

**Michael Bettencourt**

---

**When Darkness Becomes  
Aware Of The Light**

Block & Tackle Productions Press



# **When Darkness Becomes Aware of the Light**

---

**Michael Bettencourt  
and Christopher Monfette**

**Block & Tackle Productions Press**



**Co-Founders Elfin Frederick Vogel and Michael Bettencourt**

**Copyright © 2015  
[www.blockandtackleproductions.com](http://www.blockandtackleproductions.com)**

**To María Beatriz - always in all ways**

# Contents

- 1** Prologue
- 11** Wherein Gaul Finds Out That Swing, Her Closest Friend In DEAD, Has Been Keeping Secrets From Her That Will Change Both Of Their Lives, As Is Usually The Case With These Kinds Of Secrets
- 21** Wherein Gaul Goes To The Old Tower And There Discovers All Manner Of Dangerous Things That Inevitably Change Her Life, Though It's Not Clear If The Change Is For The Better Or For The Worse
- 31** Wherein Gravinstad, In A State Of Agitation, Wonders If The True History Of Valice Is, In Fact, Its True History, And How This Leads Him, A Man Who Never Smiles, To Smile.
- 37** Wherein Gaul Meets Another Feathered Creature Who Guides Her From One Land Of Dreams To Another, Where Gaul Learns That She Can Only Start To Be Free When She Starts Having Nothing Left To Lose
- 43** Wherein Gaul Adds A New Word To Her Vocabulary, Learns That A Fall Can Be An Uplifting Experience, And Meets A Boy Who Is A Man Who Is A Boy
- 49** Wherein A Pair Of Cut-Up Assassins Makes Their Entrance Upon The Stage And They Minister To A Very Frightened Gentleman As The Gentleman Gets In A Few Digs
- 55** Wherein Gaul Meets Two More Feralz, Sees More Than She Wants To See, And Finds Her Emotions Swinging Back And Forth More Than She Ever Did As A Flip In DEAD
- 61** Wherein Divot Comes Back To His Life - In A Manner Of Speaking - And Gravinstad, Surrounded By Incompetence, Is Nonetheless Tickled By A Feather
- 65** Wherein Gaul Gets More With Her Meal Than The Bread In Her Hand And Words Float Upward Like Electrical Sparks
- 71** Wherein Pym And Swiddle Pick Up A Further Employment They Wish Had Not Come Their Way, Though, Being Businessmen, They Give It As Fair A Hearing As They Can
- 77** Wherein Gaul Learns Her Fate - And Her Fate Learns About Gaul

- 85**      **Wherein War Comes And Goes, And In Its Coming And Going Prove That Defeat And Victory Are Often Difficult To Tell Apart**
- 105**     **Wherein Gaul Learns Several Meanings Of The Word “Face” And Must Face Her Situation With A Face Both Old And Newly Minted**
- 115**     **Wherein Swing Is Not Dead (Though He Might Wish He Were) And Gravinstad Demonstrates The Terrifying Power Of Change**
- 119**     **Wherein Gaul Has Her Mind Made Up For Her While She Is Making Up Her Mind, Learning In The Process That Nothing Is Ever What It Seems**
- 135**     **Wherein Gaul Emerges Into A World Literally Outside The Only World That She Had Known And Finds That Life Is No Different Outside Than It Had Been Inside**
- 147**     **Wherein We Meet The King And Queen Whose Names No One Remembers**
- 153**     **Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Pray That What Was Lost Has Now Been Found And That What Has Been Found Will Replace What Was Lost**
- 157**     **Wherein Rufus And Gaul Encompass A Compass And Pym And Swiddle Prepare Themselves To Be Boggled Down In Pursuit**
- 165**     **Wherein A Congress Of Ravens Counsels The Queen And Bensole Learns That There Are Many Worlds Kept Within And Without The World Of The Keep**
- 171**     **Wherein Gaul And Rufus Meet The Creatures Whose Name No Human Tongue Can Pronounce And Pym Turns Dog-Like In His Dogged Pursuit**
- 179**     **Wherein A World Made From Pain Becomes A World Torn Asunder**
- 193**     **Wherein A Lullaby Keeps The Assassins Calm, Perhaps More Calm Than They Have Ever Been In Their Lives, And Helps Ridicule Overcome Anger**
- 205**     **Wherein Pym And Swiddle Find Deliverance With Bruises, And In A Manner Of Speaking, So Does Bensole**

- 213    Wherein The Queen And King Come To A Certainty, And Rufus And Gaul Do Not
- 223    Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Escape Into The Ambiguous Company Of The Boatman, Who Had Once Led Life With His Eye On The World
- 231    Wherein Exile Becomes A Sort Of Home, And A Woman With A Third Eye In The Middle Of Her Forehead Is, Believe It Or Not, Someone To Be Trusted
- 239    Wherein The Worries Of The World Fall Upon Gravinstad, Which Is Good News For Swiddle And Pym
- 243    Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Meet An Angel Carried To Them By The Boatman
- 249    Wherein A Resolution Is Made Among Thieves And A Strange Grace Falls Over Everything
- 263    Wherein A New World Appears Like An Egg Inside The Old World And, Like An Egg, Is Both Fragile And Nutritious
- 275    Wherein Gaul And Rufus Have A Visitation That Makes Them Think More Deeply About Deep Matters That Need Deep Thinking
- 281    Wherein Q Is Saved And Mothers Do Not All Think Alike
- 287    Wherein Bensole And Poly X Come To An Understanding
- 293    Wherein Things That Had Been Closed Now Threatened To Open
- 305    Wherein All The Others Feel Their Own Intimations And Shiftings
- 309    Wherein What Was Sought Has Been Found And, In Being Found, Gives More And Less Than What Was Expected





# Prologue

## The Ravens of Valice

---



alice, city of towers.

Like stone fingers clawing the sky.

In the old days the old ones - out of fear, pride, stupidity - had started a wall around Valice that had now grown so high that the streets below always ran in half-darkness. A wall with roots jammed deep into the earth's bones and grown thick on ruins and war and time and fear.

Valice, city of gloom.

The streets shaded by the wall are barely brighter than the sewers that run beneath them, where an anthill of thieves and lost children scour the crippled city above them for anything that can be traded, sold, begged for, melted down, cashed in. Nasty. And never fair. But alive.

Valice, city dying.

The streets still had gas for the lamps. The houses still had fuel to cook their food. The factories could still steam their boilers to run their machines. The stores still strung candles in their windows. The newspapers still spewed from their presses each night and hit the kiosks each morning.

But everyone knew.

Everything that had given Valice its power to make power was running out - the oil drained, the gas tapped out, even the wind, even the rivers, even the ground - all exhausted. Valice had used them all. And Valice - old, thick, proud, smug - had used them all up.

Soon, what Valice had been would no longer be what it was, poised as it was on the lip of the abyss, with the ground behind it eaten away and nothing but the dark vast in front of it. Every person knew this, every stone in the wall knew this, every tower that cut the sky knew this. And then just as quickly as they knew it, they forgot it. Better to hope against hope than take that one step forward into the darkness. Into chance. Into change.

Except for the Ravens of Valice.



---

Over the towers, the vine-scabbed walls, the crushing streets, the anonymous sewers, they thicken the air with their wing-beats and their sly jabber. They are not weighed down. And of late they have been going crazy.

At night in their rookeries, a half-told secret whispers in their heads and it maddens them - to *almost* see, to *almost* hear - to almost *know* - and during the day they circle and circle, mad with the hunger to turn “almost” into “yes.” What gives them heart? What keeps the madness at bay?

The secret comes when it came from where they knew it would come all along - from underground, ready to force itself light-ward.

From underground.

From the dark heart.

---

### Alma

---

Black.

Not just the rock.

Alma's skin.

Made black from what they had hacked out of the ground. From the dust of it, the grit and smear of it.

Alma had luck, though - they had placed her near the top of the mine shaft so that, if she stared hard through the dark filth, she could just see the sun's light. Not like the ones stuffed far down in the dark. Not the lost ones. The ones who, when they came up at all for air and light, came hauled up in a train car or on the back of a blind mule, lugged like dead meat or a sack of wet sand. Dead. And dead. And still dead.

The guards did not want them to watch when the lumps wrapped in rough rags and looped with rope passed by - a slap, a punch, and they all looked back down at the ground, or at the wall with its blank seam of coal. But they could see. They could count. They knew. A day, a week, a year, who knew when? But it would be their turn, their bones dumped in a bag to be tossed into the pit where the wolves would feast and the birds pick off what the wolves left or missed.

Alma swung her pick, hard, and its point slammed into the wall - a few chunks cracked free and fell. Once more, and still more fell. She could hear the



crunch of the guard's boot at her back, and in back of that sound she heard the clack-clack-clack of the train cars as the toothed chain humped them up from the mine's gut full of the coal that went to some place else that she would not live out her thirteenth year to see. She knew this. In her bones. She swung the pick once more.

The guard's boots scuffed past, and Alma took a deep breath through her cloth mask. She could still taste the dust, feel it stick in her nose, grind in her teeth - at least the teeth she had left. She glanced up at the dim sun caught in the mouth of the mine, and for one - two - three - four - five beats of her heart her mind slipped back to a time with a house, a brother, a kiss, a touch on her cheek, pain shared by all, food, father, mother - then it all died. Her heart still beat - one - two - three - four - five - but Alma did not know why.

She heard one more scrape in back of her - the sole and heel of a cruel boot, she thought - and she held the pick over her head, poised to strike. But. That sound. Alma paused. The rasp - not like the guard at all, not so thick and dumb. Alma looked to her left. Rock. Dirt. Spit. To her right - and a pair of eyes like sparks of glass stared back at her. From a black-plumed head that sloped down to two curved wings spread out wide that linked to the clawed feet that scraped on the ground. The Raven moved closer to her.

A glance to the right and left to check - no guard. Alma threw down her pick and kneeled to stare at this bird that should not have been, in front of her, eyes fixed, head to one side, beak split, the thin slip of its tongue held stiff. The Raven took a step - click-click - then one more. It stretched its neck and raised its head, then gave Alma one, two, three nods. Alma leaned her face down to its face - she could feel the rocks bite the palms of her hands, but she did not care. Not more than an inch to go - and the Raven gave Alma a light peck on the nose. For the first time in a long, long time, Alma cracked a smile, her teeth white in a black face.

She went to touch the Raven, but it lunged at the opposite wall, where it cracked its beak against the rock and coal.

Alma glued her eyes to the dark bird as its beak drilled the rough wall, once, twice, once more, each time with more and more force.

It flicked its dark eyes from Alma to the wall, from the wall to Alma.

"You want me to - " she croaked, her throat dust-dry.

The Raven bobbed its head.



She gripped her hands around the pick, raised it high, then spiked the coal-face. Sparks leapt. The Raven stared at her, the wall, her, the wall. Once more, she slammed down the pick.

This time a large chunk fell off - then smash and smash and smash and smash, slabs sheared off with each blow - and over her head the wood-beams creaked and rock dust rained down.

Alma stopped. The beams bowed in their middles. The Raven went mad.

“We do more, bird, the beams’ll snap.”

Voices up the shaft, loud and gnarled - guards. They would soon round on her, whips raised - her skin burned at the thought. And then this mad Raven at her feet, the beams in a moan as the rock-weight bent their grain. The Raven flapped its wings, honed its beak on the rock, as if one more swing of Alma’s pick were all that kept it from air and sun, that would save it from death and the dark.

The guards showed, faces rough and chewed, their screams like darts in her ears, and the cross-hatch of scars scored on her back burned with an old pain.

“Not this time,” she hissed, and Alma heaved the pick with her whole body.

As the stone burst, the beams gave out, and all came down in a crash.

---

### **Gravinstad**

---

The Cave, some hissed it, in a voice sucked dry by fear. The Pit, they said, too. And The Hole. And The Grave. And then there was its map name, the name on all the plaques in the street and guides that traced the city streets: The Keep of Kings.

The Keep - taller than the wall, the tallest tower in a city known for the height and rudeness of its towers - now covered by a dull fog lit dirty-yellow from the flood-lights below.

Gravinstad, standing on the parapet at the Keep’s highest point, half-stared at the fog, his mind half-there, half-not. Occasionally the Ravens would pierce the mist, and when they did, Gravinstad’s mind would latch on to their dark diving bodies, his eyes keen and sharp, as if reading a message. But then they’d disappear, and Gravinstad’s mind would drift away with them.



---

What Gravinstad wanted from the Ravens - from the fog, from the parapet, from anything - was an answer to the question that boiled inside him, a question that had not been there a week ago but which now gnawed at his peace.

And what was worse, the question had no words that could be nailed by a pen to a piece of paper. It was a *feeling*, no thicker than fog. And while Gravinstad had great respect for feelings when they gave him the answers he wanted, this *feeling* gave him back nothing, and so he hated it, and, hating it, wanted to drag into the light so that he could know it and then kill it.

For Gravinstad, ruler of Valice in power if not in name (the King had the name), hated things that would not give in to his command. Everything, eventually, gave up to Gravinstad what Gravinstad wanted - such was the beauty and clarity of his will. They knelt before him, so very often, with their eyes stark mad and mouths stretched wide to beg for their own lives, or their son's, or their dog's, or for just another breath of air. All he had to do was nod, or wave his hand, or turn his back, or look them straight in the eye. And what he wanted done would be done - they would spill their guts, and then off they would go. Just like that. Snap.

But this *feeling* - what was it that squatted just out of reach and mocked him, teased him, put him on edge?

Something had changed.

Something was changing.

That was all he could tell.

---

## Gaul

---

Gaul loved the weight of the rig-out as its twined straps gripped her waist, traced her wing bones, cut past both sides of her neck and down the front of her to end in a thick belt that lined her hips. From the belt hung clips that she could hook to the rope lines that looped the grooved wheels and whizzed past clamps and brakes and screws and cams that helped Gaul spring up from tier to tier or shoot out in a straight line from wall to wall. And right now, as she hung from the block jammed in to one of the dense wood beams that trussed up the roof, the sight, as it did all the time, took the breath from her and made her feel, at least for the beat of a heart, not so lost and all on her own.



Spread out in front of her was DEAD - the Dead Epistle Assignment Department, the place where a letter went when it had no place else to go, when it was a “dead letter” and came here to be slit open, listed in the log book, and then passed on to Gaul and the ones like her to lay it in a slot in one of the walls of DEAD - and not just the walls that she could see but walls in rooms past these walls, walls in the Old Towers that were out of bounds to “the flips” (named by the ones who ran DEAD for the fanciful acrobatics they performed as they dove, twirled and swooped through the air). They spoke of these places in the flip’s code of hand signs and tongue-twist grunts so that Divot, the boss (who sat with his whip and gun on a cracked high chair), would not know what they said.

Gaul watched the flips as they swam through the air to slip a letter into a slot, then scan the walls with their cram of letters in search of their next drop-off, and the whole place buzzed like a bee hive. Across from her, Swing did as Gaul did - stuff, shoot out, toss, spin and arc. Swing - the closest thing Gaul had for a friend in this loveless place. He turned to Gaul. His faced looked tired and drained.

“I had *your* dream this morning,” growled Swing. “On the look for what I could not find. In the Old Towers.”

Then *crack!* and Gaul snapped back to real time. Down there Gaul could see Divot next to his chair, his gun raised, a tongue of smoke curled at the end of it, then she glanced at the wood beam near her head which now had a hole the size of Gaul’s thumb. This was how Divot made sure a flip did his or her job - a lead ball close but not too close made the flips get the point and move on. Gaul did not flinch - the boss can’t shoot a flip, just shoot *at* a flip - but she shied off, just to be sure.

In back of her, Gaul could still hear Swing talk talk talk. Swing all the time had his tongue in gear, his mouth a word-spout, words in a rush, a spew, once in a while clear and straight, more than once in a while full of jib and jab and no sense at all - and in the past few days more no-sense than sense, and Gaul had found that her ears had tuned him out, shut him off, let him go on, then just let him go.

“It was a letter, I think, but - for me - funny funny funny *bleh bleh bleh* - maresy oats and dosey dotes - a flip getting *mail* - dosey dotes - “

Where the wall met the roof the ones who had built DEAD had put in a line of grills with glass panes leaning back from them to let in the air and keep out the



---

rain, though, so high up, none of the air made it down to the ground and the rain still leaked in. As Gaul swung up to the slot for the letter she held in her hand, she had a shock - right there, hooked to the edge of one of the panes, a Raven. Gaul glanced at Divot to make sure his eyes were not on her - then a soft push so that she could float up to the Raven, who did not seem to fear Gaul - simply opened its wings and stood as still as paint. Gaul put her face right up to the Raven's, who first pecked Gaul on the nose then croaked a string of squeaks and grunts and pops and clicks in the flips' code that Gaul heard as clear as a bell in her mind as "Like it or not, you're going to like it and not like it."

"I dreamt of those things, too," said Swing, floating by. "Ravens. Gas-bags full of feathers skeevey lice among their hackles what'll they let in next?"

Swing laughed at his own joke and shot off before the laugh could fade out. Gaul shook her head and turned her face back to the Raven. But it had gone, slipped off like the smoke from Divot's gun. Her nose still itched where the beak-tip had stung it.

She leapt into the criss-cross of lines and wires and went back to work.

---

### Alma

---

She felt she was alive. It did not feel good.

She willed her nerves to talk back to her - did that finger move? Yes, that's one. The rest? Two three up to ten - still wired to her hands. Good. Legs? First left - yes. Right - yes. Toes - ten. Face up or face down? Nose not crushed, so, okay, face up. Were those tears or was it blood that ran from her eyes? Tears - good. But it did not feel good.

She rose up on her elbows, bent her knees, looked straight, up, left, right. How had it passed that the rock-fall had not slimed her over the floor, leaving a wet skid-mark behind. Bruised, heart-sick, cut, scraped - all of that. But still with a heart's beat, an in-breath and an out-breath, a pulse, grit-snot in her nose, grit-spit in her mouth - still the light side of the grave. How? How?

The air and dust shook as the earth groaned in its rough grind, and it took a while for things to come to a dead rest. Then sheer clean pure hush. Not a sound. Not one sound. Alma thought that this what it was like to be in one of



those rough brown bags spiked with meat and bones that passed her by up from the depths. She cocked an ear for the caw of the Raven, but it came up blank.

Alma stood. What now? Should she scream? Or should she laugh? Think, “I’m half-dead and on the road to all-dead” - or think, “Spared and, in an odd way, free - not a guard in sight”?

The wind gave her a clue.

She felt its pull and so tracked its pull, like a swim in the sea’s ebb tide. It pulled her, pulled on her - an hour - a week - who knows - the dark sucked out all time-sense - but when she saw it, she knew what she knew she saw - a light, but not in the way torch flames dance in the wind. She moved to it, came round a huge dropped stone - and saw a thing that she did not take as true though she knew it was as true as the bungs on her shins and the scrapes in her heart.

Light - bright and fierce - *from no source* - no lamp, candle, torch, flint-spark. Just light. Maybe she had not made it through. Maybe this was the light of that other place she had once heard of - the Aft-Life - full of a warm breeze and no (or not much) pain. Oh, how good it would feel to feel no (or not much) pain.

But then - the Raven. And Alma’s hope came down in a crash. It stood on a stone, bathed in the all-round light, eyes fixed on her, head cocked to one side. Alma moved to it, and the Raven stepped back.

Then it flew - and Alma flew with it. She would not lose it again.

As she moved, a voice rose in her head. Not her own, not the Raven’s, but a small voice, a young voice, full of a soothe not made from words but from warm sounds. It was this voice of ease that pulled her on - now not the wind, not the Raven - and as she rounded a bend, she saw her second sight for sore eyes.

A young boy, washed clean - no soot-marks or dirt-smears - hair short-cropped and brown - eyes a grey/hazel - skin smooth. The Raven perched on the boy’s right arm, and it ran its left wing-tip down the boy’s cheek, a touch that Alma could only think of as love.

This is not how I look, said the boy. Only how I look to you.

“Who?” then stopped short. “*What* are you?”

Perhaps, he said, what I am has less weight than what I was.

“That does not tell me a thing I can use.”

And the boy grinned.



---

A Thing Unfound, the voice said - and after a long pause added -  
Found.

And that, for all of them, was how it began.







## Chapter 1

### **Wherein Gaul Finds Out That Swing, Her Closest Friend In DEAD, Has Been Keeping Secrets From Her That Will Change Both Of Their Lives, As Is Usually The Case With These Kinds Of Secrets**

---

No one paid it any mind anymore, but there it was, carved into the stone arch that humped over the wooden doors with their fang-like hinges: Defunct Epistle Assignment Department - DEAD. And under the words, carved in smaller letters, this: "Every Dead Letter In Its Place, A Place For Every Dead Letter."

Inside, in the main hall, no one was here - the day-bell hadn't rung yet. Quiet, but not a comforting quiet - the quiet that comes just before a bomb explodes. That kind of quiet.

Past the doors, past the main hall, into the great dorm. Where all the flips, at this moment, just before dawn, lay sleeping in their rope-slung cots on the thin pads full of left-over cloth called "mattress" but which the flips called "the devil's snot-rag."

And on one cot, her ash-colored sheet tangled around her legs - Gaul. Gaul turned and tossed: the dream had her in its grip.

In the dream Gaul had her harness on, as usual, but instead of her controlling it, it controlled her, jerking her one way, and then another, slamming her into mountains of dead letters - dust down her throat, dirt in her eyes, bits of old stamps caught in her teeth.

She knew (as she always knew at this point in the dream) that the ropes and pulleys and winches followed her thoughts - actually, her "thought," only one, the hissed words in her head on and on and on: "Where is it? Where is it? Where is it?" (Where was what? another part of her mind screamed, afraid of being smashed into the wall or cracked like an egg on the stone floor - what was "it" that she needed to know where "it" was? - but nothing, just wrench and twitch and pull, the harness almost slicing her in half.)

She also knew (as she always knew at this point in the dream) that she would make her mind quiet, a white blank, reducing the three words to just one, "it," and then rolling that word in her mouth over and over and over - IT IT IT IT -

until the word had no sense. And as they always did, the ropes and pulleys and winches stopped, and Gaul hung in mid-air, the “IT IT IT IT” ticking like the metal of the stove when the coal inside burned hot and hotter.

And, as always, Gaul would start to drop like a feather toward one letter that seemed gripped in a ray of bright hot white light - on the front of the letter one line, in strict letters: IT IT IT IT IT IT - Gaul reaching, “my real name” now whispered in her teeth, “my real name inside,” turning the envelope to open it, “my real name,” knowing that soon she will know what she has always wanted to know -

And then the letter bursts into flames, Gaul bursts into flames, and -

*Bang! Kerbam! Shaliiiinnng! Boo-oo-oo-mmmm!*

Divot, the old one-eyed club-footed thug, a wicked glint in his one-eye, flailed the clapper of the gross iron bell named Snark that every morning threw the flips out of bed like a maid threw garbage out the window. “Come on, you scum” - that seems to be what Divot lived for, to say these same words every morning - “come on, you scum, haul your backsides out of that bed and bend your backs before I break them!”

Word was that Divot had lost his foot and eye in some battle in some war at some point in time no one could remember any more - nothing but a big dead letter himself, with a mucky eye-patch and a clot of wood where his left foot should’ve been.

“Come on, you scum - “ Divot began, and all the flips, speaking in one voice, to mock him in a voice that still had respect in it, “Come on, you scum, haul your backsides out of that bed and bend your backs before I break them!”

Gaul reached under her bed for her overalls and slipped them on, then for the tee-shirt (which really stunk - but she wouldn’t get a clean one for another three days), slipped on her socks (stiff from sweat), then her rubber-soled slippers (the bottoms made from left-over tires), and dragged herself upright to go to the mess hall. All around her, just like every morning, rain or shine, the other flips did the same things, dozens of boys and girls putting on dozens of overalls and pulling on dozens of smelly white socks over dozens of dirty feet, topped off with dozens of stinky tee-shirts pulled over heads with flat and cowlicked and spiked-up bed-head hair. And all of them off to the mess hall.

In the mess hall the air was thick with chatter and the stench of the porridge and fruit that they were fed every morning. Divot now stood up on a raised



platform and put on his harness. At breakfast, and again at lunch and dinner, he would float over their tables. In his right hand he held Tumor, his bullwhip, and in the left hand his megaphone, Gob, and he would “pay out” as he saw fit, screaming and lashing, droning aloft like some horsefly god.

Gaul looked at Divot with as much expression as a spider looks at the fly it eats. (Because painted on Gob’s side was, in fact, the picture of a spider eating a fly - and Gaul knew exactly who was which.) Divot would have Tumor snick the back of some flip that moved too slowly or moved too fast or whose face he didn’t like - Tumor needed its breakfast, too, a sip of blood, a snip of skin, and Divot didn’t care who or how or why - his job was to make their lives miserable, and he was very expert at that.

Gaul joined the line of flips that grabbed their wooden bowls and wooden spoons and filed past the steaming pots of glue-like porridge ladled out by the kitchen drudges who hated their jobs, hated the flips, hated life in general. At the end of the line, baskets of banged and bruised and about-to-go-bad fruit - today, pears.

“Move it along,” Divot screamed, and cracked his whip over their heads. “Get your food down quickly, my roaches, so that you can get to your jobs and work hard at your thanks to the city of Valice which cares enough about you to feed you and house you and keep you off the streets and *alive*.”

*Glop!* into the bowl, the steam wrapping itself around the pig-faced server. “Thank you,” Gaul said, though she slurred it, like they all did, into “dog-do” or “dick-shoe” or any such thing so that they didn’t feel like they owed anything to the kitchen swine. Gaul moved on, grabbed her wooden cup of water, her pear, and moved to the tables.

*Crack!* and on the back of the flip in front her there appeared a blossom of blood as Tumor sliced through the tee-shirt into the flesh. “Move on there, my incubus, step short.” But the flip (Gaul thought his name was Turgid, but names were slippery with the flips) ignored it - in fact, did something that completely amazed Gaul.

In one smooth move he faced Divot, launched a gob of porridge with a sharp flick of his spoon, and turned away as it splattered on Divot’s forehead. So quick that Gaul was not sure she saw what she saw - but then Tumor sawed over their heads and they all scrambled to get out of range and Gaul knew the truth of



what she'd seen as she heard Divot scream, "I will kill the flea-bag what did this to me! I will have his backside for my dinner!"

As Gaul sat at one of the long trestle tables that filled the mess hall, she felt something creep over her face that she had not felt in a long time - a smile. Then hid it - among the flips, no one let out anything they felt. But it felt good to feel those muscles work again - and for a moment Divot's squealing and the piggish eating and the sulfur-smelling water and her own tired body all went away through one small smile. It *almost* made the porridge eatable. Gaul pasted as much of as she could stand into her mouth and forced herself to let it slide down her gullet - the sweet sliminess of the pear helped. They wouldn't get food again for another six hours.

As she spooned and listened to the rumoring around her, something cut through the buzz - a voice, not Divot's, not the slingshot boy, but one she knew because it was one she chose to know: Swing. Swing.

She saw Swing standing on the trestle table shouting shouting shouting - not to be done at all anywhere in DEAD, but certainly not to be done in Divot's mess hall, not with Tumor not breakfast-full yet.

"Maresy dotes and dosey dotes and little lamsie divey a kiddley divey, too, wouldn't you!" Swing pranced around the table, repeating the nonsense words: "Maresy dotes and dosey dotes and little lamsie divey a kiddley divey, too, wouldn't you!" The flips around him had moved off as if Swing had been a whirlwind kicking away dead leaves.

From the corners of her eyes she could see that Divot had already launched himself for Swing. And she could also see that Swing hadn't seen Divot, didn't care about seeing Divot - he had his face lifted to the ceiling and he spun, drooling, lost - this had been Swing in the last few weeks, a changed Swing, Swing losing touch, Swing going mad - and Gaul had done nothing about it because it hurt Gaul to care about Swing.

Without a second thought, even a first thought, Gaul leaped over the table where she was sitting, leaped over a second and third table, and landed on the table next to Swing. Her flip-sense knew that Divot was almost in range. She hugged the jittery Swing, jumped off the table with him, and, clinching Swing to her, rolled underneath the trestle table just as Tumor bit into the rough wood and Divot screeched "I'll make you eat that looniness, you turd!"



---

Tumor hit again and again - Gaul watched its tongue-tip try to flick under the table, but the seat-boxes and the legs of the tables kept it away. Swing was still shouting, so Gaul clamped a hand over his mouth, stared into his jiggling eyes, and hissed in his ear, "Shut up or you will get us both turned into tonight's dinner."

Finally, Swing looked at her as if he were really looking at her, and she saw the craziness drain out of his eyes and watched them fill up again with something that made Gaul's gut twist - sad, that's what it was, sadness. It hurt so much to look into Swing's eyes - but she made herself stay, saying "ssh ssh ssh ssh ssh - "

By this time Divot had moved on - Gaul could hear Snark ringing out the end of the breakfast - dozens and dozens of legs moved past them on the right and left as the flips left the mess hall to start their work day.

"Can I take my hand away?"

Swing nodded yes.

"Good - you were slobbering it up."

Gaul took her hand away, wiped it on Swing's shirt. They stared at each other.

"You were slinging nonsense on top of the table."

"Gaul?"

"What?"

Swing stared at Gaul.

"What?!"

"Almaalmaalmaalmaalmaalmaalma - "

Swing pushed Gaul away and rolled out from under the table. Gaul followed. They were just in time to catch up with the last slaggards filing through the open wooden doors into the main hall. Already flips hurtled through the air filing dead letters. Gaul, behind, hissed at Swing, "What?"

Swing didn't answer but kept barreling toward his harness.

"What?" Gaul shouted. "What?"

Swing was already hitching himself into his harness, and Gaul took the one next to his and starting strapping herself in. As he threaded buckles and clips



Swing sang “maresy dotes and dosey dotes and little lamsie divey a kiddley divey, too, wouldn’t you!”

“Stop that!” Gaul demanded, but Swing ignored her and launched himself away, holding on to the burlap bag full of dead letters that had been hanging next to his rig.

Gaul hurried to catch up with Swing, shouldering her own bag, and soon the two of them were hoisted high, floating like flies in a rope-and-leather web. Gaul chased after Swing.

All at once, Swing braked himself - Gaul just avoided smashing into him.

“What is it, you idiot?” screamed Gaul.

“I’m leaving.” Not a trace of craziness in his eyes.

Below them, Divot, now sporting a long-range rifle rather than his whip, had it up to his shoulder and aimed directly at them. With a quick torque of their legs, they floated up and away, out of range, and hung again.

“You can’t do that!” Gaul yelled.

Swing grabbed Gaul by the throat. “Don’t. Tell. Me. That.” Then just as quickly a release and Swing flying away singing “maresy dotes and dosey dotes and little lamsie divey a kiddley divey, too, wouldn’t you!”

Clinging to the end of a glass pane overhead, a Raven looked down on everyone and everything. No one who looked the Raven in the eye would know what it was thinking.

\* \* \* \* \*

That night Swing’s bed was empty of Swing. Rumor spread like blood in water that he had run away - which meant sent to the coalmines if caught, they all knew, but they all knew that the taskmasters and hall-guards had no love for the flips, who were hardly worth their sweat to find if they had gone and drowned themselves in the shadows and side-streets of Valice.

Others believed Divot had gotten him, took him somewhere for private revenge - they made themselves shiver with nasty delight as they described Swing’s body eaten up by Tumor then given to the starving birds in the courtyard, picked to bones by nightfall, and down to even less by morning.

Gaul, her tired eyes guarding Swing’s bed, believed both and neither of these, felt worried and useless, finally fell asleep.



---

The other dream came.

Somewhere in the letters was a letter with her name on it - her *real* name, the name pinned on her at birth. She dug through the piles, tearing open letter after letter. But instead of paper, every envelope brimmed with white sand and coal that spilled out and filled the room as if it were an hourglass.

She couldn't stop herself from ripping the envelopes open even though each one raised the mound higher and higher until it grabbed her body and sucked her down. And then the envelopes started opening themselves, pouring out the sand and coal, piling it up and up and up. It sifted into her nostrils, her mouth began to fill - the grit crunched between her teeth - she couldn't breathe, couldn't move - and she knew that time had run out - had buried her true name - she took one last breath and -

And woke up gulping and spitting in the moonlit dormitory of DEAD.

And in the moonlight she saw Swing, silhouetted in the doorway, sneaking toward his empty bed. *From where?*, thought Gaul.

Orange light flickered in the distance, coming closer.

Gaul leapt catlike from her bunk and slipped toward Swing.

He seemed unsurprised to be caught. "Tomorrow," he said. Gaul pointed her finger at the approaching torchlight.

"Might not be a tomorrow" - she pulled him toward his mattress - "if you don't *hide*."

Too late.

*Crack!*

Tumor snaked itself around Swing's throat and slammed him to the floor. Swing tried to cry out but the whip stole his breath, turning his scream into a wide-eyed gasping for air.

Divot cackled as the flips woke suddenly from their sleep. Two guards stood in the shadows behind him, one of them holding the torch.

"It's the mines for you, shadow."

Divot yanked the whip, pulling Swing to his feet, his single eye sparking.





“Let this be a lesson, chums” - to the other faces staring in on the scene - “let this be a lesson” - to Swing, who gasped for the little air that Tumor let him have.

Gaul moved forward, thoughtless and angry, but Divot pointed a gnarled finger at her, and it was as if Tumor has blistered her own legs. She almost collapsed from the pain.

“Brave,” growled Divot, “but stupid.”

With a snap, Divot ripped Tumor’s coils from around Swing’s neck, leaving a flesh-burn. The second guard grabbed Swing and began to carry the boy away, dragging Swing’s heels against the stone floor. But Swing, with air back in his body, pushed free and rushed into Gaul’s arms.

Gaul clutched Swing, her eyes over Swing’s shoulder on Divot, and Divot - “damn little rats!” - snapped Tumor toward them. Gaul grabbed the leather and held it fast.

“You can help,” Swing hissed into Gaul’s ear. “They can help. Been to see them. Help me.”

“Who? What?”

“Help her!”

Gaul could hear Divot’s wooden foot thundering closer and closer.

“Old Tower. 1138. There. Hidden.”

And Divot’s hands were claws in Gaul’s hair, wrenching her backward as Swing slipped into the guard’s arms.

“Promise!” Swing screamed.

Nothing made sense, but Swing needed a promise. “I promise!”

“Can’t promise anything to a ghost,” laughed Divot, Swing already pulled into the darkness.

And Swing screamed - Gaul couldn’t be sure what - and then the clump and clank of Divot and the guard leaving - and then silence and spilt moonlight.

The air filled with the rustle of sheets as the flips dived back under their covers, trying to forget as quickly as possible everything they had just seen and heard - a blank mind being a safe mind.



---

For what felt like hours Gaul stared at the black hole that had gobbled up Swing, Divot, the torch light, his scream.

The stones cracked as they sank under their weight.

She could hear air whistle in and out of her nose, feel her heart thump against the cage of her ribs.

And she knew - knew hard, knew fast - that she was all alone.





## Chapter 2

**Wherein Gaul Goes To The Old Tower And There Discovers  
All Manner Of Dangerous Things That Inevitably Change  
Her Life, Though It's Not Clear If The Change Is For The  
Better Or For The Worse**

---

*T*he Old Tower...

*Clang!*

...1138...

*Clang!*

...the Old Tower...

*Clang!*

Gaul's eyes popped open as the fourth and fifth and endless clangs of the morning bell stirred all the flips from their grimy sheets. The Old Tower...the Old Tower... She rubbed her eyes hard as if that could erase the endless clash in her head of "the Old Tower...1138..." Rubbing erased nothing.

As she raised her head, Gaul noticed that all the flips around her looked at/did not look at her, pointing, going "psst-psst-psst" in each other's ears. She didn't care. Swing was gone.

Over breakfast, Gaul stared at the grotty porridge, the bunged fruit (apple today), trying to dig out of their mess something that made sense of what did not make sense last night. The Old Tower - the oldest and tallest of the nine towers that ringed the central hall of DEAD. Now as dead as Swing might be dead - no longer used, and no flip that Gaul knew had ever gone there.

Except Swing.

What was in Box 1138 that had twisted him?

And this thought also floated to the top of her mind: he had, outside of Gaul, gone to someone else with his secret. Out there, in Valice. How would a flip ever get to know them?

Swing had gone far. And she - promise made, in blood and fire - was going to have to go that far, too. The porridge had, by now, cooled and thickened - it looked exactly like, felt exactly like, what Gaul felt like.

And the feeling terrified that she felt - feeling that full-out - would have to wait until later.

Divot's bark split the air - "Go, my lads and lasses, make haste before I waste thee!" - and the bell called them to morning work. Gaul dragged herself upright, dragged herself toward the central hall, dragged a heavy heart into her harness.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaul took nearly two weeks to make herself ready and gather her nerve (there was a lot of nerve to gather) before she found herself, courier bag slung over her shoulder, sliding past sleeping guards and hunkering along the passageways and stairwells that brought her to the aging oak door of the Old Tower.

"Aging" it was, and she no longer had to wonder how Swing got inside. For all its thickness, the rotted wood pressed inward at the touch of her hand, the iron hinges holding up nothing. At the base of the door, just small enough to crawl through, a section of wood had been broken and replaced just well enough that an uncaring glance might miss it completely.

Gaul pressed and the panel fell backward; the sound of its *thump!* seemed, to the night-time thief, to scream out "Divot, here I am!" She strained her ears for any human sound: nothing.

Gaul searched her mind one last time. Swing had been a friend to her, enough to demand this small loyalty. Whatever he was now - the mines or the grave - she owed him this. Yes. Yes.

Drawing in a breath full of dust and the bile in her throat, Gaul crawled into the darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

But not total darkness. The glass in the skylight that had once domed the tower had broken and crashed, opening the tower to the sky, and the long stone funnel gathered what starlight and moonlight there was into a thin bluish light, less like light than darkness made less dark.

Gaul let her eyes go as bluish as the light. She knelt and felt around - found what she wanted: some dried leaves. She pulled what she could feel into a pile. Then reaching into her pocket, Gaul pulled out two flat stones. Holding one in each hand, she struck them together, and from their sharp crack sparks sprung



onto the leaves. Nothing. Gaul showered down sparks again and again until... until...

It happened: a flame leapt back, and smoke curled starward. The flames gnawed at the leaves, and Gaul piled on more and more of them, as well as dried twigs, until the flames were strong enough to show Gaul's worried, dust-bitten face.

From the bag Gaul pulled out a candle and lighted it. In quick succession she pulled out five more and lit them off the first candle. She then pulled from the bag a metal hoop with six smaller hoops tied to it by a cross-hatching of wire, each small hoop just large enough to hold a candle and angled to keep the flames away from her hair. Gaul eased the six candles into place, then fitted the crown of light in her hand around her head. The small hoops wobbled, not as tight as they would have been if they had been welded - but they would hold. She hoped.

By this time the fire had died out, leaving reddish glints in the darkness.

Gaul stood and found the right balance for the crown, turning her head right and left, lifting it back and forward. It had taken her a full week just find the right kind of metal and wire - and keeping them hidden had kept her in constant fear of Divot and Tumor nosing them out.

Now, the hardest thing of all, something she hadn't done in a long long time.

She had racked her brain about where Box 1138 might be in the tower, and she figured that if it held something that Swing wanted to hide, it'd be high up, not easy to reach. Add to that the fact that all the leather harnesses and mesh rigging in here would have long ago rotted away. And it could only mean one thing.

Swing had freehanded it.

All the older flips knew how to do it - it wasn't allowed anymore for the younger ones. But Gaul had not done it in a long long time. No matter. She had to do it now.

Gaul studied the wall, playing the candlelight across its rough face. She saw that a lot of the mortar between the stones had fallen out, which would make the climbing easier. Wedging her right foot into one chink, hooking her fingers into two others, then raising her weight so that her left foot could find a hold, Gaul



began to spider her way up into the pale darkness, keeping her head steady so as not to snuff any of the candles.

If someone had been standing on the other side of the tower, they would have seen six globelets of light snaking their way up a rough-cast wall, like slow fireflies or the slink of stars across the night sky.

Her shoulder knocked against something metal and sent it swinging, and its clatter made her freeze until the echoes stopped banging against the stones. Wedging her feet into a small chimney to anchor herself, she reached out and grabbed what she'd hit - a metal trapeze, one of the network of flylines and cross-harnesses that the workers in here had used. Good to know, she thought, though she wasn't sure at the moment what it would be good for.

Up she crawled.

Her hand, scuffing up the wall for the next handhold, suddenly grabbed onto nothing - a hole in the wall. She pulled the rest of her body upward and used her jacket sleeve to clean the metal plate she could feel at the hole's lip. The candle-light fell on 954.

Above her, against the seeping night-light she could see silhouettes of overhanging platforms and snaking chains. The climbing got easier as more and more boxes offered her places to rest her tired feet and hands. Some were even large enough to sit in, which she did, looking down into the black pool below her and trying not to wonder how she was going to get back down. Especially now that her candles were getting shorter by the minute.

Up, up...1125...1129...1133....

She was there.

....1135...1136...1137...

1138.

Behind her Gaul could feel the hard thick bar of a trapeze, and she leaned her body against it to rest. She leaned forward, peered deep into the vacant hole - then pulled back so hard that she almost lost her hold.

Inside the box, something had blinked.

From the hole came a "caw caw caw" - and out hopped a Raven, black eyes glinting. But it was not the Raven that caught Gaul's attention.

That was caught by the burlap bag hanging from its beak.



---

The Raven leaned forward, tilting its head side to side, as if deciding something, then bobbed its head, as if inviting Gaul to come closer. Which she did. With a poke of its head, the Raven pecked Gaul's nose. Gaul held out her right hand; the Raven dropped the bag into her palm, then flew off and sat on a wrecked harness, swaying. And watching.

Gaul reached up and plucked out one of the candles - and felt a twinge of alarm as she saw how short the candle had grown. She put it on the lip of the box and then wrestled the bag open. She pulled out a scrap of cloth and two rocks, one flat, one not. She put the items on the ledge. She picked up the flat rock and ran her thumb across the its surface. It was coal, and scratched into the coal's surface was a word: Alma.

Alma.

She'd never heard the word. Not in DEAD, not anywhere. The name, or title, or whatever it might be, had never escaped Swing's mouth, not in the years that Gaul had known him. Who. Was.

Alma.

A riddle.

Swing had somebody. Swing had somebody else.

Alma.

Swing had somebody he cared about.

"Cared about" was a real riddle.

She switched rocks and rubbed her thumb across the second rock's rough surface, and to her surprise it got brighter and brighter. Faster and faster, harder and harder, she brushed away the soot, clearing the surface to a cool, clear shine. Gaul couldn't believe what she held.

A diamond.

The sight of it dizzied her.

From across the tower the Raven cawed.

She put the stones in her bag, then pulled out the cloth. Across its dark surface swirled an arrangement of lines and curves - all meaningless at the moment. But what was not meaningless hung at the bottom of the cloth. A signature. Alma.





And then it came, what Gaul had half-expected to hear all the time: footsteps. A very specific pattern: crunch clunk - crunch clunk.

Gaul looked about with mad eyes. No way down and no way out. Maybe higher up - but her hands and feet were getting tired, and without the candles' light -

Crunch clunk - crunch clunk. Now closer. With a raspy whistling and a voice to match.

Divot.

"I once loved a lass from the streets of the City," he sang, "who once loved a lad from these old City streets..."

His wooden foot -

"The lass broke my heart and the lad got me thinking..."

- punched a hollow two-step.

"...and my blade did the work that my heart couldn't think..."

Gaul steadied herself by taking small, shallow breaths. Wetting her fingertips, she quickly pinched each candle dead. She tucked everything back into the burlap bag, and put that into her own bag, then slipped off the metal hoop, stuffed the candles away, and put the hoop in Box 1138.

Above her, the Raven huffed.

And Gaul heard Divot slide through the hole, like a worm through dirt, heard Divot stand up, dust himself off. Then a squeal of metal, and a bright hot lightbeam pinned her against the stones. He'd brought a flipsearch lantern. She'd seen them before, the light hooked up by wires to a wooden box with brass screws - no flame, no matches needed, and the wires sparked like her stones when they touched the brass.

Divot's tapped his leather eye patch. "The one I have is as good as two. And" - in a sickening sing-song - "I see you with the one I have." He laughed. "You up there hiding, - and you in great need of a hiding."

"You killed Swing."

"How else would I have known you were here?"

The Raven made a throaty slurred rasp.



“Come on,” called Divot, “I’ll make the beating as painless as painful can be.”

“And why would I do that?”

“Because I’ll sit here and watch you starve.”

Gaul looked at the rough stone in front of her, reading it as if it could give her a clue or a map. But it gave her nothing. So she took the nothing it gave and started to spider down the wall.

“Tis a good day when Divot gets his way.”

Already Gaul could hear Tumor snapping at the wall below her, just waiting for her to come in range, and Gaul felt she could do nothing but lower herself toward Tumor’s grip and bite.

When Tumor did catch her, it tore her into gravity, and she reached out just in time to grab a rusted handbar, jerking her shoulder almost out its socket. As Tumor pulled harder and harder at her foot, her grip on the rusted metal slipped. And Divot laughed and laughed as he pulled and pulled. Gaul closed her eyes and sent all her strength to her numbing fingers. It wouldn’t be long now. She closed her eyes tight, willed everything she had - what little she had - into her fingers.

Then - Then - Gaul pulled up her leg and found it free. She could still feel Tumor wrapped around the ankle, but Divot’s weight on the throwing end of it had disappeared. She opened her eyes.

By the doorway, Divot struggled against the dark shape of the Raven, who perched on Divot’s shoulder and plunged its black beak in and out of Divot’s remaining eye. The fliplantern’s stark blank light threw their twined shadows on the wall - the Raven’s drilling head, Divot’s windmilling arms. Divot yelled, cursed, but the Raven calmly picked the eye-hole clean.

Unable to keep her eyes off the butchery, and unable to deny the gut-thrill of satisfaction as she watched the Raven work, Gaul swung herself down the chains and bars to the ground. Her left foot landed on Tumor, and Gaul picked up the bullwhip and wrapped it into coils as she watched the Raven work.

Divot laid full out on the ground. The dark red hole to the left of his eye patch ran mucous, his cheek glistening with torn blood and muscle, his hands flailing, his voice thick with grunts.

The Raven, standing unconcerned to one side, preened itself.



Gaul stared, then said, "Thanks."

"You there?" Divot moaned.

Gaul ignored him, her eyes still on the Raven.

"Go."

The Raven bobbed its head, then wagged its head from side to side, training first one eye on Gaul, then the other, then oared itself aloft, melting into the darkness.

"I can hear you."

Gaul was surprised at the numb angry voice coming out of her pressurized chest. "I can hear you. And I don't want to hear you ever again." Had she said that? She had said that. Swing had cared about Alma. Gaul did not care about Divot.

From the floor she plucked a handful of leaves and shoved it into Divot's mouth. Divot grabbed her, but without hesitation Gaul jammed her foot-heel into his solar plexus to knock the wind out of him, and his hands went limp. She rolled him onto his back. Uncoiling Tumor, she jammed it between his lips like a horse's bit, crossed it at the nape of his neck, gave a turn around his throat, brought both ends to Divot's feet, wrapped them around his ankles, and finally brought the ends to the middle of his back, where she tied the tightest knot she had ever tied in her life around his wrists, so tight that it arched his back and pulled against his throat.

Divot was now a package for anything that wanted to take him away.

"Now you have no eyes. For Swing."

Gaul dug out a candle from her pocket and held the wick against the bulb in the fliplantern. The wick caught, and Gaul placed the now-burning candle on the ground. Then she pulled the wires from the wooden box strapped to Divot's belt, and the fliplantern buzzed out. She could take the lantern with her - but she wanted to carry nothing from her old world. The only light in the world was now the small circle that the candle threw onto the ground. Gaul cupped the candle and crawled out the hole into the corridor, replaced the panel. Old Tower, Old Tomb - it was all the same thing now.

Gaul turned in the direction opposite the dormitory and started looking for some opening that would take her away forever.



---

What Gaul didn't know, didn't hear, didn't see, was the sliver of shadow trailing her. For better or for worse, she was not alone.





## Chapter 3

### **Wherein Gravinstad, In A State Of Agitation, Wonders If The True History Of Valice Is, In Fact, Its True History, And How This Leads Him, A Man Who Never Smiles, To Smile.**

*T*his *feeling* - something had changed.

Something was changing.

All he could tell - at the moment.

From behind him where Gravinstad stood on the parapet, he heard a cough. He turned and saw one of his own Guardsmen standing exactly where, an hour ago, he had told him to stand, spine straight, gaze fixed, cool and strong. All his Guardsmen acted like this - *his* Guardsmen, pledged to him, not like the gutter-dregs the King called his army. The King knew this, and Gravinstad made sure the King - whichever king sat on the throne - never forgot this. And if, for some reason, one or another King did forget - the royal burial grounds were full of Kings who had forgotten.

But something had changed.

Something was changing.

Something his Guardsmen could do nothing about.

Gravinstad moved, and the Guardsman opened a door, then closed it after Gravinstad entered The Keep.

As Gravinstad made his way, other Guardsmen opened and closed other doors until Gravinstad found himself alone in his private chamber. From the high vault over his head fell a thin grey light, full of the grit from the grinding the foul life out on the streets that Gravinstad, if he strained his ears, could just hear pound on the stone walls of The Keep. But he did not strain his ears. He thought. He sensed. He freed his mind. And there, just on the verge of, just at the tip of - then gone, like the flick of a Raven's wing-tip.

Gravinstad pulled a heavy key from a deep pocket and opened an equally heavy lock on a oak box bound by steel straps. The top crashed over. Inside lay a book, thick as the palm of his hand was wide; he pulled it out. He flipped the top of the box back over, slammed the book down, spread it open, dragged over a stool, and hunched over the book, his eyes sucking up the words.

The Valiceiad - his eyes knew the guts of this book very well - The Valiceiad - The Book of Kings - myths that each school child in Valice had learned by heart and spat out at graduations and funerals and coronations and holidays and feasts of this or that saint or hero.

Pages turned and turned and turned, each sketched with rich and dire colors, each spiked with battles and death and triumph and more death and still more battles with flags and shouts and heads on pikes and death and -

Gravinstad stopped; he'd found what he wanted, what had been just on the verge of, just at the tip of: two face-to-face pages that had no words but only a full spread-out image of Valice's most awe-filled moment: the final deletion of the gods.

And then what had been just on the verge of, just at the tip of, jumped into the light: "Final?"

No.

Something had changed. That.

Something was changing. That.

Gravinstad had been there. He had commanded his Guardsmen and the King's vicious rabble to chop and slice and stab and carve and rain down bombs and fire as the relentless machinery of Valice, its science and technology, its engines made from calculus and physics and logic, by slow designed cruelties, like an indifferent boy pulling the wings off a fly, dismembered the gods, whose spirits were no match against steel and pride. Valice would no longer take its cues from superstition and faith and fairy tales. Valice would be strong by its own mind, in its own flesh, through its own god-like power.

But that "Final?" -

A twist in the gut.

Something, something -

Gravinstad leaned back and looked up at the vault. One thing Gravinstad knew cold and nailed-shut: Valice was dead, though Valice didn't know this yet. This current King ruled over a coming corpse.

At its height - when it had fought the gods and erased them - Valice was without peer. Its science pulled from every source of energy to make the city bright and warm and dense with art and loud with music - oil, gas, coal, wind,



---

oceans - anything that could be turned into energy, Valice turned it. And in turning it, Valice convinced itself that Valice would last forever.

Wrong.

Of everything, only the coal still held out - and Gravinstad had made sure that he, and only he - not the King, not the minister of energy, not the academy of engineers - only he controlled how it was turned into the breath that kept Valice, half-dead, still breathing. He leaned forward again and stared at the picture of the battle. The children in the mines - unfortunate but necessary. Valice had too many children, and the mines had too few workers - all its prisoners and bums and cripples and strangers had been used up - and so he made the simple calculation that the city needed the coal more than it needed the children. And so it was done.

Of course he couldn't have done this alone. Everyone knew about the stolen children - the Youngling Markets and their labor traders - but no one ever discussed how starving families one day simply came to light with one child less - the child who suddenly "died" or the child who just "ran away" - and who out of the blue had fresh food on their plates and coins rattling in their pockets and faces torqued by guilt.

Nobody came clean that they *knew* anything in Valice because the King and ministers and engineers on down to the scum that scuttled through the sewers didn't give a damn how the coal came in as long as the trainloads of it came in on time. Or, Gravinstad thought, it would be more proper to say that everyone *un-knew* themselves so that they could warm their hands and eat their food and read their magazines and laugh at jokes without tasting the blood in their mouths.

But there was more - there was always more, more than any of them except Gravinstad knew.

His eye fell on the figure of a god diving into the ground, its radiant body half-in and half-out of the earth as soldiers closed in on it. In the picture, the sky was laced with black pen-slashes that Gravinstad remembered, at the time, as Ravens - the sky crammed with Ravens circling the battle, their raw squawks laced with screams of pain. His finger-tip traced the hafin-halfout figure.

Here was The God Gone, caught by the artist just at the moment it disappeared from view. The street lice at the foot of The Keep tried to ease themselves with the bedtime story that The God Gone would return and put





the wrong things right, put the last ones first. But even they knew - *thought* they knew - that the story of The God Gone's return, really, was as worthless as spit in the ocean and they only told it and re-told it to trick away their pain and boredom.

But Gravinstad knew the escape had really happened. The coal would soon be gone - only a matter of time and technology. If Valice was to live on - if Gravinstad was to live on - it would have to be by some new way - and what Gravinstad had the children digging for was not *only* the coal. If The God Gone could be found and its immortal energies screwed down and sucked out, Valice would have its ultimate triumph: a god feeding its science, spirit as the greatest machine. And the end of life that life promised to everyone would never have to come.

Gravinstad leaned back again, looking up at the vault.

Up at a Raven.

Looking back at him.

How?

And before he could count to three, three more Ravens joined the first. Then a fifth, and then more. He leaned forward to scan the picture in the book, and what he had overlooked at first now jumped out at him: Ravens flying over the battlefield, yes, but also Ravens watching The God Gone disappear. They circled the sinking body like a black whirlwind.

By now dozens of Ravens had come. As one, they spun and twirled and cawed, and to Gravinstad's amazement (and he was not a man easily amazed), they flew faster and faster in tight circles until, like the tip of a whip's lash, they spun out straight and headed for the closed door of the room. Gravinstad fully expected them to smash against the oak, but the air surged so fist-like in front of them that it burst the door open, and they shot through like a black arrow.

Gravinstad leapt up and sped after them, his body full of a buzz that he could only think of as a kind of joy (Gravinstad was not a man easily joyed), and ahead of him he could hear door after door smashed open by the Ravens' battering ram of wind until the last door that led to the parapet.

Gravinstad got to the parapet in time to see hundred and hundreds of Ravens winding around The Keep, the birds mad, as though some great knowing had infected them. Then, uncoiling, their razor wings and rude screeches ripped



---

the fog apart until they were a black smear on the horizon that smoked away to nothing.

Gravinstad stared until his eyes watered. Suddenly he knew, clear as clear could be, the answer to the rude thought that had preyed on his mind and gnawed at his gut. And knowing this brought a large smile to a face not used to smiles because he knew (he thought he knew), down to the crossed “t” and the dotted “i,” what now must be done.





## Chapter 4

### **Wherein Gaul Meets Another Feathered Creature Who Guides Her From One Land Of Dreams To Another, Where Gaul Learns That She Can Only Start To Be Free When She Starts Having Nothing Left To Lose**

---

**G**aul was lost.

And her last candle - a spit and a spark and not much of a real flame - would soon give up its ghost.

Gaul felt like doing the same.

She sat down on a stone and put the candle on the ground, her skin crinkled by goose bumps - she could not keep down the bile of fear that crawled up her throat right out of her gut. And this deep dark just seemed to suck all the air out of her lungs and the strength from her legs.

Not to mention thirst. Or hunger. (How could a body be hungry and thirsty and scared stiff all at the same time?)

Out of frustration Gaul pounded her fist on her thigh, muttering “stupid stupid stupid - “ and probably would have gone on doing that except for the sharp hiss thrown into her right ear: “Feeling a little knackered, are we?”

Gaul froze. Her stomach dropped through the floor.

Into her left ear: “A little lost lambsey-divey, are we?”

Gaul tensed.

“Don’t even think of it,” the voice warned.

Gaul untensed - dead with fear but glad that the voice had told her that she didn’t have to do something stupid and painful to make herself look brave.

Behind her she heard soft feet move to her right, just outside the light - then right in front of her, just outside the light - and stop.

“Pick it up - the candle.”

Which Gaul did.

“Hold it up - do I have to instruct you in everything, cretin?”

“No.”

“Then do it.”

As Gaul raised the candle, the creature slipped off its shirt and turned its back to Gaul. And in the pale light Gaul saw something she had never seen before: a pair of wings bloomed from the creature’s back. Well-shaped, white (well, off-white, but if washed clean they’d be full-white), and small, no more than two or so hand-lengths long.

“Fascinating, huh? Watch this.”

Gaul watched the wings, but nothing happened.

“Anything happening?”

“No.”

“Right. Utterly useless, they are. Do you want to touch them?”

“No.”

“You can - go ahead.”

To make it easy, the creature knelt in front of her, the wings less than an arm’s length off. Gaul got it: the creature trusted her. It may have said “cretin” but now on its knees with its back to her. She ran a fingertip down the spine of one of the primary feathers. A real feather. How terrible that someone did this. But the feather was beautiful - the wings looked beautiful.

“A bit of useless beauty to be humped around on the back. Welcome to Valice.”

The wings disappeared under the shirt, and in that same motion the creature turned to face Gaul, a knife that couldn’t-be-missed held in its hand. In *his* hand - the face framed in shagged hair, a bit of dry beard on his chin and cheeks, the lump in his throat like a swallowed chestnut. He.

“Now, to clear the table - what were you doing in the tower? By the way, what you did to the cripple - ace work - shows promise.”

The truth jumped out of her mouth. “Helping a friend.”

“This friend’s name wouldn’t happen to be Swing, would it?”

“Yes.”

“Stupid name. What’s yours?”

“Gaul.”



---

“Who names you people?” The knife passed from one hand to the other. He knelt down in front of her.

“Swing - I was supposed to meet him in the tower - and then you come along. So where is Swing-a-ling?”

“I don’t know - I mean, the cripple - Divot - took him - away - I don’t know where.”

“He could be dog meat by now, then, right, from what I’ve heard about life in the Defunct Epistle - “

“Are you going to kill me?”

The light flashed in eyes raised slightly by the half-smile that crept over his lips. “That depends on what you took out of Box 1138. And while your question was important - more to you than to me, but still important - you were stupid to ask it right out like that.”

“Why? Do you have a problem with simple words?”

Where did *that* come from? And Gaul noted that mixed with her fear and sadness was anger - part of her didn’t care what was going to happen, and that part of her, against all common sense, felt unafraid - that part had left Divot in the Old Tower to die. And she had to stop herself from adding, “Either do your worst, or just stop flapping your lips and let me go.”

The knife-tip bobbed up and down.

“I forgot for a moment that you had trussed the cripple like a pig and left him for the roaches to toy with.”

The knife bobbed some more.

“I’ll let you keep your guts inside - for the moment. Now, Box 1138?”

“I have it.”

“Can I see it?”

“No.”

“I could kill you for it.”

The anger spoke again. “Do your worst, or just stop flapping your lips and let me go.” There, it was out, like a fart or a burp - no taking it back.



"I'm going to give you a third choice, *Gaul*-stupid-name. Because you are throwing dice for your friend - that goes a long way with me - and the diamonds - well, what can be said against diamonds?"

Before Gaul could make a move, he was behind her and lifting her up by her shirt collar and thrusting her forward into the darkness. She dropped the candle.

"The candle!"

"Won't need it."

Gaul half-walked, half-glided through the darkness until, with a jerk, he pulled her up short.

"Now, downward we go."

"Wait," Gaul yelped. "What's your name? You know mine."

"You can call me Angelicus - what else would be fitting?"

"I don't understand - "

"Now go."

Gaul inched her foot forward and found a hole, then stuck her foot into the hole and found a rung jammed into the slimy stone walls of what she now knew was a sewer drain.

"Careful!" Angelicus hissed. "Feel your way down - don't do anything rash!"

Gaul's toes through her thin shoes gripped each rung. Down, down, down - she gagged on the sewage fumes reeking around her but still she went down, down, down. Over her head she heard Angelicus drag the grate back into place, then drop rung by rung after her.

"It's pretty retchy at first - take shallow breaths through your mouth so as to disconnect the nose from your stomach. At the bottom, stand still or you'll be lost forever."

And she did just that, waiting for Angelicus to drop his whole frame down beside her. "Welcome to the waiting room for eternity."

Angelicus grabbed a torch stuck into a sconce. He gave it to Gaul to hold, and from a pocket he pulled a flint case. Once, twice, the sparks surprising the darkness - then a blue-orange flame sprouting. He pointed the torch down the low-hanging tunnel in front of them.



---

“Once you go in with me, you’re in - you understand? Everything up there will have been like a dream. Have been a dream. No back, only forward.”

“I’ve already forgotten half of it.”

“No you haven’t, but it’s a good thing to start saying to yourself.” Angelicus moved forward. “I’ll do my best not to lose you on the way.” And Gaul found herself scuttling forward to follow the ball of light moving away from her. She still felt the anger inside her, but for some reason that made everything she was losing feel not so much like a loss but like a beginning.







## Chapter 5

### **Wherein Gaul Adds A New Word To Her Vocabulary, Learns That A Fall Can Be An Uplifting Experience, And Meets A Boy Who Is A Man Who Is A Boy**

---

*A*ngelicus' torch led Gaul through a darkness hissing with running water, and every so often Gaul's half-blind eyes would catch the deeper shadows of various run-offs and turns. She was as scared as she had ever been about anything, and it was all she could do to keep her breathing steady and her feet from tripping her up on the slimy stones.

"You okay?" boomed Angelicus' voice through the darkness.

"I'm as okay as you are."

"No you're not."

"Yes I am."

"No you're not," Angelicus laughed, "but that's all right - everyone's first time through scares the beezie-weezies out of them."

Gaul stepped on something that gripped at her boot, but she kept her eyes up, pinned to the two soft humps under Angelicus' jacket, and paid it no mind.

"The thing about spending time in sewers," Angelicus continued, "is that they teach you to get used to anything."

"Why would you want to get used to something that smells this bad?"

"Because most of life stinks this bad or worse."

"And all you can think about is getting used to it? What about - trying to make - things smell better?"

Angelicus didn't answer her, and given the fact that she was breathing so hard that she could barely talk, Gaul wasn't sure her last words got out.

"I said, what about - "

"I heard what you said."

"Well, what do you think - "

"Life stinks, and that's all there is to it."

"Is that because of your wings?"

The splashing ahead of her stopped, and Gaul suddenly found Angelicus' face pushed right up to hers, the torch flaring in her eyes.

"Okay," she hissed. "I'm sorry."

To her surprise and confusion, shame suddenly crept over Angelicus' face.

"And me, as well," he whispered back. "In my sudden self-pity, I forgot rule one: down here, there ain't 'whole' or 'broken.' It's just 'us.' What we are, we are."

"And what is 'we'?"

Angelicus took a deep breath and, leaning his head back, vented it back out as a sigh toward the roof of the sewer. He tilted his face back to Gaul.

"The Feralz - that's how we've christened ourselves. We are the Feralz."

And without explanation, he led her further into the dark.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the darkness the flickering walls looked the same from step to step, and she was sure they hadn't moved at all until they suddenly stood at the intersection of passageways and drainage tunnels, above the growl of water rushing toward a fall.

A step ahead of her, she could hear Angelicus snarling above the noise.

"Where is it...where is the...I think it's...here..."

A snap, a hiss, and gas jets strung around the circular room erupted into yellow. Gaul could see seven tunnels thread into a vortex at the center of the room, where brown-black foam hung before tumbling downward.

Angelicus pointed to it. "Drumlin's work. Our metal man. Makes things work."

"And where are we?"

"Right where we're supposed to be."

"But where is *that*?"

Angelicus smiled as he pulled a single stone from a mound laying at his feet and held it up for Gaul to see the dark gash cut across its surface. "See that divot?" Angelicus shouted.

"Supposed to be a joke?" Gaul snapped.



“What? Hah, got me there - didn’t even think about that. No, see the *line*? The *slash*.”

“I can see it. So what?”

Angelicus didn’t answer her but instead shoved the hand holding the rock into a hole in the wall. He twisted his body as his hidden hand twisted something inside the hole. Then he slipped his hand back out. He buried the rock back in the pile.

“Now watch!”

The air shattered as a metal ladder speared upward and slammed itself into the vaulted ceiling. Gaul gaped. Angelicus laughed. “It always gets ‘em, that first time.”

“You switched something on, in that hole!”

“Indeed I did, flip,” Angelicus crowed, “and now awaits us our ticket home,”

Angelicus reached up and pulled down a lever, then leapt from the edge of the drop-off onto the ladder. “Now come on - you ain’t got forever!”

Gaul stepped off the ledge onto the rungs, and as she planted her feet, the ladder dropped, and so did Gaul’s stomach. She stared at her dirty fingernails and tried not to let the scream out that finally escaped from her, a scream that made Angelicus laugh and laugh as they fell away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The ladder dropped right down the middle of a cylinder of water, but Gaul saw none of that because her eyes were squeezed tight. Angelicus poked her. “Look!” he yelled. Then poked her again: “Look!” She opened her eyes. And then opened them wide.

The cylinder changed into a gentle curving slide that scooped the water away from them toward the river below, and Gaul found herself slipping through pure unwatered air past - no, that couldn’t be right, but it was right, there it was - past a church steeple on top of the triangle-roof of an old stone building.

“Look around, look around,” Angelicus grinned.

As the ladder pulled them closer to the ground, she looked past the church to see houses and another church and streets - some in pieces, others intact - and strings of lights melting into the distance.

A whole city underground.



"This gets everyone, too, who sees it for the first time," said Angelicus. "Welcome to our home."

She barely noticed that the ladder had slid into the earth, leaving them once again on solid ground.

"Where am I?" Gaul asked.

"You're standing on the Commons."

Gaul circled herself to capture every view of the crumbling street. "It's a city."

Though it wasn't Angelicus' voice that answered but something deeper, stronger - adult.

"You have the wrong person."

Gaul spun to meet the speaker, but all she could see were two boys about her age, neither of whom could have used that voice. The voice grew out of somewhere else. Gaul glanced at Angelicus for help, but Angelicus was looking straight ahead.

"I know that - Swing never showed. She did."

"Her name?"

"I call myself Gaul," she answered. "Could you show yourself, please?"

Perhaps he had hidden himself behind the boys, perhaps he had been tucked behind one of the church's pillars, perhaps he had just sprouted out of the ground like the ladder - all Gaul knew was that he was suddenly in front of her when he hadn't been only a heartbeat before.

A boy, a cape hanging from his shoulders, a bandana around his neck. But not a boy. But, yes, a boy - only that his face -

"Don't stare," murmured Angelicus.

But Gaul couldn't help herself. The body stood young - a body her own age - but the face -

"What does Gaul see?"

"You look - you look - old."

"I'm only a little bit older than you."

"What's your name?"



"You can call me the seventeenth letter of the alphabet."

Gaul scrunched her forehead, sifting through her letters, and her fingers leapt in to help her out. She whispered to herself, she counted - "Q!" Then, "Why 'Q'?"

"Because it's the letter that always needs company."

The boy - the man - Q - moved his eyes over Gaul, and in turn she read the wrinkles of his cheeks and forehead and how the hair in his ears stuck out. It was a face older than the body it sat upon. That was all she could see for sure.

"I'll let you in on this much. There's one Valice up there - the one that contains the DEAD like you - and another one here, which holds the half-dead like us." Q pointed at his feet. "And still more city down there. Seven 'Valices' altogether. The end. Now Angelicus, strip her of what she's got in her bag - she does have it, doesn't she?"

"Yes," said Angelicus.

"Take it. Then get rid of her."

"Angelicus?" Gaul whispered.

"She's worthless to us and dangerous." Q turned away. "Come on," he said to the two boys, who turned to follow.

Angelicus spoke up. "I can't do that."

Q stopped.

"I can't do that," he repeated.

Q did not face Angelicus, but his voice was clear and sharp.

"You should not have brought her back here. You should have taken what she had found and left her on her own. She could be a spy."

"Swing could've been a spy."

At that, Q turned to face Angelicus.

"What did you say?"

"We don't really know for sure, do we, about Swing."

"How dare you."

"I know this, Q: she came to the tower because she was Swing's friend. And she killed Divot."

Gaul at last found her tongue. "I think Swing is dead."

This hung in the air.

"That's why I went - Divot took him away," she continued, and as she spoke Gaul felt a wrench in her chest, a squeeze in her gut, and she had to force words through a throat so tight that it hurt to speak. To her surprise, she started crying.

"Swing wasn't a great friend, but he was a friend - and I made a promise - and I think he's dead - "

Q walked up to her. Again, his head cocked to the side, but this time Gaul could see a change in the face - something that looked like sadness. "You think Swing is dead?" Q asked, though it sounded as much like a statement as it did a question.

Gaul's throat was so tight she couldn't answer. She just shook her head yes.

"And you promised?"

Another nod.

His next words went to Angelicus. "You broke the rules."

"We are all a bunch of broken rules."

Q met Angelicus' level stare, then peered back into Gaul's tear-smeared face. She was surprised to see tears in his eyes.

"What should I do with you, my friend of Swing?"



## Chapter 6

### Wherein A Pair Of Cut-Up Assassins Makes Their Entrance Upon The Stage And They Minister To A Very Frightened Gentleman As The Gentleman Gets In A Few Digs

---

Theodore Pym had a love-affair with edges.

His nails, his teeth, his close-cut hair - his clothing, his glistening, well-polished knives - everything brought to an edge - everything made to slide in and bring the *insides* out. Because to him a person couldn't know a thing without spilling out its insides. The truth, he mused, was never *on* the skin, but *below* it.

On the other hand Cornelius Swiddle, his business partner, held a flame for the garrote.

In his cabinet he had all manner of strangulatory devices, from a treasured carved two-handed string of catgut owned by Hasan ibn-al-Sabbah, famed founder of the *hashshāshīn*, to the noose used to hang Gardy Loo, Swiddle's father and mentor. But he especially liked the common ordinary piano wire - swift, slick, severing. Unlike his partner Pym, he didn't care what was on the inside - he was graced with no curiosity about the meaning of life.

Though, if the truth be told, Swiddle and Pym, household names, but only among households that would need their services, were wide-spread in their tastes for the tools of their trade. *First choice* might be a shiv or a shoelace but never one or the other if a loose cobblestone or a cross-bow arrow through the skull would dispatch the target and lead to their pay-day.

At this particular moment, they stood at the door of a rather posh house, Swiddle to the left, Pym to the right. They were spiffed out in their best and usual work clothes: black straight-legged wool pants with cuffs just breaking on the instep of a pair of well-polished black brogans, a single-breasted black suit-jacket slightly tucked at the waist so that it gave a little flare off the hips, white shirt, black bow tie, and, topping it all off, a black fedora, neatly creased. Not to mention the very tight black leather gloves.

If it had been mid-morning on a bright sunny day rather than the dead of almost-early morning in a posh section of Valice, they would have been mistaken for undertakers. Which, in a manner of speaking, they were.

Pym's leather-covered knuckles again rapped in rhythm on the door.



Somewhere in the house something knocked around. They waited, hands folded in front of them.

Through the windows on either side of the door they could see the flicker of lantern-light, then see the light get brighter as it approached the door. Pym leaned just a degree or two to his right, enough to see through the window. "It is he," he pronounced.

"Who is it?" a voice demanded.

At that moment they nodded to each other. Swiddle took a small step to his left so that he could look through the window, then he stepped back and with a short jab punched through the glass and grabbed whoever was on the opposite side of the door.

In perfect harmony, Pym punched his right hand through the glass on the other side of the door and shot open the three bolts that held it closed, at the same time grabbing the door handle with his left hand and popping it open to reveal a frightened bathrobed older gent jammed against the door frame by Swiddle's tight grip. Pym grabbed the man by the lapels of his bathrobe, Swiddle smoothly releasing his grip as Pym dragged the struggling body out into the street toward the black-painted wagon hidden off in the shadows. Swiddle picked up the lantern, blew out the flame, and placed it on the stoop.

With two expert jabs Pym laid the man out unconscious, making it easier to hoist him into the bed of the wagon that they had, with forethought for the comfort of their guest, layered with burlap bags.

Swiddle swung himself up into the seat behind the horse, grabbed the reins, and snapped the leather against the horse's rump to get the wagon started while Pym hoisted himself up into the shotgun seat.

By now lights had leapt on in the upper floors of the house, but too late. The wagon melted into the darkness, the only evidence of its passing - the staccato of the horse's hooves on the street - echoing into nothingness.

"What a nice night."

Swiddle nodded in agreement. "I prefer these kinds of jobs - easy in, easy out, minimum of planning. Easy pocket money."

Pym jerked his head toward the back. "Do you know why he has to go?"

"I didn't tell you?"



---

"No, you didn't."

"I am very sorry about that."

"It's because you alone handled the contract with Gravinstad on this one," noted Pym.

"That's right - you couldn't be there."

"That business with my aunt."

"The inheritance - right. How is that working out?"

"She saw the justice in re-writing that codicil to her will that had unceremoniously deleted me from her fortune. Though I had to re-write it for her."

"The finger-thing?" asked Swiddle.

"Had to - it was only way she'd listen to reason and justice. Well, she could listen after she'd stopped screaming."

"Amazing how a little pain clears the ears."

Pym jerked his head backwards again. "So?"

"Minister."

"Minister of what?" asked Pym.

"Don't know - doesn't matter. He must have made a policy decision Gravinstad did not like and was not quick enough in his re-thinking of that policy."

"That will get you every time - a too-slow re-think of your position."

"It pays to be flexible in life," Swiddle intoned.

"But desperation can make us forget that simple truth."

"Indeed it can."

The wagon continued on into the night.

\* \* \* \* \*

The minister sat in a chair, his hands trussed behind him, while Swiddle and Pym got out of their black suits and into their work-at-home clothes - denim overalls, blue chambray shirts, heavy workboots. The minister's eyes bugged just above the gag across his mouth like two eggs; his hair, what little of it he had, lay sweat-plastered against his scalp. The air stenchd with fear.



Swiddle grabbed an oddly shaped cane, one that had a set of handles attached to a round piece of wood that was then fixed to the shaft. Pym grabbed one as well. "Come on," he said, and helped the minister stand up. With Pym on the other side holding a lantern, they walked him through a door out of the small dressing room and into a large empty warehouse. Very large. The floorspace, completely empty, seemed to go on forever in the darkness, and overhead the just-brightening morning seeped through the dirty skylights in the vaulted ceiling.

The minister stumbled, but with Swiddle and Pym's sure hands on his elbows, he never fell - though he wanted to, fall to his knees and beg and beg and beg for his miserable life.

They stopped. In front of the minister lay a shovel on the ground. Just inside the lantern's light the minister could see lighter and darker shades of earth, the lighter earth mounded up.

Swiddle untied the hands, then the gag.

"Please please please - " began the man, but Pym's slap knocked him flat down. "Don't," said Pym.

"Or what?" screamed the minister. "You going to kill me if I don't shut up?"

Pym looked at Swiddle. "Should we consider that humor?"

"I'll pay you I will anything you want I have money - "

"That doesn't cut any slack with me."

"Me, neither," concurred Pym, who leaned down and hissed at the minister, "Shut up."

Swiddle reached down and hauled the minister to his feet. "See that shovel? See the dirt underneath it? You have to move that dirt from *there* to *there*" - the second *there* being a wooden bin set on a pair of curved feet that made it rock back and forth. "We will tell you when you have done enough."

The minister, broken, picked up the shovel. Swiddle and Pym, in synch, popped open the tops of the canes, which converted into two seats. They settled themselves and watched.

"I love work," said Swiddle. "I could sit and watch it all day."

"Work is cleansing, though - a good day's work is like an absolution."

"I can agree with that - as long as someone else is doing the work."



---

The minister sobbed. He did not dig well or quickly.

“Sir,” said Swiddle. “You are definitely going to have to work much faster than that. It is to your advantage to do so.”

“Well, though,” said Pym, “people of his class are not used to such labor - they are more used to living off the sweat of others. You may want to cut him slack - “

“Nope, I do not.” Swiddle called out to the minister. “Have you ever dug before, sir?” But the minister’s sobs crowded out all other words as the shovelsful of dirt clattered into the bin. “In his silence I will choose to hear a ‘no.’”

“Good guess.”

A faint thudding came on the air to their ears. The minister didn’t hear it, but they did, and they looked at each other.

“You expecting someone?”

“Are you?”

They both knew the answer to their questions was “no.”

Swiddle pointed to the minister. “Watch him.”

“Of course - standard operating procedure.”

Swiddle stuck the cane-chair into the dirt and strode off.

Inside the little room Swiddle looked at the door as someone’s sharp knuckles made it vibrate.

“Who is it?”

“I’ve come from Gravinstad.”

“I’m not opening the door, so state your business and leave.”

“He will be here today.”

“That’s it?”

“Do you need me to say anything else to you?”

“How do I know you’re from Gravinstad?”

“When I’m gone, open your door.”

Swiddle waited.

“Are you gone?”



Nothing.

Swiddle grabbed a short-handled cross-bow off the wall that could shot around corners and slowly opened the door, keeping himself shielded by it as he stuck out the cross-bow and fired. He heard the shaft clatter in the street beyond.

He peeked around the door and saw a bag nailed into its wood. He made the bag swing, and it gave out the clatter of heavy coins.

“Good enough for me.” He pulled out the nail with his bare hand and caught the bag.

Pym turned around as he heard Swiddle come back. Swiddle tossed him the bag. “He’s coming later today.”

“Well, all right,” said Pym. Swiddle sat back down.

And the two men watched the minister dig himself deeper and deeper into the dirt as the dawn pushed aside the darkness.



---

## Chapter 7

### **Wherein Gaul Meets Two More Feralz, Sees More Than She Wants To See, And Finds Her Emotions Swinging Back And Forth More Than She Ever Did As A Flip In DEAD**

---

Q reached out and rubbed his knuckle up Gaul's cheek, pushing the tears back.

"You are crying for the maybe-dead Swing? Or are you are crying for the maybe-dead Gaul?"

Gaul did and did not like the finger on her cheek. "Maybe both."

Q tasted Gaul's tears. "These taste like you're crying for everybody in the world."

"Except for Divot," added Angelicus.

And Q did something took Gaul by surprise: he smiled a clean wide smile, and the squint-lines around the hard eyes loosened. Gaul noticed how blue they were, and she also knew that she'd seen these eyes before - she had seen them before where where where -

He spun around once again, back to the two boys who had stood dumb in the background all this time, and snapped his fingers as he did so. "Let's see what she's made of. Angelicus, take off your jacket."

"This means she's in?" Angelicus asked.

"She cried for Swing and knocked off Divot. I'd say she has a running start. The jacket - off."

Angelicus took off his jacket, and the white of his wings shone against the gray stone around them.

"Those you've already seen, I take it."

"Yeah. Yes."

"Did he tell you how? why?"

"No."

"Did you touch them?"

"Yes."



“Good. Drumlin?”

One of the boys stepped forward, no more than a year older than Gaul, broad-shouldered and jacketed. On his hands he wore a pair of tight black leather gloves.

“This is Drumlin. Attends to our metallic needs. Head full of gears and solder - “

“The lights - the ladder - “ said Gaul.

“All his brilliant brilliance. And he comes by it honestly. Drumlin?”

Drumlin walked forward, first slipping off his gloves, then taking off his jacket and his shirt as he moved toward Gaul. It was all Gaul could do to keep the scream in her throat as she looked at a right arm made of cables and hinges and pivots, the five fingers flexing with clicks and whirrs, the end of it sewn into Drumlin’s red-raw shoulder.

Q pointed upward. “Metallorganic, the Menders call it up there. Flesh and metal married.” To Drumlin: “How does it feel to be so unique?”

Drumlin didn’t answer Q - he just stood there, right arm hanging down, a medley of ticks and snaps coming from it. He picked up his clothes with his left hand.

“And now Rufus.”

The other boy stumbled forward, his eyes wide and wet, lips quivering, nose twitching - the kind of boy afraid of anything and whose tight skin would not let the terror out.

“Go on.”

“I can’t I can’t I really can’t it always make me sick to it does it always does you know it does and still you’ll make me - “

“Quit squealing,” Angelicus shushed in an undervoice. “Just do it. She’s got to see, she’s got to know.”

With a twitch and a quiver, Rufus looked at each of them, then with a deep sigh he pulled up his shirt. This time the scream got away from Gaul.

Against her will, Gaul stepped closer. Sewn into the skin where there should have been Rufus’ stomach muscles was a sheet of something clear and flexible - and behind it Gaul could see Rufus’ guts at work - pulsing, oozing, slithering, sliding.



“They caught Rufus’ nature exactly since he is always one to spill his guts at the drop of a hat.”

Rufus whined, “Can I please now she’s done looking it makes me ill to see it again it gets into my dreams I can’t sleep - “

Q gestured, and Rufus dropped his shirt and his voice at the same time.

“And now - me. Come here.”

Gaul froze.

“All right, I’ll come to you.”

“No.”

“Not your choice. In for the penny, in for the pound.”

And Q stood in front of Gaul and slipped the scarf from around his neck. Gaul could see thick suture marks cross-hatched with what looked like embroidery stitches. Q turned in a circle, letting the cape slide off his shoulders a bit, and the marks moved with him in a ring. He put the scarf back on.

“Get it? The body was a young boy’s but the head belonged - belongs? Hard to tell about these things. Let’s just say it belonged to a man that Valice, in all its infinite wisdom, found dangerous to its idea of itself.”

“They sewed it on - “

“They could afford the best doctors - and it fit right in with all the other experiments going on - Rufus, Drumlin, Angelicus - playing around with the disposables - “

“They used you - “

“Just like they used you and the other DEADlings. The way Valice always uses its children. Or I should say Gravinstad - that’s not a name that means anything to you, not now, but it will, it will have to.

“I-I-I have no idea what you’re saying,” stuttered Gaul.

Q gestured to Angelicus, who caught Gaul just before she dropped onto the rubble of the street. Angelicus cradled her as Q kneeled down to her eye-level.

“I told her we called ourselves the Feralz,” Angelicus whispered.

“Did you explain?”

“No.”





Q touched Gaul's cheek, then slapped it. Gaul's eyes, which had threatened to spin back into her skull, popped forward and open with the sting.

"Do I have your attention, Gaul?"

All she could do was nod yes.

"As Angelicus said, we are the Feralz. 'Feral' means wild, means set free from a cage, means alive rather than dead. The experimented-upon, like us; the un-homed, like you; affection-starved, like Swing for his sister Alma - "

As that bit of information sunk in, Gaul's eyes widened.

"You didn't know, did you?"

"Alma - sister?"

"You cried for him, you dared Divot, and he hadn't even told you that much - there is definitely more to you than meets the eye."

From over Q's shoulder came Drumlin's voice, a voice with a torque in it, like hot metal as it cooled. "This is garbage. She's got nothing. We should get going."

"We will, Drumlin," said Q, never taking his eyes off Gaul. "You have something for us, don't you? From Box 1138."

"Yes."

"Good."

Q stood up. Angelicus stood up as well, hefting Gaul to her feet.

Rufus sniveled up to her. "I'm so sorry I scared you I scare myself all the time I didn't mean to see my own guts they just threw me inna road and left me - "

Gaul didn't know why she put her hand on his curly hair and stroked it, but she did, and at once Rufus calmed down, and his calming down calmed her. "Thanks thanks thanks thanks - "

"Have you eaten?" Q asked. Gaul shook her head no. "Then let's get some food into you. Rufus, go get it ready."

"Will do will do will do will do" as his rat-face broke into what looked like a smile, and he shot off.

As they started walking, Gaul's whole body felt like a lump of pig iron. In fact, it was the next to last thought she had before she passed out in Angelicus' arms.

The last thought was this: “I know where his eyes come from.”

Then the roar of water. Then nothing.



## Chapter 8

### **Wherein Divot Comes Back To His Life - In A Manner Of Speaking - And Gravinstad, Surrounded By Incompetence, Is Nonetheless Ticked By A Feather**

---

The administrators of DEAD: faces blanched, shaking in their boots, huddled like chickens. Understandable - the Guardsmen rarely visited, and when they did, they only did so because something had gone wrong. And the two Guardsmen standing outside the plank door leading to the infirmary gave them no comfort whatsoever. They looked like they'd as soon kill a person as spit out a melon seed.

But even worse what was happening behind that door - worse because all they could do was imagine it, and they could only imagine the worst.

Divot had been found. And Gravinstad was not pleased.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shape stretched on the table looked like Divot, but in the way a doll looked like a real human being. The doctors had cleared the blood from Divot's face, pasted gauze pads over his two empty eye-sockets, changed him out of the rags he had been wearing. He breathed. That was about all that they could say for sure. They waited in the background.

For Gravinstad to speak.

Tumor, looped, dangled from Gravinstad's right hand.

"In the old tower?" More statement than question.

The head doctor stepped forward, though everything in his body said that he wanted to run the other way. "After we got your call - "

"You know he worked for me? I ask that because clearly he will not be working for me anymore, so it can be revealed."

"Um - "

"Answer me."

"Yes, we knew. It was not a secret."

"So he was worthless to me before he become completely worthless to me."

“We can’t say one way or the other about that - we only minister to - “

“Well, he is worthless to me now.”

Silence fell. The head doctor cleared his throat.

“After we got your call, from one of the Guardsmen - “

“Did you find that strange?”

The head doctor looked at the other doctors, his face full of fear. They urged him with their hands to speak.

“Um, no - we knew Divot met with your Guardsmen on a regular basis - actually, very regular - there would be bets - actually - on - how punctual Divot would be in his meetings.”

“Will you share your winnings with me?”

“I did not bet.”

Gravinstad leaned in closer, lifted the patch off the eye that had been pecked out by the Raven.

“My Guardsman told me after Divot did not show up as usual, on time, punctual, for his meeting. Doctor, come here.”

The head doctor, his face going whiter than it already was, shuffled into the cone of light thrown down on Divot from overhead. He stood on the opposite side of the body.

“What caused this?”

“Something sharp - you can see the serrated damage of the subcutaneous” - hesitantly pointing - “there.”

“Something sharp like *what?*”

“Well - “ He looked at the other doctors, who all shrugged their shoulders. He looked back down at Divot’s face. “Well, we thought a knife, but the cuts are too small, unless they used a stiletto blade, but the incisions are ragged - “

Gravinstad straightened up, which the doctor did as well. The doctor reached over to push the gauze pad back over the gaping hole.

“What about a bird’s beak?”

“A bird’s beak?”

“A Raven’s beak.”



---

“Um, well, it’s possible - “ The doctors in the background all nodded their heads. The head doctor continued. “Yes, it’s *quite* possible - the damage would be consistent with an avian pecking - “

Gravinstad slapped the coiled Tumor on top of Divot’s rising and falling stomach.

“Do what you need to do to finish him up.”

Gravinstad moved toward the door.

But the head doctor found himself, against all common sense, asking Gravinstad a follow-up question.

“What, exactly, sir, does that mean?”

But luckily for him, Gravinstad had already left the room, and his question bounced off the closing door.

The Guardsmen came to sharp attention as Gravinstad strode toward the quivering administrators.

“Tell me what else.”

“There’s a flip gone.”

“So what? That’s not unusual. Give me something unusual.”

“Divot was going after the flip.”

“Why? He had people to do that for him.”

“Because the flip - “

“Name.”

“Gaul.”

“He or she?”

“She.”

“What was this Gaul doing in the tower?”

The administrators looked at each other in the same terrified way the doctors had looked at each other.

“We don’t know,” murmured the head administrator.

“I didn’t hear you.”

Louder. “That is, we are investigating.”



“And where is this Gaul now? Don’t bother - you’re investigating.”

Gravinstad stared at them all, his lips drawn to a hard line.

“Was this Gaul friends with anyone?”

“A flip named Swing.”

“He or she?”

“He.”

“And where is this Swing?”

“Divot took him away.”

Gravinstad stared some more. “You may now go back to being your useless selves.”

As Gravinstad moved towards his Guardsmen, it was as if someone had cut their puppet strings. It was all they could do to keep from collapsing in relief to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Guardsman-tracker showed Gravinstad the tell-tale marks of two people moving away from DEAD and the tower into the devastated darkness, one set of prints just far enough behind the other to suggest that they were not traveling together but one stalking the other. The trail ended at a fissure in the wall where the first set of tracks obviously found a way to wriggle through the crack out of the building, followed by the second set.

The Guardsman-tracker also laid something in Gravinstad’s hand: a perfect white feather.

“I finally have my unusual.”

Gravinstad stuck it behind his ear as they turned and retraced their steps back to DEAD and the Keep.



---

## Chapter 9

### **Wherein Gaul Gets More With Her Meal Than The Bread In Her Hand And Words Float Upward Like Electrical Sparks**

Gaul woke up to food. And also to the fact that whatever had been in her bag was now on the table in front of Q, but not by itself: arrayed around it were scraps of cloth and other materials cross-hatched and etched mixed in with rough-edged diamonds.

“Eat,” said Q, and Gaul didn’t need a second invitation, but as she tore into the bread and vegetables, she also realized that not only were Q, Drumlin, and Rufus watching her but that others in the room also watched her - and what “others,” almost all of them -

“Don’t even try to understand it yet.” Q’s voice brought her head back around. “But know what you see here.” He gestured to the gathered, and Gaul’s eyes followed his hand - the two-headed, scaly, hoofed, flowered, fanged, machined - then she had to look away, it was too painful - but she kept on eating, listening. “These are some of the Feralz - and they will not hurt you.”

“No they won’t they won’t at all they may rough you a bit make fun but they - “

“Thank you, Rufus.”

“Welcome welcome welcome welcome - “ The voice trailed off, and the room fell back into a silence full of clicks, wheezes, cricks, scrapes.

Q stood up. “All right, everyone - let her eat in peace. You’ve got work your work to do. Go.” And they went, shuffling and stomping and sliding, until Q, Rufus, Angelicus, and Drumlin remained.

When the room had emptied out, Q spoke again. “Now, Gaul - it’s time - the rest you need to know.” Q pointed to the material in front of him.

“What?” Gaul said, embarrassed at speaking with her mouth full but not so embarrassed as to stop eating. Her hunger poked at her like a Raven’s beak.

“What do you see?”

“Diamonds.”

“What else?”





Gaul could see, once her eyes cleared and came into focus, that the scraps seemed to match up in a way, like a puzzle.

“And what else, Gaul?” Q asked again.

Gaul got up and moved around so that she could see the puzzle more clearly (all the time gnawing on the black bread in her hand). The scraps had what looked like a map on it (maybe it was a map - Gaul hadn’t seen many maps in her life, and in any case didn’t believe in them - there was only DEAD and the city that built it and the walls around the city - that was all) and writing (though more writing than Gaul’d ever had to read off a letter).

“A map?”

“Perhaps,” said Q.

“Maps aren’t true.”

“Perhaps.”

“And writing?”

“Definitely writing.”

Gaul looked at Q, and there it was again, that little wrench inside that whispered she’d seen those eyes before - seen them before - where -

Then she knew - and in knowing, again didn’t understand a single thing that she knew.

“You’ve got Swing’s eyes.”

Q couldn’t hide the pain that slipped across his face even as he smiled at Gaul.

“Yes, I do.”

Gaul didn’t want to ask the question, but the question forced its way out anyway: “How?”

“I told you that Swing and Alma - “ He picked up the scrap that Gaul had had in her bag, the one fished out of Box 1138, and ran his finger under the name on it. “See - ‘Alma’.” He put it back in its place.

“Right, Alma.”

“Swing and Alma are brother and sister. But brothers and sisters come from a family, and every family has parents - “



“A mother and - “ And the word “father” hit Gaul. “That’s why - that’s why you have - “

“That’s why I have.”

Gaul scurried back to her seat, her body full of lead again. Rufus moved to help her. “It’s a shock it’s a shock it’s a shocking shock I know oh poor Gaul poor Gaul - “

“Rufus - I don’t have much time.”

Rufus backed off. “Right right right right - “

“Angelicus - start the story.”

“Where?”

“The child/god.”

And from Angelicus and Rufus and even the sullen Drumlin Gaul learned, for the first time, about the wars and the rise of Valice and the exile of the divine and the myths about a return and a rebirth and the power of Gravinstad.

“And Alma’s found it?”

Q looked at the scraps. “Swing thought so. Alma says as much” - Q gestured at the table - “in her other messages.” He looked back to Gaul. “And the thought that his sister was alive in the mines after he’d thought she’d been dead and diced - well - “

“It drove him crazy,” spat out Drumlin. “Just say it.”

“He wanted to go to the mines and save her. He didn’t care about the child/god - his sister alive made him feel alive again.”

“He came here for our help,” Angelicus added. “We know these seven cities - we know the through-ways and out-ways to the land outside.”

““Outside?” said Gaul.

“Yes, Gaul,” said Angelicus. “Outside.”

Her world was falling apart and opening up at the same time.

Rufus piped up. “I been to the mines I been to the mines they sent me off for dead to the mines god it was horrible dragged out in sacks all the bodies of the diggers - “



“Rufus,” Q said. “Enough.” Rufus sunk back into himself. “Rufus here has escaped from the mines - that is another long and sad story in itself - and he was going to lead Swing back.”

“Hating it hating it hating it - “ muttered Rufus, who then pointed at Q. “Only do it for him do it for you - “

Gaul stared at Q. “And you?”

“I am Swing’s father - and Alma’s - or at least this head is. Are you all right?”

“No I’m not!”

“You don’t lie - good. We were part of a family that Valice didn’t like - as for why, that can be later, but suffice it to say that I spoke out against Gravinstad when I should have shut up about Gravinstad - so Valice did with us what Valice always does with things and creatures it doesn’t like - makes a cruel joke out of them, cracks them into pieces: Alma to the mines, Swing to DEAD, and me - well, enough to say I ended up here gathering up the pieces that Valice had thrown away.”

“The Feralz.”

“And my family.”

Gaul picked at the bread, no longer hungry, lead in her blood, her mind zizzing. She stared at each of them in turn, Q last.

“It’s very simple, Gaul,” said Q. “You risked yourself for Swing. He’s probably dead now, or if not, probably wishes he were. You can’t go back to DEAD. Valice would eat you alive - you’re about as fit to live on the streets as a piece of meat at a congress of knives. In a sense, Gaul no longer exists - you can either be Swing on his way to find his sister - “

“Don’t forget the child/god,” Angelicus interrupted.”

“Of course not - we need - “

“We need we need we need we need it - “

“Enough!” Silence. Q turned to Gaul. “You can either be Swing - or you can be nothing.”

“You want me to get Alma and this god-thing and bring them back here.”

“Yes.”

“Why can’t you go?”



“Because this experiment called ‘me’ is failing. After all these years - “

Gaul began to crumb the bread into smaller and smaller bits. Drumlin’s voice stabbed into her ears.

“I told you she’d be a washout.”

Gaul slammed her fist into the table, scattering the crumbs, making the scraps of the letter/map jump.

“Tell me more. You gotta tell me more! You gotta tell me everything!” Gaul looked up, and her eyes threw anger at Drumlin.

“You need to rest first,” said Q. “Angelicus, take her to my house. Rufus, you know which room to ready.”

“C’mon pal,” said Angelicus, resting a firm hand on Gaul’s shoulder.

Gaul stood. “I’m gonna prove you wrong,” she barked at Drumlin. “I’m no washout.”

“Talk is cheap,” Drumlin drawled.

Rufus grabbed Gaul’s hand and tugged her toward the door. Gaul threw a last look at Drumlin before Rufus pulled her through the frame and out of the room.

Drumlin went to speak, but Q held up his hand, and Drumlin cut off whatever complaint Drumlin was going to pitch. Then Q stood, wrapped his cape around him.

“I have to think.”

“You do,” said Drumlin.

“Respect,” muttered Angelicus.

“Shut up.”

“You should shut up.”

Drumlin ignored Angelicus. “Swing, I thought, pardon my piggish upbringing, had about as much brain-smarts as pond scum, and yet you were going to send him and the rat-flit Rufus off not only to get your daughter but to bring the child/god back - the thing we need if we are ever going to have a fighting start against Gravinstad. But having seen that - thing, Swing compares like lightning to a lightning bug. You can’t really be meaning - “



“Enough!” Angelicus bristled hard enough to make Drumlin lever up his hinged arm and point it, lance-like, straight at Angelicus’ heart.

“You would get a step and a half if I were in a mind to make you feel lucky before I dug your heart out - “

“Stop it.” Q’s low voice had power enough to make both boys lean away from each other. “I have to think.” He looked at Drumlin. “I have to think about all of what you said - you see, I listen to you. You are trusted.”

Drumlin shuffled his feet and said nothing.

Q swept out the door; Angelicus followed. Drumlin stood in the door frame, watching them disappear down the street.

\* \* \* \* \*

A dark figure rounded the corner and continued down alleyways that took it deeper and deeper into the water-music’d darkness. Finally, the figure stopped at a small shed, slipped a key out of a pocket and into the padlock that held the door shut, and slid inside, the sound of a dead-bolt shutting closed echoing.

Inside, the person went right to a side table, sat down and took a cloth off a simple mechanical device, a hinged lever with a spring. A hand pushed it up and down a few times to test it, and a series of click-click-clicks joined the shadows bouncing around the room.

The hand also pulled another cloth off a box that had wires connected to the clicker and wires that ran up the wall and out of the house. A flip switched-on, and a small red light glowed. The figure sat still for a moment, as if gathering breath and thought, and then the right index finger touched the black knob on the lever and started a series of short, electronic taps.

Clicckkkk - clicckkkk - click-click-click -

And somewhere much higher than this dark, drab room - in a chamber at the very top of the Keep - a similar machine answered its call.



---

## Chapter 10

### **Wherein Pym And Swiddle Pick Up A Further Employment They Wish Had Not Come Their Way, Though, Being Businessmen, They Give It As Fair A Hearing As They Can**

The carriage moved through the streets with complete disregard for the world through which it spun.

It stopped before a warehouse, and the carriage tilted and then righted itself as Gravinstad stepped out of it. He did not need to knock - he had his own key, which he used to let himself in. And come face to face with Theodore Pym, his right hand swathed in a leather glove of special design that, with a wave of Pym's hand, would send five expert knives through the air at anyone standing in front of him.

"Right on time, Mr. Gravinstad."

"Just don't wave hello at me."

"A new design - one can never be too careful in this part of the city."

"Where is your second self?"

"He's just finishing up a spot of work."

\* \* \* \* \*

Pym stood at the edge of the hole, Gravinstad a few steps behind him.

"What do you think?" Pym asked Swiddle. "Should we cut him, or should we let the earth decide?"

"Well, I know how you do love cutting," said Swiddle. "And it is quite a morning, if I do say so myself. A fine day, indeed, for a man to do what he loves."

"Right," said Pym. "My thoughts exactly. So, it's decided?"

"Would seem so."

Pym drew a long, silver spike from a pristine, black-leather case - eased it out, as if the sight of its rising metal were joy enough for a life well-lived.

Below them both, in a ragged hole lay the minister, his eyes wide and wet with tears. Snot ran down his cheeks. And above him, in the rocking crib



brimmed to the top, was the dull tonnage of earth dug spade by spade by the now fagged-out gent.

“Read him the rights,” said Pym, withdrawing yet another blade from its pouch.

“Right,” said Swiddle, bending over the edge of the ditch. He cleared his voice and squinted his eyes, as if reading from a manuscript. “Mr. Alvin Cowl, of Seventy-Four Alabaster Drive, Doonsberry, Valice. We do hereby decree that on this day...On this... What’s the day again?”

“I am not sure,” said Pym after a moment.

“Whatever it is, it is the last day,” said Swiddle. “Moving on.” He cleared his throat again. “On this day, being today, the last day of your life, we do hereby decree that, for whatever crime you may have committed, you be chopped to as many bits as the assassin hovering over you can possibly manage. Which, I can assure you, will be many.”

The minister wanted to scream but had no more will or voice for it. He kicked at the dirt walls a few times but without any real heat.

“All right, let’s go.” He was just about to make the first incision when the minister passed out. “Will you look at that? I cannot work under these conditions. If there is not the music of screams, then the work is for nothing.”

Pym slapped the minister a few times, experimentally, but nothing could stir his unconscience. Swiddle ventured a comment.

“We really do need to move on with the day. And not keep our guest waiting.”

Pym offered up his hand, and Swiddle helped him up out of the hole.

“Oh, all right - I agree.” He replaced the blade and the two of them moved to the crib full of dirt. Bending down and with a simultaneous grunt, they tipped the crib’s load into the hole, where it hissed down in a dust cloud.

“Gently for the gent,” said Pym as they dropped the crib back down.

“It’s never the doing of the deed that’s bad,” said Swiddle in a sermonish kind of voice. “Only the getting caught.”

“Amen,” said Pym, who then turned to Gravinstad. “What can we do for you, sir?”

\* \* \* \* \*



Swiddle and Pym sat on one side of the table in the office, Gravinstad on the other. The quiet that hung in the air did not give comfort, but Pym and Swiddle knew their employer well enough to know that if anything broke the quiet, it would not come from their mouths. Not by a long- or short-shot. Pym looked at Swiddle. Swiddle looked at Pym. They looked at Gravinstad, who seemed to be boring a hole into the table-top with the fierceness of his gaze. Though neither of them would have said it, Gravinstad looked like something they had never seen him look like before: worried.

“Do you two remember the war?”

Not a question they expected. A quick look at each other, then Pym answered. “We have worked hard to forget it.”

Gravinstad glared at Pym. “Is that true?”

Pym did not back down. “We served with you with honor, and we are as glad as anyone that we washed away the poison the gods brought to Valice. But we don’t dwell on it. In fact.” Here Swiddle flashed Pym a warning look, but Pym ignored him. “In fact, we say ‘honor,’ and we say we had honor in serving with you, and there’s a truth in that, but we only say ‘honor’ the way a child whistles in the dark of his bedroom after his parents have left him to fall sleep: to keep away the beasts that are the memories of that time. Why would we want to choose to remember hell?”

Gravinstad tapped a finger on the tabletop - tick tick tick - then rose and paced. “I have a job for you.”

“All right,” said Swiddle, glad to shift the topic.

But Gravinstad didn’t offer anything more, just paced. Even for two characters as nerveless as Pym and Swiddle, Gravinstad’s silence and agitation began to get on their nerves. It was always better when dealing with Gravinstad to get out the details quickly and then get out as cleanly as possible. Being with Gravinstad was always like standing on a crumbling cliff-edge with a strong wind at their backs.

Finally, Swiddle decided not to stand it anymore. “What might be the nature of the job?”

“I remember the war,” said Gravinstad.

“Of course you do,” replied Swiddle. “You commanded. In the name of the King, of course. All glory to the king. But it was your war.”





"What if I told you it wasn't over."

"I would be disappointed to hear that," said Pym, but slowly, as if testing the words to see if he needed to take them back right away.

"The war isn't over?" Swiddle looked back and forth from Pym to Gravinstad. "That's just crazy talking. Of course it's over. We killed off the gods, we saved the city. And we got ourselves full employment, care of you."

"Leave it to Mr. Swiddle to bring us down to reality," said Gravinstad.

"He is not one for looking below the surface of things," said Pym.

"You said you had a job for us," said Swiddle. "May we hear about it?"

Gravinstad sat back down.

"The Feralz are up to something."

"The Feralz?" This was something they had also not expected to hear. "The Feralz?" they repeated, the unsaid thing in their words going something like this: "Why would you concern yourself with garbage like the Feralz?"

"There was a disturbance over at DEAD. A child, a - what do you call them - a *flip*, ran away."

"You're worried about a *flip*?" The look on Gravinstad's face made Swiddle add, in a hurry, "A flip, yes - very serious, I guess."

"This flip - this *she* - injured someone you both know."

"Divot," stated Pym.

"I knew you would know that. The very one."

"He was working for you, like us," said Pym.

Gravinstad ignored the statement. "He survived - in a manner of speaking. The flip may have stolen something."

"And that's what you want us to get back?" asked Pym.

"Don't rush me, Mr. Pym."

"Of course."

"It seems the girl has made her way to the Feralz and the Feralz are preparing to take her into the mines."

Swiddle pushed forward in his chair. "Excuse me, sir, but *into* the mines? Who by choice would go *into* the mines?"

Again, Gravinstad ignored them. “I need the two of you to follow her. Not kill her, but follow her, until such time as I direct you otherwise. I need to see what she sees, to know what she knows.”

Gravinstad rose; they rose with him. He pulled a folded paper out of an inner pocket and left it on the table. “This is the report delivered to me by my spy in the Feralz. Read it, use it. And don’t fail me.”

Gravinstad reached into another inner pocket and pulled out a leather bag, which he let drop on the table. It hit and didn’t move; they all heard the *thunk* of the metal inside it. Then without more words, Gravinstad left. They could hear the clamor of his carriage pulling away until it turned into nothing.

Swiddle said nothing. Pym said nothing. To Pym, the sharp crease in the folded paper reminded him of a knife so razored that even he didn’t want to pick it up. For Swiddle, the thought of touching that crease felt like the thinnest wire of the highest note on the piano cutting through the muscles of his hand.

“Well?” said Swiddle.

“This is not ‘well’ at all,” said Pym. “It is not ‘well’ if the war isn’t over. Gravinstad has a reason for saying this. I can’t even stand to think about it.”

They both spun the paper on the table and folded it back to open it. They read.



## Chapter 11

### Wherein Gaul Learns Her Fate - And Her Fate Learns About Gaul

---

She woke without knowing she had slept. It had been that kind of unthinking sleep. She woke grateful for the unthinking.

She stared at the ceiling, tried to stare *through* the ceiling - but the ceiling remained a ceiling, and Gaul gave up, letting her eyes slide shut.

All at once, she pulled the sheet up and looked under it, then snapped it back down - where, exactly, had her clothes gone? And who had taken them?

She leaned over the side of the bed and looked, but no dirty smelly shirt and pants and underwear and socks looked back at her. However, on a table up against the wall Gaul saw four piles: shirts in one, pants in another, socks in the third - and underwear.

Someone had taken care of her.

Outside the door, she heard heels scuff against the floor. She listened harder: someone paced the hallway. A very very nervous someone.

"Hello," she called out, and the pacing stopped sharp - then a throat cleared and an answering back.

"Hello," with a jumpy twitter built in to the word.

Rufus.

"Are you awake? Of course she's awake you idiot she just called out to you - "

"Are these clothes for me?" she asked.

"Yes yes different sizes because we didn't know - "

Gaul swung her legs over the edge, looked at her knobby toes. "Where are my other ones?"

"Gone burned probably pretty filthy - "

"And who did that?"

Silence.

"Rufus?"

“One of the others she took them put you to bed - “

“Did you look?”

“No!” came back Rufus’ protesting squeak. “No no no no!”

Gaul smiled as she stood up and the sheet fell away from her. “It’s okay, Rufus, I believe you - just pulling your leg.”

“I wouldn’t do that I wouldn’t - “

“I’d look at you.”

Again silence. Gaul suddenly realized how stupid her jokey words were - in her ease at waking up without fear she had forgotten that Rufus wasn’t whole, that Rufus had been taken apart and thrown into the garbage, that she was now in a whole new world.

“I’m sorry,” she said to the closed door, “I’m really sorry, Rufus, I wasn’t thinking.” She felt very ashamed standing there without any clothes on, imagining the disappointment washing over Rufus’ twitchy face.

“It’s okay it’s not the first time people have talked to me without thinking I don’t take it personal.”

“Give me a minute, okay?”

“You got as much time as you need.”

Gaul walked over the table and looked at the clothes. All the same olive color but different sizes as she found out when she held up the shirts and pants and clamped them against herself to find the right ones. She slipped the underwear on, then her loose tunic-shirt and her baggy pants (both made from a rough woven cloth and smelling of - she held the shirt up to her nose, trying to identify the smell, something that triggered something in the back of her mind - roses - now where did that word and memory come from? - no answer). She ducked her head under the table and found a pair of slip-on shoes, the soles made from some thick black material. Rubber, she remembered - rubber, like the bootsoles the guards in DEAD wore so that no one could hear them slither along the corridors. Just remembering that made her feet tingle.

“I’m ready,” she said. “You can come in.”

The door didn’t open right away. Maybe he had left, insulted - she wouldn’t blame him. Then that voice. “S’all right?”

“Yes, Rufus. Come on.”



---

The door swung in, and Rufus stood there, hangdog, his hands clutched behind his back.

"I'm really sorry, Rufus, about saying - I got a big mouth and got no brain to go with it."

"I got a little mouth and no brain to go with it either so I guess we got something in common - "

"Give me a break?" Saying that felt funny to Gaul - she had never asked anyone to cut her any slack - but something about Rufus was safe. And that felt so new it made her stomach squeeze.

"Break," said Rufus, then looked up and smiled at Gaul. "I just gave you a 'break.' Joke."

"Good joke."

A silence fell between them.

"Q wanted to see you when you're awake."

"I'm awake."

But Rufus didn't turn to leave.

"We can go," prompted Gaul. "You said Q wanted to see me." And still Rufus didn't move. "What?"

"Q will tell you."

"But you want to tell me, don't you?"

"It's up to Q."

"Then I guess we better go see Q."

Rufus gave her a long sad look, then started to move through the door.

"Rufus," Gaul called out, and Rufus stopped. "Were you - did you stay in the hallway all night?"

"I did I did I did."

"Guarding?"

"Guarding."

Gaul held out her hand. Rufus looked at it, then took it and shook it.

"Thanks. No one's ever done that for me."



The smile that bloomed on Rufus' face could have lit the entire underground city.

"Q we got to go see Q."

"Then let's go see Q."

And as they moved out of the room, Gaul noticed that Rufus did not let go of her hand.

\* \* \* \* \*

Q sat in the midst of a garden.

Gaul couldn't keep the astonishment off her face as she walked among flowers of every shade and shape and (as she breathed in deeply) smell. With each lungful sucked in of that scented air relief washed through her. She found herself greedy for that feeling and inhaled and exhaled as quickly as she could.

"Be careful," said Q. "We don't want you to pass out from hyperventilating."

Q himself took a deep breath.

"But it's hard to resist the temptation, isn't it? It soothes the heart, doesn't it?"

"I guess you could call it that."

"Then that's what we'll call it - we'll call it 'Gaul's heart.' Maybe we'll even re-name one of the flowers. Rufus, what do you think of that?"

"I think that would be a great thing to do to one of the flowers without a doubt the flower would be better for it - "

"Rufus has spoken, and so it shall be done. Gaul, if you would - "

Gaul pulled herself away long enough to see that Q was pointing to a trio of chairs semi-circled by bushes studded with red five-petalled flowers. She eased into one of them as Q and Rufus took the other two.

"I have to ask 'how,'" she said. "Even I know green things needs the sun."

"Then ask 'how,'" prompted Q.

"There's no *sun*. I ain't ever seen anything like this."

"Another one of Drumlin's machines - it re-builds the sun and drops the light down into this darkness, mixed with the water purified through the rocks - we have plenty of water down here, as you can tell. So the flowers survive in the cold



and damp, just like us. We have a lot of strange wonders in our seven cities down here,” Q continued, “ourselves included. And now we have one more: you, Gaul, the flip no longer in DEAD.”

Gaul wanted to ask the question that needed asking but she didn’t want to ask it right away because sitting in the garden felt like it could go on forever, *should* go on forever, away from pain and fear and flight and hate, and she didn’t want to give that up, not so soon after getting it, not lose it so quick, not go away hungry for more that she could not have. She glanced up at Q, at Rufus, whose faces waited without demand. She tried to keep the question down, knowing that once it came out, the garden would go away - but just like a seed knew how to find its light, the question moved to the lips that had no choice but to throw it onto the air.

“What is going to happen to me?”

Q gave her a straight open look, then leaned forward, pulling something out of a pocket as he did. “This is what we know: we need you to save us. Nothing more. Nothing less. Hold open your hand.” She did, and Q laid out over Gaul’s palm one of the map-scraps that Gaul had seen laid out on the table last night - the scrap that had the name “Alma” scrawled on it. “That’s what Swing was going to do - save us - though he didn’t see it that way - he just saw it as saving his sister. But it would’ve ended the same.”

Gaul held the scrap between her palms, even smelled it. “There’s a load of stuff about all of this I don’t understand, right?”

“There is a ‘load of stuff,’ yes, Gaul, a world of stuff. But we don’t have time for all the ‘stuff.’ We need to move quickly, and I need to impress you with just how quickly we need to move. Rufus, stand up.”

Rufus stood.

“Make the call.”

From Rufus’ lips came a high thin whistle rising and falling in pitch, almost like music. From outside the halo that circled the garden came a thick scooping sound, like oars through water or laundry flap-drying in the breeze, and Gaul watched a sluice of black feathers fall on Rufus’ shoulder and shape themselves into a Raven, its eyes dark as pomegranate seeds, its beak sharp as logic.

“I know that bird!” Gaul gasped.





"It knows you," replied Q. "And they come readily to Rufus - they know innocence when they see it."

Q rose out of his chair. He gave his hand to Gaul and helped her up. "Keep a tight hold on Alma. Rufus, we'll follow you."

Rufus, not quite able to keep the pride off his face, nodded to Gaul to follow him, and he and the Raven led the procession out of the garden. Gaul gave the refuge one long look, walking backwards to do it, so unwilling to give up its grace and peace.

"Don't worry," said Q, "the garden will be here for you." He turned her around, and the four of them walked out of the light.

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaul knew what a book was, but she had never seen so many of them herded together in one place - floor to ceiling on every wall, and this room had more than four walls - it had eight, and a balcony around the top with more books from that up to a dome where they probably would've crammed books if they could've defied the law of gravity and had them hang them like bats.

But as much as all the books pulled on Gaul's eyes, one in particular hooked her because they'd set it up to hook her. It lay opened on a table in the center of the room, three chairs half-circled around it, a clear white light pouring down from a lamp overhead.

"That?" Gaul pointed.

"That," answered Q.

As they reached the table, the Raven hopped off Rufus' shoulder and took up a perch at the head of the book, looking for the all the world to Gaul like some sort of guard. Q pointed Gaul to the middle seat, and he and Rufus each took one of the outer seats. Gaul locked eyes with the Raven.

"It was a Raven that took out Divot. And one time, one of them pecked me on the nose, like a kiss."

"If they like you they let you keep your eyes" rattled on Rufus "but if they don't they don't the nose peck means you can be trusted right?"

The Raven nodded.

“Gaul.” Gaul had to tear her eyes from the Raven and look at Q. Q nodded at the book. “Look, Gaul, and pay strict attention. This is where it begins. Rufus, go ahead.”

Again from Rufus’ lips came sounds, only this time they spit out a stream of caws and whistles and huffs. The Raven bobbed his head, then leaned forward and, with his beak, traced the title on the page.

“The Valiceiad - The Book of Kings,” said Q.

“I can read!” Gaul shot back, and she recited from the page: “The Defeat of Heaven, Or The Victorious Triumph Of Logic, Reason, And Science Over The Dark Forces Of Gods, Superstitions, And Faith.”

“Have you ever heard of this?” asked Q.

“No.”

“All the better. This is our history, too - our recent history.”

“And my history, too?”

Q didn’t answer. Rufus spoke to the Raven. The Raven tipped forward, nabbed the corner of a page in its beak, and turned the leaf to a map of utter desolation - of men and machines blood-snarled with each other, with figures raining down out of a gashed heaven, slaughtered bodies littering the killing fields, armored grotesques branded with a single open eye - Q called it the “Third Eye” - flensing the land like butchers.

“The highest moment of Valice’s glory,” Q spat out. “Learn.”



## Chapter 12

### Wherein War Comes And Goes, And In Its Coming And Going Prove That Defeat And Victory Are Often Difficult To Tell Apart

---

The day dawned. Everyone looked cauled in dead skin.

Gravinstad - younger, fit as a needle - roved among his troops, speaking, touching others on the shoulder or the arm - the time approached death for some of them - perhaps even all of them - and while he did not love his soldiers - just stones to him, to lob and scatter as he saw fit - he did admire their willingness to do as he ordered them to do and so tried to treat them with something that resembled respect. He was a good enough actor to pull it off, and while his men wouldn't die for him out of love, they would die for him, and that was all Gravinstad wanted.

The camp smelled. All camps smelled after a while of unwashed bodies, of too-full latrines, of horses tight-packed milling in their own muck, of bad food badly cooked - all that washed Gravinstad as he walked through the camp, something he noticed, something he didn't notice at all.

No, the smell that stuck in his nose did not come from rot or fire or dirt. It spilled out from something else - from the guts of men on the verge of their own dying, from generals and tacticians who knew, barring some ill-luck, that the end of this day just beginning would bring them victory, from the enemy sunk into its own stew of odors and nerves. Yes, the smell of fear, of greed, of winning - all of that. But more than that.

The sweet smell of power. Power kept. Power used. Power won.

He breathed that smell in whole-body, and his whole body took it in.

By now the dawn-light had opened enough to show individual faces, the drear outlines of the whole army seeded over acres of crushed hay and gobbled earth. A thrill zizzed through Gravinstad - whatever happened today would happen through fighting, through forgetting all the stupid and boring details of a stupid and boring life and falling headfirst into greatness and excitement. Whatever else happened today, none of them would end the day as the usual ordinary bag of flesh waiting for its appointment with the grave. Glory blood-soaked and singed with pain - but still glory.

As planned, Gravinstad's captains had fanned through the platoons and companies to announce what the strategists earlier had set out as their coming fate. Gravinstad knew their words: how the core battalions, his shock troops, would make the frontal assault over the ridge, massed into a narrow wedge aimed at the heart of the enemy's ranks, with the intent of slicing through like a knife through muscle.

Gravinstad knew how the enemy would respond - being gods didn't make them automatically good strategists since they were often drunk on their own ego and pride. They would do as he expected: split their forces to let the wedge through, thinking that they could outflank and then surround it, all the time laughing at the supposed stupidity of the almighty Gravinstad, who now seems to have stumbled when confronted with their superior knowledge and logic - And so on and so on, blah blah blah.

What they wouldn't know - because they would not have bothered to learn it - would be the plans b, c, d, e, and on to the end of the alphabet that Gravinstad's own had schemed up. As the wedge split through, commanders would be flanking the gods' own divided army - in fact, they had left hours ago, in the stinking night-dark, to get their battalions into place. And not with a mob of the Valice conscripts and gutter-scum that would make up the wedge but with the Manchines, the ones made especially for this battle: skin case-hardened, an extra face grafted onto the back of the head to forestall a surprise attack, the neck made to swivel in all directions, their geared arms with grapples for hands. And their weapons: lightweight cannons shoulder-held with missiles tipped with canisters of toxins: chemicals that scorched, gasses for lung-searing, even a new-brewed substance that glowed in the dark and turned every fleshy body-part into sludge. The science of war had never been more imaginative.

But just in case - just in case - Starting weeks before this battle, in anticipation of this battle, his corps of sappers had been drilling through the guts of the hill on which they now stood to come up behind the gods' army - and they had just broken through into the caves carved out of the limestone hills that shadowed the rear echelons of the gods' camp, hills that the gods believed would protect the rear of their forces. Gravinstad tried to feel with his boot-soles the bodies moving through the earth-dark underneath him, his own spit-polished Guardsmen piling through and gathering like a storm in the cathedral-high caverns, waiting for the word that would catapult them into daylight and carnage. His word. His alone.



It hadn't been hard to maneuver the gods into this trap. Gods they may call themselves, and even be, but they lacked certain human qualities, such as logic and a feel for the usefulness of betrayal and deception, and so he and his generals had pushed and pulled them through ambush and feint and misinformation to come to this place on this day, expecting victory while they sat unwitting in the jaws of the trap.

The sun had not yet sliced through the horizon, but the sky had turned into lighter and lighter greys and Gravinstad knew that soon everything logic'd out on paper would have to be released into chance - the dice rolled, the cards dealt - and at that point all hell would break loose and life would never be the same.

He couldn't wait.

By this time he had made his way back to the command tent, where his generals waited for him. As he entered everyone straightened up - half-finished breakfasts put to the side, uniforms smoothed down, faces turned to him waiting for command.

"Are the messengers ready?" he asked. Someone answered yes.

"Are the Guardsmen in place?"

"We just received final confirmation - they have bored through the walls for the exits and everyone is massed for the assault."

"And the outriders?"

"Set right and left, hidden in the coulees that flank the field."

"All right, then." He pointed to Merkin, a tall thin man. "Hand out the shields and get your wedge ready to fly."

Merkin smiled as he turned from the tent and tromped into now full dawn. As he strode along, Gravinstad watched him rouse the troops to standing, at the same time calling out to the quartermasters to begin unloading the shields.

Gravinstad turned back to his staff. "Once the wedge is set, send out the messengers. Everyone knows the timing here - we've gone over it and over it and it better be as much as part of you as your tongue - and I will have your tongue if you forget one jot." He did not have to say "Do you understand?" because he knew they did. He had shaped their logics and feelings until he knew he could depend upon them the way he could depend upon his own lungs. "Wait for my signal."



With that, Gravinstad spun and half-walked, half-ran out to where the shock troops were assembling themselves. The quartermasters had divvied up the shields as instructed, and as Gravinstad inspected the ranks, he noted with satisfaction how Merkin had arranged them, how the soldiers waited patiently to be told exactly what to do - Merkin had trained them well.

Gravinstad caught up with Merkin. "Are they ready?"

"As ready as they'll ever be," Merkin replied, the excitement of the coming hunt making him tremble.

"Then deploy the shields. Look to the tent - when you see the messengers leave, begin a slow advance. Watch for the flares - as soon as you see them, move the ranks forward - keep them together - "

Merkin cut in. " - and move with all deliberate speed as one unified unit, the way the tip of a sword slashes through the paper upon which is written the poem of victory."

"You have an excellent memory."

"When it's something worth remembering."

At that moment - as he always felt at these kinds of moments - something in Gravinstad approached sympathy and closeness, the possibility of death erasing selfishness and ego, and had the impulse to shake Merkin's hand, slapping him on the shoulder with a manly slap. He resisted it, of course, as he always did, because he didn't really feel close to Merkin at all and always considered sympathy a weakness. It pleased him that he could, at times, actually undergo an urge for human companionship, but he knew he didn't need it - Merkin was a tool, a very capable tool, but a tool nonetheless, and a person who was right with the world did not feel affection for his tools - he just used them well before throwing them away.

Merkin turned to his aides and told them to spread among the troops and have them prepare to open their shields on his mark. Each shield was a chest-high hand-thick block of grey-silver metal. On top of block was a spring-loaded lever held in place by a metal loop. Merkin raised his arm and dropped it, and all of the soldiers, in one coordinated movement, as they had been trained to do, popped off the loops and pulled up the levers, and one by one, in a chorus of springs, hinges, and snapping panels, each block bloomed into a fierce body-length metal shield polished so highly that it reflected back every stray beam of light at twice its brightness. At eye-level, a slit had been cut into the metal,



---

covered with a silvered band of glass so that the soldiers could see out. The grey morning suddenly blasted open with light.

Gravinstad made his way back to the tent; as he bulled in he barked out, "Send out the messengers." He continued on through as his staff scurried ahead of him, and Gravinstad watched as the handlers of the MessengerKorps got their messengers ready to go - a wonderfully adept invention of his Menders, a mini-helicopter piloted by a monkey - in reality, a half-monkey, since its lower-half had been cut away and sutured to the helicopter itself - maybe even less than half-monkey if one counted the metal helmet clamped to its head that had a line of dials and small switches. The helicopter itself had a small propane gas tank attached to it which fired a small boiler that kept the engine going, and hanging from each helicopter was a coil of copper wire that would pay out as the machines rose, linking the monkeys to the messengers' handlers, who could send commands to the monkeys through the wires. "Go," he commanded, and the helicopters rose, fanning out to their positions on either side of the battlefield. From here they would signal, by flares, the commanders on the ground so that everyone could move as a coordinated, single-minded beast.

Merkin, sitting astride one of the battle-beasts (an enormous horse draped with metal sides), also saw the release of the messengers, and raised his arm, his eyes glued to his assigned herald, and then he saw it, the sputtering starry orange flare arcing against the now full-dawn-light, and in the same instant, with the same downward arc, he dropped his arm as a signal to move forward.

And the shields moved, a wedge of light slicing through the field. Merkin turned his horse and galloped along the margins of the wedge, making sure everyone stayed in line, in step, on the message, shouting encouragement until his voice turned ragged.

At the top of the hill, as the wedge reached its tipping point, Merkin looked up to the sky and howled, and the wedge pushed its weight forward and sped down the hill. Merkin watched them go, his face flushed, his blue eyes snapping. Then he turned his battle-beast back, just in time to see Gravinstad rise into the sky.

The Manchine commanders also saw the orange flare and reviewed, one more time, their orders: when the messengers signaled with the black flare that the gods' army had taken the bait of the flying wedge and split itself, they would march forward like the closing jaws of a vise as the soldiers in the wedge turned outward and pushed the god-army towards them.





A sapper tucked among the limestone folds also saw the messengers floating, and he whispered to himself his simple order: when the red flare went off, he would alert the miners below to blast the rock between the Guardsmen and the open air and release them to the slaughter. From his vantage point he could watch the god-army move into place as the scouts came in with news of the advancing bright-bladed wedge. They massed just as Gravinstad said they would. The sapper let his mind jump forward just a little, to the dinner tonight in the camp, full of raptured meat and unbuckled kegs of beer and the sweet stench of victory. Then he snapped his eyes back to the scene - he could not miss what was so important to see.

Gravinstad in the command tent watched the wedge pierce the incline of the hill as it sped up in lock-step. All the cogs of the machine were in place - now he had to put himself where he needed to be.

He turned and strapped himself inside his own helicopter, the blades spinning lazily while waiting to take him aloft. Without a word to anyone, he pushed the throttle forward, and the helicopter rose straight up, a thin tether of copper wire trailing behind down to a young soldier sitting at a table watching the telegraph key as if his life depended upon it - which it did.

As he rose and the land shifted angles so that he could see more and more clearly with each degree of rise, he felt a small twinge of doubt - waiting for his plans to play out was the part he hated most because he now had to trust what he could not control.

But as he got higher and higher, Gravinstad needn't have worried - he saw the god-army playing out its part to destroy itself, and he settled in as if he were watching a great tragic opera.

The wedge peaked the hill and sped sharp-point forward. Gravinstad observed how the god-army, as predicted, split its forces to surround the foolish assault. Gravinstad signaled with his telegraph key to send off the black flares, and seconds later the messengers fired off them off. The Manchine commanders, seeing the black scribbling against the sky, ordered their grotesques to move out, and the forest shuddered as the spitting, grinding, gorging battalions gouged their way forward to the battlefield.

As the god-army's cavalry sped in two arcs to surround the shields, Gravinstad signaled for the red flares, and again, seconds later, the red flares dug a line against the now-bluing sky. The sapper, seeing the falling stars,



scuttled down the path to the ground and slipped through a slim fissure in the rock face. Gasping, he shouted to his commanders, “Go! Go!”

The commanders turned to the forces massed behind them, shouting, “Blast shields up! Blast shields up!” The soldiers hoisted thick wood panels from the cave floor with ropes threaded through a pulley system screwed into the rock. As they settled into place, the commanders barked out, “Sappers ready?” and voices floated back to them from behind the wooden walls, “Ready, sir!” The commanders hid themselves, and for a moment, that moment between when the blasters turned the detonation switches and the electric current sped along the copper wires to the blasting caps drilled in perfect patterns all along the wall face, nothing happened. Then it all broke loose, and the wall fell gently apart (the sappers didn’t want rocks flying everywhere, so they simply weakened the wall so that it would fall under its own weight). Even before the dust settled, the soldiers humped the blast shields forward and laid them over the rocks, giving them a clear path up and out of the cave.

In front of them lay open space that ran clear from the wall-rubble up to where the god-army now surrounded the shielded corps. The corps had now changed from a wedge to a square, completely encased in what looked like bright-hot white light, the shields easily deflecting bullets and grenades and artillery and anything else the god-army threw at them.

The Manchines on Gravinstad’s right tore through the forest line; the ones on his left chewed to dust the moorlands as they topped the rise of the low depression that had hidden them. Together they began their squeeze.

Out of the limestone caverns poured the Guardsmen, deploying in strict arcs to get outside the circling god-army and join up with the flanks of the advancing Manchines. Gravinstad saw it all as he hovered like a bird of prey. The shield corps, as trained, began to press outward from a central point; the god-army, backing up, found itself suddenly jammed against Guardsmen and grotesques. By this time Merkin was leading forward the last of Gravinstad’s pieces, a corps of reserves that would plug the circle at the top.

Now it was just a matter of the necessary killing. And for getting the prize that Gravinstad wanted: the child/god. The stupid foolish too-trusting child-god.

Because it had been the child/god who had been feeding Gravinstad the information he had used to shift and shake the god-army into this final battle. The child/god believed the time had come for change - the current gods were



not very good gods - corrupt, lazy, indifferent to human suffering - and he bought Gravinstad's argument that only an alliance between the progress of science and the spirit of the child/god's forward thinking would bring into being the new world the child/god so passionately wanted: the end of suffering, a reign of peace. A reign of peace - Gravinstad shook his head in disbelief. Who would want such a boring state of affairs?

Merkin had arrived to knot the noose. Opposite him, at the far end of the circle, Gravinstad caught sight of the child/god hovering in the air. Without a helicopter of course - a state of physical independence that Gravinstad envied. And when the child/god was buried away in one of the Keep's prison, it would be a secret that Gravinstad would extract from the fool by any means possible.

Motion on the battlefield had stopped - the god-army, from what Gravinstad could see, seemed to look around in amazement at its condition: trapped, slaughter-ready, trumped. Before he knew it, though, the child/god suddenly flashed up next to him, his face skewed in what Gravinstad could only calculate was agony and remorse. The anguish made him want to laugh.

"What are you doing?" the child/god demanded. "*What are you doing?*"

"What I do best," Gravinstad replied, adding the salt of indifference to the child/god's wounds.

"This was not in the bargain. They would be banished, diminished, not - "

"Treated the way they had treated us?" Gravinstad asked with false innocence. "Besides, they're useless in the new world - you said so yourself. That's why we're doing all this, isn't it? So why not do it all the way? Why keep around what you don't need to have around?"

"And that about those things?" agonized the child/god as he pointed at the Manchines. "We didn't give you the power of reason and logic to create - "

"In our own image?"

"- monsters! To turn yourself into monsters!"

"Who knows where logic will take you once you start being logical?"

The child/god's face looked the way paradise did not. "You have lied to me. Completely. And it doesn't bother you at all, does it?"

The smile Gravinstad bestowed on the child/god was meant to be acid - and it was, searing and caustic. The child/god turned its stricken face from



Gravinstad down to the battlefield, and Gravinstad saw how concentrated the child/god had become: face pursed, eyes tight shut, body ramrod. As if he were - what? Gravinstad watched, puzzled, then realized a heartbeat too late what was happening. By the time his mind came around, the child/god had shifted out of reach.

On the battlefield, the god-army, all as one, raised their faces to the child/god, as if listening to a voice. The soldiers, the Manchines - none of them moved, as if what the god-army listened to had hooked them as well. Gravinstad saw Merkin at the edge of the crowd. He waved to catch his eye, and when Merkin caught the gesture, Gravinstad semaphor'd his arms, indicating for Merkin to bull his way through, which he started to do, though it was slow going through the clots of men and equipment.

Meanwhile, the god-army had let their weapons fall, had slackened their bodies, and one by one, but altogether as one as well, they morphed into Ravens, spiraling up and out of the grasp of massacre. Around and around the child/god they swirled, covering it as it arced earthward.

Gravinstad pushed his helicopter forward through the Ravens, trailing the child/god on his downward trajectory - but knew he couldn't catch it, even if he didn't have the Ravens attacking him, because the child/god did not want to be caught - and Gravinstad just missed getting a hand on him as the child/god plunged into the earth and disappeared. At once the Ravens clustered, gyred upwards toward the sun, then disappeared, a dark wedge splitting the horizon.

Gravinstad landed his helicopter next to the steaming hole the child/god had left behind. He barked at the chief engineer of the sappers. "Get your equipment over here - get your explosives, get your miners! Find him!"

The engineer examined the hole, then Gravinstad. "Sir, I'll do what you say, but it'll do you no good - I'll just end up burying my men when the sides of the hole collapse because we're moving too fast to shore it up, and whatever that thing was, if it can go through bedrock, it ain't going to stop for a lunch break so that we can catch up." The engineer considered the rage dancing across Gravinstad's face, then spoke again - but calmly. "But like I said, I'll do what you say." And made no move to do anything while Gravinstad peered into the hole and considered the man's words.

When he finally looked around at the troops and Manchines pressing in on him, he had almost wiped away the wrath and disappointment from his



face, setting it back into command and confidence. But they all knew - even the monkeys still lingering overhead knew - that the anger had not fumed away - more like tucked to one side, like the embers of a fire, to be covered in ash and ready to burn when the time came ready for burning.

Merkin pushed through the crowd and came up to Gravinstad. "What now, sir?"

"We have won a victory today," Gravinstad said to him, then to everyone around him. "We have won a victory today."

"By what definition? Sir."

"Are the gods here anymore? Do we have them on our backs anymore?"

"I'll say no to the first," Merkin replied, "and as for the second - who knows, since we didn't crush them the way you said you wanted."

Gravinstad moved close to Merkin so that no one else could hear. "Get me the scribes when we get back to the camp. I wanted a victory, and I will have my victory - Valice will have its victory - "

"You can't lie," said Merkin in an equally low voice. "Too many people have seen the truth."

"Who knows what they've seen? How do they know what they've seen?" Gravinstad shot back. "Get me the scribes - as I had asked you to do."

"I'll get you the scribes," Merkin gritted out from between his teeth, "but what you want to do is wrong."

"What I want to do is right because I want to do it," Gravinstad said as he pulled away from Merkin. "That is a rule I thought you had already learned to follow."

"It sounds like there may be one god left behind after all."

"And that was a stupid thing for you to say." This said so that everyone within earshot could hear it. And Merkin knew they had heard it.

Gravinstad climbed back into his helicopter and lifted himself a dozen feet off the ground. "A great day," he clamored out to the assembly, "and we *will* celebrate this as a great day, a day of victory and freedom. You will all remember this as a great day, I guarantee you."

Gravinstad banked to the left and arrowed back to the base camp. Merkin shouted to the sub-commanders to get their troops bivouacked, and bit by bit



the companies dispersed. The Manchines reversed themselves and chugged up the incline of the battlefield, suddenly useless and disposable (though they didn't yet know this). The keepers of the messengers reeled them in, like small fish at the end of long lines.

Merkin made sure that everyone got fed and settled. He corralled the scribes and poured into their unwilling ears Gravinstad's summons. He went on to set up the perimeter guard, schedule the watch (every four hours, kill and ask questions later), de-briefed the platoon and battalion commanders, assigned the writing of the daily log.

Then he had something of his own to do.

In his tent Merkin pulled out a writing board, a pen, ink, and paper. Pen dipped, hovering over the paper, a drop of ink on the nib poised to fall and blot - then words splashed across the paper, quickly written in between the glances Merkin took to make sure no one saw him write what he was writing. Then folded and folded and folded again, Merkin's signet ring ground into the wax melted along its seams.

Merkin paused, staring at the letter, then, without hesitation, stashed it in the leather pouch clipped to his gear belt.

He left the tent and made his way to the MessengerKorps. The monkeys all chattered at Merkin's approach. The handlers came to an abrupt attention; with a wave of his hand Merkin released them. Then he crooked his finger and reeled in the MessengerKorps commander to his side.

"How are you doing?"

The commander nodded, shrugged, didn't let down his guard in the presence of Gravinstad's second-in-command. "We did our job - what more can be asked?"

"What more can be asked, indeed, of a soldier."

Merkin let the words hang in the air. The commander started to fidget in the silence - he did not like being under such scrutiny. "Except there is one - flaw - in what you say."

"I don't know what the word 'flaw' means," the commander offered, not sure if that was good or bad.

"Then let me explain it to you. It means, the job isn't finished."



The commander shrugged again. “All right,” he said, and clamped his mouth shut. He had no idea what game was being played, so he let the cards fly by him.

Merkin pointed to the round-up of monkeys. “Which is your best?”

The commander shrugged once more, did not answer.

Merkin laid a thick forefinger first on the man’s right shoulder, then his left, as if he were dubbing him a knight. “You do that ‘thing’ with these shoulders one more time, and I will make sure that you do not do it ever again. Answer my question.”

The commander turned and his twitching finger picked out one of the monkey-messengers, who chewed its food with quick sure bites. “Mongrel - that’s what we call him - he’s sharp. If I had to choose, I’d choose him.”

Merkin reached into the leather pouch and pulled out the many-folded paper sealed tight with wax. “This needs to get to the king.”

“The king?” The commander couldn’t help himself - treason against Gravinstad was the last thing he expected to fall from Merkin’s mouth.

“The king - our ruler.”

“But what does he - “

“Speak with respect.”

The commander shifted instantly. “Our king - have to do with - “

“Have to do with your life?”

“But General Gravinstad said - “

“And, again, I ask: your life?”

The commander clamped up - he understood the hand being dealt to him. In a lower voice: “If one of *mine* - if Mongrel *takes* - and *he* finds - I will not be *fit for* - “ The commander couldn’t finish the thoughts that included someone or something finishing him off. “Have mercy,” he finally managed to let slip.

“Don’t think I haven’t been Gravinstad’s good student,” Merkin replied, in a voice equally low but certainly sharper. “I know all about your family - I know all about how much manpower the mines need - I know all about many things that you didn’t even know have something to do with your well-being.”

If Merkin had bothered to touch him, his hand would meet only shivering dust.



---

“Give me the letter.”

“You’ve said all the right words. Make sure this gets to the king because I will check. I will be very thorough in my checking.”

Merkin watched the commander tuck the missive into the monkey’s leather courier pouch, check the gauge on the fuel cylinder, adjust the directional dials on the monkey’s helmet. “Keep him on a low trajectory,” Merkin advised. “Let him hug the landscape. No one must see his silhouette against the sun.” The commander re-jiggered the dials, then released Mongrel into the sky. They both watched the small dot, hardly visible against the ground haze and smog, disappear into nothing.

Merkin peered into the commander’s eyes. “Give your men my compliments for their work today,” he said, “and tell them that silence is a golden gift.”

“I will,” the commander managed to force between his terrified teeth. Merkin turned and melted into the crowded camp.

After Gravinstad had unfastened himself from the helicopter, he made for his tent. Already the scribes had gathered there, clutching their journals and pens and canisters of ink, and Gravinstad growled at them to enter as he bulled past them, leaving them to follow in his wake.

“Sit down!” He hurled the words at them, and to avoid a direct hit, they all leaped for any available seat, even if that included the floor. Gravinstad flung himself into a leather-backed camp chair. “Get your damn books out.” The words had sting but not much force - Gravinstad was distracted by thinking about what he was about to dictate to this pack of mouse-faced scribblers. The clatter of flung-open journal covers and the rattle of smoothed-down papers barely registered with him. They waited - he said nothing. They continued to wait - he continued to say nothing. One or two of the writers pressed the open paper in front of them even flatter than it already was. Finally, Gravinstad gave them all the level gaze they knew and didn’t want to know.

“I want you to begin with the slaughter - how they were all slaughtered.”

The scribes looked at each other without looking at each other, their eyeballs sliding a hair’s width right, then left, each of them wondering who would be the one to bring up the fact that there had not been, in fact - not even by the loosest definition of the word - a slaughter. The eyes shuttlecocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth - and no one moved to mention the obvious.





Behind them they heard a sound, and grateful for the distraction they turned to see what it was - and were disappointed to see Merkin leaning against one of the tent supports. That is to say, the other jaw of the vise had come into play.

In front of them Gravinstad leaned forward, and this drew them back into his orbit. "I said, I want you to begin with the slaughter - how they were all slaughtered." Gravinstad looked up at Merkin. "Did my scribes suddenly go deaf and blind, and no one told me about it?"

Merkin moved into the tent, took up a seat. "I don't know, General. Earlier today I saw them do some scriblish kinds of things - scribbling, interviewing. So I guess they still function." Merkin turned to them. "Or are we both wrong in that?"

The chief scribe - the title "chief" indicated by a gold-embroidered goose-feather pen on the lapel of his jacket - cleared his throat.

"Ah, throat-clearing," said Gravinstad, leaning back. "That usually comes before talking. I think we may hear something after all."

"Ah," the chief scribe began, a finger raised to make a point.

"Ah," Gravinstad mocked, even down to the upraised finger.

"Slaughter, you said," the chief scribe continued, dropping the finger. He looked around at his fellows, who looked at him with one brief plea in their gaze: Do not mention that there wasn't a slaughter. The chief scribe turned his face back to Gravinstad. "What kind of slaughter does the General want to read about?"

"The best you can come up with. And I will allow you two points - you can give mention to the Ravens, but do not explain them - let it be believed by those who read this account that they were simply *there* that day, playing their folk-tale role of whatever Ravens do in folk tales - trickster, bad omen. Second, you can detail the disappearance of the child/god - but he fled out of terror at our might, out of cowardice and selfishness - that will give any of his left-over followers pause as they cower in their hidden rooms and hope for his resurrection. Give them a rotten god to hunger for, make them regret ever believing."

Gravinstad paused, looked at Merkin, then looked out through the open sides of the tent at the bustle and banging of the camp. Some of the scribes had already begun to jot things down, the scratch of their pen-tips like the rrrrricking of insects in tall grass.



“Will there be anything else?” the chief scribe asked. “You’ll want to see the drafts - “

Gravinstad answered him, but it was an answer to a question the chief scribed hadn’t asked. “This book will be the source of the new Valice. It will be the record that establishes ‘what is,’ the *thing* that becomes the official truth. You must make people believe *this thing*, get them to substitute *this thing* for anything else they think is true. If you can make that chemistry happen, then you will be truly honored, and honorable.”

The chief scribe took this all in with a bland face, nodding in the appropriate places, all the while with a voice in his head saying, “So the great reign of science and logic begins with deception and bad faith.” But another voice also had its say: “You know, I think we can do this - our power with words, our ability to bend the world into whatever shape we want - people will believe because we tell them to believe.” And he couldn’t deny the thrill tickling his spine that such thoughts of power gave him. And this is what came out of his mouth when Gravinstad finished: “The pen is another kind of sword - we will match in our words the bravery and cleverness that you have shown this day. We will call it the ‘Valiceiad.’”

“I think you just said ‘yes.’”

“Yes, I just said yes.”

“Good. Now go.”

And the scribes got up and left, gabbling among themselves, already comparing notes and turning phrases. Gravinstad looked at Merkin. Merkin looked at Gravinstad. “I haven’t forgotten,” Gravinstad said.

For his part, Merkin looked past Gravinstad into the declining bright-white light of the afternoon. His thoughts sped to his family, his daughter, his son, his wife/their mother - the world that Gravinstad was now mauling into the shape of his own image - and knew, in the sickening acid pit that had become his guts, that his momentary loss of self-control might cost them dearly. Not even “might” - most likely “will.” He hoped his letter to the king would get there before Gravinstad had turned his thoughts once again to murder.

He glanced at Gravinstad, who was staring into the middle distance lost in his own scheming, and Merkin found himself with a soldier’s cold eye measuring the distance between himself and the General - or, instead, between the tip of the knife waiting in the sheath clipped to his gear belt and the fist-sized heart-



muscle beating under Gravinstad's fifth and sixth left ribs. It wouldn't take that much - he'd done it many times before - it would be no great loss - But Merkin hesitated, let "but what if?" freeze him, flashed to the child/god who might come back and bring justice to them all - and because he didn't do it in the sharp-heat of the thinking of it, it didn't get done, and Gravinstad's indifferent heart beat on.

Merkin jumped a bit when Gravinstad's voice hit him - he wasn't expecting it. "Of course, with a story about slaughter, there should be some, well, slaughter to show the citizens of Valice. Not a lot - one or two for show - we'll say the rest were buried at the scene of their life's greatest triumph with all of the honors due good and great soldiers. But a body or two for exhibition, to let the citizens purge their sorrow and celebrate their salvation - that would be useful. "

Gravinstad turned to face Merkin fully. "Of course, I will leave the selection and their dispatch up to you. By supper I want to see the sacrifices dressed-out completely, ready for transport home. Do you have a problem with this?"

Merkin met Gravinstad's eyes full-on. "No."

"And as for the gods themselves - don't you remember how we have them chained deep in the limestone caves, bound with logical chains that trump their decayed ability to command the forces of nature? True?"

"It is true if you say so."

"This means we don't need to bring back a bound god for the citizens' circuses. Much too dangerous - trust *us* to keep the ones we didn't butcher buried deep for the sake of the safety of the state. Don't you agree?"

Merkin didn't answer; instead, he stared into the declining bright-white light of the afternoon and felt himself being blinded.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Just stop!" Gaul finally said, slapping her hand on the page that the Raven was just ready to flip. "Just stop this crap!"

Everyone rested. The room, thickened with the tales, aired out, leaving behind a silence scored by the settling of stones.

Gaul stared at nothing, breathed without thinking, did not move.

"You're Merkin."

"Yes."

"And you didn't kill him?"



---

“What are you thinking?”

“And all of this you’re showing me is a lie.”

“The battle took place. Our child/god disappeared. The Menders built the Manchines, then continued their work on us and others. Gravinstad stole the power he would have stolen anyways, though he needed the battle as grease to slide easily past the King - so he had to invent the battle because the gods had taken it away from him. Yes, it’s all a lie. And, yes, it all came true - just not the way the official story tells it, which doesn’t really matter in the end. What are you thinking?”

“The child/god - “

“We need him back.”

“But he betrayed - “

“Because they needed it - the gods had emptied themselves out, they had nothing left to give us - they just toyed with us because they were bored and clueless - the child/god understood what we needed - the care and compassion and tenderness to keep us going through a life full of suffering and death - “

Q stopped as he noted how tight and pale Gaul’s face was. He pulled back a little. “The child/god was stupid to trust Gravinstad - after all, he was a *child/god* - he thought that by scaring the gods, they would remember themselves, live in harmony with the new order of the world - “

“Gravinstad’s order,” Gaul spat out.

“Science and logic - what Gravinstad worships - had brought more good to people’s lives than the gods had ever delivered to them.” Q could not keep the disgust out of his voice. “I didn’t disagree with what Gravinstad wanted to do - I wanted to cut them all away so that the child/god would become our focus - science and logic may be efficient and dependable, but they don’t have much warmth or sympathy, and that’s what the child/god would bring - bring back - the gods were not always selfish and indifferent. Science *with* the child/god - that’s what I wanted. That was the best of both worlds that I wanted.”

“Gravinstad tricked you - “

“Tricked everybody because he had - has - one pure desire: a hunger for the power that will defeat death. He hates death. Wicked as sin, he is - but at the core of him, somewhere deep in him, he’s afraid of the same thing all of us are afraid of: dying, being forgotten, disappearing forever.”



"You make him sound - ordinary," Gaul said.

"Gravinstad is not without his - qualities."

"Even after what he did to you - to Alma, to Swing - "

Q didn't answer right away. "It's complex," he finally said.

"I need the garden," Gaul hissed, and flew out of her chair and out of the library. Q and Rufus did not follow. The Raven settled into its feathers.

"Rufus," Q asked while still staring at the spot where Gaul had been, "I don't think I was as convincing as I could have been."

"Are you surprised we are asking her to bring us back a *something* that we can't even really explain full out what it is or what we think it will do when it gets here and she could get killed in doing it and you just told her that everything official is a lie including that that *something* we want her to bring back - "

"You can take a breath," Q quipped.

" - shut up is as dumb as a post when it comes to dealing with the world because it believed a promise made by the rat-fink Gravinstad yet this *something* is also supposed to have we believe we hope we pray the power to make what is wrong right what is bent straight what is hard-hearted full of peace would you leap to 'yes, sign me on' with all that jammed into your brain." Rufus took his breath. "I wouldn't."

Q smiled as he said "No, I wouldn't either."

"You want your children back that's what drives you - "

"I want what's safe and good for all of us - "

"Yes yes of course you do but don't lie that you want your family back before you die if you don't keep saying what is true you end up like a Gravinstad which is not out of the realm of possibility for you to do you being who you were and are if Gaul goes she has to go knowing how complicated and hard to figure out all of this is not half-cocked by dreams and sweet-smelling lies."

Rufus took another breath. "I can be really brilliant when I have to be don't mean to be rude but it's never rude to speak out straight."

Q didn't answer. He rose. "Let's give her some time. I want you to bring a dozen or so into the garden - make them good talkers."

"Might scare her completely off."

“Might scare her completely on. She’s got a heart that can be reached.”

“Just be careful okay Q just be careful all right please - “

“Of course, Rufus. But we need her to choose.”

Q closed the Valiceiad.

“Go.”

And Rufus left.

The Raven jumped up onto the cover of the book. Q gazed at it, then looked away. The Raven took a short up-leap and hovered himself in front of Q’s face and gave him a hard but bloodless peck in the middle of his forehead, then landed back on the book.

“Everyone’s a critic,” Q said as he ran his hand down the stiff feathered spine of the Raven.



## Chapter 13

### Wherein Gaul Learns Several Meanings Of The Word “Face” And Must Face Her Situation With A Face Both Old And Newly Minted

---

As soon as she got back to the garden, Gaul’s lungs worked again as they were supposed to, and she washed the air through her blood so that she would not have to think about anything that she had just heard. She just wanted “empty,” she just wanted “nothing at all.”

She just wanted to go home, even though she had never had a home to go to. That was what she felt - this ache to be in a place where no one would do her harm and would love her every hour of the day.

So she sat very still, in the same chair where she’d sat before, closed her eyes, and drained her mind the way the sewers drained away the filth and failures of the city.

She tried, hard, to remember herself before DEAD - what had she looked like? Where had she come from? Nothing came. She shifted her weight, tried again. The earliest she could remember was stuffing envelopes into bags for the flips to carry - but nothing else, not even how she looked, because how could she know how she looked? Never any mirrors around, not even when the guards gave them all rough haircuts once a month - had it been once a month? it could’ve been once a century for all she knew how time did or did not pass her along in the halls of DEAD -

Her eyes popped open. Her hands flew up to her face and started tracing her cheeks, her forehead, her lips. She jumped up and hurried along the paths, looking right and left until she found what she wanted: a pool of water. She knelt beside it and leaned her face over the clear accepting surface, and someone stared back she was supposed to know, this Gaul. How odd she looked to herself, yet how normal: two eyes, two lips, two cheeks, hair that hung in bangs on her forehead and fell raggedly to her shoulders, a nose that didn’t seem to take up too much room on her face (but the nostrils flared each time she breathed and they arched a little, ridged). She bared her teeth - no gaps. She moved her hair back and swiveled her head to look at an ear - shaped like a question mark, a pinch of flesh hung from the bottom.



But it was a face that she didn't know - in DEAD, there was no reason for flips to know their faces except from the inside-out, to keep them mask-like so that Divot or the guards couldn't read them and get behind them into the brain, the mind, the dreams. Every flip wore a DEAD-face - the DEAD-face was the flip.

She could call up Swing's face - the brief scar under the right eye, the way his eyes never rested on anything but buzzed around like a fly, the lips blurred as he talked talked talked about anything that came into his head, the dimple in his chin, his shaggy blue-black hair. She could bring forward other faces as well, one after the other moving through her mind the way the DEAD envelopes slipped through her fingers into their required slots.

But DEAD was gone, she knew that - but that also meant that the only life she could remember having had was gone - and the DEAD-face that went with that life was gone, too. New place, new face. Her and not-her. This stranger she would need to welcome in and give a home to.

She sat back on her heels, taking her face away from the water, only now noticing once again the plants around her throwing out their subtle smell-nets. Her heart had calmed, her respiration had evened out. She allowed a smile to lift her lips, and she swore she could feel the DEAD-face crack into a dust that the breeze and the water carried away into the darkness.

She reached into her pocket and pulled out the scrap of Alma-cloth, spread it on her thigh, then traced the signature with her finger, feeling its track on her skin through the thin pants-leg. This Alma had a face - was it like Swing's face? Was it like her face? How were they the same? How were they different? It was obviously a face that Swing had loved - could Gaul care about a face that Swing had cared about, a stranger's face that was not completely a stranger's face?

How does anyone know who it is they should open their face for? How does anyone know who it is they should give any part of their heart to? Her skin tingled from Alma's traced name.

Gaul also noticed that she could now hear voices in the garden and footsteps coming along the path. She also noted that her knees hurt from kneeling on the stones, so she tucked the Alma-cloth back into her pocket and stood up just as Rufus rounded the bend and saw her. The Raven was not with him.

"Q says you have a choice," Rufus said, "and that you don't have to come with me but that he would be honored if you would join us back in the central



garden.” Then, letting the formality go, Rufus added, “Your face looks different are you gonna come?”

“Give me your hand.”

\* \* \* \* \*

She tried not to show any shock when she turned the corner and walked into the midst of the dozen Feralz seated or standing around the small plaza ringed with bright azaleas. She saw Angelicus and Drumlin, and it was good to see someone she knew. Rufus dropped her hand and went to join Q.

“Thank you for coming, Gaul,” said Q. “I know - we know - that this is not easy.”

“What’s not easy,” Gaul replied, “is that I don’t know what you want me to do and why you want me to do it.”

“That will come out as we talk to you - if you will stay to hear us talk. Will you stay?”

“I’ll stay.”

“Good. Because we want to tell you a story about ourselves - a hard story for all of us but one you need to know before you decide what you need to decide.”

And one by one each of the Feralz drew Gaul into the vile and pain-filled history of Gravinstad’s “program” of the Third Eye. As each talked, each first turned his or her back to Gaul and lifted hair off the napes of their necks to reveal a single unblinking tattoo’d eye - the Third Eye, meant to see what the other two eyes could not see, though in this case it was a joke since the Feralz were not meant to be seen at all by anyone’s eyes, considered nothing but discards and rejects and mistakes.

Gravinstad had created The Third Eye to “improve” his soldiers by making the term “fighting machine” as literal as possible. Arms, legs, muscles, skin, eyes - everything - would be “bettered” with metal, wires, claws, fangs, saws, flame. But before he would risk any of his precious army, he needed guinea pigs, lab rats, test monkeys - and Gravinstad found his substitutes in the too-many children infesting the lower depths of Valice. More often than a person would like to believe, parents found Gravinstad’s offer of a few coins and a couple of food deliveries enough to melt the bonds of love and affection, and they handed over their children to whatever Gravinstad had planned to do. And he had planned to do a lot.



After the war, the experiments did not stop. Driven by their “successes” in the war, the scientists of Valice had not stopped their work on the Third Eye - more and more of their outrageous blends of flesh and non-flesh limped and crawled and slinked and humped out of their laboratories - a new breed of monsters, sterilized so that they could not reproduce, set with biological clocks to shorten their already shortened lives, whom nobody loved and everybody hated and which Valice denied were the city’s own children.

So it was that Gaul heard about Galvan with the wires embedded in his skin that, when hooked to a battery (but bigger than the one Divot had carried), would send out electrical charges to paralyze someone. She listened to Nail tell how they had cut off her hands and feet and replaced them with lion’s claws and eagle’s talons. Angelicus told his story of the scientists’ hopes to get wings that worked well enough to launch a man skyward - other had had vulture’s wings and gigantic bee’s wings sewn into their flesh to do the same thing. Drumlin just grunted and held up his arm, as if that single sound held enough revealing in it. Ferrus drummed on the cold iron plating covering his legs. And the rest - Janus with her two faces looking in opposite directions, Serrate with the table-saw blades attached to his elbows and knees which had now rusted into place, the four-armed four-legged Shiva, Rufus with his dancing guts - all of them telling the story of a man and a city gone mad as its pride hungered for more and more power.

And when Gravinstad and his scientists had extracted what knowledge he could from them, he simply threw them out, like broken plates or spoiled food, and one by one, they found each other, united in their pain and loneliness, sinking as low as they could go, since they were now the lowest forms of life, into the parts of the city as forgotten and forsaken as they were. Little by little they built a life to replace the life they had had in the sun, and little by little they learned why what had happened to them had happened. Little by little they learned the stories of the gods and what had been lost by the gods’ defeat: caring, gentleness, affection, mystery. They taught themselves to love the gods that had been killed and made missing as much as they grew a hatred for Gravinstad and the Valice that had crippled them. In fact, one fed the other each and every day.

The last of their stories sifted into the darkness; quiet fell over everyone. In the silence Gaul heard a familiar sound: the slap of wings against air. The Raven dropped into the center of the circle and settled itself into the dirt. It noted everyone with its ebon eye.



Gaul didn't want to speak, but the silence squeezed the words out of her.

"And so you think that this Alma has found - "

"Yes," said Q. "We do."

"Based on some diamonds and cloth scraps that maybe make up a map."

"And the Raven," added Q.

"The Raven," Gaul spat out. "And that Raven knows where Alma is?"

Rufus whispered out a stream of caws and whistles and huffs, and the Raven, taking a hop, landed on Gaul's knee. She could feel its feet bite into her thigh to balance its weight. It dinged her on the nose - once twice - and even though Gaul felt jammed up with rage and a disordered heart, she couldn't help stroking the bird, running her hand from the back of its attentive head down its neck and along the crisp wings. The Raven shifted its weight so that it settled into her lap, and its warmth softened Gaul's anger.

"Alma and the child/god have sent the Ravens to us. Do you remember the picture in the book of the final battle, with The God Unfound disappearing into the ground? Do you?"

"Yes," answered Gaul.

"The gods don't have the power - yet - to change themselves back. They remember who they are even though they can't turn back into who they are. But they pay attention, keep a pulse on what changes, since things are always changing. And they carry messages - scraps of cloth, diamonds, from crippled gods to crippled people."

Q got up and began to walk the circle. As he spoke, he touched each of the Feralz - a kind hand on the shoulder or the head or the cheek.

"This is what we believe, Gaul. Like the gods, all us of here - the rejects, the offscum, the undone - can't, on our own, turn back into what we were. We remember who we were - or we have made up stories if we don't remember or don't want to remember - and together we have made a 'life.' But this is not the life we want to have. No matter how beautiful this garden, no matter how bright we make this darkness, there is only one truth here: we are buried, we are a form of the dead - and we do not want to be buried any more."

Q came to Gaul, and he touched her cheek, as he had before.



“And one more truth: you are a Feralz, too. What’s that little saying the guards in DEAD have about flips? ‘Flips are like flies, they buzz round the skies, when they get in your way, you smash ‘em.’ You may not have been bent and broken the way we were, but you have been broken and bent by what this city has done to you: stolen you from your family, enslaved you in DEAD, given you a face that’s not your own.”

Q moved back to his own seat. The Raven nodded and added a few caws and whistles and huffs to underline Q’s words.

“We have to get the child/god back here. Alma has shown us the way. We have to bring him home, and Alma, too. And we want you to do it.”

In the following silence Gaul could hear the perpetual movement of water, and even it seemed to have words it wanted to add, though in a language Gaul could not parse. Of the questions streaming through her brain, Gaul picked one.

“Why can’t any of you go?”

“‘Going ‘ means travel on the surface - it’s not as if we blend in. Within seconds Gravinstad’s men would nab us and bury us.”

“How would getting the child/god here change anything? It’s not much of a god if all it can do is send packages by Raven.”

“Good question. And we don’t have an answer - just a hope.”

“That a bunch of *cripples* can change the world?” Anger leaked into every word that shot off her tongue. - and she wasn’t even sure where the anger came from. After all, they were offering her something important to do, and no one - *no one* - in her life had ever thought she was important enough to do anything important. But still, the anger.

“Why not?” Q answered. “Just because we’re *cripples* doesn’t mean we can’t fight. You mistake being a cripple with being weak - and you aren’t the first to do that.”

“But the god is half-dead, isn’t it?” Gaul shot back. “Stuck in the mines with Alma, who’s half-dead, probably, too - and you’re asking me to go lug two half-deads back here because *maybe* - “ Gaul cut herself off; then, softer, “I don’t even know what you all think will happen when they get here.”

Instead of answering Gaul, Q turned to the rest of the Feralz. “Do any of you have anything to say?”



---

"I don't want to hear any more - "

But Q raised his hand to stop her and repeated the question.

The Feralz looked at one another, then Shiva spoke, one set of her arms crossed, the other shaping the air as she spoke.

"We're not stupid, Gaul. We believe in the child/god because it's good to believe in something when you have nothing - who wants to think that what was done to us was done out of pure meanness and spite, that the pain of it all means less than spit in the dirt, means nothing? We want to be whole, and I believe the child/god will bring us there. Do I think it will really happen?" She looked around the circle. "Do any of you really think it will happen?" Their silence answered her. "We have to think it will really happen even if we really don't think it will happen. If we don't believe, then we're nothing but the garbage that Gravinstad treated us like. And we ain't garbage."

"Anybody else?" Q asked.

Serrate piped in. "She said it for me." The others nodded.

"Then thank you for coming, for telling your stories." The Feralz got up, and one by one they shook hands with or touched Gaul in some way as they filed out. Only Rufus stayed. Q stood.

"You have a lot to think about. And without delay - we don't know what condition Alma is in."

"If you get the child/god back here, you're going to fight Gravinstad, aren't you?"

Q didn't answer. He just watched her.

"Aren't you? Why don't you answer me? You're gonna take the child/god and go try to kill the man who killed you, and you're all of you - "

"All of 'us,'" Q corrected.

"All of *you* are going to die - and there will never be an end to the flips and the Feralz and kids being wasted in the mines - Nothing will change! And you'll all be dead!"

"As I said, you have a lot to think about. Come on, Rufus."

"I'll be along in a minute in just a couple of seconds," Rufus said.



Q turned to Gaul. "There will be food for you when you get back to the house." And with that, Q shuffled out of the garden.

The Raven had not moved. Water-laced silence mantled them. Gaul cradled the Raven in her arms, then got up and paced.

"They leave you both here to work on me?"

"No" said Rufus "and I notice you're holding on to him."

Gaul paced some more, and soon her steps mixed with steps coming down the path as Angelicus and Drumlin re-appeared.

"The heavy guns," Gaul quipped. "Well, I've decided: I'm not going to do it. I'll get killed, and I don't want to die."

"You wouldn't be going alone Gaul" Rufus reminded her "we'd be going together."

"And you would protect me? And even worse, you think I could protect you? I'm a *flip*, Rufus - never been anything else. Never will be anything else."

"That's a stupid thing to say," growled Drumlin. "I told you she wasn't worth our time," he said to the others. "Rufus by himself would be better," Drumlin threw back at Gaul, "and Rufus is pretty useless as it is, which points up just how *really* useless you are. Thinking only of yourself."

"Angelicus, is that what you think, too?"

Angelicus blushed. "You can make whatever decision you want, Gaul, but the fact is, your life is dead. Up there are only people who want to kill you. Down here you only got people ready to trust you. You can stay dead or you can stay alive. Choice is yours."

"Why can't Q go? It's his son, his daughter."

"Because Q leads us, and Q is dying," said Rufus.

"Q is dying?"

"He's an 'experiment' that's not working out," spit out Drumlin.

"The head and the body won't stay - matched," added Angelicus in a small voice. "They're at war."

"He doesn't have much time." Rufus' voice shook a little, but he kept it firm.

"So if Alma got back here before he - " Gaul left the thought unfinished, but she knew how it ended.



---

Holding the Raven in one arm, Gaul pulled the cloth scrap from her pocket and looked at it. "I didn't even hardly know Swing - I don't even know this Alma."

"So what?" Drumlin grumbled. "You have to know somebody to save 'em? We didn't know you, and yet you eat our food and wear our clothes."

"Q would let you live here forever, if you wanted," Angelicus put in, "even if you don't go. Just because, in a way, you're like us - bent, disappeared - and yet still getting up in the morning to go on. That's all it takes to stay here."

Rufus rose. "We said enough probably too much I think Gaul needs to be alone."

"I need to be alone."

Drumlin moved away without even a nod to Gaul. Angelicus smiled a sad smile as he followed Drumlin, and Rufus touched her shoulder as he left after Angelicus.

Again, the water-filled silence. Gaul stared at the Raven.

"You got anything to add?" she asked it. The Raven nodded his head but kept its beak shut.

"Well?"

But the Raven still kept mum.

Gaul stood there, the Raven in one arm, Alma's name in one hand, and had no idea what to do.







## Chapter 14

### Wherein Swing Is Not Dead (Though He Might Wish He Were) And Gravinstad Demonstrates The Terrifying Power Of Change

---

The machine on Gravinstad's desk began to chatter - click click click clllllllccccckkk -

Gravinstad watched it without moving to pick up the strip of paper that spit out of the machine. He just stared at the paper coiling on the floor.

The machine stopped.

Still Gravinstad did not make a move to tear off the paper and read it.

Instead, he turned to face the Guardsman standing at the center of the room, holding a cage. He had been standing there a long time because Gravinstad had wanted him to stand there. The Guardsman would not move until Gravinstad ordered him to move. For some reason, this gave Gravinstad no pleasure.

"Show it," he said, and the Guardsman, breaking his pose, knelt on the floor and popped open the top of the cage.

"It's new, sir - from the Menders' laboratory."

"I know that," growled Gravinstad, and the Guardsman immediately shut his mouth and finished opening the cage.

Gravinstad glanced to his right at the figure of Swing strapped in to a large wooden chair. A rough iron crown had been clamped down over his head, holding it rigid, and a leather mask across his face kept his eyes open and unblinking. A Guardsman stood next to him.

"Make sure he doesn't look away," Gravinstad ordered.

At first what was in the cage did not want to come out. All Swing could see was a black mass that beat against the cage's mesh, letting out half-strangled chirrs and gacks.

"Hurry it up," Gravinstad snapped, and the Guardsman shook the cage harder and harder until the struggling lump resolved itself into three mounds of quivering black feathers, who unballled themselves into three Ravens.

Three Ravens more or less.

Gravinstad stood up and walked to the animals that huddled on the stone floor. He tapped each of them with his boot-toe to get them to move, all the while pitching his words to Swing who, even if he wanted to look away, could not look away.

“I had these especially made for you. Can you see what they are?”

“Yes,” croaked Swing.

“We have so many of them around, I thought we could do with a few less.”

By now the Ravens had begun to move around, but they were not like any Ravens Swing had ever seen. One had two heads and four wings, as if two birds had been jammed and glued together. Another had a mouse’s head stuck where its own head should have been - and the mouse squealed. The third had Raven’s beaks stuck all over its body, making it look like a ball of black mud spiked with nails, and the beaks clicked open and shut with the same ticking sound as the machine on Gravinstad’s table.

“As they look, so could you, *Swing* - snap of my fingers, you *mended* - unless, of course, you want to talk to me.”

The Raven with the mouse-head tried to fly away, but someone had short-clipped its wings so that the most it could do was rise a few inches above the floor. The doubled Raven jerked and spasmed, as if the two mashed birds wanted to tear themselves back into two. The beak-studded Raven sat unmoving, its legs having been scalpeled away. Swing could hear the dry clacking of the beaks as they pecked at the empty air.

“It doesn’t look like any of these designs are going to make us a better Raven - and I had such hopes.” Gravinstad turned to the Guardsman who had let the creatures out of the cage and pointed to the mouse-headed Raven. “Pick it up,” he commanded, which the Guardsman did, “and follow me.”

As Gravinstad and the Guardsman stepped toward him, Swing strained against the straps and metal that clamped him tight. “Give him a close-up look,” Gravinstad said to the Guardsman, who held the monster inches from Swing’s face. “I want you to see how finely crafted the Menders’ work is, what an excellent job they can do in turning the ordinary into the very extraordinary.”

Swing stared into the twitching mouse-face, the nose and whiskers twitching, the mouth with its useless pin-teeth levering open and closed as it sent out its thin shrieks, all the time Gravinstad’s words drilling into his ears. “Think of what



they could do with a fine young boy like you, one who ‘swings’ for his supper - ten-foot long arms, perhaps, or a tongue that uncoils like a frog’s so that you can grab that last necessary hand-hold. Think of the possibilities.”

Gravinstad indicated with his head for the Guardsman to pull the creature away. Gravinstad leaned in to Swing, his voice dropping in register. “I can keep the Menders away from you, if you want - all you have to do is tell me what you have been bringing to the Feralz, what you have been finding in the old tower, what this all has to do with the mines - it’s very simple, *Swing*, much like yourself - you give me something, and I give you back your life, and all of this will be nothing more than a bad dream.”

Swing stared at the well-oiled face of Gravinstad and he wanted, he really wanted, to tell him everything so that the pain would stop, the terror would stop, but he also knew that he was already dead, that Gravinstad would never let him go no matter what he said - but not only that, he remembered what Gravinstad had done to his father, to his sister. To tell Gravinstad what he knew, what he had wanted to do, was to deliver his family to them again, and he would rather die than betray anything to anyone.

Gravinstad stared at the sweating shivering face and waited, but he knew it was useless - the boy was either too terrified or too filled with false courage to give him anything useful - and only the nagging suspicion that Swing held something - *something* - that connected with the unease he felt when the Ravens congregated in his chambers and ram-charged their way out of the Keep kept him from throwing him to the Menders for whatever game they wanted to play.

At just that moment the machine on Gravinstad’s desk started up again - click, click, cllllliicccckkkk, cliiicccckkkk. Its strict chatter filled the air. Gravinstad stood up, annoyance flitting across his face at the interruption, then spoke to Swing’s Guardsman. “Take him back - he needs to marinate.” The Guardsman tipped back the wooden chair, which was on wheels, and piloted him out of the room. To the other Guardsman he snapped, “Get these filthy creatures out of here.” The Guardsman hustled to gather them up, trying to keep the snapping-beak ball of feathers from pinching at his hands while he nabbed the squealing mouse-head and the spastic twinned-bird, one under each arm - but as he would get control of all three, one would get away, and the terrified Guardsman found himself scuttering around like a clown in front of the man who could kill him on a whim. “Hurry it up!” Gravinstad barked, and finally the hapless soldier managed to corral all three and make it out of the room without dropping any of them.



By this time the machine's chittering had stopped, and more of the paper coiled on the floor. He walked to the desk and stared at the machine, as if trying to read the paper without actually touching it. Finally, he reached over and tore it off and began scanning the printout. Nothing crossed his face as he read, but when he finally coiled the paper strip around his fist, and began gently but firmly knocking his clenched knuckles against the desk-top, the hard face had become even harder. "She needs a little - push," he whispered to himself. "Guard!" he bellowed, and even before the last letter rang off the stone walls, a Guardsman appeared in the doorway.

"Get my carriage." And off the Guardsman went.

He stared at the black feathers littering the floor where the three mangled Ravens had skittered and tossed. Something did not feel right. Something did not sit well. The Feralz, this worthless dump of mutant skanks, had suddenly become - if not important, then more *there*, like a gnat buzzing just outside the corner of the eye. Swing would probably give up nothing. And now this Gaul, another retard flip - and not to forget Divot, mangled by a Raven. A Raven.

And yet perhaps all this added up to nothing. Nothing and perhaps. Perhaps and nothing.

The Guardsman re-appeared to announce the arrival of the carriage, but Gravinstad had already passed him before he could get out the first syllables. Gravinstad's quick leave-taking stirred the black feathers on the floor, which whirled then came to a dead rest.



---

## Chapter 15

### **Wherein Gaul Has Her Mind Made Up For Her While She Is Making Up Her Mind, Learning In The Process That Nothing Is Ever What It Seems**

---

Q and Rufus looked over the gear laid out on the wooden table: two metal-framed unfilled backpacks, clothing, shoes, dried food, candles, matches, knives, rope, paper, pencils - going-to-the-mines gear. Q glanced over at Rufus, watching Rufus' eyes count up and check off each item, his lips whispering out the list.

Q looked back at the layout. "You know, Rufus, this may all come to nothing - she may not go.

"Then I'll go myself," Rufus shot back.

"That's not required."

Rufus stopped his review but didn't shift his eyes off the table. "But if I do then everything will be in the hands of an idiot it will Drumlin will sneer and say exactly that and he will be right."

"I don't think he will be right at all," soothed Q.

"That's because you believe that's your problem you think Gaul will change her heart she won't because she is as scared as I am - "

Q felt what he had been feeling more and more lately and which he had tried to deny he was feeling - a ring of fire around his neck, traced by the suture marks, as if a small war were in play but instead of attacking each other, each side wanted to move far away from the other. Separation. Rejection. Reversal. Who knew how this would end?

Next to him he heard Rufus take up his inventory again, and Q did nothing to interrupt him this time. Who knew whose life would depend upon getting it as right as they could get it?

Q made his own list.

\* \* \* \* \*

As before, Swiddle and Pym let the racket of Gravinstad's departing carriage fade off before they spoke to each other. In fact, they invited a good measure



of silence into the room, letting their ears trawl for any hints of eavesdropping Guardsmen or other surprises Gravinstad may have left behind. Then, through some secret nod and wink of their own, they let their bodies relax, and in relaxing, let their eyes meet.

"I don't like it," said Swiddle. "It's not our usual turf. And it gives away our hand."

"I know that," answered Pym. "I know that and he knows that."

"And yet he wants us to do it."

"Without fail."

They both sat unmoving, the silence now rising to drown them.

"I don't want us to go to the mines," Swiddle hissed. "I don't want to be anywhere near that - that -"

"Shut up," said Pym, but there was a - what? - lightness in his tone. "The blade is on our neck, and there's not a damn thing we can do about it."

"The problem with having the devil as your employer is that the devil is your employer," Swiddle offered, without the hint of a smile. "We can't get out of this, can we?"

Pym shot him a straight-on stare.

"Take a deep breath and hold it."

"What?"

"I said - " and Pym's voice had razors in it.

"All right!"

And Swiddle took a deep breath and held it.

"You try to get out of this, and that's the last breath you'll ever take - I'll make sure of it."

Swiddle let it seep back out.

"I'm not going to let a bonzo like you muck up the best deal we've ever had going for us," Pym hissed. "So we have to go to the mines - big nothing! You've gotten soft, Swiddle-piddle, you've gotten lazy and sluggish. Me? I have been getting tired of butchering things that can't fight back for the sake of getting handed some filthy money and pleasing the rotted soul of Gravinstad."



“You should keep your mouth shut,” Swiddle shushed. “You don’t know - “

“I miss the war. I miss the mines. All that cut away your skin and filled you with terror on the cheap, but, man, I felt alive and alive and *alive!*”

Pym rose and paced.

“We need to get about a dozen people, to make it look like something real and not just a couple of drunks who happened to fall down the wrong sewer gap. Give me names.”

Swiddle just stared and said nothing.

“I don’t like what I’m not hearing, Swiddle.”

Swiddle shook his head, then sighed out, “The Brat, for one.”

“He would do, yes. And Lonzlo, Argent - “

“The mines,” Swiddle sing-songed. “The mines, the mines, the mines - “

Pym marched to a cabinet and threw it open, and on the cabinet’s back wall, in neat pin-straight array, hung knives of every shape, angle, curve, and color. He grabbed one and marched back to the table, where he threw himself into a chair and jammed the point of the blade into the tabletop a few hair-widths from the edge of Swiddle’s pinkie. On top of the knife sat a round magnifying glass.

“Put your eye up to it!” Pym barked. “Look at me!”

Swiddle hung his eye up to the glass - from Pym’s side it turned into a large blinking egg. Pym leaned toward the glass, and the two men, their eyes enlarged, stared at each other. “I see fear in that eye,” spat out Pym. “Is there fear in that eye, Cornelius?”

“No, Theodore Pym,” said Swiddle.

“I’ll pluck it out like Divot lost his if there’s any fear in there.”

“There’s not a drop of fear in it - “

“Keep it open! Keep it on me!”

And Swiddle, finding an ounce of reluctant courage, clapped his eye on Pym’s.

“You’ve nothing to fear from me,” Swiddle said in a voice stiff with promise.

“The devil’s employees have to stick together.” Pym’s smile played on his lips. “They’re going on a trip.”





Pym leaned back and pulled the knife from the wood's grip. He used his shirt to clean the magnifying glass. "Let us do some planning," he said.

"Yes, let's," answered Swiddle. "I am all aflutter with anticipation."

\* \* \* \* \*

Gaul sat in the garden. And stared. And stared some more. No one had said anything to her, pushed her, prompted her - but she could feel the tension in the air, everyone hanging on the question: Will Gaul go? Will Gaul go?

She had tried to convince herself to go - talked to herself in her own head, out loud to herself in the privacy of her room in Q's house, but something would not spark that "yes" that another part of her wanted to offer up to Angelicus and Drumlin and Rufus and, above all, Q, who had been patient and quiet. Was she afraid? Yes. But being underground for a few days had also helped her bring to light that she had felt fear in her guts from whenever she learned the meaning of the word, and even before that, as a flip-in-training filling the bags with dead letters, fear as daily as the bad porridge she had had to eat - and yet she had been able to live afraid without killing herself or going crazy, as had so many of the flips she had known. So if "afraid" had never stopped her before, why couldn't she just take that last step into what Q and the others wanted her, prayed for her, to do?

Did she think it was all a lie? Partly yes. She had never heard the stories of Valice as a child - all she had to go on was some book that Q said spoke the truth - or, at least, a kind of truth - and she also knew that Q and the rest hungered for something, which might make them lie to her without even knowing that they were lying, they believed it so hard.

But then that belief in the child/god - it came so strong off Q and the others that she thought she could smell it, a sharp spiced sweet-bitter odor that, breathed in deep, made the lungs clear and the blood jump. It almost made her spit out "yes yes yes" to what they asked, her "yes" coming from some hungry part of her that didn't depend upon words and thoughts and decisions to do something in the world. But then, just as the "yes" leaped to her lips, she gulped it back down, something something something keeping her from letting it go and placing it in their waiting ears.

Did she owe something to Swing? Probably. She had promised him - but without knowing what the promise would cost. Already she had probably killed a man, Divot, who, though he probably deserved to die, did not really deserve to



die because no one deserved to die, and if she had killed him, then that killing made her as bad as, if not worse than, Divot and all the others who prowled DEAD and made the flips' lives a hellish living.

And Alma? A girl Gaul's age, more or less, in the mines - who knew what she was suffering? And then again that other voice, darker: Who knew if Alma was really real, not made up, just because someone showed Gaul a piece of cloth with a name scrawled across it. Why should she, Gaul, go suffer for something that might be a trick and a lie? But if Alma was real - if she was hurt - if she was like a flip - if she was Swing's sister and Q's daughter - then shouldn't Gaul help her?

And then there was Q, who had - And Rufus who had -

Gaul got up and paced, her too-busy brain pushing her along like a strong wind ramming a ship through the ocean. Nothing clear came up to her, no simple "do this" or "do that" - everything felt shadowed in doubt and mistrust and fear. And mostly about herself - even if she did say yes, could she really do it? Did she have the smarts, the strength, the heart to go into that land of darkness and not completely dissolve? Wouldn't she end up letting all of them down and destroying their only chance to become whole again? After all, she was only a damn good-for-nothing flip who had never ever been out of the city, much less -

She shook her head to clear away the thought-knives - any more of that, and she would bleed to death from self-pity. In fact, she shook her head so hard that she thought she heard the clanging of bells - until she stopped shaking her head and the bells continued. Lots of bells. All loud, all unstoppable. The air around her suddenly got very tight. Something had gone wrong.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sewer walls danced with the gargoyle shadows of two dozen creatures who cut the water like shark fins. Strapped to each back was a narrow burlap bag about four feet in length; around each waist cinched a leather belt holding five short blades, a loop of whip, and a length of rope. Pym, carrying a blazing torch, led the pack. Swiddle brought up the rear.

They came to the downhole where the seven sewer-rivers came together, where Angelicus had brought Gaul only a few days before. Pym held up his hand, and the crew, as if wired to a single switch, stopped on cue. Pym reached up into a niche in the wall and flipped a switch, and the gas-jets leapt to life. He then



faced the grim squad in front of him, and he couldn't keep from grinning as he barked out to them.

"Not because I question the collective intelligence of the lot of you," Pym half-laughed, half-shouted, "but I want to go over *one more time* what you are to do if you expect to collect your pounds and pence at this day's end."

"Scare 'em and scam out, right?" said the one named Argent, whose teeth shone because they were forged entirely from silver.

"Not quite, my silver-toothed bucko," drawled Pym, and Swiddle, because he knew his partner's quirks, wanted to tap Argent on the shoulder and tell him to duck because the fake drawl in Pym's voice usually came before just before the wrist-flick of a knife-throw.

But Pym didn't throw anything at anyone, which confused Swiddle. "Not quite," he continued. "Our job is to get the girl named Gaul to leave the warmth and safety of the maggots known as the Feralz. You may loot - a little - if you wish, but you are not here to do your usual routine of pillage and scorched earth, which is why I didn't have you bring your usual retinue of devastation. And you are not to kill anyone, do you understand? Much as that may offend your notion of order in the universe, this is to be bloodless. Maximum fright with the least damage - is that clear, my sluice-rats?"

Grunts, nods, shrugs - Pym added them up to "yes." "Good," he said with relish. "Look around you - you'll see sconces on the wall. Stick the torches in there - we'll need them when we get back up." As the crew rammed home their torches, Pym turned and dropped to a knee and rooted in the rock-pile at his feet. He pulled out a rock with a slash in it and went to a hole in the wall. But his ham-hock fist holding the rock couldn't fit. "Scrawn," Pym shouted.

A man separated himself from the crew and moved forward - but anyone looking at him would have been forgiven for thinking that what they saw was not a man but a tree branch with twig legs and arms. Scrawn was so beanpole-skinny that he cast almost no shadow, and legend had him slithering up and down drain-pipes as easily as the right key fitting into the right lock.

"I need that right arm of yours, Your Narrowness," Pym joked as he handed him the stone. "At the end of that hole is a knob - fit the slot over the ridge and turn until you can't turn anymore."

Pym stepped back, and Scrawn inserted his arm up to his shoulder. He fiddled, bent, then stood perfectly still as inside the rock his sinewy hand turned



once, twice, thrice - and stopped. "'Sdone," Scrawn offered, and Pym said, "Then take your arm back, My Slimness - you are going to need it. And give me the rock." Pym dropped it into a small kit bag slung over his shoulder.

The only warning was a slight tremor through their feet as the ladder rocketed upward and shot itself against the ceiling. "Now get on!" Pym shouted, "now now now!" One by one the crew heaved themselves onto the ladder, one on each side, moving down the rungs to make room for the ones above them, until it was only Pym and Swiddle left to go. Pym reached up and snapped the lever.

"You ready, mate?" Pym asked Swiddle, and Swiddle was stiffened by the excitement shooting through his veins - adventure - he hadn't tasted that in a long time. It tasted good. Swiddle swung himself onto the ladder, followed half-a-heartbeat later by Pym just as the ladder dropped the mob into the heart of the Feralz.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Gaul got to the Commons, Pym's cronies had already landed and fanned out. The bells still beat out their warning. To her left, she could see Q followed by Galvan, Serrate, Shiva, and dozens of other Feralz she didn't know; and as they moved forward, they spread out to the right and left, looking to encircle Pym and the others. Before Gaul knew it, Q had deployed several dozen Feralz into the Commons. Overhead, on roofs and gutters and eaves and belfries, Gaul could see other figures scamper into line. In a matter of minutes, the intruders were outnumbered.

No one moved. Feralz versus mob. The bells stopped ringing, and a deadly quiet set in.

Gaul worked her way through to Q. Angelicus hovered just behind him on one side, Drumlin on the other. Feeling a tug on her arm, she looked down and saw Rufus, his face flickering with nervous tics. She smiled at him and rubbed his curly hair.

The Feralz hadn't been able to get around Pym. Pym had arranged his pack into a flying wedge - the burlap bangs hanging from their shoulders remained unopened.

"I've got two dozen of the finest left-overs of the Third Eye here, you cripples, wrecks, and garbage," Pym bellowed. "I got more upstairs waiting to join the party."



Drumlin hissed in Q's ear, "They knew about the ladder. They knew about the ladder!"

"Obviously," said Q without taking his eyes off Pym. His scarf had slipped a bit, and Q could plainly see the fiery red ring around his neck, the stitch-lines an angry white. The vein in his neck pulsed.

"So don't get in our way," Pym commanded, "and we'll be out of here without blood on our hands and in your streets if you give us what we want."

"We have nothing you want," Q shouted at them. "So leave."

"You got a girl named Gaul."

They didn't want to, but the ones closest to Gaul turned their heads just the slightest bit to look at her, and Pym caught the hesitation at the same moment Q's voice shot back at him, "We don't have anyone here by that name." In the same breath he pitched a hoarse whisper to Drumlin: "Get her out of here."

"You're a bunch of liars, my unjointed insects," Pym volleyed back. "I can see her right there - I know what the little snot-nose looks like. Give her to us, and we'll leave you to live out your miserable lives."

Something grabbed the waist of Q's pants and pulled her back slowly through the crowd.

"We don't have anyone by that name," Q insisted.

"Ah, it seems you've pulled her away. This person you do not have. How nicely you treat your ghosts."

Step by backward step she moved, watching the bodies of Feralz move to close off the sight of her. She looked over her shoulder and saw grim-faced Drumlin pull her along until she was completely hidden. Then he let go of her. Out of nowhere, Rufus appeared next to him. Drumlin knelt down, and for the first time in the few days she'd known him, she saw fear in his face.

"If the scum of the earth has scum underneath it, then these are it. You have to leave *now*."

"Why would anyone want me?" Gaul asked, hating the whine that had crept into her voice.

"The important question is where you are going to go. Are you going to fink out on us - who gave you shelter and food and some of who are probably going to die today to make sure those snakes don't get their teeth into you - or are you



going to the mines to get Alma? You got no more luxury of sitting inside your self-pity, Gaul, and whining about this, that, and the other thing. You either stand up to fight or you slime off like a worm.”

As if to underline Drumlin’s words, the air suddenly fragged into a white-hot blast of light along with thunder, and the sharp reek of ozone stung their noses. “That’s Galvan with his lightning,” Drumlin said. “It’s going to start if it already hasn’t started. Put up or shut up, Gaul - that’s all you got right now. But I can’t stay here - I gotta get back to Q. Rufus, if I don’t see you again, try to make any kids you have grow up not as ugly as you.” Drumlin touched Rufus with his left hand, his human hand, and disappeared into the crowd.

The face Gaul turned to Rufus felt like it was going in all four directions at once.

“We gotta go,” Rufus snapped.

“We have to go,” answered Gaul, and the two of them took off toward Q’s house.

In the Commons, Galvan made the air snap with whip-snaps of lightning, a large wooden box strapped to his back connected to wires into the net of wires that threaded through his body, but Pym’s men made no move to move forward, and Galvan’s voltage slammed down next to them but not among them.

Pym’s voice had a big broad sneer in it. “Is that the best you can do? All right, my hearties, let us do what we have come to do.”

Each man unslung the bag from his shoulder and rolled down the burlap to reveal a chest-high hand-thick block of grey-silver metal. On top of the block was a spring-loaded lever held in place by a metal loop. Pym pulled out dark glasses from his belt and put them on; so did everyone else. He raised his arm and dropped it, and all of them, in one coördinated movement, popped off the loops and pulled up the levers, and one by one, in a chorus of springs, hinges, and snapping panels, the block bloomed into a fierce body-length metal shield so highly polished that it reflected back every stray beam of light at twice its brightness. At eye-level, a slit had been cut into the metal, covered with a silvered band of glass so that the carriers could see out. Blasted with this light, the Feralz had no choice but to duck and hide.

Pym whirled his hand in the air, and where there had been men now stood a wedge of bristling faceless danger. Those Feralz who dared to look could see



themselves reflected in the metal but shredded and flattened, as if the shields had torn apart their images.

“Let’s move it move it move it!” commanded Pym, and the men, their shields held high, ripped through the Feralz, who had to scatter or be crushed. Angelicus grabbed Q and pulled him to safety while Drumlin and Shiva kept others from falling under the hard-edged boots of the invaders. The wedge sliced forward into the streets and away from the Commons. They seemed to know exactly where they were going. Right towards Q’s house.

Q grabbed at his neck as if he were being strangled, but he managed to croak out orders. “My house - converge there - use the rooftops, everyone - get above them - use the stones and iron ingots. Get the nets ready. But don’t hurt Gaul or Rufus!” Without hesitation the Feralz clambered up and away, leaping, spinning, carried by others, depending on their afflictions and skills. Q collapsed into Drumlin’s arms for a moment, and Angelicus knelt down to look at Q. “Don’t worry about me,” Q snapped, “you must make sure that they don’t get Gaul!”

“But they knew about the ladder,” Drumlin began.

“We will deal with that later. Go! I’m fine - she needs you - she needs that right arm - go!”

“Go,” Angelicus whispered, “I’ll watch out for him.”

Drumlin gave them each a hard look, then loped off down the street to catch up with the others. Q sank to the ground. Angelicus, at first, made no move to help him. “Your time is almost done,” he said.

“Are they gone?” Q asked.

“Yes,” Angelicus answered.

“Then ‘almost done’ is fine,” Q said, relief in his voice. “Help me up.”

Angelicus hesitated, then held out a hand. Q grasped it, and Angelicus heaved him to his feet. “This better work.”

“Sometimes people have too many choices,” Q rasped. “Let’s go.”

Meanwhile, Pym and his gang flashed down the streets, turned as one at corners, burrowing deeper and deeper with unflinching accuracy toward Q’s house. The stones and metal lobbed from the rooftops bounced harmlessly off the shields - in fact, some later swore that the stones never even touched the shields, as if a field around them kept the barrage from slamming into the metal.



---

When they threw the nets, the razor edges of the shields just sliced through them.

In Q's house, Rufus helped Gaul slip her feet into heavy lace-up hiking boots and hump on the full-up backpack. They could hear the clamor tumbling down the street, but Rufus geared them up with such smooth efficiency that within minutes they were as outfitted and ready to go as any two people being chased by assassins could be.

"Let's go," Rufus said as he fitted each of them with thick broad-brimmed canvas hats.

"You scared?"

"Terrified."

They moved down the hallway toward the back door. "Is there something beyond terrified," Gaul asked, "because that's how I feel."

"Welcome to what it feels like to be Rufus," Rufus shot back. The air around them was breaking apart as the battle sounds drew closer and closer. "Just stay in arm's length and don't ask any questions I know what I'm doing."

They popped into the alleyway and scooted along it to where it joined the main street, and just as they stepped forward the wedge spun around the corner and headed straight for them, rocks and metal still raining down and still having no effect. Rufus and Gaul spun and headed in the opposite direction, the wedge hot on their heels.

They couldn't run fast given the weight of their packs, but no matter how much they slowed down or sped up, the wedge never really moved close to them. At one point, each of them gulping air like dying fish, they could barely keep up a fast walk, but the wedge stayed just behind them, just out of reach but close enough for them feel the reflected heat of the reflected light.

Finally, they saw what Rufus had been heading for - a double set of wooden doors, heavily hinged, punched through a rock face, a long razorback of stone steps reaching up to the doors. "There," Rufus pointed, "ticket out our way started."

They tried to take the steps two at a time, but they had neither the breath nor legs to do it, and instead they stamped exhausted up each single step. The wedge paused at the bottom of the staircase, then started up behind them, but





its size kept it from moving quickly, and so the bulky poked the exhausted toward the double doors.

The Feralz who had been chasing the wedge waved up against the bottom of the stairs and stopped. There was nothing they could do but watch.

Gaul stumbled forward, and Rufus reached down and dragged her forward to her knees, then her feet. She was surprised at the strength in his hands. Ten steps to the top, six, five, and the wedge just behind them, it's forward point, like an animal's nose, just inches away from them. Two steps, one - and Rufus fell to his knees. Gaul reached down to pull him up, but the wedge was now right against them. Gaul could see her and Rufus in the metal's glint, their figures ribboned and plucked, close enough that their gasps fogged the mirrored surface. All it would take is two cruel arms reaching out to grab them, and the wedge/animal would have them whole to eat.

But it didn't move.

"Why isn't it - " Gaul whispered.

"I don't know," Rufus whispered back, "but I don't think we should stick around to find out let's get out of here - "

And with that Rufus pulled a heavy key out of his pocket and rammed it home in the double door's lock, turned it, shoved the door in, and slid inside, dragging Gaul along with him, slamming the door closed after them and returning the key to shoot the lock home. All that reflected now in the cruel mirror of the wedge was the chipped grain of the clearly closed and clearly locked-from-the-other-side door.

As if a switch had been turned, the wedge reversed itself, its point facing down the stairs, and moving as fast as it had ever moved, it barreled forward, splitting the crowd at the bottom, re-tracing its route through the city back to the Commons. There, Drumlin and a corps of others waited for them, guarding the ladder (which they had taken off-line), but the wedge curved to the right and headed for the stone spiral hacked into the walls that the Feralz had made as an escape route if the ladder ever failed. At the bottom of the spiral the wedge unhinged itself, and Drumlin and the Feralz watched the men fold up their shields, slide them back into their bags, sling the bags over their shoulders, and sprint up the stairs, until they disappeared through the trap-door that led back to the sewers.



The Feralz gathered in the Commons, Q among them leaning on Angelicus. They all felt dumbfounded and relieved at the same time.

Drumlin spoke first. "They hurt nobody. They took nothing. These were Third-Eyers. Has anyone ever known the Third Eye to take nothing and hurt no one when it had a chance to do both?" No one answered Drumlin, but the question did not go away. Drumlin turned to Q. "What just happened?"

"I don't know," said Q, "I'm as confused as you are. Did they get away?"

"They got away."

"Gaul and Rufus?"

"Both without a scar," Drumlin said, his eyes fixed on Q.

"Good," said Q, his voice relieved. "It's out of our hands."

"And into whose?" Drumlin shot back.

"Don't take that tone." Angelicus' usually open face had a dark cast to it. "Can't you see he's sick?"

"Can you tell me why what happened just happened, Featherboy?"

"Stop it, both of you," Q said. "We were attacked. We need to time recover. This - invasion has shaken all of us. We have been used to peace - we've forgotten how wicked the world can be."

"I haven't forgotten," said Drumlin. "All of this stinks. No one killed, nothing stolen, weapons like we haven't seen before - someone went to a lot of trouble to make trouble for us. And the only thing that happens? Flip-girl pops out when it looked like flip-girl was never going to make a move. You got what you wanted, Q."

"What we wanted," Q shot back.

"Whoever 'we' is right now. I'm done here." Drumlin stalked off, his right hand clicking madly.

Angelicus put an arm around Q. "Come on, let me take you home."

"Wait." Q turned to speak to the gathered, and for a moment he was able to fight off the pain in his neck and put back into his voice some of its former confidence. "Go home and rest. We will gather later in the garden to discuss what has happened to us and what we should do. Don't worry - we have the guard set, we have the ladder off - we are safe, I promise you." The assembly moved



away, drifting off into its multiple directions, murmuring among themselves. Q knew what gnawed at them, the same thing that Drumlin could not keep bottled inside himself. Time enough later for an answer that would satisfy them - now he needed to rest. His time grew short.

“Take me home, Angelicus.” Angelicus stooped down and scooped him up. He was amazed, though he did not show it, at how light Q had become. As if he were melting away.

\* \* \* \* \*

The shadow that fell from the back of the house not far from the foot of the stone stairs looked solidly dark. The stairs themselves stood deserted. In the air, as always: the mumble of water.

The shadow unpeeled itself, and out of it rolled Pym and Swiddle.

“No time like the present to begin our journey,” Pym grinned. “Do you have the lights?”

“I do.”

“With more enthusiasm, please,” Pym joked.

“You look positively beaming,” Swiddle sulked.

“Why not? This beats slugging off clumsy ministers or even de-heading a king. This tastes more like life.”

Swiddle spit. “That so, then life to me tastes pretty sour at the moment.”

“What you taste is your own dead self.” Pym pivoted to face Swiddle. “You aren’t going to fink out on me, are you?”

In reality, he didn’t really want to go back to the shop either - it had been getting dull and routine. He just wasn’t sure courting dismemberment and other painful pains on the way to and in the mines was the best solution to a life suddenly gone a bit humdrum. He’d much prefer something that had better food and lots of nothing time to do nothing.

“No fink,” Swiddle said, “but this is not my idea of a vacation.”

“This isn’t a vacation,” Pym spat out. “This is getting back our soul.”

Pym moved out of the shadow and toward the stairs. Swiddle followed.



---

“Your’ soul,” he said to himself, “getting back ‘your’ soul, not mine.” Nevertheless, Swiddle slouched along, and before long the two of them had picked the lock and disappeared behind the doors.

A bolt of black launched itself from the rooftop of the house where Pym and Swiddle had hidden themselves to the top step by the doors. The Raven looked up at the lock, looked down at the scuff-marks on the step, bobbed its head several times, then rose and spiraled away, its dark wings rowing itself through the dark air.





## Chapter 16

### Wherein Gaul Emerges Into A World Literally Outside The Only World That She Had Known And Finds That Life Is No Different Outside Than It Had Been Inside

---

N

ot the bats. Not the spiders. Not the slime-moss that grew on the walls. Not the rot-smell sucked in with each breath. Not the shin-bang that seemed to come with every step. The dark - that's what wore most on Gaul as she followed Rufus' small sputtering torch. The heavy dark. The mucous dark. The suck-out-the-soul dark.

Rufus, though, seemed in his element. The pack didn't seem to weigh him down, he held his head up high, and his breath came even and strong, in contrast to Gaul's gulps and wheezes.

"Wait up," Gaul panted, "wait up." She pulled up short, holding her left side. "I'm used to flying, not walking."

Rufus stopped and turned, and the torch-light threw their shadows up tall and gaunt on the walls. "It's okay, Gaul," Rufus soothed, "we have a long way to go catch your breath don't need to make it there in a day."

"Why aren't you, you know, breathing like me?"

"Don't know just not."

"Still scared?"

"Yes no it's strange I can't make it make sense but now with the choice it all seems more simple."

"More simple," repeated Gaul, "it all seems so simple."

"I didn't say it was simple just 'seems,'" Rufus offered. "Fact is we have nothing easy ahead of us."

"Do you want to tell me about that?"

"Not until we see sunlight."

"Agreed," said Gaul, breathing more easily now. "I hate this darkness."

"Don't waste your energy we have a lot of it in front of us you ready?" With that, Rufus turned and started forward.

But then something like a footstep, a slide of leather on grit - and the two of them froze, their ears perked, listening hard. Nothing. Just water-drip, small echoes, dust-fall. Gaul started forward, but Rufus held up his hand for her to stop, which she did. And there it was again - just the slightest rasp, almost - almost - no different than the sounds of the earth settling around them. They waited - Gaul found herself holding her breath, every muscle tensed - but it didn't repeat.

Rufus wagged his hand, and the two of them started forward. Gaul tried to hear if anything moved behind her, but the bang and scrape of her own clumsy movements drowned out everything. Who knew what the darkness was going to throw at them? Was already throwing at them without their knowing? Gaul stumbled after Rufus, hungry for the light.

She remembered how she first came to the Feralz, with Angelicus, and what happened before that, with Divot, and now her escape, and all of it had taken place in darkness, she seemed tied to darkness, and an image of her flying high in DEAD, up to the lighted windows at the top zipped through her, and for a crazy moment she wished she were back there, where life seemed simple even if it stank, where at least light fell free and full even if the food tasted like glue and Divot (who thought that Divot would ever come back to her thoughts?) slapped down Tumor on every exposed back.

This thinking, she thought, was what too much darkness did to the mind. Shut it out, she told herself, shut it out, forward, only forward, to Alma, the mines - but hurry up to stay with the light!

After a while Gaul found the ground beneath her feet slanting upward, which made the trekking harder but also seemed to make the air lighter to breathe and cut through. They were moving upward - that meant toward sun, toward surface - which also meant toward things unknown and unknowable.

Gaul tucked her head down and trudged, forcing her tired legs to ignore gravity, her mind fixed on making her right foot take one step, then the left foot one step, then the right foot - until *bam!* - she rammed her forehead into the metal strut on Rufus' backpack, knocking him forward to his knees, not realizing until too late that he had stopped on the path.

"Sorry, sorry, sorry," wheezed Gaul.

"Sokay," said Rufus as he got up, "we're here."

"Where's 'here'?"



As answer, Rufus rapped his knuckles against wood. "In a few moments we will have sun I think if I remember the times right - "

"And fresh air? Tastes like I've been munching on dirty socks."

"Yes yes yes."

Rufus scanned his torch over what looked like a row of seven numbers, each number etched onto a cylinder that had numbers going from zero to nine. Rufus twirled each cylinder to a certain number, and as he turned each cylinder Gaul could hear the click-click-click of the toothed gears against the ratchet pawl. As Rufus hit the last number, Gaul heard another set of gears begin to grind, and over her head she saw a ring of light appear as the ground suddenly lifted - then more and more light until the ground had a blue hole punched through it.

"The sky," Gaul whispered.

"The sky," Rufus replied. "Let's go." And up and out he went. Gaul scrambled after him.

Gaul found herself standing in a field with waist-high grass, the heads heavy with seeds. Hovering over the hole they'd just come through was what looked like a rock, but when Rufus thumped it, it rang hollow and empty. "It's not real," said Gaul, feeling stupid for saying the obvious.

"Things not always what they seem," Rufus offered back as he knelt on the ground and reached under the rock and turned a dial. Gaul heard a loud *chunk!*, and the rock slowly began to fall back into place, Gaul's eyes following it and her ears registering the clack-clack-clack of the reversing gears and the ticka-ticka-ticka-ticka of the number-wheels spinning to scramble the combination. Before long it was nothing more than a lichen-scabbed rock almost hidden by the waving stalks of ripe grass.

When Gaul looked up, she had to look back down almost immediately because her head spun and her stomach jumped. "You ain't ever seen any of this have you it's quite a sight for new eyes" said Rufus "try it again slow."

And slow Gaul did as she once again raised her eyes to take in the unfailing cut of wall that was the outer husk of Valice, a wall that ran off in both directions and disappeared at each end into a blue mist. The walls inside DEAD or the old tower - those were walls her mind could grab onto, that her body could climb - but this wall looked like the skin of some giant ancient animal, scarred, crusted, fissured, armored, something no poor flip could ever freehand and live to tell





about - or would love because freehanding it would feel like traveling to another country.

Gaul cocked her back a few degrees, and she could scan the city's giant towers, the tallest of them being The Keep. And above them, blue sky scarred with the whirling bodies of birds. She pointed.

"Ravens?"

"Most likely" said Rufus "they can't help themselves from keeping up a watch." Rufus gestured toward the hulking Valice. "I think it's beautiful" Rufus muttered "though Drumlin would call me daft for thinking good about a place that eats its young three meals a day Drumlin hates things the way some people get wax in their ears really easily."

"I don't know what to think of it," said Gaul. "I don't have eyes big enough for it."

Gaul turned to face Rufus, and it occurred to her (again the obvious took her by surprise) that she and this boy were *joined*, their lives tied together for better or worse. They needed each other (though Gaul realized that she needed Rufus more than he needed her). They were friends in a way that Gaul had never been friends before with anyone - and a flush of warmth ran through her body at the thought that *she was not alone*.

"What?" said Rufus.

"What 'what'?" shot back Gaul, caught off-guard.

"Funny look on your face," Rufus replied.

"Look, we stick together through *everything*, okay? Okay?!"

"Okay."

Gaul grabbed his shoulder. "I mean it - *everything*!"

"Okay leave the arm bone connected to the shoulder bone all right tough times are easier if two tough 'em out together okay that's why Q wanted us to go together you can let go of the shoulder now."

Gaul released him. "Sorry, sorry - I got worried there for a minute. I never saw the sky so big."

The wind whipped through, and her ears filled with the scrape of the waving grass. The sun on her face laved her new-face skin, and the feel of the wind picking through her shaggy hair made her feeling like laughing. Which she did.



"I have never felt like this," she gushed to Rufus but drew it back when she saw his head angled, just like the way the Raven angled its head as it listened and looked. Then Gaul could hear it: metal-clank, gear-grind, hard-voice. They were not alone.

"C'mon" Rufus hissed "gotta move."

Crouched, Rufus edged through the grass, trying to keep below the grass-tips, and Gaul followed him but found herself almost pitching forward because of the weight of her backpack. The ground angled downward under her feet, and as she pulled up beside Rufus, she could see that they were in a small hollow, below land-level, stretched out flat. The indifferent blue of the sky spilled out overhead.

"Take off your pack," Rufus advised, and Gaul slipped her arms through the straps and put the full pack alongside her. "See the small pack hooked there?"

Gaul noticed for the first time that hanging from one of the metal struts was a smaller leather pack buckled up tight.

"If we have to run take that easier to carry than a full pack 'sgot food and some fire-making."

"Gotcha," she whispered back, and they both laid there, waiting while the caravan-sounds, now louder than before, got even louder as they pulled closer and closer to their hiding place.

Rufus periscoped his head just enough to look over the rim of the hollow, and Gaul followed his example. Below them, stretched along a road that cut through the field, ground a military convoy. Open-sided trucks carried clumps of soldiers who rocked back and forth, guns held upright between their legs. Behind them came iron-plated hump-backed tanks with long cannon muzzles and smaller guns mounted on posts that could swivel in any direction. Along the flanks of the column patrolled what Gaul thought were dogs but unlike any dogs she had ever seen. These had huge heads and mouths, but mouths made out of metal, their jaws hinged by thick bolts and ridged with steel shards. To carry the huge heavy heads, whoever had made these dogs gave them necks corded with overlays of muscle and ligaments, which hooked into gristled humps of flesh just between their shoulder blades. Their makers had widened the dogs' two natural nostrils and added two more, and even above the percussion of the trucks Gaul and Rufus could hear the beasts breathe as they tested the wind for anything



enemy, anything edible. Oversized ears jutted from their head-tops, and these swiveled in complete circles as the dogs listened across the landscape.

Gaul also noticed that the dogs had collars around their necks, and beside each dog walked a soldier holding a box with dials and switches and from which stuck out a long thin metal wand. When a dog wandered off too much, the soldier would point the box at it and turn a dial, and the dog would stop as if someone had grabbed it by the throat; then it would turn and come back to the caravan.

Gaul turned an amazed sickened face to Rufus, but Rufus put a finger against his lips. The column was long - lots of truck, dozens of soldiers, dogs everywhere, and then the thing that made Gaul's stomach go nauseous: a long double file of children, barely clothed, barely shod, their hands tied together, the one behind tied to the one ahead, all shuffling along, encrusted with dirt, completely abandoned.

Gaul again turned to Rufus who, seeing the desperation in her eyes, hardened his own face and through his eyes tried to send her his one and only thought: "be quiet be quiet be quiet or we are dead we are dead before we begin." Gaul got it, swung her eyes back to the line of slaves.

One of the children fell, and the ones tied to her in front and in back wanted to stop, but a guard tromped over and hit the child, and while they couldn't hear him yell, they could see him screaming at her. By now the whole line had stopped, all of the children hanging their heads trying to catch their breaths. The body on the ground didn't move no matter how much the guard screamed at her, so pulling a knife from his belt, the guard cut her out of the line and threw her body to the side, then re-tied the rope in a wicked knot. He shouted again, and the line moved forward once more.

One of the dogs, scenting the fallen body, loped over to it, followed by its handler, and Gaul and Rufus watched as the dog first sniffed at the body then, nipping it with its metal teeth, picked it up and began eating it in large casual gulps. The handler watched until it was done, then with the turn of a dial had it spit out anything unfinished and guided it back to scouting around.

Finally, the last body passed by, and the rattling of the convoy got softer and softer until it disappeared from ear and eye. "Don't move," whispered Rufus, and Gaul stared at the grass-roots right in front of her, saw how they were jammed into the dirt, saw a beetle picking its ways through the tangle of stem and root



---

and matted dead grass, smelled the dryness of the dirt - if she could have, she would have buried her face and never showed it again to the sun.

Slowly Rufus levered himself up off the ground, his eyes scanning for any lagging-behind patrols, any search-dogs away from their guards. But only the wind lacing the grass, only the sky and sun persisting.

"It's okay," Rufus said, and before he could do or say anything else, Gaul popped up and sprinted over to the corpse of the child. She never heard his "Don't!"

And there it lay - an "it" because Gaul could no longer see the object as anything but an "it," the body gutted, the face flayed, an arm plucked off clean, blond hair the only thing recognizable as "human." Gaul knelt, and she could feel her eyes recording everything, the mind behind the eyes spinning like the cylinder-lock underneath the fake stone. She did not want to forget did not want to forget did not want to forget -

She finally noted Rufus next to her - he had dragged the two backpacks behind him - but she ignored him, kept her gaze on the body/parts, trying to imagine its agony as the dog's indifferent teeth cut through, trying to imagine "going" and "gone" as its heart stopped, breath stopped, eyes went dark.

"Let's go," Rufus said.

"We can't let it rot here."

"We can't be in the open like this we don't know what else follows or comes - "

"In DEAD," Gaul interrupted, never taking her eyes from the blooded remains, "when a flip died, it was as if the flip had never lived. If it was in its bed, Divot and the others came at night and stuffed the body into a bag, which they dragged out, and in the morning you could see the long track through the dirt where they had pulled the meat out. I've seen a flip die in harness and the guard cut it down. Or if they went off to the sick-room, it was like smoke going out a window. And we forgot it right away - after all, it wasn't us, only some unlucky one who was maybe luckier than us now because it didn't have to - "

Gaul stopped herself - she was just on the tip of tipping over, and she fought back the hot bile that had crept into her throat and her words. "We never got to say goodbye."



“In the mines neither bodies in bags dumped for the wolves or worms or whatever children just like dead leaves.”

“So we can’t, Rufus, we just can’t.”

Rufus didn’t say anything at first, but then said, “All right but not here back there where we were some protection while we - “

Gaul got up, cutting him off.

“But still practical Gaul we got to think practical not get blood on us blood on us marks us for dogs and others not the best no but if this means important to you then you have to listen to me.”

Gaul nodded. “You get the arm,” she said. Rufus opened a side pocket in Gaul’s pack and pulled out a pair of thin leather gloves. “Wear these we need to get to the mines don’t let grief throw you off be smart.”

Gaul put on the gloves, then bent down, grabbed the bare ankles, and started pulling the body back toward the hollow. Rufus pulled out a glove from his pack, then shouldered it. He put the glove on, then picked up the arm and followed Gaul, dragging the second pack behind him.

The body, so light, barely bent the grass as Gaul slid it up the incline and over the lip down into the hollow. Rufus slid down beside her, then dropped the arm and shucked off his pack. “Inside back compartment a trenching shovel” Rufus said as he dug out his own shovel and unfolded it. He started to chop through the tough grass down to the soil. Gaul got her shovel and did the same. The sun, the startling blue sky with threads of cloud, the hulking presence of Valice all watched them.

“Shallow we have to keep it shallow because we have no time to spend here need to get out of the open fast.” Their breaths came short and sharp as they cut through the sod and into the loose dirt underneath, and lines of sweat traced their spines. Before long the bottom of the hollow had a thin slice torn out of it. They stopped. And waited. Gaul looked at Rufus. Rufus looked at Gaul. “What do you want to do now?” Rufus asked.

Gaul threw her shovel to one side, then grabbed the ankles of the body and clumsily moved it into the trench, bending the legs so that they’d fit. The body lay on its side, looking asleep. Rufus placed the arm next to it. A pause. “I think I’m supposed to say something,” said Gaul. “Isn’t that how it’s done?”

“When one of ours dies we say something.”



---

“What do you say?”

“We’re happy for them you see.”

“Happy?” Gaul asked.

“They’re all done no more worrying so we tell them ‘Don’t come back.’”

Gaul looked at the corpse, which even now had beetles and ants crawling over it.

“Don’t come back,” Gaul whispered, “don’t you dare come back.”

Rufus started to shovel the dirt back in, but Gaul stopped him. She rummaged in her pack but couldn’t find what she wanted. “Where is it?” she growled, trying hard to keep her voice controlled and even.

“What?” Rufus said, kneeling down next to her.

“The knife.”

Rufus reached in and pulled out a small knife strapped into a leather sheath. He handed it to Gaul.

Gaul held it in the palms of her hands for a moment, then said, “Thanks.”

“Sokay,” Rufus shot back.

Without getting off her knees, Gaul shifted herself to the side of the grave. She reached down and lifted a length of hair - knotted, filthy, but underneath the filth gold-yellow. Stretching a section of it between the fingers of her left hand, she tucked the knife-blade under it and sliced upwards. Strand by strand snapped free as the blade cut through until, finally, Gaul held a lock of the hair in the palm of her left hand. She handed the hair to Rufus, then grabbing the hem of her shirt, she poked the knife-tip through the cloth and sliced off a hand-sized piece, which she placed on the ground. She nodded her head towards Rufus, who put the hair on the cloth. “Roll it up careful,” Gaul said, and as Rufus folded the cloth and tucked in the ends to keep it closed, Gaul intoned “don’t come back don’t come back don’t come back - “

Gaul took the memento from Rufus and nested it in her pack, then sheathed the knife and packed that away, then taking the shovel, she began pitching back the earth and sod. Rufus did the same, and soon the body was hidden away. Gaul knelt there, feeling the breeze dry the sweat on her back.

“We have to go we have to go Gaul we really have to go.”



Without a word, Gaul folded up her shovel and slid it into the pack, then stood and hoisted the pack onto her back.

“Then let’s go,” she said. She could feel the change in her voice as she spoke - something hard had crept into her mouth. Her neck muscles ached with the weight on her shoulders. Sweat trickled down over her ribs. A dead child lay just out of her sight.

“Okay,” Rufus said, and he humped himself up the incline of the hollow and over the top and disappeared. For a moment Gaul stood there completely alone. Then she followed.

\* \* \* \* \*

The sun arced across the sky as it always did. Its light lengthened into burnt-oranges and umber-reds as it always did as it tumbled west past Valice. And now the waning light also netted two figures shambling across the grassy wasteland, their bodies bent forward, their heads swiveling back and forth, smaller versions of the mechanico-dogs of the soldiers.

One of them knelt - Pym - and pressed his face against sideways against the ground, looking back toward the light. “Footstep,” he said, “can see the shadow of the boot-press against the light.” Swiddle looked in the direction indicated by the track and saw an upcoming night sky. “If there’s more trail to see,” he said, “we’re going to need owl-eyes to see it. Night be upon us.”

Pym stood up, looked at the coming dark sky, looked back at the leaving sun. “If the lock-wizard hadn’t had such a hard time with what he considers his area of expertise” - the words seemed to boil out of Pym - “we would have had more light.”

“Don’t blame me - though you can blame me if you want - I’ve never pretended to be able to tell you what to think or conclude. But that lock was a tough one - multiple combinations, interlocked tumblers, a ratchet mechanism I had to learn - well, we did get out after all, I did figure it out - “

Pym held up a hand to stop him. “We can’t do anything more tonight. We had better make camp.” They both unslung their packs to the ground. From each pack each man dragged out metal posts wrapped with wire. Ten feet out they started shoving the posts into the ground and unrolling the wire as they went until they had a circle around them, one wire strand six inches above the ground, the second another foot higher. Then Pym unearthed a wooden box and



---

wrapped the wire ends around two brass post on top of the box. He flicked a switch, and the box hummed.

“All right,” Pym said, “test it.”

Swiddle put his knee against the top wire and leaned his weight into it. Nothing happened at first, then suddenly the box let out “whoop! whoop! whoop!” Swiddle leaned away. “Got the tension right,” said Swiddle as he stepped over the wire into the protected circle.

“I don’t want to be awakened by every piece of waving grass,” said Pym as he moved to the circle’s center. By now night had come on full. “No fire,” commanded Pym. “We eat cold tonight.”

Swiddle sighed as he squatted on the ground. “I suppose no cold light, either,” he asked, even though he already knew the answer. And because Pym knew that Swiddle already knew the answer, Pym didn’t even bother to respond. Together they pulled out pouches of dried food and chewed them silently as the stars unlocked and night took over.







## Chapter 17

### Wherein We Meet The King And Queen Whose Names No One Remembers

---

Something did sit on the throne. The throne-seat was not empty - something definitely sat there.

Everyone in the room saw it - and in that same gaze saw the stately woman standing next to the throne. Not that she had great beauty, not that she was tall, but she did have a spine: hard, straight, clever, like the face that looked out over the ministers, all men, gathered in the room, each clutching a portfolio, and the Guardsmen posted around the room. Not that anyone in the room feared her, at least not at the moment - after all, Gravinstad stood ten feet away facing her and the throne, and when Gravinstad entered a room, all fear flowed toward him. And not that the woman didn't fear Gravinstad - he *had* killed her husband, the king, and made her a widow-queen in one swift motion. But her fear differed from the sweaty fear of the others in the room: it had given her a spine - hard, straight, clever - and it was that that kept her eyes on Gravinstad and a hand on the shoulder of what sat on the throne.

On the shoulder of *who* sat in the throne - the king.

That is, the son of the dead king - that is, the twelve-year old son of the dead king.

Who was now the next king.

Facing the man who had deleted the previous king. His father.

The boy understood all of this - at least the facts of it - the “why” came harder to him because he so often felt sad - and so he sat straight, his own spine jammed against the throne-back, and looked at Gravinstad. The hand on his shoulder felt very very good.

“Is there any other state business for the king and his regent,” Gravinstad asked the assembled ministers, “before we adjourn?”

The men shuffled but said nothing. They had done what Gravinstad had asked them to do - give the king their reports on food production, building projects, industrial output, crime, the postal service, births and deaths. Next to the throne, on a small table, sat the pile of their reports, inert as dried mud. The

pretense of government - they had pretended, and now their work was done for the day.

“No? Good.” Gravinstad turned to the king. “Is there anything else that the king would need of me?” Without waiting for an answer, he glanced up at the queen. “No? Good. Then this concludes our weekly cabinet meeting.” Already the ministers had started to file out. They had not expected the queen’s voice to get in their way. But it did.

“I - we - have been hearing rumors,” the queen said. The queen had a name - Elfrida - though most there would not have been able to recall that if asked - and Elfrida took a step forward to the edge of the dais. Gravinstad did not shift a muscle in his face, still giving her his bland ambassadorial look, but he registered how unusual this was. Nothing that rose to the level of a danger - but, still, unusual.

“Rumors are like roaches,” Gravinstad purred, buying time. “They’re everywhere.”

“Roaches are real,” Elfrida replied.

“Rumors are real, too,” Gravinstad offered back, “but that doesn’t make them true.”

“You don’t even know what I’m talking about.”

The young boy - he had a name, too - Bensole - a name no one in the room knew since no one in the room except Elfrida had any expectation that the boy would last long enough for his name to be remembered - looked straight ahead, hearing the adult voices but not paying them strict attention. The room was hot. The robe he wore was hot. These adults were boring. And he felt scared because his mother was doing something that she had told him never never to do and that was to talk to the man with the name he couldn’t pronounce but who had killed his father. This whole thing felt very bad - hot, boring, and terrifying.

“Then why doesn’t her majesty give me the benefit of what she has heard,” Gravinstad said, “so that I may be fully informed and thus be able to serve her and the king better?”

Elfrida didn’t reply but instead turned to the ministers bunched up at the doorway. “You can continue leaving. We have your reports. They will be read.” The men, like a single beast, looked from her to Gravinstad and back.

“Go,” she repeated.



---

Gravinstad kept his back to them. They hesitated.

“Go.” This time in a lower voice, a queen’s voice, and without getting a “yes” from the man who usually gave them their yes, they piled out of the room. Elfrida spoke to the Guardsmen. “You, too.”

They did not move. Gravinstad turned to them and nodded, and they left. To Bensole, the room suddenly got very hot, and he could feel sweat run down over his ribs. He stood up from the throne. Elfrida turned to him, hearing him stand, and the mix of discomfort and fear on his face went straight to her heart.

“Can I - “ he said, and she nodded. Bensole jumped off the dais and ran to a door at the back of the room, suddenly nothing more nor less than a twelve-year old boy.

“Wait for me there,” said Elfrida.

“I will,” said Bensole as he opened the door and went out.

“I won’t be long.”

But the door had already closed.

Bensole stood in a small chamber filled with books and chairs. He knew how to do this because he had done this before. He shucked off the robe, then moved a library ladder to the wall, climbed up it, then slid back one of the wood panels, which opened up a peephole in the room. He knew that the peephole was actually part of a painting on the wall, a glass globe held in the hand of a bearded man who pretended to read the future in it. Next to the peephole, held up by a brass hook, was a tube ending in a thimble-sized plug. Bensole stuck it in his ear. It connected to a brass horn that, in the painting, was a fat sun floating over a soft forest. Their voices poured in sharp and brittle.

He pasted his eye to the peephole. His mother still stood by the throne. Gravinstad (that was his name!) paced the floor in front of her.

“ - of course if you would like to tell me what you know I could then check out - “

“You sound bored,” Elfrida cut in.

Bensole could hear the silence in the room - like wind hissing through leaves.

“I am sorry if that is how I come across,” Gravinstad finally answered.

“You are not sorry for anything,” Elfrida shot back.



"I find regret a useless emotion."

"That matches how you think of most people."

"Do you have a purpose here beyond trying to insult me?"

Bensole heard his mother say nothing - again, the silence sounded like what happened when he flung water drops on the hot stove in the kitchen. Finally, his mother's voice came back into the world.

"I just wanted to - confirm something for myself. About an expedition going out."

"Expeditions are going out all the time."

"No, they're not," Elfrida replied. She pointed to the stack of reports. "I actually read these - I actually care about the 'state of the state,' about Valice."

Gravinstad paused, then moved toward the window, away from Elfrida. "Yes, you were always one who had the city's 'best interests' at heart. You convinced your husband - may he rest in peace - to have the same interest. I hope it's not something you're teaching little Bensole - it didn't serve his father well."

"You mean it didn't serve you well." She moved off the dais into the room itself, and Bensole found himself sucking in a deep breath. She had stepped away from the safety of the throne. She had told him never to do that. Ever. And now she'd gone and done it.

"As I said, I have read the reports. The ones on the military. There have been no expeditions noted for several months now. And why would there be? We have no enemies, far or near. We have no reason to attack anyone since there is no one to attack - you've attacked them all into oblivion."

"You don't mean all by myself, do you?" Gravinstad's face had a hint of a smile on it, as did his words.

"Don't smile - it pains me to see your face try to do something it doesn't know how to do."

"So to spare us both doing something we are not used to doing - me smiling, you acting like a queen who thinks she is actually a queen - why don't you tell me what you want to tell me so that we can finish up the pretending early?"

"I told you - the expedition. You sent out an expedition - "

"*Rumor has it* that I sent out an expedition - "



“You sent it out - admit it. Even your military minister doesn’t know - or else he just stood here and lied to us. Most likely both. You think I don’t see that they know they don’t own their voices and faces when they’re in the same room as you?”

“And where did you hear this rumor?” Gravinstad’s voice was casual, but Elfrida knew enough about these things to know that he was probing to see if there was some weakness he didn’t know about, some crack in the wall he’d missed. A small advantage, wouldn’t last for long, but she could use it.

“On the wind,” she answered. “Even you can’t buy off the wind, Gravinstad.”

“About a military expedition.”

“And more - but the ‘more’ is not important now. I’m not sure the expedition is important - I’m just going to assume it’s true and that you’ve got some scheme going on that’s all part of your usual betrayal of Valice. All right - we’re done here. You may go.”

Now Bensole hardly breathed - only little sips of air got past his tight throat - he had never heard his mother speak like this to Gravinstad, to anyone, really - she always kept her voice soft, never barked. And yet she had just told the man who had killed his father to go away like she was telling a dog to get lost. And the look on his face as she turned her back on him - like someone had kicked him in the shin and he was trying not to let anyone know it hurt. He felt something in his chest jump, and for some reason he smiled. At his mother. It had been a long time since he smiled.

Elfrida didn’t know if Gravinstad would aim anything at her back as she walked away from him - words, a knife, who knew? - but she kept moving as if she didn’t care if he spoke or not. And then it came.

“What else had you heard?”

She waited one heartbeat, two, before she turned to him. “Is this your way of saying that I’m right?”

“Let’s say, for the moment, that the wind blew in the right direction,” Gravinstad said.

“Let’s say that.”

“Then, what else did the wind bring?”

“Were there children on the expedition?”



Cogs and wheels turned in Gravinstad's head - he was paying out more than he was getting paid, and he didn't like it - he could just turn and leave, nothing required him to be polite - but she had heard something true by means that he didn't know about, and that - was not - good. He decided to pay out just a little more.

"Yes."

"To the mines, then?"

"Yes."

"The military to the mines? And more children? Is something wrong in the mines that the king and his regent should know about?"

"Nothing is wrong in the mines."

"And yet there is this expedition - "

She let the unfinished sentence hang, and Gravinstad knew he was not going to get what he wanted from her, which meant that she had information he didn't, which meant -

But he didn't get to complete the thought because Elfrida had turned her back to him and headed for the door. "I look forward to reading a full summary of the expedition in the minister's next report," she pitched over her shoulder. Door opened, sailed through, door closed. Gravinstad glared at the door, weighing for the smallest moment whether he would storm through it into their private chambers and wring both of their necks for his humiliation. But he waited until the impulse passed. She knew something that he didn't - focus on that, he thought. Focus on that.



---

## Chapter 18

### **Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Pray That What Was Lost Has Now Been Found And That What Has Been Found Will Replace What Was Lost**

---

*I*n the library chamber, Bensole had already replaced the hearing tube and the wooden panel and scuttled down the library ladder. His mother whispered to him “Let’s go!” and he grabbed her hand as she went out the other door and down the corridor to their apartment. He had a million - well, maybe not a million, but a lot of questions - but Elfrida pulled his arm out straight as she tugged him down the hall.

It was only when they stood in their living room, Elfrida locking the door behind them, that she let herself stop for a moment and catch her breath, learning her forehead against the door jamb.

“Mama?” Elfrida immediately faced him, trying to let the worry slip away from her face. She moved to him and folded him into her arms, pressing him against her.

“Are you all right?” she asked, stroking his hair, and he nodded his head yes against her dress. She held him away at arm’s length. “Come with me.”

They moved through the living room past two more rooms until Elfrida brought them to a wall that had a picture hanging on it of some country scene - sheep in a meadow, people eating cheese, children throwing a ball, everything drenched in sunlight. Bensole pulled back, just a hair.

“You said we weren’t supposed to - you know, after Papa - to go into - “

“I know,” said Elfrida, staring at the picture. “I know. But something has changed, Bensole - something has changed - and I think we need to - “

Elfrida motioned for him, and he stepped to her. She reached down and picked him up off the ground, letting out a big gasp as she did. “Wow, you’ve gotten big big big!”

“Mama,” Bensole blushed - he liked and didn’t like being picked up like some baby - he was too old for this sort of thing but it was nice being held by his mother.

“All right, you know what to do, right?”





“Yes.”

Hefting Bensole in one arm, Elfrida spread her other hand and put five delicate fingertips against five objects in the painting: the ball, the cheese, a sheep, the young man’s head, and the dog on its back. “All right,” she said, and Bensole reached out and put his own fingertip on the clown’s nose. They heard the noise they had expected to hear, and Elfrida put Bensole back down.

At the end of the hallway a small door had sprung open, so small that when Elfrida and Bensole came it to, they had to get down on their knees and crawl through. Bensole went first, then Elfrida followed and shut it tight.

Inside, Elfrida reached to her right and pulled a lever. In the dark sparks flew out and a bright yellow-orange flame jumped to life inside a lantern. They both stood, and Elfrida took a candle and lit it off the lantern-flame, then pulled another lantern off a shelf and lit it from the candle and handed it to Bensole. She pulled off a second lantern, lit it, blew out the candle.

Without words they moved down a short corridor, the flame-light jumping off the rough studs and nailheads and coarse chunks of plaster hanging off threads of horsehair. Bensole tried to look brave but his heart pounded too hard - they were going into the sanctum, a place his mother had said they should never go back into because it was too dangerous, but here they were walking through this dry-smelling place, stuff crunching under their shoes, spider-webs strung with spiders in them, and it was all too confusing to him - he just had to trust that his mother knew what she needed to know to keep them safe.

They came to another door with another painting on it - a seascape, with a ship sailing at night and a moon and some stars and a fish jumping out of the water and a man on the shore fishing. Elfrida spread her hand again, and Bensole, on his tip-toes, pushed on the fish. The door sprung open and a gust of cool air met them. Elfrida walked in; Bensole followed.

Elfrida took the candle out of her pocket, took a light from the lantern, then went around and lit several large candles until their soft orange light suffused the air. They put their lanterns down and faced it: a body-length painting of a smiling child, the space around him on the canvas filled with wheeling and diving Ravens. To the right, on a bookstand, lay open a copy of the same book Q had shown Gaul in Under-Valice, to the same page of the child/god diving into the ground.



Elfrida moved two cushions with her feet. "Let us pray, Bensole." Elfrida knelt down on the cushion, and so did Bensole.

"Why?" He squeezed the word out. "You told me we shouldn't - "

"You heard what I was talking about with Gravinstad," Elfrida asked.

"But I didn't understand it."

"Something I had heard - I had to see if Gravinstad had heard about it, too." She nodded toward the picture. "I think he's been found. I think he's back."

"You mean he's real?"

Elfrida smiled at her son, her precious son. "You've said all the prayers with me."

"But I didn't really think, you know, that he was - I thought it was just something grown-ups do, and I was just doing what you and Papa - you mean he's real? The stories, everything?"

Elfrida looked back at the painting. "He is real, Bensole, he has always been real. And I think that what was lost has now been found."

Elfrida bowed her head, and her lips began to move. Bensole bowed his head as well and said the same words, words his parents had taught him in secret years ago, words he didn't really understand but felt good saying because it meant that he was spending time with his parents and he was doing something they believed was really important. But now the words felt different. They had weight. And even if he still didn't understand them, he felt bigger for saying them, and while that felt good, too, it also made him feel afraid since in the world in which he lived being bigger didn't always mean that a person could be safe.

A thought crossed his mind, and it popped out before he had a chance to catch it. "Does Gravinstad pray?" he asked.

Without opening her eyes or shifting her head, Elfrida said, "No." Then, after a hesitation, she added, "Yes - but only to himself."

They prayed for a few minutes more, then stood up. They picked up the lanterns, went around blowing out the candles. Bensole's eyes followed his mother. "What does it mean if he's back?"

"I don't know," said Elfrida. "A lot of us pray to him, hiding, secret, trying to keep out of Gravinstad's eye - waiting. But to be honest - I don't know if it means



---

anything at all. All I know is that my heart feels lighter at the moment. We must go.”

They reversed their journey, shutting doors, blowing out lanterns, crawling back out through the small door and standing in the hallway. The world smelled and looked different to Bensole - strange yet familiar, everything where he had left it but feeling like someone had moved it, then put it back in the exact same place. Old, yet new - that’s how it felt.

A window faced them from the other end of the hallway, draped in sheers, and against the light in the window Bensole saw a shadow move. He tugged on his mother’s dress and pointed; she looked, then putting a finger against her lips, she glided down the hallway, tugging Bensole to keep up with her. They came to the window, and Elfrida slid the sheer curtain aside, and perched on the stone ledge of the window-casing - a Raven. Elfrida tapped on the window. The Raven tapped back. Bensole tapped; the Raven tapped. Elfrida smiled; Bensole smiled. “Ravens,” he whispered, and the word carried a thrill of wonder with it.



## Chapter 19

### Wherein Rufus And Gaul Encompass A Compass And Pym And Swiddle Prepare Themselves To Be Bugged Down In Pursuit

---

**P**ym had his broad-bladed knife out. The one with teeth. The one with the bone handle.

He and Swiddle were on their knees, at the bottom of the hollow, looking at the still-fresh dirt spread over the shallow grave. The sun had just slipped up, but they had already struck camp and started out.

He poked his knife into the ground. Then again. Then again. Then it hit something.

"Either stone or bone," said Swiddle.

Without answering, Pym started digging with the knife - it didn't take long to uncover the hair, the arm, a bruised leg.

"Either our Feralz are murderers, or - "

"Gravinstad did say an expedition was going out - with the hell-hounds. And a fresh load of children."

"One fewer, it seems," said Pym.

"Happens every day," said Swiddle.

Pym stood up. "The thing that - impresses? - impresses - me is that they stopped to bury it."

"Of course they don't know we're tailing them."

"Maybe they do - in the tunnel, who knew who heard the slap of leather or the brush of cloth against the rock-face? No one can be completely silent. Let's say they know - sense - we're hooked to them. Yet - " He looked down at the fresh-turned dirt. "Yet they stopped to bury it."

"Not like us, eh? Never a shallow grave done by us."

Pym gave Swiddle a look of stone. "You always miss the important stuff."

"So they showed a bit of heart - big deal."

"A bit of heart - " Pym began, then cut it off. He started trudging up and out of the hollow. "You always do miss exactly what you need to pay attention to," he threw over his shoulder as he disappeared over the rim.

Swiddle didn't follow right away. He looked at the grave, then back in the direction Pym had gone. "If they showed a bit of heart," he started, then smiled. He got it - he knew what Pym meant. He shambled up the slope, saw Pym's figuring cutting across the field.

"It means that they're dangerous, right?" He launched himself to follow Pym, muttering, "Now, in what way could they be dangerous to such as us?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Before long the stone hump that was Valice disappeared over the curve of the planet, and Gaul and Rufus found themselves alone in a immense empty prairie, with grass that sometimes reached above their heads. Gaul had asked Rufus why they just couldn't follow the road the expedition was taking, but Rufus said he knew a shorter way there - the road stopped at outposts for supplies, to pick and drop off soldiers, to bury corpses that didn't make it. "Too dangerous," Rufus concluded, "what with the dogs and all can't afford to have our smell reach any of their four nostrils."

So for two days they had carved their way across fields of bracken and briars and head-high sedges that had squared stalks and burr-bristles on their edges, their arms and legs swaddled in leather jerkins and chaps to keep them from being shredded (Gaul amazed that they had had these in their packs - but, then again, Rufus had come this way before and would have known). Every once in a while Gaul looked over her shoulder, having this every-once-in-a-while shiver that someone were creeping up behind her, just *there*, just out of eye-shot, couldn't catch it full-on - but always nothing came of her snapping her head around to catch it off-guard or focusing her ears on hearing whatever footfall the thing made.

What she did notice, and noticing made her nervous, was the long wavering line of their progress through the field. Even a blind person would be able to track them, the way they left behind broken branches, bent grass, foot-scrapes. She had mentioned it to Rufus, but he had let it pass - what else could they do? he asked, unless they had a way to fly, and he flapped his arms in such a funny way that Gaul laughed - but not hard enough to get rid of the churning in her gut.



But at long last they seemed to come to the end of the nettles and tripping-vines and prick-thorns - and right up against something equally nasty - a quaking bog that seemed without end in either direction. Gaul threw off her pack and sat down, pointing toward the skim of water that stretched ahead of them, studded with stumps and broken trees. She tried to bat away the gnats that clouded around her sweating forehead but without any success - they wisped away like smoke then showered back.

"This is the shorter way?" she complained as she stripped off her leather coverings.

"I made it through" Rufus explained as he took off his coverings "so it can be done and I made it through without what Drumlin has given us." From the pack he pulled out a disk with a metal arrow pinned to wood, the whole thing covered by glass. The arrow always pointed in a single direction no matter how Rufus turned the disk. "It's called a compass."

Gaul gestured, and Rufus handed her the compass. "You know how to use this?" she asked as she rotated the disk, watching how the arrow stayed true to whatever had the metal in its grip.

"Q taught me as long as we hold the compass so that the needle points this way and we follow the line of the sun during the day" here Rufus swept his arm in an arc over his head "then we will be going in the right direction more or less."

"More or less," Gaul echoed. "It's the 'less' I'm worried about."

"Don't worry," said Rufus, "if it's 'less' then you will simply drown and all will be lost that's all."

"You just made a joke."

"I have been known to make a joke every once in a while."

"Well, then, I better laugh," and Gaul gave Rufus a couple of dry ha-has, which made Rufus smile. They packed away their leather coverings. Rufus pulled out what looked like a flat plate with a leather circle stuck on the underside; from inside the circle he unfolded thin meshed cloth. "Get yours" he said "and put it on, then put on your gloves." Gaul dug hers out and put it on, fitting the leather band around her head, and the two of them stood there veiled in scrim that hung down and over their shoulders - and kept the bugs away from their ears and noses. Through the mesh Rufus looked like smoke to Gaul, but it was a relief not



to have the bzz-bzz-bzz in her ears and the crunch of little insects in her mouth. They shouldered their packs.

“Now listen” Rufus poured out “the land here moves so don’t get stuck on going down a path because it will shift on you and you won’t even know it follow me and don’t argue about the right way to go.”

Gaul nodded. Rufus turned to face the bog, took a deep breath, and tested his right foot on the spongy mass. It squelched as Rufus transferred his weight to it, but it held firm. Then another step. And another. Gaul did the same, stepping exactly where Rufus stepped. Rufus constantly glanced at the compass and the sky overhead, tracking the sun, tracking the needle. And so they oozed their way into the heart of the bog.

What neither of them noticed, Rufus being so focused on the sun and compass and Gaul so focused on Rufus - what neither of them noticed was the way the ground to one side and then the other of their path rose and fell as if something long, slithery, and thick pushed its back against the floating sod.

Before long, they were out of sight.

\* \* \* \* \*

Out of sight, that was, to Pym and Swiddle. Once out of the hollow, they had double-timed it across the moor, following the scored line of the children’s trail, their longer legs and quicker pace soon bringing them within range of the quarry. They stayed far enough behind to keep suspicion from floating off them and onto the air like a spoor, but Pym noted, as he looked through an high-powered binoculars at the two specks hacking their way through the bramble, that the girl kept looking over her shoulder as if she scented them, even at times looking right down the lenses into Pym’s eyes, shocking as if she had discovered him even though his rational mind told that it was impossible for her to see him. Still, there was always more than the five senses to sense things on the wind -

And now, with both of them staring through binoculars, they watched the two disappear into the bog, the swamp-plants and gnat-clouds soon hiding them.

Swiddle dropped his glasses and turned to lay on his back, looking up into the grey cloud-scud over his head. “I can’t believe,” he moaned, “that they’re going to go through the Dismal.”

“What did you expect? They’re not going to follow the road with the military on it, and they can’t go end-around on the Dismal - they’d be a year older by the



time they made it, assuming one or both don't become wolf-food by then. It's the best choice even if it is the worst choice."

"Best choice," Swiddle muttered. "I remember how many we lost in there during the wars, how many - "

"Just shut up," Pym said, and Swiddle shut up. He didn't want to reminisce about the war anyway and was glad Pym had shut his gob for him.

They both heard the sound at the same time, and Pym joined Swiddle in looking at the sky. They both watched the object floating above them come lower and lower, and before long they could make out details: the whirring blades of the mini-helicopter piloted by the frantic-eyed half-monkey. As it came closer, they stared at the monkey moving levers to touch the helicopter down, then reach back and turn off the propane tank and shut off the engine.

Pym shot a look at Swiddle; Swiddle stared back at Pym; they both looked at the leather pouch strapped to the monkey's back. They knew what was in it - from Gravinstad - brought by the MessegeKorps. The monkey waited; while it waited, it pulled nuts out of a hemp bag attached to the helicopter frame and ate, giving the two humans an indifferent stare.

It was Pym that finally got up and pulled the sealed envelope out of the pouch. Sealed, he snarled to himself, a joke of Gravinstad's, like he was sending them an invitation. He ripped it open. By this time Swiddle had peeled himself from the ground and walked over to see what the message said.

"He just wants an update," Pym said.

"Tell him that the Feralz duo have become swamp food and that he should order us to come home where he can shower us with loads of gold for a job well-done."

Pym ignored him as he read the note for a second time, then a third.

"That's what I would say, since this whole thing is a cock-up, Pym, has been right from the beginning. Gravinstad has something he is not telling us about but is willing to risk our lives over."

"You are absolutely right, Swiddle," Pym replied, as he looked up from the note and stared off into the distance.

"Why would the grave Gravinstad be interested in two dead-end Feralz who want to go into the mines," Swiddle continued, encouraged by Pym's praise. "A sign of mental unbalance right there, to *want* to go to the mines - and then have





us follow them, not to kill them, not to force them to do anything, but simply to watch and report - and, I suppose, if we make it, to make it back home on our own.”

“Because the grave Gravinstad thinks that those two squats out there have something that he wants but doesn’t have - and what would that be, Swiddle?” Pym tapped the envelope against a dirty thumbnail. “What is it that the grave and great Gravinstad does not have but really really wants?”

“I don’t know,” Swiddle said, “but if it’s that important to him, then - “

“Then - “ began Pym, but stopped. They looked at each other. “Then,” Pym continued, “it might be something that would be equally important to us.”

“Whether or not it ever made it back to Gravinstad’s hands.”

The monkey chewed and chewed, shifting his eyes from one face to the other, its own face thought-blank.

Pym reached into the pouch and pulled out a pencil. He sat on the ground, laid Gravinstad’s note against his thigh, and started writing.

“What’re you going to say?” Swiddle asked.

“The truth - it will serve us well at the moment.”

“Do you think he’s got someone - some *thing* - following us?”

“I wouldn’t doubt it, Swid. If it’s this important, Gravinstad’s going to have layers.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Swiddle added.

“I’m glad you were thinking the same thing.” Pym finished the note and folded it up. “Otherwise, I would have to think that you had lost your edge and that I would have to kill you.” With a half-joke in his voice.

“I can say the same about you,” Swiddle replied, keeping the same half-joke in his voice. “I’ve always admired the quality of your suspicions - they are prime-grade, usually nail-on. I would hate to think that the soft life of a hired assassin had dulled your wits and that I would have to kill you.”

Pym got up, walked to the monkey, and shoved the note back into the pouch. “If you don’t trust anybody, you will never be disappointed.”

“I always say, ‘Trust, but verify,’” Swiddle said, getting up.

“Do you want to see the note, then?”



“No, I trust you - why wouldn't I, if it's only about updating him where we are?”

“And what else would it be?”

The two men stared hard at each other for one heartbeat, two, then Swiddle looked away, laughed. “Course I trust you, Pym, after all we've been through in the war and beyond. Send him back.”

Pym flipped several switches and turned several dials on the monkey's helmet. “Back to Valice you go, MessengerKorps,” and the monkey responded to the programming with a series of automaticized movements that turned on the propane, fired up the engine, got the blades rotating, and lifted the helicopter aloft and back to Valice until it disappeared into the sky-glare.

Pym looked back at Swiddle, who unshouldered his pack and pulled out a hat-veil just like the ones Gaul and Rufus had. He put it on, did a few steps of a jig and a reel. “It's off into the Dismal, then,” he sang, “Dismal, Dismal, so abysmal - “

Pym pulled out his own hat and donned it. Then the two of them tramped forward, faceless creatures in a faceless land.

\* \* \* \* \*

The monkey piloted the helicopter until it could see the stone horizon of Valice. The instructions from the dials and switches in the helmet threaded through his brain and down into arms and hands, and it no more had an opinion about what it was doing than a stone in Valice's outerwall had an opinion about the stones above or below it.

What it didn't have a program for were the three Ravens that circled it. Even as the hands automatically steered the craft towards its heliport, the monkey swiveled its head back and forth as it watched the three birds dart in and out.

With grace and skill, one Raven plucked the note from the pouch. A second Raven helped the first unfold it, and as they flew along, the third Raven read the note and committed it to memory. The first two Ravens re-folded the note and tucked it back, then, one after the other, the Ravens gave the monkey a short but gentle peck on the nape of its neck, then wheeled away and disappeared.

The monkey sped on, the memory of the Ravens already gone, its hands and arms jittering and juking with involuntary skill as the messages sifted down from the helmet and sent him speeding toward the Keep and Gravinstad.





---

## Chapter 20

### **Wherein A Congress Of Ravens Counsels The Queen And Bensole Learns That There Are Many Worlds Kept Within And Without The World Of The Keep**

---

*I*t was probably true that a Raven had never visited the King's inner chambers. At least one invited in. But there is always time for firsts in life, and Bensole now had such a "first." His mother had shot open the window, held back the sheers, and spoken to the Raven in a string of chirrs and caws, making Bensole believe that she and this bird (this beautiful bird, whose feathers, though black, held little light-shimmers along their edges) actually exchanged information about something Bensole didn't know about.

After a few minutes, the bird took off. Elfrida slammed the window shut, then grabbed Bensole's hand. "We can't talk in here," she said.

"You're going to talk to the Raven?"

Instead of answering him, she shushed him, then pointed up to the ceiling. Bensole nodded - his mother believed that Gravinstad had invented something that would let him hear what they said, so they were always careful to keep their important words to themselves.

Elfrida led Bensole out of the living room, through the dining room and the library and out onto the balcony that hung off the Keep like a carbuncle. The parapet had a tent-cover with sides that could be rolled down to keep out wind and rain, and Elfrida untied and unfurled each sheet until she and Bensole found themselves completely boxed in and out of sight of the world. And almost as soon as she had finished this, they heard the scoop of wings, and the Raven touched down on the stone railing, then onto the balcony floor. Its claws made a snicking sound as it walked. Elfrida had stuck her head over the railing, swiveled in all directions to see if anyone had seen anything, then pulled back under the protection of the canopy and sat on the divan, her voice already chattering before she settled onto its cushions.

And for a long time they talked, his mother, for the moment, forgetting Bensole was around. Not long after, three more Ravens came to the railing, and Elfrida invited them in, too, and the five of them chattered, the queen face's alternating between joy and dismay as she listened. At one point, Bensole,



fascinated and frightened by these sculpted creatures, sidled up to his mother's side and pressed in close, and her arm, as if thinking on its own, reached out and pulled him in closer, and her warmth and the pressure of her arm went a long way to making him feel less left-out of what was going on in front of him.

Finally, they finished, and by this time the sky outside had dimmed, sun-glow still running along the top of the wall. Elfrida touched each one on the head; each, in turn, pecked her softly on the hand. And then, one by one, with a heavy grace, the birds took off, soon swallowed up by the sky.

And now, in dusk, Bensole sat and watched his mother, who was sitting across from him and staring into space. Here but not here. Bensole got up and flicked a switch on the wall. Flames leapt up inside glass globes sconced on the wall, and the gas-light drove away the seeping-in shadows - the light made Bensole feel better. A little. He glanced at his mother. She hadn't even noticed that the light had come on.

Bensole sat himself down next to his mother - lowered himself, didn't plop down like he usually did - and let his feet dangle, his legs not yet quite long enough, sitting on this adult couch, to reach the floor. He nested his hands in his lap. He stared at the floor in front of him. And waited.

Her voice, when it came, seemed to come from nowhere, so sharp did it cut into the silence. It spooked Bensole (a little) when it hit so hard and quick against his ears.

"He has been found."

Bensole nodded, as if he understood what his mother meant, but then shook his head no.

"I don't understand, Mama. What you just said. None of it. I'm sorry."

And this seemed to break the spell because she turned to him, and as she did she softened her face with a smile, and suddenly Bensole knew she was back from wherever she had gone and that he was going to be all right.

"You don't have to be sorry, my pet. Come here." She opened her arms, and Bensole melted into them. "You don't have to be sorry for not knowing what you couldn't possibly know."

"You talked to them - the birds - you can talk to them."

"Yes."



As much as he didn't want to do it, he pushed himself away from his mother and gave her what passed for a twelve-year old boy a hard and commanding look.

"I am the king," he said, "and as the king you have to tell me anything that - affects - affects? is that the right word?" Elfrida nodded, successfully keeping a smile off her lips. Assured, Bensole continued. "That affects what I need to do as the king."

Pain and wonder and love - this is what passed over Elfrida's face in the space of one heartbeat as she looked at her beautiful, damaged, trying-to-be-brave little boy. "Yes, you are the king - you are your father's son. And you are owed respect."

"So you'll tell me?" Now in the voice of an excited twelve-year-old expecting to get a gift, not a worry-burdened king - Elfrida liked that voice much better.

"Yes, I will tell you. But not until after we've had our dinner." She reached out to tickle his ribs, and he pulled away with a little laugh - but not too far away. "Let's see what the cook can cook up for us." Elfrida got off the couch, offered her hand to Bensole. "Come, my king, my liege - let's chow down!"

And together they skipped back into the house.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sky dusted with stars - this is what greeted them when, after dinner, Bensole and Elfrida went back out onto the balcony and furled up the sides. A cool breeze had come up; Elfrida pulled a shawl more tightly around her. Bensole remembered that his father had given his mother this shawl - someone had embroidered a strange set of curls and volutes and spirals on it, a riot of lines and colors, looking like the map of some undiscovered land - or maybe even a mind gone a little off. He liked that his mother had the shawl on. He wouldn't have minded if he could have been the shawl himself.

Below them, in the coarse run of the city, they could see dim pools of streetlight stretch like dirty pearls along the streets that ran outward from the Keep. Farther away, near the city's center, the lights clustered and melted together; clouds of smoke rose along with clouds of noise - shouts of vendors, bell-clang from the street buses, steam-hiss and wheel-crash from the trains - all of it just far enough away to give a twinkle and a music that it didn't in reality have either in the light of day or the dead of night.



Mother and son sat gazing at the stars, holding hands, steaming mugs of tea next to them. Bensole didn't like tea - even with a mound of sugar in it the tea still tasted bitter to him - but he drank it because his mother drank it, and she seemed less to drink it than hold the warmed cup in her hand and inhale the smell-wisps that curled upward. He had never known her to finish a whole mug of it.

Bensole knew they would talk - but he didn't want to start just yet. Too nice sitting here with the almost-quiet, the cooling-tea smell, nice to look at the stars (which he had concluded were really the heads of rivets that someone had poked through the dark metal of the night sky to keep it in place, which he also knew was all false but still enjoyable to pretend was true). But then his mother squeezed his hand, and he knew she would begin. He sat up a little straighter, made his ears pay attention.

"The Ravens," she began - and what a beginning it was. He had never heard a story like it, even from his tutors, who seemed capable of making up all sorts of nonsense, like that something called the "ocean" existed and that it had more water in it than the land had land - Bensole had never seen this ocean, so why should he believe it existed?

But this story - because his mother had told it, he had to believe it - this story was -

And later, in his bed, when he stared at the ceiling and tried to remember all his mother had said, he still had trouble getting his thoughts around the thought that such a world had existed, that such things had taken place, and that people like his mother (and his father, if he were still alive) had known people who had known all about these things.

The thing that he thought about most as he stared at the ceiling, knowing that he would not be able to fall asleep, was this: that the child in the picture hidden away in the walls existed. Well, his mother believed he existed - that's what the Ravens had said to her, that he had been found and that two other children were on their way to the mines to bring him back - though what the child/god would do once he got to Valice was not at all clear to him - And those two other children - who were they, why were they doing this? And the two men - beasts? - on their trail - who were they? (Maybe his tutors' stories about the ocean were true - these other two people were *right now* walking through places that he, Bensole, had only read about but not believed in - if they were out there, then *anything* could be out there, *anything* could be true.)



But a child/god - a god in the form of a child - that he could not wrap his mind around. To pray to a picture because his parents had prayed to a picture - he could accept that. To act like something was true - that was one thing. But to find out that it was *truly* true - that flesh and blood that he could touch was *somewhere out there* -

The child/god existed - flesh and blood that he could touch - a child/god that looked like him. Like him. Maybe even like a brother.

Thinking about that kept him from thinking about the soldier-machines and crushing bloodiness of the war (and the death of his father, which seemed somehow caught up in all of this) and the Ravens who had come and given his mother such horrible and wonderful news.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bensole didn't always know that his mother often stood at his bedroom door and listened to make sure his breathing filled the air. She stood there now, keeping her own breathing sub-sonic, waiting for the sounds to reach her ears. And there they came - her son slept. His brain had gone quiet for a time. She could let her worry go for the moment.

She hadn't been sure - it was a horrible story, one even adults refused to let into their hearts and minds, especially the ones who had carried out the atrocities, had planned the savageries - to them, to those devils like Gravinstad, what was finished was finished, and no one had to apologize to anyone for anything. But he had taken it well, and she had tried to emphasize the hope in the story - perhaps too strongly because she didn't feel, a full rise of hope in her own heart. If true that he was found - well, so what? Obviously he had none of his former powers, none of his former grace. What good could he do? What *anything* could he do?

She turned away from Bensole's door toward her own room. She did not - yet - want to think about what could *not* be done. Better, for the moment, to believe in the words of the prayers, the call for a new world to come, for a greener place and a more loving time - and to think about this for her son, her Bensole - and for her dead, gentle husband. Her heart twisted as his absence flooded her, and she stood in the dark hallway, arms wrapped around herself, crying hard and quiet, filled with so much worry and confusion. It felt like the night would go on forever.







## Chapter 21

### Wherein Gaul And Rufus Meet The Creatures Whose Name No Human Tongue Can Pronounce And Pym Turns Dog- Like In His Dogged Pursuit

---

So far, Gaul calculated, the blood-biting insects in the bog had only drained off several drams of blood - not enough to make her shrivel up but certainly enough to make her think that if they had to stay here much longer some future traveler or hunter would find their skins laid out flat on the ground like popped air-bags.

She followed in Rufus' footsteps, trying to keep her balance between the shifting ground under her feet and the shifting weight of her backpack. Rufus seemed to walk with confidence, and that helped Gaul keep down her rising fear as they got deeper and deeper into a landscape that Gaul never knew existed - giant over-her-head ferns, slickery vines that grabbed at her boots, nettles and pricklers, bright orange salamanders, warty toads, snakes that flicked in and out of sight like flashes of light.

And every once in a while - she wondered if Rufus felt it, too - but she didn't want to ask for fear of looking as scared as she really felt - the liquid ground seemed to lift and then lower, lift and then lower as if - but it couldn't be - as if - but that would be impossible - as if *something under the ground* had humped it up on its back and let it slide off as it passed by.

It would have to be something really big to do that - something long and - And there it happened, again - lift, slide, fall back.

"Did you feel that?" For some reason she felt like she had to talk in a whisper because she didn't want to wake anything up - even though they were crashing through the underbrush like starving dogs going for a pile of bones.

"I have been feeling it yes all along as we've walked."

"Why didn't you say something?!"

"What's to say?"

"Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"Any guesses?"

“Probably not friendly.” And with that he went back to looking at the sun and the compass and making their way forward.

“Probably not friendly,” Gaul repeated. She could have guessed that - what could possibly be friendly to them in a place like this, where the bugs had teeth and the air smelled like the stuff she used to clean out from between her toes.

She also realized how tired she was, now that the excitement of getting out of Valice had passed, and she would have liked nothing more than to stop for a while and sleep, even if the gnats and chiggers would gang up on her and take a pint or two. And her feet hurt, and the straps dug into her neck, and the bottom of the pack banged against the small of her back (she was sure she had a bruise there the size of a bread bun), and her skin felt oily from their constant sweating, and her hair stuck to her forehead because of the sweat, and she had an itch right in the middle of her back where she couldn’t reach, and she needed to pee, and -

Almost as if he read her mind, Rufus turned to her and said, “Need to stop?”

But something in Gaul wouldn’t say yes to Rufus, wouldn’t give in to what her mind and body really wanted because - because - she didn’t want to be weak, not just *not look weak* but in reality *not be weak*, to be strong enough to make it through, all the way through, without even knowing where “all the way through” was going to drop her down. Here she was, no longer in DEAD, no longer chained to a harness and handling other people’s dead thoughts and dreams. Here she was, known now among the Feralz, part of a crew that said they needed her. And here she was, on a mission that might make a difference in the lives of everyone. What, really, did she have to complain about?

All of this ran through her mind in less time than it took her to look back at Rufus and say, “No, let’s keep pushing on - plenty of time to rest later.”

And then it happened again - the ground elevated them slowly, held them there, and then equally slowly set them back down.

“Did what I feel just happen really happen?”

“Yes” said Rufus, and though he tried to hide it from Gaul, she caught the spark of fear in his eyes, which, strangely, made her feel a little better - being terrified with a friend around was better than being terrified alone.

“There are stories” he added.

“Of what?”



---

“Of creatures.”

Silence for three heartbeats as they stood stock-still.

“What kind of creatures?” Gaul asked.

But Rufus didn’t hear her, she could tell that right away - his face had gone blank - no, not blank - attentive - as if hearing something that Gaul couldn’t hear. And then she heard it, too - rather, felt it, up through her boot soles, a dense deep vibration that made her foot-bones hum, and the hum traveled up her tibias and fibulas, her femurs, her pelvis, up through her diaphragm and skittered along her ribs, rattling her collar-bone and pulsing one by one the seven vertebrae in her neck, scattering along the sutures and fault lines of her skull until the thick bass hum seemed to clot like a seed-pod on the top of her head that then burst open to spread the sound waves past fern-heads and creeping vines and the underbellies of the grey scudding clouds into the dark emptiness that Rufus said hides behind the sun’s light and is even there when the sky is bright.

It stopped.

“Did you feel - “ Gaul asked.

“What did you - “

“Not what I *felt*, but what I feel now.”

“Clean?” Rufus asked.

“Yes.”

“Like an everything-bad-has-been-swept-out-no-dirt-in-any-corners kind of clean?”

“No - well, yes - but for me it’s like when the doctor once put camphor oil on a rag and made me breathe it in when I had a cold, and all of a sudden the camphor fumes cut through the snot in my head and the air burned - but good-burned - my nose and throat and lungs as the air came in like I was sucking it down for the first time - that kind of clean.”

“Okay okay okay.”

And they didn’t move.

“I don’t want to move,” said Gaul.

“Me neither,” said Rufus.

“Feels too good.”



"Feels too good," Rufus agreed.

And so they didn't move. And as they didn't move, they noticed something else: they didn't have any bugs swarming around them. As if whatever had coursed through Gaul and Rufus had sparked through insect bodies, too, and now they couldn't be bothered bothering Rufus and Gaul any more.

"But we do have to move," said Rufus.

"I know," Gaul replied.

And the spell broke.

\* \* \* \* \*

Pym led, cutting trail, following the not-hard-to-see footprints of the two youngsters. High overhead, three Ravens whirled, as if writing a secret message against the sky.

Behind Pym Swiddle carried a compass, checking the sun overhead, just as Rufus did.

"I wouldn't go that way," said Swiddle.

Pym looked up from the ground.

"The sun goes that way, even if the tracks go that way. Ground shifts - this we know."

Pym scanned around him, distaste on his face.

Swiddle pointed. "We have to go that way."

Pym said nothing.

"We've already lost them," said Swiddle. "Did you really think we'd be able to tag them along a straight line? Our best bet is to follow the sun's path and move faster than they do - get to the mines before they do and give them a greeting."

Three more Ravens had joined the first three, and as one they banked to the left and disappeared into the ferns.

Pym surveyed the green stink around them, then spit.

"Not such an adventure now, is it? Burying defunct ministers for steady pay is not such a bad occupation, is it?"



“Shut up. There’s a reason Gravinstad deals with me and not with you - because he knows what a weasly little defeatist you are.”

Pym shucked off his rucksack, and from it he pulled a burlap bag: the bag had the seal of Valice printed on it. Pym untied the drawstrings, then reached in and pulled out - well, to Swiddle it looked like a mask - strange mask, to be sure, with what looked like a dog’s nose on the end of it, but not from any dog Swiddle had personally encountered, but still recognizably dog-like. In front of the nose, attached to it, was a tray, about three inches long and an inch wide, and in the tray was a kind of sponge. Straps and wires dangled from the mask.

Also inside the bag was a thin box, and when Pym opened it, Swiddle saw that it held two glass vials, each capped with an eyedropper, each filled with a clear liquid. On one bottle he could read a label: “Gaul.” The second bottle: “Rufus.” Pym took them out, put one in one pocket, the other in the other pocket, stuck the mask under his arm, then stuffed everything else back into his rucksack.

All at once, Swiddle snapped his fingers: realization.

“Gravinstad’s going to make you into a dog!”

At least a dozen more Ravens had congregated in the overhead sky; they spiraled, then banked right and disappeared into the ferns.

Pym said nothing as he fixed the mask over his own upper face. His fierce eyes stared through carefully cut eye-holes, and the snout jabbed the air in front of him. From each side of the snout hung a metal wire with a knurl on the end of it. “Get out the battery,” Pym growled, and Swiddle dug into his backpack to pull out the wooden box with the screws on the top. “Attach it to my belt.” Which Swiddle did. “Now the wires, you idiot.” Which Swiddle did.

The snout began to hum.

Pym stood stock-still while the voltage zipped up the wires through the snout and out the metal plates that pressed against the skin of his nostrils. It didn’t hurt, but he could feel what the mask was doing: rearranging the nerves and molecules of his nose, linking them with the chemistry of the mask, making powerful what was weak in humans, blending dog and man into man-dog.

And then it hit him, a whole new world hit him, and his brain could barely handle the flood of smells, some familiar, most of them not, that raged through his nerve-endings. It was all he could do to keep his eyes focused and stand up straight.



“Pym? Pym? You okay?”

Pym was more than okay. He was completely new, and the mouth under the mask stretched into a smile. He reached into his pocket, pulled out the vial labeled “Gaul,” and handed it to Swiddle.

“The land may move here, but it still holds their smell - that’s our cue. Open it - go on.”

Swiddle opened the bottle.

“Essence of Gaul, extracted from her clothes - put a drop in the tray - “

Swiddle began to squeeze the bulb on the eyedropper.

“*Only a drop!*” Pym snarled. “You want my head to explode?”

Swiddle considered that for a half-second - then let one silver drop fall onto the sponge tucked into the tray.

“Now close it up, give it back to me.” Which Swiddle did. Pym took a deep long sniff of the air, then a second one. “Not that you would appreciate the beauty of this machine, but now that I have this young Gaul in my nose, I can follow her spoor wherever it clings - to fern, to air, to a newt’s tail. And if I lose her, I’ve got our Rufus.”

Pym sampled the air in four directions, then turned and marched ahead, swiveling his head to pick up the miniscule scents pocketed in the air. As Swiddle followed him, he thought that it wouldn’t take much to get Pym to drop to all fours and sprint through the swamp like some primeval creature.

Unknown to either of them, another dozen Ravens dropped like stones into the ferns.

\* \* \* \* \*

All at once - and that was how it happened - *all at once* - the bog-ground lifted them up - and didn’t put them down. They balanced on top of a gentle up-and down-slope, frozen in place. Rufus slipped the compass into his pocket, turned an unglazed face to Gaul.

“I was afraid of this” Rufus hissed under his breath.

“Of what?”

“When I say go we run all right you follow me *stay close* but we run steady fast *go!*”



And Rufus more or less skidded down the incline on his boot soles, with Gaul an arm's length behind, and without looking at the sun's arc they splashed through pea-green water, their packs *thump thump thump thump* against their spines.

Gaul now noticed how the landscape had changed. Ferns still, yes, but now also low bushes and the yearlings of young trees and bright spits of little flowers. And the ground felt a bit more solid, a bit more "groundy," and ahead, when she dared to look up, she could see a forest edge - a long way away but still forest, trees, dirt that didn't move.

"We're gonna make it, we're gonna make it," Gaul kept chanting to herself as she saw where Rufus was headed - a cluster of boulders, dropped right in the middle of the swamp.

They ran as fast as their unbalance let them, and in each of them the air burned through their throats, their lungs, tearing a pain through their tired and terrified muscles. The swamp-mat underneath their feet kept lifting and dropping them, swelling and rolling as if two washerwomen had the ends of it and were shaking it like a wet sheet.

Finally, they pitched themselves against the rocks (though Gaul thought it felt more like the ground pitched them). Rufus tore off his pack and, dragging it behind him, slithered between two of the boulders and disappeared. Gaul did the same, and as she popped through and fell to her knees, she saw that Rufus had led them to a small walled harbor, hard blocks all around them, spit-shined sky overhead.

Through the slits Rufus and Gaul could see the ground pitch and ripple, and whatever it was that had chased them here now had them surrounded.

And then they felt it again - the deep thrumming bass - and this time, in addition to rattling every bone in their bodies the way it had done before, they thought they heard - but it was a "heard" not in the ear, or only in the ear, but something all around like a skin - but it couldn't be what they heard - but it was: singing.

Singing.

And it made them both feel - they couldn't deny it - safe.

They both stood up and peeked through the spaces between the rocks - then looked back at each other.





“Did you see - “ said Gaul.

“I saw,” said Rufus.

They each threw themselves against the rock faces and scrambled up until they both sat on top of the rocks where they could get a better view. Of. Of. Of.

The worms. Dozens of them, sticking up out of the swamp like blades of grass, of all widths and shades of brown - not like any worms Rufus had ever seen (Gaul had never seen a worm) - but upright, thick, coated in swamp water and vegetation, swaying. And singing.

Gaul leaned over to Rufus. “How do they sing if they don’t have any mouth-parts? Even I know you have to have a mouth to do mouth-things.”

“I don’t know,” said Rufus, for once his customary chatter slowed enough to hear the pauses between the words. “I just don’t know.”

From behind them - that’s where it came from, more felt than heard, though also heard, except up through the jaw-bones not through the ear-holes - a voice - at least that was the only word they could think of to describe it - a voice, then, that wrapped itself around them.

“There’s not a thing you need to worry about. At least not from us. As for the two humanthings chasing you - “

“We’re being chased?” said Rufus, not looking over his shoulder.

“How much else don’t you know?”

“A lot,” whispered Gaul to Rufus.

The voice echoed them. “A lot yes.” Was that a little laugh inside the words? Laughter from a worm?

Because that was what it was when they did turn to see what they knew they had to see, though to call it simply a “worm” was like calling Valice just a city - the word didn’t capture the truth of what their eyes saw. And what they saw was gross and awesome at the same time: tall and wide enough to cast a shadow on them, its ribbed skin pulsing, wet-mud-brown in color, draped in rotted grass and roots. They looked up at its face (or where they thought its face was, that is, if a worm had a face where most faces would be), but they both found themselves without a word in their mouths to spit out.

“Would you,” the voice played out around and through them, “would you like to hear a story?”



## Chapter 22

### Wherein A World Made From Pain Becomes A World Torn Asunder

---

Angelicus watched Q. But there was nothing really to watch since Q was not doing anything. Active, that is. Just sitting. As he had been doing every day in the garden.

After the attack, Q had retreated more and more into himself. The running of Under-City hadn't stopped - Angelicus, being Q's deputy, made sure it happened - barking out the orders, sending off the messages, reading the reports out loud to Q (though he wasn't sure that Q heard him).

But it could not go on like this forever. Everyone looked up to Q - after all, he had saved them, had given them a haven and a restored dignity - but just as in a body, when the mind retreats and the body closes in on itself, the Under-City had somehow, with Q's silence, seen its collective mind slip into silence. Except it was not a peaceful silence - more like the silence that comes before a ravenous storm.

And Angelicus knew what most of the others did not - Q's dying had sped up. The ring around his neck had gotten redder and redder, flame-red, devil-red, and it took Q more and more energy just to make his way through the day. The young body and the old head would not, for much longer, be as one. Each rejected each, though each would die if each got its way. Much like human beings in general, Angelicus had thought more than once - united in pain and yet always warring against each other.

The attack had shaken the Under-City as well - and confused it. Shaken it because a line had been crossed, their underbelly exposed - the Upper Reaches had come where the Feralz thought it would never come - but who had made such a rule, why had they come to believe such a fairy tale? They had fooled themselves, and it cut to their hearts to find out how foolish they had been.

But other questions, too, about the attack - these voiced only in the Inner-Ring, with Drumlin and Angelicus and Shiva (who had replaced Rufus - and where was Rufus, the thought went out? and Gaul? and were they still alive?) and the other administrators sitting in the Inner-Ring's chambers - the "attack" didn't feel like an attack at all. Why did it happen, first of all? Who had ordered

it? What did they want to accomplish? No Feralz was killed, no Feralz captured or tortured - these were not men full of tender mercies, yet, for them, they showed restraint. Who had wanted them to be so restrained?

And in the end, what had they accomplished? They had scattered Rufus and Gaul into the world. Had that been their objective? And, again, why?

Why, why, why - the questions just piled up.

And Q made no effort to answer any of them.

And one question, *the question* - a conclusion more than a question - a suspicion more than a conclusion because no one had any evidence - but still strong, still undeniable, the idea that no one voiced but everyone thought because there was no way not to think of it: someone from within had betrayed them. Someone who lived among them was a traitor.

From that moment on, the poison began to seep through everything the Feralz had built.

And Q sat and stared.

\* \* \* \* \*

The day it happened, the day everything cracked, started out as all days started in Under-City, that is, if “day” or “night” can describe a life underground. Q sat in the chambers; Angelicus, with his staff, two young Feralz whose hands had had webbing sewn between the fingers to see if it would increase their swimming speed, filed papers and reports. Everything was ordinary.

And then they heard what sounded like a wind, full of voices rising in pitch and noise as they came closer to the chambers building. Angelicus and his staff, Castor and Pollux, looked at each other, and the three of them looked at Q. Then Pollux and Castor looked Angelicus hard in the face.

“We’re sorry,” said Castor.

“Very sorry,” said Pollux.

“For what?” said Angelicus.

The thrum outside had gotten louder and louder, and Angelicus could now hear distinct shouts and complaints.

“We’re sorry,” they said together. Castor continued, “We like you, and we like Master Q - well, *liked*, since he seems pretty dead now, never talks - “



---

Pollux picked it up. "And we know about Rufus and the girl named Gaul, which while we think it's okay for people to believe in what they want to believe in -"

"The child/god sounds really daffy to us - "

"Because we're so young, probably - "

"And if we're going to have to wait around to see if they get back with, what's her name again - "

"Alma."

"Alma - and this thing that some really have got in their heads that the child/god is, like, going to be the savior - "

"It's all too crazy for us - "

"And given the attack - "

"Yes, and given the attack - "

"Which really scared - "

"Really scared us - because we're so young, probably - "

"Because of all that - "

"We're going to go with Drumlin," said together.

Angelicus stared at them, momentarily dumbfounded.

"Drumlin?"

"Drumlin."

The crowd sounds outside washed up against the building, and Drumlin's voice tore through the air and Castor and Pollux steamed out the door and down the stairs. Angelicus watched their backs disappear out the door; then he stepped to the window just in time to see Drumlin call up to him.

"Angelicus!"

"What are you doing?"

"We want to talk to Q."

"I asked you what you are you doing."

"I don't talk to you. We don't talk to you. It's Q we want."



“Well, it’s me you got, Drumlin. And what are you doing? Has the metal in your arm leaked into your head?”

“That was always your problem, featherhead - you always missed the news on the wind. You are now beside the point - there’s a new way of doing things, and it don’t involve you.” Drumlin looked past Angelicus. “Q!” he shouted.

Angelicus turned to look at Q, who seemed not to have heard any of what was going on - eyes fixed on the floor, his scarf wound around his neck (though Angelicus noticed, even at this moment, how the red had crept up his neck, up to his ears), body slumped forward. Angelicus turned back to the window.

“He can’t speak now - he’s sick, really sick, Drumlin - and if you have any respect for him, you and everyone else will just go - “

Only at the last second did Angelicus catch sight of the stone rocketing toward his head, and he jerked to his right just before it slammed into the lintel above him and bounced off, showering him with granite dust.

Angelicus noted that Drumlin said nothing - to the stone-thrower to stop, to him to apologize. So that was how it was now - Drumlin had always been, in one way or another, someone who had felt proud in being tough, in being real, in never letting “sorry” slip past his lips. Angelicus had been wrong in thinking that their working together had, in some way, made Drumlin a friend. He didn’t know what Drumlin was, but no friend stood in front of him now.

It so surprised and unnerved him to feel a hand on the small of his back moving him away from the window that he almost let a punch fly until he saw it was Q escorting him away from the window.

“C’m on, friend,” Q said, his voice raspy from disuse. “I’d like your head to stay just where it is - unlike the one I’ve got - “ Q let the sentence slide off unfinished. “They want me, not you - let’s let them have me. It’s time the truth came out.”

“You aren’t going to - “

“When a wound is dirty, you clean it out.”

Angelicus stared at Q as if he’d never seen him before. “What are you talking about? What do you mean about the ‘truth’?”

Q ignored him. Q stepped to the window.



---

And here is how it appeared to the people in the street: Q above, leaning heavily on the window-ledge, alone, with Drumlin in the street, backed by the rag-tag Feralz, looking up at Q - Angelicus now hidden from sight. And the perpetual splash of falling water in the silence that the appearance of Q brought to the crowd. Q let the silence linger - it didn't do him any harm to keep his mouth shut - after all, Drumlin had called this meeting, so to speak, it was up to him to drive it along. So Q looked out over the people whom he had always trusted and loved - and because he loved and trusted them, he was going to have to tell them truth.

But in a moment.

For in spite of the danger below, the possibility of a cracked head, the anger, Q felt calm - why, he didn't know, but he didn't need to know why - just take it, keep it close, let it work.

Of course it had to break - these things always do. And it was, as it should have been, Drumlin who broke it - Drumlin the fixer, Drumlin the resuscitator of dead machines, Drumlin the healer.

"I'll come right to the point."

"I wouldn't expect anything different. But which point will you come to?"

"There's only one: you."

"And that's where you're wrong - but we can start with me. So, Drumlin, come on - start with me."

"We want you out."

Instead of answering, Q let his gaze cover the crowd.

"Is that true?" Said to Drumlin, but pitched to everyone else. "You want me 'out'?"

Q had to admit to himself that the roar of "yes" that washed back over him stung him - he felt rage, betrayal, vast disappointment as he scanned the faces of those he had helped bring to safety. Oh well, he thought - whoever said life was trustworthy? He decided to continue to toy with Drumlin rather than give in to the despair coursing through him.

"Does that mean 'out' of the room I'm standing in - "

"Don't confuse the - "

"Or does that mean 'out' of Under-City?" Q continued, ignoring Drumlin. "Which 'out' do you want?"



“We want you out - “

“‘We,’ is it, Drumlin - you’re speaking the royal ‘we,’ now? Have you been elevated to royalty?”

“Enough of your blabber,” Drumlin growled, pronouncing each word exactly, filling each word with hard metal. Q knew Drumlin well enough to know that he wasn’t a person who could be sweet-talked - it was coming to the time when the swords had to come out.

“And enough of yours. You want me to go? All of you? Even some of you? Then I will go - I’ll be dead soon, anyway, which is about as ‘gone’ as any of us get to go. But before you take charge, Drumlin, you need to come clean with the ones backing you up down there.” He looked out over their heads. “Has he come clean with you?”

To his credit, Drumlin held off as long as he could from asking the question that would, Q knew, cause the final break in what was already breaking apart.

But he had to ask it. “Come clean about what?”

“About - “ And even at this moment Q hesitated - would the truth really do anybody any good? But he had no choice - the truth chose him. “About your connection with Gravinstad.” Q pitched his voice to the crowd. “Has he told you about this?”

Their eyes locked. Behind him Q heard Angelicus fall into a chair.

“You haven’t, have you?”

Again, to his credit, Drumlin did not play it like the usual villain, snarling out “you bastard” to Q and turning to the crowd to denounce Q as a liar while the crowd, finally realizing, advanced on him with murderous intent. Instead, Drumlin answered in simple Drumlin fashion: “No I haven’t.”

Q knew that he could ignore Drumlin now - he’d been de-fanged, he was already rejected by the crowd if he didn’t already know that - and so he spoke to everyone else, and as he spoke the crowd pushed in closer to the building. Too late Drumlin moved to escape - a couple of multi-tentacled Feralz grabbed and held him.

“Drumlin is not a bad person,” Q began, “so don’t hurt him - and his contact with Gravinstad did not cause the attack - I’ll tell you about that in a moment. But he has been in touch with the Upper Reaches for a while now. How?” He stared down at the captured Drumlin. “Because he’s brilliant. A telegraph. You’d never



see the wires, of course - run them up one of the dark walls, over to the ladder-well and up into the sewers, up through the street, along the poles, from pole to pole to pole all the way to the top of the Keep - and to the ear of the man who made you all who you are today.

“And why? Let him go so that he can talk.”

They released him. Drumlin walked to the top of the short rise of stairs that led into the building - just high enough to see everyone looking at him.

Q turned to Angelicus, still seated, still looking stunned.

“Once he explains, I’m going to have tell them about what we did as well.”

“You can’t! They’ll kill all three of us.”

“I won’t attach your name to it, Angelicus - you never agreed with me on it, you were too gentle to fight me on it - there’s no reason for your life to be ruined.” Then Q smiled a lopsided smile. “But you may want to prepare a back-up plan just in case. You just never know with mobs.” Q moved back to the window before Angelicus could speak - except that Angelicus didn’t have a word to offer - they had all stuck in his throat.

Drumlin didn’t hesitate. “I did it - yes. I did it. I spied on you all for Gravinstad, and you can do away with me for it if you want. I did it so that my family in the Upper Reaches could eat - that much is true. Gravinstad had his hooks in me from the day they ‘released’ me from the Menders’ laboratory - he always had his little spooks everywhere, we all know that, and you’d all be stupid to think that they weren’t down here - who knows, there might be others standing right among you right now. Gravinstad isn’t too particular.

“What’d I tell him? Nothing much - I often lied. What did I care, as long my family stayed safe and he, the bloody-mouthed one, stayed up in his keep. But then Gaul came - and that changed the calculations. I didn’t know if Gravinstad had others down here - I assumed he did - and I didn’t want him turning to me one day and saying, ‘How come I got this tidbit of information from so-and-so and not from you? What else have you not told me? How much do you not love your family?’ And there it would be - my family gone and me buried alive here. No dice.

“So I told him about Gaul, and Alma - but that was all. That was the last time I sent him anything. What Gravinstad did after that he did without me feeding him anything - but, like I said, I’m pretty sure I’m not alone down here. Gravinstad





likes to eat from a lot of different plates. So, there it is - kill me if you want - I did you no harm, but I didn't do us any good, either. That's the way it is when you deal with Gravinstad - everything turns to shite, especially the stuff you love."

No one moved. Drumlin's story - well, how many of them had something similar, if not in the circumstances, certainly in the feelings - those that could remember their families remembered all manner of pain, and those who could not remember ached with the wish to have a family to recall. They all hated their lives, their deformities - and who could blame Drumlin for wanting to keep them alive?

But, on the other hand - there is always the other hand - this man/machine - this *manchine* - had consorted with the enemy, for Gravinstad was always, would always be, always had to be the enemy, the demon that burned in their brains and souls. Drumlin had to pay a price for what he did, even if what he did, they all would have done if faced with the same choice. And so the crowd, without even discussing anything, came to a decision - it was only a matter of choosing the method of punishment.

And so they thought, in the wordless way mobs think, until Q's voice lofted out over them again.

"I know what you're thinking," he said, "the Drumlin must pay *something* for what he did. And *usually* that would be the case - usually. But not today." Q paused, and even Drumlin turned to look at him.

"Someone else betrayed you." He lowered his face to Drumlin. "I know where you keep the telegraph - have known it always. Gravinstad doesn't know who's at the other end - I'll bet your family is safer than it's ever been for the information Gravinstad got thinking it came from you." Q looked away, back to the crowd. "Gaul was undecided about leaving - as well she should have been, seeing as how we were asking her to walk off the edge of a cliff without giving her any reason to think she'd be able to fly. I thought - I believed - she wouldn't go unless - well, unless someone pushed her off the cliff.

"So I pushed - a few bright taps to Gravinstad, and the move was made."

"You called down the assassins?" From Drumlin. As expected.

"I did."

"For your own selfish - "

"Everything you would say to me is the truth."



"It still needs to be said," snarled Drumlin. "You wanted Alma back before you died - you don't care about the child/god. It's just about your own selfish - I can't believe you risked our lives! Who cares if the child/god never came back? You think life is going to be *better* if Gaul and Rufus come back lugging Alma and this - thing? That Gravinstad is going to let *you - us* - keep it? Q, grief I can understand, abide - but you could have gotten some of us killed. At least I never set up something like that."

A confusion came over the crowd - new information, first jerked right, then left, not one but two traitors and both of them respected and depended-upon - what should they do? And no one had any answers.

Or, it would be more truthful to say that the answers came from someplace completely unexpected. From over their heads. Raining down stone and injury and death.

Swiddle and Pym and gang, as they escaped up the stone steps and back out into the sewer, had left behind what Swiddle had called their "gifts," since it was he who had put them together - in reality, some very nicely hand-crafted bombs, with intricate precise clockwork mechanisms - exquisitely precise - that had been set to go off days after they had been triggered - set to go off when the Feralz had come to believe that all threats had disappeared, that it was all right to let down their guard and go back to what they considered their normal lives and put away, for the time being, the thought that the Upper Reaches wanted them extinct and erased from memory.

Exquisite timing.

One right after the other, following the line of the stairs up to the sewer.

And not small, by any measure - whatever Swiddle had packed them with burned hotter and brighter and more fierce than ordinary gunpowder. Something government-issue, no doubt - the tax-money of the citizens of Valice at work once again.

And as the crowd craned their heads up to look at the explosions - giant blooms of fire that tore apart the air and stone - they saw, too late, boulders screaming down on them, smashing into them as they ripped into the Commons and the gardens and everything soft and hard in-between.

Bodies disappeared under the deluge, and those not crushed spun backwards the way water in a pond spurts away in waves when a stone smacks the surface.



Without even thinking Drumlin sped down the stairs and started herding people down the street, screaming as he did, "Get into the cellars! Get into the basements!" No one in front of him needed to be told twice - they scattered like dandelion seeds on the wind. He turned back just in time to see a jagged spear of granite grind through the roof of the chambers, and, turning, he sped back into the building, then up the stairs where he saw Q and Angelicus staring at the stone spike, which had knifed right between them, touching neither.

By now the rock-fall had stopped, all the bombs having spent themselves. Shards, grains, dust - that continued, sounding just like the water that usually filled the air. In the sudden raspy silence Drumlin and Q looked at each other. Angelicus, in an agony of indecision - he admired them both, loved them both - shifted his eyes from one to the other, waiting to see what would happen.

"Who do you think they'll hate the most now?" Drumlin spat out.

"We both know the answer to that," Q said in his usual quiet way.

"They'll hate you like I hate you."

"Drumlin - " Angelicus began.

"Shut up." Said not with fierceness, Angelicus thought, but sadness. Drumlin hated what he found himself saying, but he needed to say it.

"Look at what you did," Drumlin continued. "The creatures you say you love - you can begin to figure what prayers you want to say by their graves."

By now all three of them could hear what they had not been hearing before: cries, screams, yells, shouts as people picked their way through the rubble to save whom and what they could save.

"That is, if they will even let you near the graves. If they're smart, they won't let you touch a thing - the touch of death you have. It'd be better if you finished off your dying right now before they got a hold of you."

Angelicus waited for Q to say something, but Q had nothing to say - Drumlin had said all that needed saying, and what could Q add to that? He was as good as dead if he went downstairs, and rightfully so - he had brought evil into the place he had said would always be safe, and there was no redemption for that sin, even if Gaul and Rufus came back with Alma and the child/god and former glories and triumphs were restored. The only question now was about the manner of his dying, not the fact of it.

Drumlin turned to Angelicus. "You with him or not?"



“Angelicus,” said Q, “there’s no reason for you to do anything but stay here and help - you’re needed, you’re important - you don’t need to do anything for me.”

“Yes, I do,” Angelicus replied, giving Drumlin a look that was both nervous and defiant. “What you did - “ He let the sentence drop - they all knew how it ended. “But you’re not a devil - you need help.”

Drumlin pointed his metal arm at Angelicus. “You stick with him, you’re dead, too.”

“He’s dying, Drumlin,” Angelicus replied. “I can’t let him die alone.”

“You should - he would’ve had you killed without a second thought.”

“I have my own second thoughts.”

“Then suit yourself,” Drumlin said, his voice low but hard. “Consider yourself killed off.”

The three of them heard footsteps on the stairs. Nail appeared, his talon’d feet cutting into the wood floor. “They’d kill me if they knew I was doing this,” he wheezed out, “but they’re at the Commons now - and they’re coming for you.” A clawed hand pointed at Q. “And you, too.” The hand shifted to Drumlin. “They see the two of you as one.” Nail nodded toward Angelicus. “Like it or not, angel-boy, unless you kick these two out and take over, they’re going to crush you, too. They’re in no mood to not get what they want.”

“Do it, Angelicus,” Q said, “banish us. Now.”

Already they could hear the angry voices pouring through the streets.

“Angelicus,” Nail warned, “you got about five seconds to decide the rest of your life.”

“All right! They’re gone.” They could all hear the anguish in Angelicus’ pronouncement.

“Not good enough - you’re going to have to say it from that window, to all of them - and they’re gonna have to see the two of you disappear - “

“Shut up! You’ve done what you’re supposed to do - now get out of here!”

Nail bowed, a smirk on his face. “Happy to be of service, fly-boy.” Nail turned to Q and Drumlin. By now the square outside the Chambers churned with bodies and anger. “I never liked either of you - I don’t feel one bit sorry for whatever’s going to happen to you.” To Q he added, “You made something down here, I’ll



give you that - but what you did was stupid past stupid. There can never be any going back to *up there*, never any forgiving, you understand? The Upper Reaches might think we're the dead and half-dead ones down here, but *they made us!* And that just shows the deadness at the middle of their own hearts. We're the live ones, Q, we're the ones the rest of the world is going to have to rely on if it wants to come back alive - and one of the best things we can do to make sure we keep our health is to get rid of sicknesses like the both of you."

Nail pointed at Angelicus. "Do it now, or I will kill you myself and throw your meat to the dogs outside."

All of them heard stomping and crashing from the floor below, and then heavy feet on the stairs as Feralz pushed their way forward.

Angelicus, without hesitating, walked to the top of the stairs and barred their advance. "Get out of here," he barked. "Go back outside and wait."

"We want Q and Drumlin," a voice demanded.

"They're under my protection."

"You don't have any right to give them protection." A second voice, ragged and angry.

"You don't have to right to hurt them," Angelicus threw back.

"We have the right to protect ourselves." The first voice again, sharper.

"And you think turning into an animal will do that? Don't you have enough of that from the way they ripped you apart? You want to be like Gravinstad?"

At the mention of the name, the mob hesitated, and that gave Angelicus the only chance he was going to get. "Go back out. In two minutes I'm going to be at the window - you'll hear what you need to hear. Think you can you spare two minutes out of the rest of your lives? Go on - leave. It'll all be over soon enough."

A hesitation - then a clatter and slam as the crowd turned back and away. Angelicus watched them file out, and without taking his eyes off them spoke to Nail. "You leave, too - and guard the door. Make sure I get my two minutes."

Nail hobbled down the stairs. The slam of the door, and then quiet.

Angelicus spun to face Q and Drumlin. "You heard it all. It's all been set. Choices made. Now it's all about playing them out so that no one gets killed." Angelicus focused on Drumlin. "You're both going into exile - they're not going to get their hands on you. What you did, you did - nothing can undo it. All I can do is



---

put you someplace where you can begin to look into your own hearts and figure out what you need to do with yourselves.” Angelicus pointed to the window. “I’m going to tell them exactly that. Then I’m going to escort you to the border and let you go - you have six other cities to lose yourself in - you both know about the secret food-stores we’ve made down there, so you won’t go hungry - you can go to the Upper Reaches and take your chances there - but you will be banished, you will be gone.” Angelicus paused, the next words the most difficult he’d ever said in his life. “You are my brothers, we have made a life here together - but from now on - brothers no more.”

And this is exactly what Angelicus told the crowd. And exactly what Angelicus did, leading Drumlin and Q to the border, the crowd following behind, still seething yet also now coming to terms with what they were losing. (And Q, suddenly weakening as they left the Chambers, picked up by Drumlin and carried on Drumlin’s back.) And the two cripples disappearing over the edge into the ruins. And then Angelicus alone as the crowd dispersed, watching where they had vanished.





## Chapter 23

### **Wherein A Lullaby Keeps The Assassins Calm, Perhaps More Calm Than They Have Ever Been In Their Lives, And Helps Ridicule Overcome Anger**

---

Swiddle, because he wasn't bound by the mask clamped over Pym's face, was the first to notice - the ground was not - what was a proper word? - stable. To be sure, they were in a bog/swamp, and a bog/swamp had some stretch to it, of course, a little spongy-give - but this was more than that. In fact - though Swiddle really didn't want to entertain this thought - the ground felt alive. And suddenly unpredictable.

Pym, though, was deep into his scents - not making "sense," thought Swiddle, without any laugh to go with it - and either didn't notice or didn't care that the ground beneath their hobnails had begun perking like bacon on a hot griddle.

Swiddle had also been taking note of the Ravens threading around them - a rookery on the move, specks of char on the glary sky, their calls to each other ear-harsh and rhythmic. Ravens and a swamp were usually not mutual - but the thought dropped away as he cantered to keep up with dogster Pym.

And then - that was it, it wasn't just something he *thought* he felt, he felt it sure and unforgiving - the ground flipped him, butt over tea kettle, a one-and-a-half gainer landing belly-flat and knocking the air clean out of him. He just caught Pym making the same geometric curl as the elastic ground-cover slung him up and over and slam-down, knocking the mask loose and no doubt smashing the glass vials in Pym's pockets.

Then it stopped. Swiddle didn't move, couldn't move if he wanted to since he barely had enough breath in him to know that he barely had any breath in him. He managed to croak one word: "Pym?"

Pym didn't answer - Pym didn't move. Swiddle couldn't see if Pym's ribs moved or not. "Pym?" he managed again. Same result: same silence.

But if the thought of Pym's sudden mortal departure was not enough to jerk Swiddle back to life, the five arm-thick worms jutting themselves up suddenly through the ground in front of Swiddle's nose did the trick. Swiddle flipped onto his back and jack-knifed himself into a sitting position. But too late - five and



five and five more spearheaded through until suddenly he was surrounded by a palisade of wavering worms, their skin peristaltic, their smell (even without Pym's magic mask) a smell of everything that has ever gone rotten in the world going rotten all over again.

Swiddle threw Pym a terrified glance, but he couldn't see Pym's body through Pym's own ring of wick-like worms.

One of the worms curled itself toward his face - no, it was his ear, his right ear - and without any ceremony stuck its pointed end into his ear canal. Swiddle tried to pull away but couldn't because a second worm had done the same thing to his left ear, both worms pinning him in place, and Swiddle was about to scream for help he knew wouldn't come when, on the other side of his breathing and clanging heart, he heard, through the wormheads stuck in his ears, something like - what? it couldn't be but it was the only word that came to light - like a cradlesong.

A lullaby.

And Swiddle became unafraid, and something like laughter settled into his throat.

\* \* \* \* \*

The worms had names.

Not that Rufus and Gaul could pronounce them because they sounded how dirt would sound if dirt (and swamp muck and fen-scum) had a way to bark and gargle and belly-slap all at the same time. The closest they could come for the worm - actually, The Worm, since it was so large - was Mish-la-graw-a-thrppssiss-sluck. They said it several times to let their tongues get the hang of it (they had to keep wiping spit off their chins because of the tongue-roll caused by the "thrppssiss" part of the name) and it seemed to please The Worm that they tried (they chose to *think* it pleased The Worm - they had no way of knowing since it had no face to show if was pleased or displeased as well as the fact that The Worm and all the wormlets surrounding them on their rock hadn't eaten or done something equally nasty to them - yet - which seemed a good sign).

In reply to The Worm's question about the story, Rufus answered, and it surprised Gaul no end when Rufus phrased his answer in actual sentences, with actual proper periods and other punctuation. She had thought, in the little time she'd known him, that Rufus always spoke like air hissing out of a punctured balloon.



“Thank you, M-M- Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck” - wipe chin - “thank you for offering us a story. But we want to know something that’s a little more important at the moment, if that’s all right with you.”

From somewhere both inside and outside their heads, they heard Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck say, “What would you like to know?”

“The two humanthings you said were chasing us - could we hear a little more about them?”

“Even better,” said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. Two other thin worms slithered themselves up onto their rocks and starting at their ankles wound themselves around Rufus and Gaul. “Don’t worry,” said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. “We’re doing nothing to hurt you.”

“Oh yeah?” yelled Gaul, who looked at the face-end of the worm just smelly inches away from her own. “Why’re you trussing us up like a - a - “ Gaul couldn’t think of a good comparison because she was distracted by the fact that that the worm had opened what was clearly now the replica of something like a face except that it consisted basically of a hinged slit cut into the worm’s head and that the worm, without explanation or even a “please,” popped Gaul’s entire head into its mouth. Gaul’s scream went nowhere in the moist darkness. And she realized, as she screamed, that she could scream. She could breathe. It smelled, but she wasn’t going to suffocate. “Rufus?” she yelled out.

“Don’t worry” came Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck’s voice. “Your friend is fine. You are fine. We’re going to bring you to the humanthings - you can’t travel underswamp like we can, so we’ll breathe for you - it’s so much quicker for us to go this way. For you, too.”

And with that, Gaul felt herself lifted and turned upside-down, and then all along the length of her body she felt the rhythmic contractions of her carrier as it bored through the swamp-mat. Dirt, then water, then roots, then vines, then - and then - all of it washed over her, and she was surprised that she could tell the difference between the different materials without being able to see them - as if all her other ways of knowing about the world got sharper because she had lost her eyes for the moment. She sensed the worm angling upwards - they must be coming to where they were going. And then the air on her skin.

The worm removed its mouth, spitting her head out like a cherry pit, and it took her a couple of seconds to adjust her eyes and get her bearings. She saw Rufus, who had just been popped out as well, and she had to laugh as she gave



Rufus and herself the once-over and saw them covered in mire and muck. Well, after all, they had just burrowed through a swamp - can't look one's best after that. (And where was this light-heartedness coming from?)

"There," said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck, and Gaul and Rufus turned at the same time to see two worm-fenced-in men, one of them sitting on his haunches with a worm stuck in each of his ears and a smile on his face, the other flat-out on the ground, breathing but unconscious, worms also stuck in his ears. "Do you know them?"

"No," said Rufus, coming closer to the unconscious one, then moving to the sitting one, who, when he saw Rufus, plucked the worms out of his ears. "Hello" was all he said, then put the worms back in.

"What's going on with him?" Rufus asked.

"We're singing to him" was all Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck would say.

"No, we don't know them," Gaul added as she inspected both of them. "What were they doing?"

"Following you."

"Why?" Rufus thought out loud.

"C'mon, Rufus, it's not that hard. Someone knows where we're going - maybe this Gravinstad's got a Feralz or two in his pocket - "

"I wouldn't believe that!" Rufus shot back at her.

"Really? All of you are all clean? In DEAD, we all knew who the flip-flop-mouths were, who was feeding what info to who - you're telling me that wouldn't happen in Under-City?"

Rufus didn't answer right away, which was sort of an answer to Gaul's question. "Whatever the finking going on in Under-City, it's pretty clear these two are not here for a picnic."

"They're a danger to you?" asked Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck.

"I guess," said Rufus, unable to keep the sadness of being betrayed out of his voice. "No one from their side should know we're out here doing what - we are supposed to be doing."

"And yet here they are," said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck in a voice that said "obvious" and "dangerous" at the same time.



By now the worms and Rufus and Gaul had to take notice of the Ravens - not just a few of them but at least a couple of hundred moving their way through the grass. Rufus and Gaul looked at each other, then shrugged their shoulders: sense and meaning had long ago run away from them.

“What do you want to do with them? With ‘us’ to do with them, if you want?”

Gaul turned to Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. “This is all moving too fast for me.” She turned to Rufus. “You, too?”

“Yes me too” answered Rufus, back to his customary verbal rush.

“We can’t decide about them until we know who they are, what they’re doing.”

“Why?” said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. “They are not here to celebrate your birthdays. What more do you need to know?”

By this time, one of the Ravens had come up to Rufus, and Rufus, kneeling down, spoke to it. The Raven responded, and to Gaul’s even further surprise (if there was any more room left for surprises), Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck let loose a stream of Ravenspeak that took both Rufus and the Raven off-guard. The three exchanged what Gaul could only take as a question-and-answer about the two captives - one a happy-for-the-moment twit, the other doing a good imitation of a corpse - and then finished and looked at Gaul.

“How do you know all that with the Ravens - and for that matter, how we speak?”

“We’re very interested in sounds because we live in a place without a lot of air and no light - but the underswamp carries sounds really well - would you care to know the physics of it?”

“No,” said Gaul. She’d noticed that the one who was unconscious had groaned and stirred.

“Later, then - part of the story. We learn all sorts of sounds to keep ourselves connected in a place without light and air and maps.”

“And you know these Ravens?” Gaul asked.

“All life knows all other life,” Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck replied. “Only life like your kind goes out of its way to know nothing about anything.”

By now Pym had groaned himself awake - the presence of two worms stuck in his ears didn’t seem to bother him - the effect of the lullaby - and Gaul and



Rufus gave each other a look that said “We have to do this even if we don’t want to.” Rufus nodded. Gaul turned back to Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck.

“I want to ask them some questions - I’m gonna need their ears.”

The air around them thickened and pulsed for a moment, and the four worms headphoning in to Swiddle and Pym pulled out and slipped back into the ground. Pym just looked stunned, but Swiddle started slapping the ground around him, shouting “I want ‘em back! I want ‘em back” until, realizing they weren’t coming back, slumped over in a grumbling funk, “it was so nice - it was so nice - “

Gaul spat out, her anger louder than she’d intended, “Who are you?”

Pym, now more awake, stared in frank disbelief at the worms fencing him. He stood up, and the worms extended themselves to his height, keeping the cage packed tight.

“Who are you?” Gaul asked again, and Pym’s voice threw back, “It’s too bad Alma has to depend upon two twizzly little gits like you to rescue her.”

“Said the scuzz-bucket who can’t even keep up with the gits,” which surprised Gaul since she’d never heard language like that come out of Rufus’ mouth - and his face, torqued and tight - he was mad-mad-angry and Gaul had no doubt that if pushed Rufus would rip out their hearts and saw them both in two. “You work for Gravinstad,” more statement than question.

Swiddle stood up - the worms lengthened themselves. “Pym,” he threw out, “Pym.”

“Don’t use our names!” Pym snarled back.

“Who cares?” said Swiddle. “It’s not like the war. And how do they know if our names are our names or not. I don’t even know if your name is your name, even after all these years.” Swiddle motioned to Gaul. “Come closer - him, too - I assume it’s a ‘him,’ can’t tell with the raggedy hair, even though your name is Rufus.”

“And how do you know that?” Rufus shouted, unable to contain the heartbreak he felt as he knew without doubt that someone in Under-City had sold them out.

“Because you have a few squealers in that sewer-pit of a city you sicklings call home.”



“Who?” Rufus’ voice crackled. Gaul heard/felt Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck send out the healing bass vibes, and while Rufus didn’t slacken in the rage/sadness he held in his face, Gaul could see his body soften just a touch as the sound-waves smoothed over him.

“We don’t know,” offered Swiddle. “Gravinstad - oh shut up, Pym, it’s not like they don’t already know - we don’t know from who Gravinstad hears. He just gives us our marching orders, and we march.”

“To kill us?” This from Gaul, a gentling hand on Rufus.

“No - to shadow you - to report.”

“To watch you fail is more like it,” threw in Pym. “It wasn’t in our orders to kill you - but you never know what can happen out here in the wilds.”

“How could you report all the way back to Valice?”

“Swiddle, shut up.”

“Agreed.”

The Raven tapped on Rufus’ boot, and Rufus reached down to pick it up as it let loose a rush of Ravenspeak. “This Gravinstad,” Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck said, “clever man - he has a machine that flies out to meet them, and then flies back.”

Swiddle gaped. “That’s what the bird said? How would it know - “

“Piloted by a half-monkey/half-machine” added Rufus “the monkey broken apart no different than us the bastard!”

“Oh, it’s very different than you,” Pym said, “it’s got more brains.”

Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck intervened. “You know what you need to know. The question now is, what do we do with them?”

Rufus put down the Raven and stalked up to the cage that held Swiddle. Swiddle held Rufus’ gaze - after all, even though Pym would say that Swiddle had mush for brains and spine, Swiddle was an assassin down to his bones, and no rat-faced groundling was going to stare him down or make him feel a remorse he had never felt before - but part of Swiddle also hated this whole business, not just tailing these two children but being the dog to Gravinstad’s hound-master. And what he hated most at this very moment was the possibility that he would die in some horrible fashion in the clutches of a swamp smelling putrid and surrounded by worms. That, he thought, was not a dignified dying.



Rufus left Swiddle and walked to Pym. Pym shared none of Swiddle's qualms. If he was going to be raked to death here, fine - none of the brutal universe made sense, anyway, and to die in one place or another made no difference. The only thing that mattered was to die as viciously as possible, taking out everything one could in a swath of blood and bone-shards until the breath left and blood oozed away. Let the rat-faced boy rant in indignation - it would make cutting his throat all that more humorous. And if the rat-face instead was able to gut and spit him, fine - more power to him. In either case, make it hurt as much as possible - at least the universe understood that much.

"I think we should kill them." Rufus' voice had grown deeper and more jagged.

Gaul turned slowly to face him. "You can't mean that," she said. "You of all people - "

"Kill them and wipe their muck off the face of the earth like cleaning off a stain full of pox and - " Rufus to Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck: "Would you do that for us?"

"We could," said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. "We've no great love for those who drain the swamps and foul everything we need to live. The fewer of them, the better."

"Wait, wait," interrupted Gaul, "you can't really - we can't really - be talking about killing these two. That wouldn't be right." To Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck: "Do you know why were out here?"

Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck indicated the Ravens. "They've let us know. Which is why we didn't kill you right away. You had protections."

"But you'd kill them?" Gaul argued.

"Why not?" Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck argued back. "They're no good to anyone, they've done no good for anyone - what would be the point of keeping them alive to do more harm?"

"But they haven't done any harm to us!"

"You think they wouldn't you think they have to sin against us to make them sinners we kill them we get rid of a problem that'll keep us from doing what we need to do."

"Then it'll make you as bad as they are, a killer."



Rufus marched right up to Gaul, edged over into her space, making her lean back. “Nothing I did would make me as bad as those two what with what was done to me don’t you think we have the right to protect ourselves to get revenge and justice what good is life if you can’t wipe out what lives and breathes to wipe you out?”

And Gaul didn’t have a good answer for that one because what Rufus was saying made sense - and the anger and shame he felt gave his words weight and truth, more weight and truth than Gaul had on her side.

“But it’s wrong,” Gaul said.

“It being wrong doesn’t make it the wrong thing to do” Rufus shot back “because not all wrong things are the same wrong things there are worse wrongs and better wrongs and these two are worse than any worse I’ve ever done or thought about doing I say kill them and make it hurt long and hard.”

Pym let slide a bit of snide remark. “You should come work for us, laddie - you have the gravitas for doing classy assassinations. What say you, Swiddle?”

Rufus was too far from Pym for his gob of spit to make it, but Rufus’ intention was clear.

“Look, *Feralz*,” the word dripping sarcasm from Pym’s lips, “make up your minds - either kill us or exile us - we don’t care.”

“Speak for yourself,” muttered Swiddle.

Pym ignored him. “Your philosophical debates just eat up whatever time all of us have left in the world.”

Gaul and Rufus faced each other, and the tense misery in her friend’s face broke Gaul’s heart. Almost everything in her wanted to do what Rufus wanted to have done in order to bring peace and charm back to her friend. Almost. Some small portion of her couldn’t let go of the thought that killing these two, even if they deserved it, even if life would be better with them erased, was not what this journey of rescue and comfort was about.

“All I can say, Rufus, is this: we got sent out here to find something that was supposed to make life better - I can’t believe starting it off with executions is the way to make that work out. We’re coming from a world chock-full of what these two are chock-full of - are we supposed to be adding to the pile or making the pile smaller?”





Gaul took a step closer - then another step - and did something which, for her - a month ago, even two weeks ago - was not on her usual list of motions and intentions. She laid the back of her hand against Rufus' cheek and stroked his skin. As she did, she could feel (Rufus could probably feel it, too) the bass soothe of the worm-voices. Rufus' eyes were pinned to the ground, and without looking at Gaul, he grabbed her hand to stop her caress. Then, with a move both jerky and strong, he brought Gaul's hand to his lips and kissed it. "All right," he said, "all right all right all right."

They stepped apart.

The Raven spoke, and Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck laughed. Even Rufus smiled, disheartened as he felt. "What?" said Gaul. To Rufus: "You have to teach me this gabble."

Rufus looked first at Swiddle, then Pym. "This is what the Ravens propose that they carry you back to Valice and dump you on Gravinstad's doorstep like so much meat gone past its prime."

"They could do that?" said Gaul, "lug these tubs o' guts all the way back?"

"I like it," said Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. "Certain rough justice in ridicule."

"Then let's do it," said Gaul. "Let's drop 'em off like a couple of dead letters."

Two worms out of each fence wrapped themselves tight around Pym's and Swiddle's legs to keep them still while Rufus and Gaul, with the help of the Ravens, coiled them with tough vines until the two of them were wound as tight as two spools of thread. Then, after Rufus and Gaul pushed the two trussed assassins over onto the ground (and took great pleasure in the solid *thunks* they made as they hit the dirt hard), several dozen Ravens marched up to each man, hopped on top of them, dug in their talons, and started a rhythmic wing-stroking that slowly but surely lifted each man up and up and up and back and back and back to Valice. Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck and Rufus and Gaul and all the worms watched as the black-clotted airborne lumps slowly dissolved into the day-glare and horizon, followed by a long pennant of Ravens cawing out their laughter.

Rufus and Gaul turned to look at one another. Rufus' face said "Thanks." Gaul's face said "Thanks." They nodded - and the storm had now passed.



---

In their ear-bones they heard Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck's voice. "Now, about that story."





## Chapter 24

### **Wherein Pym And Swiddle Find Deliverance With Bruises, And In A Manner Of Speaking, So Does Bensole**

---

The parade of ministers wore him out, as they always wore him out. There were always decisions to be made about things he didn't understand - he wanted to understand them so that his mother, who always stood behind him, who always whispered in his ear the words that needed to be said, would be proud of how well he did what his father used to do - but it just got too hard sometimes, with the trade deficits and budget expenditures and policies on land use, and after a while Bensole felt just the way he thought a puppet must feel, with the strings jerking and juking him in every direction than the one he wanted to go in, which in this case was out of this room and back to his books and games.

At first he didn't see what the rest of the people in the room saw because his back was to the window. But he could see that they saw something because they dropped their papers and ledgers and portfolios on the table and floor and moved to the full-lengthed windows behind him, muttering their apologies for interrupting but for all of that not stopping.

Elfrida turned as well, and Bensole hopped off his chair and ran around her. He couldn't see because of the minister-herd crowding the viewspace, so he tugged on his mother's dress, and both of them slid sideways out of the room through the french doors onto the balcony.

Bensole clambered up the small wooden stoop against the balustrade that allowed him to get above the edge of the parapet (soon he'd be tall enough to do away with the stairs) and had to hold back his laughter when he saw what everyone else was seeing: several dozen Ravens carrying what looked like thick logs but which in fact were two humans, coiled up in what looked like vines. And even better: the Ravens seemed to be bringing them straight to him, straight to this balcony.

The crowd watched the Ravens drift along, the tiring birds replaced by fresh birds, until the flotilla floated over their heads. Then like dirigibles leaking their lift, the Ravens lowered their cargo earthward. When they were about five feet above the flagstoned balcony floor, Bensole held up his hand for them to stop,

which they did. Elfrida gave him a curious look, but he ignored her, holding his hand up in what he hoped was a king-like gesture of command. Then, with a decisive snap, he swiped his palm downward, and the Ravens, knowing what he meant, let go of the men so that they slammed into the stone with bone-jarring thuds. It was all Bensole could do to keep his delight inside him: he had commanded, and the Ravens obeyed because they knew he was a king, and a king was meant to command and be obeyed. The Ravens, their jobs done, lined up like black-caped sentries on the balcony's banister.

Elfrida turned to the ministers, a broad sharp official smile on her face and her arms spread wide. "The session is over for today. Please pick up your materials and leave as you normally would." The ministers backed up - what else could they do with such a force of nature herding them away from what they wanted to know much more about - but they did so like a bunch of walking jack-in-the-boxes, heads bobbing up and down trying to get a good look, a better look, and getting nothing at all since they kept getting in each other's way. It was not hard for Elfrida to quarry them through the open doors back into the room, like a border collie packing the sheep back into their pens. She closed the double doors behind her, then continued her forward rush, cajoling, joking, flattering, but never stopping her pitched momentum, finally sweeping them out of the meeting room into the corridors, then shooting the bolt on the door. She could hear their muttering and scrabbling through the door panels, then silence as they all moved away. Gravinstad would know soon - they didn't have much time.

Elfrida launched herself back out to the balcony. She not only feared Gravinstad's inevitable arrival - she didn't want to leave Bensole with whomever lay stunned out there. That was the way infections began.

When she pulled the french doors closed behind her, she found Bensole hovering over the two logged bundles. Two men, to be sure - she did not know who they were. "Bensole," she snapped, "get away from them."

Bensole gave her a look half-amused and half - well, the only word Elfrida had for it was "adult," a change she had noted from the time she had told him about the Valiceiad and they had prayed in the chapel. And his gesture to the Ravens - she brought that forward in her mind, now that the ministerial gabble had gone away. A boy's gesture of playing, yes, but something stronger as well. Both pride and fear burned through her - the last thing she wanted was for her boy to have to enter the devilish world of adults even though she knew there was nothing she could do to stop that - he was already there, she knew, and it made



her work in protecting him that much harder - perhaps even impossible, since no one can be protected, really, from whatever evil the world will do. Evil such as these two groaning strangers. She had half a mind - even more than half a mind - to lift them over the balustrade and drop them to the streets below.

"Bensole," she warned again, and Bensole moved away - a step. "Who are they?" he asked.

"I don't know."

"What are they?"

"I don't know."

Behind her the Ravens began to talk, and she listened without talking back to them - she didn't want to reveal to these two that she knew Ravenspeak. They told her what they knew and how they had come to bring them here - at least that's what Bensole figured they were telling her. While their gabble filled the background, Bensole bent down to examine the packages. They couldn't speak since the vines had been wrapped in a way that covered their mouths. But he could see their eyes - and so he examined their eyes.

The eyes of one of them - green, greenish (*hazel* - that was the color) - stared back at him without any light in them - not dead, not blank, but *focused*. The other one - his eyes danced, a little, darting here and there, a simple mud-brown, more lively - but not kind at all, the way a cat always scoped out the territory for any wandering eatable mice.

"Who are you?" Bensole said.

And then he knew.

He stood up and backed away from them

"You went to kill him. You want to kill him."

Their eyes showed that they did not know what he was talking about.

Bensole looked over to his mother, who had finished listening to the Ravens. She joined him. The Ravens followed and hopped onto the two prone bodies. With the same deliberate rhythm they lifted the bodies skyward again. Even hazel-eyes let in a small shift of fear as his body lifted from the solid floor.

Up up up they went, then veered toward the Keep, toward Gravinstad.

At that same moment Elfrida heard what she had been expecting to hear: the heavy thud thud thud of the knocker on the chamber doors.



“That’d be Gravinstad, right?”

“Stay here.”

Elfrida disappeared through the doors. Bensole watched the drift of the Ravens Keep-ward, wishing (and being surprised at his wish) that the Ravens would just drop them and get rid of them. It had been a mistake for the Ravens to stop here - no, *he* had made a mistake in making the Ravens stop here. *He* had put everything into danger - and the confidence he had felt before just melted away.

Even Elfrida couldn’t keep Gravinstad from bursting onto the balcony, and Bensole found himself forced against the stone balusters as if a big fist of wind had punched him backwards.

Bensole scuttled out of the way and to his mother as Gravinstad bellied up to the balcony railing and watched the Ravens port his two hirelings to the Keep.

He snapped around to face them - but Elfrida noticed that even as he did that - a gesture of anger, a move of raw emotion - he guarded it, took the edge off the move. Gravinstad still didn’t know what they knew or didn’t know, and until he got what he wanted he was not going to kill off what could give him what he wanted.

“A question?” she asked.

Gravinstad shot Elfrida a hard look, then softened it ever so little as he spoke. “What else would you expect me to have?”

“Who are they?”

“Why did the Ravens bring them here first?”

“Feeling left out of the loop?”

“I told them to.” This from Bensole, who never spoke to Gravinstad unless Gravinstad spoke to him. Elfrida’s impulse was, first, to shush him and, second, to pull him closer. But she didn’t. She let play out what she knew had to play out at some point.

“*You* told them to? *You*? Who couldn’t change his underwear without asking his mother’s permission?”

“I told them to. They were on their way to there” pointing to the Keep “but they passed by here, and I am the king, and I wanted to know what was going on in my kingdom. I held up my hand, and they stopped.”



---

Gravinstad didn't quite know how to respond to this - what? this nothing, this flea in his ear, something to squash. "So the Ravens dropped them - here?"

"Right there," said Bensole, who stepped the three steps it took to stand where the bodies had been logrolled. "Right here."

"Did they say anything?"

"They couldn't."

"Dead."

"Gagged - by the vines."

"Vines?"

"They were tied up - " Elfrida began, but Bensole cut her off - not harsh, and only she could catch the flicker of apology in his eyes, but definitely a cut-off.

"They were tied up in vines - wrapped around with vines like a package with string. The vines across their mouths - so couldn't talk."

"So they said nothing to you."

"Not to me. Not to my mother."

"Did you know them?"

"Why would I know them?" Elfrida noticed that Bensole did not say "we" - yet another subtle shift.

Gravinstad stared at Elfrida as he spoke to Bensole. "I just thought you might have come across them in your kingly duties."

Elfrida knew what Gravinstad's look meant, that these two men had been the ones, that it was not hard to get rid of kings - and Gravinstad knew she knew this.

"They didn't say anything," Elfrida reported. "They had nothing to say to us. The king has every right to know what he is responsible for - and Ravens carrying in two bodies is unusual enough - though the fact they were carrying them to you doesn't seem all that unusual."

By the now the Ravens had disappeared from view, having banked right around the spike of the Keep. Gravinstad wanted to say much, most of it not useful to him - to curse this woman whom he hated and wanted out of the way, to crush this boy who had begun to think he had powers he didn't really have, even to level Valice from the face of the earth because, truth be told, he had begun to





despise the very thing that gave him all his power because it had begun to stink and fester and decay under his hands. He had gotten everything he wanted - and now he found himself not wanting it.

None of this left his face or his eyes or his lips.

"You're sure they said nothing?"

"There was nothing for them to say."

"There was nothing for them to say," repeated Bensole.

"There was nothing for them to say," mused Gravinstad. "Well, it certainly put a scare into the ministers."

"I hope we can read a full investigative report by the Interior department for our next session. I'm sure you'll make yourself available for questioning."

How he hated her.

He left without saying anything - and Elfrida noted that so rushed had Gravinstad been to get here before any beans spilled that he'd forgotten to bring one or two of his Guardsmen with him. He had been alone - and unguarded. Elfrida had to put aside the leap her mind made from Gravinstad unguarded to Gravinstad attacked to Gravinstad dispatched. She could do it if she had to - and as she looked at Bensole and the small tempering he had shown today - where it had come from she didn't know but it had come and would not stop the more he learned and demanded of himself - she guessed that at some point there would come a time when that time would come.

"I want to know who they were," Bensole said. "And what the Ravens said. Gravinstad doesn't know the Ravens speak, does he?"

"I don't think so," Elfrida answered.

"Otherwise he would have asked about it, wouldn't he?"

"I don't think he could have held himself back from asking. The more he knows that you don't know, the better off he is."

"It's a good thing he doesn't know about the Ravens, then, right?"

"It is a good thing."

"What did they say to you?"

"We need tea and chairs. You go get the chairs."

Elfrida started back into their apartment



---

“Mama?” Bensole called out.

“Yes?” she said, turning around.

“I don’t really like tea.”

“You don’t? All this time?”

“All this time.”

“Why didn’t you just say so?”

“You mean, I could’ve said that?”

“Of course - did you think I wouldn’t’ve liked you if you said you didn’t like tea? If you don’t ask, how will you ever get what you really want? What would you like?”

“Coffee.”

“Coffee? You’ve never had coffee.”

“I want to try it.”

“I’ll put milk and sugar in it - that’ll make it easier to get used to.”

“Milk and sugar it is.”

“Coffee,” Elfrida said, shaking her head. “Learn something new every day.”

She turned once more and went into the apartment.

Bensole looked at the sky and realized he was hungry to hear what his mother was going to say to him - and to taste what coffee tasted like.

\* \* \* \* \*

Elfrida waited in the kitchen while the water boiled in the teapot and the water perked through the grounds in the coffee-maker. Two mugs sat on the counter - his and hers. “His” had been Bensole’s father’s, though Bensole didn’t know that. His father hadn’t liked tea, either. She began to cry.





## Chapter 25

### Wherein The Queen And King Come To A Certainty, And Rufus And Gaul Do Not

---

**G**ravinstad got back to the Keep in time to see the Ravens whirl and whirl and whirl in ever-tightening spirals, then rocket off to the horizon - just as they had done before.

In front of him, dumped once again on bruising slate - Swiddle and Pym. The two Guardsmen watching over the inert but breathing hulks reported how the Ravens had glided in, hovered, then jettisoned their load, all the time filling the air with their ragged gabble.

“Cut them loose,” Gravinstad growled. The Guardsmen slipped out their knives and sawed through the tough fibers. Pym and Swiddle rolled onto their backs, staring up at the sky, the vines digging into their backbones (but they didn’t care - all they wanted to do was make sure the earth would not leave them again). Gravinstad’s face suddenly appeared in their field of view, upside down, unhappy, unsmiling. “Welcome home,” he said in a most unwelcoming voice. “I think you have a lot to tell me.”

Swiddle spoke first, as usual without thinking things through. “Could we have something to eat and drink?”

“Try this,” said Gravinstad, who without hesitation spit in Swiddle’s face. “And consider that generous since word of you airborne two is all over Valice, which means that the element of stealth has, shall we say, been lost.”

“Don’t try that on me,” said Pym.

“I wouldn’t think of it.” Instead, Gravinstad rammed the heel of his boot into Pym’s solar plexus, which made Pym puke up the nothing he had in his stomach.

Gravinstad snapped his fingers, and a Guardsman brought over a camp chair and set it down. Gravinstad lowered himself into it, leaned his elbows on his knees, and spoke to the two thugs like a disappointed parent. “As I said, I think you have a lot to tell me. Perhaps even to teach me. But one thing I want to know right away: our Gaul and our Rufus - where are they?”

“With the worms,” said Pym, his breath returning, wiping the slop off his chin with the back of his hand.

“You mean you killed them?”

Pym managed a half-gargled chuckle and looked over to Swiddle. Swiddle, wiping the muck off his forehead with the palm of his hand, matched Pym’s strangled laugh.

“As you said, *master*, even you have something to learn.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Bensole wasn’t sure if he liked the taste of the coffee - but he knew he didn’t dislike it and would work hard to come to like it. Coffee was what adults drank, and if he drank coffee, then he would be that much closer. So he took another sip, liking the smoothness of the sugar and milk and still trying to get used to the bitterness underneath.

“So Rufus and Gaul - that’s their names, right?”

“Right,” said Elfrida, seated next to him, sipping her tea. “How do you like the coffee?”

“I think it will take me a few more cups to figure out liking it or not.” He took another sip. “It’s not bad. So Rufus and Gaul - they’re all right.”

“They’re all right, I guess - they’re being taken care of. And those two who you had dumped at our feet - at least they’re back here and not out there hunting them down.”

“Which means they’ll make it to the child/god.”

Elfrida put a finger to Bensole’s lips. “Even out here - who knows what Gravinstad has his mad Menders working on.”

“Then teach me Ravenspeak.”

“I think you’re right. I think we can start that right away - we’ll start with your next cup of coffee.”

They both drank in silence.

“I never knew about the worms in the swamp,” Elfrida said to break the quiet. “We were always taught that what lay outside Valice was wasteland, dark matter not worth knowing - only Valice had glory, ‘Valice’ was the answer to any question.”



“Worms,” repeated Bensole. “I want to see them, meet them. And if there are worms like that, then there are, well, there has to be more, right? Other worm-kinds-of-things, right?”

“There is always more out there than what our minds think is enough for us to think about - the real world is always bigger and more surprising than the world up here,” Elfrida said, tapping her forehead. “I would like to see the worms, too.”

“So why don’t we?”

“We can’t.”

“Why not? We can’t leave the city?” Bensole leaned forward. “We’re prisoners - is that what you’re saying?”

Elfrida said nothing for a moment, gazing first at the determined face of her son, then out into the blankness of the sky. “It’s not possible to leave the city and go to the worms.”

Bensole slammed back into his chair. “I don’t get it! I don’t understand!”

Elfrida’s “Be careful with your coffee” popped out without her thinking about it, but her mind flew elsewhere because of Bensole’s simple question: What if they did leave? What if they not only left but worked with Rufus and Gaul to bring the child/god back? She heard Bensole fuming next to her, his frustration a pressure against her side, and she reached over to stroke his forearm to calm him down - and all the while her mind calculated danger and disaster and triumph and - well, what else to call it but hope - and the thought began to form in her that perhaps - perhaps - what Bensole had said was not impossible - in fact, was something that had to be done, because what were they really doing here but waiting for Gravinstad to do away with them one day when they were no longer useful.

Elfrida put her mug down on the stone floor and fronted Bensole. Bensole, startled by her movement, all at once let go of all his frustration and focused on her face. “What?” he said. “Did I say something wrong?”

She shook her head no. Without warning, she let fly a string of Ravenspeak.

“What?” said Bensole.

“That’s your first lesson. It means, ‘We will take about this later.’ Repeat after me.” Elfrida made the sounds again. Bensole did his best to follow her lead, but the sounds fell out of his mouth the ways leaves get blown around by



the wind. Elfrida broke it down for him, sound by sound, and Bensole repeated them - and at once the sounds in his mouth mixed with the aftertaste of the coffee and he felt suddenly happy.

\* \* \* \* \*

Just outside the halo of firelight Rufus and Gaul knew that the worms had set up a perimeter guard, but all they could see was Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck as he sat coiled in front of them, three or four feet of him spiked upright and penduluming now six inches to one side, six inches to the other, as the stream of story poured out of him into the ears of Gaul and Rufus.

"The worm began at the beginning of the world," Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck chanted. "Without the worm at the beginning of the world there would have been no world because it was hard-packed of rock and without a heart. The worms gave the world a beating heart because they passed through the earth and the earth passed through them making soil, making life to burst through rock and turn rock into story and story into us."

Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck went silent. Rufus and Gaul, food-full (gift of the worms), gazed into the fire, lost in thought and feeling.

"Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck?" Gaul asked.

"Yes?"

"Do you know why we're out here?"

Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck didn't answer at first.

"Do you?" insisted Gaul.

"Yes."

"Could you tell me, then?"

Rufus punched Gaul in the upper arm, but not hard. "Don't be daft Gaul you know why we're here."

Gaul punched Rufus back a lot harder. "I know why *you're* here - I just don't know *why* I'm here." Gaul stood up, began pacing. "This child/god - this Alma - who are they to me? I got no proof that any of this will work out the way people want it to work out. Everybody's got their hooks into this idea for what *they* need - how can I know anyone's telling the truth about anything?"

"You do - well, did - probably 'do' again when they get ordered back out to get you - have two men sent out to shadow you - your being tracked means that



you two are worth something to someone,” Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck said, “and so what you are looking for must also be worth something to someone.”

“I don’t care what it means to anyone else! I want to know why it should mean anything to *me*!”

Gaul must have heard herself, saw Rufus shudder and turn away, because she softened her tone right away.

“You know about the child/god, then?” Gaul asked.

“Yes,” Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck replied, “we wish we didn’t but we do.”

Gaul shot Rufus a big-question look, but Rufus stared at the fire.

“You wish you didn’t?” echoed Gaul.

“We know about it, but we wish it wouldn’t come back.” The way Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck said “it” made it sound as if he was ready to spit into the dirt. “It’s been much better without the gods around.” Again, he did it again, that “it” - aaarrrrkkkk-pfth!

“I thought everybody wanted the child/god back.” Gaul stared at Rufus. “That’s what certain people have made me believe.”

“Not us. We have no use for it or for any of them. Gravinstad did everyone a good favor by getting rid of them.”

The use of “Gravinstad” and “good” in the same sentence?

“You think Gravinstad did something right?” Gaul asked.

“Even evil people do good things, though they may not mean to.”

“And getting rid of the gods - “

“And all the fairy tales and mumbo-jumbo hooked up to them,” Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck said, “was a very good thing.” If Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck had had a mouth to spit, he would have definitely spit this time.

“I have to ask it, Rufus.”

Rufus shrugged. Gaul turned back to Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck.

“What was so bad about the gods?”

“When you’re put together mostly out of water and dirt, like us, things get very simple - life here” pendulum six inches to Gaul’s right “death there” six





inches to Gaul's left. "There is pain, and there is whatever stops the pain. And when death comes, as it always does, it squeezes out the water and the dirt inside us and gives them back to the water and dirt already in the ground, and that's that. We don't care if any of that 'means' anything, makes any sense. Nothing makes any sense. But we love each other, feed each other, fight each other, sometimes kill each other - and that's just the way it is. That's all there is to us. That's all we need."

"But the gods - " Gaul persisted.

Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck moved his coils, took a different position. "It's not the gods, really - they're just stupid and vain and a big cosmic mistake and make nothing but trouble for everything. It's what other beings did - beings like you - that we hate - believe in stupid stories, patch together books of the worst nonsense you can think of - miracles, the sun stopping in the sky, seas turning to blood - and then kill each other off saying that their book is the right one, their gods are the right ones - and the gods all the time laughing and stirring up trouble and not caring how much blood flowed or how much suffering happened. With the gods gone, the people could snap out of their insanities and see life for what it really is - get the 'worm's-eye view.'" If Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck had had a mouth, it would be smiling.

"So why did you save us today if - "

"Because it's not right for two men to chase down like rabbits two children who are only trying to do what they think is the right thing" Rufus spit out in a word-stream "even if the worms think the right thing they're doing is not the right thing at all and pretty stupid for all of that."

"Something like that," said Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck. "You talk as if you your tongue and teeth just lay back and don't get in the way." Back to Gaul. "We don't care for what you're doing, but we hate it even more when those that have power use it to crush those that don't."

"If I don't get my words in edge-wise I won't get them in at all that comes of being a little rat-faced beggar with no voice to speak of."

"And I have to ask you," said Gaul to Rufus, "did Q feed me a load of trash in Under-City, or does this thing we're doing really have legs to it?"

Rufus looked at Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck, the fire, the stars, the guard-worms, his bitten fingernails. "You can look at me, too," said Gaul to get Rufus' attention.



“No one really knows” Rufus let out “and Q doesn’t want to die without knowing and he really really really wants to see Alma before he loses his head I’m sorry bad joke.”

“I got suckered,” sighed Gaul.

“Look at what you got in return,” offered Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck.

“And what’s that?” Gaul felt her voice was coming out of her belly, her spirit had fallen so low.

“You ever feel more alive than you feel right now?”

“Alive?”

“Alive.”

Gaul looked at Mish-la-grow-a-thrrpssiss-sluck with what she knew was the face of a pole-axed dunce.

“Alive?”

“You’ve never heard the word before?”

“Course I have - just that - “

Gaul felt her face move out of “dumb” into “well, I’ll be damned!”

“I don’t think I’ve ever felt alive ‘til now, to be honest.”

“There you go.”

“There I go what?”

“You’re being what most people never get to be in their entire lives of dirt and water.”

“Alive?”

“Alive. So how can you muck up a gift like that with anger at your friend Rufus when, child/god or no child/god, you escaped from that cesspit called Valice and met us? Seen some of the world? Fought a battle? Been rescued by worms?”

“Do you all have a name?”

“You couldn’t say it - you don’t have enough spit in your mouth or hours in a day. ‘Worms’ll do well enough.”

“Well, thanks to the worms - and thanks to Rufus.” Gaul turned to Rufus. “To you.”



“The sooner you learn to trust the idea that you can’t trust anything to really be what it looks like, the better off you’ll be - there’s a lot of freedom in everything being up for grabs and not nailed down.”

Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck moved himself again and prepared to leave.

“That’s enough. Sleep.”

And between two blinks of Gaul’s thoughtful eyes, Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck slid off into the darkness. Now just Gaul, Rufus, the firelight, and a sky crammed with stars that Gaul stared at as she thought.

“I’m not sorry” said Rufus “I don’t know anything for sure either don’t know if the child/god coming back will make anything better or worse but I do want Q to see Alma because I care about Q - “

“You can take a breath,” offered Gaul.

“ - and it’s best when a parent never gives up on a child and doesn’t let them go like they’re nothing more than dirt on a window I know what I’m talking about.”

Gaul sat and stared into the fire. “Do you think - Never mind.”

“What?”

“Do you think I had parents?”

“You must’ve.”

“Can’t remember.”

“Doesn’t mean you didn’t have ‘em.”

“Comes to the same thing, though, if I can’t remember ‘em. All I can remember when I try to remember are letters, paper, people handing me about like I was an ill-wrapped package. Nothing before that. My first pictures up here” tapping her forehead “make it look like I came out of a dead letter myself.”

“You still had parents.”

“Maybe my parents were dead letters.” Gaul picked up a branch and poked the fire. Sparks scattered up to box the stars. “Maybe having parents ain’t the best thing for a kid to have.” Gaul poked the fire again, harder. “And maybe Alma’s lucky.” Gaul threw the branch onto the fire, watched the flames eat at the bark. “Where do we go from here?”

“Through the swamp I think then past the badlands and then we’re there.”



---

“So it really ain’t that far from Valice.”

“Wouldn’t make sense to have it far away if you’re starving do you want the food close to you or on the other side of the world from you that’s Valice starving and eating everything it can get it’s mouth around.”

“And you were there.”

“And I was there and I don’t want to talk about it.”

The fireflames played over the worry-lines in their young faces, and the light and warmth gave them no relief from the troubles they felt. The only thing certain was that none of it felt certain at all.





## Chapter 26

### Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Escape Into The Ambiguous Company Of The Boatman, Who Had Once Led Life With His Eye On The World

---

*I*t took them three full days to put together a kit for traveling. They had to be careful about it. Elfrida thought she knew pretty through-and-through all the ways Gravinstad spied on them, but she could never be sure that his Menders hadn't come up with something new. They couldn't ask the cook for food, or to prepare something for travel - better to think that everyone on staff was Gravinstad-bought - so while one of them distracted her, the other slipped into the pantry and pocketed items and slipped back out. The same with their clothing. Elfrida would pretend she was rifling through her wardrobe, casually tossing aside a few items here and there, then just as casually lay them out and fold them, as if she might be donating them to the poor, as innocent as a lamb eating clover. She did the same with Bensole's clothes, tut-tutting like a disapproving mother at some imagined stain or wrinkle, keeping up the pretend of it all.

In the library Elfrida would suggest, as if it had just come into her head, that "why don't they look at some of the old maps," adding that doing it together would be more interesting than what that stuffy old tutor had him do when he came to give Bensole his history and geography lessons. So they would haul out map after map so that they could plot out their route while, on the surface, chatter away about how nice it would be to travel to here or to there or Elfrida beguiling Bensole with some story of an exotic land she had visited before she got married and became a mother. All the while they kept an eye on the route they guessed Gaul and Rufus were following, based on the Ravens, based on what Elfrida knew about the mines and the wastelands in-between, based on guesses and hopes.

They also worked through old architects' drawings of the Keep and the other buildings, tracing their fingers along smudged corridor lines and tunnels and passageways. It didn't look good or smooth. They obviously couldn't use the easiest route, which would be to walk out the front gate and lose themselves in Valice's underbelly. And though easiest, it would be very unsafe - Gravinstad's

spies were everywhere, not to mention the cut-purses and other riff-raff ready for a throat-slit and a nab.

No, they had to make their way out through the buildings themselves, and she knew, though she didn't say anything to Bensole, that they would be trusting as much to luck as to knowledge - the drawings were old, the routes unclear, the dangers unceasing. Even with the best of maps they would be at risk at every moment - and they certainly didn't have the best of maps. But what else could they do? They did what they could.

\* \* \* \* \*

They stood in the hallway outside the chapel covered in the pitch-darkness of after-midnight. Each wore a full-out knapsack, stuffed with only what Elfrida thought they would need and not an ounce more. Elfrida had pulled the heavy drapes to on the windows so that no stray eye or ear could penetrate from outside. Bensole had a stool in his hand. His mother waited, listening, hearing the settling of stone, the torque of drying wood. Then she whispered, "All right, let's do the painting."

Bensole put the stool down, stood on it, and faced the painting that he had faced only a few days before. Elfrida put five fingertips against five objects in the painting: the ball, the cheese, a sheep, the young man's head, and the dog on its back. "All right," she said, and Bensole reached out and put his own fingertip on the clown's nose. They heard the noise they had expected to hear.

At the end of the hallway the small door had sprung open. Bensole swung off his knapsack, fell to his hands and knees, and pushed it and himself through. Elfrida followed him, pulling the door shut behind her.

Inside, Elfrida reached to her right and pulled a lever. In the dark sparks flew out and a bright yellow-orange flame jumped to life inside a lantern. They both stood, and Elfrida took a candle and lit it off the lantern-flame, then pulled another lantern off a shelf and lit it from the candle and handed it to Bensole. She pulled off a second lantern, lit it, blew out the candle, then turned off the flame. She grabbed a half-dozen thick candles and stuffed them in her jacket pocket. She felt them knock against the box of matches she'd pulled from the kitchen shelves. She told Bensole to grab candles as well.

Then, without words they moved down the short corridor. Everything looked exactly the same as before - the flame-light jumped off the rough studs and nailheads and coarse chunks of plaster hanging off threads of horsehair. But



everything felt different, too, and Bensole's heart pounded hard. A few days ago he would have walked - he did walk - down this dry-smelling hallway, stuff crunching under their shoes, spider-webs strung with spiders in them, confused and, well, babyish. Not now. Not now at all.

They came to the other door with the other painting on it. Elfrida spread her hand again, and Bensole, on his tip-toes, pushed on the fish. The door sprung open and a gust of cool air met them. Elfrida walked in; Bensole followed.

With Elfrida in front and Bensole behind, Elfrida moved the painting out of the way to reveal another door, this one built of rough timber and furzed with splinters. Elfrida put down her lantern, told Bensole to do the same, and together they lifted off the heavy cross-beam. They leaned their shoulders into the gnarled grain and lunged - the door fought back, but they opened it enough, then grabbed their knapsacks and lanterns and put them on the other side, then the beam, and then themselves. Elfrida pulled the painting against the doorjamb, and together they eased the heavy door back into place. On this opposite side the door also had two brackets gunned into the wall, and Elfrida and Bensole settled the heavy beam into place. Now no one would be able to follow them unless they broke down the door.

Settling their knapsacks on their backs and holding up their lanterns, they both stared hard at the edge of their thrown light.

"Do you remember the map?" Elfrida asked.

"Of course."

"Then you tell me."

Bensole thought a moment, turned the floorplans around in his mind, rifled through the onion-skin-thin sheets of architectural drawings, found what he was looking for. "We follow it until we come to a cross-hallway."

"And then?"

"Turn right."

"Which takes us?"

"To another cross-hallway."

"And - "

Bensole answered before the "then."

"Left until we reach the sluice."





“And from there?”

\* \* \* \* \*

It took them a lot longer to get lost than Elfrida guessed it would. They had made their way to the sluice, then through it, sliding down the spiral staircase, bodies jammed against the wall while the wooden steps, dry-rotted and whining, threatened at every step to toss them headfirst into the darkness like so much trash. At the bottom of the sluice they found that they had to move rocks out of the way to find what the yellowed rendering had made look like a tunnel a person could walk upright in but which, in reality, forced them to crawl on their hands and knees through an inches-thick muck of mud, scum, rat-bones, and whatever else gets caught in the flush-drain of a sluice.

After that - scraping themselves as clean as they could but still smelling like mold and fear - was when they became lost. The flush-drain emptied into a three-pronged tunnel (here, at least, they could stand up), something not mentioned on the rendering, and they were forced to choose a path - the middle one, but without any real solid reason why that one and not the left or the right. And so on they walked.

And walked.

And walked.

Until the lanterns gave out.

The candles were harder to hold - the dripping wax burned the skin, and the flame danced in the breezes so much that at times it became impossible to tell themselves apart from the flitting shadows on the walls.

Eventually (since all paths have to end somewhere) they found themselves emptied out into a broad hallway with nothing but emptiness overhead, an emptiness they felt more than saw since the circle of their candle-light did not cut the surrounding darkness much.

And then -

But it couldn't be -

But it was -

A voice.

A human voice.

Singing.



“I once loved a lass from the streets of the City” it sang “who once loved a lad from these old City streets...”

Elfrida raised her candle and could just make out the wall of the passageway twenty feet away. She pulled on Bensole’s arm, pointed to the wall.

“Blow out your candle,” she said in a low whisper.

They huffed out their candles, but just as they did the singing stopped. Elfrida and Bensole froze, but each would have sworn, if they had dared to say a word, that the darkness was filled with the noise of their brains thinking, the quiet was so dense.

Then the voice started again, and they took the moment to scuttle themselves against the wall.

“The lass broke my heart and the lad got me thinking...”

By now the voice had rounded a curve in the passageway. Each tried to melt into the wall that dug into their spines and ribs and stay very very quiet.

The voice hummed the tuneless tune as it floated through the darkness. And then, when it looked like the voice would pass them, it stopped, and sentences spilled out.

“There are two of you, yes?”

If they could have breathed without breathing, they would have.

“Two, yes - one is deeper than the other, so I’d say older. You can’t hide your breathing - humans can hide many things, but not that.”

Still Elfrida and Bensole stayed glued to the wall behind them. They had no weapon, and even if they could have pulled one out, neither of them knew how to fight. Most likely they would have ended up slashing each other.

“I heard you blow out your candles. Light them for yourselves. You have candles in your pockets - I heard them knock against the box of matches.”

Elfrida, not knowing whether acting or not-acting was the right thing to, dug the matches out of her pocket (their rattle sounded like the jangling of a thousand chains!), slipped one out, rasped it against the scratch-board, and lighted the candle. As she did, the voice moved toward them, changing as it moved into the candle’s light from a voice to a pair of feet, then a pair of feet and dirty pants, dirty shirt and jacket, an arm in the jacket at the end of which stuck out a gnarled hand holding a wooden walking stick, and, most amazing



and shocking of all, a face wearing two criss-crossed eyepatches on each of which was painted an eyeball: two stark-white circles with two black dots in the centers.

"You're blind," Bensole noted, his voice, on top, surprised, and underneath, compassionate.

"Blinded," the voice corrected. "The condition of 'blind,' yes, but not by nature's choice, not by the grace of an uplifting affliction making me appreciate better the gifts that life can bring a person even in this vale of suffering."

"Who blinded you?" Elfrida asked.

But instead of answering, the pair of eyes tipped to one side, then tipped to the other, as if shaking his thoughts back and forth to make them spark against each other.

"Who blinded me, the queen asks."

"I am not the queen."

"Yes you are. "

"No I'm not."

"And this must be your son."

"Leave him alone."

"I haven't done anything to him."

"I am not the queen."

"Yes you are, in name - in name - but perhaps not in your heart? If so, then be so, be 'not-queen' - it doesn't matter to me - nothing matters to me."

"What's your name?" said Bensole. "If you know ours, we should know yours."

He didn't answer right away. He looked at them - that is, he held his face fronted to them, the painted eyes staring - and when he spoke, he seemed to give them an answer to a question they hadn't asked.

"The Boatman - the one that carries the dead from the living shore to the shore of forgetfulness - sometimes carries the forgotten back to the living shore, though that always ends up in tragedy and farts - I've become close to the Ravens - "

Neither Elfrida nor Bensole knew what to say to this, so they said nothing.



"I just gave you my name, in case you weren't listening."

"Boatman?"

"Used to be Divot, now it's Boatman."

"And you live here?" Elfrida asked.

"Live? Not a word I believe in anymore. Since I've given up hope, I have felt much much better."

Divot took a step closer, and as he did, he arced the walking stick above their heads in a blurred weave of infinity signs, then slammed it into the ground. His voice growled out.

"The queen/not-queen and her son are found wandering in a forsaken part of the Keep, stinking of slime and escape and wearing 'lost' all across their faces - now why is that? That is the mystery before us now."

Elfrida glared back at the eyeballs as if she were really holding the gaze of a real pair of eyes - and like Bensole, she felt pity for the wandering Divot, pity which blunted the anger and fear she felt at being cornered and threatened and helpless.

"We are here because of Gravinstad."

There, it was out - if Divot was a spy, then the dice were thrown - Elfrida found herself wishing she had strapped a knife to her shin-bone and had her hand poised over it ready to draw and strike at the first movement of Divot's treachery.

But Divot only moved his head back the slightest bit, and his body untensed just a little. "That's one the Boatman wishes would show up at his boat. There's a good chance he wouldn't make it intact to the other shore. What's the Grand Rat done now?"

"The details don't matter," said Elfrida. "What matters is that we need to get out of the city without Gravinstad knowing how we did it and where we're going."

Divot leaned forward, his body back to tense. "I asked, what's the Grand Rat done now?"

"Look, I said - "

Bensole interrupted. "Do you know about the child/god?"

Divot turned the eyeballs to him. "I lost the right one in the war."

“He’s been found.”

This time Divot’s body didn’t just relax, it slumped - relieved or devastated, Elfrida couldn’t tell in the shifting light. “He’s been found,” Divot’s voice managed to croak out.

“And Gravinstad knows it,” Elfrida added. “Gravinstad is seeking.”

“And so are you.”

Silence. Divot seemed completely sunk into himself. Elfrida fidgeted, in part because she knew that whether they liked it or not, they had to depend upon this cripple, this Boatman, to get them out.

“Tell me.”

“You lost an eye over him.”

“That’s why. Tell me again.”

“The child/god.”

“The child/god.”

“It will all be better. All suffering explained. All suffering relieved. All pain repaired. All doubt made whole.”

“That’s why you’re going.”

“Yes.”

Then, without preface, Divot straightened up, came back to life. “Wait here,” he said as he turned away from them and walked off into the dark.

“For what?” Elfrida asked, unable to keep the exasperation out of her voice.

“There is more than one Boatman,” he shot back, and then disappeared completely.

Elfrida turned to Bensole. “Put your arm through mine,” she said, which he did. Then she blew out the light and, arms linked, they settled their backs against the wall to wait for the return of the Boatman.



## Chapter 27

### **Wherein Exile Becomes A Sort Of Home, And A Woman With A Third Eye In The Middle Of Her Forehead Is, Believe It Or Not, Someone To Be Trusted**

---

**U**nder Under-City - Q and Drumlin now had this hell all to themselves. They named it Styx. Not that it was much of a kingdom. While six cities lived beneath Under-City, the Feralz had only barely looked into them, and then only into Styx, and then only into part of that, since most of it had crumbled under the weight of the cancerous city above it. Here was darkness. Here was cold. Here no food grew, and not much had been stored. Here was death in exile.

Q and Drumlin, now comrades more than ever, even though what bound them together was a shared act of betraying shared friends, knew that if they stayed in Styx, they would die - after all, what else was someone sent to exile supposed to do?

But Drumlin growled in his usual way, "I ain't dying," and Q added, "I am dying, but not here," to which Drumlin chipped in, "That's what I meant - not in this rat hole." So, because Q had once been Merkin, in many ways still had Merkin inside him, and Drumlin, though never a soldier, had a soldier's scorn for weakness, they scumbled around until Q found what he was looking for: a separate exit up to Valice, something the other Feralz would not have known about since they were content to have their ladder and their sewers and the one escape route. And this is where the two of them now stood, on the verge, ready to cross a border away from their present exile into an even more unknown exile and knowing that there was no way out but up.

Drumlin looked up the crumbling staircase, his candle's light swallowed by the darkness. "So we go, right?" he threw over his shoulder at Q.

"Of course. But you know what this means."

"But you know what this means," Drumlin mocked. "Of course I know what it means. I don't necessarily want to know, and I don't necessarily want to connect again with -"

"They just made a different choice."

"To live among scum."

“Black is always black to you, isn’t it?”

Drumlin didn’t answer back - he knew what Q was getting at, and besides, as much as he hated the thought of riding the open streets now - for that is where they were headed - he had to admit to having some curiosity about the Upper Reaches - given Drumlin’s sour attitude about life, it was a curiosity to see how much everything had fallen apart - but it was curiosity nonetheless, more than fear, more than desperation. For Drumlin, always, anger and disappointment were like coal thrown on the fire - it only made the thing burn bigger and hotter.

“You’re sure they’re waiting for us? I don’t want to be meat hanging out for any Guardsman or Gravinstad stoolie - “

“You saw me tie it to the Raven’s leg myself.”

“Between here and there there’s always cats and rats and - “

“Drumlin.”

A pause.

“Sometimes I can’t stand the stink of my own voice,” he pitched.

“Then it’s time we go meet our brethren,” Q said, and with that, holding his own candle high, he started up the staircase. Drumlin followed. And the darkness closed in on them.

\* \* \* \* \*

Only passersby on the street with a sharp eye and the ability to rise out of the everyday funk caused by having to make a living and figure things out would have noticed that the memorial plaque on the backside of the pedestal that held up a statue of dead king Krakow, who had been famous for building the Keep and infamous for his delight at riding his horses backwards while yelling “Whoop-tee-do” and letting his favorite stallion have a seat at the dinner table, slid down and away to let out two very ragged and filthy beggar-looking people, who hooked the plaque back to the stone and slipped into the flow of ragged slumpiness called “just another day in Valice.”

The passageway to the Upper Reaches had not been easy - collapsed, almost blocked, jumpy with unseen creatures that scuttled over and clacked against the stones, slimed with groundwater and mold, and always dark (since they couldn’t crawl and candle-hold at the same time) - but at least it had been open, and now, standing in the shadow of the mad Krakow and assaulted by the weight and thickness of the noise in the streets, they each looked at each



other's eyes to anchor and settle themselves before they launched across the street to find the coffee house that (they hoped) would have sitting at one of the tables their Feralz contact.

Not all the Feralz had gone underground into hiding. Some decided to defy Gravinstad, defy their damage, and stay in the air and sun (even as polluted as it was in Valice) and try to live lives something like they might have lived had not Gravinstad and his Menders unmended their bodies and spirits. Of course not much was open to them. Whatever were the lower depths in a city like Valice (and Valice had depths to which people could sink that would shock a civilized world), the City Feralz went one, two, three steps below that. They scavenged, they stole, they broke every law to break, invented laws and broke those as well, acted like selfish pigs, hated and mistrusted each other - yet would wage war against the world to protect one of their own if that world did him or her an injustice or an insult - and through such selfishness and unselfishness managed to keep themselves free and defiant - even if they did tend to die young from their "mendings" and the brutality of their freedom.

Gravinstad had considered wiping them out but decided against it - just as one couldn't really get rid of rats, he had no 100-percent sure way of getting rid of all of them and have them stay wiped out - and, besides, they caused no one any harm. Like scorpions in a bottle, as long as they stayed in their rancid camps out by the bridges and along the fetid banks of the rivers, they posed no harm. And they also gave something back, so to speak - many of them would work at the crap-jobs in the city no one else wanted - shoveling manure, burying the cut-off limbs from the hospital, burning the dead in the crematoria - and so paid a sort of dues that bought them a little protection.

Such were the people Q and Drumlin now sought out as friends.

With final deep breaths, they spun themselves out of the protective backside of the statue and into the bristle of the Valice streets. Q, of course, knew the streets well - as Merkin he'd walked them, patrolled them, flushed them clean of rioters and riff-raff - so he and Drumlin sped along.

Drumlin, of course, had once lived topside, but he was surprised at how strange everything looked and felt. He kept pulling down the overlong sleeve that hid his metal arm, not able to get rid of the sensation that everyone passing him front and back could see through the cloth into the hinges and grips. Everyone came across to him as a Gravinstad stoolie, and he found himself sweating and breathing shallow and almost overwhelmed by fear and loathing.





Q must have sensed something because he stopped and turned, putting a gentle hand against Drumlin's chest to get him to stop as well. "It's all right, mate," he whispered to Drumlin. "It's all right - no way Gravinstad will know we're here."

"It's not that," said Drumlin, and the distress in his face went right to Q's heart. "I feel completely alone here - I have no connect with any of this - it's been a long time - "

"We have some time on our side - it'll get better."

"Not that you have a lot of time," Drumlin tossed back - and smiled. "That sounds like me, doesn't it?"

"It does. Keep complaining - it brings the color back to your cheeks."

With that, Q turned back, and the two of them made their way through the madding crowd.

It didn't take them long to find the coffee shop, and just as Q had hoped - he didn't tell Drumlin this, but he was worried that the Raven had been eaten by the cats and rats, or had cracked its wing, or had been lime-snared by a greasy pie-maker and slipped into a meat-pie - his contact sat there, white mug on the table, a hood slopped over so that Drumlin couldn't see the face.

As soon as the two of them entered the shop full of the brittle smell of roasted beans, the person looked up, and Drumlin could see why he - she - had hooded herself. Above pearl-grey eyes, a straight-bridged nose, and lips where the left side turned slightly down and the right side turned slightly up in a half-smile, pinned right in the middle of her forehead blinked a third eye - not a tattoo'd eye but a real one, of a different color, with a different eye-lash, and moving out of rhythm with the other two. Her skin was smooth, but she wasn't young - she and Q looked about the same age, though her shaved head, which Drumlin could just see under the hood, made her look less old.

Q, reaching behind him without looking, grabbed the lapel of Drumlin's coat and pulled him toward the table, where they sat down to face the cowed woman.

"Order something," she said. "They don't mind whatever revolutionary crap you want to cart in here as long as you buy their cheap and unbelievably bitter and caffeine-stuffed coffee - just don't drink it unless you don't want to sleep for one-and-three-quarter days, which in some ways is a better alternative to the sweat-wallow of bad dreams though, to be honest, I sometimes cannot tell



---

the difference between awake and asleep except that they both have different second letters after the initial 'a.'"

Even as she had launched her words, Q had raised his hand, two fingers extended, to the thuggish waiter sloped against the counter, and by the time she'd finished, two mugs with thuggish-looking coffee sloshed down in front of Q and Drumlin. Drumlin noticed that the woman drank her coffee on her in-breaths so that her word-stream had no hitches, and it was as if the coffee fueled the talk.

Putting her mug down, she turned her three eyes to Drumlin. "You have a metal arm - I can smell it."

And that did it - Drumlin was taken in. She could have asked him then and there to show her the arm, and he would have done it, in public, full view, without thinking of the down-sides. And she, for her part, knowing this, would never ask him to do something so dangerous - though part of her wanted to test him.

He stared at her. She stared at him. They stared at each other. Drumlin picked up his coffee and drank it - the bitterness never tasted better.

"Poly X?" Q asked. Poly X slowly turned to face Q.

"Q. We seem to have only names with single letters."

"Not mine," said Drumlin. "Name's Drumlin."

"Seven letters - lucky number." She turned back to Q - and Drumlin noticed that while her two-eyes rested on Q, the third eye rested on him. "I suppose it's good to see you again. Though I never expected it."

Drumlin wanted to ask how they knew each other, but he kept his mouth shut.

"I didn't expect it either. But it is good to see you again."

"So they kicked you out."

"It's a long story."

"Longer than you could put on a Raven's leg."

"Yes - and the Raven?"

"Released - I had to fend off a few of the pie-sellers who saw profit in the bird's fat-meat, but it's gone back to its rook. And aren't they all long stories in



the end, even though most of them should be short because they're just not that interesting. So."

And Poly X sat there, waiting for a story, long or short didn't matter - but she would not wait forever. "I have an inch of warmish coffee left - that's what you have."

Q looked at Drumlin, who, though continuing to be smitten, had no clue what to do next. Give him an engine, he could fix it - give him a battle to fight, and the machinery of it confused him down to his bones.

"The child/god," Q whispered, and Poly X, the mug halfway between mouth and table, put the mug down and looked at Q as if he had said the foulest thing any being - animal, human, or Feralz - could have said.

"Is there a plus or a minus that goes with that?"

"I know, I know - "

"You say you know, and I know you know, but how could you even - " She held her hand up to stop Q from speaking, gave a nod to Drumlin. "He know?"

"He's a babe to all of this."

Poly X turned to face him, laid a finger-tip next to the third eye, which closed its lid. "I didn't get this from the Menders." She waited. Drumlin couldn't bear the silence, and the words came out without his choosing.

"Where did you get - "

"Glad you asked. I didn't always have this stuck in my forehead. Once I was just a two-eyed woman, married, with a husband off doing, well, whatever he was doing" - a quick glance at Q - "and I was doing what a faithful wife does when her husband is off doing whatever he is doing. And then one day - it always comes down to 'and then one day' - dropping out of the sky like a locust-swarm came a god - I don't know which one it was, who can track their names or their appetites - maybe it was on holiday, though gods know what they would need a holiday from since their lives had little or nothing of the trash about it that we have to bear. But anyway, down it plomped on the road in front of me, and before I could say 'get your goddamn hands off me,' before I could tell it that it should put it clothes back on and goose himself back up to where he belonged, it tossed me on my back and ripped every bit of womanhood out of me. Do you know what I am saying here, Metal Man?"



Of course, Drumlin knew what she meant - he knew the stories about how the gods came down as swans or bulls and did to humans what would be crimes if humans did the crimes to other humans - that is, he knew them as stories, as tales, as things happening somewhere else to someone else - but he had never known a moment when the stories had turned true for an actual person. Until now.

"Yes," he managed to breathe out. "I mean, I've heard - "

"And his gift to me for the gift I hadn't given him but that he took anyway?"

"The eye?"

"To give me foreknowledge, it said - to give me visions and powers." She spoke to Q but kept her eyes on Drumlin. "Looks like your boy here is a little green around the gills. Have I offended him?"

"The opposite," Q answered.

Poly X leaned toward Drumlin, just a bit, and Drumlin felt himself want to pull away, and he forced himself to stay put. "'Twould've been nice if it'd hid the eye at least under my hair so as not to make me a ridicule in public. Don't you agree?"

"I don't think it makes you a ridicule at all."

"How very nice of you. Though I'd prefer not to have it at all. Visions and powers translate into nightmares - it didn't happen to point that out to me - when I sleep the pain of the whole world floods through me - the eye sees it all, can't not see it, sluices the pain into my heart, and I cannot bear it, cannot bear it at all - so - " And here she raised her mug and drained it. "I search for substances that keep the eye defragmented - the owner here will be able to buy a dacha in the country from all the coins I've slipped him over the years trying as best I can to keep from seeing in sleep-darkness what I would never want to see in the light."

The third eye opened. Poly X turned to Q. "And now you're going to tell me something about the child/god, and that can only mean one thing because no one talks about the child/god without talking about 'the return of' in the same breath. So just tell me the truth."

"It has been found. In the mines. By Alma."

"By Alma?" She repeated it as a statement - "By Alma" - her voice suddenly, Drumlin thought, sounding human and worried.



And Drumlin also thought, How does she know about Alma?

And Poly X said to Drumlin, “Alma is our daughter. Well, half-daughter - isn’t that right?”

Q added, “Her father is - “

Drumlin blurted out, “The god.”

“Metal Man is quick, I’ll give him that,” said Poly X. She pointed to Drumlin’s coffee. He shook his head no and slid it across to her; she downed it. The silent air between them buzzed electrified.

“So you see - “ Q started, and Poly X half-scorned a laugh as she replied, “I see plenty well, don’t forget.”

“What I was going to say was ‘so you see, we can’t go into the whole story here.’ Can we move to someplace else?”

Poly X slapped her open palm on the table; the thug-waiter slouched his way to them. Poly X said to Q, “Pay up.”

“How much?” said Q to the waiter. He named a price, and Q dug through the many folds of his clothing into a small leather purse which gave up what the waiter had named. The waiter paused for a moment before scooping up the coins to see if whether a tip would follow. It didn’t. He slid the coins into his seamed palm, made a fist, banged the table (but not too hard) to give his opinion about customers who didn’t tip, and moved away.

The three of them rose. Drumlin noticed that the third eye always periscoped around the room to check out the scene - it never seemed to rest, hardly ever blinked.

“Where do we go?” said Q. Poly X didn’t answer him, simply walked out of the shop. Q and Drumlin followed, and it took Drumlin a few seconds to adjust himself again to the noise and stink of the roadway. Poly X took off to her right, and they followed her, now having no other choice but to trust this woman who hated the very idea that had forced them into exile and above-ground and into the world. Drumlin didn’t like the odds but what choices did he have? For a moment, it felt good to have no choices and to let life take him wherever it was going to take him. This was not a machine he could fix. He followed the man and woman who had once been husband and wife into the jury-rigged back-alleys of Valice.



## Chapter 28

### **Wherein The Worries Of The World Fall Upon Gravinstad, Which Is Good News For Swiddle And Pym**

---

**G**ravinstad sat in the chair, under the skylight, in his chambers. The same grey light sifted down, throwing Gravinstad's face into shadow. This time, not a Raven to be seen in the place.

Pym and Swiddle slouched in chairs facing him. They looked better than they had a few days before. Some bruises, scratches, vine-burns across their skin, but overall not too damaged.

The grey light also threw them into a gloom. They could feel Gravinstad's shadowed face focused on their own. They didn't like it. They never liked it when Gravinstad looked at them and kept his mouth shut. Just as he did right now. Being vined up and whisked away by Ravens did not, at the moment, appear to them to be a bad alternative to their situation.

Whatever their situation was. Because their situation did not sparkle clearly in front of them at the moment, full of direction and possibility and profit the way it had when they had been assassins-for-hire taking out ministers and cabinet chiefs and the occasional king. A straightforward job of waste management, Pym had called it. How easy it had been to just be gargagemen on contract.

And now - Swiddle felt again the push in his guts that had begun when the Ravens had logrolled them onto Gravinstad's balcony, the gut-push that had kept him on the toilet for more hours than he cared to count up. He really wanted to raise his hand and ask permission to make it to the bathroom, just like a snot-nosed schoolboy from a frown-faced teacher, but he didn't dare. He tightened everything inside and held it. The effort made him sweat. Gravinstad probably liked that fact.

For his part, Pym, though his body hadn't changed one ounce or one inch, felt smaller, swimming in his clothes, shrunken in stature and force, ashamed. He had failed, and failed in the worse way, not by dying in pursuit but by being tricked and defeated and humiliated in the bargain. Him, Theodore Pym, turned into the ordinary.

Gravinstad didn't know what to do with these two. On the one hand, they had made a fool of him. On the other hand, they had brought him valuable information

- the worms, for instance - and how far this Rufus and Gaul had gotten. Reports from the mines were not as good. No matter where his Guardsmen had looked, they could not find this Alma or the child/god - and all the workers, though still working, worked with a grumble and a resistance, as if they sensed something about to change. Something in the air. Something that sweetened their prisons. He did not like it one bit.

So, what to do with them. He didn't want to do away with them - they had given him good service, and though Gravinstad was one who would just as soon smash a plate and get a new one rather than clean the one he had, he didn't really want to trash them. But they had to earn back their keep, or he would toss them aside like yesterday's news, and without a twinge of guilt or distaste.

"Well," he said, and shifted in his chair, causing the shadows to slide to different places on his face. Pym and Swiddle perked up - his movement seemed to promise that some sort of judgment had been reached, and whatever it was - and it would be painful, no matter which way it went - it was better to have something happen than to sit in endless waiting, guts twisted, laced with shame.

At that moment a knock on the door. Gravinstad frowned - he'd left specific orders not to be bothered unless something happened worth bothering him. And the knock meant that that something had happened, and that meant that he now had to deal with something that most likely he would prefer not to deal with at all. Yet one more thing. The knock, one more time. Swiddle and Pym looked up at Gravinstad. Gravinstad, really having no choice in the matter, since he'd given the order, barked out, "Come in."

A young Guardsman strode into the room and came to a sharp military halt. (Swiddle wondered if any old Guardsmen still existed - they all seemed young. Then he put the thought out of his head.) Gravinstad barked again. "What?"

The Guardsman, to his credit, answered promptly, no fear-hesitation from being in the presence. "The Queen Elfrida and her son, Bensole, have disappeared."

The words hung in the air like artillery ready to explode.

Gravinstad stood.

They exploded.

"Repeat what you just said."

"Yes sir. The Queen Elfrida and her son - "



---

“When?”

“The housekeepers just reported it. So did the cook.”

“And no one saw them leave.”

The Guardsman didn't catch the bass note of menace in the voice, but Swiddle and Pym knew it well - and they also heard in that note, oddly enough, another note of resurrection: with the royalty out of the house, Gravinstad would need someone to bring them back. And it might as well be them that did it because they have a certain expertise in these matters, despite the recent setback to their skills and fortunes.

“No sir, no one saw them leave. We had the guards posted where you told us to post them, and the secret observers - “

“Shut up.”

And the Guardsman, to his credit, did not splutter into silence but grabbed the cut-off like a man snagging a stone out of the air with his bare hand that had been aimed at his head and held it lightly and without personal insult.

“I want to inspect the apartments.”

“I will tell the others that you're coming.” Pym noticed that the young man had not phrased it as a question but as a statement, as if he already knew what Gravinstad should be saying in this moment.

“You do that. And tell them to touch nothing.”

“I already have.”

“And why would you say that without my telling you to say that?”

“It made sense, sir - evidence touched is evidence spoiled.”

“I never said that.”

“My father - a chief inspector - “ For the first time, the young man faltered, realizing too late that he may have realized too late that he'd stepped over some line. Gravinstad let the shame/fear settle into the young man's bones, then spoke.

“You did the right thing. “

“Yes sir.”

The Guardsman waited.





“You may go.”

The Guardsman pivoted with a snap and left.

“He will either kill me or be my next best man.”

“Why would he do that to the hand that feeds him?” asked Swiddle.

Gravinstad settle his gaze on the two of them. “Go ahead,” he said.

“If they’re gone - “ said Pym.

“They will need to be found,” said Swiddle.

“Where could they be headed?” mused Pym.

“Is there any connection between our return and their departing?” added Swiddle.

“How badly do the two of you want to finish your job? That is, with some new amendments. Convince me on the way.”

And with that, Gravinstad flew out of the room. Swiddle looked at Pym, Pym at Swiddle. “We need to talk,” said Swiddle.

“Agreed,” said Pym. “But first let’s convince him of our sincerity.”

“Shouldn’t be hard to do, since that’s what he wants to hear,” Swiddle agreed. “His back’s against the wall.”

“It don’t happen often,” said Pym. “We got to be that wall he’s up against.”

“You ready for that?” asked Swiddle.

“I’m finding out what hatred and shame can do to brace a man’s resolve - it’s bracing.”

“Well said.” Swiddle held out his hand. Pym took it.

“Like the old days, all right?” said Swiddle. Pym nodded yes.

They flew out of the room and down the corridor to catch up to the worrying Gravinstad.



## Chapter 29

### Wherein Elfrida And Bensole Meet An Angel Carried To Them By The Boatman

---

**A**t first they had lit matches to fend off the darkness but soon gave it up since each match didn't last very long and, if anything, the small light-globe thrown by each match only seemed to make the darkness darker when it went out.

So Elfrida and Bensole, the odor of burnt sulfur drifting away, sat in the utter darkness of wherever they were in the bowels of the Keep, their own dirtiness around them, and waited for the dwarfish blind man to either rescue them or hand them over.

The blackness made everything else more intense - each crick and crack and dirt-fall and pebble-slip sharper and more frightful. They were lost without any way back, even if they had wanted to go back, and for the moment who they were and what they would be were in the hands of something else that seemed to care little or nothing if they lived or died in comfort or pain. Elfrida hated it, and her hatred made the waiting all that much harder to endure.

Bensole let his eyes go blank, like he did sometimes in bed when he couldn't fall asleep, and let his whole body follow, trying to let the anxiousness and hesitation go. Sometimes, when it worked really well, he felt as if his whole body had dissolved and nothing real was really real and all of the sadness and worry (the death of his father, his mother's unhappiness) just melted away to nothing -

They both heard the slough-slough at the same time, along with the tap-tap of a wooden staff, and both snapped back into the present tense from wherever their thoughts and worries had taken them. They could also both see lantern-light, which could only mean one thing: Divot had not come back alone. So, here it was, they both thought: this was either rescue or betrayal.

The light crept closer, the knocking of the staff louder, and finally, they could make out the stout man's false eyes in the lantern-light coming from the end of an arm attached to a body they couldn't see clearly.

"Here he is, your savior," Divot rasped out.

The arm held the lantern higher, and they could now see framed a young face - and above all else the face looked kind, not Gravinstad'd, not treacheried.

"Who are you?" prompted Bensole.

The young man didn't so much ignore Bensole as turn his attention to Elfrida as a sign of first respect. "Your Highness - "

Elfrida stood up, brushing off the seat of her pants, then gave Bensole a hand up. "Please, don't," she said. "'Highness' is not what I'm feeling at the moment. My name is Elfrida; this is my son, Bensole."

"Elfrida, then - and - " with a nod " - Bensole. I'll say welcome, but this place makes a pigsty look like a mansion."

"And who says welcome?" Elfrida asked.

"Yes, who welcomes us?" Bensole chipped in, determined not to be left behind.

"His name's Angelicus," Divot offered. "You gonna show 'em why?"

"Not right now," Angelicus half-whispered, "this is not the time and place - "

"Angelicus?" Said just loud enough to grab his attention - after all, even if the Queen were using her first name, she was still "Queen" and due a Queen's respect. "This is not the time and place for niceties. If we are going to place ourselves in your hands - and Mr. Divot here - "

"'Divot' will do," popped in Divot.

"And Divot, then - he seems, at least for the moment, to be on our side and not against us since he went and got you and not a Guardsman, and if you are here because Divot has brought you here, then I suppose we can, for the moment, trust that you're trustworthy - but not if you're going to hide secrets from us."

"She's got you there, Angelicus, got you there."

Angelicus did not hesitate. He handed the lantern to Divot.

"All right, then, Elfrida - and Bensole. No secrets - clean slate." He shucked the jacket off, draped it over Divot's shoulder. He slipped his buttonless shirt over his head, laid it over the coat on Divot's shoulder, and stood before them bare-chested. Then he half-turned to show them the stunted wings. Bensole looked up at Elfrida, saw her eyes fixed on the wings, then fixed his own eyes on the wings.



“Angelicus,” Elfrida half-said to herself. “Your name - “

“Enough?” asked Angelicus.

“Enough,” replied Elfrida. “Put your clothes back on - you’ll catch a cold - “

Angelicus slid his shirt back on, slid his jacket over his shirt, took the lantern.

“My name, yes - quite the joke, eh?”

“I don’t get the - “ Bensole started.

“‘Angelicus’ is from an old language, Bensole - a very old language - it means a messenger, it means a creature who flies out to give the news - “

“News bright or news dark,” added Divot to Bensole, “since not all angels have the whiff of goodness about them. This ‘un - you can rest on him.”

“And how do you know that?” asked Elfrida.

“Because he gave me these,” Divot answered, tapping his eye-pieces. “He found me, didn’t hate me, gave me a resemblance to a human being.”

Elfrida looked back at Angelicus. “Is that what you do, Angelicus? Is that what the Feralz do?”

Angelicus kept his face composed and cool at the mention of “Feralz.” “How do you know about the Feralz?”

“Up there,” Elfrida said, pointing overhead, “information is as precious as water in a desert, so a thirsty person finds as much as possible and stores it away. The experiments - there are records - I’ve seen them - “

“And not all Feralz,” said Divot, “get thrown out of the lab. They’ve taken me in - anyone disfigured by these demons - “

“Mom?” Elfrida turned to Bensole and saw what she should have been seeing all along, if only she hadn’t been drawn in by Angelicus - a frightened face with questions all over it. “The Feralz?”

“We’ll have time,” said Angelicus to Bensole, “but not here. Even things that look deserted only *look* deserted - “

“So where?” said Divot.

“It’ll have to be top-side,” Angelicus answered. “I can’t bring them to Under-City - things are not - safe enough - there, at the moment.”

“True,” Divot replied.



“It’ll have to be to Poly X. She’ll know - she always knows.”

“Well, I’m not going there - “

“Didn’t expect you would.”

“Much better for me here.”

“I understand,” said Angelicus, who turned to Elfrida and Bensole. “You’ll have to follow me - we’re going into the city.”

“Won’t that make things more dangerous?”

“Not if you know your way around the underbelly - you just have to choose the dangers you can make it past. Top-side’ll be better. We’d better go.”

Elfrida reached down and hefted her knapsack. Angelicus leapt to help her swing it onto her back. “Thank you,” she said, and he just nodded, taking a step back. Elfrida helped lift Bensole’s knapsack onto his back, and the four stood there, cupped by the darkness, reluctant to break the connection they’d all made and move on.

But someone had to move, and Elfrida moved. She turned to Divot. “Thank you,” she said. “I’m sorry for your loss - your eyes - “

“ I deserved this - I have done bad things in my life, and bad things should never go unpunished. Even if the child/god comes back, I don’t think I’d accept the return of my eyes - some things you need so that you don’t forget.”

“Well, thank you again.”

“One thing I would like, though.”

“Divot,” Angelicus interrupted, “we do need to go.”

Elfrida put a hand on Angelicus’ forearm, then back to Divot. “What?”

“Keep an eye out - “ he chuckled at his own joke - “for a child named Gaul. I did her a grave harm, did her friend, Swing, an even graver harm - handed him over to Gravinstad. If you find her, care for her - she did what she did out of friendship.” He indicated Bensole. “Not much older than yours here.”

“If she means this to you, I’ll do what I can do.”

“All right, then,” announced Divot. “ Boatman has done his job” And without any hesitation, he turned away from the group and its light, and marched off into the darkness, his staff thump-thumping, his tuneless tune floating up and out and then gone.



---

“The Feralz have taken him in?” Elfrida asked Angelicus. “How do you know he’s not Gravinstad’s dog?”

“What could he tell Gravinstad that Gravinstad wouldn’t already know? Not all the Feralz in Under-City want to stay in Under-City all their lives. So they’ve fooled themselves that a squeal or two from them to Gravinstad will spring them from their condition, cancel their breakage. It’s never happened, won’t ever happen, but many still keep trying. With Divot, though - “

“What?” said Bensole.

“He has a real ache to be redeemed for the evil he thinks he’s done. I don’t know what evil he’s done - but he feels it strong inside his heart, this urge for cleansing himself - I think his ache makes him honest. But what do I know?”

“More than I know,” said Bensole.

“I know nothing worth knowing. Except maybe this - maybe not - sometimes I think being alive is the worst evil done to any of us and none of us should be blamed for anything we do - “ Angelicus caught Elfrida’s eye and veered off. “But for another time, son of the Queen. We need to get out of here.” He handed the lantern to Bensole. “Here, you lead. Just go straight down this corridor - I’ll tell you when to stop.”

Bensole took the lantern and moved forward. Angelicus placed a hand against Elfrida’s knapsack and urged her to follow her son. Elfrida took one step, then another, and sailed into the darkness. With a look over his shoulder and his head cocked to one side listening for anything not ordinary in that unordinary place, he followed, and the three of them, led by a wavering light, cut a wake through the darkness.





## Chapter 30

### Wherein A Resolution Is Made Among Thieves And A Strange Grace Falls Over Everything

---

No matter how much Gravinstad pushed the chief investigator on the scene (a bespectacled fat man with thin wrists and a few strands of rusty-colored hair pasted across a plain scalp), no matter how much he berated the chief investigator's assistants, he could not get them to tell him how the Queen and her son had escaped from the Keep undetected, and therefore unfollowed, and therefore out of his control.

While Gravinstad had the chief investigator walk him through what he and his helpers had done, Swiddle and Pym took themselves out onto the balcony - the same balcony where, not long before, an air-fleet of ravens had dumped them in front of the Queen. The revisit to their humiliation was not lost on either of them.

"He's going to ask us to go out again, you know," said Swiddle, breaking the silence between them that needed to be broken. Pym shushed him and led him by the elbow to the railing, out of ear-range of the two Guardsmen posted at the balcony door.

"He's going to ask us - "

"I know," hissed Pym.

"I know you know. Do you also happen to know what we're going to do about that?"

Pym didn't answer right away. Swiddle wasn't sure about the look on Pym's face - a look he hadn't ever seen cross his kill-partner's face before. It looked like regret, though Swiddle was not well-versed in these interpretations. And regret mixed with rage - yes, that was in there. And, perhaps, shame. All in all, not the face of an assassin - looked more like his mother's face for most of the time Swiddle had known his own mother - when she wasn't dodging his father's fists, that was. Swiddle wasn't sure what he felt about Pym's new face, in part because, he recognized with a jump in his stomach, that his own face felt set in the same way.



Without taking his eyes off the far horizon, Pym let slide a nerve-raking phrase: "I hate the man, Swiddle - hate him until it turns my guts into a knot." Then, lower and quieter: "I want to kill him."

Swiddle slid his eyes over to the Guardsmen, making sure they hadn't heard the blasphemy (but, then, who knew if it was blasphemy? perhaps hating Gravinstad was a common thought among all who had to deal with the butcher) - they stared straight forward, looking attentive and bored at the same time.

"Do we have a Plan B just in case we can't knock him off?"

"Don't get sarcastic with me, Swiddle - I'll rip your throat out."

"I'm was just wondering if we have a plan to deal with - "

"That man - " But Pym cut himself short, shifted his right knee to his left knee pressed against the baluster, coupled his hands into a single knot of fingers. "That man," he began again, in a lower voice, "has ruined us." Pym paused; Swiddle waited. "It's time someone ruins him."

"And, if not us, *mate*, then who? As much as he trusts anyone, he trusts us - " This made Pym chuckle, which did nothing to lighten his face. "'Trust' and 'Gravinstad' in the same sentence." He shook his head. "It's a wonder my mouth didn't melt with the obscenity. In any case. He trusts us, with what passes for trust with him."

"And?"

Pym half-turned to Swiddle. "What is all this ruckus Gravinstad feels about the child/god? Why is he so hot to get his hands on a defunct god? We know - we were there. Unless - " Pym waited to see if Swiddle would pull the thread.

"Unless the god is not defunct."

"Or unless the god is defunct but Gravinstad doesn't know it."

"It comes to the same thing in either case," Swiddle continued pulling. "Gravinstad *needs* the child/god - which means - he ain't just looking for a buddy."

"If the child/god has value - "

"Has *more* value than - "

"Exactly. Then perhaps our duty lies not with the power-that-be in there but  
- "



---

“With the power that’s to come - “

“We don’t know if there is a power to come - “ Pym turned back to stare at the horizon.

“That’s true - the child/god could be nothing but a fairy tale. But what - “

“The power is not with the child/god but with Gravinstad’s mania for it. We agree to go get it - we tell him how we *ache* to *kill* to complete this mission so that we can wipe away the stain of our humiliation and disgrace - we will do *anything* - “ And here Pym made a little victory-pump with his fist. “Yes! *Anything*! And through all of this - whether now or when we come back - we wait for that moment - you know that moment - “

“I do know that moment - the victim sets his eyes on the prize, goes to reach for it thinking he has won it all, and then - “

“From this moment forward, Swiddle, to that moment - is this the way for us, or not?”

Swiddle didn’t answer right away. He wanted Gravinstad dead, too, to be out from under his brutal thumb but would prefer it if the universe somehow arranged it without his having to do much, or even any, of the work. Swiddle liked his comforts - Pym had always been one ready to leave comfort behind in service to anything that tested his will through pain. That was a fundamental difference between them: Pym had a strange kind of purity about him (if the word “purity” could be used about a murderer); Swiddle was always ready to settle for a little less in order to avoid confusion and discomfort.

But, on the other hand (and there was always an “on other hand”), Pym was his friend, the only friend he’d ever really had (though, again, “friend” was an odd word to use for people in their line of business), and he owed Pym what gets owed to people who stick by and do not desert. And Pym never deserted. Ever.

And neither would Swiddle.

“From this moment forward, Pym - this is the way.”

“I can rely on you?”

“Is a Raven black?”

“A Raven is black.”



And it was good that this was the end of their conversation because Gravinstad had finished berating the chief investigator and had come onto the balcony to speak to them.

They didn't ask him anything - if he wanted to tell them he would tell them, and if he didn't, he wouldn't.

"Our Queen has disappeared," Gravinstad said, more out to the air than to either one of them."

Again, they said nothing, waited.

"And her son. And no one can seem to figure out how they did it."

"And why," Pym added.

"And why," Gravinstad repeated, surprised that Pym had offered anything. "Where do you think they went?"

"It's hard to know with people 'up there,'" Pym responded. "You know, people with power, or the looks of it. We" - indicating himself and Swiddle - "we just serve out what others want. How they get to where they want what they want - clear as mud to us servants."

Swiddle tried not to let his eyes dart back and forth too much between Pym and Gravinstad - for all of Pym trying on a low-like humble voice, even Swiddle could hear the sarcasm in it. But Gravinstad must have been really thrown by the Queen's disappearance because either he ignored or didn't hear Pym's goading. He just moved to the railing and stared into the same blank air that Pym had been staring into.

A noise behind them - Swiddle and Pym turned. The chief investigator made his way onto the balcony. Try as he might, he couldn't keep a smile off his lips. He'd found something, Swiddle thought - and felt a shift under his feet, like a small earthquake. This scared him. Agreeing with Pym to do something about Gravinstad was one thing - to have the very stones pressing against his foot-soles punch him forward to take action was another.

The chief investigator fought his smile - and lost. "Sir - "

Gravinstad didn't turn. "What?"

"You may want to see this."

In the hallway leading to the chapel, the chief investigator's assistants had taken a painting off the wall - or, rather, had ripped it off, since the frame, it



seems, had been screwed into the plaster and studs. Five perfect little circles had been cut out of the picture painted onto the canvas, and the circles had been attached to five metal disks, which in turn were attached to five rods that disappeared into the wall. A ball, a cheese, a sheep, a young man's head, a dog on its back - and a clown's nose.

"Do you know the combination?"

"We've calculated and tried all but one. We thought you should be here for the last one."

"Just do it," Gravinstad growled.

Which the chief investigator did, an assistant pushing on the clown's nose last.

They all heard a noise they had not expected to hear and saw what they did not expect to see.

At the end of the hallway a very small door had sprung open. Without hesitation, Gravinstad dropped to his hands and knees and disappeared through it.

"This is our chance," hissed Pym into Swiddle's ear, and in a flash, before any of the Guardsmen could react to the surprise of their commander on his hands and knees, Pym also dropped to the floor and wriggled through the hole. Swiddle, reluctant but determined, followed.

Gravinstad had already pulled the lever, and the sanctum jumped with the flickery bright yellow-orange flame in the lantern. He took a candle from one of the shelves and lit it off the lantern-flame, then pulled down two more candles and handed them to Swiddle and Pym, who lit them from the lantern.

Without words they moved down the short corridor, the flame-light jumping off the rough studs and nailheads and coarse chunks of plaster hanging off threads of horsehair.

They came to the other door with the other painting on it. "Come here," Gravinstad ordered, "hold up your lights." The two of them crowded in behind Gravinstad and raised their candles to throw more light on the painting. They pressed right up against Gravinstad, and Swiddle, with a quick jig in his stomach, realized they had never been this close to the man - and that his clothes and skin had a smell. This was not a knowing about Gravinstad that Swiddle had



ever thought of having - and he worked hard to ignore how real the man felt at the moment.

All of them peered at the painting, knowing now what to look for, and once they knew what to find, they found it: six circles around six objects in the painting. Gravinstad spread his hand over five of them. He nodded his head in Pym's direction. "Press the fish." Pym did, with enthusiasm.

The door sprung open and a gust of cool air met them, almost choking out the candles. Gravinstad walked in; Pym and Swiddle followed.

Gravinstad went around and lit several large candles. They faced the painting of the smiling child and wheeling and diving Ravens. To the right, on a bookstand, lay open a copy of the Valiceiad, to the page of the child/god diving into the ground.

"Now, there is either another way out of here, or they have turned into smoke," mused Gravinstad, who had a content look on his face - at least part of the mystery had been solved, and the chaos caused by the mystery had been reduced a little. In other words, he felt in control again, and that always made Gravinstad smile. "Look around."

It didn't take long to find the door behind the painting. Gravinstad spread his hand on the door and leaned ever-so-slightly forward - he didn't need to lean much to learn that the door was blocked from the other side. He took his hand off, slapped it clean against his thigh, pointed to the two brackets gunned into the wall.

"I would guess - given my limited experience in these matters - "

Swiddle and Pym didn't miss the ease in Gravinstad's voice - he was on the hunt again, questions were being answered.

"The beam that had been *there* is now *not there* but on the other side, giving stiff resistance to pursuers and devoted protection to the questing Queen and her brat."

Yes, he was feeling better.

Gravinstad pivoted, sending Pym and Swiddle back against the wall-studs. He shouted. "Guard! Guard!"

A stirring at the other end, and then a voice: "Yes sir?"

"Bring me your sword, now."



A scrabble like an oversized rat, and a fresh-faced unvulgarized Guardsman appeared, his ceremonial sword in his hand.

“Give it to me, and get the hell out of here.” Which the Guardsman did, moving even faster backwards than he had done forwards.

Gravinstad handed his candle to Swiddle, but Pym grabbed it out of Swiddle’s grip. “Let me hold that,” whispered Pym, a grin on his face, then spoke to Gravinstad. “What do you want us to do?”

“Give me some light.”

“Right away - Swiddle, put yourself there, on his right side.”

With the light dancing off the blade, Gravinstad pressed the tip of it into the thin slit between the door and jamb. Using his weight, he worked the blade through, inch by inch, not only pushing it forward but wagging it back and forth, splintering the dry-rotted wood and enlarging the opening.

Sweat broke across his forehead, ran down his temple - and Swiddle, as before, realized he’d never seen Gravinstad sweat, ever. He looked away, looked at the blade, anywhere but into Gravinstad’s all-too-human face.

Gravinstad worked the blade, worked the blade. The slit flanged out, splinters fell to the floor, and the sword bit by bit disappeared into the crack until Gravinstad had almost wedged it through to the hilt. He then backed it off eight inches or so, let it go, and stood up, swiping his forearm across his wet forehead to dry off the sweat.

“All right you two feckless drones - now has come the time for you to earn your keep once again.” He nodded at Swiddle. “See that wood-end over there?” Swiddle picked up a 3-foot length of two-by-four. “Now get on your back, your butt against the door.” Which Swiddle did, not at all liking the crunch of plaster under his wing-bones, the dust up his nose. “Put the bottom of your feet against the wood, the wood against the blade.” Which Swiddle did. And he knew the next command: push.

“You will push up. Pym, you and I will anchor the handle.”

And so Swiddle pushed up, Pym, jammed up against Gravinstad, leaned on the handle to give it a pivot, Gravinstad locked the handle against his stomach - and with a lot less effort than they’d imagined, the cross-beam on the other side popped out of its brackets to the floor. Swiddle’s force carried the sword upward, and its arc brought it just past Gravinstad’s right ear - an inch to the left, and his



and Pym's troubles might have ended right there. But instead the sword crashed into Gravinstad's right shoulder - a nasty bruise at most.

The door swung open, and the mystery of the disappearing Queen was solved - at least as to how she and her son had slid away. "She would be anywhere by now," said Pym, making the unhelpful comment to keep Gravinstad thinking that he, Pym, was still just a block-headed killer-for-hire and not now a man committed to Gravinstad's deletion.

Gravinstad stepped back into the room, ran a finger through the patina of dust on the book, took a long review of the painting, kicked at the two cushions on the floor, noted the placement and arrangement of the candles. Swiddle and Pym, now chilled by the sour draft that came up through the tunnel, kept out of Gravinstad's path and waited.

"Not just 'anywhere,'" he said, and it took them both a moment to realize that he was responding Pym's useless statement. "Look around you - think for a moment - "

"The child/god," said Swiddle.

"Where else?"

"But why?" asked Swiddle, but Gravinstad said nothing.

"So we're going back out?" Pym asked, as if that were the next logical step for Gravinstad.

Gravinstad glared at them, and Swiddle found himself sweating again, but a fear sweat, cold. It was as if he had no nerves left at all.

"Send you back out? My two fools?"

Swiddle looked at Pym, but Pym's face told Swiddle that he, Pym, had already thought of the answer to this and was ready to pitch it. Pym shifted his face into a mix of shame and fierceness.

"You have to send us out again. We know where they're going - we were there, we *know*. This child/god means something to you, and we owe you doing the job right that you hired us to do. But more than that - more than that" (and here the face tipped its balance toward the shame) "my *dignity* was stolen from me out there, Gravinstad" (the familiar use of the harsh name echoed in the room) "what made me whole was taken away from me by those brats and those *animals* - those *worms*! - and I want - I *need* - to get back out there and do the job



I was meant to do out there - we were meant to do because I know Swiddle here feels the same that I do, has said as much to me in his own way.”

And then Pym did a thing that really made Swiddle’s sweat ooze - he moved in closer to Gravinstad, as if they were *buddies*. To Swiddle, that was like leaning into a cobra for a kiss.

“You have to give us this chance,” Pym whispered, “we need this chance to make ourselves whole again, to put us back into your good graces again. Send us back out - we’ll get the child/god for you and get rid you of everything else that troubles you - the Queen, her bratling, the two Feralz - anything. But we need this chance.”

Pym leaned away.

“You would do all this for me.”

“I would do all this for *myself*,” Pym answered, “for my own pride, my own saving grace. And then for you, because we owe you.”

“You agree with him?” Gravinstad asked Swiddle. “In your own way, that is?”

“Of course,” Swiddle offered back, surprised at how his voice had taken on a humble tone - Pym’s acting must have inspired him. “Of course,” Swiddle repeated for emphasis.

Gravinstad brushed past them and down the hallway to the midget door, and without even seeming to break stride, he was through the door and into the apartment. Pym punched Swiddle. “Let’s go, before he changes anything in his mind.” They scuttled down the hallway and out the doorlet.

In the outer hallway Gravinstad was instructing the chief investigator to send three people through to re-trace the Queen’s escape path. Swiddle and Pym tagged along with Gravinstad as he set a guard in the apartment and on the balcony. As Gravinstad turned to leave the scene, Pym and Swiddle turned with him. He stopped dead in his tracks and faced them.

“My chambers, 9 PM. I find your devotion touching. But screw up one more time, and there will be no more screw-ups.”

“We’d do the same,” Pym said back. To Swiddle: “Wouldn’t we?”

“We would.”

But Gravinstad missed Swiddle’s words because he had already stalked away.





“Let’s get out of here,” Pym said. They worked their way along corridors and down stairways until they spilled themselves into a side alleyway. The Keep soared over them. They continued down the alleyway onto the main thoroughfare and caught a hack coach, which they took back to their warehouse, both of them feeling as if they’d been away from their home for years even though it had only been days. They let themselves into the building and then bolted the door shut. The quiet of the place weighed on them.

Swiddle found that leaving the Keep and making it back to home ground hadn’t done anything to stop him from alternately sweating and shivering, as if his body didn’t know which way to turn and so turned all ways at once. He also realized that Pym had asked him a question.

“Swiddle, mate, where are you?”

“I’m here,” he said, “well, half-here - thinking - “

“About?”

“What not about? Now it’s not just nicking a couple of Feralz but a Queen - “

“A Queen in Valice is like earrings on a pig - ugly and useless.”

“But she’s still a Queen - even if we did ice her husband - and she’s got a child - it’s a mother and child as well as a Queen and the next king - a mother and child, Pym - “

“A pair that our patron wants swept away - and patron trumps family all the time.”

“But what does that make us?”

“I can’t believe you’re sifting through these ideas again! Look, Swiddle, here is the prize upon which we must keep our eyes: the death of the devil that now bedevils us. The washing off of the pitch that has scummed us. If this child/god can lead to Gravinstad’s death, then let’s go for it.”

“But what if what comes after is worse than what is now?” Swiddle couldn’t keep a whine out of his voice.

“So what? We can only know now what we know now, and then do what we can do. And I swear to you that my life as of now is dedicated to seeing Gravinstad in a grave of our own making. And if you won’t go along with me, then I’ll put you in the grave right next to him.”



"I am with you, Pym - you don't have to second-guess on that. But I won't kill children. Not anymore. In fact, I'm not going to try to kill anyone, except for Gravinstad, who, I agree, deserves having done to him what he has had done to others. He has earned his dying - but a child never earns a dying."

"Fair enough, in an unfair world." Pym leaned back in his chair. "We have some hours to go before we have to be there again."

But Swiddle said nothing in response - he was staring at the table top, though his mind's eye did not see the wood-grain - instead, he was seeing the painting of the child/god - more like feeling the painting - and he had to admit that he liked what he was feeling as he stared through the table top into the smiling face. It made him feel an odd thing: hope. And immediately, as soon as the feeling/word raced through his brain, his body shivered and sweated at the same time. It wasn't going to be an easy journey.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Pym and Swiddle stepped onto Gravinstad's balcony, they found themselves bathed in a sulfurous floodlight. Guardsmen were all around, and parked in the middle of the circle of light were two helicopters, but larger than the one that had visited them in the swamp, large enough to carry them. And piloting them were two apes, not the small frantic primate that had flown to them.

"Get on," said Gravinstad. Pym almost leapt into his seat, eagerly snapped the safety harness shut across his body. Swiddle slipped into his seat more slowly, not trusting for one moment the machinery, the pilot, the whole purpose of what he was about to do. The snap of the tongue into the buckle sounded like bone breaking - his bones. For a moment, Swiddle reconsidered revising his promise not to cause the death of anyone except Gravinstad to include Pym, for convincing him of this last hurrah, but he let that go as soon as he thought it and focused on trying to get back that feeling of hope he had had earlier. He liked the feeling and wanted it back.

Seeing them tied in, Gravinstad stood between the machines and gave them their orders. "You're going directly to the mines - we know that's where everyone is headed, so why go around when we can go straight? Once there, find this Rufus and Gaul and use them to get to the child/god, and then bring it back - you'll have complete command of any troops to do just that, and these helicopters as well. All I want back is the child/god - anyone else is dispensable,



and in general everyone connected with this - venture - excluding yourselves, of course - need not come back to Valice. And 'everyone' means everyone. You've got food and supplies in a knapsack under your seats, just in case - "

In case of what, thought Swiddle - he had no other plans than to nab the child/god and hie it back to here, not to go trekking in the dismal countryside on vacation. Did Gravinstad have something else -

"Swiddle, pay attention."

"Yes."

"I've sent messages to the mines to the effect that the two of you are me when you get there." He leaned toward them. "Find the child/god, and you will never have to do another job for me or anyone else again. There are always rewards for deeds well done. Go."

With that, he stepped back and made a whirling motion with his hand. The apes started up the motors, and the blades sliced the night air. The two machines rose. Both Pym and Swiddle could see tiny lights dancing on the helmets of the apes as electrical impulses swam through their brains carrying information and directions. The helicopters banked away from the Keep and passed over the fitful streets of Valice. From this high up all that could be seen of the city was the lighted streets, like the nervous system of an animal.

After a time they passed over the edge of the city, and then into the hinterlands, where the bowl of darkness underneath them reflected nothing of the star-studded sky over their heads. Occasionally they saw small lights tucked into the darkness - a farm house most likely, or the camp of gypsies or other detached people. They saw the military base, men and machines bustling around to complete orders given for unknown reasons, obedient and uninformed. And from the military base they saw convoys moving out, bent on some mission Pym and Swiddle had no way of knowing about - perhaps just exercise, perhaps to smear into oblivion yet another peasant riot, about which the citizens of Valice would know nothing because no word of it would ever make it past the walls into the pages of the newspapers they never read anyway.

The base dropped behind, and now just hours of dark flying through star-lit air, their bodies given over to not-knowing at all where on earth they were. Swiddle couldn't keep the picture of the child/god out of his head, and every once in a while he was able to capture that hope-feel he had. It didn't stay long, and it always ended with a shiver - but it didn't disappear completely. Pym's



---

thoughts were very different - scheming a scheme to get Gravinstad what he wanted, and then to get Gravinstad. His thoughts were bloody, just the way he wanted them.

The apes thought nothing except longitude and latitude and velocity and so on. Who knows if that brought them happiness or not?





## Chapter 31

### Wherein A New World Appears Like An Egg Inside The Old World And, Like An Egg, Is Both Fragile And Nutritious

---

Drumlin would never have been able to re-trace the route that got them here. Poly X had led them through narrower and narrower streets, at times so narrow that the tops of the buildings tipped into each other, and denizens of the upper floors could have, if they had wanted to, embraced while leaning out their windows. If they had wanted to, that is. Which didn't seem likely to Drumlin as they passed through the wretched quarter, everything covered in a skim of dust bound by dirty water and troweled on by time.

Like a melon seed spit from between the teeth of a gap-toothed street urchin, the three of them popped out from between two careened apartment buildings into a cobblestoned square, the stones grouted with weeds and moss, but a square that actually had light falling on it and into the windows of the apartments that fronted it. Poly X dug keys from her bag, slicked one into a lock in a door, and knocked it open with her shoulder. As soon as they were all inside, Poly X rammed it shut, then dead-bolted it.

"Welcome to Chez Poly X," she said without any humor as she started up the stairs. "Upscale for around here because we actually have a lock on the door and keys that match it. And do you know why that is? It is because of who owns the building. And do you know who owns this building? Of course you don't, so I will tell you. We own it. And who is this 'we'?"

By now they were on the second-floor landing, where Poly X stopped, selected another key, slid it into a second lock, turned it, and pushed in the door, leading them into "the inner sanctum," as she called it. As Poly X threw bag, gloves, coat, and what-all onto the table in the middle of the room, she turned to them both to finish her speech.

"Who is this 'we,' Q - or should we call each other by our given names?"

"Those names name the dead."

"And the dying, it looks like."

Q put a hand to his neck. "That's a subject for another time."

“Sooner rather than later, I would guess.”

“If sarcasm could cure, I’d be healed in your presence.”

“You came to me, Q - I didn’t invite you. I don’t even want you here - “

“But you must still care about him.”

Poly X and Q stared at Drumlin. Poly X’s third eye drooped its lid, then opened slowly, giving first Drumlin, then Q, a friendly once-over.

“Otherwise, why? You could’ve stopped the first Guardsman on the street, or the first cop, and turned us in - I’m sure they would’ve found some law we’d broken, probably something against Feralz even breathing in public, offending the eye of the good Valiceans - but you didn’t. You shared coffee, you kept your mouth shut - and at this point I should probably keep my own shut.”

Drumlin stared at his feet - the last thing he wanted was to do anything that would make Poly X discard them, but Q was his friend and now fellow prisoner, so to speak, and he couldn’t let pass what shouldn’t be allowed to pass.

The look that Poly X gave Q was not hostile, which is probably the best that could be said about it. And, then, as if nothing had interrupted her, Poly X picked up the thread of her previous explaining. “I was saying, who is the ‘we’? Aren’t you all the least bit interested?”

“Yes, of course,” said Q.

“Then come with me - because before I say whether I help or not, whether ‘we’ help or not - because this is not only my decision - you need to understand some things.” And with that she turned and made her through an archway into the second room and through a doorway out of their sight. Drumlin looked at Q; Q looked at Drumlin.

“You could have at least told me,” Drumlin snapped out, “so’s I wouldn’t look like a complete idiot.”

“She likes you - don’t worry - it’s me she’s got the knife out for. Now go.”

And out of the room the two of them went.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the shadows of another alleyway that let onto the square.

Angelicus popped his head out, periscoped around, and withdrew it.



“They went into the house,” he said, “so at least I know we’re in the right place.”

Behind him, pressed against the wall, Elfrida and Bensole, face-grimed and exhausted, just nodded, glad for any good news. The trip from the Keep through the sewers and then up to the surface had been both terrifying and boring, but the trek through the city had disheartened Elfrida and unnerved Bensole - Elfrida because she had forgotten how tattered her kingdom really was, Bensole because he had never visited the squirming filth of a city street and felt himself trampled by everything.

“So what are we waiting for?” said Elfrida.

Angelicus looked overhead and just caught a face being drawn back into a window. Without a doubt, other eyes they couldn’t catch were also perched and scanning.

“This won’t take long - we shouldn’t be out in the open like this - but I need to tell you some things first before we go on. I can’t tell you everything - it’d take too long. - but better a few facts under your belt than nothing. Poly X and Q are not their real names - “

\* \* \* \* \*

They followed Poly X through the room onto a deck that had been cobbled onto the side of the building. Below them was something that Q and Drumlin marveled at because even though it was brighter and more lush and all-around more beautiful, it looked exactly like what they had tried to create in Under-City: a swath of open field that bloomed with food. (Fields made, Poly X told them, by gutting then tearing down buildings the city didn’t care about fixing up or blowing up, then hauling off the stone and brick to make what Drumlin and Q could see were smart, tight, small individual houses scattered along curved roads that wended through the field). Food tall, food vined, food bushing out, food rooted - and everywhere, everywhere in the field, in the buildings, people worked - that is, Feralz worked: gimpy, foreshortened, spindled, perforated, wrenched, splayed - but working.

“This is the ‘we’ - we call it a coöperative, but it’s actually more like the kingdom of heaven on earth - everyone has an ownership in everything, no one goes hungry, no one goes homeless, no one goes missing, no one goes unloved - though a few are as prickly as a chestnut shell because of their pains and fears and don’t take readily to being loved - they’re the ones that test us, they’re the





ones that make us better. They get what they need, even if they don't always know they need it."

What could Q and Drumlin say? So they said nothing and watched.

"We make everything we need, and what we don't need we sell off to get the things we can't make. Nobody 'owns' anything here, though everybody owns everything." Poly X let her three eyes scan what she described, and for a moment, all three eyes seemed at peace, at home.

"We do this in Under-City," Q said, "but not on this scale. We can't - there's only so much stone we can break into soil, only so many grow-lights we can string up - "

"I never liked Under-City, the idea of it, the practice of hiding away and behaving like shadows - "

"We're hunted - "

"So what? Is living so wonderful that you'd turn into a shadow to keep on living? That, to me, to us, is not living - that's just being a breathing corpse." Poly X's third eye closed, and Poly X's face slipped from grim to sad. "I didn't mean that - not entirely - not applied to you - "

"But you're right," said Q. "Exactly right."

To shift the sadness, Poly X spoke to Drumlin. "You know what makes all of this different, Drumlin?"

"No."

"We're Feralz, all right, but not like you. Everyone you see out there is god-damaged, just like me. We didn't get Mended by Gravinstad - that's not our Feralz birth - no, we were all 'visited' by the gods - some ripped in half, like me; some looned by dreams; some blinded by promises never kept; some butcher-carved in faith-wars - the catalogue of betrayals outnumbers the stars - serve it to say that all of us here have no interest in seeing the return of anything divine. What keeps us producing as much life as we can is this: when we die, we die; when we die, we go back into the ground to become food for whoever needs it; there is nothing more than what is here, what is now. The only faith we have is in each other."

"A bunch of unbelievers, then," said Drumlin, but it wasn't clear from his voice whether he thought this was good or bad.



“Unbelief is what we believe in,” Poly X said with a wry laugh. “At least all I have to do is go next door to see my ‘god,’ who is probably passing wind and a little ticked off at me when I knock on his gate.”

“What’s your role here?” said Q.

“I’m the arranger,” she said. “I make sure it all hangs together so that we all don’t hang separately. I bargain, I contract - I’m a fixer, a fixer-upper. I have a talent for negotiation.”

With that, she turned from the balcony and strode back into the building. “Come on,” she said over her shoulder, “we need to talk.”

\* \* \* \* \*

But what they found was not what they expected to find. First there was the - creature? - human? - planted in the middle of the room. The skin was stark white - and it shimmered, as if dusted with crystals. Which it was. With salt. In front of - her? - him? - stood Angelicus with two people no one else in the room knew, one of them a boy with a backpack too big for his frame and a woman whose worried look announced to Poly X that she was the boy’s mother. The salt figure held a well-engineered pistol on the three strangers.

Poly X slowed her pace, and her three eyes scanned the room and its people. “Lotswife,” Poly X said to the figure of salt, “you can put that away.”

“Are you sure?” said Lotswife, her voice a salt voice.

“Well, let me see. Angelicus, should she put the gun down?”

“I am always in favor of guns being put down.”

“Especially when pointed at you.”

“And at people who trust me.”

Poly X nodded to Lotswife, who slipped the gun into a holster belted at the small of her back.

“I found ‘em bunched up at the front door - and I asked myself how would they know about this particular door.”

“Lotswife is one of our guards - for the common defense - you can go. Good work.”

“I’d prefer to stay and hear who they are.”

“You’ll hear - but later, in council. When I’ve had a chance to sift them.”



“Can I give ‘em something, then, if they’re going to be part of the trusted ones?”

“Your usual gift?”

“Of course.”

“Of course.”

Lotswife pulled out a thin-bladed knife, pulled up her shirt and held the shirt-end under her chin. She placed the blade-edge against the skin of her stomach, her left hand cupped underneath, and with a few swift strokes scraped a moundlet of salt into her palm. She looked at Bensole and nodded for him to step towards her. Bensole looked up at Elfrida. Elfrida looked at Lotswife.

“It’s all right,” said Poly X to Elfrida, then said to Lotswife, “He’s her son.”

“Then don’t worry,” said Lotswife as she indicated for Bensole to move to her.

Bensole did, his eyes fixed on Lotswife’s crystalline skin. “Hold out your hand.” Which he did. She dumped the salt onto his palm. “Take a lick.” Which he did, and the salt taste, primary and spiky, made his tongue prickle. “Keep the rest somewhere safe - without salt, we die.”

She scraped another moundlet for Elfrida, who stepped forward to receive it. Lotswife looked her straight in the eye as she shifted the salt into Elfrida’s hand. “I got godified one day - go ahead, lick it, too - good - because some god - “ As she spoke, Lotswife cut off two cloth squares from her shirt - a shirt that looked like it had had a number of squares cut out of it, then slipped the knife back into its sheath. As she gave a square to Bensole and one to Elfrida, Poly X went to a drawer, took out a ball of twine, and cut two lengths from it, then joined Lotswife. “Tie up the salt in that, wear it close to your skin.” As Lotswife continued, Poly X helped Bensole and Elfrida fold the salt within the cloth and tie the twine around it so that they could wear them like amulets.

“Name I can’t remember - strolled into my yard and told me that he wanted one of my two babies for - something - can’t remember - and it told me to look away while it choose one - but what mother can look away - and I looked - and it turned me into this - and it took them both - I got godified for daring to look - now I spend my days doing nothing but looking.” She pointed to Poly X. “I wish I had her third eye - she got afflicted with something useful.”



“And you are useful, too,” Poly X said, moving to give Lotswife an embrace, which Lotswife returned with force. “Without salt, we die - your watching will save us. As it is, it’s already brought back someone I didn’t know was still alive. For better or for worse, so there you are. Now, back to your post!”

Lotswife turned and left the room.

“Now, Angelicus, who do we have here?”

But Angelicus ignored her and went up to Q and Drumlin. Without comment, he embraced one, then the other. “Are you both - “

“Stop it,” said Drumlin, “we’re fine.”

“Good to see you, too,” Angelicus replied, laughing, then turned to Poly X. “And you, too.”

“The same right back.”

“All right,” said Angelicus, pulling himself together. “Introductions. Poly X, Q, Drumlin - this is Queen Elfrida -

“Elfrida - just Elfrida, please - “

“Yes - sorry - forgot - Elfrida, and her son Bensole.”

Poly X walked up close to Elfrida. The third eye kept looking Bensole over while the other two stared into Elfrida’s. “I didn’t think you really existed. And that you had a son.”

“Existed? I don’t know,” Elfrida responded, “but my son is real.”

“Gravinstad had your husband murdered.”

“Yes.” But this from Bensole, not Elfrida. “He had my father murdered.”

Poly X turned her whole face and body to Bensole. “And what do you plan to do about it? Is that why you’re here?” Poly X turned to Angelicus. “Why are you all here?”

“I should answer that,” Elfrida said. “We’ve heard that the child/god has been found. We’re going to find him and bring him back before Gravinstad does the same.”

“What is it with you people?” Poly X hawked up phlegm and spit it out. “That’s what I think of your ‘quest.’ That’s what I think of your ‘god.’” She pointed at Elfrida. “You would be much better served if you served your son better and



stopped dragging him into danger for some stupid ideal - 'the kingdom of god on earth' - "

"Poly X," Q said, but her anger swept away his words like leaves on a flood-tide as she paced the room, her boots pounding the floorboards. "This - *this* - here - here and now - what we have - is all the kingdom any of us needs." Drumlin stepped out of her way, or else she would have mowed him down. He noticed that her third eye was shut, seemingly asleep. "Needing the child/god is a sickness - "

"Poly X," said Q again, this time harder, but still he was no match for her voice.

Poly X marched right up to Elfrida and grabbed the cloth bag holding the salt. "Did you hear what Lotswife said to you? Did you?"

"Yes."

"No you didn't. You heard it but you didn't listen to it. 'Godified,' she called it. Do you know what that means?"

"I heard what she said - "

Poly X flung Elfrida's bag away and, without warning, moved behind Bensole and grabbed the boy's hair, pulling his head back. Equally as fast a knife appeared in her free hand, drawn from a sheath against the small of her back, and the blade-tip hovered over Bensole's throat. "You didn't hear Lotswife, Queen Elfrida. *This* is what she said." She moved the knife a hair's-breadth closer. "This is what it is like living with a visitation from the gods."

"Poly X!" This time Q's voice carried. Poly X did not take her eyes off Elfrida, and the knife didn't waver. But her third eye opened, opalescent in the afternoon light, and set its sight on Q. "This is her son. Her child. Her Alma."

Poly X did not flinch at the name of her daughter. "Do you really think Alma is still Alma if she's been 'in the presence'?"

"It doesn't matter," said Q. "A child is a child. Give him back."

Poly X snapped the knife back into its sheath, let go of Bensole's hair, and shoved him towards Elfrida, who caught him and held him close. "If you find your precious child/god, don't drag him back here. I'll tell you this: Gravinstad may be the devil, but he was exactly right in getting the gods off our fronts and our backs. I hope Gravinstad finds it first because at least I know that with him, he will try to drain the creature dry, use it up until there is nothing left to use, and



chuck it away like an orange peel. *That* would be just fine with me, with Lotswife, with all of us here.”

“And Alma?” said Q.

Poly X turned to Q. “Who is Alma to me? She’s all yours.”

Neither of them said anything more as they stared at each other. Drumlin caught Poly X’s third eye, saw it widen in what could only be described as horror, then looked down at Q. The irritated redness around the suture marks had flared into scarlet, and the skin ruckled, as if something inside were trying to get outside. Q grabbed his neck, his eyes bulging, his breathing turned short and sharp. He dropped to the floor. Poly X dropped to a knee beside him. “It’s gotten worse in the last few weeks,” Drumlin said, “he’s been trying to hold on until - “

“Shut up,” said not with anger but efficiency. “Angelicus, go through those doors on the balcony, ring the iron bell out there - *now!*” Angelicus sped from the room and almost immediately they heard the bell’s clamor rip through the air. Bensole cowered against Elfrida, giving up all pretense at courage.

“Drumlin, in that cabinet over there, with the glass doors - the needle and bottle on the bottom shelf - *now!*” Even before her words dropped away, Drumlin had made it back with the syringe and glass vial. With steady hands she pushed the needle into the tube and sucked out a clear liquid. By now Drumlin’s whole face had purpled, and his mouth snapped at the air like a dying fish. Poly X withdrew the needle, lifted Q’s forearm, and injected the liquid. In what seemed like an eternity of waiting but which probably only lasted a minute, Q’s breathing returned to normal and the inflammation in his skin drained away. “It won’t last long,” Poly X said.

In the background, Angelicus’ bell continued to ring away.

“What can we - “ Drumlin began.

Poly X ignored him, turned to Bensole. “Go tell Angelicus to stop. They’ll be here soon.” Bensole looked at Elfrida. “Go,” Elfrida said, “it’s all right.” Bensole edged from the room, and soon after the bell stopped.

“We can fix this,” Poly X said, her voice flat. “We’ve done quite a lot of learning about how to unmend what the gods and Menders have done. The question is - “

“There’s a question involved?” Drumlin shot out. “You fix him. He’s got Alma.”

Poly X said nothing. Angelicus and Bensole came back into the room.



“Fix him,” said Drumlin, this time a darker voice, and while it had been going on all the time, everyone in the room now heard the metallic clicking of Drumlin’s hand.

And they also heard crashing footsteps cascade up the stairs, and then a knock on the door. “Come in,” Poly X yelled, and four people piled into the room, two of them carrying a stretcher.

Poly X paid them no mind, but the rest of the people in the room couldn’t help but stare at them. One had tree bark for skin; another had antlers branching from his temples; the third had skin acid-bleached completely white; the last had horse’s legs for the lower half of her body. “Come over here,” Poly X commanded, and the four laid the stretcher on the floor next to Q, then gently hoisted him on to it and picked it up. “Take him to the hospital, bring him to Asclepius - I’ll be there shortly. He’ll know what to do.”

The four moved carefully but efficiently out of the room. “I’m going with him,” Drumlin said, and moved to follow them.

“Stay here,” Poly X commanded. “You’ll only get in the way - and all they’ll do is tell you to sit down, shut up, and wait.” A faint smile crawled over Poly X’s mouth. “You can do that here just as well as there. Besides, we all need to talk.”

“You have a hard heart,” said Drumlin.

“Not much of a conversation-opener, but I can use it. But let’s move on to the deck, let’s breathe fresh air and let our eyes rest on something more gentle - the sky, the sun, if not each other. But we do have to talk because - “ and here she turned to Bensole and Elfrida “ - I have a couple of true believers on my hands who want to do exactly what I don’t want them to do, and a fate must be decided. You are in my hands - don’t blame Angelicus - and the fact you are queen and he is heir cuts no slack with me - we gave up the bad habit of royalty a long time ago. Shall we?”

With that, Poly X moved out of the room toward the deck. As soon as she was gone, Elfrida hissed at Angelicus, “What have you got us - “

Angelicus just shook his head. “Don’t judge quickly. Besides, if you do want to get out of the city and on to where you want to go, you will need her help - she has connections to people, groups, outside the wall - she knows what you need to know.” Angelicus moved to Drumlin, who was still clicking his metal joints open/close, open/close. “It’s good to see you.” Drumlin stared at the floor, said



---

nothing, then, with his left hand reached up to give Angelicus' shoulder a hard squeeze. "Yeah," he said, and left it at that.

"Come on," Angelicus said, "let's go hear what we have to hear." And with that, the four of them left the room, Bensole's arm linked through his mother's arm and walking so close to her than they seemed joined at the hip.

Poly X's spit dried into the wooden floor.







## Chapter 32

### Wherein Gaul And Rufus Have A Visitation That Makes Them Think More Deeply About Deep Matters That Need Deep Thinking

---

They both saw the firelight from a far distance, the only light in the bowl of ink called the countryside at night. Pym tapped the left shoulder of the ape and pointed, and the ape banked the helicopter and headed for the pin-point. Swiddle's helicopter did the same, and as they moved slowly forward, they could see the flames of the fire and then two figures seated around the fire, two figures who, as soon as they heard the whirr of the blades, stood up and moved out of the fire's light.

No matter, thought Pym. He grabbed the handle of a floodlight joined to one of the helicopter's struts, flipped it on, and almost immediately its hot spot nailed Gaul crouching behind some low brush. Swiddle had turned his on as well, and its prying eye found Rufus. Gaul and Rufus tried to move out of the lights, but the apes piloted the helicopters so that the lights looped the children like bridles. Pym reached under his seat, pulled out a loud-hailer, flicked it on, and let his voice boom through the night air.

"Just stop it, will you, both of you? You can't get away, so just drop where you are."

Gaul dropped to one knee, breathing hard, and Rufus joined her, and together, under the twin bright-white spotlights, waited to see and hear what there was to see and hear. Gaul thought for a blinking moment about gods and painful magic and was only saved from the complete paralysis of terror by Rufus sharply whispering into her ear, "Gravinstad's bastards again - recognize the voice - we either die or we walk what could be more simple than that?"

"Good," came the voice again, "now I have your attention." Pym let the silence hang for a moment, then spoke again. "And I've forgotten what I want to say. Hmm - what could it have been? Oh well, not important. Be seeing you."

Pym flicked off the loud-hailer, tapped the ape on the shoulder, and made the motion to move forward, which it did. Swiddle's helicopter did the same, the two spotlights sweeping the ground before shutting off and everything soon swallowed up by the night's dark mouth.

Gaul and Rufus, now clutching each other in the total blackness, waited. And waited. They could see their campfire, its warmth and invitation. But still they waited. Breathing soft, trying to hear beyond the cricket sounds, the grains of dirt as the ants moved, the breeze. Nothing more than their breathing. Nothing more than that. And slowly, arm in arm, they made their way back to the light.

“What was that?” hissed Gaul. “Why didn’t they land? Why didn’t they - “

“I don’t know,” replied Rufus, “they could have but they didn’t they must be going to the mines - “ Rufus let his voice trail off.

“You don’t think,” said Gaul. “You don’t, do you?”

Rufus didn’t say anything at first as they sat back down at the fire, Gaul only realizing now how much she was shivering when she came back into the fire’s embrace. Her insides felt heavy as melted lead with the thought that everything they had gone through - She shook her head hard, her matted hair, in need of a wash, falling across her forehead and cheeks. She wouldn’t believe it, she wouldn’t believe that it had failed, that they had failed -

“They know why we’re going but they didn’t stop to kill us so they must not know everything yet which means that everything’s still the way it was only now when we get there - “

“They’ll be waiting for us. We’ll be sitting ducks.”

“Any more than we already are quack quack.”

“What did you say?”

“Quack quack.”

Gaul looked at Rufus with a look that said all she couldn’t say about how stupid and crazy she thought Rufus was at the moment, and then it struck her how stupid and crazy this situation was and why not quack like the sitting duck she was, that Rufus was, and she felt a smile spread across her face and her whole spirit lift as she looked back at Rufus and said, in an even serious tone, “Quack quack.”

“Quack quack.”

“Quack quack.”

The insects around them paid them no mind as they laughed themselves silly. The stars paid them no mind as they wiped tears from their eyes. The wind ignored them as they stared into the fire, smiles on their faces.



---

“Quack quack.”

“Quack quack.”

The wood crackled in the fire.

“I don’t how we’re going to do this,” Gaul said, finally, her voice calm as she discussed what might be her last days on the planet.

“I’m not sure either.”

“I mean, now everybody knows we’re coming - it’s not like we can sneak in and sneak out - assuming that we would even know where to sneak into and out of since neither of us have a clue where Alma and this child/god thing is hanging out - “

Gaul stopped her recitation as she saw Rufus’ face, how sad his face had become.

Gaul moved closer to Rufus, and she put her left arm around his shoulders and pulled him in close. He put his right arm around her, and together they stared into the fire.

“I was so clear,” said Rufus, “so clear when we left why we were leaving - “

“So was I - we had murderers on our rear-ends.”

“C’m on not that I mean for what Q said about Alma about the new world about hoping that things would be better once - “

“Once we hauled the god thing back,” added Gaul.

“And there would’ve been a time when I would’ve clumped you for saying ‘god thing’ as being disrespectful of Q and Alma and Swing - “

“I haven’t thought of Swing in forever.”

“There’s a lot we haven’t thought about but now there’s a lot that I have and Gaul - I just don’t know any more.”

“Know what?”

“If I want to if I should - I’ve been thinking a lot about what Mish-la-graw-a-thrppssiss-sluck said about the gods about people about making up stories which only make things worse and worse and how I wanted to kill those two - “

“I sort of regret now my opinion about that.”



“ - and you know what I have really been thinking been feeling lately and I don’t what to do about this but I have lately been wishing I could see my parents - “

And Rufus ground to a halt. And Gaul didn’t answer back because she had to admit that she, too, was feeling the same things, the same doubts and confusions, and same wondering about just what they were doing and why they were doing it. But with this difference: even if this all turned out to be a big empty nothing that cost her everything, she at least knew that it would be better than grinding away her life in DEAD and always being too afraid to be anything other than afraid.

“You know,” said Gaul, finally, “the way it’s been coming across to me is that whatever’s going to happen is going to happen, and while we should not be stupid about things and make sure we take care of ourselves, a lot of what is going to go on is going to go on without us having a word sideways or edgewise to put in about it, so we might as well - “

“Might as well go along for the ride right?”

“Right. It’s like what Mish-la-graw-a-thrrpssiss-sluck said about dirt and water and living. It all goes back to where it came from and who knows what any of it means - and whether this child/god’s got any better take on the whole thing than we do, having coming up from underground into the company of worms and Ravens and making our way into the pit of hell to find, maybe, a god who’s still alive. Sounds all right.”

“Which means scary and dangerous.”

“Which means all right, right?”

“Right.”

And then Rufus did something that took Gaul by surprise - he kissed her on the cheek. And Gaul did something that surprised herself - she kissed Rufus back on his cheek. Then Rufus stood up and went to get a few more branches, which he threw onto the fire, causing sparks to jump up into the darkness, sat back down and put his arm back around Gaul.

The two of them sat there, staring, calm for a pair who, in a day or so, would make it to the mines and walk into a situation more or less blind, with two assassins waiting for them, not to mention Gravinstad’s soldiers.



---

Just outside the firelight, bodies moved - feathered bodies, the flamelight just caught in ebon eyes. Low and ragged, one Raven spoke to another. The other Raven answered. And in the darkness other bodies circled the pair. All the Ravens settled themselves down into the dirt to make sure that the young man and young woman, arms around each other, made it to the morning.





## Chapter 33

### Wherein Q Is Saved And Mothers Do Not All Think Alike



Bensole had never seen anything like it.

Clean.

White.

Sweet-smelling.

And busy. People wearing loose shirts and pants of all colors sprinted around.

He sat next to his mother in what was a waiting room. Drumlin sat far away from all of them, his head hanging down. And they were all waiting.

Poly X paced, wearing a run in the clean floor, her three eyes focused intently on the ground.

Bensole leaned into Elfrida and whispered, "What do they call this place again?"

"The Sanatorium."

"What does it mean?"

"The place of healing."

"And Q - "

"And Q is here, Bensole - we've been over this already."

"Sorry."

She hadn't meant to be short with him, only that her own nerves were raw with worry and fear - she hadn't expected to be waiting to see if a total stranger would be alive by the end of the day, especially one whose head - And she shook her own head hard to rid it of the images of an old man's head grafted to the body of a young boy - the pain and horror of all that, the sheer pain that must have ripped -

She patted Bensole's hand. "I'm sorry, too."



Elfrida stood up. “You stay here,” she said to Bensole, then fell in step with Poly X. The third eye glanced over to take note of her presence, then went back to its staring.

“I know this is not a good time to ask - “

“No, it’s not,” replied Poly X.

“But I have to ask,” continued Elfrida, not at all intimidated, “because I have a son to think about and something we have to finish - “

“It’s not my concern that you threw away your kingdom - not that it was worth much - “

“It wasn’t worth anything, to be honest,” Elfrida said, “not since Gravinstad had my husband killed - “

Poly X stopped, and Elfrida could see the effort she made to turn her full attention away from her own worries about Q and place it on Elfrida. “ I know you’re worried - “

“I’m not worried,” said Poly X. “Q’s in the best hands around here - why should I worry?”

“Because when it comes to people we care about, we worry, no matter how hard a face we turn outward to others. To be honest, I’m worried about Q as well, and I don’t even know him - just because, just because it’s important to keep remembering how to care - “

A single tear ran down from the third eye. Poly X’s other two eyes stayed agate-like. “You wanted to ask me something.”

“Yes, I did.”

“So ask.”

“I need to make my plans.”

“About the child/god.”

“I do believe - and it doesn’t matter to me what you think about my believing. So, yes, plans about the child/god. I know where it is - “

“Exactly?”

“I’ll have to admit ‘no’ to that, not exactly, not the exact latitude and longitude - “

“Whoever does?”



---

“But I know close enough - and I know that Gravinstad knows as well - and, well, I’d prefer it if I found it rather than that butcher.”

“I know someone else who’s found it as well - you who is so worried about her son.”

“Who?”

“My daughter, Alma - oh, it’s a long, boring, tear-filled story about how a god came and ravished me and seeded me and my husband - have you figured out that Q is my husband? was my husband? a former general of Gravinstad’s by the name of Merkin - you haven’t figured that all out?”

“There is no need to be mean.”

“Well, it makes Alma a half-god by way of violence, and when Merkin fell out of favor with Gravinstad, and Gravinstad decided to Mend him with a new body and threw Alma in the mines and I ran for what little worth my life had - has - well, you can see why I don’t care two pennies and a belch for what you want to do.”

“You don’t care about your daughter.”

“I love her and I hate her - is that so hard to understand? If she’s found the child/god, then let her have him - just don’t bring him back here, back to Valice, back into the world, because then the poisons will start all over again, and if she is its ally, its protectress, then I will, without hesitation, cut her down if that means making this world god-free and liberated.”

“So you won’t help me?”

“What do you think?”

“I have no place to go.”

“You can stay with us - or you can go back with Angelicus underground, assuming that he’ll go back. But to help you get to the mines, to rescue and recover - why would I put a knife in my own heart?”

Elfrida found herself both drawn to and stepping back from Poly X - on the one hand wishing she had some of Poly X’s metal in her blood but also feeling pushed away by the anger and bitterness - though she understood those feelings, would have felt them herself if she had had happen to her what had happened to Poly X - and, then, from some dark recess, as if she had her own third eye open and seeing, Elfrida, thinking about the corpse of her husband stuffed into the royal mausoleum, knew exactly what Poly X felt - the same rage



that made life so clear: kill the evil, lay waste to the wicked. This was why, in the end, she wanted the child/god back - not for peace, not for harmony, not for love, but for sweeping clean the filth that would do whatever it could to ruin her son's life. Her rage had love in it - her love was salted with anger.

"Are you all right?"

Elfrida looked up at Poly X, realizing that her mind had not been in the present tense. Poly X's third eye stared at Elfrida the way a needle pierces cloth, and the thought leapt into Elfrida's mind as she felt herself held by that stare that she and Poly X, instead of being enemies, had common ground to walk - what, she didn't know, she only knew that knowing her own dark heart made her, for the moment, feel not ashamed or guilty but freer than she had ever felt before. The third eye blinked, releasing Elfrida.

"Are you all right?"

"Yes, I'm all right - I am - all right." She looked back at Bensole. "I'm going back to my son. But I haven't finished talking to you yet - I can't stay here and I can't go back - and I hope you will hear me out."

"Had a reckoning with yourself, didn't you?"

"Yes."

At that moment, a man walked through the door - though to say "man" and leave it at that would be to miss the extra set of arms and hands that grew out of his back just below his wingbones - and up to Poly X. Bensole moved to his mother, who put her arm around him. Drumlin shot toward them, his hinges spiking clacking. Poly X faced him.

"The rejection had gone pretty far," he said, "but not too far. He will survive - we were able to remove the head and put it on the simulator - it's short-term until we can figure out how best to keep - "

Drumlin leaned into Poly X, his metal arm raised. "This is how you propose to save him, by chopping his head off?"

The doctor leveled with Drumlin. "It was either that, mate, or the infection would've eaten head and body both. The Menders did this all the time - they didn't care if tissues matched - they were experimenting, not healing - always a game with them." He turned back to Poly X. "As I said, he's on the simulator for the time being."

"And that means what?" snarled Drumlin, not at all intimidated.



---

“That means,” said the doctor, spelling it out, “that we are going to have to find something like a body for him. Do you happen to have one?”

Drumlin raised his metal arm, the arm whirring and snicking. “I’ll build him a body. Would that work?”

“Yes,” said the doctor, “if you could do it.”

“Then I’ll do it.”

Poly X looked at Drumlin with a half-smile on her face. “Oh the things we would do for love.” She glanced over at Elfrida. “Right?”

“Right,” said Elfrida.

“When do I begin?” Drumlin interrupted, his arm clattering in excitement.





## Chapter 34

### Wherein Bensole And Poly X Come To An Understanding



Outside the hospital Poly X led Elfrida and Bensole through a garden overstuffed with ripeness, with flowers tricked out in brash and pastel colors, with vines looped and roped across trusses, with groundcovers studded with starlets of whites and reds and yellows, the air thick with vegetative sweetness.

She sat on a bench, and Elfrida and Bensole sat as well. Overhead, Ravens scribbled on the sky, their calls sifting down like soot.

“What am I going to do with you?” Poly X mused.

“I don’t know what to do with myself,” Elfrida answered back. She looked at Bensole. “What should be done with me?”

“Which means, what should be done with me, too - I mean, as well.” Bensole was surprised by his own voice - and a little surprised at how tired he was of all these adults making decisions about his life.

“What *should* be done with you?” Poly X was nothing if not direct.

“My mother is right - we can’t go back. Don’t want to go back. Every day was like - “

“It’s all right,” said Elfrida, putting a hand on his shoulder.

Bensole shook the hand off. “It’s not all right. Nothing of anything is all right. Gods - the tortures - my father - how can anything be all right? All of you have really messed it up for all of us - “

Elfrida went to comfort Bensole again, but Poly X motioned for her to stop the gesture.

“So, if you were in charge, what would you do, oh wise one?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“Yes, I am. Stand up - go on, stand up. It’s a simple request - I want you to stand up.”

Bensole glanced at his mother, then launched himself upright, trying to make his spine-bones as tall as possible. In the background, just audible, Bensole heard Ravens.

Elfrida scanned the tree-tops and saw Ravens settle into the upmost branches. She tried to hear what they were saying, but they were too far away.

“Look at me - right at me.” Bensole anchored his gaze on Poly X’s face.

“Good.” To Elfrida: “I’m not going to bite his head off.” Back to Bensole: “Now we adults sometimes think you children tell us the truth about things - ever heard of the phrase ‘out of the mouths of babes’? But I haven’t heard - “

“I think you should shut up,” Elfrida interrupted.

Poly X ignored her. “I haven’t heard one thing out of you except complaint. Tell me one thing you would do, if you could do it, that you would do to make all this mess you say we’ve stuck you with better.”

Ravens began to settle into the trees in the garden. Elfrida looked at Poly X, but Poly X didn’t seem to notice their presence. Her three eyes were fixed on Bensole.

Bensole did something that even astonished him. He looked around for a moment, then found what he was looking for: a deep-red amaryllis. He turned back to Poly X. “Do you have something I can cut with?”

Elfrida began to reach into the pouch slung across her shoulder, but Bensole stopped her, turned back to Poly X.

“Do *you*?”

Poly X reached behind her and slipped out her blade. “Will this do?”

Bensole wagged his fingers, indicating that she should turn it over to him, which she did, handle-first. He then went to the flower and, cupping the body and petals, sliced through the thick green stem. As he did this, the flower dusted his shirt-cuff with golden pollen.

He carried the flower and knife back to Poly X. He handed the knife to Poly X, handle-first, who slipped it back into its sheath. Then, as if he were a herald bringing an announcement of the deepest significance, he offered the flower to Poly X.

“What is this?” she said.



“This is your daughter. This is Alma. This is one thing I would do. For you. To make things better.”

Poly X did not move.

“Take it,” said Elfrida. “You asked, and he answered. Take it.”

Bensole kept holding out the flower, straight-armed, the petals shivering a little because his arm was getting tired. The third eye looked at him, and he looked back at it, fierce but without anger, and Poly X held out both of her hands, and Bensole placed the flower in the bowl made by her fingers. “So this would be it?” she said as she brought it up to her nose to inhale.

“It’s a start.”

Still cupping the flower, she lowered her hands into her lap. “You don’t know this, but I had already given orders that if the two of you tried to leave without my permission, you were either to be thrown into jail or killed. I meant what I said about bringing the gods back - not on my watch, not on my time. But - “

She gazed at the flower.

“A daughter is a very different thing.” Poly X looked at Elfrida. “A negotiation, all right?”

“Not that I have any negotiating power.”

“I’ll give you the means to get to where you want to go - you can go meet your god, if it’s so important. But the only thing I want you to bring back is Alma.” She held up the flower by its cut stem as if it were a goblet, looked at Bensole. “Your son might do some good around here.”

“Why don’t you go with us?” This from Bensole.

“I can’t. Too many things to do here.”

“How do you know that we’ll come back?” This from Elfrida.

“I could hold him hostage - would you like me to do that?”

“Of course not.”

“I can’t hold your kingdom hostage because you don’t have one anymore. So what do you think I have to rely on with the two of you?”

“Our word,” snapped out Bensole. “You can have our word. Our promise. Right, mom? Would you take our promise?”





“Make the promise to yourselves, not to me.” Poly X shot up from the bench; she held the flower by the stem. “Come on - you don’t have any time to waste. You’re leaving today - even with what I’m going to give you, it’ll take you a hard time to get to where you think you’re going.”

Poly X started out of the garden. “Come on,” she threw over her shoulder, and Elfrida, with an arm around Bensole, hurried to catch up.

Three Ravens settled on Poly X’s bench and delicately dipped their beak-ends into the pollen shaken out of the flower. They then clinked their three beaks together - one, two, three - so that the grains drifted off into the breeze, then lifted their heavy bodies off the bench and down the path.

\* \* \* \* \*

The horses in the stable that Poly X showed Elfrida and Bensole were, like everything they had been discovering about themselves and the world, both what they appeared to be and something different. Sleek, roan in color, but with six legs, like the doctor with the extra pair of arms and hands, machined to do something more than what they had been born to do, the mended and the godfied interfering in life the way they had been interfered with by the Menders and the gods.

Two stablehands were saddling up the horses.

“I assume the two of you know how to ride.”

“It’s one of the useless skills that royalty possesses,” Elfrida responded.

Poly X patted the thick sloping neck of one of the horses. “These two are horses, despite the extra pair of legs, so handle them like horses, respect them like horses, and they’ll serve you like horses. This is Chiron; the other is Antibes.”

The stablehands also threw panniers across the rumps of the horses. “In there you’ll find food, matches for fires, a blanket. And maps - you can’t take the main roads, but the secondaries will get you there - we’ve had our cartographers out there for a long time, so we know the maps are good.”

By now the horses were ready, and the stablehands led them into the sunlight. Three Ravens sat up in the rafters, watching.

“Go,” said Poly X. “Just go. Don’t thank me, don’t curse me - I don’t even know if I want you to succeed, really - I wish there were some other way to get Alma back without the attachment of gods in the bargain. And who knows - I may



---

change my mind, send out people to bring you back, force you to return. No one can ever know what a day will bring. So go. Now.”

“I don’t know what the proper thanks is here,” said Elfrida.

“Don’t make this something it isn’t,” replied Poly X. “This is not friendship, this is not camaraderie, this is not motherly.”

“Then what is it?” asked Elfrida. “Why do it?”

“Just go,” Poly X said.

Elfrida put her arm around Bensole and led him from the stable to the horses. Poly X watched the two of them, then looked down at the flower still in her hand. She will not be the same, she thought. And none of us will be the same when she comes back. This will be the beginning of an end.

She watched Elfrida and Bensole mount the horses, watched them talk to the stablehands who pointed them down the road they needed to leave by, watched the two of them whisper into the ears of the horses and caress their manes, then watched them flick the reins and heel the horses’ ribs to move them forward until there was nothing left of them to see.

The three Ravens overhead muttered and chattered, then flew off to follow the horses.





## Chapter 35

### Wherein Things That Had Been Closed Now Threatened To Open

---

*T*he mines. They had arrived. For better or for worse.

Under the safety of a rock overhang, they watched the dirt road below them. Occasionally, military patrols would pass by. Sometimes they guarded trucks that hauled frightened lumps of children to be stuffed down the throat of the mine, sometimes they came alone on some mission unknown to Rufus and Gaul. One thing they knew: this place had a lot of guards. A lot. Everywhere.

When activity on the road quieted down, they would clamber back over the rocks so that they could see the mine entrance itself, a black gouge in the side of a mountain, surrounded by minor mountains of slag waste, huge trucks steaming into and out of the entrance, the empty ones going in and others coming back out full, heading off to Valice.

As they observed the huge operation, as they listened to the horn blasts and constant revving of engines, as they watched the guards patrol the mine's perimeter, they looked each other square in the face, thinking the same thought: we are never going to make it inside. And then they would retreat to their overhang to brood and wait for a sign.

Which came sooner than they thought.

Towards dusk of the second day, at a time when traffic on the road had died off, Rufus and Gaul heard the steady rhythm of horses. They slinked back to their overhang to see who was coming, and they saw two people they did not expect to see: a woman, tall in the saddle, and a boy not much older than themselves. And the horses: six legs each.

And one more strange thing: three Ravens standing in the middle of the road.

The two riders pulled up their horses as they approached the Ravens, and Rufus and Gaul could hear the three of them chattering away to the woman, who seemed to understand everything they were saying.

"She knows Ravenspeak," Rufus whispered.

"Can you hear them?"

“Too far away.”

And just as he finished, the woman turned her head to look at them, at their hiding place. She pointed, looked back to the Ravens for confirmation, and then threw her eyes back up to their hiding place, and just as her eyes landed on them, a half dozen Ravens started dancing around their niche, making such a racket and fuss that the only thing they could do (since they could no longer pretend that they were hidden) was to move into the open and hope that whoever the woman and boy were that they had nothing but the best intentions towards two frightened and tired and hungry and filthy travelers.

Rufus and Gaul made their way down to the road. Elfrida and Bensole got off their horses. The four, circled by Ravens, took several beats to look one another over. The horses knickered. The sun slipped horizonward.

One of the Ravens shot out a cannonade of clicks, caws, and gutturals, and both Elfrida and Rufus answered at the same time. They gave each other a look of warm surprise.

“You speak - “ Rufus began.

“I do. What do you think?”

“I think we should take their advice and move off the road and into the caves that that Raven suggested.”

“I agree.”

And before either Bensole or Gaul knew what was happening (even before they had a chance to register each other’s existence), Rufus and Elfrida moved back along the road until they saw the fissure the Ravens had pointed out. With twisting and bending the four of them and the two horses made it through. Just past that they came into a huge cavern. From the ledge they stood on they could hear a stream below them, and in the glare-white light of the lantern Elfrida pulled from the pannier (a metal cylinder with a steel ball in it that could be shaken between two magnets to produce power) they could see driftwood that the steam had dumped to the side, ready for a fire.

“A fire,” said Rufus.

“A fire indeed,” agreed Elfrida.

And before long firelight danced along the walls and across the pelts of the horses eating the dried food Bensole had carried in his pannier. And the four



humans ate thinbread and drank tea from metal cups as the fire's smoke lost itself in the reaches of the cavern.

And they talked.

\* \* \* \* \*

The cage carrying Pym and Swiddle dropped 700 feet before jerking to a hissing stop as the air brakes caught its weight and lowered it to the mine floor. Five soldiers crammed into the cage with them, but none came within three feet of Swiddle and Pym - these were Gravinstad's men with Gravinstad's power, and it was best to keep a safe orbit around these molten stars.

Almost hidden by the seven male bodies was a child. Two soldiers clutched its thin arms with professional fingers, but there was there was no real need since the body barely moved, barely breathed. A blindfold covered everything above the nose, and the hair, grimy and ratty, spiked up over the rim of the cloth mask. They had tied its hands behind its back.

The cage door rattled open, and the seven adults strode down the main hall. The child shuffled along, half-pulled by the guards. Other paths opened off to the right and left, and down each one, surrounded by the grind of machinery and the shouts of workers, Pym and Swiddle could see shadows dance haloed by black dust - scenes from hell on earth. And one other thing they noticed - the place was hot, sweat-making, the air soupy and foul.

The group halted in front of a wall of burnished coal, the surface polished and honed. Swiddle put a hand on it, and jerked it back - the coal radiated heat, and they could all feel themselves encased in it.

"This is where we think the anomaly took place," said one of the guards to Pym.

"The 'anomaly,'" Pym repeated. "A wall of coal utterly smooth, glass-perfect, in a hell-hole like this - I would call that an 'anomaly.' Have you tried - "

"Sir, we have tried everything to get past this."

"Everything?"

"Diamond-tipped drill bits, explosives, even a gang of workers whacking it with picks for an entire day. You can see, sir, nothing dents - "

"Did they try your ugly face?" Pym countered.

The soldier fell silent.



If they had done all the soldier had said they had done, then they were, indeed, in the presence of an anomaly. The rock bore not one gash, and the heat tried to suck the oxygen out of the place. If there was a red-hot god to be had in this place, Pym guessed it would be had right here. “What do you think?” said Pym to Swiddle, whose face had become sweat-slick in the black radiance.

“I think - “ Then he looked at the soldiers and caught himself - Gravinstad’s man couldn’t be caught speaking what he really thought, which was that all this was nothing but madness and idiocy and that most likely he was going to die some horrible painful death at the end of the process. “I think,” he began again, “that this is as good a place as any to begin.”

“Then let’s begin.”

Pym turned to the pile of rags that was also a human body and whipped off the blindfold. The child blinked several times, the face slate-blank, the eyes gleamless. “Swing, is it?” said Pym in an oily voice. “Is it?” Swing nodded, his ragged hair bobbing around his temples and forehead. Except that this was not the Swing that Gaul had known. This was a changed Swing, a damaged Swing. For Gravinstad had had his little joke with the boy. Instead of eyebrows, Gravinstad had had his Menders sew in black Raven’s feathers so that it looked like Swing had a pair of arched Raven’s wings over his eyes. Lucky, thought Pym, that that was all he had done to you. Pym swung the face to Swiddle, who saw the feathered arrangement and could only just keep the surge of revulsion in his gut from spreading across his own face. Pym brought Swing’s face back to his own.

“Now, you’ve told Mr. Gravinstad many things that have kept you alive - about your sister, about a god, about - well, I think it’s all trash, but Mr. Gravinstad seems to think differently. He seems to think you have something to offer.” Pym lost his concentration for a moment as he tried to figure out just what Gravinstad thought this fry would be able to do. After all, he had come to them bundled on one of the transport trucks, accompanied by a messenger and written orders from Gravinstad to “use the boy in whatever way possible to find and appropriate the resource which we seek” - and that was all. What did “whatever way possible” mean? Leave it to Gravinstad to suggest nothing in order to avoid blame later if the “whatever way possible” didn’t work.

Swiddle cleared his throat, and Pym brought himself back. He gave Swing one last glare, then stepped back. “Your sister is behind there,” Pym said. “If you want to save her and yourself, you better make something happen.”



The seven adults stepped back, as if moving away from a package that may or may not be a bomb, and waited. Swing stared at the wall and did nothing. Nothing.

“The boy looks knackered, Pym,” said Swiddle, but Pym put up his hand to shut him up, and Swiddle shut up. The seven stood there, waiting, sweating. One guard let out a long exasperated sigh, and Pym, snake-like, had a knife out of his belt and the knife-point a hair’s-breadth away from the guard’s left eyeball. “Shut up,” he hissed, and the guard swallowed everything.

Swing still did nothing, made no move - and then something changed. His head perked up, as if he had heard something, and he raised his right hand, palm and fingers straight, and laid it flat against the stone. Swiddle noted that he didn’t jerk it away but rested it there, as if he had pressed his hand to a window-pane and was watching rain beat against the glass - he had that kind of far-away look. He brought up his left hand and did the same thing, and then leaned his body into the rockface, resting his forehead, with its Raven eyebrows, on the rock. Swiddle thought (though it might have been a trick of the dim light ) that Swing glowed.

All at once, Swing dropped to the ground, his body convulsing, spasming. Swiddle fell to his knees beside him, cradling the boy’s head in his hands, and yelled at the guards to pick him up - carefully! carefully! - and get him back to the surface. One of them - the one who’d sighed - lifted him off the floor with no effort, carrying the body that jerked and juked as if in pain, and the soldiers as a group moved to the elevator.

But Pym screamed at them. “Bring him back! Now! Now!” And they carried the twitching body back to the rockface.

“Pym, the boy is epileptic, the boy is sick - you can’t deny him - “

“I will cut your bleeding heart out if you say another word.”

Anger surged through Swiddle at Pym’s bloody-mindedness. “Not before I crush your face, you frog-spawn - don’t you dare talk to me - “

“Don’t *forget* why we are here! He - “ pointing to Swing “ - is nothing but a tool. Shut. Up.”

And Pym was right, of course. But that didn’t take away the bitterness that singed his mouth as he watched the gaunt child tremble and jolt.





Pym turned to the soldiers. "Stand him up - hold him. Put his damn hands on the rockface if you have to - but *keep him connected!*"

Two soldiers held up the limp Swing, and another two, each taking a hand, pressed Swing's palms against the surface. Almost instantly Swing stiffened, and all four guards felt their hands pushed off Swing's body by the voltage that surged through it. This time the aura that Swiddle had seen before strengthened until a corona of white-yellow light outlined Swing's body. Everyone covered his eyes, and all they could hear - more "feel" than "hear" since it was so low - was a deep bass rumbling that punched the solar plexus and took the breath away. They all fell to their knees. And no one knew anything.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Ravens found the passageway for them. It started at the back of the cavern where they had camped by the underground stream (Elfrida and Bensole had brought the horses back out to the road and set them back on a return course to Valice), and now the four of them, following the sharp-bright light of Elfrida's lantern, moved behind their Raven-guide, who took them past branchings and cut-offs and fall-aways (Bensole thought more than once that if their Raven all at once dropped dead, there would be no way any of them would remember all the turns and twists that got them where they were - and he thought, so this is what trust means).

After what seemed like both forever and not that long, they came to a wall through which had been blasted a hole, and Rufus, holding the lantern, stood on Bensole's shoulders, who stood on Gaul's shoulders, to see what there was to see. The Raven chattered, and Elfrida and Rufus nodded. "What did it say?" said Gaul. "And Rufus, can you hurry - Bensole's heels are digging into - "

"It's an air-shaft," said Elfrida, "for the mine. Rufus, come on down." Elfrida held out her arms, and Rufus, who half-turned to face away from the wall, gave a short hop and landed in Elfrida's arms. Then Bensole crouched down and jumped off Gaul.

"An air-shaft for the mine," Elfrida continued.

"They didn't give us a lot," said Rufus, "but they had to give us air at least though if they could 've gotten away without doing that they would have."

The Raven spat out a few more phrases, and Bensole, to his own surprise, shouted, "I understood some of that! He said this is the way in."



“Yes, that’s what he said,” Rufus shot back, “your ear is good.” Rufus and Bensole high-fived each other, and for a split second Gaul felt jealous - Rufus had never high-fived her, and they’d gone through worms together, and now this snout-nosed royal git was here and -

She only stopped herself because Elfrida spoke to her. “Gaul, you can climb this wall, right?”

“I can freehand my way up, no problem.” That made her feel a little better - no one else in that group could freehand anywhere near as well as she could.

“Then take this” - she handed Gaul a loop of rope - “climb up into the shaft and find a place to tie this off, then throw it down to us. We’ll use it to climb up. It’s not that far - shouldn’t be too hard.” As Elfrida handed the rope to Gaul, Elfrida noted that she felt good about this situation at the moment - she felt in charge, useful, smart, things she hadn’t felt in a long time. Who knew what an hour would bring, and she continued to worry about her son, knowing that they were walking into Gravinstad’s camp, but for now, everything felt right.

Gaul, rope slung over her shoulder, looked at the wallface for a moment, then toed onto two small ridges, and her fingers hooked into two small cracks. And it all flushed back into her body, the oneness she felt with the surface of the rock, and she didn’t even have to look in order for her hands and feet to find the chinks and embosses and folds that got her quickly up to the shaft - it was as if her hands and fingers had eyes of their own.

She looked around to see if she find an anchor, and there it was, almost as if placed for her to find: a square block of stone that had been left behind when they chiseled out the opening.

“Can you find anything?” Elfrida’s voice floated up.

“Got it,” Gaul shot back, and she threw one loop around the stone and tied it off in a solid square knot. Then she stepped to the edge and threw the rest of the rope down to those below. “Come and get it.”

Rufus and Bensole had no trouble winching themselves up hand-over-hand. And then it was just Elfrida, and the rope dangling in front of her made her feel heavy and foolish - when, exactly, was the last time she had done anything like exercise? Were they going to have to truss her like the two assassins and haul her up because she was too much of a slug to make it up the wallface?



So with enthusiasm and fear of embarrassment, she grabbed the rope, planted her feet against the rock, and started up, ignoring the burn in her arm muscles as they caught her weight and pulled it upward. And before she knew it, and to her surprise and relief, she sat on the edge of the hole pulling up the rope behind them, a little out of breath but very very glad that she had made it on her own.

She unhitched the rope from around the rock and slipped it back into her knapsack. The Raven had already started hopping down the airshaft, and the four followed, soon reduced to crawling on their hands and knees, and sometimes slithering on their bellies, to get through.

Before long they came to an intersection where four other shafts joined theirs; at the center sat a giant fan, its blades turning lazily as it moved the air along. The Raven selected one of the passageways and flew down it, and the quartet flew after him.

Dark, tight, hot, and sloping downwards - and getting noisier and rougher as they dragged themselves closer to the mine itself. The ground trembled, dust sifted into their eyes and noses and mouths, and their hands and knees, though padded with whatever rags they could tear from their clothes, had gotten battered and bloody. And they were thirsty - Elfrida and Bensole had brought canteens, and they shared the lukewarm water, everyone taking sips and swishing the water around their mouths before swallowing. It felt like being buried without being dead.

Finally, the Raven brought them to the end of the shaft, which emptied onto a hallway in the mine. There was no grill or covering, so the four of them dropped the five feet to the floor of the hallway - and waited. They could hear trucks, train cars, voices (shouts, cursings, barks, snarls). The Raven spat out a few sharp caws, and Elfrida told everyone to flatten themselves against the walls and follow her - which they did, trying to melt into the black rock that rasped their backbones.

They slid along, all the noises getting louder and louder, until they came to what had to be the mine entrance - what Rufus and Gaul had been able to see from their hiding place. Workers and soldiers surged everywhere, and it was all they could do to keep from yelling out when they saw the chained gangs of children being carted off. Gaul held Rufus close, who trembled and gibbered, memories of pain battering him. The Raven tugged at the hem of Elfrida's skirt, and she looked down at it. It turned itself, wings outspread, to face a bank of



elevators in the opposite wall, and lobbed a string of clacks and craws at Elfrida telling her that she needed to take the middle elevator down to the 9th circle - and after that they would be on their own, there was nothing more that it could do.

The four of them were obscured for the moment by niches in the walls near the entrance. Elfrida touched each of the three children and pointed to the elevator bank, pointed hard to make sure that they understood that that was where they were all going to have to go. They all nodded, and Elfrida, taking Bensole by the hand (who took Gaul by the hand, who took Rufus by the hand), started a sharp run across the gallery. For some reason, because of timing and sheer luck, trucks obscured guards' views, guards turned their backs for a moment, gangs moved away rather than towards them, and they were able to sprint to the elevators without setting off any alarms. Elfrida slammed open the door of the middle elevator and herded them all inside, slammed it shut, quickly scanned the button panel, slammed "9" with the palm of her right hand. The winch caught, and they could all hear the grind of unrolling cable as the drum rotated and lowered them into more stifling darkness.

It seemed to take forever. The car juked back and forth, throwing them around, and when they passed each elevator stop, the abrupt light from that opening splashed against their faces. But soon the rush of the car's fall slowed, and they coasted to a stop - a very strange stop because unlike any of the other elevator stops, this one was flooded with hot-white light and running up through the elevator cables and the metal car-box and into their bodies flowed this low bass surge that rattled their bones.

The door slid open, and they had to cover their eyes to keep them from being singed and blinded. The grinding bass note, filling the cavern with a dense pressure, dropped them to their knees. Gaul shouted, "Take off your jackets - put them over your head!" And they did, trying to bury their eyes and ears away from the overload.

Swing, however, never moved, his hands bonded to the rock, his eyes shut, his body like an exclamation point. Then, without any warning, Swing pulled his hands away; the light and sound dropped to zero; silence oozed into the cavern.

Gaul unwound her jacket from her head. All she could see through the dimness and dust was one upright body standing next to the rockface. Gaul got to her feet and started moving forward - something about that back, that figure -



By this time Elfrida had untangled herself, and she saw Gaul making her way forward. “Gaul!” she hissed, “stay with us!”

But Gaul ignored her.

Gaul couldn’t believe her eyes.

Rufus and Bensole, hearing Elfrida, unhooded themselves. Rufus called out. “Gaul friend be careful we are nowhere and everywhere lost here - “

But Gaul ignored him.

Gaul couldn’t believe her eyes.

That figure - she knew it. As if come back from the dead - from the DEAD.

“Swing.”

That single word crashed into the emptiness.

“Swing - it’s Gaul.”

There - a movement of the shoulders, a tilt of the head, as if hearing.

“Swing.”

This time Swing turned completely around. Gaul bit her tongue to say nothing about the Raven’s feathers, but it was Swing’s face.

And not.

Still the shape and pattern of Swing’s face, but now colored by something else - pain, yes, but also power, also peace. And not a hint of compassion or friendship.

Swiddle and Pym and the soldiers stirred on the ground and tried to lever themselves upright. Having been closer, they were more bruised, and it showed in their voices - yips and cursings and groans.

“Gaul.” Swing’s flat voice brought Gaul back to focus.

“Swing,” she started, “we’ve come for - “

“It won’t be what you think.”

By now Pym and Swiddle had risen to their feet. “It’s the worm-girl,” Pym spat out along with dust and muck. He looked up to see the other three by the elevator door. “And her boyfriend. And her grace and her little pip-snot.” Pym made a mocking bow to Elfrida. “Your highness - we are your husband’s killers - that’s how you know us.”



---

“Pym,” Swiddle hissed, “why don’t you shut up?”

Pym ignored him. “Aren’t you ecstatic to be here with us? In this - hell-hole? Waiting for - “ Pym turned to Swing. “Waiting for what, flip? Just what are we waiting - “

They all heard it. Distinct. Sharp. An announcement. An annunciation.

Crack.

The five soldiers, now upright, at least in their bodies, all looked at each other sideways, their frightened snap-glances saying what their voices wouldn’t - this was not the time and place to be in this time and place. Seven hundred feet from safety. Seven hundred feet away from these lunatics.

Crack.

Behind Swing the rockface unseamed itself. The soldiers began edging back to the elevator, on their way passing Elfrida, Rufus, and Bensole who were moving closer, as if drawn in by a magnet. They reached the door, and without much fuss or fanfare, they filed into the cage and disappeared upward from view.

Seven people now stared as the wall peeled away like the rind of an orange. Only Swing’s face stayed calm, dead-pan - everyone else gaped at the thing happening in front of them that none of them (except for perhaps Swing) knew if it would kill or coddle them. All that they had worked for and believed now made its way toward them, and they were as ignorant now about what it was as on the day they had started their journeys.

The wall stopped splitting - in front of them, an opening large enough to walk through without having to twist or crawl. Dust sifted. Pebbles fell. And Swing, without hesitation or invitation, walked through it and away from them. The six of them looked at each other - there was no question at all of what to do. They all filed into the opening, hard on Swing’s heels - the killers, the sinned-against, the confused and dazed, all marching forward into the darkness.





## Chapter 36

### Wherein All The Others Feel Their Own Intimations And Shiftings

---

**D**rumlin felt it course through his boot-soles. Poly X, standing in the workshop with him, felt it jitter through the chair she sat in as she watched Drumlin craft the mechanico-body for Q. The tools hanging on the wall shook, the screws and nails in their drawers rattled, and even the rivets in his arm, soldered into place as they were, felt like they were unloosening themselves.

“An earthquake?” Drumlin asked Poly X, but she didn’t answer him. He saw her third eye open wide and dart looks around the room, as if looking for an assassin it knew was there but was hidden and armed.

“No,” she finally answered. “No.”

“Then what?” Drumlin was already back at his contraption, a slim cage of wires and joints and knurls and hinges, a metal mannequin waiting for its head.

Poly X didn’t answer.

“Then what?” Drumlin asked again, more out of courtesy than interest since the mechanicals of his work had stolen back his attention.

Poly X stood and put her left palm over the third eye, as if to shield it from a too-bright light. Drumlin took his head out of the skeleton as she did this, the protective gesture not a usual thing with Poly X.

“What’s it seeing?” Then, as he realized, with more urgency. “Is it seeing - “

“We have no idea what we’re in for,” she answered him.

“They found it, didn’t they?”

“Who knows what they found?”

“But they found it.”

“I said, who knows what they found.”

She took her hand away; the eye remained closed. Drumlin moved closer to Poly X, intent on more interrogation, as was his style, but got brought up short when he saw one tear spill out from the third eye and trace down Poly X’s forehead and get lost in her left eyebrow until it slid out from there and



continued its journey down her cheek, where Drumlin, not quite knowing why he was doing what he was doing, caught it on the knuckle of his right index finger and carried it off her cheek. Then he didn't know what to do with it, so he wiped it on his pants.

"You are quite the charmer," Poly X said with ironic sweetness.

"It's not a thing I usually do - have done." He cleared his throat, and Poly X noticed a blush in his own cheek. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"The tear from - that - "

"I don't know." Poly X tried to sound off-hand, but even Drumlin could see the worry in her face. "It has a mind of its own, this one-eyed beast. You should get back to work. Our reMenders are marvels, but even they can't keep a single head alive forever."

"Yeah - yes - I should - "

He moved back to his model, spanner in his hand, his nose smelling the lubricating oil on the machine and yet his mind traveling somewhere with Poly X's third eye. This had never happened in Under-City. Which is why he would never go back.

Poly X took a foot-long piece of string and wrapped it counter-clockwise around the palm of her hand. Then unwrapped it and re-wrapped it clockwise. Then unwrapped it and re-wrapped it counter-clockwise -

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, seated in his chambers, Gravinstad noticed nothing - partly because he had sunk himself into his usual planning, which he could never stop doing, his mind always calculating, scanning, mining the information for the leads, the signals, the uneaten clues. And partly because, as of late, he had found himself fighting off a mind-virus that had inflicted the idea into his brain that everything he had ever hungered for, schemed to nab, fought to hold on to meant nothing at all - meant ashes, meant garbage, meant - well, "nothing" was the word that kept coming into his mind. Nothing. No thing. Not a thing.

He hated how this heaviness robbed him of his appetites and his confidence. He hated himself - and that was something he had never ever had inside himself at all. Ever.



---

But things do not remain the same for long.

It finally cut through the funk that attended him in his chambers. The chair-arms buzzed with it. The soles of his feet wired it upwards through his leg-bones and into his knees. Even his hair-roots hummed.

By the time he bolted out of his chair, the funk had passed, replaced by an electric thrill that came, he admitted to himself, from the suspicion, from the hope, that he had gotten what he wanted, that even now they had bundled the defunct god into the transport and were slogging him back to Valice where his Menders would wire the de-celestialed being into the grid and keep things as they were now set up set up as they now were. Everything changed so that nothing would be changed, power kept in proper hands.

He propelled himself onto the balcony and against the railing, his face pointed toward the mines, and the last time he remembered this kind of excitement -perhaps the only time he had tasted it - in the war, with the fighting, the cruel beauty of pure violence. He felt more alive than alive then, had never felt as alive since. And here the feeling had come rushing back, believed lost but welcomed back. Whatever happened from here forward would make everything that came before useless. Now marks the now that mattered most.

Outwardly, nothing had changed. But he knew to the center of his bones that it had all changed. Now came patience, planning - he had come back to familiar ground and felt what for Gravinstad passed for happiness.





## Chapter 37

### **Wherein What Was Sought Has Been Found And, In Being Found, Gives More And Less Than What Was Expected**

*T*he heat - it slammed them.  
And the light boiled.

And the smell - half the sweetest sweetness they had ever smelled, half the rankest decay they had ever tried to avoid.

Swing led them - unfazed, peaceful as a scalpel.

The others followed.

And there it was, what they had come to find.

And it was nothing like anything they had imagined.

Yes, a girl was there, upright, recognizable as “girl,” most likely Alma, and Swing walked right up to her, and as he raised his right hand, palm outward, she raised her left, and they layered their palms together, and for a half-moment the air and light twitched, and Swing took on Alma’s glow.

But the six of them couldn’t ignore - couldn’t look away from - couldn’t delete - the “thing” that hung off Alma’s back, vaguely human-shaped but shriveled and rust-colored like an apple left on the branch too long, dangling by an umbilical that ran from Alma’s left back into the thing’s head. There was only one answer to the question of what the seed-pod was.

Swing and Alma continued to stare into each other’s eyes, their eyes flicking and darting. The six of them stared, their eyes darting and flicking, all of them filled with dread because nothing about this situation felt stable, understandable, predictable, survivable. They had come with hopes and dreams and wishes - and none of what they had come with was now worth the spit it took to say its name.

Alma and Swing nodded, as if through all their staring at each other they had come to some conclusion. Swing moved to Alma’s left and lifted the thing, taking up its weight and loosening the umbilical. It squirmed but without any real strength to do anything. Swing, without hesitation, leaned in to clamp his teeth on the tube and gnaw through it.

“Wait!” This from Pym, who even as the word exploded out of him was moving toward Swing. “You don’t have to do it that way,” the words accompanying a knife slipped into Swing’s view. “Let me.”

Swing, his teeth bared and ready to bite, angled his eyes at Pym, and Pym noted that the eyes had neither spark nor warmth in them but at the same time were filled with a kind of knifish aliveness, empty of recognizable emotion but, for all of that, electric and searing. So this is how gods are, Pym thought as he raised the knife, utterly indifferent and beautiful in their indifference and what freedom in that from the muck of humanness -

Swing drew his teeth away and instead stretched the cord taut. Pym grabbed it with his left hand - it felt rubbery and cartileged - and with the knife quickly sawed through it. He made the cut close to Alma’s back, which left a small nub sticking out.

Without any nod to Pym, Swing grabbed the end of the umbilical and swung the thing against the wall again and again, smashing it to a pulp. Pym, who stood closest, couldn’t see any liquid come out - as if Alma had sucked the husk dry, taking everything the child/god had to offer without giving anything back or allowing anything life-giving to remain. So that’s how she survived, Pym thought, as he watched Swing toss the body away like so much garbage. She didn’t let it take her - she took it instead. Very interesting, her doing that, he thought. Something to pay attention to.

Swiddle, watching Pym with a mix of both horror and pleasure at being so horrified, noted that the nub Pym had left behind had already disappeared into Alma’s body and the pulped body tossed away by Swing had already become nothing more than dust and a stain. In fact, he would swear that since the time they had come into the chamber, Alma had grown - not so much taller or thicker but in something else, in a radiant energy, in a possibility for explosion. Here was power the likes of which Gravinstad could only hope to have but never have his hopes made good.

It was only when Bensole squirmed against the curve of her arm did Elfrida realize that she had been crushing him against her to keep him protected, though from what she didn’t know. She didn’t feel in danger; this was all about waiting, about being on the threshold of something as yet unclear but poised to change everything she had ever known and felt and believed in. Not so much waiting for the bomb to explode as watching for the flower’s seedpod to burst and flush its possibilities into the wind.



Bensole, underneath the chalky taste of fear in his mouth, was mesmerized. Everything his mother had said about the child/god was true and not true at the same time - great power but not in the smiling form like in the picture, something to respect but not in the knee-bending, prayer-making way they had practiced with their prayers. And now if his mother would just let him go, he'd be just fine!

Gaul found herself supporting Rufus, who at the sight of the transfigured Alma seemed to have the breath leave his body. All he said, over and over, was "poor Q poor Q poor Q." Gaul didn't mind holding Rufus up, it felt good to be useful, but she knew what Rufus' sagging weight and sad refrain meant - that everything had gone to smash for him, that all the goodness he had wanted to do - for Q, for Angelicus, for Gaul, for Under-City - was now ash. He had nothing left to give or have hope about.

Gaul couldn't disagree with that - while she had never been convinced about the "why" of bringing back the child/god, she could sense how important it was to the people who had given her shelter, and so she wanted to do it because they wanted so badly to have it done, and now that what they had found was so useless, how could they not feel despair?

But there was more for her, more that Rufus would not understand. Because standing in front of her was a young woman sparking power of a kind Gaul found herself hungry for, and little by little as the moments in the chamber passed, she found herself wanting to have that power, to *be* that power - for what, she didn't know - for good, for evil, for nothing, who knew - but the purpose wasn't important, having the power was, having inside her what the world with all its confusions and sufferings could not drain away from her. And while Rufus' phrase filled her ears, another word rang underneath and over it: Gravinstad. So this was how it felt.

From their entry into the chamber to Swing's dispatch of the used-up child/god, no more than five minutes had passed - but such is the velocity of thought and feeling that everyone in that room who had been thinking and feeling felt that they had spent hours, even days, there in that bright, rancid, transforming place. Swing raised his right palm again, and Alma placed her left against it, and they could all see a flow of light pass from Alma to Swing. Then they parted, and both turned to face the six astounded human beings.

"You all came for something," Alma spoke, and they were all (except Swing) surprised to hear the voice of a young girl instead of thunder or roars. She



repeated the sentence, and they realized they were expected to respond, and they responded with the only honest answer they could offer: yes.

“Whatever you came for, you won’t find it with us.”

“What are you going to do?” Pym asked.

“What we need to do.”

But before Pym could get out another question, they all heard something they knew they had been listening for: the beat of military boots on rock, the rattle of weapons, the growl of machinery. In an instant they were eight against an army, in an undefendable chamber, with a new-minted child/god who as good as told them that they had come on a fool’s errand and would probably not defend them. So this is what the nearness of death felt like.

A voice brayed through a loud-hailer that everyone inside had better come outside if they valued their lives. The six of them exchanged a look, then turned their six faces to Alma and Swing.

“Well,” said Swiddle, “would ‘what you need to do’ include any plans that cover saving the backsides of those who came to rescue you, regardless of the purity, or lack of, of the motives that moved them?”

To their surprise, Alma and Swing smiled.

“Did you think we were going to leave you behind? Oh no - we have a use for you.”

And with that, Alma and Swing joined hands. Swing held out his other hand, and Pym grabbed it, who grabbed, Swiddle’s. At the other end, Alma held out her hand, and Gaul grabbed it, who then hooked hers into Rufus’. Bensole took up Rufus’ other hand, then grasped Elfrida’s. Elfrida found herself holding hands with one of her husband’s assassins, and for the moment nothing about that bothered her.

In a ring they stood, and through the humans breached a voltage of superb and cleansing simplicity.

The voice through the loud-hailer repeated its threat of imminent invasion, but the hand-holding circle paid it no mind. None whatsoever.

\* \* \* \* \*

The stones of the Keep tremored so hard that mortar popped out of joints, and it felt as if the entire massive Keep shifted a half-inch to the right. Gravinstad



looked down into the streets, saw them filled with terrified beasts, smashed bodies, snakes of fire, cascaded buildings. Alarm bells banged away.

And all this blended in his mind as he thought of the future: alarms and smoke. The script for war. Finally.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the huge cleared area in front of the mine, where the trucks had turned and filed, hundreds of children milled about - dazed, emaciated, filthy - but freed. They wandered around and over the slaughtered bodies of soldiers and supervisors and truck drivers (the trucks themselves listing to one side or the other, their axles cracked, their engine blocks smashed). The children brushed by the mules and dogs and cats and rats and other animal survivors, some who, like the mules, stood stock-still, dumbfounded, while others sniffed and nose-prodded and (mostly the rats) began to gnaw. Thick black smoke billowed out of the mine opening, torquing upward into the grey-bruised sky.

The eight of them, still holding hands, stood at the center of the carnage and liberation, six of them still amazed and dazzled by the swiftness and efficiency of it all. A sweep of Ravens circled overhead, their voices annunciatory, their feathers as dark as the smoke of destruction.

Rufus, who seemed to have shaken off his intense disappointment, spoke first, directly to Alma and Swing. "What now they have to eat we didn't rescue them to have them starve or be eaten - "

Gaul chimed in, "We came to make sure that what they did to Rufus they wouldn't do - "

Pym interrupted, "Gravinstad, I'm sure, already knows, and he's got those famous wheels in his head moving - "

"Which means more soldiers, war - " Swiddle added.

"And I am supposed to protect," Elfrida said, "a kingdom I have not done a good job protecting."

"Me, too," piped in Bensole.

They all waited for Swing and Alma, realizing that so much now depended upon these creatures about whom they knew nothing and who might not be reliable. The Ravens had all landed and circled the circle, and Elfrida, for one, didn't know if the Ravens were joining them or blocking them from leaving.





“Food,” said Alma. She pointed a finger at a group of four older children, people Gaul’s age, who stood and stared at the dead body of their gang boss. One of them snapped his head up and back and announced, in a voice bright with authority that carried across the plaza as if he had a loud-hailer up to this lips, “Attention!”

All the children turned to look at him.

The second child, a girl, snapped her head up and back and announced with the same confidence, “Food.”

The third: “Break open the food lockers.”

The fourth: “No one gets more than anyone else.”

And the four of them, as swift as gazelles, sprinted across the plaza to the warehouses and, with the merest of efforts, cracked open the storehouse doors. Other children, as if guided by an unseen hand, arranged tables, others brought out the food, still others made sure it got handed out in a fair and effective way. Being fed - no, they were feeding themselves. They were doing it themselves.

“Now,” said Alma, “do any of you have any idea of what is going to happen?”

None of them answered, though each of them had his or her own selfish desire.

Swing spoke, which surprised everybody, and his voice, like his sister’s, a boy’s voice. “It will be unlike anything you’ve ever known.”

And it was.

## **The Beginning**



## About Block & Tackle Productions

After more than a decade of projects together, Michael Bettencourt and Elfin Frederick Vogel joined forces to form Block & Tackle Productions. In addition to producing Michael's plays with Elfin directing, B&T Productions also look collaborates with other playwrights and directors and explore different media for dramatic narrative, such as live-streaming theatrical productions, recording radio-play podcasts, and creating short films.

Whichever project B&T Productions pursues, it will create theatre narratives focused on our present times and where every part of the production - design (set, lighting, sound, media), performance, script, the brand of beer sold in the lobby, and the pre-show music - relates to and nourishes every other part. As often as possible, B&T Productions will do this in collaboration or conjunction with like-minded theatre-makers.

*Elfin Frederick Vogel (Producer/Director)* -- Elfin has directed over thirty productions in New York City and regional theatres, from classical plays (among others, *Othello*, *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Measure for Measure*, *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Three Sisters*, *The Cherry Orchard*) to 20th-century plays (*Six Characters in Search of an Author*, *The Real Thing*, *Exit the King*) and new plays, among them *Only the Dead Know Brooklyn*, *Excerpts from the Lost Letters of Hester Prynne*, *No Great Loss*, *Four Plays*, *The Sin Eater* (all by Michael Bettencourt), and *Moral and Political Lessons on "Wyoming"* and *Reckless Abandon* (by Vincent Sessa).

*Michael Bettencourt (Producer/Writer)* -- Michael is an award-winning playwright and screenwriter. As always, special thanks to María Beatriz. All his work can be seen at [www.m-bettencourt.com](http://www.m-bettencourt.com)

**Block  
& Tackle**  
**PRODUCTIONS**

**[www.blockandtackleproductions.com](http://www.blockandtackleproductions.com)**

