

KABIR, SHUVAM, M.F.A. In-Between. (2019)  
Directed by Holly Goddard Jones. 86 pp.

Centuries past the end of days, the floating city of Fleet remains the last bastion of life in a world ruined by the emergence of magic. Fleet, and the realm around it, is shaped by the thoughts, intentions, and nightmares of the magicians within, often but not always under control. As the long-forgotten rules and Lore that regulate the city begin to fall, a young magician named Jonathan questions whether the city, and the rules that have rendered him powerless and destitute, truly deserves its eternal flight. This thesis comprises the first three chapters of a presumptive novel.

IN-BETWEEN

by

Shuvam Kabir

A Thesis Submitted to  
the Faculty of The Graduate School at  
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Fine Arts

Greensboro  
2019

Approved by

Holly Goddard Jones  
Committee Chair

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis written by SHUVAM KABIR has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair \_\_\_\_\_  
Holly Goddard Jones

Committee Members \_\_\_\_\_  
Craig Nova

\_\_\_\_\_  
Michael Parker

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Acceptance by Committee

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Final Oral Examination

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
CHAPTER	
I. A HITCH IN THE AIR.....	1
II. KNOWLEDGE, POWER, ETC. ....	23
III. PA25 .....	63

CHAPTER I  
A HITCH IN THE AIR

The first void inspired curiosity, more than fear. The ten-foot square of nothingness appeared without warning one day on the corner of Trench and Aspire Streets. The hole belched up a fiery cloud of mist. It didn't behave like normal fog, but crawled up into the air. By the time it dissipated in the sun, onlookers realized the hole was more of a tunnel, going straight down and terminating in daylight. It provided a brief glimpse of green clouds through the bottom of the floating city of Fleet. Jonathan was one of the first to see it, shuffling along on his customary path between school and the storage unit he called home, a path so well-worn it was practically a trough. Other evening folk flittered between work and home like shadows. But few looked twice at the pillar of mist. Late for dinner, or a date. Too busy to be restless, or curious. His folk. The Enders had cordoned off the place, erecting barriers of clear, hard air to ward off curiosity and clumsiness alike. It was the seven-hundred fifty-fourth day of the year, one of the longer years on record.

“What’s coming on?” Jonathan said to a bystander. The old man was shivering in the evening chill, and had a nervous glow about his aura.

The man muttered under his breath, then pointed at the building. “That’s my home.” His mouth opened again, and closed wordlessly.

“That’s a dirty big hole,” Jonathan said, because he was bad at conversation. But it was true. It was a dirty big hole, and the smoke rearing up out of it didn’t just rise, it loomed.

The void claimed half of a small apartment building. It was a clean split – no rubble or crumbling of brick. Bedrooms and staircases and drywall and wiring all exposed to the air. From the sidewalk, Jonathan thought he could spy half a mattress, even the bedsprings bisected.

“That’s no enactment,” the man said. “It’s a bad case of entropy.” He stalked off, away from the building, shoulders hunched up practically to his ears, as if he could block out the noise. Jonathan knew that feeling. Turning back, he breathed in with mouth and nose, like a cat scenting the air, and coughed at the metallic stench that hit the back of his throat. It hit him with more than just taste and smell; Jonathan prided himself on being sensitive to the vast energies bouncing around Fleet. No, there was something distinctive about the atmosphere here.

As he pondered this, the Quaestors finally arrived, a couple of fat old fashion-disasters trying not to stumble over their golden robes. They knew their stuff, though, and quickly enacted threads of pure light around the place, which draped the apartment like spider-webs on a shrub. Enactments of light, they were saying to those worried about their home, to keep the building secure, stop it from collapsing anymore. But that also meant they needed to clear out. The assembled crowd didn’t like that, it seemed to Jonathan’s ears. A dripping man, red-faced, bare-chested, and covered in duds, demanded he be let back in to finish his bath.

“Regular ablutions!” he shouted. “Six past noon every weekday, sharp! I haven’t breached a contract in sixteen years!” Sympathetic muttering followed this outburst; who in the city didn’t supplement their income of magic with ritual and contract? Some things you just had to take for granted, or else how could you call it living? Jonathan nodded along in agreement, to avoid notice.

Jonathan had tried to make one of those contracts himself – skipped breakfast and dinner every day for five weeks. He had hoped that habit would become ritual, and ritual would foster reality bending, rock-hard belief. He’d have called it the Lore of the Ascetic, and the friends he didn’t really have would bask in his positive thinking and go-getter attitude. Unfortunately, that wasn’t how the Lore worked. Collective belief was the important part, a layering of wills whose psychic weight would bend reality until it fit that belief. That was why it didn’t rain in the city. That was why the traffic lights and the floating platforms flew.

And following those rituals, those habits, behaving in the proper way, as the Lore dictated, would fill you with the buzz and glow of magic, that ethereal energy that was the currency of power. On the flip side, violating it would leave you drained dry and destitute. That was why you walked a leisurely 4 kilos per hour on the sidewalk. Why lunch was at noon-thirty, rather than eleven which was when Jonathan tended to get hungry. Why shoes were pointed even though it was uncomfortable. Why he had to pay to get his hair chopped at a barber’s, even though he could save cash doing it himself.

For a single person, it'd take years of repetition to build up enough willpower, enough momentum, for personal Lore to form. Like the man who had apparently taken a six minute shower at precisely six on the clock every day for a sixteen years.

The vast orbiting tenements and the lower streets relied on a collective will to remain intact; concrete and brick and mortar were merely suggestions, channels through which solid secure enactments could flow, though he understood it wasn't always that way. But most citizens looked to their own holdings, investing their own Will in keeping their apartments in the air and their surrounding streets clear. The Enders looked to the trash and only the most tedious of repairs and minor errands. The Quaestors didn't look to much at all. Any disrepair fixed itself slowly, haphazardly. As a result, the fractal city of Fleet was a glued together mess of shiny facades and crumbling side streets. The shifting of the buildings stretched and dissolved the connecting earth and roads. The city had been full of holes, even before entire blocks began dropping out of existence.

But the city ran on the power of belief, of will, of wanting things to be a certain way bad enough that the realm would take notice and make it so. Brick frontage was meant to be whole, curbsides straight edged and sharp cornered, windows gleaming jewel bright with lamplight and warmth. These collective expectations took shape in the air, creating the Lore of appearances, and blanketed the city in illusion. The trash piled up in alleys became warped and faded, as if viewed at the edge of a mirror. The drab quality of the sunlight during the evening, the paleness of what should have been rich red wood paneling some buildings, were all overlaid with the proper color and hue and shape.

In the year before the voids had appeared, Jonathan dwelled on these things. It had been hammered into him that his short life of personal weakness, lack of virtue, and inability to shape his own Will were what made him sensitive. Hasty breaths of people who stood too close tickled the back of his neck, sidewalk conversation grated, and even thin sunlight set off headaches. For these reasons he took his meals early and late. For these reasons, he couldn't stop himself from nervously glancing past the edge of the city, to the whirl of sickly green and pink clouds, caustic air that would melt flesh. Anyone who ventured down below the city, or out among the clouds on a floating platform, had best learn to ward themselves, and ward themselves hard, against the combination of acids and energetic particles and exotic radiation that made up the realm outside Fleet. Something about the city – enactments formed centuries ago, and continuously powered for centuries still by a collective desire to live – kept it safe from that. And now, something about the city was falling apart. Aging, maybe, ancient beast that it was.

There had been other signs, in the days past. On the skyway, Jonathan had seen an old man complained to his wife about “catching entropy,” removing his cap to show off the sock stuck rigid to his hair. Jonathan had seen a couple of children splashing at one of the ornamental fountains, gawking as dribblets of water formed the clear shapes of glyphs on the sidewalk. The floating platforms and the skyways experienced turbulence, streetlamps undulated at twilight, and everywhere there were worried whispers about the bad old days when the world was more magic run amok than the orderly pathways of enactment that made up Fleet. With the arrival of these voids, Jonathan was no longer the only one paranoid about it.

And Jonathan realized that whatever had set off this strangeness, it posed for Jonathan not a threat but an opportunity. Because these voids had thrown the citizens of the southwest corner into the same panic that Jonathan had coexisted with for the past year, ever since Mama Len had kicked him out. He knew that gnawing gut fear, knew its roots, its symptoms, and, most importantly, one of its cures. He knew people would be looking for something. Something Jonathan had.

His chronic sensitivity that let him notice the hitch in the air. The metallic taste, the shuddering that ran through his shoulder blades and stomach. A feeling of uncertainty, forgetting where he had been about to place his next footstep. A silvery haze in the corner of his vision, or mistaking round shop-signs for square. The illusions that masked the gapes in the brick walls flickering in and out of existence. All of this, Jonathan noticed, occurred only in very particular parts of the city: a shabbier city block populated by old grounded shops – a haberdashery, a toy store—and the apartments above it; the corner of Trench and Aspire Street, where the first voids had appeared two days ago.

But he had also noticed that hitch in a line of old apartments along Brick Castle Street, only a few blocks from where Jonathan lived, practically alongside the city's edge. Jonathan knew it for its ornate but disused archways over the alleys, and because it was one of those edge places, lying between two neighborhoods but obeying the Lore of neither. There was a restlessness there, a bracing quality to the breeze. It set Jonathan off. It set people off. It was the perfect place to sell himself. Or bits of himself, anyway.

#

Now, in the early morning just before shadows appeared and lengthened, Jonathan settled himself against the side of one of the alleys in Brick Castle Street, where that hitch in the air was strongest. He turned his jacket inside out, so the outer pockets and the more obvious frays were hidden against his chest. He fished out a much-abused packet of sugar sticks and tapped it against his palm. There was a satisfying staccato as the candy slid and packed against the side of the box. An hour before dawn was the right time, when that hitch turned to excitement, and people who had spent long night shifts learning the loneliness of the city were receptive to some hasty intimacy.

Again, Jonathan tapped the box against his hand. The tapping echoed against the alley, against him, against the glowing green things embedded in the alleyway moss, against the wanderers in the night. Some glanced out from beneath shrouding caps, waited for a pitch, but that wasn't the way Jonathan worked. Those who knew what they wanted would recognize Jonathan for what he was offering.

There was shame, of course. And a bit of anger. A leaden discontent with the idea of debasing himself. He was weighed down with it. It roiled within him like a stormfront, his legs watery with the urge to run. But this weakness he needed to sweep away.

On Jonathan's left ring fingernail was etched a number, that counted down with the hours. It currently read "40." When it reached zero, a very large balorite troll by the name of Silverfish would call in a very large debt. All he had to balance it, currently, was some lint, an irregularly shaped handkerchief, a pair of thatched gloves, a very important scarred opal, and a single silver Vale, Jonathan's currency of choice. And, if Jonathan

were focused and brave and smart and all the things he knew he wasn't but could pretend to be for a day and a night, what he had might just be enough.

Jonathan drew on that Vale, channeling the power into himself to keep himself awake. A bit of Enactment to send out an inaudible siren call to the needy and the bored. And at the same time, he felt that coin shrink, the silver tarnishing and the channel of power weakening. He cut it off quickly, knowing that he needed only a little.

The fact of the matter was that Jonathan was desperate. The fact of the matter was that all of it, the things Fleet provided to everyone, the clothes and the food and the place to stay, had to be bought and paid for. Magic was transactional, the stuff of being was exchanged for goods and service. Currency was power. Jonathan needed to eat. Jonathan needed shoes to walk, needed cash to buy them secondhand, needed cash twice over to cast his Will outward and mend them into something wearable. Needed currency to open doors and light lamps, to complete his classes, to keep friends unsuspecting. But worst of all was the burbling pit within him, the one that told him to need, need, need, that, unless silenced, wouldn't let him sleep, or eat, or smile without calculating to the iota what it would cost.

#

When Mama Len had kicked Jonathan out, he had spent some time at the End of Days Sanctuaries. They were run by Eschatonists, a friendly little cult that dabbled in self-healing and mentalism, some of the more over-looked varieties of enactment. They also sheltered transient streetwalkers and, occasionally, creatures from the down-below. They offered courses in Sharing, in the formation of Trusts. Jonathan had earned his

license for Purity of Heart there, the only one he held. At night, huddled around little Make-lights, some of the older boys and girls talked about how they used those skills on their own time, entrepreneurial-like.

You had to spend an hour walking around the north or southwest quadrants of the city, where the buildings were more tenement than small business. Darker parts of the city, where tall buildings and a low sun made shadows of men and women. Where there was a nascent mood, an excitement that lurked beneath the surface as you crossed from alley to alley. Then too you had to make sure the area was clear of Enders; the custodians roved around the city like a tide, on their own mysterious schedule. They weren't always easy to spot, but someone sensitive could feel their awareness like a haze of heat in the back of the neck. But that was another half hour wasted roving around your territory. Then you had to choose your spot—not right up close to the street, which would just be ignorant, but set back in alley or against the corner of a stoop or under an awning or fire-escape. Around, between, against, within—you needed the casual pedestrian to look at something else, something bigger, before they saw you. Don't be a mannequin, open to all, but keep an orbit around your spot, reading posters or pacing and always ready to meet the eyes of a hopeful client. That meant your spot couldn't be a vacant street, but something busy. One of the girls recommended a deck of playing cards or a box of sugar sticks to sell, so you could never be accused of selling direct. You had to be careful, because of the obscenity laws.

They swapped tips and recommended places. Callahan on Inn Road had a kiosk selling black-market flowers and reclaimed scarves, and he'd tolerate funny business

around his shop for a cut. There were also cafes with wide, tall windows, where you could bribe the baristas and graze on Arabica beans and signal with the placement of cup and plate and cozy what goods you had to sell. But those were for people who made a career of it. As for the actual doing of the deed, well, that tended to come naturally.

Jonathan had tried to make use of that pilfered knowledge and mostly failed; on a typical day, Jonathan simply wasn't an attractive prospect. But now, he had a hunch about where the hotspots were.

So he found his spot in Brick Castle Street, a little alley beneath a raised walkway connecting two apartments, vines and lilies dangling down, and settled down to wait for the restless pre-dawn people. At school, Jonathan learned the Lore of sunlight. That those living close to the sun took power from it. That the people of Fleet, so high in the air, quickened in the daylight, drinking it in like plants and burgeoning with Will. (As it was written, so it was sang, so it was known, and so it was. *Et cetera.*) For the night people who passed Jonathan, the opposite was true. Exhaustion made them carry themselves lightly.

One old man caught Jonathan's eye, and he tipped his cap in acknowledgment before passing on. He would have bought, Jonathan knew. Well, perhaps another day.

The real tedium was the wait. Selling stood on the edge of legality; spontaneous intimacy wasn't exactly smiled upon in Fleet, considering discipline and faith were supposedly what kept the city floating. You could never know who was buying and who was just friendly. That meant hours of looking for just the right kind of dead eyes – the

old seeking to claim some innocence, the young roving for some spice of impropriety. Always on, never looking too attentive.

He was slowly draining what reserves he had left, keeping himself awake, the coin shrinking in his pocket. A clock in the distance tolled out the fifth hour – early yet for true night work, but not the worst time for a discreet seller. Magicians strolled or floated by, the occasional platform casting a flickering shadow as it drifted along the street dozens of meters up. A familiar instinct crept up on him, an unhinged sort of feeling that his poverty was a blight, his desperation an odor. The bodies around him were a stony reflection of the absence inside him, the void that should have been a swirling will rather than the typical lethargy.

Then a mixed group of older students passed by, from different schools. Jonathan watched them, packet in hand, one foot against the wall. It was odd; the students of different schools rarely found enough in common to hang together. There was a boy and a girl, both in the telltale overalls of the School of Creation, stained with something oily and iridescent. A younger boy had the telltale shaven head and austere robes of the School of Foresight. The tallest of them, hanging back just a bit, was a student from the Academy of Self-Actualization (what they did, Jonathan had little clue, though their massive brick building towered over Public Academy no. 25, where Jonathan himself attended). He had proud shoulders, but walked bent forward eyes fixed just ahead of his own feet and eyebrows fierce with thought.

Then Jonathan felt the razor edge of attention on him, and turned to meet eyes with the boy from the School of Creation. A hitch in the air. An instant of recognition.

Jonathan let himself smile slowly, slapping his box of candy from one hand to another, and nodded backwards, towards the alley. The older boy's steps faltered, then he recomposed himself. He reached out to touch the Academy student's shoulder, spoke quickly, casually.

“Cure for what ails ya?” Jonathan said, as he approached. “You a dreamer?”

“Something like that,” the boy said.

“Good,” said Jonathan. “I can help you dream.”

#

“To be honest, I'm not sure how this is supposed to go.”

“Just a bit more,” Jonathan said. “Gotta get to the edge of things to make this work.”

The staircase at the back of the alley led up to a balcony that criss-crossed the buildings. Brick Castle Street was only a few blocks away from Fleet's edge, a fact made obvious by the view. Though the ramshackle houses and squat brick structures weren't the most charismatic parts of Fleet, the rising sun and the swirl of toxic clouds far beyond gave it a bit of glamor. The balcony itself was sparse, though a couple of wooden crates provided seating, and a curtain of aged ivy made the incoming light flicker. The boy rocked forward, grasping the balcony rail as he stared.. The boy rocked forward, grasping the balcony rail as he stared.

“Can I call you something, mister?” Jonathan said after giving the boy a moment.

“Simpleton will do for me,” the boy said.

“Well, I wouldn't want to be rude,” said Jonathan.

“It’s my name,” Simpleton said, still gazing out.

“What a view, right?” Jonathan said. “Really makes you shiver.”

“I have a friend from the School of Incantation. Always looking for words. She’d say it’s sublime. Just like that.” He breathed out the word, girlish, and rolled his eyes.

“Sublime. Is this your parlor?”

Something sarcastic in that question.

“It’s no one’s, really. You know the Pedestrian Lore?”

“Jaywalking and dirt? Not exactly hard to miss; it’s printed in the sidewalk.”

Which was understating it; the words took to life, floating around anyone who rested their heels for a second like a swarm of flies. The city liked to keep citizens up to date.

“You ever wonder why?” said Jonathan. He picked out a discarded wooden box and sat on it.

Simpleton shook his head, confused. “Why what?”

“It varies from street to street. Every neighborhood has a different way of things. Crosswalks around schools are strict, but they don’t have much to say about noise. That kind of thing. Some neighborhoods are quiet during the day; others at night. If you made a map of where you could walk, it’d change practically by the hour. Right?”

“I guess.” The idea seemed to bother him.

“Trust me,” Jonathan said again.

“I saw someone try to cross a road once,” Simpleton said. “A friend of mine. Such a little thing. Crossed the Grand Street where there wasn’t any cross walk. Halfway

through, his feet glow. Red. Says they were burning. Then there's Enders swarming all over him. And they drag him back to this side of the street. Slapped him with a demerit."

Jonathan knew the feeling, having collected a few himself. But Simpleton was pacing, nervous now. And that bothered Jonathan. Wasn't he the one risking himself? Wasn't he the one with debt, destitution, and starvation hanging over him? He coaxed himself to gentleness.

"You don't have to worry about that here. These back alleys, they're between neighborhoods and territories. Little pockets where there's nothing. No Lore. Look," he gestured at the trash piled up in the little alley, at the grass growing out of the concrete. "Look," he said again. He pulled out one of his sugar sticks and took a bite out of it, then tossed it into the dirt of the alley below. Simpleton started, then jerked towards his hand.

Jonathan faked a laugh. "Littering, right? Egregious. But look, no lights, no alarms, no Enders."

Slowly, Simpleton sat down. Not on the seat next to Jonathan, but across from him. The light from the neon lamps in the street filtered through the hanging ivy and covered his face in slits of light and shadow.

It gets lonely, looking out over the edge of everything and seeing nothing for yourself. That's what Jonathan wanted to say. Or maybe not lonely. The last city in the world, Fleet floated on an undercurrent of desperation that no one wanted to acknowledge, let alone put words to. It was unnamable, what came with being the last of something. Of having everything behind you. Like being the prow of a boat approaching a glacier wall.

You can feel it, right? That tide of something just coming up from beneath you. Like you want to walk and keep walking. You can feel entropy in the air and the city breathing apart, the cracks in the sidewalk widening. You can feel all that, and it takes up all of you and you want something else. That was what Jonathan wanted to say, too. But he waited.

Finally, Simpleton grunted, breathily, stretched both hands up. “It’s the turning time, see. Exams are done. Nights are long. I’ve been celebrating with friends I’ve known my entire life. I’ve been out all night. Sampling every exotic meat place this side of Palisade Street. Yesterday, we went dancing in the underhalls. I’ve got my projects approved. The old man’s proud of me. And it’s just not hitting me. Not any of it.”

“That’s normal,” Jonathan said, low and quiet. “That’s exactly normal. Listen, I can show you the deepest parts of the Central Grove. I can show you being lost in a part of the city where there are no lights. I can show you drowning.”

Simpleton frowned, and Jonathan sensed, in a panic, that he was losing him. “I can make you feel safe. That’s useful, to carry with you. Something you can revisit.” That would be a feat to manage; Jonathan didn’t have many spare memories that exuded safety.

“What about flying?” Simpleton said.

“Flying!” Jonathan said. “Like on a platform? Or a skyway?” They were a common sight. In most of the city, floating platforms hung thick enough to form elevated streets, another layer of pedestrianism.

“No,” said Simpleton, “I work with platforms all day. Other machines too. I mean, actually flying.”

“Like, a bird?” Jonathan said, incredulous.

“Like a bird,” said Simpleton. “Could be.”

Jonathan thought for a second. Then he took Simpleton’s hand.

“Remember that this goes both ways. I’ll be taking payment from you at the same time that I give you this. Good?”

“Good.” He was looking forward to this now, and Jonathan felt himself infected with it. It was the strangest kind of satisfaction. What greater intimacy was there than this? Two people who didn’t even know each other’s names, sharing, for just a moment the tenderest part of their souls.

Simpleton would be supporting the link, but Jonathan would need a bit of will of his own, to pluck out his memory, shape it and encapsulate it and feed it into the boy. It was the tiniest of magics; as his teachers were fond of saying, self-control was the easiest thing in the world. Before your will could take shape in the world around you, it must first be mastered within the self. Still it would cost Jonathan the last of his coin. A risky investment

It was worth it. Jonathan told himself that, made it an immutable truth, as he grasped the boy’s hand, pressed a finger beneath Simpleton’s jaw, and shaped his will into a needle. Reaching into the other boy was like yelling into a stormy horizon. His vision turned dark at the peripherals, and Jonathan felt stray thoughts and sensations like

a whipping wind. At the same time, the sudden rush of power the boy sent him lit the air like a salt lamp, like a neon flare.

As the boy rocked back and forth, trapped and entranced by the recesses of Jonathan's mind, Jonathan took a bit of that magic and wove together a vision. Those surreal dreams of leaping slowly up and down buildings; the time he dropped twenty feet from a fire escape and sprained an ankle. When he was ten, he'd taken feverish and laid in his room for two days, his whole body feeling fiery and light. He threw that in there, too. Then he tightened his thoughts and recalled the hours spent roaming Fleet, every turn and crevice he'd walked in Fleet, stitched together a balcony view of the entire city laid out like a map, like an unfinished puzzle, like an enormous hulking creature folded up on itself. The buildings laid out in grids and hexagons, piling up on each other and wound around with curling highways. The dense greenery of the central grove, and the holes bleeding multicolored fog. The dreams, the memory of the sprained ankle and the fever—those shrank and faded from the corners of his mind as he gave them to the boy. The map too shrank and blurred, but that was a no big loss—a new vision he could reform at any time. The bone deep memories of the city might blur, but would never disappear.

One last thing to complete the grand lie. Something to anchor the fever dream, something Jonathan had been proud to discover on his own—that sometimes an unpleasant lie was more convincing than a perfect illusion. That bitter was more real than sweet. He fed the boy a burning memory, the feeling of being chased, continuously, by a gnawing and hollowing hunger. The fear that unless he kept moving, he'd drown, the absolute certainty that there was nothing below him to hold him up.

Jonathan knew then that the boy was flying, high above the rooftops of fleet, practically touching the swirling clouds. Buoyant and aware, eyes and nose and skin drinking in the sharp air, the prick of unfiltered light, filled with the knowledge that the tautness in his stomach and elbows and knees kept him aloft. He had done that; other sellers were content with giving over the memory of their first kiss, or running at triathlon, or graduation, or some other sad and vicarious thing. All the little things people needed. Jonathan reminded his Simpleton what it was to want.

Rapture was painted on his face. He balled up on his toes, would have stumbled if Jonathan hadn't been bracing him. Jonathan could drain him dry if he wanted, leave him empty of will, and the magic powering it, give him a taste of Jonathan's own desperation.

He could do all that, but he wouldn't. Jonathan let him at it for minutes, then, wrestling guilt and reluctance, he pulled away.

For a moment, Jonathan felt himself roiling on the inside, like a small fire. He was flush with it, now. The boy, on the other hand looked exhausted. And angry.

"What'd you stop for?" he all but shouted.

Suddenly all Jonathan wanted was to be away. The moments after were always insipid. Jonathan hated to play the mother, but it was better than watching this boy collapse in an alley.

"It's not exactly easy on me," he said. This wasn't exactly true; it was the easiest thing in the world. But it was still giving away parts of his soul, parts of himself that were in limited supply. In Fleet, this was a cardinal sin – the soul was the seedbed of the will. It must be nourished and inviolate, not packaged and sold.

“Keep going,” the boy said, voice hoarse, suddenly, gentle. Lying. And Jonathan realized then that he’d misjudged Simpleton. This wasn’t childishness, wasn’t mere neediness. He backed up.

“Don’t be stupid,” said Jonathan. Or he tried to say, as the boy reached out and grabbed both of Jonathan’s hands.

The flow of magic was back again. Jonathan felt the boy trying to re-forged the connection, his will spiking a headache in Jonathan. What had been an act of surgical precision on Jonathan’s end was a forceful groping from the boy. He was of the School of Creation, more used to shaping magic with his hands than his mind. His will wrapped around Jonathan’s ribs until he couldn’t breathe, forced him against the wall and jerked one leg nearly backwards at the knee.

Jonathan wanted to yell, but he forgot to unclench his jaws and it lodged there. The awareness of it all going wrong reared up, and instinctively he recalled all the things he should have done right– he should have been strong enough, so he would never have run dry of magic; he should have stayed on Mother’s good side, not gotten himself cut off from his family; he shouldn’t have gotten in debt with Silvereye. All he had wanted was to be safe – not have to scrounge or scavenge or sell, not have to choose between soap or food, not have to carry his shame on him like a stench. Now he was far from it, far from home, back in the feral place. The boy’s nails bit into the skin of his forearms.

He let the boy have his way, for just a moment. Then he jerked, tucking his chin, pulling both arms back so that the boy’s nose was propelled forward, meeting the crown of Jonathan’s head. A wet explosion, a pop and muffled gurgle, and Jonathan was free.

Jonathan didn't bother taking second look at Simpleton clutching his nose. Simpleton, with a sheen of red painting his lips and hair. Simpleton staring down at himself as if still entranced. Instead, Jonathan ran.

#

There was a hitch in the air, like an excited breath. The fractal city of Fleet was an ancient beast, animated by the spark of magic. Those that lived there kept it alive, floating high above a dormant volcano, more by force of habit than anything else. It all sat on a massive disk of earth and bronze: the millions of lights, shifting alleys, revolving farm towers, the automated custodians, elevators, doors, floating platforms, and the spells that convinced the air, every second, that the city of Fleet was weightless. All these drew power from the magicians themselves. As every kiss had heat and every covenant made and story told held a spark, the citizens formed a web of power just by being.

So it was that the city of Fleet was, in a very real sense, alive. And when the change in season brought with it the chill of an oncoming frost, the musk of falling leaves, there was a shiver of excitement. The ancient instincts of harvest and festival reared up in the back of the mind. Lamps rattled and flickered. It was a changing time, a month of turning. Every magician felt it, and so the city did too.

In the center of the city was a small, red-brick skyscraper with a massive oak sprouting out of its roof. It presided over a wide promenade, lined with a cluster of shops at street level and a tangled mess of towers and tenements above. The buildings were arranged in tiers, the ones closest to the street all the same height, those clustered behind a bit taller. Their roofs were connected by walkways of solid light or floating brick, so

that it seemed like there were streets at various heights. Floating kiosks and platforms vied for space on those roofs, creating a makeshift shopping district of sorts. Thronging about it all were they, the citizens themselves, ringed with auras of pure will. Fiery.

The least of them was Jonathan. He walked the early morning mist, shuddering with the sense of the city in him. Shuddering, in horror and relief, and beneath all that the magic inside.

Jonathan felt it again, for an instant. That excited breath catching at the back of his throat. That hitch. He had decided to spare a bit of currency to take a platform back towards the academy, to look upon the city and try and feel something good for a change.

The floating platforms rose above the street-facing buildings, halfway up the taller skyscrapers. They were long, flat, brick or wood assemblies. Jonathan suspected the structures were scavenged from the rooftops of disused buildings, with hemispheric gravitic engines bolted to their undersides. They rode invisible currents in the air, Jonathan supposed, the engines stabilizing them, much like the numerous bits of enacted will keeping the city afloat.

The city was a tangle, this high up. After the night people arrived home, and before the students and day laborers and physicians and bankers woke, there was a sparseness and a stillness to the city. Rays of high-atmosphere light stretched thin and far, doing little to lend color the streets and silhouettes of man and building. But they caught on the frosty edges of the fog, lending the occasional line of rainbow edging.

The platform was warm from the purring engine. The few other passengers were bundled cozily against the cold, though the pilot sat at the bow, cross-legged in short pants and a loose blue jacket, seemingly immune to the frost and the windchill.

Again, that catch in Jonathan's throat, that rising tide of excitement. Almost a cough. It was intense, stealing over him. Something hysterical, reaching out and plucking at his will, his attention. He was sure this time; it wasn't his own giddiness he felt. He breathed in deep, and breathed out with the city. What and where?

He looked down at the same moment that he realized that they were crossing over Brick Castle Street. He wondered for a moment if Simpleton was still down there, or if his friends had returned, perplexed, to retrieve him, or if he had stumbled his way out of the alley himself.

A sharp pain in his hand yanked his gaze down. The debt, the number carrying it printed on his hand, had disappeared. Labeled instead were the words *all accounts suspended*.

He looked down at Brick Castle Street again, more to have something to distract him than anything else, and he realized he was seeing not the city streets and low tenements, not the early morning fog, but an unnatural, thick, and yellowing smoke. It bled out from the city block. From where it used to be. And there, far, far below, beneath the mist, was a hint of green. A void where the city block had been.

## CHAPTER II

### KNOWLEDGE, POWER, ETC.

*“There was a time before our rise, when the earth was livid and spewed forth a great wind, an altering force. On contact it stripped the elder races of their component parts, divided them into matter and essence. Rob a man of his heart, his sight, his touch, his compassion, his love, and one finds that there is little else bonding flesh to bone. So the skeletons of our forefathers' forefathers fell to the earth, once the spectral whirlwinds razed the land and took them apart.*

*Those who lived through that time did so only because they learned to bind themselves together. Enacted their will upon their bodies, so that they were immune to the mutagenesis. From there they learned to cast out that will to the old machines and engines, to maintain them beyond their time; to the objects around them; even to the elements themselves. A skilled man could bind his will to an entire forest, the quaking of a hand to the flow of the rivers, breath to the rustling leaves, toes to roots, skin to bark, and the shifting of the mind to the movement of all these parts. This, we do call a spell - that trance, that period in which one feels their being to be bound up in another, another thing, and exerts control thereof. Of course this is merely the most direct and powerful category of these spells - the binding of will to object. There are many intermediaries that can be used to direct the world around us - words, sculptures, songs, rituals - these can*

*all rigidly define an intention or instruction, which can then be bound through an enactment of will to an object or element or target one wishes to subdue and influence.*

*An inattentive reader may believe this primer to have the stench of science about it, that there is some kind of framework that grants one a mastery of these arts. Make no mistake, this is magic of the purest sort, and no magician should ever dare venture outside the precepts, the rules, the forms, the Lore outlined herein. There is a reason there are none other than us left on this earth, none other than this city left flying. These ways are the only ways to continue, and we must do all we can to stave off the wildness that lurks within us all.”*

Excerpt from *Anatomy of the Spell: a Primer* written by Anders Hare, 600 years before the fall of Fleet. Catalogued by Jonathan Day.

#

The yacht cut through a low scudding cloud. Blue lounged on a deck chair, one leg kicked up on the deck rail, and a mirror in his hand. He had affected a man’s body this week, and he had his cousin’s face on. Cassander Drybuck, the noted actor, the noted charmer, the noted young libertine known as much for his work at the gaming tables and dueling circles as the stage.

Given that the real Cassander Drybuck was a busy young man, he had outsourced much of his stagework and social appearances to cousin Blue. Much of his reputation was Blue’s own doing, and thus he felt entitled to borrowing it every once and a while. He affected a scowl, pinching an eyebrow between thumb and forefinger. A thin line of

smoke drifted out of it, as if he were pinching out a candle. Blue dragged his finger down the brow, focusing as it turned fine and blonde.

“There, Hasten,” he said to the pilot. Pilot, majordomo, butler, and occasional man-at-arms. He was Cassander’s man, but Blue borrowed him, too. “Identical, wouldn’t you say?” Blue gestured to his face.

“The spitting image,” Hasten said, glancing only briefly over. “But the voice is all wrong.”

“Hasten!” Blue barked in perfect imitation of Cassander’s tone, the voice he reserved for orders, dismissals, and reprimand. Blue let himself smile as Hasten straightened instinctively. “Come now, I know my business.” He let his voice lighten. “Besides, this is Cassander’s natural voice. He pitches it down, you know. Couldn’t tell you whether it’s a machismo thing, a first-born-son thing, or a stick-in-the-rear thing. It might not even be on purpose, just the way he’s learned to carry himself.”

Blue adjusted his jawline in the ensuing silence.

“Did you remember your fingers?”

Blue looked down. Seven on his left, six on his right. Hard to keep track at the best of times, but especially so when he changed faces. He wrung them out; a flame coiled around the extra fingers, and the fingers grew fleshy and waxy before receding into his palm. Blue was reminded, usually, of a tree growing in reverse, rapidly, but the thin clouds made him think of dissipating mist. Of a part of him disappearing suddenly. Hasten kept his eyes stolidly forward.

“And your nose.”

“I thought I had that right,” Blue murmured, looking back at the mirror. “You think he’s having it lengthened? To be fashionable?”

“No, only that he is a young man growing into his father’s nose.”

Blue faked a retch. “Spare me the servile act. What about you, Hasten? I could do a little work on you. Make you youthful, in vogue. Please the wife.”

“My wife is quite pleased enough already, I assure you.”

Blue focused on his nose, bringing it to a satisfyingly masculine point.

“She will be missing me this night, I think,” Hasten continued.

“Oh, spare me,” Blue began.

“Dinner getting cold. Cool, empty mattress.”

“I’m going to this party. That is the end of it.”

“Please yourself.”

“This is what I’m for, Hasten. No one needs to know how much of a recluse my cousin is as long as I’m here.” When Hasten didn’t reply, he went on. “It’s important.”

Blue pulled out the invitation and flipped it over between his fingers. Under the effusive, filigreed greetings, was etched the words, *come join the Grintford Estates in an unveiling of The Beckoning of the King, melody for Inverse Mandolin*. Magician Peel had only ever given public concerts for the Unium and single-string harp, but it was a little known fact among actors and stagewrights that her newest passion was for the intense silences of the inverse-mandolin. As for Grintford himself, he was master of the Grint Furnace Works, the forgemasters and welders and glassworkers of the city. Not to mention purveyors of all things hydraulic, steam, or gas-powered.

When the silence stretched on, Blue groaned and kicked his feet out. On the stage, where he typically impersonated Cassander, there was room to pace and release that pent-up energy. But the yacht was long and slim and mostly bare, and Hasten would probably fuss about him ruining the balance of the flight or something.

It was important to be there.

“What do you think, Hasten?” Blue said suddenly.

“About?”

“About”—Blue struggled for a moment— “If you were Hasten, the man, and not Hasten, the servant. What purpose would you give for yourself, what role would you play in the vast minefield of possibility that is Fleet, that would leave you fulfilled, and proud, and happy?”

Moonlight bounced off the nut brown skin of Hasten’s scalp. “Can’t say I’m unhappy where I am,” he said, after a moment. “Something on your mind?”

“Idle thoughts,” Blue said. “What does Cassander do, in the ample free time I provide for him by taking his place at these venues?”

Hasten went silent again, and this time Blue thought he’d hit on something. “Does this have to do with his *other* work? The Quaestor nonsense?”

“It isn’t nonsense. It is a sacred familial duty—”

“To play cross-guard? Come now, they don’t do anything important.”

Blue was familiar with the noble enforcers of morality and harmony and law and Lore and whatever else. They waltzed in and out of the Drybuck parlor as if they owned it, their gold robes, gold-dyed beard, their medallions and rings doing nothing to keep

them inconspicuous. Their exaggerated whispering and closed-door meetings just another kind of theater, a way for their little secret society to feel mysterious and important. Certainly, their public faces, the agents who worked the streets, were lazy bumbler on pension who delegated most of their work to their Enders. Blue couldn't imagine what importance Cassander saw in them.

“They have been busy recently,” Hasten said, “with the holes appearing around the city, the panic, episodes of entropy.”

Blue waved that away. He'd heard about it, of course, but it didn't strike him as particularly portentous. Fleet had floated above the desolate remains of the realm for a thousand years; if it hadn't crashed down out of the sky yet, he didn't think a few potholes would make a difference. Blue turned his eyes out toward the night, beyond the city, and out into the swirl of thunderous clouds beyond, and the eternal desert sands below. The air there, both in the sky and on the ground, itched and burned, he knew. It cut through all but the strongest wards and liquefacted flesh like it was dust. Sometimes, Blue felt like he belonged out there. Not in the frigid lights and still shadows of the city.

With a quick whoop, Blue threw both hands up, focusing his will into a spark that expanded into a flare. It travelled up, arcing out and over the clouds until it disappeared in a flash of lightning.

“You know you can always talk to Hasten, right?” Hasten broke in. “Remember, I've seen to you since you were in diapers, young lady.”

“Sir,” Blue said vaguely, wondering if he could manage to throw fire all the way over the horizon.

“Pardon?”

“I am a ‘young sir,’ As long as I wear the face and form of a man, you should – look, Hasten, it’s acting, alright?”

“Take whatever face and form you want,” Hasten said. “You’ll always be the little brat that melted every glass she drank out of. Fine ceramic, too.”

“How much longer, then, Hasten?” Blue said, affording him a smile.

“Just ahead, now.”

And beneath that seeming calm, Blue felt something else simmer. Blue, always the younger. Always the family pet. It was getting tiring to hide so often behind a face not his own. And yet, here he was, doing so all the same. Looking after Cassander, all the same. True, this time he had borrowed Cassander’s visage without his permission. Blue found himself tapping a finger on his own shoulder repeatedly, so he forced the tension in his shoulders away, and with his will enacted an aura that warmed the entire yacht, so that he and Hasten left a trail of steam behind them as if they glided along a dark, unlit sea.

#

The Grintford winter estate was a wide marble building, a kind of stair-step shaped array on the wealthier northeast side of Fleet. There was a low wall around the edge of the roof, inset with little bowls of incense that burned bright and hot. Grintford kept a collection of trees on his roof as well, oaks and willows that stayed green all around. In a show of what was presumably frivolity, there were open-flame lanterns all around, braziers as well, whose flames leapt high and close to the foliage. There was little

risk, Blue assumed; Grintford's will would keep the flames in check, or the portly, leather clad Enders lurking in the corners would smother them with their own bodies, if necessary.

Blue's spirits lightened as soon as he hopped onto the roof. Gatherings like these were where he crafted most of Cassander's reputation. Blue had a knack for making himself at home anywhere, in any face.

There were various long tables scattered artfully around, lined with tureens of turquoise vapors and iridescent soups. Some plates had long thin strips of exotic meat, though few were daring enough to partake. There were also bowls of punch, infused with exotic spirits. Blue could see the spirits through the glass bowls, wispy fish-like shapes drifting round and round, that gave the drink a vivifying effect.

Those outskirts were where the apex predators of high society congregated. Lenoille Haleeda, spun-cloth heiress, glittered in a diaphanous robe. Liaster Harrion-Smythe wore a vest around a loose shirt, sleeves translucent and ghostly. The heat of the torches made necessary the evening's fashion. As he approached, and before any took notice, Blue enacted his will onto his clothes. He fluffed up his own sleeves behind his back, flared out his pants a bit and made artlessly ragged the tails of his verdant coat. He was dressed for fall fashion, but that was no matter; he spun, pretending to take in the vision of the party, and loosened his shirt and thinned the fabric of his pants, so that it was thin and wispy. The coat was like a weight, a sheering force on his suddenly shapeless clothes. Enter the gentleman, improperly attired, stage left.

Blue pasted Cassander's toothy grin onto his face. A subtle hole opened up in the throng as they noticed his approach, which Blue disdained for a moment so he could pluck a flute of fine spirits off the table.

"Hail!" Blue said. Or perhaps the other's might have taken it as "Hael!" He raised his glass in an irreverent toast, and beamed at his – Cassander's – friends.

"Nearly late, Cassander," one of the ladies – Arlin Ilk – said in a low and playful voice.

"And you missed me all the more," he said. Blue winked and swirled his glass, and he was taken then, sucked into the vacuum that each of them generated.

There was a kind of self-importance to them that Blue recognized from the stage. The self-assured knowledge that the world would part around. You had to have that swagger, to navigate the stage. Here, mistresses Haleeda and Ilk spoke almost above each other, both confident that they would be heard, as master Sellsbeck bulled through to let everyone know that he knew exactly what they were talking about. Harrion-Smythe was young and possibly also susceptible to drink, but his habit of pointing his finger at every exclamation kept him in the conversation.

"Oh Cassander, do listen to Sarah's tale—"

"An entire week's worth of groceries—"

"The building just sank down through the stone, I'm told—"

"Having trouble keeping the new hires in line, but they conform—"

"Kind of a feeling of, I don't know, of loss—"

"The Poverties, you know, they call it 'catching Entropy'."

“Sarah, you know I find you enrapturing, but fill your drink, first, do—”

“An entire week’s worth! I couldn’t imagine—”

“Do you actually call them that, unironically? Do you say it to their face—”

“Not even sure what’s beneath the pavement—”

“It’s sort of like, ‘Listen, Poverty’ and they just gape; it’s exciting, really—”

The conversation swirled and rebounded, so that Blue was nearly dizzy with it. It was strange; the drink wasn’t so strong that he should have trouble keeping his head. Perhaps it was that multicolored smoke that enveloped the party. The sweet-smelling haze formed an artificial ceiling that caught the candlelight and glittered, iridescent. It thickened towards the center of the rooftop, where Blue spotted more bodies.

One of the ladies swayed, jostling Blue’s arm, and as she leaned back, Blue took the opportunity to ask about the music that he’d just been so dying to hear.

“The performance,” a lady, Sarah Sellsbeck, said. Her voice was almost a falsetto, and her eyes were half shut. Blue knew for a fact that mistress Sellsbeck wasn’t accustomed to spirits, but she had always held herself ladylike in Blue’s experience.

What then, was she drunk too? But there wasn’t anything like a slur in her voice.

“Grintford sits watch over his newest obsession.”

“Obsession?” Blue said. “What’s Hael fallen for this time? A flutist? They have delicate fingers. Or perhaps the violin? Less tender, and more—”

“No,” Liaster said now. “Selene.” And then, eerily, to Blue’s eye, the rest of the circle turned on them and nodded, as if they had been listening all along and found some

signal to throw away pretense. But then they were back at their own conversation, quickly enough that Blue wondered if he had imagined it.

“His newest obsession,” Liaster continued. “Scandalously young, I’d say,” and there was something defiant in his voice.

“Let’s take a turn, old sport,” Blue said, taking the man by his shoulder. “What’s this about obsessions? Gossip’s not a thing to take lightly, now.” He scooped up another flute of punch and with some sleight of hand switched it with Liaster’s empty glass. He walked him toward the center of the roof, where there were fewer party-goers. Most sat in wire chairs, arranged, Blue realized with a jolt, in a semicircle, an audience. There was a thin screen of smoke enveloping this part of Grintford’s roof, one that rippled with color. Grintford himself was well known to be a master of shaping smoke, but Blue hadn’t realized he could be so ornamental with it.

“The music, well, it is a marvel,” Liaster motioned to the Enders on station at the edge of the roof. Each had an addition to their squat black carapaces. Attached to their visored hoods were large curving horns like you would see on a loudspeaker, or a tuba. The horns put out not music, but intense silences, such that they ripped color into the smoke and little voids that wiped out sound. Anti-music, as was fashionable of late. Blue had to keep his distance to listen to Liaster, but he admired the swirling patterns of color all the same.

“Grintford is holding his own little party just there,” Liaster said, pointing towards the center of the roof, where the smoke was thickest. “Though he has ears only for the

little girl on his arm anyway. Even though she hardly speaks. Name of Selene.” He lurched towards the smoke.

“The musician is a little girl?”

“No, no.” Liaster shook his head, bull-like. “The musician is Helmund Peele. The inverse-mandolin is overpowering in person, I gather. Selene is no doubt clinging to Hael like the limpet she is.” He hesitated. “Limpid? Limpet?” He shrugged. “Charming, I suppose. She smiles nicely, anyway. But odd, and very young.”

“I have been accompanying Grintford on social outings, but he’s so distracted of late. It would be nice, you know, to have someone worthwhile in my corner. I thought we could all be friends.” Liaster went to press a shaky hand against Blue’s shoulder. “Can you believe she told him I was a waste of his time? She used those words. He takes advice from her, for some unfathomable reason.”

He was unsteady, Blue realized. Almost sickly, and his words were slurred. At the same time, Blue felt himself lose balance as he supported Liaster. He became aware of the slowness of his own breath, and the meandering path he and Liaster had tread around the rooftop’s edge. The smoke and the spirits really were a heady combination.

He took the opportunity to steer them both towards the center of the roof, where half the party were gathering alongside Grintford.

The man himself had flinty eyes and a square chin. His beard was not quite a goatee, but rather a thick fringe that circled his lips and mostly avoided his chin. When he smiled, his nose curved down and his mouth curved up as if someone had taken a razor down the center of his face. It was almost salvaged by eyebrows that sat high on his

forehead, so that he appeared to be pleasantly surprised rather than constantly leering. Next to him was a girl that Blue assumed was Selene. She was a slack young thing with devastating blue eyes, and a doll's wide expressionless face. A teenager, by Blue's estimation, only a few years younger than Blue truly was. There was something inescapably childlike about her, her blank staring and the languid way she draped herself over Grintford's arm.

But Blue's attention was taken by the musician standing just beyond, who had to be Helmund Peele. Her dark hair was long and unkempt, fingers calloused as she strummed and, occasionally, scraped her nails down the inverse-mandolin. She sat on the edge of a stool and held her head and neck upright, tendons straining. Her hands and arms pistoned back and forth with the vigor of a crescendo, but she had bags under her eyes and the dim light of weariness behind them.

In truth, it wasn't the musician but the music that captured Blue. Or rather, the anti-music. Blue knew about the inverse-mandolin, mostly for its obscurity. Supposedly, it sucked out music from the listener, leaving them with the knowledge and the sensation of sounds that should have been there, but weren't. The way a footprint told you everything you needed to know about the foot that wasn't here.

But knowing that did little to prepare Blue for the reality of it. The anti-music came upon him as waves of deafness, but left echoes of rhythm and vibration on his tendons and bones, as if he were the instrument being played. As the music swelled, he did too, and as it dropped, he felt his breathing still and his knees buckle. Peele's technique was odd; she pinched the strings and sawed at them, rubbed and thumped on

the side of the wood, each producing a sensation and a yearning that left him, Liaster, and the assembled crowd leaning forward. Daisies towards the sun. He almost didn't notice Grintford approaching him and Liaster.

“Ander, old friend,” Grintford called out as he neared. He motioned them back with an imperious hand, away from the sound-sucking aura of the instrument.

“Gr—Hael. A wonderful show you've put on.” Blue took Grintford's hand. Blue had met Grintford only on occasion—Cassander preferred not to delegate his closest friendships to Blue—and he had never liked the man. There was something absent about his stare, something cruel about his frequent laughter. Certainly, he'd never had a kind word to say about Cassander's cousin Blue. But he was Cassander's friend regardless, and certainly his taste in music was top notch. “Wonderful sound.”

Blue became aware he was slurring his words. He tried to collect himself, but then his vision swam, the colors glinting off the smoking and making it hard to focus. “Where did you find her?” Blue said, nodding towards Peele.

“Helmund Peele?” Grintford said. “Quite the multi-talent. Reluctant to play for us, but my argument was compelling.”

“And her?” Blue waved in the general direction of Selene.

“Don't mind her.” Gruff then. Blue bit back a frown at that; there was something of a pattern cropping up.

“I have to say, you look quite unwell.” Grintford's grin was back, even as Blue jerked himself straight. Grintford waved a hand, and Blue felt that cloudiness in his mind

again. Grintford bared his teeth in a laugh, then leaned back, suddenly, as if deflating.

“Oh,” he said, putting a hand to his head. “I’ve overstretched.”

Then they were both laughing, though Blue didn’t know what was funny. Perhaps it was because Liaster had nodded off on his feet, chin bumping into Blue’s shoulder.

Regardless, Grintford put an arm around them both.

“Enjoy yourselves,” he whispered roughly. “Bask in the warm embrace of the Rat King.”

“I’m sorry?” Blue said, managing actual bemusement now.

“Soon enough, soon.” Grintford said. He shoved them back, away from the concert.

He walked Liaster back towards the crowd they had left earlier. Was it his imagination, or was there a strange sameness to the bright-eyes and flushed cheeks of the men and women?

“Cassander, sweet, there’s something wrong with your ear,” one of the older ladies said. She reached towards his left ear, but Blue caught her hand in his own and pulled her into the first steps of a dance. At the same time, he swiped his other hand over the offending ear; true enough, it had receded backwards. That was a strange lapse in control for Blue. He fixed it with a toss of his head.

“What was it?” Blue said, turning back to the lady he held. “Lint?”

“Must have been stardust,” she slurred, eyes half-closed. Blue laughed, in Cassander’s sharp way, and twirled the lady.

#

Blue didn't know how long he danced for, or how many partners he'd had. They seemed to whirl by, nothing more than a series of faces, man and woman both. More than once, he had to stop and readjust his appearance, to return to being Cassander. His control was receding, but he found he didn't mind.

#

At length, Blue realized he had rejoined the crowd at the center of the roof. But now the concert seemed to be over. Instead, Blue stood with a group of party-goers, stone-faced now, as they stood in a circle. They were all still, staring straight ahead or murmuring to themselves. Occasionally, one of would leave, only to be replaced by someone else. A few held hands and swayed, or rather, stumbled. The smoke was so thick it obscured stars and moon both.

"Damn, rat-faced, eldritch, *dirt*," someone was whispering vehemently. Blue turned to face whoever it was and discovered Helmund Peele sitting rigid on her stool, next to him. Her knees were locked, and the pale wrinkles and crow's feet furrowed in what seemed to be intense effort.

"Magician Peele," Blue said. "I'm a huge fan."

"You'll forgive me if I don't shake your hand," Peele said. "I had to choose between keeping my mind and keeping my body. Tried to compromise, and here we are."

"I'm sorry," Blue said slowly. "All of that went well over my head."

Peele still didn't turn to look at Blue, but her eyes widened slowly.

"Are you lucid?" she breathed. "Are you hearing me, truly, right now?"

"Of course I—" Blue stopped and swayed. His vision darkened, then returned.

He was still standing in the circle. Only now he held a flute of fine spirits in his hand.

“Hmm,” said Blue. He turned to Peele.

“Back again,” Peele said.

“I’m not sure if I’m enjoying this party.” Blue said. “What just happened?”

“You said you were lucid. Then your eyes glazed over and you waltzed off. To grab a drink, I suppose. That was ten minutes ago.”

Blue considered that, and then downed his glass.

“You need to listen to me carefully, while you’re able to.”

“Would you like to stand up?” said Blue.

“I can’t,” Peele took a deep breath. “Listen. Hael Grintford is attempting to summon a Gestalt Entity into this realm. It has taken control of him, and threatens to do so for everyone here. Did you get that?”

“Once again,” Blue said. “Way over my head. Why can’t you stand up?”

“Because,” Peele hissed, “An eldritch abomination has taken control of my body. Insidious dark tendrils, seeping through my veins. Puppeting my nerves. That sort of thing.”

Blue stared for a second, then nodded, once, slowly.

“Three weeks ago, I arrived at Grintford’s request. I thought he wanted to sell me a piece of music, but all asked was for me to play a sample of it. I was flattered. Which was my mistake. The creature was hiding it’s presence in the mandolin. Just a small piece of itself, but once I began playing, it took me over instantly.

“The piece it had me play was part of something much larger. Something called ‘The Beckoning of the King.’ Grintford offered it to me as chamber music, but it’s a piece of a play.”

“Is that what this?” Blue waved around at the smoke, the gathered party-goers, and at Peele. “Grintford is trying his hand at theater?” Blue said. “Well, good luck to him, because it takes more than music complete a summoning. Astrological alignments, artifacts, leylines, a stage. Proper acting. Swords, spears, cannonades to send whatever creature you invite back to where it comes. An audience that appreciates a bit of danger, and the cyclical triumph of good over evil. What is this for Grintford, some new attempt at prestige?”

Peele frowned. “You’re an actor.”

“Finest thespian to set foot on the stage,” Blue said. “Cassander Drybuck.”

“Well, he wasn’t planning on fighting whatever he summoned, but welcoming it.”

Blue stared. “That’s simply not done. No one would be so stupid as to set one of these creatures loose. The Quaestors would crucify him; the mayor himself would come down here to level the place.”

“This thing he’s trying to summon, it calls itself a Gestalt Entity. Grintford got some of the—I suppose you’d call it stagecraft—right. It resides in another realm, I think, or far away in this one or—anyway, it talked to me, as I was playing. I could see what it was.” She paused. “Some of what it can do, anyway. With the smoke, and the music, together, it can extend it’s will into numerous others. That’s why everyone here is like

this.” She tensed her shoulders in what Blue supposed was an attempted shrug. “Keep you awake and aware for weeks, if it wants.”

“Like a puppet? Sounds like mentalism to me, or a Trust.”

“It splits its will into a collective. It wants to, anyway. It’s hold on me is strong. On you, it seems, less so.”

Blue glanced own at the glass in his hand. “I suppose. It talked to you?”

“In a sense. The things it intended to do. Mentalism, like you said. Our minds connected through, that thing. It was a blessing in some ways, being part of something larger.” Peele’s face seemed to sag. “One’s perception of time, at least, is less rigid.”

“What did he want?”

“The entity? Eyes and ears, I suppose. I think it feels crippled without—”

“No,” Blue said, impatient. “What did Grintford get out of all this.”

“Oh. I can’t be sure. He and that, Selene, they may not want anything. Maybe they’re just mindless limbs at this point. Dead-set on spreading it’s influence.”

“Hence the bash.”

“Not smart, not by any stretch. But this thing in him, and the girl Selene, I think it was close. With Grintford’s smoke.” Peele’s eyes flickered down towards her ruined fingers. “And my music. Three weeks, I’ve fought that thing.” Her eyes shifted back up to Blue. “My cause is lost. But you need to leave, while you’re still able. If you hold your breath, you can maybe sneak out. Contact the Lorator General.”

Blue was silent for a long moment.

“Do you hear me? You need to run.”

But Blue didn't hear her. All Blue could feel was a growing, gnawing disdain. This Gestalt whatever-it-was wanted to take his body and mind. Grintford had used his insidious smoke to render him stupid.

Blue focused, then, for just an instant, and dropped his wards. Without the wards shielding his sight, his vision grew brighter and clearer, and he could see, just barely, the tendrils of brick red smoke coiling around Helmund like snakes, reaching out from the inverse-mandolin.

Like most people, Blue rarely ever lowered his wards, so he made sure to re-erect them quickly. Then, he ran a hand over the inverse-mandolin, and enacted fire and force upon it. He shaped those energies away from Peel's hands, raising a deft, thin barrier on her skin, between her and any heat. The mandolin cracked and shattered, like ice in Peel's hand, then sifted into fine ash as it poured out of her fingers.

And yet Peele remained, frozen, with her hands cradling the shape of the inverse-mandolin.

"That was priceless, what you just destroyed," she said. Her voice was hoarse.

"I thought for sure that would work," Blue said.

Some instinct howled in Blue, and he turned to find Grintford, standing behind him, smiling through his slim beard. Smoke swirled around him as if he had been belched forth from below. Selene was still on his arm. Seeing the two of them together, Blue could understand where Liaster's earlier discomfort came from.

Blue breathed in and expanded his senses, lowering his wards again to do so. It was true – if most people were self contained, inhabiting their own bodies, Grintford

himself was the opposite, at the moment. He was spread out, a network of spectral roots connecting him to the entire mansion, roof, statues, trees, the smoke that flooded everything. What worried Blue was the hint, the tinge of shadow that crawled along those links, that spread out across him and the other men and women.

Blue slammed his wards back up. Such insidious tendrils were what Helmund meant when she spoke of the gestalt entities, and their infectious influence. This, then, was a danger. If Grintford did...something, to these people, then the creature would spread from him to them, or...

Blue cursed. He didn't know, and perhaps he didn't care.

"Let's have words, you and I," Blue said. "Alone."

"We're always alone," Grintford said, not making any attempt to move. "I'm listening." Blue stared balefully for a second, then turned to Selene and gave a courtier's bow.

"Cassander Drybuck," Blue said. "Thespian, among other things. Forgive my manners, they do run away from me."

The child remained silent, so Blue was left to awkwardly straighten himself.

"What have you done, Hael?" he all but whispered.

"The King is angry," Grintford said in a voice just as low, and a manic grin. Which was good, which was what Blue wanted. "Selene suggested I summon him."

Blue flicked his eyes towards the girl, then back to Grintford.

"Helmund Peel. Did you think her absence would just go unnoticed?"

What was they way forward?

“It did go unnoticed.”

There had to be a script.

“Something has taken a hold of you.”

A proper way to do things.

“Well, yes. So?”

Nothing for it.

“Let’s settle this proper. You follow the rules, and so will I. I accuse you, Hael Grintford. Of malice aforethought, abduction, and,” he thought for a second. “Lechery.”

“Lechery?”

“Of kidnapping and confinement. Of the illegal manufacturing of theatrical enterprise. Reckless abuse of minors. Are you afraid to prove your innocence the true way, by the Lore?”

“To be clear, you are calling me out? In my own home?”

Nothing for it.

“Take whatever advantage your property and your domain will grant you. Right is on my side.” Oh, but this was coming out fine. The lines rolling out of their mouths as surely as it would on stage.

“On behalf of the Drybuck estate, I do hereby bring forth a duelist’s suit.” Blue said this, knowing it would complete the ritual, bind Blue to the offer he had made. A red glow touched the tiles and spread out along the rooftop.

“Are you seriously challenging me, in my own home?” Grintford said, his grin crawling back up the side of his face. “Where I am empowered?”

“I’m confident. Choose the spell.”

#

It was to be a battle of smoke of course. Grintford’s choice.

Blue knew the Lore of smoke, though not well. Cedar and Amber for something purgative but slow, coal slag or rubber would give you a coiling insidious smoke. All kinds of intricacies of elemental particles and thermic reactions that, if known, would let you shape smoke with the grace of a conductor, as easy as breathing. It was the knowing that was important, the familiarity on the level of the soul that would let you link your will to the smoke, and control it. Grintford had been born with some of it, no doubt, but the rest was likely earned by endless hours spent breathing incense and ash, tinkering and experimenting with oils and stones, using familiar rituals to seal the knowledge into his skin. Some few of the men and women of Fleet knew their essence, their talent and the nature of their heart from birth, but fewer still were lucky enough to master it as Grintford was.

But Blue wasn’t worried. He didn’t know the ins and outs of smoke, but he knew its deepest lore, that it was subservient to fire. And Blue, in his formless and changeable heart, was a creature of fire.

Grintford arranged for a circle of smoke: incense burners on tripods. Amber, sage, charcoal, jasmine, and pine were expected, but there were also pots of red and green crystals, and several filled with colorless oils that Blue was unfamiliar with. Each burned with a low, dry heat, kept in check by the inscribed will in the pots and the frost edged

night air. The smoke they sent forth was multicolored, even shimmering at times. When the Enders had cleared the area, Grintford shot Blue a look.

“At your leisure, Cassander.”

The rules were simple – they would use the spell of smoke that Grintford provided to wrestle, might against might, will against will. Their will would be invested into the coals, the oils, the salts, and the smoke they produced. The skilled duelist would keep their coals burning low, conserving their fuel while forcing their opponent to burn through his own. The smoke itself could have different effects, depending on the fuel. Charcoal would choke the opponent and amber could sharpen one’s own concentration, for instance.

It was a typical duel, with no judge but the Lore that permeated the air and wordlessly signed advantage or disadvantage based on how just each party’s suit was, whose territory they stood on, their societal stature, etc. There was an old story at play, that Right made Might, and the Lore existed to enforce all the old stories in Fleet. Blue hoped that the fact of Grintford’s cheating would cancel out the advantage of his domain. Perhaps the Lore would detect that he was possessed by something evil, dark, and send down a bolt of lightning to smite him then and there. Blue shook his head; of course not. The gestalt entities hid deeply and quietly in the soul of man; that was how they evaded notice from the Lore in the first place. Lore wouldn’t do the heavy lifting for Blue, not here.

Blue flexed his hands and cast the spell—Grintford’s spell—breathing in the colorful smoke and melding his will to it. Mastery of the spell of smoke would have let

Blue, for a time, create a subtle mixture of hypnotizing scents, weave illusions, purify the smoke into baser elements that invaded the nostrils and into the mind. But it was twisty; the smoke writhed beneath Blue's will, as if there were a nest snakes crawling through his mind. But this was a thing Blue could do well – shaping and controlling the elements of the spell came as easily to him as touching his hands together behind his back. Perhaps Blue wasn't a master of smoke, but that mattered little when he was a master of magic.

The tiles flashed, red, then red again, then all color faded and the duel began.

Blue concentrated, and the pot of charcoal in front of Blue expelled a burst of smoke, which roiled into a ball. Purple coiled into it, and it flew across the fiery ring and towards Grintford, expanding as it went. The charcoal would set Grintford's eyes on fire and his lungs burning, splitting his focus between warding off pain and keeping his burners efficient, causing him to burn more fuel for every attack. But just before it reached him, a pot of green crystals belched out a pillar, swallowing Blue's smoke as it neared and inundating the roof with an acrid smell, a yellow haze. Blue felt a bit of his will sapped, vision wavering and a slight cold rolling up his left knee. That single burst had taken a sizeable portion of his charcoal, while, he noted, Grintford's pot of green crystals seemed mostly unspent.

Blue ignored his discomfort, and sent more streamers of multi colored smoke out and into the air. Investing his will into the smoke gave him a vague awareness of what each type of fuel was capable of; one of the oils could induce sleep, a pot of red salt would produce a slow moving smoke that might serve as a barrier. But that awareness was weak, fettered by Blue's unfamiliarity with smoke Lore. Instead, he used the sheer

force of his throw out more and more tendrils of smoke. He hoped the sheer amount would prove a challenge and that something would get through to Grintford. But Grintford merely sent out a thin layer of white steam, scooping Blue's smoke up and safely away. He was laughing then, from across the ring.

“A poor showing, Cassander! Neither grace nor finesse!” He bowed to the onlookers, a mocking curtsy.

Blue concentrated, exerting his will and drawing even more smoke out in an attempt to overpower Grintford, but Grintford whipped that white fog into a funnel of blues and greens and reds that twirled up and safely away.

And Blue's vision wavered again. It was, he realized, that yellow smoke that Grintford had sent out; all he would need to do was sit there as it sapped Blue of strength. Blue's mind raced. Was it amber or something else that produced that sapping effect? Was it lithium smoke that overpowered amber, or copper?

Blue stopped. He was going about this the wrong way. Treating it like a game rather than a fight. Matching elements, trying to figure out fiddly little rules. It didn't matter, when Grintford could conjure and shift his smoke faster and more precisely than Blue. That wasn't any way to fight, not in Blue's estimation.

Instead, Blue bypassed the smoke and sent the flames about him burning high, sending forth a furious wave of colors. Then he warped and shaped that smoke ruthlessly. It thickened and stilled, sparks of flame spilling forth as well and dotting it like stars. It was a hulking mass now, one end elongating into a neck, a maw that glowed from within. A tail sprouted out the other side, wings and limbs spidering out until the figure of a

dragon, a dozen measures across, reared up into the sky. Blue concentrated again, and sent the figure lurching towards Grintford.

All this was in a furious instant. Grintford's eyes widened, the jocular grin falling away as the dragon stretched and reared, arcing across the space as its maw opened to devour him. He threw forth both hands, his own smoke forming a hasty dome around him. The dragon smashed against it, the hyper concentrate of smoke and Sulphur, and the weight of fire held strong as Grintford's smoke crawled around the dragon, forming little snakes and tendrils that bit and whipped. Slowly, Blue's dragon was forced back, but not far.

It was a true battle of wills now, of competing apparitions. Grintford's smoke shaped itself into flickering crows, ropes, snakes, limbs, all of which thrashed against Blue's dragon. None of the subtlety of weaving gases and burning fuel, this was soul against soul. And Blue knew this was a contest he would win, that he was possessed of vast reserves of that stuff of magic, some burning thing giving his will an inexorable push. Grintford had no winning move, not here. Not without help.

There. Grintford's head whipped back, then around. Scanning the crowd. Looking for someone. Another member of the gestalt. Blue thought for a moment that he would lock eyes with the musician, Helmund.

But Blue watched as Grintford locked eyes with the child, Selene. Felt the surge of strength within him as he began pushing back against Blue. And beneath that feeling was an awareness, an insidious sort of link between Selene and Grintford that boiled in the air, as Grintford's panic and the child's cool assurance took a physical, if unseeable

form, enwrapping each other in the air like mingled stench. Blue's tongue turned back imagining the bitter, the evil of it. If he hadn't encountered it before, he wouldn't have known what to look for, but Blue knew the feel of the entity well now.

The dragon skidded back, the pitch black foam of its hind legs, the claws that Blue gave it, useless on the polished tile. Blue let it. Instead of fighting where Grintford expected him to, he centered himself, then punched his will forward, through the inlaid wards protecting Grintford's burners, through all conventions of the duel, into the coals smoldering there.

There were rules; a powerful Lore keeping the duel fair, strengthening the just and draining the unjust. But Grintford had turned his back on his protections the second he threw in with the entity. Only so many could be saved. This, Blue knew: that what he was doing was right, that the Lore would make way for him.

Shrouded by the whirling smoke and sparks as it was, the small explosion was no doubt a surprise to Grintford. First it caught onto his sleeve, holding unnaturally fast despite Grintford's attempts to pat it off. To Blue's eyes, it seemed as if the fire traveled on his skin as easily as it did the fine fibers of his coat.

Blue focused slightly, twitching the finger and sending the fire around to Grintford's back. He was stumbling then, waving frantically, and some of the hushed onlookers began to point. Blue sent the fire crawling along the ground, too, reaching some of the ornamental trees and bushes, to better distract the others. At the same time, he banished his own creature of smoke, sending a screen of blackened air over the rooftop, hiding just how badly immolated Grintford had become. Finally, he swept his

other hand around, banishing the smoke that stifled and weakened the onlooker's minds, that made them willing victims for the Entity.

"He's lost control!" he yelled, for the benefit of any witnesses that woke quickly. "Grintford, contain yourself! Are you well?" Then he ventured into the smoke, past the coal and incense burners. "Hang on, sport, let's call this off."

Grintford flailed on the ground, the fire biting at him. His natural wards held back the brunt of it, but, given life by Blue's will, the flames refused to go out. From his free hand came a torrent of mist, a quick enactment of will, but that did little to smother the flames. The child Selene crouched only a few measures away, pulling a fold of her dress over her mouth to protect herself from the dissipating smoke. Her other hand was outstretched towards Grintford. Blue could feel the pulse of power between them, a rankling, unholy thing. An unsanctioned link. Some other force, not the will or the magic that was at the heart of all enactments. The entity.

It was clear to Blue. The child was a branch of the entity, and Grintford a twig. The gestalt entity grew out of its main host, an insidious weed. The main host would infect a small circle of secondary hosts, who would each in turn spread the entity's influence to their own circle, and on and on. Men, women, and, it seemed, even children were not immune.

And this was the result. The child turned to Blue and snarled. An animal in man's guise. Blue's lip curled, and when Selene leapt at him, soft shoes slipping on the hot tiles, Blue merely caught her in the stomach and shoved her aside.

For all his bluster, his arrogance, his self-satisfaction at his own finery, Grintford was of the nobility, and therefore, noble. Steam tunnels, gasoline engines, hydraulics businesses all ticked and turned to the beat of his drum. That was the Lore of patronage in Fleet; if Grintford reveled in his youth, his virility, his power, it was largely to the benefit of those beneath him. And there was a purity in that, a rightness; perhaps, it wouldn't make sense for Grintford to fall to the predations of the gestalt. Unless, perhaps, it was presented through the innocent guise of a child. If this child had infected him with her taint, then the taint had to be dealt with, delicately. The guests at the party were also potential victims. Blue hoped that, though they were under his influence, he had yet to successfully infect any of them.

And besides all that, Cassander counted him a friend, as loose as his standards were. Blue would save him, and everyone else on his rooftop. Blue would be his savior. He forced himself not to smile.

When Selene hissed again at Blue, he pointed his finger at the tiles beneath the child, and sent his will into it. The tile forgot its true form, crumbled, and reformed into a serpent of stone. He sent it towards Selene, who fell back with a wordless, infantile yell.

Blue considered Grintford for a moment, fingering his chin. The child wouldn't be able to struggle and bolster Grintford at the same time. So, Blue ignored the child and pushed at the man. He strengthened the intensity of the flames around Grintford, so that it slowly ate at his wards. It was no easy feat; his wards were strengthened by generations of familial Lore, each parent passing on a portion of his own power, his own earned strength down, compounding with each successive scion. Additionally, Grintford's

pedigree guaranteed him a potency of will that would have bolstered how quickly and strongly those wards grew throughout his life. And on top of that were the dark powers roiling within him, loosening his natural limits, his self control, rendering his will ever more wild.

So Blue pushed, and pushed hard. Grintford was strengthened thrice over, but still Blue knew himself to be more powerful. He threw his will against Grintford's Wards, and the fire burned white hot. He threw his will against Grintford's will, and the fire turned green and yellow at the edges. He threw his will against the shadows within Grintford, and the man was engulfed in a sphere of multicolored flame.

Blue knew then that fire was what hurt these things. All at once, Blue felt Grintford's wards collapse, his will peter out, and the wild presence within him retreat, and Blue swept his hands and dissolved the flame.

Selene moaned, animal-like. Her hair had frayed and warped, candle-like, from the heat. The stone python wrapped her around, ankle to shoulder, so that she was encased in heavy rock. Blue ignored her and approached Grintford, who was curled up in a ball. Though he was largely unburnt, his fancy dress was in tatters. Dark tattoos crawled over his skin, alive and agitated.

"Give it up, Hael," Blue said in Cassander's softest baritone, the one he reserved on stage for lovers and dying brothers. "Let it go, or I won't be able to help you."

Grintford reached for Selene with singed finger-tips.

“There won’t be anything left of you,” Blue said, speaking now as much to the thing inside Grintford as Grintford himself. “Not if you push me any further. Not even enough ash to glaze one of your pretty vases.”

Grintford met his eyes, then, eyes slitted to narrow windows. He opened his mouth as if to say something, then retched. Blue took a step back, and waited.

His jaw opened wide, far wider than was natural. So much that his teeth were practically turned out, lips curling and exposing bloody gums. He retched again, and something crawled out of his mouth. At first Blue thought the shifting smoke and the flames that were slowly engulfing the nearby tree were throwing shadows, but there was a gross weight to the thing poking out of Grintford’s mouth.

It fell from him, landing wetly on the tiles. Many legged, multi-mouthed, and furry. Blue stepped back and watched it with his predator’s eyes. Blue assumed it would return to its source, to the child Selene, but instead it shot in the opposite direction, away to the edge of the roof.

Blue focused his will on the edge of his finger, sacrificing a bit of his nail to conjure first a spark and then a flame. He whipped the bolt of fire into the skittering thing, but it was fast, spider-like on the roof. The fire fell wide against the tiles. But Blue twitched his wrist, and the fire reared up into the shape of a wolf. In a flash it fell upon the creature, encasing it in flame, before flaring up and leaving nothing behind but soot.

A cry echoed behind Blue. A deep, plaintive wail of something lost. Blue whirled to look at Grintford, but he had fallen unconscious, arms clenched tight around himself. He turned then to Selene. Or rather, where Selene had been.

The python that had been restraining the girl was merely a stone coil resting atop the tiles. At the edge of the rooftop, Blue thought she spied the flicker of movement, something crawling and unshapely, but the night seemed after the blazing fires. It didn't make sense; when the entities spread bits of themselves, branched out, trimming those branches should have weakened the more significant bodies. If Selene was the one who had infected Grintford, then

Blue realized then that the fire had engulfed most of the tree, the wind blowing sparks across the roof. The shrubbery was setting alight as well. He stooped to pick up Grintford, who seemed to be a bit beyond himself. He murmured something indistinct, "Still a prison," or, perhaps, "Still imprisoned."

Blue frowned. He would have preferred that he come back to himself bit more quickly. Selene's disappearance was already...unsatisfactory, but Grintford was Blue's main objective. Blue bit back his disappointment, and dragged Grintford towards the edge of the rooftop largely free of fires.

Most of the party-goers had all but lost their heads; from their shrieks, one might have thought a bit of fire was the end of the world. Blue patted out flames that were in reach, and extinguished the larger fires with a sweep of his hand and a bit of enacted will. He made sure to give a gallant showing, offering his hand to Sarah Sellsbeck. Some, at least, would remember Cassander Drybuck as the hero of the night.

Soon enough, the remainder departed on their private sky yachts, summoned hastily to the rooftop edges. The party guttered out with the flames, an unfamiliar tension taking the place of the befuddlement that had gripped the party. What and how, were the

bare beginnings of gospel and rumor that night. Marion Henn dispelled some of it by tutting over Grintford's apparent "dishevelment," which Blue was quick to follow up with a comment condemning "regrettable addictions, to theatrics and otherwise." That was enough of a seed to send most away in a comfortable illusion of propriety. The night had just been another show, a disastrous performance that honorable young Drybuck had managed to take in hand. And though you could normally assume Drybuck and Grintford to be of a kind, in cahoots, partners in dishevelment, it was clear this night that the two were opposed. It must be assumed, therefore, that Cassander had arrived to take Grintford in hand; that they should fall to dueling was regrettable, but no doubt a symptom of Grintford's impropriety more than Drybuck's. Would the Lore have sent fire down upon Grintford and his property otherwise?

That was how it would seem to the noble upper crust of Fleet, Blue thought, so that was how he reported it to Cassander himself, when he arrived, unexpectedly, on a platform.

#

He was wearing a drab yellow cloak, antiquated and unfashionable, with the hood up. Blue supposed he had chosen the platform, rather than a skiff or a yacht, to be inconspicuous. By the time Blue had dragged a stupefied Hasten out of the kitchen, most of the other partygoers had made their own retreats. Of Peele, there was no sign, about which Blue chose to be optimistic. Regardless, the platform scarcely had room for more than Blue, Cassander, Hasten, and Grintford on it.

After a time, Blue finished recounting the night's ventures. "And you don't look surprised," Blue said when he was done.

It was surreal to see Cassander rub his chin, like a mirror that didn't obey you.

"I make a study of these things."

"Should you be up, Ander?" Blue said, but Cassander shot him an icy look, so he didn't bother inquiring after his health.

No doubt Cassander would have questions. While relaying his story, Blue hadn't spoken much about the duel; easier to leave that to Cassander's imagination. Cassander could never have hoped to match Grintford at his own game, on his own turf. Blue smiled at that.

Cassander stopped. Even crouching over as he was, there was an erectness in his posture, an attentive manner like a pointer dog, that spoke to bearing and posture honed on the twin stages of theater and aristocracy. Cassander had always gone for understated elegance, which never played well to the crowds, but did him well in more intimate gatherings. There was something unadorned about the way he carried himself, the sense that he would vibrate like a taut string when struck with sudden emotion. Too often, this meant he'd played mother and father to Blue, rather than cousin. Too often, he let it get to his head.

"Why're we stopping?" Blue said. "And don't bother trying to wake Grintford. He's quite worn out, I'd wager."

"No doubt you would," Cassander said. They were drifting in mid-air, Grintford's residence still in sight. The moon had begun to come out, shining a bone white glow onto

the retreating yachts. There was light enough for Blue's eyes to adjust to the darkness, and he could see, when Cassander took down his hood, the stiffness of his lips, the steep frown of his fine brows.

"Explain, now," Blue said when he was fed up with the silence. "What happens if the creature spreads. Since you seem to know all about these things."

"I didn't realize you were making 'this' your problem."

"The rest of the party was in some kind of trance. Like they were half asleep."

"The intermediate stages. It gets worse."

"Would have gotten worse," Blue said. "If I weren't there."

Just a nod, was all Cassander gave him. "If this spreads," he said, pointing at Blue. "There is no more Blue." He pointed at himself. "No more Cassander. No more Grintford, or Sarah, or Liaster, Mary, Elanuel. And on. It's all just we, just one." He smiled wryly. "It's a matter of perspective, but I think most of us would object." He bent down to check on Grintford again. "And things like this can happen."

"Ander," Blue said. "He'll be fine. This is the best thing to happen for him."

"Is it?" Cassander said.

"I could have brought him to you in an urn, if you preferred."

"And that?" He pointed back towards Grintford's rooftop garden, looking quite forlorn with the singed trees and bushes. "You—with my face, and my voice—do this—"

"Had I not taken action, they would have partaken of more than just punch, Ander." He leaned closer, so their noses were barely inches apart. So that Cassander

could see truth in his own eyes. “And even if it were you in your rightful place, I doubt you could do half as well—”

“Look to yourself, why don’t you?” Cassander said, pointing down at Blue’s hands. Blue held up his right hand to the moon. A sixth finger jutted out behind his pinkie, then receded. His other hand was working on a third thumb. He realized that he’d been sweating despite the cool night. His brow twitched and his legs wobbled even as he sat.

“Isn’t it always the way. You’ll be useless to me for days, yet.”

“Useless to you?” Blue said. “I saved these people—”

“From a disaster you caused.”

“Are you deaf tonight, Ander? Not only did I discover this thing had a hold of Grintford, I took it out.”

“And such an elegant assassin you’ve proven yourself.” He laid a protective hand on Grintford. “You find it easy to cause trouble when you have my face to hide behind. To claim everything of mine as yours. There has been a lack of discipline on my part, I’ll grant you that, but that ends tonight—” he cut himself off as he began coughing. Blue reached forward hurriedly to help him, but he pushed back savagely.

“And the child that supposedly was the cause of this?”

Blue took a moment before replying. “I think you have that backward. It’s just a hunch, but Grintford, perhaps, may have been the one to take advantage of the girl.”

Cassander looked down at Grintford. Disappointment tinged the anger on his face. “Not just a victim after all. He’ll answer for that. And you for your foolishness. We can’t

approach these things recklessly. This isn't a snake; you can't cut off the head and expect the body to rot. If you had—" he struggled for the word, "eliminated the girl, the entity possessing the girl, then Hael, the entity possessing him, I mean--would have weakened. It would have retreated, followed its link backward, by instinct, to its forebear, or the main nest."

"Selene might be in the wind, but she didn't seem to like what happened when I burned out the thing in Hael. If she tries to return to the main body – to whoever it was that got to Hael in the first place – then all the better." Blue hesitated. "Right?"

"No." He shook his head and clutched his arms together. "Hael would have been the link between her and the rest of the horde. With Hael purified, she is...disconnected. It would have been better to apprehend Hael without destroying the entity within him. Now it's all a mess."

"I know the feel of her, Ander. I can find her."

"No," he said. "Not you." To Blue it seemed he suddenly looked his age, as anger dropped away from him entirely. "My voice, my face. When you act with those, you act with my authority. No more."

"So what, I'm—" Blue stopped. "I'm supposed to just—" She shivered. "Lore, get us out of here. Why aren't we moving?"

"Not yet," Cassander said. "There's something I want to confirm."

They sat, then, in silence and moonlight, drifting high above the fractal city. Every dozen or so blocks formed a square, and each square of the city contained the same arrangement of waterways and streets, and the squares unfolded up and out from the city

center. At night, the city became an arrangement of ghostly silhouettes, homes and vehicles arcing over the sky like drifting clouds. In that moment, where everything seemed unmoored and unanchored, Blue realized that Cassander had simply taken from him the thing that was his life. The stage, and the fight.

Fleet sat above all else. Above even the end of the world. The world outside the city was inimical to life. Foul air that stripped body from bone, wild energies that warped time and space in insane ways. All there was – and this Blue knew too well – was a desert of plastic and fused bones, bleached so purely that even memories fled. It was loneliness, beyond nothing.

The city was the thing, the whole of the world that mattered. An arrangement not of brick and will, wood and magic, but of people. The people, the one people, the culmination and pinnacle, the bright spark point that defied the infinite vacuum. And, Blue realized, he knew them hardly at all. And now, the gestalt threatened to take them and gobble them all up. To make them all of a kind. Just another kind of desert. Cassander would become Grintford would become Selene would become Hasten would become Blue. All one root, only to be dried and murdered by the desert the world outside had become. And thus that spark would dampen, and flicker, and swallow itself.

“Let me help you fight this thing,” Blue whispered. But he might as well have spoken to the moon, as Cassander chose to ignore him.

“See now,” Cassander said instead.

Blue bent over the side of the platform to look. Grintford’s magnificent villa, the marble and the tile and the inlaid lights, the singed bushes and the lonely, balding tree left

standing. Blue took it all in, then took in that it seemed to be sinking, sinking into the ground. The color drained first, the marble becoming a plain white stone, almost translucent. Then, as if the earth were swallowing it from beneath, it shifted downward, smoothly. Not a quake or sinkhole, but a void. Mist bled forth from where the edge of the building met the manicured grass.

“I suspected. Their apathy won’t hold for long. Not in the face of this.” Cassander was murmuring more to himself than Blue.

But what was one building? Blue wondered, as he sat back. A bit of stone, a bit of tree. Replaceable. There were things that weren’t replaceable.

There was a thing Cassander could take from Blue. His face, his voice, his authority. And, perhaps, his friendship. But there was a thing Cassander could never touch. That higher thing that Blue pursued, even when he didn’t know it.

“Let’s leave it for tonight, Blue,” Cassander said. “Let’s go home.”

But Blue knew that home wasn’t home anymore.

## CHAPTER III

### PA25

*“Entry—mutagenesis: Before the new magic came and brought with it the Lore, there was only Man. All one thing to itself. But it knew it held lesser parts: the oddness, the mania, the strange desires. These lived only in dreams and in the idle furrows Man left in clay, and smoke, and steel, and the lesser elements. But then arrived the Lore, which actualized belief into law, and the strongest dreams into living, heaving creatures. Our Oddities arrived, leaving Man at once reduced and expanded.*

*The part Man must not forget: though the Oddities may long for it, they can never be what Man once was.”*

Source unknown, author unknown. Est. 400 years before the fall of Fleet. (Note: ink on laminated price tag, 2-in-1 Shampoo and Radiation Cleanser). Categorized by Jonathan Day.

#

From a freight-stop at the edge of town, Jonathan caught a school barge directly to Public Academy no. 25. The students were loud, which gave Jonathan the chance to check his hand. *All Debts Suspended*. He hoped it was a reprieve, but he knew to be wary of gifts. No, this was a sign to be cautious.

He thought he'd be able to nap after returning to his shack, but by the time he got home there was only time to retch out his nervousness once it caught up with him. But

the feeling of Simpleton's hands on him had been impossible to vomit out or scrub off, and he worried that when he get the opportunity to sleep, it would be far from restful.

Across the aisle, one of the larger kids took in a deep breath, then blew out a burst of enacted air, frosting Jonathan's shoulder. Toofer, who sat next to him, took the brunt of it on his hair, but he simply rocked back and forth. The bullies liked having fun with Toofer, but they always got bored quickly. It made him a sort of useful umbrella for Jonathan to hang near. Or a lightning rod.

PA25 lay under Grand Street, a busy street near the center of Fleet that thronged with shops and restaurants at street level. A thick cluster of kiosks and platforms and elevated walkways together formed a second layer of the city at rooftop level. Glow-paint store-signs and the glaring neon undercarriage lights of the platforms cast the street in harsh shadows despite daylight. Towering above it all was the Academy of Self-Actualization, thirty stories of brick high on its own; the massive tree sprouting out of the tower-top added perhaps another twenty. PA25 lay three blocks down the street, a wide and ominous blue staircase leading into the depths of the city.

The barge let them out near the stairs. As Jonathan went to follow Toofer down, a loud zap rent the air, followed by some loud giggling behind him, and then hoarse bellowing as someone yelled at someone else to quit the mischief. But the damage was done and as the school bell rang out, the tide of students turned into a torrent as panic took hold, and Jonathan had to grab Toofer to make sure they both made it down the stairs intact.

#

PA25's hallways managed to be both frantic and depressing. The off-white tiles were eternally clean, but their grout was a putrid green that Jonathan suspected would glow at night. The lights overhead were fluorescent and buzzing. The hallways turned at angles varying between 95 and 103; taken together, they seemed tuned to aggravate. Jonathan made sure to take each corner wide, giving the walls a wide berth. The school's lack of maintenance meant that it was rife with existential whorls—the swirling orbs of pitch black that sucked in stray bookbag straps and shoelaces and happy thoughts. The janitorial Enders were slow in cordoning them off with hardlight barriers. It was common knowledge at PA25 not to round a corner too fast, lest they run into one and promptly suffer an episode. The locker next to Jonathan's, no. 44, belonged to Colton and had a slight dent in the corner right under the hinge. Colton spat in his hand and tapped on it, and the dent straightened itself out, slightly. Jonathan had watched Colton do this every day for the past four months, and still the dent remained.

“Gentlemen,” Colton nodded to Jonathan and Toofer. Colton liked to keep Jonathan as a friend, because he thought Jonathan was homeless and that being friends with him made Colton the salt of the earth. Jonathan figured he couldn't be too picky about his friends.

“Did you shower?” Colton said, and Jonathan knew a moment of horror.

“Don't breathe my air,” he said, fighting it back as he tried to sniff himself on the sly.

“You've got dirt in your hair.”

“Lore, I’ve hardly been out of the house,” Jonathan said. “It’s not pigeon dirt, is it?” He tried to calculate how much time he’d have for a bathroom break. He had a bottle of soap, sitting next to a spray bottle of all-purpose multi-dimensional spot remover he’d lifted from a janitorial cart, and Hyper-Lax brand anti-digestive biscuits, all of which were rarely useful but priceless on the occasions that they were.

“Here,” Colton said, “let me practice.” He stepped closer. “Step one, focus,” he hovered his fingers above Jonathan’s head, and Jonathan felt the tingle of magic on his scalp. “Step two, enact.” He snapped his fingers. “Step two, enact.” He snapped his fingers again, then several times more, until a red glow lit up Jonathan’s periphery. “What do you know, only a little bit of burning.”

“You’d best be talking ironically,” Jonathan said, looking in the mirror on the locker door.

“Anyway,” Colton said, as they packed their books. “I started a Trust with Hila and Ranger and Tio and the them.”

“That’s some weird cultist”—Jonathan paused, searching for a word—“dirt.”

“No, it’s really in right now. It’s really, it’s really good. And convenient. You can hear what people are thinking, and connect, like your souls, and--”

“If I wanted to get married five times over, I really would join an End of Days Cult.”

“It’s not marriage,” said Colton. “Don’t be like that. It’s good to have something like this, with all this entropy flying around. Oh, hole,” he warned as an existential whorl

wandered down the hall. Colton flattened himself against the wall, while Jonathan pulled Toofer aside.

“The point I’m trying to make,” Colton said when it had passed. “Is that I’m thinking maybe me and Hila Bell have got something more than a Trust going on, if you’re catching my current here.”

“I don’t know who that is,” said Jonathan. “But congratulations, I’m sure the two of you will repopulate the southwest quarter singlehandedly—”

“You John? John Day?” said someone with a deep, keening voice.

Jonathan looked around, then looked up. The troll who’d called him was maybe a year behind and certainly two feet taller. He was craggy and bottom heavy, eyes hidden beneath a mossy brow, a slate streak down the bridge of his nose.

About half of the students were of the Oddities, those who were strangely shaped and deprived of Enactment, who lived in the under-burroughs of Fleet. They – or their parents, anyway - worked the deep engines and furnaces that kept the city running beneath the surface. Above grounders liked to label them all ‘Oddities,’ but they were of various shapes – fuzzy, scaled, insectile, and/or dozen-legged. Instead of barges, they arrived by elevator, tramping up from the lower levels of the school. The Public Academies one of the few places where under and over mingled.

The Oddities tended to favor light canvas or bright-colored leather, when clothes were applicable; Jonathan supposed it was warm down there. But the troll wore a red wool sweater, which he clutched in both rocky fists.

“Jonathan,” Jonathan said. “All three syllables.”

“Larcan,” he said, pointing to himself. Larcan’s head swiveled, scanning the hall, before he leaned in. “Bridge said you could help me out with something.”

“Who?” said Jonathan, as Colton hung back.

“She said you could take care of Jason Souille from eleventh-year for me.”

“Who is she, why would she tell you that, and why are you tangled with Souille? All he wants is an excuse.”

“I don’t know,” there was a rattly whine beneath the troll’s tone. “All y’un just came down the stairs real quick, and then he shoved me, and told me he was gonna Y’know. Get me.” He sniffed, and fingered the sweater he was wearing. “Said he din’t like what I was wearing. Shoved me real hard, too.”

Jonathan noticed the conspicuous hand-shaped hole in the sweater, and a whitening below it, as if someone had scored pavement with chalk. For an instant, fresh memories returned, of whitening handprints around his own neck, of thoughts not his own tendriling into him, and he had to clear his throat.

“Listen, it’s not my problem, alright? Not my deal, to stick my head out.”

“Jonathan,” Colton said, low and urgent. “The bell.”

“You gonna leave me like this Day?” he said. “That’s a lotta class.”

So it was just “Day” now. Colton yanked him by the collar of his jacket. Still, seeing that look on Larcan’s face was too much like staring into a confrontational mirror. “Just, just try and stay out of his way,” Jonathan said, as they began sprinting to class.

#

The first class was Correctives, where Magician Patria held sway. There, they recited the various failures that would relegate them to life as an “inferior,” as he put it. He was an old man, his face ninety percent wrinkles, one of those where it was impossible to tell if he was jolly or murderously angry. Which was apt, because his students never knew whether they would face Patria the jokester, Patria the draconian, or both at once that day.

“Last week, we discussed the demerit for irrational thought, which fully half of you have earned.”

The class tittered, on cue. Jonathan checked the row of eye-shaped tattoos running up his arm. Seven in total, earned all at once a year ago. The demerit-eye for irrational thought was third up from his wrist. Currently, it was half-closed.

“To review,” M. Patria droned on, “this demerit keeps watch for excitability, hallucination, or loss of logic.” Folds of skin on his neck flapped back and forth as he spoke. “Now many of you have heard the news or read the broadsheets about these new, these sinkholes that have been showing up, yes? I want you all to consider this a part of your lesson, because we learn things at school! We don’t just stare!

“These sinkholes, are nothing more than the latest symptom of a malignant, yes a malignant, strain in the psyche of our youth.” And then he was off. “We are the last, and the highest of men. This world is built and molded to our desires. And what a world it is, bits of holes dropping in and out. We are to blame.” Though he stared down his students with piggish eyes. He droned on from there, lulling the students. Jonathan watched him

carefully, because those eyes were sharp, and were searching, yes, searching for any hint—

“Raise your arm, Ecker.” He turned suddenly to one of the girls in the front row, who shot upright from a drowsy slouch.

“Em Patria?”

“Arm up. Now.” Frail as he looked, M. Patria had a strong will, one that pervaded his classroom – his domain. When he wanted arms up, they wanted up. He clapped once and flicked his fingers as if they were wet. Ecker’s arm shot up, all at once as if she flinched, and her sleeve rolled down. One of her demerit tattoos was open and blazing red against the pallor of her forearm.

M. Patria let out a dramatic, distressed sigh. He made a gesture with his hand, little more than a shrug. The rows of desks ahead of Ecker’s parted, and Ecker in her desk-chair shot forward to the front of class, then revolved until she faced the room. The carpet smoothed over and blackened, as did the rough puce-painted cement walls. The ceiling lights dimmed, except for a broad, phosphorescent circle of light that glowed directly above Ecker, casting her red face in a stark light. All this happened in an instant, in less time than it took for Ecker to lower her arm.

“So, Ecker,” M. Patria said from behind her in a low, reedy whisper that nevertheless carried across the room. “What brings on this spell today? What foolishness has your demerit detected?”

“Just daydreaming,” Ecker whispered. “I guess.”

“Ah, dreams!” M. Patria circled her, and addressed the room. “Such wonderful things. Our leaders, we call them visionaries for the dreams they have for us. And our children, we encourage them to dream of life free of vigors and dangers. What were you dreaming of, Ecker?”

Ecker looked as if she would burst into tears.

“Well,” M. Patria shouted, bringing his face close to hers.

“I was just, just thinking about, going shopping.”

“Shopping.”

“Afterwards.”

“Afterwards, she says. After what, Ecker? After you disconnect yourself from the here and now? After you forget all law and lore of civility? After you break another window?”

Ecker mumbled something. Something that might have been “accident,” reached Jonathan’s ears.

“Well we’ll have no more accidents won’t we. How long do you have left on probation, Ecker? Ninety days?”

“Wasn’t given a number, sir.”

“Well keep this up, and you’ll have longer left than you started out with.” He kept his eyes on her, perhaps hoping for her to look up so he could stare her down. Eventually, he let up. “In the meantime, we’ll have you do better.” There was a dim glow about Ecker’s head, that quickly receded. “You may blink twice, per minute. That should keep you focused on the here and now.”

“That goes for the rest of you. This is not a vacation. You are here to listen, learn, and improve.” He made the same gesture as before, and Ecker’s desk and chair slowly shuffled back to their original spot, though Ecker herself remained locked up right, eyes wide open and watering.

#

There was a fly in Magician Taleel’s classroom. Classrooms were the domain of the teacher, in the same way that households were the domain of the house head. Magician Taleel could lower the temperature to near freezing, turn the room into an oven; make it rain, or snow. It was her own little world, if she had the will to control it. And that meant the ghastly puce carpet and matching wallpaper, the cheerless collection of bookshelves in the back, the dust on the windows, even the bored stare and occasional train of drool, and, yes, the buzzing of the flies, had to be some kind of reflection of M. Taleel. Did that mean there was something rotten within her? Some corruption, some stink, that let in flies.

But people like her went to buy from people like Jonathan in the back alleys. People who felt some lack, some corruption or weariness or anger, and tried to correct it. And that feeling was decent, a kind instinct, a desire to be Good. Whatever “Good” meant, they wanted it. And Jonathan held onto that fact because he didn’t want to be a Cynic. He shouldn’t judge M. Taleel, after all. Wasn’t it better to be rotten and aspire for better, than to just be blandly perfect?

He scrawled M. Taleel’s figure in his notebook between quick, furtive glances. The pen bit deeply at the shape of her shoulders, her thin pointy chin, her hips. She was

bald, in the way of the seers, but covered it up with a mannish and unconvincing toupee. Then, incensed, he turned the page and took notes on her lecture, pen scribbling rapid and nervous, biting his lip as he fought back an awkward grin.

M. Taleel read from her own notes at a grating pace. “The Lore of the Spoken Word states that the things we say are at the heart of enactment. Paraphrased. The Spell, see. Simpletons that you are. You consider the spell to be a collection of words that triggers a reaction, an effect. I say ‘sit’ and –” She waved her hand vaguely, then looked up, frowning as if trying to remember something. She moved her hand with more deliberation, and the pile of books sitting on her desk tumbled over, each tome aligning itself with the others until they created a neat row. M. Taleel looked back down at her sheaf of paper, and mumbled as he tried to recall her place.

“My will demands the effect. But it is the words. Or the gesture. Or the ritual, that triggers it. In any of our libraries, you will find endless lists, every. Conceivable combination of words and the pre-cise effects they have.”

There was a creaking from behind Jonathan. He turned to see one of the students waving her hand. Ann, or Anne, or Annie, he couldn’t remember. Her last name was Haddock, though. Like the fish. Ecker sat in the row ahead of her, eyes wide and glistening. She was trying to push an eyelid down with her finger, but it was refusing to budge.

Paradoxically, there was a sense of giddiness about the class after M. Patria lost his temper. Not happiness, exactly, but a restless energy. Jonathan should have seen it coming, before Magician Taleel’s class. It was a regular occurrence, M. Patria singling

out a student and making them the day's fool. And always, that cramping tightening anxiety that he forced upon the class lost its hold, and for a moment they felt free. Like holding your breath too long, and taking that first glorious breath of air. Jonathan turned his eyes forward and sat far back in his chair.

“Countless scholars have experimented. Researched. And delved deep within their inherited memories to recover this knowledge, these elements of the Lore.”

“Are there other spells? Ones we don't know about?” Haddock said, without waiting.

M. Taleel looked up vacantly. “Don't speak nonsense,” she said, but without much bite.

“However, this is a simplistic way of looking at enactment. The scholar Etrutard tells us that the Spell is not just a collection of words, but an essence. If we Incant the word “water” a thousand times, a million times, and focus on every aspect of the word, it becomes not a word, but a million words. Cool and blue and fluid and moist and shimmering and weighty and brine and ancient and deep. It becomes a state of mind. There comes a bridge between your will, and the water itself. You are the water, and by your will, the water is whatever you want it to be.”

M. Taleel looked up, as pleased as if she had written those words herself. She looked up, perhaps expecting attentive and enraptured children hanging on her word.

“What I'm trying to say is, the potential of enactment is practically limitless.” She looked at them, a bit of a wrinkle forming delicately between her brows, as drowning silence edged in on her spiel.

“Hey Em Taleel, if, if the power of enacting is limitless, why do I gotta get a license to go flying?”

“Now, um, Etrutard’s understanding of the term ‘Spell’ allows it to be applicable to not just incantation, but gesture and ritual.”

“Hey, Em Taleel, if the power of enacting is limitless, why don’t you enact yourself someone to keep you warm at night?” This was one of the older boys, Jason Souille, who was sharp, who knew M. Taleel preferred to ignore rather than engage with crassness.

They all had to be sharp, Jonathan supposed. Ignorance, real or feigned, Jonathan had learned, was useful for keeping yourself in line. But they all had that keenness that let them smell blood in the water. Let hem realize M. Taleel was having a good day, that she was feeling soft, that they could push.

One of Gerard’s friends squealed in laughter, and then they were all clamoring for her attention. Haddock had her hand in the air again, practically screaming. As M. Taleel shushed her, a boy on the other side of the room twirled a finger, directing a crackling wave of static behind him; it crawled along a short, blonde girl’s skin and sent her hair into spikes. She promptly leaned forward and tapped him on his shoulder, sending him toppling out of his chair.

“Enough!” M. Taleel shrieked. She snapped a finger, and the boy flew back into his seat, ribs banging into the desk’s edge. Behind her, one student took the opportunity to stand on his chair, flopping back down as her back was turned.

And, Lore, it was all so predictable. The inevitable descent into foolery. Day in and day out. Maybe the excitement of the night before had left him drained, the worry over what exactly had happened to Simpleton. Whatever the case, Jonathan couldn't bring himself to partake. Instead, he felt a rush of terror that this, this would be the best parts of his life.

M. Taleel's voice was a falsetto, then, as she tried to make herself heard. She threw the students back into their seats, bound them all with an enactment that made them write as she read again chapters from Etrutard, as she huffed and sweated.

Beneath Jonathan's sleeve, the tattooed eyes remained half-closed.

#

Jonathan owned seven demerits, the tattoos arranged in rows of two eyes with a single large one planted over his wrist. They were encircled by words, thin script that curled like lashes.

In order from the crook of his elbow down to his wrist, they read:

Distemper and Apathy, Dishonesty and Avarice, Disability and Irrational Thought, and Violence.

The tattoos were Wards, a kind of Enactment. Most Wards were protective, a little deal between the person and Lore: follow this rule, live up to this title, and luck/influence over the motion of running water/strength/health/good eye-sight/clean teeth/clear pores/etc. would be yours. Platform drivers could read the air, furnace workers were immune to steam burns. And of course, every citizen aboveground shared the same Ward

above their diaphragm - Magician. A reminder of what they were, and that Enactment didn't mean mastery.

Magicians Patria and Taleel no doubt had Wards of their own, ones that gave them complete authority, complete ability to move and manipulate students in the confines of their classrooms. No doubt, some mysterious and shrouded administrator they answered to had the same influence over the entire labyrinthine school, and he or she answered to someone higher up the ladder.

Demerits were a little different of course; instead of conveying privilege, they were a warning and way to keep track of the unsavory. Should they glow too harshly, not only would every bystander know instantly what that person was, but it would call every Ender in the block to that location, to drag the sinner off to the nearest corrective facility, for a fine and more stringent binding.

He had earned many of his demerits in the weeks following the time Mama Len kicked him out of the orphanage, and he turned to the End of Days Sanctuaries, then to wandering the streets. School had been a refuge he welcomed in those days, but he rarely had the will to go. And in hindsight, he could tell that he wasn't hiding his gut-churning terror at his lack of prospects as well as he later learned to.

In a lot of ways, he was grateful for them. The Demerits and the things the End of Days Sanctuaries had taught him. When he earned his license for Purity of Heart, he learned how to make himself small, to make himself slippery to magic and absent to the senses of others. And when he earned his demerits, he learned how to apply that to himself. How to lie, in thought and presence, so that his demerits remained closed and

slumbering no matter what he did. He merely had to remember that the things he did were unavoidable, the best solutions in the worst situations. That he was right and good.

The demerits on his arm were meant to burn and darken whenever he repeated his mistake, in whole or in part. Anger, a lack of effort, lying, stealing, showing weakness, hallucinating. Hurting others. If he avoided those, completed his community service, he might, might just have a chance at one of the private Academies. Might just have a chance at earning a proper licensing, building up a collection of wards, not just Magician, but Master of Magic. An open door.

Otherwise, he'd be consigned to labor in the furnaces, even lower than the oddities. To scraping and scheming, not knowing how long his meager and strained currency would last, how many meals he had left in him, how many meals he could skip. To living in the abandoned Cascade tenements at the edge of town for the rest of his life.

#

Jonathan tried to enjoy school, mostly because the free lunch tended to be his only regular meal and he didn't want to seem ungrateful. He took his proper seat across from Toofer at his proper table and forced himself to eat slowly.

Given the various shapes of students served at the cafeteria, the food tended towards the inoffensive. The plasmic gelatin held most of what was healthy and could probably keep him going by itself. There was also some sort of watery meal dotted with raisins that served to fill the stomach, and paper-dry bread that kept him from digesting too fast.

A loud thump next to him jarred him out of his food induced reverie.

“I hear they make this out of caterpillar puke,” Jonathan said to Toofer. Toofer worked through his food in relentless silence.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t complain.”

Behind Toofer, a number of students were huddling over something on the table.

“A thousand days?” One of the mantises said. “I can’t handle another thousand days.”

“This year was bad enough,” said another student, which Jonathan thought resembled a large animated wig but was, he knew, an orlop and would probably strangle him with its prehensile hairs if he said that out loud. “Coming up on eight hundred.”

“This is ridiculous. They can’t keep us in sixth-grade for a thousand days. Can’t the sky-kissers do something about it?”

“No one controls the length of the year,” said Jason as he squeezed by with his tray held high. “You’d know that if you didn’t spend so much time sucking dirt, lowscrub.”

“Looks like the almanac’s come out early,” Jonathan said to Toofer. A scuffle broke out as the mantis leaned forward with its feelers outstretched, but the orlop yanked it back. Jonathan caught a glimpse of the tome it was holding up with another long, tendril-like, lock of hair. Jason clenched a fist and yanked, and the book sailed out of its tendril (arm?) and into his hand.

“Hang on,” he said, grinning wildly. “I need to see if it’s raining on my birthday.”

“What do you think, Toofer?” Jonathan said. “I could use some slow time. A thousand day year could be good for us.” He looked back at the group of orlop and the

mantis, who were huddled with several other students, whispering furiously now. “Guess it’s not gonna do much top put people at ease.” He waved for Colton’s attention, and motioned him over. Colton tossed the almanac back on the table and joined them.

“What do you want, Day?”

“I’m not in the mood for any slop,” Jonathan said, even as his stomach clenched in hunger. “And Toofer’s on a strict diet.” He passed his tray over to Jason, who wrinkled his nose.

“Hey, I’m sick of cafeteria food, too.”

“Then take it to the trash when you’re done. And leave the creatures alone, will you? Givin’ me a headache.”

“Aw, we’re friends,” Jason said, taking Jonathan’s tray. “Aren’t we friends, Pelemon?” He yelled at the mantis behind him.

Even after a year, Jonathan hadn’t gotten the hang of reading the other creatures, but even he could tell there was something decidedly unfriendly about the way the two kept their backs turned toward Colton. A kind of wall.

It was tiring. The windowless hallways and the puce and gray and fluorescent lights were claustrophobic enough without the way the two groups tiptoed around each other. Outnumbered as they were, Jonathan knew students from above ground like Jason felt like there was some kind of conspiracy behind the way the under-people flowed around them, something unreadable and unknowable, frightening, in the faces of stone, or mandibles, or octuple-eyes.

Jonathan, and Colton, and Toofer, and the rest of them no doubt grew up being told too many stories about monsters to be comfortable breathing the same air as them. But how must the Oddities feel, crowding in hallways with reality-bending overlords who corralled them underground? They probably knew the old stories, of how magic rent the earth and poisoned the air, but they didn't know about how tightly they controlled themselves, how the Lore kept them grounded and safe. How "magic," true magic, was as strange a concept to the magicians as it was to the creatures.

Colton waited for Jason to wander off before he stopped spooning chunks of gel into his mouth. "You heard about the big sinkholes we've been having?"

Jonathan stopped massaging his knuckles under the table. "I walked by one of the first ones. Smells odd, gives you vertigo."

"Well my dad's a glass maker, right, so he works for Grint Works."

"So?"

"So my dad's boss is Grintford himself."

"Big man."

"Big man! Owns most of the Furnace, I hear. I bet most of them," Colton motioned towards the under-students, "work for him as well."

"You're telling me your dad knows Mr. Grintford?" said Jonathan.

"Well, no," Colton said. "But he works for him."

"I doubt it."

"He works for the company, I'm saying."

"Sure, sure. Like a laundry-man. Or bricklayer."

“Like a glassmaker, alright? An art-i-san.” He spooned another bit of gel into his mouth and frowned as he swallowed. “You’re a real snip, you know that, Day?”

“But what’s your dad say about Grintford and these sinkholes?”

“You ain’t no better than me.”

“Alright, alright, you got me hooked now. What’d your dad say? I’m curious now, I’m listening.”

Colton’s lip twitched down, but pride took over and he continued. “Well his whole house – his winter house, cause apparently he needs one – got swallowed up by one of them sinkholes. That’s a big place. Lost a lot of expensive furniture, a lot of Enders.”

“There was a whole block,” Jonathan said carefully, “an apartment block in the lower quarter, that disappeared the other day, too. Brick Castle Street. I thought it was just a, a plumbing.”

“Ain’t no plumbing problem that tunnels holes that deep. You can see straight through to the ground if you lean over, I hear.”

“The ground?”

Colton motioned with his spoon. “The ground that we’re floating over.”

For a second, the fact that several million, magician and creature alike, sat suspended on a rock floating among the clouds a mile above the vast desert below, recaptured Jonathan. He fought back his queasiness and noted that Colton, too, seemed to have been infected with the same thought. They shook themselves at the same time.

“Anyway, my pa says it’s a harbinger. A bad sight at the Turning Time of year.”

“Of what?”

“What?”

“What’s it a harbinger of? What does your pa say it’s a harbinger of?”

“He just says it a harbinger, alright? Doesn’t have to be ‘of’ anything.”

“You can’t just harbinge on your own. It’s a before and after thing, a paradigm.”

Jason Souille interrupted them by clattering down the tray Jonathan had given him. “Take my trash out, too, Day.” He snickered.

“What you get,” Colton said, “For being a snip.”

#

Practicum was as typical. Jonathan stared down at the weighted cube on the slate top of his desk. The day’s lesson was for the enactment for sublimation of a pure metal, an exercise in finesse. But by the end of the class yet again, Jonathan was the only with an unmoved, unaltered bit of stone on his desk.

“I can’t do it,” Jonathan said, annoyed when M. Rivur chose to be encouraging that day.

“You *can* do it, Magician Day.”

“I can’t. I’m too stupid.” He didn’t want to point out that his cache of magic was limited. His debt may have been suspended, whatever that meant, but he wasn’t about to waste what few resources he had on this class. What would be the point? They all knew he was worthless as far as enactment went. Trying to reverse that opinion would be like trying to reverse the flow of a toilet– a lot of effort for a lot of mess.

It didn't help that he'd thrown out most of his lunch, either, and he had the beginnings of a headache crawling up his neck. There was a simple enactment to fix that, too, but he couldn't be bothered.

"You're not too stupid, Magician Day. You just need to—" she halted as she knew she lost him. "Put the right effort in," she petered out.

Jonathan massaged the back of his head as the ring of the bell, the scraping of seats, and shuffling of notebooks and jackets drilled into his head.

#

Jonathan made sure to stuff the wrappers for the Hyper-Lax biscuits deep into his locker. As expected, Jason Souille had been stumbling to and from the bathroom ever since lunch. Jonathan had clocked him taking the exact same route multiple times; who wasn't a creature of habit, where the bowels were concerned?

It was a convenient route. It passed the same odd twist in the hallway where an existential whorl lurked just around the corner. The Enders patrolled the hallways, but Jonathan knew for a fact that they were old models, slow to respond and not apt to record infractions. Regardless, Jonathan knew his timing just had to be marginally precise and he'd be free and clear.

Jonathan positioned himself across from the dimensional whorl, near the bathroom. He bent to tie his shoe and waited for Jason Souille to stumble on by. He invested a small amount of magic into the chipped heartstone in his pocket, until it shone with only a dim glow. His will thus extended, he was able to slowly and carefully guide the spherical gem to a perfectly inconvenient spot. A spot that caught Jason Souille's

shoe at just the right angle, as he came around the corner clutching his stomach, to send him flopping to the floor, limbs spiraling down at an angle as his head fell directly into the existential whirl.

“Ah, Lore,” someone said. “Another one.”

Jonathan made sure to be the first one there, close as he was. He yanked Jason by his shoes, collecting the chipped heartstone as he did so.

“How can nothing make sense if all there is, is sense,” Jason muttered, fingering his face.

“Oh, he’s got it bad,” Jonathan said.

Enders came eventually to transport him to the counselor Horowitz, and Jonathan took some satisfaction from the relief on Larcan’s bald rocky face.

#

Jonathan tried not to think in terms of good or bad days anymore. A bad day was something you only had to face once, after all, each time. And anyway, the binary didn’t appeal to him. But he couldn’t help thinking that he had, for the first time in a long time, gone accomplished something two days in a row. That was practically two good days.

So as he exited the bowels of PA25 into the crisp open air of Palisade Street, tossed and swirled by pedestrian auras and platforms zipping by, he liked to think the warm sun was in some small part for him. That he’d done right. Or good. Or something approximating it.

A man and woman waited for him by the freight-stop— a tall young man, vaguely familiar, in a blue coat and uniform of the Academy of Self-Actualization, and next to

him a young woman, a young woman who was young-looking, deep blue eyes that didn't seem to blink and the kind of perfectly round face you'd see in a child's toy. She had a shawl wrapped tightly around her ears and hair, her socks appeared to be bandages, and the white slip looked like something more suitable at a fancy-dress dinner than a day walk. It was burned and tattered at the edges.

Jonathan knew they were waiting for him because the man leaned over and consulted the girl before waving.

"We're friends of Emory," he said. Jonathan made to pass him, and walk his way home, but the man caught him by the shoulder. His grip was iron strong, and as Jonathan met his eyes, he saw a silver light that leaked out as if it longed to be unleashed. "Emory Simpleton."