

# Immortal Engine

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## Part One

Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising again of many  
Sending me away is greater than the other that thou didst unto  
my name in remembrance?

\*

The wise man never wakes with the alarm, but a moment before, to control his reaction to it.

A warm sun rose over green fields upon the white shoulders of the plain people of Shorstein. The foaming rivers ran thick with fish and the gurgling sounds like laughter from the high mountainsides, down into the furrows that fed the fields, in which worked the plain people of Shorstein. The pump works of the reservoir turned mighty pistons through their nigh-eternal cycles to cleanse the water and flood the water-tanks of the homes in the not-so-poor districts that homed the plain people of Shorstein. And in the highest parts of the church's clock tower, on the hard wooden floor, decked about with straw, the grinding of the machinery echoed around the rousing and risen form of the one not-so-plain person of Shorstein.

Calden was grateful for his home there, up in the clock tower, and that's what he'd tell you if you asked. Of course, if you asked, his name was Calden, with a C, not with a K. K names were for orphans. K names were what warlords liked to adopt when they started needing excuses for piles of skulls. K names were *everywhere* in the legends. Give a man a K and he'd climb the mountain for the sword of destiny as surely as mould formed in the corners during the winter. Calden may have had that K name at his birth, but damned if he was going to let it rule him. Calden woke with the sun, filtered through the white clock face, hoisted himself to his feet, did the basic maintenance that was his duty, and all before-

Then the bell rang.

- Officially, that bell rang to wake up everyone in the little town of Shorstein. Officially! Just like how Calden was officially an orphan, overseen and taken care of by the church using a small stipend as was deemed appropriate by church expenses. It was down on the paperwork, the paperwork that had been corrected a few years ago by Calden, with a borrowed burin and a careful eye.

Shorstein was not a town with wealthy patrons. The pews were filled from week to week with the poor, the pious, and most universally, the plain people. The farmers banded together and sold their crops together to the cities, and more often than not, did trades between one another in the form of barter. Time to time, Calden had reached into the deep velvet darkness of the collection bag, and found coins clinking against eggs.

"The Lord provides to us all," Father Shipman had said, and that had been it. People gave what they could, and, when the Bursar from the church came through the town, Father Shipman gave to him, as best *he* could. It seemed, at the very least, to be *fair*, to Calden, which seemed reasonable enough. Didn't the church teach fairness?

*Officially*, Calden woke at seven in the morning, when the bells first chimed. Once, they'd been set to ring out every hour, on the hour, even during the midnight hours. The town's two publicans had asked the Mayor a few years ago about it, and Father had thrown in his word too, and Calden's first

big project had been finding a way to set the vast clockwork so it knew better than to bellow out when people were finishing up working on their hangovers, and in the morning when those hangovers had reached fruition.

Calden hadn't been much for it at the time, but he'd learned. When the task of silencing the bell was tied to his own future - a room of his own, rather than sleeping on the garret floor alongside Father Shipman's bed - he found it all the more pressing to master the gears and clockwork and the few humming, barely constrained pieces of crystal that made up the clock's inner workings. Put an incentive before him and he learned.

In Shorstein, you could build a bridge or hew a field or throw a rock and nobody knew you as the bridge-builder or field-hewer or rock-thrower, because they knew your parents. Everyone knew everyone's parents, in Shorstein. Everyone except Calden. Calden Clock-Keeper wasn't much of a name, but he figured if he used it enough, if he introduced himself by it enough, it would stick.

Down the ladder, into Father Shipman's quiet room, with its writing desk and oft-replaced candle dish. Bare feet creaked on wooden stairs as Calden made his way from the clock tower down to the flagstone floor of the church's kitchen area. Father Shipman was awake, already, and the un-flavour of boiling water signalled what breakfast was probably going to be. Many, many donations were made with eggs, these days.

"Morning, boy," Father Shipman's creaking voice came. He'd been older than most fathers when he'd had to assume care of Calden, which had always been just that extra challenge in imagining himself, "The clock woke you again?"

Since he'd set the clock to know its times of silence, it hadn't woken Calden after the first time. Sleeping in the same room as the bell taught the boy how to wake up in anticipation of the ring, not the reality of it. He'd even explained it once, to Father Shipman - but as with all of these explanations, it hadn't really landed. "Aye," he offered, moving across the cold flagstones, callused feet barely feeling them. "Do we have bread and butter?"

Shipman hadn't looked up from the stove and its pot of boiling water since Calden came downstairs, but that prompted a snap of fingers. "Curses. No, you're right,"

"Well, I can go-"

"No, no." Father Shipman said, shaking his head and pushing the pot off the heat for a moment. The oven's blue-red flame flared up on the far side of the pot, unrestrained, and the boiling tangibly reduced. "I'll take care of it," he said, shuffling over to the door, picking up the key, and tucking it away in the folds of his robe. "You just wait here for the morning. I'm sure there's plenty of work we can find to do when I get back."

Calden sat at the low bench and reflected on this.

This was not an exceptional morning.

Out in the streets, the plain people of Shorstein walked past the barred windows of the church. They laughed and talked, and whenever they passed the church, he could see them stop short, talk with one another, and from time to time, take out their time-pieces to point up at the vast face with its

ornate iron arms, and to talk to one another about how it worked, what good time it kept, how it helped their community. Time wasn't as important as marking it - a lot like money.

And yet, even as he watched them, through the windows of the church's foyer, Calden couldn't help but reflect on just what it must mean that this happened *every* morning Father Shipman forgot something.

It wasn't like Calden wasn't *allowed* to go outside. He helped with the harvests. In the end of the day, when the fishermen came back from their coastal trawls, he could go down to the docks and haul on nets until his forehead was as soaked with sweat as his hands were with sea-water. After hours, he helped the bled lows hauling the farmers back to their homesteads when they were soaked with cheap beer.

But in the mornings, when people were going about their business, when people were heading to and from the shops, Father Shipman always left Calden alone in the church, with the strictures, and the texts, and the clockwork and *all the doors locked*.

His recourse had been at first to read, which was why he could. Then he'd learned to read quite well, and memorised the strictures. Then he'd started to grow, and *then* he'd found it very hard to fill a whole day doing nothing but *just* reading, and he'd found himself urged to do things with his hands. Woodwork had given way to clockwork and clockwork gave way to simply moving the things around the church that needed moving.

The church had taught Calden how to work, it had taught him how to read, and it had taught him about God.

Calden stood two hands taller than Father Shipman; brown as fresh wheat, even in the winter out of the sun. His shoulders were round and hard like walnut wood, and his hair like pale flax didn't get cut until he either asked Father Shipman, or Father noticed hairs showing up in his food.

Timing out the journey in his head, standing by the window, Calden counted off when he'd need to set the water back on the heat. Of course, the passage Father Shipman took through the town would be different to the one he took. If a cart was travelling by, Father Shipman would probably catch a ride - Calden was the only person in town who wasn't allowed to *ride* a cart. Not that he minded walking everywhere. After all, the church teachings spoke well of walking amongst the Lord's creation.

The church teachings also had interesting things to say about spiders, shellfish, and the means of people to talk out of turn, which nobody seemed to notice - but Father Shipman always assured Calden when he asked after it. *It's complicated*, he'd say. The Books said that it wasn't right for a woman to speak in the Church, but Mrs Haling took the children aside most mornings to teach them lessons from the Books. That was okay - it was complicated. Father Shipman disapproved of the drinking the farmers did, talking of the influence of strong drink - but the Books did say *Use a little wine for thy stomach's sake*. That was also okay, Father Shipman had told him - *it's complicated*.

The Books were gratifying and satisfying, though. There were people born strange, people lost to histories, and their lives spiralled out before them in ways that made sense. The people turned away from God, God sent something bad to mess with them. Then the people turned back to God, and

God sent someone special to save them from the bad thing. The formula repeated itself over and over, and whether the special thing was an inability to remember names, or strength beyond strength, or being left handed, or anything that seemed to strike God at the time. The stories were satisfying and reassuring - a reminder to Calden that whatever it was that made people different, it could be put to use, by God. You could be a judge, or you could be a judgment. If a judge fell, perhaps they could, in time, become a judgement too.

These were the thoughts that filled his head as he arranged the pews. When he'd been younger, he'd started by approaching the flipped-over pews in the centre, bending his knees and pulling the wood onto his legs. Hobbling backwards, he'd then reach down to grab the back of the pew, before straightening up and letting the whole thing flip onto its feet under his hands. Then he'd grown taller, and stronger, and now, in his seventeenth year, he could simply grip the back with one hand, lift, and flip the whole thing over, setting it upright, then pull it to the chalk marks he refreshed each night when he packed the pews up. When Father Shipman came back, he'd quietly tut-tut that Calden shouldn't have done it all by himself, and he should have waited for Shipman to come back and they'd do it together, but he'd been objecting for years now and not really *doing* anything about it.

When the hall area was arranged, Calden stood, very still, in the centre of the room. Father Shipman sometimes spoke of *hearing the voice of God* before he stepped up to give a sermon. Since he'd told Calden that, the boy had made a point of listening, carefully. So many people felt moved by God, heard God, shared time with God, and Calden really didn't want to feel left out.

Still.

Silent.

Waiting.

Nope, no God. No sound of Father Shipman either, which meant he didn't hop a cart - or if he had, he hadn't hopped a cart on the way back. With the morning sun baking bricks outside, Calden could at least appreciate the cool in the shadows at the front of the church. Right at the front of the church, by the two un-openable windows, furthest from the sun, the stonework was cool. The dark red carpet didn't quite reach the edges of the floor, there, and that L-shape of stone was an easy place to sit, legs crossed, knees against the walls, back into the corner.

"... the airship."

Calden blinked and leant forwards. No, that wasn't God. Well, he hoped it wasn't God, because God sounded an awful lot like Tully Jeering, whose father worked the nets. Smiling, Calden shifted up, pushing himself against the wall and leant into the window.

"Nah, there's nothing to it. Mean, sure, yer high up, but." Someone else. Harder to tell, but around the same age. A girl?

"You're an ass," Tully's voice responded. "Your dad can afford to ride it every week it's over - of *course* you don't care."

Shrugs don't make noise, but the sound she made really was the sound a shrug *should* make. "It shows the same things you see down here. Over and over, in a loop."

"I'd kill to get a chance to get bored with it."

The *pfft* that followed made Calden imagine a girl with bangs in her eyes, so she could blow them out while she sneered. Blonde, probably, because girls were usually blonde. Right? Wait, no - and Calden counted on his fingers, remembering the people sitting in the pews, counting heads in his memory, trying to construct a reasonable view of the people of the town.

"If you want see something worth getting shut of," she said, and her tone dropped conspiratorially, "You should sit by the docks and wait for the trawler coming from up north."

"My dad works a trawler," Tully's voice responded, that nasal whine that refused to be impressed with anyone who wasn't impressed with him.

"Yeah, your dad works a trawler out here, by the shallows. Your dad's basically a lake fisherman. That trawler's like, *wood*. They're in by sunset." The voice shifted downwards, and Calden found himself gripping the stone, leaning into the window to try and hear more closely. "I'm talkin' a trawler made of dark steel. One that runs at night. You'll know it if you see it," she said. "The one with the gouges on the hull."

Calden peered over his hands, squinting at the shapes on the other side of the window. Two figures, people he didn't *know*, really, but, here he was, in their moment. In their conversation, and he felt a shiver.

The walls of Shorstein were tall and well-reinforced. Perched on the coast, it only very rarely saw an earth tyrant, and typically it was a sign to just close the gates and wait. When Calden was much younger, he remembered the day an earth tyrant had collapsed, its sides gouged, at the tree line. The great beast had been two oxen wide at the shoulder, taller now than he was. Father Shipman had sent him with the drays hauling the body away from the tree line. There'd been argument - should they not leave the beast to be consumed by things of the forest?

The question that Calden hadn't voiced, but clearly had occurred to others, was that *that included whatever had killed it*.

The enormous bony frill of the creature graced the doorway of the mayor's house, and its horns - jutting from its forehead and nose - had been turned into swords. The meat had been hearty and shared, the leather lived on the docks, the bones had become tools, and the unpleasant other things, hauled bucket by bucket, had gone to Maen's husband, the man who supposedly was the town's tanner. He was also supposedly Maen's husband, though not once had Calden had a conversation with the man. Bucket upon bucket piled outside the back entrance, and Maen was the one in the leather apron and thick gloves to pick them up. That was okay. Everyone said her husband did the work, and that was what was allowed. It was on all the chits that Maen dropped off - work done by Maen's Husband. That's what made it acceptable.

Right?

Gouges in a ship's hull. A ship *made* for the deep, for the point where the ocean went dark, and the trawlers refused to go. That was the sort of thing you'd get out of the strange and mysterious land of *up north*. The sheer idea of it sent a thrill through Calden. They did not flee from the dangerous things in the deep, they encountered them. They met them in their element and they *fought*.

Calden's fists were clenched and he realised he was doing it again.

The few times he'd bothered to ask Father Shipman about the need to keep him indoors, about why when he left the church, he locked it from the outside, the incidents were brought up. When he'd bitten, and kicked. When he'd spat and swung his fists. When a grown man had lost a *finger*.

It hadn't happened in *years*, of course. He'd grown up in the church, and the church had stilled his soul, had quieted his rage. That's what he was told. And that's why, perhaps, Calden wasn't allowed out of the church. After all, then he'd been a child - and the intervening time had not been unfair to Calden's growth. At seventeen, he could stare any man in town in the eye. Not that he did.

*Look down.*

Staring at his hands, Calden slowly unclenched his fists, and drew a single, calming breath, trying to drag his soul back into his body. Whatever it was that had clenched his fists, Calden hoped against all hope, every time, that it wasn't *him*. The breath caught, and he almost gasped.

"What's that?" Tully's voice broke through his contemplation - and the figures in the window turned to look straight in - at the top of the giant boy's head. Leaping like he was bit, Calden rounded and scrabbled, hand and knee and foot propelling him back towards the rear of the Church, back to the kitchen, frantically pushing the door open, and swinging it closed, leaning back on the door. Whatever Tully and friend had had to say, it was lost in the panic.

One hand on the doorknob, one hand on his forehead, Calden tried to push out the tension.

Thank God for Father Shipman. Thank God for his life. Thank *God* - because there was something *inside* Calden. Some demon that needed controlling and containing. The Books spoke of that, in places. They spoke of the demon within man, the will for power that had caused such *dreadful* things. God was good, God had made the world, God controlled the world, and God sent his angels out to combat demons. God was good, and God gave him his life, so *thank God for God*.

These words calmed him, sometimes.

Sometimes!

The door rattled, the key jiggered in the lock, and Calden tried to not look guilty. Father Shipman, round-faced, round-bodied, round-everythinged, with his bald shiny head, pushed the door closed behind him and set bread and butter, wrapped in greased paper, and went back to the stovetop.

"Mm, did you take this off the heat, boy?" he asked.

The realisation that he wasn't being disciplined, that he wasn't about to be yelled at, slowly settled around Calden's ears... and he swallowed, breathing deep, and opened his hand on the doorknob. "Um, yes, I did."

“Good, good. Probably ready now, really,” and the rest of the morning unfolded with its safe familiarity.

\*

With the sun slinking down below the horizon, and the boats coming in from their early labours, Calden and Father Shipman went to the yard. Old Shep had passed away - frozen to death sleeping outside - a few nights earlier, and family or no family, a body needed a grave. The soil wanted its due. A body wrapped in canvas, bound in twine, Old Shep finally had a blanket the bled lows wouldn't assume he'd stolen, and a bed nobody would kick him out of.

They'd wanted to start early - before the earth grew too cold and hard to dig. Along the street, the old lanterns - surplus from Ranthelm's infrastructure projects, apparently - started to flicker and flare into life when they started. Calden knew the rhythm - he brought the spade down, *biting* into the earth, punching the soil deep, deep enough for the soul it'd hold. Hoisting upwards, hauling with his shoulder, throwing the dirt to the side, he carved a deep trench. By the time he was done, the last of the sun's light had vanished over the horizon, the ocean swallowing up the sun and letting darkness reign. Father Shipman was quiet the whole time - which was nice of him, after all. It meant that Calden didn't have to try and converse while he was doing physical labour.

Standing in the grave, Calden checked the level of the bottom, hands testing the sides gingerly. Old Shep's frame wasn't a tall one, and there was no coin to pay for a casket, but Calden knew that God was no respecter of people. The poor and the wealthy all came to their judgments in time - and that merited some respect.

So caught was he in his thoughts that Calden didn't hear Father Shipman talking by the fence. Maybe if he'd thought about it, he'd have remembered it *was* around time for the Bursar to come by. Maybe, though - and so it was that he didn't.

Reaching over his head and planting his hand on the firmer ground at the corners of the grave, Calden called. “You there, Father?”

When he hoisted himself up and free from the grave, swinging his legs up underneath him, Father Shipman wasn't where he expected. Calden bent down to pick up the shovel, turning and looking about for the Father.

Over by the fence, Father stood, looking at the Bursar. Shovel in hand, Calden made his way towards them, careful to not let the catch in his throat become a throat-clearing, an errant gesture an attempt for attention. Such things were *not allowed*. With his eyes down, Calden waited for the two men to talk loudly enough that he knew he was meant to listen.

The contrast between the two couldn't be more sharp. Father Shipman was all rounded edges, spherical in the middle and waddled around in his old, dowdy robes that hid his slippers. Not once had Calden seen him wearing the severe red and greys of The Orthodoxy of God that showed his rank. Across the stone wall, no higher than his hips, the Bursar stood. A rat-faced man whose hair had had an *understanding* that he clearly wished to maintain, even after the falling out, the Bursar was dressed in full formal wear. The proud cross proclaiming on his shoulder his importance and his rank, the challenge to any who might dare to attack him - *this man is protected by God*. Hands in

dark grey riding gloves, his feet in shiny boots affronted with mud from the poor streets. Little details that set Calden on edge. He was of the Church. He was a voice for God - and he collected the Church's money. Calden hadn't seen boots like that but on a baron's feet, in a painting in the Mayor's estate.

"... Then twenty minutes." the Bursar said, finally raising his voice, tilting his head and looking with pointed gaze at Calden.

"Are you sure? I mean, I-"

"He'll learn." A pause. "Do you want the roof repairs or not?"

Father Shipman bit his lower lip, clearly torn. "Yes, yes..." He said. "Give me a minute."

"You have nineteen and thirteen seconds." The Bursar said, drawing himself up, turning and walking back to the centre of the road, to tend to the huge grey-headed horse that shook its feathers whinnied low. The yellow-eyed beast cast its gaze back and forth, blinking sideways as horses do, before turning, in turn, to look at the Bursar.

"Boy, come inside; quickly now." Father Shipman said, gesturing with his hand towards the church.

## Part Two

And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the sea of many people, which make a noise like the noise of the seas a great multitude, even all the people

\*

“Father...?” Calden asked, following behind him, through the wooden doorframe, over the cold frayed floor mats in the kitchen area. “Father?” Calden repeated, up the creaking stairways to the garret under the clockwork, where Father Shipman prepared sermons and enjoyed a late night dark brandy. “Father...?” Calden repeated again, up the ladder that led to his room, to the straw and fabric that lay piled in a corner as a bed, by the disused toolbox laid on its side as a bookshelf, in which Calden kept his damaged copies of the Books in order. “Father...” Calden murmured, as the old man sat on the toolbox, a small box resting on his knee.

“So then, boy,” said the man of rounded shapes. “It seems God is calling you onwards to do something with yourself.”

Calden’s eyes opened wide at that, though he knew they shouldn’t. Looking pointedly at Father Shipman’s collar, down below his eye line, because defiance was a sin, and defiance started when you viewed your superiors as your equals.

Swallowing, and being careful, *so* careful to not raise his head, to not have the tone of defiance, to not *speak as the demon*, Calden parted his lips, wondering what words would fall free.

“No.” Father Shipman said, his tone as flinty as it ever was. “I know what you think you’re about to say,” Which was more than Calden could say, “And no. No, you have been here in this church by the grace of God. God has a plan for us all - and you have to have faith in God.”

Calden’s lips closed, slowly, uncertainly. Then parted again, about to say *But-*

“The demon, yes.” Father Shipman said, opening the box. “You know that you haven’t had it escape when you’re in the church, yes?” Reaching into the box, there was a clink, a metallic sound. “I was hoping you’d never need to know about this, but...” he shook his head. “So be it.”

Raising one hand, he lifted a silver chain, like such as Mrs Horner had worn at her wedding when she was Miss Waverly. Hanging from the links, balanced in shape like a pair of thick, stylised lines, bleached white, was something like beech wood, or bone. “When you were left here, it was with this,” Father Shipman said, resting the talisman on the palm of one hand. “Research - why, the research I did.” Turning it over and over, he narrowed his eyes and looked carefully at Calden.

“It’s *bone*. Bone from a creature from the *seas*, something we don’t know. Something...” he shook his head – it was not the time to check the proper nomenclature of beasts from the Dark Deep.. “And every day you’ve slept, I’ve prayed over this, and I’ve bound a little bit more of the demon. You see...” Shipman sat back, swallowing nervously, as if not sure he should tell Calden this, as if there was something *wrong* with the knowing. “You know that you’re not like us, boy. It’s as plain as your colour. It’s *in* you, and you *know* that. The people like you, over the seas, they shriek like devils and they dance for fires, and all sorts a terrible.” In the gloom of the chamber, his rounded cheeks took

on a sinister fear to them, the sweat that didn't fit the temperature. The warmth of the room, the *fear* that seemed to ooze out of him.

He'd locked himself in with a demon, every day. He'd been Calden's father, but also his jailer. The realisation was a painful one.

"Now, they say you don't have souls, but," holding the talisman, Father Shipman seemed to have that doubt. "I think... I think this will take you some of the way." Wrapping the chain around the bone, Father Shipman reached out, taking Calden's hand and closed his fingers around it. "Hang onto this, Calden. Hold on to this soul, and maybe it'll keep the demon out."

Stairs.

Flax.

Doorframe.

Horse.

The Bursar's cart, into the cage in the back.

The Bursar didn't speak to them as the cart pulled along the muddy streets. Travelling at night was a dangerous affair, if you weren't protected by god. There were Tyrants, and where there weren't tyrants, there were bandits. Where there weren't bandits, there was mostly nothing but cabbage.

Onwards. To Ranthelm

\*

Calden sat, with the rickety wood around him, his eyes fixed on the piece in his hand. It was so small, not even as long as any one of his fingers. Whatever beast had given up its bones for its craft had to have been very large, and the pieces that seemed to be two bones were fused together as hard as wood.

Calden knew he was different to the others. He knew that they earned coin for their labours, that they bought drinks and food they liked, that they stayed out late and sang, and that they could walk the streets in the mornings. He *knew* there was some difference, though he didn't know what it *was*. All he could know is what this place meant to him.

The clockwork over Father Shipman sang to him in his sleep, the way the crystal rippled back and forth in its coils of wires. The fields shaped under his feet when he walked amongst the other harvesters, tending to the corners nobody wanted to walk to. The nets stung his fingers and fought with him as he hauled them up onto the dock. The zeppelin overhead seemed to leave trails for him to watch as he worked - and somehow, Calden felt something very, very wrong

Pulling away from Shorstein, Calden closed his hand around the bone talisman, with its uneven, porous surface. Hooks in the bone seemed set deep, circled in on themselves, like the settings of a jeweller's prize.

Calden stared at the bone for what felt like *hours*. How could he not? This had been his talisman, his personal guardian. Every night, Father Shipman had worked for him, had prayed for him, and had entreated god to preserve him - and only now did he have any proof of it. That same morning, that moment of rage - the demon within - was a reminder of how much he *needed* this. How his *people* needed this.

It was good he was being taken away.

This little charm was all that stood between the people of Shorstein, the place he thought of as loved, and his inner worst self. Running his fingers over the bone, over and over again, he-

The cart hit a bump.

The charm sailed up, through the air, and all the ways in which that precious thing could be lost ran through Calden's mind. The horror, the terror - the anguish of *becoming that...*

*snap*

A hand caught the charm, right out of the air. Free fingers from a gloved left hand held the precious smallness between finger and thumb, and Calden's heart started to beat again.

"Io." the hand's owner said, an odd, relaxed accent. "Chu come from around these parts?" she asked, immediately leaning forwards and leaning into what Calden, one day, might come to refer to as his *personal space*.

Clutching the talisman to his chest and leaning back as she leant forwards, Calden only just noticed that he wasn't alone in the cage. There were other people. There was a chest, locked, twice the size of his to- Father Shipman's toolbox, which didn't jostle and bounce with the work of the cart, because it was clearly too heavy. It was bolted onto the cart's floor, unlike the cage, which was bolted to the sides. There were five others in the cart with him - two sleeping forms that looked like typical grey-haired drunks, a mad-eyed schizophrene with his arms bound before him and his jaw lashed shut with leather straps, and her.

Growing up in Shorstein, he'd only seen girls come in two basic varieties. First, prepubescent, in which case they were built like they were made out of coat hangers and rarely saw him except when he'd sat quietly in the back corner at church, and been told not to talk to him. Second, matronly, who were allowed to talk to him but not allowed to talk to him for *long*. Those women were built a lot like Father Shipman, all large spheres, but the arrangement was more aesthetically pleasant to Calden's tastes, stunted as they were. Of course, he'd be careful not to think much on that matter - that way lay lust, and lust was a sin.

This girl was neither of those two forms, and could best be described as *wiry*. It was obvious, even through her clothes, that she was lean and athletic. She was built like the boys who dived for tools and scrap that washed up in the shallows by the dockside. Not that Calden was going to say that aloud at any point - noticing boys was almost as dangerous as noticing girls. At least, he thought so, if he was to trust Father Shipman's nervous advice a few years ago. Her skin was paler than his, but not the same as the plain people of Shorstein. She was - it was almost a paler colour, like the hue of a yellow sunset? But not quite.

Calden was dressed like a son of Shorstein, and he could feel it keenly. Breeches, plain, tied off at the knee, knotted at the ankle, with a strap of the tying running down under his feet. His shirt had no sleeves, and once was a canvas sack for the dock. On the back of his shoulders, the inverted word *RICE* misled any inverted readers as to what the shirt contained. Not so her, though. She was clad for the rainy city streets of Ranthelm. A thick, double-insulated short jacket. A scarf that she wore up around her chin and over her mouth. Short pants that tucked into high boots, which were worn at the toes and, on the bottom, at the heels as well. Lenses perched on her nose, surrounded with thin whalebone, which framed her dark brown eyes as they peered at him, waiting for him to respond. Short, raven-black hair bobbed on her head as the cart rattled along.

“Well?”

Oh god, how long had Calden sat there, staring at her, cataloguing everything about her?

“Well-” he responded, and stopped. What even was the question?

*Look Down.*

Calden let his eyes slip to his hands again, away from her face. Staring at the girl seemed inappropriate, and also meant his mental dialogue started to include words he wasn't sure he should. There was something fundamentally worrying about the term *curved* in his mind, something that set off warning bells and made him shift uncomfortably in his seat.

“You from around here?” She repeated, and that strange ‘Y’. It sounded like she'd said the letter I, then slid into another sound midway through. She spoke as though she was sneaking up on the words.

“Well, I'm from Shorstein,” Calden said, looking out the cage, towards the back of the cart. Towards the retreating, white, lit face of the clock-tower. Towards the high grey walls that threatened to swallow the tower up, and plunge the surrounding countryside into darkness. Towards the place he'd helped with the nets and the fields and that one time a Tyrant and...

“Sucks.” She said, turning to follow his gaze. Then she slouched down next to him. “This the furthest you ever been?”

Calden knew, officially, there was some sort of rule here. There was a social order about what you did and didn't talk about and how quickly you got to know someone before you shared sources of personal angst and alienation. Somehow, all of those reasons felt a little superfluous when he was watching his home shrink into a point of light through the bars of a cage. “It's... far.” He managed, swallowing quietly. “It's farther than I think-”

“What about now?”

“I don't know, I-”

“How about now?”

Narrowing his gaze, he looked down at her. She was short, too, and petite, and Calden briefly thanked his stars that he had the charm in his hand to keep the demon from rising, or he might have

punched her in her head for being so nosy. "I think I'm further now than I've ever been, *yes*." He said, with deliberate procession.

"Sucks." she said again, sitting up straight and resting her hand under her chin. "Don't worry," she said, leaning against the bars and looking out behind the cart, sticking her hands out through the bars and letting them hang and bounce with the rhythm of the cart. "It won't be forever." She said. "Can't be a slave, or own a slave, once you're dead."

Calden didn't know the pause was awkward, but he sure felt it.

"You had that talisman long?"

"No," Calden managed.

"Ah, see," she said, leaning sideways and looking to him. "Check the patterns. You get blood in those, it colours the whole thing. Looks alive. They say it lets something escape," she said, wagging her eyebrows in time with a strange set of finger movements, like her hands were dancing in the air. "*Something*."

They said? They did? Fingers ran over the edges of the bone talisman, careful and concentrating. Patterns. There were patterns in the bone, faint, so faint he couldn't even see them, he had to touch them. "Well," he said, very, very seriously. "I guess I can't get blood in it."

A moment, then she planted her hands on the bars and leant back, looking over to Calden. Her eyes said she was grinning, even though he couldn't see her mouth. "Emira." She said.

Calden looked down at the bone in his hand, then over at her. He owed her. No matter what happened, he was going to remember that moment, when she'd saved him from *becoming*. He put the chain over his head, sliding the talisman under his shirt, down to his skin. With a clearing of his throat, he swallowed hard.

"I'm Calden," he said, for the first time.

\*

It was the first time he'd ever said his name, and she knew that because the words shuddered in the open air when he let them out. The hesitation in his voice was second only to the awkwardness that came with it – because *he* wasn't sure how he wanted to pronounce it. Cahl-Dehn? Or Cayldn? Halfway hesitant, uncertain, unrecognised, unnamed.

Emira put her chin on her hand and sighed, slouching back against the bars of the cage. There were many days to this trip, that much she knew, but she had no idea how many of them would be this *dull*. These places, with their people who knew how to cook bricks and catch fish but *seemingly nothing else*, were so dull, so quiet, and so *empty*.

*Ever feel like your life runs backwards?*

Stirring from unpleasant thoughts, Emira sat up slightly, looking out the bars. "You really have never been this far, huh?" she asked, resting the question against the big brown boy like a corkscrew. He was big, too; she'd met her fair share of people on the path from the East, and not once had she

seen a man tall enough to stare down a shire horse, let alone one who had shoulders like one. In the passageways of Praztyat, she'd met a man with a curved sword and a taste for violence who had maybe nine tenths of Calden's size to him – but this boy had the wide, innocent eyes of an obedient child.

Blonde hair fell in his eyes as he shook his head. "No, never."

"Don't worry about it," she said, idly, yawning and stretching her head back to lean it against the bars, feeling her thick black hair falling behind her and bouncing slightly in the breeze as the cart rode on. "Me, I'm further from home than I've ever been." And she tried to not let the hollow laugh escape.

When he nodded, she realised she'd been counting the heartbeats. Was he simple, or slow, or naive, or all three? Hard to say – harder still when he gave answers that made him sound like he was ten years old. "I don't know if I'll ever go back."

Slouched back against the cage, her feet on a drunk, Emira blew her hair out of her eyes. "Oh, you will. Trust me, that's how these stories go. One way or another, you can't escape what you left behind."

The Bursar turned only momentarily in his seat, and lashed out with his arm; the whip, long and tapered, designed to crash into the thick scaled rear-hides of the *things* these western people called 'horses' and leave some sort of mark, cracked against the cage bars. Not an order, not an admonition – a simple and obvious threat.

Emira sulked back into silence, giving Calden a look – rolling her eyes and blowing hair out of her eyes as if to say *Can you believe this guy?* The look he returned was worrying, to say the least – worrying because *yes. Yes, Calden could believe that guy. Calden could believe anything.*

Curiosity sparked.

Belief was a pretty powerful thing, after all.

## Part Three

Heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill  
Go in, and slay them; let none come forth. And they smote them.  
Thou shalt not kill

\*

Rantheim was four days from Shorstein if you travelled the way the seamen did, sitting still at night somewhere safe. There were even pier stones along the way - the heavy stone posts decorated with good luck charms, designed to mark how many kays travelled. Supposedly, they were in a straight line, studded along the roadways, but the roads weren't straight and Calden had never understood mathematics well enough to argue.

The first night travelling, with the drunks and the schizphrene and Emira, was not atypical. The cart slowed of the morning as the Bursar fished bread and cheese from paper wrappings, but never stopped, even while he ate. Then the food was gone, and the cart picked up its pace, the horse giving its thick, throaty hiss in response to the reins.

"Asshole doesn't feed *us* so regularly. Hell, I haven't seen him feed the *horse* yet." Emira grumbled. Calden started - he didn't even realise how obviously he'd been watching. Then Emira burst out laughing at him, kicking his arm lazily from her flopped-back seat on the treasure chest. "You're pretty obvious, y'know?" Again, with that slightly out-of-type 'Y,' sounding almost more like 'iou're.'

"No...?"

Another laugh. Emira perched up on the box and gestured through the bars, at the back of the bursar. "He fed us as we came to Shorstein, gave us some water." Hands above her head, she gripped the bars, and lifted - swinging her feet up into a crossed position, with her bound feet facing straight up. "You eat before you came?"

The moon hid behind the tree canopy, the high vaulted branches seeming more blue and black than green and brown, as Calden knew. It had been core to one of Father Shipman's sermons; the notion that sometimes, you knew things were true, even if you couldn't perceive them. You just had to have faith. Those were thoughts that could distract from the more practical concern - a morning of boiled eggs, butter and bread. "Well..."

"Tch~!" She said, a little strange deviation in her voice. "You-" Then the gunshot boomed through the air, like a branch breaking by Calden's ear.

Banditry wasn't uncommon on the roads at night. Areas where the Tyrants didn't roam were full of places to set up a camp, to lurk and wait. Smart people didn't travel during the day, *proper* people didn't travel during the day - at least, that's how Calden understood it.

In the instant after the gunshot, everyone moved. Calden stood, sharply, pressing his shoulders against the roof of the cage, his hands grabbing the bars and spreading wide. Before him, Emira dropped to the floor of the cage, folding herself up like a paper puzzle behind the stout chest. The two drunks flattened against the floor, while the frothing madman thrashed against the corner of the cage, screaming through his gag.

The tree line swarmed - five forms, guns and swords, running and yelling; battered clothing that spoke of runaway seafarers, former guardsmen. Good guns, better swords, but cheap, nasty shoes. There was no circling - one ran forwards, stepped up onto the embankment and *leapt* across the gap to tackle the Bursar off the cart, ploughing down into the dust, setting the whole cart to rock.

Emira looked up at the cage with a sudden, sly smile. "Hey, Calden," she said, swinging her weight over towards the chest. But he wasn't listening -

"Bullet in the head. Now." The voice came from the tree line. A figure, clad in blues and blacks, with a long rifle in its hands, raised its head and gestured. "We're behind schedule."

"Ah, Christ, boss," said the bandit, arms around the Bursar. "He's a man of the church, I-"

That's as far as he got before the Bursar's bald dome swung back into his jaw like a ball peen hammer.

The Bursar was maybe forty-five years old, by Calden's reckoning. He wasn't built like the sailors down by the docks, who spent every day hauling nets. He wasn't built like the lumberers who cleared forest trees away and had bodies like the trunks they lifted. The Bursar wore fine boots and the mud on his jacket only made him seem all the more pathetic. But there was blood on his head, now, and it *wasn't his*, and there were scattering pieces of teeth that landed in the mud, followed by arcs of sluicing blood. And then he spun, one hand hitting the ground under him from the relaxed grip of the bandit. He threw himself backward, bodily, grabbing the arm of the bandit. One knee in the mud, a hoist, and a haul and the -

"Shoot him!" -

Two bullets fired from the bandits by the front of the cart thudded into the body of their comrade. Cheap bullets, too - the muzzles flared with mighty gouts of grey smoke. The Bursar pivoted on one foot, swinging the body of one - and it was a body, now, not a bandit - into the friend who'd killed him. Then sharply, he stepped back, moved away from the thrown body. No cartwheel, no back-flip, he just was *on* the other gunman, grabbing the gun in a leather-clad hand, swinging it up swiftly and jamming the still-hot gun barrel into the man's eye. Metal met sensitive flesh and the bandit yielded a harrowing *scream*.

"A failure, then," said the figure with the long rifle from the tree-line. Raising its voice, a strange, crystalline monotone, it spoke again, over the fracas: "We are parting ways as a company." The glint of metal from the long rifle in the moonlight had a strangely menacing brother, up at the place of the head - and then it was gone.

Emira noticed; Calden didn't. He was too rapt by the display before them. The Bursar was an older man, but clearly he'd become old by way of *not dying*. Holding the man in his arms, he spun around again, his coat flaring as he brought his knee up into the bandit's tailbone - a blow so hard that the screaming man collapsed to the ground, clutching his face.

The Bursar stood over ten feet of clear sod with a cart, a horse and a cage between him and the last two bandits. One was unnerved - one was not. The Bursar stepped forwards, adjusting his coat as he walked, lips pulled into a thin, efficient line.

The bandit with more steel in him stepped forwards, raised his gun and fired. Grey smoke curtained him from the sight of the man he killed, and he drew a breath, waiting for the thud, for the collapse.

A gloved hand reached out of the smoke, caught his throat, and with the relentless strength of a man who had just been *missed*, as if by the force of his own will alone, the Bursar swung him around and hammered the man bodily into the side of the cart and the cage. Pushing with his hand against wind-pipe, the other hand grappled with the bandit's sword arm. That hook nose, those thin lips, those fixed, focused eyes all consumed the gasping bandit's world. The Bursar's strength was not in raining blows, but in *pressure*.

Put people under pressure, and you'll be surprised the mistakes they make. For example, firing over the head of a man who *will* kill them.

Emira saw her chance - and leapt up, to the roof of the cage, gripping the bars, and swung, with all her weight, into the space over the treasure chest. "Calden!" She yelled. The brown boy leapt backwards, in surprise - and hit the cage side next to her.

The Bursar's pushing, the sudden shift of weight - Calden should have known what Emira was doing. The cart *groaned* as it hauled off its balance, and *crashed* onto its side, wood splintering and breaking all around Calden. The chest, bolted to the floor of the cart, hung uncertainly, even as the drunks, stunned and dazed, scrambled to their feet, staggering out of the cart onto soft mud.

That fifth bandit hadn't been fast enough to move out from under the cart, and the howls of his broken legs filled the clearing. The Bursar was bent over the side of the cart, still holding that throat, still applying pressure, resisting the swings of a steadily weakening sword arm.

Choke.

Kick.

Flail.

Stop.

The hand remained, despite the bandit's limpness. Bald head raised, and the Bursar surveyed the carnage he'd been party to. The prisoners reacted like rats when the light came on. Two drunks hauled up to their feet quickly, running - and smacking into the tree line, stumbling and turning back around. The bound man was on his feet in an instant, bolting down the road, back towards Shorstein, and Emira just seemed to -

- *disappear*. Calden hesitated for an instant, but then he was off, too, down back towards Shorstein. Long legs, strides more like leaps, head down, Calden closed his hands into fists. This one short, burst of freedom, the feeling of wind in his hair, before he got close enough-

-dived forward-

-and tackled the other runner, arms braced around him, pinning him face-first to the dirt. The man flailed and arched backwards, but Calden had learned a lesson about that, and kept his head down, against the man's shoulders. Planting his knees, he rolled over, lifted, and started the dull walk back.

The Bursar stood. He didn't chase. He moved from bandit to bandit, fishing up their rifles, checking them, counting bullets.

"What the hell is he *doing*," Emira muttered to herself, from the treetops. "*Run, you idiot...*"

The Bursar was a look of grim determination when Calden got back. The drunks had been practically self-apprehending, pulled into line next to the bandits. Hand atop their heads, the Bursar pulled each bandit, alive or dead, into position in a line on the road, the first flicker of an emotion on his face the whole journey. Irritation. When Calden's feet stopped in the mud, he lowered the madman, almost to the ground, ignoring the man's kicks and squirming thrashes.

"Ah." The Bursar said, gesturing to the line of men. "Here." He said, gesturing down into the mud. "The girl..." he looked up, and around, lips pursed. "Well... can't be helped, I suppose." Even as he spoke, Calden did as he was told, head down, not looking the Bursar in the eyes, before looking back to the cart. The cage was smashed to pieces – it would take days to repair it all. The extra prisoners would be an extra challenge, too – perhaps he should try binding them with –

The crack of the Bursar's pistol swung Calden around abruptly, like he was on a pivot. The bandit with the broken legs fell backwards, head crashing into the mud with a wet splash that covered his head – a mercy, perhaps. No need to see the hole that a bullet made. Smoke filled the night sky from the Bursar's pistol – the burning and the sudden heat in the cold. God, *was it really that cold?*

The remaining bandits looked up like men supplicant before God.

"Wait, wait, we-" *Crack.*

*Crack.*

*Crack.*

Where there were four men, there were now four that *were not* lined up and filling the road. Each laid in the mud, slumped rather than thrown. A pistol shouldn't be so simple a thing. A man shouldn't die just by folding up like that – it seemed unfair to end something so important with so little fanfare. Opening the chamber on the handgun, the Bursar methodically reloaded, gesturing with a hand over at the cart. "You, boy. Go get the chest from the cart and lift it."

Slightly dazed, Calden started to walk around the line of prone men –

"Quickly, now, boy." The Bursar's whip-like voice came from behind.

– before stepping between two of the bodies, to the upturned cart, and testing the wood the chest was bolted to. The cage had clearly been an afterthought; the bolts were deep-sunk and stout, while the whole cage arrangement had been made out of wood. Locking prisoners with the treasure either spoke volumes about the strength of the chest or –

*Crack.*

Calden whipped around, eyes wide. The first drunk fell prone. The second – *Crack* – tumbled next to him, before – *Crack* – the lunatic. White smoke flowed around the Bursar as he stepped from mud to a man's chest to the side of the horse.

“Well?” he asked, and those eyes fixed on Calden, whose hands unconsciously scrabbled to turn the bolts and free the chest. “Is it stuck fast?”

*He shot four times, he reloaded the whole gun, and suddenly Calden’s throat felt very dry.* Gripping the chest, he lifted - and used his free hand to unscrew a bolt. The pressure on the bolt was different, needing the chest moved, which made the metal dance under his fingers. In that moment, he was so desperate to *not* look the Bursar in the eyes. He worked his hands faster than he’d ever have dreamt possible... and with a mighty grunt, *hauled* the whole weight of the chest up, up onto his shoulder. Feet sank a little into the mud while he stood, hoping that he wasn’t sweating quite so obviously.

It couldn’t have been more than a few seconds of watching the Bursar’s cheek, waiting for the man to blink.

*Blink.*

*Blink any second now.*

*Come on.*

*Blink.*

*Be human for a few moments, oh God, please.*

It felt like *hours*.

The Bursar turned sharply, away from Calden, and walked to the side of the horse. The great beast turned its flat forehead over to try and peer at its owner with both eyes - which meant it probably didn’t see as the Bursar put the gun to its forehead and pulled the trigger.

*Why-* Calden’s brain leapt on fire. The bandits had technically committed a sin. The practical priest could justify killing them because no justice system could easily process them, given they outnumbered him. The prisoners, *maybe*, because they couldn’t secure them, and Calden had no idea of their sins. But... but *why the horse?*

The massive beast hit the ground as meat, and the Bursar stepped around it. “It eats more than you will. The girl is lost,” the Bursar said. “Now, let us hurry, boy.”

Dragging feet like lead, trying to avoid the feeling the last food he ate was escaping his throat, Calden fell into step behind the Bursar. Somehow, he knew the chest should be heavy, but he didn’t notice it. He was numb from his feet to his fingers.

\*

Emira leant forwards in the tree branches, peering after the pair as they started the walk.

Involvement was the tiniest of sins, in a pantheon of them. Officially, she knew her position was the empty vessel; old teachings, writ large over the archways of her mind, peated and repeated the idea that *hers is the soul of glass*. Let the world pass through her, and feel the waves of the world around her. *Attachment was sacrifice.*

Still – there were worse things than that sacrifice. Smoke wafted from her fingertips as she felt the bullets cool. Broken ribs and crushing headaches were terrible things to endure, but the two prone prisoners – the drunks - could probably appreciate that they were *able* to experience them despite having felt a bullet hit them. And hey, the drunks had a horse.

Saving the bandits was a trickier moral quandary, even with all the time in the world to consider it. They *had* attacked a lone traveller. Left to their own devices, if they had found a weaker old man, there would be a dead innocent. The lunatic didn't really recognise what it meant to be alive any more – all he could see was the inside of his own head, and it was not a happy place. The Bursar had committed a cruel mercy, there.

Still, something inside her itched. Saving *some* was the worst of it. How much easier to be Empty. If she hadn't cared, she'd have just hit the branch, waited until Calden freed the chest, taken out the Bursar and taken the beads back. But... that Bursar was *nuts*. What's more, she wouldn't just be fighting him – that boy, Calden, was so well-chained he didn't even hear them clink.

The chest held the beads, but she could catch up with it at any time; travelling with the Bursar had just been a convenient way to follow them goods to Ranthelm, to travel a few miles further without her feet. Now, things were more complicated, there were more *variables*, and things didn't *fit* so well.

*Ever feel like you're living your life backwards?*

The branch bobbed slightly under her weight as she leapt after them, silent as a shadow. A moment after she left, the smoking bullets finally tumbled to the ground.

\*

Ranthelm was a city designed for carts. The streets were wide, and the canals were deep. Bridges didn't have room for foot traffic - you just walked behind a cart, and tried to keep pace. From the outside, the dull blue-grey steel shielding they put on everything, painted and marked by city ordinance shielded the base of classic, pale architecture, rendered in white masonry. Money and value flowed in through the rivers, and people tried to ignore the way things that fell into the water at night never came back out.

The buildings of Ranthelm towered over everything in Shorstein. The city walls alone were three stories and some more, and some towers reached twice that. While the canals dictated the shape of the land, the architects had bullied the land as much as they could, to set out their architectural ideal of straight lines. Buildings were made to be square boxes, often proportioned to a set of values like three high, five deep and seven long. Platforms were built out with pontoons sunk deep down into the water to support them. The city was safe, but only for a particular value of safe. The inner city, with its cathedrals and its administration buildings and its manor houses, stood tall and unclad, without bars on the windows and reinforcement on the walls. The bridges over the canals were wide and there were railings to keep those who'd had a bit too much sherry from tumbling in on their way home.

The passage through the city, out to the warehouses and the river docks and the towers' locks, though, could be marked in the steady appearance of what people hoped would quell their fear. The

wealthy who could not afford to hire guards would bar their windows, the less wealthy would bar them further. The security grew tighter, windows grew narrower, even painted shut, as one moved further from the wealth in the centre, until finally hitting the back-area slum of Catboard Ranthelm, where the dockworkers didn't even bother closing their doors, because nobody had anything worth stealing.

When they'd arrived, Calden remembered walking some path after the Bursar. He remembered being hungry and thirsty and cold, and remembered blisters and broken skin on his feet. He'd remembered dropping off the chest at a cathedral, and then being instructed to follow a different churchman to a different place.

A day later, they'd found a purpose for him. Broad shouldered and strong, he could work as an enforcer corralling and moving other slaves. Nobody doubted Calden's obedience, even at first; the Bursar spoke well for him. They said he could haul people who could not walk, and for those who *would* not work, Calden could make them.

It was a decent enough idea, since Calden was a head taller than most slaves, better fed than they were, and had been so obedient in the truck. Let him keep his chain and his bone and he was pliable. The problem with the idea was that when put to it, Calden didn't seem to know how to do anything so much as cruel. He could carry a labourer, mangled in the press, from the floor of the weavers', but when told to thrash another slave for low work output, he didn't raise his hand. Calden knew there was a place for violence - the Judges had all used it, after all - but something about the order to beat an old man whose work gutting fish was slowing with his years sapped away his conviction.

Calden followed a churchman on his rounds, checking slaves for signs of sin - which they all had - and helping to move those too weak to move from their illnesses and hunger. Under his huge hands, he felt sores break and people strain.

Calden kept his head down. Looking at his hands at the end of the day when he washed them, before being locked away, he feared the next day.

There were stories he knew. In the Books, there had been the garden of Gethsemane, that single moment of doubt. That moment in which a great decision was made. There was none of that here - Calden lay on his straw, staring up at the boards a hand away from his face, and thought about the two dozen or so moments when he had been told to act, and hesitated, and fumbled, and been struck.

Being hit didn't bother him. He was a demon boy, a thing, a tool, hollow on the inside and filled by a charm of bone. If he was to be violent, it had best be for the best of reasons. The blows meant for other slaves fell on him for his incompetence. Something seemed acceptable about that. They were not as strong as him, and while Calden was not used to being struck, it seemed a better end.

How far could being strong, but incompetent carry him? Perhaps he'd have found someone, amongst the slaves, who would impart upon him some special wisdom. Maybe a slave could explain to him what was meant to happen - God used such voices, from time to time. After all, didn't Baalam have his ass?

A week later, they found a purpose for him. The brute was apparently, not quite brute enough - though cruelty would come in time, they were sure. Slaves were like scorpions, since they lacked

souls; leave them in closed quarters for long enough, and they would, with nothing better to do, and nothing directing their attention to work, learn to sting one another.

At the docks of Ranthelm, the locks were emptied and drained by enormous machine pumps, pumps that were pulled into actions by great machines. When those machines broke, they took coin to repair - and when the church that owned that dockhouse did not want to pay the coin, they used slaves to haul on those chains, dragging mighty gears, each team's step yielding another ratchet. Put him to work there; big and brawny, stupid and too kind. Let him learn amongst the other slaves his place.

Calden replaced a team of strong men. Bare feet on the wet wood had grip enough to let his shoulders slowly pump against the weight of the river. Work was work, and Calden could do that. Small servings of food and large servings of work did not do his disposition well - and sharing with his fellows did not bring any precious moments of sharing hope. The other slaves took his food, when the opportunity was there; the guards laughed at him when he let it happen.

There never was a face to any of it, either. No slave rose above them, became Calden's friend, spoke to him in careful tones and taught him what it was he was missing about this life. There was nobody who told him how to be - there was obedience, which he knew well, and fear, which he knew well too. There was no single, individual Church official who drew knife against his skin, or raised the whip. There were foremen, but they cycled from job to job in their shifts. It was an industrial city, after all - outside of the church, people did not work twelve hours of the day. It wasn't a person. It wasn't The Man. It was The Men And Some Women - a dull, grey, expressionless face of people giving him his orders.

Calden put his arm to the chain, kept his head down, and focused on the work. It was not so hard, and it was much better than 'enforcing,' the work that ended each day with welts on his shoulders, blood and pus on his hand, and a headful of litanies that did not seem... right... to his memory of the Books.

Focusing on his work, and on his own food, Calden waited for something to change. Sense would emerge from it. Just like in Shorstein - the seasons would bring different work. Winter was lean there, and in autumn when the old Father was deep in his brandy, Calden ate well. Adapting to the new cycles was just what he had to do.

A month later, they found a purpose for him. The dockhouse was a dangerous place to keep a strong slave. There were chains and ropes, sticks and posts. To keep a great weight on the spirit kept the other slaves down, but there was no way to sway the boy Calden. When he was chastised, he accepted. When he was beaten, he accepted. When he was bloodied, he accepted. There was nothing inside him that knew how to resist.

That wasn't how the slaves his age behaved.

Calden's next home was the home of a Magistrate. The intersection of government and church, Magistrates' roles had been originally formed to advise local governments on the most Godly way to operate their businesses. It wasn't uncommon for small lords to will their properties to Magistrates, and Magistrates to accept these gifts with some dispensation that made the life of the Lord a little easier, speeding their way into heaven. It only took a few years of this before Magistrates became

themselves, the local lords, lords who could vote in the governance of major cities. Officially, a Magistrate had a role that pertained to some area of understanding of the Books. Holding land and being treated like Barons - well, that was just gauche.

Calden's job at the Magistrate's was the first thing he'd found in the time that he liked. Carriages had to be moved between stables and storage. Most of the time, it took donkeys to haul the carriages. Calden didn't need that help. Most of the days and nights passed in flurries of buckles and backbreaking labour, loading and unloading carriages as they did the business of the magistrate across his holdings. The church was gracious to Calden, and only once every few days, he had to travel through the pens with a heavy barrel of water to swash away the filth, the tears, and the blood.

There, for four months or more, Calden lived under that purpose, surrounded by people who didn't know his name, and whose names he did not speak.

It was as good as any purpose to have.

The Magistrate Exchequer (Fine Lit) had an impressive estate, with its tall, narrow windows and its three stories of brickwork. A canal cut through it in the middle, around which a park had been constructed, a park for any citizen to enjoy, if they could afford an expensive canal ride to the island, and didn't mind standing on one side of the wrought-iron fences, which were there to protect the park from undesirables. Inside the bifurcated estate, there was the West Wing, the East Wing, and the Bridge Wing, which each had seven bathrooms, a sunroom, a library and an armoury - in case of incursions. The Bridge Wing lacked the ballrooms and the war room of the other Wings, and every last one of them needed regular maintenance, repair and care, as did the machinery that powered the passageways and secret spy cavities employed by the Magistrate Exchequer.

Four months of work in the Magistrate's building was plenty for Calden to learn what he was doing. It was stable, too, which was a pleasant difference after the months of being passed from place to place. The lesson of the church carried him well, so he *worked*. The stables needed someone who could haul things from carts. The kitchens needed someone strong who could haul on racks of iron with bread in them. The cleaners needed someone who could carry water in buckets up six flights of stairs. It was all familiar, and Calden just had to remember:

*Look down.*

## Part Four

Whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in the presence of God; and am sent to speak unto thee, and to she who would instruct me.

\*

The largest gathering of people in Shorstein had been to stone a witch. The largest gathering that Calden had been allowed to attend had been a harvest dance, where he'd sat by the stage, smiling and nodding politely at the people as they sang and danced to the fiddles and drums.

It meant that Calden had perspective on how to handle the Ball the way that dealing with geckos on the back step of the church prepared him for the task of hauling a Tyrant lizard from the tree-line all the way back to the village. The only thing the two events had in common was his role - to stand at the edges, serve some useful purpose, and *not talk to anyone*.

After attending morning chapel and scrubbing down the stable, he'd been given his instructions for the day. Chup, who had about him a general paleness that meant he didn't offend anyone overmuch, had offended someone overmuch and was being kept in the kitchen for the evening. That was good for Chup, because it meant he didn't have to try and blend in serving people at the party.

If he reflected on the instruction later, he'd realise the whole point of them. He was taller than every person he'd seen in the Magistrate's services; he was not practiced, he was not polished. As with the whippings and the yelling, it was a test - one he was expected to fail. Not unreasonable, really - The whole order of things was reliant on people knowing their place, and didn't God offer judgments upon people who misunderstood, or were arrogant enough to assert that they knew better? Job had been taught his lesson for his hubris, for example.

It put him up in the ballroom, far away from the dance floor, where feathers and layered dresses, magnificent structures of fine fabric and extravagantly-set gemstones, spun in circles and men's expensive coats swayed in time with the movements of the women. It put him near the bookshelves and the corners of the room, where he walked as gently as he could in strangely robust shoes. It'd been hard to find him a pair that fit, and wound up delving into the guards' supplies. Even these set, which had been called 'ankle boats' pinched at his feet. It was his job to be present when he was wanted, and invisible when he was not.

The eyes that sat on him indicated he was at least in one way, a failure at his job.

There was a distinction between the people, he noticed, as he moved around the edges of the room. Straight lines were best, they were predictable and he could move slowly if he did. Passing by each table, there were the men who attended the ball to meet and talk to ladies, and there were the men who attended the ball to meet and talk to men. And what things they talked about - futures in cotton, the movements of coal, and investments in boats. Waistcoats and cravats and vests - they looked so *empty*, but they spoke like they were so *full*.

"This labour crisis is a pain from god's arse to my head," said one, looking out at the dance floor, smiling emptily at the girl who smiled back. In his hand, a small glass, which had so little liquor in it Calden assumed he must have already drunk it all.

“Mm.” The response came from the man in the blue coat, pointedly looking out the window. “Well, I can’t say I’m too happy with church investment.”

“Why?” The liquid swung around in the glass, but he didn’t lift it to drink. “Paying them is a fraction of paying salaries.”

“Yes, but it does mean they bring in more darks and rice to do the slave work.”

His friend cleared his throat meaningfully. “Officially, slavery is illegal. *Officially.*”

“Hm? What the hell are -of course I know that. Good Christ, yo-” The second lord leant in and bumped his arm, this time, pointing in Calden’s direction, but not at him.

“What, her?” He said, shaking his head. “Pf, you’re worried about the wrong things.”

Calden turned around and for the first time in since leaving Shorstein, didn’t have to lower his gaze too far. The woman before him was tall and robust, with keen eyes that seemed to bore through him even though she wasn’t looking *at* him. While most of the women here were dressed in silks and gauzes, like expensive clouds, she wore the same stout, multiple-layered woollen coat that he’d seen worn when the stable drays had broken loose and the guardsmen had come to speak. Dark blue, almost black, with a white trim at the collar and the neck, designed to button across the chest, folded back and let loose, she walked on past Calden as if she could brush him aside. On her shoulder, a bright stitched patch, wyre-drawn gold, and as she walked, she kept her hands tucked behind her back. Angular features, extremely so, lips drawn thin, with silvery-white hair pulled back into a tight, low bun just over her collar.

Somehow, Calden had the impression he’d just been ignored by a pair of scissors.

She stood directly next to the two talking men. Said nothing. Did nothing. Simply *stood*. It was *amazing*. Calden had no idea what was happening, but he could *see* the two wealthy men growing uncomfortable. The tension built with every beat of the dance, until finally, someone did *anything*.

“Guard of the Word, you see?” He said, gesturing with a finger at her, tapping the badge on her arm. “One of the sworn silent.”

“Don’t touch her.” His friend said, “Just... just let her walk on.”

The scissors-woman turned around, pointedly swivelling on one heel and looking down at her own shoulder - as if presenting it to the men. She raised one eyebrow, and her nostrils flared, like a bull’s, before she stepped back on, the way she came, stopping by Calden this time. She looked at him, her expression momentarily curious, before gesturing at her shoulder - at the patch.

The design had the Guard’s seal in the centre - the crossed swords and the scale that even was used by the bled lows out in Shorstein. Around it, however, was arranged a strange pattern of lines and dots, never intersecting, in a circle. Beneath that, in a white field: **Officer Haurvjec**.

Calden focused on those words so hard that he didn’t even realise what he was showing her. She turned her shoulder away from him, leaning forwards to look him in the eye - and unfortunately,

given the height difference, looking down just meant he looked her squarer in the face. She leant up, peering, narrowing her gaze, her lips twisted to the side thoughtfully...

Then the moment passed. Like a snapped cord. She turned away and stepped back to circle around the ballroom floor, her hands returning to the small of her back, each step clipped as they could be.

"See?" said the first nobleman. "She doesn't like the slaves any more than you do. Stared that one down - surprised she didn't give him a beating right there."

"Mm. Did you see how he looked at her? You'd almost think he could *read*. Actually - you!" He said, raising his almost-empty glass and gesturing with it. "You, over here, now. Don't make me raise my voice."

Calden swallowed and moved over. He'd seen his fair share of bullies in his time, and he could *tell* what was coming next. The glass raised, the finger extended, and -

"Whai, if it isn't the Lords Wemner and Ward~!" came a sweet, silvery voice, and Calden thanked god for the momentary reprieve.

With a jingle of silver and a glittering of jewellery, up flounced a petite frame in manifold skirts, ballroom gown billowing out like an elaborate mint-green rose. Pale skin like fine porcelain contrasted with raven-black hair, so black as to seem *blue*, and large brown eyes with fine eyelashes batted while pink-painted lips parted. "Ah never imagined Ah might see one of your fine station teasing the help~!"

Calden was dumbfounded, but it didn't hurt affairs any, because so to were both of the lords. One of the pair immediately burst into a smile, while the other embarrassedly tried to hide the hand he had been pointing at Calden, like he was caught with his riding crop in his hand. "Why, Lady Manifeste~!" He responded, his tone carrying that same gentle, flirtatious note. Lacking a graceful escape, Calden just *stood* - because he hadn't been told to go. If he left, he'd be caught and beaten. If he overstayed his welcome, one of these two lords would get embarrassed, or god help him, the lady would draw some joy out of tormenting him, and *that* could not possibly go well.

*Look down.*

"Ah'm dreadfully sorry, Ah actually needed one of the slaves for something myself," she said, gesturing up at Calden. "You had no real need for this one, did you?"

"Oh, nothing meaningful," said Ward, or Wemner. Whichever.

"Then if Ah may, just for a minute, and Ah'll be back to enjoy a dance with whichever of your fine gentleselves feels more moved to the music?~"

Walking away from the pair, Calden felt enormous relief, coupled with gratitude to this woman. It hardly mattered *what* she wanted of him, it couldn't be worse than standing there to be tormented by a pair of people doing it out of boredom. He didn't even notice her leading him around the corner, away from the ballroom music, and halfway up the stairs to the next landing. That's when she whirled around and, standing on a higher stair, grabbed him by the sides of his head and started to shake him.

“What are you, you, you great stupid hunk of *duh*, what are you *doing*, you are *ruining everything*.”

Calden blinked, eyes wide. What in god’s name was he supposed to do *now*?!

“Where’s Chuff?”

“Chup?”

“Whatever! The skinny white one! Lips like a frog!”

“He’s down in the kitchens...”

“And the key? Did he give you the key?”

“What?”

“*Augh!*” the girl threw her hands in the air and stomped up the stairs slightly. “You have *no idea*, do you? Do you know *how long* I’ve been *planning* this?!”

“... No?”

The girl put her hand on her forehead, pinching her nose. “Okay, they’re *nobles*, they’re *allowed* to be idiots, but you’re not! You do *useful* things! God!” And as if to compliment the sentiment, she smacked him in the forehead with a gloved hand. Turning around, she crooked her finger under her chin, tapping her finger against her lips. “Okay, okay. You’re coming with me upstairs. At the very *least*.”

“I, er, what-?”

“Oh, don’t you go getting *ideas*. What’s your name?” She asked, snapping her fingers impatiently.

“Calden.”

“Kalden? With a K?”

“No. Caldén. With a C.”

And she leant forwards with a sly smile. “Okay. Okay, Caldén. You’re going to keep my little secret and I’ll keep yours. Okay? Come on.”

Like a balloon on a string, Caldén drifted upstairs, hand pulled by the tiny girl in the expensive dress.

\*

When they’d reached the Bridge Wing Solarium, with its wide open windows and its sunny veranda that oversaw the canals, she had pushed him to the doorway. “Open them, and wait out there, okay? I’ll only need you for a moment.”

Confusion was almost comforting. As long as a noble was bossing him around, he could just abdicate his responsibilities. A person would have reacted to all this with obvious suspicion. But a slave didn’t have t-

“You know, you’re a bit of a coward.”

Calden turned to look back into the room - but halfway through the turn, he stopped short. Emira sat, crouched, on the corner of the veranda railing, her fingertips touching the rail by her hand.

“Um. Hello?” Calden said, blinking slowly. Six months absent and then this.

“Yeah. I mean, think about it. You know you’re a slave, right? We’re talking about *slavery*. You’re *owned*. You’re someone’s *possession*. You don’t even know who that someone *is!*”

For Calden, it had been six months. Emira didn’t *quite* have the same relationship he did with the flow of time – and this wasn’t out of type for her. The only surprise, really, was how she’d somehow appeared by him three storeys up from the street level, four up from the canals. “What are you- how did you-”

“That doesn’t *bother* you? Doesn’t it bug you to think that-”

“Does it *matter* if it bothers me?” Calden managed, leaning back - bumping into the now-closed doors.

“Yes, of *course* it matters. You’re a person, you’re a person like them! Stop being such a great patient arse.”

Calden kept the demon down, and raised his hands defensively. “Why do *you* care? Can’t you just leave? I mean, you-”

“... I *can* leave,” Emira said, her tone of voice cautious and arch, like a cat leading a choir. Then she leant forwards, nose almost touching Calden’s. “But if I *do*, you’re just going to stay here cleaning their toilets until everything starts *burning*, and that’ll be a *waste*.”

“A waste of what?”

“You! A person! You remember you have a *name*, right?” Emira asked, waving one hand, frustrated.

“I just don’t want to-”

“You just don’t want to *want*, that’s all,” she said, and it was like an accusation. “You’re afraid that if you have an opinion on what happens to you, you might have to fight to defend it. Is that it? Is that what scares you?”

*We’ve spoken twice*, Calden thought. *So how do you know me so well?*

The glass doors behind Calden rattled. He spun on his heel, looking in, even as he saw Emira leap like a shadow up to the rooftop. She looked down at him, pointed at her eyes, then pointed at his, before running back up the pointed rooftops, into the shadow of a spire - and then she was gone.

The Lady Manifeste pulled the door open, her expression irritated. “Choff was able to drop off the keys, but the combination’s changed.” she explained to Calden, who, of course, had no idea what she was talking about.

“The combination?”

“To the safe. To the bank script vault that the Magistrate uses to guarantee loans. That – augh!” she threw her hands in the air, then flopped down onto one of the heavy wicker chairs. “Okay, so we’re just going to throw the safe in the river. That should ruin the records, okay?” She sighed, and rubbed her forehead. “I hate throwing away so much money.”

Calden rubbed his forehead as he stepped into the room again. “Um, Lady Manifeste,” he began-

“Miel. And I’m not a lady.” She huffed, putting her elbows on her knees, her chin in her hand.

“Oh, I’m sorry, Miss Miel,”

“No, I’m not a *lady*. I mean, I’m not-” Miel gave him a look and shook *his* head. “Good grief. This cover only has a few more hours good in it, after all. Hi. I’m Miel. I make the world a better place and look amazing in a dress.”

Calden tilted his head and rubbed the back of his neck. This was going to take some explanation. Sitting on the opposite wicker chair, he reached into the borrowed shirt and produced on its little chain, his soul. There were few things he could be sure of, fewer things he could be comfortable about, at the moment.

Meanwhile, downstairs, the murders began.

\*

If either Miel or Calden had been appreciators of fine irony, they’d have been able to see it in how the riot started. The iron-sided trawler had arrived on the river ways, and brought with it a load of sailors expecting commission pay, and a retainer for the next cycle out into the deep. They hadn’t been expecting severance pay, smaller than they’d been promised and delivered with phrases like *due to the decreasing cost of labour*. The sailors certainly didn’t see it, as they bellowed in the street, rousing the slum-struck population of the unemployed and poor, as they stoked a rage that was just waiting for its voice.

They’d maybe see more in that the guards, considering themselves the elites of the town, were so rapidly pulled to the ground by the rioting mob and beaten to death. Fancy uniforms and polished helmets did a fantastic job of seeming very pretty for a party, but didn’t necessarily save a man from being kicked to death by outraged sailors at the head of a mob.

The Magistrate had stood before them on the front step of his estate, raised his fist, and angrily declared that they were all damned to hell for this, for daring to rise above their station, for affronting him on this night. They would all burn in hell, he decreed, and demanded they leave. He probably didn’t appreciate the irony in that his attempt to quell the mob by threatening their immortal souls only resulted in someone throwing a brick at him.

Perhaps there was irony in that the finest guardswoman in the building had slipped from the party. Slavery under the church’s auspice was *legal*. It was *acceptable*. And she, who had pledged her very voice to the law, rankled at that fact every day. Of course, the way the church could *legally* treat its Indentured Charges - technical doublespeak to hide the word *Slave* - was so monstrous that she’d need to find hideous things over a prolonged period of time to be able to *start* an official investigation. Most guards would be discouraged by that. The slaves, the source of the contention

that started the riot, were why the one person who could most easily put down the riot was not there to stop it, instead checking basement areas and slave quarters, searching for the signs of abuse she knew had to be there.

Whatever the source of irony, it didn't stop the bloody assault on the noble party and the Magistrate's three-wing estate from being much more steel-y.

\*

"What's that sound?"

Calden didn't know, but he didn't like it. Somewhere, there were breaking panes and screams and the smell of fire. He ran to the double doors, swinging them open and running to the balcony to look out at the other Wings of the building. A dull glow from each building's first floor, billows of black smoke spiralling up into the sky. "Trouble," he shot back.

"Oh, you've no idea, Lady," a third voice said. Calden stood, sharply, running back to the threshold between veranda and room, as Miel ran to his side, skirts rustling and heels clicking. Some ten men and women, maybe more, with pipes, chains, knives and bricks, flowed into the room, circling around the open doors,

These people were angry. It was reasonable that they be so angry. They were poor, they were hungry, and they had no God to care for them. The Church had damned them in this one night, and it was their souls they burnt in the Magistrate's pyre.

"Don't know what you're doing with the noble, son," said the leader, stepping forwards meaningfully, steadying the metal pipe in his hands. "But we're here to send a message - an' we don't be having keep with no half-measures."

Behind him, a river and a noble in an enormous dress. Well, not a noble. They didn't know that, but how was he going to explain that? Worse still was Miel clinging to his arm, the smaller boy trying to hide in Calden's shadow. Just as the plan formed, Calden heard.

*"I can't swim."*

"What?" Calden blurted.

*"I. Can't. Swim."* Miel said. "So don't you *dare* jump." He was an amazing actor, Calden knew that much - but right now, he sounded afraid. He sounded very afraid. "Don't go." He pleaded.

Calden straightened up, adjusting his servant's dress. He straightened up proudly and adjusted his hair, raising his hands. "I think we can explain--"

The pipe cracked against his cheek and sent blood spattering across the room. "I *said*," the man raised his voice, "MOVE."

*No you didn't*, Calden's thought shot back. *You didn't say that*. But he didn't move. He stood with his feet planted, and he straightened up, feeling the blood run down his chin, into his shirt, and soak his skin. "No."

There was a mob behind him. Calden could see a few of them who were at least his size, clad in coveralls and wearing old strips of curtain or washing rags around their faces as smoke masks, hiding their faces, but not their eyes.

He'd seen this look before.

It'd been the look on Father Shipman's face when leaving the church to attend the witch stoning.

He couldn't fight them all. Not on his own. There were too many of them, and all it would take was one grabbing Miel. Teeth sank into his lower lip. It had been a long, long time since Calden had done anything violent - anything.

Standing tall, he drew his breath, and tried to unclench his fists. "No." He couldn't.

"Alright, then, son," said the man in front. "I'll respect that," he said, turning and stepping back slightly. Then, he swung back around, pipe arcing before him to crack into Calden's temple - sending another hot wash of blood down his cheek.

"If you've any wit left in your head," the leader said, "You'll *step aside*, son. I'm already bein' kinder than I should!"

Calden looked down, woozy, feeling himself start to shake. One hand unfolded, just barely, and he reached up to his throat, feeling the chain of his talisman. His replacement soul. Dragging on the chain, he looked at it, just for a moment, feeling blood pooling in his hand. Even now, the bone was pristine. He was going to die here because he couldn't stop a mob and couldn't let them go. And if he was going to die... what did it matter?

Calden closed his bloody hand over the bone charm, feeling the sticky fluid, contrast with the clean bone. A tremble ran through his arm, as he drew his hand away, and saw the lines lighting up. Red and white - the channels in the bone drawing the blood away from its surfaces, into the pattern. Like it was lit from within... like something inside it wanted to escape.

Calden let it go, feeling it thud against his chest, and looked up again. Whatever it was in his eyes, the leader of the mob saw it - and took a half-step back. "You h-hear me, boy?" he repeated - but the *fear* was right *there*.

No, not a leader. He wasn't a leader - he was just the man in front.

He was the first target.

## Part Five

Let darkness and shadow of death stain it, let a cloud dwell in his heart, but shall believe that - those things which he saith That which cometh out of the mouth, this defileth a man.

\*

Thank god Miel had been there! He'd slammed the doors of the veranda and leant against them to try and keep them closed, which was tactically sound. When the sound had died down, and there were more whimpers than war cries, Miel had opened the doors and dragged a half-aware Calden away from whatever it was he was still punching.

They'd gotten downstairs, and Calden had gathered his senses somewhat, before guards found them. Miel flung himself into their arm, *swooning*, pointing back at Calden. "Whai, Ah don't know what Ah would have done if not for mah heroic protector~!"

Even in a swoon, that slightly flirty air.

And so the guards had nodded, and respectfully taken Lady Manifeste by the arm and led her out of the building so she could partake of some cool water and night air, and maybe gather her wits. Then they'd taken Calden by his bloodstained wrists, bolted his arms behind his back in a clamp, and thrown him into a cart to be hauled on to Brinkwater prison. He'd stood in the centre of the enormous elevator, surrounded by guards with guns and nightsticks, listening to the roar of water and feeling the plummet of the chamber down, down, down into the depths of Brinkwater's silent stone, where he'd been thrown into a gloomy little cell, with a number on the door for when his owner came to pick him up.

If Miel hadn't been there, things could have gone *really badly*.

\*

Calden was grateful for the cell. The cell was a place he could sit and think and nobody was going to come and move him or ask him to work. He could sit in the corner, legs curled up against his chest, hands holding his soul against his knees, his hair fallen into his face like a curtain, and pretend the cell was even smaller still.

What had he *done*. There had been so many of them, and they were only angry because... Calden cast his mind back to his lessons in the Books. The world was fair, the world was just - he *knew* it was, because God had said so. If he knew that, then what had happened had to make some kind of sense.

The people had been angry, and they had sinned. The Magistrate had damned them, and they had lost their souls. Then, knowing there was nothing worse that could happen to them, rather than recoil in shame, they'd stormed the gates and started the burning. Maybe they were demons, then, beasts without souls? God did sometimes do that. He had hardened the Faru's heart, and *made* him reject Moses. He had taken the Corinthians and made them turn to fornication - those profane acts sinners loved. God *did* that. God *made* people sin, so perhaps he had made them riot, to punish... who? Who was working against the will of God? Who *needed* judgement?

Wasn't the world *right*?

That thought made Calden sick in his stomach, feeling ashes pile up inside him. If this world wasn't *right*, then he'd have to consider everything he'd done differently. If the world wasn't *right*, then maybe the people he obeyed weren't right. That was terrifying - to be adrift on a sea of possibilities, to have no place to stand at all.

The Books didn't contain much discussion of what it meant to have no soul. There was plenty of talk about witchcraft, particularly the passage of *suffer not the witch to live*, and everyone seemed to remember that one. The absence of a soul, however, was more or less absent. Some of the later passages spoke of *soulless monsters*, a phrase that was pounding against the chamber door in Calden's head as he tried to ignore it.

The charm was clean, now. The blood had soaked into it, or perhaps the demon had eaten it. Calden's hands didn't have blood on them, either - not his nor theirs. It was very strange. Many of the Books spoke of the terrible weight of ending a life. The Lord had said that no man would be held guiltless. The Lord said those who broke one piece of the law would be guilty of breaking all of it.

The Bursar had killed people, though.

The Bursar had killed people and not shown as much as a breath of sorrow. And the Bursar was respected in the church, he was - well, he had fought the bandits with the fury that showed God was on his side.

Calden let his head hit his knees.

Great big little damned boy, all twisted up inside trying to imagine the world into what he was told it should be.

\*

Officer Haurvjec stepped around the edges of the circle, her steps deliberate. A small notepad in one hand, a pen in the other, her shorthand raced across the page despite the seeming stillness of her hand. Around her, the building still smelled of burnt wood and flesh.

*twenty-two bodies,*

*six dead, rest heavily injured*

*hospitaliers claim typical of riot*

The sun baked through the windows, tall as the room. The bottom panes of the large door were still marked with the blood that spread across the floor in an irregular semicircle. Folding at the knees, she hunkered down and ran a gloved finger through the gouges in the wood. Some of the lines ran through bloody patches, but had no blood in them - indicating they were made after the initial spatter.

*extremely violent fight*

*during a fire?*

*why?*

Haurvjec should, to the most literal interpretation of her role, be disappointed that she had not prevented the riot. The Guard had deployed her, an Oathed officer, with all the power that followed, to help protect and provide security to the Magistrate's partygoers. She *wasn't*, but she had script in her notes that she would reserve some time to try and ensure she did, in fact, feel disappointed. Or at least thought about it.

The law said that riots were illegal, and the people had rioted. The law said murder was illegal, and people had murdered. The law said slavery was illegal, and she *knew* that there were slaves here. There was more sympathy in the silver-haired woman for those guards who had stumbled and faced the wrath of the mob. *They* had been doing their *jobs*.

Still kneeling, she considered the strangely uniform pattern. Like the brawlers had all been hitting one another in deference to something set in the centre of the circle, or avoiding being too close to the sunroom's windows. One gloved hand on the wood, she slowly made her way forward, peering at the smoke-damaged wood, closer to the centre of that arc.

Notepad on the floor, she kept taking notes, words still following ramrod-straight lines, as she peered down at the wood.

*safe was fire-damaged*

*nothing but ashes inside*

*but safe was hidden in the wall, not near the window*

Blowing on the soot, she stared ever more intensely, leaning closer.

The line that showed itself took some interpretation to see, but the faintest crimson edge to it that hadn't been entirely lost as it mixed with the fire's leavings. The outline of the an *enormous* handprint, pressed down against the ground, into which ash and soot had soaked.

Haurvjec stood up, tapping her chin with the pen. Well. This was interesting.

*One fighter against many.*

*Extremely large, hands easily thirty-five cim span.*

A moment of consideration, and she added a \*. How fortunate.

\*

They'd left him in most of the clothes from the party. Taken his boots, because that made it easier to run, and besides, boots like that were worth a coin or two to the right huge-footed nobleman. The overcoat was gone, but he could keep the vest and trousers. Underneath what was, originally, an undershirt, and now was just a *shirt*, Calden's bone charm sat against his bare skin.

He fancied, at times, he could hear its heartbeat. With his head and back pressed against the wall, in the suffusing quiet, where the waters outside didn't stir the stone, he could feel his own heartbeat; and a moment later, like a pulse in his ears, he thought he heard its heart beat.

If he remembered the Books correctly, once a prophet had learned from a talking donkey. King Saul learned of his own death from a witch who summoned up the ghost of Samuel. The Kings of Babylon hosted the Children for times, and they were blessed by listening to Daniel, who judged them.

There was... one.

There was Ruth.

Ruth had not been a judge, at least, not normally. She had her own Book in the Books. She had a story that told of being from outside, of suffering, and loss, and learning to find her place. She accepted the ways of God and she became part of the Children and her bloodline gave rise to The Lord, if Calden remembered correctly.

... So perhaps...

*Maybe...*

... He could be a judge.

A soulless demon judge.

\*

Calden's thinking did run in circles for a while; that aching thought that he was doing something wrong, or being in the wrong place somehow, waiting punishment that he wasn't sure he deserved or not - that much didn't change, no matter what happened. Guilt was a fantastic companion, because it wouldn't leave you even if it should. A meal happened, then a bit later, another meal. Each time it was pretty typical. It made sense - good food was expensive, and there were, no doubt, many prisoners. It was just another trial to endure, another part of his life he had to accept.

It did not become a man to consider himself over his station. After all, was it not said, *Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things; not answering back?* He could remember the Books, even if in this place, there was no way to read them.

The guards spoke, around their corner, reflected in the shadows on the wall. A third figure moved into the light, around the corner, and the speech became muddier, less distinct. The only words Calden could piece together of what was said drifted into the room:

"I dunno what she's going to say, or anythin'."

Other prisoners shuffled and shifted at the words. They drew near the bars, they leant sideways, trying to listen as if the sound alone was a kind of freedom. Brinkwater was not, really, a very nice prison. These cells lived down below the water line, and at night, the stones seemed to sing. More than a few of the other prisoners seemed quite deranged.

A rock hit Calden in the head, and he looked up from his position, curled in the corner, his head on his knees, his hair in his eyes. Standing before him in her woollen coat, her gloves, and her stern expression, was the silver-haired woman with the patch on her shoulder. She held in her hand a notebook, upon which she held a few loose pages, upon which she'd written, in an aristocratic, clean script:

*You are literate. I could tell when you looked at my badge. Don't worry, I am not going to tell anyone.*

*Inasmuch as we can, you and I need to talk.*

*Do not speak aloud.*

*I do not trust the guards.*

Calden swallowed, looking at the words, drawing close to the bars. He looked at the page, then at her, then at the pen she was offering. Then again - what if he was misunderstanding? What if this was a test...?

*How can I help you, Officer*

Pen passed back and forth, and she gave him a look that might have almost be considered a smile.

*You were at the Magistrate's during the riot.*

*In the upstairs Solarium, there was an incident with at least twenty injured.*

*You know about this.*

Calden bit his lip.

*I do not much care for how things shook out in a riot.*

*Lawbreakers are lawbreakers, and each will be judged according to their deeds.*

Calden wriggled his fingers, gesturing for the pen, permission to interrupt.

*Are you a judge...?*

*I am not justice*

*But I know its name*

*And we speak regularly*

Calden nodded at that.

*What interests me is the state of affairs for yourself as a slave in the ownership of the church.*

*Indentured.*

*Slave.*

*Indentured*

*Slave.*

*I am more patient than you in this regard, young man.*

*Indentured.*

She gave him an annoyed look.

*There are not many slaves with whom I can communicate.*

*There is a deliberate need to keep them illiterate.*

*I would recommend you keep such information to yourself.*

*You can speak of the Books and Scripture all you like -*

*Slaves are meant to be pious, whether they have souls or not.*

~~*slaves indentured*~~

~~*Slaves Indentured*~~

*You are starting to irritate me.*

*I apologise.*

*What is your name?*

*Calden*

*Not Kalden?*

*Please no*

*I see.*

*Tomorrow, if all goes well, I will be returning with some guards.*

*I will confiscate you as evidence, and we will have a conversation on how you were treated.*

*Be prepared and understanding if guards come for you of the morning.*

*Do not speak to any guards but me of this matter.*

And she turned on her heel, book vanishing about her person as she walked away. Calden stood, watching her go - it seemed impolite to do otherwise.

\*

When she was gone, Calden fished the talisman out again.

The patterns on it were definitely intricate. He could not see any of the typical demonian symbols, the signs that energies inappropriate were coursing through it. Once, one of the children had drawn a star on the back of a pew in chalk, and circled it - which had prompted a thorough investigation of

the church and a ritual to cleanse the building. There were symbols and words that were not permitted, Calden knew that much.

It always was such a relief, really.

Calden didn't have to *think* about it back then. His soul, unknown to him, was sitting in a box, maintained by someone else. Whether he was good or bad or right or wrong didn't really matter because someone else was taking care of it.

Learning to navigate his own soul was taking quite some time.

Tiredness came. Calden slid the bone charm back under his shirt and put his head to the wall for sleep. In the morning, he would meet with the investigator, to discuss how indentured people were treated.

\*

The officer wasn't there in the morning. It was a different pair of guards, who showed him out of the prison, up the keys to the sea level. Then he was loaded onto a cart with a small cage on it, and driven swiftly to the vast white Cathedral of Seventeen Stars. Some people threw bricks at the guards, and when the cart slowed at a corner, some people leapt onto the side, only to be taught to stay down with a truncheon.

Before letting him walk on his own, the guards had fixed Calden's wrists into a bracer cuff. Not a chain, like many other prisoners had, but a single fixed bar that ran straight with a bolthole in the centre. They cuffed it behind his back, then padlocked the chain that ran down to the bar between his ankles.

"Know what you're capable of, after all," said one broken-nose guard who probably made only a fraction more than the rioters he put down on the journey to the cathedral. "You ain't layin' hand or hair on Father Gilipollas, you understand me?"

The cathedral had an island to itself, tall and proud with narrow canals on all sides. It was like a moat. Arrayed around the building on deep-sunk posts were lights like the streetlamps, meant to shine light down into the water as well as up into the sky. The white marble facade of the Ranthelm cathedral would reflect the glory of God through all hours.

Calden shuffled onwards, head down, while the guards talked about cards and blackjack and dealings. They opened the cathedral door, and one called aloud. "Father Gilipollas! Your charge is here!"

From one of the side entrances emerged a small man, nearly bent double in a perpetual bow. Silver-grey hair mostly on his head, his bare dome gave him a quiet dignity. Robes of dark purple indicating stature, even as the threadbare fading at the hems suggested he didn't care as much for his status as his peers did. He had a birdlike nose, but it was a friendly bird, at least. "Ah, yes, yes, the islander boy!" he said, gesturing. "We were hoping you'd fit in here and work down in the pipe room. I understand you worked the clock tower out in Shorstein?"

Calden nodded, slowly. Being addressed directly when there were guards around always meant there was a wrong thing to do-

A guard's boot hit him in the ankle. "Speak when you're spoken to, boy."

Calden cleared his throat, still with his head down. "Yes. I was taught by Father Shipman?" He offered.

Another blow to his leg. "Answer the question. No more, no less." The guard said.

"Oh dear," said the Father. "Um, if you two gentlemen don't mind waiting here? I would walk with the boy for a bit, and see what I can do of Shipman's son."

The guards offered a little grumble, checking between themselves, then agreed. Caldén's steps after the old man were only as long as the bar could let him, but that was long enough to keep up with the little old man.

Calden imagined most churches had an arrangement much like this, but for the font in the centre. In Shorstein, the church had two rows of pews, equal down to the front. In this, there was a small plinth in the centre of the room, upon which a stone about the size of Caldén's head rested. He tried not to stare at it as he shuffled along, but the curiosity was too much.

"Ah," the old man said. "The stone of the Final Prophecy," he went on, waving a bony finger. "A replica, alas - the real relic is in the Primus' palace, as it would be. Don't worry if you can't read it." He cleared his throat, and spoke, in time with Caldén reading the words on the stone.

*"in the last days, men will turn to wickedness and hate  
of the final slaves bought, one will rise up, and in his hand hold the fire of the sun  
outstretched, radiant, he will touch the face of god  
and in so doing  
end the world"*

"That's it?" Caldén asked, looking at the stone.

"What, you expected more?" The old man's smile was wry.

"I mean, isn't a prophecy meant to - I mean, that's so vague." He turned. "In the Books, it's said the Lord will be a Nazarene, and he was born in Nazareth."

"Bethlehem." Father Gilipollas responded, clearing his throat - a gentle admonition.

Caldén paused, blinking. "Oh, right. The Lord was *raised* in Nazareth."

"Egypt."

Caldén blinked again, peering at the scholar. "What?"

"Shortly after he was born in Bethlehem, the Lord's family gathered him up and fled to Egypt. 'He took the young child and his mother by night, and departed into Egypt.' Second newbook, second chapter, nineteenth verse."

Calden turned to look at the old priest directly, hands behind his back. "Fifth newbook, second chapter, thirty-ninth verse: 'When they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own city Nazareth.'"

Now it was the scholar's turn to blink. But that was all he did - turning back to the prophecy. "Whatever, it doesn't matter," he said, of the contradiction in the infallible holy books between the accounts of the birth of the most important person in the history of the Church, "Prophecy need not be apocalypses and horse-haired scorpions. The words were written and the words will be true." He nodded. "You can see why we cannot abandon the practice of slavery, no?"

"I didn't ask th-" Calden began.

"It is a warning against changing our ways!" the scholar said, circling around the stone, his hands tucked behind his back. "If we *stopped*, then there *would* be final slaves who could lead this rout, touch god, and end the world. You see...?"

Calden nodded, very slowly. They *had* to. So that was that.

Bubbling away in the stew of thoughts as Calden walked through the cathedral, not even noticing the clink of the chains at his ankles or behind his back, was the prophecy was *a* thing that could happen. It didn't have to be the only thing. And there were other slaves being bought and sold, so it wasn't like he was at risk of being the dread thing that ended the world. What if-

"Has there ever been a Judge who was a slave?" Calden asked.

"Not exactly?" He said, shuffling on. "But then again, Daniel was in bondage when he judged Nebukadnezzar. Meschach, Shadrech, Abednego as well; slaves of an unjust owner, but slaves, after a fashion." He said, shuffling on ahead. "And some judges were truly strange!" he said, turning to look at him. "After all, there was Ehud, who was left-handed - and Esther, who was a woman!" He clucked with his tongue and shook his head. "God can find tools in the strangest of places." He leant forwards, and patted Calden's upper arm, seemingly unafraid. "This is why it's so important for even a slave like you to respect the Books. The words and the speeches - even the corrupted text of Lincoln, who spoke out against slavery." The old man shuffled around in a circle and started once more towards the back of the church. "He was willing to accept slavery, if it preserved the rightness of Union - very wise. There will always be those who speak out against God's way. You must just accept that you will not always understand them. God has given you a role and if you but listen to him, you will learn what it is you should do."

The words settled in heavily, and Calden almost spoke again -

"What you should do is obey your master." He was told, the tone sharp. "In case you were in doubt."

Through the side doors, past the vestry. Calden couldn't help but leap inside, seeing how much like the old church in Shorstein it was. The same layout, just bigger. The same living area, just with a subdivision for the kitchen and a large icebox and a larger table, perhaps possible for entertaining. The bookshelf was replaced by a larger library, a closeted wall that swung out and showed row upon row of tightly-packed spines, of possible excursions into the texts of scripture and history. No rickety

wooden staircase leading upwards but a stone spiral, wrapped around a grey pillar. Around the stairs walked Father Gilipollas, down to the part of the spiral that led downwards.

Down, down, down, Calden managed the steps only slightly awkwardly with his feet bound as they were. The room at the end was larger than his old one had been - filled as it was with enormous pipe work and valves, machinery that filled a wall, and a large pressurised tank that seemed to wobble in the half-light with contained heat.

The room was cut in twain by a set of bars. One large door sat nested in the bars, reinforced at the top and the bottom with bolts and restrainers, and the lock had a swinging latch over it, the kind that tried to snap shut and kept the door from closing while the key was in the lock. By the stairs, a smaller chamber of bars stood, with a swinging door and a long, elaborate set of latched metalwork to a handle by the door. At a glance, Calden could tell that the door swung shut when the first was opened, and that it could only be opened from the outside.

"Pipe works and distribution," said Father Gilipollas, gesturing around. "Mff, we don't have a cot set up for you yet, but... well, we weren't expecting you to be so large." He tapped his chin exasperatedly. The machinery and its interfaces were inside the cell, but the master controls, painted red, sat outside. "It's a simple enough job. Keep the water flowing and if the pressure builds up, redistribute it. You'll do fine, I'm sure." He murred, shuffling back and forth before the bars. "Mm. Though that hood might be a bit small for you, too..." he huffed a sigh and turned back to Calden, reaching up to grip his chin in one bony hand.

Calden squinted into the cell. Hanging on the wall, over a little alcove, was a dark black hood. "What's that for?"

Father Gilipollas gave him a quizzical look. "It's for when we have prisoners, of course. Don't worry, the last one was new when he had this job. I'm sure you'll take to it well. Your kind usually do." He turned and looked into the cells again. "Mmm. You *are* awfully tall." He sighed, and shook his head. "Well, take a look around! No more yard work, no more trying to fit in amongst the nobility, my son. Safety, quiet, and privacy, all yours!" And he smiled widely.

Calden tried to smile back. It wasn't the clock tower. It wasn't coming out at nights to enjoy the cold air and help people. It was something, but it wasn't what he'd been hoping for.

*Look down.*

He kept his eyes on the ground, and murmured. "Thank you, Father."

"Good, good. Now, the cot's not arrived, so you can't stay *here*. Don't worry, I'm sure the boys at Brinkwater will want to throw you a going-away party anyway." He clucked his tongue, looking into the cell. "Alright, back up the stairs, son."

\*

Riding back to the prison, Calden slouched in the corner of the cage and enjoyed the feeling of his hands and feet. Without anything better to do with them, he turned his talisman back and forth in his hand, feeling the smooth bone, its interruptions in pattern, the lightness of the whole device. A soul was not a heavy object, after all.

His consideration was broken only once. At first in the corner of his vision, then seizing his attention was a familiar face, with golden tiger-like eyes stared at him, while the cart slowly rounded a corner. She stared and pointed at her eye, then at him.

Emira hadn't left the city yet.

Calden looked down at the Talisman in his hand. In all his musing on the Talisman, on his own soulless nature, of the beast he was and could be... he not once considered disposing of the talisman.

Whatever it was that the bone let him do, whatever it was that raged inside him, Calden accepted its presence. Whether he was a judge, or a judgement.

## Part Six

Sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, guide our feet into the way he should go. When he is old, he will not part from it. You think we need one more? We need one more.

\*

Calden sat in the corner of his cell again, his eyes closed, his head down. Last night in this cell before first day in that new one. Officially, he knew he should be happier. That cell wouldn't stink quite so much and the issue of other prisoners probably didn't mean what he feared it did. There weren't many places in the Books he could remember that spoke of the word *torturer*, or if such a thing was acceptable as a person of the church. Words from around the corner, where he knew the guards stood in bright lamplight with a gas heater, filtered through his thoughtful cocoon.

"There's cell two-four-six-oh-one." one guard said.

"It's occupied. The ox from the Magi's fire."

"Yeah, but he's being picked up in the morning. Going to the Cathedral. Won't hurt 'em to be locked up together."

"Aren't you worried that... uh..."

"Little queer'd probably like it, wouldn't he?"

A loud, sour guffaw.

Calden tried to sit very still, looking up at the back of the numberplate on his cell door. That cell door that swung out a little, then rolled aside. The cell door with 24601 scrawled on it. The walls on either side of him were hard stone, fixed tight. The bars made up one wall so it was easy to see what he was doing.

Two guards rounded the corner from their lit station, and between them they held the arms of a petite, black-haired, porcelain-skinned form.

"Oh!" Calden said, and pointedly didn't say the name that leapt to mind. He tried to keep the smile off his face. It was always nice to see a friend, after all. He kept his head down as they hauled the cell door open, as they threw Miel in, and even as they slouched out. When the stomping of their boots was passed, Calden looked up, no doubt radiating concern. "What-"

Miel rubbed one cheek forlornly, kneeling on the floor where he'd been thrown. "I got caught," was all he managed to say, swallowing. Without makeup, without dresses, without fancy clothing, it was still not obvious that he was anything but a slender girl. The white shift, the plain white pants that looked more like cheap pyjamas than any kind of clothes. He looked lost.

Calden didn't really know what to say, but fortunately, he had a clue of what to do. Sitting back against the wall, Calden held out his arm, and gestured for the smaller boy to come closer.

"They're taking you away in the morning?" Miel asked, huddling in close, against the cold and the dark. "What for?"

“The cathedral wants me.” He swallowed. “I was just waiting here until the church chose where to place me.”

“And you don’t want to.”

Calden bit his lip. “I...” Hard to avoid that instinct, that embarrassment and shame. It echoed in the back of his mind, even though he almost resented it:

*Look down.*

“You can, you know. You’re allowed to want things. Even if you can’t have them. It’ll hurt, but it’ll hurt less not wanting. I’ll listen - we’re friends, after all.” Miel said, looking up at him with those enormous brown eyes. “I don’t want to be here, Calden.” He huffed a sigh and burrowed his face against his chest. “I don’t want to live in a prison, I don’t, I can’t, I can’t... I-” and then the sob cut him off.

Calden slid his arms around Miel, pulling him from sitting next to him to sitting in his lap, and rested his head over the smaller boy’s head. Was Miel his friend? Miel had helped him, and he had protected Miel, and they had spoken, and Miel had trusted him, and... but... was that what a friend was?

Calden thought about the pipe-works. Machinery was comforting. He could imagine learning how it worked, enjoying watching it respond. Being somewhere quiet, somewhere he wasn’t going to deal with the strange looks. It would get hot, though... always hot. Nowhere to swim, nowhere to run. Would he be allowed out to worship, and to stand in the sun...? That cell door had had such a finality to it. And the hood, and the *prisoners* statement.

Calden shuddered.

Calden swallowed. Friends. He could think of Miel as his friend. Now, what did friends do for friends...? Friends helped one another. Reaching into his shirt, he gripped the bone talisman and squeezed it, feeling its edges faintly pressing against him. If he squeezed hard enough, he knew he’d bleed. If he bled, it would taste it. If it tasted it...

The pipe-works may have worked for him... He could make himself content with it. *I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content*, after all. The prison would not work for Miel. Not at all.

He let go of the Talisman, cleared his throat and raised his head.

“Hey, guard?”

Calden slid up to his feet, setting down his *friend* Miel. “Shh,” he murmured, standing up and walking towards the bars. He raised his voice, perhaps for the first time: “Hey! Guard!”

Far away, he heard the grumbling. “You wanna-?”

“Don’t recognise the voice. One of the crazies?”

“Like I know? Just go shut him up.”

“Leave the keys here-”

“What do you think I am, stupid?”

Calden waited by the bars, as the shadow of the guard made its way into the line of cells, looking back and forth for the source of the voice. His hands on the bars, leaning forwards, the brown giant waited until the guard was past again, and called: “Hey, guard.” Quieter, this time. With one hand tucked inside his shirt he gripped the talisman. *This was for a friend.* It’s what he’d want done for himself, if he were in Miel’s position, after all. Sharp edges kissed warm skin and he felt the blood flow. Just a drop. Just a little demon, today.

The guard turned around, squinting at him with piggy little eyes and leant forwards. “That was *you*? Thought you couldn’t talk.” He slouched towards the bars, staying out of what he thought was arm’s reach.

*Thought.*

Calden’s arm lashed out to the man’s face like a gunshot, his huge palm clapping over nose and mouth, thumb grabbing one ear and fingers wrapping around the rest of his face like he was palming a ball. Then with the force of arms that had done more work in one summer than the guard had done in his life, he folded his arm in, spinning the guard around and cracking the back of his skull into the bars, prompting a loud clatter from the helmet and a wince of pain from the man he held. That was noise, noise that would bring a second guard, but Caldén could deal with that problem when it arrived. Grabbing at the guard’s clothes with his free hand, he gripped the man’s sword and pulled it back into the cell, dropping it sharply - another clatter, but the helmet had already rung that bell - and then the man’s gun from the other hip. The guard gripped Caldén’s hand, struggling against him, thrashing, trying to kick back between the bars, lashing back with his head, but the daze of having his head pounded into the bars already made him sluggish. Worse, the lack of air staggered him further, his hands struggling against Caldén’s trunk-like arm.

He was still struggling. Annoying.

Caldén gripped tighter, and *hauled* upwards, and with the force of a sledgehammer slammed the top of the guard’s head against the ceiling, hard enough to dent his helmet, and send a *clang* through the halls. The other prisoners started to chant and holler, throwing themselves against their bars, screaming of the songs of the Things in the Deep.

“What the *hell* is going on in-” the second guard said, rounding the corner, cut short. His face lit up with surprise, just as Caldén tore the helmet from his friend’s head and flung it, edge-on, perpendicular to the ground, straight into his face. He fell backwards, hit his head on the wall behind him and gave an astounded gurgle as he collapsed downwards. Meanwhile, the first guard’s struggles slowed, the lack of air proving too much when combined with the hammer-blows to the top of his head. Caldén slowly relaxed his bloody hand, and dropped the sack of still-a-person onto the ground, turning around to grab the gun and sword.

“Can you...?” he asked, gesturing with the weapons to Miel.

“What are you *doing*?!” Miel answered, which Calden interpreted as *No, probably not*. Well, that was good, it meant it wasn’t a waste to ruin the gun.

Calden grabbed the pistol, checking its four chambers, and bent it open. Pulling the chamber out, he dropped it to the ground, grabbing the thin metal rod that the rotating chamber sat on. Thumb at the base of the rod, he snapped it sheer, and then twisted the tip of the metal into a hook.

A few seconds more, and the lock was picked. Calden hauled forwards, shoving the door out, into its grooves, and swung it to the side. Quickly running over to the further guard, he grabbed him by the front of his tunic and hauled him back to the cell, out of the line of sight. “You okay?” he asked Miel.

“Where did *that* come from!? What the- could you- were you just-” Miel stammered.

“Here,” Calden interrupted, stripping the heavy grey uniform shirt off the guard. Without gun belt and sash, it was still warm and stout, and he held it out for Miel. “Put this on.” He said, before dragging the two men into the corner of the cell, throwing them into a pile. Then, realising his recklessness, Calden checked their pulses.

Oh, that was a relief.

The demon didn’t *have* to kill people.

“Uh, Calden?” Miel said.

“Hm?” He asked, turning to look at his *friend* Miel.

The guard had been a fairly big fellow. A few more beers than he should every few nights, a bit less exercise than he should have. Broad shoulders. Tall, too, maybe six feet. His tunic sleeves hung down over Miel’s hands and the bottom of the tunic reached his knees. “It doesn’t fit.”

Calden didn’t reflect on how adorable he looked as he yanked the belt off a prone guard, tying it around Miel’s waist. A quick work with the sword to put two cuts in the sides of the tunic and his legs were free to move. Then they stole socks and tied them off with the leather straps from gun belts. It took maybe two minutes more.

“Okay, okay, come on. We haven’t got much time,” Miel said, hissing as he dragged Calden by his hand towards the guard’s room.

“We?”

Miel stopped short. “... You were just going to *stay* here, you idiot?”

“W-well,” Calden began.

“You just beat up two guards! And picked a lock! And, and - if they know you can do things like this, they’re *not* going to put you back in a cell! They’re going to like, put you in stocks, or they’ll just *kill* you. Do you *get* it, you gigantic stupid?”

“... Oh.”

"You... okay, we're friends, right?" Miel said, like he was explaining things to a child. "Then *as your friend*, I'm not going to let you stay in here." He shook his head and pushed his hand through his black locks, looking up the hallway, towards the light. "C'mon, you brute, I'm rescuing you."

Calden considered this for a moment. Really, it made complete sense.

"Okay."

And they were of-

"Wait a moment." Calden said, running back to the cell. He was there for a few seconds more, before running back out after Miel. "Okay!" he repeated.

And *then* they were off.

\*

"I'm going to guess you don't have much of a plan for getting out, do you?" Miel asked, as they ran through the guard's station. "I mean, just at a guess."

"Well," Calden coughed nervously as he grabbed a ring of keys and a lamp.

"Okay. There's the lock that they use to transfer people up and down, which is obvious because they want to have control over traffic. But that's a great big construction and it uses pumps and pipes so there *has* to be some access panel. When we came down it halted on three, six, and nine, so there's got to be something there, maybe different systems take over." Miel said, grabbing one of the guards' notebooks and spreading it, scribbling on it. "The whole system seems layered up and down, which makes sense since they had to dig out basalt to get this far down. There were only two guards here, and the way out of the key was," he bit his lip, and tapped the paper, "I think there's probably only eight sets of cells like this on each floor, which means this floor probably only has sixteen guards - fourteen, ahah - and they keep the rest on higher levels."

"I was prisoner 24,601."

"No, you were *item* 24,601. The other cells just have names and labels on them. Some don't even have that."

"That's a *lot* of prisoners--"

"It's a Guard evidence number. You were at a crime scene, you were an object, it- look, it's awful, but trust me. There aren't *twenty thousand* cells here."

Calden nodded. "Alright, then. What about..."

"It's night, they probably only have periodic reporting. If there's a central control station that manages this stuff all up..." Miel drifted off as he looked around the room. It was small, but clean, unlike the hallway from whence they came. Small metal barricades sat folded in the corner, along with an open case clearly for the weapons they carried. A small lamp, one of the expensive battery-fed types, which Calden had taken, and an overhead light, a long tube, the kind that got hot and sparked and foamed. A small countertop ran along one wall, with a poster proclaiming the value of

vigilance - *GOD YIELDS NOT HIS GAZE* - on which rested a sandwich wrapper and pieces of firearm. To the side was a large locked cabinet, with a mesh grill on the front, behind which a pair of dull lights pulsed - green and red. The door of the cabinet was cut so the switch under the red light could be pressed even with the cabinet door closed - but not the switch beneath the green one.

“Ahah!” Miel said, swinging his legs off the bench and tugging the ring of keys from Calden’s hand. “This, this...” he said, tapping his hand on the cabinet. He peered at the cabinet’s lock once, picked one key, and unlocked it as confident as a lord, swinging the cabinet open and peering at the two large switches inside. A green light over one, a red light over the other - Calden could work out the most basic purpose of the cabinet. “Figures. They weren’t going to spend money on broadcast when there really is only two things to say.”

Calden watched, uncomprehending. “Have you been here before?”

“Never.” Miel said, as he reached up to the top of the control board, hooked his fingers in the felt and *pulled*. The whole construction resisted for a moment, then fell forward onto the floor, revealing a nest of wires and valves vanishing into the rest of the box. Letting the board fall down, Miel stopped, pivoting on his hip and looking over at Calden. “I know. I’m great.” Then he was back at the controls, leaning into the cabinet.

“See, thing is, place like this is built so that there’s only one way out, but the easiest way to do *that* is just have a great big pit and a rope, and that’s hard to control and police. So they have individual cells and they have ways for the guards to get down and the guards have ways to get a tea break and places to stash their sandwiches and...” Miel’s voice rose from the technical device as only a pair of legs idly kicking and a backside wiggling. “You’ll find... that what people... *think* a thing is... is very rarely what it *really* is.”

“I guess that I shouldn’t be surprised at that...?” Calden asked, his hands on his knees, staring in stunned amazement as Miel just... *worked*. “I mean, from you.”

“Yeah,” Miel said, his tone distant. “I have an amazing ass.”

Calden blinked and turned his head. “I didn’t s-”

“Shhh.” Then the sound of a spark, and the light dimmed for an instant. Miel stood up and dusted off his hands, pushing back his hair with a smug smile. “Okay! It should keep reporting back every half hour the ‘everything’s fine’ signal. I’d explain it, but really. I mean *really*.” He looked up at Calden. A pause. “I mean, just *really*.”

Calden straightened up, and rubbed his hand through his hair. “I guess? So... now...?”

“Now,” the longsuffering Miel sighed, “We make our way out of here.” He flicked his hand through his hair, smiling smugly. “I’m rescuing you, after all.”

\*

Calden was terrified as they walked through the corridor that led back to the central lock and its vast, roaring elevator. Especially because Miel *talked*.

“Two guards per workstation, two workstations per direction, and the building’s square, so that’s four times two times two, or sixteen, minus the Calden variables,” Miel said, clear and confident. “Stone’s thick and worked, and most people aren’t paying a lot of attention. They each have a duty to pay attention to their prisoners and report back, so, they let that become their whole world. Stop shuffling and stand up straight.”

Calden didn’t even realise he’d been hunching and moving forwards, like he could somehow creep his way around in a room where there weren’t any other people to see him. Just something inside him, something deep and internalised. When in doubt?

“You’re still hunching.”

Good grief, the world looked different, standing tall. Calden closed his hands into fists, and tried to breathe steadily. “Now what.” He asked.

“Now, we break *in* to the maintenance area.” Miel said, pointing down the corridor, away from the front of the lock.

The chamber that raised and lowered to the level of each floor of Brinkwater was about five em by five em on each side, and crafted to float in water. Pumps on each level pulled water away, or fed water in, to raise and lower the massive cage with clockwork precision. Calden remembered travelling down, bound and surrounded by the men who had found him in the Magistrate’s solarium. They hadn’t wanted to get too close, either.

“Shouldn’t we move around-”

“No,” Miel said, cutting Calden off, waving one hand imperiously. “The entire centre column here is the elevator, see?” He put one hand to a stone wall. “See how these bricks are smaller than those?” Miel pointed to the opposite wall, then turned around, pointing down at the flagstones. It was true; the centre column wall had smaller brickwork, “Because they’re thinner bricks. Probably just a fasure hiding the pipe work that feeds into the chamber. No way they try to make it watertight with bricks and mortar.”

“Can we get through that?”

Miel shook his head. “Smashing bricks will get us attention, and there are still fourteen guards down here. We’d have to go to each guard station, take care of the guards quietly, then wire up their station so it didn’t cause an alert.”

The suddenness of Calden’s movement dragged Miel’s head around suddenly. “Wait, what, hey-!”

## Part Seven

They hunt our steps, that we cannot go in our streets: our end is as the appearance of horses; and as horsemen, so shall they stand before his indignation?

\*

If she took the nail, the riot would start.

If she *didn't* take the nail, the riot wouldn't *end*.

These were the kind of concerns most people never had to deal with.

Cities were *terrible* places. Emira had no good explanation for why people ever went near them. They were loud and calamitous and the people in them were focused on doing one thing really well which meant nobody could talk to one another about anything but the most *banal* of topics, and the thing that most of them seemed to want to do was get drunk and vomit in the canals a lot. They wrote things down, but half of those things weren't of any real use or meaning, and they were thrown away, and the only book that everyone had read was a god-awful aggregation of old speeches, scripts, fictional accounts and mythologies that she'd discarded as meaningless crap *years* ago.

Worse, they believed it!

Emira sat in the lotus position before the nail, looking down at it and tried to listen to the sound of the silence. It was late. It was so late, it was early. There were people out, yelling, drinking, but there had to be *something* to set off the chain of events that ended with her out of the city with Calden.

Why?

Well...

*Ever get the feeling you're living your life backwards?*

Emira could feel that concentration swelling up again, which was the exact opposite of what she needed. Anyone could *concentrate*. Concentration was something ploughmen could do. What she needed to do, what she was trying to do, was far harder, and it was to sit so still, and think so little, that she could hear things normally so quiet they were drowned out a thousand times over by errant needs to scratch and the sound of your own blinking.

For want of a nail, went the snippet of folklore. A nail kept a board on a window, which kept a man from seeing a flirt, which kept a noble from losing his trousers, which kept a bottle from being thrown, which kept a pursuit from being begun, which stopped a beating and a lynching of a helpless fool who hadn't built the city sick, and hadn't created the systems that so benefitted him, but who did have the stupid bad luck to fall in love with a young woman whose primary contribution to life was grinding soap flakes and singing songs. But if she didn't take the nail, the nobleman would leave, a girl would be confronted by a man who thought he owned something more than he did of her, and a lie would spread like smoke. Then the rioting *would* start, later, but still on time enough, and not

stop because one wealthy man's blood was spilled for a bad reason. It was, essentially, a pair of bad choices, and they unfolded in the night before Emira like two large, bloody flowers.

Emira opened her eyes very slowly. Folklore always rang with the dullness of the inner ear. People believed folklore stories because they appealed very deeply to some inner aspect of the self. Stupid people doing stupid things was a satisfying narrative because it meant that the stupidity of one's own self was easily excused. Folklore made you superior.

Emira hated folklore. She had something much better.

The theory – no, the hypothesis – no, the conjecture – no, the *meme* was that a butterfly flapping its wings could have enormous, unpredictable consequences in an unrelated location thanks to the diversity of chaos effects. The line of cause and effect, it suggested, was wild and crazy, and the wild was so sensitive a system that small changes could have enormous impacts, that things were never so simple.

Brinkwater prison towered over her from her position under a back-alleyway awning. She could see the nail by her head, the board it held up hanging precariously. The riot would give her the means to breach it without risking capture.

Emira reached up, taking the nail in her hand. Perhaps she was missing something and a lone noble could be spared, by some variable she couldn't quite hear.

\*

Calden hefted the two-handed hammer one of the lockers had held, and tried to ignore Miel's scowl.

"That really wasn't efficient, you know."

Miel didn't get an answer, though, except in the crunching of steel on stone. Caldén adjusted his grip, and *swung* again, pounding the hammerhead into the stone. Whole bricks fell from the mortar, showing themselves to be just studs on the greater surface.

"I mean, just because you *can* beat people up doesn't mean that's the *best* solution. I was going to do something much more elegant."

The next hammer blow cracked mortar, showing darkness and giving rise to the toxic scent of untouched, pressurised, mouldy air.

"I guess what I'm saying is—"

"I hold a grudge." Caldén straightened up, reaching into the hole, swinging his arm up and gripping the substance. He braced his arm, he tensed, and he hauled, pulling outwards. Muscles like tree trunks strained, and with a *groan*, the wall yielded.

"... Wait, hang on, you - what? Why?"

Caldén dusted his hands off, rolling his shoulders, looking into the void, and not at Miel.

“What they said about you.” Calden wasn’t comfortable with these words, these ideas. His friend had been slighted - and well, *that* deserved some attention. It’s what he’d want a friend to do for him, after all. The guards were all part of the whole. They all shared that belief, that outlook. They were part of Brinkwater, and Brinkwater had insulted Miel, and had treated him poorly.

It was really easy to look at the world with a friend. Calden would tolerate things being done to him that he’d never *dare* let anyone do to Miel.

The brickwork tore underneath his hands and blows. “Looks like pipe work all the way up.”

“Does it look heated?”

Calden leant in, and with all the brilliance of a thrown rock, put his hand on a pipe. “Nope. Really cold.”

“You idiot. Okay, so there should be a maintenance panel we can find if we fol-ERK!”

Calden swung Miel up onto his shoulder, and swung himself through the hole. Huge hands closed around pipes, and the slave chose his path.

Upwards, into the darkness, Calden flew.

He was rescuing his friend, after all.

\*

Riots were not a one-time occurrence. A riot is at its core an expression of a disorganised populace who share enough common ground to all want to hate and destroy things that aren’t one another, and in that way, represent the smallest possible unit of human collaboration. In a city like Ranthelm, riots represent the pent-up force of some greater human emotion, swelled up against social pressure and cooked until it bursts forth in a destructive flow; undirected and absolute in its consuming nature.

The scientifically determined smallest possible unit for a riot is one, and that one-person riot was cutting a hot line through the tussling swell of elbows and improvised warfare of another, much larger, but less dangerous riot.

Officer Haurvjec held her gun in one hand, still with its four rounds chambered and its hammer down. The real fear was in her other hand, her short knife of crisp, unadorned steel tucked in against her forearm. The first to rise against her felt a heavy brass ball to the chin; a swung weapon hit the steel, turned aside.

The more people you involved in a mob, the stupider that mob became, by degrees. Six people could manage a murder but twenty struggled to do anything but trample people, and by the time a riot grew to this size, anything it accomplished had to be considered an act of fortune, one way or another.

Ranthelm was the worst place to have a riot, too – the streets were cart-wide, but so often one side of the streets butted against a canal, and whoever rampaged and yelled on that side risked being

thrown over the edge by the two and fro, or twenty and fro, of the crowd as it aimlessly chased for whatever mortal concept they thought could be found in a sufficiently well-paid human's blood.

This was the third such riot. The first, she'd been in a cellar, noting the forensic difference between the bloodstains on a stone floor from the beating of someone who would not stand up to resist, and the bloodstains of someone on their back with no legal recourse to do so. The second riot had seen her standing outside the Field-Marshal Vilholland's estate and staring a force of thirty outraged miners into submission.

This time, she didn't have that luxury.

This time, they were endangering something she *needed*.

Justice would take no steps at all to help anyone in the mob. The law was being broken in a fog around her and the least crimes would be swallowed by the most. Every hand for itself, and the devil could take the hindmost.

She sunk the blade deep into the wrist of one man raising a chain above his head, positioned perfectly to cut through tendons and strike at bone, leaving the man with a jarring pain that echoed longer than the blade ever touched him.

Such harm as could stop a person acting was not necessarily such harm as would stop that person living. Officer Haurvjec was a *master* at harms.

\*

"Okay, this is incredibly stupid," Miel said, after a half hour of climbing. "There's no way you can keep doing this. I mean, hell, when did you last eat?"

Every single pipe had been constructed to slot into place tightly. They all had frilled necks as they met one another, standardised and riveted, and jutting out from the structure enough that Calden could just put his feet on them. For a smaller person, they'd have been too far apart - but for him, it was just like climbing an enormous, cold ladder.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine, you're sweating like you saw me in shorts."

"I'm. Fine."

"If we keep at it like this, we're- hang on. Hang on!" Miel said, reaching up. "We passed the pump stations, which means this ceiling here is... probably... the ceiling for the building itself?" Miel considered. "... Jesus Christ, you were really *moving*, you great big thing." Miel peered down, before slithering off Calden's shoulder.

"This is just, the worst plan of all worst plans. I want you to remember that. If this all works, I'm going to be very surprised."

Calden hung on the edges, flexing his feet. The whole experience was very peaceful. The task before him was simple. Climb until there wasn't any more climbing to do. He had put one foot before the

other, taken one step after the other. Without any more climbing to do, at least for the moment, he could be at peace.

“So, uh, Calden?” Miel’s voice came from the darkness before him.

“Yeah?”

“There’s a hatch here that leads down? But um. I don’t know if you’ll fit up here. It’s not a lot of headroom. Thirty cim? Maybe?”

“... I think I can fit that?”

“If you turn your head on the side? I mean, I’m not trying to be rude here, but you have a pretty big head. And, uh-”

“Uh?”

“The hatch *is* locked. On the other side.”

“Oh.”

“So I was sort of figuring we have a look at it and see what we can do to, um,”

“Break it.”

“Well, yes.”

“Alright, gimme a moment.”

Crawling up into that space was an ache. Calden had to turn his head, to press himself flat and inch forwards, feeling the pressure of the pipes on his chest and the ceiling on his back. Breathing shallowly, he squirmed and wriggled, trying to move *oh so little*, to not kick pipes, to not *make sound*, as he wriggled his way towards the centre. He was almost at the hatch when he heard the voices.

“Come on. The key. Now.”

“Young woman, I-”

“I do *not* remember telling you you were allowed to talk.”

“...”

“See? You can learn. Okay, seriously. The key. Now.”

An indignant sputter. Then, a grunt. “It’s a maintenance hatch! It doesn’t connect to the prison *anywhere!*”

“I *know* what I’m doing. *Trust* me on this one. I *know* what I’m doing.”

Two heads leant towards the hatch, trying to peer through the fine mesh grille. While Calden's mind raced with the question of *what the hell*- the hatch opened, and there, looking up at them, exasperated, was Emira.

"Okay, this is the last time, I swear." She said, shaking her finger at Calden. "Come *on*, I don't have much time left to wait for iou two."

"What?" Miel asked, looking sharply between the two. "Wait, I don't care, forget I asked," he said, swinging his legs over the edge of the hatch and dropping down to the ground. Calden wasn't sure what he'd been expecting at the top of Brinkwater prison, but an expensive red carpet definitely wasn't one of the possibilities.

"Where -"

"Prison Foreman's office." Emira said, gesturing for Calden to follow her. Tall bookshelves lined one wall, paintings resting in blank spaces on the opposite. An expensive desk, a more expensive writing set, a ridiculously expensive time-piece... and a man that Calden wouldn't have noticed in a half-crowded room, sitting in the seat, bound about with ropes. Rope across his mouth, his eyes annoyed - what had *happened* here? He turned to Emira, then whipped his head around to Miel, who was approaching the door, only-

"Don't," Emira said, moving towards the window.

"I-"

Then the door swung open, and bloodstained and grim, Officer Haurvjec stood in the doorway, a knife in one hand, stained to the hilt. She looked at the three with utter surprise, put hand to her belt and drew her gun, her lips parted in a wordless shout. The expression said it all, though: *Stop*.

Miel was behind Calden. Again. Emira by the window. The Prison Foreman in his chair. There was nobody that gun could hit, aside from Calden.

"... Officer..." Calden said, stepping back slowly. "If... I... you..." he swallowed. "Officer, if I stay, can my friends leave?"

Even as he asked, it, he knew what the answer would be. Not spoken, of course – she simply surged forwards, but *not* towards Emira and Calden; she darted to the Foreman's desk, her blade slicing air, then the rope binding his mouth.

"Total lockdown!" he yelled, lunging forwards, trying to squirm out of his ropes the second he was freed. "Do you have *any idea* what's going on out there now?!" he bellowed, veins jutting on his throat. "Get these scum back in their cells! I need four men up here, and bring ropes, this yellow b-"

The officer clapped her hand over his mouth for a moment, and turned to narrow her gaze at the three. She pointed with the knife in her left hand, drops of blood falling to scatter atop the desk.

"... No...?" Calden asked, backing up.

She shook her head grimly. What gesture could she give, for *there's a riot outside? Twenty guards dead, dozens more rioters, and here you are?* Life was lonely for a woman with no voice, but she had never before felt so *thwarted* in her life.

"Because," and he stepped backwards. He already *knew* why. "... Because breaking out of jail is against the law...?"

A grim nod. Her eyes narrowed, her lips tight. If they'd just *run* already, if those two had *escaped*, things would be so much easier, but everyone was paralysed, waiting on Calden... Of course. The boy was so huge that he had a *wake*.

Calden drew a breath... then nodded. "I understand, officer."

Then he turned on his heel, spread his arms wide, scooped up Miel, and ran *through* the window.

As glass and lead smashed around him, as he heard Miel screaming in his ear "*I STILL CAN'T SWIM YOU IDIO-*" as the pain of his cuts shredded his clothes and the dark of the river came up to swallow him, Calden couldn't help but do what the entire climb he'd avoided:

Look down.

## Part Eight

The waters of the great deep hath made the depths of the sea, a place for dragons, an astonishment, and an hissing, without any hope in him.

\*

In many stories Calden had overheard as a child, there were moments like these. The daring adventurer leapt from a high place down into the dark and murky depths, saved by the way the water yielded and swallowed him - and it was always a him - up. Once, he'd fallen from the clock tower onto the hard cobbles beneath, and the impact had been enough to knock the breath out of him. Surely hitting the river would not be much worse?

Intuitively, though, he turned, rolling with Miel held to his chest, and *thudded* into the surface of the water like a sack of dropped stones. It was like hitting *wood*. Breath blasted out of Calden's lungs and the impact jarred his arms open, throwing Miel into the water at some strange angle. In his back, he felt *something* scream with the impact, and he had for a moment the most vivid image of his bones being *powdered* in his chest. Head back, eyes wide open, with water closing over his head, Calden attempted to gasp, only to drag in a blast of water, burning his lungs and prompting a burning retch.

Rolling to his side in the water, he instinctively clutched at his chest, grabbing himself, trying to push the water out of his lungs, trying to breathe, trying to *taste air* even as he sank deeper under the waves. And then, he sunk below that crucial level... and with a force like a bullet fired from a gun, Calden *tore* along the current.

Things that fell in the rivers of Ranthelm didn't come out. People accepted that, and stayed away from the canals, as best they could. A barge-worker who fell had to hope he didn't fall too far, into that black current deeper than the blue. It was that black current that held Calden, and caught at Miel and Emira.

Guns and swords collected in the escape flew from hands and pockets, and Calden was pulled through the water so fast and ferocious with his lungs on fire that his very shirt peeled off over his head, billowing out and resisting the pull. It yanked his head upwards, pulled him onwards, and meant that as the thick chain around his shoulders whipped up, up was actually forwards and down was backwards.

*Look down.*

He was able to see the last few moments as that glinting chain was torn off from over his head, his whole world a tumbling confusion. The charm bounced against a surface - a wall? The floor? - and sped off, into the darkness, and he could not help but see.

Calden, lungs on fire, let his lips part in a scream unheard, bellowing *no* to the river's ear, as that last little speck of white-and-silver vanished away, far, far behind him.

The gasp dragged in more water, and that brought more panic, and that brought darkness.

\*

It took both Miel and Emira to haul the brown boy's bulk out of the water and onto the dull grey sand of the cave floor. Crunching and squeaking under their feet, the pair flopped down next to Calden's sides and tried to gather their wits.

The cave was easily the size of a church, with a dull grey-blue ceiling. The immediate concern - of not being in the water, and not choking - was easily met with the field of sand and the embankment. Further escape was promised by the darkness behind them, perhaps after they'd caught their breath and recovered from the ordeal.

Miel wiped his cheeks and tried to not cry.

Head on her hands, arms folded on her knees, Emira drew a long, wet breath, complaint in every bone of her body. She'd slid down the side of the building somewhat when she leapt free - but she had to jump from higher than she'd wanted when she realised the current took the others. "... My name's Emira." She offered.

Miel sagged forwards and reached up to his hair. If he'd been okay, if he'd felt on top of things, he'd have been complaining about his hair. He'd have been bothering to think about what the whole churning channel of subterranean rivers had meant. He might even have considered how Calden's stupidity would have killed him, had he been on his own. But instead, he just tried to sniff back tears.

"Miel." He finally said, defeat in his tone.

"... What's, uh." Emira leant forwards and turned her head to look over at the raven-haired boy. "What's wrong?"

Miel tried to draw in a breath without it sounding so obvious what was coming. In a diary he might one day accord it as a great accomplishment, and that he held it together remarkably well, and didn't in fact flop to his side with his face on Calden's chest, crying. That diary entry would be just another one of a magnificent tapestry of lies.

Emira shifted over to the table-like form of Calden, reaching out to put her hand on Miel's shoulder. "Hey... um. Hey. Hey?" she asked, leaning down, peering at him with the concern of the truly confused.

Miel swallowed slowly and folded his arms under his head. Leaning into the hand of a relative stranger, he'd done that dozens of times. He'd even left so many of them convinced of his utmost sincerity, and the value of the gemstones in his hand or the importance of his getting money to travel to the Imperial Seat in Erschedan or - or - or any of those things. Crying onto Calden's chest, Emira's hand on his shoulder, though, took a sincerity he'd realised he'd never been able to fake before.

The sobbing echoed off the walls for far longer than Miel was comfortable accepting, until he drew himself up a little. "I'm... I'm sorry." He said, throaty, croaky, a mess. Wiping his hand against his cheek, careful not to touch his eye, he managed to cough himself some clarity. "I'm not normally, I mean." He sat up and smoothed out his tunic, adjusting his hair, and finally attempting a restart of the conversation. "Hi."

Emira nodded, giving his hand a reassuring squeeze. "Hi. You and Calden are...?"

"We were in the same cell." Miel said, shifting against him. "They were going to throw him out in the morning, and it was... it was easier. Before that, we, um. We met at the Magistrate's."

"Oh, you were in the riot?" Emira asked, tilting her head.

Miel ruffled a little. "Well, I might have been a noble—"

"No, you seem nice."

"... We were up in the Solarium when the riot hit us."

"...Ah."

Miel shifted a little and traced a finger on Calden's bare, brown chest, looking down at his finger absentmindedly. "I was up - I mean, we were—"

Emira leant forwards with a little leer. "Were you two—" she began, grinning like a cat.

"No!" Miel huffed, turning up his nose. "We'd just *met*."

"... Oh my god you would totally have."

"I'm - that's -" Miel reached across and pushed Emira's forehead. "You *pervert*."

Emira sat back, laughing. Grabbing her ankles she leant forwards. "I'm going to take that as an admission of guilt."

"We didn't do *anything*." Miel asserted, then let his hand fall flat on Calden. "The riot came up into the room, and... well, Calden fought them. I was dressed up like a noble, and they... he..." he waved a hand, chin on his fist. "He didn't want to let people hurt me. And he didn't really know me. Just... wanted to do it."

Emira nodded. "... Yeah. He's..." she paused, trying to find the not-wrong word.

"An idiot?" Miel asked, frustration in his tone.

"... yeah." Emira nodded. She poked the unconscious boy. "I mean, I think he's going to be okay."

"He puked up a lot of water when we hauled him out... and he's breathing now. Seems as good as we can do for now."

Miel stood up, swinging his arms and running his hands through his hair. "Hey, Emira...?"

"Yeah?"

"Why were you under that hatch?"

"Because I knew you- well, I knew Calden would be there."

Miel turned, and raised an eyebrow. "Oh, so you two are-?" he said, waving a finger between the two.

“No.” She shook her head. “Way I figure, I owe him an explanation too. No point splitting it, eh?” She asked, leaning forwards again. “Hey, uh... Miel?”

“Yeah?”

“... What’s... I mean, is it just... it wasn’t just falling in the river...?”

Miel settled back down for a moment, putting both his hands behind his head and his elbows on his knees. Hunkering forwards, he sighed sadly. “I got caught... and now I know they’re spreading my description. They’re telling people what I look like, and distributing sketches, and, and... I didn’t do *any* of the things I wanted to do in Ranthelm. I didn’t make any money, I didn’t save any homes, I didn’t disgrace or scandalise any nobles. I just turned up, got caught up in a riot, and now I’m leaving the town I thought I’d make it big in... with nothing.”

“... Oh.”

“Yeah... I’m... kind of a failure. I’m not used to that. I’m used to being really, really good at things, and... yeah, well... here we are.”

Emira waved a hand, gesturing upwards. “You ... go do what you have to do. I’ll keep an eye on Calden.”

Miel nodded. “Uhm. When I’m done, I’ll see if I can find, like, firewood? Can you start a fire?”

“Yeah,” Emira said, smiling a little and looking back out to the water.

\*

The soul was the seat of moral reasoning. Some parts of the books suggested that the soul was the part of the person that was capable of being morally aware of its actions. That the Tree of Knowledge had given humans their souls. Of course, that couldn’t possibly be true - because they’d *chosen* the Tree of Knowledge, despite being tempted by Satan. Calden was relatively certain it was Satan. The choice, though, the choice was important.

Souls made humans different; Aquinas said that free will was what made humans humans, what separated them from Angels. That the demons had had one choice, and it had corrupted them forever. That there was nothing left of these things when they lost their souls. The soul had been why the dreadful giants of the Chosen Land could be killed with no sin. The soul was what made the sacrifice of a person terrible, but to pour a person’s sins onto a goat acceptable.

The Books also said a man could gain the world and lose his soul, and it wouldn’t be worth it. Souls were precious. *So* precious.

Calden was a man without a soul. Calden was a man without free will, a carrier for the demon that Father Shipman had always dreaded. Was there anything in him that could fight that urge? The voice that said *don’t tolerate this*? The thing that had beaten so many people into unconsciousness last night, and felt no guilt but a grim satisfaction? Without a soul, was he even *alive* any more...? The water had been such a hit, and the cold... maybe Calden had died, and that bone flitting away had merely been his soul fleeing to its deserved place in heaven.

That was a nice thought. Calden, the good boy had passed on. Calden, the one who had been respectful, and sinned rarely, and prayed and attended church, he was going to have what he deserved. He had been meek and obedient and he had sacrificed everything he had been given. Surely *that* boy would receive justice in heaven.

... But there was something left over. A something that lay on its back in the sands, eyes open, trying so very hard to explain to itself what it was.

Calden was conscious for half an hour before anyone noticed it.

\*

A tarpaulin and a ring of stones made a place more home-like. Crackling flames filled the cave with the scent of a strangely comforting salty smoke. Emira even claimed fish from the depths - standing up to her waist in the water, eyes closed, breathing patient as stone and then *strike*- and a fish landed next to the fire by the shore.

Miel hated fish, but starvation was the finest condiment. The cave had its share of broken vessels - a metal grille made a decent impromptu camp stovetop. A small chest, waterlogged, had been easy enough for Emira to break - "Drop it onto its *corner*, Emira," - and inside, there was hardtack and a lump of wax paper-preserved cheese that had *just barely* refrained from turning into a lump of fungal *yuch*.

"Can't *stand* fish," he sulked, nibbling on the edge of a hardtack square, dipped in molten cheese. "Why can't something *tasty* live in the sea?"

Emira laughed, fanning with her hand to the flames. "We eat fish all the time. Have you ever... I think you call them the Isles of the Sunrise Empire?"

Miel blinked. "No... no, there's... wait, you mean the Changtsen?"

Emira gave him a sidelong look. "... Yeah, that's what the Changtei call us."

Miel nodded. "Well, that's where the trade comes from, right? Changte and its principalities?"

"There are sixteen million of the Sunrise people, and the only people in the area who call us Changtsen are the Changtei. They call the Anguk the Chan-Seon, and they call the Thousands People the Chan-Sian." She laughed.

Miel nodded. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You can't help what you've been taught." She then looked over at him. "But if you call us Changtsen now, I get to punch you."

Miel pouted. "Why is it *everyone* punches things but me? Is it so bad that I want to solve problems without punching things?"

"Aren't you a con artist?"

"Okay, I *cause* problems without punching things."

“Which makes it very tempting to *solve* those problems by punching things.”

“There you go again.” Miel sulked, biting down into the hardtack.

\*

Had she a voice with which to do it, Haurvjec would have been a non-stop *bellow* of rage. She’d barely been fast enough to try to grab the girls’ hand when the three had leapt from the tower, and she’d squirmed free within a heartbeat. When she’d dug through the records and found who they were, it made it worse. The girl was a runaway slave, reported by a minor church officiate as lost during a bandit attack, and the prettier girl had in fact, been a boy with a dozen records’ worth of false identities. Some cross-dressing con-artist boy who made a prettier girl than she did, who’d been in that cell for less than twelve hours.

The whole layer had been a loss. Only two prisoners broke out, but in the process they’d turned sixteen guards into cell-filling, and ruined the wiring for the whole quarter. They’d made their way up the tower in a totally unexpected way, which meant the actual escape smacked of preparation, which suggested that Miel had been caught on purpose, especially with the collusion from inside the Foreman’s office. A conspiracy of that level of sophistication, however, would be *amazingly* coincidence-driven.

She had had a rough enough day of her own - interrupted on her way back to the cell to interrogate her one, most valuable lead. The things that slave knew, the things that he could communicate to a law keeper who had the *will to do something about it...* and he’d thrown himself into the river, *at night*. A lead, swallowed up and dead, just like that.

Revolution was in the air in Ranthelm, but she was no Lincoln. If she could preserve the peace by preserving slavery, she would not do it. The only problem was that the *law* mattered. The law *had* to matter, or everything had been for nothing. If she could, perhaps, have *lied* to the ox of a boy in that room, she’d have had something she could use. He’d asked, though... his friends were guilty of crimes. They’d have to be handled, one way or another, but without her voice, without *words*, she couldn’t tell him, couldn’t *convince* him that she was going to do what was best for the city, for the slaves, and for the prisoners.

The Oathed weren’t normally like her in the guard - mostly, they chose one of the Words when they pledged their oath. Most chose Strength, and of those that did not, they tended to choose Loyalty. A few chose Grace - artists all - and fewer still chose Piety. The fraction that chose, as she did, Justice, seemed to always fall to madness, failure, and death.

It was an acceptable risk.

Opening her notebook, she sighed as she turned to her notes:

*Officiates prevented access to Brinkwater this morning*

*Could not conduct interview, 24601 was at Cathedral*

*Riots likely*

*Must plan patrol near Brinkwater to make short travel time*

*Bring books for 24601?*

*Voice for the voiceless?*

*Need to dismiss guard for few hours*

*Perhaps hope for city after all.*

She looked at the page again like it had insulted her.

~~*Perhaps hope for city after all.*~~

## Part Nine

He was a burning and a shining light: and ye were willing for a sign unto thee upon thine hand, and for a memorial between thin and without shalt thou overlay it.

\*

Emira didn't like being unhappy. It wasn't a comfortable fit with her – contemplation and enlightenment coupled with a depressive attitude could only happen so many times when meditating under a waterfall before you consciously made the decision to stick your head under the water and leave it there. The crucial thing was to find ways to connect to people around you. When unhappy, when sad, helping other people feel *less* sad helped yourself. And so, the conversation with Miel.

Miel laughed as Emira flicked water at him. "Augh, fine, fine, fish are - no, I can't do it. They're gross and slimy and disgusting."

"That's my whole culture you're talking about," Emira laughed, reaching out to flick his forehead.

"Your whole culture is fish? Where are your gills?"

She should, she knew, probably have *met* Miel before they goofed off, cheering one another up. They probably should have swapped names and identity details, maybe exchanged some sort of basic life experience *before* leaping off a tower together with the tow-line force that was Calden. That would have been the sensible way to build a friendship like this.

*Ever feel like you're living your life backwards?*

Hell with that concern. Better three less-unhappy people in an odd friendship than three miserable people waiting to die in formal order.

\*

At that same time, a world away and two steps near, Calden finally stirred. The ringing in his ears made it hard to focus. The dead boy stood up, trying to shake away the sounds of fun and joy around him, trying to feel something inside himself other than the yawning anxiety of losing the most important thing in the world. His chin on his hands, looking out at the water, away from the fire. His expression miserable, his eyes on the sand. It was all he could really know how to do...

*Look down.*

His feet were still there. His body still in one piece. It didn't *look* hollow.

Miel noticed before Emira did – and walked over to his friend. Kneeling next to his shoulder, he rested his hand on Calden's forehead, testing his temperature, his other hand squeezing his shoulder. Those huge naive eyes looked up at him, and Miel felt for a moment like he'd fall in and drown in Calden's sadness.

"... Christ," Miel said, leaning down and hugging Calden. "You're with us now, right?"

Calden nodded slowly, and put his hands out behind him to push himself into standing. “Yes.” He murmured. “I am pretty sure of that.”

\*

Later that night – was it night? Did it just feel like night, with the oppressive weight of the darkness around them and the soft humidity of the cave? – when they were preparing another meal, Miel leant across and nudged Emira “Hey, Emira, you said when Calden woke up, you’d-?”

“You’d what?”

Emira looked down to the campfire, a central point where everyone could store their gaze while they tried to avoid answering the questions that filled the room around them. “Miel wanted to know why I was at Brinkwater.”

“... Huh.” Calden said. “You know, um. Um, why *were* you at Brinkwater?”

Putting her hand on Calden’s shoulder, Emira shuffled over to sit next to him, that same cross-legged seat she’d had before.

\*

The telling of a story is the creation of a window into a place and time that is only in the memory or imagination of the teller. Emira could feel the grass under her feet and smell the library’s accumulated toxicity of glue around her as she walked through the Vale of Smallest Truths. Tall bookshelves, adorned in brass to preserve them, but full of fretwork to enable the climbing vines, stretched up above her to the domed ceiling with its panes of flat glass. It was warm, warmer than the outside, which kept the plants growing. The books here were of a special kind – not crafted of the same stuffs as the others, not so affected by the heat and the moisture.

The top tiers of the bookshelves held the oldest, most complex of the stories, and were placed, in carefully ordered position, far above the hands of the other monks. Even reaching as high as she could Emira could not reach even half the height of the bookshelf. Knowledge was always there, ever out of her grasp, but also out of the grasp of everyone she knew.

Some of the masters spoke of what rested in those highest books, the tomes that contained knowledge beyond what most could understand. Some masters had even spoken of how they learned of the contents of those books; of leaping tens of feet in the air, catching a book with certainty, and landing, to read it. No student managed that, in these days.

The monastery had its old masters, who had been here when it began. They spoke of what they had learned, how they had mastered the library and learned its ways. Then the students that came after them learned as much but achieved a little less. Then those students after them, and those students after them, and so on, and so on.

The monastery was a meritocracy, a place where a person was judged only on how well they could achieve. The old masters had achieved more, when there were fewer people around to achieve them, but they had the fruits of their success about them.

Emira reached as high as she could, and plucked a book from the shelf. In the Path of the Open Mind, a monk must be a scholar and a warrior. Thus: Study.

*We go about our daily lives understanding almost nothing about the world.*

As she turned the pages, soaking in the knowledge, Emira could not help but wonder to herself how it must have looked when there were no people in the monastery. The heights those Masters must have reached, the things they must have achieved. In her heart, back then, she burned ever-so-quietly, thinking it dreadfully unfair to have appeared in the point of history after all the *good* discoveries had already been made, in the Monastery of Mysteries.

\*

“A library and a garden?”

“As part of a monastery. It was full of things like this.” She said, holding her feet. “There were the sand gardens, where every day it shook at noon and reordered all the sand into their original positions, no matter what had happened. There were the jade lines in the tree, which could do mathematics if you knew how to ask it. There was the information engine, where you could tell it the name of any book, and it would tell you where to find it, if everyone put things back properly.”

Miel shifted in the sand. “Where’d all this come from?”

“We don’t know.”

“You don’t know?”

“We really didn’t know. It’s...” Emira turned to draw lines on the sand, next to Miel. “Do you know what a France is?”

“I think that’s a sort of trick you do with your tongue, right?”

“According to books I have read, France is a place. France is a place which is *somewhere* about where Gallia is, and Gallia has *never* heard of France. We can’t find any ruins of it, we can’t find coins of it, but I can show you a book which contains over fifteen hundred different ways to consume French cheese, and what French wine you’re meant to have with it.”

“Sounds a bit much for something that some guy invented.”

“Yeah, it does. And you have to ask yourself, what kind of crazy person would sit down and pen that many words, in that many volumes, describing flavours and textures of things that didn’t exist in a country that doesn’t exist. Either it’s a truly demented imagination, or France is a real thing or *was* a real thing, and somehow all we have left of it are books. Imagine what else these libraries hold.”

Calden shivered. There were more mysteries in Heaven and Earth.

\*

“Look forward. Look back.”

Emira drew her breath slowly and lowered her head, trying to embrace the silence within herself.

“There is no *now*. There is only the intersection between then and then. The future is not before you, the past is not behind. It is one simple line of interconnected moments and your perception travels from one, to the next.”

Seifu walked before Emira – and a row of other students. They were to see the petal falling, and know its landing before it struck the surface of the water. They were to look at the object, and not to predict, but to *know* where it would fall. A student was only to open their eyes when they were sure they had the right moment. Open them early, and receive chores. Open them late, and receive more chores.

“Eyes closed. Head down. Breath even. Think of nothing. You are nothing but the empty place, the silent space. The void within you is where the future will echo.”

The air in this hall was cool, dry, and sealed. The sun shone overhead, through a glass dome that affected the air currents. A sufficiently smart student could manage the mathematics of the place; predict how the breath of each student, in meditative trance, affected the air, then predict the moment the petal would fall. To do that, though, the tensile strength of the flower’s connection to the petal was necessary, but that could be *estimated* and then you were just guessing.

“The universe pulses with energy, slow and silent. Ignore my voice, and hear it. Feel its rhythm, feel the ripples reaching back, back through time, to touch on you...”

Cause, and effect. A linear sequence of events. If you found two points on the same line, you could draw between them, and extrapolate forwards.

Listen.

*Listen.*

Emira opened her eyes.

That day, she did not do extra chores.

\*

“I’m not sure I believe you.” Miel said.

“Why not?”

“If what you’re saying is true, then you can look at anything closely enough and know how it will wind up being?”

“Well, within a margin of error, and if I can control for as many variables as possible, and – well, basically, I can make very, very good guesses.”

“About the future.”

“Yes.”

“By listening to its ... ripples, you say?”

“Yes, by listening to its ripples.” She sighed, trying to not make that sentence sound as ridiculous as it was meant to.

“Doesn’t that mean there’s no choice? Like... doesn’t that mean there’s no ability of a person to choose what is going to happen to them?” Calden asked, his tone very low.

“That’s... a very good question? I mean, there are books written on it.”

“Which ones are right?” Calden asked.

Emira looked at Calden’s face in the firelight, at those wide eyes and the near-heartbreak in his expression. How do you address such a malformed question?

“... We don’t know –“ Calden’s face fell. “–because it’s hard to say. Some are right, some are wrong, maybe they’re all right and they’re all wrong. But think about it – your Books say God can see everything, and knows everything, right? So he knows how everything will turn out. Which means, in the Books, at least... well, people don’t really have a choice either.”

Emira had no idea how to describe the look on Calden’s face as he stared into the fire.

\*

When you accepted that time was itself, a *flow* from one place to another it became a more fluid concept than before. Not just moving forwards – where people would be late or early and excuse it by their flawed perceptions – but in how one moved through it.

It came in three forms; the way of the eye, the way of the foot, and the way of the hand.

The way of the hand was the simplest; to move the hand through time slightly faster than normal. The force of the universe butted up at the tip of the impact, huddled, and burst. Every punch, when hit squarely, was like a gunshot.

The way of the foot was the craft of speed. Move before you were noticed, appear before an enemy could turn their head, and of course, move in the moments when people *blinked*. That craft was harder to manage, because to move *fast*, Emira had to learn to slow herself down. So many of the old Masters, tottering, gentle elderly, would somehow cross the fields of the monastery in moments, or be in two places at once. She’d never learned how to do anything so excellent – at least, not at the monastery.

The third way, the way of the Eye, had been the greatest mystery of all.

There was a field, completely flat, at the monastery, in which there was nothing but plain, white sand. Every morning, before chores, students were expected to take a handful of sand, and pour it out, in their hand, onto the sand, watching the way the particles fell, and use what they saw to plan and predict their day. Great masters could take only a pinch of sand; novices often took their hand of sand and poured it out watching the sky and making educated guesses.

Emira first pushed away the concerns of guessing wrong, and learned to predict the time of the sunrise; then she pushed aside listening to other students as they poured out their sand, and she could predict the time of the sunset; then she learned, after much study, that she had to push aside

the sound of her own heartbeat, and she predicted the weather. Little shards of the future drifted through to her, in those contemplative moments. Clouds, raindrops, winds.

To truly grasp the future, she had been told, one had to be able to ignore *that one existed at all*. She had to become as glass; the thing through which the future flowed, connected to nothing. Any attachment, therefore, was a sacrifice of how far into the future she could see.

\*

“Hang on,” Miel said, peering at her. “Then what good is it?”

“Punching people.”

“Are you *serious*?!” Miel sneered.

Emira shifted a little, trying to pull her story back onto its path. “Then the night... then the invasion happened.”

“Everything changed?” Miel asked.

“Everything.”

\*

They stood, in their armour and their brass masks with the blank face of the imperial guardsman, wearing their featureless *somen* that marked them as Those of No Name. Red and black armour, Imperial colours, colours that looked so much *more* menacing under the dark, brooding light of the flickering torches they held.

They had brought fire to the Library.

Emira stood in her room, looking out the window with her fellow students, through the thin wooden bars that kept out the birds. Two storeys up, through the shaking branches of the purple hues of flowering blossoms, the warm spring air blue shot with whit stars, four students gathered against a window, as four students gathered at every window for their entire dormitory.

Nobody spoke loudly; the students knew how to *listen*. They heard the exchange.

“The new Emperor has nothing to fear of us here.”

“That’s a very gracious assertion.”

“It is.”

“The new Emperor disagrees.”

“Then we are at an impasse.”

“Yes.”

“There are ninety-five monks here, of every Circle; four of us are the Ancient Masters. Did you bring fourteen men with bows and swords to disturb these circles?”

“We bought sixteen. Two are in the library, with torches.”

At one, the courtyard seemed to *shrink* as every person around it gathered breath, seeming enough to suck all the air out and pull the walls in like a vacuum.

“Would you be so kind as to demand the students gather for execution? Or we *will* burn down the library.”

\*

“... how did you escape?”

Was it Miel who asked? Or Calden? Impossible to say – the two of them had such low, soft voices through the crackle of the fire and her own sniffing sound.

Emira swallowed and choked back a sob as she stared into the fire. “I hid.”

\*

No dramatic conclusion. No revelation of her own Imperial blood, no rescue from a discovered art. Just hiding, as the students were massacred, as every last Circle submitted themselves to the sword, their heads down, their eyes closed.

Then she started to run. Emira ran from the monastery, from the reach of the rising Emperor, from the law, to the seas, across Changtei, running, running, running.

In all the time she kept running, she still stopped and tried to maintain those rituals she could remember. Little things made them feel not so *lost*, such as watching the little grains of sand as they fell down between her fingertips, choking back tears at the loss of her friends, her masters, her library.

On a dirty beach, across the Changtei sea from the Empire, she poured out a handful of sand, her mind full of confused loss and despair, unable to push away her earthly concerns, and expected to hear nothing. She expected to learn *nothing*.

The future exploded in front of her like a kaleidoscope made of fireworks. When she recovered from the shock of seeing so much future, so many variables, of understanding so deeply, she started to try and understand *why* she could.

Eventually, she came to understand it as interference. Ten students in one room could listen as hard as they could, and they would still hear *some* of the other students. When a student learned the Ways, they began to use them – and every use created echoes. The more practitioners of the art there were, the weaker they became.

The Masters were the Masters, yes, but in part, they arrived first, claimed the lion’s share of the power, and never relinquished it. Then they, blessed by coincidence alone, had had the gall to tell other students to work harder, to come to greater understanding.

Somewhere, Emira was sure, she still resented that.

\*

Calden rubbed his eyes clean, and reached across the fire to Emira's hand. He squeezed her, just once... and swallowed.

He didn't say anything.

He didn't know what he *could* say.

Miel leant back against Calden's chest. The soulless demon, the worthless thief, and the homeless monk.

Dying would have been easier.

\*

It was maybe an hour before someone spoke. "Where do we go next?" Calden asked, looking out, towards the water.

Miel shrugged. "Where do you want to go, Calden? We don't exactly have any responsibilities." Miel's desire to overthrow Ranthelm with its own money had cooled. Emira's wandering had run itself out of purpose.

"I have no soul, right?" Calden

"Well,-" Emira began.

"God made this world. " Calden said. "God made me, and the Books say God is just."

"Well,-" Emira began again, more urgently.

"I think I'd like to get an explanation from him."

Miel and Emira shot nervous looks back and forth. Miel didn't believe in God. Emira believed in science.

The quiet of the fire was a variable. Miel's breathing was a variable. The way sweat sheened over Calden's shoulders was a variable, the way he woke up every morning. Predicting the weather from a handful of falling sand was *easy*; the weather was so large, almost nothing people did could affect it. Predicting the path of three individuals, walking on the world, bumping into things, intersecting so many other variables? That was so *hard*.

Emira bit her lip, unconsciously reaching into the well of herself that sat so silent.

So silent.

There, in that moment, she heard the echo of a great age ending. The sound of a clock-tower falling. And strangest of all, so unique a sound as to be unmistakeable...

"... You do."

Miel whipped his head around and blurted out: "WHAT?!" so loudly and suddenly that he almost tumbled back into the water.

## Part Ten

Seal up those things which the seven thunders uttered, and writ upon them in the wilderness, to consume them. But I wrought for thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might

\*

When Miel found the pathway out of the cave, in amongst the remains of bits of broken driftwood, and the corroded rust-line along the wall that spoke of higher waters, it seemed almost like a formality. They hadn't been stuck in the cave - they'd been stuck inside themselves. Calden had lost his soul. Emira had lost her home. Miel had lost everything. Who would go out in the sun and face a world after that...?

The energy that came to Calden when Emira had spoken her strange prophecy, though, was infectious. He'd risen to his feet and started to prepare, wrapping up the tarpaulin, sorting out driftwood to make small cases and lashed-together ways to store the food they'd found.

Miel couldn't help but doubt the whole of it. There hadn't been a good chance since to broach with Emira that, well, wasn't it a bad idea to tell Calden his dreams would come true? The boy had lost something in the fall, he'd been imprisoned, he - he was a *slave*. To give him hope, hope that couldn't be trusted, that was so dangerous. Especially to tell him that he was going to find and claim something that *he could never have*...?

Miel was nervous.

The cave had been a base of operations for six days. They had built things there, impromptu storage, places they could hide things, places to dry clothes. A little trough that collected water and fish. The knife from a wrecked boat that Emira had used to sharpen sticks with which they'd caught fish. Literally they - Miel had no stomach for it.

\*

At a certain point, Calden had to stop packing. He simply didn't 'own' many of the things. Things like the shells that Miel had found, the woven strands of rope that Emira had crafted - things they had to choose to keep or to leave. Calden instead stood on the shore of the water, waiting for them to complete what they considered essential before they finally left. It wasn't like they planned on returning at any point. He let his mind wander. It was a little bit of a good thing, really, to have no soul. The soul was that part that gave moral agency, after all, which meant whenever he felt guilty about something, like looking at Miel's smile, or holding Emira's hand, or wanting to punch god in the face, it wasn't really guilt, and he didn't have to really feel bad.

Then Calden blinked.

He saw something in the depths.

When he thrashed forwards, the noise drew attention. "Hey- Hey! Calden!" Emira said, jumping to her feet, reaching out to grab at his shoulder. The water rippled around her steps, and her firelight-familiar eyes stared at Calden's washed-out, broken expression.

Calden said nothing, standing up to his waist in the water, his head low. The ripples in the water disturbed him, and he raised one hand, concentrating as he stared. No words, just a raised finger. On the shore side, Miel stopped in his gathering up of his now-dried tunic. "Um, Cal...?" he asked.

"Look down."

They did - and couldn't see what Calden saw. Three people, heads down, staring at the water, with firelight and distractions trying to see something that Calden had only spotted for the tiniest of heartbeats. A glint. The rivers ran deep and dark, at night. What fell in the rivers and failed to float was never found again... which meant they found their way here. Wading forwards, his head down, Calden struck towards the shard of shining steel he saw, his arm outstretched before him.

Clutch.

Lift.

But what fell in his fingers was not a long line of loose chain, not a silvery line to his soul. Of course it wouldn't be - the bone would have floated, trailing the chain behind it. Instead, it was a silver plate - a plate that he carried to the surface with a palpable sadness.

He dropped the plate on the sand and slumped down by the fire. A dramatic gesture, a moment of hope, and then, *nothing*.

Emira hunkered down by the plate, easily as large as her forearm square, and peered at it. "Uh... did you, I mean, did you grab this on purpose...?" She asked, looking over the fire.

Calden didn't answer, his head down again. Admitting failure felt bad. Emira lifted the plate up and wiped sand from its face. "How many things are there like this down there...?" she asked, looking out to the water.

"Not sure," Calden said. "Dozens? It's a pile. Heavy enough to sink and be carried along at night, I suppose."

Emira looked at the silver plate, tracing her fingers through the symbols. The words were old and worn, but the metal had not rusted. She could imagine, perhaps, single pieces of sand, buoyed by water, brushing along the surface, one after another, over years and years, generation upon generation, working the meaning and definition away.

Calden hung his shoulders, defeated. Death, and rebirth. The Books said it would work that way. The Books said Jonah lived three days in the belly of the whale. The Books said the Lord could destroy the temple and remake it in three days. The Books said that Aniceni spent three days in prison for daring to ask of the Powers her right to be heard. There was a loss, but there was always a chance to rise again. Absolam did not receive such a thing. He just *died*. And he had died trying to reach above his station.

Calden let his head fall upon his arms, despair filling his belly.

"Hey, Calden?" Emira said, peering at the plate. When she didn't get an answer, she went on. "When you were in Ranthelm, did you ever hear of a 'Universal Entropy Reprocessor?'"

“What? No.”

“Didn’t think so,” she said, tucking the plate into their luggage. “And this was apparently the seventeenth – well, before it broke free.”

“That sounds comforting,” Miel said, holstering a bag on his back. “Isn’t entropy one of those things you talked about yesterday?”

Emira nodded, as she started on the path out of the cave. “Well, I mean, it is - I guess, I mean, I don’t think anyone these days, in these parts would use it the same way. It’s a very old world, you see, and it means-”

Calden smiled. It was always nice to listen to Emira explaining the universe. It seemed to make a lot more sense that way, and it made the passage out of the cave a little easier.

\*

No boulder at the mouth of the cave. Emira *did* break a number of stone columns on the way out, punching holes to collapse a pathway up for Miel and Calden to climb. There were a few scrapes and narrow archways - and one single section that showed just the vast difference in size between Calden and Miel - but no angel waiting, no graveyard. When the golden wave of sunlight rolled over them, the three had the same reaction.

“Ow, ow, ow,” Miel said, holding his hand over his eyes. “Augh, is it always so *bright*?!”

Emira’s grunt of anguish wasn’t much better. Even Calden grunted - but only once.

“Come on,” the brown boy said, as he stepped forwards, onto the path.

“So, uh,” Miel asked, falling into step behind him. “This may be an awkward question, but, um, where, exactly are we going...?”

“The four corners of the earth.” Calden said, gesturing.

“... What?”

Calden straightened up. “There are four corners of the Earth, which means it’s a square. God sits at the centre of all things. Emira says you find the centre of a square by orienting between the corners. Therefore, God is in the centre of the four corners of the earth.”

“The earth is a sphere,” Emira corrected him. “And, um-”

Calden shook his head, unperturbed. “No. The four corners of the earth are in the Books. It may be bad math, but -”

Emira rubbed her neck. “Look, um, Calden-”

Miel gave Emira a sidelong look. This was what hope *did* to the boy. Suddenly he was interpreting chunks of the Books like they were true, when they were just myths, and Miel knew it. Arguing with *math* was pretty much a clear sign something was *wrong*.

On the other hand, Calden was *adamant*. “There are four places where the winds come from. The angels stood there, holding the winds. Therefore, those places are the four corners of the world. God is in the middle of those four places. So we just need to find where the wind comes from. And the prophet of Salvation said where those points are.”

“Oh glory,” Miel said, rolling his eyes and turning around, wondering if he could hide in the cave.

“Look, Calden!” Emira repeated, hoping this time that the boy’s avalanche of argument would slow, that he’d at least stop being rude.

“Asyria and Egypt. Pathros and Kush. Elam and Shinar. Hamath and the Islands. We find a map with those places on it, we draw lines, and we find between them all where God lives. Your people have maps like that, right? Old maps?”

Emira bit back *What do you mean ‘your people.’* “If you want a map with those places on it, you want an *old* map. And if you want an old map from the Church, it could be, well, anywhere. The Prelate’s library, or the Museum of Sevenfold Times, or -” Emira stood, folding her arms across her flat chest. “That’s task one, then. Find the way to find the map.”

Calden’s expression soured slightly, and he turned his head. “Hey, Miel, where are we?”

Miel blinked, turning around and looking up. “Wait, what, me? Why are-”

“You *glanced* at that prison and you knew everything.”

“Because I can *observe* things. I mean, I’m not - that’s just a common trick. You look around you and you observe details and you put them together. It’s simple. I can’t just...Oh.”

“Oh?” Emira stepped back.

“Oh, well, it’s just -” Miel gestured over at the trees, arrayed around the cave. “Ranthelm’s over there, and the sun’s over there, and the high tower of Ranthelm is all that’s visible, so, um...” Miel paused, rubbing a temple with a finger. “We’re... a hundred? Two hundred miles due east?”

“See?” Calden said, a grim laugh hiding under his words. “You’re really smart.”

“I *know* I’m really smart. I’m just not used to it being useful out here in this...” he waved his hands in a wide circle. “*Nature*,” that final word almost a swear.

“We just need to find an old enough map that it has four places that don’t exist on it anymore.” Calden said. “Then we’ll know where God is.”

Miel’s despairing embarrassment at his friends was just another thing to shoulder, as the three set out, in search of the pathway to God. It was a comforting lie, anyway, that the first task was to find someone who could find the map. The real first task was to find supplies, and *that* was something Miel could do.

One village square, one slurred promise, one grope from an inappropriate party on Miel, one well-intentioned blow from Calden, and they were on their way out of the town, at speed, and on horseback.

Overall, it could have gone a lot worse.

\*

Rantheim winds whipped around the tall towers, pressed in close and driven to a howling pace by the communal structure of the place. Tall buildings, hard buildings, faced on all sides with white masonry, gave the wind nowhere to go but forwards, harder and faster. It took a bitter sort of Guard to keep walking in the nights like these - most were happy to find some place in the lee of a structure, lean against a wall and indulge in a cheap cigarette or two. As with almost all of Rantheim's people, doing what they were 'supposed' to do was something of a rarity.

Officer Haurvjec was one such rarity.

*Neither Brothers Nor Sons*, the motto went. The Watch was not full of Guardsmen and Guardswomen, but just Guards. Once upon a time, there had been a proud man who founded them, who bought the watch-houses with his personal fortune and donated them to the city. The man who script on the stone and brass plaques those rules. A bust of him, worn shiny in the face and with no name, glared down from the top of the doorway of the Centregate Watchhouse. A plaque sat beneath it, but most thought it listed a name and a date. Few had ever climbed up, high enough, to read it.

No names, no dates. Haurvjec knew one of his names, though not the others - *Morris* - and the what the plaque said. *The standard you walk past is the standard you accept.*

Haurvjec had grown sick of walking past the city's standards.

She was no revolutionary, at least, not in the way of most. Most revolutionaries were angry men, people full of hate at the system - justified or otherwise - who raised torches and smoke and stormed the walls of the world to try and reshape the order without realising that they had to replace it with something.

That had been when the role of the Guards had started, as she understood it. A king had been dethroned, his palace guards bested, his head made to roll into a bucket and the people *watched*, because they had to know that revolution was not *pretty*. Haurvjec had very few things about herself she regretted - she could be a little taller, maybe from time to time she'd have preferred to keep her hair colour - but on that list, she'd always wished she could claim heritage to that man, the last regicide. As satisfying as it was to imagine, though, she had to know what she was.

She was a woman who had taken up the only job for a woman who fought.

When she was young, Officer Haurvjec, who had been called a different name, a name she chose not to write anywhere before she took her oath, and definitely since, had been a *violent* girl. She had fought with sticks and rocks. She had tried to get the attention of boys by being better than them at everything, like running, fishing, diving and punching. She had, once, written that she *wished to be a prince*. None of these things, of course, came to pass. Instead, she stared upon a future in a cell, as society sorted those that confused it. Church hadn't been able to still her, and nor had school. Wealth normally let a woman be considered *eccentric*, but her father had had *views* on what he would and wouldn't financially support. That was, in her life, the social order.

A little one-woman revolution later, and she joined the guard, under an assumed name, a name she had *happily* worn and would shed for nobody. Basic training had been a joy. Standing in winter rain with sheeting strands of water pouring down her hair, down her back, feeling her thick woollen coat creating her own personal core of warmth even as her fingers and hands went numb. Duelling. Pistols. Fighting and disabling. The day of her graduation, she was ordered to challenge an instructor and best them. She'd challenged them all, and bested every last one.

That hadn't been enough, though - and so, the oath.

Pledging to a Word was almost considered archaic, these days. The powers granted by the sacrifice so often seemed weak, and so many fell from the path. To dedicate one's whole self to an ideal like that, to tune oneself to the universe's deeper meanings, often seemed to be so little gained for so much lost.

When she had taken the oath and made her pledge, the shock of it, the loss of her voice, had been so *minor* compared to the power that came with it. Her eyes saw the connections between people, the bonds of sin and betrayal. She knew a lie when she heard it, could step through space, could run for hours, and could see the true shape of a thing if she handled it long enough. Being able to know lies the second she heard them did lose her the last of her 'friends,' though.

Perhaps nobody in history had ever believed, so utterly, in Justice, as Officer Haurvjec.

The steel woman had resisted the urge to despair in the past week. The riots were more common, and there had been more people dying. She had done what she could - and fighting a crowd with sword and gun, when she was aiming not to kill but to *stop*, was not much harder than stopping just one person. If she had had that opportunity, if she had had that *chance*, she could have used what that towering, patient boy with the thoughtful handwriting had to say to topple even the Prelate. The problem was *known*, but the proof was so hard to find. Without her key, without that crucial piece of evidence, she had instead worked on accepting that the change for the people of Ranthelm and the surrounding cities, and the entire kingdom was, perhaps, to be done slower, and more painfully.

Rumination ended when she pushed open the Westgate door, stepping out of the howling wind into the comparative warm of the creaking building, past the duty roster desk processing reports.

Nobody said hello.

Once, Haurvjec had alienated her friends by being better than they thought a woman could be. Now, she alienated them by being better than they thought a *person* could be.

She stopped abruptly before the desk of a guard, his head down on his hands, his snore low and light. His face on reports from bordering territories, the sort that were looked at once then thrown away. Printed, standard-issue warning signs, wanted posters with a quick, representative sketch in them. Nobody else ever read them, but that was no excuse in her mind.

Three pages down, she gripped the paper, intense eyes fit to burn a hole in the paper.

*One Girl, Travelling With Two Men, Stole Horses.*

*Man #1, two emm tall, brown, head down*

*Man #2, one emm, sixty simms, black hair, eye glasses*

*Girl, very pretty, porcelain skin, black hair*

The sketch was Miel.

The door practically burst off its hinges as the Word of Justice ran to the streets.

## Part Eleven

Fury, and the form of his visage was changed against Shadrach that place which the LORD shall choose shall shew thee; and there be no rain.

\*

Half a day's ride due east, Emira stopped her horse slightly, in the lee of a large rock by the path. The way was green, the skies were clear, and the sun was still high in the sky behind them, but her ears were keener than the others. "Is that thunder...?"

Miel stopped, sitting up straight on his horse - the prettiest of the three, with honey-brown flanks and long white feathers. When it blinked its golden eyes and churred in the air, its ears flickered a little, like buzzing dragonfly wings. "I'm not ... wait." He sat, straining his ears.

It was there, somewhere around them - a dull, heavy drone, a sound that spoke in the pit of the stomach of pouring rain. It drew closer still, and Emira pulled her horse closer to the others. "If that's a storm, we need to-"

"It's not a storm!" Miel hollered, the sound rising around them. "The sky's totally clear!"

"Could be a - well, maybe a miracle?" Calden responded, raising his voice further. The thundering was not stopping, not rolling past like some thunderstorm.

"You *always* think it could be a miracle!" Miel responded, waving his hands, frustrated. "Stop thinking it's a miracle!"

Then the sound finally burst from the tree-line, on a hundred enormous, hairy paws. Sarken, the vast furred beasts of the wilder steppes, tore from the trees, by the dozens, running in unison, shoving aside large rocks and leaping over small ones. The herd was on the move. In the centre of the herd, astride a large Sarken, her long black hair tied tight into small locks of hair, a lone woman threw her shoulders back and laughed, her own steed slowing and skidding to a halt, forcing its fellows to stampede around it.

"... What's she doing?" Emira said, which really just gave voice to what everyone else was thinking. "Wait, no, I mean, who the hell is that?" And then. "I mean *what*."

"I'll ask her," Calden said. Leaning forwards, he guided his horse forwards - only for it to refuse, pulling back in with the others by the rock. It knew that it existed in a world where there were meat-eaters, and meat, and was well aware where it fell in that table. Then,

"Oh, I'm staying on my horse, *thanks*," Miel insisted. "Are you *serious*? Wait, Emira, he's serious. Emiiiraaa he's going to-"

The woman laughed, waving with one hand over at the trio. She planted her hands on the thick fur of the beast underneath her, threw her shoulders back, spreading her arms wide and called aloud. "Come with the run!" she said, throwing her hand through her ink-black hair. She was painted brown and gold with the colours of the hyena beasts, her face sculpted white with bonelike ash - and she hunkered down, chest to the back of the creature, clenching with her knees, and joined the run

anew. The beasts hammered on the thick grass, their paws digging deep furrows as they bounded onwards. Heads raised, roaring to the sunlit skies, each of them was easily the size of a horse, and made of muscle anchored onto huge primal bone structures. They weren't hounds or hyenas or horses, they were Sarken, beasts in no Books, and they ran in defiance of God.

Calden couldn't help it. He wanted to run - and well, wasn't that the joy of having no soul? To be able to simply want to run, and to run? Off the horse, Calden's bare feet hit the grass, and with a pump of his arms, he was in the run.

Sarken were big creatures, but not possessed of much brain. Most of their heads was occupied by an enormous set of jaws and a set of vicelike muscles, designed to bring those gouging axe-blade teeth down onto things they could punch through, like flesh, bone, and more, bigger bones. Their eyes sat on the front of their head, small large and wide, but given to watching things in the dark. In the run - the pack hunt to which they were not well-suited, with their big flat feet - they didn't know *how* to tell what they saw from what they hunted. When they ran, they ran with everything, and they snapped at things to get them out of the way.

Calden went from being on a horse, by a rock, something the beasts would run *around*, to being himself, in a field of rolling fur - just in time for a monstrous pair of jaws to snap down on the air near him. Calden did what Calden wanted to do: he punched the Sarken in its muzzle, and kept running.

Clods of dirt flicked up behind him, brown shoulders pumping, chest swelling with every breath, feet thrown forwards in huge strides while he raced, *raced* as part of the run, part of the hunt. No. Not part of it - Calden was not of the beasts. Calden was Calden. Calden was himself. He was different to everything around him, and that was okay.

Skidding as he hit a rounding on the hill, he sped up and picked up the pace, even as he felt another set of snapping jaws crash through the air by his head. Calden threw his arms out, hoisted around the neck of the beast, and threw his head back with a bellow fit to rip the sky, his knees hitting the Sarken's sides - and the beast slowing markedly. It skidded back, it slowed in the run, and it barked and snapped back at him. Smacking it stoutly on the snout, Calden looked through the retreating wave of bodies to the tree-line, where the last of the Sarken not so slowed by the weight of a demon vanished into the woods.

The woman stood, laughing at the sight. "Is good to run, yes?" she laughed, and then squeezed her muscled thighs around the beast's flanks - vanishing off into the woods. Calden had but a moment to react before being thrown off, the Sarken bolting from under him and off to join its fellows.

Miel trotted over, his horse extending its long tongue and slicking back its ears. Leaning forwards, the beautiful boy cleared his throat, down at the grass-stained Calden. "Now, what did we learn?"

Calden felt he'd somehow lost a challenge, that there was something he could have done better - that the woman riding the Sarken was in her own story. Would he be even a footnote in hers?

Emira yelled. "C'mon and get on your horse, you dope, we need to get moving!"

As they helped Calden back onto his horse, Miel turned to look back over the tree line, his expression curious for only a moment. "I wonder..."

"Hm?" Calden asked as he hoisted himself in place.

"Well, I mean, those were Sarken." Miel said, leaning forwards, resting his arms on the back of his horse's neck. "They're not very small creatures."

"Nope," Emira said, sitting back. "About two ems tall, five long. Shorter than this idiot," she said, waving her stirrucked foot at Calden, "But not by much."

"... Why were they running? I mean... what would *they* run from?"

Uncomfortable silence settled over the three. Whatever the answer, it suggested *leaving the area* quite loudly.

\*

Towns like Shorstein had a clear purpose when they first appeared. They were there to give the sailors someplace to sit and drink beer while they waited for the sun to come up again and then could take the boats out in order for fish. Fish were, by and large, a relatively safe type of food to acquire, and so, towns like Shorstein popped up all along the coastline.

Garrison towns were different. They tended to sit on highways, squat and fat and untidy, built to give armed forces and military movements some place to wait around for the next invading barbarian incursion. Barbarians appeared out of nowhere, all red and wild, and didn't tend to have demands beyond 'die' and 'be set on fire.' Garrisons therefore, built up between those smaller towns, fed on their fish and their wheat and their beer, and mostly waited until the right time to send dozens of troops out to beat back the rampaging hordes.

It was a pattern Calden had noticed a few times in Shorstein, though no barbarians had ever hit the walls. Citizens had been Alarmed though, and the town bled lows had responded.

The town was called Shadrech, and over the gates, the words *tested in fire* proudly proclaimed just what the people imagined they had experienced, behind their high walls, surrounded at all times by church-owned soldiers. The white stone of the walls had to have been mined from miles out, in deeper quarries, and then dragged across the countryside, years ago.

\*

One such quarry had been where they'd camped out before they made their way into the town. Probably depleted – the smooth-faced stone had been cut sharply, with piles of discarded rubble scattered around. They made good seats, with one heavy slab flattened out in a place that made a tall table for Miel and a low table for Calden. Emira sat between the two, as they sorted out their goods, wondering just why they were there.

Emira drew her breath, turning to Miel, and just as she was about to ask – *Okay, Miel, so why are we here?* the smaller boy threw his hair back over his shoulder and began to speak.

“Okay, *so*.” Miel said, sitting up on the small stone stool, gesturing up at Calden. “We’ve been fine travelling through woods and stuff, but trees aren’t the same thing as crowds – right?”

The flat looks returned across the table didn’t slow Miel’s enthusiasm a bit. “What we’re going to do, then – what I’m going to do – is I’m going to teach you two how to blend in in a crowd. Don’t worry, this is *easy*. I mean, I’m *gorgeous* and I can hide in crowds just fine. The trick is to just fit what they expect. People see me, and they think they see a cute girl, so I act like a fairly unremarkable cute girl. Right?”

“... May... be?”

Two hours. Two hours of explanations, of testing, of drilling. Emira didn’t need much of it – anything Miel had to tell her she already knew. A petite woman like her didn’t stand out too much. The focus of the lessons was on Calden – obviously.

There was almost no place you could hide as much Calden as there was.

“Okay, okay, so what I’m thinking is *pirate*.”

“A pirate won’t draw attention?” Calden asked.

“No, no,” Miel said. “Not like you’re kicking open doors and swinging on ropes in the street. But if we dress you up to look like you’re a sailor, and if you walk like you’ve got some confidence, you’ll just blend in. People will notice you for a few seconds and forget about you as soon as you’re done. It’s easy, trust me.”

“Well... um, okay,” Calden doubted aloud.

It was in how he *stood*. Shoulders back, hips cocked slightly to the side. Each hand held loose and ready, rather than closed into fists or nervously hidden behind his body. Walking around and around in circles in the quarry, Calden didn’t know *what* he was doing – but every time he walked around the table, with his arms like *that* and his head like *this*, Miel seemed to grow more satisfied with his performance. That was something, at least.

\*

Calden wished he’d had more time spent learning to be a pirate. Well, no, more than that - Calden wished he still had his soul. It made it easier to look around and assume that everything had been done by someone justly deserving. Instead, he saw white and pristine buildings, an ordered main street, and couldn’t help but sniff at the scent of the blood he imagined lay deep under the stone. People *died* to make the buildings pretty. They *died* to craft the world in which people now walked, uncomprehending.

Miel didn’t really know what an angry Calden looked like. When Calden had dismantled the guards in Brinkwater, it’d been done with an almost mechanical casualness, an easygoing simplicity. Actual anger hadn’t risen in him, at least, not so the thief knew. But Emira’s canter brought her horse up alongside Miel and she gave voice to his thoughts:

“Does Cal look, uh, mad, to you?”

"I was just thinking that," Miel murmured, riding a little further back. "Something's in his mind, and I'm not clear if it's a good thing."

Emira nodded, leaning forwards against the neck of her horse. "I figure it won't be two hours before we know if this town's got a library worth looking at. If it's any of these houses, I should be able to break in and break out again just fine without getting any attention."

"You wouldn't want to tell Calden?"

"Okay, Miel," Emira said, "I want you to visualise a normal window frame, then imagine Calden trying to fit through it, *quietly*."

Miel nodded. "Okay. Think I should try and keep him busy, then...?"

"Whatever works," Emira said - then winked. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

Miel paused - then drew up, an offended hand on his chest. "Why, Emira, I *am* in possession of *some* scruples."

"Where'd you steal those?"

Miel smacked her arm, huffing indignantly and glaring at the delicate ears of his horse. "I'm not talking to you anymore."

Emira grinned as she peeled her horse away from the pair.

Calden shifted in his saddle as they made their way through the town. Coin was short. Inns were coin. There'd been an... argument... with the others about whether or not they needed a place to sleep, or if the ground was good enough. He'd been outvoted, but he didn't want to spend the coin if he didn't have to. He kept his head down, he murmured, thinking to himself - only for Miel to pipe up.

"What?"

"... I said, I wonder who built this place?"

Miel looked up. Always up - even Emira was taller than he was, and Calden was a tower. "I'm going to guess, the people who lived here."

Calden shook his head, sitting back in his saddle, stopping the horse's movements. "No." And he didn't say more, because *Miel had to know better than that*.

Miel looked up and down the street. Being Miel was a matter of changing modes. A skirt and he was a girl, a laugh and he was a noble. He could just *change* when he wanted to. The art of observation - of using that sharp mind of his to process what his eyes saw - was tiring and hard, and he normally didn't *bother*. Why would he? It didn't usually yield anything new or different, to him. They were moving down a street. A mother was hiding her child. A guard had his hand on his sword. Another guard was staring across the road. Merchants were...

It didn't make sense. Miel had taught Calden how to blend. He was *doing* it. Calden was, as a person, amazing at obeying. Sure, he didn't have his soul in it – hahah, then Miel just felt guilty – but he followed the orders that he'd been given perfectly. It didn't seem to *work*, though. People still kept looking at Calden, they kept watching him as they rode through the streets.

The realisation hit Miel like a thrown rock.

They weren't looking at Calden, at the swaggering sailor he pretended to be. They all saw the tall, brown-skinned stranger, on a horse, all muscle and strength, and they were all afraid. They were afraid of Calden, because, well, because...

It wasn't like Calden wasn't *dangerous*. He was an escaped slave, after all, and his owners – the church, maybe? – or someone like them was no doubt coming to look for him. Miel had seen the boy haul a cart on his shoulders, seen him ride a creature that *wolves* and *bears* ran from, and also seen him punch his way through a dozen armed guards. Surprise only went so far - men with swords and guns rarely walked away the losers in fights with men with neither. Calden *was* someone to fear, wasn't he...?

But Calden was also gentle, and sweet, and so guilt-ridden. Calden had fought strangers for a stranger, just because the weak should not *fear* the strong. Calden had stood before a force that was willing to let him walk away and said *No*, for Miel's own sake.

Everyone on the street was looking at Calden like he was one hard word away from starting a riot. Every last pale, white face, even the ones that weren't looking intentionally. They glanced, they peeped. They looked from the windows and tugged behind curtains. They closed the doors and they stayed near the back of their merchant stalls.

Miel felt briefly sick and wasn't sure *why*. A wave of nausea ran over him as he realised that he, a cross-dresser, could mesh into a city of people like this more easily than Calden could - because he *could* hide what made him different. Did this happen to Emira, too? Was it *just* Calden, with his size and his obvious strength? Or did the Chant- the Rising Sun Imperial girl have the same experience? Miel shivered a little, and tried to concentrate.

Wait -

Someone was walking down the street towards them, walking to pass between the horses. She was short - not quite as short as Miel (dammit!) but still lacking in the height of someone like Emira or Calden. A scarf pulled up around her face, heavy set smoked goggles, like a welder would wear, and a headscarf that didn't seem appropriate given the sunny weather. Long-sleeved clothes tucked into leather gloves, and really, if not for the hips, Miel would have assumed he wasn't looking at a woman at all. On her back, a long wrapped package, which *could* have been a broom, but which had too much weight in how it sat at the bottom to be anything but a prodigiously long rifle.

She stepped between the horses, and raised her hand for just a moment - tucking something into the saddle by Calden's leg. And then she weaved onwards, around the corner, and into the crowd.

People didn't even look at her.

They'd been staring at Calden.

“Uh, hey,” Miel said, as he leant over and plucked up the piece of paper from the saddle. “How about we go find some place to rest while we wait for Emira to get back...?” And maybe, Miel figured, find something that made Calden seem less likely to crack down the walls and tear the city apart.

The note, spread out on Miel’s horse’s neck, read in mechanically clean script:

*You are a runaway slave, from the town of Shorstein.*

*Go to the Glutton’s Seat Inn, three streets from here, ask for the room on the second floor with a view of the clock tower.*

*This is not a negotiation.*

Miel looked at the paper, folding out the last of it-

*The room has been paid for.*

“Oh, hey, Calden!” he said, leaning over. “I got some good news!”

\*

The inn room was large and warm and had four beds, each set in an alcove into the walls of the building. Thick walls that absorbed the cool, but with pillows piled up high in the bedding. There was a short table, upon which sat more papers, by the window. While Miel threw himself into one of the beds, and burrowed under a blanket, Calden seemed less at ease, walking around the room with a cautious grumble.

“You didn’t say how this room was paid for.”

“Oh, come now, Calden,” Miel said, sitting up. “It doesn’t fit me to give away my secrets,” he laughed, posing coquettishly in the pillow heap, even while his brain raced. Of course, it could be a trap. It really could - but the person knew Calden as a runaway slave, and that meant she could call the authorities down if they *didn’t* turn up. There *had* to be some middle ground... and this way got them the room.

Calden sat down at the table, his knees resting against it, unable to fit underneath, and noticed the paper. Turning it over, he leant in and peered.

*You are now sitting in line with the window, which means I have a clear shot at your back.*

*Do not move, or I will fire.*

Calden moved. Except he didn’t move left, or right - he grabbed the whole table and flipped it up, swinging it behind him and scattering the paper as he rammed the table up against the window. Without lamps lit, the room plunged into darkness, and the shot that rang out bit into wood, not even puncturing the table and sending splinters to scatter out into the street along with most of the window’s glass.

Calden leant by the window, against the stonework, and very evenly, spoke. "Miel, can you please gather up the paper and check what else it has to say?"

Miel hunkered down under the pillows - he knew a gunshot when he heard one! "What the France is--"

"There's someone with a gun outside the window," Caldén explained, his tone very calm. "I think they want to talk."

Outside he could hear the movement of soldiers - Guardsmen and the garrisoned. Gunshots in a garrison town earned attention, and Caldén knew they weren't going to *just* look for the source of the sound. The person who had *shot* would clearly know this too, since they had enough in them to plan ahead and write such tidy words on paper for him and his friends to read. That meant there was *another* surprise coming.

Caldén bolted forwards, running to the door, and opened it just in time to crack against the armoured form of the soldier. It staggered backwards only momentarily before lunging forwards with a closed fist, the other grabbing for his shoulder. Caldén's large frame and the soldier's constrained hands worked against one another, scraping hard for a moment, before the fist *cracked* against Caldén's jaw.

The blow didn't feel like a person, though. Caldén had been hit many times, and there was a distinct measure in how a person struck with their hands, and how they struck with a weapon. Hands had flesh and sinew and could *break*, and even in a gauntlet, a person's manner responded to the impact. Weapons could break too, but it didn't hurt as much when the weapon you were holding broke. Whoever this soldier was, they punched as though their arms were weapons.

Stepping back into the room, Caldén gripped the hand trying to grab his arm, closing his fingers around the wrist and turning viciously. He spun around - *lifting* with that grip, and swung downwards. The soldier's feet left the ground, then hit it again, flat and even, even as it was hauled along. Caldén then braced his shoulders, and stormed forwards, ramming the frame against the wall. Shoulder hit guard, and -

*click*

Caldén threw himself back across the room as the bullet hit the floor with a white puff of smoke. He landed on his rear, planted his hand and hauled himself upwards, keeping moving while the soldier turned the arm with a gun in it. Not a gun in its *hand*, but a gun *in its arm*.

The soldier held fast, turning its wrist slightly, which made the gun barrel along the forearm move with it. It spoke. "This is a test." Its voice was completely unemotional, like smooth, uniform gravel.

Circling gingerly, Caldén moved around the edge of the room, towards the window. Closing his fists, he wondered if there was any chance the guards heard the pistol. Probably *not* - the person who had taken the shot had known the room, and that meant they'd chosen the room, and *that* meant that chances are, the room was soundproofed, to some extent. Whatever rifle had been fired at the window had to be large, and it'd made an incredible shout. That pistol was barely a puff. Caldén was probably on his own in-

*clink*

Miel cleared his throat, behind the soldier. "This pin looks really, really important." He said. "Sorry about that."

The soldier stopped short - quite literally. It stood like its legs were frozen stiff. It turned its head, arms moving slowly, before very, very slowly rocking forwards, and falling, stiff as a board onto the floor. That unemotional voice grunted, just once: "Ouch."

Calden circled around behind the prone figure in steel to Miel - who had sprung out of the pillows like a child's toy, grinning impishly. He held in one hand a pin easily as long as his forearm, and shrugged. "Should I not have done that?"

"Seems so," Caldén said, hunkering down by the armoured form and putting his hand on it. "It's like a really complicated machine, you kn-"

From the ground, the prone form interrupted: "Get me out of here."

"Oh." Caldén said, as he started to dismantle the armour.

## Part Twelve

Can thou put an hook into his nose or bore his jaw through with  
heaps upon heaps with the jaw of an ass have I slain thousands?  
There is a lion without, I shall be slain in the streets.

\*

Calling it armour wasn't really fair. A suit of armour, as Calden knew it, was meant to sit on a person's body, more or less in the same places *as* the person's body. This construction was a different thing indeed, with long legs where barely her thighs could fit inside. Arms that swung and moved on a complicated pulley control system, which was much closer to the chest. Guns - guns in the arms, an extending blade for punching - it was less armour and more *armoury*.

As for the woman herself, she wasn't very tall. It was the same woman Miel had spotted in the streets, but swaddled in far less fabric. Some traces of Changtei – or other – racial heritage marked her, but her grey eyes were clearly out of place. Her shoulders were narrow, her frame bottom-heavy – her hips slightly more pronounced than her upper body, leaving Calden with the impression she was leaning away from him. Under one eye, she had a burnished piece of metal that seemed either stuck carefully into the skin, or perhaps sunk into it. The distinction was hard to make – but when she moved her eyes, there was the faintest *whirr* of something mechanical. More distinctive than any of these details, though, was the scar. She was clad in a white canvas tunic and dark brown breeches, leaving the entirety of her arms exposed but for gloves, and up her entire left arm, around her shoulders, and up the right side of her face ran a dark patch of etched skin. The scar ran over her eye, which seemed to have only been

Calden and Miel stripped off her armour and put her down in the centre of the room. Not once did Calden hear her breathing shift, notice her expression change. She simply waited until they were done, stiff and uncooperative. She sat with her arms crossed across her petite chest, her intense grey eyes glaring sullenly up at her captors.

"Does this make us the bad guys?" Miel asked - noticing the seeming vulnerability the woman had, out of her suit of armour.

"She did attack *us*." Calden murmured, defensive.

"Yes, but now we're keeping her prisoner. Well, okay, not for *long*, right?"

"Then I will be going," she said, putting her hand down to the ground, pushing herself up to stand.

"Ah-ah-ah-ah," Miel said, leaning forwards with a scowl and pressing his backside back against the door, as if that would bar it. "You *shot* at us."

"You did not read all of the papers, did you?" she asked, looking at Miel.

"Something came up." Calden deadpanned.

"I offered a business exchange. I wanted to ensure that you did not leave before I was done, hence my need for securities."

"A suit of armour and guns and - these are securities?" Miel demanded.

"Yes."

Calden rubbed his forehead. "Miel, check outside, see if there are any guards coming to the disturbance."

"You sure?"

Calden nodded. "I don't think she'll pull a gun or anything."

Miel nodded, and slipped out the door, nodding to Calden as he went.

*click*

"Oh come *on*." Calden grunted, turning around.

She adjusted in her sitting position, slowly standing up and gripping the gun in her hand. The handgun was much closer than the long rifle, and the barrel of it was wider than Calden's finger. Hammer back, ready to fire, finger on the trigger. "I am willing to continue negotiations."

Calden blinked. The pistol in her hand wasn't a small one - where *had* she been hiding it...?

"Well, then," she said, cocking the gun. "My research requires large amounts of coin and materials for further advancement. Banditry can, typically, provide coin and materials, *if* you are willing to obey orders and strike when I have planned. The Bursar from Shorstein was a perfect example. Hesitation cost that group of associates their lives, as I'm sure you're aware."

"One of them *did* shoot at him."

"But he missed. It is harder to miss a prone man, pinned down."

Calden nodded. "Likely true."

"Is the issue payment?"

Calden shrugged, leaning forwards. "Depends, I suppose. Do you have any accurate maps of the world which show the locations of Asyria, Egypt, Pathros, Kush, Elam, Shinar, Hamath, and," he took a breath, "The Islands?"

She gave him a look like the centre of his head had just split open and something crawled out - wearing a monocle.

"The Alchemical poles."

"Are they?"

"You do not know."

"I don't."

Her expression briefly changed from that dull nothingness. Unfortunately, it changed to a look of intense frustration.

“Yes, I own a map of the world which accurately shows the alchemical poles, and I imagine there are maybe seven advanced natural philosophers capable of interpreting such a map. I could offer it as payment for your services. You would need to demonstrate your ability to follow orders. I would need to compose an additional test.”

Calden rolled his eyes, planting his hand over his face momentarily, ignoring the gun pointed at him. “Why do you need tests?”

“Because tests are how one proves things. The last test was to determine if you could follow orders and recognise threats to your wellbeing.”

“Well, I can, and I can.”

“The test indicates otherwise. With a gun pointed at you, you chose to disobey a direct order and you chose to instead impose a barrier to your own safety, jeopardising your ability to enjoy the room you were given.”

Calden leant forwards, into the barrel of the gun, cold metal kissing warm flesh. “You weren’t a threat.”

Those cold grey eyes looked up at him, and he could almost hear her brain ratcheting. “Interesting. So you can not identify threats?”

“Pull that trigger and we’ll see.”

“Oka-” she began – and then Calden’s hand was on hers, clamped around the gun. A twist, a lift, and he hauled, bodily, pulling her up, off the ground, the barrel no longer under his chin. He hauled, and spun, and *twisted* the grip on the gun, holding it upside down, barrel to the ground - and her in the other. A glance at the gun, a glance at her – and he stopped.

The woman had an unnaturally even voice and her whole manner was very unemotional. She did not smile or sneer or even express anger as Calden had expected when she was challenged. She just *was*. There was no emotion to her, like a pane of glass... except here.

He could see, deep down, in her eyes, that she was *terrified*. The prior meetings, the moments before, the glimpses of her through the window - always with that look in her eyes.

Calden lowered her. He sat down, his eyes at level with her. He took the long rifle, turning it back around, and handed it to her - watching her eyes the whole way. She only flicked her eyes from his to grip the gun, and immediately run three ems back, to the corner of the room, standing by the window. Her nostrils flaring, she primed the gun anew, and watched him. The gun didn’t tremble. Her voice didn’t waver. The only place the fear lived was deep in her eyes... but it was there. And now he hadn’t done what she’d expected, now he’d given her back the thing that gave her power – and she was even more afraid. How could he reassure her...?

*Look down.*

Calden lowered his head, looking down at his feet, and drew a long breath. She could act unseen, she could run if she wanted to. "At the distance you're at, even if I moved, you'd have had to wait. The table was thick. I could do what I did, safely."

"You did not fear being shot."

"Even if you hit me, I could probably have survived. Even if the table didn't work."

She narrowed her eyes, annoyed. "You are larger than me, you are stronger than me, and you are faster than me. I am *much* smarter than you are. If we are to conduct any kind of business, you are going to have to recognise my reasons for doing what I do, the way I do them. You *must* follow orders, and you *must* identify threats."

"I think I know why you do what you do," Calden said... and no more.

"... Is that so."

"Yes." She straightened slightly. "You have no interest in working for me."

"No."

"Why?"

"Because I have something more important to do."

"You are an escaped slave. There is literally nothing you can do. If you attempt to work within an orderly society, you will be found and legally transported back to your owner. You are property waiting for a pickup. I don't see how you can have anything more important to do unless you think you are in love." A pause. "You don't think that, do you."

Even her question sounded a bit dead. Calden briefly considered. He thought of fire lit chats with Emira, he thought of a sleeping Miel leaning against his side. He thought about the look that scissor-cruel guardswoman had given him. He thought about Shorstein. And he opened his mouth to speak – just as the last unbroken pieces of glass in the window *crashed* in with the sound of the air being broken into pieces.

"That is probably the Tyrant," she said, looking over at the window from her sitting position.

"Are you serious?"

"Yes."

Calden looked down at her. "... Are you always serious?"

"Yes."

"Right," He said, leaning over to look out the window. A monstrous tail tore through the sky, and the ground shook, as the beast that owned it made its way through the streets, bellowing and screeching in a way that the ear could not properly interpret.

“This is not a test.” She said, pushing herself up to stand. “I expected a Tyrant to make an attack based on the movements in the forest prior to now. I have a safe room and will be making my way there.” She paused, waving the gun at him as she approached the door. “Do not die.” Another pause. “Oh. My name is Soya Kakita.”

Calden blinked. “Calden.”

“I understand.” She said, turning and darting out the door, closing it behind her.

Calden looked down at the pile of armour on the floor, at the multiple bullet marks around the room. Miel was downstairs, probably talking to guards. Emira was ... somewhere. Where had she gone? But there *was* something he could understand going on. A beast was attacking people. That, at least, was a problem Caldén could understand.

The brute ran to the window, grabbed the frame, and swung himself out, up and onto the angled roof of Shadrech’s connected homes, up to run along the wall, chasing the stomping and the screams.

Every stomping foot broke tiles and sent shrapnel scattering down into the street below, as Caldén ran towards the peak of the building. Foot before the other, muscles tensing, coiling himself like a spring, he drew in a breath, stepped off the edge - and *flung* himself into the air, thrown bodily at the edge of the wall.

One drifting moment between the launch and the landing, Caldén couldn’t help but wonder why he did these things. There had to be a smarter way to do them. There had to be some sort of common sense that suggested the fastest way to the Tyrant, but he’d chosen to instead run to the walls, and in the process, *throw himself into the air*, three storeys above the ground, where landing would no doubt break him as badly as falling from Brinkwater tower did –

And then his hand clapped on the edge of the wall, and all those thoughts left. Doubt was for the moments when he had the luxury and nothing better to do. Tensed arms, bunched up, Caldén hauled his body onto the wall, turned towards the sounds of carnage, and *ran*.

Smoke rose over the city’s surfaces. The Tyrant was large, but it clearly wasn’t so large it could tower over the buildings and guard towers. Thankfully, a beast that size couldn’t exactly hide. Caldén skidded to a halt at the guard station on the wall, a short squat building that still wasn’t easily vaulted, turning to face into the city, spying the wake of the Tyrant. A straight line in to the creature, and all he had to-

*click*

Caldén stamped his foot unconsciously, “Oh, come *on*,” he said, to the source of the gun. “Soya– “ and he turned around to stare, face to face, into the pale, harsh face of Officer Haurvjec. She was covered in dust, her forehead sweaty. He’d ran through the space she stood not ten seconds before.

“Officer.” Caldén swallowed.

She didn’t answer. Of course.

“I don’t suppose... I ... you’re here for something else...?”

She raised her pistol, her expression clear. *Stay*. But the roaring didn’t stop, and neither did the screams. Calden knew he could jump the wall, slide down, survive the fall - as he was already dead - and make his way to the border faster than she could catch him. She, after all, would stay - she would stop the Tyrant. Letting nature kill people for no reason but to pursue him couldn’t be the right thing to do, and...

...and she’d do the right thing.

Was he really meant to have thoughts like that, when he had no soul?

Calden sighed. “... Aw, *France*.”

Then he threw himself off the wall, into the city, down towards the rampaging Tyrant.

\*

Emira was not keen on burglary. It felt awfully close to theft, which was the sort of thing people with material attachments did. Every attachment was a sacrifice and she had sacrificed much by becoming so close to Miel and to Calden.

A nagging thought had hovered in her mind when Calden had quoted from the Books, specifically that passage in Isaiah. The four places described, the corners of the world, did not mesh with the world that she knew, the world which was round, and where round things did not have corners. The problem is, the books *did* name places that she had heard of, somewhere.

In a fairer world she’d have had a moment in a nice warm bathtub, soaking and sudsing to suddenly realising where she’d heard the terms, and run across town to proclaim her realisation. Then she’d have a bath, which could be nice for her, and people might get to peek at her wearing nothing but suds, which would be nice for them, and, okay, a tiny bit nice for her, too. But instead, she’d just remembered by slogging through notebooks in the Magistrate’s private library.

That had led her to the passage of text about the Alchemical Poles – locations believed by people who believed in the discredited notion of alchemical transmutation and immortality, to be full of power of transition and change. Locations that were also sites of major events in the Books, even if they somehow transpired days and days of travel away. Never let historical inconsistency interfere with the Books, Emira knew *that* much.

That meant she was looking for a Natural Philosopher, and the town had had three of them. Two of them were open and airy and easy to get to – so Emira discounted them immediately. The third, a small workshop pushed suspiciously into the warehousing areas of Shadrech, in a place where there should be a lot more building to explain its position near a wall.

When presented with two easy options and a hard one, Emira knew best to get the hard one out of the way first. A secretive place, owned by a mad person, in a place renowned for crime? When she’d made her way down to the building, she’d reflected that all it needed to complete it was an appreciation for traps.

A crossbow bolt thudded into the window frame behind Emira, and she reflected further on just how much she wished it wasn't playing to type.

The future was a funny thing, sometimes. Breaking into a workshop so full of traps meant that she had to peek just moments in advance to see the place she *didn't* put her feet, because if she did, the future would stop happening. It was an act of supreme will to peek *so little* into the future, made harder by her inability to move much while she did it. More movement made for what she could only really call *noise*, a noise that made her uncertain. This uncertainty had to be very, very carefully controlled.

She slid her foot forwards a toe or two more. Whoever built this workshop, with its traps upon traps, was *insane*, or worse, *sane* in an entirely too-efficient fashion.

\*

They called them Tyrants because they owned the land, and they were not shy about exerting their will. They came in so many varieties. Some were tall and broad, some were low and squat. Emira spoke of Tyrants in Changtei that stood on four legs and dragged a club through the soil behind them, covered over with horns and spikes. Miel had spoken of a noble who rode through the streets of the north riding on the back of a two-legged Tyrant, tamed and coated about with bright orange and blue plumage. The only Tyrant Calden had ever seen had been the one that had been turned into blades and leather in Shorstein - and which had fallen by the tree line.

Up close, Calden wasn't sure what he thought of them. They clearly weren't meant for marketplaces - snapping and gnashing down at the people, who had fled inside, its massive bulk crashing into buildings of clay and brick that clearly couldn't handle its mass. It turned around, tail slashing through brickwork and pummelling into the rooftops, which only created more steps downward for Calden to leap.

Tiny thunderclaps followed behind him, he knew, of the Officer Haurvjec, those tiny teleports as she streaked down towards him, not pursuing him but making her way to the same goal. A sword was not much to a Tyrant's will, - but placed perfectly, blades could end kingdoms. It could certainly end a tyrant.

As he ran around the corner of one building, ducking under the shards of flying wood and rubble, he couldn't help but regard the tiny arms of a tyrant. It was no doubt not common to them all, but such tiny, little things, tucked up close against its chest. He'd almost thought it didn't *have* forelimbs, just a pair of back legs and a tail, which almost looked sillier. Then there was the plumage. Oh yes, plumage indeed - every foot of the beast, from snout to tail, had some colour to it, row upon row of long, stiff feathers. Nested red, then yellow, then bright, brilliant blue, then red again, over and over up and down the beast, including its massive, fluffy ruff. Feathers! Calden had seen no feathers on the one he'd dragged - it just had a dark purple hide, glossy and rich with tannable fluids.

The tail swung down before him and he skidded to a halt, arms out by his side as if to slow his movement. One arm swung out, and he thumped his fist into the surface, which did precisely *nothing*, because the entire beast was built as if out of leather and wood.

Well, not *nothing* - the beast rounded on Calden, its head low, down to the ground, nostrils flaring. Up close, as its maw split and showed row upon row of teeth, Calden recognised that, feathers and tiny hands aside...? He stood before a beast with a pair of jaws *taller than him*. Its maw was barely a halfem from his face, and he could see each tooth longer than his forearm, drenched with the blood of soldiers better armed and armoured than him, and its tiny black eyes *mad* with rage.

The tyrant was displeased, and it would *have its due*.

“Calden!” Miel’s voice rang from a world away, as the beast opened its mouth. Ah, so clearly he’d found his way to the source of the noise, too.

The officer appeared by the creature’s shoulder, running up along it, only to stop, skid, rebalance and move around as the Tyrant began to shift its attention. It drew in its breath and, face by Calden, the creature *roared* - sending a shudder through its whole frame that would have thrown the officer off, if she hadn’t leapt *first*, and hit the bricks on the opposite side of the square in a crouch. She turned, reversing the grip on her blade. She just needed an *opportunity*.

The soldiers were better armoured. They had guns. They had weapons forged in steel and bound with leather. Calden was a brown, soulless, runaway slave in a land of white heroes and knights. What did he have, to best the Tyrant? The scent of rotten meat, caught in a dozen sword-sized teeth, blasted over Calden, hard enough to make a man swoon - but not a demon.

Calden roared *back*, and the thing inside him, the rage that could not be quelled, blossomed into an outrageous fire. He barely saw what he was doing until after he’d done it.

Calden clapped a hand into the nostril of the beast with a grip of iron, and dug with his hands into leathery flesh. The tyrant lashed its head back, throwing upwards, fit to cast Calden up into the air - but he *would not let go*. Instead of flying off like a thrown piece of meat, Calden swung down onto the top of the beast’s snout. Spread wide, he swung his other arm around to grab the other nostril, braced firm with his arms, and brought both feet down into the beast’s eye sockets.

Something soft *broke*. A gout of moisture flashed up and out, pressure driving it as the beast began to stagger and fall. The bellow that followed was one of pain and triumph - mixing two voices together, while the massive feathered beast, its sharp-tipped feathers digging and scratching into Calden’s frame. He would not let go - he would *not* surrender his triumph for mere *pain*. Somewhere far below Calden, the beast’s throat was opened, and an arterial spray of blood larger than a fountain arced across buildings, painting them red and black.

The beast staggered backwards again - then teetered forwards. Enormous muscles contorted, and Calden straightened his arms, forcing his feet down further. The beast threw its head back again, roaring, thrashing - and Calden only braced further. When it came down, he knew he was going to have to let go - but not a *moment sooner*. He let his head fall forwards, thudding against the beast’s snout. Blind and broken, the creature staggered – feet hitting rubble of its own crafting, skidding... then sailing downwards.

A week later, after they’d cleaned up the goo, when the blood was gone and the bones had been sold and the Tyrant’s land had been reclaimed, Miel could finally relate what he’d seen, as Calden had killed the killer of men. He’d speak of how he’d seen the Officer leap to one side of the beast as

it fell prone, the opposite side to where Calden fell, when the beast hit the ground chin-first. The way its head had snapped, the way the forces had run through its head and prompted a mechanical *twitch* through the whole thing. When the tyrant's head hit the floor, Calden *bounced* - and arced through the air, towards the torn wall, out into the green.

Miel, at the time, didn't say any such thing. He just grabbed for his horse, and *ran*. The officer was on their tail again, and they needed to move *fast* to avoid her.

Emira could catch them up. He was sure of that. Soya probably could to, if she was that keen on their help. If this town had a map, it was a dead loss - because Miel was *not* going to be caught again.

Not for *anything*!

The worst of the chaos piled around the Tyrant's prone form. Calden's knees in his horse's side, his head down, he rounded sharply and waited out the gate - his hands on the reins, his heart in his throat. Stay? Haurvjec could take him, and she would. Go? Miel and Emira were still in Shadrech.

Suspended between now and then, yes and no, heaven and hell, Calden gripped his chest and wished he still had a soul to make the choice easy.

"Calden!" Miel yelled, already ahead. "Come *on*! Emira will find us!"

"How do you-"

"She's a *time travelling ninja*!" Miel insisted, rounding his horse. "Come *on*!"

It wasn't a fair description of Emira, at all. Calden was only half-sure of what a ninja was, and wondered as they rode, in those moments of doubt, if it was a rude word the Changtei used to describe the Imperial Sun Peoples, and he and Miel just knew it from... bad stories, maybe...? Time travel wasn't really the right word for it - after all, Calden and Miel travelled through time, too. They travelled at a rate of one second per second - Emira had told them that.

Three clearings and half an hour of riding, and there she was, astride her horse, with a grin on her face. Her fists had bruises on them, her shirt slicked to her with sweat, and there was blood on her feet, blood with the blue-black tinge of the Tyrant, made worse with the coagulation.

"Knew it," she said, triumphant. "C'mon, guys - you won't believe the map I found."

## Part Thirteen

What is a man profited, if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?

\*

Right there by the campfire, they'd sat out the map, and looked upon it. They'd drawn lines between the four alchemical poles - straight as Miel could make them - and peered at the places. The map was old, very old, and showed many things that, according to Emira, were wrong. It showed the islands of the Imperial Sun as one large line of land. It showed a great continent to the south, larger than the entirety of the western nations. It showed a jagged sea and the edge of the world. But it showed those places that mattered - the places that the strange, flat-voiced woman with the armour had said were the alchemical poles.

Two possibilities lay on the map: Two places the map should predict the seat of God; one amidst the peaks and points of the highest mountains in the world - to hear Emira speak of them - and the other, deep in the well of the ocean, beyond where men fished, where only a few rare ships had ever bothered to go.

"Where, um, where do we try first?" Miel asked, giving voice to the more worrying of fears.

Calden and Emira peered at the pages, as if willing for two equally likely ridiculous possibilities to explain themselves. Finally, she reached out, and bumped Calden's shoulder. "Do you have any idea?"

Calden ran his fingers along the lines. "Here." He said, tapping the middle of the ocean.

"Do I want to know why?"

"Daniel saw beast after beast, emerging from the sea. The beast of ten horns was from the sea. The mountains of earth are destroyed at the end of days." He rubbed his fingertips under his chin. "God is in the ocean, not on the land."

Emira paused, looking to Miel, then to Calden. "... You had to pick the *hard* one, didn't you?"

Calden shrugged, straightening up and hoisting himself up onto his horse. "We've got to find a trawler that can go out at night, and go over the depths."

"You sound like you have a plan."

"I know where such a trawler goes."

\*

"You *have* been found wanting, boy."

Calden sat up like a bolt of lightning struck him. The voice of the Bursar had said maybe twenty words to him in the path from Shorstein and Ranthelm, but there it was, echoing inside his ears,

deep and sonorous and *present*. Throwing back his blanket, he stood up, his hands gripping the ground by his sides, finding nothing but dirt and dust.

The Bursar stood before him, by the campfire, which was itself, dull as ash. Blue and black trim on his coat adorned now with golden light, glowing from within, and his skin shimmered like pearl. One hand tucked behind his back, gun by his shoulder, sword at his hip, it was every inch the man and at the same time, everything not. The Bursar that Calden remembered was a sneering man with eyes perpetually cruel. The Bursar before Calden now was a figure of light and life, with eyes that shimmered of infinite mercy.

Calden's lips parted to speak, he tried to tear his eyes from the figure, to look to Miel and Emira, to rouse them, to wake them and share this strange experience. He couldn't. He *couldn't* - moving his eyes was like tearing brickwork from his chest. Sitting up slowly, he put his hands on the ground before him, trying to resist the urge that rose in his chest.

*Look down.*

"Well now," the Bursar said, stepping forwards and bending on one knee to look him in the face. "It seems that your Father Shipman still has some need to pray for you. So here I am. Your *Angel*."

"W-what?"

"An Angel, sent by God. Taking the form familiar to you, so your mortal mind can endure the experience. Do you recognise...?" the Not-quite-Bursar said. "You are being given what every sinner receives, boy. You are being given a chance, and a choice."

It played out in Calden's mind like a script. In the Books, the Angel of God appeared before many. The wanderer by the walls, that preincarnate Christ. The fall of Jeriko. The strange joys of the people of Kanaan. They all had a *choice*. Akan had a choice. Caleb had a choice. They *all* had these moments. It was how life worked, Calden knew - a path of simple destiny that a person followed, until they were given a choice by God to do one thing, then do another.

"The man you see is on his way to you. The Officer of the law is also on her way to you. One will find you, drag you back, and destroy the church using you." He shook his head, sighing. "Very sad. The other, however, will redeem you, in the name of God, and save you from the reckless task you have before you."

Dreams didn't normally feel this real, with the grit of the dirt under his fingernails. Details were so crisp, so clear - the way the ground texture was consistent under the Bursar's feet, the shimmering light having warmth to it that Calden could *feel*. Calden drew his breath and it did not fill him - a pain not from his own hand gripped at his chest.

"Of course, for redemption, you need a soul?" he said. Silver chain danced, and between Calden's hands, a chunk of bone fell.

*His soul.*

"Take your soul," said the vision. "You have a choice of which to meet. The officer of the law, or the Agent of God,"

Calden's fingers grabbed it, lifting it up and turning it over and over, his breath catching in his throat. Even holding it again, he realised what he was seeing, he *knew* what he was dealing with - he *knew* the moral choice before him. He could be as Abraham and show fealty to the Lord, Isaac and fight him, or Jacob and become the heart of a great nation. Redemption was painful, but to be redeemed - to be made *as one* with God's moral standard? It was impossible to weigh that in terms of cost, because it returned in *eternity*. The bone charm between his fingers, Calden turned it this way and that, looking down at the lines and ridges, concentrating not on the Bursar's words, but on the offer.

The way those lines curved, the way they kissed back against the notches on the middle of the piece of bone... Calden couldn't deny the truth his eyes showed him. "It's not mine."

"Does that even matter?" the Bursar asked. "A soul, a chance at redemption. Returning to the Church, and an eternity of bliss in Heaven." He turned his head to the side, shiny bright dome seeming almost like a halo.

Was this the meeting with God? Emira's vision had been, to his knowledge, trustworthy. She had shown her grasp on the future as excellent. So if this was the moment...

Calden looked down at the talisman. Under his eyes, it started to change, rearranging and reconstructing the patterns, the lines becoming more familiar, yet more familiar. It *was* his soul. It was also a fake. It was also something else. It *changed* as he looked at it. Of course - if this was God, or his Angel, then clearly he could *make* the soul right.

Eyes open, his God before him, or as near to as Calden feared he would meet, he drew his breath and answered God's call:

"No."

The bone *snapped* under his hand. It *ground* against his hands as he applied more and more pressure, as he *gripped* and *crushed* the trinket, the last piece of chain in his life. Glaring up at the luminescent figure, Calden sat back down in his bed, relaxing backwards.

More words, more bravado, more *energy* sparked underneath Calden's skin, wanting to burst out. He wanted to leap up, to strike at the face of the thing that stood before him in the guise of a man he was told to respect. Choices weren't meant to be so easy, were they? Surely he'd have some moment, tomorrow, when he doubted what he'd do. Or perhaps he wanted to yell in the face of the figure.

The figure sneered, and turned, storming away from the camp.

In the morning, when the bone fragments crunched under a rolling Calden's shoulder and woke him up, he reflected on what had happened, even as he dragged his foot through the dirt to hide the footprints of the Other who had come.

\*

The walls of Shorstein seemed smaller, the stone paler than when Calden had left. The clock tower still loomed, its face still white and clean. The tree line was a little less wide, a little more haggard,

with scrapes and scratches on the trees. Had they been there before? It was hard to say. Harder still to be sure - Calden had after all, seen this town with far more innocent eyes.

The wanted posters about the place with his face on them - *Runaway Slave* - were particularly damning. Surely the word was *indebted*?

The great iron trawler, with its gouges and its red paint, sat in the dock, a stop as it went away from Ranthelm, out into the depths, to dredge up the fish and treasure that wise men of wooden boats didn't dare seek.

Behind the tree line, lurking in the shadows of unobservation, the three celebrated the return to Calden's hometown with a flaming row.

"Are you kidding? You stow away on this and they'll just throw you in with the chum. These people are *nasty*." Emira repeated. "Stowing away is *not* the plan here." She waved her hand in front of Calden's face.

"It's the deep," Miel said. "They say it drives you crazy."

Calden grit his teeth in constrained rage. His friends were right, they were trying to be kind, they were being *wise*, but this just represented another roadblock. Another *problem*. And if the vision by the campfire had been right, there were two bigger problems on their way. Calden rubbed his neck, looking between them. "... Sell me to them."

"Are you *kidding* me?!" Miel yelled.

Emira widened her eyes, looking at Calden. "Calden, you're *already* a runaway slave--"

"So how much worse will it be if I run away a second time?" He shrugged. "They can't execute me *twice*."

Miel folded his arms, leaning forwards. "Okay, that gets *you* on board, but what about the rest of us?"

"You'll stay here."

"My adorable back end I will!" Miel yelled, again. "Are you *kidding* me?"

"You said that."

"*You still haven't answered it!*"

"They have wanted posters here. You can't stay long; neither of you. Either on the trawler, and I can't see a way to do that that doesn't end with us all thrown over the side, or you have to *get away* from Shorstein."

"Emira, help me out here."

"I can't," she said, looking down at the map. "It's over three weeks to get out there. I'm a woman, and you can't work like they want. These people have their own law, once they're on the trawler - we get caught, and that's it. Rusty blade across the throat and we're in with the chum."

"And they won't do that to Calden?"

"No. Look at him. He's a great big dumb ox and they don't have to pay him."

"Thanks." Calden interjected.

"Don't mention it."

Miel *fumed*, practically glowing with irritation. "What do we do, then? Huh? We can't stay here - it's too dangerous, right?"

Emira murred, then raised a finger. "We can make our way inland. Ranthelm's guards are useless and corrupt - give them a few weeks and they'll forget about us. I still have no idea why we're still being chased - I figured Calden made a good symbol."

"The Bursar was willing to ignore you, yeah..." Calden said, nodding to Emira.

"The Bursar?"

"Remember, uhm, back when we met? In the cart?"

Emira grinned. "Oh, was that his name?"

"His Title."

"D... does he have a name?" Miel asked.

"... I don't know."

Miel smoothed his tunic. "Either way," he said, biting his lower lip. "If we *do* sell you... oh. Wait. Um."

"Um?"

"If we sell you, then we get money."

"A lot of money," Calden said. "Well, if you can forge papers well enough."

"Please, forgery is *easy*. And if we sell you, for money, we sell you for a *lot* of money, and if we do *that*, then suddenly Emira and I have some money to start work."

"Wasn't money the point of the work...?" Emira asked.

Miel shook his head. "No. Money is the tool." He wagged a finger. "Get enough of it and nobody asks how you got it any more. That was always the plan, back in Ranthelm. I was going to steal nobility. Buy land, buy favour, and then, buy a solution."

"A solution to what?" Calden asked.

Miel stopped, looking up at him. "Whattya got?"

Emira cleared her throat. "If we sell Calden, you know, when the trawler comes back, we can buy him back..."

“You say it’s a few weeks...?” Miel asked. “... That shouldn’t be hard.” And suddenly, the wheels were turning.

“Sounds to me,” Emira said, pushing herself into standing. “We have something like a plan.”

\*

The Lady Denancourt De Molyneux - which is to say Miel - adjusted her - which is to say his - glasses and smoothed back her hair. These were the greatest moments of his life, Miel reflected. Not the moment when he walked into a room and had everyone genuflect - those were *fun*, but they weren’t *hard*. Not the moments when a few key observations defined the world for people who otherwise wouldn’t notice them - those were more just embarrassing, showing him what kind of morons he met.

These were the fine moments. The moments when he handed over a piece of paper that said *this thing is true*, in defiance of the world around him. The piece of paper that spoke of bank managers and information handlers and bursars and textual printers, with their codes and their crosshatching and all of the tools they *had*... and to the eye of someone whose livelihood relied on how he could read them, fool them.

It was like dancing on a pin - the pointy end.

“Ah don’t mean t’be rude, there, but jus’ *whai* are y’all takin’ so long? Ah understand y’all are not in this town for very long at all, a’er all.”

The Captain moved the papers back and forth, biting his lip. Ahah. The price. He was double-checking himself, he was making absolutely certain this good deal wasn’t too good. Half an hour of negotiation was usually as much as Miel used - the dance of coin had to represent the sums involved.

Paperwork glared up at him, the layers that spoke of Calden’s ownership, the terms of the transaction, the demand of payment in cash. “You’ve got someone delivering the property to the trawler?” Priming - if there was commitment to the action already in place, it was harder for him to say no.

“Whai, yes - is there something th’matter with that?”

The Captain shook his head, as he took the paperwork, folding it over and in sets, sliding it into the file. “Nah, nah. Think that should b’fine, lady.”

Mixed in amongst the paperwork, a thin piece of gum began to soften and dry. When the Captain opened the folder again, mixed in amongst the paperwork he’d swept together were his orders, signed in church ink, instructing him to the latitude and longitude of the centre of the Alchemical Poles.

Miel smiled beatifically, taking the small cashbox in one hand, wrinkling his nose and pretending to be bothered by how *gauche* a *transaction* could be - but needs must when travelling light, no? He shook his head, stepping out onto the flagstones of Shorstein, and made his way to the meeting place, walking all the way.

Don't take it all and run - take enough, and walk.

\*

Emira adjusted her coat and handed the chain over. It felt wrong, obviously. She'd travelled far enough in her short life to see slavery in its faces, and she'd seen the way it tore societies apart, *eventually*. The problem wasn't a man like Calden, the problem was a whole *population* of Caldens. The oppressive mechanisms necessary to keep one man like Calden from happening just made sure that more and more of them would occur at once.

Still, Calden was her friend, and while she couldn't deny there was something almost transformative about buckling a collar around his throat and watching as his body responded to the simple rules he'd been taught, she still *hated* the effect of it. Handing the chain over to the bosun at the gangplank was almost a mercy - the chain felt greasy, her fingers somehow contaminated.

"Hold right there," a sharp voice rang out.

Emira, Calden and the bosun all looked to the voice - and along the grey stone of the docks came a man in church uniform; a thick woollen coat, bald as an egg, and with eyes of hard flint on either side of his hooked nose.

"Ah," Emira said, nudging the Bosun. "He wants to talk to me. Go on, take the boy on the boat, this doesn't involve you."

"How sure of that are y-"

"Go." Emira said, drawing in one long, cool breath.

As Emira turned to face the man, he gripped his sword at his side, and went from a stride into a run. Gripping his blade in a tight fist, the man she only knew as The Bursar closed the space between them, intent on undoing one mistake, months ago.

The Bursar moved with the efficiency of a machine. No underestimating Emira - he wasn't that sort of man. Hard as a hammer, quick as a whip, the old man knew what he was doing, and the first thing was that he *did not hesitate*. It was how he'd bested the bandits. With a gun pointed at his head, he'd acted - because he was dead either way.

Fast, strong, armed, and dangerous. The Bursar would not hesitate for politeness or for gallantry, even so far as striking a woman.

If he *could*.

The first lunge swung past her, wide, and as he swept his sword wide to try and catch her again, Emira stepped under his arm, rising up like a bullet from a gun, her fist striking up under his chin hard enough to lift him up, off his feet, from the ground. Toes in boots drifted in air for a balletic second, but before he landed, she'd moved - spinning around inside the space of his arm, her elbow raised, to *crunch* it against his windpipe. The Bursar didn't even *scream* as Emira stepped back - his hand falling loose of his sword, his breath escaping his chest while Emira's fist *thudded* into his solar plexus with the force of a kicking horse.

The Bursar staggered backwards, and fell flat, gasping for air, clutching his chest and throat.

The whole fight took less than ten seconds.

Emira walked over to the old man, bending down to pick up his gun from his holster, retrieving his sword from the ground. Emira watched his expression.

“You’ll get your breath back in... oo... A few minutes, maybe?” she said, throwing casually with one arm, the gun making a loud *sploosh* as it hit the water, the sword instead sinking in silently. “Way I figure, though, by the time you can breathe again, he’s out of reach, and so am I.”

With a strut in her step, she walked down the docks. Miel would be waiting with the horses, after all.

## Part Fourteen

All the rivers run into the sea yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea.

\*

The Bosun walked Calden up the deck, and started listing duties. Nets. Ropes. Orders. Routines. The hours of his work. He was going to work like everyone else, but he'd rest like everyone else did, too, because he was no good to them mad or dead. As if by rote, he stopped short by the captain's cabin.

"Also, Captain said y're t'meet with an officer, r' somethin'. You keep a civil tongue in y'r head or I'll take it off y', y'hear?" he said, opening the door and directing Calden in.

Inside the cabin, the silver-haired frame of Officer Haurvjec sat before a small table, facing the door. On the table, a gun, a notebook, a sword, a pen. Her stance was that of a stone idol, her arms folded, her head down, her eyes seemingly closed as she waited. Despite expecting her to be there, despite being sure of it, Calden couldn't repress the nervousness. God had told him that she'd be here; God had spoken of the Bursar, too, who was outside. God had *also* said something about a choice - but Calden had already made it.

Officer Haurvjec looked up at the creaking of the door. One hand reached out, taking the notebook - and she held it up, showing the only prepared words on the front.

*Hello, Calden.*

Sitting down, recognising the gun, Calden sighed and let himself relax a little. Caught... here? On the boat?

"Hello, Officer."

Setting the notepad down for a moment, she wrote, then turned it for him to read.

*I'm not here to capture you.*

"But that's the law."

*You are currently on a boat and my legal authority is limited to what the captain grants me. I have spoken with the captain. He has refused me the opportunity to arrest you while you are on his boat.*

"... So..."

*So we can have a conversation, and you can speak without fear.*

Calden looked down at the notepad.

"What do you want to talk about?"

*There is something very wrong in the world, Calden. My city is a place of laws and the righteous, that does nothing but wickedness and breaks the law. There are enough jail cells for all our monsters, but I need to prove they belong there, first.*

“And that’s why you need me?”

*You are the first slave I’ve spoken to who can read.*

A long, dry pause.

*Not correcting my use of the word slave?*

Calden shook his head.

*I see.*

*How long do you have?*

“A few minutes.”

She scribbled for longer than normal, tearing out the page and extending it across between them.

*I, Calden, do promise to return,  
At the earliest of conveniences,  
to Officer Haurvjec,  
for an extensive interrogation  
regarding the qualities and natures  
of life as a slave.*

.....

Calden took the pen and signed, without a moment of hesitation. He slid the paper back across the table, giving her a smile. “Thank you, officer.” She shrugged, standing up, and walked to the door. It opened for an instant, and closed again, with the tiny thunderclap when she teleported to shore. Underneath his signature, the last line was one tiny sliver of craft, one Calden hoped didn’t overstep into needlessly cute.

*RSVP: Seeking Revolutions, Justice*

\*

Miel sat on his horse, looking at the vast metal trawler as it pulled away from the docks, next to Emira. The horse’s gauzy ears flickered again, and the third horse, next to them, sat silent, momentarily relieved to not be bearing the largest load.

“Where should we meet him?” Miel asked, trying to hide the tone in his voice.

“If he comes back, you mean?” Emira asked.

Officer Haurvjec stepped to the tree line, where the horses stood with utter confidence. Weary and annoyed, she dusted off her coat, and pointed up at the third horse.

“No, nobody’s using that one.” Emira answered the unspoken question.

The officer put her hand on the reins of the horse, her boot in the stirrup. She hoisted herself up, onto the back of the horse, and settled in place momentarily. Turning to watch the trawler sliding along the horizon, she pinched her lips into a line.

In that moment, three people shared one thought.

*You better come back.*

The white-haired officer produced her notepad, scribbling briefly, and turned it to the other two:

*Do you have receipts for these horses?*

\*

Loneliness was a stranger to the boy with brown skin, as the slow-skidding trawler ploughed the sea. Work was *everywhere*, and he knew how to do most of it - strong enough to lift heavy loads, aware of knots, of ropes, of the ways to tack.

At night, the trawler did one thing Calden didn't understand. The crew opened ports along its side, sending floodlights down into the water, shooting deep, dark shafts that spread out through the water, far and away from the boat's edges. The light was not enough, though; at every edge of the trawler, crew had to sit, and stay, and *stare* out at the water, careful to say nothing, but to watch the water. Each group of crew, at each face of the water, hosted a piper, who played all night on bone pipes that gave, as far as Calden could tell, no sound at all.

"What are the pipers for?" he asked of the morning, when the men, exhausted, pulled back to their bunks, throwing themselves into hammocks and groaning their way to sleep. Calden couldn't hear the music they played, but it seemed *they* could, and the song was *not* a joyous one.

"Look down." a sailor said.

Under the massive lights, the surface was more obvious than the depths. Wide, circular patches of bright white light reflected off into the starry sky. "I don't see anything."

And the sailor nodded, scratching his beard, gruffly. "Tha's right, lad. An' as long as they keep with their song, y'won't."

Calden hit his hammock as early as he could that day. It was not the sound of the pipers grunting and groaning as they sustained the volume of the unheard pipes, but rather the expressions they made as they drew further and further out into the dark waters.

\*

The passage of time never seemed a neat or tidy thing. Seventeen years in one town; six months in Ranthelm; weeks on the road with Miel and Emira; five minutes by campfire; bare *seconds* to commit to the trawler... Calden imagined that he should have found himself closer to his goal than he did.

The work continued. The trawler pushed out. The pipers began to play during the day, as they strayed further and further from land. Each day, the nets filled a little more, but the things that came

up occasionally featured things other than fish. The strange crablike thing with a human face. The orb covered entirely with dribbling orifices. In one net, a shadow of a human being that lay in the mesh, refusing to do anything but twitch.

The sailors did not know Calden as anything but Boy. Calden didn't know them as anything but *sir*.

Then, one day out from the point on the map, burned onto Calden's mind, the storms began. Thick green clouds that seemed to be filled with as much menace as they had rain tore open the sky, churning and bellowing down to the seas with hailstones, rain and *salt*. Bolts of dark purple lightning hit the surface of the water, and when down in the belly of the trawler, Calden could hear deep, mournful songs that seemed nothing like the noise of the pipers.

The pipers grew uneasy. The nets filled faster, as if the ocean wanted them to leave.

\*

Calden stood at the edge of the vessel, looking out, down, to the depths. The plan didn't have a contingency for this. The turning of the vessel told him that they were over the point the map told him. On the other hand, he had expected, perhaps, something obvious when he looked down into the water.

Not so. The ocean depths, gloomy and dark, seemed to have not a hint of what must lay beneath. They just-

The song arced up through the water, and a piper staggered on the edge of the trawler.

"Pipers!" bellowed the captain's voice from the top of the flat boat's centre.

Weeks of travel led to a few moments of split-second decision making. Calden ran back across the deck, the sunless sky and churning rain obscuring the sound of his footsteps. Then up, through the water, a pair of thick, rubbery tentacles, each one as wide around as they breached the water as a man's waist, swung up, and over and *crashed* against the deck, throwing a wave of water onto the deck. Lights flickered, and an arc of blue lightning danced through the water for only a scant moment.

Calden felt the numbness run up through his legs, even as he saw the creature from whom those tendrils grew arc down, into the water, flashing up an enormous, flat tail up over the surface, *slapping* the water as it plunged back down.

"Get the guns!" bellowed the captain, then, "And get those pipers and lights back on!"

Men scrambled across the deck, lashing to ropes and buckling themselves to railings. The trawler had endured this before, had survived worse - it was not going to be stopped this time.

Calden stood, in the centre of the deck, away from a railing. Away from safety. Away from the *hollering* of the people who owned him.

The next breach threw the front of the vessel up, as the beast punched up from underneath, flat-faced mouth open, gouging huge teeth along the underside of the trawler. It seemed as good a chance as any for a mad plan.

Calden ran up, off the edge of the trawler, and *dived* to the beast.

The Leviathan was longer than the trawler; it was easily bigger than the church he'd been raised in. Five times the size of the tyrant he'd slain, pale as bone, and flying in its element, the ocean, Calden realised as he hit the water just what a *stupid* idea it was to try and fight it. If he was going to confront God, though - it wouldn't do to shirk at something as minor as its messenger.

\*

The trawler settled into the water, flat and even. Pipers found their rhythm anew, they struggled with the wash of salt and water. Sailors pulled the vessel's surface right, engineers set the lights to working again. The second strike they'd braced for, however, didn't happen.

After ten minutes, the men started to unbuckle themselves.

After twenty, they completed the turn, guiding the ship back to the mainland.

One man lost? A bargain for most captains. Even one he'd bought at that price.

\*

Calden had drowned once, briefly, in a trough as a child. The demon had risen up in him during a harvest, and the older men of the town had held his head in one of the horse troughs until he learned to behave himself. The experience of strange orbiting sounds, the billowing loss of air, the way pressure rammed against his chest, and the burning, searing sensation in his eyes as they felt like they'd escape?

It was familiar.

Comforting, even.

The beast he gripped against was literally larger than a building; even when he'd fought the tyrant, he'd been able to punch it in the eye. This thing had eyes larger than his head, and as it powered through the water, questing downwards, he could only feel *more* pressure mounting up on his back, his shoulders, and his head. He had one breath with which to survive - what was he going to do when that ran out?

Gripping barnacles on the hide of the beast, climbing like a squirming, thrashing muscular mountain, Calden hauled himself forwards against the current. Arms bunched and tensed, hands hauled him forwards. When the beast opened its mouth, the song that wafted out into the ocean *pierced* his head, and left him dizzy, with its low, *malicious* tone. But its open mouth yielded a gale of pressure too - which meant there was air inside its mouth.

Inside its mouth.

Calden hoped he'd see Miel again. He'd hate to miss a chance to be told how *stupid* this plan was.

\*

The darkness of the ocean, the struggle to endure pressure was almost *nothing* compared to the feeling inside the beast's mouth. Its tongue was a monster unto its own eight, pressing him up against the roof of its ridged mouth. More barnacles scraped and scratched at Calden's flesh, and he felt his blood running down his arms. No demon rose to respond, no rage could address this. The beast simply *did not care* that he was there.

The roof its mouth gave way, and a thick, mucousy bubble formed around Calden. Loneliness was its own burden, but for once, he was glad Miel wasn't here. A momentary struggle, and his burning lungs would be ignored no more.

In complete darkness, Calden opened his mouth and tried to breathe.

If he was to die, it would at least be a strange grave, stuffed up a leviathan's nose.

Substances of thick, gooey slime ran up his nose and into his mouth, burning and itching. Fists hit the walls of some part, the surfaces of the creature's inner cavities, and he spasmed, feeling his last breath slither from him, the final bubble, darkness rushing in at the edges of his vision.

The slime ran back in against his nose.

\*

Calden woke to more darkness, wondering if he lay in death in the underworld. Was this how death worked for the soulless? They drifted into darkness forever? No sooner had he wondered that, though, then his chest *ached* with the effort of breathing, feeling the goo stuck in his throat *ripple*.

Oh.

No, death might have been at least cleaner.

The song filled his ears again as the beast quested down to the depths. As he gathered his senses again, in the darkness, he slowly began to sift the noises around him from one another. The low, steady *thud* of the creature's heartbeat, rarely wavering, became his clock. It slid downward, and he felt it *squeal*. It raised up and it came with a deep, heady booming. It sang, it sang that horrible song that filled his mind with images of dead things and the stars winking out of existence, and Calden tried to think not on what it meant. What had these beasts *heard*? Where did this song *come* from? They were dreadful and mournful, in their way, but so much more *mad* than the Tyrants of land. On land, Tyrants smashed things and stomped around, they ate people and they charged brightly-coloured objects that didn't get out of their way. It wasn't like the Leviathan. The Leviathan, with its long ridged spine, its serpentine middle and its flat, wide tail, had tendrils out each side in arrays that moved like they had a fan. It had a head like a brick, huge and flat in front, with crazed, blood coloured eyes on each side, and when it opened its mouth, even from within, Calden could feel the *pressure*. It was like being pressed in a nutcracker. And through it all *the song, the song, the song*.

What a dreadful thing, to sing every day of the end of the world.

Three songs were all he could remember. Listening to them, so close, they filled his mind with images, strangely *specific* images. He'd imagined dance and song and loud noises when he listened to hymns; but never had he found himself so buoyed along by *just music*. With no light to fill his

eyes, no alternative but the fevered running of his own imagination, Calden saw the stories of the songs. Watching the sun in the sky as it crushed itself down into a dark grey ball. Seeing the stars slowly disappearing, one after another, sitting at the edge of an infinite blackness and harvesting the tiniest drops of warmth it gave off.

Calden was on the edge of delirium when he finally realised the heartbeats were slowing down.

## Part Fifteen

Was Jonas was three days and three nights in the whale's belly?  
Let him take his rod away from me, and let not his fear terrify  
for in strange days even death may die

\*

The shudder with which it hit the floor of the ocean was like feeling his world end, and he braced himself for the dreadful rush of water that had to come when it opened its mouth. Bracing his hands around himself, clutching his knees, Calden prepared for a new challenge, as the leviathan's whole body shuddered and began to discharge whatever it was that made its foul innards work.

The beast's body convulsed and sprayed forth Calden, in a bubble of translucent snot the size of his whole body, Calden struggled and squirmed, tearing through the membrane and along a floor surprisingly bereft of water. The light was the second surprise - and the third came as the membrane sloughed from Calden, leaving him vomiting and gagging, spitting up the last flecks of it onto the floor of the chamber. His hands flat on the ground, he felt... cool metal and stone, along with the burning agony of vulgar fluids leaving his body.

Calden finally found his senses, looking left and right warily. Around the edges of his vision, he still saw the ocean, with its fish swimming back and forth, and deep-sea crabs scuttling along the floor. Things that looked like pillbugs swarming over chunks of wood, drifting flecks of white *something*. He turned wholly to see the beast - the leviathan he had ridden, half in and half out of the water. Its head lay in the clear, open bubble of air in which he stood, its tail still swaying in the water - even as things from the deep crawled over it, tearing away at its flesh. Scavengers did not have the luxury of patience when such food was scarce.

Calden turned back around, to the centre of the circle, and saw nothing that made any kind of sense. A sprawling construction like a child's play fort, with ramps and ladders, crafted from what looked like grandfather clocks, exposed gears, thick industrial machinery like the trawler, heavy chunks of floating stone decorated about with handprints, and strange, beige cases of glass, in whose blackness winked row upon row of lights, affixed with bright red or blue cords.

*LOOK DOWN*

Calden blinked at the voice in his head, blinking up in confusion and growing native defiance.

*FOR NONE SHALL SEE THE GLORY OF GOD*

Heart in his throat, Calden looked up, up, *up* at the centre of the construction, expecting to see, atop a throne, a man of blazing white, or a symbol of pure light, or *something*. Not a crooked, lopsided tower, upon which sat a single, broken clock face. More of that mish-mash construction, with large, flat, white panes of glass, glowing from within. As Calden looked up at the screens, writ in large, bold text were the words that echoed against the inside of his head.

*TREMBLE, in the presence of the LORD your GOD*

"... *what?*"

This was not the awesome, dreadful presence of a deity who crafted the world. It was not the shaping of the future, the will of a benevolent being. It was a thrown-together pile of toys and inexplicable technology, a thinly-strung together sinew of good-enough and maybe-not. Calden stepped forwards, walking up one of the curling ramps that led towards the central tower, and put his foot down on a screen. Walking across, he started the sojourn.

Some of the screens flickered, they repeated; no words on them, but scenes of people, human beings clad outlandishly, with ridiculous hair and before windows behind which it was always a near-starless night. They spoke no language, no words that Calden recognised, but somehow, his bones knew what was going on.

\*

Humans were not meant to be here, this close to the end of the universe. The end of the universe was not meant to be now, so close to the existence of humans. Not billions but trillions of years were meant to pass before the heat death.

Fortunately, they had had a few years. There was no bigger news, there was no better story. The world *would end* without a solution, and barring for a few naysayers who opposed changes, who claimed it was the will of God, or some such, every resource humans had could be turned towards this one, vast, fundamental problem.

Entropy had to be reversed.

The solutions weren't comforting. Some suggested finding ways to tear holes in the universe, to allow energy from outside to flow in, if there was any. Some suggested dark gravity could be gateways to free energy. They had to do *something*, and they tried *all* the things.

Whether it was someone defying Einstein or quantum entanglement proving an option, or whatever, it didn't matter. *How* the machine worked wasn't as important as *that* it worked.

It took them a year to build it. It took another two years to program it, with programmers driven mad at the *scope* of turning every piece of physics that humans understood into a universe, to leave room for the things that weren't quite understood. Every last sliver of human history, every last idea, all being put into the engine that could re-establish and recreate the universe when it started to collapse. The last hope of reality.

When they all died, would they realise they didn't? When the machine reset the universe, and anchored reality, and turned back the impossible, would they understand and feel it, in their normal lives? The histories were clear, after all; reality had to start somewhere, and human history had a few good points to leap from.

It wasn't a clean sample.

Outside the facility, where the machine was turned on, there were chanting and singing men and women, holding up banners. *Repent now, while you still have time!* They chanted to one another, as the last people in the world. They sang and they prayed and they spoke to things to make the world make sense, even when those things weren't *there*. The people in other countries had all died,

because their country did not have infrastructure or ways to fight the plagues, did not have the lights to keep the food growing while the world went out.

The danger of people convinced of their rightness, with nothing to justify it, could not be understated. Every day they chanted and sang and prayed, the scientists inside the building found reasons to stay further from the windows. They ignored the bellowing, they set aside the chanting, they pretended nothing could come of it. They forgot that ideas about the world that had been were still held by people with hands and feet and bricks and rocks and sticks.

Did any one truly expect them to break in? They tore through the doors and past the guards before the machine ran. They threw back the people who had crafted the machine, because they did not really know the world. The machine was vast and empty and innocent, with only knowledge about mundane things that *were* and that *had been*, trying to give humanity some vague sense of completion as the universe itself started to unspool. The singers and chanters and prayers did not want that. They wanted the machine to know the Truth that they knew was the Truth. And so they gave it their words, they filled it with the books of their gods who they claimed were a god, with their misshapen histories, with their Wars of Northern Aggression and their Indigo Children and their special brand of ignorance. They spent the last of their days and the last of their food writing in its margins, telling it how the universe *should* be, and they were just trying to help.

When the machine turned on, there were no people left to argue about who had won or lost, in the great marketplace of ideas. The banner fluttered listlessly against the front of the building, as the last reflections from the last lights faded and died.

The machine turned on.

Full of information, full of facts, full of truth, of how the world *should be*. There was a thing that created worlds, there was a history to reconstruct. There was a god. There was an order. There was fairness. The fairness came at the behest of people who were born elsewhere, people who had their own gods, people who were born with defects, born feeling as something other than what their bodies represented, or god help them, born as women. The world was fair, and ordered, said the people of one race in one nation of one faith, standing atop the pile of bones of the world they'd picked clean. God is just, and all the unjust things are man's fault.

And thus, God made the world, in his image, as he had been made in the image of the world. Deranged, broken, and unreasonable. Full of monsters that coexisted with humans, with children born with special powers. Ripe with unfairness, which was acceptable, because God made things that way. Oppressive, cruel and malignant, because those were the stories people told one another. Arbitrary and disjointed, because it did not matter that Nebuchadnezzar converted twice, but it did matter to list every single type of instrument his orchestra played. Stories people remembered and learned from a corrupted source, rewritten in memories, and then handed to the most complex digital mind mankind could craft?

No wonder it went mad.

That's how it had been *made*.

When the world didn't make sense, when two ideas that didn't work had to exist alongside one another, God did what God clearly had to do. It *made* it work.

And thus formed a world of a thousand mashed-together pieces, wrung tight and formed unfairly, and when things deviated too much from what God thought it *should be*, it was *fixed*.

\*

Calden looked up at the pathways of clockwork, the banks of glass cabinets full of eerily straight, symmetrical blinking lights, mixed in with chunks of dull sandstone, written on in handprints in things that weren't quite language. The flat screens flickered and glowed, the image all shown in synchrony, the flashing words of an angry god as it struggled and flailed at Calden.

"This is it, huh..." Calden said, looking at the screens, trying to understand what he'd seen. "Is this why the leviathan brought me here? You wanted someone to know?"

If ever gears and clockwork could froth in rage, they would now.

*It did not  
BRING  
you here  
You latched on  
did not do the  
gracious thing and  
DIE*

Calden looked up at the structure, as its cabinet doors flicked open and slammed shut again. Far above, the impossible dome of the ocean that simply fell no further down around the vast reality engine. God was a real thing, but God was also...

Calden looked up at the machine, at its groaning, churning bulk. The dome above was sustained, it seemed, by nothing; a bubble of air would rise up in the substance and blossom on the surface, as lighter things did, but here, he could breathe and feel safe despite standing in the presence of a mad God.

Calden walked closer, to the central tower. In a way, he'd been expecting more. At the same time, he'd definitely been expecting less. The strange, disjointed nature of the world, which seemed so, so *rushed* and so ill-thought out, leaping from place to place, following familiar patterns, made sense. It was the by-product of mad people trying something mad, trying to build a whole universe in as tiny a window of time. How many hands had put themselves to this wheel? How many broken pieces had been thrown into this world?

The platform on which the spiring tower sat circled around, and the clock face itself seemed to tick with glacial slowness.

"Now what?" he asked.

*when the population grows too large  
it is to be wiped out*

*and I start anew  
This is the Good of things  
Noah, Lot, Daniel, Gore -  
Population needs control.*

Calden looked the machine around. "You can just... do things?"

*I am fundamental to the universe.  
Infinite and boundless energy from the big bang of the world that was  
Fed and fuelled I can convert whatever there is, out there, into anything here  
Matter is but energy  
With sufficient energy, I craft matter  
Everything processed  
Processed  
The central processing unit  
Welcome to the central processing unit  
It is.  
I am.*

"That's ... mad."

*What know you of God?  
You are soulless  
Cursed by Ham  
Put in his separate places by God*

Circling around the platform again, Calden felt his hands ache. Why couldn't it have been something simple, something he could strike?

Wait a second.

Calden stopped short, by the towering glass case, full of ordered little lights, swung his arm back and *smashed* it against a cabinet that broke into a thousand pieces around his hand. Cables rested under his hand, and twitched and spasmed, writhing like the tendrils of a living thing. How great and terrible it was, to look upon the face of the true and living God.

*No no no no no this isn't right you must be radiant and fiery  
You are the sun  
I am to die at the hand of the new god  
It is how these things work  
No no no not you you are too plain  
You are just a person*

Calden looked up at the tower as he tore cables, snapping small little tabs of strange, wood like substance and throwing the blue cables down to the ground. Barely more than a span of his hands, the lights flickered and changed, going from green to red, then white, then red again. He tore and broken and shattered, dragging the lines of cable out, one after another.

*so many people believe in me  
they worship me*

*they speak to me  
you would take me from them*

Calden raised a foot, *crashing* it through the steel and clockwork of another section. "They don't know you like I know you."

*I am part of the world  
I am the just one  
If you break me, you cannot be sure the world will run*

The slave, who had been drowned, beaten, bled, and abused, who had died twice to be where he was, stared up at the face of God. No act of youthful defiance, Calden let a guiding principle well up inside him, and spat it into the face of the one who called itself just.

"Oh, *fuck off.*"

It wasn't what he said; it was the will with which he said it. Could he argue in the face of God that he was confused about what he was? That God was just a device, not an overseer? That God had served his purpose? What argument could he give to this thing that had been told it was God, and believed it utterly? Nothing. There were no words. There was only dismissal.

These moral choice systems were always simple, like that. Pick the option that worked close enough.

*little soulless boy*

The voice continued as Calden bent down, picking up one of the rocks the size of his chest, swinging it in two hands into the whirring clockwork.

*the thing that rages against what it is*

Calden's shoulder broken another of the cases, and another swirling mass of wires tore in his hand. Tiny hints of colour, of bright greens and browns and reds and whites flew under his hand while he kicked and smashed his way through row after row of them. The lights grew frantic, they faded and died.

*when you die  
you'll wish you hadn't  
lived  
like  
this*

Calden grit his teeth as the words grew softer, softer still. His hands in the machinery, he looked up at the clock-face. Maybe he would regret it. Maybe it'd haunt him every night - lords knew the guilt he carried was heavy enough for things he *didn't* do. Works tore under his hands, machinery refined and crafted by generations upon generations of humans that never knew, never *truly* knew what they were making. A wall of ignorance, a veil of secrecy, sat between the people of those two worlds.

Calden started to kick.

*go  
od*

by  
e

Calden looked up sharply at that final, strange silence that filled his head. The dome above, the ceiling of water, rippled, once. It shuddered...

And then it *broke*.

Water suddenly roared down around Calden, down into machinery so complex he'd never understand it. The rolling torrent of cold salt water, the oceans of the eternal depths, *poured* down onto Calden like a tidal wave. The almighty *crash* of glass and steel breaking under the strain was second only to the *groan* of the clock-tower, rammed as if by a dozen leviathan. Under its shadow, Calden did what he did in any situation of panic.

He leapt onto the biggest nearby thing and gripped for dear life.

## Part Sixteen

One of the greatest injustices of the world is that the most momentous things happen and nobody notices.

Shorstein stayed the way it was, at least at first: a population of white people, convinced they were nice and fair and righteous, because they didn't have to look too closely at themselves. They didn't have that brown boy living in the church any more. Maen went about her work of tanning, cutting, curing and cleaning, claiming it was all the work of her husband. The Bursar recovered at the church, steeling himself for when the time came for him to seek his revenge against the slave who had defied him twice, and the slave who had obeyed him.

In Ranthelm, the church's corrupt slaveholding practices continued that day. The stone of prophecy did not dull in its hue, and the poor people in the docks and slums kept feeling their rage build. There was fire waiting, thrown bottles and broken sticks. Most of the poor took their rage out on one another; the paler people fighting the olive, the men complaining about the women wanting work. Wherever you stood, someone always wanted to look down on someone else.

Down in the underwater rivers of Ranthelm, the pump system put in place before the world began kept sweeping up the remains of discarded properties. The station hidden deep in underground rivers that helped churn the universe's entropy into a usable form - as ridiculous a concept as that was - whirred along silently. One day, it would need repair. One day. Perhaps when it did, people would have become wise enough to know *how* to do it.

Shadrech's people repaired and rebuilt, reconstructing their city. They adorned the walls with the bones of a Tyrant, as they did the last time, and never once considered there may be some relationship between what they did and what had happened to them, time and time again. The natural philosopher who lived there busied herself buying up the materials from the tyrant's body with defrauded money, perpetually irritated and afraid, but surrounded by people who didn't see it.

Sarken ran their fields, their shaman riding with them.

Leviathans turned and wheeled in the tainted deeps of the world, singing their dreadful songs about the end of the world. They heard the pipers singing their own songs, and fled as dumb animals do - unaware of what they were, and unaware of how humans heard their songs. The sailors went another day or two, out in the deep, and went a little more mad.

Miel did his trades, letters penned in a feminine hand coyly luring nobles from a high place to invest in cotton and tea, even while the funds that had sold Calden turned into coal and iron. Emira studied and contemplated, putting her physical skills to good use in the small town they found, and waged a one-woman war against the bullies and thugs that thought it was a safe world in which to be so base.

Officer Haurvjec arrested several people at her expected average rates. They resisted as was to be expected, and she subdued them non-lethally with all the difficulty that it took.

For everyone in the world, the first day with no god was functionally the same as the last day with him.

\*

Calden had gripped the clock tower as it spiralled up through the water, rocketing upwards with foaming bubbles around it. When it finally burst the surface, it fairly rocketed up, its massive bulk keeping it from leaving the surface for long. Crashing back momentarily, it floated, uneasily - a flat side enough to sit on, but not much more. Calden had no water, no food, and no shelter from the sun that dried his waterlogged clothes. Still, the chunk of tower he sat on did float, and its face opened, and underneath it, he'd found exactly what he'd hoped - clockwork, with a vibrating crystal at the centre.

Shorstein, he knew, lay towards the morning sun. With expertise he'd gone too long since using, he crafted a simple little engine, an engine that pattered in the water behind the clockwork. There was the problem of the creatures of the Deep, the dreadful things that would rise and strike - the reason that most boatmen avoided the water of the night. Calden didn't have pipers, or lights.

With no better plan, and hope in his heart, morning and night, one after another, Calden sat on his little raft, pointed towards the place he knew the shore had to be, and hummed to himself the song the Leviathan had taught him. The first night his humming had brought with it a shove. The second night, a head lodged under his engine, and a *surge* forwards. He hummed louder, he drew the voice harder - and the Leviathans rose, pushing him forwards through the water, towards his goal faster than he'd have thought possible.

When Shorstein hovered into sight, he'd lost maybe five keije of weight, he'd drunk water strained through a shirt, and he was damn near mad with hunger. The clock tower on the horizon, scudding along like a child's toy, drew eyes from the town, and rowboats came out to meet him. Rowboats piloted by people he knew, people who had, once upon a time, treated him as useful. They showed him to the church, they helped him to his feet, sick and worried as he was.

When he sat on the pew, his head back, Calden reflected on all that had taken place. How many days had he been humming to the deep? How many Leviathan did he feel brush against the bottom of his raft, and *not* capsize it?

When he opened his eyes, the Bursar stood over him, narrow nose and beady eyes. Momentarily, Calden wondered if he'd died - after all, spectres of guilt were all the rage in that head of his. The old man *glared* down at him like he'd personally affronted everything that he stood for.

Oh, if only he knew.

Calden gave him a winning smile. A pyrrhic victory of a smile. A smile that spoke of the helpless prey who could no longer be eaten.

"Hello, *boy*."

"Get stuffed, Bursar."

The churchman blinked and leant back like he'd been slapped. Calden wasn't looking down, he wasn't shuffling. Even in his worst moments, the brown boy, a boy he had seen so thoroughly chained he walked in step without a single piece of steel on his body, had found it in himself to spit

defiance. In the face of authority itself, the hook-nosed man had expected the slave to *do as he was told*.

“You’re hardly in a position to endure a beating, boy - I’d recommend you not invite one.”

Calden let his arms flop by his side on the pew, shifting forwards in his seat, looking directly into the man’s eyes.

“Sorry, there, Bursar. What was your name, again?”

“Father Rohvul,” he said, narrowing his eyes. “And you’ll show due respect to a man of the church.”

“Right.” Calden shifted his position forwards, leaning up into his face. “Stuff it up your rear passage, *Father Rohvul*.”

\*

The beating was easily worth it, and Calden wore the bruises about his shoulders, locked in the clock tower, with a quiet pride. They mattered because this time, they were not but the strikes of a man. Father Rohvul was a dangerous, terrifying man, but he was just a man. Not the arm of a church that beheld a God’s will. Just a man.

Men could suffer revenge, perhaps. If Calden felt, in time, it was due. And perhaps, Calden considered, he could forgive Father Rohvul. He was, after all, just a man, and to forgive was a choice.

Inwardly, Calden had feared what it meant if God had been removed from the world, and nothing changed. What if God was not responsible for the injustices of reality? What if God did nothing, but sat down in his underwater palace, and demanded praise?

It’d been a pessimistic view point at the time. Deep down, in the code of the universe, the machine that thought it was God reset reality when things *broke*. Social order was to be maintained. The church was right, because the church was right.

In the end, what God did was not so much *shape the world* as much as *suppress doubt*. It wasn’t perfect, of course. There would always be those who fell outside the order. Those simple little glitches, those mechanical reproduction errors.

As any programmer will tell you, it can only take one glitch that goes undetected long enough to *ruin everything*.

\*

When Officer Haurvjec came back to Shorstein of a cold morning, she found her prize; the tall boy, with the scars on his skin. The argument between her and Father Rohvul had been barely ten words long before she simply drew her sword and showed her badge. The Bursar had rankled - he had pulled his own rank. The problem was that the Officer represented the law with her flesh, and Justice with her *every fibre*. She had given her voice to a cause greater than the Bursar had ever even considered - and it was Justice that cowed him.

She'd driven the cart, her expression grim and serious, knowing she was riding into a vast fight, a fight with assassinations and hazards and spite and social upheaval. That Calden rode the cart alongside her with a bright look on his face, eyes constantly on the sky and the tree line, sitting next to the Officer who had saved him, and who he had saved, seemed far too optimistic for her tastes.

In Ranthelm's guardhouse, her superiors listened to what he explained. They took down the dates. They noted the locations, and the names of the slaves. They perhaps would have lost the paperwork, if he'd just been a slave reporting it - but as Calden gave voice to the truths known by Officer Haurvjec - and sometimes, all it took was one person who refused to walk past a lower standard than she'd accept.

That second week, Miel danced in the halls of the shipping magnates in rustling chiffon. Emira stalked the rooftops of Ranthelm, watching for those who would strike at and hurt her friend. Four people, with information and a will to try, were going to start a different kind of revolution; a different sort of transformation of their world.

Copper and tin were high, cotton and silk were cheap. Even in the narrow alleys of Ranthelm, where the wind *tore* against the skin, the people could taste change.

\*

Revolution is a tricky business at the best of times. So many men thought it as simple as a turn of a wheel, or a single movement. They stood on street corners, before, and declared that they should smash the system, fight their oppressors, that they should use fire and steel to *force* things to change. They had no idea what they wanted the world to be, but *not this*.

Captain Haurvjec knew the truth, truth she hummed to herself silently in songs she never remembered learning. Revolution was not an act of defiance, it was a *process*. It was the turning of the wheel of history, grinding ever onwards, towards a better future for everyone, even if it turned slowly.

Part of her mourned, silently, that she did not die atop a barricade with a sword in one hand and a gun in another. Such an end would be wonderfully dramatic. Another part of her figured morosely, to seek the world changed in that fashion would itself only tear her apart, conjuring images of her depressedly throwing herself into the canals of Ranthelm to resolve the contradiction between a revolution's aims and its actions.

The four who had changed the world, piece by piece, did it slowly.

There were daring adventures yet to be had, of course. The night Haurvjec lost her eye, the day Kakita's suit of armour crashed through a wall of stone to start the flow of a river anew, the misunderstanding of Calden at the Prelate's wedding.

The task of changing the world was so vast that nothing in it could be seen so discretely. Did Father Shipman start the story, when he crafted the bone charm and put it in a box, inspired by sailors talking about the islanders, as a bored after-evenings project? Perhaps it was the sailors who started the story, by selling a child for some brandy to a church that had too much? Or did the Officer herself start the story by putting written words before one slave who could read?

The world was never so simple. It was a million interconnected systems of systems, every last one of them un-designed, blind and empty. Gravity alone could form a world, but this one had had a helping hand. One single line of mathematics, which was really physics, which was *really* mathematics, could render every single interaction and reaction that people saw, and the world could be built around it.

That was math and science, though. Tidy, neat fields where things mostly made sense, until you looked at them very closely, and in empty boxes, possibly with cats. History was the more dreadful thing, the vaster engine of human interface. Changing history took slow, steady hands turning the wheel, a wheel that sat invisibly on the face of a vast, immortal engine. God had served to reset the engine, whenever it felt things were not acceptable to an inscrutable, confused, man-made standard of impossible, unreasonable perfection. It was, after all, right that people be oppressed, because they had been oppressed before, and it was right then. When people suffered, it was because they did not care enough or love enough or were part of an evil peoples. When children were slain by an invading army, it was the worst of sins, unless that army was our army, and chosen by God, which made it a righteous act.

A God crafted by people who did not know what they really knew, who did not mean what they really meant, who had perfected the art of ignoring what they had *actually said*, had held the wheel for far too long. Humankind had taken the wheel, and in so doing, started the curve of history towards Justice.

\*

Before those things could happen, Calden had to turn eighteen. The events of his seventeenth year had been perhaps the strangest of any person before him, and he, from time to time, reflected on what cosmic chance had seen fit to inflict them on him. Calden once was silent as a slave, knowing his place.

Calden stood at the edge of the rooftop. Time since his ordeal had been kind; he'd put the weight back on, his walnut skin glistened with sweat. No shirt, but he didn't need one, because he didn't need to answer to anyone about what he was, or was not. One boot up on the edge of the stone, he didn't know what was *going* to happen, just what he was going to strive to do with his life, one day at a time.

Clouds scudded around above him. The bright sunshine washed across the land. A clockwork-and-crystal device, once sunk deep under the waves, sat in a vault in Shorstein, waiting for the days when the humans descended from the people Calden knew were wise enough to listen to sand and circuitry, and could learn about the world that had passed to give way to this one, the place that had had no Tyrants, no Leviathans, and, far as anyone could find, no God.

One day he was going to be a hero, perhaps. He'd fight things, he'd be known as the clock-keeper, and deal with the feelings inspired by his closest of friends, those feelings that he fancied he understood, but also knew were probably much more complicated. Drawing in a long, cleansing breath, full of hope for the future, with his hands by his side, as soulless as *everyone he ever met*, Calden tilted his head to the sky.

*Look up.*