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# CHAPTER 1

*In which we meet Able and learn of  
his simple existence in the Shattered  
Land.*

In the far reaches of the Shattered Land, in a delta between where the Delphine Meteor rolls along in its canyon, and the Silt Sea shifts in undulations of dust, there is a place called the Desert of Idex MorteZ. It's a barren gray landscape made up of piles of ancient stone tablets; piled precariously, but as high as buildings in places. The piles lean in all directions as they erode and slowly turn to dust. Upon those millions of stone artifacts are chiseled stories both true and false, philosophies and theories, secrets and myths. They are all discarded writings long forgotten—the languages they were written in forgotten.

Little lives in Idex MorteZ. The piles and piles of ancient texts are dotted by mesas that lord over the vast wasteland. There are giant, fossilized trilobites and silt centipedes, creatures who chose to venture too far into the desert from the Silt Sea. Their transparent exoskeletons are draped across the stone tablets and their bodies make homes for smaller creatures like silverfish and scurrying six-legged cybernetic bugs.

Why so much knowledge and history and law and philosophy had ever been

discarded in the middle of a desert is unknown to any in the Shattered Land. The tablets are a mix of cyphers and pictures, many from societies that no longer exist. The scribbles are just representations of change. There is so much dust and shimmering, translucent heatwaves, that the information once stored in these works is blurred and obscured as entropy makes them more and more meaningless.

In the Shattered Land there are only just a few stars in the night sky and even those have faded to what looks like red smudges. It is very dark at night in the Desert of IDEX Morte. Occasionally some errant trader might ride a silt centipede through the area, looking for schwa or treasure (it is said there are still *books* in the desert). Those travelers often make the mistake of making camp near a mesa. The mesas move only at night. And when a mesa stands, ripping its long-settled bulk from its crater, stretching out its spindly, crustacean-like legs, its sudden locution can be heard for miles around, like thunder. It is a mystery why the mesas of the Desert of IDEX Morte move at all, but they do, walking for a few hours in the dark of night, lit up by static lightning, to crash down their entire bulk on a new spot for reasons known only to themselves.

It is difficult to tell a dead mesa from a living one, but not impossible. To begin with, a dead mesa's legs will close up around it in a tight, spiny fist; like a dried out spider. Another is the ultrasonic noise that live mesa's put out. You cannot hear it, but you can feel it in the ground. There are other ways, other signs, but the first sign is the best guarantee.

Nestled beneath one such dead mesa, there is a rusty shack where a man named Jedediah and his family live. He has a wife, Evo and two sons, Able and Kane. Evo is sick and bedridden in the shack, her body covered in rough blankets and surrounded by pumps and machinations that are keeping her alive. The older brother is a nasty brute;

one who decided to turn his discomfort and pain on others. The youngest son is Able.

Every day, Jedediah and his two sons travel out into the desert where they gather the ancient tablets, stacking them on carts and hauling the refuse back to a clearing between the great dead mesa and their homestead. There, they load the tablets onto a brundlex, which scans the tablets and then pushes them along a conveyor belt where they are crushed. Out of the back of the brundlex comes *blackrock* — a mild fuel that can be sold to the trader caravans and others. With the right technology, blackrock can be used to create small amounts of energy, enough to run other brundlexes. The desert rodents, with their built-in brundlexes thrive on the stuff.

A second substance comes from the process as well, a silver rock known (not by the locals) as chrysoprase; it is exhaust from the brundlex, exhaust from the wildlife. Jedediah keeps the chrysoprase for his younger son Able. The boy has a strange knack for making things with it. It is, without question, a heretical behavior to make the things that Able does. The things... the things-that-move-of-their-own—even the things keeping his wife Evo alive—they are of a spontaneous nature, not of J'onn. One does make J'onn in the face of J'onn. Movement without soul is to spit in the face of J'onn, but Jedediah is old and tired and loves his wife, so he mostly looks past it. Still, Jedediah is suspicious of his adopted son and believes him to be cursed.



The desert rodent nearby spewed smoke and particles of chrysoprase in an effort to move, but its back legs were shredded from where a tower of tablets collapsed on it. It

squeaked in panic as Able reached for it. "There, there. You're all right." His words didn't calm the creature but it did not defend itself. Able grasped the metallic rat with one hand underneath its forearms and holds it up in front of his face. Its shining orange eyes beamed out and searched Able. He could see that its light was fading. "You're going to be all right."

The first thing Able did was press his free thumb to the top of the rat's head. The lights in its eyes go out. He lay the rat on its back and removed a bag of crysoprax and some electrol from his belt. He poured it liberally on the little creature's back legs and then with a sewing motion, works the electrol into the legs where it forms new shafts and ligaments. After ten minutes or so, the rat's back legs are fully formed and he once again holds the rat in front of him, presses his thumb to the rat's head, and the lights in its eyes return.

"There. All fixed!"

The rat, detecting its newfound mobility, squirms in Able's grasp and tries to get free. Able quickly lets it go where it scurries off into a crack between piles of tablets. Able rolls his eyes. "You're welcome."



Evo lay buried among the hissing bio-brundlexes, in a tattered and gray linen nightgown. In a fever she has pushed all the blankets aside. She wears a mask that covers her nose and mouth and breathes with difficulty. Able stands in the doorway, listening to the hum of the machines that are breathing for her. The tall accordion towers surround

her and move asynchronously up and down with tiny huffs and sucking sounds; liquids gush and rush from one tower to another, to a sphere that spins the liquid and dispenses it again.

Though he brought them into existence, he does not know how they function. It is the way of the crysoprase and electrol that he gives these things a will and a goal—though he knows the goal is unnecessary. As bad as he feels for his mother, he feels bad for the machines that will never know more than to do one thing over and over and over.

The small back room where his mother lay is a miniature city skyline, almost filled with tubes and pipes and dirty glass huddled in around the valley of where her body lay on a small, rotting mattress. A single window, high up on the rickety bedroom wall allows in any light, and it is a tea-colored light that pushes through the twin filters of dirt and fingerprints. Outside, gray restless dust whirls and presses at the glass.

Able shifts his weight in the doorway and hears the tired floorboards beneath him creak, like a mourning that is louder than his own. His is lost in confusion. He holds his hands uselessly at his side. Then clasps them behind his back. Then, he puts them at his side again—watching as the machines rise and fall, his eyes moving from cylinder to cube as each one reaches a peak, or spins, seems to hold a breath, puffs and then whooshes on again. The room is a small chamber orchestra of gushing flushes, heaving movement, clicks and sighs.

The tired light in the room captures and frames a hundred motes of dust, each in a Brownian dance. Able feels each molecule of pollutant travel up his nose and down his dry throat into his crusted lungs. He closes his eyes and takes a moment to miss her. He travels backwards.

*Lost in memories behind closed eyes now, he turns his head up from the floor,*

*playing with bits of rock, to see her looking at him with that familiar and perplexed look on her face, wondering at the measure of oddity in him. He sits and plays with electrol creations that roll about on the floor, aimless but excited. Then, as always she smiles and pats him on the head, the sun behind her silhouette, yellow and streaming. "You are so special Able. You are one of a kind. I love you."*

Able opens his eyes to the reality of the room, filled with colors like mold, mildew, rot, and he is not sure why he remembers the sunlight ever being golden. Outside dust devils come to rattle the windows and pay their respects with obsidian-eyed sorrow. The land is gray and covered with discarded speeches and arguments, stone artifacts chiseled with letters, all overshadowed by the dead mesa.

The mesa lording over the shack is singular. It dominates the landscape, its massive legs crumpled in the hot sun. For miles around it is the only structure. East, further off from Jedidiah's little valley, sometimes running against the dun-colored sunrises, marred by wavy lines of heat, run the silhouettes of the traders' centipede caravans; slow, rumbling, and multi-legged.



Able slips quietly into his room after foraging with his father for the morning. He slides a loop of twine around the door knob and a rusty nail in the wall—privacy of sorts. Able smiles to himself as he reaches underneath his cot for a secret treasure. He smiles because he knows that not all the ideas in the desert are dead, that not all machines have goals. He has three that are quite alive—he calls them his *mistakes*. They are, all three,



small orbs of metal, light and shifting parts. But they are more to him than the machines he's created to assist his mother, at his father's command, for these "mistakes" have souls.

When Able has spoken to his Father of machines and things he has made, his Father's answer is always the same: "This is a valley of men and women who have been outspoken against the True nature of things; who have thought their words history! They have all been wrong! Their petty and unnatural thoughts have come to rest here because ideas cannot outlast the Ungod of Time. All those outspoken against the True Nature of the universe are dead and wrong. They die with their mistakes after a time. And there is no idea ever conceived that does not rest here; in these fields. J'onnn is entropy, boy. Entropy is all."

Able's mistakes roll about the floor, lighting up, whirring and blinking as they bump into the cot and Able and each other. He can hear the sound of his mother's kind voice, asking him, *What are you dreaming, Able?* Unlike his other creations, these three mistakes were created with no purpose. Instead he tried to imagine what purpose they might want for themselves.

Po, the littlest of the three wants very little. Po follows Able wherever he goes. Able amuses himself by walking around the room in a circle and watching as Po goes everywhere he does, dodging the other two more rambunctious mistakes, singing a short sweet song of relief when Able sits down and Po can roll up against him and also sit quietly.

Ka and Nip are much more content to explore the room to its edges sometimes getting into pushing matches with each other when their paths cross. In large part they ignore Able and Po except when Able has gathered the cryopraser to feed them. When

Able places his hand down with a small pile of the shiny rock, they quickly roll to him and suck it up with tink and blips of satisfaction. Able feeds Po separately for this reason; the littlest of the three can't compete with its siblings when a feeding happens.

After a feeding, all three of his mistakes light up much more, burning with orange and violet and green and pink light that seeps out from between their clockworks and panels. And when he adds electrol to them, they do other things. Ka grows in size. Nip sometimes will throw out an appendage of some kind and spin around it. Po, though, never changes much, except that his insides, between the cracks in his shell, are more dense than the other two. Able sits with his arms around his knees, Po by his side, cooing, while Ka and Nip duke it out hyperactively, until the afternoon respite is over. Able's father will call out from the other room, "Boys!" and Able will herd his mistakes into a small burlap sack where they will fuss at first and then calm down, turn their lights down and "sleep" until later in the day when Able can check on them again.

Sitting and watching them after today's feeding Able is delighted and takes in a sharp breath when Nip does something extraordinarily new. After bumping up against Ka several times, Nip sits still and quivers. Its light fades, and then with a burst of new light Nip is surrounded by two halos and lifts itself off the ground. Able's eyes stretch wide open as Nip hovers over its sibling Ka, circles around it once or twice teasing, and then flutters back into Able's hands, as if looking for approval.

Curious, Able holds Nip aloft, even though he is not touching it. There is a force between Able's hands and Nip's new rings. The rings around Nip glow and rotate and there is an invisible glass sphere around the mistake now. Able almost shouts out with glee, before looking around in the quiet; instead, he holds Nip close to his face, a neon green light reflecting, and says, "Nice trick, Nip!"



Able dumps an armload of tablets onto the conveyor belt. He watches as the stone relics rumble down towards the brundlex that crush them into chunks and powder, sad that he will never know what they might have said. Suddenly, painfully, he's awakened from his brief reverie by his brother slamming a cart into his back. "Get moving, blackrock-for-brains." Able steps aside to let his big brother lift the cart's contents on to the conveyor belt. He bends down to rub the backs of his ankles. His father, approaching with a cart of his own, shouts out to Able, "If you don't keep moving in this world, son, it will cause you nothing but pain."

Rubbing his nose, Able walks away from his father and brother off toward one of the mesa's legs. He climbs a high pile of tablets to the top and looks south to see if he can see any of the dust clouds kicked up by the traders and their centipedes. Today he sees nothing. Later, after many more armfuls of tablets have been crushed and churned and broken, Able and his brother and father load a large cart with the blackrock. This cart is as tall as Jedediah and requires both Able's brother and his father to pull it down a long trail to a station where they pile the blackrock in the hopes that traders will come and leave grain or jerky in trade. Able's father and brother will be gone for several hours on this trip to the station and it is, by far, the best part of the day.

As Jedediah and Able's brother are preparing to leave with the big cart, Able—without knowing why—says, "Father, I think I could make a brundlex that would pull the cart for you, if you like."

Jedediah turns to Able, silhouetted against the low gray sky. He removes his large-brimmed black hat and wipes his brow. "No." Able isn't sure what to make of the reply.

He stands dutifully waiting to be dismissed, looking up at his father, whose eyes are so wrinkled and frowning that Able can barely see his pupils. “We do that for your mother because she is *ill*. We men and you have our health and it is ungodly to use your—” Able’s father searches for a word, “—your curse when we have our health and can do this work ourselves.”

After a moment, Able’s father squats down to Able’s level and says, with more patience, “Ungod forsook this world because men were lazy. Whatever your creations are, Able, you must not use them idly. You should not use them at all... unless you must.” Able’s father puts his heavy, almost stony hand on Able’s shoulder. “You can still be an ungodly man, my son, but to do so you must be humble about what you make.” Able looks to the ground and thinks about the mistakes in his room, hiding beneath his cot.

Back in his room, after his father and brother have left, and after he has checked on his mother, Able sits on the floor among his mistakes. For weeks now, after a feeding, Nip flew about the room. And now, for the last few days, it had taken to flying up next to a small window, high in the room. Nip would sit at the window, lazily bumping against the glass, making a light tapping noise. Able, staring up at Nip says, “There’s no where to go, Nip.”

Nip flies several times from the window to Able, but when Able tries to hold the flying mistake, Nip whisks off back to the window. Finally, Nip does what it did the first time, hovering in place and quivering, its light growing brighter and brighter. The light becomes so bright that even little Po comes out from behind Able to look. (Ka is paying no attention whatsoever to his sibling’s seeming tantrum.) Then, with a flash, Nip has sparked a new third halo, and flies across the room opposite the window. In a fury, Nip glows bright green and then shoots across the room, smashing through the window.

Able's eyes grow wide in horror. "No, no, no, Nip! Nip!" He jumps up and runs to the wall with the window. It's too high for him to reach. He strains to see if he can make out the mistake anywhere in the sky. It's bad enough if his father sees the broken window, but more than that, Able's heart is broken that his little friend has left.



The broken window was blamed on an errant rock falling off the mesa. Able escaped punishment, which usually consisted of him having to break something he loved. He looked for Nip for days and could find it nowhere. In the mornings, when collecting tablets for his father, Able would circle all the way around the mesa, looking constantly for his little green buzzing mistake. Every night, when the sun set, even though it was dangerous, he snuck outside hoping that the low light would be enough to let him see even a faint green glow. He did not stay out long, the desert was dangerous at night, he knew, but he couldn't help himself.

Then, one day, after his father and brother had hauled the big cart away, he open the tablet-crushing brundlex and emptied the cryoprase dust inside to feed Po and Ka. Without Nip there to take his share, both Po and Ka had grown in size. Po was still the smallest but Ka had grown very big—so much so he was about the size of Able's head.

When Able went to feed them, he was ecstatic to open his sack and see that there were once again three mistakes. Po and Ka were there, and now Nip was there, too!—at least he thought it was Nip. The little mistake was half the size of Ka, but no longer a sphere. It had grown a permanent ring around itself and there were small spires growing

out of its center. Beneath the spires Nip had what looked like an eye as well.

He knew it was Nip because no sooner were the three mistakes out of the bag than Nip and Ka were at it as usual, bumping each other. Nip rolled inside its new ring but it wasn't long at all before its three halos appeared and it was off the ground hovering. Nip rushed by Able's face a few times, even faster than he had been when he had left before. It hovered in front of Able and Able gently put out his hands to hold it. Nip allowed him to do so, but then after a few minutes it began to tug on Able, tugging until Able stood up, and then tugging again to move Able to the wall with the window.

Able found that he could grasp the new thick ring that Nip had grown, using it like a handle. Once he did this, Nip lifted him up off the ground, hauling him up to the window. Able scrambled to get his legs up on the sill and when he did, Nip made the strangest cheering tweet. "Wow, Nip. Neat!" Nip brought itself and Able back to the floor of the room and then made a second noise, what sounded like a warning, and began knocking on the door to the Able's room. Able knew trouble would come if he opened the door, but he couldn't help himself. What did Nip want?

No sooner had Able opened the door than Nip was at the front door of the shack banging on that door, too. Able opened the front door and stepped out with Nip now circling his head. Once more Able grasped the ring around Nip and the little mistake carried Able off the ground and away into the air. Able gasped and tightened his grip as Nip whisked him far above the cabin, around and above the great spiny legs of the dead mesa and then with a loud triumphant chirp, hauled Able all the way up to the top of the mesa where it set him down gently.

Able was ecstatic now, hardly containing himself as he stood on top of the mesa and looked all around at the yellow afternoon sky. He could see so far he didn't even know

what he was looking at. The piles and piles of tablets blended into a beautiful landscape of valleys and paths. To the east he thought he could make out a giant horn of some kind—a horn with more horns—but it was far away and hazy on the horizon. There was something more strange and closer than the canyon. A small plume of smoke rose from what appeared to be a giant beetle with its head buried in the ground. Its legs slowly moved around in the air. Nearby the beetle were a group of small buildings made of hexagons. And there were lights.



Able sat with Nip on top of the mesa for a long time, marveling at the view. He especially looked to the north where Able could see something he could not even explain. Something in that direction undulated like clouds, but brown, and distinctly separate from the sky. “I wonder what that is, Nip,” he whispered. He walked in a circle around the top of the mesa and decided to lie down and peer at his own house, hundreds of feet below, but to his horror, the big cart was back. “Oh no! Nip, my father is back.” He reached out to grab Nip by its ring and pulled it close. “Please, Nip, take me back! You have to take me back.” Nip chirped inquisitively. “Please, Nip! Down! Back down!?”

In a panic, Able grabbed Nip with both hands and started to climb down. Nip shrieked and then opened up panels all over its insides, releasing a flash of light, spinning its halos and straining to slow their fall as they scrabbled to the ground. Able’s heart leapt out of his chest in a way that he had never felt before. He had been afraid of his

father many times, but that fear was nauseating and creeping; this fear was sudden and took his breath away. Still, Nip did manage to land them both safely and then ripped himself out of Able's grasp and flew to Able's face releasing a stream of clicks, chirps and shrieks as if scolding Able, but Able couldn't pay any attention.

Running around the side of the cabin, then inside and straight to his room, he found the door open wide and his brother crouched over Ka with a chunk of blackrock in his hand that he was beating Ka with. Ka moaned and had dents and cracks and wasn't to be able to roll away while Able's brother bashed it again with the stone. Po hid under the bed moaning. "No!" Able roared. Without thinking about anything he grabbed the upraised arm of his brother and threw his entire weight on him, causing the both of them to roll over each other on the floor.

Kane quickly managed to get Able in a headlock. "What is it, Able? Is it yours?" Able struggled to get free and with ferocity, Nip flew into Kane's face and chirped and squeaked and buzzed. "C'mon, Able, what are these things? Did you use your curse? How do they work?" With Able tucked under one arm, Kane picked up the blackrock and threw it at Ka, laughing.

"No!" Able yelled, having lost all sense of thought, his vision having gone red. "Please! Stop!"

Nip flew to the other side of the room and turning red, flew straight into Kane's head, bashing him hard and causing him to scream and fall, dragging Able on top of himself. "Nip! No!" Able shouted.

Jedidiah came storming into the room on hearing the commotion and saw his one son bleeding and the other waving maniacally at some mystery... thing. He shouted, "The Ungod forsakes us!" He grabbed Able by his neck and hauled him up into the air off his



now unconscious brother. “What heresy is this?” he shouted at Able as he pointed to the mistakes. Nip, hovering near Ka, touched its fellow mistake gently and then turned a bright red color and flew in a flash at Jedediah’s face, crackling with bolts of energy. Shocked, Jedediah dropped Able roughly to the ground to swatted at Nip who shocked him every time the old man’s stony hands struck him.

Able scrambled to grab his bag and Po and Ka, slipping them both in it and ran for the door past his father still contending with the enraged Nip. As Able ran through the main room to the door, Nip changed from red to orange and slowly hovered away from Jedediah, who stalked the mistake as it floated away, keeping his distance. “This is vile, Able! This is evil! I warned you about your curse and you ignored me!”

Able stood in the main door of the house. From there he could see that his mother had sat up and was staring back and forth from him to Nip to Jedediah. "Mother," was all he could utter as began backing outside and Nip zipped between him and as his father making a cacophony. Jedediah, looming taller than ever and fuming, yelled, “You are a curse on this house! Your mother's heart was too big! You are no son of mine! Get out! Get out of this house, get out of my valley! Never return!”

## CHAPTER 2

### *In which Able wanders the Desert Idex Morteze with Po, Ka and Nip*

With no direction to follow other than his father's outstretched index finger, vaguely indicating to him to leave the valley, Able headed toward the upside down beetle, with its mysterious half-buried hives, and much further off, unknown to him, the Silt Sea. At the bottom of the hill between his Father's cabin and the tablet-crushing brundlex, he quickly grabbed a sack and filled it with as much electrol as he could find.

Able scrambled over piles of tablets with the sack of electrol and Po and Ka stowed in their bag, and Nip flitting about his head, just ahead of him. He inched his way through small paths that had been cleared over many years by his family and others who mined the tablets. After several hours of this, and as it was growing dark, he came to a depression, a crater in the tablets. Instinctively, he knew this to be the former resting place of one of the mesa's. It's size alone indicated a massive former presence.

It was then that Able realized the full scope of his problems. He was alone, at night, when the Mesas traveled (crushing other animals underfoot). He did not know where he was going. He turned to the only thing he had: the sack of electrol. So, he might as well feed his mistakes. He scrabbled to the bottom of the crater and sat on the ground with his back resting against a stack of tablets, looking out across more open ground than he'd

ever seen. Even all around his father's house, there were paths, small clearings and small canyons. But this was a circle of ground many more times larger than the footprint of his Father's house.

And then Able realized that of all his difficulties ahead, he wasn't sure if he should ever see his mother again. Of all his troubles, this one seemed very far from a solution.

He released Po and Ka from their burlap sack. As usual, Po quickly retreated to Able's backside and seemed to hide behind him. Poor Ka, though, was in bad shape. It had gashes in its side that seemed to be leaking a vermillion dust. Nip was high above the crater, about in its center, hovering. When Able looked up, Nip was the brightest thing in the night sky. There were few stars to be seen, not that Able knew what they were. Maybe they were siblings of Nip?

He attended to Ka first, taking a handful of electrol from his sack and pouring it on and around Ka, who seemed to swell up a tad and then sigh, and then shudder. As it did, Ka retracted in size a bit, but also the gashes disappeared from its surface. Ka brightened a bit in color also. "Feeling better, then?" Able asked, and Ka spun in a circle and chirped. "At least one of us is doing all right." He reached out and pet Ka, who reacted in no particular way, just rolling in angled circles, appearing to enjoy his renewed smooth surface.

Able turned with a handful of electrol that he held out to Po, behind him, and hiding underneath a tablet outcropping. It took Po a minute, but he gradually rolled out and partook of the meal. It did not seem to matter how much Po ate; he never got any larger, like Ka, and he never transformed in any way like Nip. In many ways, all three had started out the same, swirling dustballs. Po had gained more solidity, but other than that, had not changed in size at all. "My father said I was a runt. Are you a runt?" Po growled.

Finally Able turned a handful of dust to the sky, looking up at Nip, shining in a green-to-yellow and back again pattern. Nip made no noise, no move closer. Ka was bright enough that it never really got dark at the bottom of the crater, and Able curled up at the bottom of the ridge and slept, hoping that Mesas did not come to rest at the same place twice... often.



Able was rapidly approaching the upside down beetle. The wind rushed by him. The world moved by at such a fast pace, he couldn't see every detail he wanted to; there was so much to the world. That morning he had awoken with Po and Ka close by his side and Nip, back down from his vigil, scrounging around in the electrol bag. Able tried to drag him out of the bag just to make sure that he wouldn't eat all of it, but Nip was too heavy. Instead, Able pulled the bag off of Nip, revealing an almost swollen mistake. Where the center of Nip had been a sphere, it now pulsed, flat hexagonal surfaces, mashed up against one another, then shifting again into points—horns almost.

Able shooed Po and Ka (who were cautiously rolling in a perimeter around Nip) back into their bag. He picked up his other bag as well, and then began to make his way to the opposite side of the crater. But when it became obvious that Nip was not following, Able turned and walked back to him. "Are you sick? Did you eat too much?"

Able tried to push Nip with his shoe, but the mistake wouldn't move. "I'm not leaving without you. You need to come along." After a moment, "You don't *look* sick." He reached out to grab Nip's outer ring, hoping to be able to drag the little mistake, and

much to his surprise, it was slightly warm and quite moveable. He grasped the outer ring and lifted it up, and with a loud *brrraaat*, the center ring and then the core of Nip rose up from the ground as if pulled by puppet strings until they were in line with the outer ring. Nip's core spun wildly, vacillating from a smooth sphere to a pointed dodecahedron while making a *phbbbbbbbt* sound.

"Sorry," Able said, and shrugged. "I didn't think I could move you."

Nip's core spun even more wildly, shimmering like a rainbow through one color after another. It grew brighter, too, with an increased humming. The ring began to pull up on Able's hand and lifted his arm up over his shoulder. Able hung on, but wasn't sure he should. "We tried this before, Nip! I don't think it's a good idea."

The core spun until it was bright white, the humming turning into a melodic chord, then a flash, and then two metallic ribbons burst out from the core and dropped down to wrap around Able's waist and behind his legs. The tones that Nip was emitting grew louder and higher, as Nip began to lift Able off the ground. As Nip beamed and sounded out, Able found himself sitting comfortably in a swing seat made of the metallic ribbons. Then, Nip's music ceased, and light burst out of it, returning it to a bright green shimmering. Its core took the form of a flattened dodecahedron, and the sound returned to a low hum. Before Able knew it, they were above the crater and racing off toward the upside-down beetle.



As opposed to when they practically fell off the dead mesa the night before, this

landing was quite nice. Nip brought Able gently to the ground about ten feet away from the beetle with its head stuck in the ground. Only now, it didn't look so much like a beetle. For one, it was very tall. Its legs looked more like thumbs, and they didn't squirm about the way a desperate beetle's legs might. They pushed gently through the air, alternating back and forth, each one with a fan embedded in each end. Nip retracted its ribbons and hovered in place. Able reached up and patted him, "Thanks, Nip. That might've taken us days to walk."

They had landed on top of a hill, and from where they were, Able could see new things. For one, he could see the dead mesa near his father's house, smaller now than he had ever seen it. Knowing he could travel faster with the help of Nip, he felt less upset about being away from home and his mother. Maybe his father would calm down. He could go back later.

Looking, down the hill, away from his home, he saw the structures that looked like hives buried in the ground. They were covered in hexagonal windows, almost the whole of them being dark glass. And then, not too far from those, he could see a figure digging in the ground. *Well*, Able thought, *I guess I could ask where I am.*

## CHAPTER 3

### *In which Able meets the Lady in Green.*

As he approached he saw that the digging figure was an old woman in a red cloak. Able wasn't sure how to start an interaction. He generally only spoke when spoken to. With his feet crunching on the rock, she must have heard him coming, but she did not look up. He stood still for several more moments, and then, "Hello. Could you tell me where I am?"

Without looking up, she said, "Did you know that Jupaeter ate one of his children?"

Able was struck silent by the unexpected question.

"Do you even know who Jupaeter is?"

"Yes. Jupaeter ate Levy, his son, the shoemaker. He ate him whole."

"You know that, do you?"

"My father told me."

"Jupaeter's the sky. And he wouldn't take kindly to you dashing about on whatever that contraption of yours is."

"I... I couldn't really help it," Able said with a shrug.

She stopped digging and looked at him surprised. "You couldn't help it?"

"Not really."

Finally, the old woman looked up, directly at Nip. "I suppose it has a mind of its own, hmm?"

Able just shrugged again.

The old woman furrowed her brow and slowly pulled herself up from the ground, bringing her digging instrument up as a cane. She is so hunched over that she is almost at eye level with Able. "So how do you feel about Jupaeter eating Levy?"

"Seems sad."

She raises her makeshift cane and pokes it in Nip's direction—Nip flits back away—"And how did you come by such a thing?"

"I made it."

Bringing her cane down, and stroking her chin with her other hand, she closes one eye and looks Able up and down. "I find that unlikely."

Able was shocked, but replied, "It's very true." He pulled out his sack with the other mistakes, and poured them on the ground. "That one," pointing to Nip, "is Nip. These other two are Po and Ka."

"Ha ha! They have names, do they?"

"It seemed... appropriate? To name them?"

"Maybe. At any rate, I need to eat. I take it you do not."

"No."

"Then, I suggest we go inside and I eat and we talk, little one."

"My name is Able."

"Oh, it has a name too!? Well, my name is Ghendra." She turned to walk away, paused, and turned back, "That is not my only name, but it's the only one you need to know."





The inside of Ghendra's home was crowded tight, filled with a hodge-podge of knick-knacks and thingamabobs, all piled and stacked and pushed into corners in no particular order or pattern. She cleared out an area and a cleared off a chair and offered it to Able to sit. Able picked up Po and set him in his lap as Ka rolled around the base of the chair, bumping into things. Nip had stayed outside. Once seated, there was silence for a time until Able began asking questions, and he found that once he'd begun, he had no end of them in mind.

He asked about the beetle. It was some kind of "moisture collector" and had something to do with gathering water and some other things that Able didn't quite understand. He asked about the hives and was told that they were greenhouses—houses for plants. He remarked that they were not green, and she replied that they were on the inside, as he would see later. First, she needed to eat, and she lay a wooden bowl of stew of mushrooms on the table. Po, had been bouncing on Able's lap, seemingly wanting up onto the table, so Able lifted him up and let him roam about there. All eyed the stew. It was nothing like the food Able's father made, but it must be for eating. Able stared curiously as Ghendra put spoonfuls of the stuff into her mouth.

After a time, Ghendra finished her bowl of stew and burped. She pushed it away from herself. "Now it is time for you to answer some of my questions, little one. How did you come to acquire these little friends of yours?" Able explained that he had not acquired them but had made them from leftover material from his father's brundlex. He wasn't supposed to make them. He told Ghendra what had happened with his father and how it had brought him here. Mostly, she listened, but at one point she mumbled,

"Witless old fool." Able was not sure of whom she was speaking. As she asked more questions, Po made his way around the table near here, veering away when she first reached out to touch it. Able pet Po and said, "It's fine Po; she's a friend." And after that, Po allowed Ghendra to poke him and roll him over to examine him.

"I imagine, then, that you have built other mechanicals like this one, but they were different, no? More like my beetle—as you called it, yes?"

"Yes."

"But these three that travel with you, what is different?"

Able squirmed in his seat, unsure of the answer. "I didn't—or I don't—tell them what to do."

"Yes." Ghendra said with a sigh, "Such a boring life has a mechanical that has an intent—a purpose. I suppose it is good to have a purpose—not everything does—but then a purpose does cause one to repeat actions over and over. Can you imagine being such a machine?"

Able thought on this for a while. He did not know of any purpose that he had or had been given. His father spoke of their purpose at times, but Able never felt it in his body. "I guess not."

Ghendra smiled and arose from the table and said, "Let's check in on the garden."



Once inside the greenhouse, Able felt the strangest sensation—that his surface was covered in some substance. It made the air feel heavy and cooled him. All around him

now, he could see all manner of pipes that shot up from the ground, split in any number of directions and ended in bright green plates. He was baffled. He'd never seen so much color, let alone felt such a sense of life. Ghendra explained that the thing he felt on his skin was moisture—very thin water—and that the many things he saw were called plants, and that though they did not move or talk, they were indeed alive, and in fact, she pointed out, they tended to make more of themselves. They needed water and light, and beyond that, they would "do their own thing." In fact, she pointed out, the moisture that he felt was, in fact, their breath. Able marveled at their beauty.

As Ghendra and Able shuffled down winding paths between all the plants, Ghendra spoke, "It is said, that a long time ago, back when the world was well-balanced, these plants grew *everywhere*. They did not need houses to thrive. They didn't need mechanicals to find water for them, for water was everywhere, said to even fall from the sky. That was when the council was whole. That was when the codification of the world was clear. But, as you know, from digging up tablets with your father, the codification has been broken for some time."

Able followed Ghendra as she walked, but didn't really follow her speech. *Water falling from the sky?*

Even more amazing, some of the plants had small bowls of bright colors, seemingly folded together out of paper. Ghendra called these flowers.

"Look at how much color you've created! It's fantastic!"

"I didn't really create it. I built the houses and gathered the water and planted the seeds. The rest was up to Jupaeter's wife, Gaea."

"I did not know that Jupaeter had a wife."

"No doubt. Many believe she left this world long ago. But that's not entirely true.

She is merely sleeping."

The pair stayed in the garden for a time, Ghendra tending to the plants, and Able examining them all, breathless at the sight of yellow and blue and pink and green.



After a time, Ghendra and Able returned to the house. Able sat at the table again and Ghendra joined him, picking up Po to examine it. It chattered with nervousness as she held him. "This one makes me curious." She spoke to Po, "Your brothers seem content to absorb things and change, but you—you've been remembering things haven't you?" Po shook in Ghendra's thin fingers, seemingly spinning on the inside, until she set him down. Once on the table, Po rolled in a circle and then, three small feet unfolded from him, setting on the table to hold it still. Then, a split formed in its center, and a section opened up revealing a gem that was filled with light. The light stretched up from Po forming many dots that danced and coalesced into a picture of Ghendra's own face. "Oh my." A three dimensional blue and green light picture of Ghendra rotated above Po.

Able was stunned. "He's never done that before."

"I see." Ghendra got up from the table and made her way over to a stack of papers and books.

Able reached out across the table and grabbed Po and dragged it over in front of him. Po chirped and suddenly the light picture danced and changed into a picture of Able. Able laughed and said, "Po, how come you never did this before?" Once more the light changed and danced, turning deep purple, and creating the visage and Able's

father's face. "Oh," said Able, sadly.

Ghendra set a heavy tome down on the table and let it fall open. She grabbed Po once again and turned it upside down. Po made a churlish sound and the light spread out over the book. But after a moment the light fell flat on the book and the letters and characters began to also glow. Po made many, many noises, all in succession. And then, after a moment, light from the characters in the book faded, and Po uttered a low bell sound. Ghendra laughed and turned the page, whereupon the whole process happened again.

"What is he doing?"

Ghendra smiled and looked at Able, again turning the page, "He's eating." She picked Po up after the third page turn and turned him feet-down on the table. "Now, show us."

Po's light danced about and in as many colors as the rainbow, he quickly illuminated a series of shapes and objects—a castle, a mesa, some tools, a wave, creatures—all so fast that Able could barely make out what they were.

"My, my," whispered Ghendra.

"I don't understand," said Able, his brow furrowed. "How is he eating pictures when there are none in your—" Able looked at the book on the table.

"Book," Ghendra said. "It is a book and it contains information."

"What is that?"

"Information is many things, Able. The world is filled with it, really. Your name, for instance, is information."

"My name?"

"Yes. Just a moment." Ghendra got up again and knocked a stack of papers and

books to the ground. She picked up little Po and set him on the messy pile. "Have at it, little one." And Po's feet grew longer as he held himself over the jumbles of characters and began rapidly tracing them with lights.

Turning back to Able, Ghendra said, "If I wanted to talk about someone in the world, how would I do it if no one had names? I can't speak to you about my plants because even though they have names, you don't know them. But a name gives things a kind of uniqueness. Names are information. They aren't the only kind of information—there are many kinds of information. Po, it would seem, eats information. You and I also eat information, but we do it differently. In fact, the way you and I do it is even different. And when we want to remember or trade information, we have to talk about it. Po, he can simply show us what he's thinking."

Able nodded. "I see," he said, although he didn't really.

Ghendra made a quizzical face and then asked Able, "What do you feed your little mistakes?"

Able reached into his sack and pulled out the smaller bag of electrol dust. "It comes from my Father's well. He says it's just dirt but I call it electrol."

Picking up the bag, Ghendra removed a handful of the shimmering dust and let it pour from her hand back into the bag. She set it down for a moment and got up, walked to an armoire, and pilfered through some drawers. Retrieving a small tube, she returned to the table. She held the tube top to her eye and once again pulled a handful of the substance out of the sack and poured it back. Able could see her eye without the tube grow wide. She removed the tube from her eye and blinked a few times, removing a charm from her mind. "Most people in this world of ours are fools, Able." She handed the bag back to him. "They would think this substance useless, as your father did. But it

is special—very special. And you, since you know what to do with it, and I assume, how to find it, are also very special."

Able looked at the bag, noticing how light it had become. "Yes. I was thinking that, maybe after my father—maybe he wouldn't be mad anymore—and I could go home to get more."

"No. Your father is also a fool. You should seek out others like yourself. There are those that can do what you do, and they can show you more." She reached over and picked Po up and said it on the table again, where's legs shrunk down, and where the light again formed a picture, this time of a brundlex. "Bah," said Ghendra, "a primitive mechanical at best." She leaned in close to Po and said, "Show me the Ultracircus."

Po quivered and whirred and the picture of the brundlex transformed into an eight-legged machine with a plate on top of it, and on top of the plate, castle walls surrounding tall glass buildings. Though the image stayed in one place, the city on legs seemed to walk through the air. Ghendra spoke again, "You must find this place, Able. You must seek out your kind."

"I don't know. Is it far?"

"Who knows? I do not. It moves and I don't. However, I know someone who can start you in the right direction—a friend, of sorts. But I think he would be interested in helping you. His name is Gef. He is a Dustman. You will find him near the Delphine's run.

"I don't know. I should go home. I need to help my mother."

"Your mother, Evo; I do not think there is anything you can do for her, Able."

Able wondered how Ghendra knew his mother's name, but not for long. "I don't know."

Ghendra made a bed out of blankets for Able. He lay down and watched as, across the room, Po continued to shine lights on books and papers and sometimes make squeals and beeps. Ka rolled over next to Able and nuzzled him. Able asked him, "What do you do?" to which Ka replied by purring. Able smiled and drifted off to sleep.

In the morning, Able gathered a now quiet and spherical Po and Ka and his sack. He crept about the house and saw Ghendra sleeping in another room. He made his way out of the house and looked up to see Nip hovering far above in the dusky morning light. He waved Nip down, and said to him. "Take me home, please, Nip."



When they arrived at his father's house, Able, from the sky could see his brother outside digging in the ground. He had dug a large, long hole. Nip set Able down away from the house, near a large outcropping of tablets where Able could see the house. As his brother continued digging, Able's father came out of the house with something in his arms—something wrapped in sheets. In his heart, Able knew what was in his father's arms—who was in his father's arms.

Able watched as his father lowered the body into the hole. The two men stood quietly over it, Able's father having removed his hat, speaking, though Able could not hear him. Then, after a time, the two men began filling in the hole. Po and Ka made soft noises in the sack. Nip hovered close by. Able grew immensely sad and wished he could cry.





"You're going to need another name, little one," Ghendra said.

Able had returned to Ghendra's house in the afternoon and she could see from his posture what he had discovered. She felt poorly for him and hugged him. But she also knew that it would only be days before the caravan would leave at the next approach of Delphine, and then it would be many months before the traders built a new bridge and returned to Idex MorteZ.

"My name is Able."

"No, no. A surname. With it, you can add more information to yourself. You will be called Summary. When anyone asks, you can tell them you are Able Summary."

"Um, ok."

"You'll find the caravan to the east of here. You'll know them when you see them. There, among them, you will find Gef. Tell him that I sent you. And perhaps, don't show him or the rest your mistakes—not right away. Don't show anyone the mistakes until you are sure the time is right. You'll know when."

"Gef has been searching for some time for an object called the Cyclopedia. Tell him you can help him find it in exchange for taking you out of Idex MorteZ."

"But I don't even know what that is."

"It won't matter; not right away. Just know that he will help you, and then you will be on your way. And remember that Po knows things."

## CHAPTER 4

### *In which Able finds Gef and the Caravan and Delphine.*

As they flew through the air again, Able comfortable in Nip's seat, he could think of little else but his mother's eyes. He missed her desperately. In his lap, sat his sack with both Ka and Po and now a great deal of sweetbread and something from the plants that Ghendra called fruit and vegetables. She said he could use them for trade for things he might need. He was glad to have it, glad to have met Ghendra, but he was also sad and scared. Never in his life had he known so little about what would come next.

In a way, he supposed, he had never known what would come next. Days only seemed to repeat themselves without much change. But now, having lost his mother, having seen his mistakes do amazing things right before his eyes, having met Ghendra and seen new colors... now, it seemed like his life was changing daily. There was wonder in it that he liked. But then there was no knowing what would come next.

In the distance, he spotted a massive crack across the land. Before it, the tablets of Idex MorteZ spilled over each other, but the piles of ancient written language grew shorter and shorter in height until there was just barren ground. Past that, there was the crack—a huge wound in the ground that was wide and dark and seemed to stretch from one end of the horizon to the other. Then, between the diminishing piles of the tablets

and the crack, he saw a mass of movement. He could see beige tents, and people moving about them, and massive creatures of a kind he had never seen or heard of before. They were long and made of sections and had many, many legs.

Able, looked up. "Nip, don't get too close. Let's just land nearby." Nip chirped a gleeful reply and flew lower to the ground, whisking them over the hills and hills of tablets until they came near the edge, where Nip set them down.

"Now, Ghendra said to keep you all hidden, so I need you to hide, okay, Nip."

Nip buzzed with some annoyance, but then sucked up the ribbons into its ring of light, and then sucked the light into its center. Nip turned a dull, metallic orange and dropped out of the sky onto the ground with a thud. It made a sound like a huff. "Well, all right," said Able. Nip was now just a dodecahedron and Able rolled him into the sack with Po and Ka who chirped different greetings. Nip made a farting sound.

Able hefted the whole, now *very* heavy sack onto his back and set off in the direction of the caravan. It amazed Able how quickly he had become used to the idea of flight. One day he had no idea that such a thing was even possible. Then another day he was breathless and amazed that it was. And now, he hated walking and carrying heavy stuff.

When he arrived at the caravan, people were pulling down the tents and tending to the massive creatures in their midsts. The creatures had looked so small from the air, but now Able could see that they were many times his own height, and bigger and longer than even his father's house. Most people gave him very strange looks and pointed at him. Sometimes when he asked them about a man named Gef, they would say nothing and turn away. Able felt a very odd feeling. It wasn't quite fear; something like it but more creeping. Finally, though, one man, looking him up and down, shrugged and

pointed at another man who was tying bags to one of the creatures. "Thank you," said Able to no reply.

The man Gef was dressed in heavy robes and was wearing a mask withy glass eyes and a large-brimmed hat. When Able got over to the man named Gef, Able forgot himself and said instead, "What is that?"

The man paused and turned toward Able with some curiosity. "What is what?"

"Um... your animal."

"Have you never seen a centipede before?"

Able silently shook his head. The man scratched his head underneath his wide-brimmed hat. "Well," he said, "It's a centipede." Able nodded.

"You're a pretty far ways off from anywhere, kid."

"Oh. Well, I'm looking for a man named Gef."

"Ok. Well, that'd be me." He stared down at Able from behind his mask. "And you are?"

"Ghendra sent me."

"Ghendra, huh?" The man turned and tightened some straps on the bags on the centipede. "Okay."

"She said that you were looking for a—um—a cyclo..."

"The Cyclopedia?"

"Yes. She said I could help you find it."

"She said that, huh? Now did she mean that you *want* to help me or that you *could* help me?"

Able thought. "Um... she said I *could* help you. And she said that in exchange you could help me past Delphine's run."

"Really? So you know something about the Cyclo?"

"No."

Gef chuckled. "Wonder what that old bat is up to?"

Able thought on it. "She's growing plants."

Gef laughed louder. "Yeah, we all know that. Won't trade seeds for nothin', so what of it? What do you got in that sack?"

"Fruitsandvegetables."

"Fruits and vegetables."

"Yes."

"No, kid. They're two different things. There's fruit, and then there's vegetables."

Able stared blankly.

"Well, you're the only one around here who's got any of that, so that's something."

"Okay," Able said.

"You got a name?"

"Able Summary."

Gef furrowed his brow. "That's a weird name, kid."

"Is it?"

"Yeah."

The pair just stared at one another for a moment.

Gef squatted down to be on Able's level. He looked around the crowd and pulled his mask up. His face was much like Able's! "You are a curious thing, little man."

Able just stared.

"Where did you come from again?"

"The Desert Idex Mortex."

"Sure. I doubt that."

"I did! My mother..." Able paused and looked down, then continued, "My mother and Father lived out there and farmed."

"Your mother and father?" Asked Gef. "You have a mother and father?"

"Yes."

"And are they like you? Like me?"

"What do you mean?"

Gef scratched his head again. "Did they drink water?"

"Yes."

"But see, you and I don't."

"I know."

"Okay. Huh. Mother and father, huh? Well, if you don't know nothin' about the Cyclo, I don't know how she thinks you could help. But then who knows what she had in mind—probably something. She knows things."

"She showed me lots of books."

"Is that right?" Gef paused.

Able panicked, and did something he did not like, he lied. He thought of Po, and said, "I've memorized all of them."

Gef looked at his mount for a moment and then turned to Able again. "Well, you don't weigh much, so I suppose it's not too much trouble. Get yourself up on my pede and find a place to secure that sack of yours. We're getting out of here pretty quick. The Delphine's coming soon."



The bridge across the chasm was long, thin, and badly built. Mostly it was constructed of steel wires shot across the crack with massive crossbows. Everything on top of that had been knitted with steel cable. The trader's camp had entirely disappeared; now there was just a traffic jam of centipedes waiting to cross the rickety steel-sewn bridge one at a time. The riders shouted at one another about their place in line. From what Able could tell some people had more reason to cross than others. At times there were families onboard of massive insects and yet the order of the crossing was only respected in that it should be one at a time.

With not that many pedes in front of them, Gef called back to Able (barely hanging on to the chitin of the monster) that "We'll get to the other side soon! Until then, hang on tight to Arthra."

"What's an Arthra?" Able yelled back.

"You're sitting on her!"

And then, the order broke apart. Someone riding something other than a pede—a kind of steam effusing mini-mesa—came racing down the edge of the chasm, screaming, "Delphine's coming!" The world seemed to lurch as every driver of every pede now rushed the bridge and began crossing without waiting, the entirety of the bridge beginning to vibrate and undulate with the thousand legs of tens of different centipedes. Gef somehow convince Arthra to muscle onto the bridge ahead of many other riders. Able noticed she was one of the larger pedes and seemed to be carrying much less.

He looked all about the confusion to try to figure out what was going on. He couldn't see Gef's face while sitting behind him, but he could see panic in the face of the driver behind them. He wanted to grab on to Nip and fly, but the words of Ghendra kept in his head. *Do not reveal them too soon. You'll know when.*

Then Able began to see changes in the light all around. The whole time he had been with Gef and waited in line for the bridge, the light was normal just like at home. There were clouds in the sky, and from them light. Now, a shadow had overtaken the horizon. It was different. The shadow was like a new horizon. It was moving, stretching out from one end of the chasm and reaching towards the riders and the bridge. He could see shadows down in the chasm changing, lengthening.

He could feel the shadow in the center of his body, so much so that he even thought he could hear it. He looked towards the source of the dark at the end of the chasm and saw what looked like a sandstorm, only it was getting taller, and unlike a sandstorm, it was curved. A sandstorm would have been drawn across the horizon like a line, but this was like the edge of circle, and growing.

Gef, in the meantime, with Arthra maybe an eighth of the way across the bridge, began to laugh. "If you wanted to ride with me, son, you picked an amazing day to do it!" The centipede wound its hundred legs out over the steel knitting, each leg sticking to the cables with massive fibers.

Beyond the bridge, far down the chasm, a dark arc continued to reveal itself. Able could see that it was like a sandstorm, dust and clouds broiling around a dark center. Shouts across the caravan went up, "Delphine!"

The massive body rolled slowly and crushed everything in its path, smashing the sides of the chasm, tearing massive pieces off as it went. The sound Able had only thought he could detect earlier began to truly vibrate his insides and soon there was no question he could hear it. He could hear little else, only Gef shouting at the top of his lungs, "Move, move, move!" There was death in it, and he had not felt fear quite this intense—or at least only in the last few days. This was even more fearsome.



They neared the far side of the bridge and Able could begin to see much more of the outline of the the giant rock, the meteor. He could see its pock-marked surface rolling slowly over from top to bottom, huge boulders being thrust off of it and the edge of the canyon, landing with explosions hundreds of kilometers off. Surrounding the edge of the massive object was a twisting ebony nightmare of roiling, twisting clouds. Some of the debris even flew at the bridge down into the chasm or up over their heads. The air was growing thick with dust. The light from the sky was disappearing.

"C'mon, Arthra! C'mon!" The centipede zigged and zagged across the steel cables. Gef had bent way low over her and Able did the same, clinging to the insect's armor and jostling all about, sometimes so much he couldn't make out the shape of anything at all. Past Gef and over Arthra he could see the other side of the chasm, but he had no idea how near they were.

Would this not be the time to use the mistakes? But how in the world could Po, Ka and Nip even manage to deal with the massive beast? And even though Able had only known Gef and Athra for maybe an hour, he couldn't imagine leaving them behind for some reason. Something inside him felt attached to Gef. Gef's questions had raised questions in Able. There seemed to be so much to discover. Able wouldn't abandon them and fly. He hunkered down and dared to gaze again in the direction of Delphine.

With the rock blocking out so much of the sky, so close Able thought he could reach it, with the noise so loud, it drowned out everything, the dust so thick Able couldn't see the riders behind them, Arthra's shape changed. Suddenly, she was not rippling from one end to the other or side to side. Had they reached the other side? Dust was everywhere.

Another few minutes and the centipede was climbing up out of the dust cloud, up at a steep angle. Able had been worried about sliding off the side of the creature, no he was

worried about rolling backwards as the centipede climbed and the dust began to dissipate. Able felt a rise in his belly as the centipede crested a mesa and began to slow. "Woo!" Shouted Gef and he slapped Arthra hard on her armor.

The centipede slowed to a crawl and began to turn to so that Able could look out and see the top of Delphine moving through the chasm, leaving a massive, long deluge of smoke and rubble. Able couldn't make out the bridge. From where he sat, he could see other riders on other peaks. He could see some emerging up from the dark torrent, dust streaming off of them.

## CHAPTER 5

### *In which Able frees a Dustfish.*

Gef, Able and Arthra (Po, Ka, and Nip, too) ride away from the rest of the caravan. Even over the scrabbly badlands that they are in, Able can look behind and see the remnants of Delphine's destruction. "Where are we going?" Able asked. "Why aren't we going with the others?"

Gef replied, "We're going where they're going, but we're going a slightly different route." Gef turned in his seat to look at Able through his mask, "I don't want them getting too much more of a look at you."

"Why?"

Gef laughed. "By the clock! You have no idea what you are, do you, kid?"

Able thought about this. "Of course I do."

"Okay then, tell me."

"I'm a boy."

Gef laughed again, harder this time. "Who in the world would make something like you? I just can't figure."

Able had no idea how to reply to this.

"Do you know what a Noman is?"

"No."

"Well, you ain't it."

They rode on for a while in silence. In fact, the silence was immense to Able. With the rumble of Delphine growing in the distance, only questions hung in the air; that and the sound of Arthra's feet scraping at the dirt. Finally, Gef spoke again. "I really don't know how to tell you this, Able—I don't know if I *should* tell you. It seems nice to me that you're ignorant, because the world is not going to like you, Able. Not at all."

After a time, Arthra began descending down a large hill. She wound back and forth, her body curving into a long S. As they descended the hill, small gray things began appearing on and around the rocks. "What's that?" Able asked.

"Lichen." Gef answered. After a moment he said, "They're kinda like those plants that Ghendra had... sort of. At any rate, Arthra eats them, and when we get down to the bottom of this valley, we're gonna give her a little break."

Once in the ravine, Able noticed that the temperature had dropped. There was a small trickle of water running down through the rocks and even small spots of fuzzy green. There were more lichen and they varied in shapes and sizes. Some were almost as tall as he was! Gef brought Arthra to a halt and hopped off. He signaled to Able to do the same. He also removed some bags from off Arthra's back and then gave her a pat and she began to wander away.

Gef sat down on a rock and took off his hat and mask. Able still had his sack with his mistakes and the fruits and vegetables. He stood and looked at the creek. In the desert where his father lived, water came from far underneath the ground. To see it spilling everywhere like this seemed like a terrible waste.

"I'm going to have to make you a disguise," Gef said.

Able turned to look at Gef.

Gef knew immediately Able had no idea what a disguise was, so he just said, "You can't go around looking like you do. You need to cover up your face."

"Okay."

"Ever heard of the Dust Men?"

"No."

Gef chuckled. "They're a legend in these parts. Pirates... uh... raiders who can live on the Silt Sea somehow. I dress like a Dust man so that people mostly leave me be. I'm gonna dress you up like one, too, okay?"

Able shrugged, "Okay."

Gef cocked his head in wonder. "So, this mother and father of yours; they drank water?"

"Yes."

"And did you do things for them?"

"My mother was very sick. I built special brundelaxes that helped her to do things like breathe."

"I see."

"She loved me very much."

"She did? She said that?"

"Yes."

"That's... that's wonderful, Able. You should never, ever forget that—that you were loved." Gef sat back on the rock and paused. He shook his head. "I can't say that for myself."

"What about your mother?"

"No. I have no mother, Able. The truth is, you don't either, but... well, I suppose you

do in some sense... maybe in the best sense."

"I *have* a mother." Able looked at the ground. "I *had* a mother."

"What do you mean?"

"She's gone now."

Oh, Able. I'm so sorry." After another long moment, "That's why you're out here."

Able sat down cross-legged on the ground, letting go of his sack. "Yes. My father hates me."

"Why?"

"He said I was a heretic. He said... he said I do things that I shouldn't. But I can't help it!"

"I know, I know. That's the thing Able. Your parents—they're Noman. They aren't like you and me. They... work differently. We, well, it's awful, but you're going to hear this sooner or later. Better that you hear it from me. The nomans, they call us 'clockworks'. It's terrible. It's not true. We are nothing like clocks. We are so much more than that. But they hate us, so they reduce us to the simplest thing they can think of it. It makes it easier for them to destroy us. They don't have to feel anything when they do it. Does any of that make any sense?"

Able just stared. He put his head in his hands.

"What we really are is synthezoids. We don't eat, we don't drink water. We can think differently than the nomans. We can do things they can't. We feed off the light and crysoprase. And they hate us for it, and they blame us for the way the world is."

"What's wrong with the way the world is?"

"Maybe nothing. Maybe everything. It just used to be different is all." Gef began digging around in his bags. "Like I said, we're gonna put together something for you to

wear." He chuckled. "You'll be the funniest little Dust Man anyone's ever seen!"

"Can I go look at the water."

Gef smiled. "Able, you can do whatever you want now. You never have to ask me."

Able wasn't sure how he felt about that. It felt strange. But, he got up and walked down to the water.



The dirt all around the water was brimming with electrol! Able was so happy to find more to feed his mistakes. He ran back to his sack by Gef and got out his sack of electrol. He heard Po make a low worried sound, but didn't dare say anything in front of Gef. The mistakes seemed to understand that they needed to stay quiet. He went back down to the creek and began gathering more of the glittering dust.

While digging, Able saw something very strange. It was metallic and shiny and squirmy. He dug around it and finally was able to unearth the whole thing. It thrashed in his hands. It had eyes and a mouth and thin panels all over its body.

He took it over to Gef. "What is this?"

Gef looked up from the mask he was working on and said, "That's a Dustfish."

Able looked at the dustfish, which had stopped squirming quite so much. He thought it was beautiful.

"It'll die if it doesn't stay in the mud, Able. You should put it back."

"I want to keep it. It's so pretty."

"It's cruel, Able. A dustfish need moisture to breath."

"Oh," said Able. He took the dustfish over to his sack, reached in and pulled out Ka, keeping his body between Ka and Gef. Then he walked back down to the water. "Ka, I want you to take care of this new friend." Able took some of the electrol dust and spread it on the dustfish. He took Ka and helped him expand to the size of the dustfish and then pushed the two together and set them down in the water.

Ka furzeled and sucked in water and changed his color from yellow to blue. It grew a band around itself and two small pipes that begin pulling in air, making bubbles in itself. It also grew two small half-globes that whirled and allowed Ka to hover up out of the water and come to Able's eye-level. Able peered inside Ka and saw the dustfish swimming. "What should we call you?"

Suddenly, from behind, Able heard Gef shout, "In Gaea's name! What is that!?"

Able was startled and turned suddenly to Gef. "I-I'm sorry! Don't punish me! Don't make me break it."

Gef immediate squatted down and put his hands on Able's shoulders. "Able, no. No. It's fine. I'm just—I'm just amazed is all. I'm not mad. I promise." Gef looked past Able at the dustfish floating in the air inside Ka. "It's just... how in Gaea's name did you do that?"electrol



## CHAPTER 6

### *In which Able and Gef travel to the outpost of Kinton Station*

"I have no idea how we're going to hide this thing," was Gef's main concern after everything settled down with the new floating aquarium that was Ka. Able had decided then that the dustfish's name was Rolly, and had begun referring to the whole contraption —dustfish and Ka— as Ka'Rolly. But Gef had other concerns, like what in the world was it that Able had done to create such a thing. Once the jig was up with Ka, Able showed him Nip and Po as well and Gef was beside himself.

Able showed him that he could fly with Nip and showed him how Po knew things. Po happily showed Gef his own image and Gef just laughed and laughed. He had never seen a complete picture of himself like that, not in hundreds of years. A little entity like Po could help so much in restoring the Cyclopedia! He wondered if Ghendra had really known what she had sent him. Gef wondered that especially because the boy would be not only be useful, but downright revolutionary.

And Able had never had the chance to tell anybody how he made his mistakes! Once he started explaining it to Gef he couldn't stop. He had never talked so much in his life. The only odd thing was that when he showed Gef the bag of electrol, Gef confessed that it just looked like dirt. Whatever it was that Able was seeing in it, Gef could not see

it.

Gef had only heard about such things coming from the monks of the Ultracircus and that was total legend—children's fairy tales. But there was no denying what he was seeing. Able was somehow affecting the code of the world.

Gef attended to Able first. Like himself, he wrapped Able in linen bandages everywhere and gave him a belt and a small robe he'd sewn together. Arthra had shed some time back and Gef had kept some pieces of her chitin. He used an old piece to fashion a kind of helmet for Able and some very small pieces for goggles. The rest of Able's mask came from various leftover brundlex pieces he'd found in his travels. When he was done, Able did indeed look like a very small Dustman. It would have to work.

Fo Ka'Rolly, Gef decided to fashion a long cloak that could drape over the shell that Ka had formed around the dustfish and then he made a face out of more brundlex parts and hung it on the shell. He fashioned a kind of body out of lots of junk and hung it off Ka's floating sphere, like a scarecrow. When Ka'Rolly floated along, he sort of looked like a big-headed synthezoid in a cloak. Sort of. Again, it would have to do.

It was extremely hard explaining to Able that most synthezoids had masters, that they weren't free, and that synthezoids that were free were hunted and destroyed. Able just had no way to conceive of such things. But the boy synthezoid seemed to understand that he must keep his identity a secret, and that they should act like Ka'Rolly was a pet, not a friend—just around Nomans. Finally, Able needed a Dustmen name. Gef explained that the Dustmen had a sort of language of their own that sounded a lot like the movement of the Silt Sea. They had a word for that which was unique which was "hazkerets". Able and Gef agreed to shorten it to "Haz".

"Wait," Able said. "Your name is Gef. Is that your real name?"

"No. I've had several names."

"What's your real name?"

"Truth is Able, I forgot it a long time ago. I've always hoped that if I could piece the Cyclo back together, I might be able to find it, but who knows."



Able could see the outpost in the distance. Much like his father's misshapen shack under the mesa, the buildings silhouettes were haphazard and jagged, pushing out of the scrabble of the badlands like bad teeth. He could see many other pedes gathered around its edges. It looked like many of the other members of the trader's caravan had made it this far, though Able still worried greatly about the ones that maybe didn't. He also noticed a great many giant flags billowing from different camps and around the outpost. When he asked, Gef explained that these represented crews from various far-off cities, the places these traders would eventually return to when they had acquired what they were after. Cities, Gef explained, were like the outpost, but much, much bigger.

"Like the Ultracircus?" Able asked.

"Yeah, not that big. And most cities don't move around." Gef thought of the sky city of Uchava. "Most."

As they rode down the center street of the outpost, Able could practically feel the stares of the people milling about. Gef had explained that people were wary of Dustmen but they didn't hate them like synthezoids, so they were okay. "Trust me," Gef said, "they're more afraid of us than we should be of them."

The main drag of the outpost was very wide, offering accommodation too not just pedes, but all manner of other things—rigs with two legs, four legs and rigs with wheels and rigs with tracks. Sometimes rigs with wheels were pulled by things with legs. He didn't like that. Then again, he thought, he was riding on Arthra. Then again, she was so big, she must hardly notice. Able made a mental note to try and ask her some time.

Regardless, he was fascinated by every single rig that passed. They came to a big wide space that was filled with tables shaded by big pieces of fabric. Able smelled so many smells, he had a hard time processing any of them. There were smells like smoke, like flesh, like the fruits that Ghendra had given him; so many smells that they combined into a miasma that he couldn't even identify. As they moved closer, the scents would vacillate between delicious and then suddenly off-putting, nearing poisonous even.

They stopped and Gef hopped down off Arthra. Able did the same, sliding himself down her side with a rope attached to his "seat" (a bunch of blankets rolled and tied together with twine, strapped to Arthra with leather straps.) Ka'Rolly followed him, slowly hovering down to the ground. Gef rolled his eyes behind his mask. "Okay, look. You... uh... you *two* stay right here by Arthra. Just hang out. I'm going to go make some trades." As he was talking he brought down a crate off the backend of Arthra. He knew the curiosity regarding the market would be too much. "I need you to guard Arthra, okay? She needs you to stand watch."

Able nodded. Ka'Rolly beeped.

"Okay." Gef thought for a minute. "And do not let anyone see your other two, uh, mistakes?"

Able nodded.

"It's so weird you call them that. Have you ever thought about calling them

something else?"

Able shrugged.

"Well, whatever. Guard Arthra, okay?"

"I will," said Able, mustering all the confidence he could.

With that, Gef walked away with the crate.



For an hour or so, nothing happened. Able watched rig after rig go by, observing the different forms of locomotion. Sometimes when one in particular had something new, Able would point it out to Ka'Rolly. "Look, that one's got a brundlex." Ka'Rolly would make a kind of wheezing whistle.

At one point, Able felt something brush up against his foot and he looked down to see a ball. At first he thought it might be Po, having left the "nest" he'd made on Arthra's back. He was about to admonish the object until he saw that, in fact, it was just a ball. He gingerly picked it up and showed it to Ka'Rolly who made a sound as if to say, "There it is." Able looked around to find where it came from and about a fifty meters off saw some children standing in a group staring at him. He bent down and with the ball between his legs, did his best to roll out back to them.

Ten minutes later Able found himself face-to-face with a girl from the group of children. She was chewing something. She looked at Able, who was shorter, and then up at Ka'Rolly who "stood" at two meters. After a moment of mutual staring, she said, "You're clockworks is weird."

Able looked up at Ka'Rolly, who looked down. From beneath his hooded head, his makeshift face peered out with a permanent, dumb smile on it. Able looked back to the girl and shrugged. "I guess he is."

The girl squinted her eyes and looked at Able again. "Are you a dust man?"

"Yes," Able said confidently. He was new to lying, but this one he knew.

The girl looked unsure. "You're a very small dust man. Are you a kid?"

Able had no idea how to reply. "I am a small dust man."

"But you're a kid."

Able gave up. "Yes."

"You can come play ball with us if you want."

Able really liked this idea, but Gef's words stuck. "I have to guard our pede."

"You can see it from where we are. We've been looking at it and you and your weird clockworks."

Able looked to Ka'Rolly for advice and the creature replied with a sound like, "I don't know. I'm a fish in a jar."

"Okay." Able turned to Ka'Rolly and in a kind of imitation of Gef he said, "I need you to stay here and guard Arthra."

Ka'Rolly sighed. If he could he'd rather play ball, too.



After trading fruits, vegetables, brundlex pieces, metal parts, and centipede chitin for bars of silicon and aluminum and a few tubes of argon, Gef heads away from the

market to an alley on the outskirts of the outpost. There he enters a little shop filled from floor to ceiling with books, papers, stone tablets, beads, jewelry, trinkets, and all manner of small animals (organic and inorganic) in small guided cages. Gef has to stop over piles and slide past stuffed shelves to make his way to the back. There's a counter and a young man seated at it. The young man looks up and is immediately terrified.

"Uh, yes, sir?"

Gef asks, "Is Wacamolo around?"

"Um. Yes!" The young man seems relieved to leave the counter and go in search of his master. A moment later he returns with an ancient bad noman with a wrinkled face and a long mustache. "Gef! You old rust bucket!" The old noman shakes Gef's hand with vigor. "I hate to tell you, but I haven't heard a thing about cycle relics since the last time you were here."

"That's okay Waca. I'm actually here about something else."

"Well, let's hear it."

"It's hard to explain, and it might even sound silly, but I have reason to believe I have something that should be delivered to the Ultracircus."

Wacamolo's right eyebrow raised high on his forehead. His left one followed while the right one went down again. "The Ultracircus?"

"Yeah."

"Are you crazy? Did you bust a circuit board? There's no such thing as the Ultracircus. It's a myth—a legend—a fairy tale for Gaia's sake!"

"See. I have reason to believe it's not."

"What?"

"I can't say."

Wacamolo shook his head and shrugged. "I mean, there's nothing. I have nothing to help you with that."

"The cyclo says that there are texo compasses that can locate it. Maybe we could figure out where one of those is located."

"A texo compass tuned to the Ultracircus? I can't say I've heard of that before. But if there's anybody who would know, I can think of one person."

"Yeah?"

"Baron Rollo Leocadia."

"The mad scientist!?"

Wacamolo nodded.

"The master of the city of Horn?"

Wacamolo just nodded again.

"Great." Gef put his face in his hand.

"Texo compasses are hard enough to come by. You know that. But a texo compass tuned to the Ultracircus?—only a scientist would know about such a thing."

"Well, prap. I don't know what else to do."

"Now hang on a moment. Getting into the city of Horn—*that* I might be able to help you with. C'mon back. Let's consult the board."

Gef rolled his eyes, but followed the old noman anyway. When they got to the back room, Wacamolo sat down on the dingy carpet in the center of the room and produced a wooden board made with many interlocking rings. Gef sat down cross-legged on the carpet across from Wacamolo and sighed. This i'ching stuff was hoodoo as far as he was concerned, but it was all he could get his hands on for the moment.

Wacamolo threw a number of sticks on the carpet and pushed them about. He



rubbed his whiskery chin and thought. Then, after a moment he arranged all the rings on the board so that they all lay flat and he traced his finger across several symbols. Finally, he held the board out over the sticks and the rings began to move, each one rotating until it was at some angle perpendicular to the ground, some of them matching, others rotating until they were at opposite angles. "Hmm," said Wacamolo.

He read symbols off the board. "Southeast of the Horn, there is a... hollow... of tigers. There is a temple in that place. A temple of... water. The wind will show you the way and the entrance will be unlocked by... uh..."

Gef cocks his head. Old Wacamolo had done these kinds of readings before for him and sometimes they lead somewhere and sometimes they didn't, but he never stumbled over the meanings. "Unlocked by?"

"I don't know. This symbol and this pattern... I've never seen it before." He set the board down on the floor and used his hands to lift his backend to handwalk over to some books on the lowest shelf. He picked a book up and slid himself on the floor back over to the board. He flipped through the book looking, tracing pages with his index finger.

"Here it is... Hmf."

"And?"

"I don't understand. It says the door will open by mistake."

Gef began quietly laughing.

Wacamolo looked about at the sticks. "I must have missed something. That does not make sense."

"Actually, Waca. That makes perfect sense to me." Gef kept laughing.

"What do you mean? How do you open a door by mistake?"

"I can't do it, but I know a guy."

"Most peculiar," said Wacamolo as Gef laughed and stood up.

Wacamolo followed after Gef as Gef nodded to the young man and left the shop. Out in the open air, the pair walked together towards the market. "I have to know what's going on, Gef! You can't just come here and tell me your suddenly seeking the Ultracircus and solve some mystery of *mine* and then leave me in the dark. You have to tell me what's this all about!"

"Waca, honestly, if I tell you it could put you in as much danger as I think I'm in. Something came to mom out past Delphine's run. The Lady in Green sent it. Clearly, she means for me to find the Ultracircus. But who knows, it could be as much of a goose chase as the time you told me there were sections of the Cyclo in that old Arsenic mine. You remember that?"

"You can't hold me accountable for that. The winds were wrong and I merely wasn't taking into account—"

Wacamolo stopped talking as he and Gef rounded a corner and Gef came to a sudden halt, holding his hand out to stop Wacamolo. Across the way, Gef could see a crowd of children who were facing a man and a seven foot raptor. The man himself had Able by the hood of his poncho and was swatting at a bright red dodecahedron flitting about in the air and buzzing around his head.

Gef stared and then sighed. "Son of a balrik."



electrolPlaying ball with the other children was the nicest thing Able had done in

ages. It was fun! Sometimes they passed it around in order and sometimes they changed the order. Sometimes they tossed it and sometimes they kicked it. There didn't seem to be any rules. The others asked him lots of questions. He didn't like lying, so most of the time he would just answer with "I don't know." They asked him if he liked living on the Silt Sea and he didn't know, so he just said, "Not really." And when they asked him what he ate, he remembered Cal's warnings and decided he should eat something. He looked at Ka'Rolly across the wide street and said, "dustfish," and all the children moaned and grabbed their stomachs and pretended to be sick. He thought their reaction was really funny.

Able had completely lost track of time playing and talking when a long shadow fell across the group of children. They all looked up to the silhouette of a man on a large lizard with long back legs and short arms and big teeth. The raptor lowered its head toward Able and took in a long sniff and then snorted hot air on Able. The man on the raptor said, "What in the dunes do we have here?"

The little girl who had first approached Able—her name was Rilla—spoke up. "He's a dust kid, sheriff!"

The sheriff adjusted himself in his saddle. "A dust kid? Well that's the first I've ever heard of such a thing."

Able grew worried and stood very still.

"Where's your tribe, dust kid?"

Able pointed to Arthra. The sheriff looked over at the large centipede and the very strange looking character in a cloak standing next to it. "That fella' in the cloak—he a friend o'yours?"

Able nodded.

The sheriff got down off of his raptor, which snarled as he did. "You don't say much, kid." He then squatted down to Able's level. "Now look, I know you raiders like to travel in groups, so where's the rest of ya'." The sheriff looked over his shoulder down the main thoroughfare. "Are they off hiding in the badlands until nightfall." He looked back at Able and poked him, "Huh?"

Just then and without warning, a siren came from the back of Arthra and in a moment had wailed it's bright, glowing red way across the street and into the sheriff's face. Nip had busted out of the nest the moment the sheriff's finger made contact with Able. He buzzed, blared, honked and bumped the sheriff, who quickly stood up while grabbing Able by the back of his poncho. No sooner did the sheriff do that than Nip positioned himself directly between Able and the sheriff's face and let out a massive klaxon sound that made everyone in the group cover their ears.

As the sheriff dropped Able to cover his ears, Gef was already sprinting across the street. He slid to a stop near Able and swept him up. Without hesitating, he turned to Arthra and began running again. He moved like a raptor; even faster. As he and Able were piling on to Arthra and Nip had flown over with them, the sheriff gathered his wits enough to turn and see Ka'Rolly simply up and float onto the centipedes back. He looked utterly baffled, until with no other option left he reached behind his back and pulled out a long tube connected via a hose to his backpack. He shouted, "You hold it right there!"

As the sheriff scrambled back up onto his raptor and turned it toward the fleeing suspects, two more men on raptors appeared, both with weapons like the sheriff's. "Halt!" one of them yelled. But by then, Arthra was working up to her top speed and just like on Delphine's Run Bridge she was moving fast. The men on raptors gave chase and even went past the edge of Kinton station, but about five hundred meters out into the badlands

it was clear they would never catch the pede as she easily danced and wound her way around massive boulders and underbrush.

## CHAPTER 7

### *In which the crew makes their way into a hollow of tigers.*

After Gef is sure they're no longer being followed, the crew finds a butte with lots of crags for them to get down into and make camp for the night. As they are setting up, Nip immediately flies to spot fifty meters over the camp site. Gef looks up at the gold and green glowing spot and shouts, "We really don't need a beacon telling people where we are!" Nip changes color to a very dark purple. "Well, that's... better." Gef looks to Able who is examining Po. "Can you not tell it to stay down here?"

Able looks to the twilight sky and says, "I can't tell *it* to do *anything*." Able was frustrated with Nip, yes, but that was the way the mistakes were made. They had their own wills. They took suggestions, not orders—especially Nip. With that, Able gave Po a hug. Po purred.

Having laid out some large rocks that emit a bright turquoise light, Gef sits on a makeshift stool and says, "Well that did not go as planned back in town, but I did manage to get us some information."

Able was excited at hearing the word information. He had not heard any information in a few days. He sat cross-legged on the ground with Po in his lap. Ka'Rolly flattened its fake body out and set down on the ground next to Able, who pulled the cloak

back and pet Ka.

"I had an old friend at the station. He knows stuff. He thinks the only way we can get to the Ultracircus is to find a device that can locate it. Do you know what a texo compass is?"

"I know what a compass is."

"Ok. Well, same principle. A compass is 'attached' to North, right. A texo compass is attached to a thing. You could have a text compass for your house, say." Gef looks to the sky, "You could put a texo compass on that little pest."

"He was only protecting me. He does that."

"I know, I know. Really, it's your fault. You shouldn't have been playing with those kids. I told you to guard Arthra."

Able looked to the ground. "I could see her from where we were playing."

"That's not the point, kid. We need to stay low. We need to not draw attention to ourselves. *Especially* if we go where we might be going."

Able looked up again, "Where's that?"

Gef explained where the city was, what it was like, and the sort of riddle that Wacamolo had told him. "He said the door would be unlocked by mistake. I have to think he was talking about your... uh... your little guys."

Able looked at Po and smiled. "I guess we'll have to find out." Able stared into the middle distance for a while and then said, "What are tigers?"

Gef stroked his chin, "I have part of the cyclo compendium on animals. It says tigers were an ancient animal; organic, very dangerous. They have existed for thousands of years though, so I think we're fine. We'll find this hollow and this wind and voilá, I suppose."

"Gef, where do you keep the cyclopedia? Can I or Po read it?"

"I don't keep hard copies. I've committed it all to memory. One day, I'll write it all down again, but for now, it's safer in my head. There are people who would use it for bad things, Able."

"Can I try something?" Able asked.

"Sure."

"Here. You hold Po."

"Okay." Gef reached out and took the metallic purple ball in his hands.

"Find out what he knows Po."

Suddenly, Gef sat up like a steel beam. The light in his eyes dimmed and Po began generating an electric field whose arcs danced around itself and Gef's hands. This went on for several minutes until Po slowly faded back to normal and Gef fell over on to the ground. Able jumped in shock. "No, Po! What did you do?!"

Po shook and made a sad tootle.

Able got down on the ground and shook Gef. And after several minutes, the light came back into Gef's eyes. He sat up and looked around. "What in Gaia's name just happened!?"

Able picked up Po and said, "Show me a tiger."

Po's lights sparkled and danced in the air and coalesced into a light model of a giant orange cat with black striped, menacingly prowling though the air.

"I'll be a clock." Gef stared in wonder at the image of the tiger. He knew all the information about them, but had never really seen one. "It copied my brain?"

Able held Po out. "He copies all kinds of stuff."

"How?"



Able shrugged.

Gef cocked his head and kept looking at the tiger. "Amazing." Then after a quiet minute of contemplation, he said, "Show us the city of Horn."

Po obliged and a light model arose of a massive castle build around an enormous tusk of some kind. Windows and walkways had been carved into the horn and all around its base were the scree of buildings. The walls surrounding it looked high and massive.

Able said, "That's where we're going?"

Gef corrected him, "That's where we're *sneaking into*."

"Wow. It looks as big as a mesa."

"It's much bigger actually. And we need to try to get an audience with a man there. His name is Baron Rollo Leocadia and he's a mad scientist." Anticipating Able's next question, Gef said, "A scientist is a person who studies how the world works—like Ghendra. Unlike Ghendra, they're usually incredibly powerful and you don't mess with them. They're supposed to belong to this guild, a group that they have that has rules, but some of them don't and they're called mad."

"So they're not angry."

"I don't know. He's probably angry about something, but that's not why he's mad, yeah."

"He sounds important."

Gef pointed at the light model of the city. "He runs that whole place. He's real important."

"So why would he see us?"

"He wouldn't. He wouldn't see dust men and I bet he *really* wouldn't see a couple of clockworks."

"You said that name was bad."

"It is. But it's *our* word. We can say it. It's bad when other folks say it."

Able nodded.

"However, I do think the Baron would like to see your little creations. He might even know what they are."

"Really?" Able's eyes widened. He set Po on the ground, who shut off the light model and rolled over next to Ka, bumping it a couple of times. Ka made a cooing sound and the dustfish swam over to look at Po. Able thought about what Ghendra said about only showing his mistakes when the time was right. That had really not gone according to plan. But maybe this time it made sense. "So if we tell him about my mistakes, he might tell us about the text compass?"

"It's not that simple. We need leverage."

"What's — "

"It means we have something he really needs or needs to avoid—it just means we have better control of the situation than he does—which is a difficult proposition." Gef looked at the mistakes, especially Po—how much of him had that little thing copied? How did he get into the middle of this? Why had Ghendra sent Able to him? "But look. We have got to stay low. Horn has a lot of very interesting things in it and you're going to want to check it all out. You have to hold off on that, okay? There will be time for that later."

Able nodded. "I will not be curious!"

Gef laughed. "All right. Let's get some sleep. We'll come up with a plan sooner or later."



Hill behind hill of boulders and lichen reach up into the distance where the tip of the City of Horn can be seen. As the hills come down, there are here and there small indentions that grow in depth and width. These are hollows. Once in them, the light from the dim sun is even dimmer. There are scatterings and smatterings of sound. Sometimes a rock comes tumbling down the hollow walls. Having left Arthra and their supplies back at the butte, Able and Gef make there way down into one hollow and then back up out and then down again into another one. Able carries Po, while Nip and Ka'Rolly hover nearby.

Neither Gef nor Able has said much since entering the hollows. They are shadowy and quiet. There is no wind. After hours of climbing and descending, Gef says to Able, "There is something following us."

Able looks around. All is quiet. "Huh?"

Gef also looks around. "Yeah. I know what being followed feels like. Things should be quiet after we pass, but there are noises. I keep seeing a shadow back there." Gef points at the sky, "And that smoke. It's been moving."

"What do we do?"

"Hope it just follows us."

Down in one of the hollows, the bottom is muddy. "Water," says Gef.

"Is that good?"

"It's different. The other hollows have been bone dry."

Able looks around, "But there's no wind."

"Yup."

Just then, Gef has an idea. "Say, what if ol' Nip here were to carry Po up in the air and let Po have a look around." Gef bends down and looks at Po, "Could you make a map for us?"

Po shivers in Able's hand and looks to Able. Able says, "I think that means he's afraid of heights." He holds Po up to his face, "But that's okay; I'll go with you!" Po makes a sighing noise.

"You'll go with him?"

"Yeah. Watch this! Hey, Nip! Up, up and away!"

Nip floats over Able and grows ribbons that wrap around his waist like a seat. Able leans back and with a sound like gong, the three lift off the ground and fly a hundred meters in the air. Gef just looks up at them in wonder and amazement. He says to himself, "What the clock else can that bunch do?"

Able has come to love being in the sky. He can see so much. Troubles seem to stay behind on the ground. From his perch, he can see more of the City of Horn—it is magnificent. He can see the hollows spread out down from the hills around the city like great gaps between huge fingers of ridges. He holds Po out and says, "Make a map, please." Po sighs, unfolds two spindly legs and wraps them around Able's wrists, and then makes a sound of concentration, opening its many eyes very wide.

Able is patiently waiting when Po suddenly makes an alarming sound. With its left leg, he pulls on Able's arm and with its right leg points toward a patch of ground just beyond the last ridge they crossed over. Able can just barely see five slender dark silver bodies crawling slowly along, thin trails of black smoke rising from their backs. "Okay, Nip! Let' head back down."

Down on the ground, before Able can even get out of seat, he spits out in a loud

whisper, "I saw them!"

"Saw who?"

"I don't know. Tigers."

"Tigers?"

"Not exactly. But they were crawling and like you said—"

Just then, atop a boulder in the wall of the hollow, one of the creatures appeared and screamed. It was on four legs and its mouth full of teeth. Its fur was soaked black with oil and in the center of its body, a brundlex churned out black smoke. Its tail was like a chain and it whipped about in the air.

Gef didn't hesitate and pushed Able into the hollow, "Run!"

As they scrambled into the hollow, Gef knew that they would get higher and reach a point where they could, if needed, if possible, defend themselves. He looked up long enough to see other creatures—fine, tigers—crawling along the ridge, trying to flank them. "Keep moving," he said to Able, who was running on pure fear.

But to Gef's surprise, the hollow and the muddy creek stayed level. The walls of the hollow were getting higher and they weren't traveling up. Instead, it seemed like they were trapping themselves. He thought hard about what to do. Nip! He looked around and the bold, little entity was red again and knocking himself into one of the tigers on the ridge. Just as he looked, the tiger lifted a front leg and brought it down hard on Nip, smashing it into the rocks. Gef shouted, "Nip!"

As soon as Able heard Gef, he stopped. He looked up the steep hill of rocks and saw Nip, dented and wobbling in his flight. The tiger took another swing at the little flying mistake and Nip went flying into the hollow, over the heads of Able and Gef, smashing into the rocks on the other side. The creature on the ridge screamed and black smoke

billowed out of its back.

Able scrambled up the side of the hollow to Nip and knelt down. Nip was in tatters and wheezed when it saw Able. "Oh no! Nip!" Able picked it up.

From down the hill, Gef shouted, "Able! C'mon!"

Able made his way down and saw that one of the creatures was now in the hollow and behind them, crouching low to the ground. As Able and Gef kept running into the deepening hollow, Able shouted, "What do they want?"

"What do you think? Us!"

The hollow came to a stop at a large boulder. Gef muttered, "No, no, no." The five companions came to stand (and float) with their backs to the boulder. The smoking, mechanical tigers crept closer to the group, each in turn screaming and howling at the sky.

Then the whole hollow began to dance with lights. Small spots of color appeared, dancing across the walls of the hollow, the rocks, even the tigers. Able looked down and saw that Po was shaking and emitting all of the light. He held him aloft and Po exploded with light! The dancing dots began to collect together and form the shape of a massive, long, scaly dragon, with billowing hair and a giant maw. It curled up over Able and Po and then Po emitted a deafening roar. It shook Able and shut his hearing down it was do loud.

The tigers all hunched down and slowly backed off their rocks, then turned and ran.

There was a long moment of silence among the crew, and then the dragon slowly faded away and Po shrank in size, turned ashen and fizzled, smoke coming out of cracks in his shell.

Gef took a few steps forward, then said, "What was that!?" He was shocked and

laughing at the same time.

Able didn't notice. He knelt down in the muddy pools in front of the boulder and set both Po and Nip down in it. He pushed his hands through the mud, looking for the glint of electrol. As he did, Gef watched as a kind of wispy blue field surrounded Able. The energy moved around him and down his arms to where he caressed the two little mistakes. The field seeped into Po and Nip and tendrils of new material began to form around them like a cocoon. It seeped into them and they began to form perfect spheres again, Nip losing all his edges, but Po just growing back to his normal size.

Po rolled away and then lifted itself on its three legs. It again shown a light, this time at the boulder and there appeared a light model of Able, digging in the mud. Able looked and walked over to the light model of himself and began digging. He quickly hit stone and began pushing the mud away from it. Seeing what was happened, Gef got down on his hands and knees and started digging at the mud as well. Slowly they revealed what appeared to be a platform of some kind with a hole in it. Once it appeared, Po retracted his legs and rolled over to the hole and fit neatly in it.

The ground of the pool at the end of the hollow shook, the water drained away, and then a gap appeared in the ground, and before they could stand or float, Able, Po, Nip, and Gef disappeared down into the mud.

Ka'Rolly floated in the air watching. Rolly swam around in a circle and then put his face to the bottom of Ka. Ka made a sound like a question.

## CHAPTER 8

*In which the crew explores a temple.*

Able and Gef sat up in the mud. Nip and Po were covered in it. They all looked around the pitch-black place they were in. Gef had figured that if they found a door, they would find a tunnel and he had traded for some argon light-sticks. He turned two of them on and handed one to Able. Even with the two bright purple lights, it was hard to make out too much of the chamber. Gef looked up at the ceiling, toward the hole that had formed beneath them. Ka'Rolly was peering in.

"We better stick together. C'mon down Ka'Rolly."

Ka'Rolly shook its head. Gef looked to Able, who then said, "It's fine Ka'Rolly. We're safe. Come down. Besides, there's smoketigers up there."

Ka'Rolly let out a loud indecisive sound. It neither wanted to go down nor face the tigers. After a minute, Ka'Rolly floated down through the hole, his scarecrow-like body hanging and lightly swinging from Ka. and peered about. A small floodlight grew in the eye of the makeshift face and began shining about the chamber. Ka'Rolly let out a low whistle.

From what they could see, the chamber was filled with debris that was covered in soft, green moss. From everywhere on the ceiling, long stone stalactites dripped water. There were many pillars still standing at the edge of the chamber, tens of meters wide



and circular. Gef walked the perimeter of the room and found two doors.

Able made his own discovery. There was electrol everywhere! There was even floating electrol clusters in the air—floating about like fireflies! He reached out his hand and caught one of the floating clusters of the stuff. It glowed bright in his hand. He got out a sack and began gathering as much of it as he could sort out. It was in the mud, the water, on the moss and in the air. To Able the whole chamber sparkled. Gef walked over to him and watched as the little synthezoid put dirt into a bag. "What are you collecting?"

"Electrol."

"Um, yeah. That's not a thing."

"Sure it is." Able held up a handful of the stuff. See?"

"No. I don't. That looks like dirt to me."

Able looked disappointed. "That's what my father always said."

Gef studied Able. "You must have some kind of sensory apparatus that I don't."

Able looked up, perplexed.

Gef squatted down and explained. "It's how we 'zoids detect things. It's how we see. It's how we hear. It's how we know which way is up and how we know where our bodies are when we're not looking at them."

"Oh." Able said.

"It's something you should know Able. Everyone see the world differently. And what we see... well, that's not really the world."

Able looked very confused and Gef chuckled. "Forget that last part. My point is, *you* can see something that no one else can."

"Ghendra could see it."

"Is that right?" Gef said, not surprised.

"She had a metal tube that she used."

"Yeah. She knew what she was doing all right."

Able looked at the cluster of electrol in his hand and walked over to Ka'Rolly.

"Here," he said, "Use this."

Ka'Rolly sucked it up into a vent behind its fake face and then began to shake and glow very bright. Tendrils began growing out from the bottom of the orb that was Ka. They laced themselves through the skeletal structure of the faux body that Gef had constructed and attached themselves at various points. Ka'Rolly set himself on the ground and began walking around, flailing its arms in the air and making hooting noises.

Gef put his head in hands. "Good Gaia, I've had about enough of your magic, Able."

Able smiled brightly in the purple light. Magic. He liked that word.



Able used the electrol to continue to fix Nip and Po. Nip had been sitting in the mud sputtering. He was smooth and whole again but he couldn't fly. Po looked the same as usual but he seemed exhausted. After consuming the clusters of electrol, both were back to their more recent selves.

The crew decided to head through the door that lead in the general direction of Horn. Able desperately wanted to know what was behind the other door, but Gef didn't want them to get lost. He had to promise Able that they would come back later just to get him to drop it.

One chamber lead to another which lead to another. There was writing all over

much of the walls. Able recognized some of it from the tablets of the Idex Mortex but couldn't read it. Gef also recognized some it and could make out a few symbols. They tried to let Po read it too with no luck.

"How come no one can see the meaning in these symbols? My mother could."

"What? Your mother could read?" Gef saw immediately that Able didn't understand. "Read means finding meaning in the symbols."

"Oh. Then yes. My mother could read. She would read *to* me!"

"Huh. Well, most people can't read these symbols because they're so old. They're really, really old. And the people that wrote them aren't around anymore. At least... your mother could read this stuff? The tablets?"

"She wouldn't read me the tablets. She could read them, but she would read me other stuff. Nice stories."

"I wonder how old you are?"

"I'm nine."

"You just know that?"

"Yes."

"Do you remember your first day?"

"Yes. I woke up and my mother was smiling at me. She seemed very happy."

"Hold on to that. Memories fade with time. I wish I could remember my first day. Or I wish I'd thought to write it down."

Again, Able looked confused and Gef smiled. "Writing is the opposite of reading." Gef scraped a horizontal line into a blank part of the wall. The ancient stone crumbled easily. "See that symbol? That means the number one."

Able nodded and Gef continued, drawing another longer line beneath that one. "And

if I write this, that means the number two."

"But if you can write that, why not read this stuff?" Able gestured to the wall of symbols.

"There's hundreds of ways and things to write Able. Really, there's an infinite number."

"In-fi-nint?"

Gef drew a twisted loop on the wall.

$\infty$

"It means uncountable."

Able stared at the symbol for a long time and thought about things he could not count.

"C'mon. We've got to keep moving."



After making their way through chamber after chamber, and coming around in circles more than a few times, the crew comes to an enormous set of iron double doors. On each side of the doors are giant stone pots. Gef examines the door and the symbols on it. "I can't read most of this, but this one is 'trees'." He points it out to Able.

Gef tries to pull on the doors, but to no end. They are shut—maybe locked—tight.

Gef looks around for something he could use as a lever but there's nothing. Gef bows to Able, "Well, use magic then."

Able has no ideas, but then Ka'Rolly steps forward and grabs Nip with his newfound arms. He makes a long string of sounds and Nip waits until Ka'Rolly is through. Then, Nip makes a "bonk" sound and grows out its ring and begins hovering and pulling away from the door. Ka'Rolly grasps one of the handles and squats down as Nip turns bright orange and pulls. Ka'Rolly's new feet dig into the stone floor and it leans back with all its might.

A teeth-gritting scraping sound comes from the door as it slowly begins to give. Nip glows brighter and lets out a squeal. Ka' Rolly bends down even more and leans back further and then the door bursts open with a cloud of dust and both of the mistakes go rolling backwards into the room.

"Yes!" shouts Gef.

"Yay!" shouts Able. "Way to go, you guys!"

Ka'Rolly pick himself up off the ground. Rolly is doing somersaults and Ka makes a little tune. Ka'Rolly adjusts its cloak and then holds its arms up in a pose of strength.

"No kidding," says Gef. "Wow!"

A strange light is emitting from the chamber and as soon as the crew begins to enter, they can see why. They are standing at the top of a large staircase that descends to the left and right. Out of the center of the landing they are on, below, a torrent of water flows out and across the massive chamber in front of them in a canal. The ceiling of the chamber is filled with large holes, and out of those holes hangs giant mirrors. Daylight streams down through the holes and hits the mirrors, creating beams of light that criss-cross the chamber and land on massive stone pots. And growing from each pot, each one

unique, a tree.

Able whispers, "It's like Ghendra's house but bigger."

"Yeah, way bigger." Whispers Gef.

The giant quiet space seems to enforce the quiet with awe. None of the crew wants to disturb what is clearly a very holy place. Carefully, they make their way down the curving staircase to the lowest level of the chamber. The pots for the trees are tens of meters in diameter, and several times Gef's height, taller than all the buildings Ables has ever seen. Up from each pot, all the way to the ceiling, extends an enormous glass tube. The trees themselves, inside the tubes, vanish into the ceiling of the chamber, which aside from the columns of sunlight that shine on them, is shrouded in shadows. The crew stops in front of the first of the massive pots. There is a large metal box with an assortment of controls; levers, knobs, switches, screens, buttons. Over the control panel is a sign that reads, "Cedrus atlantica." Gef notes that the word is in a modern tongue that he can read.

The machine with the controls is whirring away, lights blinking, one screen showing a perfectly normal sine curve, waving back and forth smoothly. "This may have been ancient once, Able," Gef says quietly, "but I think someone's been here quite recently."

Po, hanging out in Able's belt in a pouch, makes an excited beeping. Able pulls him out of the pouch and Po shines a laser on the control panel. "Okay," says Able. He sets Po down on the control panel and Po extends its legs and crawls to the top.

"Be careful, Po," says Gef. "Don't turn it off."

Po pauses and makes a sound like, "Duh."

"Oh, well, excuse me," says Gef.

Po extends a new fourth sort of leg. It changes in shape until it matches a hole in the

control panel and then Po lowers itself until the new appendage slides into the control panel. Po begins chirping away, lights dancing all over his little frame. He forms light model of the tree over himself. Then the light model becomes surrounded by charts and graphs and equations.

Gef has wandered off to the next tree; this one says, "Cedrus brevifolia." He walks to a third pot where the sign reads, "Cedrus deodara." He makes his way back to the first pot. "I think it's an ark."

"Oh!" Able says a bit too loudly. He covers his mouth and then whispers again, "I know what an ark is."

"You do?"

"Yes. It was one of the stories my mother used to tell me."

"How did your version go?"

"My version?"

"Well, I've heard and read stories like that many times. There's a Nomish version and and Illith version, a Kravath version, on and on."

Able didn't know what these "versions" were, so he continued, "There once was a really big flood, which Jupaeter made, which is when water covers *everything* and Gaia didn't want all the animals to die, so she asked a noman named Nemo to build a really big box and put as many animals as he could in it. And then the box floated for a really long time and when the flood went away, all the animals were safe. The big box was called an ark."

"Yup. That's what I think this is. An ark for trees."

"Trees," Able repeated.

"Yeah. I've only heard of them in the Cyclopedia. I've never seen one."

"A they like Ghendra's plants. Do they grow and make more of themselves?"

"Yup."

"Why not let them grow outside?"

"They would die. The air is wrong. I'm pretty sure that's what these big tubes are doing; keeping the air right for them."

"Oh." Able said and once again craned his neck back toward the top of the huge cedar. It must have been two meters thick. "They're pretty."

Po clicked and removed itself from the control panel. "You done?" Gef said and Po bleeped in response. "Okay then. We need to move on. Let's remember, we're here for a reason."

Ka'Rolly giggled. Rolly swam in a circle as if chasing his tail.

Gef replied, "I don't know what you mean, but if you're saying this is reason enough, you're not wrong."

The group made their way to the edge of the chamber. Gef said it would be better to follow the wall to not get lost. They passed other staircases with signs that Gef could pronounce but didn't know: "Betulaceae" and "Cuoressaceae." As they passed each one, Po would shine out a new tree light model. Gef looked at it at one point and said "Show off." Po made a phbbbt sound.



The crew made their way through chamber after chamber, walking for hours. Not all of the trees were so big. Some were small and covered in flowers that were pink and red



and purple. Able could not get enough of the colors. Gef had to practically drag him along to keep him from stopping at every single terrarium.

But then they came to a chamber that had no more doors; only a large arch over the canal. On each side of the canal were large walkways with metal guardrails. "I guess we go this way," said Gef. He knew they were still traveling in the direction of the city—in fact they should be nearly underneath it at this point.

They followed the canal into darkness and lit their argon lamps again, leaving the columns of daylight and trees behind them. There was nothing but the purple glow from their lamps dancing on the flowing water, and the sound of it drifting along through the stone tunnel.

After more hours, the tunnel gave way to massive chamber—even more massive than the ones containing the tree—that was just a reservoir, a giant underground lake. The chamber was dark and they could only see out into the lake maybe fifty meters. The walkway continued along the edge of the lake until they came to a metal door, shut with a large wheel in its center. Gef gave the wheel a try and it gave easily. "Well oiled," he said. The door opened to a set of metal spiral stairs. Gef shined his lamp inside the room with the stairs and then looked back to the crew. "I guess we go up."

## CHAPTER 9

### *In which the crew gets the attention of the Baron.*

The stairs led to more stairs hick led to hallways and more doors until Gef was certain, upon examining a certain wall, that they were inside the walls of the city. He found a grate, low to the ground. He told Able to put on his disguise again and he did so himself. Nip and Po tucked themselves away in pouches on Able's belt and Ka'Rolly pulled its cloak back over its head and around its newfound body. Then the crew exited through the grate and a short tunnel into an alleyway between the city walls and the city itself. There was no one around. From where they were, they could see numerous buildings, two and three stories tall, and then lording over all of them, the castle itself—a massive horn with balconies and windows and passageways carved into it, spiraling around its gray, curved mass, pointing at the sky.

"We have to go there?" said Able peering up at the enormous structure.

"Yeah. And it will be heavily guarded."

"I could fly up with Nip." Nip chirped in agreement.

"Yeah. Yeah you could. But we all need to stay together."

"Really," Able said, "You're the only one who can't fly."

Gef looked down at Able, hurt. "You know. You're right. Maybe I should do

something about that." He laughed. "For the moment though, let's just scout out the place."

They walked down streets and alleys, generally toward the base of the horn, which was hard to accomplish because none of the streets went in any manner of a straight line. As they moved, more and more people began to emerge. Able noted quickly that things were different than at Kinton Station. The people looked haggard, gray, unhealthy. In many places there were people squatting at the side of the street, holding out bowls and jars, begging for food or water or metal. Able would have given them anything he had, but with the exception of the electrol or his clothes he had nothing. It created a feeling within him that was an awful sorrow.

And why water? They had just come from a place with more water than he had ever seen, but these people had none. He wanted to tell them about the grate and how to go down the stairs and where to get all the water they wanted, but Gef told him no; that they needed to keep to themselves for a while still. Able didn't like this either.

Then there were the guards. There were people in metallic suits, eight feet tall, that hissed and smoked when they walked. They pushed other people out of their way. Once, when walking down a street, Gef had to push Ka'Rolly and Able off to the side just to get out of the way of the mechanomen, or be knocked over.

"I don't like this place, Gef. I don't like this place at all."

"Me neither, kid."

After hours of wandering through streets they came to a wide open square with the gates to the castle on the far side. Lines of the mechanomen stood around the gates. All around the rest of the square were statues that rested in large concrete bowls. They should have been fountains. People milled about the square, gathering in small groups,

talking. At the edge of the square, any number of people stood at tables, trading wares.

"You know, kid, besides your great idea of just flying up to the top, I'm starting to think that maybe our best plan of action is to simply announce ourselves."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, we get Po to do that dragon thing again and have it ask to see the Baron."

"I thought you wanted to be quiet and stay low?"

"Well, that was then. Now we have... different... circumstances. And listen, if they do take us, which I suspect they will. You need to let me do the talking—act like the mistakes are mine, okay?"

"Why?"

"If something goes wrong, I need you to take Nip and get the heck out of here. I don't think we should let the Baron know what you really are. I'll tell him you're my assistant or something."

"What am I really?" Able asked.

Gef chuckled and put a hand on Able's shoulder. "You're unique. And you need to get to the Ultracircus."

Able smiled at this.

"Look, if something goes wrong, take Nip and go back to Kinton Station. Get Arthra if you can. Sneak into town and find Wacamolo. He'll help you."

Able didn't like this at all, the idea of losing Gef. "Okay."

"Don't worry. This is gonna work. Now loan me Po."

"I can't really —"

"I know, I know. Jus let m hold him."

Able took Po out of the pouch on his belt and held the mistake up to his face. "Can

you help Gef? I have more than enough electrol for you, okay? We know where to get lots now!" He handed Po to Gef.

The crew walked to the center of the square. Gef held Po up to his face and said, "Do that dragon thing and have it say, 'I demand to see the Baron Rollo Leocadia!' Can you do that?" Po sighed and signaled yes. Gef held Po up in the air.

Just by coincidence, a very thick cloud rolled in over the city and the dim light grew dimmer as Po's lights reached out and danced all over the square. People immediately stopped what they were doing and looked at the sky and around the square for the source of the dancing lights. Their eyes fell on a dustman who was holding up some sort of orb that was growing in size and shining lights everywhere. The lights began to coalesce into a stream of light that slithered in the air, and then grew hair and legs and scales. It formed a long dragon that then coiled into a pile resting above Gef and Po. The dragon looked at the gate and then up the tower, "Bring me Baron Rollo Leocadia!"

Everyone in the square was frozen. The guards rushed to form new lines in between the gate and the dragon. They drew weapons and stood at the ready. Thunder boomed and Gef smiled at his luck. Able turned to look at the crowds all around them. Some wore faces of amazement, while others looked on with dread. He put his hand in his pouch and clasped Nip who buzzed in agreement with a sound like "Woah."

Gef looked up, past the dragon and saw that another light was forming at the top of the tower, and he realized that's where the thunder was coming from, not the sky. And then a howling came from the top of the tower, and another dragon came swooping down, crying with maniacal laughter. It swooped down to the square and crashed through the shimmering light dragon that Po had created. It swam through the air in a circle around the square and bellowed, "You have called, fools! I am arrived!" The dragon

crashed into the square between the lines of guards and Gef and Po and even knocked a few of the guards off their feet, sending them flying. The dragon shoved its face right in front of Gef and bellowed again, "Who dares!?"

Gef held his ground, even though he had no clue what to do next. "I am Draxon the scientist. I wish to parlay and to discuss developments."

The dragon considered this and then began to shrink and transformed into a fat noman covered with cybernetics. "An electric message wouldn't have sufficed?"

Gef said nothing as the large noman approached him.

The Baron's left eye was all machine and the silver lense that was there in the eye's place stared through Gef. "A dustman scientist? How interesting." The eye shifted and changed. "Oh! A synthezoid scientist. How *very* interesting." The Baron looked at Ka'Rolly and Able. "And what interesting companions as well."

He looked back to Gef. "Fine then. Let us go to my chambers." He turned his hands up toward the sky and a circle of stones from the square shook and then lifted off the ground, carrying the Baron and the crew up into the air. The Baron commented, "Impressive use of the weather I might add." The Baron turned his back to the crew and guided the rock platform up to the top of the tower towards a large balcony. Gef turned to Able and shrugged. Able smiled back.



The Baron's chambers were a massive circular room, lined with bookshelves with ladders on wheels that reached ten meters up. The bookshelves ended where windows

began and the windows were just as tall. The floor of the room was marble so polished it gleamed. There was a massive door at one end of the room, guarded by the ominous mechanomen. Opposite the door was a dias with a large chair the the Baron settled his weight into, he poured into he chair. And in the center of the room, reaching up to and through the dome of the ceiling, was a series of tubes, beginning small at the floor and growing in width and length as it reached upward.

"First things first," the Baron said. The acoustics of the room were architected to make his voice appear to be coming from everywhere in the room. "You may remove your disguises. I certainly understand why you would wish to hide your true nature from the dregs, but you need not worry here. I am appreciative of the fact that a synthezoid could engage in science. There is no requirement regarding species for those who seek knowledge, is there?"

Gef agreed, "Yes." He removed his mask and his hat and poncho. Able and even Ka'Rolly did the same.

"Your programs are impressive," the Baron said. Gef started to reply but the Baron raised his hand and said, "Wait. Let us have a true parlay." He reached for a horn near his chair and shouted something into it. Bookcases along the wall opened, and out came running noman in very nice clothes carrying a long table, chairs and several platters of food. The table was placed in front of the crew, along with chairs for Albe, Gef and Ka'Rolly. The Baron got up from his throne and (with some effort) walked down the stairs to a chair of his own at the table.

Once he was seated, the Baron said, "Now. If you will indulge me, my good colleague, could I pester you with some questions?" He reached for some slices of meat, "And I assume that none of you eat?"

Gef replied, "Ask anything you wish, and no, I and my assistants do not require sustenance."

"Of course, of course. Now, this one," and the Baron pointed at Ka'Rolly, "An organic-programmatic mixture?"

"Yes," said Gef, deciding that agreeing with guesses was a good strategy.

"Why?"

"Why?"

"Yes. Why create such a creature?"

Gef thought through what he knew from the Cyclo, some kind of concept to justify Ka'Rolly. "An experiment, if you will."

"Ah yes. Not unlike my mechanomen I suppose."

"Precisely. I am also interested in how you created *them*."

The Baron waved his hand in dismissal. "Primitive really. Noman dregs implanted with circuitry and then programmed thusly. Mere automatons. And stupid to boot." The baron swallowed chunks of meat, a dribble of something running down his chin. "You see, if I had the ability to create—well, no offense—but something like you—synthezoids—I'd have no need for such abominations." The Baron stared at Able, making him uncomfortable. "This little one, you see. Did you create him?"

"Yes." Said Gef. Able gave him a dirty look.

"And where did you come by the knowledge for such a thing? How did *you* even gain your autonomy? I've never met a synthezoid with free will, if you don't mind my saying."

"As for my free will, that is a bit of a secret."

"I see. Yes. Of course."



"And as for any more information, I would be willing to share more for a price."

"A price!?" The Baron laughed, though Gef was not sure at all why. "Very well. What price?"

"I am in search of a Texo compass."

"Really? How droll." The Baron tore apart some bread. "I don't understand. If you can concoct these programs, you don't need my help manufacturing a Texo compass."

"It's not the compass itself I need any help with. It's the thing to which it is attached that is giving me trouble."

"Oh? And what thing is that?"

"The Ultracircus." For emphasis, Po, sitting next to Gef at the table threw up a light model of the ambling city.

Again, the Baron laughed obnoxiously and banged the table. "The Ultracircus! Are you serious!?"

"Quite."

"And when you find it, what sort of wishes are you planning on asking for from those doddering, old idiots?"

"No. I have no wishes. I mean, I'd like to—" Gef thought better of mentioning the cyclopedia. Judging from the books in the library, the Baron knew quite a lot and mentioning that he wanted to complete the cyclopedia might give him away as an imposter. "I simply want to discuss my... programs."

"Hm," said the Baron. "The council doesn't know anymore about manipulating the nanosphere than *I* do, and they certainly can't produce independent programs the likes of yours. Tell me, what do they do?" The Baron leaned forward greedily. "Maybe a texo compass for one of them would be a fair bargain?"

Able kicked Gef under the table as Gef was thinking. "Yes, well, I'm afraid that part of creating them is giving them free will. I couldn't trade one of them unless they wished to go. However, let me ask, does this mean that you have a texo compass attached to the Ultracircus?"

The Baron spread his hands. "We both have cards, I suppose. At this juncture, I am not willing to say if I have such a device."

"An impasse, then."

"Only for the moment, my good Draxon. Let us think on the matter. I insist that you enjoy my abode for as long as you like. Enjoy my library." The Baron gestured with a grand wave to all of his books. "And in the meantime, we shall both think about what we want and what is required for us both to gain it." The Baron smiled broadly, but Able didn't think it was a nice smile—more like the smiles on those smoke tigers.

# CHAPTER 10

## *In which the Baron assists the crew.*

The Baron's people showed the crew to a large bedroom chamber with large windows overlooking the city, the room filled with all manner of beautifully crafted furniture. The crew settled in, Nip flying as high as he could to the curved ceiling; Able found a large, soft chair; Po joined him in it; Ka'Rolly laid down on a bed for the first time and let out a long whistle; while Gef just paced.

Able spoke first, "I don't like him at all."

Gef replied, "I know, I know, He's off-putting. But he's willing to bargain. Maybe there's something we could come up with that he wants."

"Do you think he has the Texo Compass for the Ultracircus?"

"No."

"What makes you think that?"

"We weren't telling him things we didn't know. I think he was not telling us things he didn't know. But he knows *about* the Ultracircus. He even mentioned people that were part of it, 'doddering, old fools.' What was that about?"

"What is the nanosphere?"

"Yeah. I have no idea."

Gef looked at Po. "But we do have access to his library. What do you say, Po, want

to do some reading?"

Po chirped a song of excitement.

"I thought so."

"What should I do?" Asked Able.

"I think we're gonna' need a fast exit at some point. I need you and Nip to scout around and see if you can find a quick way out of the city—not the way we came in."

"Why not leave the way we came?"

"I think that museum belongs to the Baron. He may be able to lock it down. He definitely keeps his own people from getting down there."

"I don't like that he has all that water and food and yet the people of the city are begging for it."

"You're right; it's wrong. But we have to stay focused on what we're here to do. We need the Texo compass."

"Gef, why have you decided it's so important to do that? You used to think that the Ultracircus was a myth."

Gef stopped his pacing and came to stand in front of Able. "Able, you are incredibly important. I have seen you do things that I haven't heard about in history texts. Whoever is at the Ultracircus, Ghendra knew they could help you or help you use this special sight of yours. We need to get you to them. Maybe I'm just being silly, but some part of me thinks that the balance of this world could be at stake."

"Geez, Gef."

Gef chuckled. "I know, buddy. But look, if there were more Nips and Kas and Pos in the world, don't you think they could help people?" Gef paused in thought. "Come to think of it, why haven't you made more of them?"

"Well... I made them, yes, but in order to do it, there's part that I need. My mother gave me three of them. They're the only three I have."

"What kind of part are we talking about?"

Able searched the ceiling for an answer and his eyes landed on Nip. He looked back to Gef and shrugged, "Cubes."

"Well, that helps."

Able smiled sheepishly.

"Well hey, this is the kind of thing we can find out about at the library maybe. Let's not waste any time. You and Nip scout and me and Po will go learn some stuff."

Able looked to Ka'Rolly on the bed. "What about Ka'Rolly."

Gef smiled. "I think Ka'Rolly should investigate the bed."

Ka'Rolly let out another long whistle of pleasure.



Able and Nip made there way out of the bed chamber and around long corridors through the palace, meandering until they found a guarded door. Two the mechanomen stood in front of it, large metal halberds clasped in their hands, the shafts resting on the ground. Able tried saying hello and good morning and that they would like to go to the market, but the metal men didn't move and didn't speak a word. Nip floated up to one of their helmets and peered inside. The glassy eyes peering out of the slot in the metal helmet never moved.

Just then, the Baron appeared from around a corner. "Hello, my little friends. Can I

be of help?"

"Uh. We would like to go to the market."

"I see. Well, of course. Please, allow me to accompany you."

Albe pondered this. It would be hard to scout with the Baron there, but he definitely didn't want to seem suspicious.

"Um. Okay."

"Excellent. Let's have a look around shall we?"



Gef and Po found the double doors to the library easily enough but they were unfortunately locked. "Sure," Gef said, imitating the Baron, "have my library at your disposal." He looked down at Po in his hand. "Don't suppose you can pick locks?" Po made a disappointed tone.

Just as Gef was about to turn and leave, he could hear the loud clanking of the big lock on the door, and then one of them opened. The Baron was standing there. "Ah! You have decided to investigate the library. Excellent. I am very proud of my collection. Please let me be of assistance."

Of course the Baron wasn't going to let him in unaccompanied, Gef thought. Still though it was better than nothing. Gef put back on his airs of being a scientist and said to the Baron, "I generally keep my knowledge in a more compact fashion, but I do love the smell of books."

"A more compact fashion, you say," said the Baron as he shut the door behind them.



Ka'Rolly lay on the bed enjoying an amazement sense of comfort, the first they had ever enjoyed. Even burrowing through the wet mud, though familiar and safe, was not nearly as comfortable. Rolly adored the sense of lightness she had gained from being suspended in nothing but water, and she adored all the things to see. And Ka was able to show her what the feeling of walking was like and strength! Ka enjoyed being treated like a person, of sorts.

They were staring at the ceiling and just enjoying the sensation of floating when a face came into their line of site. It was the Baron. "Hello, my unusual friend. Are you enjoying the accouterments?"

Ka'Rolly nodded hesitantly.



Gef, with Po in hand, ran his index finger along the rows of books looking for something familiar. There appeared to be many languages making up the titles. He couldn't discern what order they were in either. He thought maybe a ruse would help him. "It's interesting to me that you keep copies of these books. I destroy the ones I encounter."

"Really? But whatever for? And how do you reference them later?"

Gef looked at the Baron, "I memorize them." He held up Po, "I refer to this program as my eye." Po played along and beeped dutifully.

"Your eye?"

"Yes. Perhaps a demonstration?"

"Please."

Gef picked a compendium he thought might be handy and carried it and Po over to a small table. He set the book down and Po extended his legs and copied the book. He hoped that the Baron wouldn't ask him to repeat anything since he wasn't really getting the information Po was. But then, he thought, if Po could copy him, would it work in reverse? A real experiment for another day.

The Baron watched Po copying the book and his eyes widened; he practically drooled. He had to get rid of this Draxon character and possess these programs for himself. Then, the Baron had a devilish idea: he could rid himself of another enemy, or possibly both! "What if I were to trade you the Texo Compass to the Ultracircus in exchange for a task?"

Gef had walked away from Po and was back scanning the shelves for any sign of a piece of the Cyclopedia. "What manner of task?"

"There is another scientist near here. She bothers me. You've seen how poor my people are. She raids my people's resources, steals crops and water. I would like her eliminated. That seems like a task you could handle. You wouldn't have a problem with killing another scientist, would you—especially one that really has no knowledge to offer."

"No. I wouldn't," Gef lied. He stepped to the Baron with his best poker face. Given that the Baron was clearly lying about the cause of the plight of his people, and given that the enemy of his enemy might prove to be an ally, this scientist might be someone worth meeting. The Baron was probably lying about the compass, too. Maybe this other



scientist had more information. "Who is this scientist?"

"Her name is Vivian. She has a tower at the Lake of the Low. The hanging city of Boisenvall is there. If you can fly, it's two days Northeast."

Gef scoffed, "Fly? I can think of much faster ways than that." He couldn't really.

The Baron pulled an object out of his robes, a small metal plate with dials and glass in its center. "Please, feel free to use this to stay in touch. I would like some proof that she is dead before I hand over the compass."

Gef took the object and thought to himself that was it. He had all the information he needed and he needed to get out of there and find the others. But then, he had a second thought. He didn't have *all* the information he wanted. The library existed in two places. He walked back over to Po and picked it up. He turned to the Baron, "Baron, perhaps you might like another demonstration of what my eye can do?" He held Po out.

The Baron barely hid his greed. He reached out and took Po into his hands. "But of course." He turned Po over and over in his hands, looking for any hint of its inner workings.

Gef leaned over and said, "Find out what he knows, Po."



Able and Nip and the Baron had walked around the marketplace, the Baron pestering Able with questions. Able figured the best strategy was just answer "I don't know," which was also the truth for most of the questions. Then Able figured a better strategy was to answer questions with questions. Able started pointing at things and

asking, "What's that?" The Baron would answer, "It's a fruit, a mockmelon, I think. Disgusting."

"What's fruit?" Able asked.

The Baron would give some semblance of a definition and then Able would move on to his next, "What's that?" Or "What are those?" or "What's that do?"

The Baron asked, "Did your master have instructions for you?"

"I don't know. What's that do?"

"That's a *door*."

"What's a door for?"

"By Jupaeter, you are an ignorant clockwork."

"What's that?" Able asked of a fountain, genuinely not knowing the answer.

"It's a fountain. At least tell me where your master made you."

"What's a fountain do?"

"It... it's a decoration. Usually it holds water—water flows out of it. Where's your master hail from? Where's his home?"

"I dunno. Where's the water?"

"There is none."

"Why not?"

"There's not enough of it."

"There's a whole big lake of it underground here."

The Baron was stunned. It was the most Able had said in an hour. "How do you know that!?"

Able shrugged, "I dunno."

"Enough! You will tell me how you know about the reservoir or I will destroy you!"

The Baron grew in size and the air around him grew dark.

Able grabbed one of Nip's rings. "What's a reservoir?"

The Baron growled in response.

"C'mon, Nip, let's get out of here!" And with that, Nip and Able took off to the air.

The Baron was stunned. "What!?" He shrank back to his regular size and took flight as well, chasing after the pair as they flew toward the city wall. "Now wait, you! Wait! You can't leave. No one can leave my city."

Able wasn't sure what he was doing, but Gef wanted a way out of the city, so maybe the easiest thing to do was to look at it from the outside. He flew past buildings and rooftops, much faster than the Baron could move. The Baron tried hurling stones at them, but Nip dodged them with ease. The pair flew past the wall and Able looked down to see a large encampment all around the road leading to the main doors of the city. And then he saw Arthra! He recognized Gef's flags.

"Nip! We need to go down there." Nip made a warning sound and Able looked back to see the Baron, pounding on something. It was as if a glass wall had been thrown up from the wall. The Baron was hitting it and throwing stones against it, but the air turned purple and absorbed the shocks. It appeared the Baron couldn't go any further than this invisible wall.

Nip and Able floated back over to the Baron, out of curiosity, just ten meters from him. He was having a complete temper tantrum. "You work for her, you useless little pile of gears, don't you! I know it! She sent you just to toy with me! You come back here or I will—" and then the Baron went silent. He stiffened up like a pole, and his eyes rolled back in his head and he vanished—turning into a cloud of colorful lights that slowly dimmed and disapated into the air. It looked, for a moment, like electrol to Able.

Other than that, he had no idea what the Baron was talking about or what had happened, but they seemed safe for the moment. "Let's go check on Arthra," said Able to Nip



The Baron was explaining to Ka'Rolly, "But really, you should get up and then we can take a tour of the palace. I have many amazing things I could show you." This had been taking far too long. The Baron wasn't sure what Ka'Rolly was or what they could do, so he was hesitant to force them to do anything, but he was losing patience.

Ka'Rolly let out a long wheeze. They liked the bed.

"You... the dustfish in you, it likes to eat, doesn't it? I have food for Dustfish."

Rolly didn't understand why, but she wasn't hungry at all. She swam in a quick circle inside Ka, who responded by moving its arms and legs like it was swimming a backstroke. Ka made the sound of bubbles burbling.

"Now, look," the Baron said. "I want you to come with me to my—" And then the Baron did a very odd thing, which made Ka'Rolly sit up. He stiffened, his eyes rolled back in his head and he vanished!—turning into a cloud of colorful lights that slowly dimmed and disappeared.

Ka'Rolly whistled and sat staring at the air. Minutes later Ka'Rolly was shocked again when the door burst open and Gef and Po were there. "C'mon, Ka'Rolly! We gotta go!" Gef ran over to the bed and tried to drag Ka'Rolly up, but something was different. Ka'Rolly was heavier, and thicker, and when they stood up, they were bigger—at least

two meters tall! "Geez," said Gef. "What have you been eating?" All four made for the door and down the hallway.

Before long they came to the same door that Able had tried to leave through. The two metal mechanomen stood with their unpleasant-looking halberds. Gef started to think, but before he could get anywhere with a thought, Ka'Rolly picked him up, threw him over their shoulder, and jumped and smashed through a window in the hallway. The two mechanomen turned slightly to watch, as Gef screamed, "What are you doiiiiiiiiiiiiing!"

At the base of the castle, Ka'Rolly smashed into the stone plaza, shattering it and forming a crater beneath them. They set Gef on his feet. He took a moment to orient and then put a finger in Ka'Rolly's face. "Never. Ever. Do that to me again!"

Ka'Rolly blooped an apology.

"It's fine." Gef checked that Po was all right. The little mistake beeped with glee. "Yeah. Right. Okay. Let's go," and the four of them made a break for the city doors. "Able better have found us a way out!"