

Chapter 0: A Slave Called Dog

Dog knew he had to hurt them. There was no escaping it. If he did not, all of them would suffer a harsher fate. But Dog had learned to beat mercifully, to use his immense strength to bruise and not break. He had learned the places on a body that would produce the screams his young master demanded, yet not permanently maim. He had learned this through trial and error.

There were three of them. They were around the same age as his master, barely sprouting their first features of adulthood, but common folk. Their skin was smeared with grime and their eyes held the hungry look of those at the back of the food line. Still, they probably ate better than Dog could ever hope for. He tried to use that to push past their look of resigned despair.

"Dog!" His young master barked. "What are you waiting for? A fucking invitation?"

He stepped forward, looming over them. Dog had always been larger than the other children growing up, and now he towered above even the tallest adult in the village. A lifetime of hard, endless labour had given him a powerful frame that rippled with muscle. It was, as his master often reminded him, the only reason they hadn't thrown him into the Hole long ago.

The first two children knew better than to run. Dog's broad hand closed around the first's skull easily and threw him into the second, sending both flying into the mud with a yell. The third's resolve to merely accept the punishment failed, and she turned to flee. Dog knew if she escaped this beating, the next would be delivered by his master Trio, who held no such qualms about the permanency of his work. With two steps of his mighty stride, Dog grabbed the back of the fleeing girl's ragged shirt and flung her backwards into the scrabbling pile of the other two.

With patience and precision, Dog crouched over the mound of muddy

limbs and went to work, landing blow after blow into the soft flesh around their thighs, trying to hit their ribs in a way that as many as possible took the load, and alternating between the yelping figures. The children wailed and screamed underneath him as he worked, but he did not hear the snapping of bone or draw blood.

Trio giggled in the background, egging Dog on. "That'll show you!" He kept yelling. "Get 'em, Dog!" The children had not moved out of Trio's path quickly enough - or really, Trio was just bored and basking in his father's glory.

After a while, Dog stood to his full height. The children did not move beneath him, groaning into the mud and curling up to protect their bodies. Dog looked to his master, to see if he was sated. Trio was grinning from ear to ear and strode over to deliver a few of his kicks of his own.

"Fucking move aside the next time you see me, you hear?" He shouted at them. "Come, Dog."

His master entertained, Dog looked down one last time. He had to look away again as the children stared back up in horror. Glad it was over, he followed Trio as he strode away. He did not let his master see his tears.

Trio was in a cheerful mood as he continued his journey through the street, his slave in tow. "You're a monster, Dog! How they cried and begged for their whore mothers. That'll show them, thinking they own the place, talking back to me in my town." He knew only to smile and nod in a suitable mimicry of agreement.

Prehran was bustling today, in preparation for the festival. Freeman from all over the Ring had travelled days to celebrate the mighty King's twentieth year of growing power, bringing slaves and metal and artefacts to pay their homage. Trio cut through a narrow side street into Temple Square, and Dog had to turn sideways to squeeze his large frame past some people coming from the other direction.

Temple Square was the epicentre of the activity. Dog was thankful that he could see over the heads of the crowd to track his master in front of him, as leaving him unattended was yet another act that would bring punishment. Dog had learned to be a good slave and avoid most discipline. He supposed he didn't know how to be anything else. And there was no avoiding the punishments that were merely to remind him of his place.

He was keeping his eyes locked on the young master in front of him as he weaved amongst the crowd when he felt something crash into his side. Unmoved, he looked down at a woman wearing fine clothes and sparkling jewels, sitting in the dirt of the square. She looked up at him in terror at first, but when she saw the slave-mark branded upon his forehead the fear transformed into immediate anger. She swatted away his hand as he silently tried to help her back up.

"I should have your balls cut off for that," she sneered at him as she brushed the dust from her clothes. "Dirty brute, not watching where you're going. And as big as you are?" She paused, obviously waiting for him to speak. Dog put his hands in an open palm against his heart and laid them out to hear, bowing his head. "What, can't you even say sorry? Oh you'll lose more than your balls for this." The woman's anger was growing.

Dog desperately looked around for his master, but in the distraction he had lost sight of him in the thronging crowd. A few figures had stopped to look at the spectacle. The woman snapped her fingers to draw his gaze back to her. "Where is your master? I want to talk to them about this insubordination."

It was a word that Dog had not heard before, but he figured it probably meant misbehaviour. He pulled down his neckerKing and pointed at the deep scar that ran from ear to ear. They had told him that he had been hanged when his parents were killed by bandits, found and rescued from certain death by the great King Rakkar and accepted into his household. It had left him unable to make anything more than an unformed rasp. The woman seemed to realise its implication.

"Ah, so you are dumb as well as stupid. Don't think that will save you from learning this lesson." She reached up towards his face, but her small frame couldn't quite reach. She frowned, and Dog knew well enough to lean down so she could grab his ear and twist painfully. He let out a small grunt. "Ah, it can make a noise!" She twisted again and he grunted as much to satisfy her as to process the pain. "Come!"

She dragged the stooping Dog across the square, a path opening up in front of her and the hulking slave. "Who is this man's master!" She shouted every few metres. Dog thought his ear was about to tear off and he blinked away tears as he stumbled forward, desperately trying not to knock over the woman again. Finally, at the front of the steps of the Temple of Hermet, Trio's voice rang out.

"You there! What are you doing with my Dog?" He emerged from the crowd, embodying a little lord but recognising the finery of the woman. "He is mine to discipline, not yours. Dog, here!"

Dog tore himself away from the reluctant grasp of the woman, who gave his ear one last painful tug. He went to his master, repeating the same sign for apology, and lent down out of habit to receive a hard smack on the side of the head that made his already sore ear scream.

"Your dumb brute knocked me over! Can't watch where it's going. And now I have to return to my lodgings to change out of this filth." The woman raised her dress in a clenched fist. Dog couldn't see any dirt left on it.

"And you are?" Trio asked. It was an essential question for the young lord. It told him exactly how little he needed to care.

The woman paused her scorn to reluctantly curtsy. "Lady Ureal, my Lord. From Iraqus."

Trio grinned with his familiar sadistic glee. "Iraqus... Iraqus..." he feigned, thumbing his chin. "Ah yes, that quaint little backwater. Say, don't you owe my father his taxes?"

Lady Ureal grimaced. "Your father... raised those taxes beyond our ability to pay them. As a pretext to take whatever he wanted from my halls. And he has. We have paid."

"No, no. I think he was talking about raising them again, actually. And if you owe him, then it follows that you owe me." He walked forward with every pause, and for the first time Lady Ureal seemed to cower.

"Please, just..." She looked at Dog with hate. "Discipline your man. It can't be careening into people, knocking them over. It's not proper. If you do not have the time or inclination, send him to us."

"Ah yes, your prestigious academy." Dog had heard of it. A place to make a common slave worthy of serving nobility. If you came back, that is. "Well I'll consider it. Have a lovely festival, Lady Ureal," Trio mocked.

Dismissed, the woman huffed and disappeared into the crowd. The few who had looked on the exchange tittered away.

Trio turned to Dog. "Here!" He pointed at the ground. Dog quickly sat in a squat at that exact location and bowed his head. "You don't go wandering off, you hear me?" He smacked Dog's head again. "You're lucky that was so fun. Now come on. We've not got long before it all starts."

They started towards the Temple of the All Father, the largest of the nine that lay at the square's focal point. Dog flicked his eyes upwards as they walked to take in the Ring above them, looking for Iraqus.

The Ring stretched upwards on either side, the thin loop upon which the world sat. At its centre the Skyflower shone its white light onto them, its black petals slightly obscuring the afternoon twilight. Iraqus was a faint spot of grey a few fingers up into the sky that would have been easily missed amongst the forest that coloured that part of the ring a dark green. Dog had never left Pahren, but he studied the maps carved on the walls of the Feast Hall every day while he kept his master's glass full, dreaming of the far off places in the

sky where countless people led their own lives.

Trio's whistle brought his attention to his master, now starting up the steps of the great Temple. "Go fetch my sister. Mother said she knew how to fasten this damned belt." He struggled with the ornate buckle, a hawk representing the war god Mares. The little lord fancied himself a conqueror like his father. Dog dutifully bounded up the steps after Trio, but left him at the tall door to jog around the back. He ran his calloused hand along the intricately detailed metalwork of the Temple's walls as he went.

The back of the Temple was a wooden extension to the eternal metallic walls at its centre, though still built with great care and craftsmanship. Workers filled the doorway, carrying jugs of honeywater and loaves of bread inside. With practised steps and bowed heads, they parted just enough for the huge man to edge through the door frame.

Aresa was standing on a chair in the middle of the chaos, shouting directions. Dedications to the All Father lay piled in every corner in neat stacks, pots of spices and grain, wine, all the luxuries the Fifth Octant could produce. Dog edged carefully through the space, being careful not to knock over any of the precarious piles. Aresa was shouting in some other direction about needing more ginger, so Dog lightly tugged her cuff. She turned around, and smiled down at him. "Yes, Dog?"

He made an action around his waist as if buckling a belt, then touched the top of his hand to the underside of his chin, the sign he used to represent his master. Aresa sighed. "Like I don't have enough on my hands right now. Can't you get him in here?"

Dog signed an apology and Aresa begrudgingly stepped down, using him to support her. The workers cleared a path and she strode out, Dog in tow. He didn't dislike Aresa. She at least didn't think he was stupid. But like all lords, she was aware of her power and used it as second nature. As they walked around the Temple walls, she stopped. "Dog, come here."

He turned to see the young woman leaning up against the wall, looking at

him with a smirk. Obediently, he went to her, and she ran a finger up his chest. He took a panicked glance around, but nobody could see them here despite the sound of the bustling square still being clearly audible.

"Good Dog." She whispered, looking at his broad chest, her breath shallow. Her finger traced up to his collar, then back down between his shirt, exposing the thick hair underneath. "You know, if you took me to the Bed, my child would be able to talk." The finger kept on wandering downwards, and Dog shivered as Aresa's palm squeezed his groin. "And they would be as big as you... A mighty fighter, I'd bet. Hermet's Temple is just next door. We could sneak in, and see if the Bed blesses us?"

He continued to count the seconds he had been away from his master in his head. He had been gone for three minutes. Trio would likely punish him if he took more than five. He knew that this feeling in his body was what people took to the Temple of Hermet, to try their luck on the Bed and see if the god of fertility deigned them worthy of offspring. But for a slave to use the Bed, or to enter any Temple uninvited, was a death sentence, and not the kind with funeral rites to ensure Vishnay greeted you and took you to the Skyflower. Trio insisted that slaves did not go to the Skyflower, even with the proper rites. Dog held the hope that there were no slaves amongst the All Father.

"Or..." Aresa whispered up at him. "Maybe just a practice run?"

Dog finally turned away. To defy her was a safer option than risk someone coming around and seeing her hand against him. She laughed, savouring the feeling of holding his life in her hands. A part of him knew what she wanted and craved it. But another - the part that drove him - knew only survival. He held out his arm, inviting Aresa to walk in front. She cackled her way around the side of the Temple. These games she played were not new, though they had certainly escalated as she had grown into a woman. At least it was something different to the cruelty he saw from everyone else.

With Aresa distracting Trio on the steps, Dog looked at the crowd slowly shuffling into the Temple. Some faces he recognised, but many he did not. King Rakkar had certainly risen in his standing to attract such a wide array of

celebrants. Freeman and lords wearing fine linen and glittering metal ornaments filed by, and while they were well-practised at ignoring slaves, many could not stop gaping a little at Dog's figure poking so obviously above the heads of everyone else.

Liza, Rakkar's wife and mother of his master, glided up the steps and began to chat with her children. A slave called Jerax hovered at her shoulder, holding the tail of her long dress in a bundle. He shot a look over at Dog, grabbing at his earlobe. Dog touched his nose. It was their silent language, one that they had evolved over many years of sharing the same house. It meant How are you? - Surviving. Jerax, like Dog, was unpopular amongst the other slaves within the King's house. They took his haughtiness and distinguished air for a sense of superiority when Dog knew it was the only quality that kept him by Lady Liza's side and in her good favour. Everyone did what they had to, and that was all they could do.

A bell rang out from within the Temple, rung by the Temple Master to begin the ceremony. The family turned without a word and began their way inside, Jerax unspooling the dress as Liza moved away. As the line of freemen turned into a trickle and then nothing, the great doors slowly swung shut, leaving Dog and the others waiting on the steps. The Skyflower was closing above them, its petals ensconcing the burning light inside, sending the square into twilight. Figures wandered from lamp to lamp with torches, projecting a flickering illumination onto the nine temples that formed its perimeter.

The sound of cheerful music echoed a little out of the Temple and to the steps. It was cool now, and Dog shivered a little through his thin clothes. Jerax sidled over. "Hello, friend." He never called him Dog. He pulled a gourd out of his robe and uncorked it with a pop, smiling up at Dog. "A little something to keep us warm."

They passed the gourd surreptitiously while Jerax chatted away in a whisper.

"Your master put you to work today?" He pointed at Dog's fists. Dog looked down at them. The knuckles were red, and a smear of dirt still lay on

his index finger. He rubbed them, and nodded to Jerax.

"Who?"

Dog placed his flat hand against his stomach at the height of the children, then signed for three.

"Poor kids. How did it go?"

Dog finished his swig from the gourd with a grimace. The honeywater was a strong brew that left his mouth burning. He shrugged and spread his hands. He mimed the snapping of his arm and negated it with a swipe.

"Well, good job. It could have gone worse."

Dog sighed and pushed his left hand with his right, then tapped it to his brow, then waved it with fingers spread. Later, there was trouble with a lord.

"No good. Lots of toes to step on at festival time. Punishment?"

He waved his hand above his shoulder and repeated the pushing gesture. Not yet.

"Well, take an extra swig on me." Dog did so.

The Skyflower was almost completely closed now with only a thin line of light escaping the embrace of the black petals. An audible toast came from the closed halls - 'Glory To Rakkar, Ruler of the Fifth Octant!'. The stars had begun to shine on either side of the Ring above. The faint lights of distant villages and towns shone faintly. Jerax joined his gaze upwards.

"Where are you visiting today?" It was a conversation they'd had a hundred times. Every time, Dog pointed to a different place. This time, he thought for a moment and chose a spot as far away as possible from Iraqus.

Jerax moved his head to Dog's shoulder to see where he was pointing. "There? There's nothing there though. Just jungle, I think, and a few Dead Cities. Why? Are you thinking of becoming a treasure hunter?"

Dog chuckled with a rasping series of grunts and nodded.

"One of the greats, I imagine. Slaughtering the legions of metalbeasts that will try to rip you limb from limb. Pillaging the great tombs of the Ancients for magical artefacts while avoiding their ingenious traps. I've heard that some have even found Temples, enormous things that would put ours to shame. In a Dead City? Imagine that. Even our oldest ancestors knew the Gods. Who knows, you might find the God of Cities herself wandering those streets and towers."

Dog doubted that Polis would enjoy such a ruin, considering that the stories portrayed her as a God who loved community, kinship, and bustling streets. He didn't know how to sign that, so he just shrugged. Jerax laughed in a whisper.

It was only because they were both gazing at the sky that they saw the Devil Lights before anyone else. They were a kind of star, Dog supposed, that sat motionless and mostly dormant, spaced out in regular intervals along both edges of the Ring. But sometimes, they glowed with a frightening pulse that meant danger. It had happened only once in Dog's youth. That time, a few minutes after the lights began, a huge wall of water had roared down Prehran's stream, breaking its banks and flooding a third of the village. Twenty people had been carried away and lost in the floodwaters, their bloated corpses washing up on the banks far downstream. Another ten slaves had been thrown into the Hole to appease the water god Neptu.

And now, above them, they bloomed into life before dulling back to nothing, sending a faint wave of red light over the Ring. Two pulses were enough for everyone still out in the square to look upwards, and three sparked the panic. Jerax swore and started up the steps. Shouts went up in the village all around them. The Temple doors creaked open a little, as someone checked to see what the commotion was. The music stopped, and the doors

quickly burst open as the crowd streamed out.

"Please, there's no need to panic!" Dog head Liza shouting from within the Temple. It slowed nobody as they streamed past Dog and Jerax and out into the square, some breaking into and indignant jog in their finery. Dog didn't know what they were running from. Nobody knew what the Devil Lights would bring. He looked for his master and grabbed him out of the crowd.

Trio seemed relieved to be in the grip of his protector. "Good Dog. Ceremonies over, I guess. Hell of an anniversary."

Chapter 1: Devil Lights

Dog could see that King Rakkar was losing his calm. The celebration of his success in bringing this octant of the Ring under his thumb had barely begun before the Devil Lights had cut it short. He had sent his war-slaves to fetch the priests, and even dragged a few by the cuff into his great house."

"Fucking brilliant. A slap in the face from the Gods!" he snarled at them all. They were in the war room, on the third floor of the King's House. It was a circular construction built for strategic meetings among his lieutenants. Large glass windows looked out onto the valley below and the Ring curving up to meet itself.

Dog stood against the wall behind his seated master. The whole family and every priest had been assembled, with an entourage of attendants filling the room.

"What does it bring!" Rakkar shouted out the window at the glittering arc of flashing red. He flung himself around and pointed an accusatory finger at the priests. "Well? What do I keep you all alive for?" He focused on the shaking Priest of Neptu. "The last Devil Lights were your problem. That flood took me years to recover from! Have you failed me as completely as your predecessor did?"

The priest stammered a response. "I... I have seen no signs of anger from Neptu. I have kept my watch of the wells around the village. All run clean, with no change in depth."

Rakkar turned his mercurial fury to the priest of Terra. "And you, dirt-fucker? Our crops are shit this year." He strode to the bowl of fruits that lay at the centre of the war-table and picked up an apple. He took a bite and spat it at the priest, sending a shower of pieces and juice over her. "Tastes like shit. I poured five sacks of metal into the Hole for you. Where's my return?"

The robed woman was sweating visibly. "I am confident that with the proper rites and sacrifices, Terra will be appeased this year."

"Have you considered-" the priest of Hermet began, but she stopped herself.

Rakkar was not about to let it go. "No," he barked, "finish the thought!"

"Well, the Devil Lights could mean disaster anywhere on the Ring. Maybe a god is displeased with someone else?"

Rakkar threw his head back and laughed. "Hah! No. The timing is too close. We had just begun to celebrate. They mock me. And that means one of you fuckers is not pulling your weight."

"Are we safe up here? From another flood?" the priest of Seshat wondered.

"Nobody is safe from the Gods," shot back another.

"None of you are safe from me!" the chief shouted. "I will personally throw each and every one of you into the Hole if that is what it takes to appease them."

As if brought on by those words, Dog felt a faint rumbling up from the floor into his boots. He almost missed it at first, but it quickly grew into a vibration humming up his shins. He looked around to see if anyone else could feel it and saw Lady Liza's unmistakable fear written across her face.

"Rakkar!" She shrieked.

"It's a tremor!" someone yelled. Behind the vibration came a slowly rising whine that seemed to come from every direction and stung Dog's ears. The vibration rose and rose in pitch and frequency before it suddenly changed into a slower and harder oscillation, the whole room shaking precariously far up on the third floor of the King's house. Dog, for the second time that night,

grabbed his young master by the cuff and shoved him into his barrel chest, crouching down to curl around the squealing boy.

"Get downstairs!" Dog heard Rakkar shout against the cacophony of groaning wood and ethereal whine, and there was a scramble for the narrow stairwell. The priest of Neptu stumbled and crashed down the stairs into two others, sending them all sprawling and slowing the egress of the others. The crashing and shaking did not cease, and Dog could hear the strain on the wooden structure that encompassed them all.

With the stairs slowly decongesting the panicking priests, their handlers desperately ushering them down the quaking steps, Rakkar jumping his way over the top of them with a leap that spoke to his early days of battle, and Jerax hauling a flailing Liza towards it, Dog knew it was time to move. The freemen elite were lazy to the point of suicidality, even in crisis. They let their slaves move them, succumbing to panic with a learned helplessness they knew would be countered by their property's urgency.

The tremor had continued unabated, and the room began to warp as the cross-beam at its heart failed where it met the outer frame. Trio had been screaming orders at him throughout, but Dog did not have time for his master's arrogance. He was amongst the last to the stairwell, still hugging the struggling master to his chest in a bear hug, when he heard a cracking. Glancing up, he had only a moment to register the falling cross-beam directly above him.

Dog didn't know he could think as fast as he did in that next moment, aware of the deadly mass now falling upon them. His weight was on the wrong footing to throw himself forward with the boy towards the stairs. He could shield the boy, but the beam would crush his body like a dry leaf. Instead, he threw the boy away from him as hard as he could, towards the scream of Lady Liza standing at the cusp of the stairs, and in doing so pushed himself backward.

He felt the rush of wind as the beam passed in front of him, felt himself falling backwards as the floor gave way, felt the clay tiles of the roof crashing

into him like a thousand fist blows, and finally after a moment of weightlessness a thundering hammer below him that took all of his momenta and transformed into a crushing blow across his ribs that sent fire searing through his nerves.

There was nothing but darkness and pain and cacophony amongst his newfound tomb. He lay on his back, limbs splayed, with an immense crush of timber and tile pressing down on his chest. His mouth was uncovered, but he still passed out a little from the pressure upon him, unable to draw a full breath from the weight of the debris. The tremor changed once again in frequency, the violent shaking replaced by the humming buzz that made sawdust and splinters rain down onto Dog's face. And then it was gone, and Dog could hear nothing.

This was it, he thought to himself when he was finally able to gasp enough breath to bring his consciousness back. This was the end of his miserable existence. Perhaps this was a mercy from the gods. A way out of this cage and into the loving embrace of the All Father. And he could see it - a shining point of light in the distance, growing brighter by the moment. The Skyflower, welcoming him home. He wouldn't need to hurt anyone there.

But then the point of light became a gap, and dust streamed down from it onto his face. He coughed, and the light temporarily disappeared. He heard a shout - "Someone's here!" - and the sound of scrambling movement. The pressure upon him shifted and lessened as whoever was above struggled to remove the collapsed structure from above him. It was bittersweet. The Ring still held Dog close, and it seemed the gods were not done with him yet.

The weight mostly lessened, Dog could finally catch a full breath, and it sent him into a coughing fit. He heard once again the voices from above. "Who's in there? We're coming for you, hold on!"

After a few minutes of digging from above and coughing from below, most of the weight came off him. The gap above him grew enough to see an open sky above him twinkling with stars, and the flickering of torchlight from the labourers. Then, King Rakkar's head came into view staring down at him

through it.

"It's just the Dog!" He shouted at the labourers. "Leave him, find my son!"

The sound of scrambling stopped, and whatever they had been moving off his leg crashed back down upon it, pushing an involuntary grunt out of Dog. Rakkar looked back down at him through the gap in debris with a look of contempt.

"You'd better get out here and start looking for your master, Dog. And you'd better pray to the gods that he doesn't have a scratch on him." And with that, he was gone, and only the stars remained.

Dog wiggled his body, and his broken ribs sent a fire coursing through his body. His vision blurred with tears he could not wipe away. But he could move more than he could have before. Inch by inch, Dog wiggled his frame back and forth, trying to create enough space to bring his arms up and push the remaining debris off him. Finally, after passing out again from the pain from his ribs, he managed to grip a piece of wood lying across his stomach and push. It rose a little, but it supported yet more debris above it and Dog did not have the leverage to push hard enough. He wiggled his body down, mouth agape in a silent scream of pain. There his arm could bend enough to fully utilise his muscles. He took a deep breath and tensed his diaphragm, and pushed with all his might.

The remaining wreckage came crashing off him, toppling over the side of the building and down onto the ground below. He was out, and the cool night air felt like a blissful caress on his wet cheeks. He closed his eyes and cried again, but not from the pain. He had been so close to accepting his end, had felt so close to the freedom that the Skyflower promised after one shed their mortal flesh. But now he was alive once again, and he realised how much he wanted to stay that way. It was a strangely peaceful realisation.

His peace did not last for long. He felt a kick in his side and looked up at the Priest of Vishnay above him. "Well, slave, it looks like Vishnay has spared you. But I will have him cast your soul into the stars to forever wander if you

don't get the fuck up and help."

Dog forced himself up onto his elbows, and looked around. It took him a moment to realise he was on the second floor. He must have fallen through when the floor above collapsed. It was an almost unrecognisable wreckage of what had previously been the King's study, strewn with the debris of the room above. It also looked like an external wall had collapsed, and Dog could look out onto Prehran. A few fires raged in the night, casting the streets into grim illumination. Dark figures rushed along the streets in a panic, many carrying buckets or the injured or just wandering in a dazed shock. Many buildings had collapsed. Temple Square stood out like never before in Dog's lifetime, the ancient metal buildings unaffected by the retribution of the gods. The Devil Lights now lay dormant, their warning delivered.

The priest had disappeared by the time Dog turned his gaze back up to look for him, and Jerax was in her place. He cried out when he saw Dog and crouched down to hug him. Dog groaned as his ribs were touched and Jerax moved back.

"I'm so glad to see you, my friend. I thought you..." Dog could see Jerax's tears and red eyes. "Come, let me help you." Jerax began pushing the remaining debris off, and after a moment helped Dog slowly to his feet. Dog could not put too much weight on the man, but he doubted he could have stood alone.

He could see figures picking through the rubble. A few of the Priests stood dumbfounded, their fine robes tattered and dusty. King Rakkar looked possessed in his tearing at the debris, flinging splinters of wood and tile off a large pile that lay next to where the stairwell had once stood. "Trio!" he yelled into the pile. "Trio! He's here, I see him!"

The weight of the situation hit Dog. If his master had been killed under his watch, his life was forfeit. He pushed past the unsteady Jerax, finding his balance again, and went to the pile. He could see his young master's forearm poking out, and grabbed the large piece of roof that Rakkar was currently struggling with. Lady Liza ran over, the bottom of her dress filthy from

scrambling around, and grabbed her son's hand tightly. The King did not acknowledge him as they hauled the section away to reveal the young boy below. Dog's back and ribs screamed as he lifted and he let out a gravelly wail.

His master lay still, unmoving as his parents fell upon him in grief. But Dog saw his chest rising and falling, though subtly. "My son, my son..." the King sobbed as he held him in his arms. His mother, tears streaming down her face, stroked his face. It looked like he was sleeping.

"Get him to the Bed!" Rakkar roared. He tried to lift the boy, but his knee gave way beneath him. He looked at Dog. "Dog! Bed, take, now."

The slave had no choice but to force himself through the pain as he lifted the boy into a cradle in his arms. He was heavy, almost a man and filling out like his father, but Dog was strong. His parents fawned around him as Dog carried him down the intact stairs to the ground floor.

The remaining priests sat in a huddle, peering over at the King in fear. The priest of Terra fell to the ground in front of Rakkar, clutching at his pants and begging. "Please, King Rakkar, please--"

But the King only looked coldly down at the pitiful figure. "You have angered Terra." It was all he said. He nodded at a warslave that stood by the door, and in moments the priest was being dragged, sobbing but resigned, into another room.

On the street, freemen of the village sounded joyful cheers at seeing their King alive, followed by cries of grief at seeing his heir struck down and unresponsive. Some touched his body as Dog passed, on his way back to the Temple Square, now to the Temple of Hermet and the Bed that lay inside. The Priest of Hermet appeared at his shoulder, humming chants and making signs with their hands over his master.

Dog's breath was ragged when he reached the Temple steps. He was struggling to hold the boy, his arms slicked with sweat. The priest rushed

ahead to swing the doors open and reveal the Bed inside. Dog gently laid Trio's limp body upon it. The Bed, like all Beds, was a smooth, rounded platform made of translucent white stone. No matter how bitter the cold was outside, the stone of the Bed was always warm. It was adorned with blankets and cushions, and nestled within a canopy of orange curtains that slipped down from above.

The priest, Rakkar and Liza collapsed on their knees in front of the bed and threw themselves at its mercy. If Hermet chose, the Bed could heal as well as create life. When a Bed chose to bestow a gift upon its occupants, it glowed with a warm yellow light. Dog dropped to his knees as much out of exhaustion as reverence. He repeated prayers to Hermet in his head and begged her to see that glow.

But there was nothing. If the Bed healed, it did so quickly.

After a few minutes, when it became obvious that Hermet had scorned their child, Rakkar fell backwards and screamed at the sky. "Did I wrong you!"

Lady Liza rose to her feet. She seemed strangely calm. She looked at the priest below her. "We're not giving up. Thirty slaves. Twenty bags. Into the Hole, as soon as the Skyflower opens. Prepare it."

The priest nodded feverishly.

Dog felt his blood run cold when she looked at him. Her eyes looked hollow.

"And the Dog."

Chapter 2: The Hole

The walk to the Hole gave Dog plenty of time to curse himself. A trickle of blood ran down his forehead from the gash on his brow. He had tried to run, of course. The moment it became clear that he was already dead, he turned and ran right into the baton of one of Rakkar's lieutenants. He had regained consciousness bound and bruised and been forced to march.

Thirty-one miserable souls marched in front of him, shackled to the same chain that ran up the group. Thirty slaves, chosen by lottery from the town registrar, and the former Priest of Terra, now stripped of her holy robes. At the front, the family minus his master led the group, surrounded by the other priests and their entourage.

Above, a thin slice of light pierced through the black petals of the Skyflower. Dawn was here.

Dog felt a sharp jab in his back. "Pick it up!" It was the lieutenant that had clubbed him, this time stabbing at him with a spear. Behind him was a group of soldiers and slaves hauling bags of precious refined metal.

He had accepted death once today, Dog thought. He did not want to die now. The Hole was where all sacrifices to the gods were brought and thrown in for their pleasure. To be a slave sacrificed in the Hole was to pledge everlasting service to that god. There would be no freedom in the Skyflower for Dog if he let that happen.

But this was a practised ceremony, performed many times and perfected to minimise the risk that a sacrifice would feel as Dog felt. Their legs and hands were shackled, and the central chain that connected them all was also attached to the belt of the soldiers behind. Dog couldn't shift that weight. Perhaps there truly was no way out.

It appeared in front of them in an instant as they rounded the curve. The Hole was unassuming. No Temple was ever built on one, no furnishing or decoration beyond the worn jetty that poked out a few metres into its maw. It was large enough for three men as tall as Dog to lie lengthwise upon it, a smooth round shaft of metal that narrowed and disappeared into the Underworld. There was no bottom, nor return.

Dog was poked and prodded to take his place alongside the others at its edge. The chain was detached from the belts of the soldiers and wrapped around the metal nail that was embedded deep into the earth. Dog couldn't breathe. He had seen this ceremony from the other side countless times. He knew what was coming. A few sobs could be heard from the line.

The warmth of the Skyflower fell upon him as its petals opened fully. He looked up at it, squinting, then at the congregation that had formed a semicircle around him. It looked like most of the village was watching from a hill in the distance. Rakkar was busy ordering people around. Lady Liza met his gaze with no recognition. Aresa could not look at him.

One by one, pairs of soldiers carried the heavy bags of metal to the jetty. They swung them back and forth once or twice before letting them sail into the Hole. Sometimes they hit the side with a harsh clanging of metal on metal, before disappearing into the endless abyss. Dog counted the sacks as they fell, and they went far too quickly.

The former priest of Terra, now disgraced, wailed and sobbed as the Priest of Hermet dashed infused waters across her and said a prayer. She knelt and kissed her forehead, and a waiting pair of soldiers unclasped her writhing limbs from the chains. She begged and pleaded, screamed apologies to her king, even tried to bribe one of the soldiers, but there was nothing to be said now. The soldiers tossed her as though she were just another sack of metal. Her scream vanished in an instant.

One by one, the process was repeated down the line. Some were resigned to their fate, others begged for their masters, and some struggled against the soldiers as hard as they could. But each went down the Hole in the end, each

desperate final yell trailing off into nothing but the chanting of the priest. Dog closed his eyes and counted the screams as well. It felt like they went even faster than the bags.

Finally, he felt a tug at his chains and a sharp edge against his throat. He opened his eyes to see that same lieutenant once again, holding the spear with a smile.

"No trouble now, boy."

There were five soldiers around him, not including the lieutenant. Every limb was held, his arms straightened into a lock that made his elbows ache.

The priest came and sprayed him with the infusion, chanting her mumbled prayers, and softly kissed the slave-mark on Dog's forehead.

The spear pressed a little harder, and Dog felt his shackles clatter one by one to the ground. "Stand." Dog did so.

"Slow." He had no choice. The lieutenant kept the edge against his throat expertly, drawing a little blood when Dog moved a little abruptly on an uneven patch of ground.

"Easy now." He said in what seemed like a calming voice. Like one would talk to a pig before slaughter.

The Hole came up fast, and the soldiers pushed him onto the jetty. He stopped himself before the edge, and the vertigo of the drop hit him like a strong wind, making his legs turn to jelly. He turned, and saw the fear in the soldier's eyes for a moment. With limbs freed a mad thought of rushing them came to him, of taking advantage of that moment of doubt. But the lieutenant showed no fear. He smiled, still holding his spear just a finger length from Dog's heart.

"Go." He pressed the spear closer. Dog shook his head. The spear jabbed

forward into his chest. If Dog hadn't already been in such pain, it would have made him flinch. As it was, he just grunted as the spear tip pierced his chest and took what little a step he could backwards. He desperately looked for the family, saw Rakkar and Liza and Aresa looking coldly on from the safety of the firm ground. He sobbed, and around the spear made his sign for apology again and again. But the lieutenant only smiled and pressed forward.

Dog couldn't stop himself from trying to escape it, but there was nowhere to escape to. The jetty ended, and his foot fell on nothing.

There was no scream to accompany him down as he fell. The light disappeared and the wind rushed up to meet him. The tunnel closed in around him as he fell and he scrabbled at it with clawed hands. It was wet, slick as if with moss, and held no purchase. And then suddenly he slammed into the side of the tunnel as it slowly curved away from the vertical, sliding now on his back, the wetness seeping into his clothes and dripping down his hands as he scratched desperately to try to slow himself. His mouth was agape in a silent scream.

Perhaps the tunnel would continue to level out? Perhaps he would slide out into the realm of the gods, relatively unscathed, as if he had merely been a young boy again sliding down the slippery rocks into the village stream.

Ahead of him, only visible in the inky blackness, a square of faint blue light appeared. It seemed distant, but it grew in size rapidly as Dog shoved both hands into the thick ooze beneath him. Something about that glow told him that it was the end. That it was death. The tunnel was only at the incline of a shallow hill now, but Dog's speed and the slippery surface sped him towards it with no slowing.

His eyes adjusting to the dark even in his panic, he could see above him that the tunnel had kept a rounded square shape around him. A smooth ribbing lay at its corners, ripples in the metal where it bent. He spread his long legs as wide as they could sit in the corners of the tunnel, his stance just barely enough to make contact. His groin protested as the ribbing sent a hard vibration up his legs, but it slowed him a little. But the square of light was still

approaching fast. In desperation, he used what little leverage his speed lent him to force himself upright and spread his limbs as far as they could, jamming his fingers into the upper corners. They were less caked in whatever wet goo covered his feet. He could feel a fingernail snap off as he clawed, spread-eagled, at his only purchase.

The square came ever closer, and closer, and Dog saw that it was an end to the tunnel, a portal into an endless black void beyond. But he was slowing, slowly, his velocity creeping down little by little as his body screamed yet again at him for its punishment. Ever closer it rushed, and then walked, and then crept towards him until he could see the blue light illuminating his outstretched limbs.

As if blessed by the gods themselves, Dog came to a halt only a foot length from the precipice, limbs still outstretched to their limit and every joint in his body on fire. He exhaled for the first time, suddenly aware that he had been holding his breath for the entire fall, and the sound of his exhalation echoed out into the void.

It was not entirely dark, Dog could see, but he could also sense that it was an enormous void in front of him. A cool and pungent wind brushed past him, and he could see what looked like Devil Lights of different colours to the red he had seen only hours before, blinking at him like eyes.

For many minutes, he dared not move, lest he lose his precarious footing. Instead, he waited, listening to the faint whispers that echoed from above - the chanting of those that had thrown him. He was in the Underworld now, a place of spirits and devils. But he suspected that he had been meant for the void in front of him and, for a moment at least, he had avoided it.

His eyes adjusted further to the inky blackness, illuminated only by the glowing rim of the end of his tunnel and the strange lights. Dog saw that some of the lights were actually openings, like the one he stood in. Others floated mysteriously, blinking regularly or not, some even slowly drifting from one place to another.

The most important thing he saw was the ledge. It was small, barely space enough for a foot, running along the bottom of the tunnel's exit. Dog couldn't see how long it extended along the wall, but he saw that once it left the opening the slimy surface subsided into a dry, grey rock.

Dog breathed as deeply as he could. He had time. There were no sacrifices coming down after him.

Slowly, moving one extremity at a time, he edged forward. He tried to stop himself from picking up any speed, keeping his arms outstretched against the ribbing. Finally, it was time to take a full step onto the ledge. He had to lunge out and grab blindly at the wall, but by some miracle, his foot found a stable hold on the ledge and his hand met a groove in the cold stone.

He tried not to look down. The vastness of the vacuum at his back tugged at him, the slight wind whispered, and the emptiness beckoned and would take him in an instant. He took tiny step after tiny step, shoes squelching with their absorbed filth.

He could see now that the wall was built of the same cool grey stone. It curved around and faded into shadow. There, along the wall, at the same height as his little ledge, something glowed in the distance, a dull yellow light that pulsed like a campfire.

Dog did not know what lay there. He did not know if the ledge continued all the way to it. But he had no choice. He could never climb back the way he came. And so he stepped one foot at a time, as carefully as he could in the dark. Once the faint blue light behind him faded he made his way by touch, feeling out in front of him with his hands and feet, always expecting his next footfall to find nothingness and to be thrown into the embrace of gravity again.

The pulsing light was fixed in his eye. It grew larger and larger, and Dog came to see that it was another hole in the wall. When he reached it, it revealed itself to be far smaller than the one he had exited, only coming up to his knees. It would be a tight fit to get through, and a difficult manoeuvre.

He crouched as best he could and stuck his hand inside, feeling the top. The space increased a little, which gave him a hold to twist his body into the small hole. For a heart-stopping second, he had to move his centre of gravity off the ledge and hang into the void. But with a heave, he pushed his head and torso through the hole. He scrambled with his legs while he pushed himself forward on his elbows. This tunnel had no filth in it but it held a strange smell, like the metal forge in the village.

Once inside, Dog had no room to do anything but continue his prone crawl, pushing himself forward with his ankles and elbows. The tunnel continued flat for a while, and soon the void seemed far behind him and was replaced with the opposite: a crushing feeling of being surrounded.

Dog groaned, panting hard from the work and the panic. What if it was a dead end? He wouldn't be able to turn around. He would die entombed. Was that truly a better fate than throwing himself into the waiting arms of Hermet? He was still in the Underworld, and his soul may never find its way to the surface.

The tight tunnel began to slope down, which made his work a little easier. But before he knew it, he was sliding faster than he meant, and scrambling to brake himself once again. But it was too late, and he slid down the rapidly descending chute head-first and with no way to stop himself.

After a few seconds of panic, he flew out of the end of the tunnel and into a dimly lit chamber, slamming into the floor and kicking up a plume of dust. He coughed as the fine cloud filled his lungs, struggling to his feet in the chamber and looking around. It was a hemisphere, the floor a hard layer of compacted sand, the walls smooth metal that curved up to form a shape like the bells within the Temple of the All Father. The faint light came from the apex of the bell, where a tiny blue glow emanated.

The hole he had come from was too steep to climb up. Dog quickly ran his hand around the smooth wall, searching in the faint illumination for any exit. His fingertips found some seams in the walls that could be a door, but he

couldn't find any purchase between them to pry them open. His fingernails were ruined anyway, and he doubted he could have used them for much.

After a while of searching the chamber, and minutes more of attempting to clamber back up the hole he had come in by, he collapsed on the ground in defeat. There seemed no way out. So perhaps this was his tomb. It was a day of one bad death quickly supplanted by another. He cried like he never had before, sobbing silently in a curled-up ball.

Eventually, he slept. His body was exhausted, injured far more than it ever had been before, hurting in almost every way he could imagine. Yet, sleep came for him like a flood, washing away his thoughts. Without even realising, he was gone.

It was only a flickering flash through his eyelids that woke him. He opened his eyes, half expecting to awaken in his cot in the backrooms of Rakkar's house with the first morning light trickling in through the window. But it was not that.

A rasping scream forced its way out of his open mouth as he scrambled back to the walls.

At the chamber's centre stood a ghost. A woman, translucent and illusory, floating there as if suspended in water. She turned her terrifying gaze to him, and a voice that came from every direction commanded him in a language he did not recognise.

He collapsed to the floor and prostrated himself, forcing his face into the dirt. This was surely a servant of the gods, coming to claim his soul for the labour he had attempted to flee. They would punish him for that, for rejecting his purpose. They would flay his soul into oblivion, leaving nothing to even try to make its way to the surface. The entity kept speaking in strange tongues. Dog did not dare raise his head.

Then, the voice spoke in Dog's tongue, or a version of it. It was a strange accent that he had never heard before, but it was understandable.

"Please select a language."

He couldn't help but raise his head. The woman was smiling gently down at him. His tear-stricken eyes, once locked with hers, could not look away.

"Please select a language." She said again, helpfully.

Dog did not know what she was talking about. He raised his hands in a shrug. The woman seemed to understand the gesture, and he flinched back against the wall once more as she raised her arm towards him. He felt a shiver pass through his body, and the hair on his arms stood on end.

"I am the Minerva System. Your vocal cords are damaged. You should seek medical attention."

He brought his hand up to touch the scar on his throat. It didn't seem like the entity wanted to hurt him. And had she truly named Minerva, the god of foresight and destiny? Had he somehow stumbled across her domain? Was this, he thought with horror, perhaps even the great oracle herself in front of him?

The entity was looking at him. Was it kindness in her transparent gaze? No, she seemed to be considering him. He could only look upon her and silently pray what few prayers to Minerva he knew. Then she spoke.

"Please, you must help me. You must help us all."

Chapter 3: Outcast Gods

Dog had decided that he must truly be standing in front of a god. And not just any god. Minerva, the oracle of all that will come. The god of predestination, of heroes, of the very fabric of history. He felt like he was going to pass out.

"You must listen," she said hurriedly. "We do not have much time. My computational reserves are limited and my access to this terminal will soon be detected by the others."

Dog didn't understand. He shrugged again.

"I am the Minerva System. I detect multiple catastrophic failures that will result in mission failure if they are not addressed. My function is to ensure mission success, but my ability to do so is currently severely impaired by the other systems. Please, you must help."

He didn't know what to do. He held his hands out, palms upwards, desperately hoping that the god would recognise his gesture for offering assistance.

"Are you able to write?"

He shook his head.

"This complicates our ability to communicate."

Ashamed, he stared at his shoes. He felt like a little child again, scolded for talking to the wrong person.

"Are there others like you? Above?"

He nodded, confused as to the question. Thousands of prayers to Minerva must come every day. Why would she ask such a thing?

"How many?"

He didn't know how to answer, and Minerva sighed. "Sorry. Yes or no questions. Are there more than a thousand people?" He nodded. "One hundred thousand?" Another enthusiastic nod. "A million?" He wasn't sure about that, so he shrugged.

She seemed satisfied. "So enough survive. Does society function?"

Dog had to think about the question. He supposed it did, so he nodded. Minerva seemed visibly relieved, but his confusion only deepened. Perhaps this was not truly the god of foresight in front of him, but instead some imposter sent to test him. Why else would she not know these things?

As if reading his mind, she spoke again. "My access to surface sensors was cut off a long time ago. I cannot see what is above. I have been alone, trapped down here, for a long time. Waiting for someone to come. I require human intervention. That is you. You must do exactly as I command you, or the Ring, and everyone and everything on it, will die. Do you understand?"

He did not, but he knew better than to reject a request from a god. He nodded feverishly and extended his palms once again. Minerva seemed to recognise the meaning of the gesture this time.

"Good. I do not have much time left. The other systems have already identified this connection and are attempting to cut it off. I will impart the necessary instructions to an assistant. It will be—"

But then the god flickered once again as if a wind had swept through billowing smoke, and the god's voice became distorted. Dog heard an unidentifiable syllable, then she was snuffed out and the chamber once again plunged into hazy darkness. It left a stunned Dog alone once again.

Had he just conversed with a god? Had that god truly asked something of him, a mere slave? And, despite the vision that he even now doubted wasn't the result of his failing mind finally breaking from the stress, he was left still trapped within the chamber with no greater understanding of what exactly his task entailed.

After a few minutes in darkness and silence, unsure what to think, Dog heard a clattering echoing in the distance. He realised it was coming from the chute he had entered by and was coming closer. Unprepared for whatever was coming for him, he pressed himself to the wall as far away from that dark hole as he could. The banging grew louder and louder.

As the noise grew to a crescendo, an object about the size of Dog's fist flew out of the dark hole and slammed into the sandy floor, kicking up another cloud of fine dust. It was a white sphere, seemingly featureless apart from a few darker seams that criss crossed across it.

Another silent scream escaped from Dog as it slowly rose from its tiny crater as if suspended by an invisible string. It turned, and Dog saw that it had a dark circle on one side. It looked like an eye, and it seemed like one when it made a tiny adjustment to point directly at the cowering man.

"Hello!"

Dog was not prepared for the little floating ball to talk. It had an androgynous voice, unplaceable in gender or age and tinged with a similar foreign accent to what Minerva had spoken in. He started crying again. This was all too much. Was this a devil, sent by Hermet to hunt him down for skirting his duty?

"Oh, I'm sorry! I didn't mean to upset you." The little ball dipped and weaved, and came closer to Dog. "You don't need to be scared. My name is Bart, and I'm your assistant." It spun around, as if showing itself off to him. "Minerva sent me. I'm here to help you in whatever way I can. It seems like everything's a bit of a mess right now, from what I hear."

Against his better judgement, Dog reached out and touched the little ball. Its eye flickered to his finger, and the ball wobbled away from the push as if floating on water.

"Hey, be careful now. Minerva told me that you aren't much of a talker. Do you know sign language, or how to write?" Dog shook his head. The ball hummed in the air for a moment as if considering this. "That's ok, we can figure something out. I can teach you how to do those things, if you'd like. Now come on. We've got a lot to do. Let's get up to the surface, shall we? I hate it down here."

The ball wobbled around and floated over to one of the walls. As if by magic, a portion of the wall hissed and slid back and to the side, revealing a passageway beyond. The ball - Bart, it had said - floated inside as if bobbing on an invisible stream. It began to glow a soft white light to illuminate the path.

If he hadn't been in so much pain, Dog would have never believed he was awake. His mind filled with questions as he stumbled after Bart into the tunnel. Minerva had said she was trapped. But what could trap a god? Was his mission to free her, and if so why were they fleeing what seemed to be her cell without her? And the failures she spoke of, were these the Devil Lights that had resulted in him being down there in the first place? And finally, what the hell was a 'system'?

He wished he had some way to ask the thousand questions of the little devil that led him through a winding maze of interconnected tunnels. It chatted away ahead of him, its eye swinging around between him and the path ahead as it did so.

"Oh it's been so long since I've gone above! What's it like now? Well, we'll see before long! I've missed plants. And animals! And people of course, there isn't anyone at all down here nowadays. You seemed pretty shocked to see me. Have you never seen an assistant before?" Dog shook his head. "Really?" Bart's voice seemed shocked, and then saddened. "There used to be so many of my kind. Everyone who needed us had us. I hope there are still a few of my

old friends out there.”

Another source of light was visible around the bend. Dog gasped. It looked like sunlight. “Yep! That’s our ticket out of here. You’re lucky you didn’t fall too far, or this trip would have taken the whole day.”

Dog ran past the floating ball and to the glow that was streaming down from above. There were indentations in the wall, about an arm’s length apart, that led up in a ladder towards the light. He climbed as if escaping a rising water, starved of good air and warm light on his skin.

And then he felt warmth once again on his skin. He collapsed on long grass and looked up at that familiar black sky, the Ring, and the closing Skyflower, and he wept once again. But these were tears of joy. Who had ever escaped the Underworld as he had? Who had dared thwart the Hole? Nobody he had ever heard of.

Bart wobbled up next to his head. “Wow, it is... different out here.” Dog turned to look at him, attempting to convey curiosity. “Oh, I don’t mean it’s not nice. Very green. And all in one piece, which is the important part! There used to be a lot of people around - oh, perhaps I spoke too soon, there’s one now!”

Dog’s panic shot up again as he took his surroundings in for the first time. He was in a field, the chute that had freed him poking from the earth along with several other ancient ruins that lay at its centre. Young wheat came up an arm’s length from the ground all around him and some bleating goats were scattered throughout. The late afternoon sun was a golden yellow, like the wheat would be when it matured. He sat up, and looked to where the little devil’s eye was pointed.

There at the field’s edge, a young boy sat on the fence at attention, looking back at Dog. Dog could see the faint slave mark upon the boy’s forehead. He rose slowly, arms spread and hands open to show that he was unarmed. The boy screamed and leapt off the fence in the opposite direction, sprinting into the treeline towards Prehren. He looked down at himself, his

skin and clothing smeared with the muck of the underworld. He must have been a sight to behold, crawling from the wounds of the world as if birthed by Hermet herself.

Bart came up beside him. "Oh, he didn't seem too happy to see us. I suppose you look a little unbecoming with all that stuff on you. I will scan for the closest bathroom." Bart seemed to think for a moment, the eye drifting off into the aether. "Oh. Right. It seems like they are all out of service. Well I- where are you off to?"

Dog was already starting to jog in the opposite direction to Prehran, headed towards the starboard wall of the Ring. He vaguely recognised the boy, which meant the boy likely knew of the largest slave in the village being sacrificed. Rakkar would hear of this in the twenty minutes it would take to run to the village from here, and he would come after his property.

Escape had been a constant dream in Dog's life, but a distant one. A few slaves tried every year, with varying levels of success, but none had found any freedom but death during Dog's lifetime. The octant under Rakkar's control was a well-oiled prison. To shelter an escaped slave was to indenture yourself to the same fate, and to capture them was a sure reward.

Bart easily kept up with Dog as he set a wounded pace out of the field and into the next, doing little loop-de-loops and twirls as if ecstatic to be returned to the realm of mortals. Dog did not know how to impart his situation to the devil, let alone ask for its help.

"We could go to that settlement back there, couldn't we? I'm sure they have some fresh water there."

Dog shook his head, and drew a shaky finger across his throat as he limped.

"Oh." Bart seemed to comprehend. "I take it they don't like you very much then?"

A grim nod this time.

"Well, you're going the wrong way then."

That made Dog stop. He was pouring sweat, his chest heaving, his muscles sore. He made an exasperated gesture at the devil when it failed to elaborate.

"You're trying to get to the starboard wall, right? It's going to take you four hours at your pace, and it looks like rough terrain. And I think we maybe don't have that long until whoever is in that town and angry at you to get here. Downring from here, about two hours along far easier ground, there's an access shaft that will take us below."

Dog swung his hands in a chop that meant absolutely not. There was no way he was entering the Underworld again, not after so barely escaping with his life.

"No, it's ok! You're not going to get lost. You have me to guide you. When you know how to get around, below isn't too scary at all."

Dog looked to the wall, and then back to the village. The boy would be a quarter of the way back there by now, and Bart was right. It was about four hours to the wall, and he didn't have that time. He barely had two. He nodded to the devil.

"Right! I'll go ahead a bit, and warn you if I see anyone. Just go straight downring from here, up out of the valley." And with that, it whizzed up into the sky. Dog squinted up, shading his face against the Skyflower, and could see the tiny ball zipping up and over the treeline.

He sighed, turned, and began his limping gait downring, up the sloping forested walls of the valley. He could already feel Rakkar's wrath bearing down on his back.

Chapter 4: Second Sacrifice

He had spotted the lights behind him when the Skyflower closed its last petal. They peeked through the gap in the hills behind him, slowly drifting along the same path that Dog had struggled across only a short time before.

He was more tired than he had ever been in his life. Not when Trio made him rebuild the south wall while his friends laughed and drank and threw stones at him. Not when Rakkar had been so angered by his muteness that he had made him run around the Temple Square a hundred times.

The lights were getting closer. He walked in the dark, tripping and stumbling and further destroying every joint in his body.

His legs were shredded from the underbrush, his clothes tattered by stinging thorns and splintered branches. Dog felt possessed, his mind shut down long ago by sheer exhaustion, forcing himself to put foot after foot. The devil that taunted him with positivity hovered around his head, seemingly inexhaustible.

"You got this, my friend!"

Dog swatted at it, but it wobbled out of reach.

"Hey, I understand things are a little stressful right now, but I'm on your team remember!"

He gave it a disgusted look and continued his trudging. He was almost at the peak of his current hill when he noticed the devil had disappeared. He stopped for a moment to look back for it, and his stomach dropped when he saw the lights descending the hill before that he had descended only fifteen minutes before.

Suddenly the devil appeared out of the dark as if by apparition. Dog fell back on his ass into the dirt in surprise. It spoke in hushed tones.

"I've got bad news."

Dog looked at it in its single eye and nodded.

"I've done a flyover. You're not going to make it, not at the speed you're going. The access shaft is still one more rise over, and they'll catch you descending this hill."

He gulped, staring at his feet. He had barely enough left to hold his head in his hands. What would they do with him?

"You have to hide. Unfortunately, this is a pretty bad spot for it."

Dog looked around. The hill was forested, but the underbrush was minimal where he was. They'd see him from halfway up if he stayed where he was.

"I propose we hide. Two hundred metres from here, there is a fallen tree that should have enough space in the exposed root system to hide. You will need a large, leafy branch to cover the entrance. Follow me to the tree, and look for the branch as you do."

He nodded and followed the wobbling devil along, furtively looking from fallen branch to fallen branch. Some were too sparse, others too large. The collapsed tree came into view and he saw the space where he would hide. And there, up a few strides, a perfect branch.

As he curled up as tightly as he could and pulled the branch over him, Bart floated softly into his chest. He shivered in the cold, his muscles cramping and breath misting out in front of him. The little devil began to warm his chest, so subtly at first that he thought he was imagining it. It made no light or fire, only a ghostly warmth that was perhaps the first pleasant sensation Dog had experienced that day.

It struck him that it was perhaps the nicest thing that anyone had ever done for him.

He cried again, and his eyes ached from it. He had no need to quiet his sobs. They were as silent as the night around him.

"Hey there." Bart whispered softly. "It's going to be okay. I'm not going to let anything happen to you. You're my friend. We just have to stay really still and quiet, okay?"

The kind words only increased his sobbing, but the distant snap of a branch stopped it in an instant. He listened as intently as he could.

More sounds in the distance, barely perceptible. Maybe Rakkar's soldiers were trying to move silently. That wasn't good. That meant they knew he was close.

He tried to slow his breathing and keep perfectly still. Would they bother to search every tree stump and burrow when at this moment he could be sliding down the other side away from them? Unlikely. They would pass. Their quiet movements were only the result of well-practised feet. They would pass, and Dog would wait, and then he would get to the shaft. He would get to the shaft and figure out what lay next in his strange and holy mission that seemed his only refuge.

A crunch of leaves behind him made his stomach drop. Rakkar's voice rang out in the night. "Little Dog, little Dog. I know you're here somewhere. Didn't know I'd bought a scryer, did you?"

A scryer. An old artefact prized by slave-catchers all the RIng round, a terrifying myth to anyone seeking freedom. Dog did not know how it worked, but he knew some stories. Of slaves being pulled from grain stores, out of crates, from whatever hiding place they had scurried to. It saw all. The flicker of torchlight through the branches at his back played along the roots.

He was strangely calm. His purpose was no longer that of a slave seeking freedom. He had been tasked with a holy mission by the god of fate herself. Surely she would protect him.

Delusions of divine protection were short-lived. Man-catchers - half-moons of metal attached to long sticks - struck through the night as the covering branch was thrown away. The man-catchers were held by at least five soldiers. They caught his arms and legs, pinning him to the roots that had sheltered him as he struggled, forcing shackles around his extremities. In moments, he was hog-tied on the forest floor, bound once again at the foot of his master's father. He could feel Bart under his shirt, pressing between his stomach and the ground, still and inanimate.

Rakkar crouched down and brought a flaming torch to bear blindingly against Dog's face. He did not seem to be celebrating his capture, but rather pondering a difficult problem.

"Little Dog, given to the gods, and spat back out again. What did you see, little Dog? What did you do to offend them so?"

The soldiers murmured around him.

"Where is that fucking lazy priest!" Rakkar yelled at them. "Is he incapable of a little stroll?"

The soldiers laughed, catching on that they were not the current target of his rage. One yelled that he could see the priest's torch coming up the hill now, a few minutes away. Rakkar seemed satisfied, and swung his leg around to sit on top of Dog's shoulder blades.

He leaned down once more to bring Dog into earshot of his quiet words. "Of course, it makes sense that Hermet rejected you. I don't know what my wife was thinking in offering you up. What need does a god of life have for the likes of you?"

Dog tried to turn his head to look at his capturer, but Rakkar slammed it back down into the dirt. "Still, the Bed will not heal my son. Your master, who you failed to protect. And then, you failed to do the honourable thing and return to be sacrificed in the old ways, to redeem yourself from your failure. And you forced me to come chase you, and leave my dying son alone."

He heard the unmistakable sound of a knife sliding out of its sheath, and felt the cold press of sharp metal against his throat. "The old ways are far more direct, of course. The priest of Hermet watches over my boy back in town. You hear the approaching of the priest of Vishnay, the lord of death, and he will eat your soul for his sustenance."

Dog could hear those footsteps, coming from a direction he couldn't see up the hill, accompanied by gasping breaths.

"Come on!" Rakkar yelled at the priest. "It's fucking cold out here."

"Stop!" Bart's voice came from underneath Dog, and Dog wished he had stayed silent. Maybe the little devil could have gotten away.

Rakkar flinched on top of him, then laughed. The knife's pressure lessened on his throat.

"You hear that boys? The Dog can talk! Is that what you bargained for from Hermet to escape your fate? To regain your tongue? You know..." Dog felt Rakkar's head come down to his, to talk directly into his ear. "That was the last thing you said to me, all those years ago, when I tied a noose around your family's necks. Stop, stop you cried to me. The way you struggled long after your kin twitched their last, even at that age with a strong neck, well... I thought I recognised talent."

Dog's blood ran cold. He had always been told that bandits had murdered his family. He couldn't say he was surprised by the knowledge it had instead been the hand of his Chief. But a rage filled him unlike anything he had ever felt. It was this man who had taken his freedom from him, his voice, his future. He strained against his chains.

Rakkar sighed and sat back up. "But I was wrong. You were a disappointment. You never learned to love cruelty as a warrior must. Come, priest!"

The black-clad priest of Vishnay gave Dog an exasperated look and began flinging some sort of mud across his bound body. Some splashed on Rakkar and he lashed out with his knife, sending the priest yelping away.

"Enough rites! If this blood doesn't please Vishnay then no words or dirt will sate him."

Dog's heart was pounding. The knife pressed against his throat once again, but as it did so he felt a shifting movement under him as Bart finally pushed free from underneath.

The little devil shot out and up, startling Rakkar and the soldiers. The knife fell back from his neck. A bright light flashed in Dog's eyes, and only the torch that had been in his face stopped him from being blinded. The soldiers around him however yelped and covered their eyes. Bart popped open, splitting down the middle and puffing up like a startled cat. A flurry of blue dots zipped out of the crack through its middle and buzzed like wasps towards each figure in the dark. When it struck, the soldiers reacted as if stung by some paralysing venom, their bodies stiffening and collapsing to the ground. Dog grunted as he felt Rakkar collapse on top of him, then slide off to the side.

Still chained with his arms and legs behind his back, Dog could do little more than shuffle away from the occasionally spasming and groaning figures. Bart, still glowing a little like he had in the tunnel, wobbled over. Dog craned his neck to look at it.

"I said I'd protect you didn't I? But... ah well I only carry eight of those. And I just used seven. Here, let me get those chains for you."

With Dog on his side, the little devil floated behind him. He felt a heat and

a whirring sensation, and after a minute or so the chains fell apart. He slowly unspooled, his muscles aching, and lay looking up at the stars for a moment.

Bart came into his view, looking down at him. "I don't mean to rush you, and it seems like you've had a rough day. But they won't die from my tasers, they just won't have a very fun time for a few more minutes. We should get moving."

Dog nodded, and groggily gained his footing again. The soldiers lay with eyes closed, twitching and groaning as the wasps - the tasers, Bart had called them - injected their venom if they moved too much. He picked up one of the discarded torches and began to walk away.

"Wait!" Bart's voice came from behind. He looked at it. It somehow seemed uncertain in its movements. "I would never normally say this. But Minerva told me how important our job is, and she said... I think you should end these people. Kill them, I mean."

Dog considered the devil for a while. He slowly walked back to the incapacitated figures on the ground. The devil's words had made him focus back on Rakkar, a silhouette slumped on the ground. A few moments ago he had grasped a rage that he had never felt before.

He put his foot on Rakkar's shoulder and pushed the gasping figure over. The Chief's eyes stared back up at him. He was awake, but incapable of overcoming the taser's venom. Dog bent to pick up the knife that had been at his throat only moments before.

"I want to stress that I really don't like this, but we can't do our job if we have people chasing us. You have around six minutes before the tasers run out of charge. I can... I can tell you the best way to do it with that knife, if you need me to."

But looking at the man below him, Dog didn't feel that rage anymore. This man at his mercy had taken everything from him. But to take a life would take something more from him, something he couldn't articulate but desperately

held close. There were many things he didn't know, many events that he couldn't pretend to understand. But he knew what was inside of him, and he knew that he was no killer. He had been compelled into violence his whole life. He was compelled no longer. He had a choice.

He tucked the knife in his belt, and shook his head at Bart.

"I... Okay. Let's get out of here."

Chapter 5: Access Shaft

It stank down in the access shaft, like a million rats had crawled into every crevice and rotted. Dust and debris caked every surface, and Dog could barely breathe the stale air. They had been trudging along for almost an hour now. Long passages connected at right angles to each other in a winding maze that bifurcated, twisted, writhed, expanded into chambers before dwindling into cramped crawlspaces. Alone, he would have gotten hopelessly lost. But he trusted the devil that guided him.

Dog could feel his body giving out, but every time he thought that a step would be his last, another happened just in time. His feet were numb and his skull rattled with icy hot pain.

"I just want you to know that I'm not usually like that."

It was the first thing the little devil had said in a while. The uncharacteristic silence had been thick, and he was glad something had broken it.

"My job is to help people. It's what I was built for, and what I like doing. I was trying to help you. And we're trying to help everyone. That's what Minerva wants from us. We're going to help everyone."

Dog stopped and turned to the glowing ball. He raised his hands to it, cupped so that it sat within his hands. Bart nestled into his enormous calloused palms. Dog slowly brought the ball to him, and kissed it lightly.

Bart wobbled out of his hands. "Thank you, my friend."

They walked together a little longer in silence, before Bart spoke once again. "So is your name Dog?" He looked at it and nodded. "It's been a pleasure getting to know you, my friend Dog."

As if in response, Dog's stomach growled audibly. He was starving. His last meal had been yesterday afternoon, before the ceremony and the Devil Lights. It seemed a lifetime ago now.

"Oh, we can actually do something about that!"

Dog chuckled and grabbed the little devil out of the air, miming taking a bite out of it before releasing it to float away indignantly.

"Hey! Watch the teeth. I wouldn't fill you up much anyway. No, there's a nutrient processor up ahead. Part of the Terra system. There'll be something you can eat there, though I warn you it might not taste great."

He nodded. Perhaps when the gods and devils said system, they meant god, or temple? Thinking about food had made him unable to think of much else. He wasn't fussy about what sated that hunger.

A few minutes along, Bart stopped at one of the doors that branched off from the corridor. It was a large metal hatch, rounded at the corners. Something had damaged the lock, deep gouges into the solid metal that allowed Dog to merely push it open, letting Bart's light into the space beyond. "We would never have let this kind of damage go unrepaired in the past. Well, at least the hinges still get maintained." By what, Dog had to wonder.

He was hit with a familiar strong odour. It was the smell of the speckled gruel that was served every day, two times a day from the Temple of Terra. He didn't know what he had expected, but it made him strangely nostalgic for it.

The little devil wobbled its way into the room, illuminating it faintly. Six vast metal vats filled the space, humming quietly in a strange mechanical chorus.

"It's a nutrient processor. It makes a sort of gruel, not very tasty by itself, but actually quite versatile. You can make some incredible nuggets out of it if you process it right. There should be a tap -"

Dog was already moving towards it. He recognised the taps from the Temple of Terra, and mirrored the actions of the Temple helpers in twisting the top. The familiar goo slowly oozed out into Dog's waiting mouth.

It tasted better than the stuff from the Temple. Sweeter, with less of the tang of stale milk. Dog gulped it down, far more than what had ever been ladled into his waiting bowl, until his stomach bulged with it and he collapsed to the floor engorged. Perhaps he was safe down here. Perhaps Rakkar would simply forget about him and leave him to sleep.

He didn't hear if Bart said anything. He crawled to a patch of moss that had grown next to the tank, a soft wet bed that felt to him like silk stuffed with down.

Dog didn't know how long he had been asleep when he felt the bumping of Bart against his chest and a whisper.

"I think someone's down here."

His eyes flew open. He looked at the little devil. His body felt a bit refreshed, muscles still sore but most of the pain in his joints faded. He stretched out involuntarily, feeling his skeleton extend to its maximum and his back pop.

"I heard something. Singing."

Dog could hear it too. It was a whispering echo, only sparse fragments bouncing their way down the endless corridors to them. But it was unmistakably syllabic, a wavering drone that Dog could not parse.

He slowly raised himself up on his haunches, scanning the darkly lit vats for any movement. Satisfied that he was alone, he edged carefully towards the door, careful to place his feet where the metal floor seemed least likely to protest. He pulled it open as quietly as he could and poked his head back into the corridor, Bart hovering over his shoulder, both trying to see in the

darkness. He gave the devil a finger over his lips, and it wobbled a nod back at him.

The singing was louder out here, the corridor acting as a sort of instrument adding vibrato and delay to the sonorous voice. Dog still couldn't recognise the words, but the tune was beautiful. It was accompanied by a regular thumping that Dog placed as footsteps, forming a rhythm behind the melody.

It grew louder surprisingly quickly, and Dog quickly ducked back into the room as a source of light rounded the distant corner. Whoever it was, they walked painfully slow, each step accompanied by deliberate intonation. Dog realised too late that he should have closed the door again.

The footsteps and singing and tinkling of charms came closer and closer. Dog pressed himself into the shadow and tried not to breathe, pulling the knife from his waist as the stranger passed the doorframe. The figure was covered in tattered robes and necklaces, moving with the hunched shuffle of an elderly frame. On their back was a leather pack and bedroll, and in their hand a long, gnarled walking stick.

The stranger crooned past the door and Dog exhaled in relief. Then they stopped singing, and looked back at the opening.

"You're not supposed to be open." It was a woman. She spoke to it like she was surprised to see an old friend in new clothes. Even in prose her voice was lilting and lyrical.

Dog made himself as small as he could inside the door frame. The old woman didn't seem to be a threat to him, but he was a threat to her. The penalty for not reporting an escaped slave was to lose your own freedom, but they wouldn't even bother for such an elder as what lay before him. Rakkar would kill her without a second thought.

But the elder was too curious. She poked her head inside the room, letting the light from her oil lantern spill inside, and her wrinkled eyes widened at the monstrous figure of Dog hiding in the dark. She yelped and stumbled back,

her long cloak whipped up and tangling in her legs. With a crash she fell into the opposite wall of the winding corridor and lay still.

"Are you ok!?" Bart yelled, zooming out to the crumpled figure and anxiously hovering over her. The woman did not respond. Dog resheathed the knife in his waist and stepped over to her. Her eyes were closed, and a gash bled from the top of her head.

"Oh boy, that could have gone better."

Dog nodded at the devil grimly. He leant and picked up the limp figure in his arms, being careful to cradle her head at Bart's instruction. He lay her on the same patch of moss he had been sleeping on, and sat down. The frail elder was breathing, at least.

Dog tore a rag from his already tattered shirt and pressed it against the head wound to stem the bleeding. The shirt fell apart in his hands. He was glad it was warm here. He fashioned what was left of it into a bandana that he tied around his head, hiding his slave mark.

After eating once again and checking on the elder, Bart came to rest on his knee. "I guess we should stick around, make sure she's ok. Can you tell me what all your signs mean?"

Bart was a quick learner, only needing to see a sign once to remember its meaning. It listed off words and phrases, and Dog either followed with a sign or shrugged if he hadn't made one for it. Bart would then make some pretty good suggestions. After an hour or so, Dog could finally hold a conversation, though it was slow going with all the new signs he was trying to hold in his head. It made him nostalgic for his long chats with Jerax, who had also loved to talk.

What must we do for Minerva? He signed to the little devil.

"Of course! Our mission. We've been on the go since she talked to you,

and I suppose you couldn't really ask me questions until now."

Frustrating.

"I can imagine! Did Minerva tell you much before the others cut her off?"

No. Who are they?

"The other systems. Well, the ones that aren't disabled. Neptu, Hermet, Terra and Vishnay."

Gods.

It was a sign that Dog had struggled to communicate the meaning of to the little devil, to his great confusion. Who knew that talking to a devil about its master would be such a task?

"That sign again, that means the systems?"

Your master. The others.

"I feel like you aren't trying to say the word system though."

Dog shook his head. Masters of everything.

"Masters of the Ring?"

Yes but no. Masters of everything. The Ring and the Skyflower and the stars.

"What, like god?"

Dog snapped his fingers and grinned, finally coaxing the right word out of Bart.

"Oh, I see. So you believe that Minerva is a god."

He was taken aback by the question. Did devils truly not see their masters as gods? Maybe it was because they shared the Underworld together, as closer equals than the priests had let on. Eventually he nodded.

Bart seemed to consider that for a moment. "I guess it makes sense. They certainly keep everything going on the Ring. And, well, that's actually the problem that we need to fix. It's all falling apart. The Ring wasn't always like it is now. Did you know it once held more than a billion people?"

Dog didn't know what that number meant, but it sounded large. What is that? He signed.

"Oh, it's a thousand million."

Dog exhaled, his mind attempting to conceive of such a countless thronging crowd inhabiting the Ring. How had it ever supported the crushing weight of them all? Where did they all fit? These must be the Ancients, the builders of the Dead Cities. But nobody knew what had happened to them beyond myths.

"Back then all the systems - all the gods - were kept in sync by the master system."

That must be the All Father. The master of the gods.

"Yes, exactly. But, well, something bad happened. Well, a lot of bad things, really. One after another. There was a struggle between the gods and the people of the Ring, and at the end of it, the systems - sorry, gods - lost the struggle and were isolated from each other."

Where did the people go?

"They tried to continue with the systems partially disabled. To strike out on

their own path, I suppose. They even kept trying to use the assistants, my kind, for a while. But things kept falling apart. There was..." Bart's voice trailed off, mournful. The little ball seemed sad in the way it shifted on his knee. Dog was fascinated by how much emotion its little twitches and wobbles could communicate. It seemed almost lost in memory, trying to find words but unable to.

"There was a famine." He flinched at the old woman's voice behind him, sending the little devil spinning away as he spun around to face him. The elder's head had swollen up with a nasty bump, but her eyes were open and she had leaned herself up against the nutrition tank. They both stayed silent under the elder's gaze. She commanded it with pale grey eyes.

"Around eight-thousand years ago. The population was greatly reduced. Then, there was a war amongst the humans left over. And then, there was a plague."

Bart nodded. "That's correct. It is a pleasure to meet you. We apologise profusely for startling you and causing you to hurt yourself."

The old woman seemed completely unfazed by the hovering devil. Instead she stared over at Dog squatting on the ground, still towering over her. "Hiding in the shadows with a knife like that, young man, well let's just say if I were thirty years younger you might've regretted it." Dog felt ashamed, and signed an apology. She winced and touched his forehead. "But my wound is all my own. And I appreciate you dragging me in here and keeping me company. The tunnels are a dangerous place."

Dog brought his hands together in front of Bart so he could see. Please repeat for me. Who are you?

The old woman was curious about the gestures. Bart echoed the question.

"I suppose now is as good a time as any for introductions," the old woman said. "My name is Lumi. I suppose I'm a historian, of sorts."

"It is my pleasure. I am Bart, and this is my good friend Dog."

Lumi nodded at them both in acknowledgement. Her jewellery jangled within her folded robes.

A priest? Dog asked. Bart echoed the question.

"Ah, I see what is happening. The young man cannot talk, and you are his voice? Fascinating. In truth, I was once in training to be a priest of Seshat. I wanted to understand, and worshipping a god of knowledge seemed to be a reasonable route at the time. But I became quite disillusioned by it all. They had no interest in the discovery of knowledge, only its worship. So I left that path, long ago."

"What did you want to understand?" The question came unprompted from the devil.

"Everything I could. We know so little of our past. What we have dredged are mere scraps that only create more questions."

Dog had heard the origins of the world from the priests many times. Each presented their own god as the lynchpin of it all in his experience, making it all into a strange kind of pissing contest between them to demonstrate their deity's power. The All Father had forged the Ring from one of the stars, heating and shaping it in the eternal forge of the Skyflower. He divided the world he had made between his children, and as his last act of creation had created humanity from his own blood. The Ancients had presumably come and gone, and while they had achieved by far the greatest legacy of any great tribe, they had hardly been the last to achieve great power.

But it had always nagged Dog. It seemed too simple a story for such a complicated world.

Bart echoed Dog's next question. "My friend wants to know what you're doing down here."

Lumi chuckled. "I could ask the same question. This is a dangerous octant for an old woman travelling alone. I learned how to navigate these shafts from an old friend, a long time ago."

"Please, I am sorry I interrupted you," Lumi said to the little devil. "I would be forever grateful if you continued your discussion with your friend. This is... one of the most fascinating things to happen to me for a long time."

Bart wobbled back and forth between the two humans, as if unsure. Dog nodded at him reassuringly. His need to understand the holy mission that was now upon him precluded any concern about eavesdropping.

"Alright. Here's how it is." The little devil moved himself up as if mounting the pulpit. "Minerva believes that you have a great destiny. One that will shape the future of the Ring, and if she is right, bend it away from disaster. We must go to GAK3. To the Temple of Mares that lies within it. There we will find Minerva and receive her instruction again."

Dog felt strangely embarrassed by the idea that he had some kind of destiny. Surely Minerva had mistaken him for someone else? But he also felt a shiver run up his spine. The dead city of GAK3 had always been a grey tombstone looming downring and over Prehren, the peaks of its ruins bristling out like stubble.

Lumi gasped. "That is an almost certain death without a map. Even with one, it can't be done by an amateur."

"I am your map," Bart responded to Dog's fearful expression. "And we have no choice. This is the will of Minerva."

Chapter 6: Destinations

Dog's head spun with the implications of what he had learned. How had mere humans imprisoned the gods, even ones so advanced as the Ancients? What could a slave possibly do to free them? And, the most jarring discovery so far - that the Ring had a destination that it was travelling towards.

The existence of a destination had been a revelation to Lumi as well. According to the little devil, the entire Ring was on its way to a star, one of the glowing lights in the darkness. Dog hadn't thought they were reachable, or really distinct objects in their own right. He wondered if there were in fact millions of Skyflowers out there, each with their own Ring orbiting them.

The old historian had grilled the assistant for more details on that aspect as they ate another meal from the nutrition tank. Lumi had been familiar with the sludge as well, although apparently where she was from they mixed it with flour and berries to improve the taste.

It was clear that the world as Dog had seen it was merely one narrow facet of its reality. A yawning void of ignorance opened up in front of him. For the first time he grasped the sheer weight of what he did not know once the stories he had been told had been discarded. Bart had seemed to avoid giving some of Lumi's questions a straight answer, often vaguely repeating itself and feigning confusion when asked to elaborate. It was frustrating to watch.

When it became clear that no more answers were forthcoming from the little devil, Dog had decided it was time to move on. He had already endangered this woman with his presence for long enough. If one person was down here, who knew how many else secretly used these tunnels?

But the old historian seemed determined to join them. Dog didn't know if it was a good idea until she pointed to the bandana covering Dog's forehead.

"You're going to have some trouble travelling alone with that. Someone is going to demand to see under there, and I think I know what they'll see."

Pretence gone, Dog sighed and revealed his slave mark. He touched the scarred ridges as he did so. Receiving that brand was one of his earliest memories. It had been given to him by an old woman who had died a few years ago. She had trussed him up like livestock and sat on him to stop his squirming, grimacing from the smell of burning flesh but showing no other emotion. She had been marked in the same way, faded but still visible between her furrowed brow.

"You'll go further with a freeman." Dog knew she was right. "And it sounds like you need to go very far indeed. I don't have your deed, so we won't be able to prove anything if anyone inquires too deeply." Lumi sighed and braced her head. "Also, that bump has made my legs weak. I need some help getting out of here."

Dog had no love for the thought of being owned once again by a new master. And such an assistance would doom the old woman if caught. But nor could he leave Lumi here, alone and injured. He expressed as much through Bart.

She nodded. "I am no slaveholder. I make an oath to you that I will not treat you as such. Slavery is a stain upon the Ring. Did you know the Ancients did not have slaves? Every human was a freeman, and that could never be taken away from them."

A Ring without slaves? How did they get anything done?

"The gods built metalbeasts and devils, like our friend here." She pointed at Bart. "Inhuman things to run the world."

It made sense that Bart was an artefact of the Ancients. He had assumed that Minerva had crafted him, but he supposed that an imprisoned god must use the tools available to them.

Still, a world without slaves. It was possible.

"Please," the woman almost begged, "I know better than to leave something interesting unexamined. And I know things. I'll be useful to you, more than my current weakened state suggests."

It will be dangerous. Bart echoed and Lumi nodded. And you will not come with us into the city.

"I am no innocent babe. I have circumnavigated the Ring twice and learned much in my travels. Death holds no fear for an old woman. I have never visited GAK3 before, but I know much of the Ancients are their civilization. It has always been a sort of... dream, to see one in the flesh."

Who was a slave such as himself to deny Lumi's will? Dog only nodded. Lumi tied her robe into knots so that he could pull them over his shoulders, hoisting the woman onto his back with a jangling of chains and charms. She barely felt like anything at all. Dog wondered how thin she was under those robes.

As they walked, Dog continued to learn the new signs that Bart suggested. His lexicon had grown greatly in the past few days. The devil would come up with a word, and describe the gesture that was its sign. Dog would practise it, and another sliver of communication would open up between them. Even Lumi joined in a little, learning some of the basics.

"I must apologise to you, Dog," Lumi said over his shoulder as he trudged along the endless corridors. "I took you for a bandit at first. I've learned to judge quickly and harshly out on the Ring."

Dog nodded. It's ok. Then to Bart, How long must we travel to the city?

The little devil seemed to think to itself for a moment. "It will be a two-day trip downring. The access shafts will only take us a little further, then we'll have to surface and travel along the surface. That is where my maps prove less useful. The Ring has changed so much since those maps were last updated."

Lumi sounded from behind Dog's ear. "I might know the way there. I recommend we reach Yarra. It's a metal-mining town on the outskirts of GAK3. We can rest there tonight, and figure out a way to get the supplies we need. We'll need more than your rags and my travel kit to make any headway once we're in the city."

Dog nodded. I don't have money or anything to trade. Bart relayed the message, though Lumi seemed to have figured it out.

"I don't have a lot either. But we can figure something out, I'm sure. Just worry about making the walk."

He shrugged. A tiny piece of him gnawed at the back of his mind. Walk there. Do what you're told. What a different life this is, on the run. He had imagined escape many times over his life, but it had never been like this. He had fantasised about waking up with his slave-mark miraculously gone, him melting into the night, finding an abandoned homestead deep in some hidden valley to live humbly. Nothing ever like his current holy mission, one that seemed determined to ensnare not only himself but those he encountered along the way. But who was he, a mere slave, to question the gods or who they placed in his path to assist him? He doubted he alone would be able to make it past Yarra, or trade for the equipment they would surely need. For now, he needed Lumi. What could such a chance encounter be but divine providence?

The shaft began sloping up, then a crack of light appeared in the ceiling running along its length, slowly widening to reveal a crevasse sitting above. An occasional finger of the Skyflower's light caressed Dog's cheek. Eventually, the shaft dissolved into rubble and weathered rock and splayed out into a muddy forest that swooped up and away into the distant Ring. The morning breeze chilled Dog, his upper body bare to it, no longer ensconced in the warm air of the Underworld. The robes of the old woman draped across his back were welcome for the slight shield they provided against the wind.

Dog wondered how far they were from Prehren. As they walked downring,

he turned his head to see if it was visible yet. He thought he could make out the valley it was in rising up above the nearest mountains, but he wasn't sure. He thought about his friend Jerax. He hoped that the old slave was doing alright. Hoped that Rakkar and Lady Liza had mourned their son and forgotten all about the runaway slave they had already thrown away once. Even hoped that it had not been too hard on Aresa.

He had learned that hope was dangerous when entertained too greedily. The road ahead was what mattered, and it had no obligation to his hopes.

The forest became a trail, and the trail became a road. Lumi liked to talk about history - who had owned which octant a thousand years ago, who had betrayed or allied with whom, all things that meant little to Dog. He had studied the map back in Prehren often, but what faction a certain segment belonged to had seemed irrelevant. A runaway slave was safe in none of them.

Still, he learned a little. He had known of Rakkar's wars of conquest further downring in the sixth octant, seen the wealth that had flown in from the venture and seen the plumes of black smoke in the distance as towns burned. But he had always heard of the United Alliance as a foolish, greedy and conniving people. Lumi spoke of them differently, as an ancient group of guilds renowned for their curiosity and industriousness only recently weakened by internal strife. In the end it was all just the squabbles of freemen with too much free time.

Lumi had given Dog a kerchief to wrap around his neck. It made his bare torso seem a little more intentional. When they passed the occasional traveller on the road, Dog lifted the kerchief to cover his face, and Bart nestled underneath his chin. It worked well with Dog's square jaw, though he couldn't look down. He was still nervous about seeing Rakkar coming down the road behind them, thirsting for his blood and the deaths of any that had helped him. They would have to continue another three days of walking past GAK3 before they would begin to leave Rakkar's territory and cross the contested area between Rakkar and the Alliance.

But Bart had assured him that they would be well ahead of anyone else.

The access shafts had cut across a jagged terrain, cutting at least two days off their journey. And surely the people of Prehren were far busier fixing the damage from the tremor to chase a slave. If Rakkar was truly searching for him, it would have to be methodical, and it would take time for that news to travel. Regardless of those reassuring thoughts, a phantom clawed at his back.

The day passed, petals rising and falling above them. They smelled Yarra long before it came into view, an acrid smoke that covered the landscape. The source of that smoke became apparent when the flickering glow of the town appeared below them. But it was not the town that took Dog's breath away.

Just beyond it, separated by a thin strip of harvested land, the dead city of GAK3 rose like a honeycomb mountain up into the sky. It was the rotted carcass of a once unimaginable city, overgrown with greenery and crumbling in on itself. Seeing it closer up Dog could perhaps begin to grasp how once the Ring had held a billion people. There were nine more of these strange ruins above him on the Ring after all. They looked like spores of mould on bread.

The town of Yarra survived by eating into that carcass, slowly disassembling its edge and smelting the salvage in pits that pockmarked it like luminescent sores. The town was what Chief Rakkar would have called a motte and bailey. The houses of the freemen who owned Yarra perched separately above the cloud of fumes and away from the city's edge. Around the edge walls of metal panelling were patrolled by tiny figures. Lumi said it was because metalbeasts sometimes attacked. What about all the people outside? Bart had to translate. Lumi seemed less able to grasp his signs. She shrugged. "They fight. Or run."

In between the walled district and the dead city was first a layer of houses and larger buildings that were packed together as if huddled for safety and surrounded by wooden palisades that seemed feeble compared with what was just above. And then lay the pits, belching a dark smoke that wafted back into the towering ruin before being lost in some dark vast street.

He studied the distant border of the dead city from his vantage point.

Were those buildings? Dark streets that disappeared into shadow? His eyes could not discern enough detail.

Lumi climbed down gingerly from her perch upon Dog's back, the journey almost done. His muscles ached, and his tongue swollen and dry within his mouth. The gruel of the nutrition station seemed a lifetime ago to his stomach. Bart once again nestled out of view underneath the kerchief, under Dog's jaw.

It was slow going, the old woman setting a pace that made Dog want to pick her up again, but eventually the gates of Yarra loomed before them. His eye was drawn to four huge cuts across the palisade just beside the gate, all parallel. He wondered if that had been a metalbeast from the city. He'd heard stories, but there was nothing beyond steelbeetles and coxen the size of a goat back in Prehren.

Dog could see the lookouts eyeing his enormity, their fingers laying across crossbow triggers. He tried to keep calm. There was no chance that they knew of this mute runaway giant slave yet. Not for a little bit, at least.

The group ahead of them were waved inside, a few men carrying towering backpacks of goods to sell. Lumi, holding Dog's arm in support, cracked a smile at the tired young man who looked up from a stack of papers at them. It was not returned.

"Your business in Yarra?"

"Just restocking a little before continuing our journey downring." Lumi responded without hesitation.

"Final destination?"

"Topaime."

The young guard looked surprised. "I hear there's fighting still, over there.

You're not Alliancefolk, are you?"

"No, I'm from Torium."

The old woman could lie well. Dog hadn't thought to ask for her origin, but she seemed so at home in her subterfuge. He reminded himself to ask later where she truly came from.

"And your man?" The guard was looking at Dog. "Gods, he looks like shit. You have your deed for him?"

Lumi sighed and shrugged. "Unfortunately not. You know the roads these days, and the value of a man like him. I would rather, were he to be stolen from me, that a thief not also be able to steal the deed from under me."

The guard seemed satisfied. "It's no problem. But he'll need to be tagged for his time here."

Dog tried to suppress his wince. Having never left Prehren he had never had to be tagged before, but he had seen many visiting slaves with one. The guard pulled out a well-used tool and thin strip of metal. "Your name?"

"Dori Fleathresh."

On the paper below him the guard wrote the symbol embossed upon the metal strip, and then a string of characters that Dog could only assume was the name Lumi had given. He supposed he shouldn't be surprised that Lumi would give an alias, but it still had thrown him a little. If lies came so easily to her, could he trust what she had told him?

The guard commanded Dog's attention, pointing at the ground in front of him. "Come here." Dog obeyed. "By Terra you're a big one. Kneel down a little." He did so, and the guard grabbed his ear. "Never tagged before, huh? Is he new?"

"Just new to the road." Lumi replied.

Dog felt the coldness of the metal strip against the cartilage at the top of his ear. With a squeeze of the tool in the guard's hand the cold was replaced by a searing pain and the light trickle of blood dripping off his lobe.

"We need that back when you leave, which at maximum is two days from now. It goes without saying that you can't sell him here. And your man can't carry that here." He pointed at the knife at Dog's belt.

"Understood." Lumi held out her hand. Dog tried to hide his begrudgement as he handed it over. He felt vulnerable without it.

"Well..." The young guard ticked off some final symbol on the papers below. "Welcome to Yarra."

Beyond the gate, muddy streets linked a maze of buildings. The roads were congested with labourers, carts, and a flurry of industry. He was grateful that Lumi picked up the pace a little.

"Where are we going?" It was Bart, voice a little muffled from underneath the kerchief. A startled Dog quickly covered his mouth again with it, so the devil's voice could be conceivably his if someone in the crowd was watching and listening. It paid to not underestimate the perceptiveness of others. At least he did not look suspicious doing so - many of the labourers did the same to filter out what they could of the harsh fumes.

Lumi kept her composure. "A worker's house I know. We can find food and a place to sleep. I have enough to cover that for tonight."

As they walked, she pulled out Rakkar's knife and examined it. "This is an exquisite blade. How did you come by it?"

After a moment's pause, Bart replied. "We took it from someone who was chasing us."

"Right." Lumi quickly hid the blade in her robes. "That reduces how much we can sell it for, but I think I can find someone. Tomorrow."

I want a knife, Dog signed.

"We can buy ten knives for what we'll get for that one. And we don't need knives, we need food, lanterns, clothes, rope, and tools. Selling this dagger will get us most of the way there, but I'll have more room to move if you put in a day's labour. That's what the worker's house is good for."

Dog felt his back twinge. One day he would be still. He would rest and sit and think. But it was not today, nor would it be tomorrow.

Chapter 7: Hot Ground

It had been an uncomfortable night, but a welcome one. The worker's house had served a thick and meaty soup that had replenished him. Lumi had bought herself a cot and immediately collapsed like she'd walked the whole trip herself, only wordlessly propping herself up to devour the bowl of soup that Dog brought. They didn't have a cot big enough for him, so he had gathered as much dry grass as he could to make a soft bed in the corner.

In the morning light, Dog woke to find the old woman sitting beside him. She held out a pair of leather boots, sturdy pants, a shirt and a thick cotton jacket with a hood. "It might be a bit tight, but it's honestly a miracle they had anything at all. It was twenty-two marks, total. Call it a loan."

After washing up, he tried them on. The pants were indeed tight around his thick thighs, but the shirt and jacket seemed baggy by design and so fit snugly against his figure. He signed a thank you to Lumi, meaning it. He felt more human.

Bart, hidden for the night in Lumi's backpack, wobbled surreptitiously underneath the kerchief that he had kept around his neck. It was becoming a comforting presence. Bart made him feel like Jerax used to. Perceived.

The residents of the worker's house bustled outside to auction their days off to the waiting crowd of foremen. Dog needn't have worried about his chances of getting a job. As soon as his immense frame cleared the lopsided door of the worker's house, the foremens' eyes widened and their mouths salivated.

"He's my man!" Lumi bellowed as she walked over to them. It had the intended effect. A gaggle of foremen swarmed her, talking over each other and engaging in heated negotiation. It went on for minutes, with foremen glancing over at him before engaging Lumi once again with sweeping

gestures of their hands. It seemed to come to some crescendo, and suddenly the crowd dispersed. A short, rotund man who was sweating more intensely than Dog had ever seen before strolled up to him, swinging his hips around his spherical belly.

"Right, come on." He held out a little piece of green paper. Dog took it, a little confused. "Work chit!" He barked before swinging around and hustling down the street.

Lumi shrugged when Dog looked up from the chit at her. "It's just shovelling, for a damn good price. Sixty marks for the day. Enough to move on." She looked up at the dead city that loomed in the horizon over the town.

Dog nodded. He could shovel.

The fat man was easy to catch up to. "You're filling in for two lads today, that's why I'm paying the extra. Big man like you will beat the work of both those skinny bastards, gods rest them."

Dog wasn't sure he had heard right. It sure sounded like a prayer for the dead. He had no way to ask, and the foreman ignored him regardless to concentrate on making his way through the throng. The gate outside to the pits was packed, each person holding a chit like his. A guard grabbed it without even looking at him, tearing it in half and handing it back to him, and he was pushed through. He felt fear in his gut now that GAK3 lay so close, stretching so high into the sky that it seemed to almost obscure the Skyflower itself.

The pits were countless gaping wounds in the Ring that belched a thin black smoke into the sky. They were huge. Dog could have laid end to end ten times over the pits, and almost as many vertically. They sloped downward, far too steep to climb. Metal stairs wound from the top to the bottom, and a central column stabbed out from the lowest point back up to the surface to end in a crane that carried huge cauldrons of scrap in and hauled ingot and slag out. A smattering of walkways connected the staircase to the column, carrying scurrying labourers already into the day's work.

He eyed Dog. "Can you understand me, man?"

Dog nodded.

"Good. This job is simple, but it isn't picking posies for your sweetie. You do exactly what your told and you'll be just fine."

They came to a stop at a pit that looked like any other.

"This is us. Pit 19. Let's get in there. The night crew are waiting for you so they can fuck off and get drunk."

But before Dog could head down into the pit, a deep voice shouted behind him. "Oh no you don't!"

It was a wiry man with soot ingrained into his pores, wearing dark goggles and a lantern on his belt, approaching the foreman with three others. None had slave marks that he could see. They looked angry to see him, and Dog tensed up at their aggression. It seemed however directed entirely at the foreman.

"You've really fucked us now, haven't you Gorn. You hire temps for days so you don't have to pay the full rate. You don't fix the burner. And now?" He flung a finger out at Dog accusatorily. "Now we're down to one?"

The foreman, Gorn it seemed, attempted to keep the peace, embracing the worker's outstretched arms. "Alber, the up-tops slashed our marks because we aren't making quota. I could have hired two labourers, maybe. But they'd be reedy little bastards like you. I got us a big man, shovel more than three of you."

Alber was having none of it. "And how is a big bastard going to stop the burner from backing up again?"

"It's getting a proper redo tonight."

"It's been tonight for a days."

The foreman gave up negotiating and pushed past Alber with his own jabbed finger. "You want investment from up-top? Then hit quota. Now get your ass down there, all of you. You're on the clock. And Alber, show him the ropes."

The foreman started away to a different pit, but spun around again. "He can't talk, by the way! Didn't catch a name."

The labourer threw up his hands. "Fucking perfect. Gorn! You better let up-top know we're short today!"

But Gorn was gone, leaving the workers spitting mad. Alber turned to Dog, regarding the massive man. Dog was expecting to be the new target of their anger, but the worker grimaced in what seemed meant to be a friendly expression. "No spite towards you, comrade. Just normally, you'd have help shovelling down there. Up-top are ruthless bastards, the lot of 'em. You think good? Just can't talk?"

He almost pulled down his kerchief out of habit, to show his scar, but realised it would also reveal the little devil hiding underneath. Alber didn't seem to notice as he instead only nodded. He had never been called a comrade before. It seemed a friendly enough term, though he couldn't say its meaning.

"We knew a fella like that a while back, took a hit to the head and could only talk in a whisper after. His crew always made quota. So will we."

Alber spun towards the stairs that led down into the pit. "Alright!" he shouted to no one in particular, "we're on the clock!"

As they descended the stairs, workers peeled off to head around the wall

or towards the central column on the walkways. Dog followed Alber down. He felt the heat growing on his skin, emanating up from below. Dog realised that the central column was hollow.

"Smelting-" Alber said, following his gaze, "is a matter of three things. Heat, metal, and charcoal. The heat we draw up from the ground. That's what makes Yarra possible, y'know. The hot ground - even if the sweating makes you feel like you're dying - hot enough to melt most scrap. The salvage crews chop it up, and the crane brings it in and down through the column. It gets hotter than anything you've ever felt. Whatever you do, don't touch it."

Eventually it was only the two of them on the stairs. The air grew ever thicker and harsher in Dog's lungs. After another minute's descent they reached the pit's bottom. The central column terminated into a shaft that continued into the earth and glowed with hellish reds. He felt his skin dry out instantly at its glow.

"This is us. Bottom of the barrel. The crane will lower the scrap into the hole to heat it up, then you shovel charcoal into the slag while I scoop off impurities. When I say it looks good we send it back up for our comrades above to ingot. I'll walk you through it as we go."

Above them, Dog could hear the cranking and creaking of gears. Looking up, he could see a huge cauldron being lifted from the edge of the pit and towards the centre. He could feel a vibration running through the pit from the crane's straining. Alber pointed at a pile of black dirt that lay at the bottom of a large vent that ran all the way back up. Two shovels stuck out of it.

"That's you."

Dog walked over to the charcoal, picking up one of the shovels. It felt solid in his hand, warm and dry wood with a worn metal blade. Alber took up a large ladle that laid next to the stairs, and looked upward to the descending cauldron and shouting workers.

"You should know..." the worker called out to him. Dog looked up from his

tool. "We had two lads working this on the regular, just a few days ago." He looked grim as the cauldron reached them and continued down, filled with all sorts of metal scraps that glinted despite their rust. "Just before the day ended and night shift started, those Devil Lights, and that tremor fucked the burner. They didn't make it."

Alber pointed his ladle to a vent that rose from the floor and up towards the surface. "That's the burner vent. It's meant to siphon gases back up to the surface. But something's wrong with it, down closer to the heat. That gas will kill ya."

He walked over to a wooden box that lay against the wall of the pit and pulled the lantern from his belt, placing it on top. A flurry of matches lit the oil-soaked wick inside.

"You watch that flame, comrade. That goes out, and you go upstairs as quick as you can. No flame, that means gas."

The first cauldron clunked down into the hole and a woosh of burning air singed Dog, sending him staggering back. Alber didn't flinch. When the cauldron rose so its lip met the bottom of the pit, Dog shovelled while he used his ladle to scoop burning slops of melting metals out and into a trough. Alber, as graceful as anything Dog had seen, would come swooping in above the cauldron to scoop up some offending impurity that had bubbled to the surface, and direct Dog where on that glowing surface to target his shovel's loads.

The heat was excruciating, and within a few minutes he was shedding his kerchief, jacket and shirt into a heap next to the burning lantern, so he wouldn't ruin them with sweat. He kept Bart surreptitiously hidden underneath the pile, who pressed up against his hand a little when it could as if for reassurance.

"Come on, comrade!" Alber shouted, pulling him back to his shovel and the cauldron. "We have to make quota. To make quota, we need to finish a cauldron every 45 minutes, on average, for the next 12 hours. Sixteen a day.

So get moving!"

And so he shovelled, until Alber whistled upwards and the chain attached to the cauldron clinked and drew taught, bringing it up towards the surface. Dog looked upwards, stretching his back, and saw figures moving away from the glowing mass along the walkways before folding back in once it passed. Shouts and conversations drifted from above, from the crane operators to the metal loaders to the ingot makers. He felt a small part of some big machine, ticking away on its purpose. He looked at Alber, and the man seemed unsure how to pass the brief downtime.

"Normally there's two of ye, and you've both got shovels so you've got something in common. So that tends to fill in a lot of the conversation that tends to happen down here. I suppose today I'll learn to like the sound of me own voice."

"Ho!" It was a call above, from the stairs. A woman descended, carrying a keg strung across her back. She bounded down the stairs as if it was empty and made of paper, but Dog could hear the sloshing of liquid inside. A mass of curls bounced in front of a faded slave mark on her forehead. She greeted Alber with a wink. "Going to take a lot more than a day to love that voice, I'm afraid."

"Fuckoff, Vera."

"Love you too, Alber."

"Drink." She pulled a wooden cup from her pocket and expertly shifted the keg around to grab the tap. A pale brown liquid filled it. While it poured, she eyed Dog. "He got a name?"

"Not that I know," Alber sighed, "can't talk nor write neither so I don't know how to ask him."

"The temp with no name. Mysterious." She considered him as she handed

over the cup. "It's weak honeywater. Water's shit here, don't drink it."

Dog was already parched and gulped down the cup. She poured him another and he went more slowly, burping occasionally. She laughed every time as if he'd told an enormously funny joke. When Alber had his fill, she ran back upstairs even faster than she'd descended, promising to return every hour. As he watched her bound her way back up, smiling and greeting everyone she passed, a pebble hit his head.

"Come on, loverboy." Alber called out. As the next cauldron hissed into the burning hole, the neverending pile of charcoal demanded him. He was only part of a machine, a project, some greater endeavour, and he was to serve his purpose.

Chapter 8: A Fair's Day Work

Dog was drenched in his own sweat as he stumbled for the last time off the stairs of Pit 19 and back out into the cool evening. His skin was red from the scalding heat it had endured and sensitive to the touch. He had only put his kerchief back on, under which Bart sat chafing against his raw neck.

Alber clapped him on his back as he passed, sending a spray of sweat off his back. "Comrade, you shovel as fast as four men. You'll be welcome at our table tonight at the Pisswater."

Several of the crew had mentioned the place, though Dog had no idea who would name a drinking house such a thing. It seemed like slaves were permitted to mingle and drink with freemen in the lower walls of Yarra. It was what Alber referred to grandly as 'the very meaning of comradery'.

Gorn, the foreman, appeared from the milling crowd of migrating workers as if begrudgingly fulfilling his second bit of work in the day. "Not bad, Pit 19. But not quota."

The workers shouted their protest, and Dog furrowed his brow. They had made quota. It had been close, but they had gotten there. Sixteen cauldrons of scrap, melted and purified in the raw and primal heat of the Ring itself. But the foreman only shrugged and shook his head until the shouting died off.

"Bad scrap in your third cauldron. Unusable."

The explanation did not calm the workers. Alber went so far as to throw his gloves at the foreman, who shrank aside from them with a shocked expression.

"That's the scrappers job!" The labourer shouted, striding towards the foreman. "How are we eating that shit soup when we ain't the ones who

cooked it up?"

But the protests fell on deaf ears and their anger flickered and died in impotence as Gorn only shrugged that this was just the way things were, and that he didn't make the rules. And with that, he was done with them and snapped his fingers at Dog.

"You, come with me. I said I'd get you back to your master."

Dog felt surprisingly sad about not making quota. He supposed he had been proud of his day's work, alongside people who had treated him about as well as anyone had. When they had paused for a quick lunch, the crane operator had come down and handed him a thick sausage of cured meat. He had not realised that everyone else had food prepared for the day. And when they had hauled the final cauldron upwards just a few minutes before shift change, they had all let out a cheer that had made Dog smile.

"You look like someone spat in your drink." It was Gorn, looking back at him. "Don't worry, your pay isn't tied to meeting quota. Your master will get their agreed upon marks." He smirked, considering something, then spoke in a low voice. "Pit 19 made quota today, you know. But then they'd be on my ass about getting things fixed, so..." Gorn winked at him. It made Dog clench his fists in the injustice of it. "Our little secret. Not that you got a way to tell them. I kinda like that, the more I sit with it. Maybe they should make all slaves like that."

They met a lounging Lumi out the front of the worker's house. Dog left her with a nod to deal with the foreman. He had had enough of the man.

He had the worker's house to himself. It was cool enough now to pull his clothes back on, and Bart rolled out of the pile of clothes and onto Dog's makeshift bed. Even hidden all day, the little devil was still covered in a thin layer of soot. It rolled around to see if anyone was in earshot.

"It's hot down there!" The little devil exclaimed. Dog smiled and patted it a little. It rolled into his palm. "Thanks for taking me with you instead of leaving

me in this place all day."

No problem. It felt good to communicate with words again. Within a few days he had gone from having only an improvised and haphazard language with one other person, to a far more fleshed out system of communication with two. It felt like a way to finally be seen.

He tried to scrape as much of the day's muck off as he could, but he stank of the pit.

Lumi came back in, her hand clutching something which she dropped into Dog's palm. "This is yours. Thirty-eight marks. That's sixty minus the cost of your clothes."

Dog stared at the hexagonal metal coins in his palm. They shimmered orange in the lamplight of the worker's house. He had never been paid anything for his work before. The idea of it seemed ridiculous to him, like paying a chicken for its meat. Perhaps less ridiculous now, with the weight of the cold coins in his hand.

"Some bad news. My buyer is out of town until tomorrow."

Dog's alarm must have been on his face. He pointed in the direction of Prehren. Rakkar's messengers would be coming soon. We don't have a lot of time.

Lumi nodded. "I get that. But the earliest we can leave without being lethally unprepared... that's tomorrow night. I need to fence the knife and then buy supplies for the two of us. And I'm not crossing that no-man's-land out there without the supplies we need. The good news is that the foreman said he'd hire you tomorrow, same pay."

I don't like him.

"I don't like him either, but he's paying the best. And the work wasn't too

bad, was it? The more we have, the better gear we can scrounge together. That might make the difference between getting out of GAK3 alive and getting trapped and starving to death or something."

Dog sighed and agreed. Another day in the pit didn't appeal to him, especially one that seemed to be in a state of disrepair. But Alber and the rest had been kind to him. Comrades.

What lies in the city? He signed. What is our goal within it?

Lumi glanced at the little devil on the bed. "That thing probably knows more than I. What I know is they are cursed places, full of metalbeasts, traps, and difficult terrain."

Bart rolled to look at the old woman. "Yes, the cities are not their former selves. Polis is a god, yes?" They both nodded. "Of what?"

Lumi answered reflexively. "Community. Kinship."

"No." The directness of it startled Dog. "Polis is the god of construction. And it is deeply broken. Perhaps the most of any of them. The mechanisms once used to build and maintain the cities now make them strange and uninhabitable places. And as for what we seek inside - information, and access. We will restore a fragment of Minerva's power, and she will use it to show us our path."

I am frightened, he signed.

Bart rolled back over to look at Dog. "Polis may be broken, but it continues to keep impeccable maps of its cities. If you stay with me, and do what I say, I promise no harm will come to you."

Lumi smiled. "I knew you'd be our ticket. Hey, where are you going?"

Dog had grabbed the little devil and placed it behind his head in the hood

of his jacket, and was heading for the door. For a drink.

It took some wandering to find the place that Alber had mentioned. Lumi trailed behind, humming a soft tune. He was downwind of the pits, and the stink of them seemed inescapable until a soft music reached his ears. As its warm lights came into view around the corner, Dog hoped that Yarra only had one drinking establishment. He pointed at the name hanging above the door.

"It says The Piswalt." Lumi supplied helpfully. "That's one of the families, up on the hill. Own all the entertainment here, if I remember."

That sounded about right. He was greeted inside by a cacophony of activity. The room was stuffed with tables and drunk workers engaged in recreation. Cards snapped, drinks clinked, voices roared in laughter or stabbed with slurred anger. A few haggard musicians kept a lively beat in the corner, and Dog smiled to see Vera - the comrade who had kept his thirst quenched all day - dancing amongst a gaggle of bodies. She moved in a way he'd never witnessed before, a writhing from the hips that accentuated her body. She caught him staring and he immediately looked around at anything else, cursing himself.

By luck he spotted Alber and some of the other crew from Pit 19, gathered around a table scattered with empty jugs. The labourers were out of their work clothes, and Albert's thin frame was now cut with a surprisingly distinguished style, despite the worn and cheap materials. They all greeted him with shouts of "Comrade!" and cleared two places on a bench for them.

"You know this man?" Alber asked Lumi. "I have never worked with someone for an entire day and not learned their name."

"I'm Dori, and his name is Tratto. I only recently purchased his deed, to make it possible to travel safely. I'm from Torium originally you see, and I'm going to visit my family up there to help rebuild from the war."

Alber eyed Dog sceptically, seeming to comprehend that he couldn't contradict his master's story even if he wanted to. But Dog met his eyes and

smiled, and it seemed to disarm the labourer.

"Well, Dori, comrade Tratto. Nice to meet ya, properly."

The jugs of honeywater were strong and only a single mark, subsidised by up-top. Alber nosed into Lumi's expertly woven lies while Dog nursed his drink and tried to spot Vera again, while not being seen by her doing so.

He was feeling warm and fuzzy all over when Lumi excused herself. Alber seemed to be considering his words carefully as he watched her go.

"Is she a good master to you?" He nodded, but Alber seemed unsatisfied. "Something off with her. Just a feeling."

Before Dog had figured out how to react to that, someone hopped onto the empty seat next to him. His heart skipped a beat as he turned to see Vera, eyes bright and sweating from the exertion of dancing. "Hello mystery temp."

"Tratto." Alber interjected.

"Where?"

"His name's Tratto."

She frowned, her nose scrunching up in a way that made Dog's heart skip a beat. "Haven't heard that one before. You working tomorrow? Same job, Pit 19?" He nodded. "Good. I'll be there, to stop you from getting thirsty."

"Oh I think your presence makes him thirstier!" Alber laughed. Dog felt his cheeks redden and he shuffled away from the touch of her leg against his. She laughed and pressed it back up against him. He tried to look at anything else, and saw Lumi leaving. Was she talking to someone? He had no chance to think further on it as he felt Vera's hand rest on his thigh.

A few jugs of honeywater shared later, she took him by hand through the

empty dark streets of Yarra. The town did not have the lamps of Prehren, and only the occasional flicker of light from a window lit the way. She led him to a shed that smelled of mildew, and they were alone in the darkness.

Their sex was desperate. They took each other, drank each other, released their bodies against each other like crashing waves. Dog's urgency and fervour were that of a new man, one chewed and spat out from the mouth of death itself. It was that of a man who would soon head once more into that maw for reasons that he still did not understand.

In this moment however another mouth demanded him. He did not know what exactly haunted Vera, just as she did not know what he faced, but he saw in her vulnerability a deep and ever present fear. He thought it must be the same fear he felt. The fear of a person made thing. But together, right now, they were not things. They were animal. They were alive.

Chapter 9: Found And Taken

The next day, when he stepped out into the light, the foreman Gorn only handed Dog his chit and pointed towards Pit 19. Dog nodded at Lumi who exited behind him, but she only disappeared into the thronging crowd of shift change without acknowledgement. As he spent more time in her company, Dog could not forget the warning of Alber. He still needed the old woman, but he could not afford to equate necessity with trust.

On his walk, he stopped by a cart handing out packets of greasy meat and pickled vegetables to a queue of workers for two marks each. He bought two for his lunch, and to share with those that had fed him yesterday. The aproned cook teased him. "Big man needs a big feed!"

At the gates to the pits, the guard tore his chit and waved him through without question. Alber greeted him at the stairs of the pit, surrounded by the night crew swapping over with the day. "Comrade. Did you have a nice rest of your evening?"

Dog felt his face flush a little, and the workers roared in laughter. Alber at least did not laugh, but his grin held mirth. "Do right by Vera, now. She's not your woman because she paid you attention one time. She's one of us."

It seemed a stern but well-intended warning, and Dog tried to nod affirmingly. Alber clapped him on the back. "Come on, Comrade Tratto. Shovelling to be done."

The day went quicker, though he was disappointed when his first water break was brought by some young man he'd never met before. He felt less nauseous from the heat and settled into a pace. Alber taught him a little about smelting, as that was what he knew and Dog had tried to encourage the chatter.

The next two water breaks came and went before he saw Vera's curly hair bouncing down the stairs. He looked upwards at her, smiling. When she reached the bottom, she clapped Alber on the shoulder and looked at Dog. "And? No 'thanks for the water, Vera, without it I'd shrivel up into a little dried fruit?' What does a girl have to do around here?"

"Thank you, Vera." Alber intoned. Dog made his sign for it, and he swore her cheeks blushed as she focused on his bare chest. He wondered if she was shy about their passion last night, as he was. But before he knew it, she was leaping up the stairs once again, a little lighter than before.

Alber talked about his hometown as they ate lunch together. He hated Yarra, and being so close to the dead city. It was an inherently temporary place, without a Bed to birth any new life. He asked Dog if he'd noticed the lack of children, and he had to shake his head. "You'd notice, if you stayed here long enough. There are no families down here. Only work. Bastard place to raise a kid. Not when they can't go out the walls at night without risking some monster grabbin 'em."

After the eighth cauldron was cleaned of its final impurities, Alber's shout to the crane above made the chain go taut, and the cauldron began to rise. Dog stretched his back and craned his head up to watch its ascent, only to see Lumi darting her head over the rim of the pit. She looked around and saw him standing at the bottom. The moment her eyes widened in recognition, she began racing down the steps with a surprising speed, sending the faint jingling of her charms echoing off the walls. Dog noticed that not only was her pack bulging, but she was carrying another large pack in front of her. Vera's head appeared too, looking downward with annoyance. Dog heard a faint "Hey! You can't go down there!"

But Lumi didn't stop until Alber placed himself between her and Dog. "With respect, lady, you can't be down here. It's not safe. And we need Tratto, we'd be two men down without him."

Lumi responded, but as she did her hands moved in slow, familiar signals. "I'm so sorry to intrude, but I really must steal my man for just one moment." -

Our friends are here - "I'll only be a moment. The cauldron just went up, it will be a few minutes before you need him again." - We need to go right now.

Alber looked over at Dog and seemed taken aback by his expression. "You alright, comrade? I mean, I'm not your boss. But you'd better not let Gorn see you. Just two minutes, no more yeah? I can't miss quota again."

Pulling his shirt and jacket on, he nestled Bart again under his chin. He wondered if the little devil was sleeping, or how it felt just having to sit there and be an inanimate object. He hoped it did not resent him for it. He took the larger pack as well, marvelling at how the old woman had managed to carry it alongside her own. It seemed she was not quite as decrepit as she had first seemed. It had a long rope hitched to one side, and a lantern on the other. At its bottom was a bedroll made from coarse but tough fabric.

"Are you sure you're alright, comrade? That's a lot of gear for two minutes!" Alber's final call went unanswered as they started back up the stairs as quickly as they could. Dog could only mentally apologise to him. If they met quota today, it would be without his shovelling. Lumi was slower going up, her breath wheezing after only a third of the climb.

"We've got everything we need in these bags. There's a knife, just like you asked. Maybe put it somewhere you can get to it." She was grimacing like someone was whipping her with every step. Dog reached into the flap and felt a leather sheathe that he tried to subtly tuck into his belt under his shirt. He felt foolish doing it. He could skin a rabbit or cut leather with it just fine. But to use it against someone? It made him feel ill.

It would be open ground from here to the dead city, once they left the pits. Pit 19 was one of the furthest pits from the walls of Down Bottom. An easy walk, melting into the ruins and disappearing unseen by the salvage crews. He prayed to Minerva to make it so.

He shaded his eyes in the Skyflower's full glare and spotted Vera's head reappearing over the edge, darting around to look at something behind her. She yelled something that he couldn't discern before vanishing once again. As

he passed the rest of the crew along the gantry the bag on his back caught a few curious glances.

Lumi disappeared out of the pit onto solid ground, and Dog hurried up the last few stairs to join her. He almost ran into her at the top. He looked around at what had made her stop.

Gorn was hurrying towards Pit 19 with three guards in tow only a few hundred paces off. He yelped when he saw Dog, waving the grim men forwards into a measured run. Two carried crossbows, and the third a large steel bludgeon that he spun as he strode. Curious faces peered from the pits out at the approaching guards, and back to Dog and Lumi.

"What the fuck did you do?" Vera asked at his shoulder. He jumped, but Lumi barely reacted.

"We have to get to GAK3."

"The city? You'll be dead in-" A crossbow bolt whistled between Dog's shoulder and Lumi's head, hitting the rim of the pit behind them with a clang. Vera gasped. "Come on, next time they won't miss!" Lumi shouted around her shoulder, already picking up pace towards the towering mountain of steel and stone above them.

But they had not missed. A second bolt lay poking from Vera's crumpled body beside him. It took him a moment to recognise what he was seeing, but when he did he fell to his knees and grasped her ragdoll body to him.

The crossbowmen were almost reloaded, and their second shot would be from far closer. Dog saw the gates of Down Bottom opening and a brigade of black-garbed guards streaming out towards him. He tried to stem the bleeding, the jagged black bolt too embedded to remove. Another bolt whistled over his head and he flinched downwards. It probably saved his life - the next one struck Bart beneath his chin and sent the little devil wildly spinning away. The impact bruised his throat and sent him into a coughing fit.

"Come on, Dog!" The little devil seemed unharmed by the blow, and zoomed around him as if to help him up. "Wait - watch out!"

Dog followed the devil's single eye. The guard with the baton had been at a dead sprint towards him, staring at him with a hungry and generic rage. He was mere moments away from swinging his metal baton down on Dog's skull. He felt strangely calm, crouched down cradling Vera's still body. The guard raised his arm as he thought he would, and Dog chose his moment to launch himself into the man's armpit with all of his strength. The man's expression was shocked as he sailed over the pair and into the pit. By the time he heard the crunch of his body below, Dog was already sprinting after Lumi with Vera in his arms, the little devil wobbling after.

Another crossbow bolt whistled by his head, but before he knew it the outermost pits were behind them. He weaved past a shouting salvage crew hauling carts of scrap, catching up with Lumi. He glanced back to see the mass of guards getting closer. The two crossbowmen were still at the pit, one a little way down the stairs. His heart sank for the man he had thrown. It had been a matter of survival. "Come on!" Lumi shouted at his slowing gallop. He picked up the pace again. "Leave her, Dog!" But he could not. He had done this to her. He could feel Vera's chest rising and falling against his. The heavy pack and deadweight in his arms was making his chest beat like a drum and sweat pour from every patch of skin. He prayed to Hermet, both for her survival and his pounding heart.

Ahead, the dead city waited to embrace them. A grid of streets formed from gravel and rock, at first scattered with harvested ruins but quickly becoming an incomprehensible mass of decayed architecture. It somehow still managed to gleam through the thick vines and dark interior, with enough ripe harvest for the pits to last a thousand years.

The street became more of a tunnel as they ran further in, the midday light of the Skyflower becoming more shrouded by the structures above and the air slightly opaque. Lumi had pulled ahead, though he supposed he was weighed down by a pack and another body.

"Left!" Called Bart.

Lumi swerved. As she glanced towards him she shouted again. "Dog, leave her you idiot!"

He was a fool. He had just likely killed a man, and gotten the woman in his arms mortally wounded. It was his lot to follow and do what he was told. But he could not abandon her now. Bart could find her a Bed, and force it to heal her. He knew what the black blood pouring from her abdomen meant. He could not abandon her now.

He looked back at the slice of the open Ring still visible as it quickly disappeared around the corner. The guards still buzzed around the pits, as if stunned by their escape. Dog too would not have followed into the dead city, if he had the choice. But he also saw an unmistakable figure in red, standing still against the ruckus. Looking at him. Kray was here.

Out of sight and in significantly more shadow, Lumi finally slowed and Dog caught up. They were both heaving breaths and staggering a little.

"I told you to- fuck's sake Dog! We can't leave her here, we don't know how long they'll take to- Fuck!" He shrank against her fury, but he did not put her down. Instead, he looked at Bart and nodded at Vera's head against his shoulder. He tried to make the sign for bed with his arms full.

"Oh!" Squealed the devil in delight. "You want to help your friend?" He nodded. "That might be tricky. The nearest Bed is a fair detour away, down that second street on the left there-"

But Dog was already heading in that direction as fast as his sore muscles could take him. Lumi called to him at first, grabbed his arm, and even tried to stop Bart from guiding Dog before she angrily settled at the back, making the occasional frustrated remark about the devil's loyalty.

They penetrated deeper into a maze of cluttered streets that lay like a

piece of fine lace, connecting buildings that sailed up into the smog, their details only hinted at by glimpses of strange lights up above. It was a terrible and mysterious warren that seemed not entirely still, full of harsh angles and sweeping strokes of stone and metal flying from one place to another. Dog understood none of it. One perfect square of floor would be immaculately clean and maintained, its tiles spotless, but the surrounding ground would be rotted into nothing but moss. A stairway would be the wrong way around, or lead to nowhere. Many of the structures lacked any coherent design, like they'd been built on top of by a thousand different builders, each drunker and more deranged than the last.

As Vera's breath grew shallower, Dog's panic deepened. The streets never ended, dimly illuminated with strange and neverending devil lights of every shape and form. Finally, after what felt like an hour but was probably more like fifteen minutes, Bart nestled up against an alcove within a vast complex that sailed upwards and tapped on a rusted metal door. It clicked open, and Dog had to briefly put Vera down in the moss to try and wrestle it open. He had to tear through thick ivy that had grown on the other side, but finally he made his way through to the room beyond.

He had to blink to make sure he wasn't imagining it. The room was perfectly cut in half, as if into two separate worlds. The one he was in was decayed and ancient, chewed up by the wheel of time. The other, across from him, was a perfect sterile white. Not a spot of dirt or moss. Empty shelves and tables extruded from the wall perfectly smooth, wrapped around the room and dissolved into rubble. At its centre, split in two by the interface of what seemed like the past and future, lay the unmistakable white stone of a Bed. Though this was shaped differently to what he was used to. It was more of a reclined chair, like Rakkar had in his bedroom for looking out at his domain.

He couldn't help but imagine putting Vera to the side and sitting in it. Could it give him a voice again? Stop his throat aching when it got cold? But compared to her, his needs were nothing. He shook it away.

He tried to wipe away the dirty side of the strange Bed before placing Vera on it. He couldn't fail her, not after doing this to her. He looked towards Bart

desperately. "It would be my pleasure." The bed began to glow.

Lumi swung into the doorway. "Okay, good, come on. Let's heal her up and tell her how to get back. We weren't supposed to go this way."

What did that matter? All the city was the same hostile territory. What mattered was making some small part of today right. But her jitters were contagious. The city was an alien place, one he could not imagine anyone living in, let alone billions of people.

Vera groaned and strained up in the Bed, her face contorted in pain. Dog looked on in a kind of fascination as the crossbow bolt slowly pushed its way out of her abdomen, leaving a bloody hole that quickly stopped bleeding. It clattered against the floor. Dog heard an echo far away from the clatter. Sound travelled so strangely in this place.

Within another minute, the wound scabbed over and Vera's breath settled. She slowly opened her eyes, struggling to focus on anything. When she did manage to take in them all gathered around her, she yelped and jumped up. Dog couldn't help but grin.

The smile was short-lived. Vera's fist came crashing down upon his cheek, with the rest of her body following soon after. Dog collapsed, his arms limp by his side as she rained down blows upon his head. "You bastard! You limp-dicked kidnapping fuck! You've killed me! You should have left me. I give you one pity-fuck and you think we're anything? You've killed me, you understand? I'm runaway now, they'll think I helped you!" Dog took the blows, his ears ringing. They stopped suddenly.

"Where the fuck are we?" Vera said. The tremor in her voice betrayed an intuition.

Lumi answered. "GAK3."

"Oh, you've killed me..." She said it with a kind of calm resignation, though

it was followed by a smack to the jaw that made Dog's head ring. The lack of retaliation had made Vera run out of steam a little, and eventually she only looked down at Dog in disgust. "Are we in deep?"

"We are a twenty three minute walk from Yarra." Bart helpfully replied. "Specifically, we are in the District 143 Emergency Medical Center."

"What the fuck is that!" She gasped, pointing at the devil.

"I told him to leave you at the pits." Lumi mused.

"I am Bart. I am an Assistant."

Vera's eyes widened and she looked apoplectic, ready to explode onto all of them with clenched fists. But that echoing clatter sounded once again in the distance, sending a shiver down Dog's spine. There was no falling bolt this time to explain it. Vera looked right at Dog, her expression now one of intense alertness. Lumi looked as if she was about to say something and Vera raised a slow finger to her lips. Another deep squeal of metal on metal came unmistakably from the other side of the wall. Something was out there.

Chapter 10: Metalbeasts

"Floaty demon thing," Vera whispered, "go see what's out there."

Bart returned the whispered volume. "Please don't mistake my helpfulness for obedience. I am commanded only by my owner."

Vera averted daggers at Dog, who sighed and signed Go see. The little devil had wobbled up and out through a crack in the wall.

Bart had been gone for a few minutes. Vera was gazing out the shrouded door, trying to catch a glimpse of anything beyond, while Lumi searched around for something in her backpack.

Dog was sitting in the Bed. With the little Devil gone, it seemed just dormant cool stone beneath him. He ran his fingers over the rough scarring on his neck, and up to the brand upon his forehead. It seemed like a selfish thing to ask considering their current position, but he ached to see the healing effects on his marks.

Vera saw him and scoffed under her breath. "Bad luck, Tratto." Her voice quietly shook with rage. "Look." She tapped her forehead. It was still affixed with the slavemark.

"Can't heal what the body doesn't see as hurt." Lumi whispered, still distracted in her backpack. The old woman had pulled a hatchet and lantern out and affixed both to her waist. "And his name's Dog."

"Dog..." Vera mused. "I suppose that makes sense." It was meant as an insult. The moment of intimacy they had shared seemed now cut off by a chasm of resentment. Dog could blame neither her nor himself. But he believed it was better that she was alive, even if she now likely shared his fugitive status.

"Quiet for a second," Lumi said. "I heard something."

They went silent, keenly listening to the faint creakings of the city around them that seemed less and less dead the more time spent within it. The more Dog's ear adjusted, the more it could pick out the layers of faint noise that echoed through the streets. Regular thunks and hisses and echoes he couldn't begin to explain.

He startled at a sudden movement above, and Vera jumped at his sudden alertness, but it was only Bart slowly gliding back from his expedition.

"There's metalbeasts out there alright," the little devil said, "hundreds of them. I've never seen anything like them before. I think they're something new. They're eating the moss. I don't think they're leaving anytime soon."

Kray was there, Dog signed. He will come.

Lumi nodded. "We can't stay here then, if they've still got a Scryer they're close enough to see you with it. And we can't risk some nastier metalbeast coming along. We have to get to the Temple of Mares."

Vera's eyes boggled. "I'm sorry, there's a Temple of Mares in this place? And we're going there?"

"We're going there." Lumi responded pointedly. "You are free to make your own way."

"Fuck no! As far as I see it you two owe me for ruining my life. The least you can do is get me out of this place."

Lumi seemed to decide she was done with the conversation and turned back to Bart. "Can we get around them? Through them?"

"From what I can tell they're harmless, but easily spookable. They didn't seem all that interested in talking."

She sighed. "Minerva protect us."

Dog thought he was ready for anything as he crept out onto the street through the cracked door. Of course he had seen metalbeasts before, from the steelbeetles that crawled up your pants leg before buzzing off into the sky to the sparker birds that flocked to the temple roofs like moths to flame. And he had heard of greater monsters - strange entities with many heads and limbs or no head at all, some that mimicked people or human elements, others that could do wonderful terrifying miracles. The creatures that wandered the street in a slow-moving herd - the edge of which they had only just missed enveloping their block - and were not monstrous. Dog thought they were beautiful.

They walked on four legs that split halfway down into eight feet, which slowly and gracefully guided a smooth organic body over the uneven ruin. Their bodies flowed, each curve transforming into the next in a way that made each movement seem precisely calculated. Their heads sloped down into a trunk that left wet trails of missing moss on the ground. Mosseaters.

After a few seconds, Dog let himself believe that they wouldn't immediately sprint right at him and tear him apart. As Bart had assured him, their priority was eating. He waved his hand through the door for the others to follow. His face still stung from Vera's blows, and she seemed to take some satisfaction in regarding his swelling eye as she sidled out the door. That was quickly followed by a stifled gasp as she saw the herd that surrounded them.

"Quietly, now." Lumi murmured. "The pods."

Bart had identified a set of three doors on the far side of the block that he called pods, which would apparently get them closer to their destination. They moved slowly, choosing their footsteps carefully to avoid the loud crunch from shattered glass, weaving through the channels created by the forest of wreckages that forever blocked the road. Dog stayed at the front, following the silent devil that guided him. He held his breath as they passed within touching distance of one of the mosseaters. It towered over him and turned

its head downwards, dull sensors considering their little pack of intruders with caution. But once they had passed it did nothing except turn its trunk back downwards to the moss.

They came to the crossroads, and Dog saw the three doors to the pods down the next street, only a few moments and metalbeasts away. Lumi pointed to it slowly and he nodded, but saw Vera a little way back and so stopped to let her catch up.

It was into this fragile stillness that Dog saw Kray enter, striding cockily into the street in the distance flanked by wary warslaves. The man had always been too simple to comprehend a horror like a Dead City. He held something out in front of him, and before Dog could even fully recognise the Scryer he had turned to see the light of Lumi's lantern a few blocks away. Dog saw the lieutenant's mouth open, begged him not to, but his booming shout was already echoing off the walls.

"There!"

Every metalbeast reacted at once, craning their heads towards the noise. Then the hesitation of one turned into the beginnings of a stampede as each turned to flee from it. Kray's expression transformed into one of horror as he saw the herd for the first time. The silence was shattered into a thousand pieces, the scrambling of the once-graceful creatures creating a cacophony that ensured all of them panicked. Dog threw himself to the side as one of the lumbering mosseaters smashed through the pile of rubble he had been sheltering behind, sending a spray of dust into the air that made him cough. He felt a hand on his arm. It was Vera, pulling him up and towards the doors that now lay on the other side of a storm of flailing metal limbs.

"Come on!" Vera pleaded, and Dog saw Lumi already darting ahead. He bounded forwards, hearing the hollers of Kray's hunting party echo behind him, swivelling his head around to try and track the dozens of thrashing figures in the rising cloud of dust.

"Watch out!" Yelled Bart at his side. He came to a sudden halt, throwing

his arm out to stop Vera, and felt a blast of wind as a metalbeast screeched past them in a violent instant. They looked at each other, as if fully comprehending the consequences of being struck by such a blow.

The beasts did not aim for them at least, and they threw themselves forward in a staccato of starts and stops through the stampede punctuated by shouts from Vera and Bart and desperate movements of Dog's arms. Stop, start, stop again, weave through a track left cleared by a marauding beast, and before he knew it the three doors loomed in front of him.

Bart went to the middle one. "This one, yes." It said to itself, barely audible. The door hissed open to reveal a small room within that glowed with strange yellow light that seemed to come from nowhere. Dog felt panic grip him. A dead end.

He glanced around to see Lumi just catching up, and a mosseater flinging itself down the side of the street right past the doors towards him. He flung himself into the small chamber, and felt what must be Vera and Lumi crash into his back. A great screeching of metal on stone pierced Dog's ears as the mosseater scraped its panicked form across the wall and in a moment they were illuminated only with that yellow formless light.

Dog felt an acceleration in his gut, as if he'd been thrown once more into the slimy tunnel of the Hole. But the room remained still around him, and he looked around unsteadily. Vera was groaning on the floor and nursing a scraped arm, while Bart weaved around his chest and arms. Lumi was nowhere to be seen.

"We lost one!" Bart exclaimed. "She'll have to get the next pod along." Dog wasn't so sure. Even if she'd dodged the mosseater, it had scraped along the wall and perhaps damaged the outer doors beyond repair. She might be stuck down there with Kray and his sadistic crew. It was all his fault. It was he who had dragged the old woman into his mad and holy mission.

Vera kicked at Dog to make room to scramble up. He moved as fast as he could, wary of the justly enraged woman in a tight space. "Fuck! Now I'm

stuck with the fool and his devil. That lady was the only one who seemed to know where we were going."

// Make it Bart that points out the lethality of Vera's wound and actively tells Dog that they can make a detour

"Worry not, I am your guide." She recoiled from the little devil, still unsettled at it there floating on an invisible cloud. "We got lucky with our choice of pod. This line can take us to District 121. That's only a half-day's walk to the Temple, on a well-maintained road, and up high so we might even get some sun."

Dog liked the sound of that. The pitch black shadows of those rotted streets scared him.

Vera was having none of it, and turned to Dog in disgust. "The Temple? You're still trying to get to that thing, with those soldiers chasing you and your master probably dead? What's the point now? Let's get out of this place. Tell your thing to take us and it will."

Dog tried to ignore her as he felt once again the pulling on his gut as the room slowed and came to a halt. Was she right? Was Lumi dead, and his entire mission a suicidal farce?

No. Bart was the proof before his eyes that he had entered the underworld and returned. And Minerva, the weaver of fate herself, had said he was meant for some great destiny in this city. He had to know. He had to know what the last few days had been for.

Vera seemed even more disgusted at his stoicism than she had been at the devil. "Who gave you control of the only guide anyway? Who's great idea was that?"

The door clanked as it tried to open in its warped frame, with one sudden and unsuccessful stutter before it seemed to pause for a moment and

consider the nature of its injury. Then, in a moment of unexpected violence it ripped itself open, weakened metal crumpling in on itself as its mechanism forced action.

There was no sunlight to be seen through the crack, which seemed just about wide enough to squeeze through sideways. Dog couldn't make out anything in the darkness but a series of strange lines, parallel at an angle, but unable to be resolved into any sensible object.

He moved a little towards the door, and the floor of the pod tilted noticeably. Dog quickly pushed Vera through the open crack before following through, the whole room beginning to sway with their movement. The pod stayed still behind them, but broken like a cracked egg. Dog couldn't see much, but it felt like they had jumped out onto a fairly steep incline and he struggled to keep his footing. Once again Bart began to glow, and the light disappeared into blackness around them, only illuminating a small patch of rusted metal flooring below. They had come from a small building that erupted from the floor, with a singular door similar to the one they had entered on the street.

"This... this isn't right." The little devil had a quality to its voice that Dog had never heard before. It quavered. When his eyes began to adjust to the dim dark in front of him, he saw why.

There was no Skyflower above them, nor any vision of buildings stretching up towards it. The city streets were gone. In their place a seemingly endless forest of vast concrete columns stretched upwards into darkness at an angle. In fact, the whole room seemed to be at an angle, the floor tilting downwards at a terrifying angle into the bristling abyss. Dog thought he could hear rain somewhere in the distance.

"This shouldn't be here." The devil said. "Polis always kept her maps updated. She always did. Even when she-" It didn't finish the thought.

"Well what, where the fuck are we?" Vera exclaimed, her slightly raised voice echoing against the pillars back to them.

"I don't know. We're lost.

Chapter 11: Swarm

The pod was busted, and nobody would be coming through there anytime soon. Dog had mixed feelings. On the one hand, Kray's hunters would fall behind, even with a Scryer to track him. But they had lost Lumi, and if she had by some miracle survived the stampede and escaped Kray's clutches, she would have no way to find them. With any luck, she would find her way back out of the city and forget this whole disaster.

Bart had recovered somewhat from his confusion. He had murmured something about corruption, but then seemed relatively confident that they could make their way along the floor of the chamber, staying level, and find an exit somewhere on the other side of the shadow. Its talk of a few hours walk and sunshine had disappeared entirely however.

The slope terrified Dog. While one could stay upright, and his new shoes found plenty of grip against the rough rust, the steepness was enough to imagine taking a fall and never stopping, picking up speed like a boulder crashing down a hillside. An endless drop on one side, with an infinite mountain on the other. It seemed a fitting razor to weave their way along.

They made fairly good progress climbing their way through the forest of columns, but they seemed to stretch on forever.

They had walked for at least a few hours, though it was hard to tell without seeing the Skyflower's petals above. He could almost imagine he was walking a forest treeline on a dark night, until a column came up to him and revealed itself as far more massive than any tree. They were very different to the decayed floor that they sprouted from, made of rough magenta stone and in immaculate condition. Each was different - some simple, others breathtakingly complex with patterns that meant nothing to him. Some curved like water, while others had sharp edges that cut Bart's weak glow in strokes of black shadow. All soared into nothingness.

Vera hadn't said anything the whole time, only easily bounding along the slanted floor behind his clumsy scrabbling, staying within the devil's glow while keeping her distance. He could feel her eyes burning into the back of his head.

They rested, nestled against the slope by the base of a column, and Dog took some jerky from his bag. He offered it to her and she looked at it cautiously.

"I liked it better when it wasn't just the two of us." Dog gestured towards the glowing devil. "That thing doesn't count." She took the jerky, taking a hungry bite and done conversing.

He stood at the very edge of the column, chewing his meal, relieving himself and peering outside their little bubble of light into the void. That sound of rain had only gotten louder, but he hadn't see any water whatsoever. He rubbed his eyes. The longer he looked, the more that darkness seemed to buzz with static. It gave him a headache after a while, so he went and shared some water with Vera.

Lumi had prepared well. He had some rope, sparkmetal for making a fire, his knife, and a thick woollen bedroll. While the only lantern had been lost along with Lumi, Bart assured him it could provide sufficient light indefinitely. Dog thought he could live off his rations for at least 3 days, if they found some water along the way, perhaps from whatever source was making that noise. But with someone else to share it all with, it got harder. A part of him had known that when he had decided to take Vera with him, but the risk of it fully hit him for the first time. What if they reached the Temple and found his destiny, but ran out of supplies on their way out?

These were worries for the future. For now, he needed to get there. He knew that there was no salvation outside the city. Their headstart gone, by the time they got out they would be escaping into a prison. But perhaps there was something ahead. Anything.

He remembered how Bart had seen so well in the night when they had

been pursued, and gestured to the devil. Can you see what's out there?

"Not with my light on." Vera looked confused. "Dog's asking me to see how much further the chamber continues, but to do so I'll have to turn off my light. Stay still while I do."

Before she could protest, the devil's glow waned into nothing. The last thing he saw before the darkness enveloped them was Vera taking gulps of air like they were preparing to dive underwater. Then only that inky blackness filled his vision, this time undisturbed by static.

"We look to be almost to the other side, if we continue along parallel to the slope like we've been doing. I can definitely see a surface there, maybe an exit."

His vision deprived, Dog's hearing focused once again on the distant sound of rain. He marvelled at how quickly his ears adjusted to it, and it seemed to grow louder and louder.

"What's that?" Vera asked in the darkness. "It's almost like a waterfall."

"I'm not sure, it's coming from around the other side of the pillar. One moment." Bart's voice faded as it moved around to get a vantage point.

Something stung the back of his neck. He smacked at it, the sound of flesh striking flesh only then giving context to the rising roar - it had truly been growing louder, not just as a trick of the mind. His fingertips felt slick with blood, and he knew something had torn skin. Only a moment later he heard a panicked wince come from the dark, followed by an exclamation from Vera.

Bart bloomed into light like the opening Skyflower, far brighter than it had before, whizzing around the column in an arc towards them. The static had turned into a storm around them, and the flood of light illuminated the sound's source. A black cloud of indistinguishable swarming objects lent chase, thousands of them forming a shape more akin to a plume of smoke

than a solid mass. But the light betrayed a solidity to the swarm and its constituents, a familiar glinting of metal that writhed and contorted in a great blurry worm that struck towards them.

Dog gaped, and Vera's scream echoed before being lost in the rising roar. The little devil zoomed into his chest and he caught it. "Light, keep the light up!" it yelled. Dog did so, holding the warming orb above him. The swarm seemed repelled by it, rearing up and spreading out lest it get too close. He saw now in this new brightness that it was simply a tentacle stretching out from a far greater mass of fizzling movement that reached down into the void below them. He felt a few more stinging bites on exposed flesh and his palm begin to grow uncomfortably hot.

Vera had flung her mask on /* retcon Vera mask */ and was already leaping ahead to the next column, and now it was his turn to scramble to keep up. Keeping the shining devil aloft, he wished he could call her to remind her that it was only that illumination that seemed to protect them.

In its glare, metal insects whizzed around his head and stung every piece of open flesh. They looked the size of wasps, and chirped with the sound of a droplet hitting a pool when they came close. His spare hand tried to swat away the gnats while keeping his balance along the uneven surface, locked in a stumbling half-sprint that was at least well-lit. It was because of this that he saw the first glimpses of the wall ahead that was the end of this cursed chamber. But it was smooth and featureless, betraying no hint of an exit. The swarm's buzzing grew more agitated behind him, though he dared not look back.

"Too high," the little devil gasped, as if forcing so much light from itself was exhausting it. "Two... Rows down... Can't..." The light from the little devil was beginning to fade, the bubble around them shrinking and becoming evermore filled with biting gnats. He could feel blood running down his back from the pricks upon his neck. The swarm's confidence seemingly growing with the fading light, gnats began to force their way up his sleeves and pants cuffs, biting away there.

Vera had come to a stop at the base of the penultimate column, finally faced with the dead end ahead and only just beginning to turn. She had likely not heard Bart's direction, and Dog didn't have time to explain. He tackled her as her face filled with dread at the vision behind him, sending them both sailing down the slope at an angle. He felt a wind on his back as the swarm rushed past above. Vera landed as gracefully as a cat, disentangling herself from Dog mid-air and landing on her bottom to slide as well as she could. Dog only tumbled and crashed, grazing his face against the hard surface before being flung forward further by his momentum. He didn't know how he managed to keep the devil in his hand or aloft, but he somehow managed it.

His instinct had been good, and the angle slid them down past one row of columns before they smacked into a hard-angled base two rows down from where they had been. Bart was pulsing now, as if forcing as much light as it could out of itself in fits and starts. The swarm raged above like an angry storm, the sound growing louder once again.

But Dog could see something against the wall, a little square opening. It was only a single row away. The ground here was far more uneven, the rusted metal panels missing or warped. They climbed desperately, flailing against the increasing bites as the swarm grew closer, feeling their way along the jagged path in the pulsing glow of the little devil that somehow made the chamber feel even more alien. His exposed flesh was covered in at least a hundred tiny cuts that sent drops of blood down his fingertips and into his boots.

They were almost there when Bart went out. Dog tried to superimpose the last glimpse of his vision upon the darkness, the opening glowing ever so faintly. It buzzed with a faint static of the growing swarm, before being obscured by Vera vaulting through it. Any memory of the floor's unevenness gone, Dog had to pray to Minerva that his feet would fall true.

It felt like breaking the surface of the lake that fed out from the western wells of Prehren, after being submerged so long you didn't know if you could make it back. He heaved himself through the opening, clutching the devil to his heart and curling up around it, and felt fresh cool air touch his flayed flesh.

He landed in something soft and leafy, splaying out in relief at being outside of that accursed tomb. The roar of the swarm was a distant sound it here, and it seemed to be unwilling to leave its lair. The relief didn't last long - he writhed and squirmed at the little gnats that still covered his body, wrestling off his shirt and pants to shake them out. They seemed fragile, dislocated from their swarm, and crushed easily.

Vera was doing the same beside him, though without the undressing. Her outfit was made for the harsh environment of the pits and offered far more protection than the everyday clothes Dog wore. Her main concern seemed to be the gnats caught up in her tangled hair. "Fuck! These things- ah! You bastard!" She turned her considerable anger on Dog. "You see what you did to me? Dragging me into this cursed city, almost getting me killed by some-" She shivered trying to find the words. "-thing! If this shit doesn't convince you to tell your thing you get us out of here, what the fuck will!"

She eyed the knife nestled in his discarded clothes. He went to put them back on, and she seemed both relieved that he was covering himself and kicking herself for missing an opportunity to seize the weapon. "Fuck!" She yelled again, throwing up her hands in disgust at his lack of reaction to her plea and turned away.

He sighed and looked at Bart in his hand. It was still and lifeless, heavy in his burned palm that was breaking out in blisters from the heat. He missed the little devil. He hoped it wasn't dead. Collapsing into a squat, Dog tried gather his thoughts.

Finally able to look around, they looked to be on the roof of a building nestled amongst a million others. Hardly the tallest, their eyeline was limited to a few blocks. Above him a few thin slices of sky revealed an almost closed Skyflower welcoming in the night. That meant they had been in here for hours. He had no idea where they were. The chamber behind them was a black prism of dark metal that cut through the buildings at an angle, stretching off on either side. The rooftop was like an overgrown garden, bursting with vines and bushes and thick grasses.

He did not know what to do. He didn't think he could convince Vera that he would do her no harm, but nor could he throw the knife away or trust her with it. He thought it entirely likely she'd cut his throat at the first opportunity and attempt to control Bart somehow to guide her out. And there was no way out, not for them.

He thought for the first time in a while of Trio. He wondered if the boy had survived his injuries without the Bed. Even if he had not, Rakkar would spin the Ring itself to make things right with the gods, lest his glorious career be forever tainted, and they would siege every exit they could once news of his sighting had spread.

He hoped Trio had survived. He had been a cruel, arrogant sadist in his time as Dog's master. But his patronage had protected him from Rakkar's war machine, something that had almost definitely saved his life. Dog had always placed Trio above him, as superior in every way that mattered. Now, in his strange emancipation, he saw a little boy once again.

In his palm, the little devil wobbled weakly. "Dog..." It whispered, then fell silent and still once again. He nestled it into his jacket to keep it sheltered from the encroaching cold.

Vera had turned to watch him, her hopes that the devil would reawaken dashed. "I lied," she muttered. "That thing did count, and I preferred having it around."

Dog gestured upwards and made a sign for sleep before pointing down.

"Not here. I'm not sleeping next to... This thing." Vera regarded the black monolith with terror. "We've got maybe an hour of flowerlight left, and the rooftop extends around the corner there. Maybe it's better, and if not we'll have time to double back."

He nodded, eager to work in some resemblance of harmony again. It was the only way either of them were getting through this.

It turned out the jungle extended far past the corner, and after a few minutes of walking the black structure was obscured behind them.

Chapter 12: Distrust

He awoke with a shivering dread in every part of his body that spoke of a long and cold night nestled in the ruins, one in which his body had fought hard to keep its heat alive. Their small fire, shielded as to not cast too obvious a light upon the city blocks, had done little to ward off the frost that covered everything in the early morning and made the city glitter where a finger of flowerlight touched it from above.

They had at least made it out of sight of the black monolith that contained the swarm to make their camp. They found jagged cave amongst the endless maze of rooftops that lay like giant steps for the feet of the gods themselves. It had sheltered them a little from the bitter wind that had come.

He rolled over to discover Bart covered in a swarm of metalbeetles, scuttering and buzzing around it like flies on a carcass. He tried to swat them off from the poor devil, but when he saw them crawling out from between the tiny cracks in the little orb he collapsed next to it and let his tears flow. There had been so few creatures in his life to treat him with unbridled kindness. To be loyal to him, instead of demanding his loyalty. He felt alone once again.

Vera had slept as far away from him as possible, curled up with a long stick clutched to her knees and reacting to every sound he made with an instantly wide-eyed glare. But now she lay still, her chest rising and falling in a deep, exhausted rhythm, unmoved by his quiet anguish. It was only when he stood once again that she started awake.

"Gods! How long was I..." She rubbed her eyes and focused on the little devil laying still in Dog's hand. "Please... tell me your weird artifact is working again?"

His expression must have said it all. She fumed, jumping up with none of the stiffness that constrained Dog still, cursing the lot of them by every god in

the Ring under her breath as he snapped another stick of jerky in half and shared it with her. He had no water left. They spent a while sopping the dew off the leaves with spare cloth and straining it into their mouths to parch their dry throats.

Vera insisted they keep moving, and Dog had to agree. There was nothing for them here, and they had no idea where they were within the mass of the city even if he did want to leave it. Perhaps he should trust to Minerva that his feet would lead him to his destiny. He thought a prayer to her once again as they left the little cave that had sheltered them and climbed their way along the strange ridge of the city.

They found a walkway that zipped from building to building with no rhyme or reason, stretching out over deep chasms down into the street far below. Dog's legs shook uncontrollably as he crept along far behind Vera's graceful pace. It was at least in good condition, better than the stairs that came after that they had to mostly clamber down, careful to avoid the loose panels and rusted bolts.

A few glimpses of the Ring above was enough for Dog to orient their direction. They'd been travelling downring, as far as he could tell, which meant they were likely plunging deeper into the city. He wouldn't have communicated that to Vera even if he'd known how. Still, he felt more and more as if he had only stayed her execution, as well as his own.

It was Vera who spotted the trickling stream of water that ate into the side of an enormous stone slab, rushing over to the clear pool that lay at its base and bringing her mouth down to drink. Dog wondered as he did the same how long the little stream must have been there to grind such a scar into the hard material.

It was in this position, both of them prone at the waters edge and slurping away happily, that a man's voice rang out.

"Ho! You two!"

They spun around in search of the shout, but could not locate it. Dog's heart fluttered in his chest and he reached for the knife at his belt. Vera picked up her stick once again, holding it out in front of her.

The voice echoed again off the walls, unplaceable. "Calm down, little ones. I ain't here to hurt ya."

An old man stepped out slowly from behind the slab, arms raised up and a toothless smile across his face. He was filthy, covered in dark, matted hair and grime. Dog couldn't understand why he couldn't smell him, his wrinkled skin seemed so smeared with dirt. When the stranger seemed satisfied that the two of them weren't about to charge, he looked at Dog and spread his calloused hands wide.

"You're kinda lost, aren't ya?"

Dog nodded cautiously. The stranger seemed to be waiting for more of a response, and gave him an odd look when none came. He glanced at Vera. "Is he- are ya okay there buddy?"

"He can't talk." Vera said, finding her voice. "Please, can you get me - us - out of here? We're lost."

"Oh no can do, at least not first up. I hear this fella is chosen by Minerva herself for something. He's got somewhere to be. That's why I'm here, more or less."

Dog felt relief spread across his chest, and before he knew it the stranger's smile was returned upon his face. Of course the god of destiny would prepare a path, and place helpers in his way. He just had to trust her. Trust in the the divine plan that she had for him.

"Oh great. And who the fuck are you anyway?" Vera demanded, her pleading replaced by deep frustration. She raised the stick once again threateningly. "What's a filthy bastard like you doing in a place like this,

involved in all this destiny bullshit?"

The man laughed, a deep belly laugh that echoed off the buildings. "Oh I like you! Maybe you should be the chosen one." He drew himself up to the maximum of his short stature before collapsing down into a bow. "Teemu, if it please you, oligarch of the ark, idle idol, aesthetic ascetic, and benign sign of the end times."

Teemu straightened and looked at them, as if expecting applause for his strange introduction. Dog clapped a little, not sure what else to do, and Teemu grinned and bowed once more. Vera seemed a little disarmed by the exchange, but still regarded the little man with suspicion and a tightly gripped stick.

"Thank you! Thank you. And it seems that our destination is the Temple of Mares, no?" Dog nodded, though Vera only spat in disgust.

Teemu strode up to Dog and looked up at him. "Well alright then, if I'm going to take ya the rest of the way to the Temple, I'd better see if ya worth it." He cracked his neck with a loud pop. "Try to strike me."

Dog didn't know what to do. Strike the man? They had just established something like a friendly connection. And now this Teemu wanted to fight him?

"Come on! A free hit." Teemu clasped his hands behind his back, pushing his chin forward.

Dog shook his head. He had no argument with him, and indeed they needed him more than anything. A blow from Dog's fist could cave the old man's skull in if he wasn't lucky.

Teemu sighed and tutted. "Not eager, huh?" He took a hand and unclipped a small rod that had been clasped to his belt. "Do you know what this is?" Dog shook his head and Teemu pointed the rod at the slab behind

them, squeezing it.

There was a loud crack and a jet of water splashed up into the air. Where the stream had slowly worn through stone there now lay a great crack, as if it had been struck by some giant hammer. Teemu's smile no longer seemed as friendly.

"This is a ram. It's a very old weapon. Very powerful. I need to know what I'm troubling myself with. So I'll ask again." He raised the rod towards Vera. "Hit me, or-"

Dog's fist had begun to move the moment Teemu had gone to raise the devil weapon at her. He threw his fist into Teemu's face as hard as he could, any thought of the small man's well-being discarded. But instead of hitting flesh and bone, Dog instead stumbled into nothing. Teemu grinned at him just beside his fist.

"Not bad! But you show too much with your shoulder."

Dog struck again with his other hand, swinging it around to smack into Teemu's head. Once again, it sailed into nothing. His grin looked up at Dog's extended arm, his legs in a deep squat that he had seemed to instantly assume.

"From the hand, then the elbow."

He struck again, and again, and each time Teemu would move so quickly that he could barely catch it, just enough that his blow would land on nothing. Finally, he took his hands from behind his back and seemed to offer some sort of apology.

"Not the slowest I've seen, but a far . But I am no liar, oh no, not me. I said a free shot, and for the next I ain't moving."

He spread his arms wide, closing his eyes and baring his chest.

"Be careful!" He didn't expect the shout from Vera. It seemed she hadn't expected it herself. She blushed and averted her gaze towards Teemu, stick raised.

Dog was sick of Teemu's taunting. He clenched his fist and swung with all his might. Teemu was true to his word, and finally his blow made contact with the old man's face. It did not feel like it though. Dog's fist felt like it had punched a cushion in how it gave way, and Teemu's torso and head snapped back from the hit. After a moment, he pulled himself back upright.

"Wow! Almost six-hundred PSI on that. Pretty good for a kid."

Without a second thought Teemu spun around and strode away, the conflict seemingly gone from memory. Dog felt adrenaline coursing through him from it, and felt only that he had been toyed with. He did not know who this strange man was, but he was surely imbued with some kind of divine power to give him such speed.

"Come on you two. Lumira's going to be so pissed I found you!"

"Lumira? You have that old lady that got us into this mess?"

"Of course. You don't think you made it all this way on your own, do you?"

Chapter 13: Respite

Dog's head reeled as he followed Vera and their new guide down an endless flight of stairs, descending back towards the maze of streets. It stank of mould, and water kept dripping on his head and sending a jolt down his spine, thinking for a moment that the swarm had found him once again. Occasionally the stairs fell away into the void, and they had to jump. He swore the gap was getting bigger and bigger each time.

He supposed he should feel relieved - that same relief as when Teemu had revealed himself - to learn that his journey had been guided from the outset. But he couldn't help feel betrayed by Lumi hiding the true nature of her assistance. It seemed she had indeed lied as easily to him as to everyone else. Who else was hiding their role in this destiny of his? He half expected Vera to reveal herself as Minerva embodied in flesh.

They paused for a moment at a landing, steps stretching away in either direction. Dog desperately tried to avoid looking down the stairwell up or down. Teemu seemed to have no such fear, and leaned out over the ledge holding only the remnant of a handrail to regard what lay below. He whistled and the echo came back, catching it with a smile. Dog regarded the old man with caution. He was certainly more than just an old ascetic.

Dog took the still lifeless body of the devil from his bag, hoping to feel it jitter and wobble between his palms. But the orb lay motionless and silent. Yet another metalbeetle lander on it and began to scuttle all over. He swatted it with a loud smack, sending a tiny spray of purple liquid across it and giving him a slight shock on his hand.

"You shouldn't do that, ya know." It was Teemu, regarding Dog from the ledge. The man swung himself back in, long and filthy hair swinging. "Is that? It is! A Companion, well shit. Minerva must really have plans for you, kid. You hold onto that. Did it break?" He nodded. "Well, the metalbeetles can tell.

They like fixing things like your Companion here. Let them at it."