

*** PROLOGUE ***

Pages spilled down the ruined shelves of Arthur's Libarynth, the maze of books at the heart of the Ubiquitous College. The darkened halls offered no entrances or exits save the books themselves. Silvery dust sifted down in showers and the flagstone floor shuddered again. Stones groaned and sighed in the distance as another passage fell away.

A struggling form dragged itself along a corridor very near the encroaching shadows, his broken body cleared a path through the dusting of powdered stone. The darkness twittered and hissed and promised nothing pleasant. Stripped of all but a strand of hope, the man inched ahead, his heartbeats tiny shoves. A mangle of legs hunched close behind the half of the laboring bundle which still possessed life. He squinted and wiped stinging soot from his eyes, his face lost under smears of blood and ancient dirt. His single purpose lay in reaching a tattered red volume between himself and oncoming oblivion. All about him words abandoned their pages, peeling themselves away to flee in inky rivulets across the floor. Scrolls holding tales lost to even the oldest living entities undulated through the air above him as the darkness crept on. He strained with every sinew to reach the red book, the tale of Reft, the final bastion.

Though the shadows seeped voraciously toward it, years would pass before they could darken even a corner of a page. Even as the wise columns, sprawling archways and tricky staircases of the Libarynth deteriorated, so too did time itself falter. The man reached out his hand, a journey of a decade. *Still time. Still time to stop the threads...*

Still time to learn the tale of Reft. Reft, a world where words came to life on the breath of Dreamcrafters, spinning unthought-of wonders from the aether. The knowledge of generations passed through story circles and the art of 'crafting. Suffused with voices and living tales, the people of Reft had never known the mystery of writing or of books and so did not recognize the harbingers of their doom. For, in a stranger's keeping, a book had slipped unnoticed into the city of Revery. Soon a second volume would appear; the gift of another stranger. There they awaited the arrival of the third.

It would take all three to unmake the world.

Dreampunk

Episode 1:
One Dream Entangled All Our Ways

by Andre Monserrat

This story is dedicated to
Taran, Matthew, Tommy, Trampoline, Romero and Ramirez.
May you find your ways.

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A True dog slumbered peacefully near the alley mouth. The professor bounded over it into the dank throat burrowed between the lumpy dwellings. He skidded helplessly through a slick puddle of bile excreted from a waste duct, slamming to a painful halt against a jumble of discharged air canisters. He frantically pushed the metal tubes back into place as they threatened to topple and alert his pursuer. The alley entrance framed a peaceful nighttime street scene, complete with sleeping dog. The mossy air of the living buildings filled the professor's lungs with the heavy green reek of compost. Plantwalls completely enclosed the alley, floor to roof, curving away into steamy darkness on his left.

Useless thoughts swam in his head: his safe office, an exam he had half-prepared, that damn shedding cat. Who would 'craft a cat to shed bits of blue fur everywhere? He pulled back his sweaty hair with a now grimy hand and focused his mind, much as he had encouraged his students to do. Only he had never anticipated a threggacat hunting his first-years through the darkened streets of Revery. A simple, cold calm hummed from his heart and his dry lips sputtered a mnemantra. As the dreamspeech shushed through the dank alley, a misleadingly thick wall of mushrooms and plantflesh sphinctered into existence before the professor. With his escape route obfuscated by his 'crafting, the professor followed the curve in the alleyway, hoping the beast would lose his trail.

He stepped carefully through the near dark, one hand guiding him along the slimy wall. Occasionally, round windows of translucent orange or green membrane cast weak light on his path. Through the thick walls came the laughter of families. Lovers arguing and making up. A crying child. Then, somewhere in the gloom behind him, a dog's howl rose into the night and fell instantly in an abbreviated yelp. The alley coughed metallically as air canisters crumpled beneath beastly paws and his pursuer let loose a caterwaul to silence the voices behind the walls.

His 'crafting had failed to convince, the professor told himself, hurling himself into another run, his legs now just numb flailing sticks. The threggacat had torn through the false wall as a rainstorm through smoke. As it would tear through him, if caught. A thick root caught his shin and sent the professor tumbling out of the alley and into a brick cul-de-sac. Splayed on the wet bricks, he squinted into the light of a streetlamp which had dutifully blinked awake and uncoiled at his presence. Past the cone of hazy light, walls hemmed him in on all sides. He clambered to his feet and pounded on the nearest door - the back of a store, someone's house, he did not care. The doorknob held fast under his throttling. He threw himself at the next doorway, a swath of light following his movements. He cursed the streetlight while kicking madly at the locked door.

"Help! Someone!" his voice shrilled. "You must let me in! Please help me!" Absurdly, he thought of the tale of Bubendi, wandering his palace of locked doors, his cries unheard by his noisy guests enjoying the opulent birthday feast he had prepared for himself. *Fame can live without its host.*

Stony yawns from across the cul-de-sac caught the professor's ear. The elongated faces of Mun and Muth, the guardians of sleep, flanked a plain green door. Mun smacked his lips and Muth's tongue lolled out of another elaborate yawn. Wisps of purple smoke puffed gently from their nostrils. Seeing no other options, the professor burst through the door of the slumber den.

"We're full up for the night," came the oily voice of the somnicubus in the antechamber. "I can reserve a coffin for tomorrow night, should you desire it." She melted out of the close velvety darkness, a waif so slender she barely cast a shadow in the candlelight. A speckled imp hunched on her shoulder, carefully braiding her long ebony hair.

"Is there a back door?" the professor panted. "Another way out?!"

"Shhhhhhhh," she soothed. "This is a house of sleep, blanketed by bliss." Even in his panicked state the professor's heart slowed a bit. A true professional. He hadn't even noticed her soft hand on his arm until he pulled away, pushing through the membrane of heavy curtains and into the womb of the slumber den.

Brass lozenge-shaped coffins reclined against the carpeted walls of the octagonal chamber, heavy lids shutting out the world. Inside, sleeping dreamcrafters drifted on the soft purple mist of exotic afir-based narcotics pumped in through a network of hoses. The professor pulled the flap of his jacket

across his face to filter out the cloud of heavy drugs. He staggered around a ticking gearwork hookah, squinting through the candle-lit haze for a way out. He saw no exit other than sleep or death.

The curtains hardly muffled the splintering front door and the scream which tore past the deep training of the somnicubus in the antechamber. And then it was inside. The curtains split with a crack of thunder as the three blue heads of the enormous threggacat exploded into the den. Spotting the professor, it bellowed a triple roar and advanced on heavy, clawed paws. Only in lectures on Wyldehame's storied history of wars had the professor seen a threggacat, then as a tiny harmless projection. At the time he could appreciate the intricacy of the monster's bony scales, swirling through the blue furry back where they terminated in flared horns on each head. Dreamcrafters with the skill and psychotic bent to create such beasts had long abandoned the First Province to engage in the lucrative warling trade to the northwest.

This must be what a nightmare is like, the professor thought, backing against the opposite wall. The threggacat blotted out the room's entrance, its heads hunching under the low ceiling. It sniffed at the air for a moment, each head exploring a different direction as though searching for something.

Is it blind? he thought. *I'm right in front of it!* An unearthly silence settled over the room and the professor's heart heaved about in terror.

The gearwork timer on the coffin beside him reached its terminus and the curved door slid open with a hiss of steam, purple smoke billowing out of the padded interior. A groggy young woman blinked out, muttering "No, not yet..." Seeing the threggacat, her eyes widened and she let out a horrified shriek. The beast pounced towards her, its cry the shredding of lightening. The wild strength of desperation jolted through the professor and he pulled a hookah away from the wall, shoving it towards the cat, hoping to distract it. Its left head whipped around, two sets of yellow compound eyes scraping streaks of light through the air. The cat batted the machine aside and lunged at the professor with one set of jaws. He scampered over the next coffin just in time, hearing the beast's teeth clang against the lid.

The awakened woman took her chance to leap from the coffin and flee across the room. The cat's right head snarled as she passed, but did not attack. Instead it stalked around to where the professor cringed in terror, balled up against another coffin. The cat raised a massive paw, intending to slash the man into strips. Just then three more coffins on the other side of the room opened. Finally awakened by the commotion, the sleeping dreamcrafters activated the safety unlocks and manually opened their coffins. One by one the other coffins gave up their yawning contents. With cries of "By the Reaches!" and "Does anyone else see a threggacat?" they scattered towards the door in slow-motion flight.

The beast turned completely around, snarling, its heads bobbing about as it examined the escaping dreamcrafters. Seeing his chance, the professor scrabbled to his feet and bolted towards the door. He had just set foot inside the antechamber when a strong, tattooed hand fell on his shoulder, instantly stopping him.

"Where are *you* going?" asked a husky voice. "Back out there? To the mundane? Away from my gift of spectacle and wonder? Trust me, you won't want to miss *this* show!" The hand spun him back into the coffin chamber. He faced a sturdy man wearing straps of black leather that lashed down his thick muscles. The hungry blue tattoo of the dragolisk coiled across his chest and gauntleted arms, finishing in a fanged frenzy of lines around his bald head. He wore the face of someone who approached his job with serious delight. A blade maven, the professor guessed, without a doubt.

Behind the warrior the cat surged up howling, its coat casting a stormy blue glow on the coffin lids. "Excuse me for one moment," the blade maven said with a wink. He spun, ornate wristblades spiraling out of his gauntlets just in time to impale the threggacat's descending claw. Its twelve eyes rolled about, insane with rage. It dislodged itself, a stream of sparkling light trailing from its wounded paw.

The blade maven stepped aside as the cat's center head lunged downward. Then the right head came at him. With a powerful upward thrust, the warrior skewered its jaws shut, his blade piercing clear through the beast's muzzle. His other blade arced through the neck and the right head exploded in a spray of light. The threggacat's scream rattled the ring of coffins and the professor cowered behind a nearby hookah, covering his head.

The warrior rolled to the floor as the two remaining heads attacked in tandem. He sprang to his feet, now on the threggacat's left side, and drove a blade into its shoulder. Using the blade as leverage, the man pulled himself upon the creature's back. Straddling its heaving sides, he thrust his hand into the thick blue fur of the center neck until he found its collar. He squeezed two buttons and the threggacat collapsed into ribbons of light, its death shriek soaking into the cushioned walls of the suddenly silent slumber den.

The warrior landed on his feet, crouching low. As he did, he rolled the cat's projection collar across his back and down the length of his left blade, catching it in a spin around the blade tip. He brought the spinning ring up over his head and flicked it free. Pirouetting on a booted toe, the blade maven dipped his head to catch the falling collar around his ropy muscular neck. The collar collapsed in size, fitting snugly under his chin. The warrior bowed with a flourish.

The professor gaped. A hush blossomed through the room. A hose, broken in the fray, writhed softly on the ground, coughing out more purple smoke. The blade maven looked up at the professor expectantly. The professor continued to stare, lips twitching.

"An audience's silence is a death knell," the man said in a low, deadly voice. "Unless they are so besmacked with wonder that all speech fails them."

The professor gulped and began slapping his hands together in awkward applause.

"Hmm, that's better," said the blade maven, standing up. He squeezed his gauntlets, sending the blades spiraling away into the aether. "You have the honor of being rescued by Brand Shraedo, Prime Edgebringer in the court of the Dragolisk."

"Th...thank you," the professor said, finding his voice. "I can't possibly repay you for... for..."

"Saving your life?" Brand finished, wiping a sheen of sweat from his bald head. "Think nothing of it, Mr. Dahns. A sack of rocks is worth more than your dead carcass."

"Excuse me?" the professor asked.

"I said I only get paid in full if I bring you in with your blood still humming!" the burly man said, annoyed that he had to explain such things.

"No, I meant the 'Mr. Dahns' part," said the professor as a new fear soaked up through his ankles.

"You're Rubric Dahns," said Brand as though every child understood this. His face grimaced with irritation and he tugged at the tight collar around his neck.

"No, I'm not," said the professor, backing towards the tattered curtains. "My name is Antwick Mays, I'm..."

"You're feshing Rubric Dahns!" Brand cursed, clamping onto the professor's arm before he could move any further. He looked the professor up and down as if some aspect of his rumpled clothing could confirm his identity.

"Rubric Dahns is an artist! He 'crafted a cat for me. I'm...I'm a professor at the University!" he said, wincing.

"Prove it!" The blade maven moved close enough for the professor to get a whiff of the strong feral tang wafting from the man's body.

"How?"

This stumped the warrior for a moment. He released the professor's arm and paced to the other end of the room. His hard eyes glittered with an idea.

"Lecture me," he grinned.

"This is ridiculous," Professor Mays chuckled. A weird euphoria washed over him and he choked back the shuddering sobs of laughter and relief welling in his chest.

"Oh, you can't speak of 'ridiculous' until you've watched a man try to spool in his own guts using the hilt of his shattered sword." Mays didn't see Brand cross the room, but suddenly he stood inches from Mays' nose, a reactivated wristblade pressed into the crook of his jaw. The professor's neck pimpled under the numbing pseudo-cold of the blade's stasis field. "Begin."

"Wh-where dream logic is concerned, there are two prevailing schools of thought. The Dafoer Principle, so named after the philosopher Kremman Dafoer, posits that 'craftlings maintain a sort of spiritual tether to the gestalt of human unconsciousness in their immediate environment. This gives the

illusion of consciousness, born from some unspoken desire in everyone's mind for that creature to exist. The Super Reason Matrix view regards this principle as pure spiritualism worthy of the cults and having no place in respectable scientific circles. I can explain the Super Reason Matrix theory best by comparing it to..."

"Enough!" Brand cried out, kicking over a hookah in despair. "Your insipid blathering convinces me."

"I'm not Rubric Dahns," Mays said, rubbing where the blade had touched him.

"I know," said the muscled man unhappily. "And I'm extremely disappointed. Not the ending I aspired to at all."

"You may be able to find him at the Lost Unicorn," Mays suggested. "It's a tavern near the University. I understand he often spends his mornings there."

"Really now?" said Brand, rubbing his chin. "I didn't hurt you, did I? You all right?"

Mays nodded, smiling uncertainly.

"Have you a family? Anyone worrying about you at home?"

"What? No, I..."

"Some sweet thing then, pining away for you while you're off haunting the lecture halls?" The warrior's eyes glinted, searching Mays' face.

"That would be nice...but..." Mays wondered where this was going.

"Who've you got to live for then? Who notes the absence of your voice?"

"My students, I suppose," Mays mused sadly.

"The ones whose heads you fill with that tedious drivel? *Those* students?"

"Well, I guess it can be somewhat boring at times, but..."

Brand picked up the broken hose, tracing a lazy purple path in the still air. He held it out to Mays. "Here, have a snort of this. Something for the pain."

"Pain? What pain?"

Brand split Mays' heart and let him collapse into the quiet purple mist.

"Those poor children. Who will bore them now?" Brand sniffed at the hose, wrinkled his nose and tossed it aside. He squeezed his gauntlet and the blade blew away into threads of light once again.

"Well, you certainly handled this situation with beauty and grace, Brand," said a voice the envy of steaming coals. A thin man stepped from the shadows, his smirk like a scar and his scar like a smirk. His steel-colored eyes collected and assessed the scene and flicked back to Brand in less than a second. A rifle-like device of curved brass, twisting hoses and glittering crystals, a new Combine toy, rested over his shoulder.

"The cat led me astray," Brand protested. "If memory serves, that end of the operation falls in your hands, Flayer. You said kitty here would lead us right to its maker, clean and edgewise. So what do we have? Oh, it's a dead professor..."

"Dead by *your* hand," Flayer interjected.

"Noted! Well, they're both dreamcrafters, so I should give kitty some credit. Oh yes, very nice. It's as difficult to find a 'crafter in this town as it is for me to find my big toe!"

Flayer rubbed his chin and Brand could tell he had retreated into his mental lair to consult with his own genius. Fortunately, Flayer had a habit of talking aloud to himself. "Perhaps narrowing the harmonics...chancy though. Could I construct an active resonance drum to replace the passive one? Is there such a thing? There can be, if I make it so." Flayer paced back and forth, unconsciously stepping over Mays' bleeding form.

"Oh, what are you going on about?!" Brand cried finally.

"Dreams and science, Brand," Flayer said. "Just dreams and science. To put it in terms you could understand: the device needs tweaking. In any case, we could probably do with less of your theatrics."

"You're the one who decided on a threggacat!" Brand pointed out. "A vicious beast of that nature demands an epic tussle! But I put on that whole flashy show for naught! I could fetch gobs of fenn for that little act!" He slipped off the threggacat's collar and tossed it into Flayer's hand.

Flayer shrugged. "Perhaps your show will distract our employer from your utter failure, though I

doubt it.” The collar vanished into one of Flayer’s coat pockets.

“Oh, *my* failure, is it? I say again that your cat is feshing wonked in the head. There’s enough culpability here for two and you’re not walking away without a thick steaming slice of it!” Brand came very close to grabbing hold of Flayer’s coat and accentuating his words with a good throttling.

“Now, now, no need to get your blades bent, my friend,” Flayer said, stooping down to grab Professor Mays’ wrists. “There’s still time to dispose of this mess and meet Mr. Dahns at the Lost Unicorn. Grab the good professor’s legs. I want to get out of here; this place is making me sleepy.”

*** 2 ***

About thirty minutes after Flayer and Brand left, the timer on one of the coffins dinged. The lid slid open and the young man inside yawned and stretched and scratched himself. He re-tousled his short brown hair and picked sleepdust from his eyes. He smiled the smile of someone used to getting away with things and feeling very pleased with himself about it.

If only I could afford to sleep like that every night, he thought. Then I could get some serious work done. I can feel it: that great brilliant concept is on its way to my brain. Just a few more good sleeps like this and it’ll get here. Wait, who are all these people?

Men in medician’s robes huddled in conference while some enjacs in oil-stained coveralls mucked about with an overturned hookah. Everyone stopped to turn and stare as the young man started to pull himself out of the coffin. He fell back in when a nervous, officious man in a jacket covered with flaming salamanders latched onto the coffin, blocking the young man’s view of the room.

“Sir? Are you alright?” the man inquired. “Goodness, did you men even check the rest of the coffins?” The salamanders poured in a mad rush around the man’s collar, splashing out of sight into the jacket’s pockets. The young man instantly recognized the visionless yet sensational assault on fashion commandeered by the designer Irie Pliedes. Somehow his lizards had become all the rage in Revery’s upper echelons. “Create a lizard with the mysteries of the soul brimming in its eyes and no one cares,” the young man had said once after an irresponsible amount of drinking. “But wrap it around your neck and suddenly everyone’s enshrining even your wettest farts.”

The official’s face, lurid in the orange salamander light, took on an overzealously apologetic expression. “How fortunate that you’re safe and sound. Did you sleep well?”

“Like I invented it,” smiled the young man. “Why, what’s wrong? What’s going on here?”

“Going on? Oh, one of the hookahs had a...malfunction,” the earnest man explained. “Madame Loalla got a very powerful dose of the slumber agents and she’s now in a very deep sleep. Very very deep.” He looked quickly over his shoulder at the medicians.

“But how did the smoke get out there? And there’d have to be quite a lot of it.”

“An *immense* cloud of it, sir. A very high pressure blast. Tore the front curtain clean in two.”

“What? Let me see!”

“Wait, wait, wait,” the officious man said, moving to block the young man. “I need to make sure they’ve finished sopping up the, uh, oil. One of the hookahs must have...”

“You know what would make your story more convincing?” the young man asked.

“What’s that?” the man asked sheepishly.

“If you offered to credit my stay and give me the next two stays for free.”

“Your next stay only,” the man said firmly. “That’s all I’ve been authorized to offer.”

“Deal,” smiled the young man, gathering up his leather jacket wedged between his ankles.

“And your name, sir? I need to credit the proper account, of course.”

“Spendrel,” lied the young man. “Paulron Spendrel.”

“Thank you, Mr. Spendrel.”

“You’re welcome,” replied Rubric Dahns.

Rubric ambled around the wreckage of the coffin chamber and past the shredded curtain. Madame Loalla's imp hunkered sadly on a perch. As Rubric shrugged on his jacket, an enjac came in and switched the imp off. The enjac picked up the perch and vanished back into the coffin chamber.

Outside, Rubric took big lungfulls of morning air, clearing the wispy film of sleep smoke from his mind. The faces of Mun and Muth snored quietly on either side of the door. He patted Mun on the cheek in thanks. Crossing the cul-de-sac, Rubric stopped before a bright yellow door and rapped on it. While he waited, he looked up at the sky, trying to judge the time. He didn't recall how long he had set the coffin timer for. *Was I supposed to go jogging with Ferron today? What day is it?*

The door slammed open. Mrs. Rumplenty stood in her kitchen doorway, glaring up at Rubric. The delicious smell of fresh sugarbread and bacon wafted out.

"I'm just in time, huh?" Rubric smiled, stepping inside, imagining that first bite of bread. He saw three small golden loaves steaming on top of the rickety stove, next to a pan of sizzling bacon. Cupboards and shelves and hook racks of pots jostled for space along the walls of the tiny kitchen. A wooden table and three mismatched chairs pressed against a wall to make room for the wide refrigerator. The pristine white refrigerator dominated the far wall, blocking off part of the living room doorway and the already slot-like pantry. The final anniversary gift from the late Mr. Rumplenty, the fridge was Mrs. Rumplenty's pride and joy and no concession could not be made to include its unwieldy mass in her kitchen. On each of Rubric's prior visits, Mrs. Rumplenty took every occasion to fling it open and peer into its cavernous interior to find some juice while he flattened himself against a wall and endured a midwinter gust of air.

"Ya, ya, jes'n time, Roo-ber-ik!" Mrs. Rumplenty seized Rubric's arm. Though a diminutive woman, she had the grip of a bird of prey. She yanked him around the table, past the savory delights on the stove and through the corridor defined by the side of the refrigerator.

Rubric found himself dragged into the living room, a ramshackle collection of dumpy sofas and end tables. Motes of dust drifted in the morning sunlight creeping through the window slats. A toad clock on a mantle informed Rubric it was nearly eight o'clock. A portrait of Mr. Rumplenty shimmered on a pedestal next to it. Balled up on the floor in front of a couch, chin planted between his knees, sat Popko, her ten year old son. He stared worriedly at a spindly, multi-legged creature on the carpet before him.

"You are explain why Popko so sad now, eh," she said. She and her husband had moved to Revery from Joffa or Buntam, Rubric couldn't remember which. As far as Outlanders went, they had gotten along pretty well in the city. "Look a't! Jes' look how't limp! You bringa the gift and eight legs't havin' an' heppy day! Popko is ver heppy! But na lookit! Three! Three legs, no eight! It canna run no mare. It can on' stand der. Like table. If't tryen to walk, it jes' popple o'er ontha floor der."

Even as Rubric watched, the creature gingerly took a few steps before its legs folded and it fell over onto its side. Popko quickly righted it and retracted back into his balled up form, glancing from Rubric to the thing. The creature's eyes, in a ring around its waist, blinked sadly. Rubric had 'crafted the sprig stalker for the child. Popko had clamored for one ever since he saw some kids at the park playing with one. Mrs. Rumplenty could not afford to pay Rubric for it, so they had worked out the trade in breakfasts.

"Okay, well you see..." Rubric started to say to her.

"No, nah me! Him! You are explain to Popko!" She pointed at her son. "I mes goan eat mah sunrisen meal 'fore't too cold. You stayen start your explainin' talk!" She shuffled back into the kitchen.

"Mrs. Rumplenty, could I perhaps have just a small slice of..." The vault-like refrigerator door blocked his path. He could hear humming echoing inside the refrigerator. Exasperated and hungry, Rubric turned back to deal with Popko.

"Hey there, Pop," Rubric smiled unsteadily. "Look...ah, about the ah..." How could he explain that he had designed the sprig stalker to gradually lose legs *on purpose*? Any 'crafter of decent ability could render a stalker with ease. But one that gradually *lost* its many legs? Now *there* was a statement about the excesses of fashion! Rubric had taken the tale of Hatefeather the Vain as inspiration. As

Hatefeather became lodged in a tree by his elaborate headdress, a dangling spectacle for all to see, so the stalker would eventually change into a pointless stick. *Vanity's ultimate reward is laughter.*

Rubric considered that perhaps Popko was not the best audience for his commentary on Irie Pliedes and his ilk. Rubbing his neck, Rubric studied the sad creature on the floor. He concentrated on the form and position of the existing legs, murmuring in dreamspeech. His spine thrilled briefly as a tiny amount of idj fizzled away. Popko's eyes widened and he clapped enthusiastically as five new legs crackled out of the stalker's tubular body. The creature itself seemed relieved, testing its new legs, clattering about the floor.

That'll do for now, Rubric thought. All his tools were back at his apartment. He'd have to take the creature back there to permanently modify the design imprinted in the collar. *Maybe I can get some breakfast out of this after all.*

Someone knocked on the front door. Seeing that Mrs. Rumplenty still had her head in the refrigerator, Rubric opened the door. His heart splashed into a pool of ice water that had suddenly formed in his stomach.

"Morning, Rubric," said Tyrix Paxton. Everything about the man in the doorway had a grizzled, overused quality, even his voice. His pockmarked pavement face housed milky blue marble eyes too tired to blink. When speaking, Tyrix made use of only a tiny corner of his mouth. His spray of auburn hair reminded Rubric of dying embers. His cracked leather jacket retained none of its original pieces of ceramic armor plating. Only the two blade pistols holstered on his belt twinkled with any vitality. Tyrix stood there intensely, as though bracing against a strong wind.

"Good morning, Mr. Paxton," said Rubric. His voice sounded like air squeezing out between two blocks of ice. "So has the day finally arrived?" Tyrix Paxton, Revery's most ruthless tracer, had made an entrance into Rubric's life several weeks ago. He began to see Tyrix at the grocery store, at the park where he jogged, around the University campus, and even on the corner near his apartment. The tracer would only nod and greet Rubric with a comment on the day. "Pleasant afternoon." "Quiet evening, isn't it?" Just a greeting and nothing else.

"Hm? Nah, I just came to warn you." The tip of Tyrix's right eyebrow shifted slightly to indicate his deep concern. "You're being followed."

Absurdly, Rubric glanced behind him, but saw only Mrs. Rumplenty finally settling down to her meal. His stomach murmured with jealousy.

"A pair of Sun Oyo's boys," Tyrix continued. "Beemer and another one. The thick one. Obrok. I had a conversation with them and they've since lost interest."

Rubric had almost deluded himself into believing that, in a gesture of magnanimity, Sun Oyo had brushed aside his massive debt. He hadn't seen any of Sun's heavies for weeks now.

"Um, thanks," said Rubric. "And why are you doing this again?"

"Oh, well, it's like this: I figure since Sun took some liberties in the interpretation of our last business covenant – liberties which left my pockets half full – I'd recover some of that money here and there. Nothing that would burn him too bad. This last intervention is worth, oh, I'd say about three hundred fenn. Give or take."

"You've been thwarting my creditors all this time?" Rubric asked, amazed.

"Well, I didn't plan to develop such a fixation on your particular financial adversities," Tyrix drawled, "but after Sun's boys kept on about it when I had asked them so politely to stop... Well, at that point you could say it became a matter of principle for me."

"So why are you telling me this now?" Rubric asked.

"Someone else is tracking you," he said. "Someone who eluded me."

"Eluded *you*?" Rubric said. When someone disappeared, Tyrix Paxton could find them. People claimed that the more someone wanted to stay lost, the easier it was for Tyrix to track them down because he could smell their fear. It was said that Tyrix had brought a dreamcrafter's ghost back from the Beautiful Reaches to demonstrate that death was no way to avoid a debt.

"Perhaps 'eluded' is too strong a word." Tyrix's upper lip twitched in annoyance. "Let's say I chose not to pursue them."

“Another debt collector?”

“Can’t say for sure,” Tyrix said. “Didn’t look like any I’d ever seen before. But then, I didn’t get that close of a look. I’d be cautious if I were you. Some interesting trouble is on your heels.”

Rubric didn’t know how to respond. Tyrix turned to go, slowly, like a door nudged by a breeze.

“Could I ask you something, if you don’t mind?” Tyrix asked, moving as before, only in reverse.

“Sure,” said Rubric.

“How much do you owe exactly?”

Rubric told him a number. Tyrix stood there several moments, still, unbreathing. Rubric thought he saw one of his eyes make a twitchy blink.

“I see,” Tyrix said. He walked away down the street.

When it became apparent that Mrs. Rumplenty would not provide him with any breakfast, Rubric took off in search of better prospects. Delighted that he had repaired Popko’s stalker, she invited him to stop by tomorrow. Knowing that the new legs would only last for another hour or so, Rubric mentally added her to his growing collection of people he needed to steer clear of.

The street and sidewalk gradually filled with traffic in preparation for another work day. Rubric waved to children playing with a boring brown True cat on the steps in front of their apartment. He wondered what their mothers had made them for breakfast and if he could interest them in a trade. He moved on, shaking his head. Bartering was just a stopgap, he realized, not the solution to the looming cloud of debt. As he walked, Rubric occasionally glanced back over his shoulder. No one in the crowd behind him seemed to pay him any special attention. *I don’t feel like someone’s following me.*

He watched the passing sedans, trucks and carts, thinking wistfully of his old reliable Dynamain Thunderclap. A true classic with elegant lines, all green and gold. Of course, that was the first thing Sun took from him. Since the value of the car hardly did anything to offset the debt, Rubric assumed Sun had simply wanted to make a point.

At the next street corner he waited with the crowd for the traffic imp to gesture for them to cross. An advertisement for the Dream Bank spidered along the wall on ticking gearwork legs. A voice buzzed out of the shimmering Dream Bank sigil.

“...advancement opportunities await! Don’t let your talents run dry! Help build the dreams of your community. To receive more information, speak your glyphs into the mouthpiece...” A few people in the group took turns shouting their glyphs at the advertisement. It continued its patrol along the side of the building.

Things aren’t that bad, Rubric thought. *At least not yet.* Ferron had told him horrific tales of the Dream Bank, what they didn’t tell you in the ads. He spoke of rows upon rows of ‘crafters strapped to natty body couches, all fizzed up on stimulants to keep their idj levels high. A chorus of ragged, used voices murmured the amalgamating mnemantra of the fused dream. In the center, raised on a pedestal like some diseased conductor, a single dreamcrafter stood at the nexus of all that energy and talent. He could harness the vast sea of potential, channeling it through his own abilities into the ‘crafting of a lampshade. An interesting chair. A know-it golem. An amusing toy. Whatever was next on the queue of mass-produced dreams. Ferron had lasted there a week, staggering home each night in a state of tweaked-out near-torpor, no energy left to ‘craft even the simplest glowmite. “I’ll take my chances on the street,” he had told Rubric. “No amount of fenn could drag me back there.”

Today’s a new day, Rubric assured himself, crossing the street. *Today I buckle down and start giving this debt situation an unflinching look.* He’d go see Paulron and hit him up for leads. His former mentor always had a few prospects he could toss Rubric’s way. Small, uninteresting prospects, but Rubric thought it best to chip away at remote corners of his debt. Excessive gouging and digging attracted the attention of avalanches. Yes, Paulron could straighten him out, at least for the next week or so.

Besides, Paulron had a sizeable investment in Madame Loalla’s slumber den which Rubric would

eagerly help him out with.

*** 3 ***

Morning splashed across the iridescent pommel capping the titanic Westfoot Hivestead, the looming guardian tower of southwestern Revery. Four other such ancient towers rimmed the city and the grandest of all Hivesteads pierced Revery's heart. Neither plant nor common stone, the secret of their construction and purpose lay guarded by the Hive, the protectors of the city and its mysteries. The watchful gaze of the Hive covered the clusters of humming factories, globular apartments, museums and shopping districts. The Hive monitored the insectile logic of traffic patterns enmeshing the city. It watched the almost perceptible glow of discovery ignite the halls of the Arcanus Combine. It watched over the ever-turning palms of Greymarket, a swath of several city blocks which knew no sleep. Some would say the vigilance of the Hive faltered at the eastern fringe of the city, where the edifices of civilization reverted to some base state in the sprawling disarray of The Digs.

On this particular morning, anyone chancing to return Westfoot's gaze would discover the rare and rewarding sight of a royal skywhale docked at the highest port in the tower, most likely delivering an emissary from the Sefftarchy of Slinn. The leviathan hooted a haunting song of daybreak as it hovered, warming its finlike wings, a True Wonder in a city so enamored with dreamcrafters. Several stories below it, a cadre of drone brothers leapt from a fearsomely high launch plank, astride the wind on dragon wing rigs flapping at their backs. They wafted into the city to begin their morning patrol. Further down, at a more reasonable altitude, wyverns hummed through the Aetheric Beltway, their cylindrical metal bellies transporting the citizens of Revery to their morning destinations.

On the ground, groggy students muttered about the campus of the University of the Crafting Arts. Some made their way into the Lost Unicorn for a bite of breakfast and the warm camaraderie of their fellows who also found themselves indentured to higher education.

A koffee mug exploded on the floor as Marz Kyle's ferret raced by, Gibby's miniature dragolisk in hot pursuit. The students cheered as the ferret, flaming egg in its teeth, leapt from the table's edge onto the back of a purple couch. A girl trying to study with a know-it golem glared at the crowd as the two creatures bounded across her table. The ferret and dragolisk bounced past the moon clock, up onto the windowsill and headed towards the steps at the front door.

"Final stretch!" cried Marz, leaping to his feet, his ropes of waist chains jangling. "Have your fenn keys at the ready, my poor fellows, for this race is mine!"

"When the egg's in hand, Marz," Gibby said, puffing a brown braid out of his face.

The sleek form of the ferret crumpled into a man's leg as he stepped through the front door of the tavern. The dragolisk squealed and lunged to grab the egg as it bounced away, but found itself scooped up by a tattooed hand.

"Awww, but isn't he a cute little scrapper?" Brand said as the lizard tried to bite the blade maven's teasing fingers. He turned off the dragolisk and offered the tiny collar to Flayer, who slipped it into a pocket with an approving nod.

"Hey, that's mine!" Gibby protested. Flayer and Brand ignored him.

"Good morning, gents," Marz said, collecting his dazed ferret, "and thank you for disrupting our respite from tedium. We really ought to be applying ourselves to our studies. Perhaps you'd care to place a generous wager on the next race? Dendra's got a fiendishly fast frost monitor."

"No more races," pleaded Missy, the waitress, who had appeared to mop up the koffee mug. "Wakes has told you time and again how much he hates it. Shouldn't you be in class?"

"We're not dodging," Gibby explained. "Professor Mays didn't show."

"Which one of you is Rubric Dahns?" Flayer asked, flinty eyes sliding over the students.

"Who's asking?" Marz replied as the other students murmured.

"Someone who thinks he's a dried up flopsy who couldn't 'craft a balbooga's red ass if it were sitting on his face. Not that he'd mind, if the tales I hear are true."

"Uh oh," smiled Brand as jaws smacked open at the audacity of the slur.

“So is he among you?” Flayer asked.

“We’ll have your name first,” Marz demanded. “Unless the dueling manner is too highbrow for your bend of the sewers!” Gibby elbowed Marz’ ribs in warning, but Marz just made his dismissive *fik-fik* sound through his teeth.

“I am Flayer,” said Flayer, tendrils of blue light uncoiling from his jacket arms. “This lovely brute is Brand.” The blade maven made a flourishing bow.

“There’ll be no dueling here,” came the dour voice of Wakes, the tavernkeeper. He appeared at the short stairs leading up to the darkened back half of the Unicorn. He patted a heavy gorewood club in his huge calloused hand. “Take your business outside.”

One of Flayer’s tendrils snapped the club away and tossed it into the air. Arcs of light crisscrossed through it and the club thunked to the polished floorboards in four pieces. Brand stood in the center of the common room, blades raised in the final stance of the Whalebelly Gutcutter maneuver.

“I *told* you he was a blade maven,” hissed Loralayne Foxpaws, a comely young woman with long blue hair leaning on the table occupied by the girl with the know-it golem.

“You haven’t told anything to anyone all morning,” said the girl. “We’re ‘boring zombies’ and you hate us all, remember?” Loralayne looked at the girl as if she might be contagious and then sauntered over to lean against the moon clock for a closer look at Brand.

“Are you going to tell me which one of you whelps is Rubric Dahns or will I have to get churlish?” One tentacle batted the flaming egg off the floor and another swatted it right into Marz’s nose. It took Gibby and two others to hold him back.

“I am the one you seek,” came a voice deep as a midnight forest. Wakes stepped aside to let someone move out of the shadows near the bar, an older gentleman with the barely-tamed thicket of a peppery beard shooting from his harrowed face. His clothes told of finery fallen on hard times, the red of his jacket clinging weakly to its former glory. Coattails like angry asps bobbed near the man’s waist.

“But wait a mo...” Marz started to protest.

“I AM Rubric Dahns,” said the man, silencing Marz with a keen stare.

“You don’t have to do this, Paulron,” Wakes whispered.

“Oh, but I do, sir,” Paulron replied out of the corner of his mouth. “A friend’s honor has been challenged.” Paulron stepped down into the room to face off with Flayer. The students were already pulling the tables out of the way. Between Paulron’s coattails and Flayer’s tendrils, it looked like an encounter between two deep sea creatures.

“At last!” cried Flayer with a smile. His eyes locked on Paulron, unblinking, reptilian. “By the cusp of the Everwall, by the tip of Krol-Gungdoth’s tail, by the dreamghasts’ final kiss, I challenge you, Rubric Dahns, to a proof of your craft!”

“By the griffons’ lost aerie, by the wellspring of sleep, by the Beautiful Reaches, I accept your challenge, Flayer,” Paulron intoned. “To disillusion?”

“Ha! We’re men!” Flayer cried, limbering up. “To torpor!”

Someone gasped. Paulron blinked uneasily and willed his coattails to pull back into the coat’s fabric. “Very well, then. To torpor.”

“*Maer Hedding returned home to find her favorite looking glass missing,*” Flayer began.

Paulron smirked. He knew this tale well. The watery verses of dreamspeech flowed easy and graceful from his lips, misting away the tavern walls to reveal the interior of a crude hut one might discover in the outlands of the First Province. The rickety front door swung in as Maer Hedding, hunched and doddering, entered and went to an ornately carved bureau at the back wall. Paulron had rendered her down to her tattered shawl and leather sack of herbs at her belt. The crone flung open the bureau and let out a twittering cry when she found it empty.

Paulron’s face pushed out of a wall to say “*She went immediately to the chattering stream, but it had only seen clouds chasing after yesterday.*”

A crack appeared in the hut wall, its spidery fingers shooting outward. Water gushed out onto the floor, washing the few pieces of the crone’s furniture into the aether. Maer Hedding stooped down to whisper to the stream, shaking her head at its answer.

“Very dramatic,” said Paulron from somewhere else.

“Thank you,” Flayer’s voice drifted in. *“She looked under every root of the Complicated Forest, but found only pools of star tears, collected drop by drop by the Widdershins.”*

“That’s not in the story!” Loralayne protested, her voice faint across an ocean of aether mist.

“It’s an older version,” said a voice like Marz’. “The bastard.”

Paulron rose to the challenge and soon Maer Hedding was picking her way through a tangled network of muddy roots. Someone giggled with delight as a tiny Widdershins, naked but for a plastering of wet leaves, clambered up a tree trunk and vanished into a hole.

“She then sought the council of the whispering cave. It showed her a roof of crystals capturing every mood of the sky. Yet her looking glass was not in a single one.”

“Embellishment!” said a tree with Flayer’s face.

“Are you giving up?” inquired a smooth stone at the tree’s foot.

Flayer’s growl built up into the rumbling of stone sliding against stone. The room seemed to drop into a giant dark sack. Crystals, like rows of glittering teeth, sprouted from the cave ceiling and indeed displaying every color the sky had ever known. The students *ooooohed* in spite of themselves.

“Quit your gaping, you badgers,” said Marz. “It’s a simple crystalline array spawned from a recursive mnemantra. A busywork exercise for second-years.”

“Flayer’s barely dripping any idj,” Gibby agreed in a whisper. “But Paulron’s not holding back. He’s going to tap himself out way too soon!”

“Shut up, you two!” said Loralayne from somewhere on the opposite side of the cave.

“Her questing brought Maer Hedding up to the craggy nest of the nigrescent Roc, whose eggs hatched every sorrow in a woman’s heart.”

“Skipping ahead a bit, I think,” Paulron’s voice boomed from a curved cave passage. “The students will miss out on some of the most delightful verses.”

“Just give the word and you may quit in disgrace,” a wind howled.

Marz could hear hoarseness in Paulron’s voice as he began ‘crafting the nest. It would have been glorious. The Roc’s inky black eggs had just started to curve out of the natty nest when they cracked and faded, along with the nest, the crags, the sky, revealing Paulron on his knees, coughing.

“Victory,” Flayer proclaimed, stretching rakishly.

“We’ll see about that,” said Marz, getting up. He fell back across a table as Flayer’s tendrils whipped through the air, smacking across his chest.

“Have a seat, boy,” smiled Flayer. “Brand, get Dahns and let’s go.”

“What?!” protested Wakes. “You beat him! You can gloat and do a cocky little dance if you like, but you’re not laying a finger on him!” The big man stooped down next to Paulron to help the dreamcrafter up. Brand lifted Wake’s chin with the tip of a blade so he could look him in the eye.

“Your serving wench will be sopping you up off the floor if you don’t move aside,” said the blade maven. “Looks like she’ll need a whole mountain of rags for the job, too.”

Missy gasped and pulled Wakes away from Paulron, marking Brand with scornful eyes. He chuckled and slung Paulron over his shoulder, easy as a sack of leaves. Paulron wheezed a protest, but the boneweary haze of torpor had already settled over him.

“The oldest stories are the best, eh, children?” Flayer said to the frightened cluster of students. “Know your roots and know your future.” He winked wickedly.

The door of the Lost Unicorn slammed shut behind them. The ticking of the moon clock thundered across a sea of stares.

“So, who wants to buy me breakfast?” asked Rubric as he stepped into the Lost Unicorn. “Hey, what’s going on?” The usual din of the tavern had been replaced by an almost conspiratorial murmur, as though the students were actually studying.

“Thank the Reaches you’re finally here!” cried Gibby.

"They've got Paulron!" said Missy, blotting her tears with a bar rag.

"And we'd have him back for a round of brews before lunch if this establishment wasn't brimming with jellyspined children!" The students groaned at Marz, having been berated by him perhaps seventy times since Paulron's abduction.

"It's all your fault, you know, Rubric," observed Loralayne. She leaned against the doorframe near Rubric, drawing her own interpretation of Brand's tattoos on her forearm. She frowned at her work and blew it away into sparkling red dust. Rubric blinked at her, surprised, and then pulled up a chair. Everyone crowded around the table, except for Loralayne who stretched out on a bench and appeared to go to sleep.

"Tell me everything," he said.

Marz held forth, recounting the morning's events. Gibby and Wakes interjected when Marz' commentary on the duel waxed overlong.

"But why did he impersonate me?" Rubric wondered aloud.

"To protect your honor!" said Wakes, as though it were the most obvious reason in the world. "Paulron's not one to stand for the kind of dung this Flayer was spreading."

"My honor? But I'm a scoundrel!" said Rubric, thinking of the large tab at the slumber den. Every kindness, every second of patience his former mentor had shown him came lashing painfully across his memory, chastising him.

"It would have been me impersonating you, Rubric, had I but thought of it sooner," said Marz. "Then we'd be toasting my victory and using Flayer's torpored ass for a footrest."

"That blade maven would have laid you out cold using just his eyebrow," Loralayne predicted, propping her head up. "You should have seen him, Rubric. He was harsh."

"And then it would be *you* they made off with, Marz," said Missy, wagging a finger. "Rubric, what are you going to do?"

"Well, I suppose I should eat a plate of scrambled osper eggs and sausages as soon as possible," he said. "It's hard to formulate a plan on an empty stomach."

Missy nodded sternly and ran back into the kitchen. Loralayne rolled her eyes and sat up since no one appeared interested in her tragic repose.

Later, around mouthfuls of egg and toast, Rubric asked, "So we have no idea where they might have been heading?"

"No, I ran out and saw them speed away in a van or something," Marz said.

"It was a Throgmoor Series Thregga Hefty cargo hauler with dual drive and detachable cab," Loralayne clarified.

"Possibly!" frowned Marz. "Possibly!"

"There's someone I can call," said Rubric, mopping up some sausage juice with a hunk of bread. His stomach was prepared for another round, but Rubric didn't dare press his luck.

"A tracer?" asked Gibby, hopefully.

"And where would I borrow *that* kind of money?" The dull blue metal of Tyrix's eyes stared momentarily in Rubric's memory.

"Your good friend Sun Oyo's been pretty generous of late," Marz said.

"Marz, I wouldn't be surprised if Sun sent those two to collect me *because* of the great pile of fenn I owe him already." Rubric shuddered as he thought of his inexorable black tide of debt sloshing against a closet door somewhere. Tyrix could only intervene for so long. "No, there's only one guy I can call now."

"Who?" asked Marz.

"Taran Baker, Special Investigator."

"I have several problems with your 'evidence,' Taran, the foremost being that vampires don't exist. And if they *did* exist, they wouldn't be in collusion with alien plant-like doppelgangers because, well, they don't exist either. And why these two groups would mastermind a heretofore unknown human kidney trade in Greymarket is simply beyond me." Cadre Commander Rajimun Hookas said all this as he ground up his herbs over a chalice of hot water. He stirred and drank down the concoction while he once again considered Taran Baker and his prisoner Arto Prank, splayed out on the bench, bound by the sinewy insectile arms of a grepp.

"What about those guys I busted last month? That gang of freaks out in the Digs. I mean, they were hanging from the girders! Come on, you sleep upside down like that, you're gonna crave neck!" Taran leaned against the heavy ivory table and picked some fuzz off his brown trenchcoat.

"Idj grifters, Taran," said Rajimun. "The euphoric effects reach the brain much swifter upside down. Gravity is their ally. But you already know this, Taran. And please don't lean on the table, for it is holy." Rajimun rubbed hard against his temple at that special place Taran always prodded. Taran had interrupted Rajimun's morning meditation for the third time this week. The soft rill of the fountains in the chamber did nothing to soothe his mind. He would need to have another talk with Taran about showing the meditation chambers of the Hive more reverence.

"Well, maybe," said Taran, "but this guy's a plant if I ever smelled one. I just need to make an incision on the back of his neck. Easiest way to check!" Taran hunkered over the frightened prisoner with a small pocket knife, one of Taran's peculiar possessions.

"No, please don't!" Arto cried, eyes bugging out. He tried to worm off the bench, but the grepp just chittered and squeezed him closer. When Rajimun didn't respond, Taran raised his eyebrows and inclined his head imploringly.

"Oh...I don't think that would be a good idea, Taran," Rajimun said casually. "Someone is bound to notice the blood."

"Don't worry, there won't be any blood, right, plant boy? Just a nasty green ooze. Doesn't stain."

"Don't let him do this!" the prisoner begged. "I'm not a plant! He's insane! You're the Hive, you're supposed to uphold the law!"

"He does have a point, Taran. This isn't exactly procedure."

"Procedure?! Hey, you didn't complain when we had to clip that kid's toes off last week. And don't tell me I'm not paying you enough!"

"That was different. He was very reluctant to talk to us."

"I swear I'm not a plant!" Arto screamed, rocking side to side. "Someone help me!"

"Then why were you jacking cars with your little leafy pals, huh? Don't tell me it wasn't so you could use the engines to power your family-sized hydroponics vats!"

"I don't even know what that means! We were going to sell the engines to some guy. I think he wants to build a bomb or something! I swear it!"

"Who do you think you're dealing with here, kid, an idiot?" asked Taran. "You're going to have to be a bit more creative with your story. 'Some guy,' 'a bomb'..." Taran held the man's head down as he pressed the point of the knife against his neck.

"Fesh! I'll help you catch this guy! His name is Flayer! Please stop!"

"Taran, I think we'll have to hear the young man out," said Rajimun. "I just don't feel comfortable with this manner of inquiry. Please step away from the prisoner."

"Aww, but I was just about to..."

"Do it now!"

Taran frowned and snapped his knife closed, stepping back from the squirming man.

Rajimun opened the chamber door and spoke to the guard in the hall. The armored drone brother stepped inside and lifted the prisoner to his feet, using the grepp's handle to steer him out of the room.

"Hope no one slips weed killer into your drinking water!" Taran called after them. He smiled at Rajimun. The large man's expression did not shift from the humorless world-weary configuration of

brooding eyes and contemplative frown Taran had encountered since the day they were first introduced.

"Tell me again what you call this method?" Rajimun arched an eyebrow.

"Good Cop, Bad Cop," smiled Taran.

"Interesting," said Rajimun. "And in this scenario, we are each a 'cop'?" He gathered his white robes and sat down cross-legged on the cushion between the two fountains.

"Yeah, you know: cop, drone, same thing," Taran said. "The slang you hear on the streets these days, huh?"

"Indeed," said Rajimun. "I assume you will be following up on this 'Flayer' the young man mentioned?" He hoped Taran would take this as a cue to leave. Rajimun allowed his essence to seep out, reaching through the floor, connecting to a chamber deep within the Hivestead.

"Um, yeah, I guess so," Taran said, scratching his chin. He watched Rajimun's eyes close and his face go slack, already on his way somewhere else. Taran shrugged and left the room.

*** 5 ***

Rubric discovered that his apartment had moved once again during his visit to the slumber den. He decided to call Taran from home upon discovering that Marz had fried the gel memory in the Unicorn's public ring terminal during one of his "experiments." Although Marz had insisted on coming along and Loralayne had slouched and pouted with a practiced disinterest that told Rubric she planned to sneak after him, Rubric forbade them both from accompanying him and finding out where he lived. He got the wobbles thinking of Loralayne randomly showing up at his door to inform him of how the world would most likely betray him today. Rubric often thought she should drop out of the University and go peddle angst in Greymarket instead, since she had such a calling on her life.

Where his apartment building once stood Rubric found the Clever Catch diner, a dive that served only seafood. He had eaten there once when the place had been over on Snap Street and had barely escaped with his life and clothing. The main course had taken issue with being eaten and Rubric had taken issue with having to pay for anything. He promised himself to never again order something described as "an exotic undersea delicacy."

A know-it golem hunkered on a temporary pedestal near the diner's entrance.

"Hey, where's the Nightwhip now?" Rubric asked it.

"The Nightwhip Dwelling Hutch has relocated to the corner of Polymagnus and Raven's Crook," the golem replied, its voice low and static-marred. Dark bands rippled through its flickering body. Rubric wiped the pedestal's projection crystals with his sleeve, but it didn't help. "A half-hour guide wisp can be provided at a fee of five fenns."

"No, I know where it is," Rubric sighed. *Raven's Crook. Might as well give up the apartment and go live at the Unicorn. It'd be quieter.*

Rubric flagged down a tumbrel. The tiny driver, dangling in a sling between two 'crafted gangly bird legs, looked Rubric up and down and demanded payment in advance. Rubric mated their keys and flicked some fenns over to the driver. Rubric pulled himself up into the wheeled cab just as the tumbrel lurched forward, throwing him down on the cushioned seat, and stumped along down the street.

A traffic jam ensnared them just a few blocks from Raven's Crook. Rubric folded back the roof so he could stand up and get a better view. To avoid paying for the cargo tram like everyone else, some Outlander had driven his caravan of thrakes down the middle of the street into Greymarket. One of the lizards had bitten the tire off a passing melon truck, tipping it over. Large orange globes of produce rolled about the intersection, splattering under wheels and heavy feet. Cars honked and winged gremlins leapt off car hoods to complain to the two drone brothers trying to keep the peace. Their armored osper mounts *gawped* uneasily at the thrakes and the swarm of gremlins.

"Looks like we're stuck for a while," said the driver, pulling down the control levers. The tumbrel's legs relaxed. Rubric noticed the right one flickering above the knee, but the driver didn't seem to care. "So...how long you been in Revery?"

"I was born here," Rubric said, slumping back into the seat. He watched with jealousy as the tires on

a nearby convertible unfolded into nimble legs so it could climb up the side of a grocery store and leap over the snarl of vehicles and creatures.

"I been here, what, five years or so," the driver went on, following his prepared smalltalk patter. "Moved from Pentuko, in Joffa, you know? Wanted to get a fresh start in the big city, you know?"

"Yeah," said Rubric, interested more in the sparkly tingle at the nape of his neck. His gaze was sucked into the blank insectile stare of a figure in the crowd. The figure, dressed in sand-colored tatters stood right beside one of the thrakes, looking directly at Rubric. A dark mask covered the figure's face, yet Rubric felt the locking of consciousnesses, of strange eyes meeting his. Rubric stood up again, throat watery and cold. One of the drones passed in front of the figure, wiping it from view, gone. Rubric blinked and squinted, trying to make his vision pierce through the traffic somehow, find the figure again. Nothing.

"Hey, looks like things are clearing up!" the driver said brightly. The drones escorted the caravan down a side street and the traffic started to flow once more. Rubric slowly sat back down, his spine afire, as though he'd been 'crafting for an hour straight.

"Some interesting trouble is on your heels." Tyrix's words played hollowly once more. Rubric ran through a mental gallery of clients and creditors whom he may have annoyed, but quickly lost track. *It could be any of them behind that mask. Or none of them.* The latter proposition hummed in Rubric's mind for a bit. *Just a face in the crowd, Rube. You're getting yourself all wobbly.* He still couldn't shake the gaze of that mask and the feeling of vague familiarity.

As the tumbrel plodded along and the driver sang a jangly Outlander song about the joys of Joffa's ale, Rubric forced his thoughts towards a plan of action. Once he heard Rubric's moving tale of mistaken identity and the lonely struggle against an unfair mountain of debt, Taran would marshal the forces of the Hive to track down Flayer and Brand. Rubric would prove instrumental in providing some obscure clue to finding where they were holding Paulron. Fortunately the two criminals would have a sizable bounty on their heads which Rubric would humbly claim. After a celebration at the Unicorn, Rubric would go out and buy a sparkling late model Dynamain Thunderclap with a dreamdash and dual drive. He'd need one to visit all the new clients he was sure to get. And some of the remaining reward could go to Sun, as a gesture of good will.

It could work, Rubric smiled grimly. Revery scrolled past him as he sat in silent fear.

*** 6 ***

Examples of the greatest technological achievements of the past age dominated the entire top floor of the Arcanus Combine Thought Citadel. The trophies of the Theory and Practice department stood drenched in light. A row of plinths chronicled the evolution of gel memory, from the volatile light-sensitive globule clusters of old to the compact viscous ampoules of the present day. Projection devices, the cornerstone of dreamcrafting augmentation, shone forth phantoms of light in every hue and resolution. The first stasis field generator loomed in the center of this museum like a brass idol to a snail god. The precisely-shaped clouds of charged aether particles gave dreams their substance.

But off to one side, one in light and one in shadow, stood two of the Combine's most peculiar discoveries: The Sylent Twins. The light adored Slik Sylent, angular and perfect in his silvery jacket, a bright pin one would joyfully drive into their own eye. Slik's face possessed an alien beauty, a reflecting pool for the last dreams of falling stars. Where Slik claimed all colors at once, his brother DedLee Sylent drank the light dry. A wild, unkempt desaturated shape masked DedLee from the world about him. Eyes that rarely looked upon sleep hunted about the room under a shock of pale hair. His hands fished nervously, restrained by the pockets of his grey trench coat, as he murmured a guttural lullaby to himself. A smile split open one cheek as DedLee welcomed visitors only he could see.

Near them a tiny microgearwork couple whirled through the steps of a lively Outlander dance atop a circular brass stage. Now a mere curiosity in an age of dreamcrafted wonders, the device never failed to enchant DedLee. He wound the key eagerly to prolong the dance.

"For the last time, brother, once the dance is done you are to leave it alone," said his twin. He ashed

his cigarette down the neck of a pipe protruding from what appeared to be a strangled bellows. Slik leaned against an aquarium column, the undersea blue of mottled fish shadows rippling across the facets of his jacket.

"They never get tired," DedLee said, grinning over the dancers. "My mind has dancers too."

"I'm sure it does," said Slik. He looked to the double doors at the entry arch. *What is taking them so long?*

"They would like to dance with the little metal people," DedLee said. He leaned over the whirring, ticking device, his jaw cracking as it unhinged a good two feet. It clamped shut on Slik's outstretched arm which had slid out just in time to intercept. Where other men may have fainted at the splintered remains of their arm, Slik barely noticed.

"Brother, what have I told you time and again about eating other people's property?" Slik asked, taking a drag with his free hand.

"Suhryee," said DedLee, his mouth full of arm and jacket. He released his brother's arm and blinked guiltily between the dancers and Slik's stern gaze. The twig-snapping sound of rapidly mending bone rippled under Slik's skin. He smoothed out his jacket, wiping away the bite marks. With a bemused, chastising look, he brushed aside DedLee's tangle of white hair and kissed his forehead.

"I need you to be serious for a while, brother," Slik said, straightening DedLee's bonedust trench coat. "We have business to transact for our benefactor and we must be tip top with everything screwed on tight. Do you understand?" DedLee nodded so fiercely that his eyes popped out of their sockets.

"None of that!" Slik said, gently pushing the eyeballs back into place with a wet squelch. "You just stand over here and stay quiet." Slik positioned his brother next to the aquarium. The fish inside gradually changed into birds fluttering up through a column of clouds.

The double doors at the end of the vast room clanged open as a muscular blue-black blur somersaulted inside. The figure flipped and spun its way around the exhibits, coming dangerously close to toppling several displays. Arcing over a case of crystal battery prototypes, Brand landed before the twins with a flourish.

"Ah, the Sylent twins," Brand said, arms outstretched in mock joy. "As if this day couldn't shine any brighter. If there were a craftier pair in this fair city, well, it's likely I'dve killed them before now."

Flayer entered at a more relaxed pace, followed by Paulron's body, now secured to the back of a grepp.

"Gentlemen," he nodded, making no effort to hide his distaste.

"You brought him in on *that*?" Slik inquired. "Have you no sense?"

"Anyone who happened to look our way would have seen two enjacs pushing a cart full of coolant casings," Flayer said. "Did you forget why Shad hired us? We are professionals, after all. Besides, we took your special elevator up here and arrived unseen. Here's your key." Slik's gaze remained fixed on Paulron and did not see one of Flayer's tentacles whip a key directly at his face. The air in front of Slik blurred and the key vanished. A few feet away DedLee spit something into his hand. The corner of Flayer's mouth twitched ever so slightly. DedLee grinned with all his teeth, causing Brand to step back in revulsion.

"Very good," said Slik, flame splashing across his elegant cheekbones as he lit another cigarette. "We will transport Dahns from here. If all is well, you will find your accounts substantially larger tomorrow morning. Good day."

"If it's all the same to you, your Slikness, we'd like to deliver the dreamcrafter personally," said Brand. "Get a little face time with the boss, you know? And my face is ever so pretty."

"I'm afraid that won't be possible as Mr. Khadjik is indisposed at the moment," Slik replied, sizing Brand up.

"Really now?" said Brand, stepping very close to Slik. He tensed his muscles so they would not shiver. He found it ever cold when the Sylents were near. Flayer eyed the layout of the room with a casual precautionary glance, noting any advantageous technologies and positions of cover. Beside him Paulron muttered and tried to roll over, but the grepp held him fast. Slik only smiled, Brand's nose mere inches from his.

"*Listen to me,*" said a voice which seemed to rumble from the floor and permeate the air. Brand's face went slack and he longed for Slik to speak again. A radiance crept out from below his collar, soaking up into Slik's face. "*I want you to...*"

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Sylent," said Shad Khadjik, standing at the door to his sanctum at the far end of the museum. The light drained away, leaving a network of vague pink traces around Slik's eyes. Brand shook a heavy fog from his mind. Slik smirked, his eyes informing Brand of his narrow escape. He stepped away as Shad approached. The Prime Director of the Arcanus Combine wore an officious black suit of immaculate design and matching shoulder cape. His steps echoed through the room as he walked to the grepp and its burden. Flayer, Brand and the Sylents waited as Shad's eyes scanned over the dreamcrafter's body. He pulled gingerly at his dark beard, his mouth curling in befuddlement. Shad then walked alongside the grepp, fingers steeped below his chin, studying the dreamcrafter. He stopped and turned to Flayer, sighing the tired sigh of a disappointed mother.

"Why have you brought me Paulron Spendrel? Or were my instructions unclear?"

"What?!" exclaimed Flayer, stepping away from Paulron as though burnt.

"Treachery!" cried Slik. "Brother, hand me their hearts."

"Try it, demon," said Brand to DedLee, wristblades sparking to life. DedLee did not move, his eyes puzzled and hurt. He tugged out a snarl of white hair, whining quietly.

"If everyone has finished posturing," said Shad, "could *someone* please answer my question? I'm not sure I could phrase it more plainly." Shad folded his arms and waited.

"He *said* he was Dahns," Flayer explained in a carefully measured tone. "The essence link test failed and I fell back upon the honed intellect you're paying for." Flayer spoke quickly to curtail the interjections forming in Brand's mouth. "My deductions led us to a tavern where I engaged 'Dahns' in a duel. Soundly beaten, we transported him here. Nothing so far has convinced me that he is anyone other than Rubric Dahns. How do you know that he's this 'Spendrel'?"

"Because I released him from my service three years ago," Shad said. "My most valuable mind, a fountain of innovation, and yet so fractured. If I recall, he is Mr. Dahns' former mentor. I suggest you use this relationship to your advantage."

"Thank you," said Flayer, relieved. "I already have a plan."

"Of course you do," Slik sneered. A tongue of smoke licked out from his mouth and vanished again.

"Once you deliver the genuine Rubric Dahns, I would like a full report of your experience with the Merkstave. In the meantime continue with the regimen I have prescribed." Shad rubbed his lower lip thoughtfully. "Have you considered narrowing the harmonics to promote the essence link's selectivity?"

Flayer nodded, pleased. "I'll attempt some adjustments in the future, perhaps with an unaltered subject. Mr. Dahns' 'craftling was hard to come by. Either they never need repair or they just aren't that popular." The two men strolled away, exchanging plans and theories.

Brand and Slik discovered each other rolling their eyes, each suddenly peripheral to the discussion. Brand drew his finger across his neck, making a rude face which Slik surmised to be the blade maven's proposed end to their unfinished business. Slik's burning cigarette butt bounced off Brand's nose with a tiny hiss. DedLee's snicker sounded like the chatter of drowning mice. Flayer and Shad wandered back before Brand could do anything more than fume.

"I am eager to get her on the accelerated program," Flayer was saying, his voice oddly meek. "How long before I can bring her to the clinic?"

"Patience, Mr. Flayer," said Shad. "Other patients whose condition is far more advanced than your mother's are more appropriate candidates for the medicians' program. We must wait for an opportunity to admit her discreetly."

"Wait?! We've done nothing *but* wait! Meanwhile she withers before my eyes."

"Then you should tell her how privileged you are to be conducting field tests of an exciting new technology," Shad grinned. "I'm sure her spirits would lift immensely to hear of the good work her son is doing. What ever would she do without you?" Flayer just frowned, seeing the threat sparkle briefly in Shad's eyes. He nodded curtly.

“Sir,” Slik said, stepping forward, “let my brother and I handle this matter. Mr. Flayer is obviously distracted by personal concerns.”

“No, Mr. Sylent,” Shad said. “I need you two here for other business. Mr. Flayer, you and your associate have one more chance to retrieve Rubric Dahns. Take Mr. Spendrel with you. He was never here and we did not have this conversation.”

“Shall I make sure?” Slik asked with a sly grin.

“This is a business transaction, Mr. Sylent,” Shad smiled. “An exchange of certain risks. We risk them failing this task and they risk seeing your brother again. Or should I say, *not* seeing him. Good day, gentlemen.”

Shad and the Sylents left Flayer and Brand in the museum trading sullen looks. On the back of the grepp, Paulron Spendrel smiled.

“Fountain of innovation” indeed!

*** 7 ***

The Nightwhip had entangled itself with another dwelling hutch at the corner of Polymagnus and Raven’s Crook, just as the golem had promised. The sinewy trunks of each building intertwined lustily, their vines lashed around the support girders. Although on its extreme fringe, the raucous hawking and bartering of Greymarket splashed down Raven’s Crook right up against the Nightwhip. Rubric wouldn’t even look down the street, and tried to pretend Revery’s infamous marketplace didn’t exist a mere stone’s throw from his apartment.

I hope the neighbors are quiet at least, thought Rubric as the door fanned open and he stepped into the lobby. Mr. Lumpwazzit, the caretaker, looked up from the desk, his personal daemons swirling around his neck. Since Rubric never saw the squat man outside of the building, he had begun to fantasize that Mr. Lumpwazzit had a symbiotic relationship with the Nightwhip. He could almost see Lumpwazzit retiring into a slime sac every night, soaking up nutrients into his wrinkly grub-like body.

“Ah, Mr. Dahns!” the caretaker clapped. “You found us again at last!”

“I see you’ve expanded the place,” Rubric said, stepping over a puddle of sap. Rubric immediately noticed the sweat sour stench hanging in the lobby. Something had changed besides the building’s location.

“Yes, yes, Inky had to sell. Fell into an abyss of bad luck. Very sad indeed.” Mr. Lumpwazzit’s grin matched those of the fiends orbiting his head.

“Inky? Weren’t most of her tenants Geezers?”

“The Nightwhip is open to all ideologies, Mr. Dahns,” he scolded. “It is a veritable stew of diversity to which the Galactic Zoo Assembly will add its own unique spice, I’m sure.”

“By the Reaches!” Rubric swore. “They don’t know that *I* live here, do they?”

“Think of them as potential clients...” The little man drummed his fingers over glistening, thick lips.

Rubric smacked his forehead. “But if they’re living *here*, they can’t afford...I mean...”

“Yes?” Mr. Lumpwazzit arched a long eyebrow. “I foresee a condescending tirade cut off at the knees by the specter of rents long overdue.” The light of the daemons glowed luridly off Lumpwazzit’s teeth.

“Am I still on two?” Rubric sighed.

“It’s floor four now, Mr. Dahns,” the caretaker said. “And don’t be surprised if you discover a fifth floor by week’s end. You’ll find the RingNet plugged in and all facilities in working order. Welcome home, Mr. Dahns!”

Rubric trudged up the stairs, feeling the added weariness of the extra floors. He could almost see a miasmic cloud of plant stench, the residue of the building’s transformative efforts. Just outside his room he encountered a member of the Assembly. If the pale blue, almost sleepgown-like outfit hadn’t been a clue, the sick fire in the young man’s eyes told him everything.

“Mr. Dahns?” the man almost gasped. “Rubric Dahns?”

“No,” Rubric said, sliding past. He fumbled in his pocket for the key.

"It's you, sir, I know it's you!" the man beamed, eyes aglow in their sunken sockets.

"Not today it isn't," Rubric said, finally fishing the key out and snapping it into the lockmouth. It chewed on the key. *Come on, come on*, Rubric thought when it seemed like the lock was savoring its job a bit too much. He avoided looking at the Geezer, now standing very close. Rubric's face flushed and his eyes blinked too much when he found himself in these situations.

"A Wanderer solicited me from across the Silent Plane," the young man explained. "He is called Chobra, a mighty warrior amongst his clan. His quest demands that he cross over to the Material Plane. He manifested himself as a great ice drake. If only you could give him shape, Mr. Dahns!"

The lock spat out the key and unlocked the door with a *snunck*.

"Ice drakes give me nose bleeds," Rubric said, already slipping inside, locking the door behind him.

"Open the gate!" the young man sobbed, "You must open the gate and let him through!" Rubric pressed his head against the door until he heard the Geezer shuffle away. *If only the Assembly had better funding*, Rubric thought. He turned around, resting his back on the door.

The apartment was in shambles. His clothes had made a violent escape from the drawers in the wall and leapt across the room, onto the couch, taking a lamp hostage in the process. His worktable huddled under the weight of several projection units and glittering handfuls of gel memory. A collar dangled from one of the projectors, another work in progress. Yellowish fluid dripped from the split bark above the door to the water closet. In the kitchen nook a weak swath of light leaked from the loose refrigerator door, highlighting a mosaic of crushed crackers spilled across the table. He'd have to complement Lumpwazzit on the move as everything was pretty much how Rubric had left it. As he suspected, the one window across from him did little to quell the roar of Greymarket's ceaseless voice.

Flyste perched on the back of the couch, grooming his wings. The tiny griffon squawked at Rubric as he slumped down on the stool in front of the RingNet scone. Flyste leapt onto his shoulder, dropping a collar in Rubric's lap.

"I won't forget," Rubric said, flipping the 'Net node on. "Ms. Marjenka's ember snake has stopped breathing steam. According to her, it's defective. It's not defective, Flyste. It's dying. Day by day it will wane until it's nothing but a charred coil of rope. That's the deal, Flyste: nothing lasts. It's a feature. If she wanted something more fashionable, she should have bought a clever hat. I'm an artist, after all." *I am an artist. I mean, look at this place. Who else lives like this?* He tossed the collar back onto the table. Flyste huffed.

The RingNet node spun and whirled, the dome crackling to life. A bulb in its base throbbed. *Messages waiting*. Rubric sighed and decided to get them cleared out before he made his call.

First message. A balbooga trundled into view on the node's gaseous screen, scratching itself and yawning. It noticed Rubric watching and turned around, raised its rear end into the air and began a rude little dance. Ferron had 'crafted a new node golem.

"I went jogging with my friend Rubric this morning," came Ferron's voice out of the speaker. "Strange thing, though: He was utterly invisible. Didn't speak a word either. The only way I could tell he was there was the air next to me took on a brooding, self-pitying quality. That and he pooched out on me about a half hour into it. I do hope he's solved his corporality issues by the time I see him next."

Rubric erased the message and played the second.

A sun blossomed open within the dome. Rubric's stomach clenched.

"Rubric, my esteemed and mysterious dewsprite," Sun Oyo's voice lilted. "Your shadow is a much sought after rarity in my house. I would bottle it and offer it only to the thirsty gods who sometimes wander in to my dinner table..." A warm hum chased away Sun's voice and his sigil puffed out of sight. Rubric found himself peering at a woman's face. She seemed to ask a question of him and he reached out to answer. "...have more pleasant conversations. Please do not turn away my associates. They only desire to pass along my wishes of a bountiful life."

The message went away. Rubric blinked at the node, unsure of what had just happened. He fidgeted with a lever, hoping to coax something onto the screen. Then he wondered why he was doing that.

"*I had a dream once*," he remembered Paulron saying one day at the Unicorn.

"*Sure you did*," Rubric chuckled.

"Her name was Meylahn. When I woke up in the morning she had vanished from my bed. I understand that is the way of dreams."

Rubric rubbed at his temple. *What was I doing? No more messages, I guess.*

Flyste dropped down into his lap, crackling. The griffon cocked its head at the RingNet node.

"Don't worry, Flyste," said Rubric, "Taran'll know what to do."

Rubric spoke Taran's glyphs and the vines sucked his voice down into the network of light and charged sap. Taran's sigil, a probing eye drifting behind a magnifying glass, flickered under the node's dome.

"I finally figured out how they're doing it, Rube," Taran's voice rattled in the speaker. "The other night I was grabbing a bite at the Clever Catch (super eel nuggets, by the way) and I saw a streetlamp across the street kind of wink at me, you know?"

"Taran, look, I need..." Rubric tried to interrupt, but Taran's mouth was already moving.

"First of all: Yuck. I mean, a leering eyeball bobbing on a tentacle? This is the best solution we have for a city-wide source of illumination? Anyhow, I just realized how much we take them for granted, like they just kind of fade into the background. But don't you see, *that's what They want!* Do you know how many eyelamps line the streets of Greymarket alone? Go on, guess. At least two hundred! I got a call into the public energy works to be sure, but still! So I figure it's got to be something low frequency, something you wouldn't notice. There's more than light hitting our brains when we walk under those things, pal. And when the time is right, those eyelamps are going to go all purple or green and then *bam!*, all the sleeper agents will switch on and we won't even recognize this city in the morning."

"Taran, I have a problem," Rubric said when his friend stopped to breathe.

"Rubric, I keep telling you if you keep making all those huge snakes you're bound to have some issues. Tell her you just need to smooch for a while until your wand is ready to work its magic again."

"No, it's not that," Rubric said. "I mean, there is no *that!* Taran, listen. Something's happened. Paulron's been kidnapped."

"The old guy with the flirtatious coat? Who'd want to kidnap him? Is he rich?"

"That's the thing, Taran: he was pretending to be me. This Flayer guy was after *me!* He had a blade maven!"

"You said his name was Flayer, huh?" Taran asked.

"Yeah, why?"

"No reason." Taran paused long enough for Rubric to suspect that perhaps there *was* a reason.

"Well, here's an even more puzzling question, Rube: Who'd want to kidnap *you*?"

"Lots of people, Taran! Lots!"

"Name one."

"Sun Oyo! He's decided to make an example of me."

"Sun Oyo!" Taran scoffed. "I've had bar tabs bigger than what you owe him. Come on, Rubric, be real. So, what, you want me to help track down your pal?"

"Well, yeah."

Taran's sigil spun silently for a while.

"Look, Rube, I want to help you, I do. But I'm a Special Investigator. The crime has to be, well... special. Besides, the Hive's got me on this vampire case right now and I can't drop it for what seems like a routine kidnapping by idj harvesters."

"Vampire case?"

"Well, the Hive doesn't know they're vampires yet, but this time I'll show 'em. Hey, tell you what: let me take a description of the perps and I'll get word out to the Hive and see what turns up. Go ahead, I'm recording this conversation anyway." Rubric gave Taran a description of the two men based on what the students had told him.

"Kay, Rube," said Taran. "I'll call you when I know." The eye blinked and went out. Rubric powered down the node.

"That wasn't too helpful," Rubric said gloomily. "What will I do now, Flyste?"

“You will come with me, Rubric Dahns.”

She stood just inside the doorway, pale and harsh down to the frayed tips of her hair. A black tattoo sharply contrasted her white face, much like the snug black web of armor plating sheathing her body.

“How did you get in?” Then he saw the door bleeding on his rug. “Oh.” He muttered and an iridescent web spun out of the aether, latching itself to the walls to form a barrier between them. A sharp beak snapped out of the web’s center at the intruder.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rubric saw a blade blur through his ‘crafting, but it bought him time enough to grab Flyste and leap out the window.

*** 8 ***

Gibby burst through the door to Professor Selsun’s classroom where Marz, Loralayne and a handful of others suffered under the droning incantation of a lecture on aether harmonics.

“Professor Mays has been murdered!” he said, his voice hoarse and out of breath. “They strung him up in the courtyard!”

“By the Reaches!” old Selsun wheezed as the entire class flooded out the door, down the stairs and out of the building. Marz, Gibby and Loralayne joined a ring of others gaping around the fountain in the University’s courtyard. The statues in the fountain depicted the wise Kremman Dafoer flanked by two griffons. The body of Professor Mays dangled from Dafoer’s outstretched hand by a rope, bobbing softly under the spray of water.

“Suck out my spine!” Marz swore.

“Someone get him down!” pleaded Gibby. No one in the crowd made a move to do any such thing.

“I was failing that class anyway,” said Loralayne. She noticed a golem hopping up and down on its stand near the base of the fountain.

“How can you be so heartless, woman?” Marz asked. “The man’s corpse is tossing in the wind and you’ve gump enough to carry on about your grades?!”

“Why don’t you go cut him down, then? Cradle his head in your lap and curse the heavens! I’m sure it will be a touching scene. Everyone’s here to see it, too.” Marz and Gibby withered under her glowering gaze. “Now, I’m going to hear what this golem has to say.” She walked over to the golem, Marz and Gibby following mutely. The three crouched down near the creature.

“I have a message for Rubric Dahns,” it croaked. “I have a message for Rubric Dahns.” Over and over.

“Just a generic public golem that someone’s frigged,” Marz observed. “Untraceable. It’s got a spindle lock, though. We need to find Rubric so he can hear the message.”

“No, we don’t,” Loralayne said, pulling a collar from her jacket pocket. She slipped it over the spindle. “I nipped this off Flayer during the duel. It’s a threggacat. *Rubric’s* threggacat.”

“Nipped it off Flayer?! You minx, that’s beautiful!” glowed Marz.

“A thregga... wait, Rubric doesn’t ‘craft warlings!” Gibby said.

“Shut up, you two. Listen.”

“Mr. Dahns,” said the golem, “Tracking you down has become too tedious and so I have arranged for you to come to me instead. We are in possession of your friend, Paulron Spendrel. He is comfortable... for now. To ensure he stays that way, you should pay careful attention to my instructions and follow them diligently. There is a table reserved in your name at the Penumbra. Arrive there at noon or Spendrel dies. Come alone or Spendrel dies. If I even hear something rhyming with ‘Hive,’ Spendrel dies. That is all.” The golem vanished into ribbons and a nasty green smoke puffed out of the stand as the memory fried itself.

“You three!” shouted a voice behind them. Loralayne nimbly slid the collar off the the spindle and into her pocket. Loralayne, Marz and Gibby turned to see the insectile bulk of a drone brother, his armor shining blue-black like the carapace of his namesake. “Please move away from the crime scene. The Sword of the Law has descended on this area.” Behind him they saw several more drones arrive on armored ospers. The drone brother picked up the fried projector.

“The Sword of the Law claims this as evidence.”

Taran carefully studied the cards spread out across his desk, tapping the Jack of Diamonds against his chin. His office door swung open and Rajimun Hookas walked in.

“Hey, don’t you ever knock?” Taran asked, quickly sweeping the cards into his drawer.

“I have a message from...” Rajimun started to say before noticing one of the cards still on the desk. He picked up the Ace of Spades and turned it in his hands. “What is this?”

“It’s classified,” Taran said, snatching it away. “You said you had a message?”

“Yes, from brother Borlis,” Rajimun frowned, watching the card vanish into the drawer. “He is on patrol with brother Beldur near the University. He wishes to speak with you immediately.”

“Okay, put him through,” Taran said.

Rajimun’s face slackened for just a moment and his eyes twitched as Borlis came through.

“Taran, it’s Borlis,” said the drone through Rajimun’s mouth. Rajimun’s face took on an uncharacteristically jovial quality.

“Hey, what’s up?” Taran asked loudly, as though speaking to someone on the other side of a thick door. He leaned forward, looking for Borlis in Rajimun’s eyes.

“I can hear you just fine, Taran. We’ve discovered the body of a Professor Antwick Mays here in the courtyard outside the University. Looks like he was murdered and then put on display. We also found a terminated projector pedestal.”

“Okay, yeah?”

“There’s also a few students here. One of them says she knows who killed Mays, but she’ll speak only to you.”

“Really? Is she cute?”

Borlis/Rajimun rolled his eyes. “We’ve secured the area and will keep it so until your arrival.”

“Great. See you soon.”

Rajimun’s features slid back into grave seriousness as he resumed control.

“I’ll never understand brother Borlis’ fondness for you, Taran,” rubbing his mouth as though the drone’s smile had strained it.

“We share the same sense of humor,” Taran said, putting on his coat. “I crack a joke and he laughs. We should try it some time, like to cop routine.”

“Do not embarrass the Hive today, Taran.”

“What? Me?” Taran winked and slipped out the door.

*** 9 ***

No one had ever successfully committed suicide by flinging themselves out one of the Nightwhip’s windows and this worked to Rubric’s advantage. He shuddered down through thick viney trunks, Flyste desperately hooked onto his shoulder. Rubric saw a maintenance daemon leisurely licking a window on the second floor. He snatched at its meaty tongue, kicked out and away from the building, riding the elastic appendage down to the sidewalk below. He let it go with a wet snap and ran for his life, Flyste squawking and complaining as he bounced along. *Now **that** was impressive!* he thought.

The facades of his new neighborhood wiped past as Rubric bolted down Raven’s Crook, looking back only once to see a white form cutting down through the foliage of the Nightwhip’s outer wall. He wished he knew a mnemanttra to give him wings or longer legs or a really slick sports car. He threw himself forward, shoving pedestrians aside like shrubbery. The blood pounding in his ears merged with a chorus of voices, calling out prices for fresh fruit, afirflax dreamblankets, and knives fine enough to slice moonlight.

The sprawl of Greymarket surrounded Rubric in a tide of commerce, colorful produce bobbing near the dark waters of illegal microgearworks and the exotic jetsam of the farthest outland. All about him

fingers flicked fenns back and forth, a ‘crafted feyblade bought, a cunning Irie Pliedes frost manta knock-off sold. “200 fenns for a desktop cloudpillar? It was only 175 last week!” “Gape the flash Booma Streetrip centispeed! Supernew, not even hit the showfloors yet! Got two left!” New and used blade rifles, some still warm. Outlanders hawking bottled cures for back aches, sneezing, rudeness, and sore consciences. And, in the deepest crevices of Greymarket, voices creaked, “Purple harvest, fresh drip from the ‘crafters spine. Ride with the harsh ghosts, flow easy on the dreamstream and kiss the Reaches.”

Perfect! thought Rubric. *You could lose a drone cadre in here.*

The woman dropped down in front of him, pale and jagged. She snarled through the shattered tattoo on her face and squeezed on a glistening black clawshield. The woman raised the bladed pincer in salute. The crowd, used to deals gone foul, rippled away into a ring around Rubric and the blade maven.

“You must come with me, Rubric Dahns,” she said, her voice steam slicing ice. “The Patterns have shaped your name and you must come.” Her eyes burned into Rubric through her fierce tangle of white hair.

“Look, I owe Sun buckets of fenn, but I can’t pay him back if I’m dead!” Rubric said, finding no opening in the crowd. He heard two men nearby wagering on whether he’d be dismembered or simply run through.

“Through the curtain of the Everwall he comes, naming us both,” she said, lightly circling Rubric, her feet barely disturbing the dusty street. Flyste leapt at the woman, but Rubric caught his tail just in time.

“Wait, did that broker from Joffa send you? How was I supposed to know the juggling balbooga market would saturate so quickly?”

“Enough! Behold!” In a single swift flurry of snaps, the woman tore away every scrap of armor and clothing on her body. The crowd’s murmur sucked away into awed whispers as even the merchandise fixed its gaze on her naked flesh. Tattoos wrapped around her entire muscular form, licking up her legs, diving into her groin, swirling about her waist, climbing her chest and back, spilling over her shoulders down her arms, masking her face in menacing mystery.

And across small alabaster breasts, in crisp black lines, were Rubric’s glyphs.

“That’s, uh, very flattering...” Rubric managed to say, knowing that he’d just been guaranteed a week of sleepless nights. The tattoos then swirled and swarmed, warped and wefted, flowing like wet paint around her belly. A black, insectile mask gazed out at Rubric from the curved canvas of her skin. The face from the crowd, but also a face from... from...

“Who are you?” Barely a breath.

“Ivory Yxtempora, swordmaiden of the Entropic Patterns.”

*** 10 ***

Taran Baker drove his Hive-issued sedan right onto the courtyard, screeching to a halt a few feet from the fountain. He stepped out, unspooled the boomcord from the door and set it humming with a single twang. As he spoke into the cone, his voice thundered out across a crowd of perplexed, wincing faces:

“If you happen to be the murderer hiding out among the innocents in order to have something to gloat about at your next serial killer circle jerk, know this: the best part of your life is now behind you! Not only is the Hive after you, but I, Taran Baker, Special Investigator, am on the case. By day’s end I will have your bank account, your car, the slimy crevice you call a home, and your large collection of ‘crafted farm animals under lockdown. If you want to run, then run. But don’t stop until you look back and see the dark side of the Everwall, because that’s the only thing that could possibly get in my way.”

Taran let go of the cone and the boomcord snapped back into place. Borlis left Beldur to mind their ospers and strode up to greet Taran. Taran found himself looking up over the cliff edge that was Borlis’s armored chest.

“Quite awe inspiring, Taran,” the drone brother rumbled. “You mean any of it?”

“Well yeah,” he said, “you guys better bring this perp in today, or at least someone who smells like

him. I'm going to be too busy tracking down this Flayer guy. He might be the head vampire. Their sire, as it were."

"The Sword of the Law is swift," Borlis intoned.

"Yeah, well it better be."

Marz, Loralayne and Gibby huddled together a short distance away.

"This had better work," Marz murmured.

"It *will* work," hissed Loralayne out the side of her mouth. "Besides, it's the only way to get to the Penumbra in time." She glanced at the tree clock at the far end of the courtyard, its dancing sprites telling her it was twenty minutes until noon. "You remember the trick I taught you about the wire harness in the steering column?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm on it, alright?"

"Don't fesh this up!" Loralayne wrinkled her nose in concentration as she hissed in dreamspeech. Her breasts lifted and grew before their eyes. Her lips changed subtly, and her eyes sparkled with gemfire.

"Too cruel," gasped Gibby.

"Quit gaping and get busy!" Gibby and Marz slipped away as Taran approached.

"Hi there, I'm Taran Baker, Special Investigator."

"Wow, I can't believe I'm talking to *the* Taran Baker!" Loralayne gushed. "I've heard so much about your brave adventures!"

"Really? Well... It's, you know... just my job."

"So modest!" Loralayne squeaked, slipping her arm around Taran's and walking him away from the fountain.

"So, ah, Borlis tells me you have a lead on who did in poor Professor Mays..."

"Isn't it terrible? He was my favorite professor, too!"

"Well, I'm really sorry about your loss..."

"It's not just *my* loss!" Loralayne said, eyes brimming with 'crafted tears. "Marz was in that class too!"

"Um, right, so about this lead you have..." Taran was distracted by the sound of screeching tires as a car pulled alongside them. "Hey, I have a car just like that!"

"Get in!" yelled Marz, behind the wheel. The door hinged open.

Loralayne swung herself inside, shoving Marz off the center seat.

"I'm driving."

Marz frowned and buckled up.

Taran still gaped in amazement. She blew him a kiss and pulled the door down. She pressed a button and the panels around the steering column blossomed with floating glyphs indicating speed, direction, and battery reserves.

"Dreamdash!" she said with glee.

"Nice," Marz grinned.

Loralayne mashed the accelerator and Taran's Hive-issue sedan peeled away down the courtyard, leapt two flights of stairs, swerved onto the street and vanished into traffic. Gibby ran up alongside Taran, who had yet to close his mouth.

"She stole my car!" said Taran.

"That she did," affirmed Gibby. "Wish they'd thought to take me along. I hope they at least get my dragolisk back from Flayer."

Taran turned slowly to Gibby.

"What did you just say?"

Minutes later, after instructing Beldur to summon another cadre over to the Penumbra and apprehend "a dreamcrafter hanging out with a tattooed blade maven," Taran Baker stepped out into traffic. A sleek red Dynamine Sunspray screeched to a halt a few feet before Taran's knees. He pointed his blade pistol at the driver.

"Please exit your vehicle, sir. The Hive has need of your shiny red sports car."

As Rubric followed Ivory through Greymarket, it seemed to him that people stepped aside in secret concert to make a path for them. Ivory had since carefully re-inserted herself into the tight web of clothing and armor with the nonchalance of a woman slipping on a robe in a quiet boudoir even as one hundred eyes languished on every strap. There had been no discussion; she simply started walking and he followed, compelled by the mystery he saw in the patterns of her skin. Ivory seemed almost unaware of him and spoke not a word. Rubric sensed that if he should try to slip away down an alley, he would only find her waiting for him. But he had no desire to flee.

“So, ah, Ivory,” Rubric began cautiously. “Who ‘crafted your tattoos? I’ve never seen work like that before. How do you control them?”

“Control is a man walking down a road who thinks, ‘Behold how I do not fall up into the sky!’” She answered without turning her gaze from the ever-opening path.

“Ah, right,” said Rubric, falling back a few steps again. They entered a small plaza of tiered stairways, each embroidered with merchants. *Up and up and up*, Rubric thought. *Every step a story*. Rubric’s instinct was to avoid such places as Greymarket where the designs of popular dreamcrafters confronted him accusingly. Where were the ‘craftlings of Rubric Dahns amongst all these others? Why did the man on the street not ask for him by name? Each new innovation, each clever concept, stole something from his heart. It felt as though, with each passing day, a flagstone disappeared from the floor of his world. Each day the way to recognition and success became that much more obscured. And one day he’d find himself standing on the last remaining stone, an island forgotten in the accounts of men.

Rubric, lost in thought, almost missed it as Ivory turned right, leading them down an arched alleyway. He pushed his woes aside with thoughts of the mystery he had witnessed earlier.

“Can you at least tell me about the face I saw there on your...your skin? I think I’ve seen it before.” Rubric walked next to her now, searching for a change in expression.

“Did you see a face?” They emerged into a round intersection surrounded by fountains. Ivory glanced over and seemed to notice Flyste for the first time. “Send your beast on ahead to announce us.”

“‘Beast’? Oh, you mean Flyste? He can’t fly.” Rubric prepared The Answer for the inevitable Question. But Ivory just gave a small nod. “Very well then.”

Rubric frowned, disappointed. “Hey, I don’t even know where I’m going!”

“How is that different from any other moment?”

Rubric looked for a sarcastic smile, but found none. *Paulron would love you*, he thought. *Paulron!* How could he have forgotten? Somewhere his friend languished in captivity because he had stepped forward to defend Rubric’s honor. And now here he was, casually traipsing about Greymarket with a fascinatingly obtuse blade maven in search of answers to a question he hadn’t even properly formed.

“Say, you blade mavens have guilds or something like that, right?” he asked.

“Many follow similar paths, yes,” Ivory responded with the straightest answer Rubric had heard so far.

“Well maybe you know each other then. See, this Flayer guy and a blade maven named Brand kidnapped my friend Paulron. They *thought* they were kidnapping me even though I have a *totally* different style than...hey.” Ivory had stopped walking several paces back. Rubric turned to find her staring at him. The prickly scent of keeva spice washed over him from a nearby stall and a cottony cloud of quiet pushed out around him. *Aha*, he thought. *A node of possibility unfolds right now*.

“Brand Shraedo, Edgebringer of the Dragolisk, is dead,” she said, her words slicing past Rubric like small knives. “At the Skerrolsley I saw him fall, the blood of my sisters pooled about him as his black soul fled his corpse. He is no more.”

The Skerrolsley, thought Rubric, his mind moving through the thicket of that name. *I should have figured such a creature as Ivory would have come out of Wyldehame*. She had a lilting accent that he had not been able to place until now.

“Another man with the same name, then,” Rubric said. “Sorry to bring it up.” He held back a grin. He had managed to stop the indomitable blade maven in her tracks, to give her pause. Ivory stood statue-still, eyes turned inward, a pale bulwark which broke the flow of the market. To Rubric, the busy throngs faded to muttering dusty phantoms, a background to Ivory, now imbued with feral light. Her gaze moved past the walls of Greymarket, beyond the fringes of Revery, focusing on the far side of some inner chasm. Her lips moved as in conversation, but Rubric couldn’t make out the words. *Like dreamspeech.*

“No,” she said at last. “Not another man. Brand yet lives.”

“How do you know that?” Rubric asked.

“A ghost,” said Ivory. “It tells me Brand has been in Revery for quite some time.”

“A ghost?” Rubric looked around but saw only commerce. Ghosts drifted in the bellies of the Deep Engines, the computational apparatus hidden away in the bowels of the Hive and the Arcanus Combine. They guided messages through the wet strands of the RingNet, moving in ways no mortal could fathom. Rubric had never heard of ghosts wandering free through the city. Except for the dreamghasts, but no ‘crafter spoke of them outside of arrogance or foolishness lest he tempt their dark thirst.

“We go to Brand now,” said Ivory, stepping into a determined march. “We may risk diverging from the Patterns for a short while.”

“Did the ghost say if Paulron was with him?”

“I didn’t ask.”

Rubric looked up at Flyste. The tiny griffon shrugged and went about preening itself.

“How will you find Brand?” he asked, catching up with her again.

“The same way I found you. By listening.”

*** 12 ***

Loralayne had no qualms about parking Taran’s car on the sidewalk near the entrance to the Penumbra. Their trip from the University had been swift once Marz discovered the switch that activated the car’s lights and sirens. Traffic tended to dissolve before what appeared to be urgent Hive business.

“So what’s our plan?” Marz asked, looking up at the curved outer wall of one of Revery’s most notorious hotspots. The Penumbra eclipsed a good city block.

“It’s simple, really,” she said. “We go in there and demand Paulron’s return.”

“What? Just like that?” Marz looked her over, incredulous. “My dear, your wit’s as slippery as a buttered eel, but I think we’ll need more than your charms to persuade old Flayer to simply roll over and bark on your say so.” He thought dejectedly of how Loralayne’s breasts deflated to their normal size during the ride here.

“What do you suggest then, Marz? What is *your* brilliant scheme?”

With a twinkle in his eye, he reached under his seat and heaved out a blade pistol.

“Noticed this when I finished beaming with pride at my handiwork on the steering column.” He hefted the weapon in his hand, eyeing down the sight, as though he had ever held a gun before.

“Just be sure it doesn’t end up pointing at me,” said Loralayne.

“Loralayne, I have to wonder... Why the sudden enthusiasm over rescuing Paulron? It’s not like the two of you are close, if one could ever ascribe such a quality to any of your relationships.”

“What, you’d rather be in class?” she said, pulling her long hair back. She got out of the car and Marz followed, stowing the pistol in his vest.

“Oh, so it’s boredom then? A little theft of Hive property to break up the monotony of lunchtime?”

“Who else is going to do it? The Hive? Flayer’ll kill Paulron if they show up!”

“Rubric’s trying to get him back too!”

“Rubric?! He’s probably forgotten all about Paulron, now that he got a free breakfast out of the situation! He’s probably at home ‘crafting ferrets that steal your heart or some other worthless nonsense! He’s never around unless he needs something!”

“Um...okay,” Marz said. He’d rarely seen Loralayne care enough about a subject to rant about it.

“So it’s up to us then.” They walked silently around the curve of the Penumbra towards the entrance.

The opulence of the Penumbra club spilled out to the curb, where flaming salamanders in lava-wrought armor guarded the arched entryways with mighty tridents. One salamander glowered at Marz, its orange whiskers curling and uncurling.

“Oh please,” Marz snorted, “I ‘crafted three of you for extra credit on last year’s exams!” He reached up and thwacked the creature on the nose with a crackle. “Hey, you’re aether-real! Guess they spare no expense here!” Loralayne yanked him by the arm through the entryway.

The lobby resembled a starlit canyon in the midst of the Mogadon mountains, complete with hooting and scurrying creatures that kept just out of view. They could hear the splashing of a waterfall somewhere past the crags to their left. A purple moon cast baleful light down on the line of patrons waiting below. When their turn came, Marz and Loralayne stepped up to the concierge who stood behind a rocky plinth. In a reedy voice he welcomed them to the Penumbra.

“Table for Rubric Dahns, please,” Marz said with a swagger.

“Your glyphs, sir...” the man prompted.

“Oh, right, of course,” Marz faltered.

“They are Griffon Griffon Neva Hiver Ostro,” said Loralayne. “He’d forget his own brain if it weren’t small enough to fit in his pocket.”

The concierge nodded and consulted the plinth’s glowing screen.

“Ah, yes. Your party has already arrived.” The concierge activated a small purple griffon on the podium’s perch. “Follow the griffon. It will show you to a lift that will deliver you to your table.”

“Hey, that looks like one of Rubric’s designs!” Marz remarked. The griffon spread its wings with a whispery crackle and launched into the air. “Or maybe not.” The two followed the nimble creature out of the canyon and into a curving tunnel shaped to resemble the inside of a giant spine.

“The blade maven, that Brand character, is sure to be with Flayer,” Marz said. “How are we to handle both of them?”

“They won’t be together,” Loralayne said confidently. “*Someone* has to guard Paulron, right?”

“Oh yeah,” said Marz.

The griffon alighted on the guard rail of a small three person lift. Nearby, in a large circular holding pen, gambolas bumped together like giant hubcap-shaped boats clustered in a dock. As they watched, a gambola descended from over the lip of the pen, landing near an exit platform. A party of young businesspeople slid out of the circle of seats that rimmed the table and headed back down the corridor Marz and Loralayne had just come from.

“Please step onto the lift,” the griffon instructed. “Then deactivate me and place my collar on the spindle. The lift will deliver you to your table.”

They stepped onto the lift, little more than a circular platform enclosed in by a metal rail. Marz turned off the griffon and slipped the collar onto a spindle. The platform hummed beneath their feet as the lift pulled itself up into a focused aether corridor.

Loralayne gasped as they cleared the edge of the holding pen wall. A netherworld of velvet shadows and purple otherlight filled the hollow core of the Penumbra. Gambolas hovered and spun under the

great dome, resembling one hundred glowing afir petals adrift in the night sky. Buckets of moonlight splashed up from the interior of each gambola, illuminating the faces which rode inside, laughing, talking and drinking. A palpable darkness permeated the air, as though it were responsible for keeping the gambolas aloft. Near any extreme edge it was impossible to see the far side of the club. Tiers of balconies curved away into the darkness, leading to private rooms of a more grounded nature. The tables swirled lazily in orbit around a small gutted moon, raised up on a massive hydraulic base. A stage protruded from the moon's interior upon which a lyre and crystalbelt trio twinkled away while an ebony-skinned beauty crooned into an aethric boomcord, stroking the very fabric of the building with her voice. Above it all, splayed impossibly across the dome of the roof, writhed a cold white sun.

As the lift rose, Marz and Loralayne continued to gape all around them. The lift paused several times, either to slide into another aether corridor or to allow other passing lifts and gambolas to pass. They realized with trepidation that the lift was bearing them towards the roof and the floor had vanished into the misty half-light below. Remembering the task at hand, they pulled their attention back to the gambola their platform floated towards. Marz practiced reaching into his vest and whipping out the pistol. Loralayne stretched and cracked her knuckles.

The lift came to a stop just below the gambola, aligning itself. Then it rose slowly to dock with it. As they cleared the edge of the gambola, Flayer's face, lurid from the table's light, came into view.

"You!" he hissed.

Loralayne slid onto the cushioned seating ring, followed by Marz. Marz flashed the gun for Flayer's benefit and then slipped it under the round table, clearly pointing in the direction of Flayer's crotch.

"No need to get up, we're all old friends here," Marz said with a wink.

"You whelps have just guaranteed Paulron Spendrel's demise," Flayer said, eyeing Marz carefully. A brass walking stick leaned against the gambola's control panel beside him.

"Where is he?" Loralayne asked. "You haven't harmed him, have you?"

"Mr. Spendrel's health and whereabouts are conditions completely under my control. A fact you should keep in mind while you decide how to extricate yourselves from this dilemma."

"May I remind you that *you're* the one facing swift ventilation here," said Marz. "*You've* been in a dilemma since the moment you brassed off in the Unicorn, scoping for Rubric. What is your agenda with him, anyway?"

"Purely business," Flayer grinned. "If you lean in closely, I'll tell you all about it."

"Marz, I think you should take out one of his kneecaps just for insulting our intelligence," said Loralayne.

"If I were you," said Flayer, "I'd be more concerned about the balbooga behind you."

"Like the lady said..." began Marz, tightening his grip on the pistol.

"May I have your drink orders?" asked the balbooga behind him. Marz and Loralayne turned in unison to see a 'crafted, life-size balbooga hovering nearby on a lift.

Marz felt the pistol lurch out of his grip and then the seat dropped away from him as tentacles shot out of Flayer's coat and wrapped around his throat. Flayer dangled him over the gambola's edge, over ten stories of mostly empty space. Marz sputtered and strained, trying uselessly to pry the tendrils away.

"You let him go!" Loralayne demanded, standing up on the seat.

"Are you sure about that?" Flayer grinned.

"You know what I mean! Oh never mind, I'm bored with talking!" To Flayer's amazement, Loralayne's forearms and fists elongated into brutish, heavy appendages many times their original slender size.

"Amazing! You're too young to be a bodycrafter!"

"Then I guess I'm too young to kick your ass."

Her titanic uppercut sent Flayer spinning. His tentacles unwound and Marz dropped from view. Loralayne flung herself to the gambola's edge, throwing her long hair forward. She sent tendrils of her own, 'crafted extensions of her blue locks, in a grasping net to catch Marz. She helped pull him back into the gambola. When they turned around, Flayer was pointing the Merkstave at them. His walking

stick had vanished.

“With this device I can twist the aetheric mesh of ‘craftlings to any form I choose,” Flayer explained. “Just imagine what it might do to the lovely skin of a bodycrafter.”

*** 13 ***

Rubric flagged down a cab at Ivory’s request. When she told the driver to take them to the Penumbra, Rubric’s eyes went wide.

“You can’t be serious!” Ivory’s look reminded him that he may as well say ice can’t be cold. “Sun Oyo *owns* the Penumbra! It’s his headquarters! He’s been after me for weeks! If I show up there, I’ll be *killed*. Or worse!”

“Do you not trust my ability to protect you?” Ivory asked.

“Actually, come to think of it, no!” Rubric said, looking out the cab window. “All I have from you is a lot of posturing and mysterious sayings. I don’t even know why I’m coming along with you!”

“Don’t you?” she said, with a slight, smug smile. Ivory reclined on the curved back bench of the cab. It struck Rubric how she seemed to fit in comfortably no matter where she was, even though she stood out as the most extraordinary-looking person he’d ever seen. No one’s skin was that white, like polished bone. Her tattoos continued to itch at his mind. He could swear he saw them moving again out of the corner of his eye, but they always reverted to stillness when he looked directly at her. Although he could never be certain the patterns he saw remained the same each time.

He sat in sulking silence, fidgeting and never comfortable. It bothered Flyste so much that the griffon sprang out of his lap and settled easily in Ivory’s. She stroked his wings absentmindedly, her thoughts several blocks ahead of the cab. Rubric, betrayed, decided to look out the window for the rest of the ride. As the cab pulled up before the hulking dome of the Penumbra, Rubric reluctantly handed over his fenn key. He could almost hear the slurping sound his bank account made. Soon it would return to its familiar wheezing and gasping. And then the death rattle.

They got out of the cab and walked past the salamander guards into the club. Rubric pulled his jacket collar up and hunkered down, trying to remain inconspicuous. *Good luck with that, Rube*, he told himself. *With Ivory at your side, you may as well have come in here wearing nothing but a flaming ferret on your head.* He’d spent weeks avoiding Sun and his cronies and, with Tyrix’s secret assistance, had done a fair job of it. Now he found himself strolling in to the very den of his most ruthless creditor. Rubric could not help but feel swallowed by the semi-dark of the canyon lobby, a great stone mouth before he descended into the belly of a monster.

Ivory paused in the center of the lobby as she apparently consulted with her ghosts once more. They confirmed that Brand was indeed inside the building. Rubric could only shrug and ask the concierge for a table.

“Do you and your, ah, friend have a reservation?” the twig-like man wheedled. He looked Ivory up and down with naked distaste.

“No,” said Rubric. “But can you put us on the waiting list?”

“Of course,” the man said. “What is the name?”

“Ru... ahem...Paulron Spendrel,” Rubric said, catching himself. No need to send out a flare right under Sun’s nose.

“Please have a seat, Mr. Spendrel. I’ll notify you when your table is ready.” The concierge gestured to the cushiony mushroom caps embedded in the canyon walls. He settled down on the spongy material and Ivory leaned against the wall.

“I don’t see why we should wait for a table,” she said. “We’re not here for refreshments.”

“Getting a gambola will be the easiest way to seek out Brand,” Rubric explained. *And the easiest way to keep out of sight if Sun’s here.* “So what is your deal with this Brand guy anyway? Why is he your enemy?”

“‘Enemy’ is too noble a term for Brand,” Ivory said, voice so low that Rubric leaned to hear. “He is a walking blight. I slew him. Why did the Patterns not show me that he still drew breath?”

“Yeah, but, why did you kill him? And what are these Patterns you keep going on about?” It took a prolonged silence to let Rubric know he had been talking to himself. Ivory stared into whatever mental landscape she inhabited, questing for her own answers.

Some time later the concierge called for Rubric, or rather “Paulron Spendrel.” The concierge activated a guide griffon to take them to their gambola. When the creature launched into the air, Rubric did his best to avoid Flyste’s pointed stare from his post on Rubric’s shoulder.

“Anyone can make a flying griffon,” Rubric scoffed as they wended their way down the corridor. “They can be mass produced at any Dream Bank. I’m an artist, you know.”

“You’ve chosen the reality you’re most comfortable with, one where there are no consequences if you fail.” Ivory didn’t break stride, didn’t pause to consider.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

She pointed to Flyste, clinging to Rubric’s shoulder. “You’ve created a creature with wings, yet it cannot fly. Are you afraid of how high it might go? What it might see?”

“It’s artistic expression! There’s a statement to make here!” He hadn’t had a chance to tell her the Answer to the Question everyone always asked about Flyste’s seeming impairment. Ivory was the one person who didn’t seem the least bit interested in his artistic motivations.

“Is that what you want? For people to praise your cleverness? You wish to indulge your crippled spirit and pass it off as art?”

“That was... harsh...” Rubric stopped walking. Ivory stopped a short distance away, turning back to him.

“The Patterns are as jagged knives for those who work against them.”

“That’s right! You just go ahead and retreat behind your opaque aphorisms instead of saying anything useful!” Who was this stranger, this blade maven Outlander, to pass judgment on him? She had barely known him for a few hours and yet she saw fit to advise him on his true calling in life? He found himself wishing to trade Ivory for Loralayne’s broody company. At least Loralayne only informed him of everything he did wrong.

Ivory, apparently finished with her diatribe, resumed walking. After a moment Rubric followed her to the gambola holding pen. Their guide griffon had alighted on one of the hovering tables and they waited for it to hover over to the boarding area. Flyste squawked as the guide flew back down the corridor and out of sight.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” said Rubric, trying to calm the creature as he and Ivory sat down. He found himself seated before the gambola’s control panel.

“Take us up,” Ivory said.

But of course, my ice queen, Rubric thought ruefully. *I exist only to serve.* He adjusted the levers, sending the gambola up into the air. He could feel motors hum and whine below the seat as the guide fins pulled the gambola into the center of the aether corridor. Rubric’s stomach filled with a familiar unease. It wasn’t so much a fear of heights, but more of a distrust of the sketchy dynamics of focused aether corridors. Rubric thought of it as being held aloft by a strong opinion.

As they cleared the lip of the pen, Ivory stood up on the seat, one foot on the gambola’s edge, as though peering out over the prow of a ship. Rubric slumped as far down into his seat as he could, trying to become one with the cushions.

By my blades, if it isn’t Ivory Yxtempora! Brand gazed across the Penumbra’s expanse from one of its many balconies. Bored with lingering in the van with an unconscious dreamcrafter, the blade maven had ventured into the club through a service entrance to find what trouble might be stirring in such an intoxicatingly dramatic venue. And Brand was not disappointed. Ivory rose through the air, a wintry harpy of the ghost world, the very sight of her charging Brand’s blood as no melee ever could. *She’s come upon me at last. Ah well, I could only spin and tumble so long before the likes of her caught sight of my nimble shadow. I’d best find Flayer and alert him of the coming storm.*

Brand hoisted himself over the balcony rail, landing easily atop the table of a passing gambola, leaving every glass upon it intact. A horrorstruck couple looked up into his smiling, tattooed face.

"Would you be so kind as to direct your gambola in a gentle upward and westerly direction?" Brand asked. "You'll have an excellent view from there. A fracas is about to ensue, you see." The woman set the gambola into motion as her husband looked on helplessly. Brand nodded in thanks. If he knew Flayer, the dreamcrafter would have chosen a position as far above the crowd as possible. Sure enough, his associate's angular form came into view along with those of two students Brand recognized from earlier that day.

"Now whose plan is the most bungled?" Brand called as his gambola drifted closer to Flayer's.

"You idiot! I left you to guard Spendrel! Can't you follow even the simplest instructions?" His eyes would not waver from Marz and Loralayne, whom he held in the Merkstave's sights. The balbooga remained hovering idly nearby, occasionally inquiring about drinks.

"We've got more interesting problems heading our way," said Brand, leaping from the table to land near Flayer. The other gambola descended in a rapid panic once the blade maven had disembarked. Brand nodded curtly to Marz and Loralayne. "Held at bay by children! You must be drying up, dear Flayer."

"I would advise caution," said Flayer. "She's a bodycrafter."

Brand looked upon Loralayne with great interest. She smiled slyly at the blade maven, her skin suddenly covered with a perfect rendition of his own dragolisk tattoo. He grinned, smitten despite himself.

"Your friend has been quite rude to us," Loralayne said. "Making threats and bandying about his metal stick. We'd just like Paulron back."

"It *is* an ugly predicament, especially when you have to look upon Flayer in such harsh lighting," Brand agreed. "But we're professionals who are making a bold attempt to uphold our end of a business obligation. It's not at all personal."

"You killed Professor Mays," Marz thought to say, feeling a bit left out of the conversation.

"Yes, that I did," Brand admitted. "My only regret is that I had not slain him sooner, thus sparing your young ears from his ponderous philosophies."

"Enough of your bantering!" Flayer yelled. "Brand, why are you here?"

"Ah yes, returning to my original point. Ivory Yxtempora is here as we speak. Only my generous company could possibly lure her to Revery. This adds some garlic to the stew, I'm afraid. To be blunt: we need to go."

"And what of Dahns?" Flayer asked.

"Oh, I'm sure our new friends here will be overjoyed to take us to him!" Brand put a heavy arm around Loralayne's shoulders, drawing her into a crushing squeeze. She huffed indignantly, at the same time sending a bundle of hair around Brand's back to activate one of his wristblades while another lock yanked his arm in Flayer's direction. The erratic swing caught the flanged end of the Merkstave, pointing it upwards as Flayer reflexively pulled the trigger. A slash of white-purple light slammed into the balbooga, sending crackling strands of energy across its body. Loralayne and Marz threw themselves to either side of the gambola, where they watched in frozen wonder at the balbooga's transformation. Its skin peeled away into the air as ashes in the shimmering heat of a bonfire as its small, apelike form warped and expanded into something far more brutish. A second set of arms, burly as its original two had become, burst from the balbooga's sides. The creature arched its back and beat its broad chest, sending out a primal yell into the Penumbra.

"One fracas, coming right up," said Brand just before the balbooga leapt into their gambola, smacking him and Loralayne into empty space.

The drone cadre stomped into the lobby as a single armored mass, their bootsteps hammering through the canyon. The concierge withered behind the plinth as they approached.

“The Sword of the Law has descended on the Penumbra,” said the lead drone brother, his arms clattering over his breastplate in ritual greeting. “We are to apprehend a dreamcrafter accompanied by a blade maven, tattoos covering their entire body.”

“They arrived just a short time ago,” said the concierge, recalling the broody young man and his stark, moon-white companion. He directed them to the gambola pen at the end of the twisting corridor.

“Can we go now?” Rubric asked, idly fidgeting with the gambola’s controls. He and Ivory had already made several circuits around the moon stage and found no sign of her quarry. Other patrons tended to stop drinking and silence their conversations as they drifted by. Rubric just waved and shrugged. Flyste had taken a position next to Ivory, spreading his ornamental wings regally.

“He is here,” Ivory said, eyes sliding over every face, pulling aside every shadow.

Two gambolas zoomed up side by side, directly in their path. Two drones rode in one and three in the other. All had their blade rifles trained on Ivory and Rubric.

“The Sword of the Law has come for Flayer!” bellowed the lead drone. “Take up the banners of peace and wisdom and surrender yourselves to the care of the Hive!”

“The Entropic Patterns heed no such laws,” Ivory scoffed defiantly.

“Um, Ivory... I think we’d better do as they say,” said Rubric. He stood to his feet, arms extended. “There’s been a mistake! I’m not Flayer! Flayer’s got these long ‘crafted tentacles... or so I’ve heard.”

Screams and shattered glass exploded from a nearby gambola as two bodies landed on its table. Brand groaned, pulling himself to his feet, wiping broken glass out of the cuts on his arm. Loralayne rolled over into the lap of an astonished young man. She smiled dazedly at him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Boys are good for some things, on occasion,” she reflected as she stood up. Her hair weaved and bobbed, untended by Loralayne’s concentration, leaving it in an uncontrolled panic. Long blue tentacles of light clutched at the gambola’s edge, the remaining glassware and even the patrons inside. Blinking with effort, she came to the realization that she had not been imagining the drone cadre floating across from her, rifles full of deadly intent.

The two groups of drones muttered amongst themselves, occasionally changing their target from Rubric and Ivory to Loralayne and Brand. “Is Flayer a man or a woman?” “She’s got tentacles.” “What about the blade maven?” “Didn’t Baker specify?” “The ‘Special Investigator’ strikes again...”

“Loralayne?!” Rubric called. “By the Reaches! What are you doing here? Are you okay?” *This can’t be real*, he thought. He had left Loralayne back at the Lost Unicorn, safe and pouty. A feeling like molten brass surged through him, a fear and an anger, to see her so bruised and disheveled and not safe at all.

“We’re here to rescue Paulron from this bastard,” she said, gesturing at Brand. “Our plan has been coming along beautifully. Though now that you’re here, I suppose something will go dreadfully wrong. You’ve found your own blade maven and a whole drone cadre, I see. What are *you* staring at?” This last she said to Ivory whose body had tensed, its every nerve, its every hair, her entire being focused on Brand.

“Edgebringer!” cried Ivory. “The ghosts whisper that you are lost. Your path ended at the Skerrolsley. I am here to guide you back!”

Brand smiled wickedly, “Ivory, my tortured snowflower! It’s been years. Let’s have a kiss!”

Ivory pulled a staff from her back scabbard and activated a wide curving blade. Unleashing the ululating war cry of an Entropic sword maiden, the pale warrior flew from the gambola towards Brand, her blade slashing down before her. Brand caught her blow in a crackling crisscross of wristblades.

The original occupants of the table, a young man and his three sisters out celebrating his promotion, pressed themselves into the gambola's cushioned seats as far from the dueling blade mavens as possible. Loralayne clapped with delight.

Completely disregarding the proximity of innocent patrons, the drone cadre let loose with their blade rifles. A hail of heavy serrated slugs flew forth with a *zwhang*. Ivory ducked and Brand flipped back to the far edge of the gambola, avoiding the shots. The drones lowered their weapons, shaking their heads as though puzzled by what had just occurred, as though hands other than their own had pulled the triggers. With the same puzzled looks, they raised the weapons to fire again.

"Hey, watch it!" cried Rubric. These drones didn't exhibit the same common sense he had observed in other cadres. Loralayne or any of the other guests could easily catch a stray slug if the cadre's aim were untrue. Rubric yanked the controls and slung his gambola to block their line of fire. He felt the slugs thunk into its underside. Loralayne, inspired by Ivory, let out a whoop and leaped onto the seat beside him. She slid around to the opposite side of the table and considered Rubric with a pitying look.

"Well, since you're here," she said, "maybe you can help me rescue Marz from Flayer and his balbooga."

Rubric slowly awoke to the feverish atmosphere that now permeated the Penumbra, extending well beyond the sphere of his own dilemma. He saw patrons in nearby gambolas pointing towards the ceiling, speaking urgently to each other. Somewhere above them, people began screaming. Rubric looked back at Loralayne. She nodded.

They headed up.

"This really isn't the best moment to get reacquainted, dearest," said Brand, parrying her blow with one blade and swinging around behind him with the other. Ivory ducked and the blade crackled overhead. One gambola full of drones slid up, angling for a shot. One of the female patrons waved frantically, calling for help.

"Your days are done, Brand," said Ivory, dancing nimbly around the rim. "Your coffers of time have spent their last." Her blade thrust at Brand's chest. He leaned to one side, grabbing the shaft of her weapon and yanking her forward. He looked into eyes colder than even Flayer's, inches from his face.

"You may find that I am richer beyond your wildest reckoning," he smiled. Brand threw Ivory down onto the table, covering her with his muscular form, as another volley of blades sang past. His breath warmed her ear as he spoke. "The Hive has seen your skin and even now their minds become addled. Let us resume this dance later." He sprang off of her, ran along the rim of the gambola and leapt onto a table between two startled drone brothers. With another leap, Brand caught the edge of a balcony, twirled himself over the railing and was gone.

"Coward!" Ivory shrieked, standing up, still feeling the warmth of his body pressed down on hers.

"Present your weapon and remain still as stone!" one of the drones shouted. "We are collecting the innocents!" Ivory sensed the other gambola behind her, feeling the prickle of weapons trained on her back. She extended her arms, cradling her blade staff in submission. The tattoos on her arms coiled in inky agitation as the Patterns spoke their displeasure. The gambola with the two drones bumped into hers and the relieved patrons scrambled quickly over to safety. As the last one left, Ivory kicked a lever and sent the gambola humming up into the chaotic storm that was the Penumbra.

They barely caught Marz in time. Rubric and Loralayne found him dangling from the underside of a gambola, his fingers slowly slipping from a guide fin. Rubric stood up, the quiet murmur of dreamspeech drowned in the mélange of screams and shattering glassware. Hundreds of points of light coalesced into a flock of glowmoths drifting languidly beneath Marz. As he dropped, the moths patterned themselves into an outstretched hand, catching the boy in the grasp of bobbing light. They

deposited him beside Loralayne, a bit wobbly and surprised. The glowmoths blinked out, returning to the aether.

“Ah, I see you finally caught up with us,” said Marz, attempting to regain a measure of composure.

“Where’s Flayer?” asked Loralayne.

“He slithered away the first chance he got. Left me to deal with the balbooga.”

“Balbooga?” said Rubric. “I would think that even you could handle a little monkey, Marz.”

The gambola shuddered as the balbooga crashed down onto the table, beating its chest with the thunder of storm clouds. Flyste leaped at the beast’s face, latching on to its jowls and pecking its eyes. The balbooga grimaced in annoyance. The tiny griffon vanished inside the monster’s fist just before it flung him out of the gambola, a falling green-gold star. The protective casing of a collar would not prevent the shattering of a ‘craftling matrix from such a height. Flyste would be destroyed if he hit the ground.

Without a thought, Rubric dove out after his creation. The fate of death reached out to honor his folly, but a stronger, swifter fate snatched Rubric away. He and Flyste smacked into the seats of a rapidly rising gambola.

“Nice catch,” said Rubric.

“It was no design of mine,” said Ivory. “The Patterns favor you this day. But it is unwise to test them. Their grace is swiftly spent.”

Rubric leaned out over the edge and saw Marz and Loralayne dropping quickly out of view, the glowing purple form of the balbooga towering over them.

“Take us back down!” Rubric demanded. “We have to help them!”

“No,” said Ivory. “We must return to the path for now Brand has joined it. The Patterns dictate this.” Rubric saw that her tattoos did indeed move before his eyes. Where it had earlier fascinated him, the sight now sparked his anger.

“You and your feshing Patterns can suck my spine for all I care!” Rubric advanced on Ivory, thinking he had a slim chance of taking the controls from her. All about them other gambolas fell from the artificial night, their occupants desperate refugees from a hostile world. One gambola, urged beyond its safety protocols, skimmed into their aether corridor, plowing down into the side of their own. Rubric and Ivory fell against the cushioned seats as the hovering platform started to tip into a steep angle. Metal squealed as the reckless gambola scraped past. Rubric and Ivory found themselves scrambling to grab the edge of the table as their gambola flipped over completely. Flyste shrieked, wrapping himself around Rubric’s thigh. Above them, the gambola’s electric engines whirled wildly, trying to right itself, sending a grating shudder throughout its frame. Rubric could feel the vibrations slowly pulling the table out of his grip. He could not bear to look down and instead found his gaze locked on Ivory’s face where her tattoo spilled angrily across cheeks and forehead.

“Do you trust me?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Rubric, hoping it was true.

“Fool,” she replied. Rubric heard no judgment in her tone, merely a statement of fact, which made it more cutting. “On my command, let go.” She studied a point in space somewhere behind and below him. Rubric’s knuckles ached and strained on the table’s edge.

“Now!” cried Ivory and dropped. Rubric didn’t know if he let go willingly or if his fingers just gave out at that exact moment. In either case, he found himself plummeting once more, landing hard on the table of yet another passing gambola. Groaning, feeling the shock of every bone in his body sounding off, Rubric rolled from the table, his head landing in the crotch of a pair of very white, perfectly pressed pants.

“Fesh,” he coughed, sending a light red spray across the pants. *I bit my tongue.* He slowly raised his head to find a brilliantly white suit jacket connected to the pants. A bleached afir blossomed from a lapel. Rubric’s gaze kept drifting up. Attached to the top of the jacket was Sun Oyo’s face, his almond-shaped eyes peeled wide by outrage.

“Hey, Sun,” smiled Rubric dazedly, sending puffs of blood across the white jacket. “How’s business?” He pulled himself up and away from Sun, looking around the gambola. Apparently Sun

was drinking alone today. Ivory slowly stood, rubbing her elbow.

“See what you have done to my most excellent suit!” Sun exclaimed, pointing out the red splotches. “You behave as a miserable ill-treated dog that drags all manner of garbage into its master’s home. You have brought this misfortune! I shall take note of every chipped glass, every dent, every ruined moment, and add it to your pregnant debt, Mr. Dahns! Your debt will now birth triplets!”

Rubric couldn’t remember seeing Sun so small and wrinkled. Why had he feared this tiny man hunched before him, wailing like a spoiled brat? Let him triple the debt; it had already grown beyond the realm of numbers Rubric recognized. A glass fell from the artificial night and shattered on the edge of the gambola, sending Sun into another rant. The sounds around Rubric lost their clarity as an inexorable pull once again took hold of his mind. Across a gulf, standing at the edge of a balcony, hooded insect eyes beckoned. The tattered figure studied Rubric, unconcerned by the disaster around it. Somehow Rubric could hear words drifting from the figure’s mask, a susurrus of windspit leaves, a language flowing beneath other languages. Just as he began to grasp familiar syllables, the words ceased and the tattered figure vanished as the hulking form of the balbooga blotted it out. The creature hunched menacingly over Marz and Loralayne. Sun’s jabbering once again came into focus, something about putting a tax on Rubric’s urine.

“Could we talk about this another time?” Rubric asked. “I need to help my friends.”

Rubric thought about taking over the gambola’s controls, despite whatever objections Sun or Ivory might have. He thought about ramming into the balbooga and knocking it off. He thought about maybe grabbing one of Ivory’s weapons and attacking the creature. Then he heard Loralayne scream as the beast raised up a clawed fist and Rubric did not remember thinking about anything until some time later.

Rubric leapt into empty space, running towards the purple beast, his every step bourn up by flowers that suddenly bloomed beneath them. He raced up a staircase of petals never seen in this or any other world. Vaulting over the gambola’s edge, Rubric threw himself between Loralayne and the balbooga.

“Rubric, watch out!” Marz cried, though his voice came to Rubric from across a wide plain.

A claw descended towards him with a languid grace. Rubric’s voice rumbled up from a dark indigo cavern, curling his tongue in guttural dreamspeech not his own. The balbooga streamed backwards into the air as a cloud of unwinding vines and twisting blossoms, the electric flora of an aetheric jungle. They fell lazily into the half-darkness, fading into nothing.

“Are you two okay?” Rubric asked, fighting his way through a drunken grogginess thick as an ocean. His head buzzed with crackling light and shredding static. It felt as though acid burned up and down his spine in place of idj.

“Us?! What about you?” Marz said. He and Loralayne looked upon Rubric with fear, as one might behave near a feral beast discovered in the bathroom.

“What did you just do?” asked Loralayne, pushing Rubric back so she could look into his face.

“I...I just wanted it to go away,” he said. The answer sounded strange and inadequate even to him, but he found no other explanation inside himself.

“Your friends are safe. We go now for Brand.”

Rubric turned to see Ivory hovering nearby, Flyste perched on her shoulder.

“Well, we’d better hurry then,” said Marz, stepping towards Ivory’s gambola.

“No!” said Rubric. “You two are going straight home!”

“But what about Paulron?” Marz asked.

“Brand will lead us to him. I’ll handle it from there.”

“Will you now?” Loralayne said, but Rubric’s fierce look silenced whatever caustic words she had cooked up.

“Go home,” Rubric said finally, stepped over into the other gambola. Flyste sprang onto his shoulder. He kept a warning glare on Loralayne as the gambola hummed down out of sight. Marz fiddled with some broken glass on the table. Loralayne sulked quietly, looking at nothing. Marz started to lean over the edge to have a look.

“Give them a few minutes,” said Loralayne and Marz knew then they weren’t going home any time

soon.

*** 14 ***

Paulron felt the van door open and shut once more, the engine firing up. Someone had left earlier and now returned. He resumed his slackened, inert posture against the wall of the cargo cab, his arms grepp-bound, his head encased in the dark dissonance of a thrummer. Once he had regained consciousness, Paulron had wasted no time in dealing with his situation. What would have been a universe of mind-shattering noise for any other dreamcrafter was to Paulron a field of patterns and waves to be studied, adapted to and shaped. Paulron knew many things his captors did not, chief of which was why his idj reservoir was already brimming up his spine so soon after torpor. Unheard by the driver, Paulron began to hum, moving up and down a scale until his notes blurred into the thrummer like the merging of two rivers. His mnemantra, now nasal and prolonged, flowed out of the bell and into the aether. Soon a coattail probed along the edge of the grepp's sinewy arms.

Having given Rubric and Ivory a good head start, Marz and Loralayne exited the slowly passing storm of the Penumbra only to run into Taran Baker accompanied by Cadre Hookas spread out across the entrance.

"Hey, grab those two!" Taran cried. Borlis put his armored hands out and their shoulders vanished under his grip, along with their ability to move.

"Not so buxom now, blue," observed Taran, standing before Loralayne. She tried pulling away from Borlis' grip, but she may as well have been stuck inside a wall.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"My car, for starters."

"It's over there." She nodded her head towards the sedan, halfway up on the sidewalk. A van pulled around the corner and stopped, waiting for the traffic wisp to change. The van looked very familiar to Loralayne.

"And will I find my piece still inside?"

"Piece of what?" Marz asked.

"My gun," Taran clarified. "It's not a toy, you know."

"That you'll have to see Flayer about," Marz said. "He's the one that run off with it."

Loralayne watched the van turn and begin to drive past them, right behind Taran and the drone cadre. *Throgmoor Series Thregga Hefty.*

"Flayer again, huh?" said Taran, eyeing them closely. "They both look kind of pale to me, Borlis. The freshly sired can take direct sunlight for at least a week, so I better check their necks just to be sure."

Just before the van passed from view, Loralayne saw a single red coattail slide up against a window in the van's rear cab. *Paulron!*

"Excuse me, Taran?" Borlis asked, turning to give a puzzled look at the Special Investigator.

"Vamps, my friend. Step back a moment. This will only take a second."

Borlis shrugged and pulled his gauntleted hands away so Taran could step in and get a closer look at Loralayne's neck. He never got the chance as he was suddenly faced with a screaming threggacat erupting from a collar Loralayne had tossed onto the sidewalk. The drones swiftly activated their blade weapons and moved to encircle the beast. Taran leapt behind Borlis, pulling out a blade pistol. Loralayne bolted down the street in time to see the van turning north at an intersection a few blocks away.

"We've got to catch that van! Paulron's inside! Marz?" He wasn't beside her. Her blue hair started to twist and fret. Suddenly someone grabbed her by the hair and swung her up off her feet. She landed on the back of an osper, her scalp screaming. Marz let go of her hair and grabbed onto the thick feathers around the bird's neck. The osper loped down the sidewalk, sending people leaping to either side.

"I didn't know you could ride one of these things," Loralayne yelled into Marz' ear as she scooted into a more comfortable spot on the saddle.

"I can't," Marz said over his shoulder. "I'm just hoping it's smarter than I am."

*** 15 ***

Rubric found himself paying for two one-way passes at a wyvern terminal a few blocks from the Penumbra. Based on more mysterious whisperings, Ivory informed him they had just missed Brand. They had to board the next wyvern to have any hope of catching up with him. More of her tattoos had begun to quiver and melt.

"I have need of your jacket," she said. Rubric slipped it off and handed it to her. Though too large, when she put it on it seemed to meld into her ensemble of straps and armor, as though she had designed the outfit herself. He could see the tips of her tattoos creeping out around the collar and sleeves, but the jacket successfully concealed the most unruly of them.

"We have strayed too far from the Patterns. This is Krol-Gungdoth's domain," she intoned.

"What are you talking about? We're on Shadowmouth Street!"

They pushed through the turnstiles with the rest of the crowd.

"His servants are drawn to such moments. We will have to fight to regain the path."

Rubric decided not to engage in another wandering conversation with her. He walked to the platform to wait as the tarnished tubular hull of a wyvern slid to a halt. Its doors slid open to release passengers and he and Ivory pushed in with the other departees. Finding the wide benches already full of passengers, Rubric grabbed hold of the nearest handle dangling overhead, oily with sweat. Flyste settled on the back of a nearby bench and started attacking a woman's fearsome hairdo. Rubric pretended not to notice. Ivory leaned against a pole, oblivious of the other boarding passengers who now had to squeeze around the extra five feet of personal space that all blade mavens seemed to command.

"No 'craftlings allowed in transit," a golem croaked from an overhead nook. "Please deactivate all 'craftlings until you have disembarked." Several people looked pointedly at Flyste and then to Rubric. The griffon had bits of red hair stuck in his beak.

"Sorry, pal," he said, looping fingers around Flyste's collar and squeezing. Flyste fragmented into an elaborate vortex of triangles, a colorful exit feature Rubric had customized. This elicited some impressed mutters from onlookers, giving Rubric a warm smirky feeling. The woman with the tussled hair glowered at him, trying to flay his skin using only her eyes. He put Flyste's collar into his pocket.

A follower of the Aether Path happily jostled his way to the front of the wyvern, in anticipation of that future where he would walk the world in an immaterial state. As he bumped painfully into Rubric's shoulder he stopped, turning a hooded head towards the dreamcrafter. If what Rubric had heard of these cultists were true, the man stood nude under the gossamer robes. The more devout members of the Aether Path enjoyed very brief naked strolls down Revery's streets before having to flee the outcry of a public unready for a life so free of fashion.

"Even the tiniest grain of sand is an unbearable weight if held long enough," said the calm grey eyes

within the hood's slits. "Empty your hands, dreamcrafter." Rubric was already rolling his eyes when the cultists' last word caught him. *How would he know?* The doors clunked behind the cultist and the other exiting passengers and then the wyvern launched out of the dock into the focused aether corridor. Rubric needed both hands to keep his balance. Ivory remained leaning casually against the brass pole, as though she had struck a deal with the forces of motion. She crossed her arms and kept her chin tucked down, letting her stringy hair fall over her face.

Sunlight winked in and out of the windows as the wyvern's wings stroked through the air. Rubric squinted out at a cityscape dominated by the pommels of the Hivesteads, reaching out to brush the curve of the sky. Taran had told him that on a clear day one could see as far as Slinn from the upper levels of Hive Prime. Rubric rarely ventured out of the city and certainly not so far east. He tried to imagine Slinn, an entire country afloat in the sky, jutting out of the face of the Everwall like rocks in a waterfall. He knew Sun Oyo had come from Slinn and had designed the floating interior of the Penumbra as homage to his airy culture.

Ten minutes into the journey Rubric noticed that Ivory was having a conversation with a man the size of a drone brother. Or rather words were coming out of his mouth while Ivory stared straight ahead, apparently unaware of his presence.

"Let's see your flash blade, honeydrop," he grated. "I know you gots one. Never gaped a beauty like you before. Go on, show me your blade an' I'll show you mine. 'Course we'd have to go somewhere...*exclusive* as it's too big to brandish here. Isn't that right?" He stroked the handle of the blade strapped over his back. The sword was almost as tall as Rubric. Ivory pulled herself further inside Rubric's jacket, looking fixedly at the ground.

"Oh, so it's like that, eh?" the man grinned a spray of jagged teeth. "Good. Don't care much for the chatty ones."

"Excuse me, Ivory," Rubric said, peeking around the man's arm. "Have you received any new information regarding our destination?" Ivory raised an eyebrow imploringly, shaking her head ever so slightly. Rubric took this as an answer to his question. The tattoos on her face made his head feel blurry.

"Mind your own business, little man," said the warrior, turning on Rubric. "I'm having a pleasant conversation with the lovely lady."

"I commend your efforts at communication, but you might want to start out with something more on your level, such as this pole here." Rubric blinked, realizing what he had just said. The quip had flown from his mouth so easily and thoughtlessly, it did not seem to have come from him. "Oh wait, can I take that back?"

Rubric found himself at a new vantage point near the curved ceiling of the wyvern, trying to pry sausage-like fingers from his throat. Nearby passengers ducked under Rubric's wildly kicking legs to find refuge in the rear. A toxic yellow glaze coated the brute's eyes and his lips pulled back in a snarl.

"Leave him be or you *will* see my blade, coming through your chest." The tip of Ivory's clawshield pressed into the warrior's back. Rubric tried using his eyebrows to warn Ivory of the man's plotting sneer. Rubric fell to the floor, sucking in air. In a single motion the warrior squeezed his right gauntlet, spun around and smacked Ivory to the floor with a dusk-red dreamcrafted hammerfist. The pale blade maven spat blood, growling.

As the brute raised his heavy fist for another blow a belt of croaking gustoads circled his head and lashed themselves to his face with thorny flicking tongues. Passengers on either side shrieked and thronged away as the warrior flailed about in a blind rage, clawing at the creatures covering his eyes. Rubric watched in awe as the man hammered against his own head to shatter the 'craftlings. Taking advantage of the distraction, Ivory coiled and sprang at the man's gut, plowing him to the ground with a rattling thud. She flipped away, hooking around a support pole and whipping herself back next to Rubric, pulling him off the floor.

The warrior got to his feet, bellowing, the last of Rubric's 'craftlings hanging from his chin in glowing tatters. The hammerfist faded as he reached back to unlock his sword. A series of whirs and clacks ran down the blade as its mechanical sheath let go. The sword curved tightly around his body

in a complex gesture, ending up pointing at Rubric and Ivory, impossibly long. The brute twisted the grip and hundreds of microgearwork teeth whirled to life along the entire length of the sword.

"Are you insane?!" yelled Rubric. No warrior, no matter how skilled, would be able to effectively wield such a weapon in the close quarters of a wyvern.

"Yes, he is," breathed Ivory. "He's a berserker, an agent of Krol-Gundoth. Did you fail to notice the tattoo? You should not have provoked him while we are off the path."

"Berserker?! Provoked?!" Rubric sputtered. *By the Reaches, she's brought all of Wyldehame with her.*

A craggy ruined grin raked across the brute's face as he dropped his weapon to the floor. Stumpy legs shone out of the handle and a glob of dreamcrafted flesh formed around them. Rubric stared at a trollish head with four tiny legs and a six foot blade for a nose. With a *clack* and a *chang*, a longsword leapt off the massive blade into the berserker's waiting hand.

The sword-nosed thing plunged the blade through the rubbery material joining the front and back of the wyvern. It crawled up the wall to the roof, leaving a gash of open sky behind it.

"What the fesh is that?" Rubric yelled over the onrush of air and screaming passengers.

"A battle brain," said Ivory, switching off her clawshield, exchanging it for the short staff strapped on her back. The curved blue blade wove together at one end. "It's establishing a perimeter."

"In the sky?!"

Ivory leapt forward, bringing the weapon around in a tight arc. The berserker caught the shaft, pulling it and Ivory closer. He smiled and licked her blade, splitting open his fat purple tongue. Ivory pulled loose, spinning on her heel, and tore across the warrior's chest. The berserker howled, wiping at the bright red gash, yellow tears pouring down his cheeks.

Rubric made a grab for the battle brain's hind legs, but the tiny beast had latched itself to the roof like a barnacle. Four purple eyes split open on the thing's back, regarding him coldly. Rubric hammered at them, but it felt nothing and continued to chew its way across the ceiling with the massive microgearwork sword.

Ivory sprang again and met the brute's heel, the force of the blow throwing her back against a pole. She crumpled to the floor and lay still. Rubric slid to her side, pressing his fingers against her neck. *Still alive.* The berserker loomed over Rubric, a curtain of blood streaming from the open wound on his chest. He lifted his sword. Rubric grabbed Ivory's forearm and squeezed on her clawshield, spitting out dreamspeech to give it some kick. The claw expanded to five times its size, impaling the berserker on the rapidly-growing tip. The brute staggered back, trying to pull himself away. He thrashed in anger, foam spraying from his lips, and shattered the 'crafting into bits.

The battle brain was making its way down the opposite wall. The passengers in the rear screamed as their half of the wyvern clanged and listed drunkenly.

"Somebody help me here!" Rubric called to them, but they were too engrossed with fighting over the emergency dragon wing rigs stowed under the benches. A pale arm shot up the pole next to him and Ivory slowly yanked herself to her feet, eyes wild and unfocused. "He dies..."

"We've got bigger problems!" Rubric yelled. What remained of the wyvern's central joint would soon be too weak to keep it together.

"We jump," Ivory said. Rubric has no idea if she meant over to the other half or into thin air; either seemed a likely option for this woman. Rubric squinted through the wind at the shifting gap of sky in the floor and then back at the clamoring passengers. There weren't enough emergency rigs to go around and the rear cabin was full of fear-crazed passengers at each others' throats. Others were huddled quietly on the benches, waiting for it all to end. A young girl who could have passed for Loralayne met Rubric's eyes and then buried her face in her knees. He knew he didn't have enough idj left to 'craft something to save them all. *This is all my fault. I took us off "the path."*

"Now! Jump now!" Ivory almost pulled his arm off trying to get his attention. Without giving his mind a moment to balk, Rubric turned and threw himself into the air, not knowing what he would land on.

The battle brain raised its sword in a triumphant metallic howl before getting sucked into the sky.

The tail end of the wyvern fell away with a great metallic sigh, heading for the street far below. Those lucky enough to have strapped on the rigs spilled out, wings unfurling clumsily like fledglings pushed from a nest. The forward section sped onwards, its aetheric repulsor coils still intact.

Rubric didn't have to open his eyes to know that his hands now had a deathgrip on a leather boot belonging to the berserker standing at the frayed midsection. He squinted enough to see Ivory clinging to the other boot. Above them, the berserker's rage washed away, sloshing out onto the floor with the last of his blood. He made a quizzical groan and then toppled forward into the sky, dragging Rubric and Ivory with him.

Rubric barely noticed the prickling unpleasantness as he passed through the aether corridor or the subsequent rush of air all around him. The simplicity of the moment stunned him: The clouds, rimmed in sunlight, slipping by unconcerned. A sky so blue it pierced his heart. The wind in his ears so thick it formed a silence. Here in this dewdrop of time he floated with no demands, no expectations except to fall.

And then the voice.

If this fragment of time could now speak it would have such a voice, all beauty and fear encased in crystalline serenity. It came from far away, his true heart calling at last to the tired gearwork that labored inside him, the poor facsimile which had counseled him until this moment.

"Find me," she said.

He responded, resonated, surprised and yet not surprised: "I will. I want to more than anything."

Sunlight filled Rubric's head and he threw up his hands to block it out, but the light continued to grow. Glyphs of energy scorched across his inner sight as if every star now revealed its secret name to him. The vision of light elongated and snapped back into itself and Rubric fell back into the torrent of time where the wind was a thunder, the air a lash and gravity a grim law. In his peripheral vision he saw Ivory, facing down towards the oncoming city of Revery, arms outstretched as if to grab death first and give it a struggle.

"I'll find you," Rubric whispered. A shock ignited his spine as every drop of idj within caught fire. Before he blacked out, Rubric imagined a shadow break the sky above him. He did not see the creature of golden fur and feathers swoop down from the clouds to grasp the lip of the falling wyvern. He did not feel the creature scoop him from the sky along with Ivory, berries into a bucket. Bearing its burden delicately, the winged beast circled gracefully to the streets below.

*** 16 ***

The osper bounded through the city with Marz and Loralayne hanging on for dear life. Whether the creature had been responding to Marz' frantic jabbing or it just knew where to go, the osper kept a close pursuit of the cargo van. The vehicle slid out of traffic and towards an onramp.

"It's heading for Southpath!" Loralayne yelled in Marz's ear.

"I can see as well as you!" he answered, adjusting his grip on the reigns.

"Have you ever been on Southpath without a vehicle?" she asked.

"No, that would be wonked!" Marz grinned, kicking the osper's sides with enthusiasm.

"I just want to make sure you have realistic expectations!" said Loralayne.

The osper dodged around an oncoming car, leapt over an embankment, ran up the onramp and onto one of the busiest thoroughfares in Revery. A steady stream of vehicles whined past in a blur of high-speed metal and rubber. Eight lanes of traffic in both directions ran the straightaway between southwestern and southeastern Revery, following the same leg of the Aetheric Beltway far above.

The osper wisely chose to run inside the outer breakdown lane where it would only need to contend with entering traffic.

"There it is!" Loralayne's finger shot past Marz' head to point out the van shifting into the far left lane.

"Yeah, there it goes," Marz observed as he watched it go into high gear, vanishing ahead into the metallic glinting of cars. Soon it winked out of view.

“Think Taran will let us steal his car again?” Marz asked.

“It went in there!” cried Taran, gesturing frantically at the convenience store, his blade pistol waving in the air. The drones flanked the shattered front window and leapt inside one by one.

“I’ll watch the entrance,” Taran called after them. He could hear the drones moving around inside, broken glass grinding to dust under their boots. He expected the sounds of combat at any moment now. Something rubbed against his leg and Taran almost put a hole through a small blue kitten ambling by.

“Shoo,” he said, toeing it away.

Moments later, Borlis stomped out.

“Well that was a quiet takedown,” Taran said, impressed.

“It wasn’t in there,” Borlis said. The other drones slowly exited the store, looking around in mild confusion.

“What?! How could you lose a threggacat in a convenience store? Did you check the restroom?”

“There!” cried Haley Johns, the one female on the cadre. They turned around in unison to see the tiny blue cat blossom into the three-headed terror they had been pursuing from the Penumbra. It raised its heads into the air, seeming to hear a distant call. With a mighty leap it turned and raced towards Southpath.

“Well, shit,” said Taran. “Look, how was I supposed to know...”

Beldur and Haley slapped panels on their armor, ignited chemical boosters on their backs. They rocketed into the sky, dragon wings unfolding.

Taran turned to Borlis, imploringly. “Hey so...”

“Talk to the gauntlet,” said Borlis as he and Dext walked away.

“It’s ‘talk to the *hand*!’ And it’s only funny when I do it!”

Brand saw the cargo van parked outside and burst in through one of the warehouse’s small side doors to find Flayer already wiring the Merkstave into a network of amplifiers ringed by aether combustion engines. Paulron stood in a far corner, still grepp-bound. The bell of the thrummer encased his head and shoulders, its dissonance rattling the windows and corrugated metal walls.

“Ivory and her dreamcrafter friend will be here any moment!” Brand declared.

“Dreamcrafter? Who?” asked Flayer, looking up from the tangle of hoses.

“I dunno, just some guy. Those damn Entropics shame tracers when it comes to finding what they’re after.” Brand began pacing around Flayer’s contraption.

“Ha! The much-touted abilities of your Entropics are just superstitious drivel, my friend.” Flayer smiled as the Merkstave locked into place and the engines hummed to life, joining the thrummer’s song.

“Say what you like, but they’ll be here soon.” He stopped pacing and backed away from the crackling energy building up around the Merkstave’s tip.

“And we’ll be ever so prepared for them...”

“Some rescue this turned out to be,” Marz grumbled as they loped slowly along Southpath in mutual dejection. Even the osper seemed to have given up, releasing an occasional gawping sigh. The screaming traffic to their left was just a noise by now.

“I think you give up hope too easily, Marz,” Loralayne said, behind him.

“Ha! And this from the Empress of Ennui, enshrouded in a gown of broken heartstrings, surveying the tormented crags of Bleak Despair, also called the Land of Unending Wailing, also known as...ow!”

"I get the point! I'm not so terrible, am I? While you and your sarcastic sycophants are busy broadening the beer capacity of your stomachs, I am preparing for the grim realities awaiting us beyond graduation."

"Seems we've seen quite a few of those grim realities today, with graduation still years off."

"And who kept their head in the midst of it all? Who didn't flinch at the sight of a dead body, hanging in the fountain...it wasn't so bad...I didn't care..." Marz felt Loralayne tighten her grip around his waist and press her forehead into his back, shuddering. She was silent for a while. "Do they really call me 'Empress of Ennui'?"

"Only the ones who care what you...hey, what's going on back there?"

Marz yanked the osper to a halt and they turned to look back down the highway. The flow of vehicles gradually dwindled to a few cars swerving erratically in an attempt to reach the nearest exit ramp. They could see a ragged pileup of vehicles in the distance. Something blue and fast darted around the wreckage, heading their way.

"You don't think that's the..." Marz started to say as the threggacat raced past them.

"After it!" Loralayne cried, kicking the osper into a run. It pulled into the now mostly-empty lanes of the highway.

"But why?" yelled Marz, pulling at the reins as though he had some influence on what their mount did anymore.

"Don't you see? Even Gibby saw it! Rubric doesn't make threggacats! You saw what Flayer did to that balbooga back there at the club! It was Flayer who made the threggacat somehow!"

"Using one of Rubric's 'craftlings!" Marz suggested.

"That must be it! Somehow that cat is tied to his device!"

"That makes no sense at all!"

"We're riding a stolen osper down the middle of Southpath!"

"Speaking of which, I think the Hive wants it back!" Marz pointed as two drones swooped overhead, dropping two projection collars. Ahead of them, two house-sized roadblocks landed with a crash. The stones quickly unfolded into blunt, hammer-fisted golems. Marz yanked the reins, guiding the osper around the first golem's descending hands. The second one had almost reconfigured itself into a wall across the highway. Marz saw a closing gap between its head and shoulder. They flew through the gap with a whoop just as it sealed behind them.

"We're still alive!" Marz called with glee.

"Of course we are," remarked Loralayne. "We're the heroes."

*** 17 ***

A column of purple energy swirled up from the tip of the Merkstave, dissipating into aetheric clouds near the warehouse roof. The car engines huddled in a circle around the amplifier, whining away.

"And what is this spectacle meant to accomplish?" Brand asked, moving a safe distance from the column.

"Ordinarily the signature encoded in the beam would act as a beacon, drawing altered 'craftlings such as your threggacat back here. Were it still activated, of course. But instead I've interfaced the Merkstave with the amplifier, significantly increasing its warping potential."

"That wobbly sprig of metal has brought us nothing but heartache from the moment we gaped it. I don't trust it, even if it did come out of the Combine! If that ceiling and the heavens beyond are still in place come evening, I'll be pleasantly surprised."

Flayer glared. "Forget about this morning's failure. There is an entirely different principle at work here. This is proven Combine science."

“Oh really?” scoffed a voice. “I would say that Combine science has as much a guarantee as casting osper droppings to divine the weather!”

“Who said that?” Flayer hissed, glaring about him and then seeing the thrummer resting on the ground, empty.

Brand frowned and his blades hissed into view. A red coattail tapped him on the shoulder. “Would you kindly hold on to this for me?” Brand spun and caught the grepp full in the face. The creature twittered gleefully and wrapped its spindly arms tightly around the blade maven’s head. Curses muffled by the ‘craftling, he struggled to tear the thing off without cutting his face in the process.

Paulron stepped from the shadows, putting himself between Flayer and the energy column, his coattails arrayed behind him.

“But...but how?” Flayer sputtered.

“I believe we left off with the nigrescent roc,” Paulron said conversationally. A volcano of midnight surged up through the energy column, spreading wings to eclipse the warehouse roof with a foreign sky. Eyes of dead stars peered down over an obsidian scythe-like beak. The roc cried out the splintered hopes of dying men.

Flayer, horror-smacked, backed against a stack of crates, his ‘crafted tendrils twitching in and out of his coat. Glass and wood rained down on him as the threggacat burst through an overhead window, drawn through the air by the Merkstave, plowing into the heart of the roc. The two creatures came together as aetheric stormfronts, their clashing a blue-black tornado of beak and claw.

Two mad whoops and the warbling *gawp* of an osper announced Marz and Loralayne as they sailed through the window frame. The osper loped down the crates, leapt over Flayer, and skidded to a halt next to Paulron, whose mouth hung agape.

“Extraordinary entrance!” he exclaimed proudly.

“Get on!” the two students shouted in unison, extending their hands. They pulled Paulron up behind them where he found little more than tail feathers left to support him.

“Yah! Yah!” Marz yelled hopefully, jabbing his heels into their mount. The osper took a few staggering steps and then honked in protest. “You can’t give up *now*!” Marz pleaded.

Two tendrils lashed around Marz and Loralayne, yanking them from the bird. They struggled fruitlessly as they flew back towards Flayer. A pair of spikey-mouthed tendrils snaked out from his coat, biting deep into the students’ lower backs. Marz and Loralayne shrieked with pain as faintly luminous purple fluid siphoned out of them through the translucent tendrils and into Flayer.

“What? A dark drinker!” Paulron exclaimed, trying to keep the osper under control. “You worthless charlatan! So that is how you bested me! Unhand those two and face me true!”

“Oh, cease your rambling, old man,” Flayer spat, ‘crafting a crabage around Paulron. Chitinous tree trunk-sized legs bit into the ground and the cage slammed down over the dreamcrafter and the worn-out osper. The cage was much larger than Flayer had intended, covered in ugly spikes which he approved of. The amplifier was doing its job. Coils of aetheric energy looped out of the twirling fray of roc and threggacat. Wings and claws dipped in and out of the cyclonic wall, blending together with teeth and eyes, a whirling mutant boring up into the roof. Flayer could almost taste the electric tang of impending disaster.

“Brand! Get over here!” Flayer could see the blade maven stretching the sinewy grepp away from his face before it snapped back into place. Flayer winced. “Idiot.”

*** 18 ***

Two golden eyes blinked down at Rubric as he awakened on the street. Startled, he rolled away, wishing instantly he had not done so as a dozen bruises and sprains announced they had come to tour his arms and legs. He craned his neck to see the rear of the wyvern across the street, relatively intact. Its passengers milled about, obviously shocked to still be alive and unsure what to think of this development.

Next to him sat a furry six-legged creature the size of a bus. Its golden wings quivered and it cooed

with pleasure as Ivory stroked its bearish face. A crackle of static dripped down its neck and its wings flickered. A 'craftling. *I made you*, Rubric thought, his certainty coming from some hidden place within.

"How did you do this?" Ivory asked him, not looking away from the creature. Her voice sounded strange to Rubric, he couldn't place why. "Where have you seen this animal before?"

"I...I must have heard about it in a story," Rubric tried, but heard the lie fall flat as it passed his lips. He pulled himself, aching, to his feet. Nothing seemed broken. He patted his pants pocket, relieved to find Flyste's collar still there.

"No. He is called Ursuburus. He does not exist save in my childhood dreams." Tenderness. That's what Rubric heard in her voice. From Ivory it sounded stranger than any Outlander accent.

Ursuburus licked her white tussle of hair with his golden tongue and then faded into dust, her hand passing through sparkling air with its final caress. Ivory's wicked tattoo could not conceal the sadness that rose in her face. But then it was gone, replaced by an accusatory glare, as though Rubric had snatched back a precious gift. She slowly pulled off his jacket and handed it back to him. On her face the tattoos twitched into the mask which had haunted Rubric all day.

"It is clear why he named you," she said stonily. "The Patterns have never woven a knot so complex. You are that knot, Rubric Dahns. A knot in the belt that binds this world."

"I don't know what that means," said Rubric. "I'm just an artist." Flashes of falling through open sky lit his mind. There had been a voice.

"Just an artist"? Then why risk your life to save your friends? Why risk your life to save me, foolish attempt that it was?"

Rubric had no answer. He had not thought of his actions as risking his life. He had seen only a single way ahead and had flowed into it as river must flow.

"When you have become undone, you will know all you need to." Ivory turned away, walking with her deliberate pace, resuming her journey on a path only she could see. Rubric followed along, silently, wanting to apologize to her, but failing to find words or even why he needed to.

The buildings degenerated towards the hunched and ramshackle end of the architectural spectrum as they passed into the Digs. After a few blocks of following Ivory's ghosts or intuitions or whims or whatever they were, they found themselves in Revery's old industrial sector, near the end of the Destrand. As the city had grown beyond its modest beginnings, the factories moved west, closer to the Arcanus Combine, closer to the source. A warehouse slanted before them, although it most likely no longer served its original purpose, transmuted by the needs of the Digs. *A haven for idj grifters*, Rubric thought with a shudder. *Or a Bloodstone arena*.

"What makes you think he's in there?" Rubric asked, not really wanting to go poking about a nest of faceless dangers if he could help it.

In answer, the warehouse roof blew open, metal girders coiling upon themselves. A maelstrom which used to be a threggacat and a nigrescent roc boiled into the afternoon sky, breaking into a claw of angry aetheric clouds.

"A coincidence," Rubric said, looking around for a less interesting building.

"I have visited the tomb of Coincidence," Ivory mused sadly, watching the clouds dissipate. "Come. Brand awaits. Perhaps your friend yet lives."

Rubric and Ivory rushed to a sliding metal door on the building's side. After struggling with it a moment, Rubric stepped aside and let Ivory thrust it aside with a powerful shove. Rubric stepped inside and tried to take in everything at once. In the center of the murky warehouse a fountain of energy coiled into the sky from the low dome of what might once have been an aetheric amplifier. A watery cold slipped through him as he saw Marz and Loralayne hanging limply some distance behind it. *This must be Flayer*, Rubric thought, following the tendrils to their source. In the far corner, a crab cage imprisoned who he hoped was Paulron and an opsor from the look of it.

Brand staggered up to them, wrestling with the grepp that had embraced his face. With a mighty pull the blade maven stretched the 'craftling far enough from his head to impale it on a wristblade. The grepp's stasis field unfurled and it flew apart into glowing strands, its control handle clattering to the

floor. Brand panted, rubbing his neck and face. He froze when he saw Ivory.

Ivory withdrew, putting a great distance between them in two catlike steps. Her blade staff blurred out of nowhere.

"Each breath you take from now on is my gift to you," Ivory said, twirling her blade in an elaborate salute.

"I hope you're feeling generous, dear Ivory," Brand smirked, returning her salute.

And so their dance began anew.

Good luck, Ivory, Rubric thought as he rushed to face Flayer. "Let them go!" he cried, trying on a commanding tone.

"Why? Who are you?" Flayer looked him over with annoyance. Marz twitched at the end of one tendril, descending deeper into torpor.

"Watch out for this scoundrel, Rubric," Paulron called from between two crab legs. "He is a spinesucker." Paulron's face wrinkled as though soured by the word.

"Ah, Rubric Dahns. We meet at last," Flayer said, pleased.

"So it seems," Rubric muttered, plotting a move. It had been ages since he last dueled, but he could think of no other way to get his friends out of danger. He dredged up the rules of the dueling manner. "By... by Paulron's generosity, by Loralayne's angst, by... Ivory's blades I challenge you to a proof of your craft."

"Excellent!" Paulron exclaimed.

"You swear by your friends," Flayer mused. "Interesting. Then by the trestle of the stars, by the belt of the world, by the hem of the Whole Cloth, I accept."

"He deals from a position of arrogance," Paulron said. "Note this, Rubric." Flayer cast the old dreamcrafter a sneer.

"My life for theirs," Rubric said. "Those are the stakes."

"Fine by me," Flayer said, tossing the limp forms of Marz and Loralayne to either side. "But my duel with you began earlier today..."

"Take up the tale of Maer Hedding," Paulron nodded. "Just after the roc's nest. I would advise..."

"Wait, that's the one with the golden spindle, right?" Rubric asked, trying to limber up. His joints were still complaining and held him in contempt for his earlier escapades. After his ordeal on the wyvern, he had no idea how he could pull this off. *Don't forget about the amplifier*, he told himself. He felt the very air of the warehouse quivering with potentiality. *I've never felt one cranked so high*.

"No, no, it concerns a mirror, you brainless badger!" Paulron clutched his head in dismay. "I always wondered if you were awake during the storycircles! Now I know!"

Flayer's arrogant scar-like grin broke open once more, anticipating victory. *Good*, thought Rubric, *Paulron was right*. He picked up the tale and the duel began.

"Maer Hedding journeyed then across the Plain of Sighs, where forgotten childhood wishes played on the winds. She heard one speak of her mirror and she followed it."

Flayer's smug laughter became the shushing of blue-green prairie grass, rushing forth from the amplifier to carpet the warehouse floor. The susurrus of sleeping children swirled across the plain. Rubric saw Maer Hedding moving slowly across the horizon. The winds carried the clatter of Ivory and Brand, trading blows on a distant hillock which might also be a crabcage.

"A weak play, Rubric," came the disappointed voice of his former mentor. "You could have..." but the wind carried the rest away. *I know what I'm doing*, Rubric thought, the turns of the tale bouncing back and forth in his mind, making sure he knew which scenes fell to him and which to Flayer. A wind roared with Flayer's voice.

"She reached the Ravine of Longing, the span between all desires. Across a lifetime of stars, the floating fragments of long-dead worlds, across the frozen beams of ancient suns, she spied her looking glass waiting on the other side."

A bit more elaborate than I had hoped, Rubric thought. *No mnemantras for these things, no tricks*. The fear that he may be unable to save his friends cut icily across his chest. At the same time a gash of earth furrowed across the Plain, drawing a line between Ivory and Brand's own duel. *She wouldn't be*

fighting him if it weren't for me, Rubric thought. *No one would be in danger*. His friends risked so much for him. *And who am I? What could I ever do to repay this?* Rubric's lips moved of their own accord as he thought of his debts, to his friends, to himself. The Plain began to separate at the gash, two titanic cliffs of earth drifting apart to form a ravine. As the world fell into darkness, Rubric fought to feel his feet on the concrete in a warehouse from another lifetime.

The hopelessness of falling from the sky, of being unable to save anyone, even himself, iced over his heart and the ravine filled with drifting asteroids and gutted planets. The memory of Ivory's eyes radiated frozen sunlight into the void. *But I did save them*. The golden globes of Ursuburus's eyes blinked down at him, a creature of hope and comfort. The firmament over the Ravine of Longing glittered with distant suns and stars. Rubric looked upon the cold beauty of his 'crafting, and saw something beyond art, beyond a mere skill. *The landscape of my soul. And there's more*. As he plummeted through the sky of his memory, a white arrow of light pierced him to the core. He ached from the call of her voice. "Find me..." Across the eternal expanse of the Ravine, a lost mirror winked into existence.

Paulron peered out from the tiny window in his prison of space rock. "I take back every disparaging word I have uttered of you! You are truly my finest student!"

A grey plateau, long dislodged from its parent world, drifted by. Ivory and Brand circled each other, their blades flashes of starlight.

"You should feel honored, Brand," Ivory said. "You are the first foe I will slay twice." She curled up through the air over Brand to avoid his Blade Crane maneuver, landing behind him.

"You Entropics - always so feshing cocky." Brand slapped a panel on each gauntlet and his wristblades elongated, encasing his forearms with scythes fashioned after the blade arms of an adult dragolisk.

Ivory dialed her blade to a shorter length and squeezed on her gauntlet. Her obsidian clawshield curved over her arm, pincers slicing the air.

"Nice," remarked Brand, raising an eyebrow. "It suits you."

Rubric continued the tale of Maer Hedding's journey, now drawing to a close.

"Maer Hedding leapt upon the smallest moon. She wove a rope of starlight which she used to capture a passing comet to pull her across the ravine. But midway across, she encountered Shri-Gungdoth, Mother of Unlikelihoods. Her hair was the color of screams, the history of joy and sorrow was recorded in the great spines of her back, and within her four crystal breasts swirled love, dreams, entropy and death."

A silence followed Rubric's voice. Flayer made no response.

"What is the matter, Flayer," called Paulron. "Is this version of the tale too ancient for you?"

"Where did you learn it?" hissed a fading sun with a scar like Flayer's.

"I had an excellent teacher," smiled a moon that would become Maer Hedding's chariot. "Of course, if it is beyond your abilities, you could just give up now."

"Yes, Flayer," laughed Paulron. "Even with your 'proven Combine technology' you may find this part taxing. Would you like me to see if there are any children wandering about for you to drain, you vile leech?!"

The expanse of the Ravine shuddered with Flayer's efforts. A luminous hand the width of a small mountain range rose from the depths to take hold of an asteroid belt. Another hand blue as the coldfire tips of the Mogadon Mountains fastened to the craggy edge of a planetoid. Spires of quartz-encrusted bone extended into the void between the two hands, impaling suns, fracturing moons. Inside the spires entire worlds coalesced from dust, swelled with vibrant life, and ultimately crumbled to ruin, all measured by the brief flashes of light licking up and down the back of Shri-Gungdoth. The dark goddess continued to rise. Her head arced up with slow, impossible grace, casting the galaxy of her hair into a wild spray of colors that scraped across Rubric's mind. Her face was round and fragile as an infant's, yet as weathered as the roots of eternity's last tree. She opened eyes so black they brightened the surrounding void into a grey dawn. *So beautiful and terrible*, thought Rubric. *As though Flayer had stolen Ivory's face and 'crafted it into a deity. Whatever he's got plugged into that amplifier, it's*

giving him quite an advantage.

“What foolishness causes you to venture so far into my domain?” the Mother of Unliklihoods asked Maer Hedding in a voice whispering from the birth of time.

“It is my favorite looking glass, Queen of Disasters,” Maer Hedding said with a deep bow. “I must have it back.” The shape of the old woman was a mere fleck orbiting the waist of Shri-Gungdoth.

“Ah, with your kind it is always ‘must.’ Surely you know the futility of your quest. In my realm, the more you desire a thing, the further away it shall drift. The more your heart values a thing, the more complete your destruction in its pursuit.” A cluster of stars in the path of her breath grew brittle and shattered into ice.

“But it is only a short distance away,” said Maer Hedding.

“It is a lifetime away,” said the goddess. Indeed, although she had traveled halfway across the Ravine, the mirror looked just as far away as when she began the crossing. Farther even.

“I am an old woman now,” said Maer Hedding. “My lifetime has unraveled almost to its end. It seems but a small length to me.”

“It would have been more fortunate for you to have wandered into my mate-brother’s realm. Krol-Gungdoth would not have suffered you to live long enough to delude yourself with these hopes. I will show you how long a lifetime is.” Shri-Gungdoth’s laughter shook apart Maer Hedding’s moon chariot, sending her floating down into the abyss.

“Maer Hedding awoke on the Many Storied Stair. The steps spiraled up into a heaven of storms and downward into a whirlpool of smoke. The Stair was infinite in both directions. Maer Hedding began to climb.”

“Unacceptable!” Paulron’s voice boomed from far away. “This twist is not in the canon! You forfeit the duel, Flayer!”

The spectral visage of Flayer shimmered in a field of stars. “You would have your lapdog win on some trifling technicality? He brought Shri-Gungdoth into the tale. The earliest version of the tale twists to the Stair.”

“Rubric, you do not have to give into this ploy!”

“He does if he wants to see his friends alive again,” Flayer chuckled.

“Enough!” cried Rubric, and a stone stairway curled up from the depths of the Ravine. The stars swirled into a vortex of smoke and an undulating blanket of stormclouds. Maer Hedding awoke on a landing, struggled uneasily to her feet and began to climb.

This isn’t so bad, Rubric thought. The Stair is an infinitely recursive construction. No big deal. I just have no idea how the story ends now.

As Rubric pondered this dilemma, Brand and Ivory fought on the spiraling steps. Ivory struggled to press Brand back up the steps to the next landing where they would be on equal footing.

“Where are your lovely sisters, Ivory?” Brand asked, parrying her sword with one scythe. “I cut down so many deadly flowers that day, I lost track of who lived.”

“Only I and Raev Ytaxia remain,” Ivory growled. “But other swordmaidens will follow our path one day.”

“It wasn’t your battle,” Brand said, sweeping down towards her legs. Ivory flipped back, losing some ground. “Things were complicated enough before you Entropics threw in.”

“You should know us better by now, Brand. We know only the Patterns we must follow and care nothing for the many banners of Wyldehame’s Dreamlords.” Her pincer jabs forced Brand back a few steps.

“Perhaps it’s time you started caring, my dear. It doesn’t take an Entropic to feel the change in the wind.” Brand used the arm scythes to launch off the top step and slam into Ivory’s chest with both feet. She tumbled back down the stone steps to the landing below. Like a deadly bladed insect, Brand descended upon her, scythes ready to impale her. Ivory curled onto her back, caught him with her feet

and launched Brand back into the air. His back thudded into the floor a few feet away. In a flash Ivory stood over him, swordpoint at his heart.

“And now I end you,” she hissed.

“There’s something you ought to know, sweet Ivory...” Brand smiled.

Ivory shoved her blade into his chest, but the ‘crafted weapon split and melted to avoid Brand’s flesh. A tattoo over his heart, a sigil Ivory had never seen, pulsed with blue light. Ivory pulled back her blade to see it crackle and reform. Shocked, Ivory backed away from Brand as he rose to his feet and gave a low bow.

“Do you like my new trick, my love?”

*** 19 ***

Maer Hedding continued up and up the spiral staircase as Rubric wondered what to do with her. The iron skull of some deep desert worm paddled through the air with fins of leather. Flayer perched over one of the creature’s hollow eye sockets.

“In the end, it doesn’t come down to idj or talent, but memory,” Flayer boomed out of the aether. “Trees, mountains, cities, civilizations, dreams... all these would fall without roots lodged in antiquity. Do you have any roots, Rubric Dahns? Without them, you cannot hope to survive the future. You cannot hope to survive me.”

Rubric tried to block out Flayer’s taunting voice and keep Maer Hedding trekking up the never-ending steps.

This is the one thing I can control, Rubric thought, watching her. Suddenly he was back on the streets of Greymarket. Ivory said to him, “Control is a man walking down a road who thinks, ‘Behold how I do not fall up into the sky!’” The scene shredded, replaced by the stair. *I have no control over anything. I’m falling.* The sensation came over him again, the wind whipping past him as he plummeted. *No responsibility. Just let it happen. What does Maer Hedding want? What do I want?*

On the next landing, Maer Hedding found her mirror resting on a simple pedestal. She rushed to it and lifted it carefully in shaking hands. She watched her own tears roll over her cheeks. *Is this what I want?* She manifested Rubric’s uncertainty by scrutinizing the mirror, turning it over in her hands. *What have I been chasing?* He thought of Ms. Marjenka’s ember snake, a ‘craftling he designed to wane and die. Popko’s useless sprig stalker. And Flyste, forever bound to the earth despite his wings. He had almost perished because of Rubric’s “artistic statement.” Again the young Assembly member accosted him in the hallway. *Why didn’t I help him?*

Maer Hedding gazed into the mirror once more, questions arching her brow.

I want to be recognized.

The cultist from the Aether Path brushed past him, wanting only invisibility. “Empty your hands, dreamcrafter.”

Maer Hedding realized she held the wrong mirror, a false hope. She let it slip from her fingers.

“Through the curtain of the Everwall he comes, naming us both.”

The masked face reached out from the throng and then vanished into a network of tattoos, of

unfolding paths.

The mirror floated toward the stone floor, spinning end over end.

“You are that knot, Rubric Dahns. A knot in the belt that binds this world.”

“I’m just an artist.”

“Could we talk about this another time? I need to help my friends.”

I don’t want to be recognized; I want to matter.

“Find me.”

The mirror shattered and the world cracked apart.

“Nooooo!” howled Flayer across the twilight expanse.

Where did I go? Rubric thought, trying to sense his body, to ground himself. His consciousness swirled about in several spaces at once, receding and indefinite one moment and a sharp point of focus the next. He could not abandon Maer Hedding now. He had to concentrate. *Time to end this.*

“Maer Hedding found herself at the End of the Circle, where all stories end and, in so ending, give birth to themselves. A forest of mirrors spread out before her, reaching to the edge of infinity’s shadow. It was her mirror. It was every mirror. She saw in them not herself as she was now, but all her possible selves – all the Maer Heddings she could have been and all the Maer Heddings she could ever be.”

Flayer could only manage a few mirrors before Rubric heard him collapse, gasping, “Impossible... impossible...”

A strength flowed into Rubric, a power beyond the strange Combine device. A power with the eyes of suns and a voice still and soft. Rubric’s descent slowed until he hung in midair, surrounded by heartbreaking blue and golden white. And then Rubric fell up into the sky.

Somehow the tale continued. Whether Rubric picked up the thread Flayer had dropped in defeat or the momentum of desire propelled it to a close, Maer Hedding turned in wonder at the mirrors within mirrors within mirrors.

“And so we meet again,” said a reflection of Maer Hedding who had chosen to stay in the village to teach the children instead. “You come once more to the heart of your deepest dream.”

“Why am I here?” she asked. “I was searching for my looking glass.”

“And so you found it,” said another reflection who had yet to know heartache. “Your mirror shows you what you wish to know the most.”

Maer Hedding could not take in the impossible array before her.

“But there are so many of you. Of me.”

“Yes. We are all your potential selves. Those that never were, those that pass you in other dreams, and those who wait for you at the end.”

Another Maer Hedding said, “Our paths start and end here in this dream. *A single thread bound all our days. One dream entangled all our ways.*”

“But which one is next?” another asked. Was it the first Maer Hedding? *Was there a first?* It was unclear which one had started on this journey.

“I am,” said a small voice. Maer Hedding turned and smiled, nodding. She took hold of her outstretched hand and let go of everything else.

Maer Hedding awoke in her sunlit bedroom, six years old with the song of her life still as new as the dawn.

The floor under Rubric's feet gradually came back into view and with it his sense of his feet, legs, arms, body. The mirrors remained, hung in space around the warehouse, reflecting a world fading from view. Flayer lay in a heap near the amplifier which still spewed a column of light through the torn roof. Rubric could hear the clash of blades at the far side of the room, but the mirrors obscured the two blade mavers. He ran over to Paulron and helped him pull apart the fading remains of the crabcake. The imprisoned osper sprinted out the warehouse door as soon as it could.

"Are you alright?" Rubric said, looking his friend over.

"I am more than alright," Paulron smiled. "I am most impressed and proud of you! 'Golden spindle' indeed! You great bluffer! You have shared the company of these two brave idiots for too long; their cunning rubs off on you." He gestured to Marz and Loralayne, groaning fitfully in deep sleep.

"Help me get them out of here," Rubric said, crouching down beside Marz. Paulron gently scooped up Loralayne in his arms. She groaned, eyed fluttering open.

"How did the rescue come off?" she asked groggily.

"A total success," Paulron said. "You two saved the day!"

Loralayne smiled sleepily and then her eyes widened in surprise. "Paulron, behind you!"

A purple tendril snaked down and plunged into Paulron's back. He grunted with pain, struggling not to drop Loralayne. Only she saw the dark look come over the gentle man's face as his eyes saturated with purple veins. Paulron's coattails roared up in a wave, multiplying, descending hydra-like on Flayer's invading tendrils, tearing them to bits.

"You, you're...fr..." Loralayne started to say, but then torpor took her once again and her head lolled back in Paulron's arms.

"Sleep, child," Paulron soothed, frowning sadly, blinking away purple tears.

Rubric stepped in front of Marz should Flayer try another attack. The dark drinker had siphoned enough idj from Paulron to fend off torpor, but had energy for little else. Flayer struggled to his feet, every breath a challenge.

"This isn't over, Dahns," Flayer wheezed.

"I think the Hive will beg to differ," Rubric smiled, glancing up.

"The Hive can't help you now!"

"The Sword of the Law has arrived!" Brother Beldur announced as he landed, dragon wings folding up. Haley stood nearby, blade rifle raised, eyeing the mirrors. A bright red sports car spun in through the open warehouse door, squealing to a halt. Taran leapt out, leveling his blade pistol at Flayer. Borlis and Dext flanked the car on armored osper. The sleek red curves had convinced Taran to leave his own car behind.

"Forget to send me an invitation to this party, Rubric?" Taran asked. "I hope we're not overdressed."

"I didn't think it was 'special' enough to bother you with," Rubric said. "No vampires, I'm afraid. Just a kidnapping spine sucker and his blade maven sidekick up to no good with their little toy here."

Taran's eyes flicked away from Flayer to examine the Merkstave and the ring of aether combustion engines. "Hey, I've been looking for those. Wait, did you say 'blade maven'?" Just then Ivory spun out through a mirror, blocking Brand's blows. He had fused his arm scythes into a single two-bladed sword. Ivory ducked and one blade crashed through the rear window of the sports car.

"Hey, I just got this car!" Taran said, pointing his pistol at Brand. Annoyed, the blade maven twirled his blades, smacking the pistol up into the air.

"Don't do it!" Haley yelled at Flayer. She had been the only one not distracted enough to see the dreamcrafter reach inside his coat to pull out a collar. Two heavy blades whined out of her rifle, but missed him, thunking into the concrete. The collar activated in mid-air, light unfolding into the shape of Gibby's small red dragolisk. Haley and Beldur watched it, puzzled, as it disappeared into the energy column. Flayer's lips moved soundlessly.

Leathery wings that spanned the entire warehouse slashed out of the white light as a full grown dragolisk emerged. Deadly scythe arms emerged from the monster's shoulder cavities on either side of its grotesquely elongated skull. Its teeth rippled like a thicket of knives and its eyes burst into orange flame when it saw the two drone brothers near it.

In unison, Beldur and Haley pulled breathers over their nose and mouth and slapped a panel on their shoulder armor. ‘Crafted armordija suits sloped out of their projection belts, encasing the two soldiers in sleek, silvery blue bodies.

The dragolisk’s scythes scissored down with lightning speed. Beldur and Haley sprang a great distance to either side on dreamcraft-augmented legs.

Taran threw himself over the car hood, crouching into a roll to snatch up his pistol while Ivory and Brand took their fight to the vehicle’s roof.

“Borlis, Dext!” Taran yelled. “Take that thing down! I’ll get Flayer!” The mounted drones urged their ospers forward, bringing their rifles to bear on the immense dragolisk.

“Switch to nullifier rounds!” Borlis shouted, yanking the blade clip out and slapping in another filled with bullet-shaped gel capsules. The two drones let loose, sending a barrage across the warling’s chest. The rounds exploded with flashes of green light, dissolving holes in the beast’s form. Angered, the dragolisk stalked towards Borlis and Dext, blocking Taran’s line of sight. He ran around the car, ducking through the field of mirrors in search of Flayer.

Outside the warehouse Rubric and Paulron leaned Marz and Loralayne next to a dumpster across the street.

“Stay with them,” Rubric said, heading back in. Paulron looked worried, but nodded.

Rubric returned to find the dragolisk lashed down by silvery cords extending from the shoulders of each armordija suit. Their legs had morphed, glomming together into thick turrets to give the drones leverage. The creature shrieked and thrashed, its wings shattering the upper windows. Dext leapt from his mount as the dragolisk skewered the bird, firing a tight cluster of null rounds as he rolled to the floor. The dragolisk’s scaled belly flew apart, leaving a jagged sparkling hole. Borlis dismounted, running past Dext’s dying osper and leapt inside the dragolisk. Perplexed, the monster tried uselessly to claw at the drone with its smaller arms. Inside the shell of the warling’s stasis field, Borlis took aim at the projection collar high above him. A halo of light decapitated the dragolisk and its body rained to the floor in red sparkles.

Ivory and Brand danced once more amongst the mirrors. *Why are these still here?* Rubric wondered, as he tried to follow the sounds of clashing blades. *They should have faded by now.* He leapt back to avoid a swirl of swords. Brand pressed Ivory backwards through the mirrored corridor. Rubric turned to follow but stopped short when he felt his neck prickle. He spun to see the tattered masked man standing in a wide, ornate looking glass.

“Who are you?” Rubric demanded. The figure remained silent, but Rubric swore he heard a whispering voice move past his ear. The strange man turned away from Rubric, walking into the hazy mists on the other side of the glass.

“No, wait!” Rubric called, reaching out. His hand passed through air as the man faded along with the rest of the mirror.

Other mirrors flew to pieces around the two blade mavens. Ivory attacked with reckless charges and unfocused, easily-parried swings. Brand laughed and twirled his blade into the air, catching it again, spreading his arms, giving Ivory an opening. She thrust out with the pincers of the clawshield only to watch them wither and recoil from him.

“What have you done?!” she cried, her voice teetering between weeping and exhaustion. “What dark dreams have you awakened in exchange for this ignoble sorcery?”

“The dragolisk relishes in stratagems, my dear,” he smiled, rubbing where the blade would have entered. “I indulged in the riskiest of bargains, a deal so sweet none could resist it, especially me. I was dripping my last from the tip of the great blade. ‘Dark dreams’ were coming for me either way, sweetness.” Ivory tried to catch his blade in her pincers, but misjudged. She grunted as his sword slashed across her left shoulder. The other end of his blade spun up, smacking Ivory’s sword into the air. It clattered somewhere in the darkness beyond the mirrors.

“Dark dreams are coming for you too,” Brand said, his voice hoarse with regret. He raised his sword point and thrust it towards Ivory’s chest. Brand’s look changed to surprise as he saw the blade pierce his own chest, or rather that of the reflection in the mirror that now hovered before him. The mirror collapsed into shards, but another spun into its place. Snarling he turned from it and ran into himself. At every turn, a mirror rushed to meet him. Separating the scythes, he twisted into the air with the Steel Blossom maneuver, cutting down everything in the radius of the blade tips. When the ‘crafted mirrors collapsed in the aether, Ivory was gone, but Rubric stood in her place.

“That was a mistake,” Brand growled.

“She... helped me,” Rubric said. “Just helping her back.” *She helped awaken me.*

“Oh, is that what you think?” Brand smirked. “Mark me, boy. Now that you’ve seen them, the patterns of her flesh will vex the twists and turns of your life from this day forward. I speak from experience.” Brand switched off the scythe blades and reaffixed them to his gauntlets. Fixing Rubric with a mixture of pity and derision, Brand bowed low. “Good day, dreamcrafter. My fight is no longer with you.”

Brand slipped away through the shifting, fading mirrors.

“Okay, tough guy, how about you back away from the light show? Real slow like.” Taran pointed the pistol at Flayer’s back as he hunched over the ring of engines, reconnecting some tubes.

“You’d shoot an unarmed man in the back?” Flayer taunted, continuing his adjustments. The light of the Merkstave throbbed erratically, casting twisted shadows on the warehouse wall.

“Hey, yeah, you can save the crafty villain routine for when you’re about twenty more feet away from that thing,” Taran said. “Do it now!”

“I can barely stand, you cowardly lackey,” Flayer spat, reaching for a lever.

“Oh, fuck it,” Taran said and shot him in the back.

The force of the blade knocked Flayer off balance and he toppled face first into the energy stream, his scream mingling with the crackling light. The dreamcrafter grabbed the Merkstave, dislodging it from the amplifier as he tumbled to the floor. The column vanished. Taran winced as Flayer’s face came into view, furrowed with smoking flesh, white light zigzagging just below the surface. To his horror, Flayer smiled, skin falling away in flakes. The ring of engines around the amplifier began to shudder and whine.

“Wait a sec...hold on...aether combustion engines plus a maxed out idj amplifier plus a smirky villain guy... Everybody! Clear out of here! This place is gonna get blown into orbit! Move! Move!” Taran bolted towards the warehouse door alongside Beldur and the other drones. He threw a quick glance behind him in time to see Brand grab Flayer and slip out a side door. A shimmering haze of heat gathered around the whirring engines.

“Ivory!” Rubric yelled over the rising din. “Where’s Ivory?!” Borlis snatched him up as he rode past on his osper. “No, wait.” Rubric’s weak struggling went unnoticed by the drone brother as they flew from the warehouse and headed to the shelter of an alley several blocks away.

The warehouse dissolved. The *BAROOM* of the aether explosion echoed across the Digs, blowing out windows for blocks. A shockwave of unstable particles rippled out, warping and twisting stone and metal in its wake. The edges of nearby building bubbled and collapsed. The street undulated into new shapes, thin stalagmites of concrete whirling out of its surface. The shockwave dissipated and the air was silent but for the sizzle of falling dust.

Rubric and Borlis stood up from where the initial shock of the blast had thrown them. Borlis’ osper squawked nervously nearby. Rubric left the drone and ran back down the street to where the warehouse had been. He collapsed with relief next to Paulron, Marz and Loralayne. He could still see the remains of a ‘crafted shield wall fading from view.

“But how?” he asked Paulron, gazing in wonder. “To craft a solid form strong enough to withstand... the idj alone is just...”

“What’s with all the yelling?” Marz protested, thrashing awake. “Can’t a fellow nab some peace and quiet between classes?” He muttered some more and curled up around a rock, snoring.

Rubric held Paulron’s gaze for a moment, waiting for some kind of answer, but decided to let it go, to Paulron’s visible relief.

“It seems I have been patronizing Madame Loalla’s slumber den lately,” Paulron said, changing the subject. “How have I been sleeping?”

“Like a first year after his midterm ‘crafting gauntlet,’” Rubric smiled.

“Hey over there!” Taran called, picking his way over the mutated street. “Everyone still have their heads attached?” Rubric waved. He saw the rest of the drone cadre deactivating their armordija suits, rising like indestructible obelisks from the rubble. Rubric scanned the new landscape around him. No trace of anything or anyone that may have still been in the warehouse remained.

“Rubric Dahns,” called a voice. He looked up to the roof of the ransacked building behind him to see a pale silhouette balanced at its edge. Ivory raised her clawshield in salute. “Our ways will entangle again, dreamcrafter.” She vanished from view.

I know, thought Rubric, recalling Brand’s words. My tale twists here. I have no idea if I am ready to follow this new path, but I cannot forget her voice. I now know there’s a different choice I can make. I can empty my hands. I can fall up.

Some distance away, Taran frowned over the convoluted spider of red metal that used to be a really nice sports car. Something throbbed warmly against his chest. Making sure no one looked his way, Taran slipped out a small brown leather-bound book and flicked open its clasp. Dun-colored letters radiated from the pages, across his face and into his mind.

Another one? But how?

Puzzling over what the book had told him, he slipped it carefully back into his trench coat, against his heart. He had to keep it safe. It was, after all, the only book on the planet.

Until now.

*** 21 ***

The Sylents encountered the masked man just outside Shad’s sanctum. The tattered figure walked towards them, heading for the exit, looking neither to the left or right.

“Excuse me,” Slik said. “What is your business here?”

The man ignored him and continued towards them.

“Stop where you are,” Slik said, flicking his cigarette into the darkness of the museum. DedLee blinked back and forth at his twin and then at the approaching man. He was very close now.

“*I said to stop where you are!*” the entire floor of the museum became Slik’s throat, vibrating with his undeniable command. His face shone with beautiful light that none could resist. The Sylent twins stepped close together, blocking the man’s path. Two steps before them the man blew apart into bits of parchment, passing through them as a wind. The stale air filled with a sharp oily smell Slik could not place. Had Taran been there he would have recognized it instantly: ink.

“Well, my brother,” said Slik, smoothing his silver jacket. “Apparently this world has seen stranger things than you and I.”

When no one answered his knock, Slik slipped through the door to the sanctum, followed by DedLee. Every piece of furniture in Shad’s sanctum was designed with a purpose, every object on the shelf created to evoke creative thought. Shad sat behind his curved desk, the nighttime skyline of Revery framing him through the wall of glass behind him. Stationed on a platform several feet above the floor, his desk cast visitors into the role of the accused or object of scientific scrutiny. But tonight Shad’s attention focused solely on something spread on his desk, something glowing with its own light.

“Sir,” said Slik, “we encountered a stranger just outside these doors, he...”

“Our client,” said Shad, not looking up.

“Ah. He must be sorely disappointed that we failed to deliver Mr. Dahns.” Slik and DedLee drifted up the stairs to get a closer look at what lay on the desk.

“On the contrary, he was most pleased. Mr. Dahns has awakened from his dream.”

“But Dreamcrafters do not have dreams of their own,” Slik pointed out.

“Apparently this one will.”

A massive tome spread before Shad Khadjik, glyphs of light playing across his face. Slik gave his brother a worried look. DedLee’s eyes widened with delight.

“What is it?” asked Slik.

“It is a story,” answered Shad, entranced.

“How can there be a story without someone to tell it?” Slik asked uneasily. Slik rarely had cause to be afraid, but the device spread before his benefactor filled him with fear.

“This...’book.’ This book is telling me the story.”

“What is it about?”

“Everything.”

“How does it end?” asked DedLee.

“An excellent question, Mr. Sylent.” Shad started flipping toward the end of the book, but then the pages started turning of their own accord, riffling to the last page. An unearthly roar shook the room as a cluster of warbling jaws and smoky tentacles thrust out from the open page to pull the book shut.

To be continued...

I’d like to thank the following people who contributed to this story, whether they know it or not: Ryan Houlette, Jeff Lucarelli, Rebecca Lefebvre, Phil “John Doe”, Ken Andert, Alex Karls, and Russ Lyster.

Dream Cast

In my head, these are the actors I see in these roles. They will serve as visual reference for my illustrations, whenever I get around to that.

Professor Mays – Anthony Stuart Head

Brand Shraedo – Jason Statham

Flayer – Sean Bean

Rubric Dahns – Jude Law
Tyrix Paxton – William H. Macy
Marz Kyle – Adam Brody
Loralayne Foxpaws – Caroline Dhavernas
Paulron Spendrel – Sean Connery
Taran Baker – Greg Germann
Rajimun Hookas – Brian Cox
Slik and DedLee Sylent – Ewan McGregor
Shad Khadjik – Clancy Brown
Sun Oyo – Ji-tae Yu
Ivory Yxtempora – Milla Jovovich

And while I'm dreaming... soundtrack by Yoko Kanno with Amy Lee on vocals.