

# The Sixth Age of Sand

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## Prologue.

In the first age of sand, there was nothing but the sand. There were rocks and lava and there was sulphurous water, but the sand was all that was really important. It sat beneath some things, and sat above other things; that which it sat beneath was fluid, flighty, knew not what it wanted nor what it was doing. That which sat beneath sand was in many ways, the father of sand, the hard stones whose existence had yielded up the faintest shards of itself. It was slow and it was solid and it did not flow as sand.

In time, the waters parted and gave forth strands of things even finer than sand, and unlike sand, it was able to twist itself together, to render its patterns against itself, and unlike sand in turn, it was able to make itself. It began with things as aware as sand, drinking in the energy that filled the skies and warmed the seas, the burning star in the distance.

In this first age of sand there were things that knew no name because names are human things and these things were not human. There were they of the deep, with tendrils upon whose ends rested eyes, creatures of shells layered upon shells, of forms shaped to the water and to the sand. There was not, at first, a conqueror of stone, who could walk out across the sand and to the places where land was. There was not at first.

In time things change. In this first age of sand, this too would change. Was it the forefather of the grass that first crossed the sand? Was it a thing-like-a-fish whose mother had been able to go a little further up out of the water to escape predators, whose mother had been able to go a little further up than her mother and her mother before her? Whose credit or blame it falls matters not; for these were fish and frogs from before there were fish and frogs and the words for both. It was not a loner amongst its kind; but yet the minds of those that come after and have minds to think cannot help but imagine it so, cannot help but imagine that there had to be one that was first. These things matter to minds. They do not matter to sand. Such is the vastness, the namelessness, the silent cacophony of the first age of sand.

The crossing of that strip of sand onto clay should have signified the end of the first age of sand, were there any poetry to it. Sand does not care for poetry, but the storytellers do. The sand kissed the feet or flippers or rolling not-quite-either of whatever it was that escaped the seas and began to expand and thrive. It was not until the emergence of many, many more things, things without names, things that could change the atmosphere, things that could transcend their limitations by swimming and walking, or walking and running, or running and climbing, or climbing and flying, whose eventual existence raised its voice and spoke what was not a sound but a word, a word that heralded the end of the First Age of Sand.

Mankind likes to fancy itself that the word was spoken by them.

Perhaps they are right.

The first age of sand was long, even by the standards of sand and stone. The third age was barely a blink of an eye, and while it did not start as one might imagine, the moment mankind saw its beginning was when a human took a handful of sand and, in a process well known to him and his kind, he melted it and shaped it and crafted it into a disc. Then that disc was taken and ground

against a stone, and then another, and in his little home, in a place called Italy or Holland or perhaps France, he tilted his head back and held the lens over his eye and looked not at a thing or a word but at the sky.

This was the third age of sand. This was the age of glass. This was the age of the telescope, of a man named Galileo, of a challenge to orthodoxy, of discovery and enlightenment and of great men who created ideas, created books, created routes where there were oceans, created a universe where there once was silence, and created a country. It was an age of understanding and exciting ideas and it was seen as the greatest of man's ages even when man had done much, much better.

The fourth age of sand came when the sand was taught to grow. Silicon, it was named, and it was set as a crystal, to grow in thick, large forms which were cut up, sliced fine, separated, dissolved and reshaped; they were then adorned about with gold and silver and copper, and these plates of crystal were married to lightning.

Thus sand began to think for the second time.

It was with humans' hands and mortal ideas that sand sped up, that sand started to act. Sand and lightning did the mathematics that let sand, and some humans, slip the surly bonds of earth. To stand in the silence between worlds, the places that did not know mankind, did not remember it, and would not even imagine it.

Some of this sand would live in the sky, whirling around the earth at speeds so unimaginable for sand that it would outrace time. That sand would listen to humankind, would speak to it, and repeat what it was told. It would watch things with an eye of glass that it should not be seeing, it would fill buckets with tape and it would even drop them from the skies into the earth's atmosphere, where clever humans would, with math done by other sand, lift up and catch it, to learn what the sand had seen.

And not even this was the finest age of sand.

The fifth age of sand was when, not content with pushing time and showing stars, sand was shaped into tubes of glass; fine and hairlike, like the strands of neuron between human minds. It would flicker and pulse with the light within it, as it transmitted, across the edges of the world, the ideas and thoughts of humans a thousand at a time. Sand did not recognise the strangeness of it, for sand, even thinking sand, is not prone to such imagination.

Humankind took these strands of sand and they lay them beneath the stones upon which they had one laid; they sent them through the oceans. They proofed them against sharks and they warded them against rain and in so doing they crafted a vast network of ideas and thinking sand, an entity that they fancied might one day be so vast as to perhaps be wise; to be so like them as to think of its own thoughts, rather than the thoughts that humans gave it. They even feared it, and silenced it, and attempted to injure it, and one another through it. It was the fifth age of sand.

But what of that second age?

In the term of ages, it was longer than the fifth and fourth and third; it was not as long as the first, but nothing could be. And when sand had been alone, there was no reason for ages to begin or to

end. So what of that Second Age? What had transpired, and what effect had it had, that it was so unremembered?

The second age of sand began perhaps with man, perhaps not. It began when a hand, or a claw, or a tentacle, or a proboscis drew, in the soft sand, and crafted from its form a shape. The world had stood under the nuclear sun for times immemorial to any living creature, and that power was strong. It was not the only power; there was the force that bound everything to the ground; there was the force of strange stones that pulled each other off the ground. And there was this... other force.

The sigil on the ground was crude and uncertain; but into its passages the power could flow. Like rain into a ditch, it filled it and it glowed, and thus began the excursion of the living creatures of this world with that uncertain force, that weakest of the five, that is known only to them as magic.

The dam was crafted, and once it was, it would burst. Magic beget magic. Shamans flung fire, and witches wended curses. In these primordial days, those species of ancient and amazing sensibility would fill their wits with this energy, an energy of potency that really was no greater than gravity, and flood the world with its impact. It was pulled into floods and flows and eddies and rituals would make batteries of it. Thousands of ideas and novel creations were carried along with the rituals and circuits used to control this force.

It wasn't like gravity, though. It pulled itself to itself. And so, there were individuals whose very nature in the womb created circuits. The magic accreted around individuals, centers and sources. It ebbed and flowed with their life, with the electrical circuits formed in their minds, the circuitry that was natural to life. And it was this energy that was carved in sand, and it was this energy that ruined cities and left pages of history to ruin. It was a time that was and is no more, remembered only by the sand.

The end of this age was as a result of greed. It was a result of excess. There was one - or maybe two, or three, or four, but either way, not enough - people shouldering the magic. And when that pool was brought together, too much, too quick, too deep; the breaking of their lives, the snapping of the circuit came with a shattering of the force.

Instead of a wellspring across the world, there was no more ocean of magic. There were crystals, jagged, massive and silent, brooding invisibly in the wastes. Deep in the ocean. Far in the deserts. In the pits of the jungles. And slowly, little by little the crystals erode, melt, refilling the ocean.

Magic is not a myth.

It's just a mystery, known only to the sand.

## Chapter One

*What do you read, my lord?*

*Words, words, words.*

*What is the matter, my lord?*

Words have power.

*A blackened tower of cracked and broken stone, whose vines have turned to rusted iron, a lone finger reaching out to brush the face of god.*

It seems almost disingenuous for a person to pen those words themselves, to express that idea in the medium, as though to satisfy some yearning need for the man who writes to be as important as the man who shoots or the man who fights. Words having power is no new idea - it's a notion that has lasted as long as sand has, and sand, if you ask it, will tell you that it has been around for a very long time.

*Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,*

*Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,*

And in each teenager there is the memory so dim as to go unremembered, is the time when every single particle of their bodies lived in the heart of a star. Thoughts of when fire danced all around and everything was light - these thoughts are rare, in the doldrums of a society and a life which rubs and erodes, slowly and steadily, against everything that you do.

*Consider if you will the word **sleep**."*

Holland's head slowly rose up off the desk, heel of a hand finding eye socket with a blind groping motion that bespoke a morning bed rather than a midafternoon class. Almost as if Mrs Cale was quite pointedly directing that sentiment at her sleeping student. What had been overlaying English lessons in the background track of a student's dreams became words, pulling a brown head up from its desk and letting green, dull eyes blink into wakefulness.

"Oh, well, hey there, Holland. Are you okay?" Mrs Cale asked, hunkering down slightly. She was being nice - just nice! - and kept her head canted to the side, surveying the look of a student. "I mean, if you're falling asleep in class, maybe you should head to the nurse's office--"

"Mfine," the blurt came back. "Mean..." Around in the classroom, a low rumble of laughter flowed. It was the same as it had been back in grade school, and the only real change was the pitch of the laugh. It was just an adolescent voice of mockery, a primal sound that spoke without words and merely gave an intonation through the scraps of syllables that wafted to the top of the soundwave. "I mean, I'm just tired."

"You really should get some more sleep at home, you know? It's important at your age," Mrs Cale repeated, reaching out to pat Holland's arm.

One of the strangest things for a teenager was to encounter absolutely genuine sincerity. Mrs Cale wanted Holland to be okay, and unlike say, Mr Hopper, didn't say what she said because she was

trying to ridicule, or to use that familiar sting of adolescent embarrassment to underscore a valuable lesson about not falling asleep in class and managing one's schedules.

Shrinking back, collar of school uniform shirt brushing up beneath ears, Holland considered the black t-shirt with its decepticon logo that was a lone splash of individuality against the school uniform code. Outside, the incessant drone of cicadas faded in over the top of the quieting students and Holland tried to remember the thought process that had chosen to wear two layers of clothing even when the first steps outside this morning had spoken of oppressive summer heat that would make the last weeks of school all the more toxic. Heat settled in the demountable classroom like a large wet sock, draped over the collective of students, with not a boy or girl amongst them able to sit truly comfortably.

As though perched between a desert and a sea, the school seemed to have precisely no shade, and fans that did nothing but send hot, fetid air in pyrrhic cycles. To stand beneath one as it started was a brief respite, something Holland could enjoy for its fleeting moment, then remain disappointed beneath as the experience got worse. In this regard, it was a lot like drugs, which made the entire experience seem a lot less interesting than that Heath Ledger film had made it out to be.

To stand in a school room in 2012 and watch a movie from 1999, in the last weeks of English class before Mrs Cale, full of enthusiasm and misplaced faith in her students' abilities to focus this close to Christmas, was a mirror of every other school year-end Holland had experienced. This year, instead of making trouble, though, thanks to finally graduating to a bedroom with a door that closed and a computer that connected to the internet overnight, Holland's school days were spent catching up on sleep that had been ignored when it would normally be seen as appropriate. An lifestyle as a system administrator or night shift manager seemed to be rolling out into the future, and Holland wasn't sure how much the idea appealed.

Mrs Cale was still waiting for her answer, concerned face tilted, moonlike, radiating that same sincerity that still had most of the class completely baffled. Mrs Cale was in her thirties, wasn't that old, and had apparently, an Xbox 360 box in her car which was normally full of craft supplies. Yet she carried herself like a schoolmarm in some of the older books they had to study, and English class never seemed to feature something other than an old classic.

"Mfine," Holland murmured, sitting up straighter. Focus on doing something with your hands, said the defensive hind brain, adjust your shirt, tug it forwards. Make sure you're not just sitting here like a lemon.

Mrs Cale stood up, smiling. "Alright, alright, then, everyone. So, we were talking about - hahah, how appropriate, Holland, we were talking about sleep. Now, in most classical fiction, sleep was used as a metaphor for death, such as in the Bible, or in the Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening. Sleep is used as a way to describe death -"

"So Holland died?" Called a voice from the back of the class.

Holland shifted uncomfortably. Lank brown hair fell into green eyes that had always been called 'enchanted emerald' by mum, and green by Holland. Swimming gave those shoulders a shape underneath the shirt that complemented the sharklike hips and profile. In many ways, Holland was a decent human, but much better as a fish. Yet, nobody seemed to notice what summers, springs, and

autumns full of exercise had done for Holland, because of the big chunky black glasses and that expression that permanently set at the emoticon “:\” Fact is, none of the swimming had given Holland the shape that everyone else in school thought it should.

“Now now, be nice. Besides, death is sometimes a metaphor for a great change - such as in the Tarot, and when we talk about the ‘death of the Roman Empire.’ I mean, Rome’s still there, and the Roman people are - we just call them Italians, now. We bring ourselves back from that death when we wake up - and thus we can see how death connects to life, which connects to major, amazing changes - revolutionary changes, even.”

Holland ran one hand through that brown hair, tugging it backwards, resetting the ponytail and trying to adapt to the unpleasant state of being entirely awake. It was embarrassing when Mrs Cale stepped into the realm of history or geography, because she always got something wrong... and hell, with the weather the way it was, nobody was willing to correct her. Really, the class just wanted to mimic Holland, put heads down and let the day end so they could be one more day closer to the end of term.

Outside, the heat and humidity’s work of the day had finally hit its feverish peak, where the skies turned blue-black and started to churn with weight. The breaking of the afternoon brought with it a fresh new load of hot water to add to the mist, but for the moment of walking, the water was going to cool things down.

“What, uh,” Holland paused, biting a pencil and looking to Mrs Cale’s face. “Um, we were doing the review, and you quoted Hamlet,”

“Yes,” Mrs Cale said, nodding. “Polonius and Hamlet discussing-”

“Yeah, yeah, and Ozymandias,” Holland said, brown hair dancing with a headshake. Something rattling around between the ears wasn’t quite connecting properly.

“Mm-hm, and then I started on about Sleep.”

“Hm? Nothing about... about a black tower?”

A laugh from the class, a this time with more of a relieved sound to it. This was as good a way to eat time in the class - the clock’s arms reached for the bell, getting oh-so-close that a few minutes watching Holland revise was as good a way to fill them as anything.

That’s when the sky tore asunder and a purple brooding eye rent the fabric of the horizon, blinking for just one long instant, closing, and pulling the clouds back in, against the space it had been, yea verily, even unto the seventh sign.

Holland sat up sharply at that. Standing up fast enough to send a chair bowling back into a classmate’s goofing hands, hands pressed to the window and face up at the sky, Holland whipped around to look at the arrayed, silent class, who were now staring with strangely patient eyes.

“Um.” Holland murmured. “Did... did anyone else see...?”

"Holland, mate...?" Called one of the ... the black-haired ones, with the spiky hair who wore his collar popped like he could make himself into a Jersey Shore contestant by force of pretension. "You... you know you woke up, right?"

Holland stood, eyebrows knitting together, still staring up at the clouds, as Mrs Cale brought that reassuring presence wobbling back around, outside of Holland's clear field of vision. "Uh, Mrs Cale, can I-"

"Yeah, I think... I think you should go talk to the nurse, Holland. Do you want me to come with you?" A snigger ran up around that. "Or are you okay to get there on your own?"

"I... think I'll be okay, Mrs Cale." Holland offered, stepping out of the demountable, leaving behind schoolbag, books, homework, and starting a staggering path off to the central office. The first spits of rain came down, and that brought with it a burst of speed. Glasses began to stain with watery droplets as Holland swallowed down the strangest of thoughts.

*What if the world woke up, and nobody noticed?*

\*

*"Let me tell you, then, of our family's oaths.*

*Let me tell you of power, coiled within us.*

*Let us speak of the snake and the song..."*

"I know, dad. And stop with the spooky voice"

"You don't like the spooky voice?" he said, his tone slightly hurt. And the tension was broken, the candles flickered, and everyone broke out laughing. "Alright, alright - come on, someone pass the mashed potatoes down here." Barb laughed, and laugh was all she could do. It wasn't a funny joke, she knew that, with the sophistication of a teenaged girl who had lived her life with a family that did normal family things. It wasn't funny, but she laughed, because the laughter bubbled up in a well above her stomach and flowed out of her mouth - some automated response dad had put in place to make her less cool, no doubt.

Mom had a job at an advertising firm; dad had a part-time job at a school - *not hers* - and her little brother was as normal as any tiny human being could be. There'd been a time, when she was the worldly age of five and he had been the strange and unearthly noise machine age two, that she'd been convinced he was an alien that had been left implanted inside mom after the time a cop pulled her over and she was in the backseat, by the government, here to destroy the family unit, but after he learned how to talk more-betterer, or, really, since he learned to *shut the hell up*, she reconciled that he was in some fashion or another, relatively normal, or a normally relative.

The Guilbert family was a normal family. They had just *one* little thing, a little idea, that made them a *little bit weird*. It wasn't too weird, though - after all, Charlie, at school, was named after a baseballer, and Rory's dad was an out-and-out trainspotter. There were plenty of kids whose parents were odd, some whose parents were weird, and some of the kids were, themselves, pretty damn

weird too, as they tried to avoid being seen that way. Normalcy was something everyone was striving to claim, and so far, Barb Guilbert had managed it.

Normal.

Normal, except how, instead of going to church every Sunday - or not going to church, nobody was sure which was the more normal of the two, and it wasn't going to come to a head as long as Jode's family went to church on Saturday, because *that* was weird - the Guilbert family had a meal with candles and the special cookingware. It was a good meal, too, just before midnight, making Monday mornings a slow start for Barb. Every meal would feature bacon and mashed potatoes, even if sometimes it was with peas and corn or some times it was with sweet potatoes and boiled carrots, and dad would drink a small glass of amber-gold liquor, and every meal, at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end, dad spoke the oaths.

This was something his dad had done. This was something his mother had done, and both of her brothers. This was something, to hear him talk about it, that had been done in the family as long as the family had existed.

The snake and the song! It was just dad's little thing that brought with it this once-a-week large meal, and really, it was the kind of tradition that Barb didn't even think of as odd. It was just a thing that you did, right? sometimes after a larger than normal number of glasses, he'd have a bit of a habit of babbling, and singing - and he'd get the guitar out of the hall cupboard and play a bit, though not very well.

Mom had to take her brother and put him down for bed - distressed about something, a little nightmare or a new concern or maybe a hair had sprouted somewhere. Barb was herself, clearly never such a problem when she went to sleep at that age. And this time, a coincidence of effect - of a fussy brother, and a second glass from dad, which became a third glass, which left Barb in the living room, sitting on the swirling circular pattern of near-black, reds, golds, yellow and brown, listening to dad playing the guitar. As his mind wondered, his mouth wandered.

"Didju know," he mused, plucking an errant note, "why we called you Barbara, li'l Bear?" he asked, deferring back to the childhood name.

Barb pulled her legs up underneath her. Deep inside, a hearty dinner with potatoes and bacon and, tonight, a little sip of sweet liqueur that mom favoured, bubbled in her adolescent stomach, soaking in and creating a warmth that would settle for hours. *Maybe if I sleep in hard enough, the morning will be easier.* Thoughts far from the origin of her name.

"Nohp," she murmured, shuffling back, leaning her head back, into the sofa. Soft cushions squished around the back of her head. Long, ash-blond hair that fell down the small of her back when she stood was almost under her rear. Arms from netball, legs from hockey, midriff from ballet - Barb could claim she did a lot of things, but couldn't say she stuck to any of them. Eyes closing, she tilted her head, wiggling an ear at her father, as if to encourage her.

"See, your mother t-inks it's because of Barbara." And the guitar sat silent. "Because of a character in a comic book... Barbara Gordon?" He said. Arms folded, resting atop the curve of the guitar, head

tilted to the side. His beard scruffed against his forearm as he sat. "But it's not. The girls at school... they call you Barbie, don't they?"

A nod. Tall. Long legs. Developed in the ways that made mom worried. Athletic. Of course the girls tended to be resentful as hell when they said it.

Dad shifted forwards, leaning so the guitar tilted with his motions, looking down at his daughter. "In Ancient Greece, they used to think that the only language that ... that was civilized?" Questioning himself, double-checking a memorised spiel. Sometimes an idea rose like the sun, slow and steady, creeping over the horizon. "And they thought the only language that was civilized was greek. And the other people in the world? Allu the others? They sat around, all day long, saying 'barbarbarbarbarbarbar.'"

"Muh?"

"And that's why we have the word 'Barbarian.'"

"You named me after racists thinkin' about how idiots spoke?"

Dad laughed, a little squeak of a laugh. His guitar flopped forwards, onto his knees, unbalanced, as the discord filled the room. *Why couldn't it have been the explanation of the oaths? The meaning behind who they were? What it meant to be part of the family, to speak of the coiled serpent, the rising cloud, the first stones and the song of the sand?* Perhaps one day, Barb would understand. For now? Rolling forwards on her knees, Barb pulled herself up into standing, rubbing hand against her forehead, Barb gave a little smile, reaching out to hug her dad around the shoulders.

"I'm gunna get some bed, okay, dad?"

"Okay, li'l bear."

It was just a family tradition. The bacon didn't represent the slaughtered pig, the potato a symbol of famine. The amber liquor wasn't the sun, captured in a bottle, and midnight wasn't the time when the stars sat in their alien configuration that showed the shape of the Prince of Infinite Eyes. Nor was the family gathering an example of when the oath was ingrained in the children. It was just a family tradition.

It would have been just a family tradition.

\*

It was just a family tradition when her father knew it; when his father knew it; when his mother, her father, his mother, and so on for so many family members had the tradition pass and change and transform. Once, the blood had been a lamb, and before that, the blood of a foe. Once, the midnight had been but once a month, and once, the magic had slithered into its circuit, so easily.

The sun trapped behind the moon, the pledges to the stars, they were all part of the pattern. The pattern in the mind. The pattern had shifted a little at a time, generation from generation. the magic had left the world, but the pattern had remained.

As the silence of the second age of sand drew to an end, mighty bergs of magic, coalesced, crystallised, pulled far away from the people who could use them, started to *melt*. Power could only be contained for so long. In some places, and for some people, it filled the air, it sparked randomly. For some - some who had ways that reached back to the old ways - the *patterns remained*.

\*

In the middle of the night, her eyes closed, sprawled out on the bed, Barb rolled over. Wincing at the light, blinking into wakefulness - *what light?* Winced. Hands held out before her, something itched, under her skin, something that pulled at the edge of her forebrain like a headache, but not quite and all of those facts were immediately shunted as the shot of adrenalin hit her system and she woke fully.

There was, in the middle of her palm, a dancing spire of green flame.

Like a candle's flame in a guttering breeze, the flame touched not her skin, nor left any heat. It etched under her skin, lines that only showed in its light.

Panic, in the state of the sleepy, is a strange thing.

Barb drew her breath; the flame vanished, the light was gone - and so came the excuse, as easy as exhaling. *Oh. It was just a dream.* thought Barb to herself, ever doubting the truth.

Magic was back.

Magic was returning to its old patterns.

## Chapter Two

What does it mean to be a witch, or a warlock? A witch is a firestarter - an old term that means the people who play with fire. The witch is dangerous, the witch is clever. The witch takes the thing that nobody else dared to use, and wields it. The witch, in all of histories retellings, is villified as terrible, as ugly, as something that should not be countenanced. And those witches, in history, generation after generation, are all women.

What does it mean, to be a witch?

It means to be unafraid of the unknown. It means to stare at the magic that wends its way through life and the living, and to not quail at what it means to know it. It means that there are going to be times when you hold lightning in your hand, and then, the witch, in tradition and in wisdom, *lets go*.

There are many things involved in this most ancient and secret of arts, scooping up the tiny droplets of magic that lie in our world, smeared across the horizon like a single teaspoon of water in which to stir a league of desert.

None of this is of the slightest bit of comfort, however, to young Hank Lovely, glaring at the sigil underneath his hands, tasting once more the bitter words of his mother's lesson.

"There there, Enk." The tone was gentle, for once, lacking her normally imperious, towering manner. "Think about what you're doing very carefully. It's been mastered by generation after generation before you."

Sighing quietly, *Hank* looked up at his mother, trying to keep the trialled tone out of his voice. "Mom," he said, shifting in his seat before the ritual circle, "Mom, you know..." And then he bit his tongue.

Everyone's parents had odd beliefs. Jacky Sandlon's mother was an evangelical, and on halloween, gave out crazy little folded comic books that espoused salvation for the non-jews. Madison Andrum's dad was convinced in the thaumic energy of crystals, and Hank's mother - his single mother - was a witch. She said she was a witch, she called herself a witch, she told him she was a witch and she filled in her census forms as a witch. She had a pointy hat, for her own halloween costumes, and she did wear black as a matter of course, though often spiced up her look with dashes of grey, to complement the silvering of her hair around the temples.

Thing is, Madison and Jacky didn't have to come home after school and spend at least an hour before they did their homework trying to match up with their parents' odd beliefs.

In his life, Hank could remember maybe three times he'd opened his mouth to say what was on his mind and actually said it, and not once had that been with his mother even in the room. Bullies wanted any excuse back when he was younger, and finding his schoolbooks and his nametags on his clothes reading the bizarre name *Enk* was a fantastic excuse. Correcting them hadn't helped *at all*.

Swallowing, Hank tamped down the dissent, looking up at his mother's sincere, rounded face. A big smile sat on her lips with no hint of wavering. Witches in his memory of the stories were thin and cronelike, but his mother always had the composition that more powerfully evoked a ship under full sail, billowing outwards and eternally unbothered by whatever challenges sought to tug at her trim.

"Yes...?" She asked, tilting her head the other way, her arms folding across her voluminous chest, redoubling the aura of unflappability. "What is it, Enk?"

"... nothing."

\*

Hank sat in his room, pen twirling between his fingertips as the scent of cooking wafted down from upstairs. Homework sat under his fingertips, the same sentence having been read over and over and over again and not once having latched in his mind as a cause waiting for an effect. Bringing the pen up to his lips, he bit down, huffing an ired sigh while he closed his eyes and at least tried to repeat it to himself.

*Compare and contrast the national attitudes towards domestic leaders Oliver Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln.*

Hank went through these motions now, ever since he was ten. Six years of going to school, waiting to hear the bell ten times, coming home, sitting down with his eternally patient witch mother, failing to make her ritual circles do *whatever* it was she'd wanted him to do, and then, downstairs to his room to try and make the homework he'd brought home into something in his head beyond white noise.

Twenty minutes of muddling words onto paper later, up to the hallway outside his room, to grab the phone - with its long, dangling cable and its normal, beige case - pick it up, thumb the same number he'd put in so many times the numbers were worn down, and call up Innogen.

Ring four times, then the pickup from his uncle, Hello-Hank, Is-Innogen-Home, Of-course-she-is-hah, let-me-get-her-for-you. Flopping back on his bed, Hank rested his heels on the end of his bed and drew in a long breath. This was not the first time he'd done this, and indeed, thinking about it, it might have been the thousandth. The voice of violence punctured the predictable, though, as across town, Innogen picked up the phone.

"Sup?"

"Hey, Jen."

"Every time, you know. Eeeerrrrrytime, you're always with the exact same greeting. Ever thought about mixing it up a little, Enk?"

"Hank."

"You correct me on that, too, errytime."

Sigh, stretch, laugh. This was the way Hank spent his evenings. This was what was familiar. He'd been in the cycle for so long, done it so consistently, that it had lost all of its feeling to him; it was a worn place in his mind, a smooth track he walked and had walked, without deviation or strangeness, for six years. You moved forwards by one step because it was the only place to go, the only place to *be*.

The conversation unwound. Innogen spoke to Enkudu about her magical studies and her schoolwork. Hank spoke to Jen about his schoolwork and his mother's crazy ideas. Laughter was shared, connection was felt. Warm. Good.

And then Jen had to go and wreck it, with the trailing sound of "... again."

"What? Wait, what?" Hank blurted, realising that he had gotten so thoroughly used to this phone call that he literally not noticed anything said. "I mean, uh...?"

"I said I'm not going to do anything like that again." Well, he was in it now, and the tone of Jen's voice suggested that this wasn't something that she spoke about often. Owlsh blinking, surprise, and an odd cold feeling on the back of his neck, a tingle and a prickle that ran down his back and into the base of his spine. "I mean, can you imagine if I did something like that at school?"

Hank sat forwards on his bed, swallowing quietly. "Innogen," he murmured, licking his now-dry lips, "What?"

"I *said*, can you im-"

"I get that, yeah, yeah - I mean, what... what are you talking about?"

"It worked, Enk. Last night. The rituals dad does. It *worked*. I took fire into my hand and wasn't burned. You know? The chant?"

Hank mouthed to himself, silently, as she spoke. *And we shall take the fire into our hands, and be not burned; we shall hold serpents and be not bit; we shall drink poison and not die.* "You're serious? I mean, y-you're..."

Hank had a very solid view of himself. A very solid view of the world. He was sure, *sure* that the world worked in a particular way and that his mother was a normal crazy lady who thought she was a witch. Maybe her brother agreed with her and maybe his cousin also had to do the same rituals, but by and large it was just a goofy family tradition. They couldn't really be witches, because witch was just a word for the old lady in the village who knew penicillin was useful, not for some supernatural wielder of power.

"... Hank, have you *ever* believed in any of this?" Innogen's voice carried with it the faintest sting of disapproval. "I mean, have you ever... even once?"

Hank sat up straight, looking at his hand, confronting it within himself. "... No. I... I've never... I mean, Jen, if... if this is true, why isn't everyone doing it? If magic works, why aren't there books, how-to guides? Why wasn't, uh, Lincoln assassinated with a heart attack or a thrown imp or something? Why do we have... guns and presses and internets when we could be doing it all with magic?"

Innogen's quiet tasted of ash in his mouth. When she finally spoke, there was a bitterness to it. "I don't know, Enk. I don't. I know what I did last night. I know what I can do again. And now? Now I know I'm going to do it *again*." Those last words came out like a sting, and the phone *clicked* accusingly.

\*

A woman's figure, clearly, cut from the shadow with an undeniable curve despite what time in gyms and jungles had done to her. Keenly aware of the unfairness of fashion, she walked on flat boots, cargo pants tucked into leather grip. Tank top, over which a flannelette shirt hung, covering her from neck to wrist, with only hands - hidden mostly under fingerless gloves - and throat exposed. Face hidden underneath a bandanna, strangely bright and gaudy considering the dowdy colour scheme she'd selected. A collage of blue, white and green, the bandanna, with its black base and white skull-jaw design, flashed brightly at the viewer, and further cast in contrast her red eyes. Skin, pale and wan, with the faintest hint of sickly paleness, furthered the comparison to a skull, and those eyes, red as blood, brought with them all the menace one could expect of a one-woman army. Hair that had genetically earned its place on beautiful señoritas who spent their time being kidnapped refused to break its tradition, fulgent and curly, even though it was as shocking white as it could get.

There was nothing about her that looked right. Nothing that looked normal, that looked like it belonged. Cheekbones of a model, hips of a dancer, shoulders of a teamster, eyes of a serial killer. It all looked so much worse from this position, towering over a prone form, staring from helplessness up at the business face of the golden-barrelled, rhinestone-studded gun.

"I, uh," he sputtered, holding his hands up, over his head, hands flailing briefly. This white death hadn't killed him in the initial fire-fight - she may well have spared him for a reason. "DEA," he croaked, the blood in his mouth adding to his torment. Gesturing with a fingertip down at himself, he started to haphazardly fumble around the edges of what he meant to say, hoping against hope that he wasn't going to mess this one up further. He lowered his head for a moment, to get his attention off the gun, to look at himself and maybe piece together where his badge and identification were.

Lowering his head, he saw the floor - the spreading red patch around a discarded golden handgun, glittering rhinestones tainted with a wet pink, the large flecks of white that had to be sections of skull and teeth, the smear of footprints that led to the bottom of her combat boots. Straining to contain the retch, he looked back up again, seeing the gun barrel once more - and next to it, a plain white business card, with a handful of words centred in it.

English?

"S-si?" A response, a nervous nod. The card next to the gun, held in her hands, gave the yawning circle of darkness that was the barrel something more terrifying, like it was some hungry abyss into which he had to cast his words, that they be consumed and judged. Thumb flickered against the business card, and from the stack in her hand, another flicked out, held before his gaze.

Today your life was spared. Today you lived. Today your superiors will hear about a conflict between two local gangs and determine it too hot to stay here.

Another flicker, like a card trick.

Do I make myself clear?

"Y-yes." Swallowing, he looked back up the golden gun. Everything about her was so practical - yet the gun's studded barrel and glittering facade looked like something he'd have seen north of here, in some redneck's cabinet to be guffawed over.

When I want you, you will respond, and you will tell nobody.

The card flickered again.

This is not negotiable.

Another nod, helpless, silent.

You will be collected in the next twenty-two minutes.

She stepped back, raising the gun, finally, and with that motion weight hauled off his shoulders. As if his lungs remembered their purpose, he dragged in a long breath, not even realising he'd stopped. Raising her own arm, she yanked back on the casing of the gun, ejecting the clip and throwing the bullet into the sky, wiping the handle just once and throwing the golden gun over her shoulder. It landed in a puddle, skidding just a fraction, flopping impotently before spinning silently, the red ooze of the dead clinging to its golden facings.

Tucking clip into the back of her belt, she turned and left, a practical movement that showed no sway or swagger, her fists clenched by her side.

Twenty minutes later, he'd given up hope for his rescue. Two more minutes, and the thud-thud-thud of helicopters made his heart leap in his chest. An hour later, he sat, slightly stunned, his expression helpless, in an EMT's care, while they drove him back to the city, where a discharge from this detail was waiting for him. This far south, there was no place for cops - it was a warzone, a world haunted by blood.

The first line of his report, written in shaky hand with the fingernails growing back, was as formal as he could manage: *While held prison for interrogation, I was witness to a gunfight that broke out between two sizeable gang forces. Numbers uncertain.*

\*

Hank shouldered his schoolbag with the air of someone who would never be comfortable, no matter how he tried. Hands jammed into his pockets, the young man bit his lower lip, trying to reconcile these ideas in his head. There was the possibility Jen was lying, or wrong. That was the most probable, but also not the most likely. No matter how he wanted to turn the idea around in his head, he couldn't imagine Jen lying - she was just too direct for that. Most of the tall, elegant blondes had focused on beauty therapy, makeup, shoes, and fashion, with notions of becoming models out of school. Innogen had taken up boxing. Most of the girls had fought for their right to a larger bathroom out on E block. Innogen had fought for the right to play linebacker with the boys' football team, for the month before someone groped her in a scrimmage line and she'd interrupted the game to break his wrist, throw him down and punch his faceguard hard enough to break it on his helmet. It had taken a few hits, but she'd done it.

After that, they'd politely suspended Innogen and she'd had to dedicate her athleticism to other pursuits.

Innogen was someone the rest of the school always seemed to regard as a bit of a shame. She'd be so great if. She'd be so beautiful if. She'd make a great athlete if. It was strange to Hank - he never felt remarkable, but there was his cousin. Like someone who got more points on character creation, she was fit, gorgeous, and really, the kind of badass that in his most private of dreams, Hank Lovely wished to be. Just there, standing around the schoolyard in her shorts and sneakers, laughing along with a handful of friends, bag slung over her shoulder. Long jacket in the school's gold and silver trim colours, a collared shirt, and the poise that came from being one of the modern gods of the schoolyard. It was like someone had photoshopped her into life.

It contrasted unpleasantly with Hank himself. Just enough shorter than the other boys to notice it, skinny all over and just that irritating little bit of feyness about him. Spectacles - not 'glasses' - and soft black hair, which kept getting cut every time it got close to the length he liked.

Innogen was probably not lying, which meant she was probably just wrong. Right? Something had duped her into believing she'd handled a raw flame. This was not a world where secrets like that could be held.

\*

Far away from the young man known as Enk, whose name was Enkudu, a place of deep heat and moist air lay resting, sunk half into the stone. It could occupy the same space as the stone, because it was and was not; a thing and not a thing. Energy and matter, both at once, bound in the large broken shards of crystal. Time had worn at the edges, letting tiny slivers drift away, into the air, slowly spreading out and finding its mean. Crystals, like many things, rely on tension. Very strong, up to a point, but *brittle*. Like drops of water in the desert, those shards of energy were so little as to go unnoticed, unless some enterprising mind gathered it together, scrupulously collecting.

The crystal was of a strange, luminous colour; green and orange, bright and yet broodingly dull. Obvious up close, and impossible to see from a distance, it rested at the cleft of a mountain untouched. Animals skirted about it, while plants grew as close as they could - African vegetation not known for its prudence and care. Not known for much of anything, really, beyond toxicity rivalled only by Australia.

A little shaved off, here and there, year after year, called from the crystal by patterns. It had been *thousands* of years since the crystals had been made - made in hubris, made in folly. They had destroyed everything that they'd been worked to create, with the passive ambivalence of energy. And now, in an era of books and thinking sad, enough had worn away. A sliver of crystal wore away under the thumb of time; a sliver that took with it a shard of another crystalline structure, which took another, and another-

A crack formed. Pressure released.

The crystal, one of many created in the ending of the Second Age, had been twenty meters across, easily, and almost a cube. Twenty-four hours ago, a fissure had formed, releasing energy from *one*

form into *another*. Things that had taken years to achieve suddenly took days. And that taste of power, with its shifting rents in the sky, was but a hint.

It was not twenty meters across any more.

It was not a crystal, any more.

It was *free*.

Ambivalent as ever, the magic rolled forth, billowing in green clouds into the sky. The world was due to change.

\*

Finally, Hank mustered up the courage, walking alongside his taller cousin towards the sports field. "Hey, Jen-"

"Yeah, Hank?"

"I'm sorry, I... I mean, last night, when you said..." He looked up at her with a nervous smile. "I'm sorry I was a dickhead."

A gale of laughter, and a pat on his shoulder. Jen leant over and bumped her shoulder into his.

"Don't worry about it, man. It's okay. And... trust me. It's weird for me, too. I mean..." She raised her hand, snapping her fingers, a gust of blue lightning crackling between her fingertips, arcing into the air in the shape of a flame, then fading.

The only comfort Hank had, staring at his cousin's hand, was that *she* was staring, too.

"Hank? I think... I'd like to talk to your mom." Jen said, swallowing and staring.

Far above, green clouds rolled.

## Chapter Three

Hot sun beat down on the sands of Moriah. The leather of Jubal's footbindings, worn smooth by months of walking and wear, felt soft and familiar, each foot leaden and worn like wooden hooves at the end of his legs. Wound strips of finer leather, braided together, ran up in a weave around, holding the goatskins in place. Jubal had become one with the walk; Moriah could be a year away and he would not mind. He had his leathers; he had his daggers; he had his sticks and he had his brothers.

This was the second day of the journey, and Jubal could feel himself losing his fears and concerns in the work of the walk. The first day of the journey had been arduous. The bundle of sticks, resting against his back, reminded him of the tent his family had pitched at the river, with their sheep and camels and goats. There is where they had gathered the sticks - sticks which now, in a bundle, scraped against the small of his back as he walked. Those long wooden strands that would not be found amongst the short, scrubby brush and brambles of Moriah. Jubal was a thoughtful man, a man who watched the sky and the movements of birds, and had always been less healthy than his older brother. Their relationship had been strained - perhaps because by the time father had circumcised them both, Jubal was barely in his sixth year, while his brother was almost thirteen - a man.

Then there was their younger brother still - walking before them, by father's side. His bundle of sticks was smaller than Jubal's. Jubal's bundle wasn't the largest, either - but father carried no sticks. No, father carried in one hand a slow-burning torch of pitch, a clay pot with which to refresh it, and a knife, the knife for the sacrifice.

Under his breath, that first day had been full of most inappropriate grumbling from Jubal. The voices father had started to hear in his old age had gotten louder. They had yielded... strangeness from him. He claimed to be older than he was, that his wife and concubines had been selected and bargained between the gods, that he had been chosen by one of the gods most specially - and every time he had done it, Jubal had found himself afeared. As the middle son, his was the challenge of seeing things from the outside. His older brother, son of the concubine, was never going to inherit the birthright of father; nor was he, son of another concubine. And then the youngest brother, the third son - and given father's age and work of circumcision, probably the final son - was the one to whom birthright, supposedly, belonged.

Thus, Jubal was the one that watched. Never seething with his older brother's stung pride, nor endowed with the power and strength that he seemed to have from the gods themselves, he never spent his days angry for what he could not have. Jubal never would be the heir; but in his older brother's mind, just maybe - *maybe* it could come to pass. If father could just see his worth...

Then the youngest son, who had been born into the arms of a father that had always been insane. Er, *blessed*. Father was the head of the house; father was the seat of god in the home, and father had raised his least son - his youngest son - with a wisdom and a care, filling his head with those teachings and ideas that struck him as wise from day to day. It had been he who had his father's ear, the one who had the means to ask questions, without himself being rebuked for his pride. Such as, in that first day.

Jubal's left foot swung forwards, dull and easy, unfeeling and sweeping like a rock on a string, arcing without effort and becoming the new support for his frame. This was how to walk in the desert -

make as little effort as possible. Yesterday, they had left behind the green of the rivers and ventured off into the badlands of the desert; today, the pounding heat of the sand, packed down into clay.

\*

On the first day, Jubal watched a rare happening. A few steps ahead, in the shadow of the tall, powerful frame of their eldest brother, the youngest had reached up, touching the sleeve of the old man holding knife and flame. So full of belief, so lacking in disappointment. The eldest had seen the old man degenerate from his greatest days, but could not shake his deep respect for him, meaning that he could not bring himself to truly deny his father respect. Respect that had never, truly, in Jubal's mind, been held. When first his father had spoken about the wheel covered in eyes, dancing in the flames, Jubal had realised that a mind was a thing, just like a knife or a horse, and just like a knife or a horse, a man could lose them.

"Father!" had said the youngest.

Father, as if he and his chosen heir were alone, turned, steps unwavering, driven on perhaps by the energy of madness, "Yes, my son."

"We have the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb we will burn as a sacrifice?"

And he had smiled, and his eyes wrinkled, his voice thin as papyrus, but with the courage of conviction that normally spoke only of a young man deep in Egyptian wineskins, "God will give us the lamb for the sacrifice, my son."

His hand gripped his knife anew. Fingers slid along the bound grip, blue veins under white skin, and Jubal worried. Steps fell one after the other, and the middle son tried to disregard the ache in his thighs and the fear in his heart. Father was not so insane - and he had his youngest son here. He would not do ... any of those fears that lay in Jubal's heart. Coming to camp with a sliver of stone in his hand and claiming he and his sons were 'chosen' had been the worst of his madness.

Surely with his three sons together, he would not do such a thing again.

Jubal's feet felt riversands turn to clay beneath him, the hard worn ground where no rain or tears fell.

\*

In many ways, the second day had been the best day of the journey. There had been three sons to walk, three loads of sticks, and Jubal may have not been given to use his pride, but there had been something communal about the experience. Father had raved less, his glassy eye had focused more on the horizon than on his feet, and there was, to the young men, a silence that would have made a Greek scholar proud. Even the youngest had not complained, even as he fell into the pattern of the walk.

Desert foliage had given way to rocky outcroppings; outcroppings to scrubby brush. Under the brush there were brambles - wide, risen thorns of withered wood, studded about with thorns and the dust of the heated lands. Through many a twisted forest, they walked, until they came here, to this... flat

tablet of stone. Had father known about it, ahead of time? No matter how much Jubal wished to say, to hear his brothers scoff their father with him, he did not.

He still remembered the morning with the sharpened stone.

Father took the sticks from his sons, one by one, piling them on the stone, laying them about most carefully in a pyre's arrangement. They did this before, at turnings of the moon and great festivals; the slaughtered lamb was to sit in the midst, and there roast, so that its blood could seep out, onto the stone, and be tasted only by the stars in the sky. Food that no man would eat - a sacrifice in the most literal sense of the word. Jubal so wished he could say why that felt strange, why it felt wrong to his mind to do such a thing.

"Kindling," father said. "Rush back, now. Rush back. The god will provide our lamb," he murmured, finger twitching on the handle of the knife. Was he even aware he'd spoken aloud? Perhaps. Perhaps not. The brothers spread out, heading into the brambles.

Brown brambles of old weather were good for kindling, but they were hard to grasp, covered in thorns. Perhaps Jubal's older brother had simply gripped one and snapped it, taking the pain and walking back to his father. Perhaps his younger brother had slid through gaps in the brambles and claimed sticks, fallen from the oldest of brambles, and brought them back. No such luck found Jubal.

Jubal's path through the rocks and thorns took him up; around the rise of the hill they had found, up past a knot of desert brush still too dense with thorns to be touched. Pulling his knives from his belt, he tested one - the thorns flicked off easily, snapping from the dry vine and leaving it clean. It seemed an easy solution, then.

Drawing knife along the brambles, he began to strip them clean, one after another, lost in his work until he heard the voice. Looking up, and down, he realised that, through the brambles, he had found his father's rock. From above, he could push through, cutting the thorns, and arrive with the kindling.

His brothers were already there; they had already brought kindling, and it had already been arrayed, father's hand still gripping the knife, working slowly. He would put down the torch; he would not put down the knife. Jubal shifted closer as he worked towards them - making out the strangeness in his mumbling.

He could not tell what his father said; he could only see the fear in his brother's faces. Watching them holding their breath, eyes wide, looking one to another as he spoke - something about stars. About a mighty nation, about gods and kingdoms and the mountains that supported the world. About a god of gold and horns, who lived in the sun and spoke of war. A god who would kill all other gods.

Then they spoke - suddenly and with energy, speaking out at their father; brother older pointed to brother younger; while brother younger recoiled in fear - then spat back the same words, with the same energy. He was a man now, too, after all - and he, more than either of his brothers, believed their father's madness.

"Then which?" Father said, raising his voice loud enough. "Which of you will be the lamb?!"

Jubal's heart leapt in his throat, and he stepped backwards. A soft patch of leather hit a soft patch of stone, and he slid forwards even as he stepped back, falling - screaming in pain as he tumbled into the bushes, skidded down, knives clutched in his hands, stabbing them into the ground to try and still his fall. Suspended in the knot of the vines and brambles, Jubal felt as though he had bathed in thorns, his skin torn with as many spearheads as a Caananite army.

"Father-" he managed, hanging as he was before them, his knives high in the brambles, tangled and lost, out of his grip.

Looking up at him, his father's rheumy eyes blinked.

"Ishmael? Cut down the lamb." he said, drawing a breath, that gave way to a shudder. "Isaac, bring your father the torch."

Jubal's blood fell to the floor; spattered on the rocks of the stones of Moriah, where its last drop would be sacrificed.

Not spent - but wasted.

## Chapter Four

The pavement hammered underneath Innogen's feet as her huge boots clapped onto the concrete, her arms pumping alongside her. And then, at the end of the block, she stopped, turned, and waited for the thirty seconds for her cousin to catch up. And then, they were off again, Innogen picking up the pace, running to the corner, and then waiting again.

"What did you do?" Enk asked, half-yelling.

"I don't know!" she shot back just as fast, taking the tone accusingly. "I just thought about the rite and-"

"No! I mean, last night! You said you'd done-"

"Oh!" Innogen rounded the corner. "I lit the candle!"

"That's it?"

"Yep!"

"A candle you'd blown out?"

"Yep!"

"... That's it?"

"Hey, what?" Innogen shot back, looking over her shoulder.

Enk clutched at his chest, drawing his breath and slowing to a stop. "Good grief, Innogen," he muttered, looking up at her. Planting his hands on his knees, and drawing his breath. "We're ... I'm..." A pause, and he looked back and around. "Wait, we're here. Why- why were we running?"

Innogen looked back, down the street, at her cousin's house. "Wow. Really? I thought." she stopped, circling around him. "I thought you'd moved at some point. Ever? Never? No?" Another pause, blithely ignoring that grand question.

"Zombies. There are zombie hamsters in my yard. There are hamsters in the yard. Innogen! There are zombie hamsters in my yard. Poked up through the snow and... and... shouldn't... Innogen, am I... that is strange, isn't it?"

"Well, it's mid-February, it should snow a few times, and I mean, we're kinda far north-"

Enk rubbed his forehead and slumped on the metal fence that marked the line between public property and his house. Well, his mother's house. Once, it'd been solid, flat treated metal, but you couldn't keep a fence like that in these parts without wind eventually flattening it, or the snow building up around it and doing the same thing. Sometime when Enk had been seven, the fence had been replaced, and it stood out in his mind with the most stark certainty as basically the only thing that divided six year old Enk's life from eight year old Enk's life.

The fence stood, in its own way, as a symbol of his youth. Mostly because while he could remember holidays rising and falling, drawing up on the horizon then vanishing instantly the day after they

were over, while he could think and remember the fence in rain, snow, hail, short windows of sunlight, and so on, over and over again, he could never really put his finger down on which year was five, which was four, and which was six. Seven, though, was the first time the fence had changed.

For just the briefest instant, the howling wind, the urgency of his cousin's sudden non-normal development - or their shared hallucination - and the tiny, half-skeletonised, half-decayed pack of hamsters that shuffled boredly around the front yard, cutting soft trails in the snow, was blown aside. Replacing it was the sudden realisation that for everything else that had gone on around him with a witch mother and a cousin who could probably have been wrestling bears in her tweens, he was a remarkably, nay, breathtakingly boring person. That same realisation then sent a shockwave through him as he realised that at the same time, that was probably the first time he'd ever felt anything of that emotional weight.

Really, it was a big day all over the place.

"Weird that there are so many of them. I mean, I only ever had six hamsters." Enk mumbled, looking down at the front yard.

"Oh, my god, that's adorable."

"They're zombie hamsters!"

"No, it's adorable that you thought you only had six hamsters." Innogen said. "C'mon. I wore these boots for a reason." she said, planting her hands firmly on the fence. Gripping, she swung both her legs in one confident sweep, arcing over the fence and planting her feet with a crunch into the snow.

Braced for anything, she stepped forwards, only to find that zombie hamsters were still hamsters - and continued their bored shuffling around in the snow, bumping head first into the tree again and again. Stomping forwards, up the path, Innogen moved like the world had to get out of her way - and get out it did.

Enk watched her moving, then at the gate. "Hey, Innogen," he said, putting his hand to unlock the gate and step through, "Why'd you-"

Innogen didn't break stride - just called over her shoulder. "Didn't want to risk any of 'em getting out. Might be able to sprint or something."

Enk looked at the hamsters. He looked at his fence. He looked at the gate... and bit his lower lip. Damn, it was cold. He was wearing his gloves, and yet, his cousin had vaulted this fence at a higher point, barehanded.

Planting his hands, he scrambled over the top, inelegant foot trying to catch purchase between two of the rectangles of the fence's design once or twice, before it finally caught - and then he was over. Bumping down onto one knee, then slipping and nearly skidding, then almost hitting the path chin-first, Enk caught himself, only to gather his breath and wits in the same moment.

A tiny, dessicated skull looked back, completely ambivalent to his existence, and shuffled on past his waiting face. Scrabbling to his feet, the boy that called himself Hank, whose mother called him Enk, and who the school bullies had called "Wank," ran after his cousin, up to the front door.

Behind him, the tiny hamsters continued in their wheeling, following the old runes scrip on the soil under the snow, and Enk tried to stop his mind wandering.

\*

When she woke up of the first morning, Barbara had accounted her expression as being just a dream. A few too many videogames, a few too few hours of sleep, and she'd just had a big meal! That sort of thing led to long, heavy sleep, and it wouldn't be the first time she'd had a strange dream after the family meal. Bacon and poatoes were not the healthiest food in the world. Resolved in her mind, she'd sought to remedy that feeling with a light breakfast of fruit and juice, and relatively few handfuls of marshmallow-laden cereal from the tupperware container.

Relatively few. It wasn't like she was trying out for pope or anything.

As her mother pulled the car out of the drive, crinkling gravel of the cool morning air, she made her own way down the path. Being independent had its vices - while her brother was driven to his appointments, Barb had luxury of locomotion, and given means to walk. Socks pulled up high, skirt close to the tops, she'd made a concession to the cold by wearing a full hoodie, loose white fabric hanging around her neck, strands of white around her shoulders and the tight, soft grip of the wrists resting around her fingers. Blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, this path was one she had walked in the past so many times she could almost find her way by the sounds of her own footsteps.

Eyes closed, Barb felt the grass scrunch under her toes, the moisture flicking against her socks. *Fwiff fwiff fwiff* through the green lines, then *scrnch* as she pressed toes against the gravel that spoke of the damaged sidewalk. A step, a turn of ninety degrees, and the toes of her sneaker slid with a *vfffffnh* across the unfinished surface. Then, eyes open, she faced forwards - and stared up the hill.

In moments like these, facing a challenge, even a challenge she knew she could beat a thousand times over, she smiled. Barbara didn't even realise she did it. Foot before foot, athletic girl pushed her way up the hill, picking up the pace as the incline increased. Push hardest as the hill got hardest, defy what it told you. Most of her friends took it easier on the hill - not Barbara.

The *fuhmph* of her foot hitting the pavement, now *running*, rang in her ear just in time with the *bleat* from her phone. Stepping forwards, shoulders back, the girl heard the sound... and ran anyway. Barbara did not run because she loved school and wanted to be there; she did not run because she was late. With wind in her hair and cold crispness on her lips, Barbara ran because she loved the running. Whenever she tried to explain that to anyone, to her classmates, the only words that sprang to mind to expound were the cliché, "*like, y'know*," and once again, she'd let silence wash over them.

Another beep from the phone, another drop of ambivalence. Rounding a corner, Barbara slowed, knowing that there were more people walking these sidewalks, students from her school, dogwalkers and even some local store-workers making their ways to work creating a stream into which she could swim, like a fish.

A hundred heads on the street, most tilted down, looking at phones.

Barbara fell into an empty space, her steps falling into the same motion as those around her, and then the third beep from her phone grabbed her attention. Now, a floe upon the river of people, Barbara was finally so deprived of mental stimulation that she reached into her pocket and yanked out her nokia. Text messages in their tight little fixed-width system view glared out at her from the display, as accusatory as the tone.

Y U BLANKIN

SRSL BARBIE

It bleated again, and Barbara faced the crossroads. Further into the history, or into the newer messages? Thumb up, thumb down... she tapped upwards, to see the most recent message.

DINT YOU C MSG?

Barbara sighed, giving a shoulder movement that had been coded somewhere in her DNA as a flounce. Turning and whipping her head around, letting her hood tumble back across the back of her neck, she stopped, biting her tongue, letting it jut between her lips. Surveying the moving bergs of people, then slowed just a fraction - just in time for a full body to whallop into her side.

"Baaaarbie!"

"Oh good glory, good Glory," Barbara offered, turning around and offering her friend a hug. Shorter, brunette, chocolate-skinned Glory wasn't named that on her birth certificate, but with all the years of friendship, Barbara hadn't yet found out exactly what *was*. Tousling her hand through Glory's hair, Barb bumped her head forwards, before setting her down.

"Okay, okay!" Barbara said, setting down her friend - wearing similar uniform colours, a style that the school preferred. Technically, there was no uniform, but they'd send these damn slips back home to your parents if you weren't adequately representing the school's 'attitude,' something that did more or less the same job. Red, green, and black woven in tartan around to Glory's knees, it was a look that always reminded Barbara of christmas ornaments. While Barbara had chosen to wear a short skirt today, Glory was clad from neck to knee. High collar, white, red sweater over the top, flats and thick, wooly socks of white up to the knee. "Geeze, you, like, wake up in the freezer this morning?"

"What?" Glory asked, laughing. "I was going to ask, what are those socks made of? Fuggin thermite or something?"

"Okay, okay," Barbara said, bumping her friend with her hip as they settled back into the flow of the foot traffic. "So this is just you, pestering me?" She asked, flipping through the history of messages, laughing to herself.

"Well, kind of. I knew you'd be coming up here and wanted to talk to you. I swear though, you've got to stop using that brick." Glory said, peering around Barbara's arm, looking at the tiny green-and-black screen. "I mean, how old is that damn thing?"

"I don't know, but my dad doesn't, like, work for a phone distributor, so, you know, lay off?" Barbara laughed, flicking back through the history. Despite a phone with apps and photos and scenesters and

whatever else it was, Glory still communicated on her phone like a grandmother with caps lock. Flicking back through the history, there was-

**Stop.**

"... Glory," Barbara began, turning the phone, to point it to her friend's face, before the number beneath it answered the unspoken question. It was not sent by Glory. It was not sent by anyone on her phone. In fact, if that number was to be believed, it wasn't sent by a phone: A chain of letters and digits that spilled off the edge of the display, with large, black chunks hiding the text.

"What... what the hell is that?" Glory asked, peering at it. "You look like you're getting creepy texts from missingno."

"From who?"

"Ugh, you live in a cave, right. Um, it looks weird. I've never seen anything like that." Glory said, adjusting her glasses.

"You do realise, like, that because your dad sells these, I assume you know, like, what it's doing?"

"My dad doesn't sell these. My dad sells good phones."

"This is a good phone."

"This is a good heavy weapon. I swear, this thing looks like your dad drove the car over it."

"Hey, we're talking about your dad here."

"Pfft!" Glory said, turning the phone around and around - before popping the back off, and pulling out the battery. A moment later, it slapped back in place and she handed it back. The booting chime and the re-connecting network signal took a moment, a moment in which two girls walked along, rapt as if it were some sort of concert.

The message was still there. The strange garbled number was still there. Except...

**Stop, Please.**

"... Okay, that is frreeek-ky." Glory said, leaning back from the phone and wrinkling her nose. "Hey, Barbie, your phone's possessed!"

"Shut up, it is not," Barbara said, turning the phone over even as she rounded another corner, heading along the path of the doctor's surgery they had passed a hundred times before. Pulling off the battery again, she put it back in place - with a hard, energetic *thwack*.

"Oof, so violent."

The screen faded up again, and this time. Thumbed into the message log, Barbara scrolled past Glory's silliness, to find: **Please don't do that again. It's very Unpleasant.**

Glory looked down at the phone, leaning back again. "You, uh. You're getting some weird messages there, Barbie. You let any of the guys at the computer club fondle up your phone?"

"Ew, no," she said, tapping the keys again. Holding the phone in her hand, the mind that worked despite the attitude that didn't was already spinning dials. "They can see what we're doing, or they wouldn't know how to change the message, though, when I took out the battery..." She tapped her chin, expression one of concentration.

**I'm right here.**

Turning the phone over and over in her hand, Barbara's reaction was immediate and decisive. Slung from her hand like a bullet, the Nokia cruised through the air as a missile, punching into the bushes, leaving a hole wider than her fist, with wispy, burnt edges, seared in green flame.

"Barb... did you just set a bush on fire with your phone?"

The ringing of the phone rattled and buzzed against clean concrete under the bush's facade, and wordlessly, Barbara hoisted over the fence to retrieve it. The fire died out silently, but left behind that odd, sweet scent, a scent that Barbara couldn't easily identify. Dropping down onto the concrete and rummaging around, Barbara lifted the phone up, turning it over and inspecting it.

Of course it wasn't damaged. Damn thing-

**I'm practically bulletproof!** the screen flashed.

"... Phone." Barbara whispered. "... are you...?"

**I am not sure.**

Barbara slowly straightened up, looking down at her phone, and slid the device into her pocket. Hands on the wall before her, she hoisted up and over, landing next to Glory. "Well," Barbara said, adjusting her hoodie. "C'mon. First period's soon." She turned, stepping forwards.

Barbara's dad didn't sell phones. But he did know *weird*.

\*

The kettle sat on the stovetop, giving off the absence of sound that always had seemed somewhat unfair to Enk. At the end of the kettle's job, it stood up and crowed, and right near the end, there was that rattle and bubble that anticipated the whistle, but nothing anticipated the rattle. It was metal, getting hot, and water also getting hot. Surely, somewhere in Enk's young mind, he'd reasoned that should make some noise. If he was going to write about it, he'd refer to the 'creak' of the metal, or the rattle of it as it settled on the element, but that'd be a lie. Most of his life he'd thought that the kettle should make some more noise than it did, and not once had he ever sat, in such silence, watching it, and realising that it didn't.

It was much, much easier, no, more desirable, no, easier, to sit glaring at the kettle, as four feet away from him, his mother had one of the most animated, intelligent conversations he'd ever heard her have.

"No, no, the meaning doesn't matter," she said, holding her hands spread, as if she was trying to hold a very tricky stack of dishes and guide it into a nook in the sideboard. "The meaning of any individual word in an incantation isn't... there, it's in how the pattern... um, where is my codex..."

Innogen stepped back, shaking her head, mimicking the gesture for just a moment, before spreading her arms and twirling the fingers of her hand, drawing it back like she was guiding a wave, or some sort of clever tai chi maneuver designed to unleash the vole of many secrets. "I don't think the codex would be of any use at all. Doesn't it talk about magic as a drop-"

"A drop of water in a glass desert, yes, yes," Mother said, leaving the room and raising her voice to compensate - too much at first, then not enough. Vanishing into the study, she raised her voice. "It's possible that you were just at a confluence point when-"

"Auntie Shahnna," Innogen said, following her out of the kitchen. "There are zombie hamsters in your front yard. There's... there's like, I was summoning *lightning*. Not teasing a drop of anything, it was *right there* and it was *all around*. No incantation, no hours of focus, no fetish, no sigils, no - just *there*."

"I'm sorry, dear, but you've got to be hallucinating..." came the older voice, drawing back through the living room, from too soft back to uncomfortably loud, before she stepped back into the room. "There simply isn't that much magic in the world to create lightning - I don't think there ever has been-"

Innogen's nostrils flared. Her eyes sparkled, deep blue, then green - and in that position, hands drawn back, without a word, a whisper, an incantation or a prayer, a long blue arc of lightning, crackling and buzzing, whispering and dancing.

That had a sound that started as it built up. It had a sound that resonated in the jaw before it crackled in the ears. The energy seemed to be burning air, which in turn pulled in more air, which dragged in, in a whirling spiral towards Innogen's hands.

It was barely a second, before she closed her palms and eyes, and the crackling arc of blue faded, dulled out. Enk could still see it - still see sparkling spots of white and blue and purple and huge dull patches that shifted colours in his vision as he squinted his eyes shut, desperate to try and recover the ability to see but unwilling to do something like rub his eyes or wince in pain. The gasp of breath that ran through him seemed to take forever.

Halfway through that arrested gasp, though, came a louder one. Enk had a mother who was honestly more curves than line; uncharitably, she was fat, but charitably she was Rubenesque, with lots of extra Ruben. When she dragged in a breath, it seemed to suck the paint off the walls.

"Innogen!" she blurted. "You wonder!"

Somewhere three feet and a thousand miles away from Enk's arm, the kettle began to boil. Enk couldn't help but notice just how bitter this was making him.

\*

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

*Tock.*

The clock on the wall showed a second more, even though the sound echoed of three. Nostrils flared, breath drawn, and head forwards, Angus tried his best to keep his focus not on the clock, or the time, but on something inside his own head that would keep his attention. Was there not some major quandary? Some fascinating line in the sand that he had seen, some ley pattern that showed promise of some future study? Within the chambers of Angus' manifold mind, came back the ringing silence that said, very simply... *no*.

*Tock.*

*Tick.*

Augh, all that time, that mental effort moved, and barely a third of the second earned away. This was the strangest of all toils, the task of waiting. He'd studied labours in the past - it was one of the tangential studies of magic, really. The hypothesis - and it was only a hypothesis, one that could scarcely be called historically tenable - was that magic did exist, and was real, but was agonisingly rare. The Chellini hypothesis, referred to in this context as something that sounded important and impressive and didn't fill in the space between terrible paperback novels as a funny reference to an old conspiracy theory.

*Tick.*

They wrote about this sort of thing all the time - cheap little novellas, churned out en masse by publishing houses that wanted to satisfy the purchasing decisions of people who wouldn't go to a bookstore, but would buy something with a spine when it was across the register next to the lollipops designed to lure in children. Angus' pencil twisted in his grip as he felt the inner walls of himself strain against one another, once again. He knew how magic worked - how 'magic' worked, at least. The magic that people told themselves, the lies and tricks that skilled people used to convince people of the most impossible ideas. He, of all people, had to know. And yet, despite it all, here he was, in this office, with the ticking, painful clock, looking to apply for this grant, with this stack of paperwork before him.

*Tick.*

Thoughts racing, the pencil gathered speed. Thin brown lines along yellow shaft shifted under his gaze, and for the briefest few seconds, Angus could distract himself by watching a tiny star forming at the center of the pencil's spin. Thank god for that - with this sort of technique he could, perhaps, stave off boredom for as much as thirteen more seconds.

The door opened, and the pencil went flying. Looking up sharply, Angus's throat dried sharply, lips parted, fingers gripping the air momentarily, as if he could grab his dignity. Lunging forwards, he grabbed the edge of the table before him, and watched the pencil bounce from fingertip to tabletop, then off to the floor, where it spun around and skidded into place next to the door - just in time to land under the foot of the newcomer.

"Oh." said the voice. "Sorry about that-" And up he looked, and saw not a man. What Angus saw before him was an arrangement; a construction, a package of pieces set together in order to *project*.

Hollywood sunglasses - Angus had no idea what kind of sunglasses hollywood sunglasses were, but he was sure they were overpriced and terrible and worn by prats - resting atop forehead to hide a receding hairline, a bright blue t-shirt upon which was scrawled an *ironic* sprawl of words, cut off at left and right, but which immediately conveyed the air of some sort of completely unbearable twat, jeans that had contrast but were frayed in all the places that said they had to be purchased in that way, and sneakers that had never once been worn doing anything that could cause the wearer to sweat.

It was hate at first sight.

Then Angus blinked, and realised it wasn't.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he wanted to blurt out, but instead what came out was, "Whu-whaht?"

"Hey there, kid," said the Douche, swaggering in and throwing himself into one of the seats in the prefabricated high school setting. No presentation hit the desk; no research, no elaborate piece talking about the possibility of very, very realistically finding *real* magic in a world that otherwise seemed to be sodden with mundanity, a skeptical but nonetheless thorough approach that wanted to settle the Chellini hypothesis with some air of rigor and finality. No. Nothing. Just his hand. Then - wait! No! The Douche reached into his jacket, pulled out an ostentatiously fancy iPod, without a case to keep it safe and protect it from scratches, showing a few nicks and scratches around the edges, before tossing it, face-down onto the desk. "Trevor Spector. You're?"

*I know who you are! I know what sort of dreadful sensationalist supernatural spectral tat you peddle on a channel that supposedly was dedicated to learning and history and I just want to pull your hair out from the inside you completely disingenuous douche.* leapt through Angus' mind. Instead, he managed, "Ang-gus," before being sharply cut off.

"Alright, Gus, great;" Trevor said, leaning forwards, looking at the stacks of paper but not *at* them. "Just so you know, this grant is a big deal. A million dollars dedicated to this kind of research? We've got three ghost hunt locations set up already, three big deals, three very, very big deals!" He said, waving a finger. Not once did his eyes settle *on* Angus' - they instead hovered somewhere near his forehead and ear, looking keenly at the body of Angus, but never at *Angus*. "You see," and then Angus had a hard time hearing more words.

*Trevor Spector. Birth name probably Trevor Balls or something like that. What an utter stain, a sensationalist 'ghost hunter' with his own TV program, making low-budget low-information tat full of jump scares, trying to parley his own gullibility into something financially meaningful. Oh, I know who you are. I know what you do, and I know that right now, I have the science of the Chellini hypothesis, I have several graded papers, I have peer review and research into the historical curiosities and untestable events, I have years as a magician's assistant and engineer under my belt, and this grant to work out whether or not this phenomenon is real is mine. You can't out-style and out-slick me here, you sanctimonious f-*

The door opened again, and the last of Angus' pencil gave its final squeak. Trevor looked up at the newcomer - and suddenly, that demeanour shifted. No longer two strangers competing for

something - *or a wannabe alpha male trying to smack down his opposition with his own hollywood stented dick*, Angus figured - Trevor shifted gears entirely.

"Why, Mr Errenthorpe," he said, oil slithering out of his every word. *So phony. So artificial. There's no way in hell this artificial prick is going to get any traction on this grant. This is an issue that needs to be treated seriously.* Angus permitted himself just the faintest smirk.

This was going to be easy.

\*

Tick.

Tick.

*Tock.*

Hm. Seems that that sound was Angus' watch, not the clock on the wall. Somehow, from out in the When you hated someone, everything they did became offensive. Whether it was the manner of dress, or the manner of communication, or even innocent things like a pair of sunglasses purchased from a roadside cafe to keep the glare out of one's eyes.

Papers fluttering under his arm, Angus looked up and down the street. Blowing his hair out of his eyes, he reflected on just how his research would be further impeded by something as vast as a million dollars. The grant, really, wasn't going to be any good - it'd be better to go home, and to once again review his work. After all - the meeting had been interrupted by the news report of a school exploding, swarmed all over with glowing green insects that ate brickwork.

Angus looked down at his paperwork. What he needed, right now, was to push the feelings of resentment he'd had rising in his chest since Trevor entered the room, and had only blossomed further when he'd grabbed the aging millionaire by his wrist, dragging him outwards with the words, "Quickly, to my van - we have to catch this."

It hurt, to be a midpoint in someone else's story. But hey, Angus could console himself... research was probably about to get *easier*...

## Chapter Five

*"Saul has slain his thousands, but David his tens of thousands."*

The women had chanted those words in these very streets. David was anointed but short years ago, and crowned king only very recently, and yet the legend had already started to swell. Saul had been a good king to start, a decent king then, and finally an ex-king. David... Hah. King David. Hard to forget the image of the man who was king, stripping naked and dancing in rapturous ecstasy towards the face of the Ark of the Covenant. Yet, the people spoke of him as having slain *tens of thousands*. Saul did not slay thousands, Saul led *armies* that slew thousands... led armies that *refused* to slay thousands. David... hah. Like a skein of wool across the racks, the stories of David were growing so tangled and filthy, fetid and ruined. Nobody seemed to know any of the truth of David, but they were so very certain as to what the truth was. Saul was no more, and so now, there was *David*. David, David, David, the man whose name was chanted and sung. The man who had slain a lion. Slain a bear. Slain a *giant*!

Somewhere, that word 'King' created a ghost around a man. Samuel had been right, in a way - he could walk out to the edge of nowhere, find a nobody, and *make* him into a king, with the right assistance. Had David died somewhere between Jesse's flocks and Jerusalem's throne, it would have just been time to go anoint someone else, there'd be a chance to salvage it in the ruins. That's where men like him came in. Men like him, and Avishai, and Elhanan.

...Yahweh, Elhanan. Somewhere in that man was tangled up another lambskin, hiding a core of hate. Whatever it was, Elhanan had made his hatred a weapon. Something had told him he was wrong, that he would never amount to anything, that nothing he did would matter... and Elhanan had taken that truth in his hands and bled on it.

Elhanan was the smallest giant in the world. Barely three and a half cubits tall, wielding a sword fully his own height, it was that sword that had bit the shoulder of Goliath, that monster of a man. Reared on red meat from his youth, the greatest soldier of a god of prosperity, Goliath was a testament to what war men could make with coinage. Towering over Elhanan, he'd swung that spear - blades on one side like a monster's scythe - and the sight of it...

When he'd seen it, he'd been running down a hill, scree and dust flying under his feet as he sought to meet and help his friend. Far out of Goliath's grip, *he'd* hesitated. In the blade's reach, though, Elhanan had not. No - he'd stepped *into* the weapon's arc, ducking under, turning as he did, swinging the first swing of his sword up into the beast of Gath's thigh. That had been the dawn of death for Goliath... when he had faced down a man almost half his height.

Bloodied and battered, Elhanan had claimed the last of Goliath's blood, his own hair and blood matted in those desert-burnt eyes. Elhanan stood over the form of the giant and brought his blade down on his neck. And then again... and again... and again.

It takes a lot of work to knock a man's head off. Even a dead man's.

Elhanan stood in the bloody carnage, that head held by its hair against the sand in one hand, and spat upon the gates of Gath. Whatever demons lay inside Elhanan weren't quieted that day - because he went on to slay the champion sent to recover Goliath's body - and the two more that

came after him. No, with no food and only a lambskin of water, Elhanan had sat in the desert, watching the body of Goliath until the crows came to claim it, leaving with the head. Gath thought him crazy.

Now?

Hah, now they say that King David slew Goliath. Years ago. When he was a *child*. And King David said to his friend, his brother, the man who had brought him the monstrous, misshapen skull of Gath, *Now bring me his brother*.

Elhanan had done it, too.

Whatever roared within Elhanan's chest, it did not still for mere fame.

A wooden door closed below him, and sitting in the lee of a window, he rested the handle of his wooden implement under his chin. Thoughts of then and what had been done slid further away. Elhanan was a good friend, and a great ally. His story was fast becoming another man's myth, but Elhanan did not care. He should not let it bother him. Besides - these buildings did not get so many travellers in these days. It would be a waste to let an opportunity slip past him.

The wide highway stretched by the buildings, and the buildings on the aft. A set of lines strung over between them held ropes, on which were hung banners and flags, signals to the travellers. Ropes were stout and tight, anchored into the clay brick hard, which gave them strength to hold the large banners and strength enough to even hold a man's weight. The wooden ring over his head gave a dull squeak, showing a shift in the wind.

Shaking his head, he braced his hand, held the wooden shaft in his hand, and lifted - pulling himself off the sill of the window. One foot, leather strips holding the flesh tight, hooked onto the line... and he moved. It would not be an Israelite who walked this road. No - they knew the secrets of the ways, now. This was his own little sliver of myth and history - able to watch it in his own time. He would not be Saul, whose greatest deed was his greatest sin.

There wasn't a word for what Saul had been told to do. The old priest and prophet had been oh-so-hell-bent on it... never really understood why. A veteran of many things, he'd been there at the capture - young and fresh faced, back then - and he'd been there when the time had come for that order. That ... *insane* order. There were strange things that lived in the pit of a man's stomach, and whatever lived inside Samuel had come out in rare form that day.

*"Now go and smite Amalek, and utterly destroy all that they have, and spare them not; but slay both man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass."*

Everything.

*Everything.*

When Samuel had given that order, before the King, and before the arrayed host of his elite soldiers, the only thought in his head had been *"Had he ever even seen a fight?"* An old, silvered man, coiffured about with the elegancies of the temple, Samuel had seen battlefields after wars, had offered offerings before wars, yet not once in all his time hearing tales about the man had anyone

mentioned Samuel taking a blade and walking into a war. The stink of it, the fire, the looting, the pillage, the young stupid soldiers wasting time on rape, the old and lazy soldiers wasting their time on more rape - to *kill a whole city* took time, it took will... will that in his heart of hearts, he was sure Samuel did not have.

Saul had done what a good general would do. He gave quarter to the Kenites. He gave the order at the start of the day, Samuel's voice fresh in his ears, as to the slaying of the Amalekites. Yet in the going down of the sun, with the cries of dead infants in his ears, the plaintive wails of the children of Amalek's sands all around him, Saul had balked. Saul had shown mercy. Saul had stopped himself from being the hand that committed the murder for which they were was no name. The normal response - round up the best, let the least go, leave something for there to be cleansed, something to grow anew, to teach the lesson to the people who had been slain of the people's strengths - was what Saul had chosen. A reasonable desolation. There would be no more Kingdom of Amalek, Saul had said, as they road with the bound king Agag back to Jerusalem. There would be Amalekites, but the god of Israel had broken the back of that nation that day.

Samuel had not been pleased. Samuel had demanded not a broken back, but a bloody, ruined corpse. Samuel had demanded, claiming it the will of Israel's god, *everything*. Not just men, but boys. Not just women, but mothers and widows. Not just *children* but **the newborn**. In his mind, he could almost see the mercy there - a newborn raised in the ruins of Amalek's lands would have died of starvation. The blade was a mercy. Yet that wasn't what Samuel had called it. Samuel had called it the Will of The LORD.

Samuel had spat in the face of the king. The Levite stood before the Benjamite, and showed that though the old man had not the will to fight a war, he had will enough to kill. The prophet did not want the King to imagine that the word of the LORD did not flow from his mouth, no. That was the great fear he had, that he could use against the kings of Israel, both now and future. Break the will of the yearling and the horse will not forget. The old Prophet, the man of Ephraim, the son of the tribe of Levi, the *voice of God* had taken a bound, imprisoned, helpless king of nothing, and brought Saul's sword down on his arm... and his neck... and his leg, and his other leg... again, and again, and again.

Elhanan had been a small man hacking up a big body. Samuel was a very small man, hacking up a man who was almost nothing, in the presence of his King. The will to hold power was Samuel's - and so Samuel had held it. Samuel chose the next king, even as Saul grew distant, as Saul went about the business of running the country, protecting the borders, ensuring the wars and building the highways. The business that nobody would remember, now - remembering only the mad fool that had been his ghost-hunting end.

Strange, really, how Saul's fall had come. The falling out had been private, but the way the priests had culled his authority out from underneath him, that had been public. The almost orchestrated way in which Samuel, high priest, had made public Saul's failure.

Saul's failure.

He'd chosen to show some temporary mercy. To *not* burn away the last that remained of the Amalekites. To not let a centuries old grudge from a story that was just as much myth as any of the others. That same sense of mercy had spared Anath, after all. Anath - the father that was not.

He could remember, at twelve years old, blood down his thighs, listening to his father's words. The care with which they were chosen. "I gave you to your mother, boy, but I am not your father. I will die and the sand will have me, but you, son of this nation of kings, son of this Israelite woman, are a son of a prophesied people. Speak the tongue of Abraham, learn the ways of Caanan, and slay the foes of Yahweh."

It had hurt. Perhaps that had been why he'd never had it in him, even when he slew soldiers, to rape their women. Everyone *else* did it. Well, everyone he knew but Elhanan, but the demons inside him seemed to sing during a pillage. The ritual had been painful and bloody and he hadn't made it easy on his father. His father hadn't made it easy on him either - the tradition was a small, sharp stone, and a small sharp stone it would be. Even if it was late, best to be part of the covenant than not. It was in this way that he had learned. This person he had become... the man who had seen truths and lies, seen as histories became myth, and seen as claims in the name of God had been made for political power.

The leather on his feet gave a creak, timed with the wind, flexing his feet to keep them supple. In his hand, the wood folded back upon itself with a softness. None of the chain links touched more than another link - pieces of wood to give it quiet, pieces of chain to give it flexibility. Beneath him, two Philistines, flanked on all sides by guards. Probably Kenites, given the way they needed coin. The Philistine armour was blatant - its proud red feathering was good for desert combat. Magistrates, perhaps?

The wind slid across the plains, and he slid with it to the next set of ropes, keeping above the men. So close together, he could leap from rope to rope, and if he timed it with a gust of wind, nobody would notice the dip in the flags. Clad in blue and black, up against the night sky, even if these men looked up, they would not see him. Lights set down by the sides of the highways were his allies - in a pool of light, all darkness looks the same.

Was that how it had been to Samuel at first? Saul had been a nobody, from the least part of Benjamin. Samuel's own sons were just like their father - cunning and ratlike, keenly aware of the power they held over the people, speaking with the voice of God. Nor were they given to the useful vices. He'd met them, once - bastards to the core, they were the worst kind of beaurocrat. Some kings and princes loved blood and sex, and those were vices that were worth keeping hidden. Not these two - they were sneering and childish and revelled in reporting on others to their father as if to Yahweh himself. No, their cruelty and pettiness would have been fantastic vices for a prophet to have, but not for the prophet who ruled them. If he could trust them to it, Samuel would have just handed his power over at his death, but no.

He needed a tool, and that tool had come out of the sons of Kish. Saul had been perfect. Saul had been king when they'd met - hell, David had been his son-in-law when he met, at the wedding of Michael. Saul stood head and shoulders over most on the table, and Elhanan had murmured that he 'ruled with his voice alone.' Beautiful and powerful, Saul had the making of a proud king - but came from nowhere and nothing. A perfect pawn, in the eyes of Samuel. Too humble to decide for himself, too proud to admit ignorance. Samuel had expected, he was sure, just to whip Saul a few times and have a useful new tool for generations after.

Had Samuel been considerate enough to *die*, Saul and his sons might have been able to live out a good, sensible life. That was the great vice of it, really. Saul had been a hero who had grown old fast enough, and been strong enough, to become the villain of King David's story. His *father-in-law*. David had been honoured, had been given a daughter, had been best friends with Jonathon, had played his harp for the king's terrors, had... ugh. The whole affair had left a bad taste in his mouth. It didn't matter, anyway. David was a king, and history would show him that way. It already was forgetting Elhanan, forgetting the good that lay in the soul of Saul. It was already speaking of Samuel as a saintly prophet.

Let them rot. He would construct his own history. His own myth - a story nobody could forget. Tradition held that Samson had slain a thousand men in one instance with a jawbone of an ass; lies that he and Elhanan had spread said that Avishai had slain three hundred with his spear. Those were numbers that could swell and shrink. Those were the lies of history. Not this one.

Every life claimed, he added a ring to his weapon. It had made a long way from the far east. The long straight handle had needed replacing. The flat, metal blade had needed replacing, too. The chain links? They had worn with time. Some kills were messier than others. They had needed replacing too. Yet it was his, and it did not matter what they called it - because what mattered was that, as it rested in his hands, he had a string of six hundred rings, carved into the wood, showing the lives of Philistines he had ended. His father had given up everything to make him a part of this covenant - the people of this nation. This sacrifice would not be in vain - and so, here, in the highways of the Kingdom of Israel, he plied his trade. An old soldier, too furious to die, crafting his own myth.

A twig, a stop - one of the Philistines turned away, to the Kenites, issuing them away so the men could discuss their business. Could scarcely be more perfect. His friend turned the other way, checking the shadows behind him - and when he turned back, he had no friend to turn to. The chains in his hands pulled tight, the wooden link against the Philistine's windpipe with such force that not even a scream could push it back. A struggle - a strain - and then a sag. Not dead. Not yet. That would wait - because as the first turned, to look, to see nothing, and started to run, he swung the whole body in both hands, *throwing* it at the fleeing man.

The first body landed like a thunderclap, and he landed atop it. Hooked blade in his hand, handle in the other, the length of chain between the two pulled taut, his robes of black and his eyes of brilliant rage must have been something that even Dagon would fear. Leaning forwards, he spoke just one, simple word:

"Shamgar."

Blade bit into the man's throat, yanked back so sharp and fast as to pull fibers apart. He'd bleed to death on the sand - and the blade then pitched into the back of his friend's skull. Unconscious man spasmed, then became a dead man. Yanking steel from bone, he stopped, turned, and looked with a grin behind his scarf at the running Kenites, coming towards him.

The mantra repeated itself, in his mind, as he raised his exotic weapon, ready to repel then run: *Let them sing the songs they wish to sing, let them tell themselves the deeds of their king; the Philistine's fear is this halfblood's fame, and come gehenna's foul scent **they will know my name.***

## Chapter Six

The truth of magic is not ancient words or particular runes. The Chellini hypothesis talks about magic's inception, its eventual appearance in a reality of large numbers. The truth of magic, in the ages of Sand, is that of patterns. Things that happen happen again. Certain shapes - shapes of energy, mostly - pull the energy of the magic in, dictate a new pattern, and reshape the magic so it flows forth anew. To manipulate energy is easy - and thus, most of the magic that people learn early is to throw lightning and fire, to release energy that flows uncontrolled and wild. Given the nature of people, more than the nature of magic, this is almost all the magic that needs to be discovered before the people, discovered, are never in a position to be discovered again. Ashes rarely hold interesting patterns.

That is not all that magic can do.

Sometimes, magic impresses itself on the universe, in a time and in a place, and hangs there. Actions that are committed in a place, wielding magic potent, can leave the impression of what was done, beckoning more energy to flow back into that pattern. The swirl and eddy of time and magic hold therefore, the memories in places, waiting for another set of actors to flow into their place, to take on the pattern. When magic was thin and wan in the world, there was not enough to activate these circuits, to fill these shapes; but as the icebergs of magic start to crack and shake, when the air becomes thick with it, these memories start to reach out, seeking places to set their patterns back in motion.

\*

*We were supposed to be perfect.*

*We were supposed to be perfectly loyal, loyal to the crown, loyal to the king. We were supposed to follow the words of a king who wielded in one hand the power of the sun, and in whose other, the chill of the moon.*

*Armour of darkest blue, we were told we were perfect. Kings came and kings went; the old empire turned from hand to hand, with power being taken by one and another. The Perfect fell with the king. The Perfect stood by the king. The Perfect were spread thick across the ground, in pieces, the inevitable loss of every revolution, every squabble for the kingship.*

*To rise out of the waves, to fight back the boundaries of the Older Ones, these were the ways we showed ourselves. The ways we distinguished ourselves from our fellow warriors, with club and shaft and blade and sling. It was what I did. It was what I had become - a beast of the battlefield, silent and stoic in the court of the king. The soft sounds of court, the chattering and gossiping, the clatter of secret messages rattling between the back reaches. Codes and plans and projects.*

*The sun and moon, we told ourselves, had a boon and a bane. The bane of the sun was rage, the inexorable force that dried up life and left its scoring marks upon the body. The bane of the moon was the insanity, the chasing of lights.*

*We were meant to be perfect.*

*We were the king's own life, ready to die with the king. The king - my king - was the last king I knew. My loyalty was to be absolute, and I was to be perfect. In the past, I wonder how other Perfects had dealt with their kings, the kings of the Sun's Bane, or the kings of the Moon's Bane. I wondered about those Perfects who had served kings who had known only the blessings of the Sun and the Moon.*

*I hoped I was the only Perfect who had to crawl under the hateful eye of a king with both the Sun's bane, and the Moon's. I hoped that it was only me, belly to the ground, whose loyalty was demanded, whose life was to be forfeit, and whose pride was too great as to raise my gaze. I hoped.*

*When the revolution came, they knew I was too strong. They knew that they could not prevail over me. The king had bled the domain, its dry and wet places, its dangerous depths and its safe peaks, and there were no more strong warriors, with stout armour and the will to fight, to stand against me - well fed, well-trained, the Perfect of the king. They did it, at the time, I think, to show me the virtue of their cause. They showed me that when the kingdom fell, it would be by my will. I could stand against them, fight my finest, kill them all and let the last of the bane of Sun and Moon lay waste to whatever was left for the king's madness. Or I could lower my arms, feign weakness, let myself die, and in so doing, let the kingdom live.*

*I chose a third channel. I rose up, reached out - and with a stunned king before me, closed my grip around his throat. The power of the sun and the moon burnt themselves into my eyes, of course - as was inevitable - and I felt my own lifeblood seeping out.*

*The revolution came, and with it came my death. Perhaps another would dye their armour blue, in the future. Yet, with the light of the sun and moon burning my eyes, feeling my last lifeblood spreading like a cloud around me, I reflected.*

*We were supposed to be perfect.*

*I died with my king.*

\*

"Hm?" Enk asked, blinking, looking up.

"I said, your mom wants us to go get something for dinner, and there's fish and chips at that English place down the street. You want to come with?"

Enk shook himself, looking up, away from the fishtank, stepping around the kitchen bench, and falling into step alongside his cousin. "Okay. Sorry, just... my mind was a million miles away."

\*

Men called the continent Africa. In the midst of a jungle people thought fit to name The Congo, then called a rainforest instead, there was part of what could be considered a country. The country, to call it that, had had two dozen names in twice as many years, almost all of which were just different ways of saying 'mine.' Out in the spiralling edges of where men could consider themselves in control, where they built big hard walls and tight windows, spread across with netting and filled with light from tubes, sat a squat little building, barely more than five paces by two, with one room. Some of the men who had ordered the building made had called the building, with its rig of steel up the side

and its short, squat tower designed to handle the winds Onderstation Twaalf. Some other men had called it substasie 12, and another set of men had called it a thing that could not be written down, because their language had not yet learned to sit still on paper.

It was an old building, and time had been unkind to many parts of it. When last people had lived in it, they had managed the wire and the mesh; they had stamped down the grasses that grew near the door, they had slept on the bunks and noticed when the mosquitos were getting in. Whatever reason they had had for leaving, it had been in a hurry; glass chambers remained in the walls and ceiling, an old radio sat unattended on the desk, coiled cable tethering the tower outside to the building. Ports sat around the building's edges, prepared to be connected to a generator, capable of turning gasoline into power. When the men had left - and make no mistake, in that time and in that place, they were men, because women might go getting *periods* on things and weren't as capable as white European men, especially at the important task of institutionalised racist oppression - had taken the generator with them.

From time to time, in the storms, the wind picked up. The trees around the tower leant in the wind, but the cross-stitch pattern of metal didn't; and in these moments, ever so briefly, that tower was the tallest thing that could stand, in the rain and howling wind. A dubious honour, because it also meant in those gusting moments, the wet tower was the thing most likely to be struck by lightning.

In those instants, for a few seconds, power charged down the lines, jumped through frayed points and into the many discarded pieces. Blue lightning coursed through old wires and circuits, and for a few glorious seconds, bulbs were lit, the radio blared, and a single rattling whirr suggested that the old, dilapidated fan remembered its futile duty to try and cool air that started on the unpleasant side of heat exhaustion. For just an instant, a discarded relic of an old world was gifted power, and acted as if nothing had ever changed. The devices did not need intention. They just needed power.

\*

Hands in his pockets, *Hank* hopped from foot to foot while watching the rotating hot dogs in the window. Nothing about this place smelled good; it was hot food, it was cheap food, and when you were twenty meters away from the building, with nothing but snow in the air around you, that off-brown chemical scent turned through profane alchemy into cholesterol so potent the brain recognised the onset of future diseases and accepted the devil's bargain. Delicious, hot, salty and sour, fries and fish and battered sticks of maybe-fish and pressed something. Inside, Jenn paid, then darted outside again, away from the roof-peeling cloud of boiling oil vapour.

"Okay..." she said, as they stood outside on the sidewalk.

"Okay?" he asked, looking up at his cousin.

"... You're in a bad mood."

"Huh?"

"Be honest with me here, Enk."

"Hank."

"Enk."

"Hank."

"... Did you ever wonder why your mom called you that? why my dad called me Innogen? Why we're... not normal?"

"We *are* normal."

"Enk, I can throw lightning bolts. *We aren't normal.*"

And there it was. "What do you mean we?"

A dread pause crept in the air between them. Silent and seething, Enk looked back down to his shoes, kicking them in under the waft of snow.

"Your mother," Innogen began.

"My mum is..." and there. That was when he ran out of things to say. *Think ahead, Enk. **Hank! Dammit!***

"Your mother's been talking about this all day. She says that something's massively increased the amount of magic that exists - that everything we've been taught, everything she heard of as myth is real, now, and... Enk, it's like-"

"Hank."

"- we've just had an industrial revolution drop in on our heads."

"Yeah, but, you said our. You said we. *You can do this. I...*" *Oh god. How long did that pause take? Has it been an hour? Ten hours? Oh heck, finish the sentence, Hank, somehow find a way to finish the damn sentence...* "... can't." Enk finally exhaled.

And then, damn her, Innogen slung her arm around his shoulder, pulling him in close, hugging him tight, a one-sided bro-hug. "Enk, we've been doing the same stuff since we were kids. I seriously cannot think of a single piece of ritual I have done that you haven't done. The only thing that's ever been different was yesterday, when I *lit a match*."

"But you've always believed it." Enk murmured. "You've *always* talked about it like it matters, like it's not just something crazy your mum makes you do. It's... it's..."

And Innogen laughed. *Oh god, don't laugh, don't make this something easy. Don't make me care about it like that...*

"Enk... it's always been something crazy mum makes me do. Don't you remember? I lit a match and mum and dad peed themselves, and talk about how I might be able to do it again next year. It's *crazy* to set fires with your mind. How many problems do, I mean, c'mon!" she laughed again, bumping her head against his. "Enk,"

"Hank."

"Enk. Do not do that. Do not accept that. You are **not ordinary**, Enk. You're not Hank Billy from Ontario whose mum works in a Call Centre. You know how to swim and fish and spit and sing and your mum's a witch who can do magic." She brushed her hand through his hair, letting the boring brown locks bob in her hand. "And you're a witch's son. So stop trying to be someone else."

\*

Most magical practice isn't about achieving anything at all. To throw energy around, to create force, that's the sort of thing that is rare and unnecessary. Magic is about patterns, and practice is about creating those patterns in the mind. How well the lessons stick, how well the patterns repeat, that's the trick to it. A boy could spend a lifetime repeating the mental routine, finding himself falling into it oh so easily, and never once see any effect, in the same way the bulbs and radio sit still and fallow, their circuits pointless and still.

Until the moment of *power*.

The ocean was full of eyes - it always was. The drifting, green shape that swelled up underneath the surface and belled upwards, its three inhuman faces pointing outwards did not look, to any of those eyes, like anything that mattered. To those eyes, there was nothing that mattered that did not move like fish, or falling food. A large green shape, breaching the surface, its triune faces sloughing sand and soil from the very depth of the ocean itself turned, just once, runes upon its surface glittering bright with green. Magic had returned. Lightning had struck.

What state was the world in, when last magic had been lost?

Three perfectly circular mouths, cut in expressions of dull surprise, didn't move, didn't draw breath, but spoke just the same. A single, resonating sound that went unheard by all but those to whom the patterns fell.

\*

Innogen dropped to a knee, her hands clapped to her ears. A scream unheard fell past her lips. Eyes spilling with blue lightning, she turned to look down the street, drawing in a single ragged breath that echoed of thunder, one hand flailing next to her, to catch Enk's side. To grab his arm. To steady herself.

And the sound stopped.

Or rather - the *pain* stopped. Enk looked down, his head tilted to the side, at his cousin, his expression worried: "Innogen? Are you okay?"

\*

Angus sat, despondent, in the corner booth of the cheerful little red-and-white diner, watching the clock's hand a second time in one day. The afternoon had been full of strange news. There had been a school bombing. There had been an outburst of individuals claiming magical powers. A christian cult in the middle of Utah had claimed to be the White Horse in many forms. Palestine, oh god, Palestine. For the first time since they had been called into existence, the twenty-four hour news coverage channels actually had a reason to report constantly. This wasn't 1952, when a single

superpower had gained something they'd been striving to gain for months - in one single day, every single nation had suddenly had 'magic' appear - and appear out of nowhere.

Watching the news flick from place to place, it varied. From a human interest approach, with families finding old devices in their homes being magical, to the more tragic, where buildings were collapsing, oppressive and old nations were suddenly and sharply aways in blood. What stood out to Angus, more than anything else, were the stories of the scientific, where glowing scientists beamed to the cameras that for whatever reason, the new greatest boundary of discovery had finally been thrown open.

"You see, science has had a lot of the most... the most simple groundwork already done," said one bearded man, eyes positively alight. "We thought that there were all these things we couldn't do, because we were sure how the rules worked. We've learned, today, that... that the rules are so different, there was this whole mansion of rules we never knew about. Imagine if you were a, a, an explorer, and suddenly overnight, a new continent appeared in the Pacific ocean to be explored."

Strange.

Angus had never expected anything like this. The last person to give a damn about the Chellini hypothesis, he'd always considered his life a deliberately fruitless endeavour. There was a certain rote boringness to his life. Education, part time job, better part time job, more education, and eventually, a full time job while pursuing something like education. In all of that time, he'd never once felt like he mattered, like any of the study he was doing was important. In the great clockwork of modern society, Angus was an ornamental wooden bird, unconnected to anything else. When he was twenty, it had bothered him. When he was twenty-five, he had fought against it. When he turned thirty, he had let his shoulders finally slump down into the pathetic slouch they were always destined to be, and embraced the all-encompassing nature of *bugger-allness*. The only things that had ever animated his soul had been irrelevant things - the angels on the head of a pin, the circular room's corners, the slightly interesting point where farenheit and celsius overlapped. With that in mind, and lacking art, lacking passion, lacking anger, Angus had simply become the spackle of academia.

Hand nervously turning the coffee cup, the screen showing the remnants of a Tibetan monastery visible in fly-overs. Golden cracks in the mountainside cut burning lights through the snow, while the smoke that spiralled up in the sky scintillated with a million colours, like the skin of oil on the surface of water. People were gathered around, bent in prayer to the invisible flames that transformed the wood from brown to grey, crumbled ash.

Angus' day job required him to, technically, do something glamorous. He interacted with magicians, stage presenters working on a different continent. Most of the time, he drew diagrams and outlined plans, and sent them on. Jonathan Creek at least had been exceptionally good at his job to justify his boring demeanour. Angus was just exceptionally boring as well as basically competent. People paid him for being reliable, not for being artistically talented. It wasn't so bad - it dissuaded him from straying too far from his field of secondary study, the supernatural. Ghost hunting and witch-busting and its ilk always reduced in Angus' mind to the conflict between the two phrases, stuck in his mind like briars, both gleaned during that education.

*In any sufficiently random universe, microcosmically small events are guaranteed to happen even if unobserved.*

*All science is either physics or stamp collecting.*

Angus turned his coffee to the other hand. On the screen, a heartwarming story about a young girl who flew into a tree to rescue a kitten, landed, and was now able to talk to flowers. The interviewer desperate that nothing strange was going on, hoping to offer some reassurance to those, 'back in the studio' who weren't out in the world at large where *terrifying things were going on*.

The Chellini hypothesis and the words of Ernest Rutherford. The Chellini hypothesis was a desperate, hail-mary pass from the mind of a not-quite academic, trying to justify his own pursuits, and receive all the grants and exceptional nonsense. In some ways, the Chellini hypothesis stood as an example of what you *could* con a departmental organisation out of when you had sufficient knowledge of beaurocracy. More than once, Angus had imagined that maybe, the whole hypothesis was a way to be granted money which could be spent on gin and cheap bread. Lords knows they'd stunk of it when he'd picked up the original texts.

What would happen if magic was real, and something had kept it from being observed? That magic was not *impossible*, but instead *massively rare*? Then the question became observing those rare events, and cataloguing them. It had been four years of study, travelling by public transport, to every single supernatural 'event' he could find. Angus had become quite a good sleuth at this - a wonderful little burster of miracles. He learned about paredolia, he learned about confirmation bias, and every time he arrived with his notebook in hand and his scientific attitude, he had left behind him annoyed and irritated people who either thought him an idiot, or were saddened that he'd proven their miracle wrong. Time to time, Angus worried if that was how the people who left the magic shows would feel if they ever knew how it worked. Just wires and plants, most of the time...

Turning his coffee back to the other hand, Angus looked away from the screen, down at the coffee. Syria. Syria was an old country. There was an odd correlation, in his mind. America, Canada, and Australia barely appeared in the news - mostly boring little suburban towns, with tiny, mundane differences in reality. A ten year old who carried a kitten out of a tree. They weren't showing up in the news - but in Iran, Afghanistan, Palestine, Egypt - there was a clear problem. A wall around the West Bank, created out of shimmering light that. Some soldiers had shot the wall, which had only echoed with a word, a sound. Those soldiers now lay in hospital beds, eyes coloured completely black, repeating the word over, and over again... and the doctors who heard it reported headaches and nausea.

Angus looked at his notebook. At the stack of papers that represented his presentation on the Chellini hypothesis. At the coffee. Just like that, the decision was made. He knew it. He realised what he was dealing with, what he had to do.

Draining his coffee, Angus stood, turned, and bolted out the door. Behind him, a stack of books and paperwork lay, unattended, unexamined. The Chellini hypothesis sat uncontained and was, eventually, picked up by a waitress with better things to do than examine rubbish on tables, and thrown out the back, into the trash, where it served to make a hobo slightly less uncomfortable. Words, words, words, spilling over the man's form while he slept - their meaning forgotten, their

pattern broken. Angus didn't care - he was on the move. He'd seen it, a pattern, seen something that could finally separate the animating spirit of his body from its unending physical lethargy. Maybe he was seeing something nobody else was - maybe he had the insight necessary into just what was going wrong. Either way, he couldn't just sit there. Angus stood, and Angus ran - Angus left.

At the same time, Angus did not.

He sat, looking at his coffee, his notebook, and drained the cup. Flipping open his notebook and settling into the bench seat, and sighed. Nothing about him mattered. Nothing about him had ever mattered. He had never changed anything, and all he'd done with his life was destroy people's miracles, while trying to find just one, legitimate miracle. Raising the cup in his hand, he looked across the dull, grey diner, to the dull waitress, waving the beige cup in his hand. "Excuse me?" Even as he said it, he turned down to look at the paperwork again. It was in here. It had to be in here - four years wasn't going to vanish down the drain for no purpose.

## Chapter Seven

They had called him many things. The men of his tribe called him chieftain, the women called him lord. They called him the Lion of Monoah, Those he had conquered called him The Son of the Sun, and knew better than to look upon him, for he would tear out their eyes, and leave them as slaves even unto their own people.

He was tall, and he was strong, and his parents, in their bonds, had told of the prophecy that had brought with him. They spoke of an angel of the lord who had burned their sacrifices and told them that they would carry a piece of the sun in their blood. They spoke of these things, from within a chamber of wooden bars, their son having claimed the land around them. The Judge of Israel, the mighty conqueror, the vanquisher of the Philistines. And the Amalekites. And the Hitties, and the Jebusites, and the Jezereelites, and the Danites, and the Korhemmites, and every other tribe large enough to have a name.

He roamed the land as a man of a gang, heading up an army that seemed to be as much about watching him in his terrifying displays as they were about helping him fight. More often than anything, they formed a ring around others, to keep them from fleeing, and waited until their prince and monster killed everyone who dared come close. You fought your way out of their circle, or you fought the beast, and died.

This was the creature into whose life Delilah married.

Being the second wife of a general and a monster was a dangerous proposition, even moreso when he seemed to have no idea of what a wife was actually *for*. Of course, he had been told many things, euphemistically, but she knew ignorance when it walked into her tent. Their wedding night had been quiet and tense, with her sleeping on the ground underneath his shadow, while he, exhausted with his revels and steeped deep in Caananite wine, fell face-first into the pillows and simply snored. Bare skin but for that glorious mane of hair, twined about with yellow strands of hair taken from the body of a lion, he slumbered, with no interest in the pleasures of a woman.

When she had been given by her parents to the Lion of Monoah, it had been at the behest of a mother terrified of her own life and a father certain that he could barter to his advantage. A wise move – while his territory was expanding, his patience was not, and he had killed many of their neighbours that owned land. Giving Delilah to him had been a wisdom and a curse in the one gesture.

Make no mistake, she was given. Even in the nights in the tents, while the Sun And Shield strode the battlefields, sending his men home and charging through ranks of foes to beat them with bones, she railed against that gift. Stone knives in the servants' areas were hers as well, even if she wasn't allowed to touch them. She was not to talk to her husband except when he was at rest, and she was not to leave the areas marked by her tents. In essence, Delilah had stopped being owned by her father, and moved on to being owned by a madman.

Strange to her that a man so primal had so little interest in her body, as she had originally feared. But as the weeks of the marriage wended on, and her nights grew longer, she began to feel safe, and comfortable in her silent place on the floor. It was a hard life, but every night she saw him fall face-

down on the cushions with the heat of the desert on him and the blood of others on his hands, and smile as she realised that an ugly duty she had always feared would not fall upon her.

In this safety, Delilah grew bold.

The question that started it all had been innocuous-sounding, but it had been structured with so much care that it was wielded with more grace than if she had taken up one of the knives.

“Tell me,” she asked, leaning forwards and rubbing her hands across the musculature of his shoulder, huge swells of meat that brought to her mind the flanks of cows, “my husband. From whence does your strength come?”

He laughed into the pillow at that. Nobody asked that question of him; he was a man ten hands tall and six wife at the shoulder. He could lift a cart over his head and he could run through the desert for a day without water. He was more than everything any other man had ever been, or at least, any man he had heard of in the valley – why would he ever care to hear at all about the question of *why*?

“Perhaps,” he said, shifting underneath Delilah, raising himself up to allow her another portion of his frame to oil, “It is my piety. I am, after all, a Nazirite.”

She had seen him reach into the faces of his slaves and tear their eyes out. She had seen him burn temples, and ravage rivers. She had seen him standing in burning fields, walking through the flames, without fear or shame, and yet he thought of himself as pious.

Delilah was a woman given to observing rather than acting, a woman of poor education but a nimble mind. Not once had she ever suspected her husband of being wise – but it was not until this moment that she realised she dealt with a child. An enormous, violent, unnaturally strong child.

*Why* did not matter anymore. What mattered was *what he believed*.

And that was it. That was all it took. An admission, an insight. That night, as he steeped himself once more in his horns of wine, she slid to the servant’s quarters, and pressed a servant into a silent promise.

History would remember the servant’s actions less than Delilah’s; many would claim it was Delilah who had *cut his hair*. Delilah could not wield the blade – she had the will, but not the opportunity. She could not bring the blade to the bedroom, for she had to be in place on the ground, asleep, before her husband fell into his dreams.

The servant took the knife, raised the blade, and cut his locks, one after another. Smooth golden lion’s mane fell down out of his face and onto the bed, each braided strip tumbling down onto his face and leaving barely a whisper of a reaction across his scarred and scraped features.

The servant took his hair; but it was Delilah’s voice, spoken softly into the soil, deep and sonorous, into the ear of the sleeping giant, that told him what it meant. She spoke to him, month after month, shaping his dreams with her words, words repeated while he woke, in innocent ways, and shaped the pathways in the mountainous man’s mind.

The Son of the Sun woke up, bald, and weak. Three philistine men were there, holding his hair. What happened after that, Delilah did not know, but she was sure that it was a simple story with a bloody, unhappy end. Her husband had been an idiot, but she had not – and so, with his strength gone, and his enemies coming, she fled the camp – leaving behind servants with lies and myths about silver shekels.

Let them think her a whore for a monster who had felled a great being by circumventing the rules of god. Let them think her something far less than she was – a woman who had convinced a sleeping giant that she *was* god.

Closing her hands, as she walked out into the desert, she reflected down on the soft-woven golden hair that lay in her own braids, a crown around her head. Maybe history would remember her, but she doubted it. Stories were about men and their lives, their failings and their losses. Perhaps...

... Perhaps, if she wanted to make a story about herself, she should see about convincing the world that she was a man. Perhaps a new name that spoke of golden hands and having taken Israel's judge from them.

Hm.

Bendan.

That would do, for now. And she threw her head back in the desert, and roared at the sun – which *trembled* at the strength that she had found within her. A strength that had found its first knot in a long, storied pattern.

## Chapter Eight

The drifting swells of the ocean knew not the shape in which they sat. To one drop of water, forward is as arbitrary a distinction as flamingo, and so they simply respond to the whims of gravity and other related forces. Somewhere, a very irritated lecturer explains how centrifugal isn't a word, and another points out it's as good as any other, and a mathematician mocks them both in the privacy of her skull, but the water doesn't care. The water's been in her body, in his, in his, and it has been in Napoleon's and it's been in the earliest moments from the dawning of the world. It has been part of a tar and it has been part of an ocean, and in this moment, it was part of a storm.

The thing that rose from the ocean had done so with a ponderous lack of grace, sloshing and bobbing as it breached. The water that crested off its crenellations and surfaces ran in ways that meant nothing to anyone, but meant something to the water. Energy followed patterns, and patterns pulled energy after them - and so powered turbines, which pushed air, which created the most dreadful and sonorous bellow that rang out, across the waves. The machine caught more water, as it tilted and juddered and shook on the ocean surface, taking on water, which spurred more patterns, which prompted more glowing, eerie light - and prompted another, later bellow.

What had been clear sky, but a few short minutes before it rose up was now a rolling nexus of storms and webs, crackling lightning that lit up the strange, brooding seaweed that had been transformed by these stone bellows. Slowly growing and calcifying, the strange architecture attempted to form a crackling skin on the ocean's surface, rippled and broken by the storm and noise around it.

It set out about itself a nearly circular ring of clouds, sending a near vertical river into the ocean, somehow amplified by the strange and magical influence of the device. Expanding by stages the storm sheeted down onto the empty world beneath it, the rain striking only the inhuman faces carved on the stone with their expressions beyond understanding. Eyes held wide apart, all palps arrayed about the forward mouth to create a nearly perfectly round hole, shell and tissues spongy and inflamed. The artisan whose hand? had crafted the device did not seem to mind much whether it was understood or not what was expressed - but it was *expressed very hard*.

Satellite photography could barely get a good look at it. Attempts to flyby the zone and take photographs were stymied by the weather. The only thing anyone could say, with any certainty, was that it was, yes, yelling, on some peculiar timing, and every time it did, the stars shook in their sky.

The world was changing, in one single day.

Jerusalem was gone. Not destroyed, not a crater, it was just plain missing. Jeeps riding towards the cordoned perimeter found themselves driving out the other side after only a few minutes of driving, like the whole of the city had been rolled up and tucked away. Political analysts were already making silent, grim wagers on the bodycounts of a million people hidden from everything else. Would there be anything to clean up when it came back? Would there be an era of understanding?

Would it ever come back?

The world was so full of magic right now that the patterns didn't have to be exact. People were filling with it, and some weren't handling it well. Some people felt the energy thrum in their minds, and the

banks of the Ganges were littered with the bodies of people who, hearing the echo, had moved as it had bid them, and so sent on the echo to the one next to them, and sent the echo on to the one next to them, to them, to them, to them, until the dance was complete and the body fell, prone and silent, but smiling forever.

Every day, people wished the world was a bit more magical. As with all such wishes, the problem was proportion.

In Enkudu's town, one large family, considered witches by their neighbours, 'but harmless folk, anyway' were hearing the screams. They'd lived their whole lives with a drop of magic between them, passed around like a candle in the darkness, reading one word of a great and fascinating scripture, truth revealed one generation at a time. Snow on the rooftops was sloughing off in the screams. They had learned to live with a little light - and now the sun was rising.

In Angus' town he ran from window to window, trying to shout at people, trying to find them, trying to provoke something, someone, someone - and strangely terrified as to why he could not. He bellowed in the faces of children, only to find them reacting as if to nothing at all. The police start their curfews, and a state of martial law is declared. More than one man on the news uses the phrase 'Everyone Has A Nuke,' and the world becomes that little bit more scary, that little bit more dark.

In Barbara's town, when the police come to instate the curfew, they are unsure and they are afraid as well. They do not know what it means, but they know that one girl in their town, and her family, walk tall and without fear. They know that there are messages on the wires. They know *something* is wrong... and they hold on, with both hands, to their guns and their armours, trying to reassure themselves that the world is going to make more sense, tomorrow.

In Holland's town, a school had disappeared.

\*

There are things that people think of as fundamentally human that are actually a byproduct of a trend. A shared cultural behaviour, where seeing Carl do it makes Terry more likely to do it and that makes Janey more likely to do it until suddenly, they think everyone does it and there's something weird about the people across the world who don't do it. Because hey, everyone does it - what are you, some kind of weirdo?

These ideas rattle and squirm against the insides of the ears, notions that somehow, some part of oneself is universal, is greater than oneself, and anchored to something that isn't just the cultural software of a greater collective coding project, thousands of thumbs mashing on the same key. They may well be universal to humans - but humans are the only people who can try and solve that puzzle, rendering it almost impossible to be certain. Once, there were people who were not human - but they had no humans to study, and they didn't really study. They mostly threw spears and had sex with one another.

An unchanged, unvarnished path of DNA wended its way through millenia, always different from yesterday but never so different that it wasn't the same DNA any more, and along the way, people festooned it with little signs and sigils, orders and edicts to tell one another about what it was to be

human. More than a few of them told each other that there was a part of themselves that did not exist, and was the most important part of them that existed. There were others who said that being human was about collecting four fluids in the right balance. Others still thought that humans were the clay of the earth, fleeing from the eyes of vengeful gods.

Possible, then, perhaps, was the notion that humans commonly wanted to have an answer to the question *Why*?

Certainly it was a compelling question. One of the earliest questions humans asked one another. One of the earliest ones that young humans ask their parents. *Why* is a consuming idea. One thing that is not, however, necessarily universal is the need for *simple answers*.

As magic rolled across the skies in shimmering green waves, with bright blue sparks cresting over a jade construct that blossomed from the depths of the ocean, many people looked out at the world they had, and wondered about its strangeness. Yesterday had made such sense. Today was so strange. Tomorrow would probably be stranger. And of them, some thought *I hope that this is a sign*. They thought to themselves, *Perhaps this is the works of my god, or of the enemies of my god*. *Perhaps this fits in my world view already*. *Perhaps there is nothing to be afraid of, because this is someone's fault*. They thought many things, in the hopes that they could sleep, and wake up in a world that was a little less strange.

These people did not realise that they had never not lived in a strange world.

Yet patterns pull the magic, energy flowing in ways and movements dictated by other energies, and by the motions of things. Enough people gather in one space, and focus their wills, if they find the right pattern in the shared ideas, with the right energy slipping point by point through their shared, communal circuit, they can make something happen. So small an effect, in days past, that it seemed no different to the placebo effect, but still, something. With magic wild and free, though, with energy enough to fill stadiums in the hands of children, some ideas, some satisfying, some dangerous ideas, could sluice together, and become something.

\*

It dripped off the surfaces of the ceiling, a dark blue stucco that looked like a sliver of skyline, full of bright yellow stars and strange, swirling hues of rose and purple. At first a few drops at a time, a growing flow of potent, strange scent, the odor of thick-cut bacon gone slightly moldering started to slither to the edges. Seemingly flowing as if from a higher space, but where there was no space, the diner's ceiling began to blossom with patches of the nighttime sky.

A waitress, who for mercy's sake, goes unnamed, did not look up. She went about her day, watching tables fill and empty, never seeming to notice the grey, boring man with the paperwork in the corner. She did not notice as she refilled his cup of coffee, and he did not taste it as he drank it. She did not notice the clock striking five, then six, then seven, then seven, then seven, then rhinoceros. The friers in the back crackled and hissed, viscous drops of golden amber fat floating up, into the surface of the ceiling.

Perhaps it was only a few hours. The doors did not open, but she did not recognise when that happened. She let people in and let them out, even though there were no people seeking to enter

and to leave. She did not recognise the heat or the oppressive scent that filled the room. There was so little of her left to notice anything.

The last thought she had, before the last of her was worn away by the suddenness of it all, was that it was strange how little expression was on Angus' face - and she knew his name was Angus, because he knew his name was Angus - when the stars reached down from the ceiling, spiralled into a huge spine, and plunged into the back of his head. It was almost like he had known it would happen, that there was nothing more to him than the waiting for this dreadful, dull end, whose violence somehow seemed so mundane. Violence *was* mundane, wasn't it? After all, when there were seven billion people in the world, one or two of them ending in some way or another was hardly meaningful. The whole was not diminished by it.

What once was Angus sat back in its booth, looking down at the paperwork before him, and felt his - yes, his, that was a good word, it spoke of identity and identity brought with it things like pain and fear and the end of the self and so much could be done with that - so much *was* done because of that! His... his... *his* hands clench around the pencil. He had been so grey before - but now he was black, black and blue and sparkling golden.

He raised one hand, turning the wrist to hold it over the cup, and filled it, letting the last of that red blood sluice out. Dipping his pen in the cup, smiling a smile that threatened to dislodge the top of his head, he started to write.

There was something about this whole paper that was so very, very wrong.

Sipping from his cup, What Was Angus drew a satisfied, smug breath, the top of his jagged head looking like wisps of dark smoke, spiralling up into the ceiling of the diner. The Chellini hypothesis - how *fascinating*...

\*

When she was given every reason in the world to make an excuse, avoid school, and come home, Barbara didn't. She went to school. She went to each class. She paid attention, she noted down her homework, and she prepared herself for cheerleading practice. The news had by then picked up, and more than a few parents had reacted by turning up at school, careful and nervous, to pick up their children and take them home, where things were safer. It was like there'd been a bomb threat at *every* school.

Barbara hadn't gone - why would she? She didn't feel any need to fear. It was so strange - oddly untouched by the world around her, unphased by her friends, by the practice, by the music... why did she feel insulated from it all? Wasn't she a kid just like the others? Well... whatever it was that had changed in the world today, it had changed in a way that seemed to change *around* Barbara. Sitting at her desk, in her bedroom, with her phone in front of her, and her homework arranged in leafs, she tried to reach down into herself and feel like there was something - anything - about her that felt like the girl who two days ago, was scared of the idea of being shoved over on the stairs.

**What's Up?**

... Oh yes. That. Reaching down, she picked up the phone, setting it to the side. "I'll talk to you when I'm done with my homework."

**You can't multitask?**

"I can, but I have to read you to read your responses."

**Oh.**

Half an hour later, the phone flickered again.

**Done yet?**

"No."

**Oh.**

Another half hour, Barbara rubbed her eyes and pushed her classwork to the side, shaking her head and putting her elbow on the table, her chin on her hand. "Good grief. Okay, okay, like... Who are you?"

**I still don't know.**

"What's going on in the world today?"

**I definitely don't know.**

"... is there any way you can talk to me in like, more than, like, seven words at a time?"

**Probably not.**

"This is going to be totes a pain in the ass."

**Totes.**

**The Prince Of A Thousand Eyes**

**was an archaic god-concept**

**to explain the milky way**

**as observed in the arctic circle?**

Barbara looked down at the phone again, her expression pensive, not that it mattered whether or not the phone could understand that body language. She'd heard the term many times in her life, but like other family's prayers, it stopped being words that meant anything, and become just random sound, part of a familiar sequence of words that were spoken but never heard. The few times she'd spoken to her father about it, he'd suggested that it was an ancient god of some variety... and she leant forwards, peering at the phone.

"Okay, where did you get that?"

**You can look into the past**

**by listening intently to  
the stones and looking at  
the stars.**

**Your family has spoken of  
this prince many times.  
I think I can hear some  
very old echoes.**

Barbara picked up the old Nokia phone, turning it around, and around, watching as it didn't seem to react to being manhandled. It was a very, very strange feeling. "What... else can you hear?"

Barbara squinted, leaning in, and the next few hours melted away as she read, and read, and read.

\*

The rattling of the truck carried Holland away from what was left of the school. Images of what had happened whirled back and forth, along with scents and tastes – the way that the whole school had been there. The opening of a vast eye in the sky. The shuddering of the buildings. The way each and every part of Holland's body had lifted up, as if leaping for joy, and streaked up towards the heavens. In one long, disorienting moment, Holland remembered seeing other students, friends, teachers, and yes, even some enemies whose sins had seen so petty and mundane, in hindsight drift up to the sky. Clad in their uniforms, the bright red school ties and socks seeming to flare and brightly splash against the sky.

Holland had watched with trembling fear, feeling only a small lift towards the sky. Holland had swallowed, had looked up into that dreadful gaze. It was not a human eye – not by any metric. The clouds had parted in a rusty roll, and shown at the edges, deep purple ridges of what could only be flesh. The milky surface of the eye ran through with lines of blue and black around the edges, visible from so far away that they had to be as long as lines of silver in mines. The centerpiece of the eye was golden and slitted, looking perhaps like Sauron's must have, in the eye of many children who read of its colour but not of its substance. It was an eye - it was *definitely* an eye. Vast and brooding, and watching. It had focused, it had slid around under its glossy sclera, and it had *looked*. The huge black iris had tightened and cinched down.

Holland was no child. Holland had done some study of physics, of astronomy, and even to a young mind that had a bad habit of nodding off and hiding in the back of the classroom to avoid being called upon to make a creak-voiced, nervous answer, there was something very wrong about an eye emerging from the clouds. It couldn't be that some vast dreadful thing had hovered over the earth and leant down - there was... gravity. Weather. It would affect... the clouds, maybe? Or perhaps it would ruin the whole... sun? Would it block out the sun, or something like that? Either way, to seem so vast from down on the earth, it would...

Holland gave up, for the twentieth time and just relaxed. The window made a reassuring, real, thock sound at the impact of a weary forehead, and the face beneath that forehead gave a weary, worried, smile.

Everyone had hung in the air. Some higher than others. They had been staring, staring up at the eye, but not screaming. There was no fear - it seemed like Holland's was the only set of eyes that looked *at* it, and not *into* it. Only Holland saw what it had to be, what it might be, and everyone else... saw into it. For a moment, Holland had felt empty. What did everyone else experience, in that moment? What was it like?

And then, the eye had blinked.

And when it closed, everything it looked at was gone.

The people were gone, no longer hovering in the air. The school buildings were gone. The grass was gone. A vast circle of dirt, some six inches deep, eerily uniform, but not glossily so, had met Holland when the eye's influence disappeared and gravity asserted itself. And out on the edge of the cow paddocks, shaken by the experience, a bleary Holland had started to walk.

State Emergency Services were there - minutes after Holland had left. They had had to report the disappearance of the buildings, the trees, reconstructing from photos and the school's website. They started a search, spiralling out from the site, looking for signs of survivors. Then signs of the dead. Eventually they started searching for bricks and mortar, for signs that there had been a school at all.

Nothing.

And Holland sat in the cabin of the truck, eyes bleary, shaken, surprised, being driven towards home by a farmer who had not a mean word to say in the hot summer day, who had seen kids leaving school in the past, and figured dropping one in town wouldn't hurt anything. After all, it wasn't that small a town that truants were a big deal - and on such a hot day, maybe a few blank periods were worth a sneak into town to spend time at the pool? Either way - wasn't his concern... and from his eyes, this kid needed some rest.

Holland's eyes were closed, and Holland wore a smile. Still, it hid behind it a loop, running over and over in a confused, teenage mind: *What was it?* became *What did it do?* which then asked *Why spare me?* before, *Is it because I'm...* and there it stopped. A breath, a heartbeat, and it started again.

... over and over and over again.

Magic loves patterns.

Perhaps the most dangerous thing about patterns is that once a pattern is established, in the human mind, it takes precious little for that pattern to start to reach backwards. It doesn't have to have been a pattern always, but the hints of the pattern, the beginning of the pattern, or even unrelated things that coincide with parts of the pattern, will be seen as part of the pattern. This, not surprisingly, is how many people saw miracles to happen; they pray, and it rains, and they forget the times they prayed and it did not rain, or the times it rained without their prayer. The pattern was in

their mind, and that pattern remains, it grows, and it expands. The weather. The traffic. The colour of a piece of cloth.

Something written in a newspaper.

Head against the glass, eyes closed, Holland twitched awake. Not uncommon – sometimes it was hard to sleep at night. Naps throughout the day made up the difference, somewhat. Still, natural paranoia – that lurking guilt that spoke of being discovered doing something, anything, or maybe just the strange fear of being caught for being – had been a constant companion, and it was that hand that reached into Holland's mind and punched through the soft fog of rest. A faint ping echoed on the edge of hearing – and the teenager turned to look at the driver.

"Um," Holland began, "Um, what was that?"

"What was what, mate?" asked the driver. He'd done this before. Usually, it was truancy that the kids were interested in. The story was inevitably nonsense, but he didn't mind – he'd wagged plenty of school in his time, and it hadn't hurt him. "You'll have to speak up!" And a huge, work-callused hand, still covered in busted filth from the farm, thumped the dashboard. "Hard to hear you over this!"

"No, I mean, that little sound?"

"Can't hear much in the way of little sounds in here," he said, laughing, and leaning forwards. It was true – the truck was one of the older models, a rattling workbox that had been once a shiny and pristine ute, gloriously orange in the tasteless eighties when it had been built – probably in Japan – and was now a general, faded brown. "You okay? We'll be in town in a few minutes."

"No, I mean," and the sound rang out again, louder this time. "What is that?"

The truck rattled on the rough road and Holland sat up straighter, leaning to the side, looking at the window. The winch for the window had been broken off years ago – now just a bare screw, with a pair of pliers sitting on the dash that almost seemed to ask 'Well?' – and so, even as another pinging noise, this time louder echoed in both the passenger's ears. Then another, and this time it wasn't a ping, it was a chime, and it was *loud*.

"What the fu?" asked the driver, and in that one moment, Holland realised that he had no name. Oh, he'd given a name, he'd had some sort of rambling introduction, but he'd spoken knowing that Holland didn't much care. Holland had no reason to care, after all – as far as he was concerned, speaking to Holland was just a way to fill the noise in the cab, and he was just ferrying some nice, well-intentioned and scared-seeming kid away from the school. A little irresponsible, perhaps, but what did it tell you about a man who was willing to do that sort of thing, so easily, and so trustingly?

These were the thoughts that Holland had as the truck was lifted up, up, *up*. It was like one single moment of weightlessness was blessed with an hour's introspection. Hand to the window, Holland reflected, looking up at the sky that, *at least the eye's not back*, before the tumbling profile of the arcing truck spun to face the ground, to show what it was that had been.

There was a bull in the road. Holland knew it was a bull, because Holland's school had been surrounded by farmland, and bulls had been all over the place. Those bulls were different, though;

they did not straddle both bitumen lanes, they did not hulk forwards like that, with huge shoulders and *hands* that turned into *hooves* when they hit the ground, hooves that looked like frosted glass. Also, bulls as Holland understood them had two eyes, small and round and black on the sides of an enormous nose – they did not have empty sockets there, rimmed around with an iron plate, which bridged across their enormous muzzle, through which a series of black, scorched holes had been punched as if by the hand of an enormous nail. Behind the scattered array of holes, an asymmetrical fistful of *eyes* stared, each one of them as large as Holland's *fist*. And then the whirling cabin showed sky because gravity and momentum were fickle mistresses, both of whom were cleaned up after by their unpleasant chamber-maid **impact**.

It wasn't proper impact, though – thank god for something stopping the mere *ground* from getting involved in the whole equation. The back of the truck's tray hung in the air, gripped in one massive, monstrous hand of glassy fingers that jutted incongruously from under dark, red, furred feathers. Holland, pressed against the windshield drew ragged gasps, reaching out to grab the driver, who slumped, unconscious. No blood around the cabin, which was good, but Holland knew enough about medicine and unconsciousness to know that didn't mean anything. A concussion could lead to a subdermal hematoma, and if he was unconscious throughout it, he'd die without ever knowing it. On the other hand, he was easily double Holland's weight, and lifting large objects had never been in Holland's purview.

Nobody was around. Nobody had been around last time, either. Nobody would judge Holland for what happened, either – after all, Holland was just a child, and what was going to go on the newspapers? "Teenager found guilty for abandoning man to multi-eyed bull-beast?" That meant the only person making this decision was the person Holland was. The blender. The quiet one. The meek one who never ever, ever stood out or got the laugh, the one who just wanted everyone to look at someone else.

The beast moved the hoof of one foot forward. As its hoof lifted up, off the ground, the glassy substance transformed, Disney-like, into a set of fingers, long and muscled, with an extra set of joints – and prodded at the back of the truck's flat bed. Leaning forwards, it turned one of those mad, empty sockets to the side, and Holland saw *clean through its head*, and out the other eyesocket.

Holland resolved. Holland acted. The truck had been thrown, it wasn't all in the mind of one young student, deranged and staggering from some suppressed action. A lifetime of fears and intrusive thoughts and how much Holland had ever felt *other* and *wrong* were suddenly brought to a fine point. Nothing had ever felt so real, nothing had ever felt so intense, and not once before had a decision been so easy to make.

It was the right thing.

The pliers tore the plug on the door to unlock it – Holland had bumped it while sleeping, locking it – and the door itself kicked open. As the truck shook, under the fondling hand of the bull, Holland swung both legs forwards... and jumped out of the cabin. Turning around sharply, Holland grabbed the legs of the driver, pulling back on them and hauling as hard as possible, falling backwards onto the bitumen of the road to pull him up and over – his whole form folding over and flopping onto Holland's shoulder suddenly. Gaggling with the effort, and slightly dazed, Holland couldn't help the cry that escaped.

The truck stopped shaking. The beast turned... and lowered its head. All of those eyes on the front of the beast's head looked directly at Holland and the driver. But those eyes blinked, blinked once and twice and three times, and some of them blinked sideways, and one of them, whenever it blinked, changed colours. Then the whole beast turned its head, lowering forwards to point that ... channel through its head at Holland like *that* was scrutiny proper.

Disconcertingly, the inside of the creature's head seemed to close down in on itself, just once, then re-open the channel, a moist sound accompanying it like a moist plasticine replica in stop motion. It looked at Holland. It looked at the driver. Its eyes narrowed as it peered at the driver, but they blinked and whirled confusedly as it looked at Holland. Driver. Holland. Driver. Holland...

Behind Holland, one of the cows in the paddocks that flanked the road gave a loud, seemingly helpful moo. Somewhere inside Holland, an instinct to fit in spoke up, reached out, and forced an action.

"Moo." Holland said – and it was a *amazing* moo. Oh, you sit around in a school out in the middle of paddocks, kids fake mooing all the time, talking to or about the cows on the other side of the fences. Those moos sounded like the word was read. A person saying the word 'Moo.' What had just escaped Holland was an actual *moo*, and for a moment, Holland felt a strangely sonorous connectivity to all the cows in the fields...

And the bull leant down, looked at Holland as if it was looking at a very pretty lady cow, snorted a puff of hot air that completely enveloped Holland from head to toe, moist and sloppy, and whirled, running back down the road again.

And then, Holland finally exhaled, turning to the important task of dropping to one knee and trying to administer the most basic forms of first aid.

## Chapter Nine

Sometimes what you want and what you need are the same thing. What so many people wanted, in a world gone slightly crazy, was time to think...

Angus had lost track of how long he had been roaming the streets of London. He had expected that the first night of magic would be quiet and strange, but not quite this strange. At first, running from the diner, he had roamed the street, trying to contact the authorities, only to find every public phonebox dead. Then he'd tried to find anyone who could help him contact the authorities. Nobody had noticed him or responded. The further he ran from his starting point, the people became fewer and fewer, until he stood on a train platform, looking across at a 24-hour store, door unlocked, in which there were no people. Somewhere in the running, so to had colour drained from his surrounds, and he had been roaming through the monochrome world with a sense of unease that couldn't be easily shaken.

It wasn't like finding oneself suddenly in a black-and-white, empty London would be anything but disquieting. Angus knew that – he'd seen *28 Days Later*, and those opening minutes had scared the living hell out of him.

Yet despite that he'd been put into a sort of rhythm already. He'd taken to finding doors that were unlocked, then making his way inside, and trying to find something he could consider useful, or a hint, or information. News broadcasts showed no people, but the cameras still changed position, cutting from place to place. The chiron beneath the footage? Blank, no hands to write on it. Then he'd check for written information, and head back out again.

What had happened to him? Why was he here, alone? What was more strange to him was, why wasn't he afraid? He'd been thrown into... what, an alternate earth? Everyone in the world had disappeared? But here he was, feeling safe, and fine, and oddly disconnected. There didn't seem to be any magic here, right now. There weren't any teenagers blinking towns out of existence, or fireballs being thrown. After a fashion, Angus imagined, it was quite safe.

Still, he'd gotten up and left the diner because he'd wanted to help. He'd wanted to change things. Unlike almost everyone else in the world, Angus had a working knowledge of the Chellini Hypothesis. In a way, he reflected, he might well be an expert on the matter. An expert in a hypothesis that needed years to accrue data before it was worth considering, or even testing.

Angus sat on a front porch, looking up and down the street, and reached into his coat, fishing for the notes on the hypothesis. Maybe there was some...

*Ugh.*

Angus' notes weren't in his pockets. Of course. He'd drained his coffee, stood up sharply, and ran out of the diner. The diner – hell! Now he just had to find that place again. A moment to reorient himself, and Angus started back, trying to retrace a long and meandering path.

\*

"Enk,"

"Hank."

"Enk," his mother went on, "are you okay?"

*No, mum. I'm not okay. I'm really not okay. I woke up with a normal day and a normal life and now it's completely crazy and I had to help carry Innogen home from the store, and when I got back home I found you roaming the house as a particularly fat pig wearing a witch's hat. I am not okay.* "I... think so." Enk said.

"Do you want to talk about it?" She asked, sitting on the edge of the bed, resting her hand on his foot, through the blankets. This wasn't normal. He hadn't had an experience like this since he was very young - and that, somehow, made it all the more unsettling.

"I don't know what I'd say," Enk murmured, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Enk," his mother said, rubbing his foot again with her hand - when he came home, it'd been a few short moments before she'd unravelled and become a human again, saying something about 'anchors' and 'perspective' - but there was still that odd, slightly unnatural awkwardness about a woman you'd seen trotting around on all fours. "Enk, things are going to get very, very odd." As if they hadn't been already. At least Innogen had stopped feeling the pain and the sound when they came home - though she'd wanted to go straight to sleep.

And Enk nodded, biting his upper lip. "I just... I want to try and keep things as normal as they can be. I don't... I mean, mum, has it ever... ever worked like this before?"

"No."

"So why did you believe in it...?"

"Because... because I guess you have to believe in something..." she said, shaking her head, giving a little sigh. "It was a bit of a shock, I won't lie. I mean..." she shook her head again.

Standing up slowly, she turned back to Enk. "Innogen is sleeping downstairs, Enk. If you hear something, come wake me, okay?" she asked, shaking her head, and adjusting her witch's hat.

\*

"Olympics, they say."

Angus looked up when he heard the voice. It was a sound that wasn't just his own footfalls in this eerily unpopulated London. It was a sound that had motivation and purpose behind it, it was a signal that there was someone else here. The words did not just speak to him, they spoke of a human being.

At first, the sound seemed to resonate off many places, so the sandy-haired not-quite-intellectual turned around a few times, looking up and around. Buildings loomed overhead, all of them, and the clouds seemed so far away. It was clear, at least to Angus, that this wasn't really London. London had small, tight buildings, cafes and coffee shops, dotted in amongst the towers. There were open fronts, not blank faces. It was not just Not London, it was more of what London's most distant critics feared

London to be. It was what London was, to the readers of the *Daily Express*, except there weren't any black muslim immigrants knifing people in the streets.

"Is that so?"

The second voice was a man's voice, lower, and Angus moved down the street - strangely linear, now - towards it, calling out. "Hello?" No response forthcoming, until he rounded a corner. The street was still just as blank, though at the end, he could see it opening up to the Olympic Stadium - which was nonsense, he'd not crossed the Thames and - well, maybe he had. Nonetheless, that the road map of this London didn't work out was probably the least of his monochrome concerns.

"It is so." The woman's voice again, and above. Angus looked up, seeing up on a balcony, two figures, dressed oddly alike. Both in monochrome - obviously - a pair of thin, harsh-faced people, a man and a woman, wearing what could probably have passed as normal afternoon dress in London, in 1930. Understated almost to a fault, they seemed to be discussing the important matter of the flag they were folding between them - the enormous fabric still in five shades of grey.

"It seems a little odd to me. There's very little olympic about it. I remember more burnt offerings and hominids around Olympia." She said, her tone crisp and clear and almost painfully British.

"It's a symbol, you see." He responded, tone a little tired.

"A symbol?"

"Yes, a representation of things that are not, but are, in the head."

"How odd."

"How odd?"

"How odd."

"Well, they'll not need these things here."

"No, not at all, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"I suppose."

"Hm." She paused, looking away from Angus and her counterpart, shrugging as if to an audience. "So I suppose."

Angus shook his head, stuffing his hands into his pockets, moving past the pair. This place was not normal London, these people were not Londoners, and the Olympics had been a while ago. A few discarded pieces of old tat that hadn't been thrown out properly were no more meaningful a symbol than anything else. And whatever they'd been talking about had been... it had been like a glass wall. For some reason, trying to interrupt them seemed pointless, and not just because of his own inassailable Britishness, embarrassed at the idea of intruding in someone else's conversation. Shouldering forwards against a wind that wasn't there, Angus walked on, picking up his pace. The...

the diner, that was it. He needed to get to the diner, back where he'd left his paperwork in his rush to get out.

The street seemed to take forever, but when he stepped out of it, the grass under his foot crinkled with a sound like glass bells chiming. The moment of his arrival brought with it a sudden thought, a thought that prompted an uncomfortable turn, and a look back at the street to a series of buildings with no balconies. *Wait, where did those people go?*

"It's quite garish." came the woman's voice.

"GAH!" Angus leapt five feet to one side, the wrong side, as it happened. A sand path through the grass lay under his feet, but out on the grass, the couple were again. This time, Angus turned to look out at them, walking to the edge of the crunching path, and avoiding the grass. When he drew nearer to it, it seemed to glow with malevolence, the way a knife did, tilted in the hand of a psychopath.

"Rhubarb, apparently." said the man.

"I fail to see what that has to do with the aesthetics."

"Rhubarb was used." he reaffirmed.

"I rather think that you are making that up."

They stood, under the shade of their parasol, looking up at the dome of the 2012 Olympic Stadium. Angus looked at them, while they looked at the building. Occasionally, the parasol twirled with a deliberate slowness, tick, tick, tick. Angus finally mustered up the courage to call out.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Hey, are you there? Can you hear me?" he asked, clearing his throat, "Um, I don't mean to, I mean, excuse me? I - I just, I saw-" and so he went on. Was it a minute of stammering and awkwardness? Two? Five? Ten? It was two turns if the parasol, at least, with a pause between. Whatever it was, though, Angus spoke to people who did not seem to see him. They did not seem to notice him. And when he drew his breath to start again, Angus realised just how stupid it was. They weren't real. None of this was real. It was all just some sort of... created experience. It was something *made* for him to move through, clearly. Looking down at the path, then at the grass, he couldn't see it any clearer.

Turning away from the pair, Angus pulled his collar up, and started to jog towards the stadium.

Angus had not gone to the Olympics when they'd been on. Money he didn't need to spend to watch sports he didn't care about being won by people he'd never heard of. He could spare himself the loss of funds and just enjoy the thought of being good at cycling and rowing and dressage, as if that was something that should somehow matter to him. When there was a physics wing of the Olympics, maybe then he'd pretend to care, but not anyway, because pff. He didn't imagine, though, arriving at the stadium would have been nearly so slow, last time, walking in through an entrance, carefully making his way through a ticket stall that was unattended, jumping a small stall, and entering not the stadium seating area, but the vast and open green of the grounds.

This time, Angus came upon them as he walked across the ground in the center of the stadium. The yawning mouth of the opposite exit - a *vomitorium*, he remembered smugly, - spread before him, making the journey through this olympic stadium far easier than simply moving around it. It stopped being a roadblock and had become something he could pass easily. Nothing to know, nothing to care about, just focusing on the path ahead of him.

It would have been easier to focus, though, if not for the pair again.

"These?" she asked, strolling along the track area, juggling small steel balls in her hands.

"Shotputs." He said, walking along behind her, catching each as she threw it up into the air, in an arc towards him.

"And these?" She asked, passing by spears punched into the ground, picking one up easily and spinning with it like a dancer with a baton.

"Javelins." he said, tilting side to side as each javelin whizzed past him.

"And these?" She asked, stopping in her backwards walk, looking at him with her head cocked to the side.

"My thoracic bones." he said, awkwardly, his voice audibly distorted by the spear punched clean into his chest, a long smear of grey blood down his front. That had been enough to stop Angus in his tracks, turning to look, ready to... to... to do something. Run towards them. First aid, that was what Angus should do. Did he remember much first aid? Or maybe he'd do more harm than good. Maybe this wasn't normal. Maybe ... maybe Angus should just stand still, and watch, like a lemon. That's what Angus thought. It's what Angus always thought. It's what Angus did.

"Quite." She said, stepping up to him, her ruffled skirt swirling as she put her elbows against his shoulder and navel, gripping the javelin in both hands and tugging.

"Quite?" he asked, his tone slightly dubious as to this explanation for why she'd stabbed him in the chest.

"Quite." She reiterated, as his chest gave up its grip on the javelin, which came shooting out, and pinwheeled backwards, spinning away, past Angus, leaving a long, smooth line in the sandy path next to him.

Angus watched in what he was sure should have been horror, but somehow wasn't. The man's chest was closing up, healing over, becoming whole again, but the stain was remaining, as if to keep some element of horror to the whole experience. Even now, he wasn't sure what to call them. Despite being so far away, he could hear them as clearly as if they were walking right next to him.

Angus shook his head and steeled himself, turning to the gateway. This city, this vast, empty, grey London was not where he needed to be. There had to be something to change the atmosphere, something to make it different. It was hard to remember, but not impossible - something about paperwork. About a need to work, about the restaurant and... and... blame. Something had to make this place make some sense. Something...

Angus realised he had been shaking his head for easily two minutes, standing still. No. That's not how it was done. Putting one foot before the other, he started to walk.

A moment later, Angus started to run.

There was nothing here. There wasn't sound or noise or colour, there was just this vast, grey, brooding London. There weren't other people, there wasn't even colour in his boots or in his hands. If a lack of sensation was the problem, then he'd make do with the one thing he could give himself - tiredness, exhaustion. And so he ran, he ran as best he could towards things that looked familiar, though so much did in the grey and bleached nowhere.

Angus rounded another corner, trying to blot out the noise, because he knew it was coming. Hearing those voices...

"What *is* that scent?"

"Burning grease, apparently."

"Apparently?"

"Apparently."

"It's quite excruciating. Hardly fitting for a party."

"A party?"

"Why, of course a party. It's my birthday, after all."

"Surely that makes it my birthday, too."

"That remains to be proven."

"Why burning grease, though?"

"I don't know. I for one would complain to the waitress."

"The waitress?"

"The waitress." She reaffirmed, nodding once more.

Wait.

Angus skidded to a stop.

*Scent.*

Turning on his heel, Angus looked around, and started heading backwards, back towards the voices again.

## Chapter Ten

Warlocks were one of the older forms of human magic. When there had been a little magic in the world, there had been a variety of methods to collect it and use it, though there was not an understanding of the task as it was undertaken. For most of human history, magic was unknown not because it was rare, but because people thought it was common. Every fungus-eating hedge-wizard who had ideas about not eating excrement was seen as magical, while real acts of magic were few and far between.

Refining the oil of magical energy when it was so rare was hard. Some students saved up magic through their whole lives, witches turning a year's worth of magic into five minutes worth of transforming energy, and hiding most of the things they did behind a shroud of ritual, pretending that it was a magical potion, and not just a tincture of boiled willow bark that had dulled the pain. This manipulation, this distortion of the facts, in little slivers, had been the core of what made magic seem more common than it was.

The important thing was not the action, or the ritual. It was the pattern. A rite in the woods, a circle of a ritual, laid out, would not do anything – it took a mind, watching the pattern, and thinking the chant, and knowing all the little pieces that came together, with the pattern at their centre, to truly bring magic forth. That was what Witches did. They learned the pieces, they brought them together, and those pieces made the drop of magic sing.

\*

None of which mattered to Barbara. She had other concerns on her mind. Before going to sleep, she'd made a queue of messages to her own phone. Normally, that sort of thing indicated lunacy, but this time, the phone had proven remarkably astute.

**as far as I can see there really is no  
reason that you should be afraid of  
any of this.**

"You're a phone."

**I suppose that is true.**

"Do you have a name...?"

**I'm not sure that's a good idea.**

Barbara rolled her eyes, pushing white locks out of her face. It was very, very hard, sometimes, to feel like she was on an even footing with anything, and she had spent her whole life feeling very much like one of the lucky, rich, normal people. Getting strangely sassed by her phone was a clear sign she'd lost control of her life.

**See if I have a name, I will no doubt be**

considered a person, insofar as you are  
capable of that.

That means you might become attached to me  
and that will make me a liability during  
moments of importance and danger.

What if I am captured?

I would be a hostage!

All just because I had a name.

If I have no name then I have no person  
and I won't provide any risk to you.

"You address yourself with 'I.'"

**Crap.**

"Plus, you're my phone. I saw you first talking. Erm. Texting. Hang on, am I paying for this?" she said,  
talking aloud to the phone.

**I don't think so.**

Barbara shook her head and sighed, planting the phone against her temple. "I'm going to call you  
Aikon. If anyone has a problem with that, I'll... set them on fire or something. Or turn their bones  
into glue." Another pause. "I can do that, right?"

**I don't think you can do the glue  
thing.**

**I also don't know why I know all this.**

**I just seem very explainy - and very  
loyal.**

**Maybe you just needed a friend who you  
could identify with-  
so you made me!**

"You think I made you?"

**It seems a Warlocky thing to do.**

"Why do you call me a Warlock?"

**Because it's what your father's oaths**

**call you.**

**In Old German - Waer Loga!**

"That's just some old mumbled nonsense."

**Most things are, to the right people.**

**Context is everything.**

"Alright, then." Barbara said, standing up and walking towards the bed. "I'm going to call you Aikon, because it's Nokia backwards. You are going to keep your head down and try to not bother me when I'm in class, and we're going to keep adventures and weird stuff to an absolute minimum, okay?"

**Adventures?**

**But Adventures are cool!**

"Oh god help me." Barbara muttered, throwing herself down in a slouch onto the mattress, dropping the phone into the drawer next to her. No need to charge it, after all. Those Nokias lasted *forever*.

\*

Morning had come, and with it a family meeting. Dad had mentioned something about danger in the community around them. Something about having to stop going to school, in the name of keeping protected from other kids who may have... powers. It seemed hollow to Barbara at the time. She knew the real danger in her school wasn't someone with powers coming and doing something stupid, it was her doing something stupid and someone noticing it. What's more, she had no intention of doing any such thing – because stupid things drew attention, and Barbara knew the kind of attention she liked.

Still, it had all come down to two questions.

"Are you sure?" She'd asked.

"Do you trust me?" Dad had responded. Mom had reached across the table, and squeezed both her daughter and husband's hands... and that had been that. Mom was off to work, and Barbara was stuck, at home, reading through her textbooks and wondering just what the point was of education in a world where somehow she could throw green fire.

\*

To modern parlance, witches and warlocks are twinned ideas. Women become witches, and men become warlocks, in whatever fantasy novel universe they believe represents an older tongue. Truth to it, the word *witch* derives from the word *wicca*, which derives further from the Latin word *victima* – a sacrificial victim. Even then, there was an understanding that those students of magic, using the drop of energy spread across the deserts of cities, were trying the patience of their communities. One way or another, they would be blamed, they would be cast out.

Warlock, on the other hand, was much younger. Warlocks were never of the old ways. Warlocks did not watch the earliest green lightning crashing through channels of sand. Warlocks were so new that their name came from who they were – *waer-loga*, or *oath-breakers*.

A promise made is a promise remembered, and a debt owed can create quite the memory. With a deal made, a Warlock could make a man remember him, think of him, and create in his mind a pattern. A tiny capacitor, a tiny little battery, waiting to be tapped. One person, one debt, one promise. Two people, three debts, four promises, more and more until everyone owed the Warlock a little, everyone remembered the Warlock a little more. Oaths were the currency of the Warlock. Many thought the power the Warlock had derived from the debts. That owing a Warlock gave him a tiny piece of your soul, that you lost something of yourself in his spells. Not so – but still the rumour persisted. Memories laced with fear were the more potent, and the warlocks knew it. Those who were feared rather than loved were the strongest – and thus the technique became refined, and refined.

People called them oath-breakers, because they liked to imagine that the deals were broken by the Warlock. Even if they didn't intend to pay them, though, people remembered the debts. The pattern remained, etched on a mind, and whispered to children, to siblings, to spouses. The Warlock was far more dangerous than any Witch; Witches sought to channel the power in themselves, drawn from around them. Warlocks drew their power from a pattern across a dozen minds, a hundred minds, a kingdom of minds.

What power could be drawn, then, by a pretty blonde girl, with a cellphone and the internet?

\*

The human memory is a plastic entity, composed mostly in the software space of the brain. A complicated but ultimately poorly-debugged device, the brain works with any degree of efficiency mostly thanks to redundant systems over redundant systems, such as the storage of memory. Recent hypothesis indicate that the brain creates a memory by recognising the experience, then filing that experience in the memory. Unlike plumbing, though, the memory does not need to pass through the first to reach the second – but rather, two parallel systems handle this, with the second usually slower. *Usually*. Sometimes, that memory is created before the experience is registered, and the brain has a moment where it tries to reconcile remembering something it had just done. This phenomenon is known in common parlance as *déjà vu*, and many stories were shared about how it worked, and why.

One idea was that *déjà vu* was the remembering of an older memory from an earlier life; to recall someone else's memories, like a ghost. In many ways, it was a silly idea – to remember the memories of someone else feels nothing like that. The sensation is less disquieting, and more confusing, as the memory tries to hold onto conflicting information. Key details stand out, echo in the mind, but the brain has to try and reconcile possibilities and impossibilities, and that often leads to strange behaviours, and momentarily altered perceptions.

Enk would know.

Innogen was fine, by the time the morning came. Mother had spoken about how important it was to get fresh air, and, after telling the pair that school was not an immediate priority – at least, until the

skies stopped doing odd things, the ocean stopped screaming, and there weren't any more ships heading out to what seemed to be a rapidly expanding problem in the sea.

"What was it like?" Enk – wait, no, Hank – asked as he stepped out on the sidewalk with her. A shopping list tucked into his pocket, they'd been given strict orders to spend only a little of the change on maple bacon candy and if they did, bring that home, because, you know.

"What?" Innogen asked, looking down to her cousin. Knitted cap on her head, sweater thick on her body, it was easy for her to hide everything about her that made her so damn remarkable, if not for the bright, glowing eyes, the radiant smile, and of course, the fact she was head and shoulders taller than Enk. Sometimes, things were very unfair.

"The thing. You collapsed."

"Oh," she said, turning, guiding Enk down the street, taking the lead. It was what she did, after all. "It hurt my head. I mean, like... a super huge stress headache, you know?" she asked, looking down to him again, or rather, looking next to herself, where she expected Enk to be. "... Why are you doing that?"

"Why am I doing what?"

"Walking sideways?"

Enk looked down at the ground. Then at the pavement edge. Then at his cousin. For some reason, there was some part of his brain that threw up reasons – reasons that would make *sense*, but... weren't his. Saving space on the pavement, he needed to look at her, he needed to make sure she was alright, he- none of them. Not one of them was a real reason.

"... I was?" he asked, turning, facing straight on, and trying to adjust his vest, under his sweater.

"You're such a weirdo," she laughed, leaning over and butting her shoulder against his. "Love you, Enk." She said, then adjusted her cap and picked up the pace. "C'mon, what's on the shopping list?"

\*

Sometime ago, Enk had learned that fish only smelled when they were bad. The end of the day at the fish market, you'd smell a lot, but in the morning, it was actually more likely to smell of cleaning fluid and ice. Living where they did, you knew the smell of good fish, and mostly it was the absence of smell at all. There was just the smell of soft grass – and some mud – from the morning snow melt, around the cleared plastic tubs, brought from the docks, full of packed ice and still-fresh fish.

At least, that's what Enk remembered from cooking shows, and oh god, he was such a nerd. Standing in line next to Innogen, he watched her as she smiled, laughed, and spoke so easily to the girl next to her. Someone she didn't know. Someone who had just wandered up in the crowd, pretty and bronwhaired. Innogen had struck up a conversation with her, because her cardigan was coloured like a penguin, complete with a tuxedo-like tail, and that was, to Innogen, adorable.

Enk inwardly seethed not with resentment at his cousin, but rather with embarrassment at himself. He hadn't even bothered to start a conversation with a stranger, and here he was, annoyed that someone else's conversation was going better?

Huff.

Turning back to look at the racks of fish, Enkudu blinked, trying to stop himself from looking at the Girl in the Penguin Cardigan. Shifting his shoulders, adjusting his tie – why did he wear a tie? Why did he come out, in all seriousness, wearing a tie, a vest, and a collared shirt? Was he hoping to impress someone?

Years later, Enk would wonder if maybe the infiltrating memories, influencing his mind, were to blame. They weren't. Enk just didn't know what Enk really liked – like the satisfying feeling of a tie slipping into place, the way a vest made his chest feel warmer.

Enk's roaming eye went from place to place, falling upon the deep plastic tub, in which crabs, arrayed in piles, tied up with rubber bands, rattled and creaked... and seemed, for a moment to speak to one another.

Crabs did not speak to one another. Crabs communicated through some method or other, but surely it wasn't a conversation with language and refined tones and influence and terms like *emperor* and *authority* and *magistrative*. Surely not. But Enk couldn't stop himself staring, couldn't help himself, as that moment lurked in the back of his mind, the moment in which... the moment in which he had taken up his spear, and then, rising up to the king's throne, bodyguard of the king, he had brought his arms forwards, and –

No.

Not arms. Not hands. No, claws. Claws, grasping, crushing claws, the outer set, for... for...

It hadn't been a spear.

It had been a spine.

It had been... it had been...

Innogen whirled around just in time to see her cousin collapsing, face-first into the wet earth, mud splashing around Enk's front. Arms held by his side, hands shuddered and twitched, as Enk tried to find himself in a shape that he wasn't any more.

Innogen grabbed Enk by the arm, trying to pull him up, up off the ground, calling as if from many leagues away, up out of the water, voice coming murky and distorted:

"Enk?! Are you okay?!"

It seems everyone had a chance to collapse in this family, day to day. Arms flailing wide, Enk's hand closed around one of the small, discarded rolls of duct tape, left after being used to fix a plastic tub, his hands in a death grip. A moment of flailing more, and Enk blinked –

Enk could see his nose.

Everyone can see their nose. It's always there. The brain just edits it out. Seeing it, *actually* seeing it, is a disorienting thing, particularly because the brain knows it's not meant to be seeing it. And he spat and sputtered, and immediately tried to mash his claw-hand-grip-spine against the thing that had become so close to his face.

It was... quite a sight, watching Enk trying to mash a roll of duct tape up his nose.

"Enk, Enk, honey, you're kinda scaring the living crap out of me here," Innogen said, pulling her cousin close, not caring about the mud. Hugging him, she gestured at the penguin girl. "Hey, you," she said. "Go get..." she fished in her pocket, throwing her mobile phone to her. "Get where there's some reception and call 'Auntie' on that phone. Tell her we're –"

"No!" Gasp'd Enk, sitting up, grabbing Innogen's shoulders, gasping for breath. "No, no," he said, pushing himself up, sitting, no, standing. Staggering for a moment as he hauled himself up, he reached out, taking the phone from the penguin girl, and giving her what, at that moment, Enk hoped was something *like* a dashing smile.

"... Thanks..." he said. Turning back to Innogen, he swallowed, and held out his hands. "I'm fine. I know what it is, now."

"Know... know what?"

Enk had felt, in that long moment on the ground, two minds grappling for position. He had his own mind, of which there was a lot more, and which was a monkey brain, rattling against memories, errant and drifting, imprinted on the magic around him, from the sea, old and cold. He knew the story, now, of the bodyguard. He knew the story of the king – and he knew that the king had been not *human* at all.

Magic was older than human people – but civilisation and magic, they were also older than human people. Maybe, just maybe, the reason those people weren't known about was because *those* empires had collapsed, in part, thanks to magic.

"I know what the thing in the ocean is. And... and we should try to stop it."

\*

Most people like to imagine that the world is a fair place. This is a comforting idea, and seems to work well with the human brain's habit of seeking patterns in its surroundings. Something goes up, so something comes down – sometimes it's cold, so sometimes it is hot. These things are not as connected as humans like to imagine – after all, there are more places in the universe where throwing an object up will result in it simply sliding away with no end in sight than places where it won't – but they are still part of the human psyche, taught from birth that the world is a reasonably balanced place, with some symmetry to it. Fairness is part of the human outlook, and those people who see the world as unfair are often called selfish or bleak.

Magic did not see the world that way. Magic cared about patterns. It cared about the mind, it cared about the way the energies flowed, the old runes. To say it even cared was wrong – but what it meant for most people was that magic seemed to exist without rhyme or reason. There were not rolling riots down the main street, as people who had magic went mad with power. People were, for the most part, in their homes.

The first day, there had been lightning. The second day, fire. But now, people had learned lead still worked.

Mostly, people stayed at home. People hugged their families close. And many, many people went to work, as best they could, keeping their heads down and being fearful and modest. Somewhere, a suited reptile that called itself a human being was talking about ways to make money off the tragedy, or ways to exploit the need for resources into places like the vanished school that had left Holland behind. Somewhere else, though, a blonde girl thumbed her phone, wondering why it had said something so banal seeming.

**war**

**war never changes**

Barbara looked down at the screen. In the short few days that she had had this phone, it'd lost none of its obscurity.

“What does that mean?”

**it is an aphorism from a video game**

**it seems appropriate based on**

**historical information I can obtain**

That ‘I’ again. “Okay, then. Was there some reason you brought it up?”

**it seems to me that the changes**

**in the world around you are**

**mostly cosmetic**

**people with power still have**

**that power**

**and you even have the same**

**approach to warfare through**

**out most of history**

“I’m sure that’s an answer, Aikon, but that’s really not the answer to the question I asked.”

**in every fight, it is not uncommon**

**for hate and fear to be more**

**important than want and pride**

**most wars seem built around**

**these values**

"I'm fairly sure," Barbara said, wading her way through a snowdrift outside an otherwise completely clean storefront, feeling the bitter cold rolling up her legs under the knee. "that there's more to it than that."

**this is why the doctrine of mutu**

**ally assured destruction was so**

**popular in nuclear politics, da?**

"Da? You're Russian?"

**isn't nokia a russian brand?**

"It's Japanese, I think. Or Korean."

**you sure?**

"Don't start speaking those languages, I can't read them."

Barbara looked up from her phone, realising that she'd been talking to it in her hand like it was, well, a smartphone and she was a typical Siri-worshipping apple user that her parents couldn't afford her to be. She'd left the house to get some fresh air, and her father had been frightened, but she'd come out anyway. Why? Because this was her home, she was free, and the fact that some stranger could have a gun had never stopped her. She wasn't going to live a life of fear.

These were ideals and ideas that swirled around a teenage mind and never found themselves vocalised. More often, people would assume she just didn't *know* any better, because that was easier.

"Why do you bring this up?" She asked, finally bringing her attention back down to her phone.

**because how people respond**

**to pressures can be some**

**thing to indicate how they**

**will in the future**

**you made devices**

**in case you ever lost**

**the war**

**'dr strangelove'**

**right?**

Barbara leant against the store front, feeling the glass of the window against her shoulders. Scarf hanging down in front of her, she pouted annoyedly at the phone, wondering if she'd paid enough attention in class to answer this one.

"Yeah, the bomb that blew up if it didn't get a command that stopped it?"

**close**

**but something like**

**that**

Barbara looked down at the phone once more, and sighed. When, exactly, was this magic thing going to do what it was supposed to? You know, make for big magical explosions, and fights, and...

No. Don't be silly. That was the sort of thing that got people hurt. It got them killed. Barbara was a cheerleader. She was a good student. She wasn't... she wasn't some teen superhero. That would be just stupid.

Then she heard breaking glass. Then she heard a thumping body – and turning around, she saw, in the store behind her, two figures thumping into the floor, wearing balaclavas and holding pipes.

Barbara didn't think about it. She just acted.

**oh dear**

Of course, the true shame of the event was that neither Aikon nor Barbara was really aware that Nokia was a Finnish company.

## Chapter Eleven

When she put her mind to it later, Barbara would have to consider she'd picked a really fantastic outfit to go out doing things with some degree of anonymity. Sneakers were flat for running and jumping, but her black socks, drawn right up to the bottom of her skirt, were leggings-thick. Sure, not as tough as say, her jeans, but it wasn't like her jeans would stop a knife. Would they? Hm. Test that later. Short skirt with a red tartan pattern, because she liked how it looked, and underneath, shorts to keep in the warm, leaving a single strip of white flesh visible under the hem of the skirt, up at the top of her thighs, over the tops of those socks. Her dark blue hoodie, at least, was oversized enough that she could pull it down over her head, zipped up, and then she just had to yank her scarf across her face, behind her head.

Thirty second transformation sequence, and she hadn't had to get naked.

Testing the knot at the back of her head, pulling the cords on her hoodie just a little so it didn't fall easily, she stepped from the corner, and *ran* around the edge of the building, looking for any kind of entrance.

Barbara grabbed the backdoor handle and without even *thinking*, a blast of hot, green fire shorted out from between her fingertips, blasting against the screws and threads and whatever-else made up the lock. Pulling back, she let that stout door swing open, free, behind her, and ran inside. Perhaps a more subtle entrance would be useful in the future, but Barbara was acting on something deeper than thought. It was not the part of her mind that remembered consequences and actions; it was the part of her mind that remembered that her father named her after a superhero.

Inside the store, there were four outlines. People. Think of them as people, Barbara, think of them as just guys who have – wait no, think of them as people, not guys. Dammit, why did it have to be hard to be sensitive when you were, well, doing what most of the other kids in school fantasised about doing?

What were they –

*Paf!*

*That's not what guns sound like, Barbara reflected, as she dived behind a counter. Guns make this big almighty roar, and there's this huge crack of force and they knock things over where they hit. They don't just go paf like a firecracker, do they? Do they? Man, movies are bullhockey.*

She stuck her head over the counter, not even realising that the fire from her fingertips was swelling, blossoming in her palms, not even being touched. Green flame beckoned in her grip. A moment passed, a realisation – this stuff would *kill* people.

Barbara didn't want to kill people. She just wanted to defend this place. She just wanted for a store owner to not lose their stuff. She... had no idea what she was doing here.

*Deep breath. Don't panic. What would Aikon say?*

A clutch in her throat. Wait. If Aikon *did* say something, her phone would chime. If her phone chimed, the guys – the people! She didn't know they were all male! – with guns would hear her.

Barbara closed her eyes, and tried to listen, without freaking out, to the yelling around her of the me-**people** in the store.

“Hey!” she heard, yelled. “Someone’s here!”

“I can tell, asshole! What you doin’ shooting like that, could have been me!”

Well, okay, they were young. One of them sounded bl- was it okay to say someone sounded black? But then there was that Rick Astley song, and he apparently sounded Black. Why was it so hard for Barbara to keep her thoughts in the here, and now, just after she’d –

A hand swung over the counter, and a column of green flame shot up past it, blasting hot air and toxic smoke into the ceiling in a ring. Reaching up sharply, Barbara grabbed where she thought the throat would be – haha, got it! – and *yanked*, pulling down hard, and fast, pulling whoever it was face-first into the bar, with all the force of her whole body, not even realising she’d lifted her weight off the ground and made him *smack* face-first with all of that force.

“Ow!” he blurted, trying to straighten up, fumbling for purchase on the countertop.

**That** didn’t knock him out? Man, movies are **such** bullhockey. Green fire was easy, but if she couldn’t stop these guys from fighting back, what was she going to *do*? Holding his shirt – hoodie? – at the throat, Barbara hoisted her whole frame up, and swung both legs over the counter – *crack*.

Okay, that didn’t earn a response. Two-footed kicks to the head, even as they made her ankles and legs ache, were clearly okay at putting someone down. But then, she had to follow through, swinging onto the countertop and leaping back, diving between two rows of goods. This, she did understand. They needed to be discouraged, they needed to want to run-

Wait, the guy on the counter was still moving and getting up? What the hell? Then his three friends had grouped in on his location, and Barbara, hunkered against the end-cap of an aisle, held her breath...

To run was an idea that simply never crossed her mind.

\*

Elsewhere in the fields of Qinghai, a different four men were running. They were running through fields of rice, across broad, flat plains, trying to keep their feet out of potholes, trying to keep from looking behind them.

What loped behind them was golden, it was fanged, and it was terrible. What was worse was that it oh-so-clearly could catch them, if it wanted. If it but wanted, it would have bounded upon each one, and torn him to pieces.

But what was the alternative? To stand still, to let the lion made out of stars consume?

No.

So they ran.

And they hoped that something would change.

\*

Barbara hunkered back against the row of donuts. She drew her breath.

She was ... something. She had magic. She was a warlock. She was the better armed person here. She was the aggressor. She was the one with the power. There had to be something Okay, all four of them were male. That was at least a little bit comforting. It meant she *could* call them all guys without feeling a little bit bad for assuming.

"So what were you doin' out back?"

"Photocopyin' my ass," came back the response.

"Seriously?"

"Whatchu want me doing? Out here stuffin' cans into a bag while we run? We got all the tuna fish and puddin' we're going to need, jeeze."

The one that Barbara had knocked prone, had pulled down and beaten badly was still dazed; sitting up, tended by the second. The third and fourth were moving down the aisles, slowly, carefully; one gun between them, a knife to the other, this was definitely a *dangerous situation*.

Barbara's heartbeat was steady as a rock.

There are some patterns that are part of the greater myths of humankind. The stories that we tell one another. The stories that we tell ourselves. The story of the journey, and the return. The story of the stranger's arrival. The story of the underdog – and of the moment of triumph in the heart as the righteous agent visits punishment upon the wicked. These stories are tattooed on the insides of the human mind, perhaps because they are part of what make us human.

Patterns are patterns, though... and knowing or not, Barbara drew her breath, closed her hands, and let the green flame rise. *Courage*, she reflected, *was being scared, and acting anyway. John Wayne said that. Movies may be bullhockey, but...*

\*

The four men in the field stumbled forwards. The Lion was drawing close on them. This was a story they knew, too; it was script in their myth and their culture. The world was a vast place, with diabolical spirits that did not care for humanity. They had believed it, they had known it, and they had practiced their rituals accordingly.

The lion was a beast of patterns. It had been made by one pattern. It was drawn by another pattern.

And now it loped down, tiring of the hunt. It was time, not to feed, but to win.

\*

Barbara stood, tensed her shoulders, and turned. Her left hand moved like she was flicking a softball out, a low underarm sweep that sent a brilliant scorch of green fire, in a long thin line, across the

store, the motion prompting a yell, a yelp, and a scream, as it lanced past the advancing man in Aisle Three. His gun discharged, wildly, as the end of the barrel *dissolved* in the path of fire.

Her right hand however, went the other way, an overhand wheel that sent her phone, hard as a goddamn *brick*, across the other aisle, shot like a bullet from a gun into the temple of the knife-wielding man, who was lifted up off the ground, and thrown back into the rack of goods behind him. A clatter, a thud, and a spilling bag, a bright-sounding ‘ting’ of his knife hitting the ground, and he was *down*.

Barbara stood, opening her hands, two huge spirals of green flame running up her arms. Lowering her gaze, her eyes alone visible, she spoke the one word, the *only* word, she could think to say:

“Run.”

It was not spoken. It was not said. It was growled, a low, dull roar in one syllable. Whatever it was, *it was heard*.

\*

The Lion simply did not exist. In one moment it had been about to pounce, about to crash upon, about to tear apart... and then, it was not.

The Lion had found a better pattern.

\*

As the thieves ran out the back door, carrying their unconscious member, Barbara stepped over to pick up her cell phone. The case showed barely a scratch, the glowing green screen bright and black in the pattern that formed words.

**why did you do**

**that?**

**I’m sure that the**

**store owner had**

**some form of**

**insurance**

“... Because I was here,” she said, and tucked the phone away. It was a dirty way to end a conversation, but... somehow, she figured Aikon wouldn’t mind. She had to get out of here before someone turned up to see the holes in the walls, the molten gun on the floor, the burnt out lock. She’d caused a lot of damage – but... but at least nothing had been stolen, right?

\*

"Why do we always do that? Why do we keep referring to a drop of water in a desert? I know you taught me, but it's something that everyone is saying, it's been said all over, and I don't know why it keeps coming up. What's so important about deserts, mum?"

"I don't much care, Enk,"

"Hank,"

"Enk, but I would like if you two can leave the house without having a collapse."

Enk sat down on the edge of the counter, his hands on his head. "Things... things happened in deserts, mum. Things that matter to magic itself."

Innogen sat on the back of the sofa, her head tilted to the side. Ponytail bobbed as she folded her arms underneath her breasts, trying to ignore her aunt's pointed comment. "Enk, you fainted talking to crabs."

"No, I..."

Enk sat back.

How was he going to explain this?

A memory, when drawn from the mind, was a rolling mass of electrochemical signals working in parallel to create images, sounds, illusions of experience that rattled away inside the mind. Perhaps the words, the thoughts that come with those memories are the same, the narrative we provide our own lives, though, chances are, they aren't. They're something we fit on them later to think that we're more ordered, more sensible than they are.

If two strings are tuned to the same frequency, plucking one plucks the other, without any content. The vibration travels, touches the string, and pushes it; so to with these resonant thoughts. Magic works similarly; an idea can be pressed into that force, which in turn propagates it, sustains it, and echoes it for many, many generations hence. It may move its space, but not lose its place.

It just needs someone tuned right.

"I'm seeing memories," he said, waving his hands. "Memories of like, Bible figures. Moses and his kids, uh, Samson's wife, this... like, crazy Batman dude with a chain, and ... I think a crab."

"A crab?" said his mother.

"Just bear with me, okay? The crab was the one that..." he shook his head, straightening it. He sat up straight, adjusting his vest, feeling his phone in his pocket, comfortingly. The girl in the penguin cardigan had apparently, put her number in it. That was... something nice. "... The crab remembers fighting its king, and-"

"Crabs have kings?"

"Last week you put a lightning bolt through a window at school, Jen," he shot back. "This is probably not too weird by comparison."

"Okay! Okay."

"The crab was sad, and dying. It was remembering fighting its king, which was a betrayal, or something. It was all Jaime Lannister, I think. Anyway, he... she? I don't even know. The thing is, they were fighting over something. The king had gone mad, and was using his magic to... like... a laser..."

A hand on his shoulder.

"Just... take your time, Enk."

So much of the conversation, so many moments of pause. Everyone was moving in this sort of Ray Harryhausen slow-motion, held still as they thought about just what they were going to say, what they were going to *hear*. That feeling, that fear, that Enk was going nuts, in a world that was going very, very nuts.

This wasn't how Magic was meant to work. When you lived your whole life doing hedge tricks, knowing that you may, one day, start a fire without a match, or maybe flip a coin ten times in a row with the value you wanted, you didn't expect this. You didn't expect your son to have visions, you didn't expect your niece to throw bolts of lightning. It wasn't ever meant to be something of this scale.

Innogen was lucky. She was too young, brash, and proud to feel any of that fear. The way the world turned, that was an adult fear. Innogen was wondering about the wide open expanses of the world that were forming before her. This was an era where school didn't lead to college didn't lead to a job didn't lead to being pressured at thirty to marry. This was a world where she could draw a sword from the sky and conquer, say, Quebec.

Enk, however, was all in the mind of this one deep mystery. Each word came very carefully, as if he was afraid that he was building an idea out into the world where it would snap, and he could fall into the depths of lunacy.

"They were at war, using magic. They were wiping themselves out, they were destroying their civilisation. And it was a war like ours - like the Cold War, where any minute now, someone would push a button and end it all. And that meant that they had to build things for that situation. They built things that would win the war *after* the war. They built things to destroy what they had in case someone sought to take it. They wanted to win, so much more than they wanted to survive."

He swallowed, rubbing his neck.

"And that thing in the ocean is one of the things they built. I think if it's given enough time, it's going to destroy all the magic again - just to make sure that there's nothing left." He managed, huffing a breath and rubbing his neck with his other hand. "... I think."

"Good." His mother said.

"What?!" blurted Enk, not realising that he had blurted in the same time and same tone as his cousin.

"Good! Magic's ... it's making the world crazy! Have you looked out there? It's a shooting gallery going on out there!"

\*

Some things were making sense to Enkudu, but those puzzle pieces sliding into place meant older, ancient pieces of thought machinery had to fall away.

What did death really mean to a boy who could now, with concentration, tap into the memories of another, even on the moment of death? Jubal had known how to fight with knives, how to survive a desert, how to escape a horse, and most tellingly now, how to die. Shamgar had known how to wage a war in a group or as one. Delilah had outwitted a prince and monster, conspired with two languages, weathered many storms and escaped history's eyes. Even the ... crab... had known many things, remembered in its dying moments.

Enk stepped onto the road ahead of Innogen. The cars were coming, yes, but he knew that as he moved, he wouldn't get hit. The pacing wasn't right. He could look at that path ahead of him, and commit to it - and just failing to hesitate brought him forwards, in the right time. A moment later and he'd have been a smear. Behind him, Innogen yelled, standing on the kerb.

On the far side of the road, Enk turned around, and waved his hand over his head. "C'mon." He simply said, turning to the sidewalk, parallel, walking along it while he sunk his hands into his pockets, his head between his shoulders, his gaze to his shoes.

There was of course, Shamgar. That one bothered him the most. The online search had been super useful at finding out about Ishmael and Isaac, and he'd heard a Sunday School Story about Delilah years ago. The premise was pretty obvious, but Shamgar? Nobody knew a thing about Shamgar. Some dude in the Bible who had had two verses dedicated to him that seemed to confuse and to contradict. But closing his eyes and relaxing, Enk could feel his memories flooding in against the others, like pools of melting quicksilver. The feel of the wood in his hand, the sense of the desert night, the spatter of Goliath's blood on his face.

Enk had been having these flashbacks since just after the first night of magic. He'd felt they were just his imagination wandering. Just drifting spikes of possibility in his mind that had, for years, been happily pacing around in a tight little circle. But it wasn't like he or his mother had ever really been into the Bible - how was he meant to have imagined up a fanfiction for *Shamgar*, for crying out loud? The son of Anath? Or not? Then when he'd drifted off, staring at the crabs, in the bucket, the other memory had bubbled up, from the depths of a memory that was not even his own.

\*

The words of the Guard didn't really sit in Enk's brain the way the words of the others did. When Shamgar had looked at his hand, the word he thought was 'hand,' not ?? or yad. Somehow, the language of the mind was not quite as fundamental as Enk imagined it should be - but still, it played a part. The water that flowed from place to place was water wherever it went, but the pipes and plumbing had to have some influence.

It hadn't been a Thing or a Device. It was almost like The Device. Like there was no good term for what it was, since nothing like it had been built before, and yet how it was built had been such a triumph of engineering, it deserved more than mere uniqueness to mark it.

The war over magical energy had brought with it a host of innovations. Factions, nations, the crabs had split apart - crabs really felt like the wrong term to use, but whatever - and fallen to long, staring battles across vast, deep gulfs of the cold and dangerous water that were peopled by the deep beasts, the places the crabs did not go. Magic bridged the waters, but *control* of magic had become crucial.

The device was meant to watch its area. When magic was used, ripples set through the water – or even the air, if a crab was ever fool enough to spend time out of the water – would bounce off one another, and eventually, the very sensitive device would recognise that.

The device was powered by magic, yes, but receiving any magic at all would still it. Any magic at all, within the kingdom of the crabs, would keep the device sitting, in its place. The device perched quietly in its place, deep and brooding, and simply waited.

Magic was destroyed, consumed, by another culture, before the device had been activated. The mad king had almost activated it ahead of time, had willingly used it to destroy the world to destroy his enemies.

Still...

The king had died. The magic had been lost. The device had lain dormant.

When magic had returned, the device could see; it could detect it, such was its design. But within the swirling slopes of suboceanic sand, down in the ditch where the device had long since fallen, the ocean, the device saw no crabs. It saw no crabs with magic. It felt no stirrings of magic from the people it had been set to notice.

And so, it had engaged.

It had risen from the doomlike depths of the ocean, filling itself with magic and water on its ascent. It had flooded its inner chambers, starting pumps and valves, engaging a mighty engine. The device turned, and wheeled, bit by bit, and when it breeched, it began its dreadful process.

Mankind once dropped dreadful weapons upon the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

It was not the first time that a doomsday weapon had been made. It was just the first time a doomsday weapon had *worked*.

## Chapter Twelve

There are a number of facts about the way the human body functions that people simply don't know, even though they could experiment and find them. One is the way vision is influenced by air. An individual deprived of air often talks about 'blacking out' – about the way vision collapses to a point, an encroaching blackness filling the field of vision. In these moments, though, there's a second effect that most people don't notice – often due to the terror associated with being unable to breathe.

As the brain loses oxygen, it shuts down systems quickly to try and minimise what it takes to work the vital systems of the brain, and directly, the body. One of the systems that shuts down before consciousness itself does is the recognition of colour. All visual information becomes greyscale, washed out, and at the same time, sharp, thanks to the power of adrenaline.

It's a hard thing to notice. Someone has to be deprived of oxygen a few times to truly recognise this phenomenon and not simply consider it part of the general spectrum of unpleasantness that comes with the sensation of being choked into unconsciousness. It's a tiny little insight into the world, a shared secret only known amongst the small number of people who have suffered asphyxiation multiple times – a habit that most people avoid developing.

Not many people saw the world like that, even for an instant. Angus couldn't shake the similarity, as he stared out upon the grey London.

\*

"Excuse me, young lady," the man said to Holland. She looked up in response, blinking at him owlishly behind her brown hair.

"Um?" Holland asked, in response, looking up and down the street. The past few weeks had been a terrifying place in the world, and Holland, already used to hiding herself in plain sight, was dealing bit-by-bit with a society that seemed to care more about big questions about the existence of magic than it did about any of the specific questions that had plagued her in high school.

"Mm, yes, you?" the man asked, shuffling forwards a little closer. The street was more or less empty – the bakery behind her, with its fluttering banners proudly displaying Australian Dairy didn't do much to detract from the image of a bakery where fathers lined up of a Sunday morning, papers tucked under their arms, laughing and joking about the Friday night game and the Saturday night beer. The whole place was so ... so wonderfully, painfully, banally normal, and this man just wanted Holland to answer a question. Right?

Shuffling closer still, he held out at arm's length an old, copper pocket-watch, busted filth and concrete dust clinging to its contours. "Don't suppose you can read this for me?" He asked, his tone a little shamefaced. "It's hard to see with my eyes the way they are now... it's a real c-" he began.

Holland ignored the typical punctuation as he spoke on, and leant down, bringing the watch up to her eyes. "Hm. Oh. Roman Numerals, right?" she asked, interrupting. "It's ten to one, mate." She

said, closing the watch and setting it in his hand, a nagging thought bubbling up in the back of her head.

Why hadn't she checked the time on her own watch?

\*

Angus blinked himself alert again and looked across the field. It was no mistaking, a schoolyard. Not a schoolyard like he'd seen in London growing up – high fences of old style meant to fit in with the city's aesthetic. No, this place was – well, it was large, for a start, larger than any school he'd seen before. Huge expanses of half-grassed fields, short and scrubby lawns that had patches of dirt where people clearly had walked too much, shortcutting around posts in the ground designed to curtail ... what? Cars? Cows?

It sat some distance back from the fence, the fence that was, itself, a clear byproduct of London's strange mirror. Leaning forwards, Angus murmured to himself.

"Schools," he said. "Schools and buildings and homes... why?" he drew his breath, speaking louder. It wasn't like he expected nobody to talk to him. He knew there were at least two voices he could expect to hear. "Is this a world without magic?" he asked, clearing his throat again.

\*

Holland carried the bread home. The rest of the world had been losing its mind with magic. The disappearance of the school had brought with it a sort of disarmed tension and a lack of visits from DOCS. Wait, they weren't DOCS any more. They were... uh... those guys. Anyway, without them checking, Holland had just stopped going to school. Chores and errands took up the day, and then the library had time and place and quiet to study.

See, the rest of the world was dealing with borders and wars where magic happened. In Australia, there'd been one incident with someone in Melbourne turning someone else into a frog in the middle of the crowd, before being shot to death by bodyguards, showing that the criminal underclass still had something quite efficient at enforcing their own set of rules.

That had almost been it. It wasn't like Australia had this vast expansive history and all the witches and warlocks were coming out of the woodwork. There were superstitions, yeah, but it was a new nation – why weren't there great signs of... Holland wasn't sure. Something like the slave chains or the Eureka Stockade or the Rainbow Serpent thrashing across the countryside.

And why had that one school been taken?

And why *hadn't* Holland?

These were the thoughts punched through by the sudden garrulous voice of a woman by the bus stop. "Hey, excuse me, mate," she said, her short black hair and thick black glasses working together, "Do you have the time? My phone's out..."

Holland looked up at the woman – god, so confidently androgynous. He could feel a little squirm in his stomach as he shuffled for his watch, fishing around in his pockets, before remembering it was on his wrist. Pulling his shirt back, looking at the display, and mumbling out, “It’s one thirty, miss.”

“Thanks, mate,” she said, turning away and looking down the street for the bus. She’d finished her sketches for the day and had places to be – but she could tell the boy that just walked past her had felt enormously uncomfortable, and more than a little attracted. Well, that was nice.

\*

“A world without magic?”

“Is it really, now?”

“It’s hard to say, isn’t it?”

“After all, didn’t you grow up in a world without magic?”

“Hardly seems right to me that magic is to blame for everything to do with colour.”

“Mm, yes, there’s spectrums, isn’t there?”

“And crystals. Also Newton, one believes.”

“One believes a lot of things.”

“Perhaps that is the problem.”

Angus turned to look back, to the opposite wall. Whenever he heard those voices, he knew it had to be connected to them, the twins who’d been following him since he found himself here in Grey London. Rather than standing on the wall behind him, though, they were just there. In the street. Within arm’s reach.

Suddenly, the wishes he’d had to be able to touch them felt a little dead in Angus’ heart. Why would he want to touch them? What was he going to do? Prove they existed or something? In this vast grey London, chances are they did anyway. She and he had that oddly reminiscent face. A freckle on one’s left cheek, mirrored on the right. The same birdlike expression in their eyes, a sort of distant curiosity that spoke more of boredom than of interest.

Angus hadn’t even realised he’d raised his hands, like he was going to reach out to grab one of them - and hastily, he brought his hand up to clear his throat, smoothing the front of his shirt. “I... who are you?”

“I don’t see how that’s the slightest bit of interest,” she said.

“Well, he did ask,” he responded.

“That doesn’t display interest, that’s just small talk.”

“Answering questions is what this place is all about, isn’t it?”

"I think you'll find that's the exact opposite of what it's for." She said, her expression a frozen unsmile.

Behind Angus, hollering out over the fields, a school bell. He didn't even mean to turn his head, but turn he did, knowing that when he looked back, they'd be gone. That's what they did, right? Turning to the fence, committing to the loss, he stepped forwards, and leant forwards to look through the grille, drawing his breath slowly, a lurching anticipation in his heart. What was it, then? What was this new horror going to show him...?

Students. Normal students, emerging from classrooms, without enthusiasm, simply shuffling around and moving to their bags, retrieving food, sitting on benches. One or two of them listlessly kicked a ball between one another. Angus didn't know how long he'd stared at the scene before he realised what it was he was seeing. It was eerie in its subdued simplicity.

This was just how students weren't. It was quiet and boring and dull and safe. Nobody was going to get hurt, because nobody was going to do anything that might endanger them.

Angus turned back to the twins - who, of course, weren't there. Gripping his jaw like he wanted to tear off a beard he didn't have, Angus dragged in his breath and turned, stomping down the gravel path, away from the school anew.

This wasn't 'without magic,' he could realise that much. What *was* this world, then? What was it that made this world *different*?

\*

Holland pushed the front door open, seeing the letters on the mat. Bending down to pick them up, fingers trembled at the familiar logo.

Another visit.

Holland sighed heavily and set the bread on the countertop. These letters were the worst. There were so many things really wrong with the home situation, but they never wanted to talk about that. They all wanted to talk about the same thing, which always came out the same basic way...

"Are you fitting in at school?"

"Are you having any problems finding friends?"

"Are you doing any sport?"

Are you using the change rooms never came up, but how much they wanted to ask. Holland just let a sigh escape and slouched into the cigarette-stenched sofa. Hands flopped helplessly over the side, Holland reflected absentmindedly.

The important thing, really, was that Holland never stopped thinking about ways to understand. Surroundings changed, but Holland had to keep thinking about them, or something might slip up, someone might hear something wrong, something bad might happen. Attention had to be paid, and, in as much as possible, understanding had to be reached.

\*

Magic didn't bring the world colour. Light did that. Human ability to perceive light gave that colour context, and that colour with its three simple bases had given rise to artistic shapings that had shaken the core of what humans considered their souls.

No, it wasn't magic that was missing...

\*

A tension exists in the world of humanity, between two vast ideas. On the one hand, the human mind seeks for everything it sees and everything it experiences to be interconnected and have some sort of fundamental connectivity between cause and effect. At its very worst this notion is used to justify wars, penury, the deprivation of life and liberty, and violation.

On the other hand, the human mind is equipped to recognise the randomness and unconnected nature of the events in reality, knowing that things may be linked by causality, but the behaviour of humans is so removed from fundamental things that all life might as well be random, with no great sense of justice or fairness dominating and judging actions. At its very worst this notion is used to justify wars, penury, the deprivation of life and liberty, and violation.

Essentially, there's a flaw fundamental to people, and it probably is a tendency to try and find ways to justify wars, penury, the deprivation of life and liberty, and violation.

Angus was an academic trapped in another world, whose body roamed the earth clad in night-blue and white stars. Barbara was a cheerleader-turned-warlock, capable of flinging fire, an indestructible phone, and the ability to bind people's will with oaths, magic growing with her reputation. Bea, reflection that she was, was a practitioner of a form of craftsmanship that builds ghosts and gives rise to guardian spirits. Enkudu was a witch, who can remember things the world forgot. Innogen was a different kind of witch, who played with fire in her fingertips, an athlete and a fighter. Holland... was Holland.

These were not the only people roaming the world in the strange days of magic, in the new age of sand. A few other players – most significantly one to whom no magic would fall. One to whom experience and dedication and resourcefulness could always be weightier than any new force.

White hair blew past her cheekbones, her expression grim, her nose wrinkled in disdain. Not for anything she saw, through her milky red eyes, but for everything that had been, thus far, in the world. The helicopter beat its way down next to her, yet as the winds picked up, she gave no visible

sign of even noticing, not even as it set down and the grass prostrated itself before the man-made god of wind.

A relaxed moment, she had time to fish out the stack of business cards, flick, flick, flicking through them, finding the right one, then flicking it into her other hand, holding it up, arm's length, into the helicopter, in the face of the only passenger.

Am I being set up for a video game introduction?

"Nope," came the booming voice, the rattle of a strap. "I'd get out and invite you in formally, but I'm strapped in, and you know about my legs. C'mon in." he said, gesturing next to him.

A badly animated video game introduction?

"You seriously plan these out ahead of time?"

Yes. I do seriously plan these out ahead of time.

The duffel bag clinked next to her foot as she turned and took up her seat. Flip flip flip, and finally, she held out another card.

This is about the thing in the ocean, right?

I'm the only one you can find, so you want me to take care of it.

He nodded, sitting forwards. Hands gripped the counter next to him as he hoisted his body, pushing himself backwards a little, legs hanging like led before him. The wheelchair was visibly sitting, folded up, across from him.

"Yeah," he murmured, rubbing his chin, hand going through his dull grey beard. A habit that he'd acquired to deal with the small, pointless pains. The prickle of stubble against fingertips gave just an instant of relief from the dull, throbbing ache in the wrist, the hand, the phantom pain down in the legs. Turning to her, he leant forwards and drew a breath.

"We have a briefing, such as it is."

We have some time.

I only have so many cards

Tell me what you know.

\*

The bellows from the ocean grew more common as the weeks went on, as the world sat in its embarrassed silence, governments trying to focus on internal affairs and regulations designed to control and handle and understand the new coming swell of magic. It was only natural, after all – and making it worse was the way some nations didn't seem to 'have' magic the same way other nations did.

Helping nobody's tensions was that the United States seemed to have wellsprings of magic in its people, but had inherited a strangeness to the land with it. Vast swatches of Arizona seemed to be

peopled with white-outlined ghosts, ghosts that shot at explorers who came near with bow and gun and other, strange devices. Old forts were the worst for it – Texas' landmarks cordoned off for the safety of the people there. In the Middle East, histories of battles played out on the sand and in the minds of others – the memories of those who had impressed upon the magic conflicting with the memories of those who had studied it afterwards.

Across Russia, a black order of shadows and shapes, on things that moved like horses but bellowed like smoke found the places where once had been those that they sought. Most people ran. Some stayed. None were found.

The nature of magic seemed to be atemporal, connecting to ancient thoughts and memories, histories that shaped the nature of people. Yet in some places, remote and rare, there were few things changed. Some claimed that magic did not reach everywhere. They were wrong. Magic enveloped the world, a new atmosphere, that crested the top of the mountains.

People's memories, however, had their limits.

## Chapter Thirteen

Holland sat on the bed in a dull grey-blue room, light filtered through patterned glass and old, Salvation-Army purchased third-hand, smoke-yellowed curtains. The floor was clean, as clean as Holland had been able to make it, amongst the small burn marks and the stain from the previous owner, or, more likely, one of their dogs. The walls still had telltale creeping fingers of yellowing lines that bulged and formed into patterns down at the skirting board where the crinkling paper started to flake off the walls. Holland did not have many things to be proud of, but this room was one of them.

The other rooms in the house had a faint dustiness to them, the hints that when you walked on them bare-foot, you were disturbing strata of some variety. The way people left footprints in the carpet, the way all the levered door handles had sometime ago given way to gravity and taken permanent place pointing downwards, the Christmas lights strung up around a front porch that wore no sign that they had ever been taken down in the past three years – it was a painted picture of a house that had somewhere in history, given up living and contented itself with simply existing.

Holland only controlled one room, and that room, as best it could in the circumstances, was ordered. Clothes hung on cheap metal coathangers, the kind you could repair if you were determined, in a cupboard with only one door. The second door had been removed because apparently, 'it had been staring,' which was something Holland supposed you wanted to avoid in homewares. The clothes inside were pastels, white, and with one or two bright, gay colours amongst them. Nothing that stood out too much, cleaned carefully on Saturdays.

The bookshelf by the door held old Penguin classics, discarded second-hand copies from throw-out racks. A copy of *Frankenstein* with pages missing near the start, a Reader's Digest hardbound on the history of the French foreign legion, the extra copy of *Anna Karenina* that the school had accidentally purchased when it thought Holland was two people – sitting snugly and carefully in between bricks and plywood. Well worn, read over and over, stories about...

Holland sometimes fantasised about the world ending, not out of any kind of begotten malice but because it was fascinating to imagine the ramshackle room found generations later, with a skeleton in repose on the bed in some artful position and watching people trying to reconstruct from the books and the signs around the room just what it was that made up the person known as Holland. The books were always fun to dwell on – because clearly, an educated person would want to own classics and books about the French foreign legion.

Then reality slithered in like bulldust in a rental car, and Holland realised that if all that remained of the room's occupant was a skeleton, the books would have rotten away well beforehand, too. Probably also the clothes and maybe even the coathangers. Did people rust faster than cheap metal? Hard to say for sure – hard to remember, too. Somehow, 'decomposition rates' weren't covered in Bio.

"Why, what a *interesting* room we have here," came a stranger's voice. Holland didn't jerk up to look at its source straight away, though so many instincts begged to. More than once, a stranger had come into the home, with its insecure locks. So far, they'd all come by to see Matt, had a conversation, maybe a smoke, and left. By not simply jerking into action, Holland could remember

the difference between a scared child and an independent soul. Who Holland was, as always a hope, was closer to the latter than the former, no matter how much fear every day had.

"I said," the voice began again.

"I heard," responded Holland, looking up with a practiced, dull, nonconfrontational expression.

What stood in the doorway didn't have the menace that befit its appearance. When a figure like it – tall, lean, unnaturally thin with a body that seemed composed of no actual mass, but rather, a cartoonish outline of black and blue texture wearing battered, weary pants, and a body studded about with stars and twinkling expanses of celestial matter, flowing up into a narrow, spade shaped face with a sharp, jutting chin and deep red eyes that blinked and winked with the deaths of great supernovae – stood in a doorway, one would expect it to stand with its hands by its side, making a gesture as a heavily breathing assailant. Instead, it, the Prince of a Thousand Eyes, stood in the doorway, in profile, head cocked forwards, arms slightly behind itself. It resonated awkwardly of a nonchalant position, if it wasn't being held by a completely dreadful unthing, an entity that seemed to be composed of the things that inspired fears in mortals of the vast, terrifying rolling space into which some intrinsic part of self could fall. The Abyss, staring back, and blinking.

"You're a remarkably hard boy to track down, Holland," it said, and Holland blinked in surprise, his hands clenching into fists. "Or is that girl?" it asked in turn, tilting its head the other direction, like a bird sizing up Holland as if she were prey. "You were at the school."

"... I was at a school."

The Prince pushed the door further open with one casual hand, though Holland didn't remember it being open in the first place. Normally, that door was kept completely closed, no matter which side of it Holland was on. It was Holland's one fortress, one respite, and now it was being casually invaded by... something.

Bits of blackness dripped from pooling corners on the ceiling, the Prince's swagger bringing with it a sense of growing menace. Leaning down, the thing looked Holland close in the eyes.

"You've never seen me before, but you know my name," it said – and its smile was a jagged, razor-jawed thing. Hands on its knees, it leant forwards, into Holland's preciously-guarded personal space, caring not for the steadily increasing anxiety, the ratcheted, nervousness of Holland's breathing. "... but you have seen me before, haven't you?"

The Prince twisted its head this way, then that, in a way that suggested there were no bones left in what it could call a body, while Holland marshalled a response.

"... You were at the school," The words came stiltedly, because Holland had never been good at standing up to anyone. It required you to stand out, it forced attention. That was something Holland always wanted to avoid. "You... made it disappear."

The Prince nodded. "Well, I took it away. It and a few buildings, but mostly just the people in it. The people who were the same," it said, blinking once, twice. "I figured I owed it to you, since I missed you, that first time."

And there it was. The question not said.

“... Why.”

The Prince reached with an arm too long, pulling on Holland's open-back wooden chair, skidding it across the carpet, and perched upon it before Holland, peering forwards again. By now there really wasn't anything between the two – Holland's forehead pressed against the Prince's.

“Isn't that the question you ask yourself every day?” It laughed, chuckling. “Why am I poor? Why am I struggling? Why am I ... different?” Its chuckle was like burning love letters in a discarded shoebox, crackling away around a wedding ring that had never truly represented love. “... This is the problem, Holland.” the creature shuffled, wriggling its chair forward, resting its hands on Holland's knees.

Holland really did like that chair. Smashing it with two sudden, sharply raised feet, sending the weight of the Prince sprawling out on the ground came so quickly that the only thought was regret. It was instinct, it was reaction – and Holland immediately dipped forwards, given strength and fervour by panic. That had been one step too far. Scooping up a handful of chair, and gripping a length of wood in a closed fist, Holland drew a breath and brandished it menacingly.

“Get out.” Holland breathed. “I don't care why you took them. I don't care! Get out and never touch me again!” The second hit clapped against the side of the Prince's head, and then a third. “I said get out!”

The Prince stepped back, and for just a faint moment, something about it betrayed a human emotion. It didn't show smugness, it didn't show ostentatious grandeur. It simply stepped backwards, and let the smile settle back in place.

“You know,” it said, standing in the doorway once more like something Tim Burton would have designed while doing particularly bad acid. “Typically people like you are defined as friendly and intelligent,” turning sharply on its heel, shock of not-hair bobbing above its head in dark sparkling retinue. “Or at least, you know, sweet.” Rubbing a hand against its temple, the Prince stepped forwards. “But fine, fine. I was just offering you a chance to back to school, you know,” it said, turning back and narrowing one eye. “Somewhere safe. Somewhere without the crazy. Somewhere, you know, where nobody would ask you that question, ever again. Somewhere you could feel normal, because it's a place nobody needs to know things. That's what I do, Holland,” it said, turning around fully again, and now there was something more dreadful than just creepy about it.

Seeming to fill the doorway, the figure was no more a figure; it was more a gap, a space in space over which the door hung. It swayed slightly, as if suddenly there wasn't a house around it to support it, just the bare bones of the room itself, with the dripping blackness in the corners seeping in. The star patterns swirled and spread, and the face seemed to sink away, Holland looking out into the nightmarish nothing of nowhere, pulled slightly by the feeling of air rushing out.

“People want me around, Holland. People want me to make a world that's safe, that doesn't surprise them, that doesn't confuse them.” It laughed, cacklingly. “And if you don't want to come along, if you can handle living in this world...”

A pop, a sudden rush of blood in Holland's ears, and the creaking, the rattling stopped. The room stilled, the blackness retreated, and the wood felt oh so heavy in a now-limp hand. Like all the weight in Holland's body sunk to the ground, the teenager dropped down onto a bent knee.

"... I know plenty of people that can. You can fend for yourself, after all. Besides, he's not much of a father figure, is he?"

Holland looked up, eyes wide, and ran straight past the doorway, into the shadowy blackness, past the star systems, a thrown hand gesture pushing through the milky way, casting aside galaxies until that fantasy popped, and the familiar horrible carpet appeared again. Then, heart pounding, Holland checked the house, the house that had been so subtly subdivided into the territory of Holland (one room), and the territory of Him.

Holland searched, and did not find.

And the Prince was gone.

\*

The symbols we absorb as children, the ideas that we accept as true, become the symbols by which we find shapes and meaning in the world around ourselves as adults. This is why it's said that children's toys shape adult's world. Perhaps why the generation of children that grew up with Buck Rogers made the rockets that took to the stars, or the children that grew up with Star Trek made mobile phones, and the generation that grew up with Gummi Bears spent their adult lives wondering how to do something useful with their lives.

>Consider the child who grows up with dolls given to her by her mother and father, pink dresses and songs about princesses. The concern was that she had an odd name. She would grow up with a complex, so she should be given opportunities to be a normal girl.

Consider in turn, the child that grew up with her father's superhero figurines. The stories of caped crusaders. A bucket of lego that, at first, was bigger than she was. A tub of toys with logos and insignias, robots that turned into trucks and trucks that turned into guns. Flowing fabric only in the flavour of a cape, hoods and masks and cops and robbers. There was no thought of what it would do to her. There was thought about finally getting some use of the huge trunk of toys that her father had been keeping since he left home.

One of those children grew up to scorn girlish things. She wore shorts when she could, she wore the boy's uniform at school. She swam and she laughed and she even boxed, when she could. She was loud and raucous and shameless and she partook of the family's rituals with aplomb and even memorised them and mocked them.

The other child grew up to love her girlish things. She smoothed down her skirts and collected berets and scarves and she indulged tastes in fashion. She liked pink. She liked her hair. She strove to fit in at school, then rose to the top, being sweet, talented, and acrobatic. She was smart, too, but for some reason, nobody ever noticed it.

Nobody ever noticed that the cheerleader named Barbie had never owned a Barbie doll in her life; nobody cared that the tomboy named Innogen had pictures from her fourth birthday wearing pink frills and a princess hat. Who would? Who cared?

Those two children tell us nothing useful at all about any other children, but they do tell us that once upon a time, the girl named Barbara leapt around the backyard with a towel around her shoulders.

The burglary had awoken something inside Barbara. Sure – she'd messed up a bit. She'd nearly concussed a man with an indestructible mobile phone. There were broken windows and locks, and, overall, probably as much damage as just letting the burglars things and run. The roar that had run through her, though, when she'd stood up; when she had, inside herself, decided no, this doesn't happen.

Heady. Rich. It was like the sip of her father's liquor.

The burglary had been a mess. The assault in an alleyway had not been at all. Two drunken brawlers had almost turned ugly when both pulled their guns, when a practiced arc of bright green fire blasted through the space between them, melting gun barrels off, fusing mechanisms, and lighting the whole alleyway with its spattering sparks of sickly green.

They'd run. That was fine. That was enough. Two guys with guns who'd been about to kill one another was hardly the avatar of justice, but it had been a good proof of concept.

The third had been an attempted home invasion. Aikon had been quite irritated about it, about her literally wandering the neighbourhood. But the wall was easy to climb; the thin brickwork thicker than a balance beam, and she'd stood on wider and done handstands. The man had come to the front door of his ex-wife's house, a gun stuffed in the back of his pants, and a butcher's knife in his hand, the slight lurching of alcohol betrayed as he stopped at the door.

Barbara had reflected, in the moonlight, masked and hooded, above the man's head, looking down at his shiny, shiny bald spot, that the whole world looked different when you just stepped out of what you were told it was like. The thin brickwork was secure under her sneakered feet. A dense, big city like this, she'd have her nights cut out, and people always with guns, always, always, always. That was just how it went.

The green fire had arced from her hand with ease, spinning the knife out of his grip and into the patio, where it melted into the floor. She'd dropped down to land on the ceiling above him, and growled out her one-word-warning:

“Run.”

It's what she said; it's not what he heard. What he heard was something deeper, more primal, more fundamental, where the very voice of the earth and the stars drew breath and bellowed in his face, tearing the sky and uttering a primal roar in the shape of the lion, outlined around Barbara as stars.

The figure of a man that fat, running away in terror was quite something to behold, in that odd, Humptyish way.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth taught her that sometimes escalation could de-escalate problems. The seventh taught her that some people would always see her as a potential victim, and the eighth showed her that her town was so large that she couldn't patrol it all. She needed to sleep, after all.

And eating bacon and potatoes and a little malted liquor with her father, she'd sat back and contented herself, wondering about what nine and ten would be.

Barbara would have been able to spend her whole life like that.

\*

Every time the bellowing happened, Barbara felt it. She didn't even hear it – they were so far from the Atlantic ocean that she didn't even connect the events.

But the notes played onwards.

And Aikon started to worry.

## Chapter Fourteen

Patterns are complicated, in almost all situations. When not looking at a videogame or computer design, areas where mathematics take a profound place of importance, most patterns seen by humans are not really patterns at all; there are imperfections when you get close. Even the most perfect snowflake has faint points of molecular asymmetry. What humans regard as a pattern is really an aggregated average; millions of millions of subatomic errors and near-enough-is-good-enough designs shifting against one another. The pattern the human sees isn't the pattern the world has shown.

Lines are only straight in the human mind; concepts are only ever simple in the human mind; no matter the simple, apparently easy construct, humans have never been able to make reality as simple as their ideas. Laws. Countries. Constellations.

Genders.

Barbara had a pattern in her mind; mild mannered high school cheerleader by day, as the school tried to accommodate its newfound level of complexity, and by night, mask-wearing vigilante, leaping from rooftop to rooftop, protecting the places that these days, the police were scared to go. That was her pattern; a pattern that could hold for day after day until the end of her school years, when she'd...

... she'd...

Well, she'd come up with something.

It was easy in school. Tall, blonde, athletic, have rhythm? Welcome to being a cheerleader. Nice and kind as well? Be a well-liked cheerleader. That was all they needed, and they had a box for you to fit in. The box had always been an easy one, but Barbara couldn't help but wonder if the box had been as kind as it had been for, say, her father with his comic books, or her mother who had, it seems, always been shaped a bit like a jelly donut. Chances are, it wasn't going to be kind to her brother, either – already his time in school had rung loud with talk of bullies and of *not fitting in*. School was a machine that put you in a box and carried you a little closer to your future – Barbara was at least grateful for a comfortable box.

Guns were still a problem. Naturally, plenty of people she met were armed. Even people who weren't doing anything wrong were armed, because that's what life was like in a concealed carry state at night. It wasn't even that that many people owned guns – just the people who came out at night and crept around people's windows seemed to have the notion that they needed a gun.

Another pattern that existed only because Barbara was observing it. The *spotlight fallacy*, where the details a person is exposed to shape what they consider to be the norm.

Guns were often the easiest target to dismantle, too; they weren't very big, but they were hard metal, and when Barbara flung green fire into them, it tended to cut them into pieces and leave behind something the person holding them would drop, *fast*. On the other hand, sometimes there was distance, and the way she moved her arm to fling a softball-sized arc of fire was too much of a tell.

Sometimes, like this time.

He was also at the edge of the rooftop, gun barrel wavering at her, finger on the trigger. These were... non-ideal circumstances. Every time she'd found herself stuck like this, though, some part of her had risen and *known* a way to solve it. There'd been the panic she'd induced in one man. There'd been the creeping waves of beetles, and of course, throwing Aikon at people served remarkably well. Something about that phone was damn near indestructable.

This time, however...

"Hey, Aikon," she said, "we got a plan for a bullet...?"

Of course, without the phone in her hand, it wasn't like she could see any response. That was awkward as heck. That put this one on her to solve.

What did Warlocks do, again? They used the little drops of memory of themselves in other people's memories. Well, it seemed that wasn't something that vigilantism leant itself to. Plenty of people knew there was someone masked, who roared like a lion, leaping from rooftop to rooftop. That didn't mean they knew anything about who she was... or what she could do.

Far above, Barbara felt the shape of the stars; the tug on her mind that had formed ever since the first time. The nobility, the pride, the sense of control. There was some part of her that now stood outside herself, that looked down over everything...

Some part of her that saw the gun, the hand, the ocean, the device – wait, what?

*Bang.*

Guns didn't sound like they did in the movies. Not nearly so powerful, or potent. Just like a pop, of fireworks or of breaking sticks. Maybe a thousand people clapping their hands at once could fake the sound.

Lacking for a better solution, Barbara did what the Lion would do – and as the gunshot echoed in her ears, she opened her mouth, stepped forwards, and *roared*. Her bandanna, masking her face, seemed to open *its* drawn-on lion's muzzle, the roar seemed to echo...

And the Lion was gone.

\*

The Prince stood behind Holland this time, in the doorway of the other bedroom in the house. Faded stank sheets, stained with sweat and cigarette yellowing, tousled on the bed, too hot in the summer to need blankets when they didn't have air conditioning. Nothing here; the paper packet at the edge of the bedside table next to the ashtray, next to the folded over bike magazine next to the bare bulb lamp with its metal ring of ex-lampshade. The wardrobe, the wallpaper, all unchanged.

Just empty.

He'd been here. He'd always be here in the afternoons. With a full pack of smokes, he'd have to be here, because there was no other reason to leave before beer got cheap later at night.

Holland had spent years resenting him and now he was gone and now, rather than a feeling of relief, or even anger at the abandonment, Holland was filled with wroth at the cackling, star-patterned foe that stood in the doorway.

"You know what's really funny," the Prince asked, knowing that it wasn't a question, just an effort to twist the knife. "It was you really, that did it. You, deep down, and all that confusion he had. Why couldn't you be *normal*. Why couldn't he live in a world where his kid made some *sense*..." The prince threw his head back, cackling, hands on the doorframe, as if slowly swelling up from within, about to burst forth with enriched stars, tumbling about the world.

"It's what separates them all, you know. Some people just want a point where they don't have to say 'Why?' any more!"

And the Prince leant forwards, head now much bigger than Holland's, much bigger than all of Holland, and leered with a maw full of daggerlike teeth.

"When I take them all, they'll be safe. They'll be elsewhere. There won't be a bellowing in the ocean, there won't be a thing they have to deal with. There won't be the fear, and there'll just be those *brave* people like *you* left behind. How many people do you think are like you, you know...? Well, you know. In mind. Not just that." The Prince cackled.

That's when a superhero burst out of his chest, fist raised, and punched him square in the face.

\*

Barbara wasn't sure what she was doing. Really, she wasn't. She'd stepped into the path of the bullet, she'd roared – and for the briefest instant, she'd been the outline of the stars, the lion of the sky. She'd been something more than herself, something so many believed in, something that people looked to and saw as nobility, power, stubbornness, and with a lucky number today of onlythree. That garbled instant, cast across the stars, swallowing up what she was and casting it aside – before she'd been pulled by something.

The Prince wore stars like a cloak; briefly, Barbara had been not sars, but what stars represented to many people. In that instant, she'd seen her city; she'd seen the ocean; she'd seen the world.

And here she was, hearing that cackling, that mocking, that meanness, to the nice person in the bedroom, and the only thing that she had imagined it possible to do had flowed from her hands.

The uppercut slung upwards, pushing the Prince up off the ground, throwing him off his feet as she spun around immediately, swinging her other arm around, fist closing around Aikon in her grip to give that swing some extra impact. The *crack* of her phone smashing into the side of the Prince's head was echoed with the overwhelming **thud** of her knee then hitting him in the midsection - well, maybe the balls, she liked to imagine – before she stepped back, green fire in her hands.

The Prince staggered back from the assault; he clutched at his chest, his face, dazed, blinking. "What..." it said.

"I'm... too human. That hurt... that *hurt*," it blurted, angered at the situation, terrified and confused all at once. Waving its huge taloned hands, it reached forwards, ready to eviscerate the teenagers -

before Barbara turned, blasting a green flame hole in the wall of the fibro building, grabbing Holland by a wrist, and *running*.

This was not... familiar. This was all flat and scrubby grass, and the sun was bright and hot as steam. Waving fronts of green danced in the winds by the roadsides, studded and decorated about with bright flares of tiny, soft yellow beads, and for the first time in a long memory, Barbara professed the thought she always felt guilty about:

"Where the hell am I?" she asked, turning to Holland.

"Keep! Running!" came back the response, Holland pumping arms and trying to maintain pace. Good grief, this girl could *run*!

Behind the two escapees, the Prince staggered back, clutching at its torso; the pain magnified, the retaliation of a moment past. Its hands drawn away from its chest, it looked down at itself... and heaved a long, ragged grunt of pain.

A constellation was missing.

She had stolen his stars.

Far behind the running youths, the Prince looked at its hands. There were... seven billion people on the planet. How many... hm. How many could he disappear, to his world? Would there be enough of them...?

The Prince stroked an unchain, walking away from the smoking crater in the wall. There was one thing that could stop him, though... probably best to go deal with *that*. He stepped forwards from the soft sand of the mining town's grass, and to *somewhere else*.

Grass slowly slid back up into its shape. The building slowly burned. Not for a kilometer of running, though, did the two youths slow down to breathe.

Holland slouched against a tree near the old creamery, the rattling of the train as it hummed past contrasting with the pounding blood that seemed to echo around everything. Hand on heart, jumper sleeves rolled up, Holland tried to gather something that could be considered wits.

"H-hi," Holland managed, looking to Barbara. "I'm Holland..."

Blonde, tall, leggy, athletic, and astoundingly feminine looked at brunette, sickly, nervous and androgynous.

"Um, Barbara," she said, with a twang in her voice that spoke of the United States – not just the US, but... somewhere a bit southern, somewhere where they had Charms and Mintjuleps and a burning need to Rise Again. "But, uh, you're..."

Holland swallowed, extending a hand. "Holland." Repetition. That had been a long-standing trick.

Barbara nodded, and smiled, taking the hand, clasping it and giving a reassuring squeeze. "Of course!" she said, nodding. "And uh, what should I use to refer to you?" she asked, smiling broadly. "I mean, for your preference – oh, um, that is, if other people don't know...?"

She knew.

And the hand holding Holland's was warm, and kind, and not tense or sick.

Barbara blinked in surprise, as her new friend's arms flung around her, wrapping her up in a huge hug, a hug that could bury doubts and sadness; a hug that bespoke a strangely simple, wonderful thought: *You're not alone.*

Somewhere in Barbara's pocket, words flashed on a screen.

*We do not have much*

*of a plan for a bullet*

*but you could try*

*winging it*

\*

The waves lapped against the dock edge while Enk sat, slightly defeated on the edge.

"Well, what were you expecting?" Innogen's voice asked, from somewhere a million miles away. "I mean, this IS Canada, we're not actually out in the middle of the ocean."

"I ... he would have just walked. Dove into the water and swum the whole way."

"Who? Crab guy? Or the guy who killed Goliath."

"I told you his name was Shamgar. And he didn't kill Goliath. Elhanan killed Goliath."

"I thought that it was David."

"That's the point! That's the...." Enk sunk again, sighing. "That's the whole point."

Innogen looked out at the water again, then down at her cousin, who, more and more, was seeming like a little brother. Reaching down, she squeezed his shoulder, then tousled his hair. "You wanna get out into the middle of the ocean, right?"

"I... I don't WANT to. We NEED to."

She shook her head. "Nope. Not the answer I wanted." Innogen slid down to sit on the edge of the wharf, her longer legs hanging down past Enk's. Another reminder that somehow, everything he'd wanted to be at some time or another, was outdone by her. "You remember things. You say this thing's dangerous, and that's cool and all, but I bet you that there are governments with like guns and bombs and boats trained on this thing. Right?"

"... probably."

"How about, for once, Enk, you stop trying to act like it's someone else's idea?" She asked, tilting her head, hair hanging down out of her cap. "Seriously."

Enk looked down at the water, quietly disconsolate. There was something about all this that didn't work any more. These stories that swam together in his head, these narratives. Shamgar would have climbed onto something and just made his way by foot. Delilah would have cross-dressed, disguised herself and become a bandit king whose people ferried her. The Royal Guard – god, what name did he have that Enk could use – would have just walked into the water and swam. That's what his mind was telling him to do.

Innogen swung her legs idly, resting her elbows on her knees. “Y'know, this is where your girlfriend's meant to invigorate you.”

“What? I don't have -”

“Well, nah, y'don't,” she said, laughing. “Honestly, always thought you might be gay, but-”

“I'm not gay!” Enk blurted out, narrowing his gaze. It wasn't even really mockery, it was just pure instinct now.

“See, in all the movies, the boy who's all too serious for his good, at this point, has a weird thing that pushes him out of his comfort zone thanks to a girl-” she gestured over her shoulder, “Penguin-hat, right?”

“She was wearing a cardigan.”

“Penguin-Cardigan?”

“I don't even know.”

“Point is, you're all down an'disconsolate and murky, and then she shows up to show you you're going about your life all arse-backwards.” She said. “Would that make you feel better...?”

Enk sighed heavily. Honestly, a movie script, as stupid as that was, would make him feel better. Even as that thought rattled through his mind, though, he felt ashen in his mouth. “No.” he shook his head.

“Good. Those movies are awful.” Innogen said, dusting herself off. “Sit tight, Enk. I'm going to see what I can do.”

Canada can be compared to a slightly unclean measuring cup, with almost all of its population clinging to its bottom edge and the sides. The chill of winter could be pushed back by the ocean's weight, but it didn't stop the snows when nature decided to paint the town white. That didn't stop the boats from going out anyway – some farmers, some couriers, some pleasure boaters – lunatics – and some patrolling to see that people kept themselves safe.

Despite this, Canada, as the second-largest nation in the world, paid host to some of the most beautiful natural vistas white people can easily see without having to learn a second language.

The net cafe down by the wharf sold internet time at two dollars an hour, which meant mathematically it cost Innogen twenty cents to hunt down the nearest cruise ship passing by their way on its way to circle up into the glorious arctic displays, before swiftly turning tail and heading way, way back south again, as soon as possible because holy heck it's cold. It took another ten cents

of time to find it on a website designed to track positions of loved ones. A few more minutes and she was back out heading down the wharf, sneakers squeaking before she dropped next to Enk.

“Soooo,” she began.

“You shouldn't begin a sentence like that.”

“So what?”

“I mean, it's...” Enk huffed and wished he had something to throw in the water. “... It's bad grammar.”

“Tabernac. Don't tell me what's bad grammar or I'll throw you in and our grammar can fish you back out.”

Enk laughed, but the laugh was against his will. Smiling despite his gloom. He'd had such purpose. It was so easy to cast his mind back. Jubal wanted to fight to live, and could endure the walk, if he was with his family. Delilah wanted freedom so dearly she could destroy a god to claim it. Shamgar...

Okay, Shamgar was kind of crazy? But he was driven.

Enk wasn't driven. Those people watched kings being displaced, watched empires being dawning, they saw change happening, change that Enk had spent most of his adolescent life actively avoiding. Everything in his life was so comfortable, so pattern, so rote – why couldn't he just go back to that?

Innogen leant in against his arm and bumped her head against his. “Okay, you're going to have to trust me on this one, but I think we can steal a ship.”

... Why oh why oh why couldn't he go back to that?

“I mean, we'll have to get a little way out, then we can juke onto a cruise vessel that's heading south. That's where this thing is, right? Middle of the Atlantic?”

“If it's, like, anywhere, a cruise ship will avoid it.”

Whap. Innogen smacked her hand into her cousin's forehead. “Okay, hi, hey, guess we're doing this now. Hey, Enk! How you doing?”

Enkudu looked at his cousin, momentarily stunned. What the hell was this, what was she getting at? Rubbing his forehead, he leant back. “Well, um, I'm good...” he managed, on the second mumble.

“Well, that's not what I'd have expected you to say,” she said, leaning forwards and looking not at the boy, but at the water. “Because you collapsed a few days ago, and a day before that, I collapsed, and there was also zombie hamsters.”

Enk shivered a little, and bit his lip.

“I guess what I'm so-so-so-so-saying,” Innogen said, wrapping an arm around his shoulder and punching a lone knuckle into his temple, light enough to only just hurt. “is that you wanna actually talk to me?”

Enk sagged at the shoulders again. It felt like no matter how many times he did that, he only noticed his shoulders when they felt like they were about to slither off his sides and run away to join the circus. Defeated, he looked out onto the waves.

"I... think we need to stop the thing in the ocean."

"We do?" Innogen asked.

"We do. There ... I mean, there aren't any other witches around that we know of."

"Lots of people say they're witches," Innogen said, her tone leading, a little flinty.

"Not many people know what that means," he swallowed. "We're witches, aren't we?"

"We are. And what's your name."

Oh augh she had to. Drawing his breath, he lowered his head and let his hair tumble in front of his eyes as he said: "Enkudu."

"Attaboy." Innogen said, shifting. "You can come with me, then."

"Wait, I can come with you?" Enk asked, but Innogen was standing, walking down the wharf, her ponytail swaying as she went. "You weren't-"

"Damn right I was going to leave you," Innogen cackled, standing at the edge of the wooden walkway, her heels rocking on sandy clay. "Love you to bits, Enk, but if there's anything out there worth doing, I want someone coming with me who wants to do things. Not, you know, avoid doing things. You can be, I wanna do. C'mon. We gotta go talk to your mom about stealing a boat."

## Chapter Fifteen

Innogen and Enk only had a few days after the return of Magic before they set out on their journey. Barbara had over a month, practising her warlock powers. Holland hid from school for weeks, knowing that with all the people disappeared, nobody would notice the one who was not. Angus slipped into the arms of Grey London mere days after it all began.

For Enk, the day of magic's return was the start of winter; for Holland, the dawn of summer. No seasons sat at the equator, though, the boundless torrent of sunshine sheeting down onto dull, jade faures, each one as large as a warehouse wall, into which were carved three faces.

The faces did not own human shape; they were symmetrical down the centre, but not possessed of humanoid character in any other way. Each face was markedly different, with one possessed of a pair of grasping tentacles, studded on one side with shimmering, interlocking plates, and on the bottom with soft flesh from which finer hairs sprouted. Another had a pair of stalks, folded in against the central line of its pouchy, shelled cheeks, eye of polished stone that shone brightly even through the ages. The third had not a single mouth but rather an orchestra of interlocking and interconnected pedipalps, little bony structures that were rendered so lifelike in the unmoving stone that they seemed to twitch as the eye scanned from one side to the other.

Cards looked down at the shape from her position in the helicopter. White hair flying, her thumb on the rack of paper in her pocket, duffel bag by her feet with something indescribable bobbing in the ocean before her. It was as close as she'd ever felt to home, at least since the many microfractures in her life that had put her in Colombia's jungles before the threats that the drug cartels brought.

Next to her, the general was bellowing.

"Basically, getting too close to it is dangerous! Y'see the channels on it?" he said, leaning forwards, pointing at the jade. "The water runs into them, lights up, and something goes, like, really wrong!" The roar of his voice only just matched the blades and the whipping winds. "We've landed a few frogmen on it, but we can't send 'em in without knowing for sure what we're getting in to."

Out flipped the card:

Not Surprised.

A laugh. "Basically, nobody wants to be responsible for what goes on! It's in international waters, nobody wants to take credit, and we've all got our own fires at home to take care of! So!"

Take Care Of It, Right?

"Just recon! We need you to tell us--"

A flat look.

"... We need you to report back on what you see in there!"

Cards sighed, resting her hand on the frame of the helicopter. The duffel bag. Shoving her foot against it, she considered just how full it was, how much more she had to go. Shoving with her foot,

she kicked the bag underneath the bench, against the older man's wheelchair, producing another card in one hand.

I will be coming back for these.

He swallowed slightly, gripping the buckles of his seatbelts. Hesitation got you killed in this job. "Okay," he said, gesturing. "Take us down!"

\*

The kiss of whipping air, the embrace of the water, the silence of the water. The rippling waves around carried a stranger character, a literal sussurus that rippled wordlessly through her skin, her bones, her skull. Right there, she knew how the ships were kept away.

The whispering rippled through the fluid of the water, and a clear spiral of empty air circled around the Floating Entity. Things that drew close disturbed the still air; the still air pushed air into the patterns, and that started the magic, which set up crosswinds – and worse, shooting lances of cold air against the thing that disturbed the pattern. The unnatural stillness of the ocean was more of this pattern – the water lapped the sides of the device, flowed up into the patterns, then magic flared and spiralled back down against the surface again. It was flattened. It was stilled.

Throughout her career, she had many times faced situations that others had described as weird. You saw a combat veteran going native, or delve into something barbaric, or you watched the ways people transformed their culture in response to drug cartels. Sometimes, people commented on what they'd seen her do.

Continually in her mind, the word bubbled back up. This was weird. Not once had anything ever felt so weird. Weird was relative. Weird was what people thought an albino latina mercenary with CIA training was. To Cards, that wasn't weird. She lived that every day. An area larger than a football field in the middle of the ocean with water so still that it sounded like it was whispering ... that, that was weird.

Fingers gripped the surface, and like a shadow fleeing a sunrise, she slid up the side of the structure.

Those were thoughts for another day.

Cards arrived on the drifting green, the *device of the sea*, without knowing its name. It simply was *the thing*, and it wasn't like she'd written down what it was on her tiny preselected library of communications. That was fine, though, because somewhere in her brain, the machinery that *cared* about what things were called, what weird things were and how very important they were to people.

Cards had, after all, spent years never even being referred to by her name. Those that knew it didn't say it, and those that said it didn't have the courage to say it a second time. To care much about the name of a vast, jade structure, the size of a manor seemed rather pointless. When she was done with this task, after all, she could return to her strange, one-woman war. A different story, a story about someone else's life, about her goals, about the burning rage that sat in the pit of her stomach, about drugs and hate and revenge.

Cards was a very strange woman in a place whose name she did not know.

Enkudu and Innogen were the next to see it on the horizon. Squatting over the foamy waves like an enormous grey-green frog, Innogen broached the question that one human on the planet had a possible chance of answering.

“What is it called, anyway?”

“I dunno,” Enk said, ruining everything.

Getting to the cruise ship, convincing his mother to come with them, then to not come with them, then convincing her to just stay on the cruise ship as their 'back up' swayed in Enk's brain like little beads on a long string. Weeks – weeks! – of time had slithered past him, but that aching, twitching sense of urgency pushed against his insides every time he went to sleep in his own bed, every time a day finished in which he did nothing but practice magic with Innogen, every time he *didn't get closer to here*.

That unflappable confidence, that ironshod spine that defined Innogen had simply accepted the time. Weeks? She planned it. She mapped it out. Then she set herself goals. There were *rules* during this period, there were *orders* that she set herself. Through those days, Enk had watched Innogen, fuelled by magic and by a *need* to not waste her time, shifting slowly and steadily into something that even his mother had *never* imagined when the word uttered was *witch*.

Innogen didn't seem *taller*, but she sure seemed *more*. She'd taken to wearing beads around her wrists, slightly profane symbols of religiosity in which she didn't believe. Her snow-tan had grown uniform, her magic fine, her expression grim. *Her* parents had been just as twisted as Enk's about the whole affair, wringing their hands and quietly wondering about what this magical influx meant.

*Not one* of them had been able to do a twentieth of what Innogen could do. When Enk had explained to the family the risks of the device in the ocean, the great, vast relic of a bygone civilisation, the family meetings had been awkward but also with a certain pained embarrassment as they acknowledged that none of them knew a damn thing. They'd been witches the way most of Enk's friends had been Christians. It was one thing to go to church to get married, it was entirely another, far more terrifying thing for the heavens to part and God to start turning water into wine in semi-random ways. Then with the thunderbolts and all of the smiting and – basically, nobody had any clue what to do.

It'd been hard on Innogen, when she realised that her parents and her aunt and her cousin really existed in a world that prayed for rain but owned no umbrellas. People who wanted magic to be real but had been incredibly unprepared for the idea of it. Seeing her own parents looking *to her* for advice, for guidance – for a *lead* – in all this mess had been very hard.

Innogen for all of her struggles, though had *no idea* how hard it'd been on Enk.

Innogen had been toning her body, practicing her magic, and reshaping her mind. Patterns that had been so hard to recreate perfectly now had such a margin of error that she seemed less like a cauldron-turning witch and more like something out of a fantasy cartoon, throwing bright, sparkling blasts from her fists, throwing things without touching them, and repairing harm to herself with

chants and words. When he'd walked into the kitchen to find Innogen with a cleaver stuck in her forearm he'd fainted, which meant the experience did more harm to him than it did to her.

Enk had not been experiencing that. If magic was a flow, as a river, Innogen had constructed dams, let the energy well up within her, and drew that power out in controlled bursts that created energy. Enk was adrift, on a raft, pulled along by whorls and eddies. Inside his mind there were the borrowed dreams of at least four names; four people who dwelled in deserts, who rebelled against their lives.

One of those people were not what Enkudu considered people. That thought kept bothering him. Waking up and wondering where his exoskeleton had been, or why he wasn't due a moult yet. Enk had only ever spoken one language, but the girls at school who spoke French – there may have been boys that spoke French, but for some reason, Enk never remembered them – had told him once that *thinking* in a second language could be confusing. Enk woke up some mornings thinking in Aramaic, in Hebrew, and in that... that *strange* language that didn't even have human words.

Reaching into the wells of his memory, Enk swallowed the nausea that came with it, the feeling of *air* on his *shell* and the *softness* of his form. That reach was done with mental hands, but the grasping was done with mental chelicera. The information came to him while he blinked in the painful brightness of a cruise ship day, parties and bars and laughter down on the shuffleboard deck echoing even unto him where he stood, seeming alien and strange despite its boring simplicity.

Words they'd used had involved two different types of language, in parallel. Bubbles of air forced in the water as well as a keening sound that travelled far; words had a 'large' reference, a 'small' reference. It was a language in which had worked engineers, architects, poets, alchemists, magicians, madmen, and kings. Sometimes, all at once. But how best to explain how it sounded? To simply... say the words, as they sat in Enk's mind?

"They called it *Great-Silence-of-Forever-Under-Sea*." He swallowed slightly, and pulled his coat around himself, as Innogen began to weave the dweomer that would render them invisible while they began their plan to steal a boat. "Or just *Forever*."

\*

The first steam engine was created in the first century, and did nothing more than spin around in place. It was seen as a minor curiosity by the philosopher who constructed it, a little toy for the entertainment of simple minds, but not to be put to any meaningful purpose. A literal steam engine rocket, the device – an *aeolipile* – was made, then seemingly forgotten about. The *railway* was invented seven centuries earlier – and the carts on that rail were pulled by human slaves.

Invention is driven by needs. The Greeks didn't need a massive engine that hauled goods from place A to place B. They had slaves for that, and much of what they needed, they'd get from local areas.

On the other hand, when the British Empire needed to move things further than slaves could easily lug them, the two technologies came together and formed the spine of an economy. Seems that the needs were not met by what slaves they had.

On the other claw, the civilisation that gave rise to the *Forever* predated humanity. Many nations of the crab people, spread across the narrow band between beach and depths, building and mining the world with the tools shod about with runes.

They did not mine for iron. They did not craft engines, did not build libraries, and while they spread into new territories for new spawning beds, with high rocks and regular eddies, to ease the flow of eggs into new territories. Oh, how human biologists would love to know of them, if only to try and explain the weirdness of *sacculina*! They grew corals and crafted out of simple stones things they could scrip with runes, runes that were worn away and made meaningless in time, as the magic fizzed away.

In the lifespan of a four *billion* year old planet, humanity knew that they only existed for a hundred thousand years, give or take. They also knew another race like them emerged in that same time. What seemed so strange is how few ever imagined that someone *else* had happened *even before that*. A whole civilisation that formed, developed, rose...

When they fell it was a mere century of centuries before there was nothing left of whatever they had been.

\*

It was like something out of a videogame, a zone of *arbitrary punishment*. When the boat stemmed a little closer, the water rippled and distorted, its totally unnatural stillness discontented by even the smallest waves pushed against it. The current pushed back, and no matter how Innogen tacked – tacked was the right word, right? – the boat bounced back and stuck in place. It was like trying to boat uphill.

The military vessels were no longer there, though. With other concerns, it seemed warships were not too important to the governments who had an interest on the *Forever*. Helicopters buzzed by periodically. Planes may well have taken from a higher point. While Enk clung to the edges of the small stolen boat, he tried to ignore the pieces of broken flotsam, the drifting chunks of boat-and-what-else that wafted around that edge of the stillness. Adjusting his lifejacket, he huffed a sigh and tried to tune his thoughts back to Innogen's yelling.

"It's... like a rune!" she said.

Enk's memory dredged up its explanation easily. A rune. A pattern into which magic flowed, and reacted in a way to influence matter outside of the rune. Enk's own mind was a little cross-section of ancient runes, runes that had caught the shape of other, older thought patterns, and that was why he could remember... others. How they thought, what they felt. That disorientation was enough to make him seasick on land – but here on the ocean, it was so easy to think of... think of...

The guy with the spines and the claws and the hard-shelled underside, the guy who remembered *moulting* and preparing his dorsal package of eggs. It was easy to think of *his* thoughts, to think of *his* magic, and *his* ability to fight and some part of Enk knew that he wasn't remembering things correctly but Enk had enough of his life being complicated right now and remembering having claws and four extra legs was *way* more disorienting than remembering having... like uterus-balls. *Whatever*.

It was easier to think of ... that ... crab-person.

Innogen swung forwards on one of the cables, leaning over the prow of the boat, planting her hand on Enk's. "Stay with me, Crabbypants."

"Bwhuh. Yeah, a Rune, right. You mean, the water...?"

"Flows into the runes and finishes them. It's how it's reacting, like, even though it's... not really running?"

"That why it yells, y'think?" Enk asked. And yell it did. The bellowing sound that rippled across the world, the sound that had knocked Innogen over like a hammer, was not just a metaphor this close; wind seemed to build up in the depths of the massive jade structure, rippled... and *blasted* back out again, sounding like a vast, mournful wail.

*Mournful whale.*

Huh, that was an uncomfortable thing to remember, for some reason. Enk shook his head. "Yeah, like... it's designed to work even if nobody's doing anything to it! It's a ... a... fail-deadly!" he said. "We need to avoid disturbing the water to get any closer!"

Innogen didn't ask *or else*. A bobbing piece of helicopter fan sat on the still surface not twenty feet away. It, apparently, wasn't disturbing the water *enough*. "Don't disturb the water... huh." Innogen asked.

And then she leapt. Innogen threw herself forwards off the edge of the boat, pushing down on it as she went – and as her arcing body – thrown surprisingly high – swept over the pond-still surface of the ocean, she brought her hands down, together, held the pattern in her mind, closed her eyes and-

*pop!*

- the detonation of energy from between her hands was a *gasp* against the surface of the water, sending only the faintest ripple along its edge. A swell of motion, a bubbling in the water. Enk didn't even realise he was holding his breath as he saw it, until the a chain of purple and red energy, crackling in *lines* fell down out of the sky, coring down against the surface of the water. While the mystery of the drifting ship parts was explained, Enk was too saturated with terror to do anything but watch every last detail in vivid technicolour. The way the water surface didn't ripple with the energy coursing through it. The way the energy seemed to ripple and defray under the surface, spreading out like cream in coffee, but somehow leaving the surface glassy. The way that the coursing strands of energy seemed to cut the air, leaving behind a strange, corroded scent he couldn't quite understand,

Innogen had no appreciation for this, though. She was twenty meters on, cresting her arc and falling once more, balling up her hands and bracing to do the exact same thing again. If disturbing the water was the problem, she just needed to keep ahead of the disturbance. It wasn't that far...

Wasn't this where the heroine had a moment of confidence, slipping when confronted with the terror of what she was doing? Enk was sure there was something like that. He knew that he might

have been able – well, not literally, but he was *sure* that if he tried what Innogen was now doing without any seeming effort, he'd have tumbled into the ocean and been bolted into shark-food.

Innogen didn't have time for that.

Landing on the jade with flat, sneakered feet, Innogen hooked her toes in a rune-wrought shape and started to climb, to no dire effect. Standing up as she reached a flat point on a crab-thing's face, she turned, waving her arm above her head and crowed, "Okay, seems you can get out here, if..."

Enk heard "... .... ..!" Which was fine, because all he had to communicate in response was embarrassed frustration. His cousin had just thrown herself through the sky like some sort of rocket-jumping videogame character, and she did it *so effortlessly*. Trying not to fume, Enk reached up to stroke his second set of chelicerata-

Wait, no, he didn't have those! He didn't have ... those things around his mouth or things around his hips or the ability to render the surface of water mirror-glass for hunting birds, or the ability to breath in water! He was just-

Hang on, one of those sounded useful.

Enk straightened up, looking at the edge of the boat, at that eerie line in the water where the swashing waves simply settled into a flatness, and rippled into nothing like they were embarrassed. Innogen created patterns in her mind, patterns Enk had had to create with little rituals and scent triggers and all sorts of things he'd been dreadful at using. That was how things had been for *Enk*...

But not for *that crab person*.

Stepping out, over the edge, Enk planted one foot on the surface of the water and felt his heart leap into his throat as it started to sink.

Then stop.

Hanging like in someone's arms, Enk slowly lifted his other foot out of the boat... and stood on the surface of the water. It did not so much as *ripple*, wafting silently along with the motions of his feet; he lifted his feet, the water stayed concrete-still underneath him. He knew he had to be displacing it with each step. Scientifically, he had to know that. But ...

The King's Guardian knew this spell.

Each step came with agonising concentration. Maybe more than was necessary – but to slip up once meant either a bolt from above, or worse, to slip into the depths of the ocean where *who knew* what his memory would throw in his face. One meter at a time, Enk stepped, slow and steady, to reach the edge of *Forever* where Innogen sat, looking down, inquisitive. Too worried to say anything.

"C'mon," she said. "I found a hatch-type thing." Grabbing Enk by his hand, she pulled him up to stand on the platform with her.

The crab-people, they from below and before, had wanted a way to walk the water, to hunt birds.

What technology they'd needed, they'd made.

## Chapter Sixteen

You develop the technology you need to solve the problems you have. When you have a problem with breaking rocks and cutting bronze armour, you tend to develop iron. When you have problems of inadequate archers and large labour forces, you will probably develop muskets. When you have enormous huge piles of money and a military-industrial complex, maybe it's just natural to develop unmanned drones.

The Forever's jade exterior gave way to a dark, polished green corridors. Each corridor was almost circular; flat on the bottom, with a ridge running along the middle about elbow-height for Enkudu. Innogen had to duck slightly in the passage. While the walls had every reason to be *wet*, they instead felt strangely dry to the touch. When Enk laid his fingers on the surface – nervously at first, then more confidently when it failed to yield, despite its seemingly organic feel.

*Why are you even here*, he wondered. It was only a moment after he thought that that he realised he wasn't thinking about the Forever, but about himself. This was some Famous Five stuff. Somehow, no adults had been involved in this story, somehow it was just Innogen and himself, and ... and it just happened because Innogen had had the confidence to make it happen. That was still strange, to him. That she had the confidence at all, really.

Why didn't he?

The corridor was never, as far as Enk could tell, straight. The whole of the Forever was circular from the outside, and the path they walked seemed to curve off in either direction once past the hatch. When Innogen stepped forwards, her sneakers *squeaked* like she was stepping on fine sand. Enk followed, but without the same firmness – gentle steps like he was afraid he'd sink down in.

"Innogen...?" he asked, looking back behind himself, nervous at the deep, inky blankness that filled the hall behind them. "Is this the right way?"

She laughed, brash as ever: "We'll make it the right way."

Good grief, she was enjoying this so much!

The tunnel, grim as it was, did breathe with a strange, lazy light, glimmering under the green of the passageway. The light seemed to brighten as they walked on, drawing them onwards and inwards. The passage curled up – then down again, as it belled outwards. The belling expanded further – and then as the pair rounded a corner, a chamber the size of a large room, nearly spherical... in which dozens of shells, the size of Enk's chest, lay scattered across the floor in pools of slowly smoking liquid.

"... The heck..." Innogen murmured, standing in the doorway – unconsciously putting her arm back behind her, protecting Enk with her body. "Hey, Enk, you know these guys..." she said, swallowing, and looking down at the prone form of whole crab-like people. "... Why are there still some... like... is this... should they-"

Enk leant around Innogen, swallowing nervously as he surveyed what was, without any doubt, something... dead. But fluid didn't sit like that in the ocean, and every sign of the people who had

been the crabs had faded away, hadn't it? Without things like iron they'd been claimed by the deep seas, lost to forever, and eroded into the tiniest pieces the shoals could render. Without magic to sustain them, they'd died out...

Why then, these... fresh forms?

Enk stepped forwards to look the forms over, trying to swallow what fear he had. The figure was like a crab – well, it was like the crabs in his memory – but it wasn't a crab. It wasn't even like one of the crabs in his memory. As he tilted the shell, and watched a complicated collection of spiralling coral fall from within. Runes glimmered on their surfaces, punctured and torn by some... some thing.

"They're not crabs..." Enk said, poking a piece of coral – watching as it tumbled into the hissing liquid pooling on the floor, foaming along its edges, dissolving into a scummy film atop the fluid. "They're, like..."

Enk would have to get used to a life of being interrupted. A spine the length of his arm shot over his head, and he ducked forwards after it streaked past. Balance upset, he waved his arms behind him, flailing backwards, trying to avoid falling from his precarious toe-weighted perch into the fluid. It could dissolve coral, after all, and Enk's imagination was so fertile a place to imagine what else it might do to his skin.

The moment of material dread as Enk leant back, back, back, flailing his arms and trying to not tumble face-first into oblivion, was so palpable he didn't really hear what happened behind him. He didn't hear Innogen wheeling on the guard that stirred; he didn't see her in those short few seconds, running up the side of the curled wall, throwing a blast of force down underneath her – a crackling charge of lightning that filled the air with sound and ozone – and land atop the green guardian as it lumbered mindlessly forward. Enk didn't her plant her hands atop the spines of the not-crab, the *guardian drone*, and fill the air with such a crackle of ozone as to make eyes water.

He just saw his own panicked, terrified face, reflected in still, corrosive waters... before he slumped back onto his butt, while Innogen, spine in hand, slid off the creature she'd just... well, slain. Destroyed? Wiping green goo off her hands – her hands! - she ducked back while the form sunk down into a prone helplessness and spurted fluid all around. It sure as hell didn't seem to phase her.

Enk's lifejacket, on the other hand, didn't seem very comfortable with the goo. The hissing sound hit his ears only slightly before the positively toxic scent filled his lungs. Gripping buckles and stripping it off quickly, Enk managed to hold himself back from a swoon, swinging the chemically-burning composite of plastics and foam away from himself against one of the dull-lit walls. Gasping for breath, he slumped down by the doorway, hands on the floor, head down, and tried to breath a breath that didn't feel simultaneously too wet and not wet enough.

*Would this stop her?*

As quickly as that thought bubbled up behind Enk's eyes, the response flooded back: *Who?*

"You okay, there...?" Innogen said, hunkering down on one knee, brushing her hair out of her eyes. A scrape along her cheek was red and showing the signs of a truly impressive bruise, but it didn't stop her from giving him a grin like a tiger.

"... Yeah..." Enk said, slowly pulling himself up and trying to suppress the tiny song of resentment that played in the back of his mind. The reminder that it was just so easy for Innogen to, to, to... to just **be**. "I'm ok-" and the gun interrupted him.

"That's..." Enk said, looking down at his foot.

"That's a gun."

"That's a really, really fancy gun." Enk continued.

"Would you... would you like to stop standing on it?"

Enk hopped backwards like his foot was on fire. Innogen, ever cautious, leant forwards and poked it with the chunk of torn-off spine. "Did... did the crab people make..." she squinted. "Handguns with the word 'Desert Eagle' written on them?" Pause. "In English?"

"No..." Enk said. "No, I don't *think* that they did..."

The gun became a point of contention between the two. It was more of a philosophical question for the pair. A classic dichotomy, where Enk wanted to run away from it very, very quickly, while Innogen wanted to run away from it in the opposite direction, towards whatever it was that had dropped it.

"It's a *gun*." Enk asserted, as if that made his point for him.

Innogen watched him inquisitively as he spoke. It was a long-internalised mannerism of the family. Somehow, they'd learned that you don't just blurt out your opinion at someone when they're being an idiot; you let them be an idiot for a bit, and signal your disapproval with head gestures and narrowed eyes, suggesting that *you're* the mature one. Growing up had always been that awkward race towards claiming the label of maturity.

Maturity, however, could go hang in the face of fear.

"I mean, it's a *gun*," Enk repeated, louder, flailing his arms out by his side. When that didn't work, he pointed down at it - and even as he did, he leant away, like the gun was possessed of some personal animus, some need within it to act.

"It's an *empty* gun," Innogen said, a lesser of her two points. "And I don't think it can hear you."

Enk felt his cheeks flash hot at that, mentally scoring one for his cousin. It wasn't frivolous: he knew she was doing it too. "That's not my point," he blustered, and rolled on as he circled. "That means there's someone else in here, with a gun!"

Innogen turned that birdlike head tilt down to look at the gun on the floor. Then she looked up at Enk, narrowing her eyes, then looked back at the gun. Enk. Gun. Enk. Gun - as if that repetition could force him to reconsider what he said. Enk caught it only a moment later, when she started the cycle once more, "Well, who *had* a gun! At least *one* gun!" The thought connected, "Who's to say they don't have *another* gun?"

Innogen didn't *facepalm*, per se, but she rubbed her temples with her fingertips. "Kay, kay, okay, Enk? Enk? They might have a *bazooka* and an attack dog. They might be twelve feet tall and made of *sharks*," she said, wriggling her fingers as he leant towards her cousin.

*While you're making your point, it's not helping me be less scared*, Enk **didn't** say. Ten minutes later when he thought of it, he thought of it very, very hard and bit his lower lip and puffed out his cheeks in exasperation behind Innogen's back, and *wished* he'd thought of it earlier. That was the way of all arguments within the family, really - with Enk always wishing he'd had it in him to be the smart, clever, dynamic person he could be in the back of his head all the time.

Innogen's path through the bowels of the machine pulled Enk along, side passages ignored. She'd won the argument, and the confidence in her step drew them further in... all without ever saying the trump argument that Enk knew he couldn't fight:

*We're Witches.*

\*

"Mom, mom. Okay, calm down, mom! Mom, I landed on my feet."

Holland had never found two weeks to be a long time. Two weeks of school time was, what, a few tests, two PE events to hide from, two embarrassing admissions on Friday afternoon of doing 'nothing' and two Saturday mornings watching black-and-white cartoons on a cheap TV. Two weeks was a slide of pills and a grocery shopping trip when the Centrelink cheque cleared, before He realised he had money and spent it all at the pub. Two weeks during school holidays was basically gone in *no* time.

Two weeks with Barbara around was *amazing*.

First things first, they found a way to contact Barbara's parents. Normally, Holland would have used the school phone, but that wasn't an option any more. Without small change, phoning Texas on a payphone was just flat-out not an option. They'd been hiding in the back of the library, trying to manage the phone before the nice young man, with the crinkly brown hair and the big black glasses 'caught' them, explained to them how to access the operator, and what a trunk call was, and what it was for.

That became part of the routine.

The world was becoming smaller. The internet worked; telecommunications networks were happily buzzing along, and that brought news... but the news seemed to be nothing but terrifying stories of people barricading themselves in, hunkering down, world governments trying to communicate without leaving their homes. Growing up in Australia, Holland had always felt that America was basically just over there, because all their TV shows were on if you tuned on to Ten or Seven or Nine, and Britain was just over the other direction, a bit, thanks to the ABC showing the BBC. The world wasn't very big, and it was very white, and it was full of people just like Holland, but, of course *nothing* really like Holland.

With flight shut down, with air channels churning with dreadful storms of green fire, Barbara's parents had started making arrangements for a sea vessel. Somehow, the oceans were – relatively –

safe for travel, so some trade, some movement, was transpiring. Supplies were going from countries that could handle them to countries that needed them. Australia and New Zealand, apparently, were safe enough. Without that easy reach, though, to America, to England, Holland felt the vast emptiness of Australia, felt the isolation of the whole affair, more keenly.

Every two days, like clockwork, they made their way into town to hit the library at noon. They made the trunk call – thank goodness for that kind librarian – and Barbara talked to her mother or her father, and reassured them. It was just like a little vacation, she said.

When Holland and Barbara had done the trip on Saturday, Barbara had asked some really weird questions. *What Kind of Potatoes, Should I Try And Get Some Whiskey, Do You Prepare The Bacon Any Way...?* And none of it had made any sense for Holland. But then they'd gone to the store, and they'd picked up potatoes at the green grocers, smiling at the Vietnamese family that ran the place. They'd dropped into the local delicatessen, buying a tiny, tiny pot of honey, they'd bought thick-cut bacon.

Holland knew that at some point, the government would get around to asking where He'd gone. They'd stop depositing the money, and Holland would have to come up with something then. But without him turning money into beer into bruises and piss, the two could afford some small, tasty treats like that.

They'd moved bookshelves over the hole in the wall. They were making something of a life, making some *stable place*. Two weeks was no time at all.. but in two weeks, Holland could feel stable ground growing underfoot, could feel a routine, a regularity, could feel... okay. All it took was one person, at least, one person, to tell Holland... *You're Okay*. All that time trying to go unnoticed...

Thank goodness for the Magical Apocalypse, and the saw-toothed teleporting creep with the stars all over his skin, or Holland might not have found that one person. That... first person?

Then in the evening on Sunday, at midnight, Barbara sat them down to a dinner at midnight, quietly pushy, but kind. She'd cooked – the only time she did – baking potatoes in the oven, doing the bacon on the gas oven, with onions and a bit of honey. They'd come out crispy in places, soft in others, burnt in others, but it was all okay, because Holland and Barbara, two friends, sat at the table, ate together, and sipped that sweet, honeyed cordial drink Barbara had made.

And then, at midnight, Barbara drew her breath, pushed her hair back over her shoulder, and stated, clearing her throat:

"Let me tell you, then, of our family's oaths.

Let me tell you of power, coiled within us.

Let us speak of the snake and the song."

She paused, long enough to look at Holland's reaction; Barbara's eyes flicked to her friend's, then to her food, then down to her cup, focusing on the golden liquid as she went on.

"We stand before the Prince of a Thousand Eyes,

We raise unto him the least of us

He sees us, he knows us, he remembers, remembers, remembers our debts.

We promise to own as little as we can.

We promise to share the stories of those who own ideas.

We promise to do nothing to deserve our name.

We promise to strike no man with hand or foot.

We promise to endure famine with the least.

We promise to burn our memories.

And we promise to remember, remember, remember, what we are owed."

The awkward silence that followed filled with a plastic plate being clinked by a metal fork. Holland finally mustered it to ask, "What was... what was that?"

"It's this... family ritual thing," Barbara said, blushing a little, looking at her plate assiduously. "It's, I mean,"

"It's okay," Holland blurted, waving hands, trying to reassure-

"But I just-"

"I mean, we don't-"

Silence.

Barbara shook her head, drew her breath, and smoothed down her blouse. The blouse she'd picked out of His bedroom, the clothes he'd kept from... *before*. It fit decent well enough. She finally spoke. "It matters to my dad," she said, unconsciously echoing a conversation her father had had with her mother, the first time *she'd* seen it, "and I hope you don't mind."

"I don't mind," Holland said, nodded, and meant it. A smile never more sincere had found Holland's face; and Barbara returned it, relieved.

That had been the first Sunday night. The next Sunday night, they'd done it again, and Holland had tried to mimic the oath. Barbara'd giggled, they'd shaken their heads, and that had been that.

Holland started working on Barbara's costume the next day. Barbara was a superhero, right? So Holland needed a costume. Holland had been altering clothes for years – putting pockets inside a hoodie was easy. Putting small weights in the hem of a skirt to keep it down, also easy. Fishing weights, from His garage. But every superheroine needed a symbol, something central, something that could be used as the centrepiece of her style... right?

Two weeks felt like no time at all, Holland considered, fingers working steadily on the embroidered patch, outlining the shape of a proud, golden lion.

\*

During World War II, the fear of the Allied forces was not a major bombing strike on the capital of England, London, but rather a massive, debilitating bombing attack on cities that provided the supporting infrastructure. A nuclear blast in London would have disarrayed the central command – it would have killed a large number of people. It would not, however, have killed the country the way that a loss of say, Birmingham would have. When enemies struck at one another, they struck at facilities that built things. They pounded at airfields and they mined and bombed railways.

It was not so much the people that mattered, but the things those people could do. An engineer could repair a plane, and he could repair another plane and he could keep repairing planes. A pilot could only fly one plane at a time. It wasn't the people who drove the war machine that mattered, it was the people who kept it working that did.

The modern world, the world of not-so-much-world-war, was no different. People pointed to the millionaires, the lucky few, the rich technologists or the spurned individuals who drove the infrastructure to take its cosmic leaps into the future. Few realised that it was the work of an army of system administrators, security analysts, electricians, plumbers, and groundskeepers that kept the entire ordinance moving forward.

It is a popular myth amongst people that one day, a large portion of the population will step out of the world and watch the ensuing mess. The myth usually features horse-like scorpions, dragons, whores and rivers of blood. What they don't seem to realise is just how little of that is necessary.

Zombie Apocalypse fiction, suffusing and consuming as it is, spreading and choking out other, less-nimble, less-popular types of fiction, worships at this same shrine. The notion that there needs to be some massive, supernatural, terrible change in society to provoke its downfall.

All it takes for the world to crumble is for enough people to not turn up to work.

## Chapter Seventeen

Spotlight had never been Holland's place. The window displays of tall spools of cloth and singer sewing machines, glossy and white with their untouched surfaces, had always seemed a defensive front, put up to lure out peoples' mothers – people that had them – as a sort of human barricade between the street and the fun stuff. Pillowcases and bedsettings and tablecloth racks – good grief! – were nothing interesting, but along the grey-blue pathways of pressed linoleum between display areas showing the most delightful of outdoor patio napkin rings, lurked the crafts section. A wondrous place, a place where modelling clay and brightly coloured home-made sticker systems waited for their discovery, where you could buy things that were fun without batteries, things that were fun without electricity or a big flat-screen plasma or Two To Five Players, Ages Nine And Up. Things that wanted to be creative, things that wanted to be used and made into other things, and the things they could become were things that you chose.

For some reason, Holland really envied the kids who had toys that encouraged change and creativity.

For some reason.

Barbara, on the other hand, had been slightly wowed by everything in the main street. She'd been stunned to see people crossing the street, shocked when Holland referred to the small knot of four cars at a light as 'pretty busy,' and when they'd stepped inside the Spotlight and she'd seen the sprawling complex that spread across three storeys and a full city block, wondered about why it was so small.

In many ways, Holland's view of America was shaped by television, and television never took you inside a Hobby Lobby if you weren't going to buy something at Hobby Lobby. It was a Hobby Lobby, what use did they have to be mentioned for non-advertising reasons. But Barbara came from this place of commercial palaces, places where single stores could occupy the space that Holland expected to be dedicated to entire shopping malls.

On the other hand, Barbara had gaped at the two parks that flanked the shopping district, with their towering artwork and their youth centres, so ha ha ha.

When they emerged from Spotlight, with blue and gold in bags, Holland couldn't help but wince at the feeling of the shopping. This only worked because the government was still sending out cheques, and hadn't looked into Matt's existence. That process was so automated that even as the world squealed into crisis, there had to be an end coming. Then... what. Two teenagers, one really cute, one passable, taking care of themselves in a world where nobody seemed to leave the house?

Barbara stopped short, looking down at her phone. She did that a lot – Holland had always thought it was a bit of a stereotype. School had been always far enough out that nobody had reception, which meant there was no reason to spend your time staring at a phone. But Barbara spoke to her phone, which made some sense. It was her main contact point with her home.

Holland had been a little disturbed, walking through the Spotlight, by just how many people said Miss, are you here with your daughter? Which was wrong on a lot of levels, not the least of which was that Holland, wearing a full sweater over a collared shirt and sneakers, was slightly shorter than

Barbara. It was like nobody expected two teenagers to go into a fabric store together, so they just didn't see Holland as Holland.

Sliiiiightly irritating, that!

Barbara leant against Holland's arm, her hands occupied on the phone, trying to keep Holland from walking on without her. Holland turned a little, standing on the sunny pavement, and leant forwards to look in at the phone – it seemed the thing to do.

*Λεω!u*

*a cιrce? εη? ιo ιιe η?ιw op o?*

*βυ?εαδε? no? εε ιι?εε? ιεηw*

"That's a tiny bit rude," Barbara said, admonishing.

"Oh, oh, I'm sorry," Holland blurted. "I just..."

"You can't read it, can you." Barbara asked, grinning.

"... No."

Barbara turned the phone slightly, standing next to Holland and holding the phone out. "Okay, Holland? This is Aikon. Aikon, this is my friend Holland."

The text -

*what exactly are you expecting*

*to do with all of the fabric a*

*nyway*

- remained on screen for only an instant before flashing over.

*hello holland*

"... Your phone can talk?"

"My phone can think." Barbara said, grinning down at it.

*to barbara and a remarkably la*

*rge number of other phones in*

*fact*

Holland peered at it owlshly. "Is this..."

Barbara swallowed. "Think ... Aikon is my sidekick."

*not you*

Holland leant back. "You th- I wasn't- I didn't want-"

*that was a joke*

Barbara smoothed back her blonde hair with one hand and cleared her throat, looking at the phone carefully. "Aikon's connected to mobile phone towers, which means he can..." she paused. "Hey, Aikon, what can you do?"

*can't do that dark knight thing*

"Yeah, but -"

*can connect to every single mob*

*ile phone in the world with eno*

*ugh time and assuming they are*

*on and near mobile phone recept*

*ion which in this country let m*

*e tell you is not such a picnic*

"Yeah, cellphone reception is kinda hard to keep stable around here..." Holland murmured.

"Anyway, we're going to make a superhero costume," Barbara said, *no irony in her voice at all*.

*oh good*

*then you'll go save the day?*

"The day needs saving?" Holland asked, still reading over Barbara's shoulder.

*2.3 billion people are missing*

"Wait, what?!" Holland leant forwards, not even realising how much of Barbara's personal space invasion it required.

*2.3 billion people are missing*

"He's very literal."

"Why's it a he...?" Holland asked, giving Barbara a quizzical look.

"I-"

*you want clarification?*

"Yes!" the two teens blurted at once.

*since the arrival of magic huma*

*ns have been disappearing from*

*industrialised and urban centre  
s at a rate hard to calculate.  
extrapolating that information  
is challenging since mostly it  
involves treating cellphone sig  
nals as unique individuals but  
they're not and well basically  
anyway. the point is that peopl  
e are going missing and they're  
going missing fast.*

Holland felt sick. Barbara's eyes widened. "Two point three billion people?"  
*two point four now but that's  
a level of semantics you don't  
necessarily need to keep up. th  
e rate of disappearance is incr  
easing.*

"What?!" Barbara asked, holding the phone. "Are- are you serious?"  
*yes*

Holland leant in and looked at the phone, as if it had eyes that could be stared into, as if it had a will that could be bullied with sheer force of bewildered, half-found strength. "Why."

*I don't know*

The phrase came out slowly, like Aikon was already nervous enough about using a pronoun, let alone admitting confusion.

Barbara put a finger on her temple. "They're just *gone*."

Holland swallowed, touching Barbara's shoulder. "W-what about that thing? The"

*prince of a thousand eyes*

A pause, an unsettling quiet. The houses nobody opened, the quiet in the streets, it all made a bit more sense. "It took Matt," Holland admitted.

Barbara bit her lip for a moment, "Was Matt your-"

"It took Matt," Holland asserted, as obstinate as possible.

\*

That night, the meal was quietly eaten. The music on Matt's CD player was a little tinny. The costume was sewn in silence.

Aikon had started a counter. Just ratcheting upwards, numbers piled up higher, showing the steady increase from one thing to another, the rate of disappearance. The people being taken away.

Holland often wondered in these moments why nobody did things. Holland had seen in school, videos about all sorts of terrible things going on in the world. Always, the thought kept bubbling up: Why was nobody doing anything.

Barbara came to Holland after dinner, clearing her throat. "When will the outfit be done?" She asked, hunkering down to sit next to the coffee table, strewn about with needles, thread, and swatches of cloth. "I mean, just..."

"I..." Holland didn't even know how to answer. "I mean..." There was so much stuff to organise, so much measurement to work with, and of course, Barbara might find it needed adjustments...

Barbara sat down next to Holland, swallowing. "Because... once you're done? I need to go chase the Prince."

Holland looked down into the blue cloth suspended between uncertain hands. "... And you don't think you'll come back."

Barbara shook her head. "... Yeah."

Holland looked up again. "It'll probably take a week or two." Drawing a serious breath. "... So I guess I'll come with you."

Barbara leant back at that, turning to look at Holland. In their short few weeks of friendship Barbara had found Holland to be many things, but outgoing wasn't one of them. Was it her boldness that drew her friend to stand with her...? Or was it that Holland didn't want to lose a friend?

Either way, the action was clear. Barbara grinned, grabbing Holland's hand, clenching a fist and squeezing. "Then we'll-OW!"

"Needles! Sorry sorry sorry!" Holland blurted, leaning back and letting the sewing fall downwards, landing messily between lap and floor. "Jeeze, I-"

Barbara laughed, sucking her thumb, bright red blood contrasting with her tanning skin. Pulling the finger from her mouth, she patted Holland on the head. "You gotta be careful. If needles are like, my kryptonite, we're going to be in so much trouble."

Holland looked around, uncertain, as Barbara stood, full of purpose. "Alright, so we're going to- wait, we're going to find him how?"

Barbara reached down for Holland's hand. "Don't worry. Wherever he is – I can go there."

Looking up at her, Holland couldn't help but tremble inwardly. There was a lion in Barbara – and when she spoke like that, that beast roared.

Holland took Barbara's hand. Barbara took one step.

And then they weren't there any more.

\*

At some point between the school and the field, Angus realised he'd started hallucinating. Whenever a house of dull grey sat at the right angle, cross from his seemingly linear path through the city, he'd start to see things that were almost colours. It was a relief, honestly - those little flashes of red and green and blue that reminded him of whizzing optical illusions he'd made in school after reading about them in some old textbook or other in the craft room, where a collection of straight black and white lines became a swirl of dull green or pale pink. It made a difference, looking down at his own shoes, seeing them grey, when he knew they were brown, his not-jeans, not-brand, not-good-enough pants, darker grey, and thinking they were black when they weren't in this perfectly monochromatic world. Belt, vest, shirt, tie, jacket, coat, all in various shades of dark grey, lighter grey, off-white, down to his own hands, dark-grey and not-so-dark grey, with the little off-white cuticles.

It stopped having meaning. The grey faded into black at curves and lines and that was that.

"I rather think he's hallucinating at this point."

There were also *them*.

When they'd changed into his outfit, copying it on either side, it'd been frustrating, moreso because he wasn't used to walking down the street in London being followed by people walking in lockstep if they weren't police, and that usually ended with a sheepish conversation and an apology. It was even more awkward when they moved in lockstep *with him*, giving every footfall that unpleasant choral quality.

Talking to them had been like talking to a newspaper - but that was the first time one of them had volunteered any words for a long while. Stopping short, Angus watched as the two strode, in their smooth, consistent step just beyond him - and then pivoted around one another, like parts of a clockwork, and faced him.

Smoothing his tie, Angus narrowed his eyes and peered at them. "Okay," he said, drawing his breath. "... How do you know that?"

The woman tilted her head one way, the man the other, and the pair shrugged. "I don't know what you're asking him for," she said. "He doesn't know anything you didn't put there," pointing with a finger at her twin accusingly.

"You know that's just as true of yourself," he said, pointing back in the same way, rigidly facing Angus and tilting his head. "And there's no there, there, either." He said, wiggling the finger accusingly at her.

As if in curt response, she leant over and bit his finger off, exposing momentary insides that weren't made of sinew and flesh but looked instead like spilling and curling black-and-white text, spread and smeared by sweat and human fumes. Showing no sign of pain, he drew the hand back and rubbed at the stump, while his sister idly crunched away in a way that sounded more like hard crisps than it sounded like the removal of a finger. Wiping her mouth with a demure fingertip, she tilted her head and looked at Angus expectantly.

"You'd imagine you'd have solved it by now, then?" She asked, even while her brother returned to pointing at her.

"Why?" Angus asked, drawing low, steady breaths, trying to not *yell*. He'd had quite a traumatic day, and he was convinced he was handling it in a fairly calm, British fashion. Somewhere, he fancied his own personal corner of the internet featured a *Keep Calm And Ignore The Greyness* poster. Still, he had his limits, and their silence earned them another, gritted, "Why?"

"Well, this is the time for answers," they said, in unison. "It's just how it would work. Isn't it?"

They seemed genuinely surprised. Putting his hands on his face, Angus drew a long, shuddering breath, feeling his shoulders ripple a little as the little boy who threw tantrums kicked on the walls of the mature, serious person Angus had convinced himself he'd become. "... Why, why, why, do you think that?"

"Because you think that." The choral response.

Angus rubbed both hands against the top of his head, gritting his teeth and managed to keep from yelling again. "I think that, do I?" he said, leaning forwards. "Every single last haunted-house fan, alien spotter and and and... uh... homeopath! used to think that I just 'wanted' the world to be like this! That I didn't *want* the world to have magic in it, and that's why I thought what I did!" Okay, well- "Here I am! Alright? Here's the real thing, here's something that's sure as hell happening and now I'm meant to explain it?! Because there's some arbitrary what, time?"

The two figures turned to each other, then looked back at him.

"You swore." He said.

"Quite a big swear." She said.

Angus threw his head back, planted his hands on his eyes and dragged in a breath that timed itself perfectly with the closing of his hands into fists. No. No. No, don't be that boy. That boy got sent to his room, that boy never solved anything. That boy got in trouble and got beat up for trying to fight. Just... Lowering his head and looking back at the figures, Angus growled. "What would you like to know?"

"Oh, this is much better!" she immediately said, leaning forwards into Angus' personal space. "What is Grey London?"

"It's a place where people are dragged by the *Prince of a Thousand Eyes*," Angus said, waving his hand dismissively, as if they should know this, "Where the Prince contains people, where things don't have to be complicated, where there's no magic messing things up, and no change. It's where

everything just is the way it is and will be tomorrow, if there is a tomorrow, because things don't change. It's the world, good enough, for those people who wish life was easier."

Even as the last words fell from his lips, Angus knew something was wrong. Knowing that, knowing to express it *like that* wasn't right. It wasn't his place to say those things because *he didn't know them*. That was *insane*. Not knowing *anything* so comprehensively in this place was *exactly* what had made him afraid of this place to start with. Swallowing, feeling something growing inside him, Angus raised his hand and snapped his fingers, gesturing to the twins. "... Anything else?" He said, trying to feel natural.

"Did the Prince make this place?" Asked the male twin.

"No, this place made the Prince. Wait, no, the same place that made the Prince also made this. They're sibling ideas."

"What makes this place like it is?" The female added.

"It exists in the mind, the place people who are comfortable dream of existing," Angus said, now practically *dancing* on the knowledge, the understanding that blossomed in him. "It's a sort of good-enough best-fit of the world where they act like most things are fine, or their little problems are big problems, but they never have to worry about a broken bone or being shot or or or..." and he threw his hand upwards. "It's why I can do this!" he said, snapping his fingers. "Because, because Grey London is about putting you someplace that won't upset you, or disturb you, or horrify you, it'll just be mundane grey nothing." He whirled and pointed behind him, keeping his eyes focused on the twins for fear looking away would break this spell. "I want to be a scholar. I want to be smart, I want to be listened to, and that doesn't disrupt anything, so I can just *be* that here." he swallowed. "... And... and... it's the time for answers, I think, so that's why I can do this."

"I didn't ask that." she said.

"Close enough," Angus said, rubbing his hand through his hair, scratching his scalp through his short hair. "You, you're Gemini. That's why you can't know this until I tell you. You're... you're..." and he waved his hands at the pair of them again. "And ... that's what makes the Prince of Eyes work. It's why-" he smacked his hand into his palm. "He's stars! He's just an idea of what the stars represent! People saw the mess on TV, people *knew* something was wrong, and they wanted someone, just *anyone* to come together and *fix* it. You know? Someone who could make it make sense." Angus' fingers clenched in that moment. He'd wanted that, too. That'd been why he'd been the first... to... Looking up at them, he pointed. "Constellations. That's what you are. Newspaper constellations. You're part of the crap we swap around-"

"That's not very nice," a twin said, but Angus was rolling.

"That everyone recognises. Nobody knows exactly what you mean but everyone knows what you are." A pause. "Sort of. *Sort of*. And the rest of them must be elsewhere, must be doing something, and-"

"We didn't ask...?" One twin said.

"... You're right." Angus said, looking forwards, at the never-ending expanse of Grey London. The spiralling road that wended up and down, pits of nowhere that curled back up and out again into equally vast expanses of ancient buildings that were never built, that just stood in people's minds as a symbol of Grey London. Where it always rains and never changes. The realisation was everything. The recognition. The Prince was an old god, a memory of something humans had once wanted to make the world *make sense*. And like a distant father, he'd returned and was trying to make everything better.

*Angus turned around.*

The diner in front of him still smelled of bacon, and he could still see the dazed waitress inside. Pushing the door open, Angus cleared his throat, stepped through the door, and called over to her.

"I'll be back to settle my bill in a few minutes," he said...

And then he wasn't there, any more.

As far as badass one-liners go, Angus couldn't help but fear that it was quite, quite awful.

## Chapter Eighteen

Jubal had once heard his father talk to him about the promises the voice made to him. One of the ones his father repeated endlessly had been the oath that his descendants would *number as the stars*. Jubal had laid back one night, and looked up at the sky, and counted until he fell asleep, and came to a total he understood of a few thousand. As far as he knew, there were maybe ten times that living in Ninevah, and there were tales told to Jubal of coins that came from as far away as the Indus, where numbers greater still lived. A family large enough to own a few suburbs in Uruk didn't sound like a bad deal, though!

Thousands of years after Jubal was alive, and only a scant fewer than before Jubal was forgotten, the Hubble Deep Field telescope turned its infrared-tuned eye to the skies and cast about its mirrors to gather information on how many stars were in the sky. It spied pin-prick galaxies, each one comprised of billions of stars, to go with the two hundred observable billion stars in the Milky Way galaxy, with some mathematical estimates as high as a trillion.

The actual number would mean nothing to Jubal. More people than were in Ninevah, more people than in Uruk, more people than in the place he did not know but was named Mohinjo Daro - Jubal's father's promise spoke of an impossibility.

So many stars hung in the sky, pinned to nothing, that if all the grains of sand in the world were themselves, whole worlds, with sand on them, there would still be more stars in the sky than sand on earth.

When the Prince of a Thousand Eyes moved, it was with a stilted, distorted motion. There was something human underneath it, something more than just that human ideal of *can't someone else fix it*, something that still knew it needed to put one foot in front of the other. The defence systems that the crabs had set up could not stop him - he was, by far and away, the most dangerous and potent force this world *had*, as its rich and pampered, its undisciplined and its safe, were swept up and away, away from a world that had things like starvation and poverty and systemic cruelty. Each golem of shell and jade rose up and was crushed. While each one woke two more, he knew the throne room would hold the mechanisms necessary to use this device for what it was *truly* intended. The light of each star blazed through inky, vacuum-like skin, which cast pinpricks upon the walls as he shuffled onwards.

The eyes of the Prince were so many, but saw so little, small and faint as they were. When stars he thought he had lost opened up on his back, when they cast their light down the tunnel he'd left, across a void he'd flown over, and hit the far wall, arranged as *leo*. The stars flared, bright, and then, were gone.

Barbara stepped out of the wall, holding Holland's hand. In the murk of the depths, with their eyes adjusting, Barbara tried to shake off what she'd seen, in that tiny instant. Stepping like that - pulling herself to the presence of the Prince, to step through the constellation she had, somehow, claimed as *hers*, meant drifting, for just a few sparse moments, in a place that wasn't here, or there, or anywhere. It was a vacuum of spaces and darkness, where the only things around were stars - stars drifting through the void.

For the briefest of instances, Barbara had not been holding the hand of Holland. She had been holding the hand of a tiny prick of light, distant and impossibly faint; and the hand of a neverendingly-wide, world-feeding ball of collapsing plastmatic hydrogen and helium in a state of swirling, nigh-eternal nuclear fission. And yet, it had also been Holland's hand. In that place, surrounded by nothing but stars, Holland had *been* a *star*.

"You okay?" Barbara asked, putting her hand on her friend's shoulder, turning to look up and down the hall. She'd expected to be closer to the Prince, not... here. Up on a platform, jutting out over a pool of thick, sludgy water, out of which seemed to jut row upon row of small, bulbous domes. Clean and smooth, she wondered if this was some sort of jumping puzzle, with deceptively slick stepping stones.

"I'm-" Holland began, before the gunshots echoed around them.

Barbara whipped her head around, planting her feet, raising her hand and flaring her nostrils. The hand raised burst into moist, green flame, churning and foaming like something in a chemical vat, casting light around the pair. Her hand refused to be burnt, the flame danced in her grasp.

Holland hunkered by her side, almost as though trying to hide behind her without actually stepping back that far, to get too close to the platform's edge. "What was *that*?" Holland hissed.

Barbara's nostrils flared, but she refused to turn her head, to look away from the hallway, from the source of the noise. Holland's words made no sense to her for a moment, until she blurted the thought, still holding that steely expression. "You've *never* heard a gun before, have you?"

Two more shots, then another. Then a painfully obvious pause, with the churning, foaming sound of the flame in Barbara's hand filling the air. Her other hand swelled with the green flame, and slowly, the cheerleader stepped forwards, closing her hands into fists. She stepped forwards, slowly, feeling Holland move behind her. Step after step -

Then another pair of shots, and a truly unpleasant *moist* sound. A strange grunt that echoed off the walls, a sound that didn't sound like any person had said it, and then a tearing and a clatter, like an enormous bowl being dropped on the floor. With her flames gripped tight, Barbara leant around the corner, tensed and ready.

It was something of an S bend in the corridor; as she peered around her corner, something else peered around the other. Something? Some *one*, someone with white hair and red eyes and a pair of *very large guns* pointed at her. The dismembered crab-like form, with its gooey strands of moisture and its twitching, fading runes between them, was barely a punctuation mark as Barbara swung around to press her back to the wall, calling out.

"Don't know who you are," she yelled, "But if you're working for the Prince, I-"

*flt.*

Barbara's dad had shown her, once, how he flicked *Magic: The Gathering* cards across the table. There was an art to the aerodynamics, something about folding and pinching, about keeping the mass tight. That had been, more or less, exactly the sound they'd made when they'd hit the bread-board propped up on the other end of the table. That '*flt*' sound - which rang from the wall where a

small business card had hit, then drifted down onto the floor next to Barbara's foot. Without bending to pick it up, she squinted down at the small card on the floor.

I 'm mute.

"Oh." Barbara called. "I'm really s-"

*flt*

Don't apologise.

"Kay..." Barbara said, her brows furrowing. "... Do you have like a printer, there to print these cards? You, I mean, can you tell-"

*flt*

I came prepared.

"You came prepared to explain th-"

*flt*

I came very prepared.

"Okay." Barbara drew a breath. "You say this is a dead end, but the Prince is this way." She called, pressing herself against the wall. "And if I come out, are you going to point those guns at me?"

I point these guns at everything.

*Oh come on, how prepared can a person be.* Barbara cleared her throat. "I... I just want you to know, we're here to stop the Prince. He's killing the world."

"Well, he's killing a big part of the world. Well, he's kidnappi-" Holland whispered to her, leaning against the wall, before Barbara gave a *Shh* look.

"So, like, if you want to fight us...? That's going to suck for you. Because I'm not leaving here until the Prince is stopped." She said, resolution in her tone. The words echoed off the stone, a subtle roar that filled Holland's heart with courage. Even with the 'likes' and the twang that had, thus far, always been associated with silly news and airline advertisements.

No *flt*. No response.

Barbara slowly leant around the corner. She stepped past the not-quite-body, trying to ignore the way Holland shuddered at it. She rounded the corner, to where the woman with the cards had to be, and found, stuck to the wall with ichor, two more cards:

You have your objectives, and I have mine.

Do I make myself clear?

Barbara turned around, the flame fading out like blown candles, and put a hand to Holland's shoulder. "Okay. So... we've like, got something *else* to deal with, as well."

\*

There are always places where very little that matters to people seems to happen. The island straits near Enk and Innogen's home, the deserts south of Barbara's, the entirety of Wales, or the vast scope of red and brown sand that stood on the edges of Holland's reality. Time can pass in those places with barely a few words – *months passed*.

When things happen, in places where people are, however, a few short moments can take *so* many words.

\*

Grey London *exploded* around Angus when he'd done that. He hoped it hadn't been nearly so messy for the girl inside the diner, with her polite smile and chubby cheeks. Considering how long it had taken him to work out *turn around* as an escape to a place that wanted to draw him in, it would be so much worse for him if the diner, with its rich bacon scent and its comfortable seats, was somehow disrupted, even if it was just an empty, inexplicable wasteland where people hid from curiosity.

Was it Thursday? He could never get the hang of Thursdays. At least, that's what he said every time he was at the pub, and the day of the week came up. It was always comforting to give out that little signal, to say to people around him, *there's this thing I've heard of, that you may have heard of too* – and feel that social contact.

Socialising was hard.

Angus couldn't explain in hindsight why his thoughts roamed so, as he travelled from Grey London to Colourful Wherever. It just seemed preferable to looking down at his hands, and watching as the patterns of stars and constellations began to dance and swirl in them, to open his eyes and watch the children running away from him and hear his own, heavily distorted voice gurgle out "*Get back here, you f-*"

\*

"Okay, so how do we..."

"I don't know, *I've* never been here."

"Very helpful."

Barbara looked down at the water, the platform, and the gulf between her, Holland, and the dancing swarm of lights that indicated the Prince. "I mean, I think if we can get across there-"

"Can you jump that high?"

"Well, I could jump like, a few storeys,"

"I can't."

Barbara bit back her thought – *Yes, but how much can you fight?* – and looked down. “Maybe... it’s like, like a jumping puzzle? You hop on one and then on another?”

Holland pointed across the room. “Well, uh, even if I did, I’d still be like, six feet below that platform.”

“Feet?”

“Yeah, feet.”

“I dunno, I thought you used, like meters.”

“Sometimes we use feet. Because we keep buying your television.”

Barbara nodded at that. “Well, lemme see if there’s anythin’ over *there*,” she said, stepping forwards and up – casting herself into the air like a bullet.

Barbara arced through the air with balletic grace, remembering being thrown from pyramid top to pyramid top, marvelling at the freedom, at the *feeling* of being so free, while her hair whipped around her. When she landed, she skidded slightly, flat shoes moistened on the soft stone. A fistful of green flame lit her exploration as she looked around, checking the surfaces –

“Hey, Holland!” she called. “There’s a switch here – maybe for a bridge?”

“Flip it!” Holland called, proving that everyone can make poor decisions at times.

The switch flicked, the waters started to churn – and to Holland’s despair, *lower*. The forms in the water, the little jumping puzzle, started to *rise*. The water sank down, drained away from the forms, while they rose up, up, up – showing those strange, mechanised crabs, stacked three atop one another. When the column ejected fully, tall enough that Holland *could* jump across them to reach the other platform, they started to move. Eyes lit up, and the crablike forms all tumbled together onto the floor, wriggling and squirming.

Then, as one, they started to crawl up the wall – away from Barbara, and towards Holland.

“Holland!” Barbara yelled, running towards the platform, springing her legs to throw herself forwards and leap back to her friend. This time, though, there was nowhere to *land* – the platform already covered in crabs. She hit a rounded, wet carapace, bounced, and skidded off to land in a tumbling roll, thrown into a corner. Pulling herself up to standing, green fire filled both her hands, she rounded, and looked to Holland.

Holland stood ramrod straight, surrounded by crabs. That wasn’t all, though – when Holland’s head turned, so did their stalk-like eyes. When Holland raised a hand nervously to Barbara, the crabs genuflected, bowing low.

Whatever it was in the crabs that wanted to defend this place, the one person they weren’t defending against was Holland.

“I... I have *no idea* what’s going on,” Holland confessed.

“Neither do I, I-” Barbara began, before a yell ripped through the chamber.

“Get back here, you f-”

\*

A single white hair falling over her red eyes, Cards flared her nostrils defensively. The ceiling had had handholds enough for her to move across, the starlight-patterns on the Prince’s skin scattered reflections she could track.

When she was sent to a location like this, it was always with a simple one-line order, really a request. *Fix this*. The rest, they left up to her. Her last assignment was more of a personal project – the drug cartels and their people in the Latin American jungles were the right kind of monster for a woman like her to fight. Her armory of ridiculous, gaudy guns all sent a message when others came to clean the place – and her personal white imagery made her a perfect pseudoreligious figure. The people of Colombia that met her thought that she was some sort of angel, something sent by a mish-mash mythology to oppose the pseudogovernments represented by drug cartels. People feared the shadow of them, and they feared *her*.

*Fix This*, they’d told her.

Well, every piece of intel she’d gathered so far suggested that the cackling, teleporting, child-attacking maniac covered in stars *might* be a place to start. Twisting her legs around the alcove in the ceiling to give her more support, Cards drew up her two ridiculous firearms, knowing that under the patina of fake gold and fake diamonds lay a real gun with the force of a cannon. Narrowing red eyes, watching for her moment – she saw that moment when the Prince bowed sharply, head framed in profile, and

She

fired-

“Get back here, you f-”

\*

Enk slid down the passage way, his feet gathering speed as he hit a flat surface. Innogen was only a moment behind him. She was faster, sure, but she kept stopping to fling back arcs of electricity, watching as they curled around the tunnel, kissing the water and filling the air with that strange scent of burnt water and ozone. When outrunning a dragon, she knew that she only had to run faster than Enk... so she was making sure he could run faster than her.

“What *is* that thing?!” Enk yelled.

“I don’t know!” Innogen called, running after him. “It’s like, like, a constellation book!” She responded, hammering steps down the pathway alongside Enk. The tunnels were usually linear – which made it hard to feel she wasn’t running into a trap. A corner came up, and then the flash of white light projected onto the wall before them – a sign that there was, between them and him, a straight line.

He moved very, very fast in straight lines.

The cackling black-and-white form *sped* through the hallway so swift as to not have any bones in his feet, or time in the intervening space. Zeno's paradoxes squealed in protest as the form stepped forwards, tumbled onto one knee, and momentarily hesitated, his head low. A star like a drop of sweat appeared on the Prince's forehead, slithering down the sharklike surface, as he raised his head and *snarled*.

*"Get back here, you f-"*

## Chapter Nineteen

The last of the curse tumbled out of Angus' mouth into a wet, sloshing sound, and the floor swung up to meet him in a perfect geometric arc, his shoulders seemingly breaking with the effort. Clothes soaked with sweat, he gasped in pain while he struggled to save his face from a bruising, and pulled his legs up underneath him in defence. Behind him, he felt his coat pulled back as if into the hand of an insistent child, then struggled with, and then released, flopping down atop his feet. He planted his hands firmer, trying to reassert the directions of up and down, blinking and squinting as reality, with all of its colour, flooded into eyes that had wandered and wondered for literally weeks in a place where grey was all.

Around him, scattered remains of a place he couldn't quite remember smashed and clattered. Angus was part of Grey London, while he was there - and it had left him with itself. Broken boards, a section of a door, beer mugs, broken and cast on their sides scattering the floor with broken glass, and a thick, stout-handled cricket bat still affixed to a bronze plaque that proclaimed back-to-back local championship wins, all rendered in that astoundingly pervasive *grey* fell around him, hitting his back like the expurgated remains from some pub dinner the Prince had liked too much to hold on to.

The Prince staggered and gripped at its chest, long spiny hands seeming to lengthen and fall into itself, filling up the hole Angus had somehow vacated. "Why... Angus you... you cheating -" the Prince gasped, its tone of wicked levity interrupted by a choked sound. "You took my body. Your body! I- I was *using* that!"

When Holland saw the Prince the first time, in person, it was as a singular, vast eye in the sky; a breathtaking and vast experience so huge and so inexplicable it had flashed through the mind and out the other side. A whole school had vanished in the blink of that massive eye and Holland had only barely been able to stagger to the roadsides to flee. The second time, the Prince had stalked through bedroom halls in the body shaped like a person, a humanoid representation with spindly arms and a huge sawtoothed mouth, like something out of a child's cartoon. Nightmarish, but in a way that Holland had resisted. That Prince had touched Holland, had stepped over one boundary too many, and been beaten with a chair for his trouble. If Holland had really dedicated any thought to the discrepancy between the two forms, it only now began to rise in bubbles of worry.

As the black man in the nerdy clothing collapsed to the floor of the chamber, gripping the ground and heaving up gasps of salty water, the Prince seemed at war with himself. No, *itself*. Holland knew how hateful the impersonal pronoun could be, how it denoted something that wasn't a person any more. What bubbled and foamed behind the newcomer was *not a person any more*.

Liquid and oily, it started from a human position; down upon the ground, two things like legs planted, in a rolling, bubbling pool that moved around its feet as it stepped. From its hips upwards, however, it lost cohesion; no head rested on shoulders, no breathing betrayed in its motions a semblance of life. Instead, it plumed outwards in a disproportionate shape that almost looked more like ink-painted mushroom clouds, with long, ropelike tendrils falling down, or were they raining? The shoulders rolled and tensed, the body torsioned as it stepped, flailing in ways that flickered in the eye and felt like afterimages, even while it was clearly *right there*. All the time, on its surface was the eternal vastness of *space*, the yawning maw of infinity that lurked overhead, and to stare into it

pulled the mind with it, a sense of everything that was not human, that was not life, was not *the world of you*, hauling it within itself. Not just spots of light any more, but vast vivid nebulae, the red-golden hue of the milky way, brighter, and more coruscant. It spoke of a world before humans polluted the sky with light, of a time when even the crabs didn't do much more than *remember*. It rolled its shoulders backwards, starting a strange hunch *backwards* while it stepped forwards, and words came from some place that was not its mouth, but were heard in all ears.

**Perhaps you're right, Angus. Maybe this is better.**

The crabs teemed around Holland, running in a patterned circle, marching in perfect formation. "Barbara!" Holland yelled, "Barbara, what-"

"Barbara!" yelled another voice from the other end of the hall. "Barbara's friend! Duck!"

At Innogen's cry, Holland ducked intuitively. A life spent in fear was a life that taught those responses. Barbara stepped aside at the exact same moment, and the air filled with the sound of exploding powder, of raining death. Holland thought it sounded like thunder and fire. Barbara thought it sounded like a pair of handguns being fired. Eighteen rounds in a few heartbeats lanced the air, hitting the cloud of black fog and stars with the force fit to stop a horse and rider. Angus clung to the ground, his hands on his head; Enk pressed to the opposite wall, trying to find his breath. Two guns dropped from the ceiling, landing with a clatter, still smoking. Gaudy and bright, golden and diamond and ridiculous, but Cards was nowhere near it. The only thing in the world more mysterious to those teenagers than the *one* adult in the room was the tower of distorted, not-quite-liquid, not-quite-smoke that bubbled and roiled, growing larger and teeming with light.

It genuinely seemed flummoxed by the gunfire; confused by the bullets, as it spread its mass, sustaining, containing - the burning heat hitting its frame, the toxic entity that it was trying to deal with being physical. Innogen seized opportunity, running forwards - leaving Enk alone for but a moment - and grabbed Angus' shoulder, hauling him upwards, away from the bubbling pool at the Prince's feet, and throwing him towards an alcove, even as she hissed out a simple instruction: "Stay safe!" When she spun around, the muck had reformed; had taken possession of some sense of self. It spoke, and as it spoke, it seemed to be crafting its own very self in worlds.

**And thus the forces of so few arrayed against the thing that they knew everyone else sought. No matter. You have been given your opportunity, and rejected it -**

"What?" Enk blurted. "What opportunity?!"

**Ah.** The frame turned slightly. Fluid rolling like a thick cloud, without touching the ground, it extended what might have been a tendril, what might have been a head, to Enk. In one instant, the boy felt a million million stars turned to look at him, everything that was strange and alien and beyond his ability to recognise, the *infinite scope* of the universe before him, and lo, he was afraid. Hands spread and fingers tense, Enk didn't even notice his backwards steps, as the looming extrusion pushed further into his personal space, but stopped short of touching him.

"Wh-what... what are you?" Enk asked, as the wall behind him came up close, too close, and the black swirl of something rose around him, spreading tendrils that filled that invisible buffer zone around him.

**I am the essential other of the social species. When you first recognise one outside yourself, you recognise that other's capacity to take from you, to bear for you, to serve you. I am that servant, the obeisance to your modern world. I am the abdication of *doubt*, the reassuring silence at night, the surrender of fear of tomorrow. I am the god that this world craves and I will make everything better if you but *still yourselves*.**

Innogen wasn't having any of it. The only reason she didn't interrupt the Prince was a matter of aiming practice. As the thing spoke, it stood still; as it stood still, she could gather the energy in her arms and through her chest and down to the crackling, growing orb between her palms. Fingers held like a cage, to contain what was, by any measure, a bullet crafted of lightning, she lowered her arms and stood as far behind it as she could.

"Enk? Get somewhere safe."

Enk hadn't demonstrated much aptitude for magic. It wasn't a cruelty; it was a simple request. If she asked him to stay, she'd be endangering him – and besides, the middle of a fight with a puddle of rolling black and infinite space hardly seemed the time to start improvising.

Every second it spoke, she had another moment to charge the energy between her hands. A pattern swiftly fulfilled, her fingers tensing even as she spread them to accommodate a larger and larger sphere of energy. Doubt was fine – she could doubt whether or not she'd *hit* it, whether or not the hit was meaningful, or any such thing. What she didn't doubt was the more moral aspects of her quandary.

*This thing is threatening every one of my friends, ergo, I am going to hit it in the head, very, very hard.* Inwardly, she was proud of herself for remembering the word *ergo*. Enk's mom would have been proud of that one.

Cursing inwardly, Cards holstered the most recent pair of guns, arms pumping as she ran down the corridor to close the distance between her and the target. It wasn't like she hadn't seen a host of strange things in the Columbian jungle, but most of them could be attributed to hallucinogens in the water. Lips set in a firm line, she ran up the curved side of the wall.

Stupid kids! She couldn't open fire *here*. She was good, but she wasn't so good when they were actually moving *around*. Normally, a gunshot made people *stand still*, or at the very least run away in a panic. These – these *youths* were engaging the Prince on their own terms, like this was something in a videogame. She needed to find a line of attack that didn't feature a *child* on the other side of it.

At least there was one near-adult nearby.

Cursing outwardly, Angus scrabbled away from the bubbling puddle of ooze that the Prince of a Thousand Eyes had become. The terrifying spread created an eye watering effect, where a fluid right by his feet seemed to teem and swarm with dancing, golden lights and the yawning distance of *everything in the universe that didn't care about his existence*. He'd stood on the edge of the Tower Bridge once as a younger and stupider man during what could only be described as a pub crawl for life's designated drivers, and the feeling of distance between himself and the water had been dizzying.

Looking into the surface of the Prince, there was no *down* to look at. There just was... out. Everywhere. Everything. There was more everything than he had ever considered there might be. As the ooze crept towards his feet, pushing him further into a corner, cut off from escape routes. If he looked *up* and over he could see the brunette girl and the... cheer-leader...? What was a *cheer-leader* doing here? Good grief. If he looked down, though, he saw nothing but inky, swampy blackness and the infinity that lay beyond.

How dizzying to stand on the edge of forever, and not fall.

Thank god there were plucky teens around. Wait, that was *explicitly not* the way to think of these things. There was him and the woman with the guns, and they had to take care of these teenagers. The boy, the girls, and the one surrounded by crabs Angus couldn't see properly.

He was holding something, and he only just realised what it was. In the explosion of the pub, as it was extracted and reabsorbed into the Prince's teeming frame, Angus was holding a cricket bat. Gripping the stout length of wood by its handle, he flared his nostrils and tried not to think about fulfilling stereotypes when he swung it. As soon as the Prince brought something like a *face* near him...

The strangest thing about the crabs was what they *didn't do*. When surrounded by individuals, Holland expected them to face inwards, not to array out and fan like they were... like they were some kind of disrespectful audience. They pushed themselves up on the tips of their lower set of legs, unfolding and rattling a tail, spines twisting in the air. A tentative step forwards and they moved with it, in perfect synchrony – remaining the exact same distance from Holland.

When the Prince raised its 'arms' and bellowed at the sky, roaring and bellowing in pain as a bolt of lightning thicker than a tree shot through its torso and maybe-its-head?-but-whatever, Holland ducked, hunkering down – and the crabs rattled up into place like a small wall, integrating and locking their claws together in a tessellating pattern.

Holland peeked over the top, watching the swirling mass of light and oil that the Prince had become put its 'hands' on the ceiling; then it wasn't even humanoid any more, but more like architecture. It washed to the walls, two columns of cackling blackness in which mouths opened and closed with broad-fanged mouths, spreading out, separating Holland and Barbara from the others – the black guy and the girl with the ponytail *and oh yes the lightning bolt*. She was revving up another one, like she was prepping the engine on a particularly disobedient lawnmower.

"Barbara!" Holland yelled. "How do you-" and a rattle of impact on the crabs suggested that whatever was going on on the other side of the wall was *not* something Holland could have survived. Lashing tendrils, explosions of force – there was *something* going on and sitting still was clearly not a good idea.

It seemed to Barbara the perfect time to start improvising. The brunette girl with the lightning was clearly an athlete; it showed in her shoulders, and her stance. Fit and strong and healthy but also used to using her height and strength. Not an athlete the way that Barbara was.

"Move!" Barbara yelled, because she knew the instinct was going to come a second later than Innogen should listen to it. The girl planted herself like a rhino when she took those shots. A two-

legged artillery cannon was impressive indeed, but they had *no idea* where they had to strike the Prince.

And it was about striking him, wasn't it?

Every single problem, really, came down to finding the right person and punching them in the face. There weren't fashion concerns or tests to overcome or hassles with her dad or the concerns over whether Holland was just grateful to have a friend, or had *that* look because of *that* reason, or even what that meant for Barbara. No, these were the moments she enjoyed, when she stepped out and made herself into a superhero, because these were the moments when it was good guys, and bad guys, and those bad guys could hit the floor with a satisfying thump.

Her father would have been so proud of that reference.

When she leapt across the spreading ink, she threw her arm behind her and sent a churning line of green-black fire after her, throwing her upwards. Cards had led the way, but when she ran along this path, there was a path, rather than the vast, crushing cold of the depths of space. To call it *aimed* was perhaps overstating it, but it did its job – throwing her further forwards without her having had to touch the 'ground' on the way through.

*Everything* was a target, because everything *had* to be a target, because right now, they had *no idea* how to even hurt the Prince.

Innogen leapt sideways as a crushing tentacle of black force landed beside her, where she *would have been* if not for the yell. She looked annoyed at the advice but it beat being smashed.

When he was younger, Enk used to watch imported Sentai shows, until he grew old enough to care about what other people thought of the television shows he watched, even when they didn't ask about it. Every single fight he'd seen in those shows had followed a pattern, a formula, where people attacked the hero only one at a time.

Watching the *mess* that ensued when five uncoordinated people, of varying degrees of skill and training, with different notions about what would and would not work, made it all crystallise in his mind. With everyone in motion, with the violence ranging from experienced expert to enthusiastic amateur in its construction, Enk had *no clue* what was going on.

Like the last Putty Trooper, convinced of his uselessness, he stood back, gripping the air and wishing he had Shamgar's chain, or Delilah's golden fists, or Jubal's knives or a large, stabbing spine designed for a variety of subaquatic purposes. Everyone else just *threw themselves in*, after all.

Moments like these, Enk wished none of this had ever happened.

**Ah. Yessss.**

The voice spoke from just above and behind his ear, but without lips and breath.

The Prince was there.

The Prince had found him.

Enk looked down at his hands, and the whitest of white boys in Newfoundland saw his skin bubbling *black*, full of stars...

How dangerous can something like *hope* even be?

Enk had always wanted to be normal. He wanted to be normal so badly that when the time came to confront *anything* in his life, his first thought was not *what should I do* but *what would a normal person* do? There was so much hope in him to be something he wasn't that Enk had never stopped to consider how little of *himself* was anything at all.

The prince rolled over his shoulder when he heard its voice – he whipped around terrified, knowing he'd put distance between himself and the people who...

*The people who can fight*

... were busy. Enk balled his fists up and looked around, biting his lower lip and fretting as he tried to find a place to look that was a *direction*, and not just raw, roaring *infinity*. A tiny circle of somewhere rested under his feet – and around *it*, there was nothing but *nothing*. Twinkling stars, dull and rare, seemed to speak from the darkness.

Then something shot from it, and struck him in the shoulder, pouring onto him like a fire-hose of oil.

In that moment, Enk could see flashes; the Prince's mind flowed into his, its voice tried to smother his. He saw what it thought, how it felt – and he saw what it knew, though only in the most terrifying glimpses. It was not ancient. It was not eternal. There was no Prince from before humanity; it was just the same, basic impulse that lay in the heart of mankind. The Prince that hovered over humanity in those early days, when magic was freshly gone was a different Prince to this one. The Prince had not always been about eternity, about absolution from doubt...

Once, the Prince had been about making sense of things. Once, the Prince had *been* the doubt. The Prince had been as people stared at the sky, and made a myth that made some sense. There was the Prince, that held the sky – but they sought to meet the Prince, one day. To come to understand the sky.

Memories of the past few weeks flashed through Enk's mind, memories that weren't his, but the Prince had no idea he was exchanging.

He felt the Prince's gaze as it burned against Holland. Holland, someone who had, at such a young age, decided with a certainty Enk never had, what it meant to *be Holland*, and taken such concrete steps to *change* what unguided biology had done. The Prince *hated* Holland. Holland was full of doubt, but it was not doubt in *things*, it was doubt in *what other people were going to do*. It was doubt about other people.

Holland doubted a lot of things, but Holland never shied from examining them. Holland never doubted being Holland.

Innogen wasn't an option for the Prince either. Innogen *liked* the uncertainty. The teenager had only a few weeks of age difference to Enk, but she lived her life full of joy at standing on a precipice, as if

always on the ready reaping of a vast bounty of knowledge, and she was willing to fall *either way*. Be right, be wrong, but she was willing to *find out*.

Enk thought of himself as sensible. He thought that his desire to assert the world as a boring place without magic was just stating the obvious. When magic arrived, it'd shaken him deeper than he'd ever imagined. Finding the magic *inside him* even moreso. It wasn't swamp gas. When confronted with something that he *could* prove, Enk responded by wanting to hide from it.

Cards... Cards was a new factor. The Prince could have tried for her, but she was an old soldier, someone bitter and independent. She had a mind like an old hammer, fired and dense and blunt. There was no way for the Prince to enter that mind. What doubts she had, she'd hunted down.

Angus was so similar, but so different. Angus lived a life defined by person after person who wanted to believe in things that were, *then*, impossible. Angus was a skeptic, down to the ground, he was a skeptic and tried to be one in the purest sense. What wore Angus down was a darker doubt; the doubt that he was doing the right thing by showing people *things that were true*. Angus could be pulled into that place, the strange depths of the Prince, because the doubt that filled him was the doubt of a human wanting to be moral. Unfortunately, imprisonment rarely made people doubt their moral principles. Angus was a doubter, but it wasn't the kind of doubt that The Prince could use. Angus' doubt was the doubt of a scientist.

Barbara *hated* what she was, but she *knew* what it was. She hated living in a world that told her she should look carefully before walking the streets, that she should be meek when she spoke, that she shouldn't like that, that because she was white and blonde and pretty she *should* be like this, should, should, should, should. Barbara grew up surrounded by a very, very clear image of what she *should* be, and resisting that, taking the shape of the lion that stalked the streets at night and didn't fear guns.

The black oil closed over Enk's head. The fluid flowed into his mouth, into his lungs; when he blinked, next, he could see at the edges of his vision, stars. In the centre of his view, he could see them bright and yellow and blue and red – tinged with the colours of an expanding forever. With every blink, the stars consumed more of the world around him, and they became more

And more

*grey*

...

..

.

..

...

The Prince stood up again, tilting his head back, drawing the oil and smoke back into his body – *his* body – the body of Enk. He parted his lips, and beyond, razortipped fangs of night cut the air, as he growled. Fingers, visible, scrabbled against

“... Well well... *this one knows magic.*”

## Chapter Twenty

Enk wasn't sure how to describe it, and was quietly grateful he'd never have a reason to. A swarm of cockroaches in his mouth, spilling out over his skin; a pallid greying around his vision until even the stars were just variances of the blackness that surrounded them. There was no Grey London for him; no, the Prince needed him *here*, needed his frame. That's where the magic was.

Innogen's next arcing bolt of lightning didn't come; there was no swirl of ozone, no corrosive blast of energy and wash of ammonia on the floor after it. She ran forwards, ducking under the flying debris, hunkering behind a curl in the wall as best she could while the Prince tilted his head to the side, disjointed, like he'd broken his neck, and *grinned*.

"What are you waiting for?!" Barbara yelled.

"That's my cousin! I can't – we need to find some other way!"

"Oh, come *on*!" Barbara yelled, bracing her green fists, fire foaming and spitting from her fingertips as she launched herself once more away from the black slime and the Prince that stood in their centre.

The stars weren't this impossible spread any more; it wasn't like the Prince's oily surface was going to claim the whole world; now it had some malice to it, some *wit*. The shapes rose up – coagulating, condensing. Holland couldn't help but imagine them as sharks' fins, jutting up from the floor, ready to leap like the worst day at Bondi.

"Hey, you! Uh, um, black guy!" Holland yelled, ignoring the prickling of embarrassment, ignoring the thought *you can't think of a better way to say that?*

"What?" Angus asked, staggering back from the spilled-black flow of rising stars. Then he stopped staggering, and like a sensible person, started to *run*. Cricket bat in his hand, woollen coat billowing as he ran, he almost missed Holland's question.

"Do you remember being hit in the head with a chair?"

"What?!" Angus stopped short, spinning around and swiping at a black piece of sludge, watching it scattering. Far enough from the Prince, the gunk could be dispersed, could re-form. "I don't remember much of anything!"

Well, that was *an* answer. Holland nodded. Every black smear streaked towards the crabs, arranged as a semicircular wall. Hit a crab, and dispersed harmlessly, spattering away again and, like a dazed dog, spun around for a moment before attempting to streak past Holland again. The strangest of it, though, was that they never seemed to move directly – like they were shooting past Holland's location. If the fear was hurting the person inside the Prince, Holland knew one way to test the fear.

Holland turned and started to run – towards the Prince. The crabs scabbled to keep up, forming their defensive line and throwing themselves forwards, anticipating the path. "Hey! Hey, guy in there!"

The crabs parted for a moment, and Holland swung the chunk of wood from the floor. The hit was so great as to break the wood, to send a shudder through the frame of the Prince – but it did go *through* him. There was some substance to him – some *strength* that wasn't magic itself. Holland was so shocked at the force of the hit, the way the wood splintered, the way the crabs parted like a curtain and regathered in the arc of the swinging wood –

“Duck!”

Angus' yell to Holland came just as a hand swept through the crabs, stacked up and arrayed. While the Prince had a hand like something drawn with fluid ink and dragged out across a wet page, it still hit the crabs like a hammer. The stacked up pile of robotic defences flipped and rolled, tumbling and scattered. Each one of them easily weighed as much as Holland did – and thanks to Angus' yell, the claw shot over Holland, and not *through*.

Holland looked up, from a crouch, at the Prince of a Thousand Eyes. He stood, seething, resentful. Rage wracked along his frame, and Holland could see shards of something to it, something not-quite-there, something that was human, but not.

Not that Enk *knew* magic, per se. The crab did. The bodyguard, with the thick spine and the metalline carapace. The veteran, the warrior, the one who had done what needed to be done, as despairing as it was. The one who had taken a mad king and pulled him down, from his throne and *crushed* and *fought* and –

Enk felt his shoulders ripple, felt himself grow a foot in height but not in mass, becoming more stretched out and drawn; the muscles in his arms felt like strings connecting wires and elaborate farming equipment, his fingers long and black and clawlike, like they were crafted from some part of scissors.

“Back!” he yelled, laughing as he raised his hand, gesturing towards the strange newcomer – known as Angus, the researcher, the skeptic, the debunker, the person with the study and the words and the Chellini hypothesis, the person who had been nice to the lady in the pub – and tried to do *something*.

No, wrong, wait, wrong – the fingers were wrong. The claw was soft, with its extra devices. It did not have the precision. It could not be twisted right. The gesture was not important, but how the mind reacted to the gesture was. The need of the flesh to fuel the pattern in the mind- ngh!

Enk clapped one hand to the Prince's head. Enk could only hope that the Prince felt the pain he felt. Not the blow to the head from the piece of wood – somehow, Enk hadn't felt that much at all. But thinking about Angus, about the *defiance*, about the *thing that was now free* – it made part of Enk ache.

Scattering the crabs, the Prince leant forwards... and peered at the space where Holland stood. Head whipping left and right, eyes narrowing, it tried to find the source of the blow – and roared in anger at how it was 'fooled.' It ran forwards, towards the nearest person it could see. “You! Warlock!” it roared, pointing, leaping over the paths of green flame that Barbara shot through the air towards it.

Holland gasped... then exhaled as the Prince literally ran *straight past*. Then, Angus grunted, under the mass of broken and shattered crab parts.

“Oh, hell!” Holland blurted, starting to dig the British man out. “Um, um, sorry! Try not to – there are sharp bits! And goo! Keep your mouth closed, the, uh, the goo-”

Holland was busy; the guy with the club was immobilised; and the girl who seemed really competent wasn’t attacking. Goddammit! Barbara snarled as she ran along the chamber floor. With the water drained away, and the crab guardians missing, it sloped downwards, allowing her some distance from the black frame of the starborne Prince. Her hands opened and closed, creating lances of fire, which she threw like baseballs. Hitting the Prince was hard, but he clearly tried to avoid being hit by the lines of fire – which meant she could use them to control his position. If the lady with the guns, Cards, was backing her up, they might be able to stop this... thing.

Barbara tried to not let the creepiness of her thought process land. She was hoping to set up a person to be shot, multiple times, by a stranger. Thinking about either of those things as *people* was scary; better to think of it as a videogame moment, or a comic book. There weren’t any health bars, or sound effects, and the scent of her own hair, *burning* when she moved too quickly through the path of her own thrown flames, stung and made her feel sick.

The Prince surged over the swell in the ground, running towards her, darting left and right as she tried to box him in with blasts, and in those moments, she realised that perhaps it would have been nice to develop a bit more magic than just throwing fire at things. Throwing fire in a variety of ways *was* useful, but-

The Prince lashed up close, leaping *into* the blast, taking a hit straight in its chest, sweeping a clawed finger towards Barbara, who ducked only *just* in time. The next sweep came low, the next vertical; each time, the Prince struck at the air, dodging and curling around her while she shot blasts at him. Each shot threw her backwards, and gave a momentary line that the Prince had to avoid crossing. Suddenly, Barbara wasn’t trying to contain him for someone else, she was trying to survive an onslaught from something she had seen *eat someone*.

“Not running, this time?!” the Prince laughed, lunging forwards, flashing a row of fangs in which the stars themselves flared.

“Oh shut up,” she grunted, foot against a wall as she stepped back, jumped upwards and fired a blast *down*, down at his head, with both hands - throwing her up into the air and arcing away, up to the platform from which she’d jumped in the first place. With a higher vantage point, she could watch the teeming shark-fin blacknesses swarming around on the floor, aimlessly bouncing from wall to wall like a videogame hazard – and Holland trying to extract the British guy from a pile of discarded crabs. The gunslinger was-

*Crack crack crack crack crack crack-*

Barbara was clear, and Cards had a firing solution, it seemed. The woman was running sideways, both guns pointing at the beast. The Prince’s arm, turning from blades to chain in an instant, shot across the quad, hitting the opposite wall with a hooked blade, pulling him after her, and out of the way of the gunfire. From her vantage point, she could see the Prince – his ‘hair’ of smoke trailing a

green colour. Well, hopefully he'd been hurt by that, but not much. On the other hand, he clearly had a real problem with gunfire. With something physical.

Barbara patted herself down, checking her pockets. Did it come with h-ahah. Fingers closed around the shape, familiar and dangerous in totally different ways, of Aikon. Hefting the phone in her hand, she briefly wondered if she should deliver it with some cool one-liner, if she could apologise to Aikon for what might go wrong. She thought about it, but gripping it in her fist, she knew she didn't have the time. Plus she wasn't that. That was... that was Spider-Man. That wasn't her. Winding up her arm, watching the white-haired woman and the chain-swinging figure duelling against one another, she aimed, and *threw*. Aikon *boomed* through the air as it was thrown. She heard the ringtone, somehow ominous and threatening as Aikon flew towards the Prince –

– *diddle-ee-dee, diddle-ee-dee duddle dum dum dum* –

It *cracked* against the Prince's shoulder. He whipped around at the wrong moment, pursuing Cards. While he lunged into the path of Aikon, it wasn't into his head – instead, smacking into a part of stars and black flesh that billowed and *tore* with an audible breaking sound. The Prince threw his head back and hollered, yelling in pain as he swung his arm out, clutching at the wall. Enk didn't feel that. Strange. The Prince had fought like Jubal, had fought like Shamgar, had fought like the Counsellor – but Enk had no idea why he was here. He gripped his hands tight, and tried, tried, to think about what he could do. What he was *meant* to do. The Prince was stunned, reeling, in pain; too human, too close to human, closer than it had been when it was Angus. What now, what did Enk know, what could he *possibly* do...? Jubal knew how to fight, and so did Shamgar – but one was for survival, the other for madness. The Bodyguard used magic, and claws...

Wait. Delilah. Delilah had learned to fight, when she'd left Sampson. Before that, however, she'd known something greater. She'd learned how to resist. How to give up, and then, more important than that, how *not* to give up. She had lived in the tent of the monster, she had been its wife, and even in that place, under that terror, she had *resisted* and *hoped* and she had used what she *knew* as a tool.

Enk knew one thing very well: How to *not* be very good at magic.

The black shark-fins stopped teeming, trembling on the floor; they spiralled, they unravelled, and seemed to vanish down into plugholes of nothing. The floor rippled and buckled under them, swallowing them up while the Prince himself stood, still, clutching at his head. Somewhere, a voice – not from his mouth, but from, from *somewhere*, as if at the bottom of a deep well, yelled.

"Hit him! Hit him now!"

Cards was already reaching for her latest set of guns, but she needn't have bothered. All that time holding charge, all that time *not* firing at what she still thought of as her cousin had given her time to gather *quite* a bolt of lightning. One chance to fire, one opportunity – and this was it.

The Prince and Enk looked, through the holes in his fingers, as the world around him turned into a vast, rolling wall of white, impossibly fast, cracking through every part of his body. Barbara had thrown pure magic at the Prince; magic it could resist, could absorb; the fire that followed was more dangerous than the force itself. This wasn't magic. This was magic guiding the lightning. The single,

massive crackling arc of electric lightning hit Enk and the Prince square in the chest – but in the same way that a sledgehammer can hit a fly in the thorax. Smashed into by the bolt of energy, Enk felt his feet leave the floor, his whole body *thrown* backwards.

\*

The ceiling, a curved, grey-green expanse, seemed to sweat long strands of cold, drizzling water. A dull ache sat somewhere behind Enk's spine, while his chest ached with a dull throb that felt like the time he'd burned his thumb on a frying pan, only *excruciatingly* worse. Being a teenager was hard; all your frames of reference were so small. He'd never been shot or stabbed or broken a bone and now he was trying to find some way to catalogue in his mind the sensations sent through his body after having survived a lightning strike through the chest. When the Prince was in control of his body, he'd recognised his hands, his movements, his actions, but none of it had felt real.

Now, he felt it. The Prince was gone, and there was only Enk left to bear the weight of what he'd suffered.

Innogen came into view, kneeling down next to him and reaching out with one fingertip, still crackling a little from the static. Enk hoped one day he'd feel enough better about the experience to joke about how silly it looked, from his perspective. Then she touched his cheek, and he saw her lips move – and heard nothing. The pulsing in his head, that throbbing ache pushed inwards, against his head, and he heard nothing but washed out, emptiness, the roar and rush of *nothing*. Innogen's hand pressed against his neck, and she worriedly pawed at his chest, below his sight. Nothing, numbness, no –

The roaring sound made him imagine that he was deaf all over again. Hands up to his ears, but he couldn't feel if he was touching the right part of him. The whole of his world was a roaring pain in his chest, the sensation of his skin blistering and rippling unpleasantly. Then the dull roar stopped, filling his head instead with a silvered silence. Fingers clutched at his head, and his fingertips *screamed* as he felt himself dragging them over thousands of tiny bumps and ripples, ridges and lines. There was a burning heat in them too, a heat that pushed from the depths of an internal fire, fires driven by the way the cells that made up every part of him split and live and *die* and –

The sound returned. Another massive roaring, another bellowing in his head, another head-gripping moment of agony. Another clutch to his chest, buckling forwards, drawing in breath, heaving and gasping as he realised he'd crossed his hands over the massive region of red and black and *ow* that had burnt a hole through his waistcoat, shirt, and singlet. When he threw his head back to scream in pain, he hit the floor with the back of his head and barely felt it.

When the air hitting his lungs finally stopped tasting so vividly of everything, when he realised that the sound that hammered in his ears was his *heartbeat*. Finally, the weight of his very self became bearable, the sound of the air rushing past his ears tolerable, and very, very slowly, he sat up. The rags he wore on his chest fell down around him. Blinking owlishly, he looked left, right, up and in a daze at his cousin, at the strangers – huddled around him.

The American girl had green fire in her hands, and was glaring down at him like he was one wrong word away from losing whatever chest he had left. Next to him, the white-haired woman with the ... creepy red eyes... held one gun, but it was cocked to the side, her finger not on the trigger, and she

wasn't pointing it directly at him. Comforting. The other two – the black guy and the one who'd led the crabs – stood at their sides.

Holland tugged on Barbara's sleeve nervously. "Um, Barbara...?"

"What." And she was cold as ice, her tone of voice completely unshaken, still looking down at Enk's prone form.

"I think he's okay."

"How do you know?"

"... I don't, really. Um..." Holland turned, hunkering down on one knee, across from Innogen as she helped Enk to sit up. "Hey, guy?"

"His name's Hank," Innogen said, holding his shoulders, careful to not touch any part of her cousin that was stained with smoke or burnt skin. *I just threw a thunderstorm at my cousin and he's still alive and oh geeze.*

"Enk," he corrected her, feeling his tongue slapping against the back of his teeth and *oh god that was always there, wasn't it? He just never noticed it. There was a moist slab of flesh in his mouth all the time and he just never noticed it.*

"You okay, Enk?" Holland asked. "I'm just asking because um, Barbara might shoot you if you're not."

"How would *that* help!?" Innogen shot, glaring between Holland and Barbara.

Cards looked frustrated, looking at the arrayed teenagers. Even Angus was too young to really grasp what she was thinking, but nobody was happy with her expression.

"If he's still the Prince, or if the Prince is coming back, or if he's the Prince's secret clone or-" Barbara began, then stopped herself short. "Okay, shorter. Where's the Prince?"

Holland sat back, resting on scuffed and wet shoes. "I can't see him. And I mean, he kinda really doesn't like me."

Enk put his hand to his forehead, shielding himself from the stabbing lances of trillions of reflected photons. "I'm – he's gone. Okay? I'm pretty sure he's gone."

"... Gone?"

Enk's hand slipped on the curved wall as he struggled up to his feet, refusing Innogen's assistance. "What do you want? He's... ngh. He's dead, at least... um, the version we had. That version's dead."

"There are multiple versions of him?" Barbara asked.

"What, was this a cover band...?" Angus asked, brows knotting.

Enk rubbed his hand in his eyes. And there it was. There was why it was all so *scary*, why it all *hurt* so much. Just like the Bodyguard, like Shamgar, Delilah and Jubal, he could feel the Prince's memories.

Those cycles, the burst of its short-lived existence... and now that memory, which had never really been *alive* was collapsing against his own experiences. Enk had been the Prince – and now a tiny sliver of the Prince remained behind, being Enk. “The idea isn’t gone,” Enk said, dredging the thoughts up. “It’s just an idea, of stars and space being a person, it’s, it’s... a personification?” He tested the word, seeing if it made sense when spoken aloud.

Angus adjusted his coat, helping the smaller boy stand up straight. “Right,” he said. “That makes sense – if human belief shapes magic, common beliefs would shape very powerful magical entities. The Romans believed that the stars in the sky were the scattered breast milk–“

“Eww!”

“Ew.”

“Ewwwwww.”

“– of the goddess... really?” Angus stopped short. “This is mythology, there’s grosser stuff than that in it.”

“Yes, but... still. Eww.” Enk repeated himself.

“Does the Prince act based on human impulses, then? A man-made god...?” Angus mused aloud.

“No,” Enk said, rubbing his hand through his hair, feeling a splitting headache that wasn’t even in his splitting head. “Gods don’t work. By the time a religion happens, too many people believe too many different things. But the man in the sky is common across them all, and, and... Ngh. Ow, my head.”

Innogen supported her cousin, sliding her arm around him, her shoulder underneath his, hoisting him up. “It’s okay, Enk, you don’t need to do anything more.”

Enk shook his head. “I kinda do... I mean, I think I do.” He looked up. The places the memories overlapped were the strongest. The way desert sands felt, the feeling of helplessness running from a superior foe, those were thoughts that Enk couldn’t shake. They were too potent and real, they were common to three of the minds his own emptiness had found. But more than deserts were the oh-so-present memories of the Prince, and the memories of the Bodyguard. Memories of what it was he stood in, and what it was meant to do. “Okay, we’re going to ... uh. I have to find the central ... throne room? I think. It’s a room with a throne, and some controls, and we need to find it soon.” Enk paused only long enough for a breath, then steamrolled onwards. “This ... building?” he said, gesturing around him, “is a bomb. Erm.”

Cards looked honestly relieved, as she fished out a slip of paper, holding it up:

Where’s the explosive?

“No, no, it’s all a bomb. The Prince was going to use it to remove all the magic that it wasn’t using – and kill everyone who wouldn’t go to Grey London. It’s a great big device that reacts to magic in the atmosphere. It soaks it up, it turns it inwards, then it’s designed to kill everything that’s connected to magic that isn’t inside it.”

Cards didn’t look *surprised*. More *annoyed*.

“But it’s designed to be controlled – the...” he paused, rubbing his forehead. “The King. The King of the... Crabs. They can...” he waved his hands. “There’s a big central chamber. Circular. It’s a throne. All we need to do is travel ‘inwards’ and we’ll find it. I think!”

“Then what...?” Asked Angus. “And how much time do we have...? Wait, I wa- hang on. I was part of the Prince and I don’t remember *any* of this. Why can you?”

Enk squinted at Angus. “I think I can hear dead people.”

Barbara threw her hands in the air. “Good a reason as any. Come on,” she gestured over her shoulder. “We need to find the centre of this place.” She turned on her heel. Cards looked at her moving back, shrugged, and tucked away her guns, following. Holland went after – with Enk and Innogen shuffling along behind them.

“What about the time frame...?” Angus asked, following on behind. “It’s been still for... uh. Hang on, what date is it...?”

\*

The central chamber was a paler green than the rest of the structure; it glimmered as soft jade in candlelight, seemingly lit from within. Channels in the ground ran wide and clear, full of water that flowed in from the edges of the room – suggesting some vast piping system, keeping the room ever full and fresh, turning the water from a stagnant pool to a pure spring. It smelled of the sea, it smelled of foam. The center of the room was dominated by a throne – tall as the room, reaching the ceiling and translucent as it approached the ceiling. It did not look comfortable to sit on – but then, the people who had owned this kingdom had not been people given to needs of soft flesh. The spires around it rang of memories, crystalline devices designed to tune the magic of the device, a device that would *know only the word of the king*. Memories darker than that swam... memories of a battle here, a battle between a bodyguard and a king, the murder of a monarch, the death of a civilisation, and the saving of a world.

Enk started at the edge of the room, stepping from dry place to dry place; originally, the patches he moved on were designed as decoration. Angus and Innogen waded in the ankle-deep water along with Cards – but Holland followed Enk’s path on the stone.

Cards flicked up her trademark piece of whiteness –

Now What?

– as Enk made his way to the throne. “Okay... Okay!” He said. “We may have a problem.”

“We *may* have a problem!?” Angus yelled.

“The throne responds to the King – just like all the rest of this place. It’s the King’s throne, it’s the King’s defenses,” Enk said, his voice echoing surprisingly far in this room. “But, but there – maybe we can use magic to, um. Innogen? You know how to do things with Magic,” he said, helplessly.

Innogen looked at the others. At Barbara, at Angus, at Cards – who shrugged – and then back to Enk. “... Enk, I don’t think any of us can help...”

“Erm.”

Everyone slowly turned to look at Holland. By Holland’s feet, down in the water, there were bright and glorious colours in the water – rising and sparkling, falling and sinking again. “Hollaannndd...” Barbara said, stepping forwards, wading over to her friend. “... What did you do...?”

Holland looked down nervously. Then, tentatively, one sneaker slid into the water. The colours parted, subsided – and a tone chimed through the room, gentle, accepting, warm. The throne coloured slightly – taking on a lavender hue.

“I think it thinks I’m the King.”

“Wait, you can’t be a King, you’re –” Angus began, pulling his feet out of the water and perching on the edge of the water. “You’re a human.”

Holland thought back to a massive, cow-like construction of magic that thought it saw a cow. Holland remembered people at the bus stop who thought they saw a boy or a girl. Holland remembered the Prince seeing nothing. Holland remembered crab golems, mindless and obedient, filing up to protect what *they* had to think was a King. Barbara had seen Holland as a blazing star, hiding in infinite space; Enk had not seen Holland at all, when he was the Prince.

“I think...” Holland said, stepping forwards, up the path, and taking seat on the throne. It was hard and uncomfortable, but Holland had sat on cheaper seats. Hands rested on the arms of the seat. All around Holland, bright lights flared in the crystal spires, blossoming in riots of colour, colour that meant something to the King.

The Throne would obey its King. Unfortunately, its King did not know how to listen to the Throne.

Outside, the storm clouds spread further, as time grew yet shorter.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The question sat amongst them with a near physical presence. Perhaps the ancient machinery around them and its unnatural magical weight could do that, could take something as conceptual and unphysical as a question and lay it upon them like a blanket with some actual *mass*.

“This is good,” Enk said, looking up at the translucent mechanisms, the way the light flit from surface to surface as if water in pipes. “If it responds to the King – erm, if it responds to Holland, we have something we can do.” Nervousness wracked Enk’s voice. He was trying to remember the thoughts of *The Prince* itself, something ancient and reformed with the magic, and that alien mind slipped through his fingers too easily. The Prince wasn’t like the other minds. Remembering the Bodyguard’s mind was alien – locked away slivers of information that Enk had somehow been open to holding, but not *grasping*. The Prince was a thousand times more alien. The solution was on the tip of his tongue, but it was a corrosive one.

“Can you shut it down, Holland?” Barbara asked, standing by the throne, resting her hand on the arm of the structure.

Innogen stood closer to her cousin, out of the water, but she wasn’t paying attention to the three at the Throne. Her eyes were over to the side of the room, where Angus and Cards were standing. Sometime after Holland had made the throne light up, Angus had pulled Cards aside from the group and started to speak. From where Innogen stood, she couldn’t make out what he was saying – but his manner reflected Enk’s voice. Enk was struggling to think through a solution in a memory that wasn’t his. Angus seemed to be having an entirely different sort of crisis.

They were all so *young*. Angus felt every one of his years on his shoulders, as if somehow being born before *Animaniacs* made him ancient. When he’d been Enk’s age, the hardest question he’d had to answer was – well, it was probably ‘You wot, mate?’ and he’d mostly avoided that question as hard as he could. Now here, they were struggling with a world of magic. Being a teenager was hard enough. What were the kids going to *do* in these coming days? It was with this worry in his mind Angus had turned to Cards, seeking the counsel of the only other adult in the room.

“Ah, hello, miss. My name’s Angus, I don’t think we were properly introduced,” And just like that, he felt like he was at a party making a fool of himself rather than trying to have a serious discussion with the person he saw as The Other Adult in the room. “You would be-”

She cut him off with a raised hand, holding a small white card between her fingers, her eyebrow raised, her expression sharp.

Classified

“Ah,” he paused. “Eum, are you with the SAS?”

Classified

“The CIA, or um... the...” he paused, looking back at the group, “... Mounties?”

Classified

Angus folded his arm across his chest, elbow into his hand, and his face into his free hand. "I think I see how this line of conversation ends. Alright, can you tell me why you're here?"

Classified

At least she seemed to be enjoying herself. The eye he could see was sparkling, even if her lips showed an expression that could only be raw, uncut boredom.

"Well..." he said, looking back at the throne. "This is... this is something very big, and I don't consider myself any kind of *expert* on magic, but I've at least been paying attention to the news. I guess I'd, I mean, what do you think?" he asked, turning to look at her.

Do you think i have a card for this?

"... Ah." He stopped short. "It's just... you ... I mean, for some reason I thought you... I don't know, wrote them when you needed them."

The sparkle in her eye stopped and she just glared at him.

"Ahah. Well, um," he turned, and sighed, looking over at the throne, with Holland perched in place, the glittering lights rising and swelling around the children. Teenagers, but for some reason, the gap between fifteen and twenty-five seemed an infinity wide. "God, I've no idea what to say to them. I mean..."

Cards tapped his shoulder, holding up two cards, together.

Why?

Do you think I have a card for this?

Angus bit his lip. Somehow, he felt it wasn't right to put this responsibility, the task before them, on the shoulders of what he still thought of as children. On the other hand, *it wasn't like he had any other options.*

Enk and Holland's conversation had that low, frantic quality to it of two people trying to open a car door without the handle, neither quite sure off if the other knows what they're doing. Holland was already annoyed by the way Enk said 'thing,' as if it meant anyt- as if it had any meaning, and Enk wasn't really listening to Holland as he strove to chase the last of the Prince's memories that had been left in his head. Not to mention the wheezing pain in his chest every time he touched his own chest, or brushed it against something accidentally.

Barbara stood back, leaning away and tried not to look like she was holding a pair of shotguns. After all, she'd known Holland... weeks longer than this guy had. Not to mention that Holland had been possessed by precisely zero star-field piles of bubbling mass. That wasn't exactly an easy thing to erase in Barbara's mind. On the other hand, the other one – the cousin, Jen? She'd demonstrated that she was willing to bolt her cousin in the chest to save the day, which she had to certainly respect.

"What are they trying to do?" She eventually asked, leaning to the side, looking Innogen in the eye.

Innogen shrugged. "Don't really know. I think Enk's trying to find like, factory settings or something, or turn the batteries around."

Barbara set her jaw. There weren't any people from her school here. There weren't any laws or really any of the things that would normally hold her back. There was just Holland, her friend, who she was worried about. When they were done here, Barbara was going to work out how to teleport again, and she was going to take Holland somewhere safe. Still, it didn't hurt to be gracious. Tossing her head slightly, looking at the brunette, Barbara finally spoke:

"You know, you are really c-"

"HAH!" Enk yelled, thumping the arm of the throne. Holland leapt away like Enk's fist was a thunderbolt, and then Barbara was moving.

"Hey!" Barbara yelled, clamping her hand on Enk's wrist, just as Holland tried to intervene.

"No, no-" Holland said, hands on Barbara's arm. "We've got it working! Well, sort of. We've... we've made it respond to me. It thinks I'm the King."

"Thank y'very much," Innogen drawled, and lowered the hand pointed at Barbara's head. Nobody laughed, but on the other hand, people didn't seem to notice the scent of ozone either. "And what does that mean now?"

Enk held up three fingers. "First things first, we can stop it killing everything." A pause. "I think."

"We can," Holland said, nodding seriously. "I mean, if that thing lighting up means what Enk thinks it means, it - yes. We can. We can save the world." And there was something *so proud* in Holland's voice at that.

"But..."

"... Oh dear." Innogen said. "I don't like But. Why is there But?"

"There's But because the device has been absorbing magic non-stop since magic came back. It's soaking it up. What it's meant to do is soak up all the magic, turn that magic into a crystal, then detonate the crystal and let that kill everyone."

"Who *made* this thing?!" Barbara yelled.

In her pocket, her phone bleeped, displaying on its screen exactly what Enk said: "A crazy person. Anyway, it's been absorbing magic for months now, and as it sucks up the magic, it speeds up. It's eating more and more magic every minute. If we leave it alone, we can stop it detonating, and magic just *goes away*. Which, you know, means it goes back to the way it was. Probably undoes anything that's... temporary, you know? Like the disappeared people."

"... And if we want to keep magic?" Barbara asked, her eyes narrowing.

"Well, then we can stop it absorbing right now. It'll form a crystal, but it'll just sink down into the ocean. The crystal will break again, but it'll take thousands of years, and it'll fuel magic into a world

that had magic already, instead of, um, none. Magic will be around, we'll be able to use it and study it, but it'll be weaker than it is now."

Holland shifted in the throne. "Or I could try reversing the crystal, and just let all the magic out there. I mean, it's possible that without the Prince there's not as much danger to having it."

Innogen looked between them. "What do you think?"

Barbara stopped looking at Innogen's hair and gestured around them. "I think that we go to war over oil and magic can probably do all it can and more. I think it lets us make heroes and heal things we couldn't. I mean, if it's anything like I've dealt with."

Holland squirmed uncomfortably, hands on the arms of the throne. "What about you, though?"

Innogen blinked. "Wait, me?"

"Yeah..."

"I mean, I'm thinking the free-for-all out there is kind of crazy. I heard some cities are missing and that's pretty scary. And we're so scared of people having access to bombs and stuff, but now we have people who can make bombs out of anything..." She rubbed her hand up through her scalp. "I'm pretty sure it's best to keep some Magic, but I... I guess I'd really like some controls on it."

Enk bit his lower lip. "I... I don't want magic. I don't want it around. I don't think we should have it... it just seems to make problems. I mean, it's been around how many months, and the world is so messed up?"

Barbara sniffed. "It's like guns, you know, Enk. You can't just get rid of them once they're out there. The damage has been done – there's no real way to control it after it's happened."

The two Canadians, the British man, and the Australian all looked at Barbara like she was insane.

Holland sat forwards. "I think... I think I know what to do."

There was no more time left. The great and dreadful machine, risen up from the depths long-since-before, a relic of an early Age of Sand, from a point in history where the machinations of humanity were literally inconceivable, began to hum. It roared no longer – bellowing as it drew in the first guttering blasts of magic, as it stripped away the force in the world – and instead sent out its force in rippling waves. A mesh of sound, so subtle and subsonic that humans did not hear it, but instead felt it, somewhere that made them more nervous than being in this strange, damaged world of magical impossibility did.

There was no blast, no flash, no crack of thunder – merely the strange exultant feeling, the glory in the thunder, that came from hearing the blast and existing afterwards. A single strange moment in which every person could say, briefly, they felt the same thing.

There was, and a moment later, there was something else.

And in amongst the water-and-magic powered turning, the magical runeshaping that transformed the world, even for an instant, there was one little selfish secret, one little change. And Holland would think back on it, years later, and not feel the slightest bit of guilt.

\*

Governments were not unaware of the Structure in the ocean. The chamber was the size of a mansion, drifting in a section of the sea that deformed all the weather around it. All sorts of names were used to describe it, and arguments were held on a variety of communication channels as to just *who* should be looking at it. To nobody's great surprise, the loudest voices in that argument were on opposite sides of the Atlantic. The argument was, nonetheless, strangled short, however, when the storm *ended* around it.

Ships and helicopters came down to rescue the people, following signals sent out by the devices Cards had brought with her. While they all had ideas in their minds of how things went, when an emergency of some sort concluded – sitting on benches, wearing heavy blankets, sipping drinks from large cups and explaining the best of the story could understand – only one of them was prepared for the actual experience of it.

Vessels carried six people to five different homes. Naval men and women listened as best they could to five different accounts of what, exactly, had happened – but everyone was glad to know that *the thing in the ocean was less likely to explode*, now.

\*

Angus went home to find himself without a job. It wasn't like there was any use or application for a person who could tell you why the magic you saw wasn't magic, what with the world *being* a place of magic, now. What's more, he'd found himself without much talent for magic himself.

In the end, Angus did what many people of only modest skill but interesting experience did, and wrote a book. Hardly a best-seller, in the reshaping world of magical studies, he instead took to the task of education. Turns out that in a world with actual illusionary magic, the task of understanding how humans' minds were fooled was still toil worth undertaking.

While Angus did not become someone glamorous, or powerful, or well-regarded amongst his community, his work kept him in sweater vests for the rest of his days.

\*

Up in Canada, by the wharfs, the witch named Innogen went back to a school schedule, champing at the new limitations on her magic. It wasn't a *bad* idea, one she could certainly understand, where magic had become sealed off, behind various levels of mental gymnastics that became easier as you became older. Whether it was what Holland had intended, specifically, or not, a person's magic hit a certain limit at the edges of their body. Innogen, as a teenager, found that while she could *construct* the patterns in her mind, could not *fill* that pattern with magic.

People had limits, now. Every day, the spells she used to clean her clothes, speed her path to school, to quicken her memory, became a little bit stronger. There weren't people *dispelling* whole cities, or schoolteachers so terrified of the possibility of a student who could throw fireballs.

Innogen did miss throwing lightning bolts, but only because it looked totally badass. There wasn't much the world could throw in her path, now, that she hadn't dealt with.

Funny thing, most nobody Innogen knew, afterwards, ever *heard* the story about the time she went to the Forever in the Sea, the time she and her best friends *fought and killed the Prince of a Thousand Eyes*.

It wasn't that Innogen wasn't proud of what she'd done. It certainly wasn't guilt at having electrocuted her cousin, who she insisted would *walk it off* once they were near medical facilities. Innogen didn't talk about that day, because she felt it was far more important to find something *new* to overcome. And therefore, she was back in school, doing well at Math and watching the news for information on upcoming scientific studies and fast-start college programs designed to teach and learn about Magic.

\*

The world was a strange place. There was still a woman in the jungles of Central America, fighting a one-woman war against the worst elements of drug cartels and rebel fighters who respected not life nor liberty. Garish, bright guns, decorated with silver and gold were still left at the sites of each fight, and the myth of the woman continued. While the people of the drug cartels changed their operations with magic in their toolsets, Cards merely added to her repertoire of tactics, a fairly important new plan: *scrag the mage*.

Cards knew what most of the others she'd worked with didn't. The world had been a strange place before, and it would be a strange place afterwards.

\*

Few people who considered 'normal' a goal in their lives ever realised how fruitless a pursuit it was. Enk had wanted to be normal so badly that he'd built his life around it – deliberately constructing his afterschool time to free himself from things like decisions. It was a hard thing to hold onto, though, after literally *remembering the lives* of so many other people.

Jubal had not wanted to be normal. He'd just wanted his father to be well. Delilah had wanted freedom. Shamgar, Shamgar had been the craziest of them all. The Bodyguard craved a world that was safe, and the Prince didn't really want anything. The Prince was everyone else's want, not his own.

Sitting in his study, he held the piece of paper, with its well-overdue report question. The school year had been shot to pieces, with all the disasters, the revolution around the world. Now that life was settling down, and magic was being studied, he had tried to go back to school. That brought its own challenge, since he remembered being *an adult* so many times over.

*Compare and contrast the national attitudes towards domestic leaders Oliver Cromwell and Abraham Lincoln.*

Enk shook his head, running his hand through his black hair, and pushed his spectacles back on his face. A sigh ran up and down his body before it escaped his lips, and he looked out the window to see nothing but whiteness.

Enk was normal. In the statistical sample size of one, he had a perfect match to the statistical model of teenage boys who had been to the middle of the ocean, become possessed by ancient not-quite-gods, and then been hit in the chest with a lightning bolt before helping to save the world.

Maybe the world didn't *need* magic. He wasn't even sure that the world was *better* with magic in it. Still... it was comforting to know that magic *was* there, that there was another great mystery for people to spend their time learning about. After all, he'd never had any gift for particle physics.

If only he could remember where he'd left his mobile phone...

\*

Warm gulf water lapped against Barbara's feet.

For one glorious year, her family's strange little ritual, *believed* to have power – without any good reason! – had been given the strength of gods. She had reached out, and pulled stars out of the sky. She had struck the face of a *thing* that stood before men did.

The dreams of her homeland spoke of hope, change, transformation, of being able to achieve with the labour of her hands. It was the place of opportunity, it was the land of the free, the home of the brave, and *she couldn't stand it*. The teenager had tasted the power of something above and beyond herself, and *had lost it*.

If America was the place where people made dreams, Barbara had decided to make sure she knew her dream, clear and certain. It was less a dream, more a plan. One day, in the future, they'd tell stories about her. About the vigilante heroine who had fought uphill to reclaim magical power that had been hers, shriven from her soul by machinations beyond her. They'd remember the mask, the indestructible cellphone, the roar of a lion's shadow that followed her. It was an ambition that could consume a person's life.

Thank god she had her friends to keep her centred.

\*

Sometimes, Holland wondered if guilt was the appropriate response, but never so deeply as to actually feel any. Magic made much of life easier for people. Some Magicians (who insisted on the term *Thaumic Medical Professionals*) were working on transitional spells, spells that would erase the barrier that Holland had grown up on the wrong side of. Holland was lucky enough to jump the queue.

Holland had friends now. The Canadian boy who had been turned into the Prince of a Thousand Eyes. His cousin, who'd *thrown a fricking lightning bolt at him*. Barbara, whose tumblr rolled on Holland's extravagant but oh-so-cute smartphone. Holland went to sleep now with people saying goodnight, and woke up to people who were happy to say hello.

Summer heat built around Holland. In one year, Holland had escaped a bull, gained magical powers, hidden from crabs, hidden *behind* crabs, faced down one of the worst human impulses, and maybe saved the world a little bit. Christmas was coming, and Holland laughed looking at the phone's screen, talking with Innogen and Barbara and Enk about this 'snow' stuff.

No more pills on the nightstand. No more stressing out over a mistimed medication. No fear of the inevitable surgery, which wasn't inevitable any more.

It had, really, been a good year.

\*

In the sixth age of sand, there were seven billion clever apes roaming the world, calling themselves 'people.' The term meant 'every single one of us, more or less,' which is not uncommon for 'people.' Before the 'people,' the world belonged to towering haired mammals that were inured to the cold. Before them, the world was owned by birds, then before that, and before that, and before that, and before that ever backwards. The world is a big thing, and it was hard to say who owned them, but the 'people' were just another category of 'people' that had built things on the world like language and time and money.

The parasites and diseases and the trees all over the world that had happily spread themselves and cared very little for the fast-moving creatures of the world were not consulted as to the ownership of the world.

The world was a strange place, in the sixth age of sand. There were smartphones to record people's runic magic. There were small countries with large natural reserves of magical history, connected to their contiguous social constructs like monarchy and cultural habit. There were people who had magical colours and there were nations with no history who used huge, open stretches of blank land to carve runes to create magical patterns thousands of times over to enable a better world. There were fights, and there were conflicts, but it only took a little bit of time for people to adjust, and adapt. The world was a place of information, now, and so it didn't need *much* magic to change entirely. Children born before the internet had learned to use it every day; Children born before magic's return learned to use it just as well.

There was legislation. There were discussions. There were collaborations. Roaming ghosts of remembered species took back parts of the wild, and started to fill the empty regions of the world that 'people' had deemed too hard to work. People lived their lives, wondering if they were capable of

The world was a strange place, in the sixth age of sand. Wasn't it always?

## Afterword

I've read more than a few authors' forewords to early works in which they describe their first book as *a labour of love*. Not the case here - *The Sixth Age of Sand* is a labour of principle.

Ever since I was young I had some vague aspirations to have a job that somehow involved creative writing. As I let my twenties grind away under a host of boring jobs like data entry and motel management, I operated with the idea that I would, eventually, find some time to set my life aside and grind out some books, which would change everything. Aspiration like this is not uncommon – most people think they'll do this.

The year I turned thirty, I felt I had run out of excuses. I set myself a goal to write a short story every week. It didn't matter what the content was, or how long it was – I just wanted to be able to say, every week, that I had completed *some* work. By the end of the year, I figured I'd have a book, something basic, some *first step*.

That's what you're holding, now. My first step.

2013 was not a good year for me. I attended too many funerals, mourned too many pets, and watched too many loved ones wasting away under the ravages of unconquerable disease. Sections of this story have been written in hospitals, at bus stops, on trains, in classrooms waiting for examination results, and in bed at night with tears on my face.

It's done, though.

And I'm sure that I can do it again, and again.

What I want you to know is that *you can write a book*. You really can. Even if you can't type, with speech recognition programs now, you *can* write a book. If you're waiting for a motivating factor, if you're waiting for an opportunity to start, here it is. Start. You can do it. It's easy if you just keep at it. Write a little every week, and you'll have something eventually.

- Talen Lee