A solitary penguin walked through utter blackness. He counted seconds and steps in his head as he walked. He has been walking for three days and he had walked two hundred and seventy miles. He should have been far outside of the North by that point, but nothing changed in the darkness so he couldn’t be sure. After another few hours he finally heard something other than his own soft heartbeat, a voice. The voice sang a single syllable constantly and moved up around between falsetto and alto erratically but smoothly. The penguin kept walking for another hour until he felt that he came to the source of the voice and then he stopped. The penguin waited in the darkness for hours while the voice continued to sing. Gradually the voice reached the end of the song and faded out into the silence. The penguin waited even longer, letting the darkness swirl into strange shapes before his eyes while fear tried to grip at his heart. He stood still and silent, his heart never beating any faster than it had during his walk through the darkness. Then the darkness seemed to grow closer, more intimate, and smooth lips brushed against his ear.

“You are dauntless and brave to have made it this far.” The voice breathed into his ears. “Your reward shall be great young one. I will grant you the honor of becoming my agent in the world.” More honeyed words slithered their way into the penguin’s mind. “Now step forward, repeat after me, and be very still.”

The penguin stepped forward and had to bite his own tongue to keep himself from moving. Pain so intense it threatened to make him collapse began to radiate from his chest and grisly cracking sounds made their way to his ears. The smell of iron reached his nose and his resolve waned for a moment, before surging back, he would not die alone in the dark. The visceral noises and pain continued and he heard the voice whispering in his ears again but this time it seemed to move around him as it talked.

“Tivar Nott launa vaskr. Drepa blakkr kaup. Stiga okividinn. Ungr grimmr otti drenger myrkr.” The voice spoke sweetly. The penguin repeated as best he could through the pain deep in his chest. He felt something push into him and felt it boil his blood with heat. He felt his own flesh melting onto the thing in his chest for a few moments before he blacked out.

When he awoke the pain was gone from his chest and he felt something cold on his face. He pushed himself up from the ground and saw snow. He had returned to the entrance of the catacombs, somehow. He didn’t need to look at his chest to know there was a scar there. He picked up the provisions he had left for the return journey and headed back to town.