Reed Reborn

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Aljana and its People

The world of **Aljana** (all-JAY-nah) is splintered and broken, but not inhospitable. In fact, its peoples throughout history have worked the world to their will, and now enjoy a position of superiority over the domains of nature, science, and geography. Technological and magical sciences are commonplace facets of society.

Aljana is home to many intelligent species, from the odd wild animal bestowed with intelligence after it got into a patch of mindberries to the great civilizations of chainwearers and Individui which fill the skies. Most people live in the sky. The toxic air of the surface makes it inhospitable. Aljana's many floating islands orbit the planet's atmosphere, some as small as pebbles and others as large as countries. Though most civilizations live on these islands, they are far from isolated, and several methods of travel between islands are widely used. The largest island, Unnafirma, may well be considered a floating continent, and many islands drift in sync with it. Islands out of sync with Unnafirma crash into it, dropping bits below the clouds, or back into the air, or being destroyed altogether.

The planet's surface cannot be seen from above, as it is blanketed in a wide-reaching layer of clouds. Below it is a mire of extreme heat and toxic gas, but life can thrive there as well. The ancient race of **decapods** have always lived on the surface, but they have ways of maintaining their high internal temperature when they scuttle above the clouds.

Chainwearers, by far the most populous major race, are proud and industrious humans. Many have no gift for magic, but have supplemented that lack with great inventions. They are emotive and capricious, and value money and trade. Above all, they value their legacies. You will not often find a thing of chainwearer work lacking attribution, but chainwearer families are tight and loving. Chainwearer spouses always travel together. The *chain* is paramount to

chainwearer philosophy/culture, representing many concepts like the importance of lineage, the sequentiality of history, and the connections of civilization. Their chief population center is the Great Web, a massive sprawl of floating islands spinning around a central pillar as its axis and connected with massive, metal chains. In antiquity, a great, influential kingdom of these humans distinguished themselves in combat using chain mail, earning the name “chainwearers,” and chains as a clothing motif have remained in fashion ever since.

Cloudwalkers are a stocky, traditional people resembling short, upright hippopotamuses whose girth gives a false impression of their true weight. They walk gracefully through the air and are light enough to stand on a lilypad when not weighed down by their own clothes. They have bulky builds, thick feet, expressive eyes, wiry tails, and by height reach an average chainwearer’s shoulders. Cloudwalkers can live anywhere, as they are taught from a young age to pull solid clouds out of the air itself, and with these clouds they build houses and villages. Many cloudwalkers cannot find themselves on a map, and their towns have similar, unhelpful names such as "My House", "Right Here", or "In the Sky."

Among the topside societies, the greatest, most powerful, and widest reaching in its influence and scale are the **Individui**. An academic oligarchy ruled by intellectuals, the Individui are not a race, but a creedic diaspora composed of all other races found in Aljana, who then renounce their former racial ties. Anyone who wishes to become an Individuus need only convert. They are the primary denizens of the superisland Unnafirma, where they build glorious, pristine cities to house their famous universities. Additionally, Individui are the primary practitioners of automation, the magic of bestowing life and intelligence to inanimate objects. Automata are themselves Individui by law if they have will, reserving the right to freedom. They

are, however, closely scrutinized for indicators of dangerous behavior. Animate objects without will are considered magical machina and are not legally Individui, and can be owned.

The **Original Inhabitants** of Aljana, or so they think themselves to be, are creatures like huge locusts. They are savage in nature, but not unintelligent. Inhabitants burrow great colonies into the sides of islands and fly through the air in droves. They are deeply superstitious and form great numbers of distinct mystery religions and cults, worshiping many deities from the sun, to the moon, or the planet, or light itself, or a particularly strong inhabitant leader. They have no culture of record keeping or preservation, so documenting the history and progress of inhabitant anthropology typically falls on the shoulders of Individui archeologists who linger near migratory hubs and plunder primitive, slipshod relics to theorize what they're worshiping at any given point. Often considered a great nuisance by many of the other races on Aljana, but are outright hated by decapods who also claim to be the original inhabitants of the planet. Were it not for the mutual aggression of decapods and inhabitants throughout history, both would possibly turn their claws against the more dovish races of the world.

Finally, wherever people can be found or wealth can be made, you will find the **servants of the Rat King**. Servants, or rats, are rat-like people, small in stature and not very well respected. The Rat King is a mythical figurehead, or a physical rat who rules by divine rite, and it is not clear which is actually the case. All rats are his servants, and all rats must answer his summons. However, the King never summons, save for calls for tribute (and some unscrupulous rats in the past have been discovered to have made fraudulent tribute calls). Rats live alongside all races, scrounging, scavenging, and scraping up their living. Their tallest would stand halfway to a human. They are distrusting, obsequious to other races and competitive with their own, and highly possessive. Some rats dabble in necromancy, and will raise the dead, usually as mindless

laborers. Rats will even raise their own dead for these reasons, to the disgust of other races. They have a bad reputation. Rats, however, are studious learners, dedicated and willing laborers, excellent finders, and can eat and sleep very little, so there are some who have come to favor rats for these traits. Left to their own devices, rats will subsistence farm or forage; they are by far the best survivalists of any race. Rats have been discovered and rescued from wartorn wastelands, deserts, abandoned clouds, and derelict shipwrecks where all others around them perished.

Aljana spins on an axis around its north and south poles. One full rotation equates to a single day on the planet. A single day on the planet lasts 20 hours. Aljana makes one full rotation around the sun every 380 days.

Several land masses in Aljana not fixed in place drift along the planet at rates faster or slower than the planet's natural rotation. In these places, the cycle of day and night may last longer or shorter than 20 hours. Civilizations in these places often choose to adopt their own relative day length and their internal chronobiology/circadian rhythms will adapt to the days as they are perceived.

Aljana experiences seasons of weather, but since the land masses on Aljana are not locked to position, they can experience extreme changes in annual seasons if they drift across the planet's latitude. Some land masses, however, are locked in their latitudinal position (not longitudinal). Aljana's prime meridian is closely tracked by cartographers, though political groups dispute its location. As such, maps, drift paths, and drift predictors in Aljana include multiple positioning metrics when giving coordinates. Many societies also track their own relative prime meridians. The Individui prime meridian cuts through the Ecole D'Obscura, the top university in the city of Golis Obscura, the capital of Unnafirma.

Around the equator and the poles, seasons are long. At the 45° latitude mark, seasons are equally spaced, lasting about 95 days each. Time measured with gnomons is always correct, as they use the sun's position in the sky to determine noon. Time measured with clocks is off, but insignificantly so, so they are still used.

Five-fingered species such as the human chainwearers can count the hours of the day on their 2 hands, with the palm side representing day (the first 10 hours), and the dorsal side representing night (the last 10 hours). In some cultures, actions performed with the night side of the hand can be considered rude or offensive. Offensive hand gestures are almost always given with the night side facing the target of the gesture.

Different cultures in Aljana celebrate different days on the calendar, but many share a similar custom of celebration around certain key events throughout the year, such as the first day and last day of the year or the coming of spring. Many cultures also have sun and moon festivals during summer and winter respectively.

Aljana's objective 20-hour rotation, 380-day orbit was observed thousands of years ago, debunking many conflicting claims.

Chapter 1.

Reed kicked a mouse down a hole. He had no reason to, other than it touched his foot and he flinched. He peered down the crag, and the creature was alive, a little frazzled maybe, but it jumped back out and scurried into the brush, away from sight. That's for the best, probably. Reed would have felt guilty killing a wild animal. It was hard not to draw similarities to his own mouse-like face, tail, and whiskers. He was a Servant of the Rat King, brown-furred like his father, and a lifelong scholar on a typical academic's career path. To a human, he stood about waist height, and human children's clothes fit him okay, as embarrassing as that was to admit.

He zeroed his mechanical dowser in the air, then plugged it in the hole, still peppered with tiny paw prints in the dust from its escapee. It hummed and sizzled and thumped the rockbed underneath. While it worked, Reed took the time to brush dry dirt off his pant legs. A puff of steam followed by a mechanical ding indicated the survey results were printed. He ripped the readout from the top slot but it tore unevenly from the perforated edge, so he cleaned up the seam before reading. *HARDNESS MAX, MARBLING HIGH, CAVERNOUS*, and on a second line, *ANOMALY: MAGIC RESISTANCE MAX*. Hardness Max? No point in stringing thread then, or planting stakes, not for one so small as him. He would need to carry a node the whole way down the cave, mapping as he descended. The cavern entrance stood a few yards away. It was disinviting, littered with signs designed to scare off travelers, more signs than when Reed first found the place months ago. *Tomorrow*, he thought. With his tools and dowser loaded onto a dolly, he trundled off. The dolly handle vibrated in his hand with each bump on the rocks, and Reed was glad to return to the dirt road and stick to it for his evening journey home.

Reed was a junior field cartographer performing his tenure research. He lived at 6 Pear Tree Road on the south end of Island 1-8-1 (nicknamed "Wunnyone") in the Great Web island

cluster, in a branch office for his university where many tenure hopefuls had come and gone. Reed extensively mapped Wunnyone's surface topology during his stay there. It was good practice, but you don't earn tenure retreading old territory. He needed to do something new, something that would advance the field. The local humans called him "Reed the Rat" or just "rat." At these epithets, Reed scoffed, if only due to their lack of originality. He had no defense, however, for their other nickname for him: "*murderer*." Reed was no murderer, but public perception is so mercurial… *and* the nickname wasn't wholly unearned.

It happened six months ago, to the scouting party. Their goal was to map the infamous Pulnare Caverns, which due to its stigma had remained unmapped. Reed had no mind for superstition; he saw an opportunity. A rare opportunity. Even if those caves *were* dangerous, finding out why is the kind of discovery that could really make a fledgling researcher. This was Reed's chance to contribute to the field. And contributions get you degrees and staff jobs.

The five scouts ventured downward. While he didn't join them, Reed felt he did ample to ensure their safety. He purchased a red oraclebird to warn them if something dangerous were to happen. He supplied them with two dozen mapping nodes and a quarter-mile of leythread. A proper cartographer might have called those preparations excessive, but Reed put in the extra work to make the expedition as straightforward as possible for the scouting party. The university doesn't pay junior field researchers very much, so spending what little he had from grants and stipends was a big risk, and it all got lost when the party failed to return.

Months passed. Reed faced no legal consequences for sponsoring the doomed trip, but still he became a pariah. Wunnyone's pig-headed governor, after the expedition's failure, designated the cave completely forbidden. Reed had no choice. If he wanted to clinch his tenure, he would have to explore Pulnare Caverns himself. Reed purchased the plot of land containing

the Pulnare Caverns. He got a good deal, too, as one might when purchasing land with a “level 5 hazard” and a “high profile incident.” Seeing the rat responsible for driving down the price then buying up the land, one might have called fraud, had anyone cared to notice.

Reed’s office co-resident, a cloudwalker named Stirmstrommendoo, offered to join him. He asked if she wanted to go instead of him, but then she said she didn't want to come at all. The next morning, Reed put on a well-loved, hand-me-down tweed coat. He straightened his old, red necktie, and stuffed his pockets full with tools and a bit of food, then packed the rest into a satchel. On the day he was to depart on his own, he made one last proposition of his roommate, who smugly declined. *Everyone is against me*, he thought.

Each “STAY AWAY,” “GO BACK,” and “DANGER” went ignored en route to the cave. *Superstitious bumpkins,* Reed thought. On principle, he scoffed at taboo, or any belief that used rumor or fear to assuage scrutiny. *When I return, I’ll personally give them a lesson in humility. Who knows? Maybe there's gold or promethium deep down, then these money-grubbing yokels will thank me for showing them the location of another source of wealth. I won't be sneered at in the market anymore. And I won't ask for any of the wealth in return, as a true and honest scholar of the Individui. Yes, the creation of knowledge is treasure enough for me. And how noble and stoic I'll seem to them, they'll hate themselves for treating me so–*

The internal rant was cut short as Reed stood at the lip of the cave. His mind quieted. *King’s fortune be with me.*

His eyes quickly adjusted to the darkness. Perhaps Reed was well-suited to spelunking all this time. A whistle of wind blew at his back into the tunnel. It tickled his hairy ears, and he shivered. Ahead, a faint glow twinkled off the tips of the stalactites. It came from the first stake the original scouting party planted, with its mapping node still emitting soft light after many

months. He noticed a strand of leythread strewn along the ground that he must have been walking past this whole time. It was probably safe to touch, being so small. Reed had heard stories of people touching full-sized leylines and horrible things happening as a result. That probably wouldn't happen with one so small. He tapped the line quickly with a single finger. Nothing. At its grasp the line pulsed with weak magic like blood through the veins in one's wrist, slightly faster than Reed's own heartbeat.

Reed cut the thread with his teeth and wrapped it around his own node's leyrod. The map node shone, glowing brighter than the staked one before him, then calming to a similar gleam. He found a flat piece of cave wall, then pulled a projection lens from his sack and plugged it into the viewport. The node projected a map of the cave onto the wall, and Reed studied it, quivering his lips in analysis. No life signs, or movement, at least not in the distance ahead. Turns out the scouting party had made some good progress into the depths before getting lost. *I bet I can use this map projection as a lantern of sorts,* he thought, *but if there is something dangerous, perhaps it's better to stay in the dark. I can see fine down here, anyway.*

He passed more stakes. Occasionally he would turn on his map lantern to investigate a shimmering spot on the wall, admiring its patina in the darkness. As he trekked deeper, a stink permeated the air, the smell of rot, maybe a foul mushroom outcrop. Familiar to Reed, but he didn't dare wonder how the chainwearers dealt with it. Perhaps they held their noses shut. The thought of them suffering through the stench made Reed snicker to himself. He ran his paw across the leythread, passing a stake, and grabbing the thread again, but this thread was dimmer and had no pulse. It came loose from his grip as he walked, and fell. That must have been the final node the original scouting party had left before they went missing. Beyond this point, he

would be going in blind. He pinched his nose. *King's fur, it reeks down here,* he thought. *I bet the chainwearers would have been vomiting at this point. I might even vomit.*

Reed vomited.

Chapter 2.

Reed clambered down a slope of limestone. At a fork in the cave, he chose the path away from the stink, but it was a dead end. *Great*. His node hummed as it scanned the new room. As he pursued the other path, a flickering, orange light cast against the rocks ahead. Reed dropped to all fours, careful not to expose himself. Sitting idly around a fire pit were five human figures. He couldn't believe it. The scouting party! Reed no longer found it funny, but bolstered by this discovery, revealed himself from the corner to investigate their bodies.

The stink was something else, and Reed cleared his throat. The shadowy forms jumped from their seats and turned to Reed, and the speed of their reaction made Reed jump back with an embarrassing "Eep!" What little skin the tiny fire illuminated was covered in cuts, bruises, splotches, and sickly colors not fit for men and women. Their clothes were scuffed and torn, exposing wounds underneath. Reed's bravado was killed.

"King's fur," he said, catching his breath.

A man slowly approached in a shambling gait. He was twice Reed's height. The lurching figure stumbled forward, and Reed took a few cautious backpedals. His heart pounded. Those scouts could not have survived this long, yet this one still moved. *How awful,* he thought*, they've become zombies*. The zombie stopped a foot from the shaking rat and knelt to his eye level. His patchy beard was caked with scum and dirt. His tired eyes slowly perked to alert as they investigated Reed. He was Graham, the captain of the scouting party.

"My God... Reed... it's you," he said in a dry, creaky moan, "you came."

Reed balked. "Y-you're alive?!"

"No, you don't..." Graham said, grasping Reed's shoulder with an icy hand, its chill burrowing through the rat's coat and fur, "you don't understand."

“What don't I understand?” Reed asked, still shaking.

“We died, Reed. We died.”

“I don't understand.”

Graham sighed, like the pitiful puff of a cloth bag full of holes after it’s been crushed by a load overtop. His hands spun in circles, then he scratched the underside of his unshaven chin.

“We were killed by inhabitants right here in this cave.”

“You were– inhabitants?”

“They killed us and then raised us from the dead. They must have used magic, we think.”

“King’s fur... that doesn’t... why would they...”

“I don’t know enough about magic. That’s just what we think.”

Nothing about this makes sense, Reed thought. *How can they speak if they’re dead? Zombies don’t talk.* He had seen resurrected corpses before. Rats sometimes use them as slave laborers. A fresh zombie is in an addled state of mind for some time, and very susceptible to suggestion. The scouting party, with no one down here to command them, must have become independently reanimated persons with no master. That doesn’t explain why they can talk. Reed’s first impulse was to interrogate, but something stopped him.

“I'm so sorry,” he said.

“It’s okay.”

“This wasn’t supposed to–”

“No, it’s okay. You didn’t know. We don’t hold you responsible. You couldn’t have known.”

“You’re taking this remarkably well.”

Graham smiled out the corner of his mouth. “Maybe. We’ve had a lot of time to process, but as for that, uh, it’s kinda hard to put into words.” His smile softened and he looked at the cavernous ceiling, still reflecting the fire’s orange light.

“And look, we even finished mapping the cave,” said a female voice.

Another of the dead scouts, who Reed recognized as Graham's wife Milly, presented a map node.

“We cleared out the whole cave,” she said, “so it’s safe. We’ll give you the map, just please don’t let anyone else come down here. Let them think it’s still dangerous.”

“You’re staying here?” *And don’t tell anyone? What’s that about?*

She nodded.

“What about your families?”

“We can't go back like this.”

“Right.” Reed sniffled. “I suppose they would be in trouble if you returned home after they received your full life insurance payout.”

Graham made a half snort, almost like a chuckle. Then he smiled.

“I didn’t even consider that.”

Reed wiped his face. He pulled out a water pouch from his sack and took a sip. It tasted sour, but that may have been his own nervousness befouling his senses.

“Please promise us you won’t let anyone know about us,” Milly said.

That was an impossible promise. He would have to bring another party back to the cave to verify his research results. Reed’s eyebrow twitched, and he clenched his jaw without responding to her request.

“Let me show you one more thing,” Graham said, and Reed jumped. “Sorry! Didn’t mean to scare you.”

"That's alright," he replied, but it wasn't alright. All of this was incredibly inconvenient. *Where do these sad sacks honestly get off asking me to keep them a secret? Don't they understand that's tantamount to* ***not*** *publishing? Why do they think I sent them here in the first place?* Still, Reed followed the dead scout deeper into the cave and put on a fake smile.

Graham shepherded Reed past a large pile of burnt inhabitant body parts. They wriggled about, still alive. Decapitated heads leered angrily in animated heaps throughout the stone corridors. Their mandibles twitched with restless fervor. The entire pile writhed and morphed, but Graham walked past without stopping to explain. Reed stared at the pile, and the heads stared back at him, chittering. He quickened his pace.

Together they entered a large, open but well lit room of wondrous gemstone strata formations.

"As you can see," Graham announced, letting his voice echo around the room, "this cave is full of jewels. Magic-y jewels. Touch one and you'll see."

Reed's fake smile turned genuine. *Incredible! I was right,* he thought, *there are actually jewels here*, jutting from the very walls and ceiling, piled high on the ground, everywhere. They glowed with rich vibrancy from crimson to black, illuminating the room with their ambience. Reed crept around the room, mystified by the luster and depth of color in each massive wall of gems. They buzzed with magical energy and tickled Reed's nose the closer he looked; he barely needed to touch them to feel their pressure. It was like standing inside an uncut ruby at the bottom of an ocean. He shook his head and thought for a moment, tapping his foot and twiddling his coat pocket flap.

"Oh my," Reed said.

"What?"

“I know what this– this has got to be the– but I’ve never–” Reed could not properly explain himself.

“Are they good jewels?” Graham asked.

Reed’s mouth was agape. He frantically considered the implications of what lay before him. He had seen jewels like this only once before.

“Well,” Reed said, his voice creaking, “this is likely the rarest mineral on Aljana. Unless I’m mistaken, but I don’t think I am given what you’ve told me so far. This has to be living painite.”

Graham squinted. “So it’s not a jewel?”

“No, it’s a jewel, but as far as anyone knows, there’s only about 5 or 6 grains of this stuff in the whole world. Golis Obscura has the only known piece of living painite on the planet and it’s just a sliver, not even bigger than my pinky finger.”

“And we have over 10 tons here!”

“Graham,” Reed said, eyes narrowing as he carefully selected his words.

“And it’s *that* rare, huh?”

“Those inhabitants didn't resurrect you,” Reed bit his lip, and met Graham’s gaze.

“What do you mean?”

“Whatever you think those inhabitants did to resurrect you, in all likelihood it was these jewels. Living painite is one of the most potent natural sources of life magic ever discovered. *Anything* would have come to life in this cave.”

“Can you repeat everything you just said?” asked Milly, entering from the corridor. “So is this like the find of the century?”

Reed jolted his head at her arrival. The other three scouts followed closely behind her, gazing around the room with newfound appreciation for their treasure that to this point they had become used to seeing. A lump formed in Reed's throat. He was not fully used to conversing with the dead, so he let himself fall into lecture as a means of warming to the act.

"Let me put it this way," Reed said, "in nature, when something passively generates an abundance of life magic, either through random mutation or some other phenomenon, what typically happens is that thing comes to life as animated materia, or *automata.* A sentient person made from physical matter given life through magic."

The scouts each appeared uniquely nonplussed.

"Surely you've seen one before?" Reed asked.

They shrugged.

"There's one in town. He's made out of a marionette and he performs at the theater? You've never seen him?"

"That puppet is a *person?*" one of the scouts said.

"That puppet is a *he?*" said another.

"Automata that are created this way generate life magic internally– and they can't stop generating, so they grow and grow and eventually their bodies mutilate as a result, sort of like rapid cancer. They grow themselves to shreds. Ironically, the life magic is a death sentence for them. So, things which generate life magic in the wild have a tendency to destroy themselves. Oftentimes the only way we know they ever existed is the evidence they leave behind after they've already been destroyed, like if a dead tree gets discovered with wild overgrowth and nasty, twisted limbs, that's evidence of a life burnout event.

“The much rarer outcome is that the thing is immune to its own magic, such as with living painite, which generates life magic externally. What happens in a situation like this, and this is only theorized but never proven because we’ve never been able to see it occur, is that it wildly creates automata around the living painite or whatever as an epicenter. Like, the rocks or dirt surrounding the painite will come to life as automata. In a situation like that, however, the painite is either destroyed accidentally by the animate rocks around it or it keeps animating whatever’s around and underneath it until nothing is underneath it and it falls into the benthic zone, like an unstoppable drill.”

“Why–” Graham began to ask, but Reed interjected.

“*Anyway*, that’s why there’s so little of it ever discovered. HOWEVER! I did some preliminary tests on this cavern. From the minerals in the cavern entrance to the topsoil, all of it was completely resistant to magic. This cavern therefore has the ideal conditions for living painite to thrive. And there is a *ton* of it!”

Milly’s eyes beckoned for an succinct answer to her original question.

“So yes, to call it ‘the find of the century’ would in no way be an understatement. This is the find of the century!”

The party took this statement like a gut punch, and Reed was puzzled to see their faces.

“So congratulations!” he said, doubling down to fish out a better reaction.

“We should be congratulating *you*,” Graham replied, “you’re the one who gets to leave with all this treasure.”

Reed blanched. “You can’t seriously still not want to come out of the cave knowing all this?”

“We’re zombies, rat-man.” said one of the figures; Reed didn’t remember his name.

Reed made a desperate noise that petered out for lack of breath to sustain it. “Look, I’m an academic! I don’t even want any of the money. Y’all can split it.” He sharply cleared his throat, blushing. “*You all* can split it.”

They shrugged with somber faces. Reed began to say something else, but one of the scouts interrupted. “C’mon, rat-man, don’t make it harder than it already is.”

“Staying down here was a decision we all made, and we’re at peace with it,” Milly added.

With these jewels, Reed thought, *the Individui are necessarily going to investigate. There’s no outcome in which I publish and these scouts aren’t discovered.*

Reed bit his lower lip and bounced in place, muttering under his breath. Decisiveness is a chief Individui virtue. His face cycled through many different emotions as he contemplated what to do. He plunged deep into wild, disorganized solutions in his mind and, after a short brainstorm, pulled something out. Not something clever or well thought-out, but something. He blinked.

“No,” he said as he waggled his finger, drumming up the next few sentences all at once, “you *can* leave. You were brought back to life naturally. As I see it, that makes you an automaton, animated from yourself.”

“What difference does that make?” Milly asked.

“Well,” Reed said, “it's an important distinction because automata are by legal right allowed to become Individui. I’m an Individuus and I could convert you. You wouldn’t have to go back to your families, but you could leave the cave and live somewhere else, as free Individui.”

Graham, Milly, and the other scouting party members stood pensively or in whispered discussion.

“What does that mean? To be Individui? Do we have to do anything for it, like go back to school?” Milly asked. “I’m a little old for that.”

“Only if you want to. I imagine for most of you it will be a change in name only. Sort of an ornamental conversion. But it’ll be enough to guarantee you safety and citizenship in Individui borders. You could live in Unnafirma.”

“It’s that simple to move to another country?” she asked.

“If you’re an automaton and you convert, it will be,” Reed said, “so you *can* leave. We can all leave!”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely sure! We can get out of here today!”

The scouts turned to each other and conferred privately. They slowly broke out in smiles, which then became cheerful embraces. Reed also smiled, inferring from their behavior that they did actually want to leave, and he was allowing them to.

“We’ve decided,” Graham said, having stepped forward on the group’s behalf, “we will go with you.”

I’m doing the right thing, Reed thought. *This is best for everybody. It’s all going to work out.* Together, they returned to the fire. Reed smiled awkwardly as the corpses bounced with giddiness past the inhabitant pile. Their pace was inconsistent, and when one of their arms got too close to Reed, he recoiled and widened the distance between them. They were dead, after all. Dead, dirty, and smelly. There was an unimpeachable morbidity to this whole situation that left him feeling disgusted, annoyed, and a bit guilty.

Back at the fire, Reed placed the cavern map node into his pack. An odor like roasted meat cut through the scout’s stench and drew him to the light. He warmed his paws near the

smoking coals, which were actually shriveled bits of charred inhabitant, still moving even as they crackled. The smoke rose into a crevice in the roof, beyond which Reed could not see. Soon, the rest were packing their belongings. Reed took some time to unfocus, wind down, and examine their dwelling. The surrounding walls were covered in amateur drawings. Several mining tools with dismembered inhabitant claws attached leaned against a flat boulder in a row like a rack of swords. It still smelled awful all around, but Reed had adjusted and was taking in some full breaths. Graham issued instructions to the scouts and Reed tuned back in to pay special attention to the names of each person with whom the scout captain spoke. He did not want to come clean about having forgotten them.

"Here, Pipi!" Milly cried.

The oraclebird landed on Milly's finger. It was a handsome little thing, delicate and colorful, with a trio of long, black-tipped tail feathers. They must have let it out of its cage and named it in the months down here. The bird likely starved to death and then came back to life shortly afterwards and became Milly's familiar. Despite being dead, the bird seemed no worse for it, emaciated maybe, plumage as vibrant as when Reed first purchased it. Milly tickled its head, and it made a distinctive warbling song in response. *It should be easy to pass them off as "corpse automata,"* Reed thought, *so long as I can convince my peers that's a real thing.* In truth, Reed had always been taught that zombies can only ever be slaves, things to be owned. *But this has got to be some kind of exception! Living painite has never before been discovered in this quantity and a zombie has never had free will like this. Probably shouldn't use the word "zombie" here. This is different.*

The oraclebird hopped playfully on her finger.

"Pipi died too, I take it," Reed said.

“Yes, she did. I bet she didn't see THAT coming,” Milly joked.

“No, Pipi definitely saw it coming,” he explained.

Milly frowned. Reed had trouble reading people sometimes.

Chapter 3.

The scouting party shambled about, vigorously collecting their effects as they prepared to finally leave the cavern. When they were ready to depart, they grabbed their leftover mapping nodes and activated them all.

“We've been using them like lanterns,” said Graham, clearly proud of his ingenuity.

“How clever,” Reed replied through a grit smile.

“That’s actually how we got discovered, initially.”

Reed clenched his teeth, holding back criticism.

“You gonna tell me about your little battle with those inhabitants?” Reed asked, trying to push the conversation away from their mistakes.

“Well, it went poorly, as you can probably imagine,” Milly said. “There were about 12 of them. They attacked as soon as they saw us. We fought as best as we could, but they eventually overwhelmed us. Then we all woke up in a pile in the cave.”

“A pile, huh?”

“Yep. We were dead at that point but we didn’t realize it at the time. We got up to fight them again, and dismembering them seemed to work, so that’s what we did.”

Reed cringed. “Did I see correctly that you made weapons out of their parts?”

“Oh, yeah, but that wasn’t for fighting or nothin’. We got bored one day and did that. Those are glorified fire pokers.”

“So then you fought the inhabitants by hand.”

“Yep. They’re big, but they’re weak at the joints. Have you ever peeled a shrimp? It was like that,” said Graham.

Reed shivered at the mental image.

“Now they’re the ones in a pile. Not bad for a couple o’ zombies, I’d say,” said Abner, one of the scouts.

“Didn’t the bird do anything?” Reed asked.

Milly paused, then said, “Yeah, I suppose she did freak out a little right before it all happened.”

“And you didn’t take that as a sign of anything?”

“You didn’t really explain to us how she worked. We didn’t put it together until well after we died. *Oracle*-bird.”

“Oh,” Reed dumbly said.

He scratched his way up the limestone slope, stopping at the top to make sure the dead explorers were keeping pace. They were, so Reed pressed on. At the deepest stake in the cave, again Reed turned to see their reaction. Graham silently collected it, so Reed pressed on. The map lights shivered and bounced on the sides of the cavern wall as they trod up the tunnel. As the light of the surface overpowered the nodes' glow, Reed turned once more to see the scouting party's satisfaction. They exited the cave with little fanfare. Reed inhaled deep the fresh air, and the scouts took to methodically disassembling the warning signs around the cave entrance.

“Oh, I didn't think of that,” Reed said with a tinge of disappointment. “Suppose the cave's not so dangerous now anyway.”

"True,” Milly said, “but we put some of these signs up ourselves, for privacy.”

Reed gawked. “You left the cave?”

“Of course,” Graham said, “but we weren't about to terrify our families. We were going to stay in the cave; that’s the truth.”

“As you can see, rat-man, we don’t exactly look like the people we used to be,” Abner said.

“And you don't exactly smell like a pastry shop, either,” Reed joked.

Graham's eyes glossed over. Reed may have forgotten the situation for a moment.

“Maybe *he* doesn't,” said Abner, “but *I'm* freshern' a sweetrose!”

Graham chuckled. “You're fresh, alright. Ripe, even!”

The scouting team consisted of Graham Balding and his wife Milly, Abner Hogan, Rich Howard, and Krieger Munk, all chainwearers. Exposed in broad daylight, they could now be plainly seen for the first time. They were all grisly pale with sporadic discolored bruises, dirty hair, and crusty, torn outfits. Graham was the tallest of them. He had a round face, strong arms, and big hands. Graham’s hair was dirty blond and his patchy stubble was even dirtier. Milly was a plain woman with long, mousy hair. She had a tiny nose and a tinier smile, which she employed liberally. Milly was kind and tolerant, but a bit serious. In contrast, Abner was extremely risible. He was short; had wiry hair, and round eyes like an owl. Rich was the youngest. He was skinny, freckled, and had a ruddy-red mop of curls. Rich was the first to volunteer for the expedition. Folks in town thought he was a clumsy airhead at best and a nuisance at worst. Finally there was Krieger, a man who could be described as thoroughly square in appearance and demeanor. He was a good listener, insofar as he didn’t speak much. His thick, black beard balanced out his lack of hair on top. Abner would joke that his head was upside-down. Krieger had toned muscles, but paper-thin skin, and would not take these taunts lying down, much to Abner’s glee. For now, they were Reed’s traveling party.

Graham, at least to Reed, was the de facto head of their group. Reed didn't want to upset their established leadership structure. Still, they all awaited Reed’s instruction. *I suppose I have*

to take them all back to the office. Reed proposed as such, and they all agreed. He bit his lower lip. *Of course they agreed. Are these chainwearers going to follow my lead until I shake them loose in Unnafirma? Ugh.*

Reed brought the party to his residence, a two-story building with an office on bottom and a furnished apartment on top on a small plot of land beside a main road. Many hopeful researchers had come and gone here, and similar offices can be found almost anywhere for junior Individui to stay while they conduct their tenure research. On Unnafirma, there exist some apartment campuses where hundreds of junior researchers live in massive communities. Those places can get wild, and Reed elected to be sent to a place with more stability and privacy.

The downstairs office was ruined from the callous scuffs of drifters. Its barren walls were stained from the discoloration of stolen decorations. The only furniture around belonged to its current residents or was too heavy to take or too beaten to be worth taking. Reed set his satchel on an old windsor chair with more missing backpoles than remaining. He asked the scouts to stay put, then went upstairs to speak with his roommate.

Stirmstrommendoo was just waking up and brewing a pot as Reed entered the apartment. She was several inches taller than him and had a face very much like a hippo. Her wiry tail stuck out of her large pajamas and her bangs, usually held back in a bun, drooped over her eyes. She and Reed were from the same year at Nigh-on-High University, but didn't meet until they were paired as roommates for their tenure research. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of her coffee. Reed did not much care for coffee, or tea, and if he had some he would take it very weak. Caffeine gave him the jitters.

"Hi, Mendy. I'm home," Reed announced.

She cracked her sternum with a dramatic stretch and yawned in Reed's face. Full epiglottis. Her throat still caked with morning phlegm formed the barrel of her morning breath cannon. His whole head could fit in her mouth and still leave room for half a watermelon. Still not the worst thing he had smelled today. Not pleasant, though!

"Did you chicken out? Is Pulnare super dangerous?" she asked.

"No, no. I explored the whole thing. And there's a lot more. Come downstairs with me."

"Pbfoof, 've you been rolling in garbage?"

"Please, I don't have the energy to joke around with you. There is something I have to show you right now!"

"Want some coffee?" she teased.

"Please."

"Coffee comin' up!" She joyously lifted a mug above Reed's head.

"Not 'please' to coffee, 'please' to come downstairs!"

"Okay, let me get dressed first," she said as she bunned up her hair.

Two more comments about the smell were squeezed in before they had descended the staircase. Upon seeing the scouts, her mockery ceased.

"Mendy, these are the original expedition members."

Her nose wrinkled all the way up her snout. "Are they okay?"

"No, they died! But you'll never believe what happened! Pulnare is a motherlode of living painite! They were resurrected and they've been down there ever since!"

Reed gave her a moment to process.

"Everyone, this is my co-resident, Stirmstrommendoo, but I don't use her full name. You can call her Mendy. She's a chemist and she's working toward her tenure, same as me."

She stared, almost angrily, as if Reed were doing her a disservice with this early morning confrontation. The scouts sheepishly waved without getting any closer.

"Hello," Milly said. Mendy went wide-eyed.

"You can *talk*?"

"I know! Isn't that something?" Reed said.

"You're all *dead*? Did Reed resurrect you?" she asked.

"No," Milly said, "we came back on our own." Mendy's jaw hung like a dead trout.

Reed clued into the tension and cleared his throat. "Could you give us a moment?" He took Mendy aside, where she indiscreetly side-eyed the dead scouts and balled her fists into her hips.

"Some advance notice would have been nice. This is a *lot*," she said.

"What, did you want me to just leave them there?"

"This is tragic, Reed. Tragic," she whispered.

"You should know I feel partly to blame in all this nonsense."

She scoffed. "Wow, that's very introspective of you."

"I'm taking them back to Nigh-on-High to have them converted."

"Why?"

"So they can live? Start over? Before I showed up they were going to spend eternity in a cave."

"Zombies can't be Individui," she stated flatly.

"Do those look like zombies to you? They *speak*. They resurrected with nobody to control them, and have retained their memories from life. As far I'm concerned, they're sentient, conscious beings with free will!" Reed said, as if citing from a dictionary.

“*Sentient and conscious*? So–so you're spinning this as– as–”

“Automata.”

“That's–”

“Pretty genius, I think. I could perform the swearing in and you could be the witness. Nigh-on-High would *have* to accept it.”

“Has this ever happened before? With dead bodies?”

“No, usually people have too much respect for the dead. But I’ll be honest: I didn’t even think it was possible.”

“Respect didn't factor in for you, I take it.”

“I made the executive decision that given the importance of this find, respect would have been *unscholarly*.”

Mendy rolled her eyes. “Alright!” she proclaimed, clapping, “let's do this, then!”

“Okay, Krieger, you're last. Come on up,” Reed instructed.

He stepped onto the ritual carpet, fresh footsteps etched into its grime from four prior conversions. It had never been used before today.

Reed held the Individui Book of Rites, also rarely touched, in one hand and his other hand aloft.

“State your full name.”

“Krieger Pinebaum Munk.”

“Krieger Pinebaum Munk, in accepting this creed, you join the Individui along the paved road to the future. All intelligent living beings may wa–”

“Do you have to read this part every time?” Mendy interrupted.

Reed shot her a poisonous squint. “Yesss.”

He cleared his throat.

“All intelligent living beings may walk this road. Gone are the shackles of birth and caste. From now on, you are an Individuus. Carry with it the responsibilities and privileges bestowed upon you.”

Krieger opened his mouth and hung on the silence.

“I will,” Reed whispered.

“I will!” he barked back.

“Witness Mendy, do you witness this and bear testament to its legitimacy?”

“Yesss,” she replied with as much poison.

“Then, sign here!” Reed shouted.

She signed the Book of Rites one final time and Reed closed it as fast as she could pull the pen away. He was grinning like a child, clearly happier to have administered the rite than its participants were to have performed it.

“Alright, great, everybody! You're all Individui now!”

“Are we still chainwearers?” Rich asked.

“Uh,” Reed chuckled, “no, you're Individui.”

“It's a little more complicated than that, fool,” Mendy snapped, “of course, you'll always be human but in the eyes of the creed you all just took, you're now *legally* Individui automata, governed by Individui laws, not chainwearer laws.”

Rich didn’t pursue an explanation, despite appearing to be unsatisfied with the answer.

“Look,” Mendy reassured him, “you can think whatever you want, but if anyone asks, you're Individui automata. Get it?”

“I guess I get it,” he said.

Mendy piped up. “Oh, wait right here!”

She rushed upstairs, but came back slowly, out of breath, with a handful of vials.

“Since you guys will be roasting in the sun more often than you've been used to, you should drink these,” she said as she distributed the vials to the scouts.

“This,” Mendy said with aplomb, “is dioxymethylene. It's all I have on hand, but I'll cook up a huge batch for you all before you leave.”

“What do we do with it?” Milly asked.

“Oh, uh, you drink it, honey,” Mendy explained, “and drink it all. You won’t like the taste, but it’ll keep you hearty in the daylight which I imagine you folks haven’t been exposed to much recently. Reed, this should go without saying, but you can’t drink this.”

Reed was insulted at the implication he would do something so stupid.

“You had that much formaldehyde in your room?” he asked.

“Well, if I'd have known we'd be hosting a zombie jamboree I'd have made more.”

“Poor taste, bad joke,” Reed rebuked.

Reed informed the group they would be leaving in two days for Nigh-on-High, a city on Unnafirma where Reed can submit his research and their conversions can be stamped and officiated.

“Field conversions,” he explained, “are always followed by pilgrimages. Afterwards, you’re free to go!”

They agreed to join him and leave the Web. Reed would first need to make a trip to town.

“Still need me to take you shopping?” Mendy asked, jeeringly.

“Yes,” Reed replied, giving her the satisfaction of her taunt.

Reed was not able to properly buy groceries as everyone hated him, so for the past several months had been relying on Mendy to buy his essentials for him.

Dusk fell. Reed stepped out to the front porch for some fresh air and stared off at the horizon. The moon was rising, and some island drifting lazily in the air like an evening cloud was obscuring it. *That's D1-S84-U13, if I'm seeing correctly. Hard to tell in the light.* Reed enjoyed identifying islands in the distance by sight alone. He was especially practiced at identifying the thousands of floating islands within the Great Web, of which Wunnyone was just one. He felt it kept him sharp and was a skill that a proper cartographer should have. Reed made many assumptions about what his ideal version of a scholar was, and strived toward those ideals in his own way. He decorated his office with maps like how he envisioned a great cartographer might, he counted his steps throughout buildings and along pathways like how he imagined Eleonoras the Blind may have, and he wore a tie around his neck just like Professor Fraucus Ehrewold, Reed's cartography professor from Nigh-on-High University. Now *there* was a true and proper scholar of the Individui. Reed decided not to go back inside, and fell asleep on the porch.

Reed awoke in the early morning having been joined outside by Rich, who was sitting between the roots of a tree. He looked great, comparatively speaking. Way better than before, at least. He was already awake, so Reed went over to chat.

"My, you're up early," he said, wiping the crust from his eyes.

"That dioxymeleen stuff works," Rich said, "I feel really good! I don't even stink anymore!"

That wasn't entirely true but the smell had certainly lessened.

"That's wonderful, Rich. D'you sleep okay?"

He chuckled. “We don't need to sleep. We're always awake and we don't get tired.” Reed cocked his head with intrigue.

“We also don't need food or water or heat or even air. We *can* breathe, but it's just to talk.”

Reed didn't realize that about resurrection, but it made sense. They talked for a bit more, and he lapped up every bit of Rich’s experience. Not often do you get to hear about undeath from the perspective of the undead, and Reed felt he was on the bleeding edge of new science even from these anecdotes.

“So, what do you do at night? Do you just sit down and wait until morning?”

“Well,” Rich said, “in the cave, it was pretty much impossible to tell when night and day were, so we were doing our own thing all the time. We would talk and play games and find things to do. I would draw in the dirt a lot. But sometimes, yeah, we just sit around and do nothing, or stare at the fire. Fires were a peaceful way to pass the time without doing anything.”

He seems like a nice guy, Reed thought.

“Did you ever get on each others’ nerves down there?”

Rich chuckled. “Yeah, sometimes!” Reed smiled.

Rich peered at the horizon. The sun was not up, but the sky was stained with purple and orange.

“I’ve never flown anywhere before.”

“Are you nervous?” Reed asked.

Rich scratched the dirt with his fingers and turned the corners of his mouth, *like* smiling but not actually.

“No.”

“Great!” Reed said, satisfied to find that despite Rich’s appearance, he was not in fact nervous.

Rich sighed.

Reed put together a bag of money and departed with Mendy to town. He would get a ride off the Web to Unnafirma and she would get food and supplies. Reed asked her if she wanted to do both, but then she threatened to go home, so he compromised. Reed felt he never had any leverage with her.

Wunnyone’s main trade hub was the center of the local town of Thorndyke. During the day it was a gathering place for farmers, promethium miners, tradesmen, crafters, and travelers. At night all these people could be found in the pub. Reed had always found the people here to be fairly brutish, ignorant, and rude. They all knew each other and would gossip about this and that. Certainly, when Reed’s little fiasco occurred, it spread quickly and Reed found it impossible to do business anymore. Among the various methods off the rock, Reed’s first instinct was to try a zeppelin, so he made his way to the blimp dock. It had a number of different companies for transit and towing, so Reed arbitrarily picked one. He walked to a large, painted sign above an iron gate that read,

Papadopoulou Docks, Wunnyone’s Finest Zeppelin Operators

Inside, a surly ticket booth clerk disdainfully eyed Reed’s approach.

“Rat,” he said, blowing a puff of pungent pipe smoke in Reed’s face.

Reed cleared his throat, prepping to be as polite an example of metropolitan class and distinction as possible for this undoubtedly uncordial transaction.

“Good morning, sir. I’m sure you and everyone else on the island will be pleased to learn that I’m leaving 1-8-1 for good.”

The clerk burped, then straightened in his chair. “That is good news. I s’pose ye’ll be needin’ a ticket then.”

“I need a ticket, yes, and I have some special cargo that I need to take with me.”

“Is this all goin’ back tae yer Indervidri city?”

“Yes.”

The clerk grabbed a pencil and scrawled ‘*Burghenbolge’* onto a ticket slip.

“Uh-huh, and what kinna cargo is it?”

Reed leaned in. “The kind for whose discretion I’d be willing to pay extra.”

The clerk squinted, then matched Reed’s lean in with his own.

“First a murderer, now a *smuggler*?” he plainly asked. Reed stammered for a second but recovered from the jab.

“No, it’s not that kind of thing. I have a couple people that need to get off the island without mixing with the rest of the passengers. This is all very above board, I assure you. They’re Individui.”

“Y’aint trickin’ me, are ya?”

“What?”

“Y’aint usin’ one o’ yer magic tricks?”

“No, no! I don’t even know any tricks!”

He blew more smoke in Reed’s face while looking off to the side in thought, lips pursed.

“It’ll be double the normal ticket price.”

“Deal. What do I need to do?”

“Three in the mornin’ ye’ll get here tae get yer folks in the cargo hold. We’ll have an area prepped for them ta stay during the flight.”

“I should mention: these passengers; they smell like death.”

“Shouldnae be an issue. When ye get tae the city, our business is concluded, so ye’ll have ta take yer boys an' leave.”

Reed paid the ticket clerk and rejoined Mendy in town, who was in the middle of haggling with a farmer.

“I won’t stand for ya badmouthin’ the quality o’ me produce, cloudy!” barked the farmer.

“I know good mushrooms,” she lied, “and these are not good mushrooms. Not for these prices, anyway.”

The farmer snorted.

“Mendy,” Reed said, “I’m the only one who’ll be needing food on this voyage. The others don’t eat. I think we have enough.”

“I didn’t get any cheese yet, is that alright?” she asked.

Maybe we had better do a bit more shopping.

As they towed their groceries home, Reed peeked at his zeppelin tickets which he had been twirling around in his fingers and was chagrined to learn that it was departing in three days, not two. *I guess I shouldn't have made plans without, I don't know, learning that first*, he thought. *Hopefully the others won't be too annoyed.*

“Stop here one second,” Mendy instructed.

“Hmm? I'm tired. I want to go home.”

Mendy walked off the road into the woods, making Reed wait. She returned with an armful of moss, wood chips, and foliage. Reed shot her a scowl, though she refused to make eye contact.

“Need organic material to make methanol, dumb-dumb,” she said. Then she plopped it all into Reed’s tote. He gasped.

“Why do I–!”

“It's for your zombies! You should carry it.”

The cheek on her!

“You shouldn’t call them that. You're their witness; you should behave like it!”

She huffed.

“And you got my tickets all dirty...”

After their arrival, Reed informed everyone of the change in schedule and of the plan to leave. Thankfully, they were all understanding, nonchalantly so. For the next two days, Reed compiled information about Pulnare into his maps and archives, and graciously let the dead scouts help him out around the office. On the evening before departure, he packed his bags. The scouts also packed theirs. Reed happened to see inside Abner's bag as he was meandering around the office, random tools tucked in with a length of cloth swaddling a large clump of living painite.

“You brought jewels out of the cave?” Reed asked.

“Just the ones I liked.”

Graham cleared his throat, and Reed turned to him.

“Yeah, actually,” he said, “I brought some too. I think everybody did.” They all shamefully nodded in agreement, like they were fessing up to a crime.

“Might come in handy,” Reed said, “good thinking. But whatever bags you’re carrying those jewels in, I need to enchant them so they don’t come to life and run off on us.”

Reed grabbed a textbook off the shelf and some flummoxing agent from Mendy’s supply cabinet and performed the incantations slowly, step-by-step, as he read them, on each sack and satchel they intended to bring. By the seventh bag, he had the procedure down and no longer needed the

book. When he finished, he leaned back in his chair to rest. Performing magic, even magic as simple as enchanting, always tired Reed out, for what little magical knowledge he possessed. It always took a toll on his stamina. A single magical jinx could wipe him out.

A haggard Mendy came clattering downstairs with a box full of assorted vials, perfume bottles, glass jars, tin flasks, anything that could hold liquid. She indelicately plopped them onto a desk.

“You look exhausted,” Reed noticed out loud. She leered back at him.

“Come and get 'em, guys. Distillation's finished. I'm gonna leave it here, y'all can come and get all you want. Good night!”

Milly called out to Mendy as she traipsed back up to her room, “thank you, Mendy.”

Mendy smiled and walked off.

“You should go thank your roommate,” Milly whispered in a scolding tone, “and say goodbye for that matter.”

“She knows I'm grateful,” Reed replied.

“No, you should still go say it to her.”

Reed looked to the boys for reassurance, but they offered none.

The smell of Mendy's room smacked Reed’s nostrils, and he recoiled against the noxious wafts of the open door. *It's amazing she can sleep in this haze,* he thought. *I'm getting light-headed.*

“I can't sleep in here. It stinks,” she moaned.

“You should sleep in my room.”

“Hey, so,” she said, staring at the ceiling, “we probably won’t see each other again.”

“I might come back, you never know,” Reed replied.

“No, uh, no, Reed. I'm leaving too.”

“Where are you going?”

“Back Home. I'm getting married,” she said, more somber than Reed had ever seen her, “which probably means I won’t finish my research or get tenure.”

This was the first Reed was hearing of this.

“I got a letter from my parents a week ago, right before you left. My parents found me a husband they like, so I'm going Home in three weeks for the engagement. If I get married, then they'll have me leave the Individui and I won’t come back.”

“That's absurd!” Reed yelled.

“It's not absurd. It's how cloudwalkers have always done things.”

“But you're an Individuus! To Hell with your old customs! You gave those up!”

She groaned. “I already told you, it's more complicated than that.”

“But you're an Individuus,” Reed pleaded.

“Don't think I haven't heard you in your study screaming to ‘the King’ when you think nobody can hear you. Do Individui acknowledge the Rat King all of a sudden? Even *you* have customs you haven't given up!”

“That's di–,” Reed stopped. It wasn't different at all.

“It’s not different,” she interjected.

“No, I kn– let me just say this,” Reed said, “thank you for everything you’ve done for me and for them, and I’m sorry you have to go home.”

“It’s not a bad thing to get married and have a family, you don’t have to be sorry.”

“You could have been a tenured chemist, that’s all I have to say.”

“I know.”

At that, she went into Reed's bedroom. Reed stayed awake in his office until well after the sun fell. He emerged, washed his face in the sink, then left.

Chapter 4.

The new moon cast the trail in thick darkness, ideal for the group as they traveled. All of them were accustomed to moving about in the dark, but they walked carefully all the same as there were rocks and roots on the road to trip on. Abner popped a vial of embalming fluid. He shivered with an open-throated gasp as he slammed it back.

“This is the worst thing I've ever tasted,” he said, wiping his face.

“Well, quit drinking it,” Graham reprimanded.

“I can't help it,” he said, giggling. He may have been getting tipsy off the stuff.

“Woah, stop, guys, look!” Rich whispered.

They all squinted into the darkness at nothing in particular, not knowing what to look for.

“That’s my old house. Do you think we have time to stop in and grab a couple of my things?” he asked.

“Is anyone home?” Reed asked.

“My parents, probably.”

“I don't know if it's such a good idea,” Graham said.

“I'll be quick!”

“We can't stop,” Milly whispered. “What do you even want from there?”

“Just some of my clothes and stuff.”

“We don’t have time for this, buddy,” Krieger whispered.

“Please, Reed?”

Why did he ask me?

“It's not a good idea,” Milly said flatly.

When did I become shotcaller? If I said yes, he can go poke around his old house, would that carry enough weight to make the others relent? It's obviously a bad idea, but my mere presence has upended this group's ability to self-govern. If I side against Rich, that will only affirm my decision-making acumen. But it's obviously a bad idea.

It wasn't fair, but Reed could no longer tolerate his own indecision. Individui must not hesitate, not even for a second.

"I suppose," Reed said against better judgment, "the sky wouldn't fall if you were quick and quiet about it."

Rich lit up. "I will! Be right back!" And off he popped.

Milly leered at Reed, who shrugged.

Rich resurfaced from the stygian silhouette of his abode with a bundle of clothes and a bulky cigar box.

"My parents never found my savings; it was right where I left it," he proudly declared. He opened the cigar box, stuffed to the brim with gold and old keepsakes. Reed furrowed his brow. Milly was half crestfallen, half impressed.

Dammit!

Rich proudly marched down the road with his extra baggage, happy to have the burden. Milly caught up to Reed.

"Guess you were right," she told him. Reed tried to smile but grimaced instead.

"You don't seem happy about it."

Reed blinked. "I'm happy for Rich that he got his money," he said with a betraying tone.

"I take it you don't particularly care about money, then?"

"No, it's unbecoming."

“I wouldn’t go that far. People need it to live.” Milly waited for a reply but got none.

“Is there anything you care about, or want?” she asked.

“I want to be a professor.”

“You didn’t like those jewels?”

“I like them on an academic level but I have no desire to own them or sell them. If they were mine I would donate them.”

“So there’s nothing you want to physically have? It’s all immaterial?”

Reed thought for a second. “Do you know what casper vellum is?” Milly shook her head.

“It’s a kind of decorated paper. It’s inscribed with runes woven into the parchment down to the microscopic level and adorned with gold or promethium. Every piece is uniquely designed. It’s always legible, even in pitch black darkness. It can’t be burned, torn, or destroyed, or even worn down over time– this stuff is impervious. You can’t even get it dirty– it stays perfect forever. That’s why the Individui government write their laws onto casper vellum, to signify their permanence.”

“Can you even write on it?”

“Yes, you can, but then they do something to it so that you can’t anymore.”

“And you want a piece of casper vellum?”

Reed blushed. “No, I don’t know. That’s like saying I want to own one of those jewels or I want to own my own law. Casper vellum is priceless. It’s not even the kind of thing you *can* own. It’s only ever created by the Individui government when they need to pass a law.”

Y’know, I probably do own the jewels considering I own the land, Reed thought, but he kept it to himself. If they were his at all, they were only temporarily his. He would see to it some time later that the scouts got equal shares.

The conspicuous group slunk into town, shoulders hunched and scanning like thieves for onlookers. Reed led the way to the zeppelin station where the burly ticket clerk rested against a lamppost near the now locked iron gate. The scouts cowled their faces and stayed put while he scurried over to the clerk.

"Hi."

The clerk roused. "Rat."

"My people are ready. Can you unlock the gate?"

The man did so. Reed motioned for the group to come, and the clerk ushered them all to the cargo door of the zeppelin. He brought the chainwearers into the hold and showed them to an area behind a black curtain for them to sit, which they did, careful to keep their faces hidden. The clerk resurfaced into the lamplight, pinching his nose.

"You weren't kiddin' about the smell." The clerk coughed.

"No, I was not."

"Would have had passengers complainin' if they were in the coach, so this was probably the right move either way. What's wrong with them?"

What does he care? I paid for discretion. Nosy chainwearer.

Reed blinked, and said, "Stink curse."

"That's a thing?"

"Those guys accidentally invented it. We're going back to Unnafirma to find a way to undo it."

"Poor bastards."

"I'm gonna pop in there to make sure they're all set, if you'll give me a minute, then I'll be right back out."

“No, when yer done, follow the stairs up tae the coach and pick a seat.”

Reed thanked the man and entered the zeppelin, the door closing behind him. The metal tiled floor chilled Reed’s feet, but not enough to make him step any livelier. He brushed his hands along the smooth, round rivets on the wall as he walked past stacked boxes and machinery. The hum of hydraulics was especially loud near where Reed’s group were sitting. As Reed drew the curtain, he found them stretched out on cots. They had a pair of little circular windows, out of which Rich peered into the darkness. Reed set down his effects.

“I’m leaving all my research and bags with you guys, if that’s okay.”

Reed plugged his ears.

“That’s fine,” Krieger said, with a raised voice.

“Okay, super. I'm heading up to the coach then. Oh, I should mention there’ll be a layover in the SFRR, but you guys will stay on board the entire time so sit tight for that.”

“How's that? SFRR?” Rich asked.

“What?” Reed said.

“What’s SFRR?”

“It's a small country; it's where I was born, actually.”

“What?” Rich said.

“It stands for the Scratch Flat Rat Reservation. It used to be part of the Web and technically it’s still physically attached but it's its own sovereign nation now. The chainwearers gave it back to the rats a little while before I was born and my parents resettled there.”

“What do your parents do, Reed?” Milly asked.

Reed went flush in the face. “Th-they're farmers.”

“They make a good living?”

“No,” Reed with creaky reserve. “No, they're very poor. I send them money every month out of my university stipend.”

Milly smiled. “That's nice of you.” He went even redder.

Reed excused himself. He pulled the curtain closed and walked across the hold to the only other door than the one from which he originally entered, then walked past a lavatory and up a stairwell to the passenger coach. It was fairly luxurious, with padded benches in two rows and a central aisle between them spanning front to back. The lights inside were off, and out the window was pitch black. Reed found a bench near the stairwell door and laid there. As he closed his eyes to get some sleep, a tear rolled off his cheek and was absorbed into the seat cushion.

Chapter 5.

Dawn's light crept over Reed's closed eyelids, and he awoke. His sternum popped at the apex of a deep stretch. Still no one on board, except for him.

"Good morning."

Reed swiveled around to see a chainwearer man, likely a merchant from the clothes on him, peering over his shoulder.

"Looks like you fell asleep, young man. You're in Wunnyone now, and the ship is leaving this morning. You might want to get off before it departs," the man said.

"Oh, no, thank you, I'm on the right ship," Reed replied, flustered. "I got here early." The man smirked. Reed frowned and moved two seats away from the chuckling merchant.

Reed straightened his tie, then brushed specks and pulled hairs off his coat for fear of being taken for a tramp. Morning passed. The cabin slowly warmed, and filled with people. Reed was forced to scoot to the window as three affluent chainwearer gentlemen in navy-blue suits had taken over his pair of benches. They curtly greeted the rat, who was pleased to find they did not have much to say after that, to him or each other. They read their papers. One man pushed a pipe past his mustache but, failing to strike his only match, put it away. Despite invading his space, the men were otherwise unobjectionable company for the trip, so Reed nestled into his corner for a silent, boring journey.

Muffled scraping drew Reed's attention to the window as the zeppelin furled its chains from the dock post. On a distant runway, a group of seven nodetrucks has been bussed into a V-formation for takeoff. The captain entered the passenger coach and announced he would be collecting tickets and that the ship would be departing momentarily. The gentlemen sharing the bench handed the captain three tickets, and offered to hand Reed's in as well, which he declined.

Wunnyone shrank away. Out the window, nothing but sky. The zeppelin cast a blobby shadow upon the clouds below. Those clouds were ever present and unbroken, totally covering the planet's surface like an epipelagic blanket. At its sight, Reed clutched his armrest and took heavy breaths. He loosened his tie and adjusted his neck to free up space for his airways. Flying always did this to him. He preferred to keep his paws on the ground, though would never admit this. A proper Individui should be comfortable flying. Reed just hadn't done it enough– that was the problem. With enough miles in the air, he'd stop feeling antsy. Or queasy.

A voice echoed out from the voicepipes hanging at both ends of the passenger cabin, "Good morning, all. Thank you for flying with the Papadopoulou Skybus. We are now in open air but we will soon be landing in about 90 minutes at Little Scratch, at which point you will have 30 minutes to get off the zeppelin and stretch your legs as we board the Sharpe-Kettering Zeppelin Train to King's Cove." He repeated the instructions, then announced he would repeat the instructions again when they arrived, which Reed felt was gratuitous.

The gentleman next to Reed pulled out his pocket watch and showed it to the man across from him. "It's time," he said. The two rose from their seats, then walked to the cargo hold door. Reed's eyes bulged. The remaining man groaned, then moved a seat over and lifted his feet onto the cushion adjacent Reed. A lump formed in his throat as the two chainwearers disappeared down to the cargo hold. *Who are these people? Agents? Headhunters?*

Reed cleared his throat. "Excuse me, sir."

The gentleman bent his paper down slightly, peeking over the top.

"I noticed how nicely dressed you and your colleagues are. What is it you do for work?"

The man's bottom lip pushed his mustache up, and he rubbed his nose. "Thank you, but," he said, "you wouldn't find it very interesting."

“Oh, okay.” Reed died a little. He blinked, saying, “would you perhaps move your legs? I have to use the restroom.”

The man folded his paper. “Sorry, little rat, but you’ll have to wait.”

“O-oh, okay,” Reed replied, quivering.

Reed curled up into a tense ball and grabbed his knees, tail tucked between his ankles. He rocked in place, enthralled by the myriad of horrible scenarios playing out in his head. The man opened his paper and resumed reading. After a while, the mustached man said, “Alright, you can go ahead now.” Reed pulled his head out of his arms. The two gentlemen were already sitting, having rejoined their colleague. Reed wiped his face and raced out the door.

He ran into the cargo hold, and flung open the curtain.

“-- and apparently they keep them all in a giant bubble. That’s just what I’ve heard,” Krieger had finished saying. Reed exhaled. He counted five heads. Rich was still gazing out the window.

Graham squinted. “Is something wrong?”

“Did anyone come in here?” They all shook their heads.

“King’s fur. My poor heart!” Reed cried.

Reed caught his breath, then went back to his seat. The gentleman next to him pulled his pocket watch out again. Reed impulsively stiffened.

“Hey, kid, look at this.” The others rolled their eyes.

Reed peeked at the watch. It had only one hand, pointed at the word “LOO” written where the numbers should be. The gentleman snickered and said, “My, would you look at the time!”

Reed smiled sheepishly and nodded. He then stewed for a while for fretting over an idiot stranger’s trip to the bathroom.

Some time passed. The zeppelin encroached on a massive, man-made ring floating in the sky. It was an Individui scangate. The blimp flew through the center of the ring, and a siren wailed.

Oh, what now?

The ring rang out, "*AIR VESSEL, ANCHOR IMMEDIATELY AND STANDBY FOR BOARDING. YOU HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS POSSIBLY HARBORING A FUGITIVE.*"

The man next to Reed bumped him on the shoulder. "That's not you, is it?"

"Quit hassling the kid," his colleague chided.

The zeppelin came to a halt. *Click, click, click, click* went the cabin doors as they locked remotely. Reed felt more drained than nervous, so he fiddled with his tie and tried to let his mind go blank, hard as that was for him. Too hard, in fact.

"Is there actually a fugitive on board?" he asked the gentlemen.

The mustached man sniffled, and said, "Those ring things are a bit touchy and I've been on trips where they had false positives but, uh, it's possible, yes."

After ten minutes, a dinghy approached the blimp and a pair of Individui inspectors entered the passenger coach. They walked past Reed and stopped at the merchant man to whom he had spoken earlier.

"August Matthias?" one of them asked.

The man looked up.

"We have a warrant for your capture for associating with the cult of Prospero."

"It's not a cult," he said.

"Come with us, sir."

They escorted him off the zeppelin. Reed sneered at the merchant as they passed. *Serves him right*, he thought. Their dinghy departed, then the zeppelin was back in motion.

Chapter 6.

After the captain's landing announcement, Reed popped down to the rest of his group. They were lying on their cots. Milly's bird hopped around on her finger to her soft whispers.

"We're almost there," Reed said. "When we touch down, I'm going into town but I'll be back before the train leaves."

"You're getting off?" Krieger asked.

"I'll be quick."

"What for?"

"I used to live near this town. My favorite shop is here and I haven't been to it since I left home. I want some stuff from there."

"Is it a cheese shop?" Abner teased.

"H-how did you know?"

Abner laughed. "It's actually a cheese shop?"

"Yes." The rest of the scouts were smiling now.

Reed didn't understand what they found so humorous but he took it as permission to go through with his errand.

Little Scratch was more dilapidated than Reed remembered. The rooftops had lost some color. The roads were smoothed from constant traffic and no repairs. Rats roamed freely here. Many were without work. Children played in the streets, searching for scraps of food or chasing birds. The old fortifications had become playgrounds, or areas for loitering. Reed stuck his hand in his pocket and felt his wallet. *Still there*. He had not done that for many years, but memory of this town had him falling back into impulsive, old behaviors.

Reed still knew his way around. He turned at the auction block onto Main Street, then turned again onto the alley to his favorite shop. It was still in business, though Reed did not expect otherwise. He gazed at the stocked shelves through the front window. Reed gaped at the peculiar speckling on a block of mint and purple cheese stamped with the shop's sigil on the side. There was a floating platter with a pyramid of white blocks on it, which Reed found quite droll. It had become stylish in the past few years for shop displays to feature enchantments. He was not the only one window shopping, as several young rats smeared drool against the glass. Reed, a practitioner of the same ritual as a kit, simpered with nostalgia.

The nostalgic fusion of sweet, toasty, and sharp aromas set Reed's hair on edge as he entered the shop. He bruxed with anticipation.

"Good morning," said a small voice.

Reed turned to address the shopkeeper at the counter. She was a young chainwearer woman, the only unfamiliar thing in the shop.

"Good morning, miss," Reed said. "Is Mr. Maltbury still here?"

"Yes, he's in the back. Do you want me to go get him for you?"

Reed nodded. She walked into the back room, and came back with Mr. Maltbury. He removed his elbow-length gloves and, throwing his apron over his shoulder, wiped sweat from his scruffy neck and aged brow.

"Good morning, sir, how can I–" he stopped, a glint in his eyes. "Is that young Reed Love?"

Reed beamed. "Good to see you, sir!"

"Look at you! All grown up and come home for a visit!"

"How's the shop?"

“Business is good. I’ve got what everyone wants.”

“Indeed you do!”

“‘ve you been ‘liberally interpreting the notion of free samples’ again?” Reed blushed and laughed. He would never live that line down, but Mr. Maltbury bore no true enmity with it.

“No, today I’ll be buying for once I think!”

“About time! What’s it been, five years since you came back this way?”

“Six.”

“Well, grab whatever you want and Christine will ring you up.”

“Christine, your daughter?”

“Yeah, you just spoke; you don’t recognize her?”

He had not. The woman stood as tall as or shorter than him when he left the country and now she towered over the front desk like any other human. He was a little shocked, but her silent smile and wave put him at ease.

Mr. Maltbury slipped his big work gloves back on and said some parting words before returning to his workshop. Reed browsed the aisles, lost in the fragrance of the holy, holey emmentals. Without thinking, he turned to Mendy to ask her to buy him something, but quickly remembered it was no longer necessary, and she wasn’t even here. Reed examined the cheeses and picked a few of his old favorites. He grabbed a dense, orange cheese with paper wrapping and a warm honey-cheese. He even picked a new one he’d never tried before: a spiced cheese with pimentos and walnuts, normally a cardinal food sin for Reed who never liked anything spicy and never liked mixing textures in his food, but Mr. Maltbury could do no wrong. He also picked out a big, cheap block and asked for it to be cut into small squares. Outside the shop, he handed the cheap block to the kids and shooed them off.

Feeling refreshed, Reed briskly walked back to the zeppelin. As it came into view, the balloon had already been deflated and the zeppelin, among others, was docked onto the Blimptrain. The coach was already secured in its clamps. The train blew its horn, and its wheels started turning. Reed gasped.

He broke out into a full sprint, flailing his shopping bag and screaming. He slammed against the chain link fence next to the tracks and they jingled from his impact.

"Stop!" Reed ran inside the train station. "Stop the train!" he yelled, "I need to get on the train!"

A rat wearing an attendant uniform clicked her heels on the dusty tile floor as she strutted over. Her chin housed a distinct, black beauty mark. She wore a tin tail cap which she also clicked along the ground to augment the percussion of her promenade.

"Sir, please do not shout."

"I need to get on the train!" Reed shouted, panting.

"Which train?"

Reed stammered. "The one that just left– the Blimptrain!"

She inhaled deep and adjusted her lapel. "The Sharpe-Kettering line will be back in town tomorrow afternoon and will depart in 2 days at this time."

"Lady, my friends are on that train. My research is on that train!"

"Sir, we cannot stop the train for a single late passenger. You will have to wait."

With that, she sauntered off, tail tapping in tow.

Reed grabbed a piece of orange cheese and wolfed it down with fervorous despair. Outside, he could no longer see the Blimptrain. The midday sun beat on his face but he did not

squint. He reached inside his bag for more comfort food, but stopped. There would be no coping from this. Time was short.

And then, Reed ran. Away from the station, down the main street, out of town, onto a long dirt road. Reed ran for an hour, never stopping to rest or seek shade. He ran past houses, and by a stinky mushroom grove, and through a melon patch, and across the train track, and over long, boring stretches of flat road with nothing but grass on either side. Finally, he turned off the road, past a sign that read: *Love Ranch.*

Chapter 7.

The path to the ranch lay walkable and straight but overgrown. Old trees arched over the road on both sides, casting it in shadow. A faint breeze blew through the leaves making the ground sparkle with speckled slivers of light. Reed slowed to a walk and let the verdant tunnel cool him off. He approached an old, wooden gate. It creaked as he pulled it open, calling a pack of barking dogs. They watched him carefully, and kept their distance with wagging tails. Reed didn't break his stride. He walked to a tall, brown mutt and let the dog sniff his knuckle, then his clothes. Upon smelling Reed, the dog yipped and jumped and ran in large circles causing several other dogs to join in the frenzy. Reed proceeded, followed by excited dogs, to the ranch house.

Dry clothes billowed on the laundry line. His old farmhouse was there, looking far less dilapidated than he remembered. It was like new, and there was another house of which he had no memory at all. *Two?* A little rat girl and her puppy, oblivious to the visitor, ran out the other house into an alfalfa field. She wore a child-sized floral dress, which Reed found odd. It was far more luxurious an item for a child to wear than the feed sacks he was bullied for wearing in primary school. He didn't recognize the girl either. The clean windows, cozy yard, and air of comfort were all uncanny. He began to wonder if he had gotten lost. But how could *he* get lost? He was an Indivi–

"Ree~~~d!"

Reed turned. An older rat woman ran to him, arms outstretched. At the last moment, she banked left. Reed made an anticipatory left dodge into her arms.

"How did you know?" he shouted, now fully ensnared.

"Give me some credit, baby."

Reed squirmed in his mother's embrace, but gave up fighting quickly. She wore a clean pair of gray overalls and a sun hat decorated with black jay feathers.

"Where's Dad?"

"Your father's in the lentil field. I'll have Percy go fetch 'im."

"He's sleepin'. I can go get Dad," said another rat walking up to the pair. She held her nursing baby in a sling. Reed dropped his jaw, even though he couldn't actually see anything.

"Woah, Plucky, kingsake! Cover up!"

"I am covered!"

"What do you say to yer sister havin' a baby, Reed?"

"I'm very happy for her, but Mom, I'm in a really big hurry and I don't have much time. I need Dad!"

Plucky walked off. A cloud of dust sprang up as Reed's mother stamped her foot, bristled her whiskers, and flared her nostrils. Reed flinched as if seeing into the immediate future.

"Gone for six whole years, and the first thing you say to me is 'hurry up, I gotta leave'? Uh-uh."

"Mom, please."

"D'you getcher tenure yet?"

"Not yet, and if I don't get to King's Cove this afternoon I may never get it!"

"King's fur, he really is here," said Percy, stepping off his porch. He was Reed's identical twin, though his fur was a bit darker and he was a bit taller and a bit stronger than Reed. A proper farmrat.

Reed groaned.

"Be nice," their mother said.

“I thought I heard your whining,” Percy goaded.

“Could you please, PLEASE just not impede me right now? It’s imperative that I–”

“What can we do to fund your education *this* time, Reed? Sell our crops so you can go to school? Sell our *kids* so you can go to school?”

Reed balled up his fist. Reed’s mother snapped her finger, and Percy flinched.

“Don’t go fightin’ with yer brother, Percy! Make yourself useful and boil some tea!”

Percy smirked. “I’ll make Reed’s with extra water.” She snapped again.

“Hey! One more word outta that mouth and I’ll sew it shut! *Git*!”

Reed’s father and sister emerged from the fields together. The old rat anxiously scanned the ranch for Reed and, upon seeing him, rushed to greet him. He was a stout gentlerat with a strong back from many laborious years. His brown fur grayed at the tips. Reed always had a fondness for his father’s genteel, soft-spoken nature. The rat had a perpetual twinkle in his eye, which Reed interpreted as a subdued spark of intelligence, and figured if he got his smarts from anyone, it’d be his father.

“Hi, Reed!” his father said, beaming.

“Hi, Dad.”

“We got the whole family together again, Brass,” Reed’s mother said, cooing.

Reed’s father nodded. He gazed at his son, grinning in the corner of his mouth.

“It’s good to see ya, boy. You stayin’ for dinner?”

“I can’t! I missed my train and I have to get to King’s Cove this afternoon!”

Brass’ mouth opened, hanging on the first word. “Well, you can take the bobsled, if ya want.”

Reed’s admiration for his father’s decisive problem-solving was tapered.

“I don’t know how to lead it,” he admitted with a face of glum embarrassment.

Brass patted him on the shoulder. “That’s alright. We can go together, then.”

A sharp, sudden whistle from his father’s lips sent Reed recoiling. Scores of dogs came running up to them, and the two led them to the bobsled harness. Plucky’s husband came to assist. He introduced himself, chipping away at Reed’s effort to compartmentalize his sister’s maturity.

“You boys travel safe!” Reed’s mother cried.

“I’ll be back before dinner, Cynth,” said Brass to Reed’s mother. *Dinner?* Reed thought. *But they had lunch already.*

She handed Brass a swaddled cloth of sandwiches and a rubber vacuum flask of tea. Reed puffed with disbelief at the sight of the meal.

“*Sandwiches?*” he asked.

“Whassa matter, baby, you don’t like ‘em? Want somethin’ else?” his mother asked.

“What? No, no, it’s great– I’ll eat them. Thank you.”

He tossed the lunch into the sled and massaged his temple. This homecoming did not go as imagined. He waved his family goodbye, then Reed and Brass mushed off.

“Isn’t your mother sweet for puttin’ those sammiches together?”

Reed finished chewing. “I’ve been meaning to talk to you about that. You guys are doing *really* well for yourselves now. Two houses? All these clothes? You’re having lunch *and* dinner, and you’re all eating *bread*? We never had any of that growing up! What the heck happened?”

Brass laughed and bumped up against Reed while keeping a steady grip on the reins.

“Buddy, it’s all thanks to you.”

“What did I do?”

“You sendin’ us money every month? Don’t remember that? We used that money to build the new house, fix the ol’ place up, buy clothes, et cetera, and now we’re practically the richest family in the county!”

Reed gawked. “Gosh, I didn’t realize I was sending so much!” He also didn’t realize his father knew the term *et cetera*.

Brass chuckled. “Well, maybe in the city it’s not so much money, but it goes a lot farther here.”

“If I’d known how useful it was, I would have sent more.”

“Oh, we’re fine, buddy, trust me. Some folks even think we’re stealin’ it or we found a gold mine somewhere. Lem says we robbed the train!”

There was around 3 months worth of stipend money in it minus whatever was spent on cheese earlier in Reed’s coin purse. He pulled it out of his sack.

“Here, take this,” he said, handing its entire contents to his father.

“Woah, boy! Is this all your money? This is too much. I can’t accept this.”

“No, Dad, trust me. Once I turn my research in, I’ll be making a *lot* more, so please. You can take it.”

Brass smiled.

“You, uh, never really had any concept of money, didja, boy?” Brass said. Reed shrugged.

“I can’t believe Percy still teased me after I practically bought his house.”

“Yeah, I’m going to have a word with him about that. Do you want your tea?”

“No, I don’t like tea. I thought you knew that.”

“Give it here, then, I’ll have some.”

Reed kept his eye on the tracks to make sure they were headed the right way. He occasionally gave directions.

“I’m surprised you still know your way around after all this time!”

“As a soon-to-be-tenured Individui cartographer, I ought to!”

Reed took a short nap, and as he stirred, they were approaching King’s Cove. Reed had been here only twice, and never for long. The town had a reputation, and well deserved. It was home to the major rat crime families that operate in the Great Web. Brass brought the sled to a halt outside the city limits.

“This is where I leave you, boy.”

“Thanks, Dad, I gotta go!”

“Take your tea with you.”

“I don’t need it!”

“Don’t argue with me, boy. Your mother made this tea for you and by the King, you’re going to take it.”

“Percy made it.”

Brass slapped the rubber jug in Reed’s lap. Fearing a lecture, Reed put the flask in his bag and rushed to the outskirts, where the train station was.

Reed sighed with relief to find the zeppelins were still docked on the train, midway through reinflating. He walked up a broken stone staircase that was overgrown with yellow grass to the station entryway, but stopped. There were two scraped-up, young rats wearing ink-stained silk shirts at the door. Reed suspected they were troublemakers as that style of clothes was popular with low-level gangsters. But they were smaller than him, undermining their intimidation factor, so Reed decided to take his chances and walk past them.

As Reed reached the top stair, one of the rats stuck his leg out to block the open doorway. He flicked a chewed stem of grass out of his teeth.

“What’s in the bag, pops? Got anything for me?” the other one asked.

“Just some food,” Reed replied, shaken that they thought he was old.

The rat not blocking the door snatched the grocery bag, and inspected its contents. Disappointed, the rat scraped off a bit of cheese, then handed the bag back to Reed.

“Maltbury cheese?” he asked, sticking a toothpick in his mouth.

Reed nodded.

“Always a treat. You be careful now, pops.”

“Thanks, there’s all kinds of unsavory types out here,” Reed said as he passed through the doorway.

“Wha’ was that?”

But Reed had already boarded.

Chapter 8.

The scouts had found a box of crackers, and were throwing them at the wall when Reed returned. They had made a mess of crumbs in the seam, but every cracker that landed face-up on the baseboard they cheered.

"Reed-man! You fall asleep up there?" Abner asked.

Reed blinked. "Uh, sure."

"You get your cheese from your cheese shop?"

"Yessir."

"Where do we go from here?" Graham asked.

"From here," Reed said, "the zeppelin will fly direct to Burghenbolge on Unnafirma. It's the closest we can get to Nigh-on-High. Once we land, we'll head on foot up the mountain to the city where we'll officialize your conversions and I'll turn in my research. I'll come get you when it's time."

"Is the city on top of a mountain?" Rich asked.

"It's pretty high up, but no. I can take you to the summit if you like but I'd like to save that until after we're done. I might be busy, though, we'll see."

Reed pointed to the pile of broken crackers by the wall.

"Clean those up when you're done."

Half a day later, the airship reached the continent Unnafirma. Reed was happy to see the zeppelin's shadow on the trees below. It meant their arrival was short at hand, and the journey would soon be over. The zeppelin docked in Burghenbolge. It was a farming village and a key transit point for travelers to and from Nigh-on-High, which did not allow air transport to access

the city directly. Reed waited in the passenger coach for everyone but him to get off, then slipped down to the cargo hold where the group were waiting, bags in hand, to themselves get off.

"It's about a two day walk to the city from here. The road is paved, however, and there are inns along the way so don't worry. Also, you don't have to hide under your cloaks anymore but still, stick together and don't get separated. If we can get to Nigh with people thinking you're my *familiars*, that's probably for the best."

"Familiars?" Milly retorted brashly.

"Like, undead servants. It's not for no reason. Cities in Unnafirma are unpredictable places, and if we look like a tight, competent group, the unpredictable will leave us alone."

"Are we in danger?" Milly asked, grabbing Graham's arm.

Reed shook his hands. "No, no. I'm just letting you know up front because it can be jarring for newcomers. One of the core Individui principles is free and total knowledge. And by 'free', they mean 'unrestricted.' And the unrestricted can get a little wild sometimes."

"Wild?"

"Just don't be concerned if we enter the city and you hear explosions or it becomes night all of a sudden. Metropolitan Individui are eccentric experimenters. Stay together; we'll all be fine."

A bold, white sign greeted them as they stepped onto the deck. It read, "*Welcome to Burghenbolge. Do NOT feed the goats.*" Abner read the sign out loud and giggled.

"Don't," Krieger said.

Most of the town's development was weighted toward the docks, with the buildings rapidly agrarianizing the further away you went. In the middle of the square, a cashmere automaton cheerfully greeted travelers getting off the zeppelin. Rich wandered to a souvenir

shop and made handprints on the glass window. Reed choked on his own saliva, and made pursuit.

"Look at that, Reed." He pointed to a tiny, carved stone goat atop a spinning, floating pedestal.

"Yeah, I see it. What did I just say, man?"

"Can I buy it? I have some money."

"What? No, we gotta go. You can't go wandering off, Rich."

Rich sulked but did not put up a fight, and they rejoined the others. Milly leaned in to Reed as they walked and whispered, "nicely handled." Reed realized what he had done. He suddenly remembered that he did *not* want to be the team leader. Closing in on the goal had let him become far too comfortable. Moving forward, he would not allow himself to fall for any easy bait like that. He was not going to be a leader.

"Lead the way, Reed-man!" Abner chirped. Reed clenched his teeth

Exiting town, Abner and Rich both wandered over to a goat paddock. Abner threw a cracker to a knock-kneed, tan kid. It bounced off the little goat's forehead onto its back, and the goat walked in circles trying to fish the cracker into its mouth, at which Abner cackled. Krieger ran to the paddock, smacked them both on the head, then dragged them back to the group. Reed massaged his temple and kept walking.

The paved road outside Burghenbolge was an oppressive, uphill trudge that wound left and right with no other means to address the steep incline. Reed picked up his pace to widen the distance from his companions, though did not make it very far. He collapsed, short of breath. When he went to school in the city, it took him some time to adjust to the thinness of the air. Now, his lungs had forgotten it. Reed sat up and drew a map of the road in the dirt. The map

gained a compass rose, a scale, and a legend, and dots for all trees along the road. He turned his head sideways at the ground and stuck his thumbs out to get a rough measurement, then with an outstretched toe drew the prime meridian far to the relative east of the town. Unnafirma's prime meridian cut through the capital of the Individui, Golis Obscura. The Individui called it "the true meridian," and Reed adhered to that standard and moniker although he recognized Aljana had no true meridian. Reed admired his work and wondered if it would be possible to come back to his map and make a lithographic plate or an etching. Graham planted his foot on the prime meridian, at which Reed gasped in horror.

"Want I should carry you?" Graham asked, smiling.

Reed settled down. He climbed onto Graham's shoulders and they continued along the road. The footprint-stamped map lingered on his mind.

They were getting close to the mountaintop.

"We're getting close to the top," Rich noticed out loud.

"For Krieger, that would be the bottom," Abner teased. Rich snickered. Graham chuckled, making Reed bounce.

"Want me to shave? I'll shave." Krieger said.

"No! Then you'd look like a scary baby." Rich laughed again.

"It won't grow back," Graham said, "so if you want to shave, you better mean it."

The mountainside became spattered with blocky cliffs and tall, flat walls. The terrain became wholly inorganic in shape. The party could not help but ogle the landscape's transformation. Ahead, cubes of granite were hovering slightly above the ground in a line. Their procession up the mountain blocked the road, forcing the party to stop.

"Reed, do you see that?" Rich asked.

Reed furrowed his brow, dumbstruck. He hated obvious questions. “Yeah, I see it.”

“Where are they coming from?”

“There’s a quarry down that way, so–”

“We should hitch a ride.”

Reed was double dumbstruck. Once in a while, a nugget of genius is panned from a river of idiocy.

“That’s actually a *great* idea, Rich.”

Rich pridefully jumped onto one of the granite cubes, which bobbed a little but then stabilized along its path. He clapped and cheered when it supported his weight. Graham helped Reed onto a slab, and everyone else hopped aboard their own slab. The granite smoothly ferried them straight uphill, and everyone relaxed. It proceeded up the peak, turned away, and hovered along the westward crest of the mountain. The valley on the other side was quite picturesque for the split second Reed had to enjoy it.

“We’re turning,” Krieger said with a tight grip on his rock.

“It’s fine,” Reed said, “we appear to be heading in the city’s direction. Let’s keep riding.”

“There’s someone ahead.”

Indeed, there was. It was a blond-furred cloudwalker, floating on a slapdash cloudy armchair. She was wearing a worker’s uniform and rhythmically kicking her thick legs. She waved her arms in a slow circle, and at each rotation the granite blocks shot off with increased speed along the mountain crest. She was half-asleep, driven to drowsiness by the monotony of her task. Reed went prone on his slab.

“Quiet, everybody. Get ready.”

One by one, they approached the geomancer unnoticed with tight lips and tight grasp on their gray platforms, and were shot off. Milly, who was last, shrieked as she flew away. The cloudwalker yelled out in surprise and fell from her chair, bouncing down the northern slope as the line of granite blocks behind the party fell out of position and tumbled down the southern slope.

They swiftly rode along the mountaintop, and as the jagged terrain raised and lowered the granite slabs would smoothly adjust their height along their way. The southern span of the mountain let off beyond the horizon, barely visible past the shroud of blue mist. Large clouds cast blurred shadows on the forest below. The slabs led into a green patch of the mountain, and deftly wove through tree trunks. At every bump or drop or dodge or turn, Milly squeaked in terror. For everyone else, the thrill had worn off after half an hour. They rode for several more. Reed's satchel flapped in the wind. Confident he could stay affixed to his rock with only one hand, he reached in to grab a handful of salted hominy he had packed, but as soon as he pulled the dried seeds out they caught the wind and pelted Graham in the face.

"Sorry!" Reed shouted.

"Careful up there!"

Reed blushed. He tucked his bag under his chest and tried to ignore his numerous pangs. Reed peered off the mountain. He had to face against the wind, which didn’t grant a very good view at all. A firefly flew into Reed's mouth. He flinched and violently coughed and in doing so, swallowed the bug.

"Careful up there!"

Reed teared up and cleared his throat, then wiped his nose. Not the snack he was hoping for.

They hit another hard swivel through a patch of tall rocks and Milly screamed. Reed rolled his eyes.

“Pipi! Come back!” Reed turned this time.

Milly’s bird was flying away, and ignoring its master’s commands to return. Milly pleaded with the bird, but it flew down the mountain and disappeared. Reed found it odd that a familiar would disobey like that. Moreso, he felt guilty that Milly lost her pet.

Half a day passed and the changing color of the sky had come as a delight to the riders, but now it was firmly evening. Hungry and unable to sleep, Reed was rubbing his finger along the dull edge of his coarse, gray platform when it slowed into a descent along the southern mountainside, wrapping around the rocky bend. Reed scanned the area and yelped as the border wall of Nigh-on-High suddenly towered before him. The granite slabs ahead of him were entering a low-cut slot in the wall which Reed could not see beyond. Just downhill, the main road ended right at the city gate. Reed preferred to enter the city that way.

He yelled to his companions, "we're here! Everybody jump!" Reed leapt from his rock and crashed hard into the dirt, rolling underneath the floating rocks and a few feet further down the slope. The rest of the group calmly dismounted, but they were taller anyway. Reed clambered back uphill to them, brushing off his coat and pants.

“Oh no, I left my–” Rich said, but quickly quieted himself, though failed to mask his concern. Reed followed Rich’s line of sight to a carved stone goat sitting atop one of the slabs as it floated away. He made no attempt to rescue it and the goat escaped beyond the wall to Rich’s dismay and Reed’s outright disgust.

“When did you have time to buy that?” Reed asked.

Rich stammered. “Ah, I didn’t have time to *buy* it, technically.”

Reed went agape, like a pitcher plant.

"No, you didn't," Milly said. "Did you actually?"

Rich smiled sheepishly.

"Good!" Reed shouted. "You deserved to lose it then, ya thief!"

"I *wanted* to buy it but you wouldn't let me!"

Reed huffed. He marched down the cliffside to the main gate, massaging his temple and muttering foulness through clenched teeth.

Chapter 9.

Reed sloppily ate a handful of hominy and some spiced cheese as he passed through the gate. He took a beat to pant out the heat and take in the entry plaza, and he forgot about his headache. It was exactly how he remembered. The city's entrance was a pristine garden populated by geometric marble sculptures placed equidistantly in rows with spiral-shaped hedges slowly spinning upwards as if drilling into the sky. In the central path one was forced to walk around an ornate, multi-leveled fountain that produced emerald and turquoise flames from its splashing water, almost impossibly. At the top of the fountain a granite statue of a winged fish blew bubbles from its mouth which popped into brilliant, little sparkles. Reed opened his coin purse, but it was empty, so instead he threw a pebble into the fountain and admired the pretty flames he had created from its kerplunk. Krieger stepped up to the fountain and tossed a coin, replicating Reed's results.

"Ought to throw Abner in here, see what happens," he whispered.
Reed smiled. "It's fake fire; he'll be fine. Might spook him, though!" Krieger laughed.

Reed lurched to see his reflection in the water. He had food on his cheek, and promptly wiped it off. He decided in that moment to forgive Rich. After all, Rich's clever idea got them to the city in a single day. Above all else, he did not want to sour their conversion with bad attitudes and grudges. It was supposed to be a happy occasion. He took a breath and rejoined the group, patting Rich on the waist and saying, "it's okay, man."

"We oughtta throw Krieger in the fountain, see what happens!" Abner loudly joked to his exclusive amusement.

People stared at their motley group as they proceeded into the city. Reed motioned for them to keep quiet. The city's architecture was unlike anything the chainwearers had ever seen. It

had a wacky opulence emblematic of the eccentric plutocrats that lived here. Some of the buildings floated in the air and granite brick bridges would form and then disassemble between them to allow leisurely crossing. Historians have called the distinct architecture in Nigh-on-High "*haute Individui*." The party entered onto a curved road with upscale shopping on one side and a fenced-off private residence on the other. Reed pointed towards an gilded palatial mansion in the center of the fenced-off lawn. It was surrounded by six identical, spherical trees whose leaves were in a constant cycle of blowing off then flapping like birds from one tree's branches to the next.

"That's the university president's house. We are very close to my school."

They kept going along the curved road. In the shop windows, eclectic clothing wiggled sensually on display as if worn by invisible dancers. They entered a worn, barrel-vaulted cloister overgrown with tiger ivy and crossed the garth to a large wooden door. A chainwearer man was locking up. He fumbled to pull the key out of the lock, and finally slipped it in his tweed coat pocket. His outfit was similar to Reed's, or perhaps it would have been more apt to say the reverse. Reed ran to him.

"Professor Ehrewold?" Reed said.

The man spun around, rapidly blinking in a daze from the sudden spur in activity. He wore a wrinkly, gray suit with a plaid tie and his frizzy, uncombed hair still held onto a few strands of brown amid a sea of gray, and dripped with sweat.

"Hey, err, I know you. Reed! I didn't know you were back."

"Sorry, sir, I forgot to inform the college. Do you have time to talk?"

He gave a shrewd squint at the resurrected chainwearers standing behind Reed and made a face of restrained disapproval.

“These yours, m’boy?”

Reed chuckled nervously. “Yes, sir, in a sense, they are *with* me.”

“How’d you come across this lot?”

“I would love to regale you with the details in your office.”

The professor rolled back his sleeve and peeked at his watch. “Well, m’boy, while normally I would be absolutely agog to acquiesce to such an invitation, it is getting rather late...”

“I won’t take long! You’ll want to hear this story for sure!”

The professor peeked at his watch again, sighed, and pulled out his key. “Very well,” he said. “Have your familiars wait in the hall.”

The professor’s office was a museum of innumerous certificates, degrees, knick knacks, and relics. Reed envied each piece, no matter how meaningless they were to him. He especially liked a lithograph on the professor’s wall of two chainwearer men demonstrating the theory of cantilever bridges using wood poles and rock counterbalances to hold up another man. On Ehrewold’s desk were several awards for such achievements as “Excellence in Grandiloquence,” “Outstanding Performance while Lost in the Field,” and “Satisfactory Lecture,” as well as a wooden name plate which had engraved:

Pr. Fraucus Ehrewold, L.D., C., S.C.,

Aureate Laureate & Master Chairman

College of Geography, Geodesy, and Cartography

Nigh-on-High University

Reed wanted an office just like this someday. He wanted a desk and degrees just like Fraucus Ehrewold’s. In fact, it would not be wrong to call this sweaty career academic Reed’s personal hero. Fraucus plopped a stool opposite his desk, then planted himself behind his plaque.

“What’s the haps, m’boy?”

“It’s wonderful to see you again, sir. How are you?”

“Growing sleepier by the second, lad! So, let’s get on with it, shall we?”

Reed gave a detailed explanation of his adventure and discovery in Pulnare, the living painite, and how he came to travel with his party of resurrected chainwearers.

“I did find it odd,” Ehrewold said, “that you of all rats would be dabbling in death. I assumed you were different.”

“I have no special love for magical science,” Reed said. “I just want to be a great and noteworthy cartographer.”

“Living painite is potent stuff. As potent as anything in Aljana. Many unknown properties.”

“I figured!”

“My God, I mean, it’s an incredible discovery, boy. Just incredible.”

Reed sank into his chair. That was exactly what he wanted to hear.

“And... what do you have planned for those chainwearers?”

“Well, I did five field conversions. I was about to get them officiated tonight.”

“Zombies can’t be Individui, lad, surely–”

Reed interrupted, “I know that, but they aren’t zombies. They’re still their own people and they can think and speak. They resurrected with nobody to command them, and kept their individuality. As I understand it, that makes them automata, animated from corpses.”

Fraucus thought for a while.

“Corpse automata aren’t possible,” Fraucus muttered mechanically.

“Normally, that might be the case but, sir, you should have seen this cave. Those gems. There was *so* much.”

Fraucus, lost in thought, stopped responding, so Reed allowed him to contemplate.

“Lad,” he finally said, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll accept your research and submit it on your behalf. The officiant’s office is closed for the night, so take your group to the Woodsmoke Inn outside the city and get some sleep, but tomorrow morning I’d like to see you back at my office. No need to bring the scary-faces, just come by yourself.”

“So you’re submitting me for tenure?”

“Yes, I am. This is an exceptional find, one I’m proud to see coming from one of my own pupils.”

Reed welled up with watery eyes and sniffles.

“Now, now, lad, none of that blubbering. It’s unbecoming of a soon-to-be-tenured Individuus professor!”

Reed wiped his face, laughing embarrassedly. “You’re absolutely right, sir.”

“See you tomorrow, son. Bright and early!”

“Thank you, sir!”

“Don’t forget to come see me tomorrow morning!”

“Okay, I won’t!”

Ehrewold remained in his office as Reed left. He shared his news with the chainwearers, and they all congratulated him. With nothing left to do in the city until dawn, they left for the Woodsmoke Inn at Ehrewold’s suggestion. Even at this time of night, the tavern hall was filled with merrymakers and resident travelers. Graham paid for a room, and the dead scouts found a table to themselves. Reed enjoyed a hearty supper of buttered bread, candied tubers, and roast

black chicken without spice. He was tickled to find that even the bones of the black chicken were black. Abner had an embalmer and no one stopped him. They spent the evening listening to the inn's musician and eventually retreated upstairs. Reed lied in bed all night, unable to sleep. He was practically buzzing with excitement.

The next morning, Reed said goodbye to his friends and told them he would be back to fetch them for the officiation. Despite not catching a wink, he was full of pep. *Today, I become a professor,* he thought. The coals in the fireplace downstairs still smoldered from the previous night and the smell of the inn's namesake lingered in the air. As he arrived at the plaza, a small crowd of children were gathered around a tall, flaming figure. Reed recognized him. He was a famous automaton, Ignatius the Fire Giant. Ignatius politely warned the children not to get too close to him and to make way so he could pass. The children playfully tested the degree to which they could approach and jumped back laughing, and daring others to get closer.

Reed marched through town with childlike glee, tip-toeing around all the cracks in the pavement, and came to the curved road that led to the university.

"Over here, lad!"

It was Fraucus Ehrewold, standing by the gate to the university president's mansion. Reed crossed the road to meet him.

"Good morning, sir!"

"And a very fine morning to you, Reed. Alone, are you?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Superlative! Follow me, then."

Ehrewold opened the gate and invited Reed inside.

"We're going to the president's house?"

“Indeed. Important matters to discuss.”

“Is this how it’s normally done?”

“Can’t talk about it on the street, lad. Come along, now.”

Reed was confused but willing to follow, and together they walked along the straight, paved path through the fresh-cut grass to the villa. The tree leaves fluttered overhead as they approached the front door. The columns in the entryway were beautifully marbled maroon with rivers of orange flowing down them, and Reed wondered from where they originated. He entered the house, and Fraucus closed the door behind them.

“Just down those steps,” Fraucus instructed.

Reed descended a deep, winding staircase and came into a long, straight corridor. Reed could not see the end of it, but Fraucus followed Reed downstairs and drew a curtain right at the bottom of the stairs, ushering Reed inside.

Reed entered a dark, circular auditorium. There were people in the stands, but it was far too dimly lit to make out any faces. It smelled of old paper, tobacco, overlapping perfumes, and the various stenches with which bohemian intellectuals were wont to wear. He entered slowly, and every time he turned back, Fraucus egged him forward, until Reed was standing in the middle of the room at a central podium. The lights rose, and Reed could see clearer the many figures surrounding him on raised benches circling the central podium. On the right side of the stands was a section filled with floating leyglass panes through which some were watching Reed remotely. He recognized one, two, three– no, many in the audience were famous Individui. There was Meenosh the Little Librarian, founder of the Clockstoppers Restoration Society; Gerrald Lauchlomond, the artificial lake creator; Fr’guin, a decapod and automaton prisondome Head Warden; Polonius Tyrantus, the inventor of the cloud skimmer and author of “A Life of

Pacifism"; Mince Michael Jones, the famous ethicist; Antimony Wilks III, the Wilksport College headmaster and business professor; Darrow Rivers, the Clark's Anchor College headmaster; Najisk the Warlock, the demon summoner; Zoine the Sandshifter, a famous outsider artist and glass sculptor; Hans Fritz Neinermeister, the retired psychiatrist who dealt with the Walton Clinic Incident; Leslie the Terrorist, the rat urban planner who led a failed uprising against the Individui years ago; Bendoonbenner, the cloudwalker hermit who survives without food or water through proprietary, secret means; Garthunk, the brick automaton and author of "Theoretical Architecture"; Flats, the sheet metal automaton; Crystal Wettinson, the author, midwife, and childbirth specialist; Gomomondey, the ecology expert; Arvis Celinus, professor of Servant Underculture at Nigh-on-High University; Ramsey, a chimpanzee fluvial geomorphologist; Montpellier Hollis, the famous mechanical engineer and inventor of the depth prism; as well as a number of famous diplomats and all the regent lords of the various towns and settlements of Unnafirma; and Belos, the leader of the Individui and High Individuus of Golis Obscura; Aquisteller, High Individuus of Nigh-on-High; and Jane Hooker, High Individuus of Coriaster; and their children, and many more that Reed knew the face but not the name or did not recognize but could only assume were important Individui. All were convened here, in this auditorium. All were looking at Reed.

Chapter 10.

"Reed Love, Individui from SFRR," bellowed Belos, the leader of the Individui, and a stirringly large original inhabitant sitting in the center of the audience between the other two High Individui at a raised desk. On his right, a chainwearer woman with red hair and glasses, and on his left, a chubby, black-furred cloudwalker. They were Jane Hooker and Aquisteller.

Reed grasped his podium for balance. On it, there was a curious, smooth rock and an envelope.

"I'd like to be the first to congratulate you," Belos said, projecting his hoarse voice not just to Reed but to the stands. "Your discovery is both new and significant. For it, you are granted tenure and a permanent position as cartography professor working under Professor Fraucus Ehrewold at the University of Nigh-on-High. You will find all the details in the envelope before you." Applause followed.

"Do you normally come together like this to give tenure?" Reed asked, forsaking the envelope and picking up the rock to rub its grooves. His hands quivered, and the rock offered something stable or grounding. It offered *something*.

Belos craned his chitinous neck. His antennae swayed. "Aptly observed. No, Professor Love, we do not. Allow me to broach the second reason we are here today. But first, an explanation as to who we are."

"I know who you are. You're the leaders of the Individui." Reed replied.

"That is who we *are*," said Jane Hooker, another Individui leader who sat next to Belos, "but that's not our purpose for calling this council. Professor Love, this is the *Society of Numbers and Broken Staves*. Its purpose is not to govern or to rule, but to study, manage, and mete

jurisprudence in secret one of the greatest threats to all who live on Aljana. By standing here today, your invitation to the *Society* is implicitly granted." Applause followed.

Reed rocked back and forth on his heels. "Please just call me Reed," he said, quivering.

Jane Hooker adjusted her thick spectacles, crossed her arms, and leaned into her desk. "Reed, we cannot understate the importance of this next item, so please listen carefully."

Aquisteller, the third one at the desk, spoke with a deep, booming voice, "The greatest threat to life in this world is the Individui."

Reed stopped rocking.

"Do you know how automata are made, Reed?" Belos asked.

"I've never done it myself but they're made by Individui, right?"

"Yes, Individui create automata with magic. And automata then become Individui. So automata can make automata. Do you know *from what* automata are physically made?"

"Anything?"

"Yes, anything. However, you may not fully comprehend how *any* that anything is. We do not teach about the full nature of automata and we allow a limited, surface-level understanding of automata to thrive in our world. The truth is that *anything* can be animated, material or immaterial."

Reed formed several questions in his head.

"For instance," Jane Hooker said, "I could make a juridical automaton whose form consisted only of 'law.' Or I could make an automaton out of various qualia such as 'the color red,' or 'the taste of citrus,' or even 'the public's perception of the taste of citrus.' The granularity of abstraction is practically infinite. We avoid such things as their creation siphons abstraction and truth from impossible-to-predict sources.

“Additionally, given that automata can create themselves, what do you suppose would happen if, say, an oxygen automaton rapidly animated more oxygen automata? Or a magnetism automaton felt lonely and wanted some friends? We would all suffocate and our homes would drop right out of the sky, to name only a few scenarios.”

“I thought air automata were impossible!” said Reed.

“No, lad,” Fraucus said, coming up behind Reed. “That’s why the council exists, because they *are* possible and the threat they pose is too great to let alone. Wherever the threat pops up, the council exists to cull it.”

“Cull?”

“Yes, lad.”

“So when you walked into my city with five ‘corpse automata,’ as you call it, seeking an officiation,” Aquisteller said, “that *was* cause for us to convene. Animation from pre-animated beings was something we considered theoretically, but never have we seen it in reality. We called this emergency meeting to discuss the proposition.”

Reed fidgeted with the stone and began rocking again. He did not want to ask the obvious question though it burned in his thoughts.

“They can’t do magic,” he said, his voice breaking. “They’re normal chainwearers, good people, they don’t–”

“Their very existence is the problem, young rat,” said Aquisteller. “What you call a ‘corpse automaton’, others may see as a ‘living automaton’ or a ‘chainwearer automaton.’ Were it some fluke we may have been able to overlook, but as we understand it, you found the source of their resurrection. A massive lode of living painite, correct? Anybody could get their hands on

it and create an army of immortals. Your discovery, if not secured immediately, poses significant risk."

Reed's hair stood on edge, and he tucked his ears down.

"Therefore," Belos decreed, "is it the decision of the council that automata made out of living persons be considered a palpable danger worthy of culling."

"No, this is not how this was supposed to go. W-what if they were just my familiars?"

"We feel for your loss," said Jane Hooker, "but this no longer applies to only them. This decision will affect all 'corpse automata' and those who seek to replicate them in perpetuity. Your companions are merely the unlucky reasons for its creation."

Reed teared up. "Is there anything I can do to change your minds?"

"Perhaps we were being unclear," said Belos. "Ignatius, the captain of the culling squad, was already dispatched before you arrived."

Reed trembled. He wanted to scream and wail, but that would have been unbecoming of an Individuus. But then, Reed didn't care about what was unbecoming of an Individuus. He didn't care about esteem, or an office, or a piece of paper with his name on it. Reed bent down behind the podium, hiding himself from the most important people in the world. He cried for Graham and Milly. He cried for Krieger, and Abner, and Rich. Reed wanted to be gone from this place and these horrible aristocrats. He wanted to be with his friends, and apologize to them. The stone in Reed's hand vibrated with fearsome energy. It lit along its grooves, then became consumed with brilliant light and color. Reed's prostrate form cast a deep shadow on the ceiling and walls.

"Ehrewold, take that from him! Now!" Aquisteller ordered abruptly.

Fraucus grabbed Reed's shoulder but, as he did so, Reed vanished from the podium.

Chapter 11.

Suddenly the nip of a cold breeze on Reed's wet face sent him shivering. He was outside. *How?*

"How?" said a man's voice. Reed turned on his heel to find him, but there was no one. Before him, the Woodsmoke Inn's charred frame billowed soft, gray fumes. Its rustic, walnut exterior was scorched an inky black. The roof halfway caved in. The building was more like a grave than the welcoming haven it had been the night before. Still, Reed could not find the source of the voice.

"Doesn't matter how. He used it. Where did he go?" said a voice. Reed searched again, but he was alone.

"You told us he had no magical aptitude!"

"Don't fret. He's probably gone back to that tavern I sent them all to," said a voice. Reed recognized this one. It was Professor Ehrewold, although he wasn't here either.

"*To which you sent them.*"

"Now is not the time, Grammaticus."

"Send a party to pick–" the voice faded to silence as the dimming stone turned to ash and slipped out of Reed's grasp.

He wandered absentmindedly to the inn's front entrance. He tested the door handle with two fingers but sharply retracted them at its heat. On the other side of the door, someone coughed. Reed immediately grabbed the handle and pulled the door open with all his strength, screaming as it seared his little paw. Smoke and heat billowed out from the new opening. It was dark, but patches of light blurred through the smoke. Reed cleared away a chair and a fallen painting that had been obstructing the entrance.

“This way! The door is this way! Come to me!” Reed yelled, waving his burnt paw in circles away from the heat.

Through the smoke, the blurred figure of a chainwearer man lumbered out into the open. He collapsed on the ground, and Reed rushed to his side. He did not recognize the man’s burnt face. The man released a mournful gasping cough and died on the ground at Reed’s feet. Reed cupped his mouth in sorrow. Another figure barreled out of the door. It was Krieger. His skin was scorched, and his eyes darted around, oblivious to his own peril.

“Reed!” he said.

“King’s coffer, you’re alright!”

“I have to go back! There’s more people in there! Don’t follow me!”

He disappeared into the opaque interior. Abner came out, dragging two smoking bodies behind him. He met Reed’s gaze, set them down next to the collapsed man, and ran back inside the inn. Milly, Rich, and Graham exited the inn together, with Graham hoisting one person over his shoulders and Milly and Rich carrying another. Rich made one trip back into the building, and came out carrying as much charred luggage as he could hold, and plopped it all into a pile outside. With one final sweep through, Krieger and Abner confirmed no one remained in the building. In total, they brought eight chainwearers out of the inn. None survived.

The building creaked and crackled for ten minutes, then collapsed. Reed mourned the deaths of the strangers and hated himself for inciting so much collateral grief. He saw the leathery, scorched flesh of the bodies on the ground, and of his friends, and shed quiet tears for them.

“I can’t breathe!” said a panicked voice.

The man who was first out the door, was now sitting straight. He frantically grasped his throat and fell backwards, pounding the earth with his fists.

"Oh, no," Milly said, horrified. The others observed the man as he violently writhed on his back, clawing at the grass in abject terror. Milly crawled to his side and affected a calming, motherly tone.

"It's alright, you can breathe. In and out; do it manually."

The man stopped flailing, and followed her instructions.

"Are you hurt?" she asked.

He thought about the question and patted himself down.

"It *did* hurt, but now I don't feel anything."

Graham and Krieger gave each other a wide-eyed look.

"Help! I'm choking! Help!" yelled another voice.

"Ack! Ack!" yelled a woman.

Another man, who Reed recognized as the innkeeper but never asked his name, was convulsing on the ground and clutching his neck.

"Reed," said Graham in a short call, and Reed went to him.

"They're waking up," he told Reed under his breath.

"Th-they're what?"

"They're *resurrecting*, just like we did." Reed gasped.

Milly and Graham soothed the newly dead chainwearers out of their panicked states. Some were responsive. Others were initially combative which came as a surprise to Reed. He was worried they may accidentally become Milly and Graham's familiars, but they all kept their individuality and intellect from life and showed no signs of mind-addling. Whatever was

happening here was different from magical animation, and it was certainly no death magic. Reed checked the rescued bags. A few hunks of living painite had spilled out onto the ground and were quickly becoming overgrown by the surrounding grass. As he recovered them, the tall grass wrapped around Reed's paw. He let his paw linger, and the grass coiled tighter and tighter. With a tug, Reed broke free from its grasp, and the grass drooped limply, almost sadly. He shoved the gems back into the sack, which hadn't burned thanks to its enchantments.

Eventually, all the inn staff and patrons who died in the attack were resurrected and on their feet. Reed grimaced. His group had more than doubled, and again it was his fault. He sat on a stump and stared glumly at the ground. He found he was unable to cry, and not for lack of feeling sorry for himself. All he could do was stew in his guilt and misery and disgrace, for he was too dry to do otherwise.

"Rat-man, come meet your new friends," Abner beckoned.

Reed scowled. *Friends?* he thought. *What friends? The innocent people I just killed?* Abner joyously wrapped his arms around two folks from the inn with whom he could not interact the previous night. They let their arms dangle.

"Can't you tell these people are confused? Quit hassling them, man," Reed said.

"Nah, it's okay. We explained everything."

"Did I really die?" one of them asked, exhaling steadily.

Reed refused to answer.

"Yeah, ya did," Abner reassured them, "but it's alright. Not so bad bein' dead, actually, having personally experienced it myself. I'm one of only five experts on the subject!"

Milly joined Reed by his stump. He leered indelicately at her dirty face, her chapped lips, her ashy hair. She brushed soot off her arms with an open palm, then knelt to Reed's level to inspect his hand.

"Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Does it hurt?" he said, blinking. "No, it's– don't worry about me."

"Thank goodness," she replied, sighing.

Reed wiped his nose. "Why does it matter how I'm doing? *They're* the ones who died!"

"But they're fine now. *You* might have gotten burned."

"You call *that* fine?" he asked, pointing.

"Well, no," she said, "it's not ideal, but they're on their feet again. We can take them with us and all get converted together. I agree it's unfortunate but at least we're right next to the city."

"No, we have to get away from the city!" Reed rose to his feet.

"What?"

Reed blinked. "I didn't get my tenure today. Instead, they took me to meet the government."

"The government?"

"They declared that corpse automata were illegal and that they had already sent someone to *kill* you guys before I even showed up! He was the one who burnt down the inn!"

"It wasn't an accident? Someone actually– it was arson?"

"It was a flame automaton! I saw it walking through town but I had no idea that it was on its way to kill you! I swear, I had *no* idea."

"That's awful... Why would they do something like that?" Milly forlornly put her hand on Reed's knee. She was still residually warm, the first warmth Reed had ever felt from her.

She continued, "...we're illegal? What did we even do?" she asked. "What *do* we do?"

Reed did not know. On the surface, Milly's eyes showed fear. But deeper, they showed a soul. A soul that longed for life, for dignity, and for freedom, from which Reed had taken all those things, and still from Reed was desperately seeking those things. A soul that thought nothing of betrayal and found no betrayal in its subject, only loyalty, like a child clinging to a parent. Reed steadied his breath.

"First," he said, "we have to leave. They're coming for us, I know it."

She nodded. "I understand."

Milly put on a face of resolve. She patted him on the knee, and pecked his forehead. Still warm. Reed did not wipe it off.

Chapter 12.

Milly informed the group of the reason for their deaths. There weren't enough answers for all of their questions, however none could deny the fact that they were dead, or at least dead-like. Abner told everyone to hold their breath, and they found they could do it indefinitely. No one complained of injury, despite their burns. Abner protested, but Graham distributed embalming fluids to everyone from the inn, and told them to pinch their noses while drinking them. Compelled by suspicion, Reed urged everyone to start moving down the mountain. Other than that, he had no plan.

As they plodded down the southern road, the group from the inn took turns introducing themselves. There was Leina Westcott, an Individui textile merchant, and her husband Hundred Westcott. They clung to each other, were sharp dressers, and erudite conversationalists, but both spoke in monotonous tones that dulled even their best anecdotes. Pallas Ravenperch was an Individui poet. She had smooth, black hair and a mature face, but was likely as old as Reed. Doone Forsythe, the inn's cook, was a chiseled mountain of a man. Piper Dewhite, the inn's bard, had stringy arms and dimpled cheeks. Teddy Tatham, an Individuus inn proprietor, was friendly but stern, and plump around the waist. Salem and Parker Winebrook were twin sisters, both scullery maids at the inn born into the Individui. They were children, unschooled and hyperactive, and wore matching pigtails.

"Do any of you know a way we can get off the continent ails.without the government finding out?"

Pallas squinted at Reed. "Do we know where we're going, or are we just walking?"

"We're just walking, but we have to go *somewhere*. I have a strong inkling that we might be *DDT*, and if that's the case we don't want to stick around the tavern and risk getting caught."

“DDT?” asked Rich.

“Um, it’s an Individui criminal classification,” Reed said. “It stands for *Doomed to Die in Torment* and they assign it to high-profile criminals and terrorists, which we are.”

Pallas frowned. “But we didn’t do anything wrong.”

“It doesn’t matter. I was there. Belos told me straight to my face that your existence is illegal and that they would cull you. And I’m helping you escape, which makes me an abettor.”

“You spoke to Belos?” she asked, gobsmacked.

“And Jane Hooker and Aquisteller. It wasn’t a good talk, though. All they did was call me in to tell me that they had already killed you.”

“But what is DDT?” Rich asked again.

“It means they’re going to hunt us,” said Pallas, “and if anyone helps us they could also be killed.”

The twins whimpered. Piper wrapped her arms around their shoulders.

“It’s just not... It’s not just,” Pallas said. She stared at the road, dragging her heels as she trod downhill.

“You’re a rat,” said Doone the cook.

“Well spotted,” Abner interjected.

“Do you know the rats at Crash Point?” Doone asked, dodging the mock.

“I know *where* that is, but I don’t have friends there, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“I heard rats do illegal flight tests there. We go to Crash Point, we can maybe get a ride off the continent.”

“And go where?” Piper asked. Doone shrugged.

Reed spied a fast moving cloud coming from the direction of the city. It passed over their heads and flew further down the mountain where it split into thousands of white birds that dissipated into thousands of directions. They were missive doves, and Reed felt he had a good idea of the content of their message.

In absence of a better plan, they all agreed to Doone's, and Reed charted in his head the best way to Crash Point. Traveling on the road would be dangerous for them as fugitives, so as soon as they reached old Tenueppo Hill at the base of the mountain, they would trek through the wilderness in as straight a line to Crash Point as was safely amenable. He relayed this plan to the party.

"If we're going to the old battlefield, we should make a stop at the Old Flagstaff," said Doone.

Reed was not familiar with that landmark.

"It's an inn at a crossroads due south of it," Doone explained. "We should get some new clothes while we're there so we're not traveling around in burnt rags."

"How do you expect to buy clothes? If we're DDT–" Reed asked.

"We're not; we're going to take them from the laundry."

Reed assented, as having normal clothes would make them less conspicuous. He still felt guilty stealing.

"Reed, did you see those missive doves earlier?" Pallas asked. Reed nodded.

"They were about us, do you think?" Reed nodded.

The dead chainwearers did not need rest, but the pangs of pain and exhaustion throbbed at Reed's ankles. After two hours of racing down the mountain, he was back on Graham's shoulders. The twins took turns scouting ahead, and would run back and warn of any passengers

coming up the mountain pass. It only happened once, and the party had plenty of dense foliage behind which to hide to allow the oblivious caravan to pass without incident. After it passed, the twins snuck behind and peeked into its coach. They pilfered some loaves of bread and ran back to the party. Graham informed them they couldn't eat the bread. They offered it to Reed, who held in his distaste for their opportunism and politely declined. They pouted, tossing the loaves on the ground. As the bread tumbled through a patch of short grass, a red oraclebird swooped down to peck at it.

"Pipi!" Milly cheered.

The bird flew onto Milly's finger and bent its head down. Milly softly stroked its feathers while cooing over her returned pet.

"You're dead but you have a pet?" Pallas asked.

"Pipi's also dead," Abner said, reveling in the oddness of the situation.

They reached a thoroughly indistinct grassy field, the Old Tenueppo battlefield. You would never have known it were significant unless you happened to stumble upon the lonely monument in the middle of the field designating it so.

"Bloodiest battle of the Sundering," said Doone. "You know about Tenueppo, rat?"

"I don't know the specifics but I know it was about retaking Ketch Caverns from decapods."

"That *was not* the bloodiest battle of the Sundering," argued Krieger. "We lost hundreds of thousands during the nine-day tragedy. The Sundering didn't even happen on Unnafirma."

Doone smirked, and shook his head. "You think what you want to think."

"I bet if you excavated here, you would find a ton of skeletons and war stuff," said Milly.

"You're right," Doone replied. "But it's a protected landmark so it's illegal to dig here."

“Stop it, girls!” barked Teddy, the innkeeper. The twins, who had been scratching the grass with their feet, jumped away from their divot and ran back to the group giggling.

The company wandered through the wood and glen, staying parallel to the road. Pallas was muttering something and Reed couldn’t help but eavesdrop.

“*...and those whom ignorance bless may…”*

Reed perked his ears to catch more of her disconnected ramblings.

“*...the stolen vanity of a flying shadow...*”

“What are you saying?” Reed asked.

Pallas jumped. “Nothing,” she said.

“What were you just talking about?”

“I was thinking of something to *say* about our situation.”

Reed perhaps understood. He, too, often formulated full sentences in his head before he spoke them aloud. Pallas must practice her thoughts to herself before she says them.

“So, what were you going to say, then?” he asked.

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

Reed cocked his head. “But I heard something about ‘ignorance’ and something else.”

Pallas rolled her eyes. “If you must know, I was drafting a poem, but it’s not ready yet, sorry.”

Reed never had an appreciation for poetry, so that was enough for him to drop the subject.

As evening fell, they hopped the fence of the Old Flagstaff Inn. It was large, too large to be called an inn. The original building now served as the main entrance to a much grander annex, prodigal with wreaths and banners and all manner of tacky decoration with no eye for visual temperance or clarity of purpose. Reed caught a whiff of dried meats emanating from the

smokehouse, one of several externally built structures dotting the estate. He had not eaten that day.

Graham turned to Doone. “Do you know your way around?”

Doone nodded. “We don't even have to go inside. The laundry is this way.” They crept silently around the inside of the border fence.

“I feel bad for doing this,” Doone said, chuckling. “I used to work here and the owners are nice folk.”

They passed the smokehouse. Reed was dying for a closer sniff. He cracked open the door and blasted himself with delicious heat. Inside, a decadent glut of racks full of dried pork coated with a honey salt glaze. They glowed like succulent, golden statues and were packed so tight that they leaned on each other. Reed bit his lower lip. They had so much. They would never notice a small strip missing. Even if they did notice, he would never get caught. It could be a *free sample*. He had not grappled with this burning desire since adolescence.

However, stealing the meat would make Reed a thief. He stifled his hunger, and closed the door.

He rejoined his sneaking ensemble with a hangdog face. They were changing into clean, dry outfits pilfered from the laundry hut. The twins were trying on dresses and showing them off to each other. The Westcotts were particularly discerning and meticulous in their selection, and they muttered jargon to themselves about the design, elasticity, and function of each piece of clothing they considered. Graham quickly changed into something modest, then shoveled all of the discarded, burnt clothes into a laundry bag and slung it over his shoulder. One of the twins, Salem, offered Reed a brimmed hat and a child-sized buttoned shirt, but he refused them. She put the hat on herself.

“I want one!” Parker yelled, at which she was shushed. Teddy snagged a similar hat and plopped it on her head.

They finished their laundry raid and hopped the fence.

“No more stops from this point,” said Graham. “From here, we run until we get there.”

“We're going to run? To the other side of the continent? Can't we sleep first?” Pallas asked.

“Trust me," said Graham, “you won't need to sleep, or rest. Do you even feel tired?”

“I'm not tired!” Salem reported. Graham feigned surprise, and Salem giggled.

“I got you something,” Rich whispered to Reed as they hiked into the woods.

He handed Reed a large strip of stolen pork and a clean, silver tie. The glaze on the meat stickied Reed’s fingers. He bit into the pork, then took off his tie, slipped it into his pocket, and tied the new one snug around his neck. The taste was exquisite.

Chapter 13.

For three days and nights, the party darted southwest through the Unnafirma wilderness. Reed kept them in a straight line during the day and told them which stars to follow at night to stay on track while he got what sleep he could in the laundry bag. On the third day, they haphazardly ran out into a clearing only to discover it was the edge of a farm. Reed was ashamed to do it, but he pilfered some crops, for his pants were beginning to hang loose around his waist. From that point, the party carefully navigated around property lines with much slower pace toward their destination, always staying within tree cover. If anyone heard a voice, or a crunching of leaves, or the barking of dogs, they all froze, and continued only when they were sure they had not been spotted. This leg of the trip was particularly marred by anxiety, and by the end of the fourth day, Reed was harrowed from the poor sleep and the unending vigilance. He relied on his traveling party's endless stamina to progress, and slipped in and out of lucidness.

On the morning of the fifth day, Reed was awoken with a tap-tap on the nose. The party hunkered in place at the top of a forest ridge. Rich pointed beyond the trees at a road leading to a town in plain view. Reed crawled out of the laundry bag and scanned the area.

“King's fur, I fell asleep,” Reed said, yawning. “Where are we?”

“There's a town right there. The road goes right through it.”

Reed did not recognize the town.

“Do we know what town that is?” Nobody did.

Reed twiddled with his tie. It did not feel exactly the same as his old tie; it was less flimsy and the material was too smooth. The tactile discrepancy between the fabrics disrupted Reed's thinking, but he could not pull his hand away from it. He remained stumped and twiddling.

“There's a number of towns it could be, depending on which direction and how far off we strayed,” he said.

“Do you have a guess?” Milly asked.

Reed twiddled. “It could be Junkerburgh, which is east of Crash Point, or it could be Shrapnell, which... is also east... of... I suppose we can't go wrong going west along the road.” It was decided.

Reed led the way on foot, and tripped over a wire, triggering the ringing of bells which had been strung up in the trees above them. Metal cans fell from the tree canopy which burst upon hitting the ground into blinding light and ear-shattering honks and whistles, disorienting everyone. Graham grabbed Reed and broke into a wild sprint. He tripped on another wire, throwing Reed into a tree and dropping more exploding cans.

Reed was dazed and hurt. Graham got back to his feet and rushed to Reed's side. He heard the yelling of chainwearer men and soon, they were upon them.

“Woah, that's a lot of ‘em.”

“Gimme the handbill.”

“Gaw-llay! You been busy, rat!”

Reed and Graham were surrounded by four sinister chainwearers, each wearing a bandolier of those obnoxious flash cans. One had black hair and breathed through his mouth, one had horrible facial scars and a single blind eye, and one brandished a strange ballistic weapon with a barrel wider than the gun itself. Behind them, the party were struggling to get their footing, as the earth underneath their feet shifted in random directions at every step. They frantically grabbed trees for balance, but the bark shifted randomly at their touch.

“This you, fuzzball?” asked the black-haired man who kept his mouth ajar at all times. He showed Reed the handbill.

DDT

Reed Love

On charge of criminal necromancy, this Individuus servant of the Rat King, Reed Love, is deemed **Doomed to Die in Torment**. Reward for capture to be determined but not below 4,000 Silver Scales. May be traveling with undead familiars.

An image of Reed’s face accompanied the text, dead center on the page.

“I thought so,” said the slack-jawed man, slowly cracking a wry smile.

A can came flying from behind the manhunters, knocking one in the back of the head, and burst. The sudden sound made the others wince and turn to face the party. The stricken manhunter nursed his head wound, and was struck again, this time by an invisible force that sent leaves swirling in its path and smacked him square in the chin. He fell to the ground, and dropped his weapon. Pallas ran wide around the grouped manhunters, no longer slipping. She aimed her hand and flicked her index finger at them, blowing up dust and knocking the slack-jawed manhunter in the side of his pelvis with the same invisible force from before. He brushed off the hit and thrust his hand into the dirt, at which Pallas slipped again and fell on her back having lost all grip to the forest floor. She wriggled around and took aim at the manhunter from the ground, but missed. She fired wildly again, but clipped an oblivious Reed in the shoulder. He spun through the air in a dizzying arc and fell into a dirt slope. His bag spilled down the hill. Pallas sucked air in through her clenched teeth, yelled an apology, and stopped firing.

Krieger, Teddy, and Doone rose to their feet, as their part of the forest was no longer slippery. Krieger and Teddy charged one of the manhunters who stood guarding his face from Pallas’ invisible attacks. They caught him by surprise with their tackle, and pummeled him on

the ground until he was bloody in the face. The face-scarred manhunter ran to retrieve the weapon. Doone pursued, but the manhunter turned the weapon on him and fired a dusty bombardment of screws, nails, and shredded flak into his shoulder. Doone flew back from the blast's shockwave and landed on another tripwire. The face-scarred manhunter opened a can off his bandolier, but it did not burst. Instead, he attempted to pour more scrap metal from his can into the weapon's receptacle. Triggered by Doone's landing, flash cans fell from the trees and burst, frightening the face-scarred man, and he spilled his reload.

He pulled another can off his bandolier, grunting in frustration, but got plugged in the cheek by one of Pallas' shots. He spun on his toe and face-planted a tree trunk, flinging the gun away. The slack-jawed manhunter noticed he was the only one left standing and sprinted toward the road in a panic. He grabbed his own shoulder and Pallas abruptly stopped sliding. She got up, and fired three times, but his skin and clothes rapidly contorted around the shots and they passed by him without harm.

Doone rose. His right arm and shoulder were covered in bits of metal, and he absentmindedly pulled a nail out of his neck. The slack-jawed manhunter cut through dense trees, but Doone and Pallas gave chase. Pallas fired one shot at the manhunter's ankle. It solidly connected, and he lost his footing. He grabbed a tree for stability, but his fingers contorted away from the bark, at which he yelped. The hunter hit the ground. His body rapidly morphed as every part that came in contact with the forest floor shriveled and wrinkled and shifted and crunched, and he howled in agony but soon quieted to weak gurgles. As Doone caught him, the manhunter lay silent. His body now unrecognizable from disfigurement came to a rest and blood pooled into the roots and fallen leaves beneath.

Reed slowly approached Doone, still dizzy.

“Are you arright?” he slurred.

“Strange,” said Doone.

He picked at a thin screw lodged in his shoulder but was reluctant to pull it out.

“I can feel that it’s stuck in there, but it doesn’t hurt at all.”

Reed rubbed his shoulder, still throbbing from the hit he took. He went to collect his bag and his things which had fallen out of it. He picked up his parents’ rubber flask, still plump, and brushed dirt and leaves off. It jingled as he did so. He sloshed it around, and it jingled again. *Hmm,* he thought.

Leaves crunched in the distance. Pallas prefired a panicked shot into a distant tree, scattering wood chips.

“Stop! I surrender!” yelled a voice.

A fifth chainwearer man flung his arms above his head and slowly emerged. He had no bandolier. His outfit was decidedly more flamboyant than the manhunters’, and in fact, Reed thought he may have seen some of the man’s clothing for sale in Nigh-on-High. His mauve vest had diamond-shaped ebony buttons that rotated in place and his frilly shirt cuffs were like lace doilies. His corduroys were striped with patterned chains that magically translated along the fabric. His cuffs bobbed lightly in the air from some kind of chic enchantment, though his thick arms remained firm above his head. The man’s effete manner of dress masked hidden strength.

He smirked at Pallas. “Young lady, that is certainly some *trick* you’ve mastered there. Air bullets at your age? Most impressive. History in the service, I wager?”

She didn’t flinch at his flattery, and held her index finger cocked in her thumb in his direction.

“I hoped not to foist my unwanted presence upon you lot. I was merely admirin’ the spectacle of combat I just witnessed.”

His eyes shot to Reed. “So you must be the *criminal necromancer* everyone in the country was informed about. I must say, to *my* eye, this be no necromancy. That young lady reacted to me faster than you did, little rat!” He tickled himself with that line, but kept his arms held high as he sputtered out pompous laughter.

He looked at Doone. “Stranger still, did I correctly hear you speak there, toolbox? Does your shoulder not hurt with all that metal stickin’ out? I wonder then,” he said, “if this one’s not controlling you, are you *immortals*?”

“This bastard asks too many questions,” Doone said. “I don’t trust him.” At hearing Doone speak, the man lit up with gleeful fascination.

“What’s your name, stranger?” Graham asked.

His smile swiveled to meet Graham’s question. “I’m Rainer Prewett. Was passin’ through Shrapnell for business when I happened to hear your raucous commotion and I had to stick my nose in it. Can’t help meself sometimes!”

“I don’t trust him,” said Doone, picking at his shoulder.

Reed tugged at his collar, and adjusted his silver tie. He sighed. “You can put your hands down, sir.”

The man smiled, and did so. Reed approached, at each step forward ensuring the man made no movement before taking the next.

“Sir, with your permission, I’m going to use the forktongue jinx on you.”

The man’s eyes widened. “Very clever!”

He knelt down to Reed’s level, opened his mouth, and stuck out his tongue. Reed tapped it thrice.

“Is your name really Rainer Prewett?” Reed asked.

“No,” he said. Doone huffed.

“Are you with those men who just attacked us?”

“Yes.”

“Is that town nearby actually Shrapnell?”

“No.”

Doone scoffed. “He lied!”

Pallas patted Doone on the back. “Calm down. That doesn’t even make sense. Listen.”

“Did you really just happen to find us?” Reed asked.

“No, I was looking for you.”

“I knew it! He lied!” Doone shouted.

“No, he’s lying *right now*,” Pallas said, “the forktongue jinx makes him lie, and the rat is using it to force him to tell the truth, in a roundabout way.”

“Were you going to attack us?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to turn us in?”

“Yes, and I’m able to do that because I’m on good terms with the government.”

“Hmm. Um, what *don’t* you do for a living?”

“I’m not a pirate.”

Reed thought for a second. “Where *weren’t* you going when you found us?”

“I wasn’t heading to Crash Point.”

Reed was puzzled. He waved his arms. “Why were you going to Crash Point?”

“Because they have– oh, that’s strange, innit? It’s like I wasn’t able to control me own words. How weird!” He fuddled with his lips and tongue with his fingers, as if wiping away residual magic.

“Answer the question, please,” Reed said, wiping his eyes.

Rainer leaned against the tree, grinning. “Contrary to what I just said, I am a pirate. Got a ship and crew, and if I’m anywhere near the place I’ll always make the trip to see what those rats are cookin’ up. Geniuses, they are! They’re on the bleedin’ edge of flight technology! The whole world’s 20 years behind those little devils! If they’ve got some new gizmo or doodad that’ll give me a competitive advantage in the skies, I’ll be damn sure to know about it first! Pirating’s a tough racquet, didn’t ya know?”

There was no way this man could have known their plans beforehand, and he was verifiably not a threat, at least not by intention. Reed fiddled with his coat pocket as it flapped softly in the breeze. He caught a whiff of it. A tinge of iron on the wind. Blood from the crumpled corpse of the manhunter seeped down the slope, trickling through Reed’s toes. He looked at his party. They offered no counsel.

“As it happens,” Reed said, “that’s also where we’re going.”

“Might I then accompany you?”

“If you must,” Reed replied, yawning again, “but we don’t slow down and we don’t travel on the road.”

Rainer shook out his arms, and his cuffs billowed and grew out like lacey swan wings. He rose above the ground, sleeves waving in the wind, and hovered over Doone’s head with a mischievous grin.

“Tell you what, rat, I’ll lead the way and you folks see if you can keep up.”

Chapter 14.

The pirate captain wove through thick treetops without snagging a single branch. He kicked off tree trunks with his cuffs sailing behind him. The rest of the party hustled along the ground with mixed thoughts on their new guest. Rich, Piper, the twins, and the Westcotts were wowed by his graceful flying and ran behind him while Krieger, Pallas, and Doone grumbled about the "arrogant, show offy bastard" and stayed close to Reed. Rainer slapped a black walnut tree and plump, green, falling fruit struck Rich on the bump of his head. He instinctively snorted in offense, having not felt any actual pain from the blow, but Rainer's impish snicker combined with the twins' own giggling made him laugh off the prank.

Reed bounced in the sack. "Ms. Pallas, I'm surprised at how strong you are."

"Why does that surprise you?"

"Didn't you tell me you were a poet? Is it true what that pirate said? That you were in the military?"

"My Da was a legate, but no, I never joined up. He learned a few things from him so I could protect myself if I ever needed to, that's all. But I'm not some sorceress or wizard. Air bullets are the only trick I know."

Rainer wound back his cuffs and landed next to Graham and Milly. He looked them up and down while matching their running speed.

"You two are a cute couple. Love can bloom even in death, eh?"

"We were already married, actually," Milly replied.

"Adorable. I'm married as well. Can I show you my wedding ring?"

Not waiting for an answer, he stuck both hands out. Every digit was flush with jewels.

“My darling Angel gave me this fabulous gold ring with an inset bezoar. It’s a century old at least!”

“Is that your wedding ring?”

“And see this exquisite jasper cameo ring with my own face in it. In’t that just a scream?”

“It’s very lovely.”

“Oh, you don’t have to say that.” He clicked his tongue. “In’t they, though?”

Graham proceeded to regale Rainer of their journey so far, and everyone was pleased that someone else was talking.

Crash Point was the colloquial name for a strip of land on the southwest edge of Unnafirma. It was well off the road, arid and rocky, and a generally undesirable place to find oneself. The group followed Rainer to a glowing borderline on the ground. It stretched from one horizon to the next, spanning through fields of dying grass and wrapping atop every rocky obstacle in its path. Rainer walked over it with no hesitancy. It flickered and sounded off in response:

“*Caution: Crash Zone, Entry Not Advised, Please Return to the Glowing Safety Line*.”

This warning would repeat for each and every person who crossed the line. Crash Point was so named because it shouldered more frequent collisions than anywhere else in the country. Islands not drift locked to Unnafirma crash and are destroyed against its mass. Crash Point, being perceived as highly dangerous, has unique benefits for those willing to endure the risks of living there. Destroyed islands dash treasures, rare flora and fauna, and other oddities among the rocks. Crash Point is effectively unincorporated territory on Unnafirma as it is considered too perilous to physically govern or police. As a result, a significant underground community has risen here.

Rats scavenge fortune among the wreckage and do business that would otherwise be considered taboo, unethical, impractical, or illegal on the mainland.

Rainer burst from the trees and danced down smooth, black rocks that pressed inward like dried out tide pools.

"Watch your step, troops! Follow me as best you can!"

The terrain was warped and challenging. To compensate, everyone paired up and held hands to climb any threatening ledges. They arrived at rows of striking red, violet, blue, periwinkle, and yellow colored sludges. The violet muck was particularly compelling, and the group stopped to observe it closer. Rainer descended.

"Careful not to get into that stuff. These are dye ponds and you don't want to be touchin' them with your bare skin."

"Is it toxic?" asked Hundred Westcott.

"Honey, we're already dead," Leina chided.

Rainer chuckled. "It's bein' treated with nasty chemicals," he explained, "but this is a legitimate industry down here and we don't want to ruin a whole batch by falling in. These colors take months to cultivate and we should try and be respectful of the good work they're doing."

Reed couldn't believe a biohazard could be so beautiful, but he appreciated that there was a place for it to thrive. Crash Point was unarable but in no way fallow.

"You seem to know a lot about it," said Reed.

"Well, I'm a regular visitor here. Plus, uh, hehe–" He pulled off his left boot. His entire foot was deep blue, same as the dye pool. He chuckled again, and put the boot back on.

“I, too, was entranced by the rich hue. This was over a decade ago, and with no one around to tell me otherwise, well, you know.”

“At least it’s just the one foot,” said Rich. Rainer frowned, and shook his head.

They entered a short cave in which cut tree trunks had been leaned against the walls where amber beetles sat producing thick globules of resin that glacially dripped down the logs’ sides. They stepped furtively over loose tools and empty baskets, trying not to disrupt someone’s livelihood. At the end of the cave there was a path that led to the cliff edge of Unnafirma. Rainer stepped out, but then rushed back inside the cave as if chased by the subsequent rain of gravel that pelted the rock walls and filled the air with dust. Larger hunks of rocks could be seen outside sporadically landing along the cliffside. Rainer waited until the weather settled, then stepped out again. He kept a steady pace until he reached a stake in the ground with a thick rope draped over the precipice. He shook out his cuffs and slowly hovered down the rope to a landing adjacent an open cavern.

“One at a time!” he instructed from below. “This rope is for rats, so don’t go overloadin’ it. Especially you, *toolbox,*” he said as he pointed at Doone.

Reed was first down. Inside the cavern was a well-organized and bustling hangar. Scores of rats scurried about toting cables, sheet metal, propeller blades, and various things which clicked and clacked. Technologies from all ends of the globe were dissected and engineered together with technical mastery here. A number of rats were tarring the underside of a large, metal skiff with a front spotlight and ornate trim around its edges. Undead original inhabitant familiars carried steel billets to the loading zone of an unlit forge. A scruffy, gray rat in a tracksuit was pacing around an old chalkboard when he noticed Rainer and Reed standing at the entrance.

“Captain Prewett!” he yelled. “And guest! Come in, come in!”

“Yes, I’m back.”

“Rainer, I’ve been developing an innerestin’ weapon that shoots watah instead of conventional ballistics, you might be innerested in–”

“That sounds fascinating, old boy, but I’m afraid I must make a pressing introduction.” He scowled. “Make it then.”

“Reed, let me introduce you to perhaps the finest mind of the modern age: Gray Gonkworx.”

Reed shook the grizzled grease monkey’s paw and winced at his firm grip. Gray chortled.

“Bit bookish but we can always use more o’ dat! What specimen have you brought me, Mr. Prewett?”

“Excuse me? Ah, my apologies, this one’s not lookin’ for a job. Do you get missives out here?”

“No. Why? Did somethin’ happen?” Rainer gleefully swaggled his head, giddy to share his discovery.

“I’m afraid this rat has curiously found himself in command of a small battalion of *sentient, intelligent corpses*. I’ve never seen anythin’ like it in me whole life. Unfortunately, the government has seen fit to label the poor fellow an *enemy of the state*.”

“Intelligent? Corpses don’t have intellect.”

“See for yourself, old boy,” he said as he pointed at Graham helping Milly dismount the rope. “Mrs. Milly, gorgeous, would you join us, please?”

She greeted the old rat with a nervous “how do you do.”

“That don’t prove anything. They could be *your* familiahs.”

Rainer squawked. “She just spoke! When have you ever seen a zombie do that?”

“Wha’ you want me to do with this information?” he asked, snarling.

“Aren’t you interested?”

“Not in harboring freaks. We have enough death labor already without headhuntahs sniffin’ around. Why youse insist on bringin’ this trouble to my doorstep?”

“Are you the foreman?” asked Doone from behind Rainer.

Gray was hesitant to answer. “That he be,” said Rainer.

“We were wondering if there’s any way we can leave the country. Anything you can offer.”

“Do you have money?”

“Uh, uh,” Reed stammered.

More of the party filed into the hangar. Gray took a step back.

“How many are there?” Gray asked with a glint of disgust in his eyes.

“Fourteen,” Reed answered.

Gray scoffed. “Four-F-Fourteen!! King’s fur!”

Rich grabbed a dusty milk crate nearby which was previously holding loose batteries and wire, then hesitantly presented his stash. “Will this be enough?”

“Hoo hoo! Butter and egg man!” said Rainer.

Reed watched in horror as Rich poured out his cigar box.

“Stand back, Reed-man,” said Abner, emptying his wallet. Gray stared disapprovingly. One after another, the scouts and innsfolk pooled their money into the crate.

“Still not enough.”

Reed grabbed Gray's collar, but was handily smacked to the tarmac. His effects spilled from his coat.

"Can't you see we're desperate?" Reed said.

"Clean that crap off my workfloor."

Reed grabbed his old tie, his empty purse, and his tea flask. Again, it jingled when he lifted it off the ground. He popped the cork, but there was no tea inside. Instead, the rubber jug contained three months worth of stipend money, minus what Reed spent on cheese a week ago. Reed gasped. His father got the best of him. He turned the jug over the crate, spilling coins over the top onto the floor, and gazed pleadingly at the pit boss whose scowl softened.

"Have a heart, old boy," Rainer said.

The old codger huffed. "When have I evah known you to dump charity cases on my lap?"

"Never. But I've never felt the need," said Rainer, seemingly in earnest. It was still not clear to Reed why a pirate would take such interest in his group's wellbeing.

Gray spit, then called over one of the tar painters.

"How many skimmahs do we have onsite? Four, right?"

"That sounds right," said the white and brown-dappled rat with a chipped tooth, "but they're not ready."

"They're ready," replied Gray. "Clear the hangar area and get 'em lined up."

The white and brown rat deliberated orders, and soon all the workstations in the hangar were cleared away, revealing a grooved runway. Four winged vehicles emerged from a side tunnel, and the rats drove them into the center of the cavern, nocking their wheels into the grooves. Each vehicle had an open top with four seats, one of which had a steering console. All four of the skimmers were lined back to back and dragged toward the back of the hangar. A rat

issued a loud warning call and cautioned everyone to stand clear as the grooved, hydraulic runway rose at the entrance to form a curved ramp.

Gray hopped into the first skimmer's pilot seat. He gave a passionate but confusing explanation of the modified skimmer's ignition, flight controls, landing, navigation, etc., and christened it all with a humorless, "couldn't be simplah!"

"Oh, one more thing," Gray said, "don't stand near the engine once it's running unless you wanna end up like Angelo."

"Genius, in' he?" said Rainer. "Built me own ship top-to-bottom, and already it's out of date compared to his newest tech!" He turned to Reed. "I've never not known rats to astound."

"*Who's Angelo?*" whispered Rich.

"It's a statue near Coriaster," said Pallas, "of a man putting his hand onto a leyline. Some people think it was a real person who touched it and got flash calcified."

"I saw Angelo once," said Leina. "Someone graffitied him."

"I didn't know you couldn't touch a leyline," said Rich.

"That may have been why they put the statue there."

"Or didn't have him removed," said Leina.

Gray finished calibrating the fourth cockpit and returned to the first skimmer's pilot seat.

"Three of you who plan on piloting, strap in and we'll do a test flight. I'll show you the controls then aftah that we'll do one more test flight soz I know you get it, get it? How's the weathah, Donny?"

"All clear," said a distracted rat at the lounge.

"Are you sure these are ready to fly?" asked the white and brown rat.

"If they're not, I'll be the first to find out." said Gray, strapping himself in.

Chapter 15.

Teddy, Graham, and Piper volunteered for the jury rigged skimmer's maiden voyage. Reed took the crate of money to Gray's "office," by the chalkboard. There was a dirty school desk pushed into a rock alcove, and Reed left the crate there. He hovered over to a pack of mechanics whose tasks the skimmer launch had interrupted. They were lounging on a dirty sofa in the corner of the cave, enjoying the break. Reed sat on a chair and silently eavesdropped on their chatter. Reed jumped in his seat at the sound of the front skimmer roaring in an instant to life. His chair vibrated as the shockwave echoed through the cavern. *Crash!* Near the entrance, a rock had fallen onto the runway, but it had enough berth from the grooves to not be in the way of the skimmers. The mechanics cheered and knocked twice on their hard hats in unison at the fallen rock's unsuccessful assassination attempt. Gray's skimmer picked up speed, and rolled along the groove. Faster and faster they rode to the ramp when another rock from out in the sky landed on the runway.

"ABORT! ABORT!" yelled the white and brown rat with the chipped tooth.

Too late. The skimmer shot off the ramp directly into a cloud of sand and rocks hailing into the cavern entrance. Reed ran onto the runway. Sand blasted his toes as he stood at the edge of the storm. The skimmer flew steady into the magnetic debris cloud. A cacophony of rock pelted the tarmac, drowning out the sound of the skimmer's engine. All the worker rats covered their ears, but Reed kept his focus on the black dot braving the heart of the cloud. The left wing produced a giant spark like a struck flint, and a plume of smoke trailed behind the skimmer like a black ribbon. Reed took another step into the hail of sand. It cut his calves up and he shivered from the pain, but maintained his focus. The skimmer banked left, and slowly made a full turn toward land. Another spark, two trails of smoke.

“GET BACK!” yelled the white and brown rat.

Milly pulled Reed off the runway like an oblivious child being led off a busy road, but his vision remained fixed on the smoking skimmer’s crooked dive. A chirp finally drew his attention away. In Milly’s coat, Pipi was quietly peeping. Not panicking, not escaping, happily nestled in the breast pocket. Reed took a deep breath. He stopped fighting Milly’s pull, and walked with her to the side of the cave.

The dust-coated skimmer screamed into the hangar at a foul angle. It scraped over the runway, producing smoke and sparks. The skimmer slammed against the front end of the second skimmer in line and banked into the lounge area. Following an urgent exodus of hard hats, the skimmer screeched forth and collided with the lounge’s old soda. The sofa caught on the front wheel of the skimmer, and the two careened into the cavern wall. A rat carrying a water bucket firmly ordered the party to stay clear of the wreckage. Diligent workers rushed in chucked water into the skimmer’s smoke. The black plume obscured the status of the passengers from the party. Milly held Reed’s paw, but now it felt as if she was the one who needed to be held back.

Gray jumped from the smokestack, covered in sand. He spent a minute hacking and wheezing and spitting.

“DNNNN!” was all he was able to say without coughing. Eventually, he expelled enough sediment from his lungs to make a scrutable utterance.

“DONNY!”

The distracted rat from the lounge earlier stopped throwing water on the skimmer and ran to Gray’s side.

“Yeah, Gray?”

“Is that what you call ‘all clear?’ You tryna get me killed?”

Donny stammered, dumbstruck.

"You're *fired!*"

"But I'm your brother!"

"You're lucky I don't throw youse off this cliff! Now get out!"

Reed ignored the familial spat and grabbed a bucket of water, but really, he wanted to see if Graham and the other passengers were okay. He hucked the water at the wing, but it didn't quite reach. Graham, Teddy, and Piper were inside the cockpit holding their breaths. They were dusty, but alive. Reed pulled a standing ladder from the damaged second skimmer to the crashed one, and the three chainwearers promptly descended, none the worse for wear.

"So much for that," said Teddy, shaking off debris.

"*That's* all you have to say?" yelled Piper. "We could have been *killed!*"

"Maybe–" said Graham, but he was interrupted by Milly's sudden embrace.

Gray did a headcount of all the rats on staff to make sure nobody was missing. He walked around, painting a dusty trail in the path of his cursory appraisal of the damage to the hangar.

"King's knot!" he exclaimed. Reed blushed at the caked grouch's foul language.
Rainer took Reed aside.

"Let me talk to him," he said, "but if things don't go well, you and all your friends can come with me."

"Come with you? Come with you where?"
But Rainer had already strutted off.

"Mr. Gonkworx," he called out in a sing-songy timbre, "in't there anything *else* in the back there to get these folks off the ground? Surely you don't expect these poor strays to all squeeze into two little skimmers, do you?"

"*GET OUTTAH MY FACE!*"

"Oh, don't be that way."

"GET THIS CHAINWEARIN' SON OF A BITCH'S SHIP. YOUSE BETTAH BE OUT BY THE TIME I GET WASHED OFF. I DON'T EVAH WANNA SEE YOUSE 'ROUND HERE, EVAH!"

Rainer bowed to the miniature erupting volcano as he stormed off. He strutted back to Reed.

"Grab the milk crate," he whispered. Reed felt the command was in poor taste, like rubbing salt in the old rat's wounds. It didn't matter how Reed felt though, as Parker and Salem happily obliged the pirate's order and hid the milk crate under their dresses. He playfully shushed them, and they straightened their backs to act inconspicuous but pursed smiles betrayed their giddiness.

The rats rolled the skiff out. It was large enough to hold everyone, but any smaller and there would have been issue, and it sported a fresh coat of tar on the bottom. Rainer shook out his cuffs and flew to the helm.

"Come aboard, everyone!"

They clambered in. Rainer helped the twins smuggle the milk crate on board and he tucked it snugly near the helm. The crate scraped along the ground and firmly attached itself to a cube of porous stone attached at the bottom to the helm console. Rainer raised a lever, lowering the stone onto the dark wooden floor. The skiff rose into the air, and Rainer pulled out of the hangar, away from Unnafirma.

Chapter 16.

They flew through the air with the greatest of ease, that daring young man, rat, and crew of zombies. The skies were choppy but not overwhelming for their cramped vessel. Unnafirma slowly shrank. It faded into fog before it completely sank over the horizon. Rainer constantly peeked at a little ticker on his steering console. Throughout the flight, he awkwardly course-corrected so the needle always pointed up, jostling every passenger with his apprehensive navigation. His hands tightly gripped the wheel. Abner unfortunately initiated conversation, unaware of the fugue of focus he was interrupting.

"Where we headin', captain?" he asked.

Rainer jolted, and the vessel jiggled but quickly stabilized.

"Captain? You call me captain?" he said.

Abner squinted. "Yeah, you're a captain, right?"

"Not *your* captain."

Abner rolled his eyes. "Where-are-we-head-ing?" he repeated, emphasizing each syllable.

Rainer checked his dial, then turned right by a single degree.

"Sorry," he said, splitting his attention, "where– what is– what– what?"

"Where are you taking us?"

Rainer's mouth wobbled as if he thought words were coming out. He was genuinely stumped. "Where am I... oh, my ship! I'm taking you to my ship!"

Abner threw out his hands in frustration for the amount of pleading it took just to get a straight answer. He weighed wading back into the mire of Rainer's attention span, and threw his hands out again.

"How much longer?" he asked.

Rainer was again baffled. He only caught up to the question enough to say, “sorry, I’m doing something.”

Afternoon came. They passed a swarm of flying inhabitants, but they gave the party no trouble. Rainer barely noticed it. A lonely airship floated stationary in the distance, and the skiff was heading directly for it. Rainer made no attempt to divert course. The airship shot something into the air, and it careened in an arc toward the skiff. Rainer did not allow the foreign object or the ship to distract him from the dial. The flying shape sprouted wings, and slowed its descent. It was a busty chainwearer lady with luscious, blond curls, using the same enchanted cuffs as Rainer’s. From the air, she measured up the vessel’s passengers before landing next to Rainer and giving him a tap on the shoulder.

“Let me take the helm, darling,” she said.

Rainer rocked the boat in alarm, then handed her the wheel as instructed. She did not grip the wheel as hard as him.

“With pleasure, my dove. I didn’t see you fly over!” He spied the ship in the distance ahead. “Ah, there she is.”

“Care to explain yourself?” she asked, pointing a thumb over her shoulder.

“You’ll see. Call a staff meeting as soon as we dock. Actually, y’know what? I’m impatient.”

Rainer shook his cuffs and flew to the ship.

“What kind of boat is that?” Milly asked.

“She’s an Anarch-class Battlegalley, custom built top to bottom,” the woman replied. “You won’t find a fiercer, privately-owned vessel in the sky.”

The pirate woman steered the vessel to the side of the ship, docking next to the main deck. Rainer's ship was festooned with ornate steel trimming around every corner and doorway. A gaudy figurehead of a pair of wings wrapped around the bow, pointing ahead like an arrow. A plaque on the side of the ship read "Prewett's True Love." Rainer welcomed everyone on board, and personally helped all of the women off the skiff. The main deck had a dark wood floor identical to the inside of the skiff. After everyone had disembarked, the woman maneuvered the vessel behind the ship and flew back to the deck. Rainer grabbed a voice pipe.

"They're here! All hands topside!"

Crewmates, all chainwearers, filtered out of the ship with curious or assuming stares, mostly at Reed, for he was standing at the front of 13 burnt chainwearers. Rainer invited Reed to stand with him, and he did. The last pirate meandered on deck, so Rainer began his animated speech.

"My gallant crew, good afternoon! I hope you're all quite well. As you can see, we have some guests of a most unusual sort. There's no way to put this other than that which it is. These people are dead. Dead and resurrected! And *this rat* stands at the center of this entire, strange ordeal!"

The crew groaned at Rainer's theatrics, but he reveled in their misery.

"Reed," he said to Reed, "allow me to welcome you to the humble home and headquarters of the Winged Prewetts. We are, as I believe I explained, pirates."

"And you're the captain?" asked Reed.

Rainer pursed his lips. "Co-captain, actually. I split the leadership with my wife, Angel, who you met but have not been introduced to." The blond pirate lady curtsied. The twins curtsied back.

“Pleasure to meet you,” said Milly. This polite greeting was met with gasps, whispers, and shouts.

“Everyone, I must ask you not to shriek!” said Rainer. “For you see, these are no ordinary familiars. You might have assumed them soulless, mindless hylics bent to this rat’s will, but I tell you *nay*! They can speak! And more than that, they are, all of them, intelligent with memories of their lives before they died! It is as peculiar a case as I have ever found in all my years on this Aljana.”

The crew awed at the party. Rainer had them hooked. They were captive to his story, and like a ringleader he played to their suspense and wonderment.

“I had just arrived in Potapart when a cloud of missive doves flew above. They littered the streets with DDTs labeling poor Reed here a criminal necromancer and his friends savage familiars. But I discovered them on the run, and I learned the truth! Persecuted in death for the mere crime of wanting to live! Have you ever heard such tragic irony? Naturally, I was moved by their plight. You know me. I’m a romantic. The government fears this new strain of undeath. I welcome it!”

The crew applauded.

“Therefore,” Rainer announced, turning to the party, “I wish to officially offer every single one of you membership to the Winged Prewetts, and I think you will find it the perfect solution to your problem. Namely, a permanent escape from the eyes of the Individui.”

Applause followed.

“You want us to join your pirate crew?” asked Reed, a little starstruck.

Rainer laughed. “Pirate *family*. Many are me very own cousins and nephews and nieces and in-laws, not to mention me lovely wife.” He winked at Angel. She winked back.

Doone stepped forward, and the crew oohed at his agency and shoulder which still had flak in it. He rolled his eyes.

“Are you not also wanted by the government? You’re a pirate,” he asked.

Rainer licked his teeth, smiling. “It’s complicated. We’re on mutually beneficial terms with many governments. We’re not exactly welcome on anyone’s soil but we provide a much desired service in exchange for staying off everyone’s wanted lists.”

“And what service is that?”

Angel poked one of Doone’s screws. He batted her hand away.

“We’re parrot traders,” she said, poking Doone again.

“Your much desired service is parrots?” Reed asked.

“You wouldn’t believe how lucrative it is. The aristocracy love their parrots. They’re *in*. These birds are worth their weight in gold, and business is *booming*. It’s gotten to the point where if you’re in the parrot trade, you can’t hardly leave your island without getting raided.”

“Do you raid parrots traders?”

“Why? Does that upset you?” she asked. “They’re all pirates nowadays, and they would just as soon raid us for ours.”

“Parrots are keeping the spirit of piracy alive,” said Rainer, “and I was born for it. I love my job.”

“I don’t want to be a pirate,” said Reed. “I can’t fight or raid.”

“There are many things you can do on a pirate ship other than fighting! And everyone who buys into the company gets an equal share of the profits.”

“Buys in?”

“Let’s not worry about that now.” Rainer smirked. “In a way, you already bought in.”

The party had been discussing among themselves while Reed and Rainer argued. Graham and Krieger approached Reed and took him aside.

“I don’t know what to think,” Reed said.

“These pirates can go wherever they want and nobody is chasing them,” said Graham. “It might not be such a bad idea to join them, at least for a little while.”

“I don’t want to be a pirate,” Reed repeated.

“We’ll make sure you don’t have to do anything dangerous,” said Krieger. “Did you see the crew? There’s kids there, and they’re probably Rainer’s family members. Clearly not everyone is fighting. He wouldn’t make those young kids fight and he won’t make you either.”

“Is everyone okay with it?”

“They’ve been okay with everything so far.”

Reed was not okay with it, but he agreed. Rainer brought out the weathered company charter.

“These little ones can’t write, so I’ll sign for them,” said Teddy.

“That’s fine,” Angel replied. “Have them sign an ‘X’ next to their name.”

Everyone lined up and signed the charter.

Winged Prewett Company Charter	
Rainer Prewett	Captain
Angel Prewett	Captain
Robert R. Prewett (Narwhal)	Gunner
Jack Prewett (Skipjack)	Powder Monkey
Malo Prewett (Plunger)	Gunner
Vincent Decatur	First Mate
Madeira Prewett (Snapper)	Carpenter
Rigel Silverhorn	Quartermaster
Edward H. Bainbridge	Navigator

Dale Schweickert	Parrot Keeper
Howard Prewett (Parrot)	Parrot Keeper
Barton Roach (Barry)	Mechanic
Paul Jones (PJ)	Cook
Perry Prewett	Carpenter/Cooper
Harriette Concorde (Essex)	Swabby
Seabury	Deckhand
Farragut	Helmsman
Stringham Prewett	Master Gunner
Dido Kentish	Musician
Bellona ~~Sunday~~ Decatur	Surgeon
Randolph Prewett	Cabin Boy
Kitty Prewett (Chicahawk)	Deckhand
Columbia Upton (Baby)	Boatswain
Graham Balding	Guest
Milly Balding	Guest
Piper Dewhite	Musician
Abner Hogan	Scout
Hundred Westcott	Guest
Leina Westcott	Tailor
Rich Howard	Scout
Krieger Munk	Guest
Pallas Ravenperch	Poet
Salem Winebrook **X**	Scullery Maid
Parker Winebrook ***x***	Scullery Maid
Doone Forsythe	Cook
Teddy Tatham	Guest

Chapter 17.

In his first week of "service" with the company, Reed relaxed. He explored the ship, met everyone on board, but did not carve a niche or set a plan for his future among the crew. He sat around. He slept a lot. No one stopped him or suggested he do otherwise. Come breakfast and suppertime, he would show up for meals and eat by himself while his friends made new friends. Effort became too much effort.

Reed and the party worked with the Winged Prewetts for several months. They traveled to exotic and jungled islands in search of rare birds, but Reed and his part of the crew never went on land when the ship made trips into town. His chainwearers took to the work well and were happy to expand their network to such a tightly linked community. They labored diligently and were never seen as an inconvenience despite their rough, leathered appearances. Pallas, Krieger, Teddy, and Abner joined the raiding squad and Rich became a cannoneer. They all became skilled fighters and earned a streak of offensive and defensive victories against rival parrot traders. Doone worked in the galley and got to cook again. Milly learned how to pickpocket, and she would play little pranks on Reed by sticking sausages in his pocket when he wasn't looking. During her downtime, Pallas elected to teach the younger crewmates literacy. The crew carried out their normal business without arousing anyone's suspicion that they were harboring fugitives. They all fell into a comfortable routine that didn't involve Reed.

Word spread that a *ghost ship* was scourging the skies, handily defeating any it came across. That moniker thrilled the crew, Rainer and Angel especially. The Winged Prewetts were riding high on a pirate's fantasy. They enjoyed fabulous wealth, earned and protected by a crew of dead pirates, dominating the skies with their restless might. Anytime Reed's associates scored a nick or a slash, Bellona the ship's doctor would stitch them back up good as new, and they'd be

back in action within minutes. The Prewetts treated the dead chainwearers like heroes and there were many parties thrown to celebrate them. So consistently were they victorious that Doone and PJ, the other cook, would start preparing celebratory feasts the night before a raid, knowing one would be called for the next day.

But Reed did not know what to do with himself on board. He felt guilty that his friends were doing hard labor and combat but didn't even get to eat or sleep at the end of the day. Not to mention, he was growing a gut from all his inactivity. So, he decided he would clean, if only to do *something*. In doing menial chores every day, Reed fell into a malaise which lasted months. He became isolated. He skipped meals. He shrugged off any attempt made to ask "what's wrong?" or "are you okay?" He was always "fine." Persistently fine. Chronically fine.

Then one day, Reed was cleaning the aviary. He had mixed feelings on this task because the room was large, the odor was strong, and floors were the grossest of anywhere on the ship, but there was something to be said for the birds in there. He could see why they were a popular pet. Their plumage radiated with spectacular gradients of color. They chirped pleasantly, were very social, and not afraid of people at all. Reed would be sweeping a pile of straw and randomly have a little lorikeet land on his shoulder and lick the nape of his neck, and if that happened he had no recourse but to giggle. The enchanted birds were even more stunning. Reed was especially fond of one ocean blue macaw whose feathers shimmered like water and bristled in tandem with the tide. That one quickly sold, but there were others like it that came and went with similar beauty. The only ones that never sold were the ship's two pet macaws, Tyco and Sweetie.

"Mr. Reed?" someone said. Reed jumped. He thought he was alone. It was Parrot, one of the bird keepers. Parrot was thoroughly nubby from his face to his fingers. Reed knew him to be a dullard, but also a dedicated worker. Apparently he was also quite light-footed.

“Good morning, Mr. Reed,” he said. “I didn’t meana scare you.”

Reed cleared his throat. “Rhrrm! It’s okay. What do you want?”

“Can you do magic?”

Reed hesitated to respond. “Only a little. Just some enchantments.”

“Can you do any *tricks?*”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Can you do a *jinx*?”

“Maybe. Depends.”

He handed Reed a slip of parchment. It was a standard instructional, found or torn from a book, on how to perform the “sandman jinx.” The steps were listed from start to finish.

“Can’t Pallas do this?”

“She tried and she couldn’t do it. She tol’ me you can do magic, though.”

Reed didn’t have a good reason not to attempt this man’s request, so he followed Parrot down to the crew quarters.

“The instructions say we need sand,” said Reed.

“Yup, got it right here.”

Parrot pulled two sacks of sand from under his bunk and cut them open with a tiny folding knife. They spilled onto the floor, and Reed stepped back, careful not to get any on his paws. As with any new spell, Reed focused on the part of his body that would resonate strongest with the magic. As he would be altering the composition of sand, he would need to understand the space around him. In the magical sciences, a person’s sense of space was considered the “mote of space, the core of earth.” Reed, with his perfect memory of everywhere he’d ever been and every map he’d ever seen, had an exceptional sense of space.

He thought about his position in the room, honing and focusing all his proprioceptive faculties. He placed his foot in the sand, infusing the jinx. It shifted slightly as if brushed by a gentle sea breeze, but not enough. Reed poked the sand with his finger and rubbed a few grains of it into his palm. He contemplated their size and distribution with respect to the pile, the room, and the planet, and placed his foot in the sand once more, infusing the jinx. This time, the pile of sand rose a foot from the floor. It spun in place as a single shape. There wasn't a piece left on the ground or floating outside the clump. It glowed red and Reed took a few steps back to get some distance from the heat of the reaction. The sand melted into a bright orb but shortly cooled to a milky white blob of glass. Reed felt a wave of exhaustion, but shook himself out of it as Parrot unsteadily approached.

"It's still hot; give it a second," Reed ordered.

Once the glass set, Reed glanced at the instructions one more time, then hopped onto the floating blob. It contorted around his tail, rear, and thighs. He leaned back, and the glass hunched into his back. He lied into the glass, and it morphed such that his entire body was supported in any position. Despite the hardness of the glass, it did not poke uncomfortably into Reed's bones or cartilage, and adjusted to any slight change in Reed's lying posture. Reed rolled on his stomach, and the glass gently caught him.

"Can I try?" Parrot asked.

Reluctantly, Reed sat up and the glass let him down to the floor. Parrot fell backwards into the glass and it seeped around his body, catching him like a giant pillow. He thrashed to test the elasticity of the glass bed, laughing. He thanked Reed, and Reed excused himself back to the aviary.

Later in the day, Angel called Reed up to the bridge over the voicepipe. The ship was floating anchored in the air, and the birds were loosed above deck to fly around for a while. The bridge was an open room with windows on all sides and a central console similar to the one from the skiff, but larger. There were a few tables and charts in the back of the room over which Farragut and Bainbridge, the helmsman and the ship's navigator, were quietly discussing. Reed glanced at them as he entered. Angel was manning the helm with one hand while sipping a glass of brandy. She had a sword on her hip.

"Greetings, master rat."

"Hi, captain."

"How are you on this *fine* afternoon?"

"Fine," they both said simultaneously, surprising Reed.

She took a drink, and exhaled through closed teeth like the hiss of a hydraulic piston.

"*Fine*, huh? Why did I think you were going to say that?"

Angel leaned over the steering wheel and crossed her hands in front of her lips. They were adorned in as many jewels as her husbands'. Reed had found her playfully wily at best and connivingly coquettish at worst, but as she stared straight at Reed, having dropped all airs, he became aggravated, like a feral animal backed into a corner. She rubbed her thumb around the edge of her glass and tinked the side a few times with the bottom of a ring.

"Parrot says you made him a sandman bed today."

"Just because he asked."

"Y'know, when you joined up with us, I could tell your heart wasn't in it."

Reed scowled.

“I’ve seen the way you behave,” she said. “Moping around. Depressed. Y’know what I think your problem is? You’re underutilized. I checked the company charter this afternoon to see what it is that you do. Turns out, *you* didn’t sign it.”

Reed squinted angrily.

“Don’t gimme that look. You’re caught, buddy. Thought you were pretty sneaky with that one, I wager. Well, ultimately it doesn’t matter, because I hear tell that you’re a *cartographer*.”

Reed allowed his defiant silence to dictate his emotions.

“Well, *are* you?”

“He is,” said Bainbridge from across the room, “his friends confirmed it.”

“Here’s what I’m gonna have you do. No more of this sad swabby stuff. Tomorrow, you’ll apprentice with Mr. Bainbridge here. That oughtta be a better use of your talents, and hopefully kick-start you out of this slump you’re in.”

Reed was dumbstruck. Angel clutched her cutlass.

“And that is my final word on the matter, Mr. Reed. From now on, if you want your meals, you will meet with Mr. Bainbridge and Mr. Farragut in the bridge bright and early every morning. Also, I’ve taken the liberty of having your effects moved to the officer’s quarters.”

“You’re gonna starve me if I don’t do this?” he asked.

“A lack of fuel will fuel your motivation,” she replied, and finished her drink.

Angel left. Farragut and Bainbridge smiled coyly at Reed and mimicked toasting their invisible glasses to him.

“See you tomorrow!” said Bainbridge. Reed stormed off.

Who the hell does she think she is? he thought. *Treating people like this.*

Reed went to the galley for supper. Doone handed him a plate of biscuits and beans.

“Tick tock, Reed,” said Doone. “Enjoy it while you can.”

Reed spit on his food in abject shock.

“You’re in on this too?” he asked.

“In on what? Captain told me to tell you that when I gave you your food.”

Angel snickered in the corner of the canteen.

The cheek on her!

Chapter 18.

Reed awoke the next morning in his new room. He had not had a night's rest to himself for over half a year. Admittedly, he felt refreshed. He exited into the small hallway connecting the four officer's quarters. Across his room, Farragut's door was open. He was in his trunks, shaving, and caught Reed in the mirror.

"Close that, would you?" he requested. Reed shut the door and walked to the bridge.

Bainbridge was already there, sitting at the table with a stack of books and a cup of coffee. He was a vintage gentleman with slicked-back hair and a fine silver stubble. His straight posture defeated the purpose of his swivel chair.

"Good morning, Reed. We've spoken a few times here and there but let me formally reintroduce myself. My name is Edward Bainbridge, you can call me 'Mr. Bainbridge' or just 'Bainbridge.' Or 'Ed,' if you want, I don't care."

He slapped the table.

"I spoke with your colleagues yesterday. From what I could glean, your land navigation is pretty good but could use some work. How would *you* say it is?"

"I have a perfect memory of everywhere I've ever been but we were running for 5 days through straight wilderness that I'd never seen before and I was asleep half the time."

"Woah, alright, let's back it up. You say perfect memory? So your spatial awareness is pretty good then?"

"Sure."

"Okay, well, you'll need it. Sky nav's a different beast." He plopped a thick almanac onto the table. Reed pulled away his fingers at the last second to avoid them being squished.

"Know what day today is?"

“No.”

“Yesterday was Ulkos 38th, so today is Boros 1st. Go to page BO1.” Reed flipped through the pages. They were ordered based on the months of the year. Bainbridge unfurled a densely labeled star chart and Reed propped the almanac vertical so it was on top. He found BO1 and gave the book back.

“Each one of these values is a star in the sky. This number is altitude, this number is azimuth, in ten minute intervals from midnight to midnight, every day. This one at the bottom, that’s the moon. The first half of the year we triangulate off of these three stars, *Merbius, Stacratus,* and *Lepnorii*. The second half of the year we triangulate off these three, *Nokero, Gromi,* and *Menuto*. On the helm you’ll find three red dials that *should* match these numbers plus or minus our degree of heading. If we run straight along the meridian, they’ll match exactly. I don’t expect this to all sink in right away.”

“No, I’m following.”

They spent the morning discussing navigational topics. Angel and Rainer popped their heads in occasionally and were satisfied to see Reed engaging. Farragut offered practical advice from time to time. Reed found the dialogue so lively that he skipped lunch and dinner. When Bainbridge went to bed, Reed took the almanac and a sextant and spent the night on deck.

The next morning, Reed shut Farragut's open door and went to the galley. Angel sat at a table shelling peanuts for Doone and PJ in the kitchen. She handed Reed a bone, similar to one she had in her mouth. PJ also had a bone in his.

“What's this?” Reed asked.

“Lamb rib. Perry woke up this morning with avian taut rash, so everyone's suckin' on a bone today. Don’t worry, it’s clean.”

“Is that serious?”

“Not life threatening, but if you experience any skin stiffness, tell Mr. Bainbridge, then go straight to bed.”

Reed swiped a couple bacon strips then scurried up to the bridge.

Bainbridge showed Reed to a cramped library made from a repurposed closet at the back of the room.

“I didn’t know this was here,” said Reed.

“Yeah, I'm something of a bookworm.”

“I have a book in there, too!” Rainer yelled from the table, bone in hand, for his mouth was full of toast. His outfit this morning was particularly garish.

“One book does not a worm make, respectfully.”

“It’s a history book on pirates. Did you know the inventors of air travel were decapod pirates. They invented flying just so they could steal from chainwearers. In’t that fascinating?”

“I suppose,” Reed said.

“What do you think of this collar, Mr. Bainbridge?” Rainer twirled his twee lapel in his fingers.

“It’s fine, sir.”

“*More* than fine. I think it looks quite spruce. Why did I even ask you?”

“Is he always this foppish?” Reed whispered, walking deeper into the book-filled closet.

“YES, I AM,” Rainer yelled back.

Reed coughed up a dust bunny.

“How do you find anything?” he asked.

“I have a system,” Bainbridge said. “Let me squeeze past you here.”

Bainbridge grabbed three books with one hand, and three maps with the other. On one shelf, there was a book by Fraucus Ehrewold tucked in the corner of which Reed had left a well-loved copy back in Wunnyone. It held no interest beyond recognition.

"Can I come in here whenever I want?"

Bainbridge shrugged. "I don't see why not. All I ask is that you don't bring food and be careful with the codices. They're old so you gotta handle 'em gently."

They spent the day wrapped in discussion, sucking on their lamb bones. Reed did feel a bit of tightness in his arm, but it didn't bother him so he didn't let it interrupt their flow.

He spent the evening on deck, measuring the heavens. The moon was full, and the stars were plentiful. In the corner of Reed's eye, a second moon had appeared. He turned to see a brilliant silver owl, shining with the same intensity as the moon itself. Reed cautiously approached.

"Wow, look at you," he said.

The owl shivered, and its feathers twinkled like stars reflected in a calm pond. It observed Reed with intense curiosity. Reed scuttled to the left, and the owl followed him. He sidestepped again, and the bird's gaze remained fixed on Reed. It never once moved its feet, for its neck was a perfect swivel. Reed smiled.

"What's your name, friend?"

"Hoo, me?" said the owl.

Reed jumped back. He looked at the owl, but it was gone. He searched the area, on and off the ship, to no avail.

I think it's time for bed, he thought.

The next morning, Reed picked up another lamb bone from the galley and went to the bridge. Farragut was there alone. He was wearing a tight, striped shirt that did no favors for his hairy arms and potbelly. He scratched the understripe of his hanging gut.

"Where's Mr. Bainbridge?"

"Oh, he had a rash this morning but he said you could take the day off," said Farragut.

Oops.

Reed spent the morning doing self-guided research out of Bainbridge's library. He took lunch in the galley, then returned.

"C'mere," Farragut beckoned. Reed joined him at the helm.

"You wanna take the wheel for a couple minutes?"

Farragut kicked a tiny stool out from Reed's blind spot and moved it in place so Reed could stand at the console. Reed stepped up and grabbed the helm.

"Hold her straight."

Reed kept a tight grip. The entire ship was in his grasp, and everyone on it. He craned his back, careful not to turn the wheel even a fractional degree.

"Easy, rat. Hold her steady. Don't have to do anything. Just keep her steady."

Reed performatively hunched his shoulders to make it seem like he was relaxing. But after two and a half minutes of pretending, he did actually settle in. Open sky straight ahead, and nothing to worry about. Farragut stood calmly by his side the whole time whispering soft praise and reassurance. He put his finger on the right side of the console, and then one finger on the top of the steering wheel.

"Now line my fingers up."

Reed slowly rotated the wheel.

“Hold for a second...” he said, pausing. “Now bring her straight again.”

Reed brought Farragut’s finger back to the top of the steering wheel.

“You just turned the ship. Well done.”

There was now a small island in their path.

“There’s an island right in front of us!” Reed yelled, frozen in panic.

Farragut took over the console and maneuvered them out of the way. Reed glared at the island like it had slighted him, interfered with his tutorial. It was unremarkable, a floating dirt ball with some shrubs on top, not even big enough to put a house on. If they did hit it, it would probably break upon the hull. But there was something about it. Something peculiar that Reed couldn’t quite parcel out.

“Hey, Mr. Farragut.”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind, uh, stopping at that island we just passed?”

“Why?”

“I want to investigate something.”

The helmsman wrinkled shrewdly. He leaned over the voicepipe. “Docking.”

The ship spun a half circle and came broadside with the island. The ship easily dwarfed it. Farragut positioned the boarding plank to hit the island’s scant walkable surface dead center. Rainer and a few others filtered out to the main deck, puzzled by the stop. Reed joined them.

“Why’d we stop?” asked Plunger, one of the gunners.

“Why *did* we stop?” asked Rainer.

“I want to investigate that island,” said Reed. Reed ran off the plank and tousled the shrubs on the island. He heard a strange sound in one of the bushes and spread it wide open.

There was an old, leather sack underneath the bush's roots. Reed pulled away sprigs and leaves, uprooted the bush, and freed the sack.

"How'd you know that was there?" asked Rainer, hovering over Reed's head with his long cuffs bobbing in the breeze.

"It was in your history book. Old pirates used to make something called 'troves' which were islands where they hid money and treasure. They were never flashy or interesting, so as not to arouse anyone's interest."

Reed opened the sack, and a hundred thick coins spilled onto the ground. Rainer cheered. They were old Individui greenbacks, over 200 years old. On one side, a bronze imprint of a cloudwalker's face, on the other a picture of a tree, but the metal was green electrum.

"How'd you know *this island* was a trove?"

"I didn't? I just wanted to check."

Rainer lifted Reed above his shoulders and howled. They shot straight up and flew in circles around the island. Reed screamed the whole way while Rainer cackled at his terror. After a few more celebratory, screaming loop-de-loops, they landed back on the island.

Rainer licked his teeth, grinning like a madman. "Well, Mr. Reed, your donation to the Winged Prewetts is duly appreciated."

"Donation?"

"Only chartered members of the company get a share of the booty, I'm afraid," he replied, smiling and clicking his tongue.

Reed's ears stood straight up. His hair bristled.

"Fine. I'll sign the stupid charter."

Rainer howled again.

The Winged Prewetts forewent any raids for two weeks and spent the fortnight investigating possible troves instead.

Chapter 19.

Now that it was no longer his responsibility to clean it, Reed fostered an untempered zeal for the aviary. He visited every day. Sometimes Milly joined him and let Pipi roughhouse and play with the parrots. Reed got to know the birdkeepers, Dale and Parrot. Dale was boring and Parrot was a little too slow for Reed to really get anything out of socially. Reed struggled to connect, but Parrot did not pick up on this, and liked talking with Reed. He didn't notice that Reed never had much to say. Parrot genuinely loved the birds. When they found, stole, or purchased new parrots, Parrot cared for them like they'd always been there, and he was always sad when the pirates made sales. He had his own parrot, named Tyco, a blue macaw. He was very proud of his trick he taught Tyco. Given the command, "*Go see Sweetie*," Tyco would fly over to Dale's rose-colored macaw and snuggle in her feathers. Milly thought the trick was very sweet. Reed asked Dale if Sweetie could do the same thing. She could not.

Reed exited the aviary and cut through the gun deck to go back to his room. Rich and Plunger were there, stacking shells in little cubbies adjacent the cannons.

"Hi, Reed!" they said in unison.

Reed waved back.

"Want I should show you how to fire a cannon?" asked Plunger.

"Absolutely not!" he replied, picking up his pace. His tail thwapped against the wall as he hoofed out the door. They giggled in his wake.

The air was brackish and breezy. They were anchored a mile out of a small, linked group of affluent chainwearer islands called the Three Bottles. It was raid day, and Bainbridge had given Reed time off so the officers could seal the bridge and discuss their attack strategy. A rival crew called the Red Devil Trading Company was docked on the Three Bottles, likely having just

sold some birds. They were expected to make the three-day journey to the Web to bank their earnings, giving Rainer three days to besiege them.

Abner and Teddy returned in the skiff from their scouting mission. They reported the Red Devils were embarked in the direction of the Great Web, exactly as Rainer predicted. Reed bumped his head against the wall as Prewett's True Love leaned into its pursuit. The raiding party stood in formation on the top deck (except for Krieger and Abner, who were bickering in the skiff with their sapping equipment), all wearing their frilly shirts with lace cuffs. For half a day they closed the distance on the Red Devils' ship. Reed waited in his room where it was comfortable, but when he heard the takeoff call for the raiding squad, he left to hunker in the crew quarters with the rest of the noncombatants. The flyers easily overtook the skiff, which was barely pulling away from the ship toward the Red Devils. Pallas was last in formation, so still on deck when Reed passed through. As she rocketed skyward, she beamed with giddy determination and spun in playful circles toward the enemy ship.

That image stuck with Reed as he descended below deck. Before his involvement in her life, she had been a poet, but now she was a pirate. And worse, she seemed to like being a pirate. But how could *he* cast judgment? Had he not also been enjoying his apprenticeship? Enjoying practical cartography in the open air with a gang of thieves at the cost of his own scruples and morals? He was a damn hypocrite. All at once, Reed's malaise returned.

He passed through the gun deck again.

"Hey, Reed, want to learn how to fire a cannon?" Rich teased. Reed huffed.

In the crew quarters, Reed kept to himself on the opposite side of the room from all the children and non-raiders waiting there. He sat next to a donkey boiler to wait out the raid and stew in his own thoughts. It was hot and loud, but offered solitude.

The wind picked up. It beat against the side of both ships and into a nearby embrasure, making Reed's ears flap about. He glanced out the embrasure to see the enemy ship. The two ships were broadsides with each other, and the raiders were harrying the Red Devils with explosive bags that concussed the rival pirates with small explosions as they shattered. Angel flew around in sweeping arcs slashing at defenders with her cutlass.

A large slot from the side of the enemy ship opened, and a massive cannon slowly rolled forward, pointed directly at the boiler. Reed sprinted away, and the cannon fired. A biting blast of cold water speared the ship clean through, ripping through the interior wall on both sides. The shockwave knocked Reed off his feet but he landed into Parrot's glass bed. The twins screamed. For a moment the ship rocked violently, but soon returned to a smooth drift. Light peered into the crew quarters' giant, new windows. The boiler was completely gone, along with the walls, the floor, the ceiling, and half of the upstairs engine room. The Red Devils' ship pulled away as the Prewett's True Love slowly came to a stop. Rainer flew in from the hole. He yelled something, but Reed could not hear. The glass bed let him down, but caught him as he stumbled back into it.

"Mercy, snakes, and thunder! Is everyone okay?" Rainer yelled. His voice was muffled as if through a folded cloth.

Reed had a horrible ringing in his ears. His legs buckled but the glass supported his weight. He stood up, but his stomach hurt as if a knife was twisted into it and he slumped back into the blobby glass bed.

"Reed is hurt!" yelled one of the twins, or both; he was too dizzy to determine who. When he looked at the twins, they appeared to be quadruplets. Then octuplets. Then everything went black.

Reed stirred awake in the infirmary to a chill on his forehead. It was the most sterile room on the ship, and the walls and countertops were pristine. There were shelves with glass doors in which various salves and medicines and bandages and syringes were neatly organized and on display. Bellona had placed a wet rag on Reed's head. The ringing in his ears was still there. The pain in his side was still there, but worse. He sniffled, and Bellona came to his side.

"Good evening, Mr. Reed," she said calmly.

He moaned softly, trying to respond.

"It's tomorrow. You've been asleep for a day and a half, and you had a nasty, little fever while you were recovering. Are you feeling any better?"

Reed blinked and nodded. Bellona discharged him but asked him to come back and sleep in the infirmary again tonight.

Wind battered the ship, and gusts from the breach in the hull blew through the corridors. Reed wandered to the galley, holding his pained side. The halls resonated with a horrible, low whistle. Reed walked with a dizzy limp, and he may have been drugged, but he had no way of knowing. What he did know was that he wanted something to eat and hoped the victory feast was ongoing. It usually was at this hour. Angel was there at her usual corner table, with Rainer and the first mate, Decatur, and Bainbridge, all mired in conversation. There was no feast, so Reed grabbed a pear, a sausage, and a mug of water and sat a few tables away.

"Good evening, captains," said Reed, surprising them.

"You sure you're feelin' good enough to be up and on your timbers?" Rainer asked. Reed waved him off.

"'s the feast over?"

"No feast," said Decatur. "We're lickin' our wounds on this one, kid."

Reed furrowed his brow. “We lose?” They nodded. “How’d we lose?”

“They destroyed our main engine with some crazy weapon. Shoots water mixed with diamonds. One shot,” he made a stabbing gesture with his hand, “right through the hull. Now we’re stranded and they got away.”

“What do we do?”

“We were just discussing that,” said Bainbridge.

“Can we hire a tow?”

Angel scratched her head. “That’s an option,” she said. “It might be our only option.”

“Okay, do that then.”

“A lot of towers won’t work with pirates.”

“Well, you get what you get when you’re a criminal,” Reed blithely remarked, taking a bite of his pear.

“Show some damn respect, Mr. Reed,” Bainbridge chided. “Those ‘criminals’ nursed you back to health.”

“I wouldn’t have needed nursing if I didn’t get shot, *Mr. Bainbridge*. I could have *died!*”

“You’d be dead already if I hadn’t taken you in!” Rainer yelled. “Little ingrate.”

“I’m ungrateful? How much free labor and treasure have you gotten for that one act of ‘charity’?” Reed’s side ached hard. Getting worked up like this was not doing his injury any favors.

“You wanna try your luck on land with your DDT, rat? Say the word, I’ll drop you off right now!”

“You can’t drop anyone off! Your ship’s broken, *chainlover!*”

“I’m about to break *you, vermin!*”

Rainer leaped over the table and rushed at Reed, knocking over chairs in his frenzied warpath. He was met, however, with a stiff slap in the face, which stopped him dead in his tracks. Bellona stood there, as Reed's protector.

"I *hope* I'm not seeing what I think I'm seeing," she said.

Rainer cowered like a struck puppy. "No, ma'am," he said.

"Shameful. The poor boy's been hit by the very weapon that put a *hole* in the *ship*, been sicker than a dog all night, and the first thing that comes out of your mouth when you see him is *bile.* Well, I don't want to hear another word of it."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Not another word!" she repeated.

Bellona turned to Reed, eyes wide like a tarsier. "Off to bed, you."

Some nascent primal instinct stirred in Reed, and he left the galley without a word. Reed was not about to argue with the woman who put Rainer in his place so handily, so he limped back to his infirmary bed and fell asleep.

Chapter 20.

The ringing in Reed's ears had not subsided the next morning. Nor had the wind. Reed kept a blanket from the infirmary wrapped around his shoulders as he made his way to the bridge for his apprentice work. His side ached. Everything was cold, the floor most of all. The saline squalls howled through the halls, and Reed pulled his blanket tight. It was a miserable day to be adrift.

Bainbridge and Farragut sat at their table in the bridge with three cups.

"How you feeling today, Mr. Reed?" Bainbridge asked.

Reed blinked. "Fine."

"Want some coffee?"

"No, thank you. I don't drink coffee." Reed did think that a warm drink might have done him some good, even if the taste was not to his liking, but he refused the black, steaming olive branch nonetheless.

"Suit yourself."

Reed sat with them, while Bainbridge and Farragut silently sipped. The mood was frosty, and Reed bundled up.

"Don't snap your links, Reed."

"Wh-what?"

"You've made connections. Good connections. The more you make, the stronger you become. Even when you fall, your links will catch you. You only fall when you've broken them all. My father used to tell me that."

Is this some kind of chainwearer platitude?

"What's happening today?" Reed asked.

“Captain Angel and a few others are going to try and hire a tow. I’ll be joining them today.”

“Is there someplace nearby you can do that?”

He stretched his back and it popped three times. Reed cringed. “Lowest Island,” said Bainbridge.

Lowest Island was the lowest island by elevation on Aljana. It was the only island that dips into the cloud layer. At its peak there was a significant port, Ludenscrown, which likely had a towing company. Angel, Bainbridge, Barry, Vincent and Bellona Decatur, Randolph, Chicahawk, and Seabury piled into the skiff and embarked on their task. The wind was awful, so they all wore wingshirts under their coats, just in case. With nothing to do, Reed went to the bridge, the only quiet place on the ship, and read Bainbridge’s books.

Reed sat in the same chair for a quarter of the day, until his butt could no longer suffer the soreness of study. He paced around the helm, but succumbed to the aching of his injury quickly. Over the horizon there was a distant island. Perhaps a trove. *Too bad the ship’s broke or else we would have been able to find out.* Each second, the island grew closer. *That’s odd*, Reed thought. He read the dials on the helm. They were moving, which means the ship was moving. And the ship was nowhere near where they were when Angel and the crew left to get a tow. A bead of sweat formed on his chin and his tail constricted.

“Captain to the bridge, please,” he called on the voicepipe. Reed rocked on his heels, watching the door like a hawk until Rainer arrived.

“What?” said Rainer, terse in tone.

“We’re drifting. The ship is drifting. I think we’ve been drifting for hours.”

“So?”

“Won’t the others get lost when they return?”

“The skiff always points to the ship. Doesn’t matter where we end up, they can get back.” Reed gasped.

“What?” Rainer asked, breaking from his brusque disposition in response to Reed’s reaction. “I just said they can get back. What’s the problem?”

Reed stared through the window, past Rainer. The captain, who was feeling very much like chopped liver, turned around and instantly understood the reason for Reed’s dismay. They were close enough to the island for its true shape to be revealed. It was one that they had intentionally and easily avoided for over half a year, one that they were now slowly drifting toward. Not an island, but a thin, large, floating ring. An Individui scangate. On its current course, the Prewett’s True Love was poised to hover right through its center. With no engine, they had no way to stop or avoid it. This wind would spell a death sentence.

Rainer picked Reed up by the chest and barreled downstairs. Reed wailed in agony. His injuries were far from healed. They had no skiff, and having sent away 8 wingshirts, they did not have enough for all 13 of the dead chainwearers to fly around the ring. Rainer put Reed down, and apologized for abruptly hurting him. He rushed to a voicepipe.

“ALL HANDS TO THE GUN DECK, IMMEDIATELY!”

Rainer took Reed’s hand and walked him to the gun deck. The whole crew met them, awaiting instructions. Rainer was panicking.

“We’re about to drift through an Individui scangate and our engines are shot! The only propulsion we have right now is the cannons, so we’re going to fire and fire and hope it pushes us out of the way! Reed, Baby, Leina, Salem, Parker, Piper, Dido, Dale, Essex: you’re all on firing duty. The rest of you are loading. Move quickly! We cannot go through this ring!”

Reed limped into position by one of the starboard cannons.

"I don't know how to fire a cannon," he said.

Rich and Plunger snickered. "Just pull on this," Rich said. The cannon fired a shell as Rich yanked a pull string. Reed clutched his ears. The explosion of the cannon was like a drum to the head. To Reed's immediate left, Parrot fired. Another migraine. Shots rang out on Reed's left and right.

"Okay, it's loaded, hit it again!" yelled Rich.

Reed fired the cannon, screaming in pain. Rich let others load his cannon and stood behind Reed, plugging his ears. It did little to help. Reed remained at his post, despite his suffering.

For three minutes, the Prewett's True Love unloaded its entire artillery into the open air. Reed fired over and over. The ringing in his ears was nauseating, but he kept pulling that string. Plunger loaded the last shell into Reed's cannon. He reached weakly for the pullstring, but lost his footing, and vomited. Plunger reached for the string, but Rich stopped her. They were spent on ammunition. The wind stopped. All that was left was the ringing. Until a new sound broke: "*AIR VESSEL, ANCHOR IMMEDIATELY AND STANDBY FOR BOARDING. YOU HAVE BEEN IDENTIFIED AS POSSIBLY HARBORING A FUGITIVE.*"

Chapter 21.

Reed fell over into a pool of milky reflux. His head and side throbbed. The faint siren wailed in the distance. Rainer slumped to his knees. Doom approached. Unfeeling, unbiased, bureaucratic doom, inevitably en route to capture and kill everyone on board.

"How many wingshirts do we have left on the ship?" Pallas asked.

"Only three," Leina replied.

"No," Rainer said, unbuttoning his, "you can have mine. That's four."

"They might kill you," Doone said, "They *will* kill you."

"A captain goes down with his ship."

"This isn't the time for your high skies romanticism; you are *not* responsible for us," Doone pleaded.

"I have a contract that says otherwise," said Rainer, handing his shirt to Piper. "Two of you should take the twins, and one of you please take Essex. She doesn't deserve this fate at her age. Land on top of the ring, and wait there until you know it's safe to leave."

Teddy and Piper put on wingshirts and said goodbye to Doone, who elected to stay behind. Hundred and Leina took wingshirts and prepared to carry Essex away. Milly, Graham, and Krieger went to the crew quarters and returned with a golf ball-sized piece of living painite. Krieger gave it to Teddy.

"Just in case."

Reed wretched on the floor. His head and heart pounded like pistons. The four chainwearers with wingshirts patted Reed on the shoulder, and departed. Reed was as pitiful a sight as he ever had been. He hyperventilated, and cried, and writhed.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Milly came to Reed's side. She placed an icy hand on his head.

"I'm sorry," Reed repeated.

"It's okay."

"It's all my fault."

"It's okay, Reed. Shh."

She hoisted Reed onto his feet and brushed off his coat.

The sirens stopped. Out the gunport, there was a metal ship in the distance. It drifted out of sight, and another ship drifted in. Reed wiped his eyes and moved closer to the window. He counted two bulky galleons surrounded by 4 cogs each off the starboard side, each one with multiple guns sticking out of their steel hulls. One of the cogs tethered a slack cable to the scangate, and another cable to its galleon with a decorative golden mast. Rainer, bare-chested, rushed topside, ordering everyone to stay below. The ring sounded off again.

"Good afternoon, Captains Angel and Rainer Prewett, of the pirate crew The Winged Prewetts. My name is Admiral Telldoobambloe. You have been identified as harboring fugitives of the Individui. These fugitives are DDT, and aiding DDT fugitives is grounds for execution."

There was a pause. Dread loomed in the air.

"However, we understand your crew is comprised of your family members. We have considered your anchoring after being identified as an implicit surrender in exchange for you and your crews' lives, and we are authorized to make that bargain."

Plunger sobbed and embraced Rich.

"It's not fair," she said.

"It's okay, baby," Rich replied. "They can take us and you can be safe."

The ring spoke again. “In a moment, you will be boarded, and searched, and all fugitives will be captured. Make any attempt to impede or conceal, and the bargain is off. There are 6 known fugitives we identified but we suspect there may be more we are after on board.”

Rainer called over the voicepipe. “Release the birds.”

Dale and Parrot sprang to their feet and rushed to the aviary.

Graham and Milly held each other tight. Rainer burst around the corner, knocking them over, and ran to the first cannon in line. He yanked the pull string so hard, it snapped. The cannon did nothing.

“Damn it!” he roared, punching the hull. He rained blows on the ornate interior trim, staining it with blood.

Pipi burst from Milly’s pocket, and scrambled around the gundeck’s ceiling. She chirped like crazy, and flew in rapid circles searching for an exit. The oraclebird’s wild behavior gave Reed a wild impulse. Succumbing to this passion, he lost control of his own limbs. Tunnel vision. The only thing in front of him, the only thing in the entire world, was his cannon and that ship. Everything else was red. His paw clutched the string, and pulled. A screaming bullet popped the gold-masted galleon in its figurehead which burst into a cloud of smoking wood chips. The aviary emergency hatch kicked away from the ship, and the parrots flew off. Reed fell to the floor.

Rainer cheered. “Yeah, Reed!”

The ring creaked on for the final time.

“Cannonfire will be a fitting dirge for a pirate’s tomb.”

One of the cogs fired a shot, and it bullseyed the hole in the crew quarters, leaving the ship unharmed. The next shot destroyed the bridge in a burst of glass and paper. The next two

shots cracked open the hull in the engine room, and shattered the ship's nodestone. The ship careened toward the stern. The fleet plastered a volley against the main deck. The dragnets fell off and the ceiling crumpled, exposing the gundeck. Reed slid down the floor, attempting to grab a cannon for stability, but his hand slipped. A shell penetrated the infirmary and the subsequent compression blast shot up the gundeck and sent Reed hurtling out of the ship into the open air.

Reed spun in circles. His coat flapped wildly. The blowing air dried his face and filled his lungs. He was no longer hyperventilating. In fact, he was able to steady his breath. He calmed, and went limp. His heart rate settled. The further he fell, the quieter the sound of the cannons.

It's over.

It *was* over, but for Reed, that was a very peaceful concept. He did not worry about fate or future; he knew what was about to occur. He didn't fight his rapid plunge. The cloud layer swallowed Reed up, and the air grew hotter. He exited the clouds, and plummeted further and further toward the planet's dark surface. The red air was gooey with toxicity. Reed held his breath. A mountain rose in the distance. The air was burning. Reed remained calm all the way down, and as he connected with the land, he instantly fell asleep.

Chapter 22.

Reed's sleep was abruptly interrupted. He was choking. He sat straight up. His right shoulder was bent weirdly, like it wasn't socketed properly, so Reed forced it back into place with his left. Good as new. He paced himself, caught his breath, and felt instant relief. The cloud layer was high in the sky, and stained deep red. *That's not good,* he thought. Still, that peaceful feeling from earlier seems to have stayed with him. For now, Reed was okay.

The air was still chunky, but it no longer bothered his lungs and it certainly wasn't hot anymore. Reed set his paw on the ground and heard a squeak. He was sitting in a field of dark, felty lichens. It stunk like sulfur and released inky spores into the air, which ignited into a pleasant green flame then dissipated into smoke. Reed smiled. He poked it again, but it was spent. He tried another one, and it squeaked and sent another puff into the air. Reed playfully squeaked as many as he could until a large, black cloud had formed that caught the wind and drifted off. As Reed followed the cloud's trail, he noticed a piece of the ship's keel bent over a mound of charcoal nearby.

He got up to investigate, and instinctively grabbed his waist. There was a bump near his pocket, but the pain in his side was gone, so he sallied forth. He cracked his neck, and it sent a wave of pleasure down his spine to the tip of his tail, such that he shivered with delight. He climbed over the keel, and it held vantage over the surrounding area. The hill led down to a geyser field, littered in various slices of wreckage. Pallas and Rainer were staring at a geyser. They survived!

Reed scrambled down the sooty, black pile to meet them.

"I can't believe it!" he said. "You're okay!"

Pallas bit her lip. "Not exactly."

“I don’t–” but he stopped, overcome with déjà vu.

“Did you die?” he said, warily.

“Ms. Pallas says I did! I think I’m inclined to believe her,” Rainer said, “considering I don’t even need to breathe.”

“Oh, man,” said Reed. And then he paused. Reed inhaled deep and puffed out his cheeks.

“Stop,” said Pallas, “you don’t have to– you’re also dead. I mean, most likely. Don’t think any of us could have survived that fall, let alone not been poisoned to death down here.” Reed kept his cheeks puffed until he was satisfied that she was correct.

“How you feelin’?” Rainer asked.

Reed took stock of himself. “Good. I feel good. The ringing in my ears is gone. I have a bump, but it doesn’t hurt. In fact, nothing hurts.” He pinched his arm, and beyond the pressure of his fingers on his skin there was no pain. “Yeah, nothing hurts.” He cracked his knuckles and it felt good. Pleasure, but no pain. *Weird*, he thought, *but I have no complaints.*

“Aye,” Rainer replied, “I’m good, too. Don’t know how I should feel about that.” He mimicked Reed’s pinching. “Lovey dove’s not going to like this. Am I hideous?”
He was still bare-chested and had taken a fair few scuffs from his landing.

“Not any moreso,” said Pallas. He gave a full-breathed, obviously fake, sneering laugh.

“How’s your bump?” she asked. “That hurt at all?”

“You ought to know it doesn’t,” Reed replied. “But when I woke up I pushed my shoulder back into place, maybe we can do the same for the bump.”

He opened his tweed coat, and felt around, but the bump was gone. However, Reed noticed there was something *in* his coat pocket. Reed pulled out a metal flask, dented but still sealed. Strange, but that wasn’t all; he also pulled out a large gem of living painite. *Who did this?*

He definitely did *not* put that there. Unpopping the flask's cork assaulted Reed with the overwhelming scent of pickled alcohol. He flinched. He sniffed it again, and flinched once more. Embalming fluid. *Someone* put it in his pocket. Reed pinched his nose, and took a fat swig on the flask. It didn't burn his throat, so he got the full taste of formaldehyde on his tongue. He took another full swallow, and flailed his fist in disgust. Rainer pulled out his own piece of painite.

"Your Mrs. Milly must've slipped this in our pockets when we weren't lookin'," he said. "She's a saucy minx, that one."

"Don't talk about her like that," Reed said.

Rainer threw up his arms. "I din't mean nothin' by it!"

They trudged through mire and rock for a day, locating anyone they could who had fallen into the benthic zone. They found Plunger's legs sticking out of a tar pit and pulled her out. Parrot's torso was completely twisted around, so they set it in place. Rigel's elbow was bent backwards over a large, empty shell, and they wrought it proper with a haunting crunch. Each body they stumbled across took a mere ten minutes to resurrect with Reed and Rainer's pieces of painite. They found everyone from Rainer's crew, but no more from Reed's.

Reed and the dead pirates chatted jovially as they searched the planet's surface for Reed's cohorts. They wandered into a basalt trapp with vast height differentials between the hexagonal, igneous pillars. The ones that were even enough to walk on formed a snaking pathway. They entered a field of ashy soil where shriveled, thermophilic mushrooms engorged like umbrellas as they walked by. They passed into a bluff, and the cry of birds echoed above. Shrieking, scaly gliders with wide, open beaks soared into geothermal steam vents, gulping up aerosolized primordial soup and riding the heat higher, only to circle around and do it again.

Reed felt strangely playful and lightheaded. He had not slowed down once while traveling, and his stamina was endless. He swung his arms and goose stepped through a knee-deep mud puddle. Once out, he pulled a slick leech as fat as his arm off his ankle and chucked it over a tall cairn nearby.

"What the–!" said a voice.

A lithe decapod with a magenta sheen scuttled into view. It had a basket of leeches on its back, and was rubbing its head with the smaller of its two claws. It jumped back at the sight of Reed's group.

"More chainfolks! And a little, hairy thing! Wha' is going on today?"

"*More?*" said Rainer, "so you've seen more of us?"

"Aye."

"Where?"

"Back 'ome."

"Can you take us there?"

"Ye, but I reckon I don't have enough leeches for all your 'ungry bellies."

Pallas chuckled. "You don't need to worry about that, ma'am." Reed was surprised Pallas could determine the decapod was a ma'am.

The decapod clicked her maxillae. "Oh, your friends said the same thing. Now, I don't know about chainfolks but down 'ere we 'ave a little somefing called *'ospitali'y*."

She tossed the leech into her basket with surprising dexterity and set off "back 'ome." With a wave of her claw, everyone followed.

Chapter 23.

The magenta decapod strafed through a canyon full of luminous quartz wherein glowing, leathery vines siphoned light from the crystals they wrapped around, and the ones that didn't were withered and dark. Reed was feverishly intrigued with her, so he introduced himself. Her name was Kay'ki and she had many jobs in her village: gatherer, butcher, apothecary, alchemist, and brewer. She had four children to unknown fathers, as was the custom, and she was preparing for her fifth in one month as all the women in her village would migrate to some estuary for a mating festival whose name Reed had no hope of remembering. Her village was called Hehe'hehe and only women were allowed to live there, except for offspring and notably, the cleric, who once sought permanent asylum in exchange for taking a vow of celibacy. When Kay'ki spoke, Reed averted his gaze, to avoid showing disrespect to her creepy, dextrous eyestalks splitting their attention between him and the road.

They made tracks in the sand, and finally came upon Hehe'hehe. It was a crater field where woven tents created covered dwellings of each of the individual craters. Light peeked from each of the bunkers. The only superterranous building was some kind of temple, inset with the same vines and crystals from the canyon through which they passed to arrive. They passed under a constructed, stone archway with an oblong pipe dangling from the keystone. Kay'ki smacked the pipe, its toll signaling her arrival. Reed jumped to smack the pipe, but couldn't reach.

A bulky decapod emerged from a tent.

"MORE chainfolks?! Wha' is goin' on?"

"That's wha' I said!" Kay'ki said.

She investigated Reed.

“I’ve ‘eard o’ this. Is tha’ a dog?”

Reed scoffed. “I’m a rat!”

The bulky decapod chittered. “I ain’t never seen a ra’ before. I fought they was li’ler.”

“Malo!” Rich yelled, running out from a crater.

“Baby!” Plunger screamed.

They ran into each other’s arms. Plunger was still sticky and they struggled to pull away from each other, which only made them laugh.

“What happened to you?”

“I fell into tar and died,” she said, laughing.

“*Baby?*” Rainer whispered, with a mix of horror and intrigue.

They convened in the largest crater where Reed’s friends were waiting around a circular banquet table. They were gussied in loose-fitting decapod party robes, wrapped around them like iron blankets. Kay’ki draped a robe over Reed, and he flopped to the floor under its weight. Milly picked it up, and helped Reed to his feet. Before Reed knew any better, she was sloshing his metal flask around.

“You left a few drops,” she teased.

“Can you blame me, you *sneak*? I know you know how bad it tastes.”

She grinned. “How do you feel?”

“Y’know, you’re gonna hate me for saying this, but I feel fine. Actually fine.”

“I bet you do,” Abner said. “Not so bad, is it? *You* didn’t believe me. Give me the rest; I’ll drink it.”

They were abashed not to partake in the grand feast of leeches, creamed scales, curried tendril, stalk mash, tripe slurry, and anus flambée. Their decapod hosts did much prodding for

them to merely taste the banquet, but finally relented to their fasting. Once the table was cleared, a decapod joined them in the crater, larger than they had yet seen. She wore covers on her claws and a white vestment drooped over her spiked carapace.

"Well now," she said.

"Welcome back, cleric! How was your journey this time?" Kay'ki asked.

"Just fine, tank you. I came to see our strange guests who've toroughly embarrassed us wit' their lack of appetite..."

"Our apologies," said Rainer, "but by creed, we cannot eat a host's food, even when it is freely offered or out of surplus."

"*What*?" Reed asked. Rainer smacked him.

"I tink I understand. I too have a creed. Though, I regret there is much I do not know about your people. Would you mind if I asked some questions? We have *never* had guests from above the cloud."

"Are you the village leader?" Rich asked.

The decapod chirruped. "There's no leader. I'm merely a cleric."

Reed finally tuned in to the conversation.

"*Ohhh*, Kay'ki told me about you. You're the exile who gets to live here even though you're not a woman," he blurted.

"Exile at one point, but I'm very happy now. But enough about–"

"Are you a pirate?" Rainer asked. The decapod balked.

"How the blazes could you guess that?"

Rainer scratched his chin. "I'll be honest: I thought all crabs were pirates."

"I resent that 'crab' comment, but yes, I *was* a pirate."

“We’re also pirates!”

“I stopped being a pirate when I took the creed of the Individui over 150 years ago,” the decapod cleric said.

“Oh yeah?” Reed pounded the table. “Well I ***HATE*** *the Individui!*”

Abner cackled. “Yea-heah! Tell ‘im, Reed-man!”

The cleric bristled his spikes. “What good is a *pirate’s* opinion on the Individui anyway?”

“Joke’s on you, *crab*. I’m *not* a pirate; I’m a tenured cartography professor, and *I hate the Individui!*”

“You told me you didn’t get tenure,” Milly said, worrying over Reed’s behavior.

“I lied! They made me a professor so I wouldn’t do anything when they killed you. But I showed them *hic* I told them where to stick their tenure and escaped!”

“How *did* you escape?” Abner asked.

“I don’t know; it was probably amazing.”

“I’ve heard rumors of the manners of rats,” the cleric said. “I see they’re not ill-founded.”

“Uh, he’s drunk, sir,” Milly replied. “Normally he’s very polite. I’ll take him outside, we sincerely apologize.”

She bowed to the cleric and to Kay’ki and dragged Reed into the open air. Graham accompanied.

“You acted like a horse’s ass in there, Reed,” Graham chided.

“Can I be frank with you?” Reed asked.

Graham sighed. “Sure.”

“Back in Pulnare, when I said you were corpse automatons, I made all that up so you would leave. There’s no such thing. If I submitted my research, they would have sent a team to

mine all that painite. You didn't want to be discovered, so I lied to get you to come with me. My selfishness caused *all* this."

Milly knelt to Reed.

"That's not how I remember it," she said.

"What?"

"You're dwelling on all your bad motivations in hindsight, because you're at a low point, but at the time you knew it was unhealthy for us to rot in that cave for eternity. I spoke with Mendy while we were staying at your office. She was very blunt in telling me how half-baked your scheme was. We chose to follow through with it."

"Why, if you knew?"

"So maybe you brought us up under false pretenses, or not even false but ignorant pretenses, so what? We should have brought ourselves up way before that. That should have been an empty cave by the time you arrived, and it would have been if we weren't in such a funk."

Graham folded his arms. "How you were for the first few months with the pirates was basically how we were every day until you showed up. You needed a push, and so did we. So don't beat yourself up, and there's no need to apologize. However, you *are* going to apologize to that cleric."

"Oh, and stop lying," Milly said. "I can always tell when you're doing it."

"Okay..."

Reed went inside the temple to wait for the cleric, as he figured that would be the place for them to cross paths again. He sat on a stool, intending to wait, but was soon overcome with impatience. Pacing led to wandering. The interior was dimmer than outside, but slivers of the quartz' light seeped in through cracks in the brick. At the end of the nave was an altar carved

from a purple geode. Images and writings were scratched into the higher stones around the wall. Reed pushed aside a woven curtain and entered a side chamber housing a long stone shelf on which thick books were stacked. He picked one at random. The binding had pebbles and flecks of bone imbued. Each page was a leathery parchment, a quarter inch thick, and dense with illegible notes, sigils, and drawings. There were some maps on a couple pages, which Reed studied. They differed from his home maps of the benthic zone, in slight or major places, but they were hand-drawn so he gave them some leeway.

"There you are."

The room instantly brightened. Reed dropped the book.

"Careful with that!" said the cleric, placing it tenderly back on the shelf.

"I'm sorry! I didn't mean to!" Reed yelled.

"Not a problem, no harm done, I tink. Simply gotta be careful, is all. This is my research room."

"You do your research here? It's a bit cramped, don't you think? Especially for your size?"

"No, rat, this is where I put my research after I've done it."

The shelf was crammed high with manuscripts, loose pages, and leather-bound books, wanting organization.

"You wrote all these books?"

"Aye, I'm a professor after all. Gotta do *something* for 150 years."

"I thought you were a cleric."

"I have many jobs. Professor, one of 'em, but also cleric, tanner, bookbinder, *cartographer.*" He leaned forward as he said that last one.

“You’re a professor; who do you teach?”

“Sadly, no one. This whole time, not one pupil.”

“How can that be?”

“I’m the only Individuus who lives on the surface.”

“Surely there are more decapod Individui. I saw one myself, in Nigh-on-High!”

“Right, and like the rest of ‘em, once they convert they elect to live above the cloud. I’m the only one who ever went back home.”

Reed fiddled with his tie, now tattered and musty.

“I don’t mean to be indelicate, but why don’t you just–”

“Go up? I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m DDT. I completed my pilgrimage and a day later they made me DDT for associating with pirates. Go figure.”

“The government has loosened its stance against pirates since the Sundering,” Reed said. “It’s a tenuous armistice so long as the pirates keep to themselves, which they do. I suppose everyone’s softened a bit. Bearing that in mind, do you think they’ll ever lift the DDT?”

“Never. It’s never happened in history.”

“That’s not good news. I’m also DDT.”

The cleric set a chitinous appendage against the wall.

“You? For what, being a rude guest?” Reed chuckled.

“I tried to declare a new type of automata made from corpses, and then I tried to have those corpses converted to Individui. We had to go on the run, then they shot us out of the sky. That’s how we ended up here. How’d you escape?”

“I jumped off the continent. Had me a limp for a year, then I molted and it went away.”

“Why did you think you’d survive jumping off Unnafirma?”

“Ah, well, I’d already done it once, but that’s not important. How can you survive down here?”

“I can’t! But as soon as I died the living painite brought me back, now I don’t even have to breathe and I don’t feel the heat at all.”

“So the government wants to kill you for the crime of *being immortal?* What do they expect to accomplish?”

“Seems silly when you put it like that,” Reed said.

The cleric scuttled out of the side chamber, and the room darkened upon his exit. Reed followed.

“Is that light magic?” Reed asked.

The cleric shook his head, as if dumbfounded.

“Only the most basic light trick? Don’t they teach you that in *rat school*, or wherever it is you learned as a zoea?”

“In Individui schools they don’t teach light, or chaos, or arcana, or even form to children. And where I went to school, they didn’t let rats learn magic at all. By the time I got to university there was practically no need for it, so everything I ever learned I had to figure it out myself, and I admit,” Reed sniffed, “my magical knowledge is not well-rounded.”

“Well, you can learn the *illumination trick* in two minutes. All you do is use your eyes. Your eyes are the source of sight, the core of light, so focus on what you want to see and produce the spell. Easy as can be!”

Reed looked around the temple, and the entire room lit up.

“King’s fur!” Reed cried.

The cleric laughed. “Come into my study and do it again!” he said, and he sprung off past the apex of the temple through an open doorway. Reed entered and immediately brightened the room.

“Nice one, rat!”

“Hey, you know what?” Reed said.

“What?”

“*I’m* one pupil.”

The cleric exhaled, loosing a pleased burble. “I suppose y’are, aren’tcha.”

The study housed many old charts, height maps, and surveys, but also corks and threads and clippers and scrapers and flatteners and all manner of tools for making books. On a central desk was a strange piece of parchment cut like two flowers attached to each other by a single petal, with a topographical projection drawn carefully on it. Maps of the surface lined the walls, although to Reed it appeared to be the same map centered around the village, drawn over and over, slightly inconsistent each time. Reed placed it to his home maps of the surface, but there were major differences, which he found puzzling.

“What’s with those on the wall?”

“That’s the surrounding area, where we are right now. I remap it every ten years.”

“Do you have nodes; do you do all this freehand... or free*claw?*”

“I assure you they’re quite precise. I don’t use a ‘node’ if that’s someting chainfolks have.”

“They look imprecise to me.”

“I beg your pardon!”

Reed moved closer to the wall. “These lines, they’re all over the place. They’re different in each one.”

“Those are fault lines; they shift every season. That’s the whole, darn reason I keep havin’ to remap every decade.”

“*Fault lines*? I’m not familiar.”

“Aljana’s surface isn’t like your floating rocks above the cloud, kiddo. You gotta tink differently about it. Less like a rock, but more a kind of nebulous miasma that’s always slowly changing. Entire mountains can move several feet along the ground every year. I’ve been tracking it.”

“Mountains moving? I’ve never read about any of this.”

“Well, you *might* have if I was ever able to publish any of my research.”

“Can’t you publish to a leyline? *Ah*, right you don’t have nodes.”

“What’s a leyline?”

“They’re magical cables that can transmit information and magical energy. You seriously don’t have any of this stuff down here?”

“No, we don’t have much new technology. Either way, I can’t publish.”

Reed paused. “So, all those books in your research room, and everything in here, you’ve never published any of it?”

“Hehe’hehe is dead center on all my maps. If I ever published while I was alive, I’d be giving the Individui precise coordinates to my location.”

“Why’d you do that?”

“It didn’t occur to me *not* to do it until I had already been doing it for 130 years. I don’t have students, but I also don’t have any mentors either!”

“And you’ve been collecting this information for over a century and nobody, not even the Individui, knows about it?”

“‘s about right.”

“That’s a scandal! How can something like this even happen? Individui surface maps must be 200 years out of date, at least!”

“Maybe someone will find my research after I’m dead. Other than that, it’s not my problem if the government’s own laws are stopping it from– whatever, it’s not my problem. Nor is it yours, Mr. *I Hate the Individui*.” Reed grinned sheepishly.

“Just call me Reed. I’m sorry for being rude earlier.”

“Reed the rat?”

“Very original. What’s *your* name?”

“I changed my birth name when I converted, and then that new name immediately tied me to my DDT. Now, everyone calls me the cleric, and you can do the same.”

Reed departed the study, but stopped in the doorway.

“Do you have time tomorrow to teach me some more light magic?”

“Time, Reed the rat,” the cleric said, “I have in abundance.”

Chapter 24.

"We have to go," said Rainer.

"What? Why? We're safe down here." Reed asked.

"But we left people behind. My wife, and family. We've been gone for a full day and they likely have no idea we're missing. If they try to find the ship, they could be arrested, or killed. I have to make sure they're alright."

Reed pouted. "I gotta talk to the cleric one more time, at least."

"Ooh, good idea. Find out if he knows a way for us to go back up. I don't think many of these other crabs have ever left the surface."

"Psh, okay."

Reed sulked back to the temple. The cleric was mixing oils in a pewter jug in preparation for an ablution in a corner mudhole. He shook himself out, and sand sprayed from his carapace onto the ground.

"Back so soon?" he said, still focused on his ceremony.

"Apparently, everyone decided that we're leaving. What's that you're doing?"

"Ritual bathing. Have to clean myself off after my journey."

"Yeah, looked as if you were almost filled with sand."

"I was."

"Huh?"

"Some places outside the village are dangerous. We pour sand inside our bodies for protection. It softens crushing blows."

Reed grimaced. "They want me to ask you if you know how to leave."

“Can I ask a favor? Can you bring my research with you? I’d be happy to show you the way back up if you did.”

Reed pondered. “Weren’t you just saying how publishing would lead them straight to you?”

He patted a stack of compilations and manuscripts. “This stuff, I think, would be fine.” The decapod had an air of desperation.

“It’s not a good idea,” Reed said, ducking his head and scratching his nose.

“This might be my only chance.”

“I know you’re probably itching to publish. I was in a very similar situation a few months ago. But giving all these originals to us, with our DDT, don’t you think that’s risky? Did you even make copies?”

“*Copies*? Uh...”

“I think,” Reed said, “it would be wiser to sit tight. We’ve already been firebombed once. If it happened again, 150 years of research would go up in smoke. You’ll forgive me if I’m somewhat obliged to prevent that.”

The old cleric chittered and sighed.

“I won’t forget about you but for now we have to go back,” Reed said.

“Right. Right. Let’s go talk to your folks. Go into my study and fetch a big, rolled up map with green lining and meet me there.”

Reed found the map and slung it on his shoulders like a yoke. The cleric, Kay’ki, and the chainwearers were huddled around a hole from which a small fire spewed. The cleric took and unrolled the map. He pointed a claw at a distant mountain, and then tapped the map.

“Okay, that mountain due northwest is Trba’fohepi. It goes above the cloud and there’s a chainfolk town at the top. Go there and the Luden’igiza Funicular will take you right into town.”

“There’s a town on top of the mountain?”

“Yes, called Ludenscrown.”

“Ludenscrown?” Rainer asked. “That’s where Angel and everyone else are!”

“Ludenscrown is on Lowest Island, I thought,” Reed said. He squeezed closer to the cleric to study the map.

“Yes, that’s what chainfolk call it,” the cleric explained.

“Wow,” said Rich, “so Lowest Island isn’t an island at all? It’s the top of a mountain? That’s wild! Are we the first to figure that out?”

*Obviously not, they **have** to have known already.*

Reed blinked. “Maybe, Rich!” Rich’s eyes went wide with excitement.

“Is the train free?” Pallas asked.

“No, you buy a ticket,” said the cleric.

“Do you have to buy it with decapod money?”

“*Decapod money*?” Kay’ki asked.

“Yes, you do,” said the cleric.

“Well, uh, can we *have* some?” Pallas asked

“What’s decapod money?”

“They mean shells, Kay’ki,” said the cleric.

“Shells ain’t the only money?”

“Speaking on behalf of the village, we can’t just *give* you money for nuttin’. There are limits to our hospitality.”

“We don’t have anything...” Rich said.

“That’s not true,” Rainer said. “We have everything that was on the ship. There was treasure on board, from all those troves we found. Cleric, if we can find our swag, can we leverage it for some of your ‘shells?’”

“I would have to discuss that with the treasurer. Where’s your ship?”

“‘Bout a day’s walk.”

“No, more like two hours,” said Reed. “Judging from the map, it looks like we took a really roundabout path to get here. Not surprising considering we were searching for survivors the whole time.”

“Survivors?” Doone asked.

“You know what I mean.”

“Bring Kay’ki,” the cleric ordered, “she can guide you.”

They borrowed the map and set off for the wreckage site. Upon arriving at the first piece of flotsam, they split up to search for treasure.

Reed jumped onto a pile of silty loam or loamy silt, it was unclear.

“Eep!” he squeaked, but covered his mouth. The ship’s engine room laid before him, but something was inside it, rummaging around. Metal creaked and snapped, and a burly, spiked decapod tumbled on its back into the dirt holding a misshapen piece of the ship’s trim. It rose to its many feet and inspected the scrap, tapping it a few times with an imposing claw, then molding it flat. The decapod turned around, so Reed fell backwards down the pile and scurried away to find someone. He found Kay’ki.

“Rat, there’s pirates ‘ere. Be very quiet,” she said.

“I know?”

“Not chainfolks, *actual* pirates. We saw a couple scavengin’ parts of the ship.”

“Hmm, then I saw one, too.”

“Let’s leave.”

Reed and Kay’ki weaved through dust piles to dampen their footprints. Reed attempted to vault over a knee-high dust pile, but as he put his paw onto it, it rose up. Dust spilled over and beneath it all was a very dirty, glass blob. It morphed around Reed’s paw like a cushion.

“Oho!” Reed whispered.

The dust pooled into the hole where the sandman bed had been pinned. Sinking pebbles clinked something underneath. Reed thrust his paw in to clear away sediment but immediately hit a hard part, cracking his knuckle. He brushed off a buried sack, and found that it was full of trove gold. They were chainwearer “bucks,” cupronickel coins with an imprint of a stag on it.

“Jackpot!” he whispered.

Kay’ki buzzed with giddy delight. “Real treasure!” she whispered.

They silently hoisted the coin sack onto the dusty sandman bed with a clockmaker’s delicacy, then Kay’ki pushed the bed away from the wreckage site like a luggage cart. Graham and a few others were waiting empty-handed, but gave Reed silent thumbs-ups upon seeing his reclamation. More joined the group with nothing to show, including Rainer. The only one not back was Pallas.

“Last time I saw her, we were walking together past those hoopy rocks and we split up,” Milly said.

“I think I know where you’re talking about. Milly, lead the way, and you come too, Reed,” said Rainer.

They passed the hoopy rocks into a ridge of slopey mica. Pallas was hunched in cover by a sheet of white rock, so they crawled to her position.

"What's going on?" Reed whispered.

She pointed to an idle decapod in a clearing ahead. It was big and spiky like the cleric, both unaware of their presence and of the trove sack slumped over a bone a few feet away from both parties.

"It's *right there,*" she said. Her gaze was fixated.

"Don't worry about it, Ms. Pallas," Rainer said, "Reed found one already."

"But it's *right there.*"

Rainer sighed. "Reed, you want to maybe take a stab at getting it out? You're sneaky."

"What? I'm no burglar."

"Can't you both use magic?"

"I know one single trick," Pallas said, "and it's not sneaky."

A trick? I know a trick now. I wonder if...

Reed examined the clearing. On the left side, the sack and the decapod, and on the right, more unimpressive sheetrock. Reed chose an arbitrary point on the sheetrock wall to focus his gaze. A tiny spot began to shine as if blessed by a mote of sunlight. It slowly grew brighter, and larger, and brighter. Reed moved the light gracefully along the wall, like a pond skater dancing on the water's surface. The decapod roused from its idling and scuttled over to examine the playful display. When his intrigue brought him within a foot of the wall, and both eyestalks were firmly affixed, Reed turned up the brightness to the highest he could manage in a single instant.

"Argh!" the decapod shouted, falling onto its back.

Pallas lurched out of cover, snagged the sack, and they all sprinted away. Inside the sack were ancient Individui "smackers," silver coins stamped with the design of a pair of lips.

Parrot pushed his bed the whole way back to town. He slapped the arch pipe to sound their arrival, threw the gold on the ground, and jumped into his bed with a jubilant sigh. He nestled into the dusty glass and closed his eyes, enthralled in some pastiche of sleep. Dale tapped him on the shoulder, but Parrot refused to wake up.

Kay'ki took them to see the treasurer, a smooth, green-hued decapod named C'loco.

"I dunno if I wanna do business wit' these chainfolk after they wouldn't touch my cooking the udder night," C'loco said.

"Wait, you're also the cook?" Abner asked.

"Yes, and the whelk farmer, and the drillmaker, and the bead-driller."

"These crabs sure wear a lot of hats," Rainer whispered.

"Make the trade," Kay'ki ordered.

C'loco took the treasure and gave Rainer a stack of shells. He picked one up by its corner and it drooped like a wilted petal. He flapped it about in disgust. The chainwearers gathered around him with a mix of curiosity and bewilderment.

"*These* are shells?" Rainer asked.

"Yes."

"*This* is what you use for money down here?"

C'loco bristled in offense. "Yes..."

"It's made out of *paper*." The shell itself was a slip of parchment with an image of a shell on it, not filthy in any sort of way, but Rainer spoke as if he was carrying a stack of turds.

"Your rudeness is boundless, pirate. This is money– I don't know what else to tell you."

“Don’t you have something more solid? Coins, perhaps?”

“Refined me’al is too impor’ant to waste on making money ou’ of. Paper’s just as good. We all use it.”

Rainer distributed the strange money to everyone in the party. Parrot refused to take it because he was sleeping. Rainer tried to flip the bed, but it merely cushioned his hands and pushed Parrot gently to the side. Reed dismissed the jinx with a touch of his paw, and Parrot fell into a pile of clear sand with an abrupt yelp. That “woke him up.”

As the group prepared for their departure, Reed analyzed their destination in the distance. Trba’fohepi’s shapely profile imposed on the red air. It was a clean mountain, with straight ridges that didn’t jag or jut. Reed was disappointed to find it in the same place as yesterday.

“I thought you said the mountains moved,” Reed whined to the cleric.

“Slowly! They’re not jogging every morning, brash child. Tectonic drift is imperceptible to the naked eye.”

Reed wanted to see it, but he did not have much time to dwell on his disappointment as the group shortly took their leave from Hehe’hehe. Reed waved the cleric and the town goodbye. Maybe he’d see the mountain move once they actually got there.

Chapter 25.

They walked in wide paths through strange terrain, ignoring the eyes that shone from any dark crevice. It was lush, then arid, then lush again. They happened upon a road paved from the wear of traveler treads, and followed it to the foot of the mountain. The rail came into view. It was straight as an arrow, with a single, slanted, open-top carriage at the bottom that perfectly bisected the mountain. Near the carriage, a ticket seller stood idly at a stand. From its pipe, it blew dark bubbles which popped into smoke.

What is it with pipe-smoking ticket clerks? Reed thought.

The decapod choked on its inhale and hacked up a smoke bubble. “Bless me! Chainwearers!” the clerk shouted. “How are you down here? Bless me, how can this be?!”

“Good evening, sir, or uh, ma–,” Rainer said.

“We must get you on the train right away! Quickly, chainwearers, come aboard!”

They hustled up a wide stairway into the carriage and the ticket clerk shot like a missile into the conductor’s seat. At once, the train rolled uphill.

“Do we not need a ticket? We can pay,” Reed said.

“Nope, we must get you to safety first,” the decapod replied. “And we don’t take chainwearer monies.”

“We have *shells*.” Reed handed the paper money to the decapod. The conductor did a double take and coughed up another smoke bubble.

“How came you by this? Much oddity in your presence here! No matter, we must take chainwearers to safety.”

The train car jostled in its hurried ascent. Reed may have found it obnoxious before, but now did not experience any discomfort even as his head repeatedly bumped against the metal

wall. They passed into the cloud layer, and the air rapidly moistened. The decapod beat its chest, and its carapace gave a warm glow. Droplets formed on every surface of the train car. From Reed's chair at the end of the carriage, he could not see the other end. He stuck his arm outside, and the thick fog obscured his hand.

"Claws inside, rat!" the decapod chided, clacking its own claws as some kind of gesture. "Must be careful!"

Reed blushed and recoiled into his seat. They emerged from the clouds with Ludenscrown in plain view, a hundred feet higher. The skies were clear and the sun was dipping below the horizon. Tightly packed windmills formed a border wall around much of the town, their sails spinning synchronously like gears in a machine. Ships docked at different elevations encompassed the island like dark clouds.

"Breathe easy, chainwearers!" the decapod announced. "We are here!"

The carriage slowed and clicked into place at the top of the rail next to another wide stairwell. Rainer pooled the shells and gave them to the conductor.

"Not my place to ask how; just know I find this situation very strange!" the decapod said.

"Your reaction is duly noted, my friend," Rainer said, chuckling. The decapod nodded with utmost seriousness. Reed could hear it muttering as it unlatched the train car and journeyed back down the mountain, "very strange, bless me, very strange..."

Ludenscrown had many shops and houses. Its numerous street lamps were picking up the slack from the new moon. They stampeded through the sleepy, cobbled streets, hoping a towing company might still be open. Reed struggled to keep pace. His stamina was of no concern but the chainwearers had longer legs than he did. They cut through side streets when a crowd or even a single person would have blocked their way. At every turn, Reed could see fewer and fewer of

his group in front of him. They turned another corner, but when Reed turned the corner, they were gone. Reed stood at a three-way forked alley. Every second spent contemplating increased the distance between him and the rest, so Reed acted decisively, and ran down the middle alley. It opened into a main street, but he could not see his friends. He ran back to the alley and took the right-hand path. No sign of them down that street either. Reed tripled back and set down the final path, and a pair of legs swooped down a foot from his face. He whomped into them at breakneck pace and fell flat on his back.

A firm grip lifted Reed up and set him on his paws.

"Woah! You're cold!" said a face with bouncing, blonde locks. It was Angel.

"Wh-wh-wh–"

"'Wh-wh?'" she said, mocking his cadence. "You're here all by yourself? Where is everyone? Is the ship fixed?"

"Uh, no, yes, and no," Reed replied.

"Those weren't all yes or no questions."

"Right, sorry, there's a bit to explain. I, uh, actually, why don't we..." Reed did not want to break the news. Angel hooked Reed under his armpits and they flew up to a rooftop. He attempted to wince, purely out of instinct, but his neck was locked in place by Angel's pillows. *Thank goodness I don't need to breathe,* he thought, *or this woman would suffocate me.* Her curls and cuffs flapped in his eyes and struck his pupils. She set Reed down on a slanted shingle roof where Bainbridge and the others were waiting.

"You're freezing– are you okay?" she asked. She grabbed Reed's hand and put a hand on his cheek. Reed didn't realize he *was* cold. Her face showed deep concern.

Reed fessed up. He described the fleet that shot them down, and the fate of the crew, and the meeting with the decapods. Angel went as cold as him. She mourned the loss of her ship. Bainbridge mourned the loss of his library.

“How’s Rainer? Is he alright? He’s not *deformed*, is he?”

“I don’t know. He still looks like a chainwearer to me. Do *I* look deformed?”

“I can’t tell.”

They ran along rooftops to the docks of Ludenscrown, knowing they would be Rainer’s group’s destination. Angel and her team had spent the last two days being told off by every towing company in town, and were devising a plan to get the job done anyway. They reached a dock. Ships and tugboats surrounded the cliffside, ambiently bobbing in the still evening air. There were three towing companies all within a single plaza, but only one had its lights on this late. Rainer banged on its scuffed, wooden door to no avail. Bainbridge cradled Reed as they flew from the roof.

“Darling!” Angel cried, floating to the road.

“My dove!” Rainer replied. “Am I hideous?”

“No, darling, you look so handsome.” They kissed, and Angel shivered. “Icy lips!” she chirped.

The towing building’s light dimmed. Out came a stout woman who locked up behind her. She recognized Angel within the crowd, and grunted. Her top lip was wanting of a shave.

“Have a heart, lady. We need a tow,” said Rainer.

“No, we don’t,” Angel remarked. “We don’t have a ship.”

“We don’t? Oh, you’re right, we don’t! My dove is so smart.” Rainer cooed. Doone rolled his eyes.

The gruff tow-woman waddled to Angel and pushed her aside. “Outta my way, Miss Thing. I don’t work with pirates!”

“I take it you’ve met.” Milly said.

“That old goat’s just as ugly on the inside as she is on the outside. I tried to be civil!” Angel said.

“There’s just no talking to some people, I’m afraid,” Rainer said blithely.

“We were going to steal her tug tonight.”

Rainer gasped. “Clever! Oh, my dove is so clever!”

“How is that clev–” Reed said, but was interrupted.

“Mr. Bainbridge! Please escort Mr. Reed to the skiff and we will meet you outside Ludenscrown, on the double, sailor!”

Bainbridge and Reed pulled away from Ludenscrown. An old tugboat hung in the air, the only light in the sky, so they met it. Bainbridge flashed the signal light from the front of the skiff, and the tug flashed back. Someone threw a towline, and they boarded. The tugboat welcomed Reed with the creak of weathered metal, and the ship’s boiler rattled as if it housed a violent prisoner desperately banging on the walls to escape. The only part of the ship not shedding paint chips was a modern harpoon cannon that had been retrofitted to the bow. Reed scaled a clunky ladder to the bridge. Inside, all the officers were cramped around the helm discussing a paper map of Ludenscrown and the surrounding area that had been shoved into the window seam.

“Reed,” said Bainbridge, “where was it that you all encountered the scangate?”

Reed examined the map, and in his mind overlaid one of the cleric’s maps. He tapped a point in the open sky, where on the surface would have been their crash site. “Around here.”

“Hop to, Mr. Farragut. We have to find Essex.”

“I’m not too confident we can get there in this crate,” Decatur remarked.

“She’s a sturdy gal,” Farragut replied, testing the give of the helm. “Don’t count her out just yet.”

Chapter 26.

In the dead of night, they clattered on course to the location Reed identified. The windows of the bridge shivered from the wind and the ship's own constant vibration. Rich and Plunger manned the port and starboard spotlights, keeping them fixed ahead so they didn't inadvertently smash into an island. Someone spied a tiny glow in the distant darkness. They cut the spotlights. Angel hit the bridge lights, and turned the heat off. The boiler's clattering stopped. They were engulfed in the silent black of the night sky. As they approached, the distant gleam split out into a circle of tiny lights. Reed peered into the dark. He caught a glimpse of something faint, so he opened the bridge door and leaned over the guard rail. In the middle of the ring of lights, a single cog from the fleet that shot them out of the sky drifted sleepily. Reed informed Rainer.

"Mr. Reed, when I signal you, light those bastards up."

"Light them up?"

"With your light trick."

Reed exhaled. "Oh, of course."

"Mr. Farragut, take us slow and low. We're gonna tip 'em over like a box of biscuits. Careful not to pass through that scangate."

Reed followed Rainer to the harpoon cannon. The wingshirts traded hands to the raiders, who then equipped themselves with nets and spanners and kitchen knives and anything else they could use to bludgeon an Individui sailor. Farragut positioned the tug directly underneath the cog. Rainer gave his signal and the cog's keel lit up in an instant. With a clear shot, Rainer fired the harpoon cannon, skewering the cog from below. It latched the bottom hull, and Farragut further lowered the tug. Angel and the raiders flew above the cog as it tipped towards its stern.

The harpoon chain held strong as its prey careened. The sailor's screams echoed into the night. One managed to scramble on deck, and Angel swept him overboard with a cackling swoop.

Rainer joined the raiders, and Reed remained on deck. Four figures descended from the darkness and landed next to him. They set Essex down, and the twins hopped out of their arms. Salem and Parker hugged Reed, but Essex was very weak.

"Thank goodness!" Teddy said. "We were getting worried."

"Teddy!"

"Is there a kitchen on this ship? Essex *needs* water," Piper said.

"A small one, right there."

Piper carried her to the galley. Teddy joined the raiders and the twins shone the spotlights on the cog, now tip-up.

Leina cringed. "Ew, Reed, what happened to you?"

"Thank you. I died. Everyone died, actually."

"How did the people on the skiff die?" Hundred asked.

"Okay, not *everyone*."

"So Angel is married to a corpse now? How dreadful," Hundred said.

"Dear, you're also married to a corpse. I hope you don't think *I'm* dreadful."

"Not at all, sweetheart."

They both sauntered off to the galley. Over his shoulder, Hundred gave Reed a sort of get-a-load-of-this-guy look about Leina and shrugged. Reed didn't understand.

The harpoon line went slack for a second then snapped tight again. The cog had flipped. Raiders buzzed around it like gnats while others flew inside to dispatch the disoriented enemy

crew. Reed lit up the main deck with his trick. A body was thrown from the ship, and the sailor screamed as he plummeted past the tug. Reed cringed.

Have some dignity, man, he thought. *I didn't blubber this much when **I** fell to my death.*

Another chainwearer sailor fell like a sack of flour. Two cloudwalker sailors floated down like beach balls. Reed intended to keep the cog lit, but when more and more bodies rained down the side, he too went to the galley. He did not have the stomach to watch people die. After a while, Rainer flew down to the deck and issued Farragut some orders. Farragut carefully flipped the cog rightside-up and brought the two ships parallel. The cog was secured, and there was much rejoicing.

They patrolled all night, but could not find another ship. The next morning, the cog and tug were still connected. Nobody could figure out how to dislodge the harpoon, so they steered the ships back to back, with Angel at the cog's helm and Farragut at the tug's. At the very least, they were pleased to have cannons again, but did not know where to go. The sky and all the clouds were bright red, so it made the blue, flapping dot approaching the ship easy to spot.

"Hey, Parrot!" Dale yelled. Parrot came outside. "Look who it is."

"Tyco!"

Parrot's parrot landed on the deck of the tug. He gave it water, and it drank a little but refused food. The parrot must have been well-kept in their absence. Tyco preened, and Parrot watched in loving adoration. Reed and Bainbridge came on deck.

"Woah, Tyco's back!"

"Good for you, buddy," Bainbridge said, patting Parrot on the back.

"Is he the only one?" Reed asked

"Uh-huh. Tyco came back 'cause he loves me so much."

"Go see Sweetie!" Reed yelled.

Tyco flew off.

Parrot gasped. "*REED!*"

"Let's see where he goes! Maybe he'll take us to the other birds."

Bainbridge paused for a second, then shot up the ladder to the bridge. Reed didn't know the old man had that much hustle in him. Both ships leaned into their throttles to chase Tyco. The blue macaw swayed left and right, and caught each breeze to rest its wings while gliding. It occasionally squawked and adjusted its heading. Reed admired the bird's innate sense of direction and wondered how it knew where to go. A sudden gust sent the bird into a tailspin, but in drawing in its wings it quickly recovered and shot out from the drop as if riding a current.

After an hour, another macaw joined Tyco's flight path. Parrot called it out. Two gray lories joined the flock. Farragut signaled for Angel to ease off the throttle, and they both slowed. They entered a field of multiple islands dotted with holes in their sides. These holes were indicative of original inhabitant dwellings, but they could have been abandoned. Birds rested in the inhabitant cave openings, and many took flight to follow Tyco. Nestled snug in the center of a clearing among the rocks was a galleon, with a decorative golden mast and a destroyed figurehead. It was covered in parrots, either on the ship and flying around it. Tyco landed on top of the mast where Sweetie was sleeping, and snuggled next to her. The cog's radio came on.

"This is Admiral Telldoobambloe, any orders from G.O. about what they want me to do with all these birds?"

Rainer's eyes bulged. "Him's the one what shot us down!" he whispered.

Angel picked up the receiver and affected a deep timbre, "nyyyegative, sir, we're only here to deliver bird seed and supplies."

“What the hell do they expect me to do? I’m not a zookeeper!” he shouted.

“Apologies, sir, they’re still deliberating. Hopefully we’ll get orders soon. Standby for boarding.” Rainer giggled.

“We’re a sitting duck for pirates and these damn birds are crapping all over my ship!”

“Language, sir,” she replied. Rainer burst out laughing.

Angel approached the galleon with Farragut close behind.

“What now?” she asked.

“Let’s tip ‘em over again.”

“The harpoon is still stuck, honey.”

They maintained their steady, furtive approach. Rainer jumped down from the bridge and across the gap between the two boats to meet with Farragut in the tug. Farragut maneuvered the tug adjacent to the cog, and the harpoon line pulled tight horizontally. Angel’s radio came on again.

“Sailor, your docking formation is questionable.”

The two ships descended upon the galleon.

“Respond, sailor! Are you aware you are still tethered to that other ship?”

They further descended.

“That chain is going to collide with us! Pull up!”

The tug and cog dropped below the port and starboard sides of the gold-masted galleon, wrapping their connected harpoon chain around its main deck. The impact sent every bird flying. Both ships held steady, and the chain caught on the galleon’s capstan. It attempted to pull away, but not soon enough, as the two pirate ships throttled forward, tipping the galleon toward the front. The Individui fired their broadside cannons into the open air, hitting only rocks and clouds.

An explosion rocked the galleon from inside, sending vibrations along the chain to the cog and tug. Smoke billowed from the ship's gunports.

The raiders flew to the vertical galleon. Half entered through a hatch on deck and the rest took the bridge. The radio crackled. It sounded like multiple voices.

"*–people!?*"

"*Quiet, tubby.*"

"Hi, this is Abner. We've secured the steering wheel room. We're gonna start chucking folks now."

"Don't throw the admiral. I'd like a word," Rainer replied.

"Roger that," Abner replied. Then there was a fumbling sound.

"*Ab, you gotta put the receiver back on the hook.*"

"*Put me down this ins–*" Click. The radio cut off.

Reed sat in the bridge and twiddled his tie.

"Hey, captain," he said.

"Yes, Mr. Reed."

"Let me talk to that guy as well."

"Sure thing. I din't actually have anything I wanted to say; I just wanted to get his hopes up, then chuck him."

"Okay, sadistic, but," Reed said, "just based on his name I think the guy might be a cloudwalker. If that's the case, throwing him off the ship won't do much good; he'll just bounce on the cloud layer."

"Wow. So we should shoot him, is that what you're saying?"

Reed frowned with a hint of amusement. "No, just let me talk to him."

Screaming sailors rained from the upside-down galleon and Reed took the time to ponder his upcoming conversation. Abner brought the admiral, a cloudwalker as Reed predicted, to the bridge and tied him to a pipe.

"You dogs! Bastards! You'll be sunk for this!" the admiral shouted. His tail wiggled at every insult.

"Language, sir," Angel mocked. The admiral growled.

Reed stepped forward.

"Telldoo... blah blah," he said, "I can never remember cloudy names. Do you recognize us?"

"You're the necromancer."

"Sure," Reed said, squinting. "You blew our ship to pieces at the scangate, and we fell to the surface. I *died. You* killed me. You killed everyone here!"

"That doesn't make sense."

"But it's the truth. Or did you not watch us sink?"

"You're standing right here in front of me talking; you *can't* be dead!"

"No, it can't be *necromancy*," Reed said. "I *am* dead." The cloudwalker went wide-eyed.

"I don't know enough to comment on the legitimacy of your claim."

"Well," said Reed, "you did kill us. So, has the DDT been called off since we died?"

"DDTs never get 'called off.'"

"Do you remember when you first found us, and you offered the Prewetts a bargain for their lives?"

The cloudwalker gritted his teeth.

"Would you make another one?" Reed asked.

Reed took off his tie, and undid his top button.

"Can we have the room to ourselves, everybody?" he asked.

"Hoo hoo! Alright, everybody out!" Rainer ordered. They exited the bridge but Rainer, Angel, and Bainbridge, and Decatur, and Abner all watched through the window.

"So," said Reed.

"So," repeated Telldoobambloe.

"The Individui can't kill us. They've already tried twice. My crew: they're out for blood. They never sleep and they never starve. All we have to do to escape you is fly down to the surface and you can't follow us there. Before you showed up, the Winged Prewetts were unrivaled in the skies. Now, we're even stronger. Can you comprehend having to defeat an *actual* ghost ship? We're a thing of fantasy. We are unstoppable."

"I can't stop the DDT."

"We can keep stealing ships, and crashing them into Individui ships, and sinking. We survive the fall, you don't. That's Option One."

"I can't stop the DDT."

"Here's Option Two. We *all* survive the fall."

"What?"

"That's right. In Option Two, everyone we kill, we then resurrect. Then, the number of DDT resurrected Individui increases for every victory we claim. You can be the first to join us! Would you like to become immortal and share in our DDT?"

"*I have never seen this side of him*," said the window, followed by shushes.

"You're insane!" the admiral yelled, flinging saliva.

“Hey, I didn’t start this battle! I didn’t shoot *you* out of the sky!” Reed wiped spittle off his cheek and dried his paw with the admiral’s own cheek.

“*He **tried** to shoot him out of the sky.*” said the window, followed by more shushes.

“So there’s Option Two. I don’t know about you, but I don’t like Option One *or* Option Two. Too violent, and I want to get on with my death, not spend eternity as a worthless pirate. Anyway, here’s Option *Three*: the DDTs are canceled, and *in exchange*, we stop scourging the skies and provide a much needed service that the Individui doesn’t even realize it needs.”

“*Parrots*?”

“Shh, no. What do you know about the surface?”

“It’s a toxic hell.”

“Not for decapods, and not for us. Did you know they have no leylines? Individui presence on the surface is practically nil. I met a decapod below with 200 years of unpublished research. That’s raw, untapped knowledge.” On the word *untapped*, Reed tapped the Admiral on the nose. “I have personal experience building leylines; it’s how I became a professor. With our help, the Individui could expand its influence to the surface. Doesn’t that sound attractive? Are you not enticed?”

“I can’t stop the DDT.”

“Yes, you’ve said that, and I believe you. So, we’re taking you hostage and you’re going to contact someone with the authority to bargain.”

“Belos is the only one who can do that.”

“Then I hope, for the sake of your mortality, that he’s not busy.”

With that, Reed departed the bridge.

Chapter 27.

The crew scoured the galleon for provisions, weapons, and valuables. Parrot and Dale were able to collect all the birds in the area and repurposed the galleon's brig into a makeshift aviary. All three ships were under the Prewett's control. While the pirates looted the galleon, Reed and Abner were attempting to fix the capstan which had been dislodged from its post during the siege. They pushed, and made a little headway, but their combined strength wasn't enough and it shunted back into its slant as soon as they relented. From one of the surrounding rocks, a swarm of inhabitants crawled out from their holes into the light.

"Eep!" Reed eeped, pointing at them as they flew over.

"All that tough talk earlier and you still eep?" Abner said, but then he saw the inhabitants. "Oh, shoot."

They landed on the galleon deck standing shoulder to shoulder. There must have been over 20 of them, each one a foot or feet taller than Abner.

"How comed you shooted our home?" one of them said.

"Hey, we didn't shooted you. We just finished killin' the guys that shooted you," Abner said.

The inhabitant twitched its antennae. "So you eneny of our eneny. That means not our eneny."

"Always a treat to meet a master logician out in the wild," Abner said.

Rainer flew from the tug, his avian cuffs sailing behind him, and shook them back to normal length as he landed.

“Whoa-ho, what’s going on here?” he asked. The inhabitant stood in amazement at Rainer’s landing. It felt Rainer’s shirt up and down with its forearms then rubbed them against its abdomen and antennae.

“Lo, not eneny. I not never seed man fly with wings before.”

Rainer examined the imposing insect and its posse.

“Lemme ask you something, inhabitant. You strong?”

“We strong!” Many of them in formation repeated the statement.

“Would any of you strong inhabitants be interested in doing a little job in exchange for some cabbage and *sugar*?”

“Yes, I want!” one towards the back said.

“We only have enough for about ten of you.”

“Ten? How manies is that?” the front inhabitant asked.

“I like you. You’re in,” Rainer said.

He picked out nine more inhabitants from the crowd and sent the rest back to their holes in the rock.

“You seriously want to recruit these yokels?” Reed whispered. “I think they might be *inbred*.”

“Recruit? Psh. No, they’re *contractors*. Just a little extra muscle for our trip to Unnafirma and there’s plenty in the galley to keep ‘em happy. Let me give you a piece of advice, Mr. Reed. If you look like a problem not worth solving, then nobody will.”

The cloudwalker admiral made contact with Unnafirma and they were able to schedule a meeting with Aquisteller, the leader of Nigh-on-High, to conduct negotiations. In the interest of diplomacy, the galleon, tug, and cog were given special authorization to make a sky landing just

outside Nigh-on-High where Aquisteller would meet them on board. With their new henchbugs, they ventured north to Unnafirma.

Reed showed the inhabitants to the galley. They pigged out on leafy greens and Doone prepared pitchers of sugar water which they enthusiastically guzzled. They went through a month's store of veggies within the hour, then fell asleep with full bellies.

"You should have given them the food *after* they finished the job," Doone said. "If they eat like this every day, we'll be bone dry before we reach the city."

"I'm afraid that's how it is working with inhabitants," Rainer replied. "You pay up front, then you pay again afterwards. What you don't want is for them to get bored and hungry waiting. But you let me know when you feel peckish, Mr. Doone, and I'll consider it an issue."

The inhabitants did not end up waking until they had arrived at Nigh-on-High several days later. Krieger dodged a nasty swipe trying to rouse them as the ships were brought to a halt outside the city wall. He marched the bugs topside, where they lined up on deck. The raiders equipped them all with swords pilfered from the two military ships' armories, then themselves stood in formation. Reed stood at the galleon's helm alongside the co-captains. He called for Milly to join them.

"Need something?" she asked

He opened Milly's coat. Pipi was happily sleeping in her inner breast pocket. Reed smiled.

"Just checking," he said.

A wide cloud platform arced over the granite wall and hovered to the main deck. Aquisteller hopped off with his four cloudwalker bodyguards clad in armor. Their halberds resonated with a strange, orange vibration. The bejeweled wire holding Aquisteller's robe jingled

around his thick, furry neck. Angel and Reed descended to greet him, while Rainer stayed in the bridge, his sword trained on Telldoobambloe's neck.

"This is a great embarrassment to me," Aquisteller said with his booming, resonant voice. "There is *no* precedent for this in the entire history of the Individui."

"Sometimes things don't go the way we hope," Reed replied.

"Welcome aboard, matey," Angel said.

"Save me the empty felicitations of an *outlaw corpse*. I'm here for my admiral."

"Your hostility is noted, if nothing else," said Reed. "Are you actually empowered to make the deal we're seeking? Where's Belos?"

Aquisteller snorted. "I'm *empowered* to destroy this entire ship if I so desire, you quivering runt!" His pupils faded away and his fur took on a sheen as if moistened and spotlit from behind.

"Enough, Aquisteller," said a voice.

From within Aquisteller's cloud platform, two horizontal glass panes slipped to the fuming cloudwalker's left and right side. They tipped vertically. Jane Hooker and Belos peered through the clear sheets like windows, but they were not physically present.

"This is some display of force, Professor Love," Jane Hooker said, her voice slightly warbled as if distorted by rippling water.

"A paltry battalion compared to the militaries of the Individui, but our strength isn't in our numbers, High Individuus," said Reed.

"This is exactly the outcome I predicted!" Aquisteller barked. "You are the very reason we declared your kind illegal!"

"Calm yourself, Aquisteller," Belos said with a tone that kept his order unhypocritical.

Aquisteller huffed. “You should know, *Professor Love*, that we’ve acquired all the painite using your valuable research. You have my thanks for that.”

He wrenched his huge mouth into a spiteful grin.

“You’ve saved me some trouble,” Reed replied. “Feel free to return it to me at your earliest convenience. I can take it now, if you like.”

“Pbf! Why would I–”

“I bought the land in order to explore it. I *own* the Pulnare Caverns, which includes mineral rights. So, thank you for unearthing the gems but I’d like them all back now. We might need ‘em soon!”

“I would rather die than–”

“Telly! You’ve only made things worse for yourself! Be silent!” Belos ordered, disturbing the water pane with ripples.

Aquisteller took a step back and lowered his head.

“State your demands, Professor Love,” Belos said.

“You can keep the painite. Its worth is more than the entire stores of Golis Obscura’s treasury, so don’t undervalue this token of my goodwill. You can also have the parrots. In addition, we will stop our resurrection chicanery, return your admiral, and, as previously stated, build leylines to the surface. I am well-suited to the task and my team and I have personal experience stringing leythread.”

“And in exchange,” Belos replied, “your DDTs are rescinded and corpse automata are made legal?”

“Yes, and I have one more request.”

“What is it?”

“Do you have a list of every single DDT?”

“Somewhere, yes.”

“I met a decapod Individuus on the surface who’s been in hiding for nearly two centuries. He’s spent that time researching and mapping the benthic zone, but he can’t publish because he also is DDT for his previous associations with pirates. I don’t know his name, but he changed it when he converted, so it’s probably on record somewhere. I demand his freedom as well!”

“Granted.”

Reed paused.

“What?”

“Granted. It’s all granted.”

“WHAT?!” Aquisteller exclaimed.

“I see through you, Reed,” Belos said. “All this posturing, all these swords, yet you come here bargaining for peace and freedom, and offering knowledge. You are, in essence, the same rat you were when you so innocently came to us with the fruit of your research. *None* of this ever posed a threat until *The Society* made it so. Our own hasty, reactionary meddling has borne your ruin, incited bloody war with pirates for the first time in over a century, and driven one of our finest, young scholars away from the Individui. To abide by our original decision given its disastrous consequences would be to willingly defend ignorance.”

Reed’s brow wrinkled. He clutched his coat jacket. Not needing to breathe, Reed sighed, which he felt was appropriate.

“Aquisteller, you mentioned there being no precedent for this. That is indeed true. So, we will just have to set the precedent.”

“I do *NOT* agree with this decision! They killed over thirty sailors!”

Reed scoffed. “Well, there’s thirty of us dead here. Let’s call it even.”

Aquisteller stomped his flat feet, muttering curses.

“Jane, will you break the tie?” Belos asked.

“I agree with Belos.”

“JANE!” Aquistelled shouted.

“It’s settled. I shall have to get right to work drafting legislation for this unfounded act of DDT amnesty. Prewetts and Reed’s associates, I am sure Aquisteller would be happy to arrange accommodations for you within the city.”

“Uh,” Angel interjected, “we’ll be fine on the ship until you get those pardons sorted.”

“That’s Individui property!” Aquisteller barked, “not some thieves’ clubhouse!”

Jane Hooker cleared her throat. “It’s less work for you if they bunk on the boat. Let them stay.”

“Quite,” Belos replied, his image fading from the glass until he was not visible. As soon as he could no longer be seen, the glass burst into water droplets and splashed against the deck.

Jane adjusted her glasses. “I shall see to it that preparations are made for your mission to the surface.”

“This is absurd!” Aquisteller shouted, waving his fists.

“Perhaps you need to cool off, Telly,” said Jane, as her glass pane rose above Aquisteller’s head. She disappeared, and her glass burst, soaking his robes and black fur. His guards’ helmets shivered from stifled laughter. The pirates felt no need for such restraint.

Chapter 28.

Aquisteller took his leave after the admiral was released. They fed the inhabitants some more, then set them loose back to their rock. For two days and nights after that, the Winged Prewetts celebrated their victory with music, dancing, and feasts for those that could eat. Piper impressed everyone with her ability to come up with song lyrics, and she sang an ode to Reed's courage that made him blush. Rainer one afternoon went into the city to provide the government with the names of all the crew members, and came back with a heap of new clothes, including a child-sized wingshirt. He insisted Reed try it on, but Reed refused. After some wrestling for which he was thoroughly outclassed, Reed was forced into the snug, lacey blouse. Several pirates picked Reed up like a battering ram and swung him back and forth overboard, pretending to throw him. At each countdown, Reed begged and screeched for them not to throw him. They were only joking, but as soon as they let him down, Reed tore off the shirt in a manner which could only be described as what one might see if an angry orange had a point to prove about its dedication to nudism.

The following morning, Reed was mopping up the main deck when the gray, soapy water in his bucket rose into the air. It spread out to form a thin, upright disk and flattened like a dusky, floating mirror. The wobbling reflection took shape in the suds, and soon Belos appeared in the water, sitting at his desk in his office. He rotated the mirror to inspect all angles of the deck.

"Am I early?" he asked.

Reed approached the mirror. "Sorry, early for what?"

"Oh, drat. Aquisteller must be dragging his feet. There was supposed to be a ceremony."

"A ceremony?"

“Excuse me one moment, Reed.” He looked around, examining the mirror in which he appeared. “Also, get some clean water please.”

The mirror burst, dowsing Reed’s shirt and pants in dirty suds.

King’s knot, Reed thought as he flicked droplets from his sleeves. It was okay to think but not to say out loud.

Reed barely had enough time to drag everyone topside before a small battalion of cloudwalkers had marched on board. They were clad in blue robes and golden pauldrons, and each wore a unique woven muzzle around their snout. Aquisteller followed behind in similar garb, only his pauldrons were more recessed and his robe was lined with jewels and stripes of animal skins. He carried a lacquer chest which he stuck under his arm so he could adjust his circlet with a free hand. He and Reed exchanged a curt glance. Belos appeared again in a dirty mop water mirror.

“Oh, Reed, I thought I asked for cleaner water,” he said.

“Sorry, I had to wake everyone first.”

Aquisteller dipped his hand into Belos’ image, causing it to ripple. Each wave purged the mirror until it was as clean as fresh glass.

“Much obliged, friend. Please begin the proceedings.”

“I defer.”

“Very well. Good morning, chainwearers,” Belos said. “Uh, you may know this already, but throughout history, the *Doomed to Die in Torment* criminal classification sentenced the highest severity of treatment for any so unlucky or so villainous to warrant its designation. So resolute was the Individui’s vow to stop DDT criminals, that each DDT was written into Individui law, and that is how the system remains to this day.”

Belos adjusted his stance. “However, laws can be changed. As Individui, we’d like to think our foresight is strong enough to justify *never* changing the law, but things happen we cannot predict, and the law must transform to reflect those changes.”

He motioned to Aquisteller.

“Line up to receive your pardons, pirates,” Aquisteller said.

The black cloudwalker stepped up to Reed, who hadn’t moved but ended up being first in line by virtue of standing in the middle of the deck. He opened the lacquer box and rifled through it with his bulky fingers.

“Here’s yours, *Reed*,” he said.

He handed Reed a beautiful, unblemished slip of decorated manuscript that shone like gold and reflected the morning sun into a million colors. Reed raised it to his eye to examine its intricate illumination, so delicately designed that he strained his pupils to make out the detail. It read,

The Triumvirate of High Individui Belos, Jane Hooker, and Aquisteller

Pursuant to The Authority Granted in the Codex of Clemency, Grant

Reed Love

Full and Unconditional Pardon

Having Been Considered Morally Innocent or Wrongly Accused of All Convictions Previously Laid Against Him

Reed stepped aside, and tugged at the parchment but it did not rip or wrinkle. Aquisteller continued handing out pardons.

“Do I get to keep this?” Reed asked.

“Yes,” Belos replied, “this is *your copy*, so to speak. In order for your pardons to be legally sufficient, they needed to be codified as laws, and you will all receive your own copy of the individual laws pardoning each of you.”

“King’s coffer...”

Reed read it over and over. Every inch was an art gallery, every letter a library. He flipped the paper, revealing a golden labyrinth of serifs surrounding a garden of the three leaders' signatures. Cold silver-blue promethium leaf outlined the shining golden border. Reed had in his hand his very own page of casper vellum.

Graham received his, and Reed tucked himself into Graham's elbow to inspect it. His pardon's illumination was completely different. Swirling trellises of clovers and petals that cut across the page with hypnotic, impossible geometry. He went to Milly.

"Is this that special paper you mentioned?" she asked.

Hers exploded from a filigree cornucopia of bronze fruits so lifelike, no, *more* than lifelike, your mouth would water at their perfect succulence. Plunger tapped Reed on the shoulder.

"Hmm!" he blurted, startled.

"The guy's been calling your name," she said. Reed's mouth dumbly hung slack.

"Come here!" Aquisteller barked.

Aquisteller gave Reed another casper vellum pardon. It was decorated with mesmerizing, serpentine stone columns wrapped in polychromatic ivy and holly. The pardon was written for Lestrid Moore.

"Who's this?" Reed asked.

"Lestrid Moore is the name of a decapod who was declared DDT the day after his conversion 178 years ago. His original name was Lez'mor. You demanded his freedom, and here it is."

There came a hum, low and resonant, from below. Several of the newly exonerated immortals went to investigate off the starboard bow. The hum grew louder and louder, until Reed too turned his attention away from his two vellums. A monstrous, iron castle rose beside the

galleon, dwarfing it. The hull facing them had two hundred gunholes, at least. Reed tucked the pardons away in his shirt for safekeeping.

Belos yelled, “everyone, please come aboard and we will finish the ceremony.”

The gigantic ship lowered a drawbridge, and they boarded. The hull was several feet thick of solid metal. As the drawbridge closed behind them, sealing the hull, the hum significantly dampened. It made Rainer’s ten inhabitant reinforcements seem a trivial strength. Truly, if the Individui had wanted to obliterate the pirates, leaving nothing behind, they could have. The crew entered a drab, mixed-use meeting room with a few hanging lamps, chairs, and a chalkboard.

“Welcome to the Dictator-class Merbius Superstratonaught,” Belos said, “the largest ship in Aljana. I bid you farewell and good luck as I let Aquisteller take the reins now.” His mirror floated toward a drain grate, and burst, splashing the floor and walls. Aquisteller sighed.

“Normally,” the cloudwalker said, “the Merbius is a bomber. But for your operation, we’re not dropping bombs; we’re dropping nodes to the surface. Once they’ve all deployed, we’re sending you dead ones down to build and connect them. Everyone living will stay behind for you to rejoin upon your successful return to the ship, which will be docked on Lowest Island.”

Aquisteller loosened his pauldrons, and they dropped to the floor. One of his guards quickly claimed them. He shook his head and peered at a wall where nobody was standing in annoyed thought, then sniffed and turned his gaze to the door.

“And because I wouldn’t put it past you cutthroats to abandon your family, I’m also sending an escort.”

Another of the guards opened the bulkhead, and Ignatius the Fire Giant lowered his head to enter the room.

Reed gasped. “You?!” Aquisteller smirked. “That’s the one who burned down the inn!”

“You can’t fault him for that. He was merely doing his job,” Aquisteller replied with a wry sneer.

“Then we should fault YOU for it, because YOU sent the order!”

“Stop, rat,” Ignatius spewed, belching hot steam as he spoke, “if you threaten the High Individuus, I will be forced to suppress.” His voice was deep and creaky, like an old man’s.

“*Bastard!*” Pallas screamed.

She fired two air bullets into Ignatius’ chest. They absorbed into his flaming mass, and he grew larger.

“Delicious.” He blew smoke from his billowing maw of a mouth.

Pallas charged the towering fire automaton.

“Please do not approach me. I am very hot.”

Angel clotheslined Pallas, who fell on her butt. “I get that you can’t feel it, but he *is* very hot. He’ll burn you up, babe.”

“I am very pleased to work with you all on this important diplomatic assignment,” Ignatius said calmly. Then he left.

“We don’t want to work with him. Get someone else!” Rainer said.

“Be silent, cur! Follow through with your own bargain so you can get back to your eternity of debauchery! Professor Love, you come with me; you’ll be needed in the navigation room to chart a proper course.”

“Mr. Bainbridge, too,” Reed said.

“Who?” Aquisteller asked.

“That’ll be me, Your Cloudiness, I’m a navigator and Reed’s mentor.” Rainer snickered at Bainbridge’s obsequiousness.

He waved his furry hand. “Whatever.”

Chapter 29.

The Merbius was like a flying fortress with many weaving hallways and stairwells. Aquisteller guided them through each maze-like corridor, but even he had to double back from wrong turns once or twice. They passed through the bomb bay. Racks of giant leynodes were poised over rows of drophatches. They were similar to the mapping nodes Reed made in Wunnyone, only much larger and more professionally constructed. Off to the side, a few dormant bombs rested in their own racks.

"I don't think I feel comfortable being on the same ship as a bomb," Reed said.

"What are *you* so worried about?" Aquisteller said. "Weren't you saying that you were ready to crash your ship and fall back to the surface at a moment's notice?"

Reed sneered. "You're a jerk."

"A jerk with a pulse."

There were 16 nodes prepared for the mission, and Reed plotted where in the sky they should be dropped to cover the most ground. Two would have to be built at the top and bottom of Trba'fohepi, leaving 14 for the rest of the surface. That would not nearly cover the entire planet, but it was no small area either, about a third the size of Unnafirma. Reed determined the deployment sites with some guidance from Bainbridge and the Merbius' own navigator. They proposed a schedule to line the drops along a curved path leading away from the mountain. Aquisteller approved their plan and authorized the superstratonaught's takeoff.

A few days into their journey, Reed lingered in the bomb bay. He didn't want to miss the final node drop, as he had been locked away in the navigator's office for every preceding one, planning the next site. A few from both crews shouted over a poker game nearby.

“Should I check or raise, Reed?” Rich yelled. There was no way Reed could see his cards.

“The fact that you’re asking me means you should fold.”

The sirens and spinning deployment lights switched on. The poker players threw a blanket over their game just in time for the drophatch to open, flooding the bomb bay with light and heavy gusts. Reed ran to the guardrail to watch.

“FIRE!”

The node detached, falling to the clouds below. It bored through, whirling up wind that closed the hole behind it. In an instant, the clouds had reformed like nothing had come through them, and the whistle of the node’s descent faded. With the last node package deployed, the cloudwalker crew reracked the normal bombs.

The ship arrived in Ludenscrown, so the pirates were called to the lifeboat dock. Reed was the first to arrive. The walls were lined with hanging vessels, each as large as the Prewett’s skiff. Graham and Milly filtered in, surprised at their own arrivals. A few minutes passed before. Aquisteller poked his head in, and satisfied he’d found the place, flung open the door. He surveyed the room, growing annoyed as he confirmed there were only three present.

“Where the hell is everyone?”

“D’you get lost?” Milly asked.

“What do you expect? It’s a maze in here!”

“*Reed* found it no problem.”

“Well, he’s abnormal. And a cartography professor.”

“Y’hear that, Reed-man? You’re a freaky cartographer, according to this guy. You should put that on your resumé,” Abner said, entering midway through the conversation.

Reed fed directions to the lifeboat dock from various key destinations on the boat, such as the galley, the main deck, the crew quarters, and the bomb bay. After several repeats, everyone had arrived. Most were wearing wingshirts, just in case.

“Thank you. I was lost,” said Ignatius.

“Please don’t talk to me,” Reed replied.

Aquisteller, Angel, and Bainbridge stood on a catwalk while the crew lowered lifeboats into launching lanes from davits. They hung above similar drophatches to the bomb bay.

“Someone has to take Ignatius. He can’t steer himself,” Aquisteller said.

“I cannot steer myself,” Ignatius repeated.

Rainer volunteered to take the fire giant. With everyone boarded into, they dropped from the ship, at which Milly shrieked. With Farragut’s boat in the lead, the party circumnavigated Lowest Island until they came upon the funicular rail, then dropped below the cloud layer into the deep, red surface air.

“Let’s stop in Hehe’hehe,” Reed said, “I want to give the cleric his pardon.”

“You take the wheel, then,” Farragut replied.

Reed shuffled carefully onto Farragut’s seat at the helm.

“How do I lower it?”

“Just steer,” Farragut said, “I’ll cover altitude.”

Reed followed the road from the funicular back to town. When the temple came into view, Farragut took over the wheel and landed the lifeboat inside the crater field.

The decapod villagers emerged from their covered craters to investigate the party’s arrival. Their surprise at the return of chainwearers to the surface was cut short by their fascination with the flame automaton. As he stepped off the skiff, he was quickly swarmed.

“Please do not touch me. I am very hot,” he said,

But the decapod ladies were undeterred. They poked and prodded and manipulated his living flame appendages with their bare claws, unfazed by his heat. Ignatius gasped, and his sharp inhale forced him to hiccup smoke. Kay’ki stuck her smaller claw into his mouth.

“Are you not burned?” he asked.

“‘e aint much ho’ah than the lava baffs, I reckon,” Kay’ki said to her companions, “if that.”

“No one has ever touched me.” Ignatius’s orange flames shifted to a bright carmine. His violent flickering calmed to a soft wiggle.

“Goodness,” said the cleric, exiting his temple, “was it so bad up there that you were forced to return?”

“Hello, again, *Lestrid*,” Reed said with a grin. The cleric stopped in his tracks.

“How came you by that name?”

Reed swaggled his head. “Oh, I just happened to read it on this document I acquired pardoning one Lestrid Moore from all crimes. I have it right here, if you'd like to see it for yourself.” The cleric took the vellum in his spiky claws. He examined it closely, his eye stalks locked on the page. His pupils became glossy, and he turned them to Reed.

“Is this a trick?”

“No, it is not. We’ve all been pardoned, and I bargained for yours as well.”

“Pardoned from DDT? Surely not!”

“It is true,” Ignatius said. “I am a culler of the Individui, and were it not so, I would have killed you already.”

The cleric lifted his head and frowned.

“That’s not the only reason we’ve returned,” Reed said. “We’re also building a ley network on the surface. You’ll be able to publish!”

Reed took everyone to the cleric’s study. He marked on one of the maps where all the nodes had dropped. Three of them ended up landing in a large, brown area with no topology markings. Reed furrowed his brow.

“What’s this place?” he asked. The cleric leaned in.

“That would be Ank’her Desert. You shouldn’t go there.”

“Why not?”

“Dangerous.”

“How dangerous? We don’t have much choice. The nodes dropped there. Building this network was a condition of our pardons.”

The cleric chittered. “When I was a pirate, our hideout was in that desert. I have no reason to suspect it’s moved.” He squinted at Rainer. “And no offense, but these aren’t pirates the way you chainfolks are. They’re *real* pirates.”

“Offense taken, but say more,” Rainer said.

“They’re murderers. They kill for sport, and the treasure’s a bonus. Many are Sundering veterans. I was with a crew when we were driven from the Web and were forced to hole up in the Ketch Caverns. We fought for days, but were repelled. We ended up burrowing through the bottom of the continent and falling back to the surface to escape.”

“You fought in Tenueppo?” Doone asked.

“I was very young and didn’t know better. They abducted me from an estuary when I was a newborn and forced me to join one of their crews.”

“These pirates sound like some really bad eggs,” Rich said.

“They’re devils,” the cleric replied.

“Matters little,” Rainer said, “it’s a conditional pardon. And I’d like to be done soon, so I can get back my sweet dove.”

“I beg you, stay away.”

“We can’t do that.”

“Make sure to inform your people not to touch the leyline once it’s active,” Reed said, “For any reason.”

“How will we know if it’s active?” Kay’ki asked.

“You’ll know if it glows, it’s active, so don’t touch it.”

“Wha’ about wildlife? Can’t very well teach them, can we?”

“They’ll learn to avoid it on their own,” Pallas said. “Animals are smart like that. The leylines will eventually become buried in sediment so you won’t have to deal with this problem for long, anyway.”

“One last thing, cleric,” Reed said, “when we’re all done here, I’d like to talk with you some more. Study under you for a while, if that’s okay. I’m interested to learn more about magic.”

The cleric was silent.

That evening, they returned to the bottom of Trba’fohepi and assembled the node package there. The node stuck straight in the ground upon impact, so the crew’s efforts were mainly spent attaching the numerous reels, consoles, and peripheral components. Reed had made many smaller versions of these for his Pulnare expedition, so he did what he could, but found he was earnestly more useful deliberating tasks to the taller, stronger chainwearers. After the node’s construction was complete, they unraveled one of the leyline reels to the next node site.

Chapter 30.

The leythread was thick, but delicate. They discovered in bringing the reel up the mountain that attempting to use the lifeboats to fly from one node to the next while unraveling caused the thread to snap if it unraveled at any speed faster than walking. After a snail-like ascent, they connected to the Ludenscrown ley network and established contact with the Merbius. The connected leythread infused with magic, activating its inert enchantments. After this, it took on a rubbery pliancy and became almost impossible to break, not that they intended to. Reed and Farragut took special care not to touch it after this, lest they end up like Angelo. Moving forward, Reed and Farragut scouted fallen nodes from up in the lifeboat while the rest traveled on foot. That task delegation was favorable. Whenever Reed felt bored or listless during their surface travels, he would pull his pardon out from his shirt and admire it. It never crinkled, and in the thickest, mustiest biomes it never collected a speck of dirt. After two weeks, they had traveled and worked their way to the edge of the desert.

The Ank'her Desert air was opaque with swirling dust and haze, too much so for Farragut and Reed to be of any help in the air, so they rejoined their colleagues on the ground and Farragut took a turn unraveling. Sand enveloped the thread as soon as it touched the ground. Reed was thankful not to feel any pain from the sandstorm's deafening roar. Reed attempted to use his illumination trick on the sand ahead, but it only made it harder to see as the sand in the air was also lit up. Night fell swiftly. The crew held their pardons aloft, as they remained visible in the darkness. They walked in a straight line, eyes fixed on the pardon ahead, unable to see its carrier. Ignatius wandered off, but they chased him down before he managed to fade from sight. The group hunkered in place until light returned to the tempest.

Reed's feet sank with each step. Clumpy earth coated his fur and clothes. They encroached upon a large figure, the first node of three nodes in the desert. The desert sand cushioned the stake's drop, so the node had fallen sadly on its side. The party went to work setting up as they had done over ten times by now. As they attached the leyrod and clipped the leythread to it, the node hummed to life with a familiar glowing aura. The light worsened their distance visibility, as it made the immediate surrounding haze overly visible from refraction, similar to when Reed tried to illuminate their path. He plugged a fresh leyreel into the node's attachment port.

"Wha's this?" said a barely audible voice.

Reed froze, but the others kept working, having not heard anything through the sandstorm. From the violent dust cloud, an oblivious decapod came slithering to Reed's position. It passed right by him. The decapod approached the node, tapped it, and looked around.

"Anuvah one?" it said.

He didn't know if the decapod had even seen him, and didn't want to expose himself to discover it. Milly walked past the decapod and they both jumped back.

"*Chainfolk!* Wha' the hell is goin' on?!"

"Uh, uh–" Milly stammered.

Ignatius ran to them and stuck his hand out.

"Identify yourself," he said.

The decapod turned around like a flash and sprinted out of sight.

"It escaped," Ignatius said. "Shall I chase?"

"No, don't get lost," Milly said.

Ignatius informed Rainer about the decapod stranger. Concerned, Rainer reached out to the Merbius over the node's communicator.

"How many nodes do you have left to build?" Aquisteller asked.

"Only two," Rainer replied, "but they're in a harsh desert, and there's tell we might encounter some unfriendly locals. We saw one already, but he ran off."

"Doesn't sound unfriendly to me."

"Well, he might come back with his friends, is what I'm saying. We were specifically warned not to go here."

"I don't care. Finish the job."

"We've been told there's old decapod pirates from the Sundering War in this desert. We're not equipped for any kind of skirmish."

No response.

"Telly?" Rainer asked.

"You don't call me that."

"Well, did you hear me?"

"I did. Finish the job." The line clicked.

The node stopped humming as it had finished scanning the area. Rainer polled the party to determine whether they would press on or retreat to find weapons. Each node dropped with a cache where the additional components and the tools required to install them were held. At this node alone, they had a number of extra cables and arm-length wrenches, and at the next cache they would find more. The wrenches were hefty in hand, and could be used as a bludgeon if needed. For most, that was enough, so they embarked toward the next dropsite.

The sandstorm abated. Haze cleared from the sky but it did not brighten. The party was deep in the shadow of a massive mesa. It towered to the cloud layer and its shadow stretched across the horizon like a funeral pall. Reed illuminated their surroundings, for it was finally helpful to do. They trudged over dune tops and tripped over rocks. The sand here was especially fine, and did not catch the grip of their feet well. After hours of marching, Reed allowed his mind to go blank.

"Get down," Pallas whispered.

Pallas was prone, as were all in front of her. Reed dropped to all fours and Farragut crawled beside him.

"Why are we crawling?" he asked.

"I don't know. Pallas said to."

Reed shimmied to the front, where Rainer, Graham, and Krieger laid flat against the top of a sandbank, peeking over it. The node was just ahead. All around it were decapods, alert and scanning the desert, armed with iron clawguards, crossbows, and dented knives. They had built some rough fortifications around the fallen node using burlap bags and rock piles. The node was partially buried, and decapod sentries were piling more sand around it.

"What are they doing?" Reed asked.

"They must think we're coming," Krieger said.

"We *are* coming."

Ignatius reached their vantage point, and upon seeing the scene, leaped over the dune. The decapods immediately spotted him and formed ranks.

"Cease all tampering and disperse," he calmly ordered.

"The fire guy! He's real!" one yelled.

“I told you!”

“He came from that way!” one of them yelled, pointing a gauntlet at Reed’s position. At this, a sentry threw a bag from his belt on the ground. The bag split open, spilling more sand into the sand. From there, the sand swirled toward their dune in a snake-like path and burrowed down. After a second, the dune exploded, sending Reed, Krieger, Rainer, and Graham flying. Rainer’s cuffs shot out, and he brandished his wrench in a flawless aerial recovery. Pallas flew behind him, leading a squadron of raiders. Reed fell into the fine sand, reeling from the launch.

Ignatius changed color, and blasted a decapod with a rapid stream of blue flames. The decapod fell backwards, but rose unharmed. Rainer swooped and clocked him in the head with his spanner. A sentry infused a magical tornado into the piled up sand by the node, and directed the vortex at Rainer, trapping him inside. Krieger and Abner, now airborne, pulled a cable tight and soared to the tornado-wielder, wrapping it around his claw. It popped from the joint, and the decapod howled in pain. Sand poured from the joint. The tornado persisted despite its wielder's incapacitation. Rainer rewound his cuffs and fell from the spinning gusts, dropping his wrench.

Pallas was not making much headway against the decapods with her trick. Her air bullets pelted their thick shells, doing little to stun or damage them. Ignatius, too, struggled to make a difference in the fight, as his fire only pushed the decapods around without hurting them. Pallas dropped near Ignatius, his orange light emanating off her face.

“I am not hot enough for them,” he said.

Reed yelled, “Shoot *him*!” She fired into Ignatius’ flaming stomach. He expanded, and increased the size of his stream.

“Do that more,” Ignatius said.

Pallas dumped ten shots into Ignatius, who turned blue and engorged to the size of the node itself. Around his feet, the sand crystallized into rough glass shards, and each decapod upon which he fired was blown away. As they landed, the sand that wrapped around their feet and filled their gauntlets became glass, ensnaring them. Their movement was also slowed significantly, and one struggled to raise its arm or twist its torso.

"Fall back!" one yelled, and many did. The sentries retreated. The trapped ones cracked the glass around their feet and clinked and clattered into the desert, away from the node.

"They escaped, but I will not chase, so I do not get lost," Ignatius said.

Farragut found the leyreel nestled nearby in a divot, then connected the node to the main network. The decapods had pilfered the tools and some of the various node attachments from the drop cache, but thankfully left the leyrod alone as it was an otherwise unassuming peripheral. Rainer contacted the Merbius again.

"All done?" Aquisteller asked over the audio communicator.

"No," Rainer replied.

"Do me the favor of not wasting my time before the job is complete."

"This node was guarded by a large group of decapods. They found it before we did, and they were ready to fight. I have to believe they've also found the last one."

"And you think they're pirates from the Sundering? Ignatius, can you confirm?"

"I have not confirmed their identity as such, High Individuus," Ignatius said.

"Well, if *Captain Prewett* thinks they are, then we'll operate under the assumption that they are."

"Yes, High Individuus."

“Haven’t we done enough? Even if we build the node, the ones that get away will just destroy it once we’re gone.” Reed said.

“Tell you what,” Aquisteller replied, “in one day's time we’ll be in position above the last node. Once you get there, one of your pirates can fly up and bring more lifeboats down in case things get hairy. Sound fair?”

“They have magic, man, and none of our magic did anything against them,” Rainer said. The line clicked.

“He hung up on me!” Rainer yelled.

Milly gasped. “What an ass!”

“I’m sure if he were here and he heard you say that, he’d say that his ass has a pulse,” Reed said.

Milly tittered. “Was that a joke?”

Reed blushed.

Chapter 31.

Soon, they were out of the mesa's shadow and enjoyed the faded gray daylight that softly dispersed through the clouds above. They came upon the wreckage of an old ship, submerged halfway in the desert sands. Its dry, petrified wood was bleached white. At the top of its mast, a tan flag hung without a breeze for it to flap. Pallas pulled it out to investigate. A clawed Jolly Roger. The flag tore easily from its post, and rotten bits of it crumpled away like dust.

Doone pulled open a hatch, and hopped below deck. It was well-preserved with the gunholes shut so sand did not leak in. Rich cracked open a powder keg. Still full. He sealed the lid and carried it up.

"How long do you suppose that's been down here? Is it still good, do you think?" Pallas asked.

"Was the lid tight, Rich?" Rainer said. Rich nodded. "I imagine it's fine."

"Ignatius, you wanna carry that barrel?" Abner asked.

"Yes, I can carry it."

"*No!"* Pallas screamed. Abner laughed, and Krieger swatted him on the skull.

Each step up a dune pushed against Reed's feet, digging between his bare toes. Were it not for the endurance of undeath, this trip would have been impossible for him. But not once in their trek through the desert did he require Graham's shoulders.

Afternoon arrived and the pallid air turned golden orange. Reed, having not had one their entire expedition, took a turn holding the leyreel. He held it firm and let the thread sink into the sand between his heels. Ignatius gazed plaintively at the cloud layer, it having become his color. He howled a muted bellow to it, and returned to his march.

Pallas, who bore witness to his cry, said,

"O, in the dead of night, a fire sighs,
his ember'd whispers blend into the skies.
Was born of flame, in shadow now he lies.
With burning rage he waits for night's demise.

He dreams of dancing in the golden glow
and basking in his father's old chateau.
To leave behind the ashes, charred and low,
and soar on wings of flame he used to know.

This herald of the stellar patriarch,
bound to Aljana, flickers in the dark.
This captive of the night, this sighing spark,
each ev'ning scorns the Moon with cruel remark.

O, fire, yearning for your solar source,
in dreams, may you find solace on your course.
Though distant, may the sun still be your force,
and in His light, your wild soul endorse."

She sighed.

"I thought you weren't a poet anymore," Reed said.

"Why?"

Reed, in hindsight, could not remember why. It sounded silly, hearing it from his own mouth.

"I guess I assumed you gave it up because you liked being a pirate so much."

Pallas shook her head. "No. The truth is Da didn't want me serving in the army, even though *he* was a legate. They called him Edgaral the Cannon, and like the name implies, *his* air

bullets were like cannonballs. Destructive like you wouldn't believe. He never taught me the trick, of course, but I pieced it together on my own. When he found out, he enrolled me in seminary school. I got into a lot of trouble there, but, I don't know, I guess they straightened me out. I picked up writing after all, the *last* thing I ever saw myself doing."

"I have heard of Officer Edgaral," Ignatius said. "He is a man of honor and valor, and showed a great deal of love for his troops."

"Hm, so *that's* where it went."

"So you do like being a pirate," Reed said.

"To put it a certain way, yes, if only because it's a taste of my childhood ambitions that my Da denied me."

"It seems you found new ambition," Ignatius said.

Pallas blushed. "Well, I can enjoy them both, can't I?"

They trekked further into the desert, each footstep disrupting the perfect lines drawn in the dunes. Pallas was suddenly prone again, so Reed dropped too.

"Are we there yet? Are there crabs?" he asked.

"Unclear. Crawl up and ask," she said.

He did so. Graham, Milly, Abner, Rainer, and Doone were peeking past a jagged boulder with saltpeter marbled throughout.

"How many are there?"

"None," Graham replied.

In the distance, the final node lay unguarded in a graveyard of shipwrecks, each bearing worn flags. Many were cracked open, some were intact, all lying in the sand.

"Should we do it now since there's nobody here?" Reed asked.

“Don’t be hasty. They could be hiding in those ships. It’s impossible to say how many there are,” Rainer said.

“Shouldn’t we get the lifeboats?”

“They’ll see us. We should wait ‘til it’s dark.” Rainer held his hand out, and Reed could tell any follow-up interrogation was not welcome. He waited, sitting out of sight from the wreckage, and allowed Rainer time to strategize. Dusk washed away all color from the clouds. Reed remained seated, idly observing his own wobbling shadow on the rock cast by Ignatius’ warm light. When Rainer noticed Reed’s shadow, horrified realization possessed his face.

“Oh, no,” Rainer said.

Hmm?

“We’re exposed,” he said. “The fire– Ignatius– you gotta run away from us, right now!” Ignatius burst down the dune, longways around the wreckage.

“Ms. Pallas, back him up. Krieger, Ab, get the lifeboats.”

As he said this, Ignatius shot his flames, pushing back three ferocious decapods. Several crabs in pursuit lobbed gunpowder sacks at Ignatius, which staggered but otherwise dealt no appreciable harm to the automaton. The twins, the Westcotts, and the other noncombatants fled into the darkness, away from the ships, but Reed stayed. All the raiders flew up, and Reed grabbed the leyreel.

“Where’s the– okay, you’ve got it. Mr. Reed, run straight for the node. You unspool and we’ll protect you as best we can. Quick and quiet,” Rainer said.

Rich, Plunger, Graham, and Milly walked in formation with Reed at the center. Doone brought up the rear and Rainer hovered overhead as they ran down the desert slope toward the final node. Reed paid little attention to his surroundings or his colleagues. His only concern was

not tripping on the snags and planks of fallen ship debris in his way. To his right, clangs and yelps. To his left, a sharp battlecry and a thud. Left foot, right foot. A series of subterraneous explosions swept sand across Reed's face. He did not stop.

Once again, the drop cache at the node had been looted, but the leyrod was left alone. Reed clipped the thread to the rod, and the node hummed in response. The leyline infused, illuminating their footsteps and the fallen decapods in their path. Their task was complete. The only thing left was to hold out for Krieger and Abner to return with the lifeboats.

"Cut the line!" a speckled, red decapod yelled.

His companion swung its claw at the leyline. In a flash, the decapod turned to stone. *Just like Angelo,* Reed thought. The speckled decapod roared, and charged Reed with sword in claw. Graham rushed to Reed and parried the blow. Sword against wrench, Graham struck the scuttling pirate. A spark flung from the point of their clash into the decapod's eye, and it recoiled. Graham seized the tempo to mercilessly wail on the crab's limbs and carapace. Its sword claw popped from its shoulder joint, and fell to the dust. Sand poured from the opening.

"I'm not a fighter!" he yelled.

"You seem to be doing fine," Milly said.

Graham smiled. "You're sweet, honey. Reed, get on the line and tell 'em to hurry up!" Reed contacted Aquisteller on the communicator.

"The final node's up and running, but there's a *lot* of enemies here."

"Your friends just arrived. They're in the docking bay now."

"Tell them to hu–"

Everything lit up. Reed flinched. Instantly, it was like day, brighter than any day they'd spent below the clouds.

“Shoot them down!” cried a voice.

The flying raiders, who had been striking from the darkness, were now plainly visible. Farragut, still stunned, took a crossbow bolt to the knee, and he spun to the ground. Reed frantically surveyed the battlefield. When he identified the source of the light, his heart sank. Amid the wreckage, standing atop the crow’s nest of a broken ship was a decapod with spiked claws and a white robe, shining like the sun.

“Tell them what?” Aquisteller said.

Reed hung up the line.

“Lestrid?!” Reed yelled.

“I begged you not to come, kid,” the cleric said.

“I got you your pardon!”

“I’m sorry. You were 150 years too late.”

“You said the pirates were devils! Why are you in line with them?”

The cleric sighed. “Sorry I let you down. Sor– yep, sorry, that’s all I can say.” He raised a claw, and produced a streak of pure light that knocked Reed down. It burned through his coat, and seared a streak on his shoulder. Reed grabbed the wound, feeling no pain. The cleric, with another perfect streak, skewered Rainer through his stomach with dead aim, and he fell into a pile of wreckage. He fired again, and nailed Teddy in his stomach. Pallas flew to the ground near Ignatius and took cover. Rich took a running start, and lobbed his powder keg at the cleric. With a wicked fast claw, Lestrid sniped it at the height of its arc, and it exploded midair, giving Rich just enough time to scramble back into cover.

“Lez! Lez!” the decapod pirates cheered.

Reed cowered behind the node. He felt betrayed. Reed had planned to apprentice under the cleric after this whole business was finished. That dream was impossible now. He crept to the communicator and contacted Aquisteller again.

"Where are the lifeboats?" he asked.

"You hung up on me," Aquisteller snidely replied.

"WHERE ARE THE LIFEBOATS? We need them NOW!" Reed yelled.

"Have your hands full down there, do you?"

"They're swarming us!"

"And you're sure it's pirates, then?"

"Yes!"

"M'kay. Well listen, Reed. I'd love to waste two lifeboats on a gaggle of worthless, murdering zombies, but the presence of pirates from the Sundering complicates things a bit. They all have DDTs, after all. My options are limited." He snickered. "No, I won't be sending lifeboats. In fact, my only legal and ethical recourse in this situation is to send bombs instead to wipe out all the confirmed DDT targets."

Reed was speechless.

"Aaand you won't be surviving *this* one," Aquisteller said, with a sing-songy voice that crackled over the communicator.

"You better hope I don't," Reed said.

The line went silent.

"If it wasn't clear, I *do* hope you don't." Aquisteller clicked his tongue. "*But* you won't. You'll be lucky if there's *dust* left of you. I'm going to glass this whole desert." Click.

Still no lifeboats from the cloud layer. He peeked at the cleric, and the cleric met his gaze. Reed spied a hint of sadness in the old crab's eyes, but no sooner had he seen this did the cleric fire a perfect shot at Reed's stomach. Reed crumpled to the sand. It covered his clothes, his fur, sunk into his shoulder, and coated his tongue. High up, four bombs submerged from the cloud layer.

He's going to glass the whole desert. Those words burned in his memory. *Glass the whole desert.*

Time slowed.

***Glass** the **whole desert**.*

Reed contemplated the coarse grains between his toes, in his mouth, on his coat. Their texture, size, volume. He stuck his paws into the desert sands and called upon every ounce of strength within him, drawing more and more and more of his stamina. He found it to be limitless. The restless vigor of the dead. He pictured the entire desert in his head, projecting a mental image of every river of sand and hill and curve, every peak and valley on their path here. His memory of the cleric's maps was precise. His memory of their journey was perfect.

This better work.

He drew more strength from the cockles of his soul, and all at once, infused a sandman jinx into the desert.

Chapter 32.

Sand shot skyward. It flung off Reed's clothes and out of his mouth into the air. The node destabilized as sand pulled out from underneath. Reed lost his footing, and entered a freefall alongside the node. He landed hard on his butt onto bedrock. All around, wreckage crashed to the porous stone that once cradled the desert. Some ships, however, were lifted and crushed within the swirling mass of floating sand. The decapods too were rising to the mass as if drawn in by a black hole, having filled themselves with that same sand. One by one the floating desert swallowed them. Reed spotted the screaming cleric, still glowing, helpless to stop his ascent. He examined his stomach. A hole had burnt through his shirt, right where Lestrid shot him. However, his pardon, which he had tucked into his shirt, was still in perfect condition, having completely diffused the cleric's attack. Reed sighed.

"Sorry I didn't come sooner," he whispered, as the cleric's light dimmed within the liquid sand.

The massive, spinning ball clumped into a bright red goo. The bombs plunged into its mass and sank as if submerged in gelatin. Their blurry silhouettes sank to the center and burst, creating a bubble within the glass that quickly reformed. Not a drop of molten sand was spilt.

Rainer walked over to Reed. The gaping hole in his stomach didn't faze him. Reed could see right through to the other side.

"Wow," Rainer said, gazing at the opaque, red orb in the sky.

"Yeah, wow," Reed replied, then shook his head. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't brag,"

"No, you *should* brag. This is amazing."

"How's your, uh, stomach?"

"Chicks dig scars."

Reed squinted. “I don’t know if that applies to... wait, that’s a joke.”

Rainer laughed.

“So that cloudy bastard actually bombed us,” Rainer said. “I mean, we have to kill him, right?”

“That might be tough. He’s a High Individuus.”

The massive sandman bed finally cooled, leaving a giant floating ball of translucent, yellow glass. Trapped inside were three dozen broken ships and two hundred decapod pirates, frozen in freefall. Left like this, they would suffocate, and Reed was in no rush to aid them. From the cloud layer, four more bombs fell, screaming like bats in their descent.

“He did it again!” Reed yelled.

The bombs fell into the glass blob, but it caught them gently like a giant pillow. The bombs nestled into the top of the sandman bed, and came to a stop, resting in their indents.

“Oh...” Reed said, “hmm.”

“Wow,” Rainer said, sounding almost disappointed that there was no explosion.

“Is that my bed?” Parrot yelled.

Two more bombs exited the cloud layer.

“Wow, this guy won’t let up,” Rainer said.

The bombs stopped in midair just above the other ones, almost as if they were examining them. They changed course and flew down along the side of the massive glass blob. As they drew closer, Reed saw them not as bombs, but as Krieger and Abner, who descended along the edge of the giant sandman bed, then landed next to Rainer.

Abner made a do-you-care-to-explain kind of look.

“Hey, they’re taking off, like, the ship is leaving,” Krieger said.

“You weren’t able to get lifeboats?” Reed asked.

“We never found our way on board...” Abner replied. “When we got to the ship, it was sealed tight. Krieger couldn’t figure out how to get in, so really, it’s mostly his fault.”

“*You* couldn’t figure it out, either!” Krieger snapped. Abner snickered.

“We’re all going up this time. Mr. Reed, do you care to join?” Rainer asked.

“Yes.”

“Love that attitude!”

Rainer’s cuffs unfurled, and he cradled Reed like a baby.

“Everyone on me! The rest of you, stay put!”

Ignatius shot up like a rocket, fire trailing from his legs. Reed didn’t know he could fly. All the raiders shook their cuffs out and joined Rainer’s ascent above the clouds.

They plowed through the stratus blanket. The Merbius had not made much headway in its escape. The raiders formed up like wild geese, riding each other’s windbreak to catch the floating fortress. Ignatius could not match their speed, so Pallas fired a couple shots at him. Each one pumped him full of color, and he soared past them to the ship’s hull. They flew just outside the docking bay doors, but they were closed.

“Mr. Ignatius,” Rainer said, “the ship is sealed from the outside. Would you be able to melt through the hull?”

“The wall is thick, but if the lady feeds me, I can,” he said, pointing to Pallas.

“Feed him, lady,” Abner said.

Pallas shot Abner in the face, sending him hurtling down the side of the Merbius. Krieger laughed. She then fired rapidly into Ignatius, and everyone gave him plenty of berth as he expanded and then compressed into a white color. He set his hand on the hull, and it glowed

white at his touch. Pieces of wrought iron dripped like magma. Metal warped around him as he bored deeper into the solid plate wall. Eventually, he returned from the hole, still white with heat.

"You may now enter. I must expel this excess. Please stand back."

He blew fire away from the ship until he was orange again. Rainer entered the hole, carrying Reed. The hole joined the floor at an odd elevation, allowing access to both the docking bay, and the brig above it, so they went up, and found themselves in an open cell. Reed illuminated the room.

"My hero!" Angel cried.

She stood clutching the bars of an adjacent cell, locked in with Bainbridge, and the Decaturs. Rainer rushed to her side.

"My dove! What are you doing here?"

"They put us in the brig when we protested the bombing. They didn't even give us the chance to get physical, they just locked us up!"

"High Individuus Aquisteller cannot hold you. This is an illegal arrest," Ignatius said. "It will go in my report."

"Who do you report to?" Reed asked.

"The High Individuus."

"So, your plan is to report that Aquisteller broke the law *to Aquisteller*?"

"Yes."

"Tell Belos instead," Reed said.

Ignatius paused in thought. "The protocol is unconventional, but the subtext of your rhetoric leads me to believe that it is the wiser decision."

"Can you melt these bars?" Rainer asked.

“Stand back.”

He ripped the cell door off its hinges, then turned to free the other four captured Prewetts. Angel gingerly put her arm through Rainer’s stomach hole and gave him a familiar do-you-care-to-explain kind of look. He grabbed her hand from behind his back and pulled her forearm further into the hole. Her forehead landed on his lips, and they both giggled. Reed cringed.

“Shall we?” Angel said, wiping her arm off.

“You read my mind, dove. Let’s get a couple of these lifeboats and vamoose!”

“No,” Ignatius said, “to hijack an Individui aerial vessel would force action on my part.”

“You’re just a hot, flaming buzzkill, aren’tcha?” Angel said.

“Be not mistaken. I am merely advising against any action that would jeopardize your free departure from this ship.”

“*Be not mistaken,*” Angel repeated, mimicking his cadence, her last hurrah of disagreement.

“Insult is legally protected,” Ignatius said.

“I can’t just sit here and do nothing,” Rainer said, “so let’s shake the tree and see what falls!”

He hopped down to a lifeboat through the hole in the melted floor, then scrambled out to a voice pipe by the door.

“*Telly to the docking bay*. Your mother is here, and she’s fully nude. She’s requesting your presence for a *sultry* encounter. And as a personal note, you’re very lucky, sir; she’s quite beautiful if you can look past the fat rolls.”

Click.

Chapter 33.

"YOU ARE DEAD WHEN I FIND YOU!" Aquisteller yelled back through the pipes. Rainer cackled, and his laughter infected the whole crew who were present.

"Hey, I can rile him up, right?" Rainer asked Ignatius. "Nothin' illegal about that?"

"Insult is legally protected."

Rainer giggled, and picked up the voice pipe again.

"Ahoy, Telly, me again. Mama's getting impatient. If you don't hurry up, I may have to step in for you." Click.

A minute passed. The ship's emergency sirens started to wail, but Aquisteller still had not yet arrived.

Rainer picked up the receiver. "Hoy hoy, son, it's your new dad. Wow, what a woman. Supple, passionate, really the complete package. Anyway, we're *still* in the docking bay if you want my sloppy seconds. I can maybe have Reed offer directions if you're lost, though you may have to wait... he's currently indisposed. Beat you to the punch, in a manner of speaking. Sloppy thirds!" Click.

"That's disgusting," Reed said.

Rainer blew kisses to his wife. "You know you're still #1, lovey dove."

She rolled her eyes.

"Reed, you should totally say something!" Rainer said, high on his own antics. He motioned for Reed to join him at the voice pipe.

"Hi, it's me, Reed," Reed said, "Uh, I am done with your mother. Now I am also your new–"

The docking bay bulkhead slammed open, and Reed dropped the receiver. Aquisteller entered the room, holding the bulkhead door for balance. He panted, snout wrinkled and veiny eyes wide, scanning the room for malcontents. Sweat dripped from his chin.

"Oh, Tellster, you're here, finally," Rainer said with a cocky smile, "we were worried about you, matey, thought you might have gotten–"

"YOU'RE ALL DEAD!" Aquisteller screamed.

Rainer pursed his lips.

"No, High Individuus, they are free to leave," said Ignatius.

Aquisteller squinted and inhaled. "What did you say to me?" His sweat hastened and fell in thick beads. It pooled around his flat feet and with more the consistency of water than sweat.

"They are free to leave, so you are compelled to release them."

The black cloudwalker's eyes widened, and the corners of his lips raised slightly. His fur was soaked, and the bottom of his chin dripped like a faucet.

"I'll tell you what I'm *compelled to do*," he said.

He pushed his hands together and formed a circle with his fingers. From the circle, a geyser of water erupted at Ignatius, and the room filled with steam. The floor became drenched, and when the steam cleared, the giant fire automaton was gone.

"Ignatius?!" Pallas yelled.

The raging leader of Nigh-on-High, his dripping hands trembling from the violent attack, turned his attention to Rainer and Reed.

"Let's clean out your *filthy* mouths," Aquisteller said.

Rainer darted to the ceiling but forgot to take Reed with him. Another cannon of water burst from Aquisteller's hands, pinning Reed against the wall and battering him mercilessly with

ballistic liquid, each droplet a needle, each gallon a punch. It shredded Reed's clothes to ribbons. The torrent waned, giving Reed a moment to spit up water and wipe his eyes. Aquisteller froze in place with a mix of rage and fear on his face as Angel pressed him against the bulkhead. She held a small knife at his throat.

In the middle of the steam-filled docking bay, a puddle magically rose up. Angel noticed and pushed her blade tight into Aquisteller's neck, producing a trickle of blood that mixed into his damp fur.

"Stop it! Right now!" she yelled.

"Ack! That's not me!" he said, choking.

The puddle spread vertically and flattened to a mirror. Colored refraction like swirling soap formed in the center, took shape, and an image of Belos appeared.

"Finally some clean water. I heard–"

He paused, glancing around the room.

"It's not what it looks like!" Angel said.

"It's exactly what it looks like! Help me, Belos!" Aquisteller yelled.

Angel threw the cloudwalker to the floor and dropped the knife.

"Aquisteller attacked us, your Inhabitancy. See for yourself. The room is flooded with his water magic," Bainbridge said.

"They lie!"

"It is a serious thing to make such an accusation of malfeasance and impropriety against a High Individuus," Belos said. "Where is Ignatius? He will no doubt give an honest account of what transpired here."

Aquisteller went cold in the face.

“Ignatius is dead. Aquisteller drowned him,” Reed said, blowing water from his nose.

“He– he threatened me...”

“Telly,” Belos said with a somber tone, his antennae lowering, “*that* I cannot believe.”

Reed coughed up a lungful of water.

“We’ll discuss your future with the High Individui later. For now, bring the Merbius back to Golis Obscura.”

Aquisteller’s jaw hung slack. He stared blankly at the cold, wet floor, and at Belos. His eyes became watery, though from tears or his own magical moisture one could not determine. He grit his teeth.

“Don’t,” Belos said.

Aquisteller sucked in air, and adjusted his stance, planting his feet evenly spaced from his shoulders. His pupils disappeared, and strange light shone from behind him as all his fur became slick with condensation.

“Don’t!” Belos yelled.

“INSTANT OCEAN!”

Water spewed from every inch of Aquisteller’s body, but in a flash, Belos wrapped his mirror around the gushing cloudwalker in all directions like a cubic prism. It rapidly filled up, and Aquisteller floated to the middle, screaming bubbles. His body seized, and his eyes turned bloody. His skin ruptured, and the water in the cube became a murky red, obscuring him from sight. Belos sighed. He unwrapped the cube. Offal spilled into the docking bay along a river of bloody water. Bainbridge cranked open a drop hatch so it could drain from the room. Belos slumped over his desk, his head hunched into his claw-like hands.

“I am sorry you had to experience that,” he said.

“Are you alright?” Reed asked.

“I just watched one of my oldest friends get crushed to death by barometric pressure from six different angles. Realistically, I should take some time to decompress from that.”

“Pun intended?” Abner asked. Belos’ antenna twitched. Krieger chuckled, which threw Abner off guard.

“Captains Prewett and Prewett, please take temporary command of this ship and bring it back to Golis Obscura for me. If you could do that, I’d be in your debt,” Belos said.

Rainer flew down from the ceiling. “Uh, aye, sir.”

“I’ll inform the crew about the change of leadership, then, I don’t know what,” Belos said, shivering. “I’ll figure something out.”

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Reed asked.

Belos waved a claw. “I’ll be fine. You just– you have no idea the amount of paperwork that comes with killing a High Individuus.”

“Oh...” Reed said, “you’re dreading the paperwork?”

“I knew you wouldn’t understand,” Belos said. He slipped away from view and the mirror burst.

Chapter 34.

That evening, the Prewetts took the lifeboats to reclaim the crew who were left on the surface. Reed stayed behind. His favorite coat, and his shirt and silver tie, were tattered rags after Aquisteller's trick. He had put his pardon in his coat pocket, so his old, red tie was unharmed, and Reed was thankful he could reclaim some small piece of dignity. Dripping and naked with his tie dragging along the floor, Reed walked to the laundry room, using his pardon to cover his berries. Probably the most expensive loin cloth in history.

On a flat cot, a stack of sailor outfits rested, pressed and starched. All of them were chainwearer sized, but Reed took a short-sleeved buttoned shirt and tried it on. It fit loose around his neck and drooped to his ankles. He wrapped his red tie around his waist like a belt. This outfit would be fine until they got to the city.

Reed made his way to the bridge, where the mood was frosty. Angel was affecting an erratic, authoritative tone to her orders, assigning strange, appearance-based nicknames to each of the crew members and micromanaging their sitting posture. She rushed to Reed's side.

"I have no idea how to command a real ship," she whispered. "Nice shirt, by the way."

"What? Just do it normal," Reed replied.

"I can't. It's different here for some reason. I feel like I have to be all official and stuff."

"No, just do it normal. This is not what 'official' looks like."

Angel grimaced, then addressed the crew. "Belay all previous orders!" she barked. "We're doin' it normal!"

The Prewetts and Reed's friends were met warmly upon their return to the Merbius. At dawn, they set off for Unnafirma. They never returned for the cleric's research.

It was sundown and the ship was enjoying a smooth cruise back to Unnafirma. Reed took a few glasses and clean plates from the galley to an empty office near the officer's quarters, and shut the door behind him. It was barely an office, just a desk with a simple oil lamp and wooden chair in an empty room with no windows. Reed pushed the furniture against the wall and laid his dishes out on the floor. Sitting on the ground, he grabbed an empty wine glass. He held it aloft, and infused some kind of magic similar to dismissing a sandman jinx. The glass twitched. He tried again, but harder. Same twitch, no stronger or weaker than the first time. He scooched back and placed the glass on the ground such that it was in the center of the floor, then closed his eyes, lifting it straight vertically. *Break*, he thought. He infused again. A hairline crack around the rim. *Break*. The crack expanded. *Break!* The stem of the glass snapped, and both ends fell out of Reed's paw to the floor, shattering.

Good, he thought, *now I'm getting somewhere.*

After an hour, Reed had ground all the glasses and ceramic plates down to fine sand and dry clay dust using only his magic.

Reed felt the sand between his fingers. *Move*, he thought, *the principle of the sandman bed must be reducible to this. Move!* A few grains fell to the floor, possibly only displaced by the air of his paw as it quivered an inch above. *Move!* The sand drifted to the side. It slipped along itself like a soft, crashing tide, following Reed's finger everywhere it went, tickling his hairs. *Yes!* Undistracted by hunger or sleepiness, he continued long into the night, until the lamp went dry, which was fine because Reed could light the room on his own. Many hours passed, which he spent manipulating his sand and clay into little shapes.

A knock on the door broke his concentration. Milly entered the room. Reed's sand circled around him like the islands in the planet's orbit. Some had been compacted into clumps, or clay

rocks, or glass shapes. She knelt to eye level with him, but Reed was in a compromising position on the floor and didn't want her seeing under his shirt, so he sprung to his feet.

"Did you do all this?" she asked. Reed nodded sheepishly.

"Have you been in this room the whole flight, teaching yourself geomancy?" She smirked.

"I saw what I could do in the desert and wanted to see what else I could manage. It's a lot harder this way, it turns out."

"I'd think this would be easier than that."

"Well, I already knew how to do it. I had instructions. This stuff I'm figuring out all on my own, so cut me some slack."

"I'm not teasing!" she said. "I think it's impressive."

Reed smiled.

"Come in. Shut the door. I want to show you what I've come up with," Reed said.

She did so.

The rocks and clumps and glass all decomposed to sand and dust again, and swooped to the ground at Milly's feet. They formed a sphere. The sphere's surface populated with hundreds of moving pebbles and rocks drifting along its perimeter at different elevations. Finally, Reed employed the illumination trick to color the sphere, becoming white on the bottom while all the pebbles sparkled with flecks of blue and green.

"What is this?" she asked, entranced by Reed's intricate display which slowly spun on a central axis.

"It's Aljana. This is what it must look like from space."

Milly covered her mouth with a hand.

“It’s beautiful.”

Reed pointed at the largest rock in the sphere’s orbit.

“That one there is Unnafirma.”

“Oh! You reminded me. We’re here! We arrived in the city an hour ago and everyone’s been looking for you.”

“Why didn’t you use the intercom?”

She giggled. “We did, knucklehead.”

Reed laughed. “Wow, I must have really been in the zone.”

They exited the ship together.

Chapter 35.

The entire crew entered the city of Golis Obscura, and were shepherded from the docks to École D'Obscura's Stadium of Ceremony by a well-staffed military escort. As they walked through the wide-open city streets, Reed was enlivened by the wealth of greenery around the ornate, stone facades that towered like mountains along the road without suffocating the urban traffic. There was not a cobblestone out of place on the walkway, and the metropolitan citizens who turned their heads with interest at their procession were all clean, cheerful, and appropriately dressed for the temperate, sunny weather. Boxed sweetroses along the lane filled the warm air with the fragrance of berries and peaches. Truly, this city was the jewel of the modern world.

Trumpeteers heralded their arrival as they passed through the promethium-spangled gate to the Stadium of Ceremony. The colosseum stands were empty, but the central field had a stage erected, where Belos and Jane Hooker stood shoulder to shoulder wearing dark, woolen gowns with golden tassels.

"Hi, guys!" Jane Hooker said with a bubbly, corporate disposition. "Thanks for coming! Line up and we can get this ceremony started!"

Belos waved. His exoskeleton was considerably pale and his antennae dangled limp over his tired compound eyes.

"I'll be running point on our little show today," Jane said.

"First, congratulations on a *very* successful mission completion! With your outstanding efforts, you have broken through a five century-long diplomacy stone wall to the surface. Really, job well done!" She clapped, and the military escort applauded in turn.

“Furthermore, we wish to offer our sincerest apologies on behalf of our colleague. What his deal was, I’ll never know. Regardless, fair compensation is in order!” She motioned with her finger. The guards marched behind the stage, and came out carrying jingling chests. They proceeded to leave a chest at the foot of each person.

“4,000 Silver Scales, each! Furthermore, we have ordered the construction of a brand new custom-built Individui battlegalley, complete with aviary, to replace the ship you lost. The ship is yours as soon as it’s complete, however, we would also like to offer you the chance to return to the skies, not as pirates, but as privateers in service of the Individui aerial armada.”

“What would that entail?” Angel asked.

“You would retain *most* of your autonomy. You can carry on with your avian business ventures without fear of harassment on our part. But it also means no more hijacking tugboats. Additionally, you may be summoned during wartime when civilian commerce is disrupted to do this or that.”

“*This or that?*” Angel replied, “I’ll have to discuss it with my co-captain.”

“Take all the time you wish. Your replacement ship won’t be ready for another six weeks, so you have until then to return with your decision. So, that’s it! You’re all free to go, or stay, up to you. We won’t bother you anymore.”

“Just like that, it’s over?” Graham asked.

“That is a *great* question, and thank you *so* much for asking it, sir.”

“Uh, you’re welcome?”

“*Damn, she’s good*,” Abner whispered.

The ceremony concluded, so the crew hauled their chests to a campus building where lodging had been arranged for them during their stay in the city.

“Reed,” Jane Hooker said, “stay behind, please.”

They waited until everyone left.

“Look, uh, if you’d like to become a professor, the option’s still open,” Jane said.

“Hm?”

“Fraucus says he’ll take you back.” She produced an envelope from a pocket in her robes.

“No offense, but I have no interest in crawling back to Fraucus Ehrewold after he turned me in.”

Jane shrugged, pocketed the envelope, then produced from the same pocket an ivory case with a tiny, metal latch. Inside were six flat, dark stones with curved grooves along them.

“These are slipoliths. They’re only for Council members. They’ll take you *anywhere* one way. Use one if you ever want to come back. Otherwise, if you’re ever called upon to join a Council meeting, use one to slip to Seat 120 in the auditorium chamber. I trust you remember where that is.”

“I’m still on the Council? After all that?”

“Naturally. The automaton problem still exists. We were hasty in our judgment this time, but the Council is historically quite accurate in our rulings on plausible threats. If you run low on slipoliths, again, go to the auditorium. You can get replacements there.”

“I used one of these already.”

She sniffled, and adjusted her glasses. “Yeah, we’re still foggy on how you managed that. Normally this requires training just to get your magical reserves high enough to *practice* using them. You sure you’re not some prodigy?”

“Definitely not. Prior to dying, I couldn’t do a single jinx without getting tired.”

“Were you tired after slipping for the first time?”

Reed thought for a second. “Not that I remember.”

“Well, it didn’t look *to me* that you were tired at the time.”

“You were watching me?”

“Naturally,” Jane said, “but someone advised me to observe the situation before apprehending you and your friends, so I watched from the trees as they rescued everyone inside the inn. That touched me. And then all of the collateral victims revived, and instantly you all saw to their wellbeing. What position was I then in to quash an ongoing act of selflessness and compassion? You must have known something I didn’t, so I elected not to pursue. Aquisteller remained... unconvinced, and he didn’t like that I let you leave, so he ordered the DDT.”

“Who advised *you*?”

“Hoo indeed.”

Reed attempted to levitate his chest of silver coins to the dormitory. It budged, but not by much. When a guard assigned to Reed’s escort offered to carry it for him, Reed refused, electing to drag it to the dorm himself. After 20 minutes of valiant effort but little distance, the guard took the chest anyway.

Reed was assigned his own room at the dormitory, so he carried on with his experimentation. He could move a coin through the air, but breaking it down was much more difficult. For hours, he focused on manipulating one of his Silver Scales, but it did not so much as dent, let alone bend or break. He smushed his hand against the face of the coin until its scale had imprinted into his palm. After a day of tireless infusion, he gave up on breaking the coin. He did find, however, that he was able to lift all the coins in the chest, which was a definite consolation to his efforts. Reed gathered the coins into a clump and formed them into a rat-sized silver throne. He sat in it and floated himself in circles around his room, very pleased at this

discovered application. Then, he wrapped the coins around his feet like metal boots, and walked to the ceiling as if up an invisible staircase, but lost his balance and teetered upside-down. The coins held up, leaving Reed dangling from his levitating boots, and he let himself down gently.

The next day, Reed went into the city. Graham and Milly accompanied, eager to do some sightseeing. He bought a new shirt and slacks from a rat-run open air market in some uptown plaza. They didn't have a coat that suited his tastes. Everything was too gauche or too clean. Really, he wanted his old coat back. Graham politely turned down a gaggle of panhandling kits, but Milly slipped them a Scale while his back was turned, and Reed did the same.

They arrived at Reed's true reason for the excursion, a shop called Books Unbelivre. Its storefront stretched along the entire city block. Books Unbelivre was well-known in underground academic circles as *the* place to go on Unnafirma to buy textbooks. Some dedicated superfans would journey to this shop from all over Aljana just to browse, and in Individui lecture culture one could not find a more prestigious stage than the Unbelivre coffee lounge, humble as it may appear to the outsider. With his sack full of silver, Reed piled his tote high with books ranging from beginner's magic to advanced geomantic principles and theoretical phosphomancy. An original inhabitant sharing Reed's aisle was peering through book spines when Reed added a book called *A Treatise on Tropothermal Albedo* to his second shopping bag.

"Doing some light reading?" the inhabitant asked.

"What?" Reed was caught off guard.

The inhabitant snickered. "*Light* reading. It's a joke, like, that book you just grabbed is actually quite dense, but its subject material is literally about light, so *light* reading."

"O-oh," Reed said, faking a smile.

"Can I see what you've picked out so far?"

The bug was nosy but Reed figured it was innocent academic interest, so he agreed. The inhabitant rummaged through the shopping sacks, and cocked her head. She held up two books side-by-side, and chittered with curiosity.

“You shopping for your kid?” she asked.

“Nope, just me.”

“*Grade One Magic?*” she asked. “*Conceptual Wavelength Refraction and Corporeal Hyperfluorescence?* Don’t you think these books are a bit, uh, far apart from each other?”

“Well, I’m starting from scratch and I don’t want to have to make another trip.”

“You’re learning light magic from scratch?”

“I’m certainly trying.”

“Well, I’m doing my tenure research right now on phosphomancy,” she declared with a smug lilt, “if you want the whole gamut of knowledge get rid of these books,” she took three specialized books out of Reed’s bags, then grabbed two off the shelf and slipped them in their place, “and buy *these* instead. The instructions in these build on each other and generally the knowledge is curated more foundationally than anything else published.”

“Really? Thank you very much,” Reed said. “Can you offer similar recommendations for geomancy books?”

The inhabitant gave a confused smile.

“Geomancy? Seriously?” Now Reed gave a confused smile.

“Why? What’s wrong with it?”

“No, it’s just, what would you want to learn *that* for? Most Individui I’ve ever known give up on geomancy, especially since the most you can hope to get with it is some engineering Joe job stacking quarry rocks. Plus, it’s notoriously difficult.”

“Oh, no, I figured it out on my own, I’m just looking for guidance.”

“You figured it out *on your own*?”

“Is that difficult?”

“*Is that difficult?* Okay, well, good luck on your tenure, buddy.”

“I’m already tenured, but thank you.”

The inhabitant scoffed and excused herself.

Reed rejoined Graham and Milly at the front and the bookstore clerk rang up Reed’s three bags of textbooks.

“We can help carry,” Graham said.

“That won’t be necessary,” the clerk interjected, “for an order of this size, we can arrange transport at no additional cost.”

“That’s great!” Milly said. “We’re staying at the Preston Hall Dormitory near École D’Obscura, can you send it there?”

“Certainly,” the clerk replied.

“Is it still free to have it shipped off of Unnafirma?” Reed asked. Milly glanced uneasily at him.

“Ah, no, there would be a fee.”

“That’s fine. Have the books sent to 1 Love Ranch on Scratch Flat Rat Reservation, Great Web Island R99-2.”

Milly knelt.

“Are you going home?” she asked.

Reed licked the corner of his mouth. “I think so, yeah.”

“How long have you been planning this?”

“Just now, when that guy asked where I wanted the books to go. I think I want to go home.”

“Oh,” Milly said, crestfallen. “I always had the impression that you didn’t think much of your family.”

“Yeah, well, I may have given that impression. But now I miss them. I’d like to go back, and stay with them for a while. I don’t know. Maybe I’ve just been feeling wistful lately now that we did what we set out to do. Plus, I’ve fallen into this disappointing trap of hero worship one too many times. It’s time I took charge of my own studies, and my own life. I feel ready for it.”

“We’ll certainly miss you,” Graham said.

“You might want to think about going home yourself, guys. Even if you do give your family a spook, it might not be terrible if you visited them, let them know you’re *technically* okay.”

Back at the dormitory, Reed went to his room to mentally prepare for his departure announcement to the rest of the crew. However, after a minute of pacing in his room without any good ideas, he decided no preparation was best, and went to the mess hall.

Most were there, but the room was quiet. Their plaintive expressions told Reed the jig was up.

“I knew the day would come when you’d get fed up with me, Reed-man,” Abner said.

“C’mon, guys, that was my news to share,” Reed replied.

“Sorry,” Milly said, half-smiling.

Rainer smirked. “So, you wanna leave the company, do ye? You’ll, of course, have to buy out, same as how you bought in. What do you think a fair buyout price is, honey?”

“4000 Scales,” Angel said.

Reed balked. “What?! I just spent some of my– you can’t–”

“They’re just teasing,” Bainbridge said, “there’s no buyout. You’re free to go, Reed.” Reed fell into a crowd of hugs, from which nobody drew any warmth, but that wasn’t the point. He shook Bainbridge’s hand, and Rainer’s.

“Take care of my scouts,” Reed said.

“You sure you want to leave?” Rainer asked.

“I might come back. As a *contractor*,” Reed said, “but I don’t take lettuce as payment.” They ended the day in a celebration, singing songs, playing sports in the stadium pitch, and raiding the nearby chemistry lab for its store of dioxymethylene. That night, those dried out corpses were soaked.

In the morning, Reed silently slipped away with his chest and his clothes, and boarded a blimp back home to his family. They were surprised to learn about his death and immortality, of course, but still offered him a seat at the table for supper every night. They all enjoyed his wealth, from which Reed built a third house on the property of his own. The barking of dogs became the background accompaniment for his continued studies, and he helped out around the farm, too.

The End