

The Hunted

Prologue

The Omega

The air was cold, crisp, clean.

Even at his elevation, the wind still bore traces of peat.

He surveyed his ancestral homeland, now abandoned.

Not a foreign soul for miles.

Eline shivered, wrapping her shawl around herself more tightly.

All the souls belonged to him.

Eline did not appreciate the cold. Shivering. Reacting. Like an animal. Like clockwork. He knew her as he knew all humans, as thoroughly and completely as he knew the workings of any machine. She bore the cold to be beside him. She was beside him in the cold to curry favor. She curried favor in order to advance her standing and the standing of her offspring. Knowing this, the gesture was hollow. Lucretia she was not.

He needed not gestures, merely compliance. She had never failed to be compliant, nor would she. Clockwork.

"Darling," he said, adding an echo of warmth to his tone, "you are clearly freezing. Go back inside. I shall join you shortly."

Few appreciated the cold. It was clean. It preserved. As it gnawed at skin, it sharpened thoughts. Few stimulants could produce such clarity. Unlike the easy, ultimately corrupting benefits of drugs, its gifts were reserved for those who could not only exist but dispassionately observe their existence.

At current, there was no slack, no movement on the great chains serpentining their way like leviathans up from the rocky surf. His island perched atop a honeycomb of helium sat placidly in the sky.

Some think of the circle as the perfect shape. It was, and it was not. An individual circle was the closest thing that existed to perfection. However, that perfection is ruined by the presence of another circle. It fits poorly with others of its kind. A circle is only perfect so long as it is solitary. It is the hexagon thus chosen by nature when nature needs bees build.

They all fit neatly, nicely, nestled in hierarchies each order neatly stacked into larger hierarchies. Nobles, merchants, peasants, servants, wives, children, grandchildren, and their further progeny. Stacked. Repeatable. Expendable. It was all but an industrious, orderly beehive.

He felt the cold distribute itself throughout his body.

Their flesh would rot while his would not.

He left the howling winds for the ticking of gears. Mechanical minds were improved by their lack of pretense. No matter how complex the mechanism, no matter how intricate the output, no one would imagine it to be anything but a machine. The computers of old were inelegant, ungracious in this respect,

the people full of pretense.

Complex machinery was still not but machinery. The prerequisite of choice is the understanding of the machinery itself. Anything less was just some form or another of stimulus and reaction, a series of gears grinding against gears.

He did not react but act.

He was a circle.

He was King.

I Arthur

The haze left no room for shadows. Dawn's luxuriant light was stripped of its radiance, repackaged, and scattered by particulate. The whole of the district was cast in an uncanny amber glow. There was no direction Arthur could face where his eyes were not forced into a precarious squint by the corrupt light.

Arthur was making his dreaded monthly visit to the workers, give them a bit of a speech and encouragement. It took so little to motivate the wretches. The visit wouldn't have been so bad if it weren't for the smell. The stench was palpable. It was an amalgamation of sulfur, human waste, and aromas boiling off countless pots filled with all things rotten and synthetic. It clung to everything. He knew it would permeate his suit, following him all the way back to his pristine home. The dirt road had occasional patches of cobblestone. It made for an awkward gait and dusty clothes. Perhaps he would have been better off taking the carriage all the way to the factory, but then he might miss out on a bit of sport. An old woman passed him slowly. In the tinted light, her skin was the color and texture of a long spoiled pumpkin. She passed too closely by far, smiling nervously her head bowed so as not to accidentally meet his gaze. The stench was overwhelming. He held back the impulse to vomit. Why was it that the poor all had that same smell? Each had it to a different degree, but it was unmistakably all the same bouquet. He had a superfluous nose for red wines, but he couldn't fully untangle that smell. It was like a mixture of stale overused spices, old sweat, and something else he couldn't quite put his finger on—a sort of sickly sweetness.

People might look similar on the surface, but in reality, deep down, where it counted, there were protagonists and side characters, kings and pawns, men and men-shaped animals carried forward on pure instinct. A mendicant lacking several fingers and a leg was slumped against a wall. His face was coated in a thick layer of dust, begging bowl in hand. His jaw had the unbalanced appearance of one who has been missing most of their teeth for a long time, like a cow in the middle of chewing cud. Clearly, the beggar should be on a work crew, but he looked too damaged. Given the disorder in the lowlands a few stray wretches were to be expected. *Perhaps I should take matters into my own hands*, he thought as he reached into his pocket. Arthur felt the leather in his back pocket. He looked into the sunken soulless eyes of the beggar. Eyes wreathed in cracked salt, hoping for nothing more than a few scraps to chew on. Arthur let it go. He wasn't worth it. *One can't teach old dogs new tricks*. The beggar's dull wet sullen eyes stared intently at the empty hand which emerged from the pocket. Arthur raised his leg and mock kicked at the man. The beggar fell clumsily on his side to dodge. Laughing, he kept his foot raised as the copper curled up whimpering. Arthur left the sobbing malformed ball where he lay. His oxfords were already dusty enough.

Arthur had only been walking in the lowlands for a few minutes, yet the acrid miasma was already burning his throat. He resisted the impulse to cough, it would only make it hurt worse.

A little boy bumped into him. Arthur felt a tug at his back pocket and smiled. *That little boy did it to himself*, Arthur thought. As the child ran off, the bemused Arthur turned around at a relaxed pace. He tapped his finger against his thigh once, twice, three times, and then, right on time, the little boy fell to the ground, screaming. The boy was thrashing back and forth as if he could somehow dissipate his pain by turning it into kinetic energy.

The trick wallet worked exactly as the salesman had described. The pain sounded exquisite. He was one of the first to get one. His friends, all of whom enjoyed a bit of sport, would be so jealous when he told them the story. *One less thief*.

Arthur ambled over to the child who, at this point, managed to get the blood from his hand seemingly everywhere, his face contorted, howling like a dog whose leg was stuck in a bear trap.

A woman, on hearing this commotion, came running from one of the nearby squalid stacks. She looked down at her son, appalled, and finally traced the blood to its source—a right hand clutching a blood-soaked bit of leather that had erupted with cruel gleaming black spikes.

Arthur loudly cleared his throat. The woman spun around, sheepishly casting her gaze downwards, doing her best to ignore the cries of her still screaming child. It seemed that she understood the situation well enough. Coppers should really know better than to raise thieves. Since the constables didn't go far enough, it was up to men like him to help put them in their place.

"Sir," She said, eyes still firmly cast on her shoes. "What was it tha' my boy did?"

"It should be perfectly obvious he tried to steal from me. I don't imagine this is the first time he has stolen, is it?"

The woman's eyes cast down, "No... it's just that...he's 'ad it hard."

"Do I look like the kind of man who wants to hear your whole wretched back story?"

Her face darkened.

"But don't worry too much. I am glad that if he tried to steal, it was from me. I'm guessing with the negligence down here, the boy could use a lesson or two."

"Yes..." She pushed the word out of her throat as if it were a boulder, her eyes glued to her ratty shoes.

Not good enough of a response. He could sense her still clinging to some pretense of dignity. He knew well when someone was actually broken. She wasn't quite there yet. "Well? Aren't you going to apologize to me? Another noble would have beheaded the boy by now and been in his rights to do so."

"...Yes, yes, I am so sorry... I deeply apologize." Her son's screams clearly pierced her, but she knew better than to turn away.

His soft dark brown gloves firmly grabbed her under the chin, forcing her gaze upward. Her face was a little puffy from crying, and she had the general dejection that adorned the faces of all the lowland

girls. Her cheeks were sunken, her eyes dark. It was that exact brand of helplessness Arthur had found so impossible to resist. Certainly, she was no lady, but she had her charms.

The boy continued to cry, his instinctive attempts to clutch his hand with the other repeatedly foiled by the unyielding spikes.

She was shaking throughout her whole body. "Sorry, sir, very sorry sir...would you sir like me to give you that back?"

"Oh, that thing?" He said, trying to change his tone slightly to one more cavalier. "It was a prototype, ruined by your boy and rendered worthless now. Who would want to keep hold of something after *that* anyway." He said, pointing to the sobbing blood-soaked boy.

"Yes, sir..." She nodded, then following his finger, finally getting a chance to look at her mewling babe.

"Tell you what," He reached into a hidden pocket near the front of his coat, producing two crisp fifty denarii notes from his real wallet, "I am going to have mercy today. Use this to see to his hand. With this money, he should be able to retain enough use in it to find employment." He tried to say in a soft tone. After a brief pause, he said, "But scars help you remember the lessons pain teaches you."

She turned pale. "Thank you so much for your kindness, sir..."

With the confidence of a predator whose quarry was well caught, he moved in close, his breath on her ear, and whispered, "Oh, I am sure you know some ways to pay me back for my generosity, don't you?"

She didn't respond, merely issued a defeated, diminutive nod. Breaking in a new toy was always the best part. As much as he would have liked to start then, he didn't want to be late for his inspection.

"Good, I will stop by later. Now, go see to your son before his screaming gives me a headache." He turned nonchalantly and began to walk away from the crying child.

Yes, today is going to be a particularly good day, Arthur thought. It was only a pity about the smell, or he might try spending more time down in the lowlands. How could they stand to live in such filth? A true gentleman, he reflected, would give up his life before he would debase himself like a dog. But what should he expect from them? There were protagonists, and there were side characters, footnotes on the journey of important people.

Yes, today is going to be a good day indeed.

A clang. He felt warmth flow down his head as cold spread throughout his body and dust filled his lungs.

II Slate

Slate stood shovel in hand. It was caked in layers of dust and old cement, now with the addition of a red pattern on the back, drops slowly inching downwards, giving it the image of a red ghost. He had acted on instinct. He had assaulted a 'lord.' A lord that he just happened to witness torturing a child. A lord that, even though he had worked in the man's factory for the past twenty years, probably couldn't pick him out of a lineup. As he watched the man in his dainty suit kicking up dust, convulsing on the ground, he considered his options. The penalty for attacking one of his 'betters' was death; the penalty for killing one, however, was also death. So, with a shrug of his shoulders, he once again raised up the shovel, this time plunging it downwards to a satisfying crunch.

He spit at the ground and turned around to see the young boy and his mother staring. For an instant, they had a look of gratitude, but then she picked up her mangled boy and ran. He didn't blame her. This is a situation that was going to turn real ugly, real fast, and the bobbies weren't famous for their listening skills. Being a lowlander was already more than half the way to guilt.

He could always run, but they'd catch him. They'd ransack the whole area looking for him before they did. That pair he just saved would be in the crossfire. Some hero he'd be then, saving people from one wolf, only to throw them into a den of lions. His hands were shaking. It wasn't about anything so fanciful as heroism, it was hate. Pure hate distilled over a lifetime of slow toil and constant humiliation. Still, he already killed the fuck, so he might as well play the part.

Slate climbed the narrow stairways of the stacks, cluttered with peoples' shit. He got up to his place, kicking some trash bags out of the way. His place didn't even have its own toilet. Just a bed, a boiler, a few bottles, and black mold. He grabbed one of the purple bottles of tigel spirits, went back out, and sat down next to the corpse he made. He drank from the bottle and lit a cigarette. If a copper like him was murdered, the bobbies would hardly bat an eye—just trash killing trash—but canaries got paid well for tips on this sort of thing. The phone probably started ringing before the stiff hit the floor.

They would be there soon. He could feel the tingling spread throughout his body, his breathing slowed. He watched the cherry of his cigarette glow softly and felt something that he hadn't felt in a very long time. He felt human. He could have lived maybe another twenty years as a dog, but this way, *this way*, he'd die like a man.

The bobbies arrived on the scene within an hour or so, swarming like flies. They circled around him. The bottle was empty.

"Did you see what happened here?" Said a man in a well-pressed uniform with a dark handlebar mustache. Clearly didn't think a man could have the balls to sit next to a goldy he just murdered.

Slate was no stranger to a bottle or three of tigel but decided to play up his drunken slur all the same. "Yeah, saw it with my own eyes I did, officer. This man lyin' dead 'ere was torturin' folk, sick

bastard that one."

"We don't care about what happened to some slummie trash—what happened to this man here?" Pointing to the nearly decapitated corpse in the stylish blue suit speckled with blood as if Slate were blind.

"Ah, well, you see there officer, he happened to come into contact with my shovel somethin' fierce to the back o' 'is head, then seeing 'im writhe on the floor as he was, I thought it was only right merciful o' me to stop his squirmin'." Slate was grinning.

With a nod from the man with the mustache, a younger bobbie held his nightstick aloft, and then all was darkness.

Slate woke up on the ground of a crowded cell. He looked at those around him, marked them all—lowlanders like himself, many of whom still trying to put up a front as if it mattered at this point. His forehead ached. Lifting his hand to his face, he could feel the lump left by the nightstick. He hadn't tried to resist, but he wasn't exactly surprised. Now all that was left was to wait. He propped himself against the wall and patted his pocket, searching for a cigarette. The bobbies had taken them, the bastards. He was sobering up just enough for the hangover to start.

"Heard you killed a goldy." One of the other prisoners spoke. He was young and spindly. He didn't look like a man who was accustomed to hard labor. Probably a thief of some sort.

"Ya, recon I did," Slate said, "turns out they look jus' the same on the inside as any other bloke, soft 'eads to boot." He had seen the insides of more than one man in his lifetime.

The other prisoners all turned and stared at him, "What 'appened?"

"Well," Slate said, cracking his knuckles. "This guy tore a kid's hand open, fer some reason, an' was chatting up the mum while the lad was layin' there screamin'."

"Those toffs do whatever they like." One voice said.

"Wish someone would kill 'em all." Another voice said.

Slate straightened his back against the wall, his chest naturally puffing out, "Any you lads manage to sneak a smoke?"

"For you? Sure." The spindly man handed him a crumpled cigarette, which he lit. Pity Slate was a dead man. He could get used to this.

The boys were all around him, chattering about. It felt like the start of some revolution. *There's a lot more of us than them. Maybe some of them might crack a skull or two. If any of them manage to get out.*

He was summoned to meet with his solicitor sometime later, a pencil-neck reeking of the familiar scent of strong tobacco and perfumed gin. A stained tie was dangling from his neck. Public defenders, worth their weight in gravel.

"Mr. Stain?"

"Stein, Slate Stein."

"Sure. I am here to represent you in the matter of the murder of one Arthur C. Swordsly."

"Not on ma jaywalking charges?" Slate said.

"Umm...Do I have the right file? One second..." The solicitor opened his briefcase. Papers flew out in a mess as the little weasel of a man scrunched his eyes up to read the crumpled text.

"Don't bother ya'self. I reckon I do recall killing some toff named that." Slate probably did have some jaywalking charges as well. They probably didn't matter much now.

"Ahh, good. But you should show respect! Imagine what the judges will think! This is a serious matter, and I shall find it a hard enough task without your frivolity."

Like Slate had any chance to begin with. Public solicitors were paid by the same twisted bastards that made the system that held them down. They were meant to fail. If one accidentally succeeded at something, they'd probably have to write a letter of apology. They were like the bit of wood pattern on top of particle board. Just there for show, but everyone knew what was underneath. This one was a typical silver nobby besides. In his case, the only thing allowing for something like justice was the fact Slate was guilty.

Slate cracked his neck. "Let's just get on with it. Spare a doomed man the song and dance, will ya?"

The solicitor was sweating bullets. "Good, you understand then. In the trial, you must explain how it was that your low upbringing and station would cause you to commit such an unjust action. Then you must acknowledge the greater wisdom of our society and its laws and throw yourself upon the mercy of the court. If you do this, you will get a swift and merciful execution, perhaps even peacework."

"O' course m' lord, o' course."

"Glad we are on the same page." Taking out a soiled handkerchief to wipe his brow, he continued, "You're lucky, a real priority, they fast-tracked you, so your trial will be later today. Remember what we discussed. I must now get to my other clients."

Clients my ass, Slate thought. Apparently, he had caused enough commotion earlier to get his own cell in solitary. He could feel the last tingles of the tugal wear off as he passed into sleep.

He was roused from the cell, shaved, and put into a suit. It fit like shit. Slate could barely move his arms without the seams threatening to burst. He stood in front of the three judges. Why would you need three people to say the word guilty? This was all just for show. Slate would make sure to give them something to wag their gobs about.

He listened to the prosecutor wax on about what a kind and gentle family man Sir Arthur Swordsly had been. The only son of a high noble house, leaving with only a young boy, his son to carry out the family legacy. They talked fancy about the great tragedy of his early death, of how those unfortunate

souls in the lowlands would now be bereft of his firm but fair guiding hand. Slate just wanted it to be over. It was almost as bad as when that prick was alive and would show up at Crius and gather everyone together so that he could prattle on about some nonsense while everyone else was itching to fill their quotas. *Leadership and guidance my ass.* Toff like him, only ever talked to a mirror. His widow was crying. She looked more like someone cutting onions than attending a funeral.

Then it was the turn of his own solicitor. “This man you see before you, Slate Stain, is, as his name would suggest, an anathema to the glorious order of our empire. A hardy weed raised in the dirt, but one whom up until this point provided productive labor without troubling anyone outside of the lowlands. His guilt, honorable gentlemen of the court, is as obvious as his pronounced distended brow ridges, this I shall not pretend to deny.” The solicitor paused for effect. Rubbing his sweatstained handkerchief across his face again, he continued. “But still, I believe redemption can be something he can work towards. He is surely very sorry for his unprovoked attack. Most likely, he was out of his mind on the tigel the constables found him besotted on. Evidence of this can be found in the fact that he was lying next to the very Noble he had killed! Does that sound like a man who was in his right mind? Let him serve out the rest of his life, using those strong hands of his to provide peace work in penance. Or failing that, most honorable judges, give him a quick and merciful end, as one would a rabid dog that had previously served his master loyally.”

The verdict, to the surprise of precisely fucking no one, was guilty. But for the sentence, Slate would get one chance to speak on his own behalf. He would show them who was a loyal dog.

“First off, it’s Stein, not bloody Stain. An’ ya, I dun killed the bastard, an’ I’m not ‘bout to pretend that what I did was wrong. Dun’t yous pretend otherwise. You prolly knew the whoreson better than I. Glad I did it, glad he’s dead. I’d do it again in an ‘eart beat. I’d kill ‘im even sober an’ the like.”

The crowd broke into a mixture of real and feigned outrage. Gavels were struck, powder from white wigs was shaken loose.

The center judge took control, silencing the room. “Given that you are so low as to not even repent to your crimes, we three have determined to auction the right to hunt you off and to have the proceeds of such auction go to the grieving widow.”

“I suppose the *grieving* widow oughta thank me twice then.” Slate said, grinning.

“Bailiff!” A judge called out, but this time the nightstick didn’t manage to knock him out. It just stung a bit. The bailiff was a limp wristed mary. Slate decided that he might as well fake it, so he closed his eyes and went limp.

“Poor bastard.” one of the men carrying him said.

“Yeah, the stones on this one, never seen the court so riled.” said the other.

“Pity ‘e’ll be a corpse soon, seems the sort I’d like to have a drink with.” said the first man. *Who the*

hell do they have carrying me, janitors? He had hoped those fru-frus would have to carry him for a change, but of course, they never do their own dirty work.

Slate already knew what his defiance would buy him. If he had played a good little servant, he would have maybe received ‘peace work,’ life in some remote asteroid mine, but killing a goldy made that proper unlikely. Best he’d hope for was the guillotine. Peace work was a thing they dangled before men desperate to cling to life to get them to cooperate with their little justice play. Slate hadn’t been in a very cooperative mood.

So his life was instead sold to some toff. Probably a bunch of lads who bent down and licked justice’s hairy toes did too. Slate had grown up watching judicial hunts. Usually, some winded sod running through the streets for a few minutes, then falling to his knees begging and getting blown away. Seeing a guy running through the streets and getting his head blasted off probably went a long way in getting coppers to keep theirs down. Wasn’t rare for a hunter to take out a few more in the process, collaterals they called them. You saw the bull’s-eye on a forehead, and you ran away just as fast as the unlucky mark.

After the carriage ride, they splashed water on his face, his cue to wake up. The rules were read to him, though it wasn’t as if the rules for a justice contract weren’t public knowledge among the folk in the lowlands.

“The timer would start as soon as the defendant agrees to the terms. The timer shall be thirty minutes head start in which the defendant can run and hide from their pursuers. You have the right only to run or hide. Any additional force may result in discipline to family members. You will be given a brand on your forehead. This brand shall signify you as the subject of a justice hunt. You may not seek aid from others. If others aid you in any way, including but not limited to: getting between you and the hunter, sheltering you, or fighting on your behalf, they may also be killed with no penalty.” That’s where all the ‘collaterals’ came from.

“Dunno,” Slate said, “Seems a little one-sided to me, guess I’ll ‘ave to refuse until you blokes come up with better terms.”

The constable sighed and gestured. One man held his shoulder down while another holding a red hot brand approached him. Like most things, asking him to agree was just for the look of things. The brand was the mark of the empire, a circle surrounded by a honey comb, with each comb becoming smaller and more numerous the farther from the circle they were. All the little lines on the periphery would swell together, becoming an outer circle. The end effect, he knew, was indistinguishable from a bull’s-eye. Slate didn’t struggle as the man approached with the brand. He pressed it into Slate’s forehead, searing his flesh. Slate bit the inside of his cheek as hard as he could. His eyes watered, but he wouldn’t scream. He now knew what he would smell like cooked on a grill. His eyes watered so bad he

could barely see. He wasn't crying. Those bastards better not think those were tears.

The guy behind him undid his cuffs. "You have thirty minutes preparation. Best of luck, chappie."

As a child, he had played hunter and hunted with his mates. He knew the neighborhood, the alleyways, the cracks, holes in the wall. But even with just a bunch of snot-nose kids, you always get found eventually. Real hunts were worse. Justice hunts were the fucking worst, people running everywhere you go. He had seen too many chases to believe there was any real escape. Slate would be damned if he dragged anyone down with him. When he lifted his shovel, he had already decided he would die like a man. His body wanted to shake. He wouldn't let it.

Instead of running like a chicken with its head cut off, instead of hiding like a rat in the sewers, instead of trying to hijack a carriage, Slate went to the nearest bar.

Upon seeing the mark on his head, the patrons fled. The bartender, a robust man around forty with cheeks reddened from drink, slammed an empty glass on the counter, "Hey! You get the frik outta m' bar! I don't serve deaduns, especially not corpses liable to attract bullets."

Slate gave the bartender a flat look. "Got thirty minutes left t' go b'fore the hounds are unleashed. Just wanna few drinks, mayb' a smoke er two b'fore then. Give a bit o' mercy to a dead man."

"You that guy what killed the goldy ain't ya? The one who attacked the boy?"

Slate cracked his knuckles. "Yep, that was me. 'Justice' is awful swift these days."

"Story made me think of my nephew, bright lad an' all but a bit on the thieving side o' things. Glad there's folk like you around. But ya do ken that if I 'elp you, I'm liable to get me own mark. Say I jus' leave a bottle 'ere, and flee for my life, right? An' you get the frikin-fuck outta my bar in 'alf an hour, they couldn't hold that against me now, could they?"

"Hypothetically, say, I wouldn't mind a bottle o' Urbina." Slate said, spying the bottle of red wine he'd seen some of them fancy folk drink when they visited the lowlands.

"Esh, along with m' right leg." The bartender said, sighing, "Been meaning to dust this bottle anyway." He said, paused, "before I runs away in terror, that is." The husky man grabbed the bottle from the top shelf, delivered it onto the table, and gave it an ornamental dusting.

"And smokes."

"Sure. Been meaning to dust off this pack too." The bartender said, dropping a pack and a lighter on the bar, this time not even pretending to dust them. He then left with a mock salute.

Slate opened the bottle and put it directly against his lips. The wine went down a bit smoother than tugal, but it didn't have the same kick. It was sour and bitter, not sweet at all. It was almost savory. Wine was an acquired taste he didn't have the time to acquire. Putting the cork back in the bottle, he bent down and grabbed a trusty bottle tugal. Alone in that deserted bar, he lit a cigarette. What a Wonderful

World started to play on the radio. Slate chuckled.

This, Slate thought, is a good enough way to go.

He didn't exactly have a watch, but it was close enough to thirty minutes. Slate left, after all, he didn't want to mess up the man's bar. A man does you a good turn, it's only natural to respond in kind.

He wondered what kind of fanciful, frilly, feckless fops bought the contract to hunt down a man who was all but bound and put before them. He just hoped it would be quick. Those who take justice contracts were known for playing with their prey in the manner of a well-fed house cat. Taking the nearly empty bottle of tugal with him into the street, Slate lit another cigarette. It was his last, he reckoned.

They didn't try to camouflage themselves much, draped in flamboyantly colored spider silk body armor. In their hands, they were sporting some fancy-looking firepower. In the lowlands, their kind could be spotted miles away. They saw their quarry in the middle of the street, bottle in hand. Slate was glad to see their disappointment. They wanted a show, not this time. He wasn't going to give them one, not the one they wanted anyway.

"You there! Do you know who we are?" The evident leader of the group said.

"M' eyes work jus' fine." Slate said taking the last swig from the bottle and dropping it, "You's the peacocks that bought the right to end me, so jus' get it o'er with."

Anger flashed over the man's face. The leader brought Slate painfully to his knees with the butt of his shotgun. "Well, if you are too stupid to run, did you think you could beg? Did you want to pray?" He said, regaining his mocking swagger and control of the situation.

Slate froze for a second, looking up into the barrel of the gun. "Ye," he said, spitting out a toothful red mist onto the ground, "I pray yer mother never birthed such a little..."

Wadrian's shotgun atomized the parts of his quarry that could continue to taunt him further. He had wanted to savor it a little more, but that sort of man didn't make for a good bit of sport.

"The problem with these justice contracts is that they just don't have any spirit. Just like putting down a mad dog." He said, wiping an errant blood splatter from his cheek with a look of disgust, "Hardly worth the money, but at least it is for a good cause. One less wretch polluting the streets." His crew strained their necks nodding in agreement.

He had tried a few contract hunts in the past. Though they were a bit more lively, he was simply too impatient to deal with the wait. Justice contracts were really a kind of charity anyway. The money going to the courts and the victims rather than some undeserving drunkard and his whores.

Sometimes Wadrian wondered if he was too generous. Even though it wasn't a particularly good

kill, he could still feel the rush he got from an execution. Looking at the headless corpse of the pathetic man, he felt the sudden urge to kick it, and he did. It shook a little unsatisfactorily. He kicked it again, this time using the heel of his boot into the man's side. He heard the crack of ribs breaking. He continued again and again as the inert mass of man quivered violently. His foot sunk into the wet cavern he had made in the corpses ribs. Pulling it out he feared some of the blood might have seeped into his boots. *Trash*, this one had actually killed a noble a member of a greater house, even if it was just a Swordsly.

He turned around, walking back to his carriage. His next stop would be his mistress, a sweet little penny he collared. Shackled up in the midlands on his denarii. She knew how to show appreciation, unlike his wife. Today he had earned a good night's sleep.

Part 1

III Gram

Hands covered in oil and grease, Gram wiped the sweat from his brow. *The damn thing still wasn't working, but why?* Sitting down on the ground with his knees tucked towards his chest, he pulled out a cigarette, lit it, and inhaled deeply. Why the hell was he stuck working on this heap? It should be Tom's bloody job. But Tom was incompetent, an incompetent brownnoser who was roughly as useful as a bull in a china shop. If Gram was born a silver like Tom, he'd probably be an executive by now instead of being in his late twenties and still living with his parents. From what he heard, Tom was on the verge of being tarnished. Maybe there was something to the King's justice after all. A fresh look at the liquid fuel rocket engine showed that while fixing the oxidizer pump, he had knocked a wire loose. It was always some stupid thing or another. The whole world was some kind of conspiracy of loose wires. Wire reattached, the machine hummed to life.

He could finally head to the bar and have a drink. He washed his hands, the black soapy bubbles rolled down the sink. He scrubbed with the coarse liquid until his hands were raw. It took over a minute before they were sufficiently clean to put his gloves back on. Dusting himself off, he threw his work goggles haphazardly on a counter, grabbed his coat, and started to head out. Bracing himself to avoid eye contact turned out to be unnecessary. The only people left were just a few dolphins who were currently mutely plugging along, hands moving mechanically at the tedious work before them. Under the dim red light, their cranial scars cast shifting shadows on their bare scalps.

Gram lit another cigarette on his way to the bar. There was a low rumble as the skeletal black frame of a void drifter slowly passed overhead. Tilting his head skyward, it would be hard not to notice the stark contrast between the grim crowded architecture of the lowlands and the towering glass structures of the upper city—something the typical resident had become numb to. Envy is a sin. It was what the posters said—not that anyone in the lowlands actually believed any of the propaganda the ministry put out. They just internalized it.

Lower Elysia was separated from the rest of Elysia geographically by a river and politically with guns. *Elysia. The King sure did have a sense of humor.* Upper Elysia and the Midlands should be “The United Future Occupants of the Third Circle and Fourth Circles of Hell,” and Lower Elysia could be “The Loose Coalition of Current and Future Occupants of Tartarus”—but then all the capitals in the empire had been named badly.

He was supposed to meet up with his chum Marco, but the lug didn't show. Marco was supposed to pick up the tab for this session too. Gram didn't have much more than a few pennies on him. Enough for some tugal, but that felt like a waste, given the bartender's prowess. It is the sort of thing you drank at home for a third of the price. For when you just really wanted to make today into tomorrow.

“One bottle of tugal, Jim.” Gram said to the bartender.

“You said you hate that stuff.”

“I hate it when I have money. When I don’t, it becomes an attractive alternative to being sober.”

“You’re one of the few regulars that keeps me feeling like a real bartender. I don’t want you dulling your senses with that shit.” He turned to a slumped-over man still grasping a bottle of it, “No offense, mate.”

“Eh?” The semi-conscious man replied.

“How about this,” Jim said, “I’ll let you try some new cocktails I’ve been working on.”

“Ahh ya spot me too often. As much as I’m tempted, I think I’ll just have the tugal.”

The bartender began mixing a cocktail. “Here ya go.”

“Thanks.” He took a sip. The balance of flavors was overall good but a bit too fruity for his taste. The botanicals remained crisp and floral but not overly so. Clearly, this wasn’t made with the normal house gin. “Went top shelf, did ya?”

“How do you like it?” Jim did have some better liquors, usually reserved for the tourists slumming it as an adventure or trying to pick up copper girls, but occasionally he’d mix some for him. Wasn’t all that necessary. For cleaner drinks, sure, it made a big difference, but Jim was able to turn bottom shelf hooch into something complex, and more importantly, for his typical clientele, drinkable.

“Can I get a dash or two of bitters in this? I think for normal clientele, this would be good, just reads a bit one dimensional.”

Chuckling, Jim added a few drops, “Bitter or strong as always?”

“Preferably both.” Gram said with a smile taking a sip. *Better*, he thought.

A girl sat next to him, relatively dolled up. There were plenty of empty places at the bar, so he knew where this was going. Gram kept his eyes focused on his drink.

“So, what’ll you be having next?” She asked.

“Negroni if the bartender finds that agreeable.” Gram pointed at the bartender. “This guy right here, won’t find a better mixer of spirits in the lowlands.” It helped, of course, that Jim was dialed into Gram’s pallet.

“That’s what I’ll try then. Jim, two negronis.”

“Ahh, so this isn’t your first time here.”

“Nah, you’re right about Jim though, don’t think anywhere else down here has a place that serves anything other than glorified horse tranquilizers, but still, I think he’s even better when he uses the proper stuff.” Turning to the bartender, “Jim, make those two with the good stuff. To be honest this isn’t the first time I saw you here, but given you always have company, I’ve never had the opportunity to chat.”

“Yeah, well ya know, bad form to drink alone.” Not that it ever stopped him.

“Neeshka.” She extended her hand.

“Gram, nice to meet you,” He said, shaking her hand.

“I don’t live down here, got myself a little place in the midlands, but gotta be down here most days for work.” *Well, doesn’t that just make you special.*

“So why not drink a little closer to home?”

“Can’t beat the lowlands on prices, and it isn’t like we got better bartenders in the midlands. Anyway, a sober carriage ride is dreadfully boring.”

“Lucky I’ve got a short commute then.” The negronis arrived, Gram took a big swig, Jim knew to give Gram less sweet vermouth.

“You ever been to the midlands?”

“Once or twice.”

“Ever think of moving there?”

“Not particularly. I like to keep my carriage rides from the bar short to the point of walking.”

“This might be a bit odd, but I work for Atlas. You know we’ve got a few plants down here.” Gram hated it when mid-managers used words like ‘we,’ as if they owned a damn thing.

Before she could finish, Gram said, “Happy enough at Crius, thanks.” It wasn’t his first time being headhunted.

“Oh, come on, I could get you something better than whatever you’re doing there.”

“Sorry, got my current boss just the way I like ‘im. Getting used to a new one would be like trading a trained dog for a wolfhound. Might be bigger, but why risk it?”

“It would also be closer to me.” She said with a coquettish flourish.

That she was attractive, there was no doubt. A shot of electricity ran down Gram’s spine. “Like I said, I’m fine.” He poured cold water on his imagination, fun now, hollow later.

She leaned in to whisper in his ear, “By the way, Gram,” She said in a sultry voice.

“Yeah?”

“You’ve got a big grease smudge across your forehead.” She gave him a peck on the cheek and then walked out, leaving her business card and more than enough coin for the two drinks. Jim looked at him and shrugged.

“Another, Jim.” Gram said, shredding the card.

Gram hadn’t exactly kept track of how many deep he was, but he was starting to feel the warmth spread through him, his mood lightening. This was pretty close to his optimal level, but maybe one more wouldn’t hurt. Each drink carried with it just enough judgment-altering ability to justify the next.

“The toffs ‘ere are all under control by aliens!” Gram overheard, “Tha’s why we don’t move

forward with all these big ships we build. We're just a factory for 'em." Gram took a larger sip. It was none of his business what sort of nonsense people believed.

The man continued though, it seemed like there was some correlation between how little people knew and how loud they felt comfortable talking. It was a bad idea, he knew it was, but he couldn't help himself. He got up and walked to the table clearing his throat. "Well, actually, science fiction aside, space travel has natural limits. Perfectly explainable without little green men." He was going to need another drink soon and a cigarette. His brain was itching.

The man looked up at Gram, "First off, they're grey, second off, you really believe that it requires a thousand men just to send one toff to a space station?"

Gram lit a cigarette "Yeah, at least that, 'specially since we're stuck using vacuum tubes leaving terra firma. But regardless, the physics are pretty simple. You need a fuckton of energy to send anything into space. Not to mention that since toffs don't like blowin' up, things have to be machined with precision, not just throwing some hydrogen into a tube of pig iron. They have to be precise enough to intercept the space station perfectly, and if they are directly going to the moonbase, it's a damn sight harder."

"Yeah, well, what about them asteroid miners? They go up to the base, an' then ya never see them again. Part of the alien slave force!"

"Humans have plenty use for slaves," Gram said. "Ya have any idea how long it takes to get to a valuable asteroid? Bloomin' years. They just send the stuff they mine back here usin' unmanned ships. There's a reason the goldies don't just go out there themselves. A reason it's mostly peace workers despite the very high and entirely hypothetical salary. Space is just a big empty depressing void with the very occasional cold rock to break up the monotony. Our best ships can go to mars in a few weeks, but not a lot to see other than red dirt and nowhere to go. Just a sealed-off enclosure where you drink your own recycled piss.

But then miners aren't exactly flying first class. Those mining crews go up with the equipment, moving that lug at any reasonable speed just doesn't make sense to the corps, energy scales exponentially as does the impact of space dust."

The man chortled, "Sure do know a lot of fancy words. My guess is you're one of them, a stone speaker. I'll tell you what's really going on" *This should be good.* Gram thought, a smile cocking up on the left side of his mouth.

"So," the man said, "'bout a century or two ago, what happened?"

"The birth of quantum computing destroyed the financial system and eventually computers?"

"Ha! Ya even believe that one, how's more computing gonna lead to less? Use your head." *Well, without encryption, it is sorta hard to do anything of substance on one.* "An' then conveniently they say that's around when the designs of the JOLTs came up, and what did we stop doing?"

“Using solid-state technology?” Gram said, knowing he would be ‘corrected.’

“We discarded our silicone, used to be every human alive was said to carry silicone with them, and now? Not a one.”

“Silicone is useful for making circuit boards, which aren’t useful if all the circuits constantly fry.”

“It’s more than that. Silicon resists. It’s got properties that resist *them*.”

“And who exactly is them?” Gram asked. Everyone around them was listening intently.

“The aliens, o’ course. They are the ones who gave us the plans for JOLTs and the rest to make us stop carrying silicone around. Our ancestors knew the properties of the stuff. Ask yourself, we got plenty of rocks on earth, diamonds, and the like. Why do the golds covet the ones from space? You talked about how space is all difficulties. Why not just take the ones from here?”

“Because when you get rich enough, waste is the whole bloody point of buyin’ something. Showin’ off how many aurens you can sink into something totally useless is their game. No mystery there mate, just waste fer the sake of bloody waste.”

“If that’s the case, then why not ‘waste’ a little more on us coppers? Why, space gems?” *Because fancy space rocks give you status and treating workers well doesn’t.* “Nah, everyone in this bar knows how miserly those blokes are, yet don’t bat an eye spending the equivalent of five lifetimes of our toil to buy a new necklace. I’ll tell ya why. Those stones ain’t natural. They send out an energy field that controls them. As for us, it makes us submit, makes it so we can’t think clear. Think about it, you see a goldy without that stuff? The higher up, the more they wear. It links them to the aliens. Each gem is quantum entangled to the homeworld.”

“Then wouldn’t anyone have detected such fields?”

“Nah, they affect the quantum state of your mind. They operate on a different frequency than usual, interfacing with the microtubules.” *More gibberish.* “But,” the man said, reaching into his pocket, pulling out a handful of necklaces. He revealed that under his shirt to show he was wearing one. “These are natural silicon crystals. They prevent the field from getting to you.” *Abh, that’s the game.*

“You can’t just use the word quantum in front of something to make it true. I can’t even counter because what you just said was exactly nonsense. Look, it’s easy enough to understand the state of things. King took over, gave some blokes privilege. Wealth an’ power an’ tech concentrated, and we spend our time lettin’ them play rocket man.”

“Ha, and who do you think the King is? Some immortal, unaging entity that no one ever sees that popped up right after the calamity? Clearly an alien! He doesn’t even bother to have a name.” *Okay, that is the most plausible thing he has said so far.* “The class system, they said they were doing tests, but what they were really testing was the effect of the stones. Those the stones could control became the goldies, those the stones could influence more weakly the silvers, an’ the rest of us, those it just calmed to become nice

compliant worker bees are us coppers. Think about how you feel when one of them approaches you. That's the effect of the gems they wear. But with these," he said, grabbing the necklaces, "You can regain control."

People had entirely crowded around the table at this point, "How much? Can I buy one?" Gram knew it would end this way. He slid off his left glove and stuck his hand in his coat pocket, counting the wires.

"Well, that's the thing," The man said, "hard to find this stuff, these crystals come all the way across the sea from the federation, one of the only places left on earth, not under their control. If you put it on, you'll start seeing the truth. You might not be ready for it."

"I am! How much?" One man yelled. He didn't look ready for much.

"Can't do less than 20 pennies each."

Gram's preparations complete, he slid his left glove back on. He laughed loudly, and the crowd turned their attention back to him. They wouldn't listen to reason. He had given them that chance. "Any of you folk ever see me with my gloves off?"

He was a regular, and he had the habit of never taking his gloves off in front of others. This was about to pay off. The patrons looked at each other and shook their heads.

Gram wryly shook his head. "I'll give it to him. He did get some stuff right, about the toffs having energy fields. It isn't the gems they use, though. Think about it, the toffs with the most gems are the women. Are they the ones that make you feel all weak in the knees? And those hunks of rock aren't going to do much, see silicon of old was very pure, that stuff he's hawking is mostly crud. Not that it matters, it wasn't the silicon anyway. It was the circuits."

"Circuits?" Someone in the crowd asked.

"Yeah, electricity travels in all kinds of loops. Actually the King had all his stuff in this thing called a Faraday cage. Faraday cage is basically where you got a bunch of metal loops that trap the waves from coming in" Gram was merely guessing that the King had used a Faraday cage to maintain and access so much knowledge from the old world. Still, it wasn't like anyone there could correct him if he was wrong. He took off his left glove displaying numerous wires wrapped around his fingers. "See, the way I avoid the mind control fields is my hand absorbs them, got a big one around my chest as well, but I'm not gonna take that off. Each wire is twisted into a Mobius, which is like a never-ending spiral that catches the fields dead."

"Mobius? Fuck's that?" one man with a glass eye said.

"Well, you see, a Mobius is a loop that twists on itself, so traveling on the surface will lead you to go forward infinitely." That is what a Mobius was, but it had absolutely nothing to do with Faraday cages. The thing about people is the more fancy terms you throw at them, the more liable they are to believe

you. The further from understanding the more useful, which was why every charlatan used the word quantum. That was a little too cheap for Gram's taste.

"So that's the same tech as the King?"

"One and the same. I gotta keep them hidden, though, or else the goldies will catch wise. I wear a whole suite, but even one can boost confidence. Here stand up and try it on." He took one of the improvised wire rings off and handed it to the man sitting on his right.

"Can you feel that?" Gram asked, "You can stand a little straighter, breathe a little easier, your mood is a bit lighter, the confidence flowing through you now that some of the pacifying waves are being caught."

"I can! It's incredible, like seein' in color for the first time!"

The nut job was sitting jaw clenched, fiddling with his necklaces.

"Now try on one of those necklaces. See if that does anything." Gram said, then turning to the inferior conman, "if that is alright with you, of course."

The man nodded, and the rube to his right tried it on.

"Nuthin', at least not like the ring."

Gram smiled to himself. He was still surprised every time just how suggestible people were. He turned to the conman. "Well, I applaud ya for noticing the waves around you, but that is just half the battle, I'm afraid." Then turning to the group, "look, I normally wouldn't tell anyone this stuff. Some of you know me, now you can understand me a bit more, why I know so much." It was either that or the fact he actually read books. He knew which theory they would find more appealing. "I wear one on each finger, but really you get the most outta the first one." Turning to his right, "but still, can I have my ring of power back?"

The man held his ringed hand to his chest and looked at Gram sheepishly. "Can I buy it off, ya?"

Gram paused and did his best to look pensive. "I suppose I could part with a few. These bastards are hard to make though, I'll have to limit it to one per. Otherwise, you might get wave decompression sickness, an' that's not pretty, let me tell you. Plus, with just one, you wouldn't need to hide it."

"How much?" The man who was the current wielder of the 'ring of power' asked.

Gram gave a pained look, "Lowest I could possibly go is 30 copper, and I'm serious you can't tell anyone about this."

The assembled group searched through their pockets, and soon, there was the sweet sound of coin clinking down on the table. The rock salesman sat mute, arms crossed.

Gram had a conviction. That conviction was that if someone was going to profit off of ignorance, it might as well be someone who actually knows the truth. He counted the coins and dispensed the 'rings of power' to his happy customers, each talking excitedly, no doubt increasing the placebo.

He clanked the night's tab down on the counter. "Here you are, Jim, in full." Leftover jangling in his pouch was a little more than a week's wages. Not a bad night, but he had to get up early in the morning. It was time to head out.

"Hey," The crystal kook said.

"Ya?"

"Do you have one more you could spare?"

Gram smiled. It turned out to be a good thing that Marco hadn't shown. He probably would have ruined everything.

Gram's parents' house was only a twenty or so minute walk from the bar. The main street was lined with ladies of the night, hustlers, and people crouching in the roadside cooking food off improvised cinder block stoves. He used a hard-earned copper to pick up a meat skewer. What was precisely in that meat was a matter of great debate. At the price, it was unlikely pure lamb as was advertised. What was certain was that the spicy greasiness hit the spot after a night of drinking. The majority of gas lamps had long fallen into a state of disrepair. The flickering light that illuminated the street instead came from cooking fires and hawkers' lanterns. All these little operations would evaporate in the day only to coalesce once again when the bobbies left with the setting sun. Gram stumbled forward, finishing the skewer. It was time to leave the relative safety to enter the shadowy side streets.

Gram heard the unmistakable whimpers of a cowering boy coming from a nearby alley. He peeked his head in, seeing at first the dim silhouette of a corpulent man. The heel of the man's overstuffed palm pressed against the brick wall. He looked silver, no doubt on safari, looking for some pennies to shine. Gram raised his fist and saw it overlap with its double. He closed one eye, and it turned back into a singular fist. That ruled out a frontal assault. The man was likely armed anyway. Normally he preferred to talk things out, but silvers had too much insecurity stuffing their ears.

The silver kicked the boy. "Filthy lowie street trash." He kicked the boy again. "You dare steal from me?"

The boy was sobbing, "No sir, it's just dark, bumped into you is all. Promise."

Gram took a deep breath, the kind one does before entering a freezing cold shower. *Fuck*. As the silver readied another kick, Gram stumbled into him, knocking them both down.

Gram stumbled to his feet. "So sorry, sir. I just had a bit to drink, and it's dark. So sorry, sir." Gram made a show of patting the dust from the man's coat.

The silver gave Gram a strong backhand knocking him into the brick wall. "Get your filthy hands off me, you stupid oaf!"

Gram put his head down. "Sorry, sir."

The silver hit him again, this time in the stomach, winding him. With a hard blow to the back, Gram hit the floor. Gasping with dust, he looked at the place the kid had been. It was empty. He smiled to himself. Then he received a kick to the stomach. "These warrens are bad enough without having you thieving rats crawling out of every corner."

"Sorry, sir," Gram coughed. "I swear I've got money. Don't need yours."

The silver crossed his arms. "Oh yeah? How much? Enough to clean my clothes?" He gestured at his slightly dusty coat. "I think not."

Gram groaned pathetically. "Yes, just stop, please stop."

Another blow to the stomach, Gram curled into the fetal position. "You'll be lucky enough if I don't report you." The man put his boot on Gram's side.

Gram laid there coughing and groaning. "Please sir, please, I got the money."

The man pushed with his heel turning Gram on his back. "No use laying around all night then, up with you. Let's see what you have."

Gram achingly staggered to his feet, the taste of blood on his tongue. He presented the man with his coin purse.

The man weighed it in his hand. "Hmm, perhaps worth even a few denarii. It's a pittance, but I suppose I'll be merciful this time and accept." The man dropped the bag in his left coat pocket. "Just watch where you are going in the future, trash." He shoulder-checked Gram as he walked past. Gram put up no resistance and was pushed against the wall. Gram slid down, still gasping.

Well, that hurt more than expected. Gram touched his side, wincing. In the morning, there would just be bruises, deep purple bruises. He's had worse.

"You okay, mister?" The boy whispered, slinking back onto the scene.

Gram coughed beating the footprint out of his jacket, "Peachy, just peachy. You?"

"Your daft, aren't you? Ya know I was tryin' to steal from him."

"Come over here," Gram said, gesturing in the direction of the voice.

The boy hesitantly approached. Gram gestured for him to come even closer.

Gram reached behind the boy's ear. "You got something behind your ear." As Gram retracted his hand from the boy's ear, he moved the palmed denarius to his index finger and thumb, smiling at the boy. "You gotta work on that technique of yours, or it'll get you killed. Here take it." He pressed the coin into the boy's hand. "Your cut for distracting him. Now let's get the hell out of here before that fat toff gets wise."

The purse was heavy with coin, not as stuffed as that silver would like people to think but still far more weighty than Gram's had been.

IV The Hawk

It won't be long now. Malcolm picked up the empty gun. Based on the purchase records, his quarry should have two more left, perhaps a third if he picked up a black market surprise. The man's groupings were poor, firing wildly as he ran. When it came to bullets, it was quality over quantity. You only needed one. Malcolm followed after the man's frenetic pace with a brisk, determined stride. He had memorized the layout of these streets in preparation. The quarry would be out of room soon. One wrong turn more, and the man would be cornered. The armored boots the man wore might protect his feet, but they also broadcast his location. Not that Malcolm needed it. The man had taken another right, wrong move.

There he was, after a year, Jacob Booling. Finding his location and getting him to trap himself had been simpler than Malcolm had hoped, but perhaps the cornered prey would at least manage a decent fight. Malcolm methodically buttoned his spidersilk coat before peering around the corner into the alley. The man was standing head to toe in heavy armor, gun in each hand pointed directly forward. He must have felt protected in his armor as he did not even bother to use the dumpster in the back right corner as cover. Upon seeing the flash of Malcolm, he fired, striking nothing but wall. The armor was good, but not that good. An armor-piercing round would go right through, but why rush things? Malcolm counted to three in his head and then moved out of cover, rolling a smoke grenade into the alley. Booling's eyes would be burning, but not overly so. He would seek cover behind the dumpster so he could remove his helmet and wipe his eyes. He would keep watch from the side of the dumpster, waiting to take more pot shots. Malcolm silently climbed up a maintenance ladder on an adjoining building and crept on the rooftops until he was behind and on top of the unaware man.

The wind whistled through the tenements, it had already dispersed most of the chemical smoke. Jumping down, Malcolm kicked his prey in the back. He used the back wall to brace himself from the Newtonian eventualities. The man's unarmored head hit the dumpster, and he fell clumsily forward onto the ground. Kicking the guns away from the Booling, Malcolm tried to remember exactly how much the contract had cost him. Now that he was closer, he could clearly see his panting quarry was practically squeezed into his body armor. Either he bought it second hand or before he had gorged himself.

"Up," Malcolm commanded.

His prey was sweating profusely, panting while making noises of submissive complaint. He got on his knees, his back towards Malcolm. He moved his right arm to the area around his waist. He could be readjusting, or it could be a weapon. Malcolm's moved his gloved right hand and grabbed the opposite sleeve of his coat. As the man spun around, his hand was gracefully separated by his arm's own momentum. The hand landed a few feet away from him, still clasping the gun. Malcolm let go, the translucent monofilament cable returned to the sleeve of his spidersilk coat. The gun was a single shot 50 caliber black market special, not a bad play. No accuracy, but enough firepower to pierce Malcolm's

defenses. The man screamed in pain. It was loud and unpleasant. Malcolm observed him coolly.

His screams had subsided to whimpers.

“Face me,” Malcolm commanded. The man slowly and reluctantly shifted his knees until he was face to face with the hunter.

“Do you have any last words?” Malcolm asked sternly.

“Please don’t...” The man pleaded. Sitting there on his knees in the dirt, holding the stump where his right hand had been with his left. Malcolm could make out his own outline in the man’s wet weeping eyes. *Disgusting*. He raised Esmerlda, his revolver.

Bang.

It only takes one.

Malcolm holstered his gun. The alley smelt of gun smoke and warm leather mingled with the metallic tang of freshly split blood.

Malcolm turned away from the mass decaying organic tissue. He removed a monogrammed handkerchief wiping away the errant blood splatter and dropping it on the ground.

Malcolm looked up at the moon giving a rueful laugh, his black Paradisian oxfords kicking up dust; his off-white spidersilk overcoat trailed behind him. Garish displays were one thing. He hated painted nobles. But quality, quality was something very different. He would kill for a cigarette after all that. His brain fuzzed with annoyance, but he quit a week ago.

The night was still sedate. Perhaps this time he had avoided his own hunters. He sighed in relief, knowing at the same time it would also somewhat defeat the purpose of this mediocre hunt. Edgeworth must be losing his touch if he hadn’t shown up on the scene yet with a mob of fans. Still it just meant the author would barge into his office for the details. Not that the man really needed them. As the hunts became more and more anemic the man had begun weaving his tales using narrative embellishment more as cloth than glue.

As he walked to the Bureau of Contracts and Acquisitions, confident he would not be bothered he took out Esmerlda dropping the remaining ammo into his pocket and taking out a presoaked burr brush and polishing cloth. To a true hunter, his gun was more than a mere tool. Most modern hunters left maintenance to their servants, barely knowing anything about their weapons. Malcolm had designed Esmeralda himself and had her forged by the best gunsmith of the age. He looked upon her, an ebony grip, silver-plated steel barrel with an intricate ML carved in flowing floral script, and at the end of the barrel, an emerald sight. Such a revolver deserved better quarry. He gently holstered the freshly cleaned revolver placing the cleaning kit back in his pocket.

The last three or so contracts he had bought blew through almost all their money early, fattening themselves up, fully prepared to be slaughtered. Putting up a lackluster defense, some body armor, a few

guns, maybe a trap of two if they were really clever. He hadn't had to face so much as a skilled mercenary in years. Any sense of thrill had abandoned him. It was all just an extravagant waste of money. But then, for a man of his position extravagant wastes of money were expected. It was just another cost of doing business.

"Come on!" Malcolm heard in the distance, "Everyone knows you are all-goers, shiny little penny like you, just give me the price, but mind not to cheat me on the fare."

"I told ya, mister, I got a beau an' evernthin' jus' please leave me alone." A female voice protested. An all too common sight in the midlands. As Malcolm approached, his suspicions were confirmed. A copper ingénue coquettishly ornamented by her employer was handing out flyers. The man was silver, his clothes a colorful hodgepodge attempting at the gaudiness of a gold but with material so coarse a blind man could easily tell the difference.

Malcolm's gloved hand padded the man's shoulder firmly.

"Just who in the hell do you think..."

Malcolm said nothing, merely letting his eyes shift into a cloudy storm.

"Oh umm...sorry, is there something I can help you with, sir?"

Malcolm thought about an old primatology book he had read about baboons. Specifically about how mid-ranked baboons would beat and terrorize those lower in the hierarchy but cower if they drew the attention of a male higher ranking than them.

"I was just thinking what a lovely vista this might be without you to impede it," Malcolm said.

"Yes, sir..." said the mid-ranked primate, looking a little bewildered as he moved aside on the wide and relatively empty road.

A man not well-versed in subtext. Malcolm thought, looking at the man coldly.

With a pained swallow that seemed to contain all of his pride, the pragmatically pliant primate said, "Yes...yes, sir." He hesitated at first and then, with haste, moved out of Malcolm's sight.

The predator defanged in front of the girl; her face became filled with a heady mix of emotions, gratitude, confusion, and fear. But Malcolm did not deign to give her a second glance. Altruism was not a vice Malcolm possessed. He had no interest in collecting strays.

Turning in the hunt, he reported the location for the cleanup crew to do its job and perused the contracts on offer. Almost all of them were either pitiful specimens, less promising than the mark he had just so easily polished off, or no-fight contracts. His reputation wouldn't be in danger anytime soon, he could wait, focusing on his expansion plans.

Sometimes a contract would be worth it, would energize Malcolm to slog through the tedium of life for a few weeks. One contract he always remembered had taken him over a month to complete. The

mark had been hiding in a small fishing village, changed his appearance, even gotten himself a local wife. Malcolm tracked his ID to a hub city near the ocean and managed to follow leads from there to track him to the village. Being a fisherman was a clever turn since they were not required to register. He knew he had the right place, but finding him would be like finding a needle in a haystack—that is, it would have been had it not been for the fact that his ID was used in the hub city to load up on weapons. He simply had to do reconnaissance to find out who was too well-armed for a simple fisherman. It is relatively easy to find a needle in a haystack with a metal detector. The irony of being given away by one's own defenses had not escaped Malcolm. He had wondered if it had escaped the faux fisherman but didn't get the chance to ask.

He still remembered the sense of accomplishment when he had finally reached the denouement. That had been his second contract. Since then, quite a few had instead opted for the fortress-of-goons strategy, which could be fun and made for a good tale but lacked the subtlety of tracking elusive prey.

Someone had gifted him a justice contract once. They were the worst. With thirty minutes preparation and no ability to fight back, you might as well shoot a chained and sedated animal—not that most hunters wouldn't prefer that. The market for hunting contracts was more geared towards the appearance of challenge rather than any actual challenge itself.

Malcom's own motivation behind hunting was a fastly fading echo. Yet, he persisted. He was the fabled Hawk after all and still too young to retire without murmurs. At one point, he even decided to spare a mark to experiment with how that felt. He had been told a story about providing medicine for a sick wife and education for his children. It hadn't been a good chase to begin with, and the final pull of the trigger would have just left him sad. Letting the man go didn't make him feel anything either.

His next contract simply came to him. The mark fell to his knees, having blown all the money and sought Malcolm out to beg for his life. He had heard the Hawk had become merciful. After wiping the blood splatter from his shoes, Malcolm hunted down the man he had spared. Finding him in a brothel bragging, he quickly righted his reputation and was never again tempted by mercy.

There were, of course, hunters that got off on being merciful. They would corner their prey, wait for them to beg, loudly, publicly. Then, in magnanimity, the whitehats decide to holster their guns. Maybe say some nonsense, maybe a pouch of coin. One thing was sure: if the mark had a pretty sister, they would probably pay her a visit after the fanfare died down.

If they actually wanted to help, they could just give the money for a contract away to some slum orphanage. A lot less of that would be spent on booze and whoring—but no, whitehats show mercy in the most impractical and public way possible. Anyone who considered the matter for more than a few seconds would realize this, which meant precious few did.

As he left the Bureau he saw his own hunters, the swarm of fans chittering excitedly. Edgeworth

was in the center, wry smile and notebook in hand. Ready to pen up the latest issue of *The Adventures of The Hawk*. Besides the author he noticed a young woman in a fine dress somewhat dirty and wrinkled from an obvious scuffle. She was waving at him with a bloody handkerchief the initials ML on the edge. Likely she would want her grim trophy autographed.

Altruism wasn't a vice of Malcolm's because Malcolm had no interest in playing pretend that humans were anything other than what they were.

V Gram

Gram's consciousness slowly dawned, covered as it was in a woolen cloud of a mid-grade hangover. His hand brushing against the clutter left on his bed. Seeing the fetid light creep in through his window, he groaned as he sat up. The pain reminded him of the previous night's injuries. The sun was too high, his improvised alarm clock had failed again—he probably needed to tinker with the escapement.

“Ma! Why didn't you wake me up? I'll be late fer my go' damn toil!”

“Sorry, love, I just heard you come in so late an' I thought...”

“Ah, forget it, Ma.” Gram said.

She saw him as he was throwing on his shirt. “What happened to you?”

Gram hastily pulled his shirt down to cover the prominent purple and yellow discolorations.

“Nuthin ma, don't worry about it, I gotta get going.”

“You and Marco always getting into scraps, don't you think you are a bit old for that now? Let me put some cream on it.”

“Ma, it's fine. I'm a grown ass man I can handle myself.”

“Well, I'm just worried about you son. Can't a mother do that?”

Shit, going to be late again. He wouldn't get fired. He was no replaceable cog in the big machine that was Crius Aeronautics. Without him, their costs would skyrocket. Well, not skyrocket per se, but at the very least, go up enough so that the mid-level section manager would have to eat a plate of crow in front of an upper-level section manager. The mid-level section manager hated crow.

Gram was almost dressed. He tried to do something with his wavy locks of hair but no matter what he attempted, his hair was clearly set on rebellion.

His mom stood at the doorway. “Hun it's cold outside, don't forget your coat. Do you need a scarf? If you wait a bit, I can pack you a lunch.”

“We've been over this a thousand times. I got it.” Gram gave his mother a kiss on the cheek. “Luv ya ma.”

She gave him a hug, and he winced. Maybe he had cracked a rib after all. “Love you too, son.”

Gram threw on his dark green wool coat, buttoned it up all the way so that the collar would shield his neck from the wind, put on his leather gloves, and grabbed a green apple as he rushed out the door. He really had to save up enough for his own place soon.

If he was ambitious, he could probably do as Neeshka had suggested, move out of his parent's place, maybe out of the lowlands entirely and into one of those nouveau middle-class digs in the midlands, a whole rung or two up on the social ladder. But he didn't want to be around those types, pretend he wasn't copper, he didn't want the ersatz feeling of community, everyone smiling, knives behind their backs.

He enjoyed his work if only from a detached intellectual perspective, working terrestrially so that others might escape terra. Even if it was just a bunch of toffs having a holiday on the moon.

For a long time, people had been sold a bill of goods: that our future lies in space travel, that it would somehow liberate the human race. Free us from the shackles of this infinitesimal blue ball powered by a mediocre star drifting inconsequentially through an incomprehensibly wider galaxy that was itself not but a grain of sand in the big picture of the universe itself.

Pull the other one.

Space was, for all intents and purposes, basically an infinite vacuum featuring a few inhospitable rocks. No matter how much humans screw up Terra Firma proper, anything we find in space will remain a much worse option. Pretty obvious when you think about it: While tech might advance, and advance it has—aside from the few times humans found it in their best interest to turn swathes of land into shimmering green glass circled by ruined buildings and shadows; or those lovely times some inventor came up with a device whose sole utility ended up lying in effectively uninventing other, decidedly more useful devices. It just isn't possible to square the circle that doing anything outside mankind's ancestral home costs a lot of energy. Coming back costs a lot as well. Doing both, well, now that is really going to cost. Not to mention making a place habitable for the squishy little water sacks called humans.

Humans with their incessant need to breathe oxygen instead of sulfur, to have air pressure to keep our insides inside, to not have it be -200 Celsius or 200 Celsius but instead to remain within 0-45 Celsius—a rather pedestrian range when viewed on a galactic scale. Space travel was likely perfected, but it would never be perfect. What was once the hope of some starry-eyed dreamers and scientists had now become almost completely co-opted by the rich. Just another way to show off their wealth. Asteroid mining? It might never be cost-effective in terms of raw materials, but it did allow you to slap the word space in front of things and charge a hundred times more.

All the mining and machining necessarily meant that everyone and their brother now worked in a space-related industry. All so yuppies could drink champagne on a space station.

Human progress sure is a hell of a thing.

Slipping into the workroom, he looked around at all the people present, noting Marco still wasn't around.

"Where's that big lug?" He asked before anyone could comment on his later-than-usual arrival.

"Your chum didn't tell you?" Tom asked, clearly enjoying giving Gram the news. "He took a little visit to the contracts and acquisitions, came out with a mint. While we're here toiling, he's probably knee-deep in steak and whores. Till the timer runs out and some hunter puts a bullet in his brains anyway." Tom laughed and gave a playful jab into Grams bruised ribs. It was a cruel laugh, but then,

Tom was just that kind of guy.

Gram's work went slowly that day, his hands taking numerous pauses, his eyes glazing over during diagnostics. Tom had even been forced to chip in a little. He grumbled about it to no end.

It was quiet now. Gram could hear the delayed echo of his footsteps as he made his way through the cavernous rocket assembly room. The dolphins were scurrying around in the dim red light. The nighttime supervisor would be passed out drunk already. Dolphins rarely made errors. If they did, the morning crew would handle it. Walking into the vertical assembly silo, he craned his neck up to see the almost completed rocket. There was a lot of Gram's sweat in that rocket. He had personally touched just about every wire in the second and third stages. Officially he was a grunt and paid like one. Unofficially he acted as one of their primary diagnosticians. At least it was more interesting than what he did when he got started. He walked behind the rocket. In its shadow was a ladder, one that went all the way to the roof. Gram grabbed the highest rung of the ladder he could manage and swung himself up. He proceeded to skip every other rung. It was a long way up.

He sat on the roof, the permanent part that supported the rest when it folded out. It had two concrete rings, one inner and one outer. A C was formed between the rings with white rocks. It was large but not nearly large enough to be seen from space. Gram sat in his usual place towards the middle of the C, facing the upper city, next to a substantial pile of cigarettes. They were his brand, and not by coincidence. No one else ever came to the roof. It was technically off-limits.

He was sure to be alone there. Alone above the tenements, at an altitude where the miasma had thinned. His legs dangled freely over the side. He picked up one of the white rocks, throwing it at the nearby crawler crane. It responded with a deeply resonate clang. He lit a cigarette. The skyscrapers across the river dwarfed anything in the lowlands, even though the population was a mere fraction. Crius tower was a series of oblong grey circles rising in a wave. It was barely noticeable next to Atlas tower, stiff, sharp lines octagonal with bony ridges. It was the skeletal finger that had loomed over Gram's childhood. But for the last ten years, it stood in the shadow of the expanded Hyperion tower. Once a tower, now an hourglass. An impossible gravity-defying hourglass. The new addition supported apparently by little more than an extended elevator shaft. From there, it grew out, an inverted pyramid of crystal and unknown black material. Four great grey columns grew up from the ground connecting to the top, but in truth, one couldn't understand how such a massive structure would be possible without looking past the building to the hole in the sky. A tear in reality, blacker than black. The Elysian Void Bubble. As it spun in the breeze, the only evidence a distant observer had was the constantly shifting outline. When the wind picked up, it looked like an unsteady portal to an alien elsewhere. It was probably the largest advertisement in the world and the only one that was a structural necessity.

There, across the river, was where Marco probably was tonight. There, across the river, was where the man who was going to kill him was. Gram threw another rock. Marco had mentioned getting a contract the last time he got into his cups. Gram had laughed. How many times had Gram said the same? He shook his head. How was he going to get that hot head out of this one? The smoke from his cigarette rose in slow curls. His eyes fixed on the enormous structures breaking up the horizon.

He cringed at himself. *Who do you think you are? You chase wires.*

VI Marco

The restaurant was fancy, all done up in gold and red leather. The ceiling was so high you could probably fit an elephant in it. Not that the toffs would let one in. They barely even let Marco in.

Marco had never had so much real meat in his life. His stomach felt sick, but that wasn't going to stop him. He ordered another ribeye, reminding the waiter to cook the thing.

"Very good, sir." The waiter replied with a bow. His pompous face was struggling not to twist up. He might not like serving Marco, but the bloody toff lover had to at least pretend he did. The first time they handed him a steak, they barely even heated it up, the lazy bastards, but he made them do it again. Looking around, he noticed that most of the toffs hadn't stood up for themselves but pretended like they enjoyed themselves all the same. The thing about money, it doesn't matter who you are. Each penny was a little claim to power. When you've got a chest of aurens, you might as well be one of them. Working was for chumps. Selling a contract was easy money, real money without so much as having to kiss ass once. Marco took a sip of the fine wine. It was sour and bitter, leaving his mouth feeling dry. It was also very expensive. Marco concluded that it must be very good.

Ira, the girl accompanying Marco, was dressed richer than any of the goldies around. He had bought her a sparkly golden sequined dress and a fine fur to put over her shoulders. He had taken her shopping so that she would look the part, but she just wasn't used to the high life. She was shy, spending the whole time staring at her forks and comparing them to the forks the bloody toffs were using. She still didn't understand. They had money. It didn't matter what bloody fork.

"Isn't this great? And it's jus' the start," He gestured with his arm as if the whole place was his, as if the whole world was. "Ya know," Making the first real eye contact of the night with her, temporarily suspending her focus on what-fork-should-be-used-to-eat-what, "ever since we was kids you were the cutest little thing, 'ad everyone around your little finger. Little princess of the lowlands."

Ira blushed and began furiously arranging her forks. "Thanks, fer that, but ya do know how I butter my bread, right? I'm not that same little girl no more."

Marco used the largest fork available and cut into his steak. "O' course I do, but one toil's the same as another, don't mind all that. An' I still see tha' little princess, now I can treat ya like one. I gots more than enough for the two of us. Jus' quit yer toil, just like I quit mine."

Ira flipped her hair back. "Awful nice, Marco, awful nice of you an' all. But don'tcha come with a bit of an expiration date?"

Marco's face darkened. It was too early for her to bring that up. Too early. That's the problem with people, too focused in the future. That's not a proper way to enjoy life. But it didn't matter anyway he had a foolproof plan. "Dun' worry about it, luv. I gotta foolproof plan."

"Funny, everyone else who said that is proper worm food by now."

“Yeah, well, this is different!” Marco lifted the oversized fork and took a big bite out of his steak.
Was steak supposed to be so chewy?

“Yeah? How?”

“You remember Gram? He'll have one.”

VII Sapphire

Sprawled out on a couch her legs in the air, Sapphire gazed at the last remnants of daylight piercing through the stained-glass roof of the study. Lifting up a hand in the path of the light, it turned a decided yellow, moving a bit to the right, it was ruby red. Further right and her hand became cobalt blue made with real cobalt. After spending a few minutes of moving, flipping, and angling her hand in the light, she came to a sudden and inescapable conclusion. She was bored.

When asked what living in the penthouse was like, she would say, “It is nice. That way, you can have windows on the ceiling.” Or simply and more usually, “It’s nice.”

She did realize she was fairly lucky, of course, especially when she thought about the Vestal Academy or the fleeting dim scraps of memory from before she was sold to the school.

The Butler came in. “Tea or Coffee, Miss?”

“Coffee.”

“Very good, Miss.”

It had been a few years, but she still hadn’t quite got used to the whole servant thing. It wasn’t exactly like getting used to being paralyzed, lying there, unable to move. It was more like getting used to the option of being paralyzed. Still, it filled her with just a little unease. She always told herself she should at least learn the staffs’ names. Though till this point, she had always forgotten to ask. Maybe when he comes back with the coffee...What would that be like, having a job where people call you by your job? What was the general rule? You call maid maid, butler butler, bartender barkeep; but you call carpenter Carl, luthier Luther, and rocketship engineer Roger. What decides who gets a name and who doesn’t? Is it better to be a profession named person? What about kings or prime ministers? They get both their title *and* name. Well, the kings of old did anyway. But then, if you called someone maid Sally instead of Sally, that somehow seems worse than just calling her maid or Sally. If you are a Duke or something, you get your title plus the place your title gives you, like Duke of Oxenfurt. But how would that work? Maid of Upper Elysia Lomo Building Penthouse? Maid Sally of Upper Elysia Lomo Building Penthouse?

“Your coffee, Miss.” The Butler returned, presenting Sapphire with a steaming hot cup of dark rich black coffee. Extra extra bitter, the way she liked it.

“Thank you, Butler.”

As he turned to walk away, she suddenly remembered.

“Butler?”

“Yes, Miss?”

“Are any of the maids named Sally?”

The butler pushed his lips together in a way that folded his face, “No, Miss. Is there anything else

you need?”

“Damn.” Her attention turned to the steam rising from the coffee—it was spiraling a little before it disappeared. She wondered why it didn’t go straight up. This quickly became boring. She rolled a dice and got a seven. It was a good roll. She had been hoping to read more of that book.

VIII Gram

Ordering a rare ribeye and a bottle of Hermitage in his best accent, Gram tried to add an air of suaveness to mask his giddy, childlike excitement. He had never been to Upper Elysia, but Marco paid for his pass.

“I’ll ‘andle the waiter good, make sure those lazy lads actually cook the steak!” Marco said, beaming with pride.

Gram had always liked Marco, but he had always been painfully aware of one inescapable fact, Marco was a bit of an idiot.

“This isn’t butchers special ya nob, or that soy-protein simulacrum nonsense. This is a steak, from a real proper cow. Ya cook it too much, all the flavor goes out, and it becomes tough and dry. Might as well be saving a few denarii by slopping down some of Sal’s back alley special if yer gonna insist on it being incinerated.” Of course, this would be Gram’s first time actually trying steak—or proper wine for that matter—but he had read about them extensively.

“You always think y’re better th’n us, putting on airs, but yer jus’ like us. *Simulacrum*. Jus’ talk like normal folk.”

“So, ya need my help. You take me to a fancy restaurant where you proceed to pronounce every silent-fucking-t on the menu, not to mention cham-PAG-gen, then you accuse me of putting on airs?”

“Ahh, go fuck yourself. So, are you going to help me or not, king fancy pants?” Marco always knew exactly what to say to diffuse a situation.

Gram sighed and took a deep sniff of his wine. Cutting the steak perpendicular to the grain, just as the cookbooks had said, he closed out the bustling restaurant bringing all his senses to a singular focus. Taking his very first bite, he could feel the meat almost melt in his mouth, the rich savory near nuttiness melding with garlic, some thyme, and the oh-so-very-much butter. The richness of it all he cut with a sip of his Syrah—dry, acidic, and full of flavors he had yet to contextualize. This was the exact perfect moment he had dreamed of. He sniffed the wine again and took another sip, this time gently swishing the wine around in his mouth. It was astringent, leaving his tongue feeling dry, very unlike the sweet medicated aftertaste and oily mouthfeel of a slum-wine. He had read it tasted earthy with notes of black fruits and leather. He couldn’t really taste the leather, but he tried. Would it be better if he could taste the earthy leatheriness instead of the dry fruitiness? What did that even mean? It felt like a tangled ball of flavors that he wasn’t able to undo. Perhaps by the end of the bottle, he would understand it better.

Emerging from his momentary tranquility, his eyes refocused on his friend sitting in front of him. He couldn’t afford to indulge himself too much, not when Maro’s blood was picking up the tab. “So what kind of contract do I have to thank for this lovely meal with such an old friend?”

“I got meself the most expensive contract they had. An anonymous no-fight contract went fer

double some o' them. An' that way ya get the money upfront, none of that waitin' to be selected te get yer fare like getting picked fer a team in grade school—not that I'd have to worry too much about that.” He said, flexing his right bicep showing off what a prime candidate he was for slaughter.

“Ain't that just bloody splendid! I'll have you fight 'em off with pillows, I suppose. An' if you won't even know who the hunter is, you could ask the guy for fucking directions!” Gram let out a frustrated sigh, shaking his head. “For King's sake, mate.”

“Pretty sure can't use pillows either.” Marco's expression was earnest, “Not like fighting back helped blokes in the past. An' the ones that like ya to fight, them's the ones liable to keep ya held up for days, cuttin' and proddin' an' the like.” His face made a sour expression.

A standard contracted hunt was paid one year in advance for the hunted to 'prepare,' which in reality usually meant throwing off your yoke and living like a king while trying to forget that later that year, you would be gunned down for sport. There were all kinds of contracts where fighting back against the hunters was allowed to varying extents, some even with guns. Those were usually not in particularly high demand, and you didn't want to meet the hunter that did have them in demand.

As for cutting and prodding, all hunt contracts had a proviso in them forbidding torture, but in effect, there was not even the slightest incentive to enforce it. It was true no-fights—all else held equal—were more likely to go for a clean kill or turn out to just be whitehats and fuck your mom instead of killing you. But the reputation of a hunter also made a big difference on the final contract price since both parties normally got a chance to decide whether or not to sign. Anonymous contracts were too expensive, basically priced at around how much a well-known torturer would end up having to pay, which meant, of course, that Marco could look forward to a prolonged and painful death by a particularly cowardly torturer. The logic of adverse selection wasn't that complicated.

“Well, why take one to begin with?” Gram asked, knowing that Marco somehow had trusted him to get him out of the impossible situation.

“The fuck ya think? Because fuck them, that's why. Coulda' just quit, but why trade one boss fer' another? Get the most outta a year then make an exit. Better a year as a king than a life as a mouse.” Marco took a big glug of his cham-pa-gen, “But then I cooled down a bit, and thought hey! What about Gram? You always got all them daft plans buzzing about! Maybe I can have my cake an' not be murdered fer' it.”

“So glad you thought of me.” Gram took a sip of wine. There had to be a way.

“So can ya help me er not?”

Following another, even deeper sigh, Gram nodded with a grim expression, “You sure as hell aren't making it easy on me, but fine, I think I can cook something up. But you know, thinking is thirsty work.” He said, pointing to the wine list.

IX Malcolm

Malcolm watched out the window of the carriage as the gas lamps that lined the streets began to be lit, illuminating the city with cones of warm light. Upper Elysia was kept immaculate by the small army of guarantee workers in grey robes. They kept their heads low, scrubbing at masonry and picking up cigarette butts. Malcolm observed the street passively. He had a negotiation coming up. Negotiating with a bureaucrat who had the slightest bit of power was 80% ego-stroking, 10% letting them know you are on their side, and 10% seeming important enough that you being on their side will stroke their ego, with the remainder being genuine institutional concerns.

As easy as it was, nothing drained Malcolm faster, which is why he much preferred some combination of blackmailing and knowing their bosses, which also worked. The flaw in this is that getting to know their bosses was 80% ego-stroking, 10% letting them know you are on their side, and 10% seeming important enough that you being on their side will stroke their ego—and, well, there are some people for whom blackmailing is not a viable long-term stratagem.

Friendly relations with the mayor in particular always proved taxing, and this time he had a big ask, and they both knew it. According to his calculations, it would take precisely three lavish dinners, four late nights out, and listening to the story about being invited over by the Swancourt's roughly one hundred times, with various levels of drunken embellishment. Just the simulation was exhausting. He knew how to play the game but wondered exactly what others got out of these 'friendly relations.'

The annoyance buzzed in his head incessantly and he pictured losing his temper. He had the carriage driver stop in front of the tobacconist. This was no time to quit. Besides, it was that perfect chilly weather for inhaling rich, warm smoke. This marked the four hundred and sixty-third time Malcolm had quit quitting. *There is always later*, he thought, and pulled out the slender black cylinder from its wrapper, placed the gold end in his mouth, lit it with the engraved silver lighter he kept telling himself he would throw away.

When he finally arrived at his penthouse, his staff rushed to him, grabbing his outer garments, dusting them, and putting them away. He removed Esmeralda putting her in her case with one last bit of polish. "Fetch me a coffee and a cognac."

Niles, the butler, bowed shallowly. "Very good, sir. And would sir like a hot bath?"

"Yes, that would be lovely."

The Butler turned to go.

"Oh, and Niles, send someone out to get ashtrays."

"Very good, sir." The Butler said this with another slight bow. Malcolm often told them to throw away the ashtrays as a sign of his commitment to quit, but he was pretty sure at this point they just kept them in storage.

“Daaarling, is that you?” Sapphire said, her voice playful and coquettish, as she began exaggeratedly descending the stairs. “Good! I have been terribly bored.”

Malcolm eyed Sapphire giving her an unbalanced smile. “I see. That is my job, then? To amuse you?”

“Isn’t it?” She said. “So tell me, how did the hunt go, *darling?*”

He gave her a weary expression, “I need that cognac.”

“Aww your prey not worth the catching again?”

He sighed. “It has been flavorless of late.”

“You could always try hunting banana fish!”

“Esmeralda is not meant for underwater.” Though Sapphire was occasionally amusing, she possessed no ability to read a situation. Malcolm should have guessed as much when he picked her. He walked past her and began ascending the stairs towards his bath. The lights went out, and the background hum of the city was silenced. Someone had set off a JOLT, probably another teenage noble having a spot of trite rebellious fun. The infrastructure quickly reset, and the lights turned back on. He continued to make his way up the stairs.

Laying in the hot bath, he inspected his body. There was not so much as a bruise. Should he give up the hunt? Malcolm couldn’t think of another hobby that could fill the void. Business was just business. Relationships were too. The hunt had been his. Malcolm lit a cigarette and took a hungry sip of his cognac swishing it around his mouth. Cigarettes always tasted best right after quitting. Perhaps it was just the nature of joy to be ephemeral. No, that wasn’t true in the case of the hunt, they had objectively become easier, and more tedious. He could measure it just from the amount of fictionalization Edgeworth added into his accounts, that was a clear external measure it was getting worse.

What he needed was to do a better job of vetting his prey. Money was, of course no object. So long as he got that rush again. If his next hunt didn’t serve as a palate cleanser, he would hang up his gun. *Hang up my gun and do precisely what? Collect space rocks? Throw lavish parties?* The nobility were the worst gossips around, if you were not seen throwing money around you might as well be insolvent. Hunting had been acceptable, occasionally enjoyable, and by far the least wasteful in terms of auren per unit of reputation earned, especially if like Malcolm, you preferred a challenge. What was the point of power when all your options for maintaining it were distasteful?

He slid on his silk robe and went to bed. After a few minutes, he heard Sapphire’s unmistakable clomp. She had her own room with her own bed but most nights insisted on sleeping next to him. She lifted the heavy down cover and moved next to him. She claimed it was for the extra warmth, and yet her heated blanket sat in some closet with many of the other things he had bought to fulfill her transient

wishes. Perhaps not everything was business. He turned, giving her a kiss on the forehead before falling soundly asleep.

The Academy Girl

- Three years prior -

The Vestal Virgin Academy for Young Ladies stood apart from the rest of the city with its anachronistic spiraling gothic architecture, its grey masonry contrasting with some of the most sublime stained glass one could hope to see. It was built inside of the husk of some second age religious structure.

There, girls starting from a young age, are tutored and molded to be ideal partners. Elegant, always knowing what fork to use and how to dance. Learned enough to make witty-sounding conversations but not enough to question their husbands. Taught to be tolerant of all manners of behaviors their husband might exhibit. Notoriously well-groomed, able to apply makeup and select the perfect outfit to be a proper accessory to her husband. Of course, the main criterion for selection was how beautiful the girl was projected to become. Though their projections had startling accuracy, in the case that one of the products grew surprising features, they would be sanded down with cosmetic surgery. Those girls who were not selected for marriage by the time they turned twenty would instead work off their substantial debt by putting their charms to use elsewhere.

There were, of course, other such academies, but having a wife from one of them was like buying any other off-branded things—you will spend every encounter trying to explain why, logically, it is just as good or better. Even if it *is* just as good or better, deep down, you will not be able to believe it yourself. The other academies also did business with those seeking a live-in mistress, but Vestal would only sell marriage contracts—if there was one thing the headmaster knew, it was how to maintain brand image. They accepted less than 1% of applications parents submitted, but for those they did accept, they paid handsomely. Those girls selected for marriage contracts would have their station increased to that of their husbands, the only way in Elysia for a copper girl to become gold. Certainly many of the parents held this bit of trivia on their tongues as they imagined what they would do with all the money they would get for selling their daughters. This led to a whole cottage industry popping around preparing applications. Where there are bread crumbs, there are birds to peck at them.

In Malcolm's youth, he had explored and experimented in all manners of physical interactions in an attempt to produce emotion. But everything he tried had just left him feeling colder, more uncomfortable. The thought of his younger self going through those "experiments" made him vaguely nauseous. He understood the practicality of the matter—in his early thirties and having taken the helm of a company, marrying became a default expectation.

He debated marrying for connections, but that would be too draining. There would be expectations

placed on him that would not be worth the extra social capital. He had enough to easily afford a Vestal, so he thought he might as well. His butler scheduled the appointment.

An ebony carriage arrived, decked out in burgundy satin and silk, its steam engine purring with a melodic thumping rhythm. In the carriage, there was a heavy black leather binder containing a set of files on the available girls. All the pedigree information a horse breeder could hope for was in there, pictures from various angles, health checkups, and a handwritten “Letter to my future husband.” Everything was there except for price—that would be gauche. The lurch in his stomach started to make him feel as if he was making a mistake, but he calmed himself. This was his best option, aside from a few eventual rendezvous to produce an heir. He only really needed to see her on social events.

The premises of the Academy were surrounded by luscious well-groomed gardens that always smelt of spring with ancient vines that snaked up the walls. Two great mahogany doors were pushed open by servants as he walked under the archway and began to take off his gloves. “This way, sir.” An immaculately dressed escort bowed while pointing his right arm towards the grand hall, where the girls stood in a line.

Malcolm walked around them. While aesthetically polished, they were just that, polished—even graded using gemstones. Each exuded a desperate and servile energy while attempting to hold themselves as delicately as possible. While it was permitted for them to decline any gentleman, the consequence of failing in their role of attracting a suitor made this functionally unheard of. From a young age, they had been conditioned, molded by carrots and sticks, into this. Looking into their eyes, the gnawing feeling in the pit of his stomach intensified. Not human eyes, they were doll-eyes—the same passive doll-eyes his mother had.

It was permitted to take them on dates, give them a bit of a test run so long as physical interactions did not exceed a courtly kiss on the hand. But what was the point? Malcolm was sure after a lifetime with one, you would know exactly as much as you did after reading their folder with their letter written in cloying cursive script.

“Is there anyone else?” Malcolm asked, the first words he had uttered since getting in the carriage. The girls visibly collapsed but then immediately straightened themselves up, making extra effort to appear dignified, like a runway model who stumbled on a bit of carpet.

“Sir, with respect, these are all the girls we have, ages 16-19. We do have younger... but I am afraid we must insist that fruit still ripen.” The headmaster said in a regretful tone, adding, “though that is not to say some discreet mutually beneficial arrangement cannot be arrived at...” with an ignorant knowing smile.

Malcolm balled his hand into a tight fist. He was about to leave when he heard someone yelling—
“Where in the hell did you put my book?”

The headmaster's face cycled from embarrassment to rage and back again.

Malcolm turned to the source of this disturbance. In a frilly ruffled dress that didn't quite seem to suit her, with bangs that curled against her forehead, long wavy chestnut locks that reached her waist, and bright clear blue eyes, there stood a girl. She seemed immune to the awkward silence that followed in her wake.

The headmaster stamped his foot his eyes screaming do something to a nearby servant. "Young lady, your sisters are now undergoing a selection by this fine gentleman!"

"Sorry to be a bother, sir." She said, giving a cursory bow in Malcolm's general direction, then turned back to the headmaster and exclaimed, "Now where is it? I wasn't finished yet!"

Malcolm broke out in laughter. "What about her?"

"Her, sir? I am sorry, sir, but, as it might be obvious, she has been delisted for her behavior."

Delisted, that's why Malcolm didn't see her portfolio. He looked at her eyes, which bore an impatient, self-possessed expression. She impatiently shifted her face. A tiny spark of levity overtook him. "Good, I will take her."

"Sir, I must insist, she does not meet the Vestal brand!"

"Then I am all too happy to take her off your hands. I trust that will not be a problem?" Malcolm's dealt with enough men like him. To such a man, his words were not so much forceful as they were force itself.

The headmaster simply gulped and nodded his head.

"Good. Write up the contract, and I will see you are paid in full."

Arms crossed, sitting on the opposite end of the carriage on the way back, the girl named Sapphire spoke to her new husband directly for the first time. "Why choose me?"

"You are not dull."

"I see." She said, nodding her head and looking out the window.

Malcolm picked up the report on the company's attempt at an air-cooled modular nuclear reactor. It still wasn't nearly reliable enough for his tastes. It looked like their reliance on Atlas would have to continue. It was a valiant effort, but best not to throw the good money with the bad. By the time he put the report down, she was still looking out the window. It had been a long silence.

"So, what is the book?"

She turned to look at him. "What book?"

"The one you were yelling about."

"Oh, that? Nine Stories. It's an old classic."

"I will see that a copy appears in your bedroom."

X Gram

“Alright, buddy, listen to me.” Gram was almost finished with his second bottle of wine (still couldn’t taste the leather) and yet managed to speak as clearly as with the first glass. His speech, if nothing else, merely accelerated. He went over details and contingencies and counter-contingencies and counter-counter-counter-contingencies. Every time he came up with an idea, he saw its flaw, then he saw the flaw in exploiting that flaw. The more he talked, the more certain he became that such an open-ended task with so many unknowns leant itself to near-infinite branching paths. Marco’s eyes had been glazed over for most of it.

“How ja you do it?” Marco said with a pronounced slur.

“What?”

“That iron liver of yours,” Marco slurred. “Drink like a fish and lookatcha you’re a bloody twig.”

Gram finished the bottle off. “Practice, practice in all things, my friend.” Given enough excitement, Gram could stay functionally sober well past what any normal person could consider reasonable. Some people called this power of his ‘alcoholism’.

Marco’s head was hovering a few inches from the table. “Well, you should drink more then, eh? No fun having you buzz about talkin’ like that to yourself.” He hiccupped, “you gotta catch up.”

“Marco, did ya forget about why you asked me here? That blockhead of yours has a target on it.”

Marco looked up and grabbed his drink. “Ya well, you’re bein’ an awful stick about it. Relax ‘ave some fun fer fucks sake. We got plenty of time.”

Gram considered what his retort should be but then thought better of it. He stood up to find the waiter. “Let’s switch to cognac.”

By the time Gram got back, Marco’s head was resting firmly on the table. He decided to just have one anyway. Surely, Marco wouldn’t mind. Now he could enjoy himself without having to worry about Marco messing things up. A bit of drool fell from the edge of his friend’s lip and landing on the table still connected to his mouth by a loose thread. He sat there alone. Across from him, his friend was deep in Bacchus’s somnolent embrace. Slowly sipping his cognac Gram wished he felt equally peaceful. He finally had the meal he had dreamed of, read about, and yet a blanket of malaise covered him with increasing weight.

There was no way of saving his friend without losing him. The fact he thought he could save him, actually believed it made him cringe a little. Could he really outsmart a hunter with all the resources that entailed? No one survived hunts. He had ideas, but they were just that. Was he fooling himself? As he took another sip of cognac, he felt a stone in the pit of his stomach. Macro’s blood bought the meal, and the oaf really believed he, Gram could save him. He talked a big game but he was no Slate. This wasn’t a game as much as he tried to keep it in the realm of the intellectual exercise. Looking at his slumbering

friend he imagined, for the first time, truly, him dead in a year with the fault squarely in Gram's lap.

Guilt started to creep into the mix of emotions. The lummoX had embarrassed him at this fancy restaurant, but why should he care what a bunch of toffs think? He hated them. Gram looked around at them. All those toffs spent more time on social cues than their food or wine. In no way did they appreciate any of what they had, nor did they deserve it. A din of banal chatter was all they could produce. He looked up at the gilded ceiling and let the environment fuzz. His heart was beating so hard it felt like it was drowning him in blood. Blood forcefully inflating Gram's veins near to the point of bursting. The feeling was that of preparation to run from a lion, but with the clear and cruel knowledge that there was, in fact, no lion. The faces, everywhere the people masked menace behind false smiles and forced laughs. He felt as if his mind was detaching from his body. This wasn't the first time Gram felt like this, but why now? He took another sip of the woody-fiery cognac in an attempt to soothe his nerves. It burned numbly as he swallowed. Gram was a fraud. It was all fraud and he had to go.

On the trip back Gram's panic attack had subsided though he still felt some residual shame which tempered his annoyance of wrangling Marco home. He knocked on the door, and Luna answered. She was Marco's cousin, short with a cute little button nose and a sharp jawline, a mix of facial features that managed to somehow make her appearance both soft and angular. Her eyes lit up upon opening the door, then she scanned over to see her semi-conscious cousin who Gram leaned up against the wall.

"Oh Marco, ever since he got the contract, he gets like this every night. How much did he drink?"

"Eh...not so much. He must just be tired."

"Then I'll make some coffee for you two."

"Ummm, I really should be headin' home."

She gave him a warm hug, Gram stiffened up. "It's been a long time, just one?" Her voice was a silky playful contralto.

"I suppose just the one couldn't hurt?"

He dropped Marco off on the couch to a billow of dust. She brought out a French press and started grinding the coffee. Dull confusing conflicting fuzz went through his head restricting his responses to single syllables. But then he noticed the coffee—the grains were much too fine for a French press. The water had already boiled and was taken off the stove a while ago, and she was still grinding the beans as the water cooled. Gram was about to start giving advice. The grinder and press were new, obviously for guests. They were hard to come by in the lowlands, where coffee typically started out as brown pellets from a silver can and finished its journey of becoming coffee if you could call it coffee with the simple pour of a kettle. There was a lot of pride in that coffee. He held his tongue, the mistakes might cancel out anyway.

“How is the coffee?”

“Very nice.” Every instinct in his body told him to gently explain what she did wrong, but he suppressed it and smiled instead. After all, it wasn’t so bad, really.

He caught himself staring into her soft brown eyes. She was smiling gently into his, delicately pushing her hair behind her ear. A bad idea, a very bad idea. Things rarely worked out in the end and with Marco it wasn’t like he could just avoid her. If Marco lasted that long. Gram felt the punch of guilt from that last thought.

Gram finished the coffee in a gulp. “Let me carry him to the bed.”

She laughed, “at least the couch is an upgrade from the floor.”

Plopped heavily into the bed Marco groaned. Gram gently pulled the covers over his friend.

“You really are a dumbass Marco”

“Fuck you Gram” Marco mumbled half consciously.

“Love you too buddy.” Gram messed Marco’s hair before leaving.

On the walk home his head crowded with thoughts until it went blank and he felt numb. He was almost entirely sober by this point, he lit a cigarette, maybe just half a bottle of tical and he could get some sleep. It was late and he had work tomorrow. He carefully opened the front door, closing it without a sound.

“Alex, is that you, hon?”

“Dammit, ma! For the last time, the name is Gram.”

The Great Uninventions

What are the prime factors of the number

40290244436087233475164451928081894728872979728449193944066781740876900915295229934416
52278453905702637716052509821382938153046395969188607671858225369520?

That is a question whose answer was solved to great and horrible consequences.

In the old days, there was a time when technology flowed freely throughout the classes. Rich and poor would spend hours with their faces glued to various illuminated display screens. Information, games, movies, anything could be made available to the whole world with little more than the press of a button. It came to be that as time went on, the technology became integrated into almost every aspect of life—communications, leisure, and, most consequentially, banking. Anyone could and did have access to these devices, the information literally floating through the air. You might be wondering what exactly prevented other people from claiming the ones and zeros that at the time constituted the foundations of a human life. And the answer was the question: what are the factors of the number

40290244436087233475164451928081894728872979728449193944066781740876900915295229934416
52278453905702637716052509821382938153046395969188607671858225369520?

This question and questions like it kept that free-floating information from being anything more than a scrambled mess. Everyone sees the number, but without knowing the numbers that made it, you can't unscramble the mess, so everyone's information gets to float around as an open secret. If you could figure out the prime numbers that made up the very large number, that is, the factors, then you would have the key to unlock those open secrets. Any device could solve these sorts of problems, given a long enough time, but it wasn't until the invention of the quantum computer that it could be reliably solved in less time than it takes to rob a bank. It had been a race between all the biggest corporations, each too afraid of missing out to seriously ponder the question of why. As technology does, it scaled and shrank and polished until it could answer such a question in less time than it takes to grab candy out of the hand of a baby. The first black quantum computer came online shortly thereafter, and all those ones and zeros became defenseless. With no privacy with no ability to exchange financially, the system collapsed in spectacular fashion. There had been other forms of cryptography, ones companies and governments largely failed to implement in time. As was the nature of vast bureaucracies, they had dragged their feet. The adoption they had undertaken was partial, all one needed do was find the weak spot, the division that dug their heels in. Ultimately it mattered little. Would-be robbers were swift-footed in finding the right algorithms to crack these patchwork defenses. It was perhaps an irony that the collective efforts of these thieves left their stolen treasure little more than ice on the equator. Foolproof quantum cryptography was possible, but given that the devices only operate in temperatures approaching absolute zero, they weren't exactly portable or practical for individual use.

This was the first great uninvention.

The second occurred in a garage of one Samuel Smith. On a sunny afternoon of tinkering, he had done it. With a final turn of a screw and the flip of a switch, his neighborhood and the city it housed fell into darkness. So was born the very first device dubbed by its creator as the Jolly Old Lightning Trap. It was relatively cheap and easy to make for an enormous electromagnetic magnetic pulse bomb. It would later be scaled to the point that a competent high school science team would have a good shot at rendering useless every complex electric device within a small country. Since each country had its fair share of holy kooks, revolutionaries, as well as the standard run-of-the-mill miscreants, global darkness soon followed.

In the immediate aftermath of J.O.L.T's blooming all across the world, electric cars, which had become the norm, stopped working; modern planes often found their pilots struggling to land what essentially became very large hang gliders and remaining computers and screens were turned into intricate paperweights. Restrictions were, of course, tried, draconian ones at that, but it proved a seed of chaos too easy to acquire. In the end, transistors and capacitors were pretty much out. Electric motors could still be used. However, even though simple motors would not be destroyed by an EMP, they would still be disrupted, and there is nothing quite like the sheer chaos of entire road of cars suddenly losing all power and control. Cars and planes that could not continue to function during an EMP blast were banned in most parts of the world, by whatever governments still existed to ban them.

Electric-heated steam-powered vehicles, in particular, became the new vogue. While it is quite possible to build internal combustion engines that can withstand an EMP attack, without technology such as fuel injection, many of the efficiencies they had gained over the years had gone away. Besides, by this point in time, fossil fuel technologies had been primarily phased out as people had come to the collective realization that, in fact, it would not be better to make the earth Pliocene again.

Having electric-heated steam engines, though more wasteful, was considered much safer for transit, as a temporary loss of the heating element would not mean a sudden drastic loss of power or control. Steam power is about hot water, and with a temporary loss of power, the water is still hot, so the user retains power and merely needs to press the restart button for it to be as if nothing ever happened.

Technology still advanced. But now, the rules of the game saw that it did so firmly under the hands of a few for the benefit of the few. In daily life, tube amps, landlines, gear logic, newspapers, physical books, simpler engines all made a comeback in a big way.

An old news report interviewing Mr. Smith showed that he had this and only this to say—

“Well, it sure was fun.”

Society was plunged into chaos, and out of that chaos came, as it so often does, a terrible order.

XI Eli

The carriage looked opulent, but Eli would have appreciated if more work had been put into the heating system as he rubbed his hands together. It had been the most expensive looking carriage he was able to book. Always lead with a good foot forward. The meeting had to go well. If he could get an in with Lord Lioncourt, member of the higher nobility and youngest corporate executive officer in recent history, he would be on easy street. He could send Ashley and Phillip to a top prep school. His wife would be so impressed that she would even nag him less. The Greensohns wouldn't dare look down on him anymore. He could even join the Sterling club! One step away from gilding. Everything depended on getting this contract. He had a secret weapon, a gift he knew would instantly ingratiate him. It cost his life savings and then some, but why worry about pennies when gold was on the line? He spent the remainder of the carriage ride trying to stay on task, his voice box shifting mutely up and down as he practiced his pitch.

Arriving at the headquarters of the Hyperion Corporation filled Eli with a mix of awe and unease. He knew the hourglass towering over him was safe, safe enough for Lord Lioncourt himself. But something primal, something weak, screamed from within him. Looking up and seeing the impossible blackness above the tower, the void bubble, Eli trembled, concluding it must be natural that such displays of dominance would have that effect.

Eli steadied himself. He had burned through all of his social and financial capital to get here. He only had this one shot.

A guarantee worker, the hood of his robe down, was taking a smoke break leaning against one of the colossal silver-grey columns he was supposed to be polishing. There was an easy life. The King gave that worthless rabble food, housing, and purpose. Indolence is how they repaid him. After yelling at the man to get back to work, Eli felt a little less tense and entered the building.

Pausing in front of the elevator doors, he took out his pocket watch and stared. After some time elapsed, he straightened his tie and called the elevator. Proudly announcing to the elevator attendant that he had business on the 126th floor, he stepped in, turning sharply to face the door as to keep his feet parallel to the sides of the elevator. Visualizing the most important handshake of his life, he wiped his sweaty hands against his brown suit. As the elevator passed through the old foundation and began rising into the new building, he was able to see through the glass just how far from the ground he was. High and getting higher, his stomach lurched. Closing his eyes, he visualized the handshake, his lips moving to silent words.

Eli walked out of the elevator and was struck by the immense marble architecture around him. Even Royals might blush at such opulence. The receptionist greeted him. She clearly was not of pure stock, a chimera of occidental polluted with orientalism. Eli tried to suppress the turning of his mouth and the

flaring of his nose. Perhaps good help was hard to come by even for people like Lord Lioncourt. *No, that can't be. Look at this building. He could easily afford to have a member from the gilded class serve him.* There has to be another reason, and he had a guess judging from her clearly pronounced amative bumps. Anyway, this was to his advantage—he now knew something Lord Lioncourt kept secret. He could round up a couple of stunning purebred girls, occidental or oriental, who would make excellent full-service secretaries. He moved some beads in his mental abacus.

Eli had arrived exactly fifteen minutes early. Respectful, but not too eager-looking. After about an hour in the waiting room, he saw the mayor leaving the office, puffing on a cigar and smiling. *A good sign.* After what felt like an eternity to Eli, the receptionist finally spoke, “Mr. Lioncourt is ready to see you now.”

Walking in, Eli could hardly have imagined a more well-appointed office. The paperweights on Lord Lioncourt's desk alone wouldn't be out of place in a museum. Seeing Lord Lioncourt in the flesh, sitting there looking at him coolly, brought a shiver down Eli's spine. A reaction to the man's near-perfect phrenology. This was what it was to be in the presence of a high noble. The Lioncourts, it was whispered, were first among the nobility. Some rumored they even used to be royals. The King was a man of unquestionable judgment. *But of course, he was. He was King.* What he had understood once logically, he now felt viscerally.

Lord Lioncourt stayed seated as he entered. Eli put his hand out, which was met after a pronounced delay. His grip was firm. “Lord Lioncourt, sir. My name is Eli Jenkins. Please just call me Eli.”

“In that case, Jenkins, you may call me Sir Lioncourt.”

A bead of sweat fell down Eli's head.

“Cigarette?” Lioncourt offered one from his immense chair.

Eli sat down in the well-appointed chair across from Lioncourt. Sitting down, he looked up at the man towering over him. “No, sir, I don't smoke or drink. As reliable as they come, sir.”

“Mind if I smoke?”

Elated, Eli responded, “No, no, sir, please do.” only to realize the man had already lit it before he had a chance to say anything.

“Lovely receptionist, you have.”

“Anna is, indeed,” Lioncourt said with a lazy exhale.

No sign of annoyance there. That was it. Eli could see a chink in the armor and so thrust.

“Interesting choice, bet she has quite the charms, that one.”

Lord Lioncourt's icy stare showed he had miscalculated. Of course, who was Eli to dare to be so familiar with a high noble. *Stupid, stupid Eli.* That was a bad use of the information. Beads were rapidly reshuffled in his head.

“Indeed. Mr. Jenkins, was it? What business exactly is it that you have with me today?”

“I have a proposal for you, sir, once in a lifetime profits.”

“Yes, I am sure my wealth is your chief concern.”

“And, of course, it will help the empire.”

“Charitable and patriotic, how good of you.”

His tone wasn’t as Eli had hoped, but Eli had an Ace in the hole. “But before we get into the nitty-gritty details, I have a small present to thank you for having this meeting.” Reaching into the pocket of his finely pressed brown coat, he took out an envelope with the bright red seal of the Bureau of Contracts and Acquisitions. Lord Lioncourt accepted the envelope, opened it, and gave it a read—

“A No-fight contract?”

“Yes, sir.” Eli beamed. He had picked the most expensive type of contract there was—a fact Lord Lioncourt would no doubt be aware of. “I’m not a hunter myself, though. Just thought nothing is too good for the Hawk himself.”

“Quite,” he said with a smile. “Shall we get down to business, then?”

Eli sighed in relief.

XII Malcolm

More and more, Malcolm wanted to crawl out of his skin. He had better let that damn mayor's aide know just how much she owed him. What in the hell was he going to do with a no-fight contract for some random lowie with a name like Marco Jones? He couldn't exactly regift it—that would be a blow to his reputation, enough perhaps to somewhat undermine his operational abilities. Of course, the Eli Jenkins' of the world wouldn't bother to actually do any research. They would trust price to the point they would probably eat shit instead of filet mignon if it were the more expensive option on a menu. Even if it was a no-fight contract Edgeworth would still manage to find a way of embellishing it. A sneer worked its way up the right side of his mouth.

Malcolm inhaled his cigarette deeply, the red ember growing and consuming the black paper in a fiery cone. The cigarette retained its shape and structure, turning into one long cylinder of ash in only two or three puffs already bordering on the gold filter. He put it out and lit another.

"So, did you bring your proposal for me to look at?"

"Yes, sir," Jenkins said, passing a folder across.

The midlands were full of his type: as mechanical and predictable as robots, trying to claw their way up the social hierarchy with a smile, only ever engaging in their position, never thinking about what they actually had—it was for this reason that anything you gave them was an absolute waste, pearls cast before swine. He had trouble even considering them human, but then, they were an occupational hazard.

Perhaps he could at least end up useful. As Jenkins made his rehearsed sales pitch, Malcolm took out his pocket watch, staring at the rotating eye of the tourbillon, watching the seconds as they passed by. He opened the folder Jenkins brought rapidly perusing its contents.

"So, what here is proprietary?" Malcolm said.

"Proprietary, Lord Lioncourt?"

"Yes. As in something here that no one else can copy."

Drips of sweat fell down Eli's under-baked brow. "With you on board, sir, I am sure it will be a success."

"But why, Mr. Jenkins, would I need *you*? Even if I *did* want to go ahead with this half-baked idea if the crux of its success relies on myself, why not simply do it myself?"

Eli shifted in his tiny chair. "My Lord, I'm not sure what you mean."

"Let me put this very clearly: even if this idea was good—which, to be honest, Mr. Jenkins, would be exceedingly and overly generous to say—so long as another corporation can copy it, it would only be profitable if it was executed better than they could. The only possibility of that is if *I* did it. If you could, you already would have. So, I already have both all the information and the only unique thing on the table of value. There is no scenario in which I need you."

The man before him had a sickly pallor and appeared to be melting into his seat.

Malcolm had gone too far. He knew it. Sometimes he just could not help himself. He knew even if someone brings you a giant heaping plate of extremely expensive excrement if you don't take a bite, smile, and then give them something in return, the gossip will be more trouble than it is worth. It was perfectly okay for someone in Malcom's station to crush a man. You just had to do it the right way.

"I am just explaining this to you because I see potential in you, Eli."

"You do, my lord??"

Malcolm sighed, "Yes, and I would like to make some deals with you, just not this one. Here, I see you have property holdings in Bree. I have quite a few plans for development in that area. Schedule another meeting with my receptionist on your way out."

"Thank you so much, Lord Lioncourt!" *He could scarcely be a more pathetic specimen.*

I will see that he is ruined by the end of next year. Malcolm leaned back in his massive seat and read through the hunt contract. At least the mark seemed fit enough. Something woefully wasted on a no fight contract.

XIII Gram

Gram stood in front of the door. It had been a week since he had left an inebriated Marco to sleep it off. It was after work, and he had hoped by now Marco's daily revelry would have calmed down, at least enough for him to remember a single bloody conversation.

He knocked at the door, and it was, once again, Luna that answered.

"Is Marco home?"

"Out with Ira."

"Oh." It appeared Gram came too late, so he started to turn around. He thrust his hands into his pockets in the most casual, nonchalant manner he could manage, his right glove brushed up against something hard. Turning about to face her, left hand behind his head as if looking awkward somehow made him less awkward, he gave Luna an unsure smile.

"Was there something else?"

"Umm...yeah. This." He said, thrusting the contents of his pocket at her. His eyes cast downwards, his face started to feel hotter. *This is still a very stupid idea, you know that right?*

She dangled the necklace before her eyes. "Is this for me? It's beautiful."

"Umm, nuthin' big." The reddening of his face intensified, "Just a little thing I made for you, from a bunch of gears I had lying around anyway. See, lift the crown, wind it till it stops, an' then press it down. It will ding exactly when it is the optimal time for coffee to soak, given you're using boiling water an' all."

"You made it for me? It is shaped like a crescent moon!"

"Yeah, umm...that is just a coincidence." Gram said, "Ye see, got a lot of old watch parts shaped like that. Anyway, doesn't mean anything. I just...thought it'd be useful."

She put the necklace on. He hoped he had gotten rid of all the pointy edges. "Do you wanna cup?" She asked.

Gram was unsure that he did, but she grabbed him by the arm to lead him inside. It would give him a chance to ask about Marco. The water was already on the stove when he walked into the ground floor apartment.

"So Marco's still on a bender, eh?"

Luna shook her head in exasperation. "He only comes home after getting kicked out of some fancy hotel or another with Ira. And even when he does come home, he only managed to make it all the way to the bed once this week. And that was jus' cause Ira put him to bed."

She set the boiling water off the stove and began grinding the beans. The rich aroma spread through the small space. She began winding the necklace, about to pour in the hot water that had been sitting on the table for a few minutes.

Gram looked at the kettle anxiously. “Oh, and umm, remember it is for *boiling* water.”

Luna smiled and put it back on the burner.

“So, chances Marco’ll come back later in a state to talk strategy?”

“None.”

He had guessed as much. The necklace let out a slight ding causing her to gasp in surprise. She plunged the filter down, poured the black brew into a green mug, and handed it to him, pouring her portion in a dark blue one.

Gram took a sip and nodded. “This is really decent.” *Ehh, still a little weak. Should have set it a couple seconds longer*, but he had been constrained, making it in that shape. Should he try to explain bloom? No, he reminded himself the optimal explanation wasn’t the most complete. It was the most useful. She was happy, and the coffee was already much better than most places. “By the way, there’s this other thing called bloom where you pour just a bit of the water to soak the grounds for about half a minute before you pour in the rest.” *Idiot, you just can’t help yourself, can you?*

He waited nervously for her response. Luna made a thoughtful frown. “So, when should I press the crown down? After the ‘bloom’ is done?” Good, she knew him well enough not to take offense.

“Yep, and if you stir it during the bloom, it helps make sure the coffee is evenly exposed.”

Luna gave the slight nod of polite disinterest. “Aren’t you going to take those heavy clothes off? It’s pretty warm in here.”

“Nah, I’m fine.”

“Gram glovewearer be it summer, winter, or spring.” She laughed. “Cold hands warm heart, I suppose.”

“Is liking a nice pair of gloves some sort of crime then?”

“Well, gloves indoors might certainly be considered a fashion crime in some places, but I’d say in your case I’ll judge it as a mere peculiarity.”

“I’ll have to rely on your witness testimony if I ever get called into fashion court then.” Luna laughed a little too hard. He was pretty sure it wasn’t actually funny. Gram stood up. “Anyway, Luna, I gotta get going—Oh, and tell Marco if he isn’t sober enough tomorrow when I come by, I’ll break his bloody legs.” He bowed his head in a perfunctory manner and swiftly left. “Be seeing you.”

XIV Marco and Luna

Marco woke up on the couch. The light was blinding. His head felt like it was in a vice, a vibrating vice. Maybe he had a bit too much again last night, but it wasn't like he'd be late clocking in for the toil. He went into the kitchen to get a bottle of tigel spirits and a jar of pickles to quiet the thumping in his head. Nothing quieted a hangover quite like the tingle of tigel and some piquant pickles. That was Marco's favorite radio advertisement. He wasn't sure what piquant meant, but it sure did help a hangover.

Each bottle of tigel spirits comes with a purple tiger giving a double thumbs-up, with the printed golden label below it saying "Feel the Tingle." *Don't mind if I do.* Marco could afford the fancy stuff now, but there was just something tigel had that those fancy alcohols didn't. Probably that drug they added to it. Marco didn't know much about drugs, but he knew what he liked, and by that measure, it was a damn fine drug. It was fine to go out and have a few cocktails, but afterward, he would just crave tigel more. Tigel, sweet, salty with just the right amount of burn now that'd be a good advertisement. Folk could ken that.

"So, whatcha do to get kicked out this time?" Luna startled him, coming out of nowhere. It was those tiny silent feet of hers.

Marco took a swig of tigel and looked at her. She was already all dolled up, like she was trying to make him feel bad or something. "You know how they don't like us folk hanging around. Happy enough to take our denarii all the same, but then out'cha go soon as they got an excuse."

Luna looked at him skeptically. "Uh-huh. And whatcha do that gave them an excuse?"

"Nothin', jus, maybe vomited a bit, an' some other things...bu' I offered to pay, leeches already had their fill." He took another swig.

Luna was eyeing the tigel in his hand. "Don't ya think it's a bit early?"

"Ehh, quit your gabbin', jus' need some hair o' the dog."

"That's what you said yesterday, to be utterly maimed by said dog."

"It's a tricky thing, dogs." He took a big, defiant gulp.

"Well, Gram was here last night. Said if you're not sober by the time he comes over today, he'll break both your legs."

"Feck 'im." Marco took another sip. "I ain't in a rush."

"He's just tryin' to help."

"Haha yeah, and I bet you'd like him to help you..." A slap across the face stopped him from finishing his sentence or his tigel, which now lay spilled all over the ground. She turned and walked away from him.

Fuck her too, he thought, grabbing his still throbbing head. Then, again, it was unpleasant as hell when she was mad. She'd make a point of ignoring him until he apologized. Silent aggressive, that was

her style.

Walking to her room, he tried his best to look apologetic. “I’m sorry, I’ll go sleep it off. Be proper sober.”

She snapped her head away from him. “No, I love it when you get drunk. Go ahead, drink up, Marco.”

“Aww, come on! Dunt be like...hey, where’d you get that necklace?”

“Just take a nap, Marco. Tell you what, I know you been eatin’ that fancy food north o’ the river, but I’ll make you some decent fare for when ya wake up.”

He still felt like shit, so he nodded, walked to his room and flopped into bed, and pulled the covers over his head.

A knock at the door, earlier than Luna expected. Marco was still sound asleep, but she excitedly rushed to the door. It was just Ira. Luna’s smile inverted. She brought out the worst in Marco—not necessarily her fault, but it was just the way he would try to impress her always made him act like a colossal ass.

“Marco home?”

“No.” She said with a sharply descending tone.

“Then where’d he go? He was supposed to pick me up earlier an’ take me shoppin’ across the river.”

If Luna could describe Ira in precisely one word, it would be—*ugh*.

“Marco!” Ira yelled.

Luna stepped out, closing the door behind her.

“He is home! I knew it!” Ira said, “You jus’ wanna keep him here so you can get some o’ that contract money—got news for ya, you got no way to compete. I got things I can provide ‘im that you can’t.”

Ugh, ugh, ugh. Luna decided she had been much too charitable before.

“He’s my bloody cousin, practically my brother, so maybe I just don’t wanna see ‘im dead.”

“A little too late for that luv. Don’t tell me you bought into all that Gram nonsense. No one’s ever survived a contract, and I don’t see how someone blabbing random facts about nonsense is gonna change that. Face it, hun, it’s inevitable. He’s having fun, don’t you go takin’ that away from ‘im off some false hope.”

“I’m sure ya been showin’ him a *real good time*. But I wonder if he’d still want to take you out to dinner and shoppin’ so much if he knew that he’s just a piggy bank and you don’t mind him breakin’ so long you are the one who gets to pick up the coins?”

“He’d never believe ya. Don’t ya know, I tell ‘im over and over, he’s just my knight in shining

armor, rescuin' me from all those bad men." She said, her voice as sincere as a pop song.

Luna grabbed the side of the door and smiled. "Anyway, if ya leave him sleeping right now, you don' need to test that little theory of yours. I'll tell him you were lookin' for him." Luna shut the door with a solid clang.

Luna was reading a novel when she heard that unmistakable thump coming from Marco's room.

"Food!" Marco had finally woken up. Just in time for dusk.

"Sure," Luna said, washing her hands.

Marco had a tendency to say "food" more often than "Luna," to the extent that Luna almost took it to be her name.

She started preparing some eggs, with tomato and blacon ("Don't be worried about the l, it is only there for legal reasons," it said in small print at the bottom of the package and then in a yellow circle with big blocky letters "Four times cheaper than real bacon with all the modified soy protein big boys need!")

"Anyone come by while I was knocked out?"

"Nope, who would?" Luna said.

"Ehmm ya know, how 'bout I give you a few denarii that way ya can buy some proper groceries."

"No, thanks. Dun't want folks thinkin' I'm trying to leech off your blood money."

"Who'd say tha? I eat most of it anyway, here." He forced the money into her hand. She accepted it grudgingly and tucked it in a hidden pocket under her dress inside her corset.

"Your chows jus' as good as that upper city stuff, Lun-Lun." He gave her a big hug that more than fully enveloped her though he didn't squeeze too tightly this time. "An' with that money, I bet it'd be way better than what the toffs do with it, besides that'd just be just a meal or two up there."

"Thanks," she put her arms around him and squeezed for a few moments before releasing the hug. "Really think my cooking is good?"

Marco laughed, his stomach shaking. "Do you mean good enough for Gram? Dunno. He eats with them books in 'is head. But if he ate with his tongue like normal folk for a change, he'd love it."

She punched him in the arm. "Hey, Marco?"

"Yeah?"

"What do you see in Ira, outta curiosity?"

Marco's brown eyes gained some warmth, "She is the sweetest person I ever met. I ken that she can come off cold, but if ya could see her with me, you'd understand. I'd give the whole world fer her to make 'er happy."

"I'm sure you would." Luna's expression was flat.

XV Gram

Gram walked speedily through the streets weaving through the after work rush fluidly as he overtook them. Normally he felt exhausted after he finished his shift, but today was different. He could hear the distant chirping of birds. There was a certain beauty in the way the haze refracted dusk's light giving the air a red tint. The void bubble above Hyperion tower was spinning rapidly, Gram imagined the pleasant breeze those outside the crowded lowlands must be experiencing and let out a relaxed breath. It was time to take the plunge.

Gram finished putting it together, a plan even Marco should be able to follow, given he could restrain himself—which made the matter a fifty-fifty gambit. But if that failed, there was a trump card that brought the odds of Marco's survival to roughly ninety percent. Gram rubbed the small bit of paper in his pocket. Taking it out, a jolt of fear went through his spine, he hesitated to drop it. From behind, people had begun pushing him out of the way to pass. The idea of Marco dying, Gram knowing he could have done more flashed through his mind. *Coward worthless coward.* Gram repocketed the paper and pushed on with grim determination and a hint of guilt trying to convince himself back into a calm.

He knocked on the door. Luna answered, unsurprisingly.

He regarded her with a nod of the head, "Marco in any state to talk business?"

"Yeah, please come inside. Coffee?"

"Please." Gram said, walking in from the cold.

"Ohh, let me get that," Luna said, leaning in close to him to wipe a grease smudge from his face.

Marco walked into the room looking buoyant. "How's the toil? Alfred still bein' a dick?"

"There any other way to be Alfred?"

Marco laughed, "Would ya like some tigel?"

"I think for this particular conversation, coffee should work."

"Suit ya'self." Marco said, lighting a cigarette and reaching for a bottle.

Gram placed his hand on his friend's wrist. "Especially for you."

Marco shook it off. "Fine, I'll jus' 'ave coffee." turning to his cousin, "Thanks, Lun." Marco sat down in the hideous overstuffed chair he bought on one of his shopping trips with Ira.

Gram sat down on the couch, cracked his knuckles, and spread out. "I was originally quite upset you took a defenseless contract. I'd 'ave welcomed the opportunity to cave some hunters head in. But the more I thought of it, the more I realized it would play to our advantage."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. As always, you luck yourself into all manners of smart decisions, Marco."

Marco nodded. "Ma always said luck'll get you further than smarts."

"I can imagine her giving you that bit of advice." Gram knew he could say such things without

Marco noticing. “Anyways, what do you know about hunter contracts?”

“Fer a bunch of sick toffs, an’ fer a bunch of men tired of the toil.”

“Yes, and what is the track record fer those that ran?”

“Dead te the last, unless they got someone playin’ a whitehat. You got an idea how I can be pardoned?”

“That’s not exactly the best strategy, too much unpredictability. And you never know what they will want in exchange for their great and generous mercy.” He thought of the widespread reputation so-called whitehats had, and then he thought of Luna. His blood boiled a little. “Nah,” he continued, “I got something a little more foolproof planned.”

“Like?”

“Do you really think with all the contracts, there has never been *one* person to escape?”

“They got the power ain’t they?”

“Still, not one? Think of incentives. It isn’t like they can track people wherever they are, and it isn’t like every hunter is a bloody crime novel detective. Let’s say that someone did manage to escape. Who’d tell? The failed hunter? The Bureau of Contracts and Acquisitions? The guy who managed to escape? Nah, none of them. It is all about appearance—it’s in no one’s interest. How much money you got left, Marco?”

“Bout ‘alf.”

“King’s sake, Marco, it’s been like a month, you fucking muppet! That shit was more than thirty-year’s pay!”

“Feck you, like you know what it’s like te be flush.”

Gram shrugged, “shouldn’t change the plan anyway, not exactly unexpected. Question for you: what kinda person would want to pay more for no-fight contract?”

“A bloomin’ rich coward?”

“A *lazy* bloomin’ rich coward.” Gram said. *Lazy bloomin’ rich torturing coward to be precise, but he doesn’t need to know that.* “You don’t need t’ be impossible to find. You just need to be harder to find than is worth their while. After they give up, you’ll likely be marked as dead. So long as you stay hard to find, you can stay very much alive.”

“How’s that?”

“Put yerself in their shoes—ye got more money than sense, and ya don’t want your reputation besmirched an’ such, what would ya do? Simple, you’d lie and say you caught them.”

“But how d’ ya do that? One o’ dem hunted bunkers?”

“King’s sake, think for a fucking second.”

“I did think!” Marco slammed his hand down on the table. “Ask around, most hunted save enough

fer one o' them. The'r your best bet fer a couple extra months o' breathin' air."

"The money difference between a hunter and a hunted, someone desperate enough to be killed, on the one hand, someone doin' the paying on the other." Gram held his hands up bringing one above his head and the other below his waist. "Imagine you're runnin' a place like that. What are your incentives? You can make money twice—once from the hunted, then from the hunter. What hit to reputation could occur if all your clients conveniently bloody *die* as we all know they do? Wouldn't surprise me if bloody hunters run most o' 'em."

Marco leaned forward, gesturing his arms sharply forward. "You an' your 'incentives.' They say they help people! If they're so bad, then how come everyone uses one then?"

"Because people are idiots! They're taking the obvious way outta a riptide and drowning."

"Then how, Mr. smartfuck?"

"With this." Gram said, handing Marco an ID card with a picture of Marco, but with a different name.

Marco eyed the ID with suspicion. "'ow do I know about yer incentives then? They dunt seem particularly in line. Someone letting someone ken about one trap just to lead 'em to another."

Gram was surprised at the uncharacteristic sign of cunning coming from Marco. "Because, Marco, I'm your friend, asshole."

Marco considered this comment and rolled his eyes. He eventually nodded to confirm the truth of it.

Luna handed the coffee to both of them, giving Gram the green mug and Marco a grey one, taking some for herself in her dark blue mug and sitting down on the couch next to Gram. Gram noticed she had painted a little clockwork crescent moon in silver on the side of her mug.

"This ID should pass full muster at any checkpoint. It has the holographic overlay, the micro-engraving, everything. No one should question you."

Marco eyed the ID closely. "How the hell did ya do all that then?"

"I have my ways." Gram much preferred to keep this particular trick a secret.

"So, what do I do?"

"Upper Winslet is currently having a bit of a boom. Lots of folks movin' there fer work."

Luna turned to Gram. "Upper Winslet...so Marco has to leave?"

Gram nodded his head. "Yes, Marco has to leave."

Marco's eyes widened he hit his fist on the arm of his chair. "Bu' I don't wanna go to Upper bloody Winslet..."

"Well, my dear fellow, ya should've thought 'bout that before you signed a contract. I'm not made of magic, and if you stay in the city, there's no way you won't be found out."

Hesitantly, Marco sank backward into the chair, its stuffing bulging around him, “So I should book passage on a void drifter then?”

“King’s sake no—A: not a lot of people take those, making it much easier to show up in search of passenger manifests. B: you would, no offense, stick out like a sore thumb. C: I couldn’t build an established wealthy identity ‘cause I don’t have a corp’s bloody resources. What you have there is a bog-standard ID of a bog-standard ordinary copper. How many coppers ride one of those? D: those tickets are bloody expensive. E: It ain’t like ya really need to get there in a speedy manner unless ya want to hurry up an’ die. You can either take a train or an airship there. Just keep a low profile. You should have more than enough to get there and lots of extra cushion.”

“Alright, alright, I believe ya! You don’t have to throw one of your bloody lists at me. But I don’t want to take an airship, them’s things liable to fecking explode.”

Of course, Marco bought into the propaganda. “Given the number of airships every day, practically none explode. Lug heads like you think they do because anytime it does happen, it’ll be all over the papers. Not to mention that the guy who owns the Void Cruisers also owns half the bloody newspapers. It’s a port city, and rail hasn’t been built to it yet. Airships are the only direct route, so you’ve got less chance of detection. So, unless you’ve got a crippin’ fear of heights or something, take the fucking whale.” Gram restrained himself from explaining under what situations the hydrogen gas would prove deadly and how new materials made it fairly unlikely. Or that void cruisers could theoretically suffer from catastrophic implosion. Marco’s jaw was already clenched enough.

“Fine, fine, if ya want me to take an airship, jus’ say ‘Marco take a bloody airship!’ Don’t pretend like your givin’ me a feckin’ choice.”

Gram looked directly into Marco’s eyes. “Marco, take a bloody airship.”

Marco sighed. “What about Ira?”

Gram looked up innocently. “Who?”

“Don’t play dumb, ya know who I’m talking about!”

“Sure, she can come with. But when you ask her, you should let her know that after this, you’ll be right back to the toil with barely a cent to your name.”

“That ain’t true! You’re just tryin’ to make her leave. Should still ‘ave enough that we can live pretty prim an’ proper.”

“Here, I made you a list of do’s and don’ts: do get a job, don’t spend a bunch of money ya shouldn’t have in the first place. That money should make life easier, but don’t you go acting outta yer class. That’s what worries me ‘bout Ira.”

“Yeah? And what if I just stay ‘ere with her an’ sign up for one o’ them safe houses before the hunt starts?” Marco puffed up his chest. Nothing shows you are willing to abandon reason for the sake of

masculinity quite like a chest full of air.

“Then ye can go there and matriculate into the waiting arms of yer hunter, ya daft prick—Here, take this other piece. It’s sealed. Don’t open it. It’ll put you in danger if you do. If you get caught, just give it to the hunter and play along with whatever happens.”

Looking at Marco’s scowl, Gram realized that nothing else could be done now. He would see reason, eventually.

“Leave by the end of next month, an’ don’t spend all yer bloody dough, ya feckin moron, or if ya want, you can just stay here and get slaughtered real peaceful like.”

Marco didn’t respond, just stared at the ID. Gram got up to leave. Luna got up and followed him outside.

“I’m sure Marco really appreciates everything you’re doin’ for him, in his own Marco way.”

“Yeah, he’s got his way. Given circumstances, he’s practically dripping with gratitude as is.”

“I appreciate you helping him too, you know. Do you really think you can save him?”

Gram gently connected his gaze with hers, “Yeah, I do.” He nodded his head and departed down the street. *I hope.*

Marco will be safe. Gram looked at his right hand and wondered what price would he end up paying.

XVI Alex

Looking over the railing, Marco could feel the wind on his face. Funny, looking down at everything from up there. Those little square patches where people lived and died, fucked and cried, it all seemed silly.

Feeling a soft warmth squeezing his arm, he looked over at his companion and decided he liked that view better. She was perfect. He had always thought so, ever since they were kids. It was just like in one of the old romance stories, Beauty and the Beast and the like. He always liked it when his ma read that one to him.

She was wearing a skintight scaled silver top emphasizing a near-impossible cleavage, a dark fur coat, and a large brown space diamond dangling from a gold chain around her neck. Giving her free reign to go shopping had set him back quite a bit, but it was worth it to see her smile.

“That fur looks great on you, dollface!” He said with a smile, but sudden realization turned it into a frown. “Ya know, uh...He helped set up the whole thing, getting you on board and the plan and stuff... And it especially has an entry ‘ere sayin’ not to show nuthin’ not befitting class. He even underlined it and wrote Ira next to it, then circled the Ira.”

“What’s the point of havin’ fur if the whole world don’t know ya have it?”

“You know you can always still wear ‘em for me, sweetie.”

She rolled her eyes. “Why do we have to follow that piece of paper, huh? Can’t ya think fer yerself?”

“It’s just that...ya know...I think he thought it out.”

“Is he the boss of you?”

Marco puffed up his chest. No one was the boss of him, not anymore.

She hugged his arm more firmly. “He’s just out for yer money, ya know. Marco, I love you, but you are such a lug.”

“Luv ya too, but y’re wrong about him. He refused to take any money, didn’t even take any for this lovely fake! I’m sure he’s on the level. Me and ‘im we go way back.”

“That doesn’t mean nuthin’. For all you know, he just set this as a trap for ya, gonna make a tidy sum off yer hide. Bet he told ya to be careful with your spending cuz he’s got a deal to collect on the rest after the hunter has his way. That’s why he didn’t want ya to just live it up with me for a while, then lie low in a shelter. Knew you’d blow yer wad that way. Sick man, that Gram. I can ken folk like that.”

“Yeah, how?.”

“ ‘Cause of my work, all kinds ya meet there, you get to see what they’re really like.”

Marco tried to shift away from her, but she clung onto his arm even more intensely.

“But you saved me from all that, didn’t ya, my big strong knight? You’ll keep me safe, won’cha?”

Marco wrested his arm free, turning to look down at her. “Me and ‘im we go way back. An’ it says here we shouldn’t use his name. Nor yours. Nor mine.”

“Blow it out yer ass, Marco! If you wanna play the lapdog, fine! Be *Alex*! But I ain’t gonna be no Daisy. Plenty of Ira’s in Winslet. I know ya said you ain’t got a penny to yer name, but I ain’t daft enough to not do some basic accounting. All he’s trying to do, luv, is make things miserable fer us! He doesn’t like me and wants your pot all to ‘is self.”

He grabbed her by the shoulders squeezing the soft fur slightly. “That’s Alex. Did you fall on the ‘ead there, my dear Daisy?”


Ira paused and then put one hand on his chest, “Aww mah big strong bear, you jus’ got such a kind trustin’ heart! I don’t wantcha to be taken advantage of, is all.” She ran her fingers down his chest, “An’ for this trip, I’ll be your Daisy, just like on the manifest, your little daughter, mister.” She giggled, “But I dun’t have one of them fancy IDs like urs. Mine jus’ says plain ol’ Ira. So wouldn’t that be safer?”

“I guess...sorry, jus’...ya know, I can be a bit defensive ‘bout ‘im. He’s a good bloke, bit of an ass but good.”

The Note In Alex's Pocket

So You Are Dense and Want to Not Die Horribly

A Gram Guide

- Do not show other people this note (Including and especially Ira)
- Don't take Ira with you
- I know you are still going to take her with you, but just be careful with her, okay?
- Remember, even if you think no one is listening, don't bring up any name closely related to yourself, especially not your own name. You-Alex Ira-Daisy Me-Mr. Green Luna-Rei
- I know you are still flush with coin but do not under any circumstances show it! No expensive clothes, or hooch, or anything else not befitting of your class. This goes double if not triple for 
- Get a job as soon as possible. Imagine how it would look if some copper just moved to a new city and proceeded to escape the toil. No such thing a copper with early retirement. Upper Winslet Mining Company should be looking for warm bodies
- It might occur to you that even though your contract is no-fight, you could still buy weapons using your new ID. Don't
- Keep the sealed note with you at all times. If you are found, hand it to the hunter, try to act casual, and play along
- Don't under any circumstances open the note
- Don't try to contact me or Luna or anyone else. If you must, leave a message for Mr. Green with the Alchemist, ask for our friend Jim. Emergencies only
- Remember, we'll miss you ya daft bastard, do your best to follow this list and try not to get yourself bloody killed. Just keep that big blockhead of yours down for King's sake!

XVII Malcolm

Sitting in his well-appointed office, Malcolm found himself in a break between meetings. He pulled out the folder on his hunt for Marco. He had disappeared, but by all accounts, he was just your typical lower city thug, which meant one thing—he was at a hunted “shelter,” glorified feeding pens. As a shelter, you could either sit back and collect payment twice or do the honest thing, help a bunch of lowlifes, and get a bullet in the head as a reward. The lucrative nature, of course, meant that too many shelters tended to open. Where there are crumbs, there are birds—though, in order for the Bureau to keep friendly relationships, they did make sure to strictly control the bird population.

As an active hunter, he had connections with all of them, of course. He even got a discount because he agreed to wait for a fortnight to be contacted after the prey left. If you wanted, you could always pay them extra to more or less deliver them to you. But where would be the fun of that?

Strange. It had been months, but none of the shelters reported having him, and, by now, any off-the-books shelter should have been found out. Malcolm sent a member of his staff to search the premises and interview the cousin. Marco wasn’t there. And while she said she didn’t know where he was, the agent suspected if given the right “encouragement,” she would. Malcolm wasn’t the sort to torture collaterals. Not that that was a common view amongst hunters—it was, of course, not permitted to do so, but what the law says and what the law was were functionally two different things entirely. Some things could be purchased with money, other things status. If you were high nobility, you could get away with doing just about anything to a copper so long as you were willing to dish out enough coin and a few favors. It was apparent to him that this reality was not lost on those meek scurriers. This made being among the creatures rather tiring. Normally he only entered the lowlands on a hunt, but his interest was piqued enough that he decided to give the girl a visit.

The girl answered the door shivering. No doubt her friends have been filling her with horror stories.

“Do not worry, miss. I am not here to hurt you. Just a bit of your time.” He said, trying to adopt a gentle tone.

“Yes, your lordship, please come in an’ ‘ave a seat. Would my lord like some coffee?”

“Please. I would not have expected to receive such a warm welcome. I thank you, but you do realize who I am? Why I am here?”

“Nuthin’ to hide here, sir. You can check yourself, and you’re not gonna find him. So come on into my hearth and home.”

The apartment was small but surprisingly well kept for one of the old public housing units in the lowlands. Most of the furniture was what he would expect aside from a tasteless overstuffed chair

covered in cigarette burns, most likely a recent purchase. He couldn't smell any smoke in the apartment. Moving closer to the chair, he gave it a light sniff. There was but the faintest hint of the cheap tobacco. There were errant dark purple stains, tugal. It was surprising how often tugal stains had come in handy. It was almost impossible to completely clean, the cocktail of drugs found in it made spilling all but a certainty for habitual users, and tugal stains grew darker as they oxidized but at a relatively slow rate. The lightest color stains on the chair had been made months ago. Malcolm turned his cool blue eyes to the girl. She was pretending not to look at him as she ground some coffee beans. She was definitely nervous, but more deeply than that, she was confident. He had expected a penny like her to make a cup of instant sludge. Clearly, it was something she was proud of. She probably offered coffee to everyone who came in. A reliable and comparatively low effort way of building social capital. She added boiling water to the grounds and stirred, winding her odd crescent moon necklace after pouring in the rest of the water.

"Where did you get that necklace?"

"If ya don't mind, please keep your questions to Marco." She said, crossing her arms in a defensive pose.

The necklace dinged. She plunged down the filter and handed Malcolm a coffee in a grey cup.

"Of course, my apologies, miss," Malcolm said. "So, about Marco," He took a sip of coffee. It wasn't horrible. He gave her a considerate nod, "Do you know where he is?"

"Outta your reach, hunter. Other than that, I got no clue."

He took out a piece of paper and a palladium fountain pen and wrote a number with a series of zeros on it. Passing her the note, he said, "Would this change your recollection?"

"Nah, sir, but this check sure is fine cardstock—too fine for the lowlands. Here, take it back with you." She said, passing it back.

Good. That was more than he had been willing to pay to find Marco, but he had a suspicion she wouldn't take it, and he loved being right. He updated his model, thanked her for the coffee, and walked out of the hovel.

She clearly knew something—she was terrible at hiding it—but she was genuinely loyal. Her demeanor indicated she was pretty confident. Somehow Marco had slipped out of the city undetected. An impressive feat, though it was so unusual that the substantial bribes would be easy to trace back.

It was also clear that whatever was going on, it wasn't the work of this Marco. The necklace was almost certainly a gift from whoever helped Marco evade him for this long. It was an odd roughly made one-of-a-kind piece shaped like a moon. It was an unlikely coincidence that her name was Luna. It was made as a french press coffee timer, something almost unheard of in the lowlands to begin with. If it had been a gift from a family member or simply bought off some junk merchant, the reaction would

have been different. She was defensive, trying to redirect, clearly having something to hide, someone she was trying to protect.

He supposed that it could be a woman behind the scenes, but he gave it a less than five percent chance. A street tough like Marco is unlikely to swallow his pride enough to seek such advice from a girl, and then there was the necklace. He could have Marco's and Luna's acquaintances dredged up until he found out which mutual friend of theirs fit the profile. From there, it would probably be trivial to figure out the rest. But this was at least so far mildly intriguing he was in no rush to skip straight to the end.

The reports flowing back to him showed no sign of a Marco, which meant that he must have a fake ID. But how could someone like that get access? A fake was one of those things that required more than just money—it required serious connections. He had his agents bribe the various transport officials to get details of bribes they had received lately and found several instances of similar bribes within the postulated time frame. All the men had bribed in order to get female accompaniment onboard without ID. Almost all of which going to boomtowns. Each with implausible backstories of traveling with their daughters even in the face of obvious lack of large age gaps between them. ID numbers were not required for those under the age of thirteen. Marco must have a fake ID, but his companion Ira must not have. Showing the unknown helper had limited resources in terms of ID creation. Still, it was impressive to create such a relatively large smuggling operation just to help his client have company.

He put out feelers to the peace officers in the different cities to look for newly arrived people from the lower classes. Specifically looking for the names Marco or Ira, for those spending or having beyond their means, and for those who don't get jobs or quit their jobs while being able to pay off the deposit against becoming a guarantee worker. Had it been any other hunter with a no-fight contract, an anonymous one no less, they would have just claimed to have killed Marco already and bought a justice contract to make themselves feel better about it. But to Malcolm, the challenge was the reward. He felt this quarry would, in the end, prove to be quite fallible.

XVIII Gram

Failure, why did you even try? He's probably dead, and it's all your fault. It isn't my fault, it isn't my responsibility, I did the best I could, it isn't my responsibility. You don't actually believe that, do you? You piece of shit.

It was dark. Gram's eyes were closed. Laying restlessly in bed. The hunt should have started in earnest a few months ago. He hadn't heard anything, which is precisely what would occur if Marco was safe, but also exactly what would occur if Marco was dead. He had drastically underestimated the resources hunters could burn, would burn. He had overestimated this hunter's laziness. He had gotten so much wrong. But why would such a hunter take a no-fight anonymous contract? The best guesses he based his plan on were all garbage. Gram had been sloppy enough, left enough of a trail that his adversary could easily find him if he wanted to.

And Luna, how did he miss the danger Marco escaping could potentially cause her? He kept an eye on her just in case, though realistically, what could he do? Nothing. But if anything happened, he would do something. Knowing that you were that kind of coward, knowing for sure, that would be worse than death.

But it wouldn't come to that. The hunter was principled, or as principled as someone who hunts the poor for sport could be. Principled and tenacious, any difficulties Gram created were more likely to excite than dismay. What if the hunter got frustrated? If the trail went cold for too long, would he change his tactics then? How fragile was his ego? Too many unknown variables, too many branching paths.

Planning had been exhilarating, picturing some rich toff banging his head yelling in frustration. But planning is one thing—you can plan that next year you'll exercise three times a week, stop smoking, drink in moderation—when you actually have to pilot that body for months, it all breaks down. The fantasy was hard to keep. The mistakes his brain pointed out kept multiplying. His brain wouldn't shut up. *I did my best. Your best is garbage.*

He had blown the money he had been saving up to move out on bribes. He considered asking Marco to at least cover those costs, but he knew if he did, Ira, the reason for those costs would whisper in his friend's ear honeyed words of that being evidence of Gram's betrayal. Funds exhausted, he could barely afford to go out and drink, not that he had wanted to be around others anyway, but he wanted to be around his Dad even less.

His Neutral Milk Hotel record was playing for what had to be the hundredth time that month. The blunted needle of the player had begun to distort the already scratched record. Gram realized this and did nothing.

A heavy hand hammered at the door.

"Turn that mopey shit off and get outta yer room!"

Fuck you, Dad. Gram thought, saying nothing.

The hammering and yelling continued. Gram got up, turned on a light and turned down the volume.

“I know you’re in there! This is my fuckin house an’ as long as you are squatting ‘ere you’ll do what I damn well say!”

Gram had nowhere else to go. That prick damn well knew it. He turned the music back up, as loud as it would go, and tried to focus on tinkering with some of the stuff on his desk.

The Day Gram Got his Name

- Sixteen Years Prior -

As a child, Alex Brown did not get along with his teachers, with his parents, with the other students. He did get along with Mrs. Eliza, the librarian, Mr. Tobbs, the janitor, Ms. Stikes, the lunch lady, stray animals, and Marco. Marco was a few years ahead of him, physically built like a bull, popular, attractive, good at sports. Alex had been stuck in detention with him a few times. Marco would always laugh the loudest when Gram played the clown.

One day they had been tasked with writing “I will not misbehave” one hundred times. Alex had finished the task early and began reading a book.

“What is this?” The teacher said, pointing to his sheet of paper.

“Well, you are a math teacher, so you should already know.”

“This isn’t what was asked of you.”

“Well yeah, ‘I will not misbehave’*100 is the same thing. Didn’t you teach us we should simplify expressions?”

“That’s it, detention!” Her face was red.

“When?”

“Tomorrow!”

“Oh, no...hmm...already booked for tomorrow, I’m afraid.” He said, looking through his notebook casually. “Do you have any preferences about which day of the week?”

Her face turned scarlet, “That’s it! Make it two detentions!”

Alex looked into his notebook like a maître d' at a prestigious restaurant being asked if they could seat three. “Ohh, mmm, do you want those served consecutively? Because that could be a problem.”

As the roar of laughter filled the room, the math teacher's face turned a rare carmine before yelling and leaving the room.

After that detention, Marco had approached him and said they should hang out sometime.

They sat outside throwing rocks. Marco made sure to demonstrate he could throw further. Alex

conceded the point freely. They threw rocks in near silence until it was getting dark.

“So like why’s the sun gotta go down? Couldn’t they jus’ make it stay up there?”

“The sun doesn’t go down, bricks-fer-brains.”

“Then where does it go?”

“Well, technically, it moves in space, bu’ relative to earth, it’s standing still. We’re constantly movin’, fast at that, spinning while we move around it.”

“Doesn’t feel like we’re movin’...”

“Well, if the earth were to stop, you’d think differently of it.”

“If yer so smart, why’re you always in trouble huh? Why aren’t you out there making money?”

Marco said, landing a solid hit against a nearby tree.

“I’m not that smart, Marco, yer just dense.” Alex chuckled, hitting the same tree with noticeably less force.

“Feck you!” Marco hit him on the arm, hard but playfully.

Alex hit him back, putting in as much force as he could while still making it look playful. “And even if I was, wouldn’t matter. We’re stuck.”

“Whatcha mean?”

“Let me tell ya a story.”

Marco began listening intently. Alex hadn’t guessed it when they first met, but Marco was a genuinely curious bloke.

“There once was this king, and this dragon, and this hero. The dragon hoarded a bunch of gold. King wanted the hero to slay the dragon, as heroes do, so he can take the gold, as Kings are liable to want. But the thing is, he needed a sword that could cut the damn thing. The King put ‘is best man on it, but the hero just broke ‘em like twigs against the anvil that forged them.” Alex made a gesture like he was breaking a sword on an anvil. “But this tough, he wasn’t a normal hero, his dad had dealings with the one-eyed god, that god had gifted his father with a sword of unrivaled ability, only to break it in two later so he’d die in battle.”

Marco furrowed his brow. “Makes no sense. Why give a man a sword and then break it?”

“Yeah, well, the one-eyed god was kinda a dick like that. He would ‘elp both sides, start a conflict, or give them something to make ‘em confident, just so he could take it away at the last moment, leaving ‘em vulnerable.”

“Why would ja want a god like that?”

“Dunno, gods ‘r gods, ya don’t choose ‘em. Anyway, he was a clever god. Maybe the stories are meant to remind us that relying too much on things can be a weakness. That’s why I don’t tie my shoes.”

Marco leaned back, looking up at the sky, “Bullshit.”

That was fair. In truth, Alex never could quite get the hang of tying them properly, so they always came undone. “Nah, see, the problem with an untied shoe is that ya don’t know it. So, ya trip and fall on yer face and the like. If you never rely on them being tied, you never have to worry, ‘cause you’ll always be careful. Keepin’ your shoe untied is in keepin’ with the lessons of the one-eyed god.”

Marco rolled his eyes, “Jus’ get on with it.”

“You’re the one who interrupted! Anyway. So, the hero had the two halves still and got someone to reforge it. Afterward, that sword cut right through the bloody anvil. He used the sword to kill the dragon, only to find out the dragon was the king’s brother, transformed by greed, and the king was planning on killing the hero to take the cursed treasure for himself, so the hero killed the king and inherited the dragon’s hoard.”

“So, what’s the point? Greed’s bad?”

“Point is Marco, yer dad ever give you a magic sword?”

They both laughed.

“What’s yer name anyways there Mr. Brown?”

“Alexander the Great, Augustus, Caesar, take your pick,” Alex said with a mock grand sweeping gesture.

“Blow it out yer ass.” Marco chuckled.

Mr. Stuart Brown was already well into his cups, which was not unusual given that dinner typically happened an hour or so after his work shift ended. Alex didn’t understand why his dad drank. He never seemed happy when he did.

Alex had just been reading a book on nuclear power and was talking rapidly about it—it was cool because it harnessed energy from the atom and there were all types of different designs, but it was also kind of lame because it was just boiling water to create steam to turn a turbine like everything else did. He freely used words his parents didn’t know and continued to chatter in far too great of detail despite their obvious lack of interest.

“That’s nice, dear.” His mother said.

His father sat there grinding his teeth.

“Always puttin’ on airs. If yer so bloody smart, why your grades so low?”

“ ‘cause they don’t like me an’ it’s all just a bunch of repetitive busywork.”

His mom put down her fork and looked at him. “Alex, you’ll never get anywhere with that attitude. Do you want to be a guarantee worker?”

Alex looked at her, suppressing an eye roll. She said that kinda thing all the time. “I won’t, ma, I’ll

be fine. Jus' can't deal with a heap of bullshit."

His dad slammed his hand against the table, the plates clanked. "And what exactly do you think the real world is like? Huh? Think anyone's gonna give a copper like you a job that ain't just repetitive slog?"

"I'll find something da'."

"Sure ya will. Can't even do yer bloody school work, but I'm sure you'll handle a proper toil just fine. Look at'cha! Ya can't even use a knife proper like, look bloody 'tarded."

Alex glared back, "You know why that is da. Is that really what you want to call me? Your own son?"

"Nah, wouldn't dream of calling *my son* that. But you, my boy, you got nuthin' of me in ya, yer a Brown as much as I'm a feckin' queen!" His words were slurred. There was a torrent of rage behind them, a dam giving way in a storm.

Alex was confused, looking at his mom. "What's that mean?" His Mom's face took up a ghostly pallor.

"I'm sayin', ya little blue-eyed bastard, that yer a feckin' bastard! If it weren't for the cursed neighbors, I'd 'ave sold ya off to be one of them dolphins." As he spoke these words, his spit aspirated across the table.

Alex was trembling at the realization, but everything made sense. Given only one grandparent had blue eyes on his mother's side, his chance of inheriting blue eyes from his dad, while not impossible, was highly unlikely. He doubted his father could work out Punnett squares and wondered why he himself hadn't before. However, his father knew, it must have been tragically more direct.

The table was stone silent. His dad sat radiating anger. His mom tried her best to disappear into her chair. Alex shook, staring at the spit on his plate.

Finally, Alex looked up at his dad, at Stuart. "Never was there anyone so happy to be a bastard. I'm glad I got nothing of you. Fuckin' glad."

"Yeah, you ungrateful little shit? I raise a fuckin' cuckoo in my nest, and this is what I get?" His dad stormed to the other side of the table and rained a deluge of blows down upon the twelve-year-old Alex.

Standing over the bloodied boy, panting, his dad stopped, stormed past his mom—who was motionless—and grabbed a bottle.

His mom gave furtive glances at her husband. "Fuck this," he said, taking the bottle with him to his room.

His mom ran to Alex and held him. "It's okay, baby, it's okay."

Alex forced her off him and, without saying a word, walked out of the apartment. He had nowhere to go, but he'd be damned if he gave that prick the satisfaction of knowing it. He spat blood on the welcome mat.

Wandering to the park, he tried hard to hold onto his hatred. It felt warm. It felt righteous. But he just couldn't help it. Little cracks of doubt kept forming in his shield of wrath. It must have been hard for his father. It wasn't his dad's fault or his fault. It probably wasn't even his mom's fault. Even if it was her fault, he understood all the sacrifices she must have made to that man to keep him safe.

He sat in the park, bloodied and throwing stones, doing his best to keep the rage firing in his belly. A familiar voice appeared behind him, "The fuck happened t' you?"

Alex threw a bit of loose concrete against a tree so hard that it broke up into a dust cloud.

Marco simply sat beside him, breaking up a larger bit of concrete, giving the pair more to throw. "Ya know, we got this couch, goes t' bloody waste at night." He said after a while.

"Sounds good," Alex said, throwing another bit of concrete.

Marco's mom, Maggie, was a plump, friendly-looking lady with ruddy, rosy cheeks. "Oh dear, let's get you cleaned up! Come in, come in."

A six-year-old Luna peeked from behind a half-closed door. Alex forgot how badly his face was pummeled and tried to make a funny face at her, which made her promptly shut the door.

Maggie took a wet cloth, padding it to soak up the blood from his face. "What happened to ya then? You got quite the beating."

Alex stayed silent.

"What's yer name then, deary?"

Marco said, "That's Mr. Brown, Augustus Cesar Alexander the Great Brown."

"Not Brown. The name is Gram, just Gram."

He stayed there a week before coming home.

Eventually, his father, Stuart stopped banging on the door, Gram turned the volume back down. He looked at the little gizmo he was making and smashed it. Then he smashed everything else around him and grabbed some tigel from the bottom drawer, drinking it with shaking hands.

XIX Luna

The clock in her apartment read 7:30, and it was already dark outside. Luna needed to get ready. The house had seemed so empty without Marco around. She hadn't had so much as a single visitor since that hunter had come by. *Not even him*, she thought wistfully. She took out her bright red lipstick, applying it, and brushing some powder over her face. Grabbing her white coat, she checked her reflection and adjusted her necklace slightly.

No Marco, no parents, no remaining aunts or uncles, all she had left was herself and her job.

She hurried, just barely making it to the trolley that would take her to the midlands in time.

Emmett, the owner of the club, had given Luna, Miss Moondrop a list of twenty or so songs he approved of her to sing. She had sung each of them several hundred times by now. Her Dad had died in a workplace accident when she was five; her mother had died shortly after giving birth to her. She remembered her dad was warm. She remembered he called her "sweet pea," she forgot his face. She had a kindly aunt who took her in and raised her alongside her own son. Her Dad's life insurance was very generous for a lowlander. Unlike many less kindly aunts, Maggie used the insurance payout to send her to a school for the performance arts. After her Dad had died, she had seemed almost cheerful, singing and dancing, trying to keep those around her entertained, trying to keep herself from thinking. Her aunt thought a school for the arts would be a good fit for her little niece. So, with the help of her aunt and her dearly departed dad, there she stood, night after night, singing the same songs over and over until every last drop of flavor had been removed from them.

The easiest way to hate something that you love is to perform that action mechanically, day after day, night after night. No goodness possible in this world can stand up to the erosion of inauthentic replication. But a girl's gotta eat, and so night after night she stood on the stage, a ballerina spinning in a music box.

"Hey, sweetie, that was absolutely charming. Why not take a seat next to me? What would you like to drink?" The middle-aged man sitting before her patted the seat next to him. A patterned dark red ascot hung about his neck, which, Luna noted, looked expensive but clashed with his blue suit. Along with his ruffled and puffy shirt, he was a moneyed mismatched mess, reminding Luna not just a little of a rooster—appropriate since he was acting so much like a cock.

There really should be some common sense conventions about hitting on people in situations where they can't leave, where they must smile and be polite and go along, but that fact was precisely where the boldness came from. She knew at best, that people only half paid attention to her, and she knew that the only thing that could be worse than her singing robotically, accurately, night after night, was her pouring her heart out to an uncaring audience. She was hired to sing, but her real job was to provide romance. The idea of all the men at the nightclub was that maybe someday they could have her,

that it would make them interesting. She was paid precisely to promote that daydream. A girls gotta eat.

But she made sure it would stay firmly in the realm of dreams, regardless of the pocketbook. *Some mistakes you don't make twice.*

Emmett didn't agree with her on that matter at first, and he wasn't terribly interested in her opinion. People, men in particular, had a funhouse-mirror view of reality. But that just meant if you could tilt your head, squint just right, you could see what they saw, and you could obscure the truth so they could accept it, make it feel like it was their idea. Emmett was currently quite convinced that any real romance would dispel the beautiful illusion. He came to this, you understand, purely on his own. It was hard to get men to listen, but it was easy to get them to take credit.

Following the script for such interactions she had developed over the years, coquettish yet with a firm, unyielding barrier behind her smile, she was able to disengage from the conversation while leaving the men with sly grins. A little more audience engagement, and she would be able to take her break. She declined five offers to drink and three cigarettes that had been 'chivalrously' offered to her. Whatever else it was, her voice was a wonderful excuse. "Oh...I'm sorry...I'd love to, but that would dry out my throat too much, gotta protect my voice, *giggle*". She understood the rhythm of conversations and played them the same way that she sang. Occasionally, a customer would be too drunk and too entitled to be anything but dissonant, then Len, the bouncer, would show them out. After all, they ruin things for the other customers. Another idea of Emmett's, of course.

Luna walked out the back door with her bag. She was going to have her typical break meal, a tuna salad, with some feline friends. The local strays had her break timed down. Coming home from work, Luna always felt compelled to take a long hot shower. Feeding those mangy strays was one of the few things that made her feel clean. There she sat on the step, trying to make sure all comers got some, and as it all too often happened, she forgot to include herself. Before she had a bite, she had already distributed the last of it. After the feeding, instead of leaving, most of the cats hung around her, taking turns rubbing against her legs and receiving pets.

Two knocks on the door meant she was back on. Wiping the cat hair off her stockings, she left the crisp, cold night air for the warm, smoky club.

As she scanned the crowd, a familiar sight caught her eye, and her smile worked its way into the song. She tried to make eye contact, but anytime she looked over, he tipped his head down so that his hat would obscure his face, which only made it more obvious who it was—the one man she knew that she couldn't quite understand.

She walked to him directly during the next audience interaction break.

"If you really didn't want me to notice you, you wouldn't have worn your signature jacket."

"This? I won it in a bet from one of my superiors. Only decent coat I have, and it's cold outside."

Unmistakably Gram, though he had poorly adopted a posh accent in order to match the surroundings. Like she did.

“Uhuh, and your gloves? You’re the only one I know who would keep your gloves on in a toasty room like this.”

“These? Won these in a bet too. Real lambskin, lined in cashmere, simply too opulent to take off. Not to mention keeps all the germs away.”

Luna smirked, “Never, huh? And what about those red pants you are wearing? You win those in a bet?”

“You know, after a while, people stop taking your bets.”

“Remind me to never bet against you, Gram.” She said half-jokingly, batting her eyelashes.

He pulled the brim of his hat down. “Don’t use my name.”

“Why?”

“Never know who is watching. Actually, this is dangerous. We shouldn’t be seen talking together.” He got up to leave but then looked at his empty drink and began looking through his pockets.

“You’re being ridiculous, you know that, right?”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re safe. I’d do the same for anyone.”

“Anyone?” she was incredulous, but that did not stop her from feeling some anger. “Why not stop by? You could ask me at my kip then.”

“No, could be monitored.”

“Like that matters, it’s been months. The hunter’s probably gotten bored by now.”

“I don’t think so... It really isn’t a good idea for us to talk. I was just concerned.”

Her pursed lips puckered, “Well, in the future, if you want to hide, I’d suggest you learn to be a bit better at it.” Crossing her arms, she said, “Wait here until my next break, okay?”

Gram didn’t respond. She turned around to walk back.

“Miss Moondrop?” She heard him call out. “That last song was really lovely, by the way.”

She smiled to herself and kept walking towards the stage. He was gone before she turned around.

XX Marco

Marco was, to his partial amazement, still alive.

Looking at Gram's advice, he decided against it. Working in the mines would not be for him. Arrive early, bending down, walking with your back scrapping against the ceiling, working in the dark. He'd be so dirty when he came home that Ira probably wouldn't even want to touch him. It paid well, but Marco didn't exactly need the extra coin. Instead, he answered an advert for a farm, which did strike him a bit odd given how fucking cold Upper Winslet was, but hey, everyone's gotta eat something, right?

It was a "Boutique farm," but really, it wasn't much of a farm at all. It was a deep underground bunker with one of those creepy thinking machines, giving orders to the workers on a big flashing board. The light was always red, the air constantly thick and moist. Being underground with that red light for hours, it was hard to keep your wits about you. Rows upon rows of plants sitting their roots dangling in water from floor to ceiling. The place was underground so that it could still take advantage of thinking tech. He had to learn way more shit about plants than he ever wanted to. Humidity, light, light wavelength, temperature, and nutrient mixture were all calculated and controlled by the machine to provide leafy greens and herbs to mass-market middle-class yuppies for the lowest possible cost. But there were offshoots of private rooms with big glass terrariums that could run historical simulations for the proper rich toffs. Seemed like bullshit to Marco. How could they know what some old stiff's rosemary was like? If Gram was there, he'd probably explain some science shit about computers and climate. It didn't matter. All that was important to the customers was that each plant came with a little certificate of authenticity and a mechanical readout signed by the 'master botanist' himself. The botanist didn't seem to know too much, but he surely drank enough gin to at least smell flowery.

Marco was mostly put there to supervise the dolphins. They gave him the creeps. Looked like folk but wrong, glassy eyes, wordless mouths, hairless heads covered in scars. They acted like they didn't have any brains at all. It took a while to teach one how to do even the simplest shit, but once you did, they would stay on task, no sleep, no breaks, nonstop. At Crius, they had dolphins, but it wasn't like Marco had to see them up close. But here, his job was mostly to make sure they stayed on task. If they started messing up, he'd report them, and they'd be back two days later. The other part of his job was doing some of the more complicated instructions for custom jobs that the dolphins couldn't handle. Down there, nights could bleed into days. He lost all sense of time in the nonstop red glow. Marco blamed this for his worsened temper.

In the mail with his termination notice was a verbatim transcript of Marco's last few minutes at the farm. SUPERVISOR JOHNSON: We need to have a talk. You have been quite off in ensuring the custom stocks. This basil here was off by over an hour.

EMPLOYEE ALEX BROWN: Not like anyone will ken the bloody difference.

SUPERVISOR JOHNSON: Of course not, but that is why we have this whole underground facility. It will provide them with a full indisputable readout of the history of their plant.

EMPLOYEE ALEX BROWN: I was busy with the other stuff, there was a malfunction with the reds fer the main and it was confusing the dolphins, and anyway who wants to read a bloomin book bout their bloody basil.

SUPERVISOR JOHNSON: Our betters apparently.*sigh* Don't worry so much about the other plants. Their purchasers have *pause* less refined tastes. Consequentially they provide much smaller profit margins. Really the plants grown in the main are mostly just here to fill up remaining space leftover from the custom jobs. The customs are the real reason you have a job and don't you forget it. We have a reputation to uphold here at Winslet Purity Natural Organic Farms. Can I expect you to keep this in mind going forward, Alex? Or are we going to have a problem?

EMPLOYEE ALEX BROWN: Go fuck yourself. I don't need this feckin job anyway. *crashing sound*
[Transcribed automatically at 2:25 AM by surveillance bot 1012]

He had found that the level of bullshit he would tolerate was a lot less now he wasn't shit broke. It was only his life on the line, not the rent. Besides, the irregular work hours had been hard on Ira. She had always told him to quit, always said he should just throw the note away. But he kept it, and he would look for another job. Soon.

What time was it? Past noon? Impossible to tell, given he kept forgetting to wind the clocks. He could smell bacon and eggs. Real bacon was something he could get used to.

"Ira? Ira darlin'?"

No response, time to get up. As far as hangovers go, he would give this one a four out of ten no big deal.

Walking into the kitchen, he saw a plate with a single cold slice of bacon and some little bits of uneaten egg white as well as a note. Biting down on the half crunchy, half chewy, entirely cold bacon, he picked up the note.

Marco Bear,

Gone out for the day,

don't wait up for me!

Love,

Your Ira

A feeling welled in the pit of his stomach.

Familiar thoughts flooded his mind.

She is just spending my money, that's fine.

Everything is okay.

She needs to get out of the house sometimes.

She didn't sell me to an information broker yet, and won't today.

She loves me.

Overthinking shit was Gram's game. It leads to nothing but trouble. Everything was fine. It was too late to start looking for a new job. He might as well relax. Maybe he should clean out the pan and make some bacon and eggs. No, he always burned them when he tried himself. Besides, cooking wasn't man's work. Drinking was. Grabbing the crystal glass Ira had bought him, he poured in a few glugs of tical. He hit play on whatever record Ira had been listening to last, some Rondeq singer or another, and looked at a stain on the ceiling trying to determine whether or not it was growing, a task that became harder the fuzzier his vision became.

A knock at the door, he guessed Ira had forgotten her keys. There used to be a secret knock Gram told him which went *knock*knock*knockknock*knock* *knock* *knock*, but it didn't take long for Ira to get tired of it.

He answered the door and realized, looking at the man in front of him in his fancy white coat, that it was, in fact, not Ira.

"Alex Brown?" The obvious goldy at the door said.

Marco was relieved, something about work probably. He suddenly became sharply aware of his yellowed shirt filled with holes, his torn stained trousers, his unshaven muzzle, and his lips dyed tical purple. Marco straightened his back, correcting his posture.

"What's this about then? 'ere to complain about the bloody basil or sumthin'?"

The man smirked. "Do you happen to know a Marco Jones?"

Fuck.

Marco slammed the door and ran for the bedroom.

The man obliterated the door like it was tissue paper.

Marco grabbed the revolver out of the nightstand and pointed it at the door. Marco only had to wait a second for the man to step into the open door frame. Marco fired and kept firing until the revolver only went click click click. His heart was racing. Now that's excitement! He was glad Ira had convinced him to go against the note and get the gun, and the poor bastard wouldn't suspect a thing from a no-fight contract.

Calmly making a trail through the gun smoke, the man stood unscathed, smirking his fucking smirk. He raised his gun to Marco. Marco instinctively threw the empty gun to the ground and closed his eyes. He pressed his hands against them, waiting for it to all be over.

"Tssk tssk, Marco, you are not supposed to be playing with toys."

Marco removed his hands and opened his eyes to that self-satisfied smirk. Marco felt like an over-boiled egg.

“You were a hard man to find there, ‘Alex.’”

That fucking smirk.

“Ya well ‘ere I am in the flesh, jus’ get over with it.”

“Are those your last words?”

Wait. The drawer. Something else.

Remember ya jackass!

Marco lifted his hands above his head. “Wait!”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got somethin’, wait!”

He rummaged through the drawer, matchbook, other matchbook, other other matchbook. *Christ! How many different bars is Ira going to?* He glanced over. The man was staring at his pocket watch.

Fuck fuck fuck fuck. It’s here. It has to be.

Wait, coat pocket, maybe it is in my coat pocket.

“Lordship, would you mind, lettin’ me grab m’ coat, promise won’t try nuthin’.”

“Raise a hand at me again, and I will atomize that great big melon of yours without hesitation. Do you comprehend me, Marco?”

“Yes, sir.” Marco nodded. If he could only punch that fucking smirk off his face, that would show him just how much Marco ‘comprehended.’ Searching around his coat, he finally found it, the sealed paper. “Perhaps sir would like to read this?”

The man took the note and opened it. His grin vanished, his brow furrowed, and he placed the note into his pocket.

“I see,” The man said, lowering his gun, looking defeated, “Clever, very clever. But you do know this means you need to keep your mouth shut, right, *Alex?*”

“ ‘course I know that, but also means I never see you ‘round this place again,” Marco said, spitting on his own floor.

“Yes, yes, crystal clear. I have already had the tour, not exactly worth the return visit. Feel free to leave this place, Marco. But do not return to Elysia.”

“O, an’ are you going to give me the money to fix my door?”

“You really should not press your luck, dear fellow. Consider yourself fortunate as it stands.”

“Yeah, well, jus’ don’t let the shreds o’ door hit ya’ on the way out.”

His heart pounded. How was he still alive? That was much easier than he thought it would be.

What the hell was that note? Blackmail?

Hands shaking, he lit a cigarette.

He needed to tell Gram.

The man left through the shattered doorway. *Good riddance ya prick.*

Marco really had beaten the hunter.

The New Pyramid Builders

The new world order scaffolded on the sunken bones of the old.

Once upon a time, in humanities' distant past, there were great pharaohs, emperors, and kings. These rulers, used the force of their military might to collect from the peasants what little surplus those peasants could produce. This was, of course, shared with the nobility who held the specific leashes of the specific armies. And so it was that countries went forth, their people laboring from the many to the few, erecting temples, pyramids, and grand palaces. The nobility dined on roast meats and vegetables from far-flung realms while the peasants broke their backs to retain only the barest of subsistence that would allow them to carry on living, carry on reproducing. Nobles need peasants, the many for the few.

Then change occurred. Grand technologies accelerated humankind faster than the powers that be could hold onto them. The many accelerated through the fingers, out of the grasp of the few. In some places, the hands began to open, allowing magnificent structures to be built atop them, gaining succor from the vast excesses produced. In other places, the fists clenched down hard, harder than ever before. But humanity always found a way out, be it after one year or one hundred.

A new technological epoch brought with it great wonders and great strife. The digital age was one of near-infinite scalability. Anyone with an idea, an idea that breaks through, could provide it to the whole world, not just a few—oceans of drops wanting to be heard, with only a lucky few crashing upon the shore.

People lived in the digital world, rich and poor faces equally transfixed by omnipresent screens. Many sought to provide for this new world, most failed. Those that succeeded were lifted higher and higher, given wings by machines that began to think for man, rewarding success with success. A one in a million shot to become one who is patronized by millions—the few for the many.

It was an age in which the light of knowledge shined brightest, an inexhaustible web that covered the whole world.

But too much light can only blind.

Truth can only be seen when its impostors are eroded by the sands of time, while lies can sparkle like well-cut diamonds flashed before the eyes. Such a wide world made for few deep connections, and so the real languished in artificialities' shadow.

Truth fractured into truths; reason gave way to robotic passions.

Then, with the first great uninvention, all the numbers on all the spreadsheets became moot. Only those with claims to physical resources had anything. Much of what was claimed was destroyed in the riots that burned throughout the world like spiderwebs. There was a great scrambling, and out of it, a great war.

To many, it was seen as a cleansing flood.

A great leveling, bringing with it the third age.

An age where great structures would not be permitted unplanned.

An age of great consolidation, great wonders, and great waste.

An age that would stand as a monolith against the anomaly of history, carved in obsidian once again and forevermore. From the many to the few.