to bouts of OCD so intense it causes physical spasms. It's like threading a mile of string through the eye of a needle without touching the edges. And if you fail at any point, you have to start over." He poured everything into a baking pan. "Many mages who can do it refuse to do it. The ones who do will usually only work for master craftsmen, so that the effort can be part of something legendary."

"So, you can make swords that can make a man stronger?" said Rowan.

"That would require an imbuer who is also a bio mage, which I am not."

"Not that you'd admit it if you were," said Rowan.

Demetrius set the pan in a small oven over the fireplace. "Personally, I find bio magic childish."

Rowan smirked. "Why, because you don't know how to do it?"

I turned to Demetrius with concern. "Does imbusion cause the same kind of pain just to analyze an object?"

Demetrius seemed to recognize my concern, and seemed to appreciate it. "Not at all," he said, then clapped his hands of excess rice dust and returned to the armchair until supper was finished.

I liked this meal even better than the expensive lobster in Yamon Soul.

The piggie was crispy in some parts and juicy in others, lean and fatty in all the right places.

It must have been five years since I had stopped and taken considerable time to prepare an enjoyable meal, and then to actually sit down and enjoy it.

And even then, I didn't have friends to share it with.

And the rice cakes were divine, with or without the sugary dip that Demetrius prepared for them.

We ate with minimal conversation, then cleaned the kitchen together.

I was frustrated at how tired I felt once the food hit the spot, especially seeing as how my friends still had some energy left.

"You still have a lot from which to recover," Demetrius assured me. "A single night's rest, even two, isn't going to replenish what you've spent getting here."

I nodded and started for the longchair. "I guess I'll try to get some sleep then. Demetrius can have the bed tonight like I said, and I guess Rowan..."

"Sleep on your bed," Demetrius said with a friendly insistence. "A bad back is bad business for a blacksmith. Especially one who is just learning."

"Are you sure?"

He nodded.

"Okay." I truly was grateful for that. I was still so tired. I bid my friends goodnight, and looked forward to seeing them in the morning.

* * *

Galen walked into his bedroom and softly closed the door behind him.

Rowan came around after wiping dry the last of the bowls that they had used. He sat on the longchair across from Demetrius, whose attention was fixed stubbornly to the window view.

"Loved the rice cakes!" Rowan's voice was more jubilant than his relaxed smirk suggested.

"Something I learned from the Church," the monk replied.

There was silence between them as Rowan stared, trying to figure this man out, and Demetrius stared outwardly, thinking about who-knows-what.

"Did you live in Yamon Soul your whole life?" Rowan suddenly asked.

Demetrius flicked his eyes at him as though surprised by the question. "No."

He continued his gaze out the window.

Rowan turned his head to the same window, out of which the moon and galaxy ignited the far black ocean. He turned back and looked at the kitchen, which was still lit by the lanterns he hadn't thought to put out. The fireplace was filled with dying embers and the room had grown dark enough for the window to almost disappear, dominated by the sky.

Everything was so still, almost unnaturally quiet. A stroll to the water might be nice.

"I was born in Virko," said Demetrius.

Rowan looked at him. "You were born there? Your family must have been among the first settlers."

Demetrius lifted one leg and brought it up across the other. "Twenty-five years ago, my family was given a stipend from Soulhire to help Lord Hrelek build a city that would take Voulhire into a revolution of industry. I was two when that success story began."

Rowan cocked his brows with half-hearted reverence. "Your parents must have been smart people to have been called so early on."

Demetrius shook his head. "Just lucky and ambitious. They wanted to be rich. They got what they wanted and then, after twenty years, took off with the spoils of their investments. They live in Ballerhal now." He turned his head for a moment to the window. He sighed mildly, then turned his attention back into the room. "But before they left, they had the good sense to see that I was meant for more than the petty assurances of financial security. They saw that I could be something greater."

"So, they just dropped you off at church?"

"No. They gave me some gold and told me to find something worthy of what I am. I found the Church."

"So, it's not the Church you're loyal to," Rowan grinned skeptically. "It's your own contributions to it."

The monk's face and tone went eerily void of emotion. "You seem assured."

Rowan crossed his legs as well, and spread his arms across the head of the longchair. "You belong to the Church, but not as a priest. Being an imbuer gave you the opportunity to revel in all the benefits of the Church without the commitments."

For a fraction of a second, Demetrius seemed to regard Rowan's conclusion with amused admiration.

Then he said, "What about you, my fancy financier? Did your education and

training bind you in commitment to some bank in Soulhire? Because it seemed to me that just this very night you were practically on your knees begging 'Oh please don't make me go back to Soulhire, Herr Galen, please!'"

Rowan's smirk briefly hardened. "Don't let your boner poke you in the eye." Then his attention drifted toward Galen's door. "A lot of people would have wanted to see me beg. Not him, though."

"Men like him are rare," Demetrius affirmed. "Perhaps all men from his homeland are similar. But if that is the case, men such as he are not only rare, but a fast-dying breed."

Rowan's head turned back toward the monk. "I have to say, you seem a little dark to care about how kind he is."

Demetrius looked at Rowan from the shadow of his hood, the embers of the fire barely lighting his face. He stared for an unnatural length of time, Rowan wondering what sort of answer he was working on.

Then the monk just shrugged. "There's pragmatism to kindness: simply put, it makes the world easier. It makes the world safer. Logic dictates that men like Galen Bray are to be fostered and protected." Then his eyes seemed to twinkle in the ember light as he stared for another few seconds. "Or maybe it's a front."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't doubt his kindness is genuine, which is why I favor him. But even what is genuine can be forced, exaggerated, used to cover up something else. I sense that there is something else, but when I try to perceive it, that cloud only seems to thicken."

"Maybe you're wrong?" Rowan offered with a touch of condescension. "Maybe the brilliant monk is overthinking a simple guy?"

Demetrius gave him the side-eye. "Nobody is simple. Some people just like to pretend that they are." He held those dark eyes on Rowan for a length of time many would deem uncomfortable.

Rowan sank back into the chair, not allowing the smirk to leave his face. "So, are you gonna get started on that rock?"

The monk's eyes shifted back to the window. "The matter of my pace lies between myself and my employer."

King Wilhelm

All three balcony doors were open, and the cool night air swept regularly across the main room of his suite, where he sat beside a bright lantern and a bowl of dried meats and sweating cheeses, reading a book about a war between a kingdom of mice and a kingdom of dragons.

It was his third time reading it. He loved how the mice found clever ways to avoid destruction by the overwhelming enemy, and how the enemy was interesting, their motivations nebulous and multi-faceted, their kingdom dynamically cultured.

A heavy knock came to his door. He heard the voice of his adviser Dustin calling, "Sire!"

The king looked up from his book at the doors. "Come in."

The doors opened. Dustin entered. Lucius Nartik was with him.

And in between them was Midius Maido.

Wilhelm slid off his round reading glasses and set them aside with his book. "I thought Mianora wasn't allowed to travel this far up the palace." He stood and faced the chancellor. "Unless you're here to arrest me."

"Hillport was destroyed," said Maido.

Wilhelm glared at the chancellor. Then he glanced at his two advisers, waiting for the punch line, hoping it came sooner rather than later.

"It's true, Sire," said Dustin. "Investigators from the southern army arrived there this morning. Witnesses have all verified that it was the Riva Rohavi."

"Apparently Riva agreed with Lord Eldus's optimism," said Maido. "Unfortunately, Eldus allowed the town to flourish unprotected. They were taken completely by surprise."

The king's eyes sank to the floor, as though there were answers in the fine carpeting. Once more, he looked to Nartik and then to Dustin, asking, "What about Eldus?"

"Dead," Maido answered. "Along with his family."

Then the shock set in.

Wilhelm turned and walked to the couch. He didn't sit back down, just set his hands on top of it, leaning forward, looking down into the cushions. For a moment, he felt like he was going to be sick.

Presently, the king swallowed his emotions and turned to the three men before him with a stern countenance. "Are they sure it was Riva?"

"Yes, Sire," said Dustin with firm assurance. "There were many witnesses who confirmed this."

"How many witnesses?" said the king.

"Hundreds, my liege," said Nartik.

Then the king began to breathe a little easier. "Okay."

With a voice filled with dissatisfaction toward the king's demeanor, Maida said, "The Riva Rohavi is still very bad." He tilted his head. "I hope you are not planning to dismiss them."

"There will be a response..." was all the king could say.

"There is more." Maida stood with his chin pointed upward. "It seems that the people of Hillport have found out about your friend Meldorath, though we are unsure how." He raised a brow. "Perhaps your friend Eldus couldn't keep a secret. It shouldn't be difficult to see how the government is no longer popular in Hillport, thanks to all of your friends. As the town regroups, I imagine they will only harden further. In the meantime, the people of Hillport have requested to elect a lord from among their own. This they would like to do without your intercession. At all."

Wilhelm closed his eyes as a pang of shame gutted him across the lower belly. "So be it."

Maida continued, "They have also requested that their elected lord should take charge over the barricade at Lorcia's Isle."

The king sighed heavily, looking no one in the eye. "So long as Captain Barcaedi is not inhibited against his task."

Maida answered, "All due respect, Your Majesty, you can find a messenger to relay your conditions. I'm only here because of the seriousness of this matter."

Wilhelm nodded. "Are you finished?"

Maida stood frowning for another moment. "Yes, I'm done." Then he turned and left. But the two advisers remained.

The king stepped across his suite and onto the balcony to chug a barrel of fresh air. His advisers joined him.

"For what it's worth, Sire," said Dustin, "investigators were unable to confirm

the whereabouts of Eldus's son Marshus. It could be that the boy is still alive."

Wilhelm's hands pressed against the railing, his eyes turned upward to the stars. "Thank you, Dustin."

A meteor lashed nearly half the star-bright sky.

Finally, Nartik spoke up. "This attack by Riva was pathetic and everyone knows it. All they could take on was a village of fishermen. We'll track them down, and then Mianora will finally have a job to do."

Yes.

Mianora.

Riva.

Meldorath.

The king shook his head.

"The world was more beautiful when I was a child," he said, pausing for another breath of the fresh night. "It was beautiful when I was a young man. All of its evils and corruptions, I knew them well, yet still I loved the world. But there's a difference between knowing evil and seeing it, living in its midst, and sometimes, in a way, having to be party to it. It does things to the mind, leads one to doubt. As King of Voulhire for almost twenty-six years, I find myself surrounded by doubt."

Then the two men left, and the king remained, attached to the comforting dominion of the great sky above. He thought back to a night of similar beauty, yet similar lamentation, so many years ago, when the king stood on this very balcony, seeking the comfort of these innumerable stars, holding his baby prince in his arms.

"It's just you and me now, my son," said the newly-crowned king. "But we shall make new friends, and have new adventures, and we'll send better tidings across a scared and lonely world!"

Vice Chancellor Nightla

“You are quite certain?” Midius Maido asked.

“It took time,” said the vice chancellor, “and a series of vicarious consultations. But I’ve only since grown all the more certain.”

The chancellor and vice chancellor stood alone on the center platform of the council chamber, Mianora’s sprawling crown-in-hands banner swaying ever-so-gently in what little flow of air the room allowed. Oil-soaked wicks in balls of frosted glass sent flickering white lights that seemed to form slow, chaotic waves across the walls.

Midius raised his chin. “Is this because of Hillport?”

“Hillport helped,” Indara replied thoughtfully. “But I’ve come to realize how little I stand to gain by the risks I’m assuming here. Like you, chancellor, I never was in love with my position.”

“Then why did you stay for so long?” he asked. “It obviously wasn’t a bid for my position.”

“I stayed because your father asked me to. Several times, in fact—the last time being at the hour of his death. But what about you, chancellor, why did you stay? I know it’s not because you want to actually rule this nation.”

Maido raised a brow. “I stayed because my father asked me to.” He scoffed. “And here, I had once thought he was a sensible man.”

“He was,” she said. “Perhaps he saw a greater potential in you?”

“My father squandered my potential with his naïve expectations.” Maido turned a dark eye upon the Mianoran banner, an aspect of shadows and light. “At the very least, I would have had more time to write.”

Indara’s face turned sour. “Your philandering and games were what robbed you of your bard, not your responsibilities.”

A wind from outside sounded like a distant cry through Cathidien’s heavy walls. The banner above swung just a little further back and forth.

“I underestimated the Riva Rohavi,” said Maido. “I’ll need help with the

public.”

“We can see to that before I go,” Indara assured. “The king had ordered me to remove my scouts from Hillport’s region. It’s a loose means to turn opinion against him, but it’s a start.”

“He might soon have changed his mind about that,” said Maidu. “He suggested I build a fort in the area, only he delayed on the funding.”

Indara drew her mind out from contemplation and glared at him. “He was going to pay for it?”

“He might have.”

She closed her eyes. “He’s so fickle. Maybe he deserves the scorn after all.”

Maidu sneered in his own subtle way, mostly with his eyes. “I would never have suspected such hostile sentiments toward such a dear old friend.”

“You know I have no pity for the king, Midius Maidu. Or for you, for that matter. Or for myself. People suffer; ours is to deal with it, even if we have to make each other suffer in the process. The best and worst politicians always seem to understand but their chosen half of that truth.”

“You sound so certain, though,” said Maidu with a pointed grin. “I wonder what my father would have said about it.”

“In fact, it comforted him,” Indara replied with fond reflection. “Every time I said it.”

Maidu’s face went flat. “I would ante up my life that you wish he were here now.”

Indara, sensing the chancellor’s jealousy, regarded him with a mocking grin of her own, but the grin was quickly struck down by the inner workings of her heart. “There is much I’m glad your father did not live to see. So much. And perhaps so much more to come.”

“He enjoyed a powerful woman,” Maidu remarked. “What would he think to see you leave now? To whom will all the young Voulhirian girls aspire?”

She turned to leave. “Voulhirian women always find a way.”

He asked, “What about Voulhire itself?”

She stopped. There was something about the way he posed that question—a gleam of concern buried under sarcasm. Concern for himself, perhaps, but even that could be pressed into a grander service.

“I expect so,” she said, “if Chancellor Maidu finally reaches his growth spurt.”

Sarcasm returned to the younger man. “You dare imply the great Calum Maidu spoiled his only child?”

Indara approached him once more. “You are spoiled, Midius. Not because of

who your father was, or whatever power and wealth you've managed to retain. You're spoiled because you have never been confronted by an ambitious Voulhirian woman. For your sake, I pray you never are."

I am Alabaster

In another part of Voulhire's capital, in a lonesome prison far from the center of it all, an old man sat in his cell. He had already been facing at least a good six months for repeated offenses of public indecency, but then it turned out he was a practicing biomage. That would have been bad enough if he hadn't used the forbidden power to violate a judge.

The guards assigned to his block were under advisement to be nice, especially those who were not trained in magic or countermagic, but the wardens and lieutenants were all competent mages, and the sergeants were highly skilled in countermagic.

As for the sad old prisoner, this homeless fall from grace was still awaiting trial, and probably would be for a long time. No lawyer wanted to defend him and, even with the presence of a hundred mageguards, no judge or jury could bear the thought of a mere attempt to touch them with biomagic.

No respectable Voulhirian wanted anything to do with a practicing biomage. It was one matter upon which the Church and the state were locked in perfect agreement. Even doctors were forbidden from employing it. Healers had to rely on other forms of magic to fight infections, close wounds and replenish blood cells. Many went so far as to argue that medical biomagic would not be much more effective than these other means anyway; it was certainly not worth the risk of encouraging a biomage to reach his full potential.

There were rumors that some could even reanimate the dead. Hyperbole or not, this white and withered mage did nothing to ease the long-reviled perspective.

A lofty man approached his cell from the darkened depths of the hall before him. He was not like the other doorman who lurked about the dungeon, turning keys and sliding meal trays; this was a man of purpose, a man of intelligence and focus, and a power not handed to him by some royal superior, but by nature. Alabaster was surprised to see Siden visit him in this way, instead of bending

space to appear at his side in the lonely cell. The great warrior came to the bars with his claymore on his back, a gift from his old order, which he had not polished since leaving it. He resented leaving the Chaletherian Knights, but held firm to his decision. Perhaps it was more accurate to say that he hated *having* to choose. But whom did he blame more, the old master or the new?

"We really have to stop meeting like this, big one," said the old prisoner with a wicked grin.

"It is done," Siden replied with his subdued, intelligent tone.

"I expected so. And I suppose his lordship is ready to grace me with a personal audience now?"

"He values your counsel more than he lets on," said Siden, then his face softened. "But he does let on a little, albeit behind your back."

"He is as independent as you and I," Alabaster mused. "Though I wonder if he enjoys his loneliness as much as we do."

"Perhaps when he's had the opportunity to contrive his own loneliness, instead of having it contrived for him by some righteous monarch."

"I suppose we'll see." Alabaster sighed. "Tell him I'll begin my journey to Hillport forthwith."

Even the subtle, shadowed countenance of Siden betrayed confusion. "You know that I can take you there at once."

The old man nodded. "I would make my own way to him, as he once did me. Besides," that wicked grin returned as he traced his sights about the prison, "you wouldn't rob me of my fun?"

With that, Siden was gone.

A mageguard sergeant was passing through the cellblock, casually checking in on the few criminals they had there that night, when the old biomage called out; "Well, it sure as bloody hell took you long enough!"

The guard stopped, turned, and backstepped toward the old man's cell.

"No, I don't need a whole production just to break out of jail!"

The guard stood over the biomage, who was seated on the stone floor, rocking back and forth.

Clearly, the turnkey must have thought, the old man was trying to feign senility again, but the guard did not sneer at the attempt, for he had been warned, as all the others had, that this man can make people shit themselves. Thus, the guard turned away and returned to his patrol.

"Wait, sergeant," the old man called. "Please come back."

The sergeant had no idea if the old man was talking to him, or if he was just

continuing his ramble. But heeding the many warnings against rudeness, he stepped once again to the old man's cell.

The old man was on his feet, his hands on the bars, smiling with big, veiny eyes at the guard.

It was an almost startling image, but the guard maintained his composure.

He asked the old man, "Is there something you need?"

Still smiling, the old man shook his head slowly. "Not in a very long time, sergeant. It is *I* who am needed now."

The sergeant felt an intense, almost painful spasm in his right arm. He held it with his left hand. Then his right hand jerked toward his keys.

He looked up at the old man.

The old man's sharp smile hadn't changed.

The sergeant tried to run, but found that he couldn't turn his neck an inch without a tremendous pain running down his spine. He couldn't even move.

His right hand found its way to his keys.

His vision remained involuntarily locked on the buggy eyes of the old man. Those twitching, bulging white orbs dominated his vision and commanded his every impulse. Even his heart didn't beat any faster than normal in spite of how scared he was.

He felt the key in his hand glide through the lock.

The barred door opened and the old man stepped out. He looked at the sergeant. "You're lucky. You were polite. Maybe it's because you knew from the start you have no power. Then your intellect has saved you." His bug eyes shifted down the hall. "Your friend over at the front desk?" He blinked slowly as his eyes returned to the frightened sergeant. "Not so smart."

The old man then casually stepped away.

Ten more minutes would pass before the stiffening pain faded enough for the guard to start to move again. He immediately contacted the warden.