

Din of Sighs

A Novel by S. Michael White

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Foreword:

This book is entirely a work of fiction and no real-world persons are represented here. The main character, of course, shares many idiosyncrasies with the author. Despite this, his thoughts, feelings, and actions do not necessarily represent my own.

This book is juvenile, yet is not intended for juveniles. It contains immature attempts at dark humor, amateur storytelling, lewd situations, and excessive armchair philosophy.

Read only if you are okay with this! No complaints.

I wrote Din of Sighs because there's some lackluster tale kicking about in my skull when this head rests nestled in the cradle of my pillow, eyes staring at the ceiling when they should be preoccupied with other things: mainly sleep. Hopefully, gratuitously tormenting Din through my vision of some fictional desert City expunges dialogue, phrases, and unstructured *deus ex machina* into a form I must no longer fantasize about scribbling onto paper.

I sincerely hope it accomplishes this. Please enjoy.

-Mike

Dedications are often some sanctimonious ordeal, but let's break tradition and label you, the reader, as the intended recipient.

Thank You for your interest.

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Induction

You will die.

This cold truth can arrest sensibilities and incite defensive reactions, some emotional, most irrational. But you will die all the same. It might be some terrible, unforeseen incident or the decades-worth culmination of infirmity, each cycle compounding the next until your corporeal form finally buckles under the strain. A singular moment or a series of ill-fated events. Maybe a second party's involvement -a murder- either reckless or intentional. It could be a self-inflicted wound or even a beast attack.

But you *will* die.

You may kick and scream, fighting tooth and nail. You may pass in your sleep, tucked soundly within an inner pocket of dreaming pseudo-existence. You may be blindsided, surprised, at the abruptness and inconsiderateness of it all as your chances are stolen, your hopes -your tomorrows- picked apart until only shambles remain. You may welcome it, smiling benignly. You may have come to terms, your lifeblood draining conscious thoughts previously feeding electrochemical tendrils in weaving their fabric, their cloth of defining a personality that squatted this organic shell -if only temporarily. You may scream when it comes, terror manifesting itself in a visage historically witnessed by all whom came previously, the frailness and frivolity of your body lain bare across the chopping block. Your spirit lain bare for Something's judgment. Your existence lain bare, offered to the void annihilated of what had been as it assimilates into whatever will come to be.

And uncaringly, unflinchingly, life will do this thing because you must die all the same.

Body and mind dissipate, separate, fading as easily into darkness as they had emerged from its depths, the mosaic of reality reminding this persona that it had once existed just fine without the influence of this small, yet egocentric, voice. Love and anger, fear and sadness are equally swallowed by the indiscriminate cloud of nothingness, the unorganized collection of ideas and shadows becoming unorganized collections of dust, particles, and raw ingredients floating about -unarranged in a storm of possibility.

You only borrowed such things after all.

The obstinate outline of what you fiercely defended will dissolve into a nutritious paste, the pieces disassembled and consumed by other beings. Other entities. They will eagerly and methodically eradicate your presence from this world, the temporal changes on a shifting social awareness and the tentative memories in foreign, faulty minds being the only residue left behind the passing. Though these too will eventually become a remnant of a remnant of a remnant of a remnant.

You won't witness the things reconstituted from the crafting materials you provided: of blood and bone, of flesh and gray, wrinkly, skull-sized sponges of which humans glean so much pride. It will all birth a multitude of creations in your wake, just as it had done previously but without fanfare, without judgment, without your permission.

You may, in fact, meet this fate with a courage epitomizing the very best our species has to offer or you may cower, scaling the crumbling edge of a plateau that simply extends no further. But the terminus will remain the same for you, everyone you knew, your ancestors, and your descendants.

You will die and there is not a damn thing you can do about it.

But not I. Din Ashanti was immortal in those days, surviving what would have -did- kill lesser men. ("Lesser" being contextual, of course. Let's compare me to other shifty beggars, for argument's sake.)

My final death may be the most noteworthy because it was the most sudden, the most violent, the most embarrassing, and probably proven deserved given the adequate tool of hindsight's lens. It would seem that reputable circles are difficult to find. Even harder to be included in. Damned-near impossible to lead.

My passing did not go unnoticed, rather, I was expelled. So that goes without saying. This one was thrust from and out of a shifting world which I don't deny contribution. And while the changes are minor by comparison -even laudable, especially transient and inconsequential- it was my broken body that would punctuate the sentence we all will shout in our final moment: "I did what I could! Why me?!" (Wait. Scratch that last bit.)

Time will indeed erase all; that much is a quintessential certainty that the forgiving overseers offer. Though the misdeeds are speculative, the persecution was not. Wiped clean it was, we were.... not of anguish, but for a sense of duty.

I had been murdered for duty. Not of hatred, nor of jealousy. Not even out of an irrational immediacy, but a resolved and calculated assessment of "it had to be done". I'd been put down, sacrificed to that pit of human suffering to which we dare not look and speak of in harsher whispers. "Shhh! Or misery will come for you."

In the grand scheme of things (if we can accept being pawns of such a scheme) the methodology of my elimination loses its significance, but somehow I still consider the following important. Greed, lust, sloth and the rest do have their place amidst a recorded aggregate of sins, true, but a sense of Duty can be deadlier than the rest. Having a sense of Duty overrides the intelligence reputed for personal salvation, replacing the decisive process with but something defaulting to a subhuman, barely-conscious level of reasoning. Away from responsibility. Away from ownership.

A wise man will do stupid things for the sake of duty, wreaking contemplated destruction at the behest of something greater, even more wise-lier. More everything, reportedly. I'm told it's a benefit of strong character, a boon to have "good" quality. No one aspires to be a lazy lecher by comparison so honor-binding a man (particularly with the dishonorable) is quite a feat and escapable only by the disreputable dregs amongst us, boiling away the scum until but good men are left to fall for Duty's ruse.

Every action, including the Popular Seven, can be provoked by these personal laws and compulsions of behavior, a feeling of "having to" residing as sole cause of large and terrible things, alike. Duty is a prestigious term for enslavement in the name of greater causes, a bigger picture directive, even a higher power, but it is still enforced by none other than a human sense of boundary and purpose.

Regardless of stated feelings, a person's actions will be influenced via invisible chains of subconscious restrictions put in place by a detached, condescending echo within their own cranium. Duty bound: judged by the voice, directed by the voice, executed by the voice, the erected fences denoting passive barriers to which we ourselves feel that can never -and should never- be crossed. The farmer erects the enclosure to label his farm.

Duty -a deity of sorts- known to some as common sense or the conscience that steers us, sits comfortably astride sloped shoulders in whispering assured guidance. It never takes our figurative plunge itself, of course. Never walks the literal path, itself. Of course. But instead these whispers dictate the revelations of the game in proving our borrowed pawns must march forward -never laterally-, never ceasing to sway even though the music has abruptly stopped or is deafening... depending on the pawn asked.

I suppose my point would be this: name it what you will, each of us is leashed and led by unrestricted voices whom wield direct control in constituting the content of our very lives. Never tiring, never apologetic, but always with both excuses and answers in fathomless supply.

In this particular story -this particular death- my passengers were lent more confidence than should be allowed, general malaise in the mechanics of our culture causing more than my share of quantifiable destruction. Though time indeed endures, personal losses aren't nearly as hardy in the fight against the black masses, the multitude of shrieks yielded from an erratically driven game piece. I could still hear the music, the drums, but lacked the rhythm to respond in turn. I suppose.

Ultimately, I guess I was quite foolish for assuming honor among thieves.

Honor, duty, rules.... these things are determinedly meaningless in our refuge: the City sprawling maze-like, smack in the middle of ambivalence, desert all 'round. The lonely caravans snake trails outward to brave the elements, hope subjugated by desperation

when promises prove false, just to keep it going. Save the rarities, we few are born here with naught but drive to clamber atop the other scrabbling masses but, eventually, there's another pile that beckons us, draws us in to lay the foundation for. One the generations of youth are charged with cleaning around, with collecting for. They're seated with the enviable task of feeding that void with gathered pieces. Discarded pawns. They're saddled with the responsibility of stacking the ancestors high, establishing a base from which to reach even greater altitude. Or, in the very least, our niche of humanity seeks to avoid sinking further by packing a floor with precedent.

My latest death was indeed the most noteworthy, as it brought a new foundation -a new order- to which future heirs could deign to judge, to pick at as carrion. They, alone, can build upon that framework. They, alone, can criticize for it is their right.

I fell knowingly, acceptant of what had transpired, knowledgeable of the participants, aware of the costs, and cognizant of where I had gone wrong. These facts seem a luxury in facing what comes next -in the legacy which is contemptuously erased by mankind seeking its own mark- but I would soon learn from the past and right how I was wronged.

These shreds of coherence would eventually help me to understand my death. And how to stage my return.

Chapter 1: Unmanageable

There I was, an unwavering rock amid a river of huddled drab forms. Well just for old time's sake, let's say I was. I mean you can't expect a person to stay gargoyle-esque for too long without getting a crick in the neck, but picture a person looking person-like amid other people and you get the general idea of how I looked while attempting inconspicuousness.

To be specific, I was looking pretty darn inconspicuous resting on a stair just off-center of that rounded terrace with an advantaged view. And it wasn't a "river" of huddled forms as much as it was a trickling stream of people milling about. Aside from the one form whom was literally "trickling" on the stamped earth just feet from my perch.

Y'see, my idea is that elevating one's self has the inherent dangers of becoming visible while at the same time allowing you to oversee the masses, the shorter of which can't really even witness the big picture beyond their immediate proximity. With risk comes reward, and the view was pretty nice from there. Succulent juices dribbled the patchiness I called a beard as I savored the sweet nectar, the next chunk of pomegranate looking sufficiently tempting. Some poor mutt came hobbling by, one leg missing, and I took pity. I took my foot to its ass when it lingered long, however, when it seemed intent on drawing too much attention.

(I had spat a piece its direction in amnesty, don't worry.) He'll get over the boot if he manages to keep the beggars away from the surviving three appendages.

I raised the fruit to my face once more and scanned the crowd, a dung-colored hood keeping both the blistering sun at bay and my features concealed. Hoods had always bothered me, mostly because of things they do to your peripheral vision and rendering your ears near impotent. But it's a quick disguise in a pinch.

I was all eyes at that point, probing, searching, peeling aside false pretenses and looking beyond what was shown -the presentation. Furs and silks, leathers and lace. All mingled in a wash of intertwined stories and intertwined fates, bleeding to the next as a sky navigates the color spectrum. I did not see red, but red would find me.

No, literally. I was looking for a man in a red cloak. Maybe I should learn to speak clearer? But it was quite conceivable he'd wisened, sharpened, honed, finding disguise much as I'd done: my bandana pocketed and my vest exchanged for the neutral garb. This is the game we play, had played, would play. All is a game when faced with ultimatums, with endings, with a terminus, where "moves" can be weighed on a quantifiable scale. Yes... This lends itself just fine to the metaphor, in fact.

My current turn was to rise and stay mobile, taking the unknown by the testicles and

giving a firm squeeze. *When in doubt, move about.* I tossed the fruit's rind after the dog in its retreat and injected myself into the next group of browncoats I saw. Instinct was in overdrive and predicting the steps.

Walking isn't a simple left-right-left motion after all; you've got to pace it, to measure it, to feel the impact and gauge the next. There is a time and place for ball-heel slinking and sneak, but heel-ball tests the footing. It affirms the terra firma and projects either a muscled heaviness or aged weariness in how you use it. The posture is by far the most visible, but the steps are harder to master, needing timing, balance, and a near schizophrenic mindset to adopt the heft and carry of different body types. It's like dancing with yourself, but everyone is watching. The wide shoulder swing would typically accentuate a brute's inflexibility under roughspun robes, but this tends to draw attention to the hands. My hands were empty at the moment -since that was my role- but I wasn't without armament. My slumped shoulder blades now imitated those of a geriatric, my actual blade resting quietly in an inner pocket. For the moment.

Our caravan passed a cadre of jugglers. When one realizes that they work the crowd, the fiery show becomes all the less entertaining. Or more so. I chuckled in seeing a naïve pickpocket seized, but that lapse in facial control was quickly arrested. I gazed quietly at a dancer, her veils wafting on breezes she controlled with fluid gestures. Was forced to keep other parts of me in check. Her nimble fingers gesturing, her undulating curves rolling attention downwards, tiny metal cymbals snapping rapt attention back to lithe fingers. The lingering patrons leered unabashedly, unaware of their gracious donations. Once again, the show becomes all the less entertaining at the realization that she *too* worked the crowd: some smaller, more adept figure felt pocket linings and clinked their own finger cymbals, those of coin.

Vertical shadows cast by awnings in mid-day heat played at tricks for the eyes, a smart way to go about a dishonest days work in the dodgy partition between light and dark.

Horns wheezed and drums played, the intoxicating smells of roasting meat mingling with the dust erupted by carts looking to claim a free spot in the bazaar. Distractions abound, I steered towards an alcove cut neatly into a building's corner, allowing myself the imagined swallow of seared animal flesh before returning to vigilance.

I shook off the vestiges of elderly mimicry and sat flush on the ground, legs bent to rest a foot upon each knee respectively. Linen blankets hung low and shielded much of the sun, their tassles catching near stagnant updrafts from time to time and playing a little dance just for me. In the distance I heard the bell tower strike its rhythm and knew the morning to be over, but still marveled at the clarity of the sound despite raucous bleatings of impossibly loud men, women, kids, and the other kind of kids. Or the children of goats, if you prefer. Breathing deep I evaluated my place in life, the hassles, the pleasures. I

placed hands on knees and closed my eyes to sense the world, imagining it was my last moment. The peace, the serenity. It was all too easy to be swept up by the moment of the here and now.... and to become whole-heartedly bored with it.

Instinct reminded me of the nagging purpose, an imaginary kick to my haunches and a firm ball-squeeze all its own. So while bowing my head in fake prayer, darting eyes evaluated the footwear of the City's denizens... But alas, that prone, myopic position afforded little advantage in anything beyond scoping grimy thongs of crusty toes and unkempt nails jutting yellowed from thick, blackened soles. No wonder clerics were so ill-informed, so oblivious.

It then deemed practical to count a quarter glass's worth of sand before motivating individual muscles into a slow stand, flexing and addressing each group of tight sinew to bring a spine to full height. Head still bowed, hands still clasped, the course plotted itself past adobe stairs, placent strides causing robes to bob, not sweep, the dusty flagstones in my wake.

And in doing so, a pair of eyes bore into my departure.

Taking heed and clearing the stairs, I felt the stare out, reading the vibe as if it was some simple handmade sign dictating the price of painted rocknuts. Three whole silver was far too much for the stale, inedible handful, so a grabby palm exchanged the trinkets for "true" market value. Ultimately, the cart tender received nothing as I secreted spherical items to an external pouch, never dropping a sanctimonious façade in the crime.

In rounding a bleached column, I broke off into a jaunting hop that propelled me to the opposite end of another clearing, a pair of dung farmers gathering their supply for the weary trip home -one of but few obstacles blocking opening. *An obstacle will do.*

The walls were high and the store fronts bustling, everyone excluding the shit gatherers and dupes seeming to make a tidy profit off the day's proceedings. Don't feel bad, as their service was a lie, after all. Just a surplus, nothing more.

Before muscles relaxed and the seat became too comfortable, though, two dull figures leisurely trailed my path into the wide enclosure -all manner of banners strung overhead. Flags in a canopy of soiled clothes and colorful sheets casting disconcerting shadows across the cobbled floor for their stark visages. They wore different colors, those two, (neither red) both appearing to be men, neither leading the other in a shambling gait towards the manure pile. Odd. Suspicious even...

But the gray one branches off, setting immediate sights on some smiling woman beaming a flawed set of teeth and a rather auspicious mole, the likes of which competed as her best feature. Someone for everyone I suppose.

Clearly, inspection knew its focus: the crooked figure with a near-credible limp, fingers shakily comparing two ugly clumps of post-digested material with bits of straw poking out. No one buys shit; how could they? Not when we're engineered as both harvester and factory of our own personally useless supply.

His face was still hidden in the recesses of well-worn garb, but I dared not strain to peer inward. My known pursuer was indeed well experienced, enough to absorb the damning body language of curiousness, so it'd be through the sweeping glances over an entire crowd that I monitored for signs. Any signs.

Regardless, that shit farmer was having a good time, heralding the scrupulous customer as some late Godsend. With a baleful glare and clipped barking as catalyst, his young helper who - elbows deep in feces- reacted similarly, the newcomer becoming berated with sales pitches in the form of fist-sized chunks stuffed towards his surely grimacing expression. Apparently it was good shit.

"Ha, that'll teach him", a hidden facet guffawed absently.

But in suddenly catching the sporadic breeze, both the garbled speech of the tender/son duo and a cloying dampness of decomposition found their way to my position, waxing intensely.

Had to be foreigners, unless the Ditch spawned new accents I was unaware... That stink, though. The stink was all us, however. Unfortunately. I did know enough not to blame the crumbling, grey pellets they peddled for the odor of community, which caused one's eyes to water one way or another. I exhaled micro-bursts hoping to clear the nostrils, my eyes fervently accusing the stained laundry overhead. This was not a good location to be on high alert after all.

Something drastic then.

I yawned, long and deep, making certain to accentuate the shuddering shoulders as I clenched a jaw simultaneously exaggerating the motion while pretending to stifle it. The ears and eyes were cleared, senses refreshed... and keenly set on my pursuer's reaction.

Patiently, I coiled for flight, feeling the wall's ridged texture between rugged digits, my legs invisibly angled for action. But the limping man of curiosity was putting up his own hands, defending against manure merchant's overzealous sales assault, his demeanor inadvertently repelling the only person in this city who'd fund his future. Unexpected.

To my right, however, Mr. Grayrobe had paused in conversation. Tight-lipped, I detected some slight quavering in his cowl as the primary effects of the infectious yawn were subdued.

Rolling body-to-brick around the market's corner, I launched into a full run, glancing behind in time to see a flurry of gray. It'd take a clergyman to miss which alley I ducked into, but my pursuer would have to work for victory: a sprinkling of rocknuts creating a slippery trap to even the wary. My dagger thumped heavily against my ribs, aiding the difficulty of movement provided in those confoundedly cumbersome robes. The hood threw itself back in the escape, exposing my dusty brown mop to the elements. Stinging the scalp and blasting my baked skin with a fury, the sun assaulted the cramped switchback passageways leading one side street to the next. Hurling over kids and beggars alike, I expertly navigated the maze, darting under stone arches, bounding over sprawled legs, and weaving up and down earthen ramps preceding the bowels of interstitial corridors bridging well-traveled lanes.

A stomach cramp finally took root in my gut, the sub-dermal entrails tying themselves in fantastic knots from exerting a particular jump through a particular window frame. Being the divider of two separate avenues, the clay wall trailed behind me as an additional and formidable barrier to pursuit so I hung a left, another left, and finally a right.

Beginning to feel satisfied with my rampant tear across the bedraggled homes of rats and folk alike, I chucked a bucket top-down into some shadowed niche, wheezing to a halt beneath a string of peppers left to dry. I chuckled wryly, though it seemed inappropriate to plop down on the makeshift stool and fish out my familiar bandana. Exhausted, I wound the thing around my forehead, lowered it over a single eye to get the orb attuned to darkness, and thunked roughly against my adobe nook before leaning on a pillar to regain strength. The body wanted rest, to cradle my twisting innards confined within the bulbous belly, but Instinct drove me on. Salty tears of filth no longer flowed freely into brown eyes and I spat some phlegm against the wall to help clear the struggling breath. Finding saliva a little scarce at that moment, I watched the amoeba hang where it stuck, gravity finding little drive to drag the parched loogie into the awaiting dirt.

A swig of water deemed reasonable, but I labeled hard candy as the solution to my ails. I passed a rough tongue over climate-cracked lips and jaunted off in a refreshed vigor, promising to soon purge myself of sweat and soiled clothes. An attractive offer.

Luckily a favorite shop was nearby. I trotted gleefully across the plaza, a single hand massaging the offending organs back into place, an ankle starting to call attention to itself via a throbbing message I couldn't misinterpret. Despite the extremity pain, the day was looking up. Soon I'd recuperate with my own brand of relaxation, though business wasn't going to take care of itself. "In good time", I uttered. "In good time."

Wincing slightly, I spotted the vendor just ahead, a stout man taking residence in a sort of lean-to, nestled snugly against the crook of some large -but shoddy- mass residence. His wares drooped heavily on strings, like tallow, the candies glistening sweet and inviting in

the swelter. My favorite flavor is "blue".

But suddenly an arm shot out and trapped my elbow in a vise. Yelping disbelief, I nearly tumbled had not the seated man held it firmly in place as loose rocks and the fine particulate of grounded sand flew his direction. The man rose fluidly from the bench, his eyes boring into mine, a devilish smile threatening to cut his face as he brandished his own cutting tool: a six-inch serrated meat hook. He still hadn't released his grip. And I knew that blade, quite well.

"How did you find me?", I flustered, face starting to flush.

"Please. Your "monk" had considerable flexibility, but there's no missing that little paunch of yours."

He cruelly pointed this out by tapping my aching curve a few times before removing his thumb from the developing bruise on my thin bicep.

"No, after that."

This one might have been timid to declare such observations in the past, but he chuckled at present. "Well", he placed hands in pockets, eyebrows playing at mockery, "you're slowing down a little."

"I'm not slow."

"I said slowing", he quipped, an infuriating little smirk being his attempt to retain levity.

Shooting back, "I saw YOU panting."

"Did not."

"Did too."

"A ruse."

"A ruse?!", I exclaimed.

"Yeah. It's similar to a trick."

"I KNOW what a Gods-damned ruse is."

"Apparently not when you see one", he provoked.

I sulk, turning my back to him briefly. The shopkeeper sat in his candy stall, batting lazily at a fly in no particular danger of being squished in this millenia. It may have even planted a itself on his nose.

“Well, how did you know where to wait, oh fast one?”

My young friend took an air of pride. “Speed has nothing to do with it, Din. You always hunger for sweets on the hot days.” He shrugged.

Motioning helplessly: “But I’ve never taken this route. There’s so many possibili....”

“Right. But if the destination is the same, what does the path matter?”, he asked incredulously, physically pointing out the three alleys to the northeast, all leading in the general direction of the bazaar.

“It matters a little.”

“I took the shorter one.”

No amount of sheepish head scratching would bear fruit so the mentor perused his tactics. “Weren’t you wearing red earlier?”, I queried. “Thought for sure that...”

My partner snorted and held a flap open to reveal a flash of gray. “It’s a reversible cloak.”

Dumbstruck, I heard the sentinel toll from the bell tower once more, taking strikes of its own from an abuser as impertinent as the one I’d trained. Echoing incredibly, the resoundingly thick metal alerted all to its presence, an almost damnable presence if it didn’t keep the City operating more smoothly than without.

“Come on”, Germaine spoke, cringing at the ear-splitting interruption and tapping the meat hook offensively against my belly, “Let’s get out the sun. The others are probably waiting.”

And with that bit of wisdom he adopted a brisk pace, and I after him, my self-conscious palm trying to hold back chub and pride in a rueful farewell to sweets unsavored.

Below them, that slouched vendor had given up on flailing, electing to place the swatters calmly across his bulbous knees. Instead, he baited his prey, inhaled sharply, horked, and spat the now-dead bug in a viscous ball of slime and legs.

I hadn't seen blue candies anyways.

Chapter 2: Sanity

The path was indeed short, my friend being correct. But what's to be said of the longer path, the path less taken, less traveled, less known? Was my course invalidated because I was out maneuvered? Was I a failure due to the steps, the number of bends, the time it took to arrive where I did? Maybe. What are our days if not a race against time? How do the sights and sites equate when stacked against the accomplishment of doing it quicker, doing it first, the ability to look back and see everyone in your wake -in your dust- cast aside to claim the gold, the trophy, the reward, the success? Does the previous generation clear the way for the next so they may reach their potential, or is the Next expected to boost the speed of the first, to usher them safely to their destination, hampering their own chances in the process?

City-dwellers are notoriously short-tempered, fast-living, shortcut takers on the fast track from a short stop with fast-talking short-changers steadfastly short-lived with a fast and furious demeanor in the first place.

In short, to be among them is to alter course since no one feels the pressures of youth more so high concentrations of people. It's quick, aggressive, unbridled, and unfair. The slowpokes have no place beyond the sidelines. There are different restrictions and trains of thought to this people. But it's not even a discussion of patience, but of determination, not even an exchange on destination, but of exploration. Quite literally, the end justifying the means at which that means is justified. A course plotted, because a lack of course would mean no plotting -a life lived for the sake of living- because the end is scary and that not living it up means no point at all. What do you call your life prior to living it? You think of handing over your legacy at times, but it's difficult to discern when your time is up or the competition is just fierce.

Or maybe I'm just bitter because I have, in fact, slowed down.

Germaine and I made it safely to the hole intended, his lack of regard being enough motivation to grimace through a possibly sprained ankle, his expectancy of my abilities being enough to push limitations beyond natural borders. I played off the limp pretty convincingly, I think.

“Din, throw me your key.”

He caught the bulky cylinder without blinking. Upon trying the lock however, he hissed, “This is your house key!”

I checked each of fifteen pockets the underlying clothing afforded, some far-off stare knowing the misplacement to have been in the right second pouch of my vest's hidden lapel. The vest was there, and we were here, trading looks of impatience. I cursed openly, letting my companion know that I was, if not more, disappointed in myself than he. May have even left my lucky feather behind...

“It’s alright”, I offered, “We can just head in through the front.”

The picks were in the keyhole, though, the deftness of Germaine’s fingers resembling the spinnerets of our Night Hawk spiders. It was over and done in a manner of seconds, the familiar click and turn of the handle releasing a cloud of stale air that surely singed our eyebrows.

I gave a sidelong glance to a pair of dogs humping streetside.

“Can I get that key back?”

He patted the first waist-level pocket at my hip, assuring me it'd been returned. Clenching my jaw in a lop-sided grin, I exhaled and followed the fleet feet as they disappeared up a narrow ladder, the shoddy rungs protesting every footfall.

I swore a silent oath to stab the carpenter.

The gang was assembled. Save for one. Nestled in the confines of that geometric lattice, they extricated splinters in the lamplight and rolled dice, quietly for the most part. A rough individual napped squarely between a pair of square beams, sandy boots draped carelessly across a walkway. Well, what made due for a walkway. The boards we tread dropped perilously to ribbed timbers with unyielding reams of cheap rugs laid down to reduce the timbre of carrying voices and plodding steps.

Hunched to avoid snagging shards of dead tree in my skull, I kicked the boots free and shaped a rug-covered haybale a bit more to my liking. I had half a mind to toss the poorly cobbled clunkers down the closet I crawled from, but the other half wanted to hurl them at their owner. Mata grunted his first sign of coherence, the laces lashing his face, heel making good solid contact with his sternum.

“I told you to buy some new walkers”, I reprimanded, “Ones that don’t make you sound like a stampede!”

The target smiled big and serene through drunken stupor. I caught a few gazes at the reprisal, but the siren song of cheating their comrades from his last few coppers was all too strong for the gambling sort. A set of three bone carvings with painted dots cast short shadows. An oil lamp burned the equivalent of moonlight, warm and orange as it lorded over the three sets of eyes holding cards to their faces.

“Men, listen up.”

The response was less than intended. Hari placed a six coin wager down, double what filled the pot, a glassy eyed mask of indiscernible emotion displaying vague but fierce across his face. His curly hair wrapped a greasily dark complexion, the strain of pressing molars together evident in the veins bulging at his temples. The other players burned with contempt.

“Thieves report!”, I barked.

Hari’s mouth quavered visibly, the corners forming a shaky grimace of remorse bolstered

by confidence. The other two remained unamused. Eyes took the form of daggers, all but driving their points through the tan man's flesh. Clear beads of moisture bled to the surface of these wounds as the bluffer tried in vain to maintain a semblance of composure, the twitches spreading to the corners of his eyes, brow, and one would think impossible: his ears.

Lead them. Instinct whispered.

"Lead them", Germaine echoed. His stern face had appeared over my shoulder, hovering before fading into the black forest of squared rafters. I was vaguely aware of the position he commandeered to my left, atop an unwieldy sack of barley dumped into the cranny of beams where they conjoined at the wall. It smelled a little past due.

My voice lilted in feigned confusion. "Any of you guys seen my loaded dice?"

A sickening crunch of cartilage and bone broke the tension (and a nose) as the momentum sent the bluffer clamoring for handholds. He fell easily between the beams, bumping his head, imitating his own version of a smelly sack. Tug, the brawler, took an open-palmed chop to the throat, both remaining men rising to half-standing. Half, because the roof easily impeded progress as splinters drove into their flesh. A knife reflected lamp light as Sabeer gestured convincingly to a wheezing brawler. The man could neither breathe nor stand, nor was he knife-proof. But this didn't keep him from plowing forward (and through) the lighter man anyways, a quick sidestep bringing the agile -though hunched- Sabeer in a prime position to strike. Had not a spiny slab of wood not done the trick, his foot surely would've sent the brawler head-long into a supporting caber anyways, coins, cards, and dice dispersing in all directions. The dim lamp swung wildly on its peg, giving the illusion of six unhinged maniacs rocking back and forth in tandem.

A rhythmic interruption blasted the cramped quarters. A banging, foreign and indistinct.

Those six maniacs donned masks of ghastly apparitions. Everyone froze position, uttering not a sound, save the labored breathing of a bruised and winded Tug who reeled forward and gruffly man-handled his own windpipe back into place. As bad as that sounds.

The disruption continued, stifling air becoming all the more evident, the hollowed walls serving as our headquarters bearing an unbearable likeness to some dark coffin, at that moment.

"You fuckers keep it down! Or I'll skin ya and boil yer sneaky hides to make a tiny set o' armor!", shouted an ogre's voice of unapologetic rage, his voice wafting from somewhere below.

Mata awoke with a snort, then settled back into his dream state.

"Gods have mercy", Hari chimed, a knot developing unseen on the back of his skull. "I thought for sure that was a signal."

I stifled a laugh with tongue in cheek. "It is." Adopting the most intimidating grimace

imaginable, “We’ve got business to take care of. Or have you all forgotten?”

“Why are you making that weird face?”

“Just shut up. Sabeer, sit down.” I directed attention to the big man, his throat coddled in a meaty paw. “You okay, Tug?”

He nodded solemnly, the fury taking a seat invisibly beside him, but never gone. Never gone.

“I’m okay too chief”, a bloody-faced, curly-haired man lisped past a pair of digits which clamped his nostrils closed.

“Excellent.”

A silent moment.

“Wren?”, I called to the shadows, not entirely sure of his continued presence, “Go ahead and give ‘em back the money.”

A small child sat straight up between the wooden ribs running the length of the building. Smoothly, he tucked a few coins into Tug’s coarse breeches, gave a gentlemanly nod, and lowered himself from sight. The brawler did nothing but stare deadeye at the room.

“Hey! I was having won that pot”, Sabeer growled. The lanky man sat coiled around a vertical beam, probing his crown for injuries. Venom dripped freely from the words, but it wouldn’t touch me.

“Nobody ‘was having’ won that pot.” I fired back, “Especially not with the shit cards you held.”

Rising to the challenge, Sabeer spat another round. “I was having a Lords’ Run.”

“You had shit.” I felt like I was the one shooting dice now, taking a gamble in the face of some intangible loss. “That little square cut in the top corner of your middle card tells me that you had the Old Whore. There’re only two hands you can play with the Old Whore and a Lords’ Run is NOT one of them.”

Sabeer balked visibly and Germaine smiled.

“You had shit”, I repeated. “Tug brought his own cards to the table and our little bleeding Hari over there was bluffing his ass off.”

The brawler was about to protest, but I choked him off with an indirect glance and a cocked hand. “One of your cards is greased with leg sweat you cheater. D’you have any more in that shingaurd?”, I motioned towards a limb already rotated from the crowd.

“I could’ve licked it.”

“Did you lick the card you smuggled here, Tug?”, I articulated half-lidded, making eye contact in a risky maneuver. Beaten to a verbal pulp, he quieted considerably, though his

fists had done most of the actual talking thus far.

“Hey Chief! How did you guess MY hand?”, an obnoxious voice piped in.

I sighed deep, delivering fresh armpit-stinking air to a brain mulling some newly forming mouse-sized growth, one which gnawed holes through wits and running tight circles in the assumption that its own tail was cheese. “Because of your ridiculous face Hari.”

I raised my voice to a whisper, “Gentlemen!”, I proclaimed to no one in particular, “I present to you your new First Lieutenant in thievery!” I motioned toward Germaine. “Germaine!”

“What was that?”

“Speak up!”

“Who was the previous lieutenant?”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s why it is a FIRST lieutenant. Germaine here’ll be helping to manage the lot of you beggar dusters from here on in. You are t’ listen to him exactly like you’d listen to m-”

Rephrase.

I searched the wandering eyes reflecting varying shades of disobedience. And the sleeping drunk of course. “You will listen to him!”, I proclaimed, “Or Mata gets your share for the season!”

Jeers carried footwear, cards, and rusted nails in their flight across the crawlspace to audibly pelt an undisturbed waste of sometimes-conscious thought. “Is he even breathing?”, someone mused.

“You’ve made an impressive amount of progress”, I admitted, brandishing my dagger for the first time in a while.

The thing’s sheath was of simple leather, the outline wearing thin where the stain lightened and had finally rubbed away. Having rough-cut bolts lining the single side at the material’s fold kept it from coming apart at the seams, the blade truly hidden from even the light of day. Dwelling in its own pocket of shadow. I palmed the chiseled glass that imitated finer stuff on the pommel and slid the seductive curves loose from their bindings. The gray steel sung for its audience. Oohs and aahs.

“Our boy-king employer has stretched us a little thin, I’m afraid, so I can’t really up your pay without Mata missing his well-deserved share.” (Everyone chuckled at the inebriate’s expense.) “But you deserve some form of recompense even if it *is* mostly ceremony.”

The experienced cutpurse, hitherto sitting idly in his bean-sack of raw ingredients, nestled in the claustrophobic heat of a dusty attic, amid a gaggle of rowdy street thugs and ne’er-do-wells, looked more blindsided and anxious than I’d ever seen him.

“I-I don’t know what to say.” Germaine came closer to sputtering flummoxed than I

thought possible of the cool, professionally-minded individual.

“You don’t have to”, I mentioned, thrusting the gift his direction, suddenly aware of the emerald’s effect on the Nomen’s collective disposition. They clapped their hands a little too enthusiastically, too disingenuously. One even whistled. Finally, an embarrassed First Lieutenant accepted his gift none too soon and slouched backward into pensive meditation, his fingers picking absently at his lip. “You’ll have your hands full”, I spoke for his ears only.

“Now”, I declared, “What does the street say?”

“Street says we’re not getting paid enough”, blurted Tug, a little hesitant at first but he reinforced the statement with a self-convincing “Yeah!”.

“Then leave”, I retorted simply, taking a good bead on the individual reactions and throat clears. “What else does the street say?”

“The street says that the royal guard is looking a little sparse”, spoke a disembodied voice.

“I could have told you that Wren.”

“But you didn’t.” The little voice wasn’t irritated at me, but the others would be. He continued to speak truthfully from his spot, unseen. “I found out the hard way. Eavesdropping on the nobles got me a tail of three. Had to make use of Chanju Chopal’s safehouse. They didn’t leave. Din, they were former guards, now in the employ of the high-borns.”

“Gods.” I breathed heavily. “That’s going to cost me.”

“It did. I gave Chopal a fortnight of earnings.”

“And how much had you pilched?”

“Thirty-two.”

I cursed. “Well, did you pick up any new eaves?”

“None. Unless you count a hand signal. I saw the eunich sellout making this motion to the others. I don’t know if it means nothin’ just yet.”

Wren’s fist shot up from the rafters, grasping his pinky with thumb, middle fingers all draped over them like limp vines in a misshapen fist of sorts. I repeated the motion absently with my good hand.

“Thank you, Wren. Good work. I, uh, actually did hear from Mathias about the exodus from his employ.” I swallowed a lump. A couple of my thieves fidgeted.

“Come on guys, this is important. Anybody else have caveats of wisdom I can pawn on our boy-king? Any news or just whispers? The Gawker Council has been awfully quiet since the fire. A little too quiet. Anybody catch insight on this?” I asked these things

expectantly, expecting a general murmur of woes and dissent, that is.

The brawler didn't let me down: "It's good to be a mercenary these days", he droned, an omen of ill tidings and a reminder of the looming instability of our little group. Tug gave a suspiciously subtle sweep of the room, raking us slow and painful over the crags of his unfortunate cadence. "Bodyguards get a full purse. More good work to be had, hauling them dead bodies out to the Pit they found. Word is they throw them in, not even sure how deep it goes..." He twisted his face up, pinched tight to project a look of malice to the Nomen. "They hear these moans, sometimes. I'm thinkin' that not everyone carried out there is done with this world..."

"No one will pay you to haul us over to the pits, Tug", I chastised. "I'm barely confident in the work you do for me now."

The brawler seemed confused.

"And the next time you lack the decency to not threaten me behind my back, I'm going to actually sign you up for one of these little "jobs" you speak of. Trust me, the cemetery's excess smells even worse than our hideout here."

Somehow, he still wasn't getting it. "Just bein' helpful", he mumbled to the loose playing cards he then slipped into a shinguard, a decidedly childish pout on his frumpy face.

"Anybody else?"

Catching the tail end of a glance directed at the barley sack, I looked first to Sabeer and then to Germaine.

"Was there anything left, First Lieutenant?"

"Uh, only the job assignments", he remembered.

I remembered too. "Oh right." To the crowd, "Everyone think they can handle some petty thievery? We need to make up for the damage to the safehouse. Target the damn nobles. I'd rather them hate us with good reason than just *hate*." Someone yelped their approval, a bit of high-fiving taking place at the mere mention of lessening the gilded hoard of shiny trinkets and baubles the richer denizens surrounded themselves with. I wouldn't let this group have blood, but a golden offering every now and then seemed to quell the jealousy.

A whisper cut the first consensus of the afternoon however, "Din, that's not the best course of action." Germaine sounded concerned. "I think you need to reevaluate this."

That took me by surprise. "Uh, sure."

I quieted the relative raucous with both hands. "Hold up on that order fellas. I need to think about this a little more." The lieutenant gave me an approving nod contradicting to contradict the inevitable bemoaning. "Check your dead-drop locations for instructions come the morning. We should--"

Slamming open with a start, a hidden door carved into the storage space's exterior wall banged an inner column, each thief impulsively caught in their own flight path from the ruckus. Having bypassed the entire meeting, a stooped man in a fashionable jacket adjusted his collar, stumbling into the proceedings, laughing his obnoxiously nasal laugh, squinting his obnoxious squint, dragging his obnoxious stride across the threshold.

"What'd I miss?", Jackoby inquired with little interest.

"Just about everyth-"

"You guys should have been there!", he exclaimed. "I had two of them like this...." Head cocked, he gingerly placed an arm on two different rafters, one at a vertical and one at an angle. Head bent, he pantomimed a passionate dip and kiss on the low beam before turning his seduction on the second, mouth parts working obscenely for each one, respectively. Or rather, disrespectfully.

Sabeer sneered, the bluffer giggled, and the brawler made some sort of disturbing guttural sound, half grunt and half moan.

"Keep at it and you're going to get a prick in your prick. Close the door", I commanded. "You prick."

"Oh, don't gimme that. Your girl was there."

I lost all civility.

"She asked about you", he remarked casually. Tracing the overhead hardwood sheets with his longest finger -making no attempt to disguise a cheeky half-grin- he flashed his perfect teeth in something that slowly became a scowl.

My eyes doubled in size, a conscious mind trying to will the tepid atmosphere to dissipate any moisture. I grappled a top bracer to constrain my forward lean and lunged to a rising stand. Germaine following suit, at my wing. "You close both that door and your fucking mouth, or I'll cut all your heads off."

"Or what?", he startled, mildly surprised at the visceral reaction. He was a "talker" after all.

"I told you the 'or what' part. This is your last chance, you smarmy, grinning piece of twice-digested, rat-fuck!", I shot his direction. Hari quickly wiped a bit of froth off his face, the reflex causing blood to dribble from a misshapen nose.

Hollowed thumps at our feet tested everyone's flight mechanism once more, the vibrations causing even the lantern to twist and squirm as if it had better places to be. "Keep it DOWN up there!", our host blasted from below.

Jackoby gave an uneasy chuckle, taking long steps in a hunched shamble towards the trap door. "A fine day when even the barkeep is outshined by our portly cripple." Feigning a three fingered claw, he made a one-man show of flailing the heavy iron handle about in an incompetently frustrated manner, exasperating grumbles metamorphosing into a

braying guffaw.

“And where the fuck do you think you’re going?!”

“To get a drink”, he stated coolly, the relative coolness of the room below leaking gusts of breathable air our way. The acoustics changed. “I’ll take my chances with him over you.”

Big mistake. I inhaled deep and bellowed so that the message was clear. “GERD! THIS NO-MAN IS NO MORE!”

In that single command, the air sucked itself from whence it came, a pensive stare being hurled between the remaining members like an unwanted and scalding pot of oil. Jackoby felt it too, the self-proclaimed champion of women squealing like a woman, his screams of protest resounding only slightly quieter than the upturned furniture finding new and less ergonomic positions in the wide bar below, Gerd’s fits of glee apparent in every tossed, self-cobbled, scrap of wood in the joint. Only the lull after the downstairs door burst open did we hear another sound, one of choked effeminate sobs trailing off into obscurity, the barkeep belting an uproarious, “HA”, in pursuit.

“Well”, I said, clapping hands together. “That’s one less share. Drinks are on me.”

Filing down the perilous drop to the scuffed rough-hewn floorboards which -like everyone else- had seen better days, the pre-drunk members of the Nomen (and those who didn’t mind being so visible) took up seats, flipping the chairs and tables right-side-up when necessary. They undid Gerd’s spontaneous remodeling fast enough, a wary game of Lord’s Run breaking out in the far corner, the trio of gamblers intent on scrutinizing the next, each of them undoubtedly apprehensive about playing in such a well-lit area where illegitimate moves proved more difficult.

“Gerd, y’know that sunlight is free right?”, I asked, motioning to the expensive oil lamps he kept burning bright enough to prevent alcoholic naps in the windowless room.

“Sure...”, he exclaimed brightly, an uncharacteristic arching of his fiery eyebrows accentuating a rounded face, “But the service isn’t!”

I dropped a few pieces into his waiting palm, the likes of which were big enough to crush a man’s skull and three times as ruddy as his own freckled cheeks and forehead. His eyes gleamed happily above and below a tangle of crusted red hair. A glazed gaze stared through you, a sheen of oil and eyes of glass muddled your sight of him, much more his own vision. The alcohol was on-hand and in-hand faster than you’d guess, the giant paws of our host parading dingy mugs in a line before tapping a keg with a spigot and pouring the whole row in a practiced sweep. The spigot was hammered by fist. The keg was lifted by hand. And the Red Bear had never poured this many drinks at one time for anyone except himself.

“You’ve got to find me someone made of stouter stuff!”, he barked, “Someone I can rough up a little! The pretty ones, they break so easily.” He emphasized the final line with a falsetto tone at first, his teeth gnashing what could only be a vicious pride in his work

towards the end.

“I can never tell if you are an angry, sad, or happy drunk”, I mentioned, passing a filthy glass to every man present. I pawned off the ones Gerd always intended for me back on the red bear, himself, when he wasn’t looking. He isn’t very observant, so it’s not tricky.

“How about this one!”, the barkeep roared, directing a stubby digit at Tug towards the front door. “I like the weird marks! Makes me think I’m destroyin’ a man who’s bested a lot of bad guys.” Gerd entertained himself with a fantasy battle of epic proportions, swords clashing within the closed walls of his mind. (Thanks to the gods for enclosing those walls.)

Tug reacted a little too self-destructively, half-rising from a poorly assembled chair in brash eagerness. But then he caught the glint of that polished halberd hanging proudly above the tavern's resident shock of red hair. “You like these?”, he stated matter-of-factly, tugging his own clothes off to reveal more of the jagged tattoos. Black slices and crosses interspersed with lumps of flesh dotted and bespeckling the doughy man’s shoulders and back, predominately on his furry gut. “Every scar is a badge of honor”, Tug declared proudly. “I make them myself.”

Hari looked about ready to steal a coin from the semi-nude tough man before he interjected, giving the most incredulous reaction I could imagine. “This scar is from tripping out the roof-side passageway!”, he blared while pointing.

“A badge of honor”, Tug retorted with dignity.

“That one’s a MOLE!”

“A badge”, the brawler bit the conversation with clenched teeth. “Of honor.”

“Hurry up and be losing the hand.” Sabeer prompted impatiently.

“The man’s got a lot of badges!”, I summarized, reaching high to pat the barkeep, directing him to where Germaine waited patiently at the bar proper.

Gerd allowed himself to be directed, grumbling something about how real men are the ones giving the badges. His emotions swinging wildly, he seemed a bit on the foul side by the time my old friend took up residence under the business end of the mounted blade, its adjoining pole stretching nearly the full width of the room, a surreal sharpness to its armor-gouging cap promising certain death regardless of protection.

“You ever use that thing?”, I spouted, making an exaggerated motion to the polished pain-bringer of unspecified evisceration.

Gerd, facing me, looked at his spit-rag then back at a dirty mug he cradled in the crook of his arm. Eyebrows furrowed as he began smearing the inside of the cylinder.

“Hey, uh, Mata is slumbering soundly upstairs”, I offered. “Might be a good chance to check out what he keeps in that flask! When he’s sober, you guys might even discuss adding it to your current lineup of swill, swill, and filthy swill.”

Germaine smacked absently at the first sip of his beverage, opting to scoot it closer to the several Gerd had corralled for himself. Funny, I'd done the same thing moments earlier.

"You got more rats in my attic?!", the red bear demanded. "How many of you things are there?", looking genuinely concerned. "Eating holes in my burlap. Scratching and clawing yer way around." The big man was losing lucidity by the moment. "And I seen that scat you been leavin' in the corner."

"Whoa, Gerd." I struck a defensive posture. "Friend." I reminded. "You might literally have some rats up there."

"Except for the scat part", Germaine mumbled into a cup. A stoic resoluteness had convinced him to take up his abandoned container.

I coughed a fit of laughter free before regaining composure, my lieutenant simultaneously taking a moment of respite from the swallow of brown liquid. He trembled, gulped convulsively, and scrunched up his face all at the same time, a shudder racking his shoulders with even more convulsions. A demon to be exorcised. A blast of gas from his throat ended wetly, an audible swallow conjuring imaginations of a man making deals with demons to keep his own organs on the inside.

"Gimme that", Gerd lectured, more than a tad offended. "If a man don't appreciate what he's got, then he shan't be offended when it's taken away." Germaine nodded agreement, a hand wafting the air clear of both beer and burp as a quavering face turned sideways. He almost bolted for the door, but an uncanny degree of self control left him struggling for dominance over the impending torrent of vomit.

"But he'll still miss it all, anyways", Gerd continued, somehow directing alcohol past a quizzical smile, the parapet sentinels of his brown teeth blocking nothing of his favored distillation.

I left them that way: Gerd, wooing his cases of poison like a mutual lover, Germaine succumbing to his own personal battle of attrition. And the gamblers, intent on losing their tempers, wages, and respect for each other. I heard a yipe of either glee or sorrow in dragging myself up the handholds. I suppose it could have been a pained yipe, too. Never want to rule that out completely.

I paused at Mata, a brief scan of the attic yielding no sign of the younger, less scritchier, rat known to populate Gerd's place of business. But Wren was everywhere and nowhere, a real ghost among men. In either case, I still nudged the prone supplier with my foot, seeking to rouse him for the transaction if he was available. He was not able to avail. It would seem that Wren could once again witness his anti-heroic employer slip a drunk a fair bit of coin into a dusty overcoat, the same pocket relinquishing a tightly-bound parcel the size of his pinky.

That's okay. The former beggar-child was a stalwart operative of my own choosing and would keep his mouth shut for anything short of torture. Even then the outcome was uncertain.

Aching suddenly, I shook off the biting cold weaving a small knot between my shoulder blades and took a hunched step towards the upper portal leading outward to this quarter's version of rooftops. Bent nearly to the point of breaking, joints creaking hollow in that way a dead tree sways in the wind, phantom pain throbbing dull but unmistakable from the missing digits on my left hand, memories throbbing dull but unmistakable in missing sections of my emotions, I felt more like the shrinking old man that I knew I wasn't.

I hobbled low towards the door, the crenulated outreach of community housing and shops promising to sweep me away in its blocky serenity, the wispy clouds set afire by the setting sun offering a dreamscape of possibilities. But not yet. At the moment, all I saw was musty cabers of freshly cut wood, our own skin flakes scattering loose and turning old, dry, and settling every crevice in that claustrophobically heated space. The dust covered and pervaded everything within reach, a thin gray cloak of decay, lining and adhering, concealing but slowly becoming, replacing. Rugs of severed animal fur, of dyed plant sinew, both disconnected from their hosts, from their place of belonging, would continue to be enveloped in a choking haze of dried particulate, the ash covering all eventually. The ash winding its way deep into the roots of the fibers, becoming integrated to the point of inseparability. The ash would kill it of course, cause the colors to dull, cause the rug to be infectious, inhospitable to other life. The ash would blanket the blankets, weave its way into the wood -hidden and treacherous- a gradual coating made of skin husks that blanched and consumed all it touched. The ash would encroach and invade as only an unthinking, and near-imaginary enemy can do, a testament to the people whom spawned it.

I palmed the hidden panel, felt the door's release, the brisk air outside sand-blasting the general negativity of my mind state free of clutter. The action kicking up more dust in the process, though.

Behind me the little man, Wren, lay perfectly motionless and unperceived. He absorbed the environment as he had been trained to do, like I had trained him to do, unaware that he was simultaneously being absorbed. "A quiet mind is an open mind", I had once told the boy, feeding him what I had thought to be life skills, life lessons. I couldn't see him wedged between the wooden rafters, arms at sides, extended long and thin amongst the splinters and dusty carpets. I had thought this stuff would hone his abilities, keep him safe. That's what I had thought at the time. All things turn to ash in the end, though.

In reality, I think that kid was twice the sneak I could ever be, had ever been. Who knows? He might have easily endured ten times as much torture as I had done.

Chapter 3: Decisiveness

As a species, we are said to be advancing. Society? Advancing. Knowledge? Advancing. Our ancestors lived in mud huts and clubbed anything that moved, the secrets of fire not even apparent to their sloped brainpans. They hadn't yet known the beginnings of magic. Hells, I barely do.

Sure, our limitations of understanding expand with each subsequent wave of offspring, our cultures finding creative ways to band together and tolerate each other's existence; a select few of us even lead better and easier lifestyles than the previous branch of the family tree, but this can hardly be considered advancement in its own right. Humans are still the blood-thirsty savages they ever were, only more organized, more calculating, with new weapons in which to destroy, new ways to outwit both peers and their environment. New ways to gain personal advantage. War can be catalyzed by a single person's grudge against a race, employing highly specialized armies to the forefront, exterminating innocents based on affiliation. Advancement? Individual cultures struggle for domination, while unbridled population explosions have the potential to decimate entire landmasses and render them unsustainable to human life in the slightest, the rampant and all-consuming nature of our proud species likened to swarms of destructive harvester insects. Advancement? In my City only the strong, conniving, and hostile survive; but is this natural selection at its best, or a broken system teasing out - encouraging- the worst in us?

Inversely, in a mirror world where the weak are coddled by society, where the infirm are cared for lovingly, and the genetically maligned were all allowed to pass multiples of themselves into the future, would it be advancement that those weaknesses be perpetuated for all time? Would it do humanity a service to keep them around, to dedicate effort to aiding even their daily struggles: their next breath, their next meal? Are family diseases, undesirable traits, maladies, and general weaknesses worth preserving? Are criminals that valuable to be stowed in cages? If something can't fend for itself, who are we to help, and does this hurt something else in the long run? Will our children suffer because of gentle decisions made, our lineage suffer because of soft-handed tactics with those who can not or will not take care of themselves?

We have survived and proceeded through the ages, this much is certain, but which is considered advancement? Is it the morally bankrupt city of thieves or the hypothetical gentility of a world gone soft?

All I know rests on the balance of a dagger's edge. A dagger. The purest evidence of our lack of advancement. It continues throughout our questionable existence to be the strongest evidence of humanity's roots, our future, and our intention all in one. It is short, simple, and unmistakable. It is up-close and all too personal. You know its truth, its purpose. You know its usefulness, its resolve, its direction. Its permanence.

No. I think we will never outlive its utility, never advance past the need, never shedding the sins of desiring to use such things. For all of our advancement, the dagger remains.

I blinked lazily and asymmetrically at the setting sun, my bandana obscuring the inferno of cleansing radiance to a darkness eye. An eye that I'd need as soon as this spectacle was over. Trails of vivid, majestic clouds tore fluffy swaths of pinks and reds across half my field of vision. Farm rows of imaginary maize. A massive fingerprint stuck high, ever-changing and impending, despite being unreachable. I held my bad hand aloft, tried to align elegant and practiced fingers with the clouds in their steady flight. I willed a little one over to the left, elongated it, shaped it. I added a fingernail. With my consciousness, I commanded a second towards the first, shaped it too, gave them ridges. Made them mine. Flesh and imperceptible hairs caught the slight wind that heralded the next rainstorm. I felt the heavens, could grasp the hovering vapor of moisture long converted and brought to us across vast deserts, across winding dust trails frequently blown by winds wishing to erase our escape from the City refuge. Our prison. I waggled my reformed digits, whole, complete, brought them to my face with an astonishment and child-like joy. Kissed them as Gerd kissed his cups.

The Dreamsand was working.

I sniffed reflexively and reached for the package once again, the robe affording many hiding spots for my salvation, my relaxation. My own personal escape of which no one could join nor erase. Blunted senses found minute difficulty in unrolling the yellowed sheet of fragile paper, removing the tiny cone of aerated powder. I licked it once, savoring the sweet acidity and held it tight against my inner nostril.

"We're coming apart at the seams, you know", Germaine spoke through the wind. I startled visibly and pretended to toss a booger over the edge.

He ambled up slowly, taking a cross-legged seat beside me in my roost, staring outwards. He placed his hands behind him for balance, the horizon seeming to curve beyond, shaky, unstable. Short walls flanked us on either side, providing a minimal amount of cover to breezes seeming to still at his approach.

His face was limned in dimming light, a splash of pink tinting the features akin to the color of fantastic flowers I'd seen in a book once. His eyes were somber, distant, cherishing the last rays of our stinging sun. "I just thought I'd come out and say it", he said.

"We've got a little hope left."

"Even when all's lost, hope remains", he admitted after a pause. "That sort of dies out with the future, though."

The younger man, barely eighteen summers, threatened to depress me even more.

"You're a bad influence on me", I forced a laugh I didn't feel.

He did the same. "Hey, uh...."

I cocked an eye and tried to disguise the action of forcing the sandcone further up a nasal passage.

“Th-thanks for the blade”, he stammered. “No matter what happens, I’ll uh. I won’t sell it or anything.”

“Not a problem.” An uncomfortable pause. “I had a bit of an ulterior motive in giving it away, though.” *Sniff*

He looked apprehensive and questionable, a not uncommon expression plastered on sharp features and sharper senses.

“Y’see, I’ve got some bad memories tethered to that thing.” Germaine’s shoulders dipped slightly in relief. “I’m hoping that I gave those away too”, I continued.

“Old haunts are a little more pervasive than that. They tend to.... Stalk a person.”

“Well, damn. I guess it was worth a try.” I introduced laughter to him once again. “Guess the trick is to not acquire them in the first place?”

He turned, arresting my joviality with barbed eyes. “What’re you going to tell Mathias?”

I wrenched away, spitting a hunk of mucus to the adjoining building. A collection of crows roosted opposite, curious of our presence until being spooked by the action. “What he needs to hear.”

“This is dangerous.”

“When has it not been?”

“Three seasons ago, he was in a better mood. Double the pay, half the enemies.”

“Good times in the beginning, certainly.”

“Din, you can’t play this game anymore. People can get hurt”, my new lieutenant pleaded. He looked the teenager at that moment, enough so to incite a dictatorial wave of pride, resistant to reproach from a youth.

I bit absently at my upper lip until a wheezing cough found me. The Dreamsand, and my good feelings, launching themselves downward into the thin space between buildings, the recesses of our rat-maze already cloaked in mystery. I watched the expensive cone descend into the shades of navy blue, to become a victim to either the elements or a lucky alley sleeper. I sighed deep.

“You still doing that shit?”, Germaine demanded.

“I am”, I fired a steely gaze his direction. His features were still pink, but the tone was all wrong. The sand gave him crawling flesh, outline distorted as little ripples sent shockwaves through his writhing skin. The edges of my vision were squirming worms. The tingles remained.

Setting my jaw, “You got a problem with that?”

He shook his head disparagingly. “I really don’t”, he muttered. Suddenly, he kicked his feet up below him and took a single stride towards the bar, a few mud-shellacked rooftops back. “You’re the one with the problem.”

“My life is my own.” An obstinate retort, but all I had.

“That it is.” I felt him nodding behind me. “Don’t nap. You won’t make it to the palace on time.”

He took another step away, a motion I sensed inwardly instead of hearing, an action that reflected attitude. A dimmer version of Germaine paused per my request, me feeling his absence before it actually happened.

I turned to confirm the mental image, him standing confident and poised in the darkness. His eyes were obscured, but I knew the look: fiercely loyal, a twinge of anxiety, a dash of anger staving off the edges of fear.

“What’d you want?”, he stated, the coolness washing over the city in small gusts of damp air.

My old hookblade, Instinct goaded.

“My old hookblade”, I stated back, not to him but impetuosity, itself. “For protection.”

Her curves were rolling. Flesh, sensitive and supple. A candled glow sent warm shadows soft against stained wood, the thin planks of sanded grain woven together in one continuous surface, teasing the eye in whorls of pleasure and amusement. The ceiling slanted harshly but the walls were designed thick and durable for this purpose. Our purpose. I grabbed a nipple between silk sheets, the intricate stitching revealing a slightly textured and ornate floral pattern embroidered directly into the material. Such luxury. I was almost afraid to move this stuff was so expensive -afraid to stain, tear, smear, or blemish the perfectness of her quarters.

I moved all the same. They could bill me if something sullied and it would all be worth it. Caressing, soothing, rubbing, pushing. My lips skipped across the areas she enjoyed, areas that sparked heady breaths of pleasure, expulsions of air passing mute lips. Leaking through an ajar mouth, teeth causing whispers to play low across puckered lips. Her “din of sighs”, I called it. Very clever, I know. It was the only time she ever spoke to me, when I was hot, when she was wet, when the cruel fates of mankind decided to give her the ability to voice sound once again.

Coiled around each other, around this feeling, we petted and purred, souls working in harmony, hips gyrating the melody. It was time: our time. Even the soles of her feet were smooth, innocent. Toes curled in ecstasy, then flexed outward again, spread in hopes of catching the moment, simultaneously wishing to hasten and slow our ability to touch it. My throat hummed a rhythm, her legs keeping beat, my thighs becoming red and

invigorated from the effort. Fingers found those daintily flowered silks, the fabric light and airy to the perspiring skin. Remnants of sweetbark on my breath, the tingles from some imported drug working the course of my spine, I threw my head back in conquest, belting a roar in the way huge jungle cats of legend assuredly did. This seemed to cause the clenching, the spasms, the trembling below me. She squirmed and writhed, much like the world did to intoxicated eyes. When the climax passed and the aftershocks began, I stopped pumping, easing out of her with a delicateness, spilling our juices. Bills be damned. I flopped beside the reeling woman, looking long and hard into a warm gaze reflecting a set of crimson candles placed high on a diminutive table.

She smiled wide, inhaled deep, and sighed again, eyes forming their own upside down grins before settling on mine. Lips, the ambassadors of goodwill, the diplomats of feeling, congregated for another meeting, her plumpness pursing my cracked insensitive skin in their own embrace. I went cross-eyed with fatigue for a moment, causing her a silent giggle, large brown eyes sparkling, brimming with whatever it was she was feeling.

I grinned myself, rolling to the foot of our pallet, tossing aside the multitude of comfy down-pillows in looking for clothing. It was a futile search however, the ankle-high bed and covers not hiding anything more than a beautiful brunette splayed curvaceous, tone, and inviting across orange silks. My eyes were squints at that moment, despite the standing, despite the need for concern and focus. I spotted my vest finally, folded neatly and placed atop a low dresser with a single drawer. Pants were beside them, leather support straps dangling loose and limp, buckles absorbing nearby flames that flickered with each bungling hop as I got into them. It took ages, but the protective belts each found their position, the buxom prostitute- or I should say former prostitute –finding her own seductive way of undoing my progress. She snaked slender wrists up and around my bare torso -a second set of arms- gently pulling fasteners loose with both hands as I made the rounds in tightening them.

I went for the ribs. Jumping onto her with imagined bestial strength, I held Moira's hands together with my right as I sent my left delving for an unshielded hip, pinching the muscle with ticklish ferocity. She beamed huge and bucked, air escaping with each twist as she flailed her curls and curves about, madly enough to snuff a candle. A little too madly. An errant motion drove a rounded ass-cheek square into scar tissue, my wincing evident in the quick release of her. She looked pitiful, lip pouted to convey the apology, those same lips bringing goodwill to the two stubs on my left hand. I gave both of hers a quick kiss in mock apology before returning to my work.

The pants and vest secured, I flexed the phantom pains away in standing parallel to a full-sized mirror tucked in the corner. Pretending to be preoccupied with the loops keeping the vest halves together atop a starburst of yet another scar, I covertly snuck darting glances at a man's eyes and away again.

Moira rose gracefully, plucking her own sarongs free from the morass of tangled bedsheets, somehow finding my filthy brown robe of a disguise and expertly bringing corner to corner. I was momentarily distracted by her reflected breasts, the bulbous jugs of fatty tissue squeezing and contorting into oblong versions of spheres and back again, the dark areola looking back at me, the hypnotic jiggling doing evil things to my self

control. Before I knew it, she had my robes transmogrified into a neat block of coarse material, the folds' edges seemingly straight-cut from the reams from whence the thing was originally tailored.

I looked again to the mirror, the man's eyes appearing ever vigilant -never distracted by such frivolities- the concentrated glare of funneled hatred belonging to a figure long past. A man who used to own a jeweled dagger.

'You gave it away', Malak, or Kalam as he had sometimes called himself in life, chided. 'But you can't rid of me so easily.'

I turned my back to the killer, looking for more distraction.

I found them in Moira, whom lassoed me with a sheer veil of translucent green. Lips congregated once more, her bare mammories brushing my chest, warm and wet, a dribble of liquid racing the contour of my belly.

I broke contact gently. "You're leaking again."

She huffed and became cutely irritated. An eyeroll superseded a bit cheek as she stepped away to find a more concealing garment. A woolen shawl did the trick to my chagrin, the baggy network of interwoven squares offering far less flesh the opportunity to peek through. A stark contrast to her voluminous, and transparent, "harem pants" as I frequently called them teasingly.

"You want me to grab one?", I asked helpfully.

Nodding an emphasized motion, Moira took up a straight-backed sitting position on the only surface available: a spindly rocking chair assembled from elegantly bent dry-reeds, the thorns shorn clear for obvious reasons.

"Any one in particular?"

My partner thought momentarily before turning both palms up. To negate the indicator, she then gnashed at the air with a perfect set of ivory teeth, following the pantomime with a stern wagging of a single index finger.

"You want a biter. Gotcha", I said, turning briskly towards the small entrance.

An expulsion of air wedded to a heavy knock of fist on dry-reed prompted me.

"I'm KIDDING", I stressed, shutting the door soundly behind, stepping out from beneath the staircase that launched into second floor bedrooms, overhead.

The warehouse was absolutely buzzing with activity. Patrons, fresh from a day's work, shuffled in and out of the building in almost continuous file through the double set of gilded doors which were, themselves, starting to tarnish and lose their gleam due to increased traffic. So too could be said of the merchandise. Smiles abound, the men would put unkempt hands to unkempt chins, taking great pains in selecting the scantily clad goods after careful scrutiny, some needing verbal assault from the next guy to make up

his mind. They were chosen in this manner, the emotionally-deteriorating flesh merchants. Eyes sullen, lithe bodies beginning to droop from exhaustion, they tried to take up their usual positions draped over statues, nooks, and benches but typically got picked before they even had a chance to survey a place to rest. Even the homelier -less popular- girls were afforded a chance to wield their talents, their distinctly average or tomboyish charms finding some leering suitor almost immediately. I watched the girls as they emerged from the back rooms, bow-legged and grimacing, directing their clients out the double doors with a metaphorical kick to the dusty and weather-beaten streets outside, not so much as a "goodbye" trailing their wake. Most rarely had the professionalism to smile.

I suppressed a smirk, myself, in fact.

The oppressive incense and floral perfumes were similarly working overtime, the fevered stew of sweat and fluids catching warm breezes that infiltrated that central greeting area. (One can only imagine what odor pervaded the pairing rooms out back.) Glancing past long chains of privacy beads hung high on an arch, a decidedly faked feminine shout reaching my ears on the surf of smells emanating from enclosed rooms, I stood in the hive of wanton lust and profitable debauchery. No amount of palm fronds would clear the place, even when the dusk rush ended, though that didn't keep a pair of children from trying to eject the heat and smells out the ventilated window slats into the dusk breeze outside. They sat patiently in the corner, taking turns waving the huge brown leaves about, oscillating at childish whims, too tired to pull each other's hair or stack wooden toys as they usually did. One of them caught sight of me.

"Din!", she squealed, tearing across the intended path of a graceless whore and her horny pet in tow. Children were typically considered nature's best contraceptive for many reasons (the heavysset man visibly second-guessing himself being proof) but the little bundles of energy deemed far too valuable as manual fan-labor.

"Arna!", I replied with genuine enthusiasm, crouching with spread arms. "How's my favorite little girl?"

"Good." The biggest of hugs. She suddenly seemed so shy.

"Good, huh?"

She nodded timidly, eyes focused on the ground, head bowed over a little silver locket she wore around her neck.

"Did you want to help me out?"

Again with the timid nods, half her fingers probing her own mouth. An unsettling oral fixation for one so young.

"Hey, don't suck on your fingers Arna. I need you to do something."

"Okaaay."

"Okay? Good." I lifted her chin gently, trying to shake her of a tendency to withdraw.

Beautiful blue eyes sparkled back from a cherubic porcelain doll, sandy hair cascading in little loose ringlets. "I need you to head back to the nursery. I think Miss Sasha is on duty."

Arna smiled serenely at this, a strangely euphoric thing among the cacophony of clomping feet and boisterous men clamoring into the lobby.

I smiled back. "Tell her that Miss Moira is ready. Tell her that she needs you to bring one of the hungry babies."

The blonde orphan girl eased past me towards the kitchen, care, and birthing areas, feet shuffling in a miniature march with directed purpose, little sandals sliding across a lavishly woven rug with subtle wooshing sounds.

"Oh and Arna?"

She turned to me.

"See if Miss Sasha can give you one of the babies without teeth", I instructed, exposing my own pointed canines with grubby hands, barking like a wild mongrel as I lunged forward a few feet. I stopped short, of course.

Arna giggled, shrieked, and propelled forward on her mission, a rapid panting of little lungs driving the little feet in their little haste.

I beamed after her in coming to a stand.

"You're so good with kids", a voice purred from behind.

I swiveled with an instant look of hostile impatience laid bare, even before I met her face in that crowd.

"Too bad you can't have any of your own. ever", she harassed. Zibella donned an insincere pout, eyes drooping, harpy claws forming tight little balls next to where tear ducts would be located in a human being.

"Gods damn the day you give birth yourself, bitch", I parried. "Truly, it would be the end of civilization when your kind reproduces." Eyes narrowed as she fumed. "Little demon babies flying around and such." I motioned to the hypothetical slathering hellspawn stuck to the muraled ceiling overhead. The "art" was a giant orgy of intertwined female forms of course, a professional touch that let you know that this was a classy den of ill repute.

"Keep pointing around and I'll take the rest of your fingers." She feigned curiosity with a sidelong glance. "And what did you stick those in to lose 'em anyways?" A gasp. "Are you still all man?" She pointed in an unnecessarily hushed whisper. "Y'know? Down there?"

"All that and more", I spoke through gritted teeth.

Slice this bitch. Instinct prodded.

Instead, I simultaneously bit my tongue and let go of the hookblade hidden in my second hip pocket. Funny, I don't even remember transferring it from the robe. Moving a shaky hand to my side, a fist was revealed, bound tight and impenetrable.

"You gonna hit me?", she squawked, harpy voice shrill and ear-splitting. We had attracted a small audience of jeering on-lookers by this point, all female. All true whores.

"No", I replied. "I wanted to commend you."

"On what?", she demanded, hand digging impatiently into her side, chin set firmly above an ample rack shrouded in purple gauze and sequins. They matched her dangly ear piercings. Smacking on a twig of sweetbark to expunge the taste of semen and curdled man-sweat, the bitter prostitute looked particularly vacuous and bovine by nature.

"On learning to walk upright", I spoke matter-of-factly. "Quite admirable for a demon bitch, really."

She flushed deep, a real treat for me since the creature had lost all semblance of pride (and thus embarrassment) a long time ago, way back when she was but a puppy. This was definitely an anger flush.

"Go fuck yourself", Zibella seethed, a rabid frothing of saliva bubbling fresh along her lower palette. Even her cleavage engorged itself in red.

"Don't need to." Peering over her shoulder, "But it's kind of pathetic when you think about it. You, standing here. Waiting to be fucked. Being passed over by your competition, your only assets continuously losing their quality as time and hard use takes its painstaking toll on your body, being rejected by even the lowliest of shit farmers as they pile their way in here for the next, hottest piece of ass that isn't you." I gave a slight titter. "YOU fail to meet even THEIR expectations!"

She looked livid.

"Curious." I continued, pretending to work out a difficult string of logic. "So, basically the only difference between this and a hungry life of rape and poverty on the streets is that you have to plead for it now. You have to peddle what would assuredly have been taken from you over and again had you not erected this false sense of control over your life, over your destiny. As it stands you have to beg to be taken advantage of, to be brought to heel and humiliated in exchange for the near-charity of others, to be abused and tossed aside because you happen to be attached to some ever-sagging breasts and a hole that stays moist if you're lucky. You have to bend over backwards figuratively and literally to make yourself presentable, to be appealing to others because you aren't self-reliant or have the strength to be anything besides an object: a sperm repository. You go to sleep uneasy, stinking of strangers, and wake up wishing you were someone else because this is all you have and will ever be. So with all things considered, this would indicate that the culmination of your experiences -the entire purpose of your life- the watermark by which you measure 'success' is.... to be hand-selected to wrap that flapping, bile-filled mouth of yours around the next unwashed, lice-ridden, crusty dick of an anonymous alley-walker to blunder through that door."

I had a vision of Zibella with a slit throat, bleeding the last of her vile narcissism and vitriol down the front of her perfect tits tethered by expensive sarongs.

But in reality the hellhound's eyes merely welled up.

Uncaring, I plunged the concept into her without lubricant. "Smile when you swallow deep, Honeycakes. Your future of doing this a thousand times over depends on it."

At this, the woman broke down. Bawling -not an insincere pout- but actually bawling with streams of salty waterfalls pouring freely, Zibella grabbed the nearest indecisive man, one who'd already laid eyes on a buxom prostitute with olive skin and black hair. Fleshy mounds bobbing in protest, her breasts led the confused patron past the swinging partition beads to the back, a flurry of emotions clicking in sequence across the client's textured features.

Looking around, I saw that the only woman whom didn't glare at me balefully was the exotic harlot who'd been robbed, herself finding comfort in snagging the next suitor to saunter through the door. She smiled hypnotically, using practiced swings of her torso to bait the grinning man her direction.

I flashed a scowl of contempt at the nearby whores, the ones who'd overheard and saw fit to comfort Zibella throughout all these spats we had. Several turned from my withering gaze while another brushed fresh tears from a pretty face as she excused herself, alone, to some dark and hidden recess that I'd never visit. A petite sob of shame was choked back for my account.

"What happened to the son I raised?"

Madame Ashanti stood quietly, unmoved from the staircase above eye level. Dressed lavishly in a mournful shade of blue, her elegance naturally betrayed a sternness inherent to her nature. At that moment, however, she thought it appropriate to appear emotional, crestfallen.

"He's dead", I replied callously, ducking back into the refuge of Moira's quarters below the stair. I lay on the pallet patiently until Arna returned, the child handing over a bundle of chub to the mute wet-nurse who popped a teat into the suckling baby's grasp. It was then that I pulled the stained silks up to my chin, rolled over, and intently willed the visitation of pleasant dreams.

What I got was the nightmare, tired and familiar.

Cringing with each swoop, knowledgeable of the destined outcome, I clung to dear life as the massive bird of feathers aflame blazed a path across the heavens. It wailed its monstrous wail and hit each updraft with a ferocity. Feathers flew. Fire licked my face. I was burning steadily, all senses screaming for peace, nerveless skin bubbling and breaking off in chunks. The shrills terrified me, made me want to clamp down on what was left of my ears, but what was left of my fingers could only dig tightly into beastly

skin as the beastly avian dipped and soared, rolled and swerved. In the waning light of sunset, the once fluffy spots of moisture pockets rolling gently by appeared to me as face breakers, obstacles, as we rammed through each cloud in turn, visibility dropping to zero within each, the gut-wrenching sensation of diving averted by a gut-wrenching sensation of banking.

And then I would finally fall. As I always fell in these things: flailing about, strangely stiff, tumbling head over heels through the void of uncertainty. Panicked, grasping for something, anything, in a swan dive to un-existence. Hurling face first into oblivion.

I would never hit the ground, but the fiery bastard always bucked me loose to face the terrors of incessant freefall. Each time, I'd awaken when the corporeal reactions of my comatose form dragged a destructive consciousness back to the spot where the body lay. I never even bolted upright anymore, never woke up gasping or submerged in cold sweats. It merely happened, and I reacted to it now. Wide eyes merely glided open, shallow breaths barely faster than normal.

This time, however, I also woke to the sound of slurping.

Rolling in place, sheets tying my sopping legs to the pallet, I could sense Moira's warm smile though the remaining candles burned low enough to conceal her face, casting but fractions of their typical luminescence. The babe, hidden under the cotton shawl and cloaked in darkness, continued its insatiable monopoly of our shared fetish.

I wanted to speak to her, to reveal things gone wrong and unplanned, to explain the mechanics of my experiences and of my failures, to dictate the story, to narrate the tale of woe and of inadequacy. I wanted to tell her that I loved her. I wanted to tell her that she would be okay. Mostly, I just wanted to tell Moira... things. Trials of the past, visions about the future. Things that wouldn't matter to anyone at all in a hundred years though I wanted to say them all the same.

But she couldn't speak and I couldn't see. The concepts to be discussed being too evasive for visual gesturing anyways, the subjects of our lives being too hard to express. Words weren't enough. Ideas did not flow as they should. Feelings, though experienced by all, were too difficult to share and were always muddled in the translation.

For these reasons we sat in silence, letting the suckling babe in its infancy lead us to the next moment and then the next and then the next.

I found the feather tucked deep within the fourth inner pocket on the vest's left side, above the smooth multi-limbed spider of skin I kept to guard my heart, a memento of ill decisions itself. I plucked the grooved molting from its resting spot, felt the terse rigidity of the tiny spines as they aligned to the touch. They easily folded one direction, but the other: the other was less yielding, less pliable. The feather's design allowed a manipulation in a single direction only, the fluted quill protesting any other motion with resistance. The thing felt rattier than I had remembered it, bites of the elongated plumage going missing, a fine grit -almost ashy- rubbing free between thumb and forefinger. Gotta stop fiddling with it.

I held the thing up to what little light was afforded from the glow of that far table, the once blazing red appearing nearly black in such low visibility, the feather looking rather scraggly and pitiful for all I could tell. "A trick of the light", I concluded though Instinct spoke his mind otherwise. Fully clothed, it was strange that I felt so nude and vulnerable without it.

It was only then that I bolted upright with a gasp, palms already moist, blood chilling my sweat to the bone. My mind tried to undo or at least reverse reality due to momentary lapses in reason before the body's reflexes kicked in on their own, our course becoming instinctual, compulsory.

Wrestling frantically with silks, hearing threads pop from the strain, I tossed off the sheets in a vain attempt to untangle the forgetful man from his self-imposed fetters, self-imposed duties. I somehow found the ends, unraveling myself from the funeral bindings of opulence. Every muscle tensed, I finished dressing and grabbed my gear, storing the lucky feather where it belonged, double-checking that both the serrated hook and coin-pouch went to their respective pockets. In this manner, I burst from the fading glimmers of candlelight in my gilded sanctity, away from the comforts of fuzzy emotions, away from the house of seduction and the unfathomable accommodations of forbidden pleasures within.

I had missed the meeting with Mathias the boy-king, our employer.

Before I had exited the whorehouse, in throwing open the door, pools of light spilling inwardly, I had seen Moira still nursing, the baby happily lapping milk, but her head was at an angle, eyes closed, mouth slightly parted as a soft snooze resonated in her nasal canal. Funny. I guess she had been asleep the whole time.

'See you soon....', Malak offered from the full-length mirror.

Chapter 4: Fearless

The street was sultry, quiet, my footsteps echoing soundly off silent adobe buildings and mute paths of stamped earth with infrequent stone islands injected to break up the tedium. The night welcomed me in its typical fashion: an impersonal interest and uneasy stare. Few beggars stirred from their alley refuge, the nomadic nature of hope leading them in an endless search for less-infested quarters or a more comfortable heap of refuse. Ignoring my ankle, which Moira had bandaged for reinforcement -for restraint- I ran with direction. Taking advice from the sprain and from my new first lieutenant, I stuck to direct routes. (At least, that's the message I got from his chiding earlier in the day.)

The dusk rush had long since ebbed, the grid of crimped passages and narrow corridors clear of all merchants and bunglers returning from a day shouting to deaf ears about the merits of their particular brand of rusted jewelry or parasite-riddled produce. That meant the only ones street-side were the rodents and human-type rodents, the ones you needed to avoid more than a gourd acting as natural laxative. The rub was: they were unreasonably good about not being seen. As my bounding footfalls bounced off solid wood doors sitting smug in their archways, I half expected someone to mistake them for knocks, a potential disaster in the making. A fine garnish on an otherwise productive and eventful evening, if you considered excising a tumor and destroying another one's psyche productive. Which I do.

Ankle pained in a lopsided, flatfooted gait, each pounding stride driving bluntly to my skull and a fresh wave of pins up my entire leg -beginning low and ending in mid-femur- I imagined the repercussions of actually being chased in this state. I wheezed a bit in slamming into a pole, throwing an arm wide to halt my momentum, decelerating with a gratuitous thump to bring the spinning world back into focus. A bit of my medicine seemed just the thing to right such woes...

Senses dulled just to the point of comfort -a new type of tingling running the course of my system- I set out again, a scattering of dust thrown to the winds of fate. Much as I had laid a young friend to rest on the winds of change atop the bell tower, a tower that just that moment rang true and hollow across the surrounding hills of curvaceous desert hills. Gods that seemed so long ago.

My accelerated hobble easily became a run, what little headwind there was dissipating around me as some foreign chemical worked its magic on my veins. I could still hear the breeze -blowing consistent and warm- though my skin felt cool and refreshed from the sensation, little hairs along exposed arms acting as thousands of weather vanes. They pointed me forward in my renewed haste, my renewed fervor. It was the same sort of risky judgment that would help me crawl from the hole created by risky judgment, the follies of stress and oversight birthing the inevitable fruit of bystander happenstance. I actually told myself this, hoping someone would believe.

The trials of leadership are so many.

The vision blurred a bit, unexpectedly. I was still tired. Despite this, rectangles of light shone clear and luminous from certain windows, certain doors, and from the vantage of

the heavens in their twinkling majesty. Everything was so clear to me. It made so much sense. I couldn't believe how bright the environment became. So fresh, so new. So open to possibilities. A moonless night afforded the distant fireflies in the sky their opportunity to shine, to toss off the shackles of being outclassed, outperformed by such a huge and monolithic torch, the likes of which shared its reign only half the time, half the day, with a larger and brighter orb. "Even the moon can be lazy", I thought, a vacant ruler abandoning its throne so the masses; the multitude of distant night children could have their moment to shine. Finding myself lost in the non-issues of star uprisings, of the dynamics of celestial politics, I slowly discovered that I was subconsciously dividing my attention, much as a despot discovers a plot of usurpation with a mix of disbelief and horror. Part of my faculties struggled to the dedication of attempting to remain convinced that the continuation of current streams of thought were non-conducive to conductivity.

You have to focus, idiot.

"But it's all so gorgeous...."

Despite protestations, the world regained true clarity with the imperceptible gradations of a sunrise, the unwelcome clarity of details, of edges. The type of relative clarity you get after a dream when you would have previously sworn it was already real. My field of view took on the methodically mundane definition of things and objects, of the tactile sensations of individual elements instead of blending together in a physical orgy of just simply "being". I was still running, still moving, but the lusty bars of light became recognizable, slowly transforming until I could spot the wicks that burned in each portal, the candle placed high on street-facing windows, the stars, though numerous, appearing small and distant. Unreachable, non-conspiratorial. They somehow looked to lack the brightness and the personality of the former rebels, the ones vowing to upset the hierarchy of strangled power, the ones that had appeared jubilant in reaching their potential without a lunar overlord. I swiveled my bandana to reveal the eye attuned to darkness, but the tracers paraded after smears of light remained.

My own pain burned low. Although manageable, the sharp impacts had dissipated and massaged themselves, decompressed into aggregates of discomfort, of dim aches clustered in the major joints of the left leg. Similarly, the night seemed less luminous, opting to dissipate until there was only a shred of its former magnitude, a haze of character with a cricket chirp here, a twinkle of stars there. Pockets of individuality instead of an all-binding connection of a boundless sky. Constellations of egocentricity.

In rounding a chest-high partition, itself rounded from dust and visibly disintegrating - chunks of clay exposing the bird-pecked straw that beetles saw fit to roost- I slowed. The palace proper sat atop its hill, flat and spread, the compound sprawling ominously in its judgment of the surrounding area. Such a wonderful height for one on the offensive. For one looking to overlook their surroundings, to scrutinize and rule the moat of hovels, tenements, and vacancies that sprung out in a dusty brown labyrinth surrounding the seat of power, that squat building on the hill would be an attractive perch to perch on. An ideal roost for a dictatorial beetle safe within his shell.

But Mathias was not that kind of king. And Birds were always a danger.

I approached the gate with caution, a superfluous pair of guards mirroring the usual two. Clad in shoulder mail, standing resolute, and spears twinkling high and dim like the stars that night, they each caught sight of me a few paces off, heads swiveling in unison before each taking up crouched and ready defensive positions in a half-arc. That was new. And "new" combined with "armed" ruins just about every outsider's day. Acting convincingly terrified, I chose one at random and flashed a piece of paper. Just when I thought the clanking soldier was going to turn me away, another peered over his shoulder to view the symbol and juted an impatient thumb back towards the path. A path that leads to more than just a huge singular home of covetous power and wealth.

Leery (though squirmy on the edges) of the attractiveness of a unified, democratic cosmos seeping into an ever-shrinking consciousness, I floated off on the path moments before a meaty fist clamped down on my shoulder. Leaping feet into the air first, I did secondly let the fist -adorned with spiked ringlets- take lead. The nervous sort and outmatched only by my own coherent waves of jitter, the brute shot glances over hammered metal strapped to his torso as if I was mere moments from unsheathing some hidden weapon or making faces at his polished head. Truth be told I had the fortitude to do neither. These guys were too twitchy. Just a tad too pointy.

He gestured with the tip of his spear after rapping heavily on a side entrance, the guard entrance. A group of voices hushed each other before a slit opened at eye-level. Well, their eye-level, I suppose. I felt as a humble beggar, lower to the ground. Closer to the filth the mired City was paved in. A quick exchange betwixt them had me in the midst of a square sideroom, a stone's throw from the bunks lined as dominos, a breath away from the slop quarters where the clinking of dining daggers against forks could be heard.

In the immediate vicinity, however, dice-card players stared daggers in my direction, the inebriation of acquisition stretched plain on intense faces, the stakes looking rife with plunder: gems, candlesticks, bits of shiny odds and ends. I snuck my own intensity towards the stack of polearms in the corner, each glistening with fresh oil, the shiny tips reflecting their owners' look of impulsion and hunger. I barely had the presence of mind to acknowledge my own thieves sharing this pastime before reaching inwardly to the fifth pocket on the inside of a lapel.

Everyone shifted at once. I froze, all eight fingers spread, the universal symbol for "easy". I slipped the symbol to the doorman, whom gestured for me to follow.

This had, indeed, been so much easier when I hadn't announced my arrival... But a rack of jagged rapiers extended menacingly along the hallway, eviscerating the memory to pieces. No need to test my luck again, I suppose.

Mathias rested at the heart of his fallen empire: a bedroom on the second floor, his most common habit trails evidencing themselves in leading to his "seat" of power, tucked away in the bowels of the once magnificent stretch of fancy one could only imagine using a toddler's innocence. I had seen depictions of the bath fountains, of the ornate and intricate tiles in replication of the exotic birds of paradise, the shallow pools of steam directed through manual pumps of heated spray. I had heard descriptions of the aviary, those same colorful creatures collected and bred, legends made flesh, raised and stored in a massive

zoological undertaking. A squawking madhouse of rarity to be sure -but still impressive to behold- the domed cages with their benches, with their perches aplenty, inviting the most distinguished guests to visit and peruse. I had even witnessed these same corridors a few seasons back, the same passages littered with treasures, everything this home was known for having been stripped away over the decades to leave bare furnishings occupying the now barren tunnels of misery.

The palace had become only a place. Granted, the beggars would no doubt stand awe-struck by the paltry obsidian vases baked with silver wire in their exposed framework, maybe the tassled runner of imported carpet. But none of the fantasy drawings I had found in dusty tomes could be proven. None of the drunken stories passed along the years could be substantiated. Even within my own lifetime, my own experience, the splendor of the once-fabled Heart of the City had tarnished as quickly as the whorehouse's lobby, the goods being sold off to any who had coin to buy -to any willing to harvest the legend, the mystery. History had been pawned here to buy the future, to stave off the encroaching tidings, to squeeze the last drop of self-sustainability through inaction, of stagnancy under pressure.

The guard and I marched our way straight up the corridor, the unfamiliar gleam of gold now looking out of place to our right. I looked upon those doors with a flurry of emotions, of inspiration, of anger. Of longing, of lament. I looked upon the flourishes and the swirls, nature at its best, the raw materials excavated, gathered with a blundering hand, but sculpted with a craftsman's patience, perfected, the final piece of art coming together with practice and professionalism. It was a gilded edifice of accomplishment, branches and leaves duplicated, replicated, the handles inlaid with skill, tied into the golden mural with precision. The double doors to Mathias' bedroom -his only living space- were nearly the last evidence to the compound's former glory. Now, they stood as unpaid sentinels, a seal, guardians to a family catacomb, itself being buried in time, in obscurity. I recognized those doors for what they housed, for what they represented: a vault of privacy. This is where he kept privacy untouched, unstained, hidden and disconnected in his mausoleum at the center of that raging maelstrom around him. This is where he preserved himself, seemingly safe and secure.

I assumed those doors would never be sold to bribe his guards from leaving, seeing as they were the last line of defense to a cowering, strange little man.

"Who is it?!", a voice demanded from within, my armored escort not even having a chance to knock.

"A beggar, milord." He examined me disdainfully. "That one that comes around too often." He spoke with the measured impertinence of responsibility, the duty of protecting what little valuables there were from common riff-raff obviously falling far below his expectations of a job summary.

A small, jagged slot opened at our waist, presumably designed for plates of food, a dodgy set of eyes looking us back and forth. Three clicks and a slide resounded dull in the maltreated masterpiece, the holes and locks applied in slipshod fashion under this particular ruler and doing the original craftsman much injustice. I sighed along with the

mournful dirge as the doors parted, barely enough for a single man's shoulders, the un-oiled slab of mangled wood and metal groaning its dismay. Maybe the palace's former glory wouldn't have even a tombstone when all was said and done.

"Come in", Mathias commanded. "Guard, you first."

Danger. Watch your step.

Well, this was different. I was instantly alert, the tenacious effects of the Dreamsand passing discreetly for that moment, specifically. Guards were never allowed in the royal chambers, the fear, the paranoia, proving too great. It touched my mind that perhaps my services as spy were no longer needed, the overwhelmed heir coming to terms with the responsibility, with the duty of rule at last. Did he know that the recent rains nourished bumper crops, that prosperity was returning? Was he somehow informed that our economy was on the mend, that murders were down and spirits were up? That the introverted nobles were quiet and gold exchanged hands as easily as lies?

A mournful dirge played for my own employment.

"Hanse, now you."

Play your part, Instinct instructed.

I took the queue, responding to one of my aliases hesitantly. But the guard was no closer to the king than I, the mailed male looking quite unhinged at the request, obviously inspecting the bare room for the first time. One single dresser with mirror? Check. Royal bed? Check. Royal chamber pot? Check. Deranged and disturbed monarch wagging his own miniature dagger our direction? Check.

No, the guard was for me, my lateness being of no small importance in falling from the king's good graces. The funeral dirge returned and the door swung closed.

"You s-said you'd be here", stammered a ridiculously outmatched man in his second decade, sunken eyes wide, teeth bared. His jittery movement outlined a situation to be diffused delicately. "G-guard make him answer."

I suddenly had two weapons upon me, one much more stable than the first. The dirge just wouldn't cease.

My eight fingers were up again. "I was late. And I'm sorry. I apologize."

"Why were you late?! Were you conspiring?!"

A spear inched ever closer towards my abdomen at the same rate the dagger wielder was receding to a "safe" corner of the room.

"I don't conspire; I inform. Just as you pay me to do." I tried blinking the weapons away, but they remained. "Your lordship, the guard. If only we could speak alone."

Mathias winced. "No!! He stays", a wounded animal wearing a pale nightgown replied. "You'll cut me again." The spear's owner looked perplexed.

“I solemnly promise I won’t”, I said in easing hands to a patient side, planning a route to my own safe corner should the situation explode. Maybe I could bowl over the dresser as an obstacle? The mirror stared back atop the surface.

‘No way out, Din.’, Malak encouraged, looking sinister in the frame of silver, eyes cruel and harshly outlined. ‘I said that I’d see you soo-.’

“What news do you have to share?”, Mathias interrupted unknowingly. Our ruler demanded this as he eased his own weapon in the manner I pantomimed. Luckily, more importantly, the guard did the same.

I scanned the room, the enclosed space seemingly crowded and claustrophobic despite the high and vaulted ceilings. Breath came in ragged spurts. Blood seemed thick, ineffective.

You’re on, an inner voice cajoled past the dense atmosphere of returning stupor. A trick of the ears played havoc on my sense of balance, a gentle swaying the only thing keeping me upright. At least I didn’t notice the ankle at the time.

“Your people need you” I began, melding practiced words with improvisational rhetoric. This would be much harder with an extended audience, with a guard whom lived the very streets I was prepared to describe. “They need you safe, strong.”

“I am those things.” An aging boy injected. “Aren’t I?”

“You are not”, I ventured knowing full-well that a falsehood could be consequential, deadly. “You are surrounded by enemies who would steal the very throne from under you.” The guard shot an uneasy look to his employer, whom trembled as expected.

“These are the same things you’ve always said!”, he bleated, “But we need results! Details of the plot!” The tantrum held back for no one’s account. “We need to arrest the guilty! We need to sweep the streets clear of their filth.”

‘We need to stick you back in your playpen’, Malak chortled. ‘Or maybe a shiv in your windpipe.’

We need to get the hells out of here.

“We need to come up with a better plan”, I directed to Mathias, “A plan for the long term, not just the interim.”

“Everyone has their price”, Mathias retorted.

“Yes, but every seller has limits”, I snapped. Maybe a little too harshly. I was quick to follow-up with, “Your kingdom is being auctioned apart piecemeal, being broken off and fed to the dogs.”

Like us.

‘Like us.’

“You’ve got to inspire the change you wish to see.”

He froze in his trembling, a focused look training its sights on me. My dodgy yet sleepy eyes met his own. “I don’t have time for riddles”, he said unconvincingly. “You’ve never spoken of this before.”

“It’s not a riddle”, I sighed, flaying my own resistant brain for words, phrases that could possibly communicate to one blockaded by inexperience, the equivalent of redirecting the flow of a mental river. I yielded none in the effort. No metaphors of enlightenment. No gimmicky concepts to be taught. I drew a blank at an inappropriate moment.

Noticing the guard as if for the first time, I flashed the "droopy M" hand signal to a bewildered man whose night was shaping to be much more than he bargained. He responded in confusion, neither a positive nor negative indicator, just a confounded mouth noise and head waggle.

I sincerely hoped that Wren had collected valuable info.

“Gather your closest, most trusted men”, I told Mathias, my preaching beginning to transgress the boundaries of ‘Spy’ in lieu of ‘Advisor’. “Connect with them, and lead them. That’s essentially all you have left.”

But the diminutive wretch blurted failure too quickly. “There is no trust. Many guards have left me!”

“But many remain”, I spoke in earnest. “It takes more than gold to lead. It takes loyalty, and you can’t buy that. You have to create it.”

His head wiggled in eager defeat, the lone response to a slightly deeper concept, the City’s official governing body likened to a fussy upstart infant with a plate of vegetables before him.

“Your high majesty”, I began hopelessly, “You had to have some reason for inviting HIM in here. This is trust evidenced.” I motioned to the armed muscle, whom suddenly looked meek, uncomfortable. Maybe a little squeamish. “If I was to be the enemy, your assaulter, he was to be your protection, though in all honesty he’s got the biggest blade of us three. If sheer might was all it took, your meals would be undelivered, your seat of power usurped! Hells, he’d be in charge!”

Mathias appeared freshly terrified. The guard looked thoughtful, pensive, bringing his sharpened polearm to rest on a shoulder, his free hand scratching a chin of dark scruff.

“This is why trust is so important!”, I stressed. “Guard”, I began, “What is your name?”

Eyes narrowed. “Cecil.... Sir.” He added hastily, “Mr. Hanse, sir.”

“Cecil. Excellent. See, this is how you develop a rapport”, I gestured to Cecil for Mathias’ benefit.

“Pleased to meet you Cecil” I spoke methodically, demonstrably drawing out the

courtesies to bring attention to them, my pupil's gaze in unspecified awe. "Do you have any family in the City?"

"A few", he grumbled. "Mostly dead. Food shortage and all." He lowered the visor on his helm, feet planted firmly. He was bracing himself for questioning, apparently.

"I-I'm sorry to hear that", I responded. Mostly sorry for the ill-turn in a conversational dead end. I needed this to go smoother for the king's benefit.

"Do you have any hobbies?"

"A few", he admitted, a small chuckle escaping hollow and tinny from the grate atop his face.

"Y'see." I turned to the wilting daisy of a ruler, emphatic hands indicating my points of speech. "This is what I'm talking about. He's a *person* just like everyone else. Connect with it. Nurture it." I motioned towards the man whom rested a readied spear on armored hands, one foot placed behind the other, forming an "L" of sorts. "Cecil here has emotions, ambitions, just like everyone else. Just like YOU. We all have common ties. See, *common man*? It's in the name!"

Mathias looked positively encouraged, speechless even.

"You can inspire this City, make it yours again." I could feel the electricity in the room. Positive energy. Energy with which change could be carried into the future on. To reclaim the unification long past.

"No, he can't."

That was Cecil.

"Wait. W-what was that?", I queried, a little derailed in my predictions of a brighter tomorrow.

"He can't. Because it'll be MINE!", the guard roared something akin to a battlecry as he lunged.

I caught the spear in the side, the momentum of both a pickpocket's jumpiness and a bullish charge leaving me but grazed and bleeding with the dresser as support.

Malak cackled uncontrollably in my ears. I reeled from the wound. A hand came back, flushed and fluid. The Dreamsand turned it to wine. Thick, red wine.

I heard Mathias give a shrill sound, a clatter, as some small weapon hit the floor. "Don't I pay you enough?!", the boy screamed protest, the room resounding curt, the plea stifled with deafening acoustics.

"There is no 'enough'", Cecil sneered. "Now, come quietly."

RUN, Instinct instructed, even this bit of wisdom seeming overly complex.

Yet feet found their positions somehow, the dresser crashing to the ground, a drawer flying loose to meet its target. The duplicitous guard would see his coup through a dented helm if I'd anything to say about it, my bent form bolting forward. In throwing the door's bolts, in slipping past the sullied majesty of sullen defenders, the mangled remnants of a bought-and-sold kingdom, I squeezed past the historians of an era, generations past. The era had been auctioned long before we had realized, I determined in that moment. The historians having been corrupted in their vigilance, even their memories tainted through carelessness, a reckless exchange for convenience. My labored feet drummed the beat of the future, a percussion accentuating those fading moments of time, synchronous to the dirge of the door's lament. A vault I was forced to break *out* of, our monarchy laid to rest somewhere behind.

My gasps beat the rhythm -emphasized the movement, the change- my surroundings morphing into hallway, to foyer, to side-passage, to being almost shrouded in a stiflingly encompassing barrier running the circumference of the palace. Walls of stone supporting their heavy load -their burden- gave way to the freedom, the anarchy, of the night air. A stiff wind blew at my back, lending me speed, lending me ability. I flew past guard stations looking alert, though tired, spines erect with caution at my approach, weapons drooped stoic in their incredulity. These guards -the royal looters- of our town hadn't been included in the scheme, hadn't yet been briefed of the overthrow, of the revolution. They weren't yet conspirators to my knowledge.

But the sand would come, I knew. The dunes shaped themselves slowly, gradually, granules sliding across granules, small changes eliciting large results, shifts in organization, in position, causing a previously unconnected torrent of dependency to delve into disorder, into re-order. In a world where a single person can barely affect their own lives, where they feel weak and castrated, a grain amongst grains, powerless and hungry, their removal seeming insignificant, it's humbling and scary to see so much tied into so little. How those wakes occur only after an element has been removed. After the pillars of order come crashing down.

I glanced back at armed men giving chase, those oblivious to changes the morrow would bring. Those men shouted curses in my pursuit, yelling for blood. My own hands were already red with the reminder of what I'd helped to bring upon us all. My ears could already hear the curses of our successors.

Chapter 5: Admission

When all seems lost, scattered to the winds, when the horizon is gray with fog, when it's even difficult to picture yourself making it through yet another day, I've heard that one must always surrender to a Higher Power. Or blind fucking luck. What would I know, anyways?

Although I had witnessed miracles, or at least more than a single instance of the unexplainable (some called it magic), I continued to be confused as to the nature of the driving force, the cause for these things to occur. I simply couldn't warp my noggin to the whys and what-fors. I felt hopeless and insufficient, lost and befuddled. I felt misdirected, superfluous, insignificant, a statistic, a particle, a blade of grass, a dust-mote, an obnoxious boil on the ass of something even more hideous, but something larger all the same. The force prodding us, guiding us, could be a giant child with a giant stick poking holes in the earthen nest we'd constructed around ourselves, or it could be the genuine article: a pantheon of two-dimensional Gods taking pleasures as we scrape and struggle.

Prophetic writings in abundance, there was still no practical manual to navigating the pitfalls of life, no tell-all guide on how it is to be done, how we are expected to live. There was the ancient stone column in our plaza, of course, a historic monument to things we were allowed to be punished for doing. Constructed at the dawn of our civilization, it was generally pretended that the inconclusive list of simplistic shalls and shalt-nots would cover nearly every aspect of daily life, though it struck me as more than a tad archaic and irrelevant. Despite these straightforward and generic commands, life was ultimately perilous in spite of someone's best efforts to make it easier, to make it digestible. It was generally pretended the scant papyrus and carvings were enough, though a host of questions were inherent to both stories and the spiritual scaffolding our immortal essences were supposedly governed by. You'd think there would be more documentation, more evidence, more details on how the glorified cosmos of supernatural beings actually hinged in our reality, how the whole device was assembled since we are all said to be cogs in its design.

Clear answers to simple questions were simply not to be found, however. Intelligence and inquisitiveness were gifts by design, but somehow discouraged from being exercised.

How do you appease the Gods? Is that even possible? Do you throw salt over your shoulder when it spills? Do you spin in place, hopping single-footed while singing their glory? Do you burn tea leaves? Do you burn incense? Do you burn the Gods' enemies, their blasphemers? Or do you love one another, regardless of transgressions? Why don't the Gods strike down their enemies with fire and lightning instead of punishing almost at random, indiscriminately? What kind of God could kill a child? What kind of God requires sacrifice? What kind of God requires money, when providing for their flock was assuredly more deified? What kind of timeless, omnipotent being gets impatient, or

cranky, or vengeful?

If the Gods speak to us at all, why aren't the messages clearer? We can be reasonable, intelligent even. Is the complexity of The Plan really beyond our comprehension? If there is a Plan, a pre-ordained set of events that are destined to happen, can the concept of free-will really exist alongside it? If the Gods are perfect, is it feasible that they change their minds, change their attitudes, or was this simply part of their Plan all along? If the Gods do in fact have a Plan, and we were created to fulfill it, how can we possibly be held responsible for our actions?

What color was the universe before it was created and how did they entertain themselves before the concept of even color? Are the Gods still alive? Can a God kill another God? If Gods are all-powerful, can they kill themselves? Who do they reward? Who do they hate? If they hate at all, why did they create such things? Do they even care anymore? Do they even exist anymore? Do they even listen anymore? If they are all-powerful, why did they bother making us? Is life a form of trial? Are we a form of entertainment? Is the sky really infinite? Does any of it really matter to anyone else at all?

Maybe I'm a god. Maybe you're a god. Maybe we're all gods, poking our giant sticks into the nests of insects to stir up their shit. Our own pantheon of fantasized glory, the largest macro view there ever was, there ever is, to be had. Maybe we're it, the top-level, the top-tier. Maybe our relationships and the things we've built and died for are the pinnacle of organized thought through the stars, all else running tiny, un-noticed beneath our feet?

Or maybe it's just better if people continue to think this is but a preparation for something bigger, a staging area for our reward, the real deal yet to come. If this was it, all we had to go on, do you think people would be more or less civil than they are now? If the general opinion was that we were all Gods of our own destiny and that our handful of decades were the only things separating human desire and a complete and utter state of un-being do you think the common man, the average person, would be able to keep it together? Or would we have a greedy chaos envelop our City? Where a general lawlessness, a malaise of irresponsibility was the rule. Where an Ultimate Judgment did not exist, only the impulsive actions of a throng of survivors who were created, only to answer to society. If not society to themselves. If not themselves then to whimsical and unfettered impulses.

Pretty scary actually.

Obviously, I was full of questions. And to assuage my own doubt of Gods and Devils, Heavens and Hells, Man and his immortal enemy: Man, to align my fortune with the future of our world, my world, or at least divine the nature of it, I sought a person whom I thought closer to all things mystic, all things unknown. If this stuff truly existed, if prophecy and prediction were really true, if the veil of uncertainty could be pierced by

anyone, wouldn't the chances be tipped towards someone whom claimed the ability? Someone who advertised their services? I mean, between an everyday street beggar muttering to themselves about the end of days, and a person with a fancy hat and an attractive sign outside their tent, wouldn't logic dictate that the true conduit for prophecy be one cognizant of that perception? The one with the experience, with the practice, with the training, with the charisma to express these visions? Wouldn't you gladly pay a coin for the scant possibility that the garbled eccentricities of a carnival worker -a street performer- may reveal an outline of your destiny?

Of course you wouldn't, but I was desperate.

Gypsies, tramps, and thieves. Has a certain ring to it. The Fairgrounds were a lawless crotch in the intricate branches of streets where the aforementioned had dug in snugly, clogging the arteries of the dawn and dusk Rushes quite nicely, a redirection that the commuters were none too pleased about. It was a tick on the lifeblood of our City.

Filthy by comparison, burlap and hide lean-tos (some of unrecognizable furs) sprouted as grass blades after a moist morning amid the towering framework of a red clay landscape. Lines of moldy clothing hung as cobwebs in broad and narrow alleys alike, airing the stink of parasitic audacity, infecting the hopelessness to nearby susceptibles, sparking the idea to throw down their efforts and clamp onto the next bit of public property as they evacuated their own conventional dwellings. Basins of murky water stood stagnant despite the recently filled Ditch which bisected the town, the nearest access point to clean water being less than two blocks in the direction of the horizon's mountainside. Children ran about nude, their asses smeared with greenish feces, new sets of miniature coveralls cast haplessly towards broken adobe chunks dotting the crinkled walkways of an already narrow path of stamped earth.

I ducked and tiptoed around the assorted wares: crumbling vases and genuinely-fake jewelry, mule-hide adornments and wicker doodads. I shook my head absently at the cornerstone of a three-story building, its alley's redbrick having been methodically chiseled away, a dangerous practice of gathering the stuff for homes, tinctures, powders, dyes, or aboriginal remedies I had yet to discern. A toothless woman beamed back at me, a string of oblong yellow bits encircling her sun-baked neck. I gave a slight wave and she went back to her work, snapping a clucking bird like a whip while her vice-like grip released its beak and began depositing grubby handfuls of feathers into a sack.

No wonder these places were staving off the locals. They had started out smartly, a flashy side attraction that wooed the unsuspecting from their trials and their coin. Escalating quickly, the veritable woodwork was now overwrought in a tangled region of bodies, refuse, and salable garbage. I smiled regardless, absently aware of some girls skipping rope and chanting aloud, a pep in my step helping me across the support ropes of a

downed tent, its flapping material catching a stiff breeze as the night air was forcibly belched from the obstructed recesses of a pained metropolis. I doubted the wholesomeness of families separated and scattered about this place, especially in the waning hours of light, but the raucous laughter of adults clinking and passing bottles about an occluded campfire instilled a strange ease to my previously frayed nerves.

It might have been the Dreamsand. Might have been the fatigue. Might have been the lackadaisical surrender to the assertive spirit of change that dulled my senses, but the effect was all the same. I plodded in my search, visually picking through the mosaic of artificial fronts and heaps as if I would find something of value beyond what my fifth pocket, left-breast inner-lining concealed. Hey, that could have been it actually. Maybe some inner pressure was being relieved. Since I was indeed perusing the fallen sprawl of some backwards commune devoid of personal interest, my.... more basic inclinations could have taken a backseat in lieu of not trying to stick myself with some spear of support timber that stabbed from a collapsed dwelling built without mind to the essentials of basic geometry. I was preoccupied with navigating the strewn remnants of tussled bedding and assorted mollusk shells, trays and wheel-less carts, bits of colored shale dangling on string and the bowls of shucked wheat that I imagined to be already overrun by weevils in an absolutely best-case scenario. I was traversing a theoretical wasteland of undiscovery, a well plunged archaeological site of unimportance, a sociological shedding of tribal castaways and undesirables who remained unaffected by politics and social upheavals, unwary of insiders and outsiders, alike, unchanged despite weather, despite convention, and despite good sense, really.

Whatever the case, I wasn't going to be ousted as the instrument that toppled the only semblance of lawfulness of which our patch of creation had previously clung and that fact gave me an admittedly miniscule amount of respite.

As an answer to a yet unspoken question, a candle illuminated the recesses of a hollow deep-set into a sideway circumventing a pyramidal tablet I'd been looking to get past. The monument of scripture had been defaced and re-carved in ways only an indigenous people could over the course of generations, but the efficiency of its deconstruction was admirable. The stone block was being shaped to meet some other specifications though the original verses were just barely illegible past the superseding signatures and graphic sexual positions hammered with a child's precision over and again throughout the work. I walked past it with minimal leering, unknowing of the edifice's final form, and uncaring of how the new inhabitants saw this once-revered and suppositional relationship to our very makers.

The woman had a look that gave me a bit of my edge back. Deeply wrinkled, her creases cast unnatural shadows up and over the dried visage, her ghastly intensity multiplied by the sparse light cast from a single tallow of red wax. She held it at an angle so as not to

leak the drips over the claws of gnarled tree roots that jutted from a coarse, matted shawl of knitted dog-hair. It stunk and so did she, but the non-verbal beckoning I felt when she pointed at the crude-cut chunk of glass verified that I would be able to trade coin for lies at that very table.

I held my hand aloft and forward as a sign of goodwill but she snatched it suddenly, keenly focused on the palm in such low lighting, squinting with an audible queue of disturbance at her findings.

"No coin?!", she heaved with disgust, sending a grizzled hand dismissively in my direction as the crone lit a few more stationary lamps about her establishment.

I could see that one corner of the mess was well-stocked in tiny drawers, a hardwood bureau containing dozens of fist-sized containers that creaked and groaned in sliding open and closed, back and forth as she fussed with an objective only she knew of. Several of the slots were opened repeatedly but it was eventually settled that the last would have the leaves she sought. She held them aloft with a chuckle, struggled with her limited might to shut the rough-shod carpentry and nearly jumped out of her saggy skin upon spinning around to see me still standing there.

"What is it you want BOY?!"

"You a fortune teller?"

"Yes", she replied with palpable reticence.

I found my own seat at her crystal ball, brushing some clattering kid's toy off the stool before slapping two coins up in front of her own cushioned chair. It stood high and straight-backed, much more so than my present company. "Then take this fortune and tell me mine."

She crowed a bit before finally settling with a cup of already murky liquid and tossed in leaves for good measure, stirring all the while, a dark finger drawing dark swirls in its surface.

"And what is it you were looking to find?", a sly sneer accompanied the dabbing of a lengthy fingernail on the stained fabric of an armrest, the cup finding an interesting place below her bulbous nose in fathomless sniff.

I cringed a bit when she spat a frothy wad into the cup, but I reversed the question anyways. "What exactly can you tell me?"

"Oh, things, things."

"That's very specific of you."

She took a sip, but then held the floating tea leaves for my inspection. "What do you see?", the old woman peered at me with an implied screaming for validation. Or at least some form of introspect.

The sloshing bubbles and dehydrated spears didn't do much for my imagination, but I tried to play along. "I... suppose this could be me", I started, "Wandering about, aimless. It looks like I'm parting and rejoining with these little circles over here. Those could be riches or friends, hard to see in this light."

"What?", the crone exasperated, holding the teacup up to what was presumed to be her good eye. "Useless, boy, useless." She poured the swill under the table and slammed the cup back on the table between us. "Methinks I got the wrong leaves; now what's this you were looking to find again?" She heaved impatience.

At that specific moment, I was honestly looking to find the coins I'd donated when the promises seemed higher, but found nothing but an empty teacup staring back. And the old woman. She was there too.

"What I WANT is for the world to continue being its happy little self! I want my tomorrow to be brighter than your filthy den here", I chucked this at her in a fiery ball of spite. She caught it; I could see that much at least.

"Ah", she retorted. Then, holding the half dome of her crystal ball aloft. I could now see inside the other half, filled to the brim with paper-wrapped spheres of some hand-rolled substance. "Hard candy?", she asked on a high note.

"Do you not have any sort of fortune-telling equipment at all?"

"I'm a bit blind you see. Defeats the purpose. You understand."

"I don't actually. Blind? But you just lit those lanterns, easily just now.... Just this second."

"Half blind."

I chuckled wryly at her wit and caught my tongue between molars on a single side. "Okay. I'll play along." I spared this, throwing my hands up briefly to demonstrate my new malleability.

"That's the spirit!", she hissed. "And what happened to your hand? You should get that looked at." She cooed softly, bending her eyebrows in sympathetic angles.

I glared back, unamused.

"Half blind", she motioned again to one of her orbs, though I didn't witness any

difference between the two. No clouding, or laziness. No nothing. "We're the same then", she pointed at my own head for a moment before I realized that my occluding bandana was the target.

We cleared our throats simultaneously.

After savoring the awkwardness, she soon started up again, half to my chagrin. "So.... trinkets and tokens.... that's what you kids believe in?" Patting herself down, she made a minimal effort to locate something. Murmurs accompanied grunts as she reached under her shawl. "OOOH haha", she giggled in a strangely youthful embarrassment, turning her attention on me once again. "I think I remember something...."

Bent almost to the point of broken, her brittle hands reached to pat my own chest instead. Sustaining the insult with a keen bravado and a pursed mouth, I admit a mild amusement whenever she produced a fat stack of serrac cards from inside my number twelve lapel pocket, a sleight that would have sent a lesser crowd into a fervor. Or a witch hunt.

"Enjoying yourself?"

"A bit", she admitted. "I uh.... believe that I left something else on your person. Do you mind standing up please?"

"Not at the moment", I expulsed, some perversion enjoying the fumbled flirtations but a stronger, louder revulsion within me resounding clear as the town's bell. "You'd have to pay those coins back, as a start."

"HERE WE GO!", announced a renewed vigor from my wrinkly patron. She shook back her sleeves to reveal liver-spotted chicken flesh and began dealing the cards face down. "Now that I have my CRUCIAL deck of cards, you've got one fortune comin' your way! Money well spent", she assured with a row of alarmingly brown teeth.

"Those are your carvings out on the pyramid aren't they?", I probed, suppressing a tight grin.

"OH LOOK AT THAT!" She slapped the table before even revealing the top card on my left-most pile. Monotone: "The Sword of Moons! What a blessing. Fortune smiles on you this day.... er.... Night."

I looked onward with confusion.

She continued her show. "Those born under the sign are.... let's say Fearless and Bold. That sounds good. You have a knack for Coercion and Misdirection, though a bit of Discrimination would be appropriate. You control your destiny directly, though many factors vie for dominance. The hallowed serrac cards indeed tell me these truths and are very good at, uh, truth-telling."

She merely smiled at my incredulity and didn't miss a beat. A second slap, both the crystal ball of hard candies and teacup rattling in place.

"Crown of Thorns!", she bellowed in a strained timber. "A telling symbol to be sure. Your Confidence can be a detriment and this can only lead to Pain! You elevate yourself at great cost!"

I blinked a few times just to be sure my eyes weren't playing tricks in the dimness.

"The Crown of Thorns is normally considered a Transition card, since it is only with great endurance that one can handle its burden."

I licked a dry mouth, the inside tasting gritty all of a sudden, fine sweat forming at the perspiring brow, my headwear swelling with moisture.

"And LASTLY!", the crone performed with a bravado of her own. SLAP! "We have the.... MEDICINE LIST!"

I glanced at her nervously, back at the table, and then locked eyes with her once more. Though my own throat rumbled an echoed concern that should have quelled with the ridiculousness of her practiced show, the morbidity of the vision was setting in.

"The list", she spoke again softly, embarrassed, "I forgot to take this out, forgive me. BUT BECAUSE this is your FUTURE stack, the card must resonate with the Sword of Moons! In tandem, they predict change, OPTIONS. You have many Fates at your disposal, each differing greatly from the next! Not too shabby, eh?", she queried.

I could only look on dumbfounded, brain not finding the words, eyes not believing the reality. The Dreamsand. Had to be the Sand. Was this a joke?

"Is this a joke?" I forced a smirk, what little levity of being groped diminishing as a beacon of mirth long past.

"Hmm? No, it's not", she said apologetically looking down on the third serrac pile. "I'll give you some tea for the road, but you're not getting your coin back." She put a feeble hand over her shawl. "I'd decided to talk about your problems. Maybe use my wisdom to set you on your course, but you kids.... you kids like the show apparently!" She waved her arms about a bit with a falsified look of manic. She sniffed absently.

"C'mon. Level with me", I pleaded. "We both rob for a living. Now, what is this card?", I asked tersely, jutting a rigid finger in a heavy thump. My head was tilted forward requesting, nay, demanding a serious response.

"That's.... the Crown of Thorns, child. It clearly has the little pokey things going into the woman's skull. That would be queen Carina of mythology. You know your mythol-"

"And this card?"

"I *sigh*. That is the Sword of Moons. Sword. Moon. Pretty self-explanatory." She was growing impatient. "Moons don't hold swords but this is an allegory of sorts, showing that-"

"And THIS?!"

"I swear I'll throw it away after this weekend."

I exhaled sharply, clenching my eyes. I forced a rumbling groan as I tore the eight digits away from my own face. Fighting the Sand, my surroundings clung to few remaining ripples and waves, but no other aspect of my perception seemed impeded by the hallucinogen. However, upon my composure, the three serrac piles had vanished.

"Where'd they go?!", I shrieked, almost on the verge, but the crone was up and busy rooting through her drawers once more.

She turned with a mixed mask of annoyance and pity. "Keep your voice down!", she hushed, moving her rickety, stuttering joints over the cabinet of concoctions, grabbing knobs and tugging out organic immaterial one at a time. She cooed upon finding the correct leaf.

"If you were mine, I'd flip you right over and spank you raw." She wheezed at this haltingly until a degenerative cough overtook the paltry attempts at recovery. "Now", she demanded, "did you want to share some of this tea before you left or not?"

Alone. It was quiet. The old Hookblade had seen much disuse. Although it wasn't my only tool to dull through time, it remained of few that emitted sparks when raked heavily across a whetstone. My mental faculties sat entranced as the striated sheen glistened, ever more pronounced with each passing quarter-glass, a dab of saliva lubricating the marbled shard as I scraped the thing. It had been a butcher's tool, once, long ago. How long ago, I couldn't recall. Try as I might, the world was slipping.

I pushed the metal in broad, even strokes, my fingers tempering the scraping noise that tore through silence. My silence. It rang clear, sharp, a rasping graveling that seemed to travel hidden conduits, a consistent stream that paved a path from the rasping rock directly to my eardrum. I lost myself in this thought. Wearing away at the idea, honing the conceptualization which then struck me as fathomless. Was I playing this small bit of metal, conducting a tinny symphony of all-consuming unimportance, or was it playing my ear, exciting the bits of bone as they knocked against each other? Causation was evident: I performed the action and it affected me, certainly. But the purpose, the

motivation echoed unattainable.

Soon the glinting, sharpening metal had attained a force, a will. It directed my hands, having themselves numbed long ago. How long ago, I couldn't recall.

A piece of me wasn't okay with this, but I put so much effort into focusing that I had become ensorcelled with the idea of focus. It was this recognition that propelled the cycle, generated the momentum. It made perfect sense to continue. It felt right to repeat the motion. Catching my thoughts in a streaming loop of questioning the question, or reasoning against reason, meticulously dissecting arguments posed from within. I simply sat, scraping a weapon to a razor's edge, mulling the idea of being able to think, over and again. And that's all there was.

I had been snared, a pitfall of devious design.

It was only through boredom, disinterest, that broke the chain that bound. My ears sought respite, the jagged maw releasing its hostage with a suddenness, bringing with it a world containing un-muted ambience. My ears heard no rasping the moment hands ceased movement. I felt no stone the moment I set it down.

A simulacrum of quicksand, only reverse, my auditory senses attuned to the soft vibrations of a new, disparate instrument. The bailalaika's gentle plucking eroded my brain's confines, or rather, restored the original boundaries, corralling my stray thoughts into their pens. Something new, fresh, different. My wandering pieces made their way back home, much as how cattle eventually meander back to the herd. As my hands worked absently the strings sung gentle and tired, the hollow triangular body of wood resounding small in the claustrophobic quarters.

A series of stout candles burnt on the counter, casting even shorter shadows than our night's own celestial body. The moon beamed, prideful of its superiority over distant stars. A proxy-lord whom ruled the night, if only in the absence of anything greater. But when dawn crested several hours from that moment, the moon's relevance would fade all too quickly, the sun's brute power crushing aspirations of lunar glory.

I stared. The pitfall of human intelligence, once again, threatened to implode upon itself before my very eyes. I see this, just as I see the bailalaika across the room, resting vertically against a pair of expensive divans, an ornamental rug gathering dust just below. Hands elevated themselves for inspection and the coloring seemed off, wrong. The skin was yellower than I had remembered, torn. An easy smile reveals rows of stained teeth and my finger does the same, a black sphere bubbling at its tip. The pearl contorts, grows, shiny in the moonlight afforded by a miserly ruler by proxy. A stiff breeze flutters the wood shutters, snuffs a flame, and I figure it's time to wash my hands.

‘What did you see in the cards, Din?’

“Your death”, I say.

Malak chuckled wryly at this from a small mirror in that cramped closet of a stall. I hate when he does that. *No, better not to call him “he”*. I wipe some spittle from my reflected lips before busying hands in a washbasin. The liquid was lukewarm, chunks of flotsam circling its surface. I rap softly on a hollow cistern below my station before deciding that the bowl of standing water is good enough to clean such a minor wound.

‘Whose death was that again?’, he rasps, my bloody smear stabbing rivulets of corruption through a rippling pool. He was on the edge of a guffaw, but I swish the index finger about, shaking the cut loose of infection.

Nowadays, the missing finger bones undoubtedly adorned that rich man’s reconstructed basement, if he hadn’t simply directed a servant to sweep them out with the refuse of a collapsed tunnel. Maybe a rat was gnawing on them at that very moment?

Ever helpful, Instinct guided our labor through sterilization, a standing snifter of Gerd’s whiskey and a fibrous cloth for blotting. But I knew this on my own, without assistance.

Finally satisfied with the ritualistic cleanliness, I speckled water to an accusing face from which Malak glowered harshly, but the inflamed sensation of embarrassment, fear, or whatever else it is that causes your features to burn flared despite this. The forehead perspires for too many reasons. It was cool to the touch, I found, lascivious hands sprinkling more and more, an uncontrolled indoor-downpour in my second floor washroom. The cruel images seemed to melt in the effort. My little chunk of this dilapidated building became inundated, however, as this behavior soon had me overturning the bowl, choked sobs punctuating the clattering as the thing spun tight little circles about the floor.

I plopped to the ground, cheeks becoming drenched as canvas soaked up much of the spill. Icy tendrils reached upwards through belted pants, only to extinguish steaming sweat dripping freely from a flushed torso.

I cried even more, though there was no reason for any of it. I knew this on my own as well.

You have a visitor. Instinct informed.

It would seem that appearances have a special power of their own, as it is with these that we shape our truth. The rhythms on the catwalk afforded me enough time to mold this form’s appearance a bit.

“Am I interrupting?”, Germaine asked pensively, shadowing my suite’s balcony door as

if he could be missed by even the most casual glance from a passerby.

“No, just bathing”, I lied, a coarse piece of cloth becoming draped around my damp neck. “Come in, come in.”

“You’re bleeding”, he noticed, entering the domicile as if he’d never perused the place before. His eyes panned the walls for Gods know what.

“Sharpening my blade”, I said, forcing Malak’s chuckle through my own teeth. I revealed the minor cut from which the blood had gushed, where the faint smears stained my prints. “These things can get away from you at times. What’s going on, my friend?”

Friend.

“The drops, Din. You said you’d have them ready?”

Gods. I had. “Sorry. Just a moment.”

He waited patiently, obviously polite on my account, though it was all too evident our little run-in had never truly dissolved. I searched for miniature envelopes as the lieutenant fiddled with some board markers of a Chesbac game in progress. He twisted a carved figurine on its axis before graciously returning it to its position, which was two turns shy of winning I’m proud to say. We both knew this.

There was no hurry in his voice when he said, “I don’t mind taking over this responsibility, Din.”

“It’s not a trouble... just... there we are.”

He watched me produce the articles and I busied myself with codes, deftly splitting the pages apart in choosing a side to write. A Dead Drop would consist of two characters: a symbol to assert the correct recipient (each man had one), and a separate marking indicating the mandated responsibility for the evening to include pickpocketing, house theft, inaction, or the Nomens' two forms of info gathering: buzzing or infiltration. Our little group used to function quite efficiently without requiring obscure scraps to be scattered about a congested cityscape, but with certain individuals’ inability to be reached for last-minute alterations... we had soon landed unsavory situations.

To this day, Tug still couldn’t convince me to change his symbol from the double-crescent moon, which I loudly dubbed, “the Ass”. A bit of red streaked his marker as I finished up, the refuse folded and making their way to Germaine’s possession.

But he was not easily placated. He stood stunned, incredulity dripping loose as I continued to towel my own greasy hair. “These are all for theft”, he said, eyes dull and listless, fathoming my instructions born of desperation: the best kind. Oh, if only he knew

what the morrow would bring us.

“That it does”, I retort.

“The men... don't share this specialty. How are they to follow these orders.”

“They'll make do.”

“You can't expect this of them”, he protested, voice riding an edge that even he may not have understood. “Six burglaries in a night are bound to fail, *destined* to get a man caught.”

“Seven of them. And no... we need this.”

“You made instructions for me”, he deadpanned.

“No. I'm asking you face-to-face. Take as much as you can, Germaine. There's a storm coming.”

“What are you on about?”, he demanded, the measured tones departing. “This isn't your Chesbac game. Should none of them get caught... say not a one of those bunglers gets caught... what then? What have you accomplished?! This can't go unnoticed, unpunished.”

I sighed dismissively.

Germaine wafted that sigh clear out the open window, his entrance. “Out there! LOOK out there, Din. This isn't what you *think* it is. You've got to make your moves smarter, and with care.”

“Keep your voice down.” My hands insistently beckoned his volume. “Or you can just scream our operation out to the public. Your choice.”

“Your operation IS public.”

“It's *our* operation”, I reminded him. “What exactly did I promote you for?”

“Great question!”, he snapped, eyes fierce and challenging. “I can't recall... Was it laziness, perhaps? Did you simply not have enough time to yourself? Couldn't be bothered with the details as the boys risk their lives for scant tidbits of information.”

“I KEEP THIS TEAM TOGETHER.”

“They AREN'T together!”, he retorted. “Not one of them is both capable AND loyal.”

“WREN TOO?”, I flummoxed with the phrase; spittle spraying embarrassingly.

He bit his tongue at that. “No, I... I actually forgot about him.”

“They always do.” I gave a slight smile.

“Ha. That they do”, he mustered a self-directed laugh. “So quiet, that one.”

“You never see that one coming.”

“Does he ever leave?”, Germaine asked rhetorically.

I scrutinized the room in mock alarm, adhering to the last semblance of partnership in the terseness. “Is he here RIGHT NOW?”, I inquired, brows raised and at the ready.

“Hahaha.”

“Ha HA! HA ha ha.”

His gaze zagged while my own zigged, our darting glances finding all manner of solitary objects to be amused with in light of the oppressive discomfort. It'd be easy to pretend that I was continuing the ubiquitous charade, that the spindly Wren was hidden in a cup or ottoman or even tucked behind drapes billowing in the wind, but our focus did eventually fall upon the same spot of floor, the weight of the world finally catching up as we locked sight once more.

“You can't keep this up, Din.”

“Tell me something I don't know”, I muttered with a mix of disgust and loathing, eyes finding that spot on the floor again. “But please, TRUST me on this.”

“Which part?”, Germaine queried. He looked so resolute and yet so sympathetic at that moment, despite himself. He was no longer the stoic lad I'd found that day in the marketplace, or had he found me? I couldn't help but recall the enthusiasm, the sheer willingness to join the Nomen.

“That is certainly fair”, I exhaled, breath low. “But please just follow these orders... as a friend.”

Chapter 6: Defects

The bird let me go. Once a majestically soaring steed of the skies -a flaming monster of an avian spiriting its tired cargo across a boundless landscape of mountainous clouds shining fierce in the orange light of waning day- the bird let me go. Fire licked in flurries of swept fury, its tangible grace draining in a cascade of shrieks, the very skin of it melting away as the once-awesome plumes extinguished to embers. A ravenous breeze consumed the very beauty which disintegrated in but a moment, fading to ash as good fortune often does. I peered upwards into the expanding atmosphere, hands reaching for sky that stretched exponentially, far and away, in my tumult. Far and away above, just beyond my toes, a distant explosion of feathers continued its velocity, scattered to the fore-winds, propelled by unseen currents that promised nothing short of adventure in distant lands. But I continued downwards, away and afar, a stone dropped into a pool of unimaginable depths, a spec enveloped in the inkiness, a streak of red being the only stain on its purity while moans manifested themselves, accompanying unseen assailants clawing clumsily at my flesh.

I awakened calmly, the throaty groans dying out. The familiar mutilation of my own hand clutched a scarred sternum scratched raw, but its pain helped ground me. Soothing in its realness. It's curious how one can turn anything into a routine, no? Laying quietly, it took but a few moments to discern fact from fiction.

Fact: I am Din of the Nomen, a helpless, hopeless whisp of a leader with barely two senses to rub together. Fiction: I was bucked from the Phoenix again, a flaming bird that keeps me alive. (Gods, dreams are so cruel.) Fact: I single-handedly doomed our lands last night, the terror of unregulated chaos snatching victory from the faulty vestige of our last remaining authority figure. Fiction: My prick is the biggest that Moira ever beheld...

Jostling my universe back into its nooks within my wrinkled brain to which it belonged, my limbs trembled in a similar stutter, cajoling the spindly muscles from a half night of atrophy. Both the corporeal being and a person's sanity must be reaffirmed, after all. This would indeed be a long day.

I did make a valiant attempt to hop off the cot -to seize the afternoon in all its glory- but heavy bones and a pudgy gut allowed for only a modest roll, the intended rebound seeming much more spry in the forethought. Internal pools of blood resumed their flow, a not unpleasant tingling that would have to last me. At least until I could make it to the marketplace. "My first stop", I muttered to any who'd listen. The rats had been evicted from that apartment, but familiar cravings have long memories, and I instructed the belly to desist its grumblings. We had become better than that, escalated above primal urges.

A refreshing sprig of sweetbark kept both the jaws at work and my breath tolerable in hunger's place. I grabbed this, my vest, and a paltry coin purse (fourth pocket, outer cuff)

in stumbling from the door -a behavior once designed to play the potential surveillance. Instead, I played the foolish oaf all too well.

Squinting blearily towards the sky (which was assumedly that blinding smear of white and blue) I dropped to a knee in mock attempt to tighten sandal straps. Imperceptible to prying eyes, however, a piece of discreet straw would be wedged into the lower jamb, the most telling evidence of any kind of forced entry. (Had I locked the window?) Rising, I turned a key and sauntered off with the full intention of sating my various needs, yielding only to the dull cries of a swollen ankle, but even then doing it only slightly.

“That fucking old hag palmed my ‘sand!”, I mewled with rage.

I received no sympathy, however, from the dead eyes peering past a tangled unibrow, through *me* as it were. He made some lame attempt to best a fly, the cratered face brimming chockfull of ugly, but expressionless all the same.

“I got nothin’ now. Not a grain.” My hands searched helplessly, knowing the pocket system was incapable of lying. The flattened metal box was distinctly absent, this was certain, the rounded edges unfelt through layers of tight-stitched desert cotton. The old crone had exacted quite a “tip” for a decidedly uninformative divination if you ask me...

Ragged footwear kicked up dust, sending a smattering of pebbles ricocheting harmlessly off his wooden sign. “Candies” it read, though the dangling lines of colored sugar glistened far sweeter than the word, a necessity given the average consumer’s illiteracy.

“Leave or BUY”, my fleshy host lisped. He wheezed this past facial creases easily mistakable for a chin.

I continued to huff up a storm, however, skin searing in the exposed quarter-center, stifled rancor burning hotter than a mere sun could muster. The merchant continued to fester in sheltered darkness, scratching his head with a swatter before subsequently waving it about, first to shoo pests and then second to fan a breeze towards bulbous jowels. Jowels that glistened like filthy, unsavory candies. The texture of his rolling fat was broken only by sweat beads and stubble, the marbles growing in size before trickling downwards to be consumed by a bramble of barbed chest hair.

“Give me THAT!”, I spat, yanking the ineffective tool from the perspiring tub.

In a tornado of whips, I managed to fell all but one of the pesky buzzers, noting which sweets I happened to graze with the soiled end. I plopped the thing back into his meaty grasp, the merchant’s mind proving too slow to even plaster shock across his greased troughs. He stared as he always did.

“Leeeave or BUY”, he slurred.

“Sell to me at a REASONABLE PRICE”, I managed, fantasizing of tearing the stand apart with bare hands. It was insult enough that the fortune teller’s teacup didn’t pawn for half of what I expected, but the discovery that *she* had lifted from *me* left inconsolable wounds in both pocket and soul.

“Little boy wakes too late.”

“Who you calling ‘little boy’?!”

He grinned wide. “Big Man wakes too late!”, the shopkeep burred, jabbing a sausage at a lockbox beneath his perspiring ass. “Big Man miss out.”

I gritted teeth, the yellowed bones crunching hollow in my skull. A slight buzz rang out.

“Big man... must wait.” An implausibly high-pitched laughter chased those words, almost enough to incite violence from sensibilities. “Uh oh! All out”, he gargled, palms turned for inspection.

I knew this game already, knew how it would play out. *Utterly hopeless.*

Heedless of the consequences, I glared at the dripping merchant with his gut spilling out of that candy stall, imagining all manner of ways to extract the scant bits of dreamsand he assumedly retained. Mayhaps the price *had* risen due to early buyout, my lazy bones missing a sweet, sweet deal. Who knows? The City could be stocking up for a dry spell that very moment, a scarceness of comfort-substance in the wake of disrupted commerce, the rippling effect of a toppled governance (or at least the impression of one).

More likely, he’s price gouging.

Yes, that.

The force feedback of the unavailability heightened the desire, stomach and mind, when both proved to be satiable without at least a pained trek across half the town to retrieve additional funds. At least for the moment, I ached in ways undreamt, the churning of gravel sounding hollow in an abdominal cavity, bearing likeness to the full-body yearning with which it directly competed. Which was stronger? Which was superior? Which was a necessity that could go ignored?

The answer to this question is a fat man, laughing his jowls loose as he pointed at his fellow pest, one with wings and perched atop my hooked nose. I saw its forelegs churning insectile fury before I shook the thing off with a burst of rage, the cackling theme of burbling bemusement being swallowed by the crowd’s cacophony somewhere south. This fit -his fit- however, died with the slapping of corpulence, the action proving

much too strenuous to continue in this heat.

“You had FLY on your NOSE!”, he states with much mirth, aftershocks continuing their quivering despite the quake’s cessation.

To this I exhale, still comparing the benefits of a placated mind on one hand, and the comfort of a nourished body on the other. Both seemed mutually dependant, though even the most rudimentary amount of living would prove otherwise, that you can pine in different ways, one route being the “obvious” choice to some onlooker, while the opposite route being “apparent” to the next. Similar to how I lost sleep for separate reasons, the choosing of the specific brand of monotony, of the root cause of it all, would resound hollow. Ultimately, my feelings on the matter of starvation or mental anguish would be defined as a mere preference, a footnote to a summary marked “inconsequential” by some great historian penning his own vacuous comment to the article of my life’s impact.

Through time, my very concept would be edited: inarticulately rendered, inadequately documented, and subsequently filed into the Library of Too Many Words. It would be stored in this bin of oblivion until the papers turned brittle, disintegrating into dust, leaving only a stilted cover propped vertical by its own mass, a shell of unkept promises, -promises that detailed information which had obviously existed- only to crumble to illegibility long ago. If it had ever been readable at all. Lost to time, the particles’ most noteworthy of occurrences would be the low possibility of being feast for the common dust-mite.

What pains do we accept, do we embrace? What distractions do we adopt over others, even if the darkness is destined, inevitable? How can we be put in charge of making such choices when our very actions are barely worth the fiber it takes to feed a musty tome-dwelling bug? If we live for ourselves, how can one critique -criticize- the navigator of a map-less journey without destination? How do we chart the course to a goal unrealized?

In response to this, the rising swell of a mercenary’s shout shot clear across the plaza, as he motioned for a partner to load another corpse into his cart. The duo continued as they were, piling the bundles in an inefficiently placed stack of desiccation, the stench compounding upon itself in swelter that seared my exposed neck where I stood mired in indecision.

The candy salesman grinned his infuriating grin.

“I see you’re doing pretty well for yourself!”, a man croaked in his approach, my position overlooking paid undertakers at work. His little brown head bobbed up to the railing, a

little brown finger prodding my midsection. “You’ve managed to store some belly away for hard times.” A feeble smirk spread like an infection though I shared none of the joviality. A whole world of people shifted about us without heed.

Absently rubbing a bruised gut, I gave a quick snort to stave off bitter indignity. As if I’d let some withered old goat offend a man in his prime. “What am I supposed to call you again?”, I asked sincerely, a blend of extreme gratitude and belligerence being the bundle of emotions I felt for this robed hatrack. In reality, I probably should have asked *what* to feel for this guy. “It’s strange to know you as simply ‘The Practitioner’ ”, I said instead.

“That’s as good a name as any.”

“Alrighty”, I blurt in directing attention to the plaza, suddenly finding a good place to lean. “What can I do for you?”

“You mean: What can you do for the Order.”

“And just what is that?”, I asked with a façade of absolutely no concern. “My... associates couldn’t find hide nor hair of you after the fire.”

“That’s not surprising”, he replied. “Oh, we’re just a collection of individuals. We seek balance in all things you know.”

"The Order seeks order?" I scoffed. "Little obvious, don't you think?"

"Did your lackeys fail in collecting information about us?" The practitioner tries to meet my eyes, but they’re busy studying the cart, each body wrapped in filthy linens, more flies visible even from that balcony. “You might be interested in what I'm offering.”

“Not especially.” I riposted, feigning a little too much, sizing him up over a terse bicep, fingers supporting mashed chin. “And just why so chatty all of a sudden? You left me in the lurch back at the manse.” *Abandoned, more like.*

It was then that memories of the rack -of the fingernail splints- came flooding back a little too forcefully. A gasp and a bit of moisture demanded concealment, appearances being one of the lesser human needs but still there when the louder devils had abated. I did in fact owe the man my life after all was said and done, and I was being downright rude.

He watched me, a kindly, beaten smile being the best tool in his arsenal. The little bald head waited patiently through all of this, my reluctance, a prunish geezer enduring youth. We both knew the response to come, so I suppose that sincerity became much easier after a singularly shared moment.

“What are you trying to tell me exactly?”, I asked, discarding pretense.

“My brothers have a waning curiosity in you. The time is now.”

“Well, why?”, I breathe, simultaneously flattered and distrustful. A life hard-lived can be impossible to shake in the face of the unknown and I had indeed been singed by curiosity, if not wholly immolated. “We’re back to where we started.” I sighed again. “What exactly are you telling me?”

He seemed to wrestle with the words, testing the scenario as if those weathered eyes saw this exchange playing out in a multitude of ways. My reaction was obviously important, that much was clear, and he didn’t appear to have rehearsed anything. An uncharacteristic stammering seemed evident in his actions though, in his movements, a stuttering resignation flushing whatever thoughts clouded whatever it was he wished to say, what little he wanted to expose.

“I’ve been watching for a long time”, spoke an aging head camouflaged in drab, dun-colored garments and liver spots, “and... it is in your interest to accompany me into the fold.”

“You want me to join you?”

“Yes.”

“To the ‘balanced’ old men that have a ‘waning curiosity’ in me?”

“We aren’t *that* old, but you’re definitely correct. You have a place among us.”

“Wait”, I spoke, hands raised. “Just wait... WHAT exactly are you saying to me?”

“The m-“

“Say it.”

“I’m sa-”

“Because I’m hearing a lot of nonsense at the moment...”, I interjected.

“You have visions!”, he snapped uncharacteristically, tongue lashing free from reservation. A shrouded form rolled neglectfully off its cart as the mercenaries scrambled in manic response. “You have VISIONS, alright?... Impertinent pup...”

This bit of info ignited a light within, though it drove home what distinct lack of knowledge had me theorizing on what definitively “characterized” him. I didn’t know him at all, in fact.

“And wha-”

“*Dreams?! Maybe hallucinations?*” It seemed I’d ignited my host’s light as well... “You SEE things,” the little man fumed, “Of... *things* you can’t explain?!...” The recitation of some internal mantra calmed the fire, though his eyes still smoldered, pinpricks of embers visible behind a slate of gray.

I took it all in stride, however, letting neither generic warnings nor geriatric grumblings influence my exterior. “And your brothers have waning curiosity in what... my hallucinogens?”

“Yes!... Well, no...” he retracted.

I gave nothing but nonplussed reticence.

“God’s be good, son. I’M even starting to see their side.” His eyes darted back and forth looking for an escape route. “It was a mistake to come.”

I halted his step with even more outstretched hands, the determined push of an old codger returning unexpectedly strong. I didn’t falter when yellowed cat eyes flashed fierce, his pupils narrowing to vertical slits. (Well, maybe I faltered a bit, but I’d seen this trick before and couldn’t be dislodged.) Parlor illusions weren’t enough to release my grip, at least.

“Why?” I asked, unflappable. “Why, with the subtlety? W-why with the cloak-and-dagger attitude?! Your supposed Order uses magic, real honest magic, so what good could I do? I’ve never bested *anyone* now that I ponder it!”

He shook stale beans about in his rattling skull, still looking downward.

“Why do I see these things, old man?!” I pleaded, uncharacteristically. “I have a-a dream every night, in fact.”

I finally lowered my obstructing limbs, towards whatever he found fascinating betwixt us. But his gaze was non-complacent, and sought refuge in my watery eyes, shaken, moist. Should I not speak, I feared he’d divine the secrets anyways, prying corruption from my own knocking skull.

“I’m falling...”, I begin, “thrown by this magnificent bird... And then I’m drowning... in darkness. The claws of the damned are... are heavy. Dragging me down. Further down. Always down.”

Unexpectedly, words strike a chord of sadness. And just when a trust was to be realized, to be shared, he betrayed it with inquiry. “Anything else? What else have you seen?”

Death on the cards. But instead, I was quiet, calm, denouncing the very vision his argument would have me accept. To admit would be to shape it in this world, in this

plane, though a denial would isolate whatever aid there was to be had.

“Your time has come”, he announces, his own proclamation deflating the practitioner like a sack strewn of its contents. “The phoenix's feather can save you no longer.”

“The feather?”

“I know you know.”

In truth, I had always suspected. I imagined it dimming with each passing moment, alone, bedraggled and flat in my pocket, fourth outer breast pocket. I did indeed know, but couldn't allow that truth to be real. I was as ready as any of us ever are.

“My time?!” That was me. Incredulous. Angry. “It's certainly not my time!” Fear. Doubt.

“I'm afraid it is, son.” He pinned me with a look, all kindness absent in that stab. “Come. You needn't cast your dice with this lot. I offer no promise beyond what you can promise yourself.”

“But-”

“This isn't YOU”, he stressed, shaking me roughly. “Your present efforts... stealing, lies... All folly!” His breath is dry and noisy, whispering past cracked lips. “You claim power you do not possess, eking by without concern, or care. You make *enemies*”, he whispered in all seriousness. “You want power? You can't handle it! Not like *this*”, he mustered, motioning to the listless man before him. “The real question is: how would you *use* real power should you acquire it? What kind of decisions would you make, the assets you'd give up in order to preserve the balance? What, no WHO, do you sacrifice so that something else flourishes?”

“Advising a king is real power... Well was... until the damned gawker got taken by the guard... Probably a corpse on that cart by now.” My eyes found the brute across the plaza. Stooped dejectedly in a boiled cuirass -the armor of hired help- that mercenary loaded up yet another bound form, waving uselessly at the gathering flies in his plight to be done with inglorious work.

“Oh, Mathias is definitely alive”, the Practitioner chirruped. Me? I'm told this for the first time, the news a pleasant shock. “But you shouldn't be so hard on this boy, on this leader. It's quite a trick to rule a lawless band of rabble such as yourselves.” A smugness pervaded the practitioner's repressed smile. Certainly convincing, mostly pleased with this outcome. A friend of an ally, perhaps?

I exhaled loudly, a squeal burst from flared nostrils. This was all fruitless, unbidden, but at least I didn't cost a man his life, even if the boy was either deposed or held for ransom.

“So what should I do now?”

“Just come with me”, the practitioner practically pleaded. “I can help you.” His eyes were round, wide. Sincere.

I mulled this over and again, a phrase as foreign to me, to the denizens of this maze of streets, as any other. It had merit, the help of a stranger being as legitimate as the offer of a friend, both proving equally false, equally flaccid under common circumstance, the feeble statement buckling concisely under strain, crumbling under pressure whether or not you had previously met the statement’s giver. The future was uncertain, that much was certain, an obfuscating paradox of distractions casting my state of mind upon intertwining avenues of doubt. I found a road that led to life, to happiness, to order.

I found myself nodding. “Sure”, is the only response I can mutter, relinquishing control, throwing caution to the winds.

I was just so very tired.

“Quickly”, he manages, clamping onto my elbow (such strength). He makes to guide us through the crowds, the noon sun surely cooking eggs in their feathered nests. The practitioner turns to leave, a street thief in tow, but meets resistance in his first determined step.

Feeling my arm’s rigidity, he directs confusion at my immobile sternness.

“What of Moira?”

He loosened and cocked his moist brow down and askew. “I saw this coming, I’m afraid.” He wiped the beads already dripping from parallel creases. “Din”, he paused, “I respect you enough to say that the others, should they even accept you, will most likely require a cleansing of sorts.”

“I’m clean enough.”

“Not enough”, he confessed, squeezing my arm sympathetically. “They’ll want to monitor your behavior closely... Isolate you from these-”, he motioned around us, “distractions.”

“Moira can’t go?”

“Moira can’t go”, the practitioner confirmed.

With his wrinkled old mouth assuredly agape I turned to the crowd, circumnavigating a mobile picket of passersby with nubile strides. Just as alleyways cut swathes from Market Street, just as branches sprout from sturdy trunks, I forged ahead, heedless of the fact that

both alleys and branches must either end abruptly or merge with some larger causeway -a trunk, a road.

In my hand was a gnawed bone of spent gamefowl, chewed clean that only a three-legged dog could find nourishment in the hidden marrow. He crunched it furiously, lapping what there was to enjoy in what little he had been handed, whilst I continued unfettered towards the future.

Some choices are just easier than others.

The rains had been a boon for the City, this being evidenced by all manner of tells. From crop yield to currency, we delighted in the heady rush of sweeping prosperity actualized by full bellies (at last) from which overflowed a gush of ideas, opinions, and vigor. Masons now had a source to fuel their visionary excavations, sculpting the landscape as religions found public excess from which to beg. Farmers rediscovered latent societal sway while housewives massed unafraid, cajoling their young to wash -not play- in the latest flow of drainage sweeping the embankment of the one large earthen ditch.

Indeed, the census was higher than previous seasons, the population's waistbands swelling in more ways than one. While the inner ring of cramped urban sprawl crumpled at the mere glance of roaming gypsies, the foreign merchants leeching vitae from concurrent aggregations of prosperity, the feral borders of our particular nook of civilization were rising, expanding, and out-producing whatever sustenance lost battles within the City's belt. I suppose it evened out in a way.

Like sticker burrs catching the coarse hair of plow beasts, it was good to see the persistent spread of life... even should weeds birth only weeds, the flowering buds of hardy dandelions clinging more tightly than societal woes. Life would endure, it would seem. That was my consolation.

Despite the sentiment, however, our fringe's irresponsibility would indeed bear a different fruit during the coveted abundance, a spawning that spilled, gigglingly, down muddy banks of both our limited drainage spillways and limited recreational outlets. Fulfilling one need would naturally stifle another, after all. And human loins were the enemy of comestible reserves.

Notwithstanding this negativity, though, everyone's cisternae were certainly filled at present, no doubt. And the common folk were clothed in more than smiles. And there was reserve enough -at the moment- to impart upon straggling traders taking root along mercantile routes, themselves flowering with our fields and fortune. Through the gall of initial claim, of course, an upheaval of attrition loomed yet unrealized (seen only by my

squinting eyes) but... an economist wouldn't have guessed this from the concentration of benevolent gestures across a field of workers, all busying themselves with roles they'd discovered in sculpting the City, in defining their lives.

I wafted unbidden views of macroscopy aside, a familiar fly disrupting silent contemplation with its own musings. The buzzing brought realization that in pacing a low trough of irrigated soil, I'd irreconcilably trampled fresh grass clumps into a single shallow grave, green blades of trodden biology emerging past sediment towards the ambivalent heavens.

Leaving the earthen groove with but a stammered apology, I afforded one last dolorous glare to the sweating mercenary whom I'd personally castrated. His labor continued as the stiffs piled atop a burdened cart, the worker remaining persistently unaware that a daydream of further retribution burned holes in his helmeted skull. I sought consolation beyond a bountiful harvest and a flourishing community... despite the monarchial upheaval.

I wanted the stooped-back rapist to pay with more than just an exploded pair of weeping grapes in his sack but I expelled compulsions through each pounding of a measured gait, quietly conceding that Moira's husband would one day unhinge the demon of guilt. But that day would not be today. Possibilities are taunting devils it would seem. Always visible. Always fleeting. About as inapprehensible as they were agile, darting beyond grasp and teasing of what could never be.

If only you'd rescued her sooner. This phrase rode my back the full seven hundred and thirty two paces preceding Gerd's tavern; the tiny hands of a child I'd never sire grappled clumsily at a choked windpipe from behind. It would seem that the gentle bobbing of footfalls proved insufficient to buck the sin.

But I was welcomed with warmth, all the same.

Simultaneously crossing the barriers of regret, publicity, and stamped earth, I breached the bar's threshold, a surge of something within seeking to explode in a geyser of embarrassment, but the woman I'd taken as wife reciprocated and melted such ridiculous feelings. Moira met me halfway across the disheveled room, gracefully traversing the labyrinth of toe-seeking boards warped from poor carpentry and a history of spilled cups. In doing so, however, an inconsiderate splinter stabbed from a table, ripping fringed tears in the delicate shawl of silk wrapped about her delicate torso.

She sucked air past a set jaw and tentatively rotated the elbow. In seeing exaggerated concern flayed clear across my vicarious wincings, though, Moira chortled silently in leading us back to the counter, shrugging off a trickle of blood and a torn (expensive) garment as only the best of us can.

"You're always using drinks for the wrong purpose", Gerd condemned as I swabbed a bit of antiseptic across the laceration.

Moira consoled my annoyance and I eventually settled, finding a comfortable spot in propping a stool against the counter worn smooth by countless forearms. (They, too, had previously abducted splinters.) Countless lanterns burned my remaining darkness and I leaned, counting on present company to extricate the doldrums, bit by doleful bit.

The red bear busied himself as I looked her over quickly; the lovely hills and valleys heaved suggestively beneath modest layers of fine clothing. Amid other compulsions, the question of whether a whore's life would have provided such fabric outside of a thief's providence did render one without resolution. But she caught my stare (assuredly brief), and batted thick lashes of expressive seduction, pardoning the perversion with a flash of pearly teeth and genuine lines near her temples. The question evaporated as if it was never formulated.

Despite being painfully unfunny I always made her laugh, somehow. Moira brushed a strand of cocoa hair behind one ear, raising alert brows at precepts of intrusion.

"How's your mother?", Gerd offered. "You don't come 'round the bar proper much anymores."

"Well, she..."

"Always skitching about in my roof like some damn RATS!", he proclaimed with a burst, "Ha-HA!" He turned. "Girl, you want summa this?"

She kindly rejected the cup and passed attention to my proximity.

Gerd bellowed some bastardization of guffaw influenced by a mule's bray before pouring a tall flagon of cattle-piss that was at least two thirds foam, and set the sloshing thing under my nose. "Yup! Drink up!"

"Mother is good, I think", the scrawny patron with a paunch lied, ignoring clumsy alcoholic advances infringing my personal space. "We get along about as much as we used to at least. I pop by just to check up on my working woman, here."

He bent forward, baring the crooked ramparts of lower teeth, almost sheepishly so.

"Hey, uh, did you put in a good word for me.... with the mistress, I mean?", he whispered abashedly, hand cupped my direction. But all parties assuredly heard the lech if not smelling his reeking request. Moira diverted her own focus politely.

"She's ancient, you sick fuck."

Hacking his indignity away with slimy gravel, the gratuitously gigantic man straightened and smeared grime about a neck quarantined by a veil of thick, red facial hair. If only the lice had taught him decency, we wouldn't need to take turns clearing throats until the buxom woman assuaged my bitterness with a strategic hand.

She always knew how to mediate.

"Does it ever hurt to be so predictable?", I sneered half-cocked at Gerd, looking to pierce both fogs of drunken torpor and the one personality trait he kept erected as impenetrable armor. "You're terrible company."

"Am I s'posed to take offense to that?", the lummoX countered.

No. No, I suppose you must be cognizant to "counter" anything. Foam dribbled freely down the slugs he worked up and down to articulate his offensiveness. And a pool of it formed about the corners, to which a meaty ham-fist brushed the liquid away, leaving only a series of tiny gravestones in which the initiated recognized a human-esque grin.

Moira shielded the room's only other smile.

She then produced meticulously folded kerchiefs from an adjacent stool, passing us each a bundle: one for a grateful hubby, and another for the near-sighted, slack-jawed fool whom eyed the thing in identical fashion as one spied tarantulas spawning.

"It's not going to bite you", I spoke on her behalf.

"You got proof?"

I took the man's shaken timber as a direct challenge to my lady's honor, an insult to her benevolence, and subsequently ravaged the neatly tucked cloth to reveal an ovular loaf of goodness. The cheese soup was still warm. The cork of bread popped deliciously free to release a mist of fleeting steam drifting untethered from the edible bowl, my salivation transfixed on a circular opening to which the container, itself, was meant to be dipped.

With full eye contact, I broke chunks off to be submerged, and gorged it, closing narrowed slits of concentrated spite only when flavor overcame weakened protestation. Delicious. And this would dissolve a bit of my attitude, in fact.

She did reject my insistence on sharing, but a stunned mountain betwixt us stood wooden, unphased. Frighteningly still.

"It's food, you lump."

Gerd: "My girl. My girl only gave me rat traps."

"What's that?"

"The snapping kind."

"Ha!..." I blinked. "Wait, you serious?", I half-questioned through bulging cheeks.

He saw the cosmos for what they truly were and evaluated his place among them, the infinite balance being evident beyond the translucent walls housing the psyche of simple men. But physically, even the eastern Zen trance of temperance barely subdued what bubbled beyond the panes of a spurned vacuity. I did not know this.

"Gerd! You never told me about this girl of yours!", I exclaimed on both our behalves.

"The She-Devil!", his eruption finally blew, leveling all inquisition. "Long gone.... NEVER AGAIN!!", he swore to our overlords, blazes bursting past the tempered restrictions of loutishness. Gerd gripped the bar with tensing pulses, head bowed, ripples coursing fierce in the brace, wood squeaking protest as boards tested their fasteners.

"Whoa there!!", I sought the beast through words. Communication was dire.

She held his wrist.

"Not like this one", he gestured, suddenly at ease. Serene. "Moirira's a keeper", he laughed aloud, clapping a weighty grip across the expanse to my shoulder already coiled for flight. "Just lovely", he purred. "Most o'them harpies. Not every woman'll gift *soup* to you all wrapped up and pretty."

"Apparently not", I mustered, pantomiming a secret cipher of requested assistance.

Assistance extended the package once more, slender wrists jingling softly, adorned with little metal bangles I'd swiped in the bazaar.

"So.... eat", I cajoled. "And chew with your trap shut."

"What?", the husky loaf dignified. He brushed the other loaf my direction, a cold stoicism ill-suited him like a tapered gown.... one with white lace ruffles encircling a dipping neckline. He raised a vertical palm to spew some nonsense about a woman's cooking having a rightful owner.... blah the fucking blah.

I needed no further reason to stash the scrumptiousness away for later. 3rd outer trim pocket. The vest sagged because of this, lending no favors to my portly shame.

"Looks like you'll be eating for two!", he exclaimed. "Har!"

But I brushed this gentlemanly ribbing aside, suddenly concerned with the stab of pain that then rippled across her brows, briefly, faintly. I laid my own comforting hand and the sentiment was returned, though a profound embarrassment at her involuntary reaction led only to emphatic affirmations that Moirira was, indeed, alright. Labored breaths through a

constricting windpipe -little fledgling rasps afraid to take flight- sang a different tune though, and I resigned myself to addressing the issue at a later date.

If we could talk about it, we would.

Instead, her smiles were the beacon through trauma, an enviable trait. She practiced that trait just then, charming the drunken spit-polisher with a Gods-blessed charisma and wide hazel eyes that wove a peculiar brand of their own magic. A desirable spell. Oh what it was to be viewed!

She didn't seek my approval, never did. But it was out of genuine concern for any fathomed judgment that inspired that second look, a gauging of sorts. It read me. Our little literacy lessons would never achieve those heights, but the effort to open up new channels of communication fell diminutively short of a wink, a pursed mouth, cold eyes, or a pout betrayed by laugh lines when the disguise met my obliviousness.

Something within was conjoined and inseparable. A leash trailed me the further I walked, pulling me back to origin, stretching taut in defining the path to home. It was as if my intestines slid freely with each step, retracting only upon return, equally painful. I had traced an invisible line, had pinned my walking corpse to an engorged soft spot that I myself had cultivated, invested in. This vulnerability resided outside my torso's cavity, an overt target of opportunity that had potential to fell me remotely if ever destroyed, if ever threatened.

I just assumed she, too, felt this longing. This... pressure.

Assumedly. I mean, what could ever truly be known about a mute whore? What lasting connection -what bond- could be formed with winks and grins anyhow? How would a fat, fingerless bastard draped in scars and breaded soup interpret another being, one denied the most basic of human gifts? What lens would ever befall our situation, that might shed light on the truth of romance blossoming from tragedy? Of horrendous happenstance?

A piece of me believed that any random gawker had the prerequisites to scoop up an accosted mess in rape's repulsive aftermath, that the fertilizer for our rendition of love was merely the contrast to violence, that any warm body held identical appeal as the husk I occupy. And for that I was shameful, uneasy.

But another piece of me belonged, unerringly, to the effortless smile shone by a vixen whose presence quelled mens' rage and wet-nursed a brothel of illegitimate offspring.

Just feet from my position, the room glowed much brighter as a bunglingly stupid host revealed his efforts at levitating carina cores, the doomed effort scattering several fruit rines about the floor, propelled across boards and people alike. The intended purpose seemed to be met, however, as Moira was indeed a blend of flabbergasted and quivering

stitches that technically fell within the lines of being entertained. Efforts were made to conceal her red-faced convulsions, nevertheless.

I suppose I'm not too surprised to learn that Gerd can't juggle.

You'll miss this one day, Instinct divined, pre-lamenting a groove of daily pleasures - friends and food- that this one took for granted only rarely. Dull thuds of ripened fruit accented the thought, followed by the barkeeps deflated roar for more chances.

And I agreed.

Chapter 7: Shortcomings

"We'll just have to start without them", I breathed into the cloud of dust, stirring the particulate that churned violent tornados in the lamplight's aura.

In no way would I be convinced that the fates would inspire truancy in my group -of two able thieves no less- without some tangible connection to the preceding collapse of our monarchy, however vestigial it might have been. Nope, my eyes judged Sabeer and Wren's absence as conclusive as desertion. The remaining Nomen sensed my unease.

Looking about the crawlspace of musty beams, it was obvious to even a three-legged mutt that our pack of mongrels hobbled their disparate paths with bared flaws (specifically vices) but in kicking the attic's resident inebriation awake, it was crystal clear that even Mata could be on time. Didn't count he was more likely to have never left.

"Maybe they're sleepin' off a hangover?", someone hoped.

"Maybe they're the smart ones", I tossed back limply, a private shame defanging the very insult of bite. Our meeting like this was a simulacrum anyhow, moreover a morality debriefing. Wasn't fitting to bash the help who'd showed.

"What's that say about us, boss?", the Tugger mewled.

"Idiot!", someone chided in my stead. "That's what he means... This is about last night's debacle isn't it?"

"What happened?"

"Yeah, just what happened exactly?", Attic Drunk's vacant features unveiled, leaning from the depths to bestow light on his words. The skin was loose, cavities sunken. Lumpy. He had hung the question there for some time, though the single candle eventually undressed all of occlusion.

"Just a bit of a coup", I said, "The dogs of war finally bit the hand that feeds."

"Ha! Little scamp was probably shitting breeches."

"... thought I saw some new wares on the market today! Royal garments, soiled or no, might fetch a price..."

The bruiser: "Think they'll let us common folk 'take a tour' of the new estate then?"

"More like, is there anything left?", Mata droned.

"Damn it! I *guarantee* that's where Sabeer 'n' Dilawar are!"

"Dila... *who?*"

"Idiot!", a voice articulated. "The little sneaky one! 'Wren's a codename you dolt!"

"Well, I'm fuckin' sorry!" Tug's tone repudiated the words, though. The whining was shivs beneath my nails. "How come I never got no code name?"

"Your folks hated you enough to call you 'Tug'?", Germaine interjected from the sidelines. His arms folded, the lieutenant silhouetted a reclined heap atop the hay bales, miming the languid rigidity of a marionette without strings. Maybe a discarded sack of logs. "Gods have mercy."

A hacking chorus of laughter defied its cloth muffler.

"OW! What'd you hit *me* for?!", responded the pathetic whelps of Hari, assumedly nursing a freshly stinging shoulder.

"Can't hit the bosses", the bruiser giggled, the stark truthiness of that statement taking its sweet time in seeping the very air we gasped. The atmosphere grew painfully quiet in its gluttony. My own breaths labored, as if some devious assassin meted rations of it in unsustainable gulps. Or maybe a paltry, malnourished child gripped my windpipe, countering a heaving chest seeking only the respite of air laden with noxious man odor.

"Oooh. What if we go shit in the royal chamber pot?", Hari suggested, his thinning pate of curly hair smug in the idea's adorable unoriginality. "I wonder if anyone's done that?"

"Mathias won't be placing his pasty little cheeks on it no more", Tug assisted the proposal. "Why not?" He sniffed absently.

"Our *employer* isn't dead", I reminded him. "Sources say."

"Rescue mission?", Mata queried sincerely. I had had always liked that quality in him, burst blood vessels or no. And I would indeed miss it.

"What's the pay?", our bruiser asked just as curt. Just as sincerely.

Might even miss him as well when it's all done.

"Fellows", I began, commandeering more attention with a single word than the summed moments since hiring them individually, face by ugly face. I remembered those days well, fondly, if that can at all be accurate in nostalgia's veil of impaired judgment. Most days resulted in my budding weight being thrown about, a bucket of insults tailored to humor individuals as other degenerates received the pointy end of my encouragement. Exhortation through ridicule. I felt only the former emotion as I stared them down at that moment, fumbling with words that had come easier when the Nomen were both greater in

number and animosity. Politeness didn't behoove this rabble.

"Din means 'You Fuckers' am I right?", a curly head bobbed, equally distressed by our awkward civility. He plopped a sweaty palm on the mal-named bruiser, whom nearly broke his hand for the transgression.

"You got it", I smirked a disingenuous smirk. "You fuckers have to get real jobs now. We're done."

"What!"

"You can't do that!", was the general uproar, though even this paraphrasing might prove generously articulate. Rough boots clattered the cabers and blows were exchanged -with arms and roof- a clamor large enough to warrant a flurry of random knocks furiously administered from some decrepit broom (not a halberd) below. The "scritchings rats" finally reduced to their namesake.

Harsh protestation still raked my senses though, the snake den then hissing murderously, muted warnings falling on what would've been deaf ears given a half glass continuation of this punishment. Had I not been acutely aware of their desires. The men wanted coin. The men wanted security. The men... oddly, wanted this exhausted, confused, pariah of a rogue to do something about it. As if he, alone, had bearing on their misappropriated lives beyond the capacity for jerking the lynchpin free of a house of cards.

That, that I could do.

"Thieves report!", the lieutenant barked to my relief. The dissolution of our little operation came as little surprise to those steely eyes but I sensed the weariness, the burden, that tore rampant within. A snicker (was it mine?) sputtered at the pupils' raptness, "teacher" intimidating the Hells into remission, exorcising the cluster of demons spitting rancorous in our enclosed swine pen of an ex-headquarters.

"I got nothing for you", Tug admitted suddenly fearful, "unless you count one o' Madame's girls cutting herself up real bad." He shuddered. "The honey-haired one."

Moira bears her own burdens in shielding you, Instinct noted with factual precision. Probably Zibella. This info would be processed later, at least that's what I promised to a numbing sensation creeping up a forearm that partitioned my head from a rack of splinters.

All in its appropriate moment.

"Figures your intel would be whore related", muttered a perturbed Germaine. "You?"

Distasting the sudden scrutiny, Hari pointed elsewhere. "Nah. You'll get more out of

Mata", the curly one spouted in passing the hot potato along, the bare-footed target downing his fourth known flagon this afternoon. Slurps punctuated Germaine's following chastisement.

"Failing even simple responsibilities including the keeping of your Gods damned eyes open for leads and hearsay, I'm not even shocked that you three mooches are what's left of a team that -at best- functioned like Tug's addled wits trying to woo a woman with Mata's limp cock."

Sheepish didn't describe the room hard enough.

"I'll assume you've each followed DD orders?" Pert, mysterious, twinges bracketed Germaine's mouth. Imperceptible I swear, to all but my trained eye. A trap was cunningly placed, one that I condoned.

"Of course", both men sniffed contentiously.

Surprising. Historical knowledge would, in fact, wager all-against the indignation afforded by a sober pair of numbskulls seeking their footing, but maybe my final orders weren't for naught, after all. It's as if I had been a leader at a given point in time.

"For some reason, I had the creeping suspicion that you'd have altered the commands", I whispered indirectly.

"Pissing contests yield spattered pants", came the retort, just low enough that neither Germaine nor I were certain we spoke to one another.

"Perfect!", he sprang the trap loud and energetically, with finality. With command. "Keep it. It's yours."

The underlings traded skepticism.

"There are no cuts to be made, no shares to split." There was no warmth in the lieutenant's wide smile, though we both witnessed the lopsided sheepishness spread amongst our flock. The half grins said it all.

"Nice", the Tugger added.

"Bugger", whispered the one without a flask. "I was bluffing."

"As reward for sticking with this little experiment to its ultimate end", Germaine paused to stoke a dramatic flair, "keep what you would have given the group today. And as your final orders to be received from either Din or myself, at least for the foreseeable future: please say your goodbyes, disperse... and do try to clear the barkeep's good eye should you take the exit downstairs."

The boss was assuredly proud. And I was. No easy feat in wrangling this lot, especially not when the task was to kick the last employees gutter-side with the dangers of mutiny and palpable insurrection clawing at one's throat.

Although the accomplishment would have been considerably more magnanimous just a few days hence, the absences of Jackoby the flake, Sabeer the shifty, and Wren our mystical wonder-child may have bolstered but small confidence in the lieutenant's performance.

(Or was the last one here, having discovered the latest trick in melding cleanly with the very walls?)

After mockingly obligatory handshakes, they shuffled free of my sight for the last time. No pretend firing, no banishments as elaborate forms of punishment, not even the idle threat of turning loose my unofficial guard dog would keep the Nomen within the lines this time. The lines had been officially erased, the hidden doors to be boarded up.

The more gravity prone of the trio chose the simplicity of the back ladder, assumedly to trade his poisonous snake-musk with the proprietor downstairs. (Mata never retained the knowledge that Gerd's only drink of choice would be the swill he swilled in his own swillery.) The others vacated through other portholes, bittersweet scowls drawing worried caricatures of disillusionment.

"So", Germaine busted up my lamentations before they even started. He looked oddly nostalgic himself actually. "I suppose this is it."

"Why does this have to be it?"

"Paths cross, and that's it", he said. "Not like we had more than a passing interest in this thing anyways." We shrugged simultaneously.

"Yeah. I suppose you're young enough to think that."

"And you're old enough to *say that*."

"You've got a weird way of showing appreciation", I chided, peppering the lieutenant with chuckles that sprang from a voicebox spasm. Odd time to hit a second puberty.

"You want me to look up to you?", came the retort. Contentious, unprovoked. "How about you dig deep, be a model citizen? Mathias went near-bankrupt funding extortionists who'd cheat their assignments and you'd just lay back with a cone up your nose!"

"For starters, I think I've quit the stuff. Second of all fuck you...", I spat defensively. Seemed appropriate at the time. "Also, I come from a bad place. Y'see this scar?", I asked, pulling a lapel away in displaying a thatched network of baby-smooth tissue

cradling my heart. The scant hairs had never grown back.

"Damn your scars. Did I tell you about this gash in my ear? No?"

I shook the pebbles loose.

"Course not. It's private", he said. "Yours should be too." A terse digit pointed at my forehead, wrinkled in genuine shock. "Those haunts playing around in there are for your own wardens to patrol, not your neighbor, not your friend. You thrust that on the community as if they owe you. You *have* seen the community, right? Know what it is?"

I scratched a filthy neck in the suffocating pause between lashings. I wanted to be right, -I *was* right- but didn't know what words made it true. The phrasings surfacing in the boiling thought-pot presented little opportunity in topping this particular argument, my hand liking no better than to cap the stick of discourse with witticisms and logic, dominating the high ground with brooding sagacity and... admirable virtue. I guess.

If all else failed, my little paunch could always scoot out a window in hasty departure, but there was a lingual snare to place, a noose to set. Cutting Germaine free and just running beckoned, but I had grown ill-fond of running, and even moreso of "my place". Even less of being put there.

"Your pain's not unique", Germaine concluded. "Your reasons are, though. No one can find it but you... But damn it! You're hurting people."

That part was true, at least; I can agree now. But the eye of the storm is a bad place to make weather predictions.

"So what good are friends, then?"

"Pardon me?"

"Y'know", I reasoned. "In conceding that I'm a drain on what culture we've got going here, what with the blooming wasteland of diversity: gypsies, rapists, pedophiles, mercenaries, cowardly tyrants and a double serving of stab-happy guards with clinking chainmail, how unreasonable is it to share my burden exactly? Why can't you and I walk the same path?"

"People aren't crutches and there are no whipping boys", Germaine deadpanned, wrestling with what would be considered his final, parting jabs. "You must eventually give back what you take. And if the life of a hermit is so attractive to you, take a long walk out into the desert and never return."

"That's not going to happen."

He froze, almost making it a point to reflect sunlight my direction with the inner lining of his cowl. Germaine flashed this bit of red at me fierce, the color popping like no other to eyes desaturated by the dingy bowels of spirit-soaked wood collected from spares found in burnt hovels. It was indeed a startling difference to the unseasonable coat's outer layer; the vivid lining was. Just then the dust smelled sweet, layers of decay shedding away as eddies of fresh air infused my nostrils. The rusting metal of crudely chiseled nails evicted the door, threatening to trail my would-be apprentice in our chosen craft of crossing boundaries unbidden. It would seem that breathable air would abandon me as well.

The ex-lieutenant's hand held the rooftop open, chiseled face pleading as if he desired our encounter to be as utterly perplexing as possible, to gift me a moment to be pondered for eternity as our paths skewed perpendicular, always at odds and away from the other.

"Should you discover some forgotten civilization out in the sands, make it a better dustbowl than when you found it", he said, narrowing the strip of bright heat searing my singular eye until I squinted no longer. Seeing red no longer. The door clicked back into place despite the mementos erected in his stead.

His concerned glare and ridiculous string of words -of which I knew individually but not together- hung there in the blinding shadows until I crinkled a nose in foul taste. I thumbed the dripping mucous away as eyes began to water from an allergen disturbed by the hustle and bustle of dismantling my first empire.

Looks like I lost my chance to leave the youth with profound nonsense to be inspired by.

Cunning advice or no I swallowed the knot, realizing with all certainty that the perfect thing to say in this situation -the exact phrase that *should have* parted my lips- would be discovered when I was home, alone, drifting off to sleep in the snug, bowed embrace of my cot. Maybe in the throes of passion when making love to Moira, our primal silhouettes would dance across stucco walls within our place below Madame's stairs, jogging the appropriate concept, the idea, that begged recitation in this very moment. I'd discover some snappy comeback when it was no longer applicable, of course.

Germaine would never change his outlook because impatience yielded no chance to hear the words, and I was an utter idiot for not finding them sooner.

So after giving a salutatory web of saliva to the inverted visage still pleading -still accusing- in the gloom, I visually collected the memories for storage before reaching upwards to the beacon. With the candle snuffed and in hand, I made for the trap door that promised light and love, maybe a bit of revelry on the other side of shoddy workmanship.

But a hand punched free from the haystack, gripping the stubs of shortened fingers I'd been using for a kneeling balance. The sensitivity instigated a conditioned reflex.

Shocked, I jerked backwards in a stumble, stiff haunches delivering a tremendous blow that rattled the sequence of adjacent vertebrae, spinal clattering eclipsed by the metallic rasping of a lantern tumbling, delving into the attic's recesses. Breath shortened to panicked thrusts, I fumbled the coordination in managing both headband and lungs. Blood pumped in torrents. My tongue felt turgid, swollen, and ungainly in blockading the flow of air. And a broom handle protested nearby, persistent in its knocking.

But my darkness eye soon alleviated much of this consternation, bridling my nerves, talking them back down to comfort habitually associated with the calm of obfuscating lighting. I entreated my living carcass as a pack animal, as belligerence to be corralled.

The dual orbs peered quietly beyond the straw and must have thought me a fish out of water, flopping about, hysterical in the histrionic gulps conceded by panic's demand. They didn't judge, withdrawn within their hiding place as they were, but likely wondered -as I did- at the bewilderment that is organic function.

Funny how things like breathing are automatic until they're most required, as if the body uses us as shields when the responsibility of precision is dire. Our biology screams, begging for life, overriding any contradictory impulses for the majority of our waking (and non-waking) hours... until the freak incident reminds the pilots to subjugate the subconscious back into their granted roles. Whipping them back into servitude.

I'd try to remember that the next moment my heart froze, mind blanked, legs gave way, or breathing stalled in the middle of slumber. Instead of harassment, though, I'd try leaving a friendly note for the sleepwalker whom hijacked me upon occasion. Just to invoke a piece of peace, an offering, with the passengers whom share claim to this fleshy sack of bones.

Alright. Maybe Wren didn't contemplate this idea in its exact form, but he at least looked intensely enough at the precept of some inner power struggle.

"Don't follow Germaine", he exhaled, the very cover he occupied seeming oppressively itchy.

"Wasn't planning on it, but I appreciate you."

"I... found something."

"Go on", I encouraged, tachycardia remaining a chief burden. Though the little man held my mostly-undivided attention.

Dilawar, the best talent in our dispersed crew, was absolutely shaken beyond consolation. Eyes flitting with the recant of his nightly exploits, he regurgitated the details in rapid succession: the tailing, receiving his dead drop, gleaned conversations and fishy dealings,

tripping upon a loose flagstone outside the Madame's house of ill repute, noticing the bell tower's inaccuracies of late, finding a beak in his rodent soup. And the like. Compulsory tales of overbearing landlords aside, a modest filter of extraneous info brought the brunt of the scrupulously sliced shreds of meat in his story to light. In not so many words -*his* so many words- a picture was emerging, coming into focus.

I sensed the desperation in the thiefling's flared nostrils, and tingled at the urgency of their depiction. And while it remained obvious he trusted our former compatriots less than I deemed them repulsive, the cataloguing of detail was meticulous if not downright disorganized.

It would take a second party to sort.

"Your friends have double lives", he stressed for the fourth time.

"In what context?", I heaved, losing my stomach for that fight with each passing syllable. "Many of us do. I'm a good-for-nothing barfly with a penchant for vices by day. I also pluck at the bailalaika until my nubs bleed, dreaming of a time when sleep could be considered pleasant."

My informant was not amused.

"And I have unfortunate gas after eating goat cheese", I admitted needlessly.

"They have met with men in pairs, mostly away from crowds."

"Pairs of men?"

"Yes."

"As in talking to two?"

"Two total, per conversation. Sometimes one."

I sighed. "So Sabeer or Germaine occasionally speak to someone else, a man... And sometimes speak to themselves. Individually."

"Yes."

"Progress!", I declared, scratching absently in the darkness. I did want to catch Moira before she headed off to work. The day grew long, I grew old, and my head grew increasingly overloaded with things to occupy. All at the same rate, as it were.

"They speak of accommodating 'Cornelius'", Wren commented, brows becoming grim.

My old alias. Hadn't used it in recent memory, much less so around this group. Sure it

was a ridiculous name, an uncommon one even. The false front was less likely to have a real-world counterpart. This didn't bode especially well.

"So the two speak of 'taking care' of me? Or my old alias", I muttered, mostly to myself. The noose was tightening. The prophecies were tightening. Damn the Gods.

The little one affirmed the interpretation of his unintentional code-speak, leaving me alone with thoughts of escape, of fates. His fragile form evacuated a false wall, trailing hay sprouts as admonishments for haphazard social connections while I wondered at the accuracy of information in general, predictions in particular. One could tempt our puppeteers by deigning fit to thwart the plan set before us, falling prey to machinations originally intended with the sole purpose of doing the opposite. But one could simultaneously neglect that action, *also* falling precisely in line with the supposed chaos constituting the textile of existence, an unravel-able mess of tangled yarn.

At that moment, I resolved to take up knitting when the whole thing was done and over. Such a noble craft.

The cards, the Practitioner, the dreams, the fastidious pipsqueak. All pointed to an inevitable, unconditional end. Ominous, the fact loomed above and within almost every action. Sure, I could shake the overlord at times, sporadically spurning the yoke of measured doom chained to both shoulders, but it mostly held a body in place. I dragged the burden along, its deadweight inciting sparks on the bedrock behind just enough to be noticed, to be felt. In this way, you were aware of its presence despite the fluctuating personal strength experienced day to day, but still discouraged to the degree that remaining stationary was labeled as most conducive to living. But even immobility was a chore when the heft spontaneously increased density to balance the atrophy of figurative muscles lacking of contradiction.

How do you acquire the knowledge to prevent such troubles? Is it knowledge that does the helping or is it hurting? It wasn't enough that I had truly died several times (by my count anyhow) but "cheating" didn't feel like a boon when the memories and pain, the repercussions and the pressures, remained conspicuously fresh. How insatiable were our stage directors, ones whom scripted every pitfall, orchestrated every tragedy?

I rubbed the phoenix feather absently at first. But when I took notice of this action, I did it again intentionally for good measure. Should I even want to survive what was ahead? With merely the time -not the specific fate- within grasp the anxiety spiked remarkably, leaving the woeful dirge of throat clearing to console the giddy exacerbation of a brain pain stymied by slow, but steady, asphyxiation.

I needed to clear my head.

"Hey, where you rushing off to?!", Gerd blasted with a demeanor befitting the wrangling of some wild coyote pup, a pup that finished shredding his church-blessed slippers, defecated twice, and stole off into the late day to bury the sullied sacrilege.

The old fart needed children, maybe a family. That might be good for him.

"Out", I spat figuratively, somehow managing to rebuke the clod with but a single word.

The barkeep too spat (non-figuratively) though what passed for concentration didn't seem spoiled in turning droopy eyes back to rest on a fan cradled to his wild beard, in glaring down a bulbous bridge -somewhat quizzical- as if the answer of life lay inscribed there in chicken scratch. Resuming the card game, a tired Mata (himself dribbling out an enervated head) braced for the possibility of winning though he was visibly more excited at the chances of foul beverages being involved. He poured them both a snifter.

A friend. That's nice too, I suppose. I'd have to explain to Gerd later why the lot made much ado about his presence, what with the mountain's reputation of outing deadbeats... "bad men" as he once labeled them.

Water past the ditch, came the impulses within. Instinct had his own reputation: of being correct and determining the best course.

As I steeled myself against other parties -wild cards the City held to its chest- I saw Gerd for what he was, which didn't amount as much a threat to anyone, especially me. Hunched from the weight packed atop solid muscle and the crushing piggyback he gave to booze, he laughed, played cards, maybe a little dozing off when the moment struck him. Translucence was his traitor, his compatriot; so in this I reaffirmed he hadn't ratted me out nor acted against the Nomen, not now nor ever. No. He'd never divulge evidence that others sought -not to Kamal or even Malak, as the assassin called himself interchangeably.

In this and other matters, I trusted Instinct. And it was in fleeing the sodden, downtrodden wreck of a sanctuary -hunched from its own piggyback of secrets and experimental carpentry- that I felt the most relieved. I scooped up Moira in evacuating my safe zone. The last safe zone.

The thought of doom visiting the bar was unbearable, the same should my mute princess bear witness to the patterns of evil men. Of sinister deeds. People are oft limited by what they can protect, though rarely fortune smiles and reverses our dominion to conserve others at safety's expense. "Moira can't come", the Practitioner had said, and that parallel scenario sat oddly in my pit, challenging the best of minds to conclude what had been inferred, if I'd have been better off.

"You know I love you right?"

She nodded hesitantly, presumably from my abruptness. An imploring graze of a gentle palm then cupped my trembling hand and planted a kiss there. Incredulity worried a corner of her mouth, the slight indent of a cheek denoting where it was inwardly bit from apprehension.

But my presence was a contaminant that couldn't be communicated. For this reason, her question went unanswered. For this reason, we spent several moments tasking our souls with the authority of this exchange. Neither felt more at ease for the action, the icy truth rushing to greet us with each grain of the glass, the uncomfortable ubiety of debilitating hopelessness seeming simultaneously distant and looming.

So far, that it felt an eternity. So close, that its breath spattered humidly on my nape.

I was almost thankful when it felt time to release her. No more waiting. No more delaying. No more procrastination.

"Take care of Gerd", I uttered lackadaisically, the wasted effort being neither of our immediate concern. She held on tightly with both eyes, probably after I waved a goodbye to the unconcerned men through the doorframe, probably after I turned unerringly towards the network of streets that looked particularly uninviting as the Sun God steered his flaming chariot below the highest crests of our filthy refuge.

Moira probably even watched well past the disappearance of the sun and I, both lost to the labyrinth paved with the stones of dread and anxiety. Or maybe she stood there, looking longingly westward until the bar illuminated the surrounding clay lodgings, the proprietor eventually yelling for my woman to quit trading the desert bite of cold for his patience.

"That asshole didn't even give a proper wave", I reflected sourly, kicking a brown clod of mortar that skipped twice along the bumpy flagstone before changing course, arcing uninterrupted back at my sandal. I stepped over it the next time. But in doing so, I tripped over a different barrier.

Memory flashed to a moment of an attic pre-built, me staring down at the red bear's abused form, face bloodied for my sake.

Just the past, something scolded within.

The big man's grunted sentiment this night could have equivocally been gas or a mutter in losing his first round of cards, easily. The man wasn't terribly lucid after all, so imagine my embarrassment, if that's what a person wished to call it. The stirring belly bubbles were indeed most like to have mixed unsettled in his lumpy abdomen, the concoction of

different beers prompting a mouth noise emulating human speech. Never charming, granted, but I'd come to wonder what a formal goodbye would illicit given the burping that was his clever camouflage in blending with a culture Gerd once inadvertently infiltrated, never to leave.

But I'm too hard on him. Should I go back?

And, contrasting the genuine social ignorance, Gerd did always know how to handle a conversation. Much better than I, it seemed, as the foreigner turned people away *on purpose*, attracting by *accident*, a gift of endearment despite obvious shortcomings arriving unlearned, just inherent. His was an unexplained trick from distant lands.

He'd never even told me of his home, never completed a story without glazing off to... wherever the hells he goes. We didn't trade childhoods, didn't share a taste in women. I had a woman... at least until this night. Did he? Moira. Gerd.

It was so rare that we'd all laugh simultaneously. Always one of the two, two of the three.

"Isn't that what people do?", I asked nobody in particular.

Nobody responded.

Twiddling the weightlessness of one hand, a phantom tightness flared and I was forced to shudder off the ensuing tickle-stabs. The tingles still traveled in pulses when it occurred to me (not for the first time) that seeking amends -a redo- was fruitless, that we're the architects with the inability to destroy. We handle our days the best we know, bending unswervingly to the ill-formed impulses that have been present, watching over, since the initial pattering of our feet across a flat surface or baptized -baked- into us from the washbasin our mothers first plunged our shriveled, pudgy bodies into. The impulses have been there all along, shaping our reality, the rough cut -the first draft- becoming permanently etched into the scripture of this world's story. No second chances. It's all penned by our own hand without breaks, without revisions as it's subsequently executed in a public stage. Something more than a play, more than just our faults: it's the only truth.

This thought certainly wasn't short enough to be a mantra, but faired worthy in kicking unceremoniously down the lonely corridor of streets echoing hollow, self encouragement falling flat in facing certain demise. At least an idea can't ricochet back to stub a nail.

So, with no other phrases in which to cling, to chant, I began making solemn swears about the night's outcomes. Just a lot of temporary promises and false accusations of course, to keep my feet plodding. The night was unseasonably chilly, frigid even, the last vestiges of heat released from baked rooftops, the windless night howling in other ways: mostly stray dogs roaming in black, refuse-laden alleyways.

Ankle aching from the tense stroll, it was when I made a particularly ridiculous promise that I decided to stop rushing, to stop plunging headlong into whatever awaits. In my senseless anti-euphoria, I'd foresworn that Din the Ghost had no qualms of haunting the distasteful barkeep if he'd ever puked on my widow. Heavens forbid, I'd get 'em.

Somehow, the absurdity ejected a nervous pocket trapped in my esophagus, lending form as a belched laugh of sorts. But with that airburst came the confidence to relax. You don't get stalked by Death, I realized, not naturally anyways. You just sort of stumble upon it when you're at your least aware. In the other way -the incorrect way- a blind man would be perpetually and wholly stalked by the wholeness of his surroundings, bumping into ambushers as if he possessed no responsibility, no hand in what transpired.

"I'm not a blind man", I declared into the enveloping smoke of obscurity, ankle soothed by a reduced pace. My pace. Pebbles and ideas proved even easier to kick when time was wrested from its controllers whom meted their finite resources from on high, ambivalent to my courage, deaf to my complaints. If but I could allocate my own stockpiles, the monopoly would be broken; time would have no meaning.

They'll be fine, a piece of me comforted this shivering man limping amid the shadows.

"I believe you", Nobody replied.

Chapter 8: Amends

"Come with me."

I felt like I'd heard that before, maybe this morn. Under more amiable circumstances those words might be inviting, calming. But when staring down that ferreted, half-lidded gaze, ease would be the last thought upon a person's mind.

His weight shifted, balanced over a single leg. He shivered. Impatience. Prepped for flight, maybe?

"Come with me", he said again but the words weren't pleading, only demanding. Not yielding to conversation or coddling as an instructor, a guide -a friend using the imploration- just the utterances to express a command in the least effort. They were the fewest syllables to sacrifice on one like myself.

Nothing of the phrase's tradition bespoke the stubbornness Jackoby's aura. In its audacity, its gall, something emanated invisible and toxic. The man stunk in more ways than I had fingers, reeked in possibilities undetectable to the five senses. It was the stink of betrayal, of purposelessness. It was the stink of doom, the mercenary stench of skewed priorities, of twisted rancor. It was the stink of indifference to wanton destruction, the driver behind every historical crime against man as an institution. He cared for nothing; the nihilistic anarchy of complete egocentricity was painted rancid across this portrait for me and then thrown in with morality's sewer to fester.

"So this is the way it goes down", I exhaled, finding no joy in making his acquaintance a final time. "I should punch you in your stupid grin."

And so I did. Seeing my knucklebones crack across stubbornly soft jaw was a low price for admission. The wife would smile if Moira wouldn't be mortified.

"Fuck! This wasn't part of the deal!", the former Nomen exclaimed. (I suppose we were *all* former Nomen by that point.)

But before the false womanizer rocked back on his heels towards a less complicated job for the evening -maybe sucking his patrons off in some foreboding alley- I asked my contact to lead on. "Maybe you can enlighten the way", I said surreptitiously, almost trampling my wrangler down fate's road towards a predestined trap.

His reluctance preceded trustful answers but eventually we agreed that payment was never forthcoming for a job half done. His new employers weren't the type to go displeased.

"Who's got you running errands anyways?", I remarked with a superior smirk. In reality, however, it'd take little to knock me down a peg, to snuff the false bravado of real apathy.

"None. Just some guy", Jackoby's hand muffled the response, unless the runt's lip swelled below that clenched pose. He lagged as I took off in the direction indicated, our pairing soon becoming a brisk, tandem walk. "Never seen 'em before", he said.

I took pleasure at Jackoby's bloody loogie landing that indented gutter running the middle depression of our path. In fact, I'd savor that small retribution until the end of my days... which had yet to reveal its own plurality.

We made small talk for extended moments, shadows drawing long towards empty, twisting corridors of our mutual birthplace. The night was hollow, voracious, absorbing what spare essence wasn't battened down, draining the higher emotions as if people never existed, as if darkness was all that remained of the husk once brimming with life. The dusk rush long past, this time left only baser impulses: primal fear and grovels for shelter. On several occasions detritus rustled invisible passageways, a scratching here, a flapping there. I gave no reaction to these clamorous interjections nor the ominous mist enshrouding our decided route, but an equal boast couldn't be spoken for the companion whom grew increasingly tense with each deadened footfall.

Only predators prowled these nights -this was true- but years of prowling the switchback diagonals of poor city planning taught me that true dangers weren't animalistic. I knew this: knew the scratching to be rats, knew the flapping to be birds at roost. Both of which proved harmless to dawn's revelations. True dangers were quiet, not carving a living, chewing an escape from gloomy silence befalling each cycle of human perseverance.

I looked at him, breath inflating clouds of vapor, tiny voice echoing muted, themselves afraid of returning. Jackoby muttered nervously of nothing, soothing himself with familiar vibrations as if that borrowed power served some sort of barrier. He shrouded himself in the ability to affect the world when in reality it was this passing wake that allowed others to notice, to track. The ex-Nomen obviously fostered scant skills in anonymity, but then he wasn't the current target now, was he?

No. Instead, the smarmer was imprisoned by his own living, myopic to all else in the excluding focus on existing, nothing more, nothing greater. What a shame. The freedom to walk unchained would be mine alone this night. Without fear, without concern. I needn't worry if Jackoby's temporal payment maintained a standard meal and a home for the season, whether the ones with spears would make a power play, whether buildings would crack and tumble underfoot of the squatting gypsies, whether the richbloods plotted another war on poverty...

Nope. I had but one concern: would mine be a merciful end or an agonizing drag across that torturous rack? And this elemental freedom proved sufficient.

I shuddered, recalling the cemetery, the chilling monument that is -that was- the deadpile, recently deconstructed. Elsewhere, across town, the barren nubs of stone giants clawed forth from aerated soil. The surrounding buildings were just larger versions of such grave markers anyhow, but I did wonder where the battered form of Din would find its rest. Would I be stripped of dignity, of my soup? Would all belongings be stolen from my cold corpse's clutches as I was dumped, left to rot in one of so many nooks we passed, perhaps providing friendship to some confused beggar weeks after decomposition? Would it be this alley, maybe that one there? Would it be this particular beggar, maybe that one there?

"Where's this Gods-damned building?", the other hissed absently, hands tucked ever deep

within loose-fitting trousers.

In truth, goose flesh dominated my own exposed forearms, the turgid veins of atmosphere gusting 'round chokepoints churned by randomly placed arches, windows, corners of dull architecture forcing the breeze to snake in a similar manner to our own navigation of the same obstacles. Such a long walk for a short end.

"So what was the plan should I be less willing?", I queried harmlessly.

"Was told to run", Jackoby replied unsure, suddenly on the defensive, "after antagonizing you."

Wouldn't have worked, that much was clear. My leg barked, the sharpness cascading several key points in a now-stumbling stride, chasing hopes of running into the futility of a distant, plodding memory. All well enough as I had indeed grown so weary of fleeing.

The smarter cut across my route in finding our destination. Made sense, as the experienced tail to which we were leashed had preemptively held back beyond the jilted avenue, blending well enough that I no longer witnessed the cowl peaking, spying.

"Ah, here it is", my lead gestured, at last laying sight to something that perked the brows, livened his step. He looked the happiest I'd ever witnessed, the relief crashing down upon his symmetrical features all at once. He had certain freedoms after all, it seemed.

"I suppose this is it then", I said in sidling the man, profiles aligning in the coarse shadows offered by a double torch crackling protest to the humidity.

The braziers were warm.

We exchanged affirming nods, eyes cold and conspicuous to each other, of the world, of the building's occupants. I wanted to hit him again, actually. But instead of decking the whipping boy one final good one for posterity -a face-caving to remember- I extended a palm, holding the last bit of change I retained from the marketplace.

If looks could kill, I'd have one less worry.

"Hey, uh..." I managed to mimic the solidarity of our burly bartender, the impression mustered on pure whim, pure delirium, "yoo try an' not be such a prick." I tethered a quick fit of giggles, stepping forward to the entryway pooling darker than my mood.

Jackoby eyed generosity with suspicion, curious eyes excavating holes into a fleeting neck. It was then that my outline got swallowed by the cruel gullet of shadow, steps falling heavy -leaden- with my newly perceived stature, the door clanging shut. No one would guess that my last view of the outdoors was fated to be some dumbstruck former employ, a monetary tip playing prop to death's errand boy. (But at least the gawker could now afford a haircut for Jackoby's next gig.)

He knew not how to judge my temporal behavior and neither did the lonely man bearing punctuality for this meeting, chuckling low in pretending to be tall, brave, a red-bearded aggressor wielding a shiny halberd to cut down definitive foes.

So thus is our lives' impact: paths align and paths part, no one being the wiser when even identities prove cryptically esoteric. Through extended and mutual darkness, we all just bump into each other, looking for the door: the place where heads rest. That place, itself, seems to know it must eventually end. But even time proves abstruse, an unknown, in light of that supposed certainty.

I believed my life would end in those ensuing moments, and it sort of did.

He stood in a circle of light, hands stretched forward, inviting. The beard edged impeccably cut, full, growing as it too followed strict schedules and expectations. Hair was held to different standards in my circles, but the waviness of neat brown locks curtained his shoulders as directed, contrasting the come-as-you-are approach of so many of my known contacts. It was unusual. His crown was bathed in the harsh lantern projected downwards, lending a ring of shadows at the room's perimeter. An accommodation for observation, it seemed. A panel of judgment.

He was lofty, untouchable. The billowy robes through which my host enjoyed comfort bunched in particular areas, here, around the shoulders, about the hip. A sash was tugged quietly, slipping unbound to affirm that supple leather engorged his broad chest. Supple movements brushed the robe's tail aside as he took a relaxed position in a modest ottoman with but the hint of a backrest protrusion.

Had I designed the thing, a slight shiv might be holstered along its adorning edge.

"Sit, please", he motioned upbeat to a fault, though the offense never triggered one's trepidation. It was simply... inappropriate.

With this direction, I took casual residence of the similarly comfortable block within kicking distance from his. No pillows, but cushiony enough to the cheeks. He smiled openly, gestured openly.

"I'm preferring to kill you", the chipper host chirruped, "but you may plead your defense." His eyes rarely blinked.

Wasn't expecting *that* exactly.

"I am sheik, here", he gestured, always gesturing. I sensed purpose in this, like all must be communicated, everything revealed. Was nothing hidden? A slight whistling from unseen followers choired faltering unison like crickets during harvest, responding to the

unstated query. "You are in our den", he continues smiling, always smiling, thick brows casting intrigue 'round eyes ringed in black, "It is not my name, but you may call me Cornelius, if you must."

Was my host teasing?

"I'm Din", I respond truthfully, acknowledging his resources: authority, tracking skills, and intimidation.

"Ah", the sheik acknowledged that recognition.

"Should you be searching for a defense, I have none", I sighed morosely exhausted and aching, "You may have your preference." I ply for additional words, his turn to speak.

"What is this purpose of defeat?" The smile lessened. He seemed a bit defeated himself, as if expecting a fight, a chase. I wondered at the predatory nature of the man to which I looked upon but could not yet see. Not yet. Was it unsporting to have prey thrust itself upon the sword? Should I swallow stuffing until I was properly prepped for mounting? Should I sculpt the very glass marbles to replace my brown, darkness-attuned eyes? Bronze the plaque to strap my grinning head to some stuccoed wall?

Let's try this tactic. For Moira, for Gerd.

I enhanced my dishevelment, pathetic-ness, and slouched naturally. "Life is good", I manage, "but all things must end."

"We're both busy men, yes? Yes. And your type appreciates directness?", he nodded.

I nodded.

"Let's discuss the Guild's deeming of your necessary removal. Without theatrics."

"What guild?"

He's proud of this: "The *only* guild. Not your clubhouse for dummies." He tasted the concept as a bitter, invisible thing, wafting hands at and past me, waiting for a stunned mind to piece it together. Both pairs of legs tapped nervously since he was, indeed, a busy man. And I thought better when blood flowed freely.

The darkness, the light. That atmosphere of dust twirling lazily in the afterlife's light resembled my headquarters in the slightest, but the very air was consumed in what it was, in what it enclosed, in what it constructed. A conspirator cleared his throat almost imperceptible but present still, and it began seeping, tearing through those sutures holding the disparate crusts of my skull in place, from flying apart. The plates eased, relaxed, allowing thoughts from without to infiltrate the hardened shell within. I was injected with

epiphany, infused with knowledge that was equivocally stimulating and horrifying.

In setting up shop, in founding my personal group of bullies, spies, barflies and henchman, it seemed increasingly possible that I epitomized the weak, paralyzingly-ignorant leader. I was but a bum without a clue, a careless remnant of flotsam treading frantic to stay afloat in the City's churning soup intended as some malignant beef broth, only to yield the charred scrapings of the previous meal from the cauldron's edges.

Boss sheik over there could read thoughts. Smiling acceptant at my intensity, he nodded slower than feasible, lids falling as a blunting hammer to deliver confirmation: that I trespassed on an existing Thieves' Guild. *This* is what I'd been accused of both then and now. *This* is what I had become to spite the nobles. With mere sustenance as goal, I'd been tortured over something for which I knew nothing of and turned confused, misdirected, into the open clutches of an idea. I'd emulated a false crime, committing it completely.

Now I just burned with embarrassment, with anger, with the wick of a candle soon snuffed for the coming dawn blazoned redundancy across the dew of wheat fields in its stead. The daylight pried eyes forcefully open in the community seeking respite from their nightmares of accentuated terrors. They'd open their eyes and awaken, and I was left to burn, shriveling unshielded like some grub dehydrating under the harshness projected from above. From the truth. It made me wriggle.

Yellowed teeth bit a lascivious tongue, seeking nothing more than to stifle its impertinent lashings, its deconstructive impulses at such a sensitive moment. I wanted to speak but didn't, since my host saved me the courtesy.

"You save me the courtesy", sheik smiled. "I need not explain how silly you've been."

And he didn't. My Nomen had infringed upon their City, stealing their marks, stirring their pot. Parts of me wondered if he'd tapped the wealth formerly wielded by the reluctant boy-king. They'd certainly pissed off the nobles; but had sheik's thieves partaken in the royal treasury prior to its sudden and irreversible dispersal to the realm?

Don't mention the subject.

"What of my men?"

"Your *rabble*?", the beard expulses, sampling several inner emotions at this before finally gliding back to smiling with ease. "Do not worry over their lives", he concludes never to elaborate.

Then his grin wavered in ejecting the tiresome thought, teeth still bared. The mouth corners dipped, recalling something new. Something important.

"I wonder though: do you know of the dark times you help to spread?"

"The extant is conceivable."

I say this, face flushed and getting warmer. Would I be snuffed for a turf war? The *real* guild of thieves had let us exist to the point of dispersal... the Nomen proving exceedingly incapable and unruly to exist beyond Mathias's funded direction, his direct funding. Did my host know that he immutably threatened the *former* leader of the *former* group that *formerly* leeches upon the suckled, distended teat of easy money. We didn't step on that many toes, or had we?

"I'm speaking of war", he fanned these embers through a fitted row of teeth, words fit to scald skin, leaving me with no cover to hide and no reprieve from the grilling. And because of this, I felt wilted onto the ottoman, soft though it was.

Boss sheik's torso tilted to emulate curiosity. Eyebrows arching. An arm hung loosely at his side, the other folded neatly across a single knee.

"The highborn were the ones to declare a class war." I hang this on the question mark. "They baited the poor, hunted them down one by one as a council searched for your group's true leadership. Nature also, herself, is at war with our very species. Each and every man is at war with his own persona, even when good reason is impulsive, evident, and present." That statement lingers, punctuating my construction of humility I presented, to both him and our onlookers alike. "I either fall prey or participate in the conflicts to which I am thrust. As do we all."

"I see", is all the gawker tells me, continuing the familiar posture. Strong, willful. Probing.

When I neglect to stumble upon the very words lain before that harsh column of light (intentionally failing the present test) he began speaking after two eternities of stares. None of the looks entered the veil to which I took refuge and for this he respected me all the more, it seemed. At least, that's what his smile indicated.

Boss sheik Cornelius, with teeth and a murderous glint outshining the all-revealing brightness, nodded at our situation, blinking thrice less than the total of exhibited smiles.

"You recognize true conflict, and that is good. There are no figurative wars." He shifted. "But we wonder if you're perceiving our future here. How far do you see?"

Rhetorical question. He wishes to answer, himself.

"It's not at all relative", my host continues, "as our peoples live in direct consequence of our fathers. How does the son pay for preceding mistakes? How does one take what is essential to life and needed by all? What responsibilities does one assume when nothing

is written, no wisdom given? What connection- what responsibility do you share with your son, your neighbor, your wife, your brother? Will you answer for them, the people?"

Don't answer. There exist truths without proper morality, no answers to identify aloud.

"I-"

DON'T! Instinct urged insistently, demandingly.

He rarely shouted, never left my head ringing. In fact, I didn't conceive that facet of playing host to forceful wills possible... so I heeded this advice in leaving that ejaculated stammering as some philosophical footnote to be treasured by all. There were likely those present -those cloaked in mystery and draped in silence- whom wished answers even if delivered by an unreliably witless witness. But they would be sorely disappointed.

At the time, I had thought sheik's queries -his grudges- hypothetical. I had assumed, incorrectly, that the outspoken concerns were on display tantamount to the unabashed dissection of their living subject. I knew not that its use *was* the dissection and not some contrived example to propose as mulling material, something free to subjectively consider. I knew not of the personal loss that he experienced, that hung within ocular range -the edge of vision- no matter how much he tried to look away within the hours of waking and non. The interrogator's particular demons were contrastingly external, and he dealt with them in the manner he lived his life: by smiling them down.

"So", he said looking contemplatively curious in a measured glare administered out the side. It was no less disconcerting than seeing the trimmed beard head on, both eyes facing mine. "Should you were me, what would you have the guild do with you?"

An honest question, but one he wasn't done asking.

"Our City, our home, outlawed taxes to quell open rebellion. The bad times... Concessions were made to keep the civility, keep the peace. Sacrifices made, even should they be short term." He spoke of the previous King's execution... er, disappearance. History lessons. Spectacular.

Boss Sheik Cornelius continued: "A boy is left in the seat of *power*. A joke maybe. And even should it exist as joke, the balance is kept. Commerce continues, life finds a way. The guild demonstrates... caution. We're smart. We adapt as all hunters do. The city guard, dumb as they are, may not even know of us. The nobles-", he gestures wide. "The nobles can be placated. They protect their own and fallen thieves are punished for transgression."

"Punishment is how we keep the peace", he said grimly. "Keep the balance." His smile dies. "You, Din... You burned Azuriah's home. You dethroned the boy-king. Your actions

gave rise to a 'mercenary class' -traded king for a knight, as it were. The ones with those pointy spears pillaged the palace. They're empowered, hold the gold. They'll spend it sure as sun, but I've witnessed too many fall prey to their own lust for *more*. Who will hire these men when they've had a taste of control, themselves, when men want nothing because they lack nothing?"

He paused, fiddling a smile concerto of one around the enclosure, inspiring concurrence. This action told me that there were those opposed to sheik's accusations, but had been subsequently trumped, overruled, for my judgment to take place.

"All men must be gainfully employed, distracted from sloth and evils. This is true. And you Din Ashanti -usurper- have made quite the mess of things: the monarchy, our profits, the City's future. You've hired simpletons, crowning yourself king of your club, slipping misinformation to our rightful ruler -lies- anything to keep the personal commerce flowing. But you've started to realize this error", the interrogator moans scornfully.

"I most certainly have; you're right."

"... And despite this recognition", he continues smiling discreetly, always smiling discreetly. "I can't feel you've fully grasped these- these *crimes*."

My throat began to clench.

"You've cut the head off our home... Your short-sightedness thinks the reigns of power have changed hands? I'm informing that you've ensured civil war, one that will openly tear the City along its *faults*; the last bastion of our species may reject *civilization*." A gesture emphasized the last word, teeth bared.

"How do you know all of this, assume all this?", I demanded pleadingly. "Why can't I join you?"

"It's the talk of the town, of the marketplace! The fools spend this way and that, sideways, topways!" An articulated swipe of the room swept a wave of fear-mongering forward into sight. "And you... Your best is below average. You bring nothing to offer, nothing we'd replace one of our own with!"

He's agitated. Don't agitate him.

"The ones with physical power must *always* be directed by those with power of the mind, lest the population be brought to their knees! The muscle can't have clout, can't have the economy! Blood in the streets, a boot on your wife's neck. You'd have us enslaved, again! And shouldn't they retain their riches, they spend it all, what then? Gold is worth nothing, just the promises from which it's made. Sure as sun, the coins will tarnish despite their enduring shine."

"Please explain how-"

"We can't acquire a purse from cattle, Din! We can't... *steal* a mason's promise to repair a wall. Should the common man have riches, there is no riches... and nothing to take."

"I see."

"You- and your family... You've set us back. Again. Who knows how far?"

"I'm not the villain, just-"

"... just a supporting role", he finished the statement, sealing it for time's discretion.

A moment lingers, both interrogator and rat trapped within its confines. We were a box, a capsule, preserved from this grain to the next, flitting our way towards an undisclosed destination. The ages would have little effect by this... meeting, but there were those who'd affect those more profoundly.

"I tell you things so that you not be confused", the host admits. He politely gnawed an upper lip in a gesture I don't even know how to place. Hesitance? Glee? Compassion? "I wouldn't be accused guilty of putting down a dog."

He said this with bereavement. No arguments, no excuses. No exceptions.

"Fine just... leave my family from these matters", I try attempts at bartering, deflated as I was. Moira, madame mother...

An uncomfortable silence kicked down the door and stood grimacing, menacing us at spearpoint. It forced the room's atmosphere out into a long march, trudging off into the desert never to be heard from again. The silence rose the temperature, the room's pressure, threatening to smoke us out or at least suffocate its hostages where we stooped upon the similar divans, outwardly peaceful, inwardly clawing for change... for relief.

"You tell me my business?", boss sheik whispers, eyes splitting my brain's halves in twain. "You put up this defense as if you are the only one to know loss?"

Your brother...

"Your brother -your blood- took someone very special to me... in the name of the highborn *dogs*, his masters." A tremolo hinted faintly, voices -his and Instinct's- rising, churning to the surface in quiet crescendo. It was deafening.

In his eyes I saw the truth, saw myself... *his* self, staring back. Malak -or Kamal as he sometimes veiled his persona- used the sheik's glossed tears to taunt, to face me from beyond the grave, beyond this realm. I saw it in the beads of moisture pooling in divoted recessions saddling astride that thinli hooked nose before my very gaze, harsh top-lit lines

drawing contours from the wrapping of flesh I was known to possess. I saw a face reflecting in this man's sadness, his pain, and knew we to share loss for a youth's life.

"I have no brother", I whispered to the inner voices bottled within.

"AND NEITHER DO I!", Malak shrieked, wresting control for an unguarded moment, eroding resolve until the torrents belched malice in a bile overflowing the repression. Villainy overflowed like diarrhea, the contaminant repulsing all to the core. It was I who stunk, mental cavities decaying unbidden, guilt misplaced. Never had I cared greater for others beyond the innocence of mangled children but Aran would be shocked to hear the false confessions, would have been first to defend the honor of outrageous lies then puppeteering my actual fate, wielded by the imprinted death rattles of an assassin long gone. Whose conscience was murdered long before he received proper sentence.

"I killed him", Malak sneered.

You must maintain.

"You must SILENCE", came the truncated expulsion of undiluted loathing, searing the unwary minds presently reaching for their weapons' handles. *He* spoke aloud. Unusual. Rare.

And I watched it all. An observer, nothing more. Boss sheik had shiv in hand, a defensive posture despite the forward momentum. He would close the gap to remove the advantage. Spiked metal exacted a point directed from itself, maneuvered, glinted in the otherworldly glow. It matched his eyes, his teeth, flashing wildly in the beam.

"My spies say you're bloodless", sheik motioned. His sharp canines looked fiercer than the womanly shiv, at least. From the light above I witnessed the room, saw the round of occupants, saw the future as it played out. Over and again. The same each time, unswerving, careening. The stuff of dreams, the material for nightmares.

"They'd be *wrong*", Malak cajoled, wielding his own personal demise as condemnation... wafting the soiled laundry for the witnesses to inhale the fumes. This misdirection was overkill, really, but had its desired effect. Their faces were mine -internally as it were- as this accusation, the blame dispersed. It infected all, veiling each in shadow in turn. The truth, with a maniac's context and phrasing, is universally lethal.

In truth, I'd undermined this truth from even myself. Of that night. Of the blood. I'm not a murderer, though I've murdered. This information hit many of us for the first time.

Had to be done.

But sheik Cornelius the interrogator stayed his hand, meted in mindful action as it was. He was a businessman, was a leader. I envied the poise, the stride, the little flourishes, his

communication. Discipline guided him, thankfully, blessedly.

In his wisdom, he spoke these words: "The two-faced one would not be part of my family for long", he said, "and though it's unfortunate for your relation, you will be judged for your own crimes alone."

And I believed him. (The frequency of belief is amusing when I think of company in days such as those.)

Turns out, we didn't have to procrastinate much past that point. Back turned, the sheik without a name -whom commanded the enviably discreet tendrils of subterfuge and espionage throughout our fair City- gave a meaningful nod, the kind that spoke, "put down this beast", to even the uninitiated observant. I was one that failed his approval; it'd seem I had missed the opportunity to submit an application.

But still, their precision and obedience struck awe into the steeliest of hearts.

At that single, subtle gesture, a wing of shadows broke loose from their roost in grabbing limbs while the host retreated, releasing my hijacked form of word and deed. Sabeer with his shifty eyes, would take flank. He was the one to secure my neck.

What started as almost a feline purr soon gained volume until flaring shrill into an ear-splitting sound unrecognizable as the glee some knew it to be. You see, Malak had sensed (as I did) an irony approaching from behind, one descending the executioner's perch to exact worthy justice deemed appropriate by my faceless, inconsequential peers.

But no parties beyond the instability of sour schizophrenics can applaud fratricide, so the interference quieted -if only momentarily- to allow parting words, my true voice, to break through. The room would understand my acceptance. The room would recognize my control.

Plus, for some reason *how* one greets death is an important legacy... or so I've heard.

"Din, I'm so sorry", he says unseen.

"It has to be you", I remark soberly, "only you."

The dagger buried itself to the hilt.

Parting both flesh and rib, the relatively cold steel pierced my heart -its target- slicing the thick-walled organ into a wet, useless mess as blood slopped forth, the muscle finally failing the one job it knew -had slaved at- for its existence. It's sole purpose was denied as the warm runoff slid between dusty vest flaps, causing a sticking effect that wasn't unpleasant as an insulation to the night's chill. So warm. A merciful and direct kill, so deep; I half expected to tilt a chin and greet a serrated tooth jutting from the clammy bareness of my exposed chest. Instead I twisted in the fall, looking up instead of down,

somehow mindful to not further injure the frailty that is the human form in a slumped tumble off the divan.

In doing this, I confirmed the image that materialized in the mist: him standing confident, poised in a roiling thundercloud, that sea of faces. The lieutenant's eyes were obscured, but I thought I recognized that look: fiercely loyal, a twinge of anxiety, a dash of anger staving off the edges of fear. I'd seen it before in different context but the mask of neutrality gazed back, honorable. Duty-bound to principles I rarely begged.

The passing recognition echoed dull in a draining vision that faded quietly to black, the curtain dropping, rather, inviting thoughts to a contented rest. Much as a child lain to bed, head reclining at the meted softness afforded by a woman's touch, Moira's gentility; the shorn slats of knotted wood accepted the thud of my noggin.

This last image, the moving painting smeared in its daubs of tinted pigments, would be of a budding young thief whom I'd formally recognized as friend. As a brother. As a successor.

Seeing beyond, peeling the layers in what constituted a laborious last effort, I discovered that I knew nothing of this man, this dark harbinger. A nagging uncertainty was displaced by cognizance of a mask, a shield, unless this too proved an additional disguise to which was distorted, witnessed in passing. To whom were these masks directed, even now?

The familiarity was off-putting, surreal. Some shrouds hide even further deceptions and it was in drawing lines about this facet of people that I blinked quizzically until the action was definitively impossible.

I yearned to see more, to focus. But regardless of identity, a sympathetic hand closed a pair of eyelids so as not to perpetuate the persistent rudeness of a dead man's stare. This would in turn prevent closure though, from knowing one last curiosity.

Would his mask indicate the sting of betrayal, as my features surely did?

Chapter 9: Injury

This dream was different. And different is welcome.

Instead of the sickening dips, the rises, the headlong plunge into eager abyss, I walked the sands -freely- not at the mercy of spontaneity's advocate baptized in its own immolating wings, maligned to its perverse penchant for seeing the "true" inner self through a stomach's retch. No, as a man of mirrors -of many faces, he who casts scrutiny upon the land- I tasted the power I'd heard so often, had read in tomes of forgotten lore, those buried in the fog inherited by generations increasingly diffused with impatience.

In this land, this... paradise, bipedal forms bent their wills, submitting deed, servitude, and opportunities for judgment. Allowing my will's exertion. Their lives rang hollow when rapped, devoid of consciousness, begging to be filled, to be coerced.

When given many options -the liberation of choice- it is man's nature to question both maker and self, to dread wrongful or unintended consequence, to finally freeze paralyzed through universal pressures to get it right. Counteractively, if man forsook the agony of exchanging what little time he commanded in cobbling a worthwhile tenure, the fiend barrels ahead, repercussions be damned, community be damned. So with the exclusion of utter sloth, the two outcomes (maybe more to vessels lacking creature comforts and preference) provide a beginning, this false start, as an invariable waste of resources prefacing but scant years in aligning towards common cause. And even should the transition come to pass, consumption, greed, mal-intent... Well, I suppose we already know the conditions present, the cradle to which the wrong ply generations against the grain of darkness. But this is man by default. Merely human interference.

The choices are made this way. The time is spent this way. But how to invest them? How to fill the void?

This emptiness may have always been, may always be, but it lies dormant just waiting to be mined, to be seduced. It needs but a... spark. And in the negative, I saw opportunity. A deserted fort, no defenders. A haunted manse, no caretakers. No family. A dark spirit without motivation. It could serve a purpose: *my* purpose.

Portended through history's annals of repetition, it was this dichotomy of right/wrong, with/without, do/don't that my presence would alleviate. The opportunity was destined to indeed come 'round again as man never truly learns, just erects ladders from the desiccated bones gifted to the wild offshoots of progeny's branches. New men gleaned not the wisdom of their predecessors, just made use of the forebears' trajectory in dedicating advancement, never working fast enough to themselves partake in succulent fruits produced at the planting of such intellectual labors.

I mean, of course the new man must partake and enjoy! *We had to*, what with the practical expenditure of days being but a few thousand too short. The minds contain but limited capacity for reason much less the simultaneous talents in creation, application, and appreciation. We certainly required each other, made up the machine of functionality, complementing others' pieces in a semblance of an ever-contorting puzzle! But that puzzle was stacked against itself, cajoling trade from the belittlement of the next piece,

undercutting the greater image in focusing upon their own tiny sector of vision. Was this life?

The strong, the weak, the old, the new? Our species' specialization was living but we clung when the need surfaced, rejecting responsibility and care when it didn't. We hurt strangers to protect the familiar, sacrificed necessity to beat back the infinite will of the unknown. All this we do while floundering, blindly, with but shreds of advice written in the last guy's dying moments utilized as guidance towards that same moment of our own brief and inconsistent clarity to experience. Compelled by fear, anxieties, egocentricity. Or worse.

And maybe I was guilty, too... But maybe I could fix it.

Giving to takers, the harvest-less cycle of sowing, the guessing and blundering. It should be broken. The cycle of surprising, fearful demises must stop. The limited days filled with but short-sighted monkeys ignorantly plucking fleas from the next, clubbing each other with worn, blunted tools gnawed upon by chaos' instant gratification must end.

We should be served, all of us. We should be benevolent, all of us!

But what price would be paid when this dream came to pass? What benefits would this afterlife affect the living?

The details were unclear but the terminus disrobed seductively, unveiling facets of being a dream realized as a dream yet to be realized. I would strive for such things, on my own when necessary. No... man oft contradicts himself, this thought forcing a recognition of that ethereal haze befallen sleeping eyes. I woke from within, acting as edifice to those living among the dead whom lumbered about my figure, a half-world of sorts that dissolved at the threats of grasping the dream, all intangible. All fleeting.

But I had seen what wasn't and knew it must, that I would acquire assistance in architecting this surreality, the pitfalls of even success screaming apparent, accentuated by a moment of consciousness bleeding into the next. I spied the encumbrances of perpetual society, of enlightenment, the one I knew not how to create.

Was it better than naught? Would the circle break? Would *we* break?

In this manner/mind state I accepted the role to which I'd eventually play, villain or not, knight or king, and it brought a little joy. Acting as surrogate to hope, I'd ensure a tomorrow, guaranteeing *something to be* when this insane trek came to a complete halt. Past the misery and mystery, I'd define the promised lie and make it real, forge the unrealized preconceptions with the grease mopped from the mass of weeping brows if need be. I'd utilize them as tools, I decided. And I'd receive help when it was offered. This world was *ours* after all.

"You think this'll sell?"

"Sure."

Sssslicht, went the sting of acid corroding my spinal column, a sensation of ants

extricating cluttered burrows down each limb. My neck was... bound. Thick cord of rope. Veins convoluted and crimped throughout as blood trudged familiar paths like children whose slippers stuck in the sludgy avenue that is the drainage ditch. Haltingly, hesitantly.

We're moving.

The insects' militant nature marched corridors to areas unknown; as did we, apparently.

A cart. Burlap. The sun.

"You *sure*?", the first merc passed his incredulity like a hot potato, juggling some price internally. "Little flashy for my ilk. Can't be seen wi' dis puny thing. *Glass pommel*?! Well fuck ME", he groaned. "Thought it real at first."

"Give it here."

"Nah, ha ha... We flipped on it!", came the declaration, a warning for war. "It'll sell."

The bundled dead. Desert hills.

Our leisurely pace dipped, or was a wheel slogging past a divot in the road? The pace restored. Pain receptors... restored. I was jostled by our travels, felt the compacted dirt beneath rolling stride, the wood clattering against itself. A gate of sorts. Fenced in. Air... difficult in this heat... in this sack.

"Time to use it", the driver said grimly. I wondered at the treatment of his livestock, could picture a sturdy whip in hand, an even sturdier set of principles in the taskmaster's head.

Ahead, a hawk crooned.

At this or something other, the passenger balked. He spat, hocking deep to dredge up reservations. Or maybe to quell them. We all knew that *time* was certainly upon us, though I knew only that procrastination was damnation and detestable deeds were typically the ones worth doing. Typically.

"You're a weird one", he said, feigning silence long enough to threaten its permanence to each of the cart's jostled occupants.

But he was long-winded and we'd not be so blessed. I sensed a long, muted look between the pair before thoughts of the wife were interrupted since it was, indeed, *time*. Time to go? Time to spill the gawker loose? Time to pack up and get the hells outta here? Time to kill?

Don't move, Instinct superfluously cautioned. Our mutual escape plan in the making was tenuously bereft of testing my artifact's limitations.

And suddenly the brute had lurched backwards, sweaty sausage hooks grasping for who knows what, settling for a stiffly coiled leg. I didn't resist in the drag across lumps that realization would have me learn to be compatriots... former denizens, fellow travelers of this mortal coil. I felt tangled thighs, and implacable mounds of flesh through the

abrasiveness cinched around my neck. Young, old, male and female. Gods, the smell...

"Aaugh!", the beast exasperated emphatically, releasing for a second. Just a second. "The shit's down this one's leg!"

"That's why you load them sideways."

"Didn't load this'un."

"My trophy for yours", came the verdict. Chilled and clipped.

Elsewhere, that hawk gave a triumphant trill having clawed some poor prey, the furry thing dangling unseen, soon rising higher than man's aspirations. A meal for sharpened hooked mouths to eviscerate until a glistening pelt crater was strewn about a set of ribs.

Neither permission nor words were necessary in loosening the rope free, my skull yanked up and back to bend in obscenely impossible angles. The beast reached under the shroud, the sack, and gripped hair, tugging, slicing the lock with Malak's blade. And by the grace of mercy, revealing squeals of nervous fear never belied my status amongst the living, even when my upper half snapped back, dropping forward in an unsupported faceplant. Consciously disabling reflexes -the body's emergency countermeasures- indeed proved more difficult than first imagined. And although even inaction takes a peculiar effort, it was not the first law of nature on my list of criminal activity.

I mean, seriously. Does one go perfectly limp when imitating a corpse or should you lock the joints as a prone form?

"Which other ones you miss?"

"Nope. Didn't miss beyond him", the collector at the helm continued. An addling tone frayed his collected center. "Now don't-"

"Like this?"

"No, you're going to-"

"This is how you normal-"

"Dammit, hand it OVER!", exclaimed frustration's twin, a lurking... something... boiling up in assumedly rare form, for this one anyways.

The sullen taskmaster would have his way and I'd own at least one terse moment to allocate for personal designs. And whereas most would admit distraction at plotting escape whilst a swollen, blue-lipped man baked for 30 summers stared daggers into your forehead, my seeming frailty held the advantage of surplus voices without physical form. Viewpoints to spare.

You can't escape from this one, Instinct ventriloquized through another's cracking features, cocked topsy-turvy and perpendicular to my horizon. The eyes, deathly pale, were a singularity that sipped sustenance from warmth, the blistered mouth expelling no breath in communicated whispers.

"There's always an out, always options", I muttered passively, holding the secret conversation close to my chest. No use double-damning a losing hand when I was, in fact, playing for broke. All-in, on a bluff of sorts.

But silence's premature promise was but hollow reprieve, for this lifetime anyways. Our company wasn't faultless like the tour of scenic wasteland, as the passenger scrabbled for human connection: a series of vibrations striking the eardrum, ideas that loosely mimed his own brain's mappings.

"You ever feel... I dunno, bad for them?", the passenger interjected into perfectly comfortable quietness, seeking vindication.

Half of us dipped low in yet another pothole, the lumbering thuds hammering equestrian beat. The shy sun gave up the childishness of hide-and-seek behind fluffy gray and the cart cooked further, having traded the ability to merely bask.

I couldn't focus, couldn't scheme. The heat, the prattling. I faced my birth-home, invisible beyond lifeless mounds of tan, was disquieted by the hundreds of tireless hoof falls counted since consciousness, discouraged by how few I could retrace on a bum ankle.

There is no hope, Din. No out.

"I pity the living", came the delayed burp of response, regurgitated from the bowels of some repetitive limerick the driver governed his own caustic stumblings in the metaphorical winter of his final year.

This man harvested a perverse collection of souvenirs and a gruffness accessible only through joint aches and irritable bowels, I thought. You couldn't define "grizzled" without this one. In fact, I knew the sags of rippled leather without even looking upon his accusingly narrowed orbs, the drooping dough pulled by some netherworld of living torments, the hell of hard labor and hard liquors proving little match for that exoskeleton -his second skin- tempered by hard light presiding over incessant travels.

Say your own calming mantra, a blue-eyed corpse wooed as I frayed a bloodied lip absently. For you, too, have one foot in the grave.

I knew no mantras, no limericks, no poems to ease my travels, just a tome of expletives woven into a tapestry of resolve, of which would adorn my apartment's entryway. Maybe a single curse embroidered upon a mat to scrape away the day's grime. "You're Welcome", the mat would say, "to Fuck Off".

"Yeah, but..."

"They're lucky", the collector spouts, "in not having to put up wit' your stupid questions."

"Ass. I'll crush that melted candle nose..."

"Tough talk, big man. Are all mercs this rude to their elders?" A pause. "Those muscles are something else, but I thought geldings were better behaved..."

Youth's fate is to have the last word, whether it's to accept or reject their forefathers frivolity. Through feast and famine we bury the old, categorizing them into the annals of history where the impetuous feel predecessors belong.

"Fuck you", spat the beast, sitting smug as the eventual victor of generational attrition.

See?

It got quiet, real quiet. But for how long? The vehicle bobbed, jarring its cargo stacked like firewood, un-pruned limbs all akimbo, rotten flesh wasting away below wastes of fair blankets some underpaid seamstress wasted her prime years in fashioning. I thought briefly of how her days would otherwise be spent in our land, thought about where the collector and his bestial helper would be without a shipment of dead to tend, how many more were being dragged from their pools of fluids tucked away in nameless alleys or corralled from the cemetery's overflow.

Who are we if not the burden of the next generation? Who are we if not the caretakers of a crumbling era? Who are we if not the machine of the slumbering giant, puppets flopping about at the amusement of the Great Dreamer, the curtain dropping on each subsequent act as if it mattered not. Ended not.

"Finally", someone exhaled.

"Half done", the driver scolded scornfully. Duty vigilant, but tired all the same.

"Pshh."

"Pshh, yourself. And we're not parking the thing so damned close this time." To himself: "Lip almost collapsed. Fool boy."

And then we were stopping; unadulterated fear -looming big and large- sauntered out to greet us, the pit's voracious appetite living up to its reputation for consumption. Wheeling around, I saw the immensity of it, sensed the coolness of wind whipping about the depression rebuked by fangs of dull rock jutting at opposing angles at its perimeter. The thing howled monstrously, on its own, and should I have visited under different circumstances would consider soiling myself.

But alas, my bowels had voided upon initial stabbing it seems, a caked pant leg complementing the coagulation of sticky blood dribbling the trough of my back. Still warm. And since a crushed, edible bowl leaked its runny innards from the spot where I'd soon be gutted upon discovery, it was ensured that my slickness wouldn't be placated with comfortable clothes for some time.

Should I run? *Could* I run? The flight mechanism theorized in overtime. Time to flee. Time to escape. If only flight, in fact, was possessed by us terrestrial creatures, the frailties of but a gimped limb wouldn't arrest one's mobility. I had three good branches from this torso after all, but none that would avail beyond the improbabilities of flipping over for a quick sprint upon one's hands.

Do I reason with them?

The horses thrilled their own whinnying halt, the belabored grunts of a disparate duo shoveling off, hitting the sand without grace. Footsteps circumvented the rear, approached from either side, the soft granules affording a slinking elegance to any stride. And then they were upon me. Destiny howled.

Couldn't see much beyond the abrasive wheat sack draped despondently about my ears, but the shriek of rust opposing its counterpart belied a pair of hinges protesting both the separation and embracement of its mate. (Moirra, would even squeaky metal remind me of you?) And should corpses talk, it'd be a tumble of hollow clods in the language of a landslide, the lot of us trading benign knocks with our neighbor, a miscommunicated exchange that, of course, would never be clarified due to post mortem politeness. They *were* an affable sort.

Do I *kill*? Do I increase the body count, the mound of visitors rapping for deliverance at death's oaken door?

"You get the first."

"Sodder. We'll flip."

"We ain't flippin'!", the retort bit hard. "You get the first."

As luck would have it mine were the legs for which they fought, the hobbled stilts typically beneath my command being held aloft in dragging torso, now behind. The bulk of me carved a path aimed at the howling monster with teeth and gullet, limp arms trawling awkward and accentuating lines - tributaries- branching from the main current. A current that swept me away.

Swim, damn you.

He was strong, sturdier than remembered in my disturbed dreams. And because even panic knew better than a swift strike at this one's gonads, a mercenary's shin proved as sensitive as a man's of normal size. Mostly it was all I could reach, sprawled at the cusp of interminable blackness beneath, our silhouettes in motion, shining dark against the blinding pale of summer's noon. Surprised balance proved to be fallible stuff as the beast sought reliable footing, pushing only waterfalls of sand behind, no *terra* remaining *firma* for long, this close to the hungry vacancy below.

And as we gushed our simultaneous cries of contrasting nature, I took in the sights of our time: a startled horse and compatriot kicking fiercely as mounted bits tested tooth's resolve, the startled hunch of a gravekeeper's waxen scowl melting into horror. Thousands of paces away, our City stooped like some squatting drifter resolute upon the desolation it chose, simply because no one possessed it. Further still, the cliffs' outline projected a smoky mirage of haze, daring human endurance to reach them, to claim what lay beyond.

Elsewhere, a hawk returned to a nest of shrieking fledglings with the entrails of gamier - more squeamish- spoils of murder, the furry martyr sowing both terror and temporary relief to its former spheres of influence. Indeed, the rodent's family would have cause to

rejoice: the predators' bellies fattened, slowing [and fueling] the advance of a killer's appetite. The hawk and kin would be too full to hunt, a boon in sparing the remaining lessers for another time, another opportunity.

Oddly enough, this thought brought a bit of comfort to my widening eyes as a foot was gripped, the vice-like talons of my personal beast clenching fierce. His bulk would be the weight catapulting us over every conceivable edge, the anchor dragging us both into fathomless depths. Willed into action, the murky ocean rushed up to claim its visitors, to welcome the sacrifice with a sinister snarl and embrace. But at least there was one less predator in the world. My wife would one day cry salty tears when she heard the news, that the beloved spymaster had been pulled to certain doom at the mercy of the bottomless pit past the outskirts. But she had finally been avenged.

I did survive, but I had no deaths left in me. I felt around *that* pocket expecting coarse bristles of beautiful plumage, a token of heaven's forgiveness, only to find brittle ash residue. Wasn't the fall, so even magic had a scope of influence. Interesting.

I peered upwards, eyes taking their time in adjusting, simultaneously blinded by light and shadow. It was dark, unexpectedly dark. Corneas dilated, expanded to take in the world around me. Took all of a reasoning mind to believe it still there. Above, a porthole of radiance eclipsed the black ocean and I knew to reside in a hellish world of infinite night, complete with a matching atmosphere of chills and insufferable stillness. Rhythms were felt, heard rather, or was it both? Drips? Footfalls? Daresay that madness was nurtured in such conditions. I recognized that pitfall, and panicked. All this within grains of the descent.

Shuffling sand. Jets of flotsam hurtled my direction, a shoe, maybe more. I dodged.

"Hulloooo", came the call, weak but resounding. A head appeared at the treacherous lip, glaring down, the features obscured by a shining halo. "Manse, you catch yourself a live one?"

"That's the case", I replied truthfully, tapping my toes about the tilted floor, looking for my compatriot in flight. I remember landing on a mattress of muscle, rolled this direction. This invisible lump and that moistened rock. If the castrated rapist was alive...

"Ha. So it is." The old taskmaster spouted back, dripping with mirth.

I squinted. "Could I bribe a rope ladder off ya? I'm in a bit of trouble here."

An infinity or two, or three. I stopped counting. The old codger's facilities had achieved an impasse. An impasse of wits, maybe? Moral fortitude? Who knows what lurks within the hearts of men, the stubbornly twisted things to which we bestow partial control? Somewhere between cradle and grave we accumulate such baggage -such experiences- that the demons contort, taking form in various ways. Craving offerings. Demanding penitence.

"Believe it or not, gold, women, and song can't fend off the pain of dying", he injects downward. I heard every bit, though, cringing upon each syllable.

"Well, what is it you want, then? I'm pretty resourceful! No good to you dead!"

"Little company'd be nice."

An out?

"Done! Granted."

"Just need a f-friendly face is all...", he stammered, wandering away into secret thoughts, hidden rooms of the soul.

"Absolutely", I promised, hope building anew. "You've got it, friend!" The words rang back, but not from above. "You can take my whole scalp should you want it!"

Frayed nerves balanced that hope, keeping it in check. I looked behind my cowering self in vain, the depth of blackness eroding the edges of sight, but only when you stared elsewhere, away from the center. Scurrying, drops, a call from the gloom. The air was infected, breathing shallow then deep. The cave was my cage, a hollow recess cut into granite torso, my presence offending this passageway -the esophagus- like phlegm. Something wanted me away, wanted me gone, wanted me free as this was not for living eyes to behold. Not for prying eyes to know. A sigh beyond the realms of man bore the scuttling figure pleading for ascendance, drumming its fingers in tiresome patience worn thin. All involved couldn't stand my pitiful intrusion upon the sanctity of damp decomposition, bodies piled high within range.

I waved a hand, testing for blindness, afraid at the possible dissolution of my once corporeality, now... who knew? Was it imagined? Was I real?

"How's it coming?", I ask favoring a plea over a demand, bargaining in a hesitant tremolo for clarity's sake. "Whatever you want... it's yours!"

A body drops from my circle of salvation.

Clipping a surprised shoulder slow on the react, the thing crushed itself on a slab with a sickening clap of ripened fruit, dust kicking up to unsuspecting nostrils. I shielded a cough while the momentum sent it careening down an incline, fading into oblivion as if I hadn't just been corpse-slapped from on high. Had it really happened? Silence held no response. Sight told no stories.

"HEY!!", I scream, coming unfurled at the fringe of tolerance, undone by a cascade of man-sized chunks of hail pelting that tentative stone perch, heralded by a scrape and then silky trails of sand. It was becoming evident that the drop-off was steep every which way, that both my descent and trials were far from over.

More bodies followed. I dodged each in turn, finding small shelter against the singular wall, perfect for clinging and viewing the morbidity. Thirteen bodies. Two and a half second fall. They hit the bone-shattering ramp before rolling off to be consumed by

something waiting, something eternal.

"All these faces I've buried...", the taskmaster interjected after his work, a great weight lifted at the cost of some inner peace. There was nostalgia there, or maybe yearning? "I send 'em all off on their final journey and not a one knows me. I do them this favor, but they can't give appreciation. They don't know... none of 'em knows."

"I..."

"Been here a long time, longer than most", the taskmaster continued unphased, "Maybe just wasn't long enough. No one truly tells you how, just makes suggestions. Give advice. All of 'em stupid."

"It's not over yet; you still got me!"

"I shoulda listened."

"Listen to me!"

"Oh I heard", he spoke, convincing nobody with the misdirected gibberish careening in no particular direction. "I'm not one big on conversation, you hear? But you promise t' greet me on the other side? Help my crossing?"

Sincerity. Poor, dumb sincerity. "You said you'd do it", he says.

"Buddy, just get me out of here? Come on."

The battle was lost, the war entirely forfeit. The possibilities were heading -as futures do- down unpredictable routes illusively controlled by influence bartered with mind's peace. I should have given a piece of *my* mind... seeing as a tiny voice in the darkness could have been imagination's figment for the fat lot of good my direct influence afforded. And wouldn't that be the rub: mutually imaginary acquaintances.

"Hate to be alone forever, when I get there...", he spoke at the abyss, words echoing pathetic and hollow, his featured stump having vacated of termites afore accepting this job of hauling those without tales beginning to tell whoppers, speaking back.

"Stay with me! Whatever you want!" I plead the words for one whose presence trumped a broken, splintered tavern in that moment, generated consolation. (For hers, his, and maybe my own accord, as well.)

But the taskmaster's muttering continued, ever quiet, ever disquieted.

He's long gone, Instinct confirmed, the winds howling vestigial remnants away as they bounced about my cavern... my cage.

"No! Get back here!", bellowed the cave's mouth ejaculating indistinct cries upwards and towards the deaf sky, to be diffused amongst the whipping whirls of current until the particles buckled at entropy's design.

I alternated ears pressed firmly to death's foyer, straining for vibrations... indications of a

cart, horses, a rambling gravekeeper at the end of his rope. Anything to mask my own breathing that enveloped the throbbing temples like a sheath.

The taskmaster lent acknowledgement to what he sought and never reached, never took advantage of his own wisdom. There I stood, flung with the decaying refuse and the man walked free -walked *away* free- to ponder a future past, a life neglected but intact behind shuttered corridors his mind dared not tread. Not without divine guidance, anyhow. "Next time", his conscious thought, "Later. The last." Procrastination was finitely interminable when you considered eternity. And with those stakes, the regrets were easy penance. It was small pittance for undefined glories, bliss, a better life. If you hold out long enough, nothing would matter apparently.

In spite of the truth, he-who-left-living-man-to-rot and I both knew the taskmaster to be better not thinking further, that he benefited from a chaotically unsound mind. But it so happened that I, personally, wasn't and didn't. Ignorance resembled bliss from the inside but the realists -the collateral- be damned.

Regardless of that sinking feeling suckling our remaining light the monster continued its howl, spurring the epiphany that it had never truly stopped. The sounds of pain, grief, or even violence was ever-present in this place, a timekeeper of sorts.

Inside that cave and abreast my antithesis to reluctance, realizations about my own personal monster occurred similarly, an understanding of that craving never truly going away. I was no different, learned the same lessons repeatedly despite the scenario or the aging. Maybe even because of it. Was that normal? Never too old to learn? Never too young to forget? The disclosed, miniature howling took root, rattling the innards to the rine. Despite whatever courage a person claims there's always room for more, no?

So I was off, to beat back the limits of sanity, to claim disposable resources of the mind.

I trudged cautiously from the encircled pinnacle to explore the resounding surroundings, patience lending a shoulder to crippled vision, the once-useful bandana serving greater purpose as ankle splint. The once-useful ability to survive resurfaced. Running water couldn't be far off, nor the scampering of albino night critters if the other senses hadn't yet begun to deteriorate from deprivation.

Later was the time for mourning the fallen. Later was the time for gratitude at the beast's exploded chest cavity upon combined impact. Sick to my guts, I traversed the obstacle as any other: with pointed toe and feline balance, wincing at the recollection, grimacing at imagination.

This was the time to think. This was the time to live. My purchase, my investment, would focus less on influencing minds -in seeking waxen messiahs transcendent of gloom- and home considerably more towards immediate concerns. Who knew? Might even get a second chance when the forecast predicted a hail of deadweights pelting the netherworld the week after next, when my community's population got all fuzzy-acquainted with one another, sang verses of "The One Whom Stayed", and told stories 'round the sparks of a crackling campfire.

Maybe I could line the city's garbage up and give 'em voices, a cozy bunch of bosom buddies bonding over harrowing tales of daring and romance! Stranger things have been companioned after all... so it was when I discovered a friend in Hope amid the schlucking footsteps in treading my own tailor-made ring of Hell.

Then again, a light at the end of the tunnel sounded pretty good about then.

Don't think like that.

"You're right." (Instinct was often right.)

Time passed. How many corpses did I pass over? Hard to say. But the ground was hazardous, slick, loose, and oily. Picked clean they were, the ones I found scattered with sunken, craterous craniums or busted joints hanging limp. Femurs were snapped in some instances, like an engorged giant had hurled the thing after his lateral incisors got picked clean.

You got real lucky.

I wanted to strike up a torch, using flint from the second perimeter pocket near the emergency playing cards, but there were strong impulses against seeing the source of decomposition from which my nose had no reprieve. The darkness was bad, but the efforts to stifle a hyper imagination occasionally competed with and conquered the grisly reality. So it was that hesitant hands patted down the unsuspecting deceased, looking for supplies. Something in particular, something familiar.

The sounds didn't help, for I couldn't tell if a fissure had truly cracked open; some vicious hellhound -having snapped its chains- plagued myself with a demonic howl until all living guests left the cave's foyer. Or not. The wail very much masked the laborious grunts and groans bouncing back from unseen walls, a horrendous trick of acoustics...

Don't dwell on the dead. Don't attempt to cross your own thoughts.

Sound advice, but the sagacity made one question at what was the precise moment, the point deemed absolutely necessary to give up on a person? Was it the deathbed, the declaration of mortal sickness? Does a body "die" when it's of no use, no purpose, no consequence to the living? Missing or abducted persons, the infirm? Are we all just walking hollow, no purpose to our labors, no fruits to a null end?

Should Moira cut her losses, find an alternative smelly jerk to latch onto? Should she drown in remorse, mourn each passing moment for the clod who wouldn't return? Would her day even be affected?

"Gods, I should have said something."

That much, is clear. Focus on the survival that will carry you home.

And given the clarity of wishful thinking my scavenging palms succeeded, having fumbled blindly with but the guidance of a clamorous wind sandblasting that craggy escarpment. A few digits had discovered the freshest corpse in the subterranean cemetery,

a scapegoat along the peripheral edge of this prestigious pile too good for newcomers. That'd be at least one tick off the to-do list while I was down there, as permanent as the concept may seem...

He felt smaller than I'd remembered, less intimidating. It's as if the body deflates on so many levels when the spirit evacuates the husk. We're autonomous no longer, breathing, swelling with pride, pumping ourselves with the fragility composing self-importance no longer. It was indeed time to mutter thanks to the sticky chest, its indented mushiness reminding me of babies' heads, how the bones aren't fused together so as not to split the mother in twain. This one had indeed torn a person's fair share of women, and it was of one disposable whore that I took particular offense.

The taskmaster had said that the dead were lucky. He was wrong.

It's counter-intuitive how tragedy has such potential to do good. Seconds before *he'd* arrived, his last victim had turned me out, turned me down. And then I became a hero when I turned back. Had a hero's welcome, a hero's celebration. This hero would have no progeny but the wheels in motion had given so much, had taken so much. Because of him lying there in his own fluids -cast in the pit of despair with naught but gravity and a mortal enemy-, I'd found love, found a womanly friend for life. But my boon would be her sacrifice, and this one's punishment was taken from me yet again.

Some things just aren't meant to be: deplorable acts of violence inseminating hope which births doom which sires happiness which adopts happenstance's foster child of indeterminate possibility. The cycle, the risk, the reward, the crushing boot of despair.

Don't think.

And if the bad is all intended from the beginning by providence... well, then it's a sick, sick game in which we participate. The contracts are forcefully signed, the quill having thrust itself into each clammy, mucousy palm of the newborn awaiting a doctor's spank. We breach the world with vim and vigor, the aggregate of petulant bluster being stripped bare eventually, given time. The old dwindle with a whisper and it is the society -the cradle- that grows fat off the carrion, the Watcher becoming saturated with what can only presumably be some derivative of entertainment.

"Death" was the problem, and "death" was the answer.

I repeated the prayer of thanks through clenched teeth, harsh kicks serving penance to the beast's nether-regions. What was left of them at least. And because Malak's dagger was the sole supply of this field of ruination picked clean by human vultures, I retreated to the lesser corridors before chancing an outburst that compromised the integrity of this stone fortress.

It wasn't all bad, I suppose. A brighter side, right? Silver linings? Hard to see them in this muck but with a blade I could do much. With a positive outlook... well, let's just say that no amount of stink could hold me back, keep this body down. As it were. I had died my final time one way or another. It was indeed time to dig in, stay the course... I could do this, right?

My maker, any maker, the sloth, loathe puppeteer hiding cowardly behind the cloth of velvety presentation became my new enemy when naught else donned a red cloak to wave in front of burning fury. In light of no discernible foe to shovel my woes (dim as darkness is), I foresaw no more reason than impetuous futility against Divine Will to continue living. Odorous, dolorous living.

It then struck me that the cavern's lobby proved overwhelmingly nauseating, a test in retaining the sparse nutritional paste where it could be digested... on the inside, where it was needed most. I'd keep the lunch by backing further in I realized, away from the light, away from salvation. Quiet darkness would spare a body, could pardon a mind. Where truths lay hidden as damnable Gods lurk to bide time and spin fates, so too would human refuse find a spot to lick wounds, old and new, planning. Ever planning.

Though wisdom proffered rest, opportunity for self-reflection, it can't be ignored that a strategic retreat can cost more than pride.

Chapter 10: Continuation

Day 1: You may not have expected a barren maze of compartmentalized tubes to be so accommodating. While it was easy to spark and light a makeshift brazier, it became apparent that natural forces weren't interested in staving moisture from where I needed it least, nor in relinquishing combustible materials to keep the fire going. No matter, the pooled basins at my waist -full of darting bug eyed paleness- were preferable to choking on haze and squinting past agonizing brilliance on a stick at least. The critters have aversion to the torch and so do I.

Set about constructing a den, a spot amidst the abrasively textured limestone to wait and heal. It wasn't too far off from the entrance and the steady rhythm of drips provided gratifying ambience and water. (Funny, the rains didn't seem this frequent.) The filth and clothes they adhered came off despite the chill, a preference for washed garments -a comfort I foolishly pursued- yielding only the added drip of drying trousers. And no amount of ringing made them warm. A game of patience and sacrifice was afoot.

It's worth mentioning that even the simple pleasures of a card deck were rendered inoperable, though masturbation at the fast-dissolving memories of her seemed a good enough past time.

Day 2: So cold. Sh-shivering through the interrupted dormant periods. Confounded clothes still airing. I either sit and freeze or move around, an action with its own danger of burning food... or bumping the head again. Moira's loaf became its own fossil before too long, but the cold cheese was to be slurped, sucked from the recesses of sogginess. The bread would last, had to last. Until I tried one of the flighty amphibians, at least. Perhaps I'd re-evaluate the worth of picking my fellow dead-izens apart, scouring the rest for usables, but not today. Not today. Was it still day? Occasionally difficult. Difficult to discern when awake, day-dreaming, or asleep. Phases are distinguishable though dreams tend to host more apparitions to gaze upon. Things happen in dreams, as well... good to remember. Not here... not here. The nightmares are gone, though relief and joy elude this body. Pleasant as it is to survive a bout of slumber, the realization that truth is more nightmarish and less preferable is by far more distressing.

So it is that a mind can not properly gauge its own resources, that even the contaminant of desire can infect a body. I missed many things, teeth chattering in the gloom, not the least of which being a sand which soothed the thrashings. Humans are ill-equipped, even ill-engineered in requiring the cooking of meats, the wrappings of furs, and being so very fragile. But the crutch of medicinal necessity to which we relinquish control in the grips of panic counters only poor sensibilities in the choosing, both of which knew not the value of choice and decision prior to the abandonment of responsibility.

Yearning is human.

Day 3: I've accompanied dark and death long enough to become accustomed. Shouldn't have such weaknesses when survival's on the line. Instinct speaks louder than necessary, good stuff all 'round, so I follow. Doubled up on pants, made socks. Couple deathshrouds would prove handy as a tent to restrain the heat without provoking sweat. Treacherous

sweat. I promised to not wash the materials this time. Heat, energy, food... it's all the same, lost through the head and *consumed* by the head. Interesting, no? Eyes, brain, ears, nose, taste and more. The head's so important, full of senses. Gotta keep mine. You don't lose something you can't steal. No valuables on many naked bodies anyways, though the definition of "valuables" has changed. Though the definition of "stealing" has changed. Cramps are kicking in... sitting cramps, moving cramps. Hunger and headaches. Eye strain lessening, adapting? That's good. After awhile, you imagine movements, shifting darkness, belly groans... That's all it is. The speckled specs of red in trailing pupil movement is a sorcery I haven't explained. Best ignore it.

Day 4: The howling room, the dripping room. We thought silence would be more... quiet. Pressed further, sought refuge. No refuge in silence. Glued to the thoughts, jailed with the sounds. The body has voices. Whooshings deliver blood. Eyelids stick together, clicking erratically. Joints creak, especially now, now that mine turned inward for sustenance. For extract. Two combatants, no victors. "Flesh is natural", the thoughts postulate in isolation. And only in isolation do you think certain things, finding enticement in paths devoid of scrutiny, mirrors of judgment. But from the corners of these windows -the peripheral that sees beyond our plane- we spied something: mushrooms. What wonders in sight! Gathered them, hunted them in the recesses, tricks of luminescent nature reflecting dim off the main corridor, the jagged labyrinth further down. How far does it go? How far should I go? Inverted shadows of this worlds normality. Nibbled one. A test, for variety's sake. Regardless of accumulated eternity, the window for pondering good decisions seems insufficient. Probably a mistake.

Day 5: The diarrhea corner filled. Losing fluids, losing life. The bastard fungi aren't as amusing as their namesake. Debilitating restlessness giving all conflicting signals, contrariness to life. This brain knows to starve it out. Don't pick the scabs, the fingertips and palms worn with protective plates to nurture into shelved calluses. Keep the fluids, flush them out. It happens that Instinct can be so chiding, motherly, obnoxious in times when what few options beg testing. Curiosity. How else does one learn? I mean, what purpose would the shrooms serve, glowing greenly, serenely, tucked back and away in undiscovery? Would we believe that all life has meaning, all hidden corners secreted away having purpose? Would all labors yield benefits inevitable, or languish despite confidence in the daunting task accomplished? Are their fruitless actions?! Bah.

Day 6: Heard a sound. A real one. Disturbed the slumber, sweet slumber, and we're moderately certain an errantly twitchy foot hadn't spilled the belongings again. The shrooms proved a blessing. Markers for exploration, a coating for invisible crags tearing gashes across scalp and fingertips previously. Can see one's own hands now, proof they're there. The learned fear of motion dissipating. The latent hunter, awakening. We stalk the albinos with confidence, with ease. Scurrying geckos, cave crabs, water bugs. Feel the fat stores processing, churning, slimming the Hunter. Cave critters not bad, not bad at all. Rationed fire since rock doesn't burn. Combustibles dwindling. Raw will do. No pantry, so catch and sup. Crunches disturb in the least, the remains making fine bait for future prey. Learning the twists, memorizing the bumps. May not need shroom-glow given enough time. Not need self-illumination. Given time.

Gods, time? Six days assumedly gone. This is my life.

Time doesn't reverse, doesn't stand still. Outer world is changing, adapting, carrying on without my input, my approval. Must adapt. Must evolve in this place, remain relevant.

Impossible. The world is bigger than a cave, but the cave is my world, is my cage, is my nurturer and condemner rolled into one lone environment. Losing and gaining pieces, bartering the mind away for the price of progress. The cost of another day. What to do, how to proceed?

Day 7: The taskmaster doesn't return despite anxious squinting directed at the platform, the stage presiding tall and judicious over the corpse hill of his own creation. The deathmound quietly rots, sullenly decomposing the multi-facets of humanity's masks: terror, loathing, apathy, despondency and the rest, graciously eroding evidence that my persecutor - nay my protector yet proven- had damned us all to a pit in the first place.

Keep that hope.

So long ago. The remaining coherent sliver in me couldn't have just imagined the beginnings of it all... but even then, what then? I didn't make it up. He existed and then he put us here, damned us here. So what then? When would he return? Had he the intention of returning? Once returned would the squat, surly man set fire to the pile, thus commencing the final phase of his duty, of his commitment to this purge. Was immolation the final cleansing, some grand rebuke of this distraught purgatory?

And should my pleas of rescue even reach his lofty perch, would the desperate bemoaning -my direct lamentation at the injustice of this torment- reach ears not rendered deaf by a consciousness immune to suffering; was there chance? Did contrary evidence exist that dashed the possibilities of him whipping it out and pissing a geriatric's condemnation upon my good faith in a stranger's anonymous potential? Would this aging curmudgeon, so obviously contempt of life's rote redundancy, awash in a personal sea churned by grudge, grief, and retribution find a spiritual soft spot from which to salvage a pitiful wretch, cast aside?

The winged rats screeched their response, pinging shrill abatement of hope. To this, their demonic forms criss-crossed maddeningly, all vying for bits of cave cricket coaxing them ever-downward to their doom, a smart rock felling the demon and another finishing the job. Not so smug when rendered terrestrial, it seemed.

Tear ducts had long-dried, blotted arid by adversity. But torrents of irresolutely aimless squalls battered the soul, causing the mind to traipse in a daze, drowning the psyche in an indescribable... something. We were sinking and couldn't even label the fluid.

But before we succumbed, a voice -possibly *her* voice- called from the gloom and laid a trail before me, casting aside both doubt and fear. A supernatural beacon beckoned.

This was new, and new was good.

I followed as breadcrumbs, each step surpassing the previous in simultaneous assuredness and caution. Stable footing found *me* through a field of slouching forms, all reaching feebly for ambivalent assistance that'd never arrive. They reached for nothing but I

trekked onward, having drive, having ambition, but mostly having a set of working legs yet buckled by the crushing gravity of the land's law. I moved and thus could fight.

The legs only buckled at my choosing, dropping to a pair of spindly knees when the situation suited, not yet giving in. Not yet succumbing. Pressing firmly, sealing myself to the vertical surface, I listened... waiting for instruction. Rapt for Hope. I sat receptive for redemption or forgiveness, whichever came first.

The sighs were slight, but there. Not mine since even the mandatory act of breathing was halted for any indication, any trace. The echoes entranced, diffusing through and around thought and matter, alike. I responded with eager ear against the triangular slit, cupping palms to the rigid, immovable surface as though they themselves translated vibrations into valued information.

And there I knelt, head bowed, spirit cowed, bearing the lingering fetor of both decay and displaced aggression for a chance at discerning a few words propelled like gusts of wind bridging some great gap between persons. Though the blackness beyond the keyhole remained stifling, the portal's existence proved more than a mere physical barrier.

A presence at the solid door was indefinably strong. Hidden below the desert's embrace, in the most unreachable of places known to my people, it demanded full attention.

My hunched posture could be spotted there often. Dark and growing darker, the delusional man with the cramped toes -cramped against the stained wood as if he were an ornate carving- practically resided in that position. Day in, night out. I forced a semblance of routine, the mental sustenance supplied by the door's comforts sometimes greater than physical urges. To neglect the scant meals of lizard and bats fished from the air would be slow suicide, I knew, so too were the twilight-conscious periods where I sat motionless upon a stiff coil of spine, some degree of sleep wresting control over senses until I sacrificed all but the vestibules of awareness.

I slept and ate, sure, but still I grew thin. Skeletal even.

She whispered things to me. Some good, some bad, all enthralling. Addictive by nature, the conversations buoyed my spiritual center despite how single-sided the long monologues of quasi-intelligible murmurings drifting across our subconscious were. I suppose they weren't conversations, then.

It was the beguiling sort of speech administered by fabled leaders of old, the type great warlords were said to inspire their troops with, in order to trade mass loyalty for the opportunity to re-draw imaginary lines on maps. Hers was different however, being an eerie benevolence that kept us from the brink instead of propelling towards it. "Eerie" in that you didn't understand the advantage, the angle, or reasons for doing so. "I'm with you", she said. "My darling Din", she said. I didn't understand, but felt better at not knowing better.

The disembodied muse wasn't really there, that much was evident; but it was so good to

hear the voice again for the final time. Sweet as blue sugar-candy.

When silence and distant drips left my hollow skull lacking, the interstitial spaces got filled with brain's creativity as it turns out. A person experiences so little of the world on their own without filters, as documenting each detail recorded by the physical receptors would indeed mire the mind with exasperating intricacy. Your eyes, your ears, your tingling skin all scan, and the mind processes for your discerning consciousness to pick its interest. Filling in areas of blunted awareness. Creating a cognizant narrative where none exists. Its job is to make the surroundings comprehensible to a person's primitive, ignorant, and limited grasp on... well everything. And it makes an admirable effort at interpreting the spatial layout of the improbable, the impractical, and seemingly impossible. Sifting for gold in the bedrock of utter garbage.

This is likely the reason I disavowed the increasing foot-room in the cave's lobby. Maybe my mind's eye saw little logic in the shuffling shambles circumventing peripheral sight. Due in no small part to tangible insanity, maybe a slippery grasp on reality helped discredit the postulations, throwing docketed input collected by gimped senses out of scrutiny's itinerary, tossed as easily as it was acceptable to hear sweet nothings whispered if I developed aching joints in exchange for hours at a time.

In any case, the moments spent crouched against that hardened doorstep were agonizingly good. Painfully pleasant.

Sure at some point I may indeed have tried to pry it open, to pick fruitlessly at the iron lock, but in hindsight I can identify key arguments combating the deflating reality of that action. With but some sharpened carpal bones from a neighbor I, too, could convince the tumblers to align, confirming both facts that no one lay beyond the heavy oak slab to keep me properly tethered and that I'd truly given up the chase after nimble reality.

No one wants to learn that.

Nor does a body scramble to embrace change, the preconception that things will be as they are from one day to the next, persisting much stronger than the will to overcome. So when the barrier crashes inward, spilling your malnourished form through the aversive shield you've constructed around insanity, one can't help but remain frozen as the hulking shadow that was your nemesis -damp with stab wounds- manages an icy claw around all hope of flight. One simply doesn't jump at the opportunity to live that illusion at all.

Considering the mental struggle and the faltering whimper of hesitation, it's embarrassing to have the slowness of my assailant contrast so little to my living reflexes. The wraith was on top of me in no record time, a gut-wrenching cough burbling to a cautionary shriek being my sole defensive reaction. It gave rise to a blood-curdling cry before long, the enclosed spaces of the cavern redundantly playing past events as I knocked about, trailing helplessly behind the persistent gait.

Torturous echoes gave the impression of simultaneous feline genocide on unprecedented scale, his rough handling pulling a fleshy sack of ankle bones in tow across the weathered pathway, likely leaving a trail of stamped blood speckles and finger scrapings. The dead need not light, but upon turning the corner we came across this macabre scene:

One stood at the fire, eyes void, a toothy gash splitting its hemispheres. Something had suffered some malodorous injury that ejected the hint of seared skin into the alcove, threatening to send me unconscious should sheer shock not do the trick. His compatriots were tall, boiled leather plates securing fatal wounds suffered in unknown battles, the traditional footmens' apparel keeping vital organs from spilling and safeguarding the parched, grey husk from peeling back on otherwise exposed arms.

Would it have mattered?

They were all dead. Those two. This one. The former beast dragged me towards a reunion, the slightest hint of a nibbled clavicle upon his back drawing uncharacteristic and untimely shame upon my features. I flushed red, seeking liberation, finding only mold slime exacerbating bandy legs. I slipped once more and shaved skin upon stone, the wrist my captor calmly clamped wrenching free to flounder for stability.

But the ghoul froze me with his white, unblinking eyes, backed me into a side wall which soon became flanked by a compatriot. Pain didn't even register beyond the uncanny warmth of an abrasion foretold to be suffused with infection.

Funny that I considered it at all.

Their moves remained surprisingly fluid, the disconcerting pop of shoulders flexing beyond range punctuating the clicks of deteriorating joints, the chatter of bare teeth mimicking human speech to the untrained observer.

Yet they needed no communication to work in unison, setting about cryptic tasks. The heat was excruciating in my proximity to the blaze, the faceless undead plying his tool with mechanical precision. I looked to my left, to the right, akimbo arms held aloft in framing a narrow angle of view, one of flames licking upward to emit a musty smog to which only my orbs seemed bothered.

I'd thought that tears had gone extinct but they returned with a vengeance, blearing my now-lit world with make-believe monstrosities better left to the imagination. Several rows of soldiers were stored to one corner -kneeling as I remember doing- but at uniform and disciplined attention, heads bowed, vertebrate erect. They didn't move as these brutes though they all shared the mark... that awful mark emblazoned upon heated iron that continued gyrating in the heart of the bonfire.

He (I assume it was a "he") quit twirling the poker, lifting the brand in smooth approach, head tilted menacingly, empty sockets staring at nothing and everything at once. But it wasn't enough to see the cracked outcrop of stone, nor sufficient to stop the subsequent fall from sending bones cascading loose from invisible ties, the abject soldier of the damned finally capitulating to the force that claims us all.

The brand-wielder hit hard with hollow resonance and glanced up, the fleshless jaw becoming dislodged in tandem to faint and waning lights dissolving the ornate burn upon its cranium. The former human died a second time, the natural order finally usurping some binding magic that possessed it.

But no sooner had my second flurry of flight failed before one of the motionless horde rose from the motionless pack, forehead blazing. His stride replaced the predecessor admirably as the white-hot metal thrust itself where its target once existed, to which I bobbed away.

I ducked, arms going slack, jerking dexterously below the threshold of balance, sending the castrated rapist tottering sideways with useless kicks to the groin before mindfully redirecting the blow towards the back of a locked knee.

Down we went, collapsing in a tangle of smelly limbs, the deathgrip from both captors never faltering, never lessening. I reeled, squirmed, twisted and writhed to no avail, the limitless might of Hells' arts gaining traction with each passing second, positioning the frightening trio above my sweating brow.

The unfeeling corpse, yellowing bloodshot eyes superseded by an ovular design of throbbing aqua above pressed downward, the luminous spiral guaranteeing unrecognizable agony.

It loomed first, close and surreal, then impressed unmitigated suffering upon my memory like a wad of dough, the fine filaments of scalp curling and burning as porous flesh evaporated away from its proximity. Frail hair and skin both submitted to its might.

I screamed.

I screamed when the full brunt overwhelmed those dams, breaching some watermark moments later, a great trembling unable to release muscles quivering for assistance as the sizzling sack of squirming *me* now boiled unintelligibly arcane patterns upon his brow. A great shuddering overtook our form as seared flesh became wisps of black smoke chasing after the cattle brand when it was lifted. As if the thing was part of me, a handle with which to steer my skull. Some tormented unicorn...

I black out. Three generations pass.

But I soon came too, unwillingly, consciousness thrust upon me at the behest of rough - almost serrated- palms grating powder across the charred misery that once furrowed in anger or crinkled at one of Gerd's unintentional jokes. These soulless thralls raked the ambushed tenderness with deliberate strokes, hitting every nerve ending, filling the minute crevices as children would stroke the last block of chalk across a textured wall until scuffing their knuckles raw. The children would paint some ridiculous camel outline and a smiling sun that no one in their right mind wished to see. Nor did these carvings wish to be seen.

My heart of hearts contended even surviving this process, knowing the ruination to be less welcome than even a rudimentary chalk scribble across some poor sod's living room. I dared not imagine the purpose of it all, dared not imagine beyond that moment.

You must break free!

And then the deadened twistings of Hells' imagination -of flesh and bone- at last satisfied

with their horrendously invasive alterations, released their strangling grip.

I scrambled backwards, knocking life, wisdom, and motor control from our tentative possession. I shackled reflexes, flailing for the presence of mind to conjure my next move, seeing but no opportunities arise. Caged as an animal, I took another spill. Scraped more skin from its seat, shackled as it existed prior around bare ankles. Child-like innocence would even prove more careful.

Had to fight. Had to win. Had to run. Had to hide....

But despite it all -my lame flailings- the eroding trio appeared disinterested, busying themselves with yet another round of brandings as the pick got chunked back to the devil flames, the former rapist -now deceased- unceremoniously heading for corridor's end, scattering spare bones that dare impede his trudging march.

Truth is a deceptive cunt, but I truly *was* free. Free to lick my wounds.

I whimpered, hands nervous to prod the melted skin held aloft by dangerously thin scraps and a biological jelly. Like unfeeling leather, smooth and crisp, adhering to a skull by impetuous willpower alone. Every bump and ridge existed as dead, swelling cliffs of pain, each detail overburdening with tenderness. I cringed, touched, cringed again. Damnation. Permanent damnation.

What had they done?

Fine beads of sweat trickled past a sweltering hairline, the simplicity of salt biting harder than a mule's kick. I blotted the other precipitous drips standing sentinel through gritted teeth -preparing for a slip- attempting to rise once more unabated.

In this effort a wobbly stance was managed, the tiniest of victories in recent memory but one deserving the greatest accolade. None were around to congratulate this perseverance, however, save vacant stares where humanity's fires once blazed. Was this real?

It is a startlingly miniscule ability to affect the world, circumstance, and surroundings that proves evident in crises of duress, when even consciousness rejects events beyond prior imagination and shrinks back to the shroud -the womb- of secure ambivalence. What gall to have the unthinkable strike so close to home?! Belief has always conquered our vulnerability after all. "The formerly impossible shall not victimize this vessel we command", states some voiceless rustling scattered to the seasons of change, time stomping it twice over in the march to concoct ever new conditions for randomized specificity. It frequently reveals that we know nothing before casting us -once more- as role of victim. Always "victim" and never "victor".

I couldn't do this. Couldn't do it on my own. We sought the inner voices. Sought a wisdom borne of suggestion greater than the limitations my own impulses conjectured. Coming from anyone -an outsider- mere utterances outmatched the confidence deficit to be mustered, my shallow backing of half-assed and reflexive ideas seeming as ignorant remarks made by children. No authority of my own in such matters nor a master of fates, the shaking urchin of emaciated resilience buckled and caved. Near death, he begged for

help. Near sobbing, he craved direction.

Words found him.

"Prssthak haaaalm", came the reply, low as if resounding off the damp recesses of hidden walls or dripping from stalactites stowed within the very bowels of this earth, unseen. Undiscovered. But he and I and we rightly feared its real source -the vacant halls- to which the demands emanated.

The pitifully fearsome thralls continued their work in branding the dead -my peers- with seals of contemptuous fate. Blue magic throbbled upon their brows, broadcasting no signs of resistance.

"Chu'lummm da ktorrrr."

We have a friend, Instinct groaned.

Hesitance pervaded the room, stilling my company. But even the foulest of winds were welcome in lieu of that musty thickness developing. They stirred, shifting awkwardly, craterous eye sockets swaying. And the atmosphere ejected these motions outward, pushing and pulling me as submerged cloth influenced by underwater disturbances. Beyond this realm, some monstrous mouth of rock howled its cry of anguished jubilation and I confirmed that things would, in truth, never be the same. Life is indeed connected: that tree with that bird with that bug with that flower with that sun with that abysmally monotonous tune hummed as the fat tone-deaf seamstress airs her laundry on a sweltering day after praying for rain.... but Instinct sensed a new bond -a kinship- with the decaying creatures begetting more decaying creatures beyond the borders of probability.

Brothers? Hardly. But there it was and our outcomes demonstrated to be intertwined.

"Bara oor klo nichhht. Prssssthak haaaalllm!"

Didn't know what it meant. How could a mortal? So the distance was bridged and darting eyes peeked at the row of kneeling undead warriors that I completed. Towards the far wall, near the pit, a gagging smoke lingered as whips surrounding the uniformly bowed heads whom paid it no mind. I didn't break tradition with their example: keeping still, shutting up, awaiting further orders from the overseer to this operation.

Operation? *Correct*. For when the dead are conscripted into a standing army, after all, dark deeds are painfully obvious to some; and to this thought I became unnerved. What pain was in store, personal and to others? To what ends could the deceased be turned upon their former compatriots? The trio had no answers, tending the blaze as they did. Bereft of willpower as they were. The metal poker sang against stone, sending vibrations. A lifeless form skid across moss-slickened surfaces, the former beast caring not what task his arms set about doing. A new corpse was forced into position. A new corpse received the seal, the dust, the release, and began walking, forehead freshly aglow.

He was me was he. Tentacles of awareness writhed below the surface, behind the walls, below the floor. We were enclosed, many feet of rock on all sides. Difficult to think

through the motivations, the reasons, for these purposes. Too distracted.... No limb or organ felt unscathed, no sanctity of mind and body remained unviolated, unmolested.

"Tula opsheeeinn!"

And then *His* words had to invade a skull crowded to maximum occupancy, the grey/pink wrinkles bloating as intestines pouring rotten into the desert's heat, flies buzzing their contentment at supping the stinking viscosity they'd shit their young into. Maggots would grow fat and happy on the surface.

But it was dank here. No sunlight could find me. No fresh air would fill me. No people would wave good morning. No sexual pleasures lay stowed between the death shrouds used as a makeshift tent. No savory meats, perspiring with flavor, smoked to carbonization, dripping sizzling sweat into the fires to which they roasted would reach this ravenous mouth skewered and hung to drain in this subterranean meat locker! I wouldn't see Moira again, couldn't reject Gerd's ale....

A shuddering sigh then bulged outward, a lump within breath's corridor, condemning the most basic of functions. Of which became a wheeze. Of which became a maddening gasp. Requiring all the directed patience of rearing seventeen children (assumedly), the focus at this imperative, the severity, distracted my pilot past the mundane passage of time. Sheer focus accelerated the experience and just before all was lost to the persecutors -the enemy- whatever it may be, a light went off. Before collapsing from the aggregate collision of pain, panic, stress, and hopelessness at being tethered to an undulating cemetery of hollow faces, a glow dimmed outward and inward, releasing me from its will fore he no longer looked this way.

Breath came easier, mobility returned. A reprieve from temporary seizure borrowed a moment's respite before I broke free from my rank in the column of promised war yet to arrive.

Let's find this army's captain.

Chapter 11: Consciousness

We took to the darkness like we stole each day from the jaws of defeat: quiet and alone. Where light dare not pass judgment, even shadows disavowed awareness of kinship or relation, their stark absence only reeling the mind as to how both laps and friends disappeared without a moment's notice. The skeptic might even gather trouble believing the manipulation, the concept that certain things existed at all...

"Thorr shud", I imagined some throaty whisper calling unseen beyond the grave . A disembodied voice directing corpses, directing *me* in a language not of common comprehension.

Exactly his point.

"Pipe down!", some hideously stupid man hissed in carelessness, denoting his position among the limestone passages. He soon slapped an invisible hand across their collective word-hole in the gloom. To this, I felt Malak smile. He gleaned pleasure from the danger, I knew. Delighted at my systematically thorough destruction, pained and deserved. Only with Din's death would his own disavowed murder be avenged, after all, and no better way to implement this end than by pressuring. Pushing. Contorting reality by lingering as but a figment, created of guilt. Created of spite. Created from reasons abhorrent to healthy people.

The assassin's eyes materialized from black fog, given substance by the isolated pitch, the power of dark thoughts fueled by disturbed deeds. 'Murdered', those eyes asserted into mine, pupils dilating.

Righteous murder. Instinct corrected, donning ignoble pride despite it ill-suiting everyone, anyone. He only mimicked the antithesis of evil for my sake, I knew, being the driver of such cruelties for survival given his druthers. He'd done worse, said worse.

Wordless, Malak's essence took on a shade of hypocritical skepticism. It breached a slanted smile of malice, corruption, a wicked and chilling retort.

"No murder at all!", I screamed at and within my own skull, making damn certain the bickering ceased in the wake of such explosiveness that left our ears ringing from the exertion, echoes mute in their finality, the obstructions of a cluttered mind erasing, dissipating. Features flushed, warm drips flecked my skin... reminiscent of carina fruits ripening on the branch, luscious and plump and delicious.

"Gods, my stomach might have its own advocate before salvation arrived"... I thought drearily.

If not murder, then pre-emptive self defense. Instinct baited from his smug seat, stepping aside at my request but at his own unhurried pace and speed. At this, he retreats to some hollow place I know not where.

In lasting response, Malak's ghastly image then droned without sound, deriving humor at semantics before eventually fading of his own will and prerogative, mocking what power

I claimed. He's such a dick, that one.

Assert the control. Gain dominance. Retain composure. Force compliance. These were my own advices to the dwindling essence I played diplomat to, on behalf of, in lieu of.

The smoothness of stones -twisting pathways worn lithe- accompanied interjected sources of green neon, a welcome familiarity.

"Someone had the same idea", Din commented casually at the glowing shrooms spaced too far apart to lead the departure from the corpses in their animation room. These beacons, too, vanished through distance though, the subtle shades of shade enveloping all until a body was too far gone to realize what was upon them. Redigested by the glut of the omnipresent black orifice.

Make reality. Forge the future. Influence your world for no one else speaks for you...

Entombed once more in death's halls, we had but no light to speak of. Having retreated the hellish flames of the infernal trio, we groped tentatively on roughly chiseled boulders double-backing many times over. Twice I caught my trail overlapping, the uneven footing I tread indicating direction moreso than jagged crevices I caressed with nimble, blistered fingers in the discovery. But because of elevation shifts and quick corners, a twisting maze of macabre design evolved from just a single corridor bunched upon itself as fallen ribbon, a feat to untangle through mental mapping.

Assumptions abound as to its destination, my softened grunts belying the trials of blind navigation, necessitating concentration. Still, prevailing thought implied some mastermind suspended on a throne, barking orders, ruling his perversions of nature with an iron fist and harder goals.

To be honest my battering at the hands of Fate and Gods, alike, remained unphased at the recent horrors, their crumbling details forcing fetid air from chests not breathing, but compressing in their degenerative musculature contractions. *That* I was at peace with: undead mounds sighing in a simulacrum of life function.

I *had* witnessed my reanimated beggar-urchin-adopted-son turn to dust, mind you.

No, it was the infected soul sealed within a web of his own spinning of which I feared. Surrounded by underlings and drunk from power the monster would lurk, glassy eyes piercing men's lies, hearts, and the fog he generated simultaneously. Shimmering obsidian blade in hand, he surely awaited the decapitation of his foes, biding infinite time to exact his vengeance upon the hapless -and defenseless- chaos that dwell within the closest civilization. A dastardly figure. Bigger than life. The embodiment of primal terror.

"And I'll find this Conjurer of Devils there", a voice entreats, eyes gravitating towards the distinct image of light flickering past hewn wooden slats bound to solid posts. The edges had cracked when dry boards met humidity, narrow gaps affording the luminescence spilling across my face in pressing close, a manic wide-eyed glare peering inwards, a column of warmth dancing light-hearted twirls among my branded features.

The paling wretchedness of some cave creature overly-adept to conflict felt pangs unidentifiable. He was as a new animal not wanting to admit the security -the natural state of rest- at the solitude found in darkness, so close as he was to the cusp of concealment (or the lack thereof). The room now promised a de-robing of sorts, revelations. What had he become? What would he find?

Once a City lurker, Din knew the advantages of not being seen, plying the dusks' shadows as yet another tool at his whim like a blade, like a coin. He'd -I'd- exchanged tools of survival, embracing what I must, rejecting what I must, but darkness was just that: a tool, never intended as a home. Nor a refuge. It wasn't a friend, only a loan shark reaping debtors under familiar guise. Darkness produces nothing, only consumes, only destroys. Only obliterates the outlands neglected by the waning fringes of life flitting the plateau of its borders. No energy is used to draw shadows, to occlude the fruits of others' toils, to blind it all and bleed it all having been abandoned in some shallow grave of inattention, forgotten to time and invisible to groundskeepers, caregivers. Darkness was rot, and rot is what everything must become.

I wasn't filled with darkness upon being cast aside. But circumstances change.

And as I stood at that ramshackled door, leering at what little accoutrements proved fashionable from a handful of mercantile oxcarts raided to adorn some squat nook of isolation, I possessed more than just aversion to what was in store. It wasn't the disheveled desk, parchment overflowing the confines of inkwells and jars, symbology scrawled upon their every page. It wasn't the litling shelf crammed to the brim with archaic tomes -most without bindings- or the scant stacks of journals becoming furniture, themselves providing surface to drape modest brown rags. I saw cheap bowls of animal bones, fruit cores, a meager attempt at gardening beneath several lanterns abandoned in that far corner, a spade lying useless at the previous failure. Nor was it the defecation pit dug shallow, the sole bits of vegetative [possibly edible] mushrooms sprouting unintentionally, laughingly at man's lameness. It was none of these things that gave me pause, barred me, broke down my resilience to this... scenario, this test.

Somewhere beyond the wooden portal erected of felled desert spruce resided another living person confined to his four walls. Hugging his light, a similar soul of similar life. He drew breath as I did, as the abominations didn't. This person lying in that pallet bed, covers drawn atop a bristled gray beard, looked forlorn, beaten. Like me, like we. Wrinkles threatened to tear the ink apart, etched as he was upon every conceivable square of exposed human, his pallid dome reading as crags, sun-splotched crinkles in an empty burlap sack.

"Why have you done this to me?", I question coolly, Malak's jeweled dagger digging new topography above his adam's apple.

He's surprised. We all are.

And yet I press the blade further, a rivulet leaking lazily past a tangle of throat hair.

"Maybe I'll take your fingers", Malak's words leak forth, "Maybe scar your forehead. Maybe I'll kill those you love and feed your battered body to those beasts out there.

ANSWER ME!"

A croak, a whisper. "Hortaaall cayanaaa", came from within. "Who are you?", is spoken from without, the parched lips of father time tripping up the steady burble fighting to speak past the seemingly foreign detriments of a tongue, teeth, that sliver of metal so obstinately drawing blood. "Who disturbs Eckram?"

He existed as a dream, half-in this world, staring elsewhere. Directed his sudden fear elsewhere. Eyes hollow, the man inquired my reality having such little grasp of this plane, suddenly focusing, suddenly aware of the danger... my danger.

"Should your monsters show up in that doorway", I nodded across the room at my entrance, "I'll twist your head right off." I hocked a sizzling spat into the campfire burning near.

The conjurer didn't outwardly respond. Instead, our foreheads glowed a sickly blue in tandem -in understanding; a link established, my thoughts' container rapidly and suddenly feeling invaded, molested, like an unwelcome fondle by strangers. I recoiled in ambushed disgust, slipping the knife, bleeding that pig more than intended but less than deserved.

I stumbled back, tripping over some loose reading material adorned with plans: anatomy, conduits, glyphs... magic stuff. And in this he takes the opportunity to rise, forlorn but tall, diminutive only to one riposting off the floor in that low-ceilinged space.

Your back is at the door, Instinct murmured, already bored of the spectacle.

We then toppled some light furniture towards it and offered the dagger's point at the stiff, straightly-aligned stance of the conjurer, damming the flow of red with his own withered claw. It reminded me of owls the way he was poised, sheets draping his nakedness, head on a swivel. His gaze followed the outthrust blade as it circumnavigated his position to place all hazards within the field of view.

They are coming.

"I know this!"

We heard the wheezing, the shuffling, scuffling echoes emanating close and getting closer. Their din of sighs was insanity, nightmare's cacophony breaching sleep's corridor, having broken the boundaries of whatever world spawned and supported them prior.

"How do you control them?!", I screech, making progress in wresting mind back from the interloper, erecting barriers hastily. His will was evident: wanted my expulsion from this existence, to assimilate my being, small though it was.

His eyes were accusing, lips never moving. "She didn't send you?"

"Who?!", I exasperate in earnest, still aloud. Talking to myself, by myself, in a room amplifying only the panicked shrillness and the fire's crackle (which no longer played repository for my spitting disdain). Since the tables were shifted the mood had changed. And we thought we had had him...

Stab while there's stabbing to be had!

I lunged to end and begin the nightmare, to unleash the killer I once believed to be contained, the facet I desperately sought to control save for this penultimate moment. But Malak forsook the summons, and although his blade struck the floor as momentum sent this body gliding after it in a clumsy avalanche, it's not without effort that I succumbed to splitting pain shredding the inner gray matter which normally conducted assemblies of reason. I writhed on the ground as the grub I felt to be. I clutched my skull in horror, witnessing the smiling image of death's skinless grin multiplied in condescension, weapons at the ready.

I screamed, I kicked, thrashing that small space to no avail. They were upon us, knobby bones grinding a fine dust between joints barely holding corporeal cohesion, a hollow creaking of bone-on-bone somehow aching my gums to complement the icy tendrils of an invaders touch.

At that moment, I wanted nothing more than to detach my head, quell the pain.

A skeletal warrior adjusted his leather helm, fighting the decomposition composed within. Another jittered nervously, a jarring mechanical shuddering to accompany my interrogator's croak, whom took that moment to readjust his stance, the paper-thin pallor of subterranean living contrasting gushes of red spotting his tunic's open front.

"A cut like that might fell a geezer within moments...", I offer, snickering at our mutual destruction. Maybe the Gods *were* listening.

"Immortality attained too late", he replies, clotting my spirited jabs in pulling his staunch away to reveal the grievous slice I'd inadvertently inflicted. But... nothing. Thought he'd collapse, keel over from the crimson staining his clothes, that which dyed the grotesque nudity on display. We all believed the outwardly ancient man to fall there, die where he stood. But he rebelliously stands in his sagging flesh, naked save the desaturated tufts of cotton cresting his pastiness and contrasting the muddy markings tracing the contours of both nerves and limb. Some ornamental, others functional, all rippling blue pulses. He's stronger than ever, no trace of gash, not a cut within the elderly scruff encircling a wildly fragile neck.

Should have broken it given the element of surprise, some darkness remarks sourly. The conjurer then points at me, demanding answers to disguise the hint of pleading that crept the peripherals of the imperative. Truly, I just wished he'd cover his shame, his spectacle.

"Is she.... coming? What of her return?"

I know nothing of this, nor ways to use it. Failing diplomacy, I emphasized a frown and shrug. "I assume you got a feather stowed in your folds?"

"Should be here", he fidgets. They *all* fidget: the thralls. The decaying skeletons given unholy life. More chattering of joints, gnashing teeth. Long, curved scimitars reflecting the fire, reflecting my terror: eyes widened in demonstration of faces Malak never wore.

Reflexively, subconsciously, the old man raises his mental ventriloquism to escape the clamor he himself escalated. "You KNOW!", he hurls this accusation, forcefully bludgeoning me with the meaning behind it; and we hear it with both ears and mind.

Curled cringingly on the floor, I'm defenseless. "But I said nothing", I plea.

He's here with us.

Accessing thoughts.

Perusing memories.

Memories of home, of sweets, and food, and love.

Memories of pain, of happenstance, of paths crossed many times.

Taking queue to Instinct's hints: "She's the one", I whispered elsewhere, allowing cascades of recognition to fall into congruous spaces. "She's your lover, your mate."

Eckram misses her as you miss Moira.

"Captured?!", the aged wretch exclaims. "Oh no. Oh no. Oh nooo" The conjurer then faltered, tucking decrepit chin to sunken chest, sending a contaminating wave of clatters as the corpses echoed their discontent, rattling fearsomely as maracas in their boiled leather. "How could this have h-happened? We were so careful!"

Hate to see grown men cry: tears flowing freely in cascades of their own. Watery, shimmering pools of blind rage. Rage directed at me. Rage best flowing elsewhere.

"The temptress-"

"Charlotte!", he snapped the sentence in twain.

"Charlotte... was a fine woman", I console the blubbing wreck. "But she crossed the wrong people. Angered this robed group priding themselves on hidden control... Bunch of lunatics."

"I know of the ORDER!", our beloved conjurer quipped, some terse nerve lying shallow and exposed... evidently. "Maligned blasphemers, all of them!", he yells mutedly, the temporary advantage of emotional softness fading fast.

Don't speak of them. Instinct urged needlessly. Distance yourself.

No kidding.

"Who are you conversing with?", he suddenly scrutinizes, a sidelong glare propelling him forward through the throng of deadly marionettes.

"Nobody. Not even my inner demons."

"Is it THEM?", the specter of doom inquired, implied. "Are you here to steal the secrets of the holy comet? The spectacular binding it offers?!" His personal choir of minions

moaned unnerving, a snaking mass of willing warriors extending the hallway submerged in its depths, unseen.

"There's the megalomaniac I assumed you to be", I thought.

"Nothing megalomaniacal about defense." He grinned, self assured. "Ours is a noble fight, you understand, one my woman had no part in instigating. But your masters are a vicious lot, not to be trusted. She took what she needed, what our cause needed... I've played my part, is all."

He breathed deep, eyes rolling to glimpse his own brain, gapped teeth parting in expectation. "I see deep connections, them and you."

My turn at indignant assertion: "I'm NOT with the Order"

"But you are. You share a history, LONG history. It's written all over your thoughts..."

"Incorrect."

"The bald one's there, the shifty one. His eyes are through tattooed cats, you know. Books of knowledge, the lightning bearers. Fire, accusations, blame, conspiracy. And..."

He tripped on the thought, yellowing scleras blinking visions aside, throat overcome with the phantom wound already healed. Choking on truths. An inability to swallow them.

"Oh, you like that?", we chuckled nonchalantly.

"She did nothing of the sort."

"We did", I express, looping the image of pressed lips, an aristocratic manse burning about our ears. "Pretty passionate stuff, really. Didn't end there, take my word..."

"No! Make it stop!" He jerked back to the tangible plane, shunting all connection with the languid thief sitting cross-legged, warming himself at Eckram's fire. But the conjurer couldn't shunt my words in this realm so easily, the ones then elevating with the trembling throng of restless undead hordes, their tentative tethers testing their bonds. Randomly, some forehead glyphs blazed fierce, burnt out, and hit the floor with great impact, collapsing into a heap of unsupported ligaments and rotting meat as if suspension ropes became cut.

"Your Charlotte doesn't want some old fart like you!", I tormented aggressively, "But you can see that clearly now, can't you?" I innocently twirled a path in the stone, feigning distraction.

"The thralls made me age, t'was the incomplete markings!", he shrilled, overcome with grief. "Couldn't decipher until... Immortally old! She understands this, surely! Nothing went as planned."

"Maybe she does, or did...", I admit, taking on a goading sympathy, "but no matter. You can't rekindle that innocence, that passion. Infidelity, imprisonment... downhill paths, no

way to retrieve her now -wherever she is- and poor old, *old* Ecks just has these decaying toys to play with for all eternity. Forever waiting. Forever miserable. Locked in his keep - unbeknownst to the world- he'll sit motionless with his flaccid manhood robbed so soon, sitting a corner for sustainable mushrooms, terrifying the passing merchants. And for whom, exactly? Himself? The ex-lover?"

Keep going. Instinct urged.

"Maybe this decrepit old man descends into madness?", I directed pitifully. "Maybe he'll construct some pathetic simulacrum of a family out of these... things, talking to them, supping mushroom stew 'round a roughshod table, rat droppings streaking the cold granite they sit. Imagine that", I sighed, "the once-powerful Eckram devolving into that crazy hermit the world comes to shun... fearful of his destiny: the Order breaking down his door to find him disrespectfully plunging the orifice of some lifeless girl, freshly dumped."

Sheepishly the man clenched, diverting eye contact, shuffling uncomfortably in place.

Finish it.

I stared him down, heavy-lidded. "Oh, my. Eckram. Ecks." Scornful, dramatic disdain. I tsked the perversions, secretly applauding intuition. "You haven't... lay... with one of these abominations, *have you?*"

Silence presented us the answer we sought: the shrinking presence of this would-be captain of the eternal masses, of the tormented forms caught in some cobbled purgatory, a lifeless limbo barring the damned from their final resting place.

"It's all downhill from here, I'm afraid", Din announced, wrapping up the soliloquy by brushing the moisture from his palms. "Why, the whole thing's just too embarrassing, too sad: you clinging to this wretchedness, awaiting certain retribution. Drives one to darker things... thoughts of self elimination even."

Suicide.

A thrall pivoted his direction, sword raised, spurred onward by the subliminal command of the conjurer's lowered head, needing no arcane words discerned from crumbling memories scrawled upon papyrus to carry out his master's true will floating unshaped between their linked receptors. The room held its breath (though the feat, itself, remained unremarkable given the occupants).

Here it comes. Instinct cautioned, gripping reflexes tight with measured control.

'Yes, your demise', Malak helpfully cackled from the side.

But the conjurer simply chortled to himself, demonstrating a benignly unaffected morale, at least at simple ruses. "Clever of you to bend my will as such...", he growled, the rumble starting low. "Bra'cathra ra deus."

The thrall pivoted again, his scimitar following suit. Aimed at me.

"You see...", Eckram denounced my attempts, flush with facial ticks, condescending as if removing a toy from this toddler's grasp. "The ancient language is much more effective than suggestion. It's an admittedly subtle art that requires the Bond. It requires a focused willpower, AND words to get things done." He laughed aloud. "And I've studied the stolen scrolls for nigh on five cycles."

Clapping his hands, the man dissolved into the thick of it, replaced by a small army breaching the room's portal in surrounding him defensively, a storm of swords and gear and pain whirling about their commander whom they swore no fealty, but needed not the formality. Their fellowship, instead, demanded only a petty binding conjured by magical dust after all.

"Chau ka th'saa!", he uttered mentally, catapulting the lumbering executioners from a state of torpor to one desperate for blood. Just needing a direction.

"CHAU KA TH'SAA!", I belted back with intent and purpose, will made apparent through the bond we all shared.

Focused entirely on the eye of their jagged hurricane, the tides of onslaught responded quicker than I'd even hoped, close as he was. It seems the degenerated processes of youth caged within wisdom-less age succumbed slower to the silent ambush of twenty separate blades puncturing his midsection from every angle -slower than counters could be uttered. Whether necessitating collapsed lungs or no, the life force converted into a curdling, bubbling scream tandem to vitals spilling loose from their moorings.

To me -prone on that dusty bedrock- I saw little but a wall of metal shards stitched with bands as a sluice opened up between them, chest height, a light sprinkling of drooling juices raining forth.

And when some overachiever sent Eckram's head -recently decapitated- spinning through the air like some pirouetting dancer I recoiled, horrified, the thing landing teeth first into a bony lap violated by both action and the dribbling from which the necromancer's gaping maw competed with draining neck.

And then Eckram screamed from within, an unsuspecting thread woven amidst my mortal fiber turning suddenly traitorous. It emanated outwards, encircled by defenses of sacred and protective ego. A place I couldn't pierce. His anguish rang as a bell, inarticulate but overwhelming, a clapper against the hollow housing my sphere of bone provided. It ricocheted the inner walls to which I had no hands to grasp, to hold; no appendages would reach the maddening wail, reflexively shielding ears instead.

Eckram's howling superseded victory hard-won, survival well-earned, startling beyond reason, interrupting even the ecstatic throes brandished upon seeing the blood. All truncated by that dead weight falling from the sky.

And somehow I didn't faint, skittering backwards in sheer surprise, brushing the infernal spark of embers upchucked in a plume that voraciously consumed its offering, a demonic hissing erupting forth from air pockets superheated to critical mass.

Flesh sloughed piecemeal from its underlying tissue, rolling indiscriminately in flimsy, crackling sheets, clouds of dwindling hair having ignited trails of infernal glow-worms. The former head of Eckram -the former conjurer of demons- became engulfed by hungry flames, designs of foreign origin upon his brow which, too, soon faded. Succumbing to immolation, his intrinsic testament to living -a pulse countering the opposing material about him- lessened to that of an echo, merely haunting the narrow hallways to which they previously occupied. His former shelters. His previous dwellings. Barely even there...

I looked upon the perimeter of rancor's shadow feeding the dark gods, the brilliance of consumption drawing blackening shades from even whitish bone, limning the essence - the building blocks- of man's creation with corruption. Was the darkness in us, waiting to be released? That black stuff of black dreams, conjured, whipped into frenzy only to propagate itself as any other instinct-directed animal should?

Not even the stinging smoke forced a blink, the eyes reddening, puffy in their focus. I held it all at bay, vigilante that the remaining shreds might dissipate into the aether, their residue coating more than just the memories of that infiltration. My violation.

But death's visage lingers like his finality. The essence of a thing's absence merely representation at the possibility of its return, testifying against the actual vacancy of the premises. The way you gaze, inwardly visualizing some comforting outline upon the horizon or even across the room -distracted by expectation- its that warm smile or familiarity rendered that projects upon the walking realm. And its in writing off this projection that the world becomes so cruel. We glance up -diverted from the mind's overbearing presence- somehow shaken at the disjointed realities simultaneously created and subjected to in the experience.... A house burned, no longer standing, which we'd been accustomed to seeing. It's not really there. A life force dwelling beyond the scope of vision, never permissibly actualized but adapting our adaptation regardless. It's not really there! But it exists to us, alone. Alters how we think, who we are.

Enough to drive one mad. It's enough to drive some skull screaming 'til its obliteration - charred by anger- at the behest of things much larger than ourselves while seeming both small and very, very petty. It's the sort that generates surprise when thoughts don't take shape but baits one's efforts with tangible scraps, tantamount to clues of our occupancy in this place of myth and fantasy, juxtaposed with that of the imagined realm we visit in midnight's timely succour, having eaten our fill. Drifting between worlds indiscriminately, scrabbling for our sea legs between them both.

The inertia of the mind has tendencies: motion or rest, the momentum leading to simultaneously frightening or timid places. And this is why turning inward to find, not an agreeing chorus echoing initial sentiment, but rampant discord is so disconcerting. The walls of the real and the imagined become dissolved. The boundaries of will and thought melt, resulting in the disquieted entities begging distraction, base needs and desires unfulfilled despite insistence at their inexistence, at their inexperience, at their subjugation. It all flies forward as an affront to possibility, invoking trepidation at the beseechment of mirages.

Disgusted, dissatisfied, I glared at the horde, framed as I was in the hellfire Ecks stoked.

And they glared back -standing at the ready with weapons drawn- fidgeting as the ripples of subconscious command faded in and out of strength as it collectively transferred between us all. Deep shadows permeated where smooth flesh was expected. A column of angst amplified the other realm's passing fancies as the masses disappeared down inky hallways of the imagination, an extenuation of experience assuring that, yes, it existed beyond sight. This was unexpected. I also felt their yearning to actualize my deepest wishes as my hosted energies were sipped, a sustaining bond for the false and duplicated frameworks hanging about differing coordinates of that theater we all traverse. Everything was so Gods-damned unexpected.

It wasn't fair. And it wasn't enough. Not what I wanted, at all.

"Return home to us", one of them says, stepping forward upon striated nubs protruding exposed from beneath their skin sheaths, the nails worn and broken. This one was cautious, demure, hands cupped to the creature's armored breast, a pleading tone complementing the softest of postures, contradicting the disturbed visuals of graphic horror. Its bloody sword clanged heavily to the ground, nearly removing more toes had some not been missing, desiccated, or shriveled within the confines of graying slabs only vaguely resembling feet. "We miss you."

The outer corruption contrasted heavily with the inner sincerity it spoke from, admonishing blind trust while indeed welcoming it.

"But I can't, Moira", I projected downwards, away from the monstrosity I'd conjured through indirect subconsciousness, alone. Arm propped by a single knee, we were suddenly choked by the twisted occurrences harbored by infinite combinations of fate's wheels forever spinning, aligning, spinning again.

Only then did puffy eyes release their reservoirs, swollen as they were from the hellish fumes I'd ingested. They gushed an attempt to wash away the offending visions of the future, to dissolve the very role we had sworn to play, locked as we were in a struggle of natural balance or success, whichever came first.

The ghoul then places a sympathetic hand upon my shoulder, revealing even a modicum of comfort to be found in that withered gesture. This, too, was unexpected. But welcome.

"It isn't enough", Din thought, "but it'll have to do."

Epilogue

Gerd peeled his heavy girth from the ground slickened by distilled spirits.

"... damnedsss fermenter. What wastin'... again", he grumbled to nobody in particular.

He shifted uncomfortably, barely cognizant of the lateral ridges imprinted on his skin by the tavern floorboards -even the areas covered by a crusted hug of canvas restricting his midsection. In tugging the material further down he strained, straightened, slumped, and tested a muscled arm nestled askew in its rotator cuff, restoring flexibility and dormant strength after a confounded period of rest.

"Rough nap", he spoke aloud, caring little for other presences to which he might be unaware.

The barkeep was unaware of a lot of things, actually, but relished the quiet moments when it had yet to be confirmed that smaller, lighter figures with quicker eyes and un-slurred tongues intruded upon his personal space, requesting an exchange of one type or another. Whether it beer or words, he hated all the same. Hated their insistence on drinking his stock, the flies' demands of conversation. Begging verbal responses and sips at his underappreciated homebrew, both of which he'd rather keep all to his lonesome.

Interaction. Customers, blugh. He spat. Shame the second got essential after the attic rats' disappearance, after the gold ceased flowing from sources unknown. He knew actual mice of sterner stuff! But he'd soon been forced to revisit skills of civil trade and ownership, make "nicey-nice" with detestable rodents waltzing through the main door instead of playing bouncer and false front for the ones clamoring out back. Posing pretty (and pretty drunk) 'stead of pawning spare ales and lower-quality poison.

Gerd's eyes were heavy, bleary, imparting but a fraction of the world's brightness and discernible secrets through the veil of drooping curtains. But that's the way he'd wanted it, even designed it with his refuge scratched upon the fringe of those others: the city-dwellers, the darkness. He'd evade them each if the ex-tribesman had his way, nestled in the cradle between worlds. Outcomes be damned!

Settlements offered safety, damnable safety beyond the freedom he berated himself for relinquishing. The proportions were all wrong here: everything so small, frail... Women weren't thick and hearty. Steaks were dead, dried, and lean. A beast of restraint (if only they knew!), the modestly-gifted barkeep possessed awareness none would ever seek. Not now.

They all seemed pleased, away from the terrain, away from the hunt. Away from the nomadic treks traversing all manner of borders, of man and beast, natural and non. A coward's refuge from unfathomable slaughter was where he found himself awakening - the same dreary surroundings. Enough to hollow a man from the inside, some baleful thing. Unable to battle opposing clans. Unlikely to ravage plunder and pantries he stood, humbled. Hesitant. Terribly alone in the crowd. All gone, all gone.

And not heeding even a rudimentary scan of the bar's innards, the brusque man set about

beneath the counter, replacing a hose to its place, fitting it sound and snug to the bottle once more receiving the steady brown dribble. Immediately satisfied, Gerd harrumphed approval and licked a thumb previously dipped in a pool collecting about his enormous boots previously adapted to the rocky northern hills.

It was known that the man's taste had faded alongside sight, but his sample might have been drainage from that pot of yellow stowed haphazardly near the product for all he knew. Still, Gerd elicited a wicked grin at the tantalizing hope of a hops-induced coma.

"Excuse me", a too-small voice squeaked, barely breaching the barley dreams of a man beleaguered in belligerence. The larger man was interrupted in reaching for the massive halberd straddling the room, once a cleaver of body and soul, his self. But no more.

Gerd polished away, pivoting -almost unaware- in Hari's direction. You see, he'd spent enough hours bridging either world of Repercussions or the hapless musings of Daydream to lend credence to anything his own extremities indicated, so much so that it became second nature to ignore anything out of the ordinary. "Ordinary" including: a cup in both hands and the faint tingling of a bladder overfull.

Hari dried his palms nervously while the red bear mulled a fine globule of snot in a gravelly throat, eventually piercing the fog in recognizing one of his attic's "scritchier rats". Gerd did hate timidity and regretted recent ruminations about the infestation, however entertaining it had been on scant occasions. T'was all a nuisance, it was deemed.

"Ay?", the host asked parasite, weapon whispering promises within its gleaming edges. It reflected dodgy eyes back to their source. Ever-ready for when "they" reappeared.

"Y-you're being summoned to the palace..."

"I kneel to no land-king", came the gruff retort, inwardly laughable at the ridiculous presumption. His were different ways, different lands, different rulers.

But Hari proved an effective negotiator still, somehow successful in compelling the upright series of lumps to extricate himself from the entombing confines of a tavern mired and creaky with both memories and age. Clinging fast to the nine-foot polearm, Gerd felt slight ease in the abysmal darkness, glad he'd finally discovered some method to pass bulk and the thing through an admittedly disheveled doorframe. (Lengthwise was key.)

Darkness stalked him from the alleyways. The night hung oppressive in that wide expanse called "sky" to which he used to roam and take comfort, mirroring the boundless crags of green hills unfettered by civilization. But now... no amount of widening eyes provided detail, no hunching in his stride summoned the security he felt in retreating back-first against his stinking, wooden construct placed within society's confines. A hole in which to barricade, a bar in which to hole up for awhile.

Once a proud warrior -a hero to his decimated clan even- the might and imposing image of man's barbaric nature was reduced to this shambling, scuttling creature in the absence

of light.

And to that he felt shame.

Had the red bear known this journey would take place a decade hence at such late an hour, he'd have considered setting up shop within spitting distance of the prince's doorstep, the very heart of the City's network of desolate streets... ramifications be damned!

"No, no wouldn't do...", he chided inwardly, suddenly subject to the hundreds of souls he waded through. Not like in daylight -when enveloping gawkers spared comfortable berths at his flanks- unseen night citizens peered from dilapidated homes, from their hovels, from their holes recessed in the tiered mosaic of brown buildings and weathered stone streets. Inundated with stares, the barbarian was unnerved, unhinged, fighting the drought of intoxication with each step, hammering his unwelcome further through the shields he'd erected to keep nerves stable.

He supposed that was the toll for masses clinging together out of fear: inner predators, the ambitious, problematic amplification of small concerns like sanitation, food, sex, and coin. Cities ejected the uninitiated, excised the unwary, assimilated their material in one consuming practice or another had their uncannily large bones not been spit out, a pittance for the wilderness' wolves to fight over.

Ye Gods, Gerd's mewling sounded like that pontificating brat he'd once known.

"A proper tribe of distinction has little need for such things", he grunted dismissively aloof. He remained unaffected by politics, economi-whatcha-callzits. He ate, slept, and shat in relative peace and that was what counted. Or so he believed.

Still... more self-made mercs roamed these territories. Less protection. More risk. He noticed little resistance in picking absently past the perimeter gates pried from their fasteners, though, once bristling to defend the threshold of authority. The seasons had not been kind, indeed. Rumors had not been kind, indeed.

A beacon for the distressed and hopeless, our barkeep spent great efforts to stymie the offending information from ever even reaching his ears, galvanizing his brain's wrinkles as it were. Gerd wasn't a wise man -didn't have to be- but even he knew of the cadre's infiltration, how the compound wouldn't be a derelict spectacle abandoned by time.

How much time? He didn't know. Didn't need to know.

The halberd stabbed forward all the same, held so not even the wicked curves of the heavy axehead broke his stance: inching one plodding step past the next.

The doors were ajar, torchlight spilling forth. Not as much as Gerd preferred given his druthers but just enough to alleviate nagging inclinations at refuge and booze. Well, not *all* the inclinations... Anyways, the lumbering efforts to complete the night's assignment would eventually yield a warm spot on the floor, cuddling his favorite bottle of spirits reserved for singularly stressful occasions. Just had to walk that length of hallway, thrust

his stolen torch at the encroaching shadows, stampede that last stretch of carpet at the provocation of disconcerting noises all around.

He burst into the throne room with a start, spooked by ghosts, ghouls, and whatever darkness sufficiently haunts a barbarian to take residence among the lesser cultures, those with terrestrial tethers and affinities for both commerce and leadership without strength.

The adult prince -forever a shrinking violet- bolted at the intrusion, scrambling for a posture which wouldn't betray the very action. Perched on that chair, on that platform, blockaded by a column of guards, Mathias seemed less at ease than even Gerd's first introduction to the chamber -the supposed seat of humanity's rule, the focus to which all peoples were meant to bend in reverence.

Awkward silence. Twitching. Throat clears and the rattle of iron plates, the clinking of chainmail. Spears limned with orange flecks of flame held aloft and unwavering on either side. Two lines of five soldiers, each with complete defensive shielding, glinting in the sheen of backlighting fire casting the only detectable motion: pitched shadows dancing at the spectacle's request.

The man was in awe. Mathias had doubts. But a third figure -face bandaged, crate in hand- emerged from behind the throne, feet measured in a gait denoting confidence and indeterminable resolve.

"Where's Moira Ashanti?", the small frame queried, puncturing Gerd's veil of disbelief. It'd been long since he'd heard that voice, muffled though it was.

"Ain't seen her", he admitted, stunned. "Ain't seen you", Gerd prodded.

The throne room was choked, claustrophobic in the ways our barkeep didn't appreciate, walls too thick. Air too heavy, and the like. Almost made a body yearn for the freedoms of a limitless sky, traverse a land where walls rarely occurred.

"Damnation", Din banished the word, pacing. He soon took place beside the figurative ruler clothed in trepidation. Both seemed agitated, concerned for opposing reasons. They exchanged several degrees of glances, a divided peace eventually settling the matter. "Maybe for the best", it was decided.

Ignored. Shunned. Forgotten.

"Where've you been?!", the third wheel interrupted, feeling suddenly and sullenly obtuse. This attracted the very room's interest, all heads whirling in tandem. Gerd became an exhibit on display, some great silencer of worlds, a power he knew not previously wielded. "Ye run off, disappear... Thought you dead y' little fuck!" He thrust the halberd forward with a single hand, emphasizing the accusation with spittle -metal brazier dropping from Gerd's grasp. Tapestries clattered against layered stone in taking a moment to absorb the ringing of this unwelcome cacophony.

Time paused. Breathing resumed.

"Was the death of Din the Mortal", the thief corrects, always smug. Damnably smug.

"Now reborn."

"Drop that sacrilege", the barbarian spoke in earnest, eyes leveled.

"Can't", clipped the retort. "I'm destined as savior to this people, intended for greater things. I've SEEN IT!"

A breath. A beat.

"This oasis of humanity *must* be shown a better way: a sustaining land of peace and comfort, free from oligarchs and secret organizations. Free from want and desire. Free from the bonds of pain, toil, fear, madness... and even Death itself." He laughed an unnerving laugh. "I can provide all of it and more!"

Mathias averted his gaze, simultaneously afraid of every safe spot to look. Gerd stood troubled, reflexively gripping the huge weapon white-knuckled, torn of decision and the capacity to act. His friend, his compatriot. The only relatable runt in the bunch. They'd known laughter and tears together, endured moments to which he'd thought the other would break. The alcohol was a divider, aye, but...

Din needed his help, Gerd decided, someone to talk him down from lunacy.

"I'll excise the chaff corrupting this City, and they'll thank me! They'll *all* thank me!"

Guards at the ready. Some shaking whelp sitting the throne. A population hinging on competing governance, a war foretold.

And when that last bout of Din's fanaticism subsided, the resolute barkeep wrested those darting eyes behind the face of wrappings, plying convincing phrases that didn't come easy given his nature. But the upstart needed him more than ever, it seemed...

"After years of berating you 'bout the Powers that be...", Gerd grimaced, trying desperately to glimpse his true friend past that twisted, malignant spirit he presented. "You believe you've gone and become one."