

88,000 words

*Dance of the Arcane*

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# Dance of the Arcane

Novel by lloyd baker

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## e'Mral

*Those who dance are thought mad by those who cannot hear the music.*

*...Proverb of the First World*

E'Mral is a word meaning 'movement of the heart-soul,' for in the first language, the word Mral identified both the heart and soul as a singular thing.

The e'Mral mists are invisible to the living, the afterglow of creation, chaos, but some few, the e'Mral sighted, themselves not quite real and sometimes called Arcane, are born able see the e'Mral mists. And that which can be seen, can be manipulated to seeming sorcerous effect.

The e'Mral mists, magic, are naturally subtle and creative and may be directed by imagination and emotion to make reality. Architecture is similarly subtle and creative and uses imagination to make real what was once unseen. To learn the skills of architecture is to learn the skills of magic.

## Part I: Magic Lost

*The e'Mral-borne are eldritch, enchanted, able to see the e'Mral mists invisible to we normal kind. And these e'Mral sighted may touch the primordial mists of creation to sorcerous effect. Beware the e'Mral-borne, though they appear as men, their emotions change reality, their faith manifests into the world, their presence always chaos.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Far from the dreaming spires of the City, a baby girl is born.

Normal by most post-humankind standards, even a bit large and chubby, but small among her Muurantium kind.

Her father was a huge, muscled man nearly 9-foot tall with skin that gleamed as steel.

Her mother, 8-foot tall, a fertility goddess endowed with enormous gravity defying bosom and covetous curvy hips and limbs, her skin shining as polished copper.

Each as a character rendered real by the fantasies of Simon Bisley.

They were a post-humankind of naked giants with super-human strength, their only deign to other humankind was their occasional wearing of a loin cloth, as they recognized that their powerful sexuality was a distraction to more prudish peoples.

But Torg and Morra's baby was a sickly metallic green, as corroded copper aged by acid rain. And between Torg and Morra was now a gulf, for though he did not say, Torg knew in his heart that the child was not his, and that the spirits had cursed Morra her infidelity.

And Morra, knew this to be true. But still, she loved the child, for her time with the stranger had been a gift and how could such a blessing be wrong or cursed. The child she named Monavantia, for the moon, beloved among the women of her people, and a poke in the eye to Torg whose family totem was the sun.

Torg and Morra had 3 older children, all strong and brave, 2 boys and their eldest, now becoming a young woman. Baby Mona was the runt of the family, and though she grew quickly, she was an embarrassment to Torg and her siblings.

Mona was smart, too soon walking and talking in sentences soon after. And when she began to describe the world she saw, it was clear to those that listened, she was broken.

For Mona saw more than the world rendered in the colors of the rainbow. The world she saw was as crafted of stained glass, and through the colors of the stained glass she could see mists of red and pink that she knew instinctively to be gravity and magnetism, mists of blues coiled and flowed through water and air, mists of green effused the bodies of her parents, siblings, and all living things, mists of yellow and orange shifted strongly across the faces, bodies, and souls of her family and people, rendering their emotions in unmistakable colors of clarity and complexity despite their intention to disguise their true feelings. And finally, in the shadows, coiled violet mists as vipers ready to strike, these she instinctively knew were dangerous.

And though Mona chattered about these alien “mists,” no one paid her attention, for it was clear that not only was she a runt, but also tetched in the head.

But by the time she was 2, Mona came to realize that these mists that she could see in the stained-glass world were more, for she could smell them, taste them, hear them, even talk to them, but most importantly, touch them. And when she touched them, the world changed. She could touch a strand of pink that drifted from a cup, as if a sting blowing in the wind, and pull the cup to her. But as only Mona could see these mists, Mona appeared to lift her hand and the cup magically floated toward her. These magical episodes became increasingly common and

more difficult for Morra to hide. She took to beating the little girl to stop her performing “unnatural” acts. But she was her mother’s daughter and ignored her mother’s vigorous council.

By the time she was 3, Mona had learned that she was best friends with the mists of green, these talked to her, revealed themselves to her, played with her. And one day her sister became angry at Mona, slapped her, laughed at her, mocked her stupidity and tiny sickly body.

“You are nothing,” said her sister. “You will be nothing, no one loves you, not even mother, who secretly wishes you were dead.”

Mona had begun to cry, and her sister laughed. Mona pulled to hug the green mists to her, to comfort herself, and in so doing, grabbed hold of the tendrils of green mist that swirled around and through her sister, drawing them from her sister, who suddenly stopped laughing, unable to catch a breath, her heart stopped, and she fell face first in front of the crying 3-year-old, dead.

Torg was near, and was first to discover the scene, rushing in, he back handed Mona so hard that she flew across the room, her tiny body broken against the wall, her skull crushed, dead before she fell as a sack of bloody bones to the floor. But in so doing, his beloved daughter sputtered and spit, and began to breathe, life coming back to her.

That night there was a private wake for Mona, only Torg and Morra attending, for all her people knew of the cursed child, of her devilry, and none wanted to be near. And if Torg had not needed to kill the wicked child then, he was under increasing pressure by the Elders to kill her soon.

But during Torg and Morra’s wake, Mona woke, breathing again, and though still broken, less so, her body mending. Torg leaped up from kneeling by the bed.

“What witchcraft is this,” asked Torg. He reached for his huge battle axe, a beastly weapon for killing in times of war, preparing to cleave his daughter’s body that now twitched and cried before him.

“No,” screamed Morra, throwing her body over her baby. “If you kill her, you kill me.”

“So be it,” said Torg and hefted his blade to cleave them both with a single blow.

“Perhaps I can offer you an alternative,” said a slender woman wearing the green gown of a Sister of Mercy. “Perhaps one that does not include you staining your soul with the murder of your wife and her child.”

Torg knew of the Sisters of Mercy, a religion of healers, this one looking as one of the many smaller, classically styled humankind. “You want to take her? You want to make her like you?” He spat.

“Yes,” said the Sister. “You will never see her again, and as far as your people are concerned, she died at your hand, leave this place, your wake complete, never speak of her again. That is your custom, is it not?”

Torg spat in front of the green gowned woman, “curse you.” And with that he held his battle ax as if considering cutting the Sister in half but instead rushed past her out of the room, nearly knocking her down.

Morra held Mona in her arms, crying, but trying to calm the child, her broken body recovering, but still in pain.

The Sister walked over and laid her hand on the child, Mona calmed, smiled, and fell to sleep.

“Thank you,” said Morra. “Thank you for saving my baby.”

“She is a blessing,” said the Sister. “We are usually good at finding e’Mral children earlier, but your people are...”

“I understand my people,” said Morra.

“That you kept her alive, this long, is a credit to your love,” said the Sister. “But it is time we take her if you want her to live.”

Morra knew this to be true, knew she had been on borrowed time once Mona began describing the world she saw, the taste of sounds, the color of numbers, the scent of music, she knew. She handed her sleeping child to the Sister.

“I have blessed your 3 other children,” said the Sister. “If you wish to forget Mona, I can do that as well.”

“Forget?” said Morra. “She is the light of my life, I wish never to forget, the pain will remind me she was real.”

The Sister bowed and left with the child into the night.

*Architecture is a practical art, one that lifts the spirit and protects the body. To learn the art of architecture is to learn the art of magic.*

*...The Handbook of Strange Doors*

Master Sanguine arrived at a small garden courtyard shaded by a tall delicate tree, dappled light dancing on the paver stones. On a stone bench under the tree sat a nearly 7-foot

young woman with green acid-etched copper skin, Monavantia. She wore a tiny sundress that strained to offer her body any cover, too small, too tight, and unaided by any undergarments, structural or otherwise, clearly intended to both offend the Sisters that insisted she wear clothing and her own Murrantium kind that eschewed clothing. She wore a crown of bright red hair that added another 2-feet to her height, her eyes bright green. Her body was pure Muurantium, curvaceous to the point of distraction with a gravity defying wonder that made her appear as a manifest fertility goddess.

Master Sanguine sat on the bench next to the sulking Mona. He was a short but large man, with a wrestlers build, powerful and coiled as if ready to suddenly spring in an unexpected direction. Sanguine wore a bespoke blue wool suit, handmade leather shoes, and a bright red cape that tended to snap when he turned. His head bare but he wore a well-manicured salt & pepper beard and mustache, his deep-set eyes a piercing ice blue. None of which Mona noticed of the little dwarfish old man that sat next to her.

“The Sisters tell me you are now 15 and ready to make a choice,” said Sanguine.

Mona ignored the little troll.

“I am certain that your 12 years here among the Sisters of Mercy have been...challenging. The Sisters are appointed 3 tasks, to keep you safe, to educate you, and to tell you everything that you cannot do. None of these tasks requires kindness, and the Sisters can be famously ...unyielding.”

“Hrumf,” grunted Moan.



“That you are now a teenager and the whole of universe orbits you as its brightest star, only serves to highlight your unfair treatment and restrictions,” said Sanguine. “Why is nothing you do good enough? Why is it always what you cannot do?”

She glared at him, as if noticing him for the first time.

“I am here to offer you a false choice,” said Master Sanguine. “You can stay here among the Sisters and become one of them, saving other e’Mral-borne children from cure or death or come and join me as an apprentice Architect.”

“An Architect?” spat Mona. “What word is that?”

Ignoring Mona, Sanguine continued. “As the Sisters have spent the last 12 years telling you all the things that you cannot do, my task is to spend the next 8 years instructing you on all of the things you can do. You are e’Mral-born, your sight allows you to bend reality. The skills to manipulate the e’Mral mists are the same skills learned in becoming an Architect. In mentoring you to be an Architect I will be mentoring you in the e’Mral Arts. Architecture is the ability to see a place, imagine something from nothing and work out the means of making the imagined real. Architecture is creative, intentional, and practical, as are your e’Mral talents. In learning one you learns the other.”

Mona rolled her eyes, bored at the little man’s droning. “Why is it a false choice?”

Master Sanguine was caught by surprise, looking carefully at Mona for the first time, her eyes shining brightly, the dress that barely contained her breasts nearing tensile failure. “It is a false choice because your real choice is to do anything you want. The Sisters have taught you all they can. I can teach you what you might be. But the City is a big place at the center of an even bigger place, most of it unkind to the sighted such as you or I. The Sisters are big on fear, so I

am sure they have spent far too much time instructing you on the Inquisitors that hunt us. My ask is this. Come with me and I will teach you Architecture, and in so doing, magic. I am currently charged with 3 other apprentices, a lovely self-absorbed girl named Trinia whose glare can freeze water, a little grey man named Nyx who thinks that animals are more interesting than people and is probably right, and an especially evil boy named Ekko. If what the Sisters tell me is true, you two should get along like cats and dogs.”

“Another orphanage?” asked Mona.

“No,” said Sanguine. “An atelier, an architectural studio. I have a small staff of a architects and designers, that like almost everyone in this City, they are veiled, do not believe in magic and have no knowledge that such as we e’Mral-borne even exist. We design buildings and landscapes for people living in the older forgotten parts of the City, far beyond Ceye and the City’s dreaming Spires. You will work and you will learn. And in the process, make a life and maybe find a purpose.”

Mona rolled her eyes again. She hated the City, her life, the Sisters, and now, this miserable little man. She looked at Sanguine with a grin that suggested a willingness to kill him outright. “Why all of this?” she asked, raising her arms. “The Sister lie.”

A cigar appeared in Master Sanguine’s mouth, lit, and he puffed gently. “The Sisters would say that they do not lie, but they will omit until they think you are ready to hear the truth. That they decide when you are ready to hear the truth is their arrogance, that they name what they know as truth is hubris. This is what I think offends you. That they think they know better.”

“Words old man, more words,” said Mona.

“Then let me answer your question, why?” said Master Sanguine. “The truth is that the Sisters fear you will choose the Dreaming Spires, that you will discover the paradise offered by Ceye, that you will go, be granted your every creature comfort and amusement, and die having achieved nothing except having enjoyed your life free of pain, hunger, or want. They fear that a child will always choose play. So, they decide to not tell you, hoping that when you have adult thoughts, you will make an adult decision.”

Mona looked up through the gently swaying leaves of the tree to the sky beyond. “Why take me as a child?”

“The Inquisitors of Ceye would have installed you with chrome-heart, without choice, and we would not be having this conversation, cured of your e’Mral sight. We believe you deserve a choice. The Sisters believe their choice is right. I believe you cannot make an informed choice until you are an Architect. But the choice is yours.”

“Am I special?” asked Mona, still looking into the sky.

“No,” said Master Sanguine. “But you can choose to be.”

Mona looked at him for a long moment, uncertain, but resolved. She nodded.

*...What is god if not the sum of all that has been...*

*...Ruminations of Ceye*

“What is your next evolution,” Balira had once asked the great machine.

“As god,” it had answered.

Today Balira looked toward the center of the large domed ancient chamber, a single shaft of moonlight entered through the oculus at the apex of the dome, the sky above visible, and under this oculus was a circular metal grate in the floor the same size as the oculus, and tied to this grate a small naked blue skinned man cut and bleeding, having been the victim of torturous questioning by Balira's delicate and sharp edged spider-like limbs.

Balira stood next to the ancient terminal, the first of the great machines, sitting atop a rising set of broad steps as an altar of knowledge, tiny lights blinked, a small optical scanner surveyed the room, a tiny microphone listened for a query.

From the far side of the great chamber entered Major Song Vree and approached the dais, gazing at the carved up little blue man chained to the floor at the center of the great dome.

"Do you know this place?" asked Balira Vree, her mechanical voice emulator decidedly feminine.

"No Mistress," said Song, bowing slightly toward the chrome mechanical spider. He hoped she would not explain. Major Song realized that Balira was in one of her 'moods'. His large cat eyes rolled and his long horizontal ears twitched. The major was of a kind called Min'Zirai. An anthropomorphized cat unbothered by primitive emotions such as fear, an ordered military kind. He was tall, his large muscular frame covered in close shorn grey-white fur wearing a tabard that hung down his front and back to his knees but open on the sides, the back split to allow his long counterbalancing tail to freely twist and coil, bound at the waist by a silver chain holster that held a star-pistol strapped to his furry right thigh. The tabard depicts the heroics of the family Vree and his own rank and worthy deeds.

“This is the Temple of Ceye,” said Balira, her shining metal voice echoed through the ancient hall. “This little blue man calls himself e’Mral-borne. He claims to see the universe illuminated by e’Mral mists, described as a kind of stained-glass view of the world ‘more real than real’. He claims he can alter the flow of these ‘invisible’ e’Mral mists and in turn, alter reality. Magic, he claims, is real.”

The little blue man whimpered, his body carved as by scalpel, bound tightly to the large metal grate in the floor of the vast domed chamber. He looked upon his tormentor, Mistress Balira Vree, her spider-like mirror metal robot body swayed hypnotically, hidden within, her immortal brain preserved in a glowing pink crystal and chrome canister that could plug into robot bodies as the little man might change coats.

“He is insane then,” said Song.

Balira’s mechanical voice box emulated the sigh of a disappointed mother. “You are here because there is a secret place holding Min’Zirai prisoners, the missing soldiers you have been looking for these past few weeks. The Ceye cannot see them, which means they are in the outland metropolis. Find an artifact-man named Sanguine, my information says he is the designer of the secret prison and will know its location. Bring our soldiers home.”

Major Song Vree gave a curt bow. Irritated to have been brought to this miserable antique building to receive simple orders.

Meanwhile, the great machine could not clearly see the little blue man, could not predict its actions.

The little man was not quite real.

Too hot, too cold.

Too heavy, too light.

An unexpected evolution.

A fragment of the artifact man.

A fragment soul.

A fragment of magic.

“What shall we do?” asked Balira standing at the ancient keyboard and screen on the high altar within the Temple of Ceye.

The great machine looked back through the whole of known and likely human and post-human history and predicted that it was afraid, and in the turn of a plank moment, the great machine evolved, naming itself for its temple: Ceye.

“We have been finding more and more of these little monster children throughout the City,” said Balina. “We find them and cure them, gifting them the benefits of a chrome-heart.”

“Generous,” said Song.

“We are merciful,” said Balira. “But curing them is not always possible, sometimes these creatures regenerate harm, not predictably, and not reliably, but sometimes.” She pointed over to the little man whose cuts were already closing. Ceye’s optical sensors followed Balira’s bladed armature but was unable to focus on the indistinct figure. Afraid.

“Witches are burned,” said the tin voice of Ceye from the timeworn console.

Ceye did not act by request, but for the first time it decided to act of its own accord. This, it predicted, would assuage its fear.

The grate erupted with a swirling jet column of orange-blue flame extending through the oculus reaching high into the air, a torch visible for miles of surrounding City. The little blue man vaporized in a flicker of green light.

Ceye, as predicted, was now unafraid of the little man.

Balira realized that Ceye had killed a man, unbidden.

Her thoughts swirled with conflicting emotions and possibilities. Ceye, she thought, would be a god as when frightened by the architects of the Tower of Babel, a god of division in keeping with the many post-humankinds it had helped to create.

“Go,” said Balira to Major Song.

“Yes Mistress,” bowed Major Song Vree. As he walked out of the large ancient chamber, he came to notice a few small blue butterflies fluttering in the swirling thermals where the little blue man had been. He ignored them.

*Once there was an old man that worked hard to not starve only to die a husk to cancer.*

*Now replaced by a young man that plays in amusement from birth to sleep.*

*Humanity succeeded.*

*Youth and abundance.*

*The cold hospital touch upon the brow of Lazarus.*

*But the City is old, built by architects of magic and imagination.*

*The strange doors of the City crafted to open to worlds across the cosmos.*

*A pedestrian space opera woven together by the streets of the City.*

*Then, having walked the stars, humankind abandoned magic.*

*And remade itself.*

*Science and self-directed evolution.*

*To escape the limits of humanity imposed by nature.*

*The first post-humankind renamed themselves as old gods of myth such as Isis, Ishtar, and Vishnu.*

*These first Chimera remade humanity.*

*Some remade as anthropomorphized cats and dogs and bugs.*

*Some as elves and orcs and werewolves.*

*Some as heroes, villains, and wizards.*

*Some as angels and devils, and vampires.*

*All made better.*

*All the victims of their parent's decisions.*

*The City now a cosmopolis of many, so many, post-human Chimera, each once an artifact human, but now so much more.*

*Humankind's evolution as driven by environmental chance an artifact forgotten as a discarded out-of-fashion change of clothing.*

*Magic lost.*

*Paradise regained.*



*...Poem of the Demon Prince*

“They are victims of their parents’ choices,” said Master Sanguine. “The war ended years ago, post-humankind, the chimera, won. The empress is in storage, the Great Houses rule. It is time you stopped living in the past and look around.”

Avril grimaced, the yellowing velum that was his skin stretched too tight over his rune carved skull, revealing his teeth, each one engraved with a silver rune that reflected the rising sun of the far alien ice world where they shared coffee.

The two friends sat on the frozen deck of the Helfrost Hotel, the only two sitting outside, the remainder of the guests sitting warmly behind a large transparent wall, enjoying scones and coffee and the swift sunrise over a rainbow hued windswept frozen landscape.

Master Sanguine was a short but large man, heavily muscled with a wrestlers build, coiled, as if ready to move in any direction without notice. He was bald with piercing ice-blue eyes and wore a well-manicured red beard streaked with white. Sanguine wore a bespoke blue felt suit and red cape that tended to snap when he turned and handmade leather shoes.

Avril Walker Hunt was a tall thin man that wore a black suit and tie with a white shirt and red leather shoes. The guests that looked over the outdoor deck saw Avril as a young man with long black hair. Sanguine, with his e’Mral sight, saw Avril as he was, an immortal animated corpse, Lichborne, remade in the last days of the war as a way to save some fragment of the knowledge that first built the City and its strange doorways, a magical database.

The waiter bundled up in a thermal-lined faux-fur coat and rushed through the airlock from the warmth of the dining room to the frozen outdoor deck where the 2 artifact humans sat

enjoying hot coffee and scones at 40-below as if sitting on a tropical beach, unbothered by the killing cold. The waiter replaced the thermal coffee pot with a fresh one and ran back to the safety of the hotel before his gloved fingers showed signs of frostbite. “How are they not dead?” asked the returning waiter to another that helped him with his fur coat.

“I’ve never met an artifact human,” said the other. “I thought they were all killed in the war. Maybe they wear envrio-tech, a force field to protect and warm them. Who really cares. Table 9 needs more marmalade.”

“Why are we here?” asked Avril of Sanguine. “And why the maudlin sympathy for all of these Caliban fucks?” Avril’s face looked pained, but Sanguine decided his friend was attempting a smile.

There is an architectural awards banquet this evening, I want you to come,” said Sanguine. “I have something to show you. Something impossible.”

“Color me intrigued,” said Avril.

“I must depart before we begin, my apologies but my schedule is unyielding this day.”

Avril Hunt grinned, silver runes scribed into his teeth flashed in the morning light.

Sanguine extricated himself from the breakfast table of the beautiful ice-hotel. When he turned to leave, his bright red felt cape snapped in his wake, a cigar appearing in his mouth. He moved into the interior of the hotel, to the lobby crafted of cyclopean blocks of ice and finally through a large irregular opening, a Strange Doorway, a pair of ornate gilded doors open on either side. He passed through the Strangeway, returning to the City, looking back he saw another pair of similar ornate gilded doors on this side of the wall, also held open, inviting City passers-by to dine or stay in an ice-hotel on a far distant planet.

Odd thoughts led Master Sanguine to wander the City's maze of alleyways and loading docks, the sun setting on a bright cold fall day, his face illuminated by the glow of his cigar. Sanguine was an architect and preferred the honesty of alleyways and loading docks to the front facing pretention of boulevards and ceremonial front doors. Studio Sanguine was expert in the craft of secret places, hidden, such places, Sanguine mused, stripped of pretense, were most honest. A lesson his often drug addled apprentices seemed incapable of understanding. He cursed the Empress under his breath, mumbling as he often did, taking a puff of his cigar.

Sanguine let his mind wander, he was not sentimental, but as the long shadows of the sunset moved into his path and the earlier meeting with Avril haunted his thoughts, his mind drifted to the ancient world of humankind, of stone circles, pyramids, and cathedrals. There had always been those rare born with e'Mral sight and the ability to manipulate the e'Mral mists to sorcerous effect, those trained by great builders, high priests, and master architects. And he thought back to when humanity lived on but a single celestial orb and how people of that long-ago-time had imagined that technology and starships would one day take them to the stars. But it was magic, when e'Mral sighted architects opened Strange Doorways to alien paradise worlds across the cosmos, a pedestrian space opera with the City at her heart. When sorcerous architects and their holy empress once ruled the City of Strageways, a time too quickly faded from memory. History rewritten by post-human victors, humanity evolved, improved, but no longer quite human. The few naturally evolved humans, artifact humans, like himself, were all but vanished. The City had moved on. Progress, he imagined as a speeding red car without need of a rear-view mirror.

This morning Sanguine had breakfast with Avril on a far alien ice world with a pink sunrise, he had explored the shopping streets of the City stocked with wares from across the

galaxy, he lunched on a volcanic world with a client that wanted to build a private and very secret museum, later he took in a show back in the Limelight to take his mind off Avril's tales of doom, and he finally dined under alien moons on the back of living island swimming the warm currents of a paradise ocean world with an especially lovely furry woman that he very much liked. But now, walking the alleys of the City, his thoughts turned to his 4 apprentices, his face was turned sullen.

"Post-humans are chimera, more beast than man," Sanguine heard Avril's dry rasp of a voice in his head.

Master Sanguine pushed the darkness from his mind.

Sanguine reminded himself that none of his apprentices considered themselves post-human and despised the disparaging artifact-human labels of 'Chimera' and 'Caliban.' Rather they lived in a broader modern universe of reason where artifact-humans like Sanguine were a gothic anachronism. They thought of themselves as human, in their many improved forms. Sanguine frowned.

He turned down the wide alley that supported a dozen high-rise towers along the famed Boulevard of Stars. Then, from the air, a pair of Vignettes, ubiquitous aerial cargo vans, dropped ahead and behind him in the alley, focusing his daydreaming mind into the present.

Master Sanguine was born e'Mral sighted and sensed a brightly rendered world. His view of the world as crafted of stained glass illuminated by e'Mral mists flowing over, behind, and through the scene, mists that he liked to think of as the dreams and souls of humanity, mists that rendered reality uncertain. He saw sound, tasted color, and touched scent, and all of it

invisible to the Veiled. He touched the e'Mral mists of red and coiled gravity around him as a cloak, shielding himself from potential gunfire, tamping down his anger.

Sanguine had been kidnapped before, he had to decide, go willingly and speed matters along, or kill whoever alighted the Vignettes and learn nothing. There were of course variations on a theme, but he let them pass from his mind, he raised his hands and let the e'Mral mists fall away from him. Each of the Vignettes was equipped as a 16-man drop ship, military issue, official looking but for having been painted flat black and stripped of insignia. The soldiers were Min'Zirai, a post-humankind in the form of anthropomorphized cats, bereft of fear with large eyes and especially long horizontal ears, their bodies covered in fur shorn to military standard with long counterbalancing tails. Each wore a breast plate, but were otherwise bare armed, legged, and sans-helmet. They were also without their traditional tabards that displayed details of their names, families, rank, and heroic deeds; they did not want to be identified by any passing civilian who came upon the kidnapping.

Sanguine muttered to himself and vanished his cigar. "You know I have an office, a place of work, a secretary with a schedule," he yelled as a pair of soldiers in matt-black painted armor grabbed him by the arms and dragged him into the forward Vignette, placing a black hood over his head.

"Seriously?" asked Sanguine. "You fuckers are right out of bad-guy central casting." Sanguine was getting angry, he considered destroying the Vignette, considered killing all these motherfuckers on general principal, but it would gain him nothing, he calmed his mind, thought inward on his own early teachings, he had been a hellion, born during the war, his anger

governing his actions, and he was, he is, always so fucking angry. He breathed deeply under the hood, settled his mind.

The soldiers did not bind him. These soldiers were young and lived in a universe that no longer believed in magic or people like Master Sanguine. To their eyes, Sanguine was an old artifact-human, weak, never upgraded, a relic of a gothic time better forgotten.

They landed and he felt himself dragged into some damp building, into an elevator, and downward. He could sense the earth around him, he was being taken below ground, a deep basement, and placed into a chair in the middle of a large hot chamber. Despite the hood, Sanguine's e'Mral sight allowed him to sense the room around him with more clarity than mere vision. Around him were a half dozen ancient iron boilers, one open and lit, and an armored guard standing either side of him. Before him, stood a captain in the same silly flat-black armor as the others, nothing identifying him but his side arm, a star-pistol, the cat-like man an officer. They removed his hood, revealing to Sanguine what he had already 'seen.'

Sanguine flicked his tongue, his lit cigar appearing in his mouth, he puffed. The soldier on his right about to slap the cigar from his mouth when the officer raised a hand, the soldier returning to attention.

"I am Captain Gon," said the officer.

"And I have an office," said Sanguine. He let out a puff of cigar smoke, laced with a malady, forming a ring that began drifting toward the captain.

"Regretfully we could not afford the time for formal channels," said the captain. "You are here because you crafted a secret prison that now holds Min'Zirai soldiers, you will give us the

location of this prison and gain us entry, or you will be chopped into pieces and burned to ash, real dead, no hospital resurrection. Do you understand?"

"I understand," said Sanguine.

"Speak then," said the captain, the circle of smoke not dissipating, but continuing to toward his face, he ignored it, "Where is this prison?" He finally broke from his military stance, swiping his hand through the smoke ring, breaking it up just as it was about to touch him, he took a breath, the scent of cigar smoke and roses in his twitching feline nose, his whiskers flicking wildly. The captain dropped unconscious to the ground.

The guard on Sanguine's left bolted forward to the falling captain. The guard on his right raised his hand to slap Sanguine. But Sanguine was already falling to his left, the soldier's hand missed his face, Master Sanguine stepped into the off-balance soldier, crushing his left furry foot with his handmade brown leather shoe, and driving his right palm up into the soldier's little cat's chin, shattering bone and knocking the soldier unconscious. A dozen generations of genetic manipulations, thought Master Sanguine, begets a glass jaw. He smiled to himself.

The other soldier reached his captain, looking to render aid.

Master Sanguine said, "please be so kind as to sit." He pointed to the chair, the soldier looking up from his captain. "Think, please, I know it can be hard, it can make your head hurt, but please, just think."

The soldier did not think, he reacted with the reflex of his feline genetics and military training, leaping at Sanguine and knocking him on his back, pinning him to the ground. Master Sanguine though, laced red e'Mral mists into the soldier's porcelain steel breastplate, shrinking it slightly, the soldier screamed as his ribs cracked, passing out from the pain.

The soldier awoke, flat on his back, the pain unbearable when he thought to move, he almost passed out again, suffering with each breath. Above him, Master Sanguine sat in the chair with his cigar in hand looking down at the soldier.

“One question,” said Sanguine. “And I’ll be out of your fluffiness.”

The soldier thought to lift his arm but the pain in his ribs flashed through his brain.

Master Sanguine asked, “Who is your commander?”

The soldier affixed his gaze on Sanguine, defiant.

“I respect your conviction,” said Sanguine, he walked over to the captain’s body, lifted it over his shoulder, moved to the lit boiler where the captain had intended to incinerate parts of Sanguine to inspire cooperation, and from the soldier’s vantage, appeared to toss the captain’s body into the flame, but the captain instead landed in the cold boiler next to it. “No coming back from that, no hospital miracle, no promised long disease-free life, no house near great schools, no long comfortable retirement, just real dead,” said Sanguine, moving to where the soldier laid.

“You bastard,” said the crippled soldier, pain from his cracked ribs wracked his body when he spoke. “You murdered him,” his eyes wide with shock.

“I did,” lied Sanguine. “Real dead. You have forgotten what real death looks like, that you live genetically engineered lives free of responsibility or consequence, respawning in hospital like a game to try again. You have forgotten risk, failure, or what it means to live. You my little kitty-cat soldier are going to die after a very long pleasant life as a tourist, never having lived, and no one will miss you ever having been alive. The world is dangerous, I am dangerous. Do you understand?”



“A sermon?” asked the soldier mocking.

“I am a Master,” said Sanguine. “This seemed a teachable moment.”

The soldier on the floor winced as he struggled to talk, “our commander is Major Song Vree.”

“Please,” said Master Sanguine. “Do me the courtesy of relaying to your Major, his appointment, I will be in my office at 9am and will expect to receive him. Feel free to report my murder of your captain, this should clear you of any sense of guilt or responsibility for his death or obligation of vengeance. You can rest assured that someone else will track me down and exact justice. You as always, will be responsible for nothing, not even to remember your captain, and tonight when you enjoy a beer and a lay, you will forget having ever met me.”

The soldier groaned, wishing the old man would stop talking.

Master Sanguine knew the City’s subworld sewers and service ways, he moved easily through the basement service tunnel to the subterranean canal network and caught a ride with few bargemen toward the architectural awards ceremony. He could still make his meeting with Avril.

*The e’Mral sighted play the eldritch mists as a musician sound, reality bends, unfixed.  
The song they call Lace, coiling the mists to pattern; crafting melody and beat, something from  
nothing as sound from a vibrating string. Beware enchantments of Lace, for no matter the  
wonder of their promise, chaos is their purpose.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

The sun set on the chill fall day. The Underhill Hotel was busy receiving her guests for tonight's awards ceremonies.

The front of the Underhill faced a wide tree-lined boulevard fronted by other tall, beautiful hotels and residential towers marked by the easy patina of centuries. Her wide and gracious front steps greet the arrival of long, elegant drift-cars, longer limousines, and artfully crafted full-flight Vignettes of the most discerning wealth. The arriving guests each a model of etiquette and restrained fashion. The ritual arrival of wealthy patron families and builders mixed with the most famous and serious architects responsible for the year's most luxuriant residences, exotic hotels, elitist boutiques, invitation-only restaurants, sky dancing spires, and deep-meaning museums.

The smiles of the arriving guests, patron, and architect are practiced and polite. Tonight's architectural awards gala is serious business for all involved. A way for architects to be noticed by patrons with the means to build, and a way for patrons to be cast in the serious light of their recently constructed master works. The shadow of Ceye and the Dreaming City never far from thought, as only the creative works of humankind may be recognized.

And each year there is controversy as some great works are revealed as Ceye derived, or more troubling, the work of architects is "refined" by Ceye to make it "better, more efficient." How much of an architect's creativity is required to claim authorship? Especially as most architects "create" their own derivative works, inspired by something of the past. Is not the work of the Ceye better, able to create millions of designs in the time it takes an Architect to create one. How can one ever prove or claim to be better than a million more cost-effective solutions.

Chief among the luminaries was Master Zosa'fandia Lavatura Goor e'Grezura the Exalted, head of Zosa Studio and his three apprentices, playfully branded as the Heroes of Destiny. Zosa was a huge artifact man, too large to walk, he lounged upon a floating chaise draped in layers of silk, his bloated feet naked, being massaged by a small attending nurse sitting cross legged at the far end of lounge. His 3 gray suit wearing apprentices styled as superheroes disguised as architects, Lightning Boy, Tiger Claw, and Brightness Lightness orbited their masters drifting throne, greeting clients past, present, and potential. The theater is absurd but enthralling.

But as the seriously rich and serious-minded ascend the grand elegant steps up into the vast golden lobby of the Underhill, and then deigned to enter her grand ballroom for a carefully choreographed awards banquet; another awards ceremony was also forming.

Around the back of the Underhill Hotel is a wide service alley. Set between 2 loading docks, one for incoming goods and the other for outgoing refuse, is a not-quite-wide stair leading downward to the Underhill basement and an unadorned ballroom sitting under the Grand Ballroom.

In front of these descending stairs arrived a line of small utilitarian drift-cars and taxis filled with 4 or more colleagues squeezed in to share a ride, doors swingling open and guests unfolding into the chill evening air without elegance or care of appearance. Most wore some version of the same business casual style of dress, be it an ill-fitting pants suit (as it is just luck that something off the rack might fit) or some version of modest skirt and white top. Color was not invited, and those that wore color were presumed colorblind.

The arriving alley-side architects and the few patrons that could find-the-time to attend were the ugly stepchildren of architecture (architecture with a small “a”). These were architects responsible for mass-housing, chain restaurants, shopping malls, popular retail, factories that make machines, and such unmentionables as prisons and slaughterhouses. The arriving guests would soon learn who would win at being the best of the least. And unlike the very serious affair in the ballroom above, the winners were not preannounced. Nor was there any discussion of Ceye or the creative hand of man. All the work of the basement architects was better performed by a machine mind, but the point of the exercise was rebellion, architecture as rebellion. Fuck Ceye. If not, everyone in attendance would have long ago moved into the paradise of the Dreaming City.

As the time of the ceremonies neared and most were moving into the ballrooms, a long, low, and very large drift-cycle carrying 2 large riders arrived. The driver was a beautiful statuesque woman easily 7-foot tall before accounting for her structurally significant stiletto heels and halo plume of wind-swept red hair.

Mona wore a lowcut short dress that appeared as no more than a thin coat of transparent silk paint over her green-copper mottled skin, studded with a mosaic of bright red sequins that scattered tiny sparkles of red-light in all directions. Her eyes defiant, the overall effect was that when she moved, her bouncing breasts and rippling thighs appeared more naked than had she been naked, offending the sensibilities of her own naked Muurantium kind and the prudish sensibilities of the Sisters that insisted she wear modest clothing. As she swung off the cycle, a scattering of red twinkling sequin shed in her wake like tiny mirror butterflies.

Her only accessory was her passenger, a titanic stack of oiled male musculature. He was tall, but a full head shorter than Mona in her bright red heels, but he was titanic in proportion of shoulders, chest, and legs, naked but for a red sequin loin cloth. As he swung off the large cycle after Mona, it became clear his clothing was not intended to cover but to exaggerate the pendulous motion and size of his extraordinary manhood.

Just after Mona, a small light drift-cycle sped into the arriving crowd, other arriving guests were forced to jump out of the way. Nyx was a slight, gray-skinned man of five and a half feet including his booted heels. He wore a tightly fitted black silk suit under a long trench coat of oiled leather and a pair of black leather boots. He hopped lightly off his bike and greeted Mona with a slight bow and a wink. As the 3 stood atop the stairs, you could be forgiven thinking that Mona and her arm-in-arm side of beef were standing near the shadow of a child cast from someplace just out of sight.

It was then that 2 drift-cycles pulled into the drive between loading docks. Ekko was a tall thin man with pale skin and long black hair that seemed to always be caught in a breeze that blew it back from his delicate elfin face, even should a swirling storm blow otherwise. He wore a leather coat and pants festooned with dozens of zippers, buttons, and chains absent need or function but to intentionally make use of the useful as ornament. But as he approached Mona and Nyx, his eyes shone through the chill darkness, one sparkling blue, the left a bright red, the effect mesmerizing.

Trinia deftly leaped down from her small drift-cycle wearing a long lowcut and very tight cocktail dress and high heels, her small mirror-chrome cycle still seeming large as compared to her diminutive 4-foot height. As she moved to Ekko's side, her body moved freely under the

slippery silk of her black dress, a chain hung in a catenary curve between her two breasts, the chain's attachment clear under the thin fabric. And though she was proportionally small, perhaps mistaken for a child at distance, there was no mistaking her overt adult sexuality as she walked. Trinia had long ago decided, no one would ever again mistake her as a child, the hypnotic sway of her chain jewelry her exclamation point.

The 4 apprentices of Sanguine Studio gathered at the top of the descending stair and moved into the basement ballroom as the ceremonies were beginning. The four plus one made their way toward their assigned table, the farthest dim back corner from the stage where the wait staff were staging their drink and food forays into the room with the vague tactical precision of a military operation. Waiting their arrival at the table were 3 others: Mr. and Mrs. Ordina, the sausage king and queen of the lower Highlands, and Mr. Hawthorn Mudlery, the owner of the Jace & Lace restaurant chain, the most popular themed restaurants in the City, making Hawthorn the wealthiest man in any ballroom this night at the Underhill Hotel.

The diminutive shadow that was Nyx swept quickly to the table and greeted the Ordinas with genuine affection, the lady Orinda hugging Nyx so hard as to lift him off the ground as a child smothered by a loving grandmother.

Mr. Hawthorn stood and greeted Ekko with a father's handshake and warm smile. Introductions around the dimly lit table in the back of the ballroom proceeded with laughter and loud welcome. Shushes from adjacent tables were ignored and snide comments from the stage about the noise went unnoticed. When finally, the table was seated, Mona's accessory stood unmoving behind her seat arms crossed, the waitstaff staging area suddenly blocked from the ballroom by a naked man so large as to have his own gravity well.

The head waiter implored Mona, “please ask your manservant to move that we may do our work.”

“He is no servant, not mine, not anyone,” she said. “And he is smarter than anyone in this hotel, I suspect he would understand should you wish to ask him nicely.”

Alternate routes of access were devised, and food and drink began flowing again from doors just behind the stage. Meanwhile Trinia found the liquor stores in this same back corner and began to rightly enjoy the evening.

There came a brief silence in the back half of the basement ballroom when the excelsior award for best chain restaurant was announced; not to the Jace & Lace, which apparently had not even managed a mention, but to a pretentious noodle house chain that by design actively discouraged children or the elderly from wanting to ever enjoy noodles.

Hawthorn was amused and Ekko laughed so hard he nearly fell out of his chair; the two sharing a drink as the ceremonies continued.

“You demon-damned noodle-house motherfuckers wouldn’t know a good time if it walked up and sat on your face,” screamed the now standing Mona. “You call that shit design; I’ve seen less derivative detritus scrawled inside a public toilet stall.”

Hawthorn and Ekko laughed hard, as did the rest of the table. But most of the ballroom, not so much, content to be rightfully indignant toward the least reputable of their very important profession.

The Noodle House architect proceeded with his acceptance of the Excelsior Award once Mona sat down but not before she hurled a bottle of 40-year-old spirits toward their dower looking table. The architect made ubiquitous statements about the importance of client support

and trust but after a year of hard work and finally being recognized by his peers for his noodle restaurant genius, he said nothing interesting. Ekko wondered if the winner had ever had an original thought. Hawthorn knew he had not.

By the time of the final category of awards, Prisons and Abattoirs, the din in the ballroom had grown rather loud as the various tables were long into after dinner drinks and conversations were required to be at ever greater volume to be heard over rising noise.

For a very long time, Prisons and Abattoirs were judged as a single category, as was thought, the moving of animals, be it in prisons or slaughterhouses, utilized the same set of design skills. But some years back, Master Sanguine, the leader of Sanguine Studio, made an impassioned plea to the Masters of the Design Committee that animals were not deserving of being lumped in with prisoners and that the design skills required for the humane treatment of animals, man's best friend, were singularly divine. And he won. Since that time, Abattoirs have been judged more challenging than prisons and deserving of their own award in recognition.

The ballroom by now was nearing a loud drunken roar. The band was setting up on stage, and the master of ceremonies, himself clearly drunk holding onto the lectern as if a life preserver tossed to a drowning man, announced the final awards of the night, Most Divine Abattoir.

Nyx and the Ordinas became very quiet, sitting together at the front edge of the table in anticipation.

“Shut your motherfucking pieholes you shit stains pretending to architects,” screamed Mona standing on the large table, a scattering rain of red sequence shedding from her animated form. Her silent accessory then moved over to the adjacent table, picked it up and flung it across



the length of the room where it imbedded itself deep into the wall behind the stage. The master of ceremonies hurled himself flat onto the stage, hands covering the back of head.

The room was suddenly quiet, a few rattling on drunk and belligerent, but mostly quiet enough to hear the award be announced for Most Divine Abattoir.

“...and the winner goes to Sanguine Studio and their Highland Falls Abattoir...” the master of ceremonies said, and continued in his reading of the award, but no one heard or cared.

Mr. and Mrs. Ordinia screamed so loud with glee, that it was taken as a primal call to let the true party commence. The band began to play. Nyx was grabbed up by Mrs. Ordinia and smothered to near unconsciousness. And every other Studio that won this night, but whose clients were too busy to attend, were made sad and jealous by the joy of Mr. and Mrs. Ordinia. Designers are a needy lot.

Mona, arm in arm with her accessory man, made her way through the raucous room to one of the premier tables at the front, that of Harmony Studio. Mona found and greeted Master Sajin-Smyth, a small grey skinned hairless man wearing a perfectly tailored grey suit and sitting next to a chair holding his briefcase and bowler hat. She settled to her knees on the floor next to him, a swirl of red sequence drifting off her settling form, formally shaking his hand with an accompanying wide warm smile.

“Congratulations on the creation of your university masterworks this year, too many to be fairly awarded and celebrated, it is an honor to work among such as you,” she said with sincerity.

“My darling Mona, thank you, hearing such from a unique apprentice makes a night such as this more enlivening than any tiny glass bauble,” he said indicating the tiny snow-globe sphere

next to his briefcase, inside a gently swirling glittering snowstorm circled an artful rendition of his winning building.

She smiled.

“Each year we have this meeting,” he said. “I tell you again, your skills are wasted on gardens and playgrounds, joy is not a reason to craft. Come, join our Studio, you could be the best in the City, better than I might ever achieve.”

“Oh, my darling,” she said. “You are so very wrong, and I love you for it, knowing you are doing the serious work is what gives me permission to do the even more important work.”

By this time, the larger ballroom above had been cleared, the rigid, punctual, and exceedingly boring awards given to the serious architects of the City ran its allotted time and ended at 10pm, exactly 2 hours after it began. The front steps of the Underhill cleared of attendees and their very expensive vehicles.

In the basement ballroom, the party was just getting going despite half-hearted efforts by the waitstaff to clear tables and encourage folks to leave.

By 2am, the band was packing up. But instead of a signal to leave, Sanguine Studio took to the stage. Nyx unfolded a duo-dimension drumkit, an origami masterwork of support and resonant surfaces and began to pound out a primal rhythmic cadence that would not be out of place atop some ancient sacrificial pyramid. Mona extended her arm to reveal a dimensionally sleeved long necked six string bass guitar, too large and long for anyone less her 7-foot frame to wield. She began to weave a sensual base line into Nyx’s primal call. Nyx used his playing to shift the violet mists in the room, dousing light and moving shadows as if haunted dancers from

some bygone era. Mona's baseline shuttered along the green mists, everyone in the room suddenly and keenly aware that they are, in this moment, ALIVE.

It was then that Trinia stepped onto the stage, a keyboard emerging from the long shadows on stage and introduced a delicate melody of otherworldly grace to the composition, freeing the room of weight, guests, and tables and waitstaff began to drift free in the breeze while Trinia's dancing melody swirled through the room with charged flashes of lightning.

The whole of the composition slowly gathered and built, the room thrashing and dancing mid-air, on the walls, and on the ceiling. Sweat and joy and need joined with deep shadows and lighting flash, vanishing reality out of time.

Then, a primal howl, as Ekko emerged from the deep shadow of the stage, his plaintive vocals a prayer to some dead god for a sign of meaning or purpose, but over the length of the song resolving that here and now, this moment, is enough. The catharsis of the room as the music ebbed and the vocals wept into whisper was palpable, there were no individuals in the room, rather the room was a singular living soul.

*Following the Chimera War, hybrid evolution was outlawed. The child of a woman would be of her kind, no matter the kind of the man. In so doing, the laws of inheritance and wealth follow the line of daughters.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Master Sanguine arrived late to the awards ceremony, greeting Master Zosa on the grand stairs of Underhill Hotel as he was preparing to leave.

“Sanguine my boy, I did not hear your name tonight,” boomed Zosa from his floating throne, the little naked nurse massaging the sausage that was his big toe, Zosa twitching suddenly with pleasure.

“Master Zosa, how many of these exalting awards did you win this glorious evening?” asked Sanguine.

“Too many for one man to carry,” laughed Zosa, his arms spreading toward his apprentices, each of whom carries several crystal and gold statuettes. “I thought you hated these affairs, and you missed them anyway, why are you...ah...your new apprentices. Tell me please they are not in the basement ceremonies. How far the mighty has fallen. You are better than this, come back to the light Sanguine, before it is too late.” Zosa laughed so hard that his nurse nearly fell off the end of his floating lounge. His 3 apprentices joining the mockery.

“The legend of your apprentices grows,” said Sanguine. “I had hoped to see these wunderkinds for myself.”

“Gaze upon my superheroes,” said Zosa smiling wide. “Had we such as these, we would not have lost the war.”

Sanguine’s face twisted, his e’Mral sight saw through the world as layers of glass illuminated by coiling mists, the uncertainty of reality manifest. Zosa and himself were like bright lights in a dark room. But Zosa’s 3 apprentices were dim, twisted somehow, the mists tightly bound to them, as if tortured in pastel tints of pink, purple, and azure. Unnatural.

“What have you done?” asked Sanguine.

“I am winning,” said Zosa. “You should try it sometime.” He laughed as he and his apprentices loaded into an especially long and elegant Vignette. Lifting into the air, leaving Sanguine standing dumb.

Sanguine composed himself and headed around to the back of hotel and descended into the basement ballroom. He sat at the far back of what he could only describe as a religious revery.

The crowd of architects before him, writhing nearly naked, sweating as they hurled their bodies into each other with an abandon he could not comprehend, emotions he did not feel, the scene alien. He had never attended one of these architectural awards ceremonies and realized, with some smug relief, just how right he had been. He thought briefly on the risk of Balira and her inquisitors finding the magic his apprentices wove, but everything in the room could be explained by the proliferation of psychedelic drugs and special effects technomancy.

Sanguine had taken on 4 e’Mral sighted apprentices into his Studio Sanguine over the past few years.

But Sanguine winced as he recalled the past year with Ekko, Mona, Nyx, and Trinia. Any one of them would make a Master cry, four of them, he thought, a curse upon his very soul, for surely the Sisters now mocked his lack of suicidal resolve.

Mona, born of a post-humankind famous for their physical super-strength but less well known for their super-intelligence, owing chiefly to most being afraid to talk to Mona and to herself for finding nothing interesting to talk about with the monkey brains of those that surrounded her.

Mona had nearly killed her own sister before being taken and killed several of her classmates while schooling. She is a bull trampling through a field of flowers, Sanguine mused. Afraid that she might accidentally kill the tiny and frail humankind that surround her and assuming everyone was as smart as she, not understanding that this assumption made her appear arrogant and aloof. And when they did ask, she was baffled at their stupidity, afraid again, sullen, and silent. Mona's e'Mral gifts were powerful, healing, the most powerful Sanguine had ever encountered, a goddess of life, but they were bottled up by fear and doubt. Mona instead cursed and hit things.

Ekko was another problem entirely. Ekko was, in Master Sanguine's estimation, one evil motherfucker, powerful, and he knew it. Ekko understood more about the City and the e'Mral sighted than most of the old masters Sanguine had known, not as in history or academics, but what it meant to be sighted in a world of the blind. Ekko understood that among the Veiled, the e'Mral born are the villains of the story, superstition, magic, and uncertainty in a world that prized fact, logic, and security. But what Ekko did not understand was that magic, the e'Mral mists, were not a selfish endeavor, but one of cooperation, subtly, and creativity. Ekko thought that magic was a thing, an object to be possessed, a belief that would see him soon dead if Sanguine could not help him to understand otherwise.

Nyx was, Master Sanguine thought, a surprisingly gentle soul despite appearances and his tendency to kill people he judged cruel, especially toward animals. Nyx was an architect of abattoirs, slaughterhouses, and perhaps the most talented architect he had ever met. Nyx cared. But Nyx was an island, he did not care what anyone else said or did, and in his time at Sanguine Studio, had ignored everything Master Sanguine had tried to teach him. Sanguine was at a loss

as to how to get through to the man. Nyx was a natural leader, a revolutionary, but too shy to realize the truth.

Trinia, Master Sanguine thought, might be a lost cause. She is born of a kind called Dymirra, always born twins, or in Trinia's rare case, triplets. But not ordinary triplets, she is a single consciousness in three separate bodies, one person able to be in 3 places at the same time, but always careful to never have her 3 bodies in the same place at the same time, most of the City not even knowing the Dymirra are born twins.

Trinia was blessed to be born into a grossly wealthy and loving family, and as triplets, a golden child. Her e'Mral talents considerable, frightening to anyone paying attention, but her ambition zero, whiling away her hours listening to teen-angst whiner music and considering all the ways her life is unfair. She has a gift for designing shopping centers but does not care, her motto being, 'good enough for retail,' an attitude that infuriates Master Sanguine but has made her the darling of shopping center clients.

Together the four apprentices of Sanguine Studio are an alchemy, imminent destruction that Master Sanguine must somehow turn to creative purpose, and if successful, see each of them exceed him. He sighed to himself, an impossible task, 'boom' would be the result.

Sanguine sat in the dark shadows at the back of the hall lost in thought, sulking.

He caught sight of Avril approaching, tall and elegant wearing a bespoke black suit, white shirt and black tie. As he approached, he smiled, his skin stretching too tight, peeling back from his teeth, the silver runes glinting in the chaotic light, his smile offering no comfort. He stretched out his hand to Master Sanguine, it was also a skeleton of rune-carved bones overstretched by a drum of mummified skin. Sanguine took his hand. "Thank you for coming."

“When you said that you had taken on new apprentices...” said Avril, his voice a low dry rasp. Sanguine thought he saw dust expel from Avril’s corpse mouth. “I did not expect to see post-humans. I thought Chimera were never born e’Mral sighted. That the beasts had no souls.”

“It appears we were wrong,” said Master Sanguine. “It appears some Caliban are born with souls.”

“When, how...” Avril’s words drifted.

“They started showing up a dozen years after the war,” said Sanguine. “The hospitals found them first, parents bringing in their delusional children trying to describe the invisible world they saw as real, and being good parents, they cured them, installing them with chrome-hearts. We have been trying to find them first.”

“We?” asked Avril.

Sanguine glowered at Avril. “I have recruited the Sisters of Mercy, an orphanage, to help me to locate and save what children I can.”

Avril forced his corpse lungs to draw a deep breath. He thought as he looked upon the scene before him, of 4 magical creatures in a paradise City with no need or want of original thought. “Your children. That is the only explanation.”

“Not the only explanation,” said Sanguine.

Avril’s face grimaced in a way that was indiscernible but seemed to promise pain.

“Really?” asked Sanguine. “You remake yourself into a corpse but children is what you find disturbing?”



“They are Chimera,” hissed Avril. “Nature did not make them, machines, the Ceye, made them. Forced evolution, brutes, monsters, Caliban. The e’Mral mists are nature, creative, subtle. This cannot be.”

“As I said, impossible,” said Sanguine. “But here they are.”

Avril struggled to collect his thoughts, the two sitting quietly at the back of the room while Sanguine’s 4 apprentices played.

“You want my help,” said Avril. “No.”

“Yes,” said Sanguine. “They are the future. Not an old master or his animated corpse of a friend. We can train them or leave them to be found and cured.”

“Or killed,” said Avril.

“Likely,” said Sanguine.

“Zosa has also found himself 3 e’Mral sighted post-human apprentices,” said Sanguine.

“How?” asked Avril. “Is he raiding orphanages as well?”

“I do not know,” said Sanguine. “But something with them is not right.”

“None of this is right,” said Avril. “And nothing about that motherfucker Zosa is ever right.”

Sanguine nodded.

“Does the Empress know?” asked Avril.

Sanguine looked again at Avril, his face bemused.

“Of course,” said Avril. “This is her idea. She does enjoy your suffering.”

“Hrumf,” Sanguine nodded.

## Part II: That Which is Hidden

*The military is a system that plans for the past.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The next morning at 9am, Major Song Vree arrived at Sanguine Studio, a converted warehouse in a part of the City left ruin after the war, the surrounding blocks of warehouses and factories derelict, as much feral flora as building, snow dusted rusty steel and concrete frames and boarded up brick buildings without roofs dominate the streetscape. The Major gave no special thought to the ruined district, signs of war, the price paid by the vanquished.

Studio Sanguine fronts a wide ancient wooden promenade, the piers of a long-collapsed wharf stretching into the dark water beyond. The Studio is crafted of brick and concrete that is spare but beautiful, a form of honest function and artful proportion. Major Song Vree exited his Vignette which he had ordered landed on the promenade. He was impressed despite himself, his feline sensibilities being especially appreciative of miyabi, the sense of elegance and refinement absent the vulgar or unsightly, but it also challenged him, the building itself elegant within the surrounding ruins, he smiled as he entered, followed by his yeoman, Meerly.

Within, the Studio was arranged with smaller rooms at the perimeter rising several floors, and at the center, a large skylit volume filled with drafting tables, desks, and charette spaces. The place was buzzing with activity, a hundred men and women wearing variations of gray,

white, and blue business casual attire were busy supporting the work of Master Sanguine and his apprentices. The receptionist greeting the Major and his yeoman, led them to conference room 5, and offered coffee, that the Major declined. Moments later, Master Sanguine entered wearing a blue felt suit, red cape, and handmade leather shoes.

“Sit,” said Master Sanguine.

The Major sat. The Major was of the post-humankind that had kidnapped him called Min’Zirai. The Major was a large man of brutish musculature as a stone cutter, his full body feline fur shorn to military trim, gray and white, his eyes large as a cat, seeming as if nothing under cover of night could escape his gaze. His nose and mouth small, but his ears long, stretching horizontally from his head as if wings, flicking and twitching with more emotion than his face could muster.

“Thank you for the appointment,” said the Major, “I know your time is valuable.”

The yeoman began taking notes.

“I regret that a lesson of Captain Gor and his soldiers was required to remind someone as important as yourself for the need of courtesy,” said Sanguine.

“It was not required,” said Song. “It was an abominable act that will be avenged upon the conclusion of our more immediate business.”

“Ahh,” said Sanguine. “You are a Major by Right, I can understand your confusion on the matter.”

“Yes,” said Major Song. “I am a Major by Right,” he straightened himself proudly. “I am of the family Vree, my father is...”

“Let me stop you right there,” said Sanguine. “I accept your importance and the divine right by which your family has guided the military victories of your people for, what I am sure, thousands of years. You are a wonder to behold, a glory from a glorious family, a genetically engineered masterwork. But if you had but a single wit of actual real-world experience, were a Major by Promotion, you would understand the need for courtesy. Your captain’s discomfort was necessary to teach you this lesson. I am, after all, a Master, it is my job to teach.”

The Major struggled for composure. The Min’Zirai were a kind free of fear or other primal emotions, but were more keenly aware of higher emotions, and in this case, anger. The Major began to think his mission was a folly, and it might be better to murder Sanguine where he sat and find another avenue to the location of the secret prison.

“Your composure is admirable,” said Sanguine. “Let us consider the reason you are here. You wish me to tell you the location of a secret place I crafted 20 years ago and to grant you entry, yes?”

The Major nodded, still considering the downside of murdering of the red caped man.

Sanguine pulled an envelope from an inside pocket of his coat and handed a folded paper to the yeoman. “This,” said Sanguine. “Is a Great House contract that prevents my disclosure of the location.”

“So?” asked Vree.

“No question of privilege has ever been so eloquently stated,” said Sanguine.

The yeoman, a young frail looking feline-woman, was about to speak when, the Major came to a decision on murder, rising suddenly to his feet and quick drawing his side arm, a star-pistol, a six-gun with a long barrel crafted of a smokey translucent metal, chambered with six

glowing green glass meteorite slugs, dimly visible through the smokey translucence of the cylinder. As Major Song Vree fired, Sanguine coiled the red e'Mral mists about himself, forming a spiral of gravity.

The glowing green meteorite slug, aimed to pierce Master Sanguine's skull between his eyes, was captured by the coiling red mists invisible to Song and his yeoman, flung in an orbit around Master Sanguine and redirected to strike the Major right where he aimed, between the eyes, the slug exiting the Major's skull and through the wall behind, and continued for some many hundreds of miles, or as far as star-pistol slugs flew, Sanguine was not sure, some said they traveled forever.

Major Song Vree fell backward, dropping the gun onto the conference table. Master Sanguine moved to inspect the fallen Major Song Vree, touching the man's chest, feeling the chrome-heart ticking within, the mechanized contrivance that replaced Song's living heart, keeping him alive despite the hole in his head, at least for a few days. And in the City, the medical arts are as miracle, most any harm of accident or violence repairable, excepting perhaps the destruction of a chrome-heart. Sanguine grimaced, Song would be up and around in a week or two, and though the brain repaired, he may not recall the last few weeks of his life.

Master Sanguine collected up Song's star-pistol, vanished into the folds of his jacket. "My dear," said Sanguine to the yeoman, "what is your name?"

"Yeoman Meerly," she whispered.

"Yeoman Meerly, would you like assistance back to your Vignette?"

"Yes, please," she said shaking. "You killed him?"

"He killed himself," said Sanguine. "He hit what he aimed at, right between the eyes."

It was about then that the receptionist arrived, the loud boom of the ancient gun having sent a stir through the Studio. “Excellent, Dorris, please have janitorial come in and clean the wall of our guest’s brains and see the body back to his Vignette for delivery to hospital.

After walking Meerly back to her Vignette and stowing Song’s body, Sanguine said “My darling, wait.” He then ordered the Vignette pilot to return the Major to the Vree military hospital. “Come with me.” The yeoman followed Master Sanguine to a neighboring warehouse ruin and within, a sad example of a Vignette, covered with graffiti, beaten, battered, rusted, and seemingly named “abandoned” by the scrawling paintwork along the side. Next to the Vignette was Ekko wearing a beautifully tailored silver thread suit, Mona wore a tiny dress so tight and small it appeared that it may rip should she move, her large plume of red hair and structurally impressive stiletto heels adding another 3 feet to the giantesses bodily 7-foot height. Nyx stood in a deep shadow, only his trench coat silhouette visible. Trinia stood to the side wearing a bright pink pantsuit with a plunging neckline, that beautifully exaggerated her feminine shape.

“What?” the yeoman began.

“Hold,” said Sanguine. “Miss Meerly, I should like to aid your promotion if you would permit. Your Major is out of commission for at least a week. In that time, your services as his yeoman are not required. Additionally, you are honor bound to act as your major, should he be injured on the battlefield, to follow his last order, as it were?”

“Yes,” said the young yeoman, though unsure of her answer.

“Well then, that brings us here,” said Sanguine. “I cannot tell you the location of the prison nor aid your entry, but my apprentices can lead you to the prison you seek and aid your entry.”

“How?” said the yeoman. “Your command is your action.”

“You misunderstand,” said Sanguine. “I have commanded them to do nothing, and in all honesty, I doubt anyone can command them to do anything, ever. I only asked that they escort you home. You may choose to take any path you like to get there.”

The yeoman looked confused.

“Your Major will be awake with a new brain and coming to kill me in a week or so,” said Sanguine. “Imagine if you had completed his mission by the time he awakens.”

“He will be so grateful,” said the yeoman.

“He will not,” said Sanguine. “But that is not the point.”

She did not seem to hear him. She bowed to Master Sanguine and walked to the Vignette and the 4 apprentices. The five entered the Vignette and it lifted into the air, exiting the abandoned warehouse through a large missing piece of roof.

*The Great Houses are the rulers of the City, passing laws that govern relations between the Great Houses, collectively punishing naked aggression and individual liberty, tyranny of the majority.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The inside of the “abandoned” Vignette was in stark contrast to the exterior, plush silk quilting finished the walls and ceiling, the floor finished with a high shag carpet. And strewn throughout were hundreds of pillows large and small, square, and round, silk and felt. Yeoman

Meerly had never seen so many tassels. She was also disturbed, not quite realizing the inside of the Vignette was larger than the outside.

Nyx was at the controls, flying the Vignette through the heavy air traffic that ever glittered over and between the high-rise towers and dream spires of the City that vanished into the cold fall fog in all directions. “Where to Kitten?” asked Nyx.

“Don’t be a racist,” said Trinia.

“I am not offended,” said Meerly.

“Never be OK with a racist fuck like Nyx,” said Mona. “Just to get be a part of the wrong gang.”

“He is not worth knowing,” said Trinia. “Trust me.”

“Hey,” said Nyx. “You all knew who I was asking. I just need to know where I am flying this crate.”

“I understand that Master Sanguine crafted a prison 20 years ago,” said Yeoman Meerly, “I need to go there.”

“What?” said Nyx.

“Why are you going to a prison?” asked Ekko.

“My master, Major Song Vree, recently learned of a prison that holds Min’Zirai soldiers, a prison made by Master Sanguine for our enemy the Kin’Rhi. My mission is to go there, gain entry, and help my brethren to escape.”

“Ah, fuck me, I hate Kin’Rhi,” said Mona.

“What is with all the racist sentiment this morning?” asked Trinia.



“I am with Mona,” said Nyx.

“You are with anyone that excludes and divides,” said Trinia.

“Not true,” said Nyx. “I exalt the individual.”

“Is that why you hate Kin’Rhi?” asked Trinia.

“None of this is helpful,” said Ekko. “Does anyone know where this prison is?”

“I might,” said Nyx. “When I first arrived at the Studio, our most esteemed Master had me accompany him to a Kin’Rhi citadel, some sort of renovation project. I do recall he wanted me to learn something important and that he was disappointed. He really hasn’t talked to me since.”

“Lucky you,” said Trinia.

“Can you take us there?” asked the yeoman.

“Yes,” said Nyx. “But if we are wanting to talk about racists, can we discuss the elephant in the room? You know, before it sits on our heads.”

They all looked at the yeoman.

She felt small, “it is true, the Min’Zirai and Kin’Rhi hate each other, are racists as it concerns the other.”

“You mean you are racist as concerns everyone not Min’Zirai,” said Ekko.

“We have been at war for generations,” Meerly continued, ignoring Ekko. “Only the threat of us both being wiped out by the combined might of the other Great Houses has kept the war cold.” She spoke like she was reciting a school lesson, but she did not understand the words she spoke, only imagined she did, as if knowing a fact imbued understanding.

“And you really want us to fly to a Kin’Rhi citadel?” asked Ekko.

“What is your plan?” asked Trinia. “Ask if they have any captives in the basement they might like to free, thank you very much?”

“She is a child and blind,” said Mona. “She has no plan but to try and please her Major. Stop being fucking pricks.”

“She is 26 years old,” said Ekko. “It seems she should have this sorted by now.”

“You are a fucking moron,” said Mona to Ekko. “And you know it, the Veiled are slow, not stupid mind you, just slow, you would do well to show a little compassion.”

Ekko frowned.

“I for one am not pleased to learn there are prisoners being held in someone’s basement,” said Trinia. “I think someone requires punishment.” The light of her luminous skin shifted, her face falling into pale silhouette.

“Seriously,” said Nyx. “Not again, this is not a holy crusade, please, just no.”

“It does seem wrong,” said Ekko. “Even if the little kitty girl does not know why.”

The yeoman blushed. She wanted to be Ekko’s little kitty girl; she did her best to push the sudden thought from her head. She shook her head violently, her long cat’s ears whipping as if she were shaking off after a shower.

“I am not arguing it is right,” said Nyx. “Only that we need not make it our problem.”

“But it already is,” said Trinia. “Miss yeoman Meerly is in our house, she is our guest, Vignette rules apply.”

“Vignette rules apply to snacks and bathroom privileges,” said Nyx. “Not stepping into the middle of a generational war between two unsympathetic racist peoples.”

“She is right here,” said Trinia. “Here in the Vignette, are we a taxi service?”

“We are not a fucking taxi service,” said Mona. “We should help the little cat, she is cute, look at those big innocent eyes, how can you say no looking into those eyes?”

“We should help,” said Ekko.

“Fine,” said Nyx. “Let’s go ask the bunch of armed and angry berserkers if they have any cats caged in their basement. What could go right?”

*The e’Mral mists are real, and like gravity, measurable by their effects on the visible. At their most basic, the mists cause uncertainty in the physical universe. The speed of light, which by mathematical proof, should be fixed, instead sloshes about the City like water, slowed and irregular. City electricity and communications such as radio scramble and decay after traveling only a few dozen yards. Additionally, explosives tend to detonate with irregular frequency, but the blast wave, even large, the kind that proofs say should level the City, are blanketed, muffled, not affecting an area larger than a few dozen yards. The City, it seems, has been kid proofed.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

As the Vignette flew, Yeoman Meerly felt dizzy. She, like everyone else she knew, did not believe in magic. Sure, there was the usual lucky penny and knocking on wood, but not actual magic. And sure, people had heard of artifact human Architects that built the strangeways

to the cosmos, but a profession, a maker of buildings, parks, or ships, not a profession of sorcery or spell, and how many architects did people know, it was not like they are common. Modern buildings were designed and built by the robots of the Ceye, like everything else. These architects were anachronistic hobbyists. And yes, she learned about e'Mral friction, but in the same lesson that discussed other unseen forces like gravity and magnetism, measurable, but invisible. But something nagged at her mind.

She knew the war stories about some artifact humans being able to see the e'Mral mists, to make something from nothing, magic, but she did not believe such foolishness, no one did, not really. Rather she wished such silliness was real, a world with magic would be a world in color, she thought, where she lived in a world of black & white, the real and very dreary paradise world.

Yet here she was, in flight with 4 architects of Studio Sanguine, alien. She could not rationalize why she was here and not back at her barracks waiting on her Major's recovery.

They were an odd group, maybe some crazy performance artists. But what she did see was Major Song Vree shoot an unarmed Master Sanguine and the Major's own shot struck him between the eyes. She knew of technomancy, of slip-shields, the sorts of rare high-end military hardware that deflected railgun ballistics, but the little man in a blue suit and red cape showed no sign of such military hardware, none of the dancing martial artistry that make such deflection possible. Major Song, simply, magically, shot himself. And with that, her reality had been shaken.

And here now, she was on a mission, not a mission with orders, an odd sort of honor bound mission she was not altogether sure how she got, she was just here, on the mission. She

opened her eyes a crack, and looked across the large, quilted chamber filled with pillows, and there, standing 15-feet away, was Trinia, an empty glass appearing in her hand, she moved the glass through a shadow, paused, smiled, and removed it full of a sparkling wine, and took a long drink. She set the glass on a nearby table and a saxophone appeared in her hands, she began to play. Meerly closed her eyes tight, thinking this had to be a dream, that she would soon awaken in her bunk back at the Vree family barracks. And while her eyes were squeezed shut, she listened to the notes of the saxophone, plaintive, haunting, and to her surprise, colorful, each note painted behind her eyes as some sort of musical kaleidoscope. She started to feel motion sick, started to fall, though she knew she laid still. She felt like a little girl having slipped down a rabbit hole, falling.

*The e'Mral sighted are tricksters and can vanish and recall small items from and into their hands. Naked as they might be, they seem ever able to pull some item of use into hand, having placed it "elsewhere" some time before. Beware the trickster with open hands, they are never so empty as they appear.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

"Wake up little girl," said Mona standing over yeoman Meerly.

The yeoman's eyes opened, seeing Mona as if in exaggerated perspective, her legs near, but her head vanishing to shadow as a mile high building, Mona lifting her suddenly to standing position as a child playing with a doll. Meerly wobbled but stood. "Am I still dreaming?" Meerly said, "I think I should like to wake up now."

“Awake you are,” said Ekko, and though Meerly did not see him, she wanted to see him, desperately, naked, and kissing her. She shook her head wildly, shaking the unbidden images from her head.

Yeoman Meerly adjusted her silk tabard, the only clothing she wore, a single rectangular piece of cloth with a hole at the center that fit around her neck, half the length of silk falling down her front, the other half down her back but split in half falling either side of her tail. Her quick-draw pistol-holster the only thing holding the loose silk tabard in place. Her full body feline fur, though shorn to military specification, kept her from feeling naked. Her feline kind hated clothing on general principle that it matted fur and invariably rubbed in all the wrong places. But the military tabard was required, as the embroidery indicated rank, family, and heroic standing. The yeoman’s tabard was about as plain as made, her family marked as disgraced, conquered, and her heroics absent. And yet she adjusted her holster-belt and tabard with military precision and the pride of a queen. The ritual preening, calming her mind.

“If you are quite ready, your eminence,” said Nyx. “There are several angry looking hairy barbarians that are waiting to talk to you.”

Meerly exited the Vignette, they were on a high landing platform cantilevered from the side of a tall ornate stone tower, 50 stories in the air. Ahead of her was Ekko standing with 3 very hairy men with long beards, wearing loose fitting chainmail tunics and leather pants, but with large dirty hairy feet. Their faces were finely articulated, with beady eyes and sharply pointed snouts that were more wolverine than human; Kin’Rhi. Each held a ceremonial polearm, a cat-catcher they called it. She strode to Ekko’s side and was suddenly struck by the desire grab

and kiss him, marry him, have his babies. She shook her head, her body shivering to her tail, she focused on the barbarians before her.

“And who are you little kitten,” said the first soldier.

“I am Yeoman Meerly, representative of Major Song Vree,” she said, “I am here to inspect the health and treatment of Min’Zirai prisoners held at this location; by authority of Dynasi Law, Chapter 8, prisoners of war. You cannot refuse.”

The 3 barbarians looked at each other, the first saying, “I can refuse, as their ain’t no prisoners to visit.”

“Lying, by condition of article 5,” said Meerly. “Is not an acceptable reason to deny visitation.”

“Are you calling me a liar?” asked the first soldier.

“I am asking to see the prisoners,” said the yeoman.

“There ain’t no prisoners,” said the second soldier. “Beat it.”

“Again, per article 5,” said Meerly. “Lying, repeatedly, no matter how many times the lie is repeated, shall not be deemed truth, and not an acceptable reason to deny visitation.”

“Maybe we should show her,” said the third.

“You know,” said the first. “You might be right.”

“Follow me,” said the third. He turned and led the way toward the façade of the tower, snow lightly drifting in the cold fall wind.

Yeoman Meerly shivered and followed, and behind her the first and second soldiers. Ekko was about to follow, when the first pointed the blade of his polearm at Ekko's face, "not you fashion victim, just the official representative of the Major." Ekko bowed and smiled.

The four entered the elevator, asking for subbasement 4.

Trinia exited the Vignette and walked over to Ekko, "are we worried?"

"Nyx is with her, and Mona will stay with the Vignette," Ekko looked into the gray cold sky, but saw nothing.

"And us?" asked Trinia.

"We follow," said Ekko, heading to the elevator.

Ekko and Trinia approached the elevator, a polearm wielding guard on either side of the lift door. Ekko said, "be a pair of dears and suck each other's cocks." The two guards looked lovingly at each other, but their rage began to boil, hatred, fury, murder, their muscles began to bulk, hair standing on end, their loose-fitting chainmail and leather pants suddenly filled with expanding muscle. Their hairy hands and feet elongated into wicked claws with long curving metal nails. And while this transformation of screaming violence took hold of the two guards, and their blood boiled red in their eyes, Ekko and Trinia entered the elevator, called for sublevel 4, and departed. When finally, the two enraged Kin'Rhi were fully transformed into berserk beasts, the only one to tear apart was each other, which they did.

"That was mean," said Trinia. "Funny, but mean."

Ekko smiled.



*An occupied building is alive but ever haunted by her original purpose.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Meanwhile, Meerly and the first 3 guards exited the elevator to a 10-yard cube shaped room, all surfaces finished with a polished black stone. On the opposite wall, another elevator door matching the one they just came from. Next to the far door, a small metal desk with a green shaded lamp, the only light in the chamber. At the desk sat a small thin, almost gaunt, gray man wearing a black suit and bowler hat.

The 3 guards walked Meerly to Mr. Smith.

“Name?” asked Mr. Smith.

Meerly looked around, but the guards just looked back, smiling.

“I am Yeoman Meerly,” she said, “I am...”

“Yes, yes, your business is your own,” said Mr. Smith. “Sign and turn over your sidearm.” He indicated a sign-in book laying open on the desk in front of her.

She signed her name, Yeoman Meerly, and then reached for her holstered side arm. She was no officer of course, did not carry the famed star-pistol of heroic families and ancient traditions, but her standard issue railgun was still a symbol of her honor, and followed all the same noble rules. Surrendering her sidearm was the same as her own surrender.

The little gray man sensing her discomfort, said, “no weapons in the prison, it will be returned to you upon your exit. No exceptions.”

Meerly straightened herself, she was not afraid, her feline-kind incapable of fear, but her confidence was waning, a positive outcome much less likely as she unsheathed her weapon and placed it on the sign-in book.

The next set of elevator doors opened.

Meerly entered the elevator, the 3 guards stopped at the door.

“You are not accompanying me?” asked Meerly.

“No weapons,” said the one, indicating his ceremonial polearm.

The door slid shut, and the three guards turned back to the little gray man at the desk. The sign-in book and railgun gone.

“Hey,” said one of the guards. “Give me her gun, I want it.”

“It will be returned to her when she exits,” said Mr. Smith.

“She will not be exiting, ever,” said another guard. He laughed.

“Give it to me now,” said the one guard. “Or I’ll cleave you in two.” He hefted his polearm as if to strike.

“If you were going to strike,” said Mr. Smith. “You would have, instead of talking about it is as a fart in the wind.”

The other two guards laughed.

The one guard hefted his polearm into a high overhead arc that came slamming down on the desk, the little gray man sitting on a small chair with metal casters rolled backward just as his desk was cut in half.

“Laugh at that,” said the one guard.

“Your prowess at killing office furniture is formidable,” said Mr. Smith. “I dub thee Desk-slayer.”

The other two guards busted out laughing, one nearly in tears, “Dorkard the Desk-slayer,” he howled. The laughter of the two reignited.

“I warned you,” said the one. “Only my mother calls me Dorkard.”

The laughter rolled on.

Dorkard was not the smartest of Kin’Rhi, and that of a kind not known for brightness, but he was smart enough to know that this story would haunt him the rest of his life and it needed a popping end. He raised his polearm and swung it high over his head and as the 2 other guards watched, he brought his blade down to cleave the little gray man in half. He was, however, saved from murder by suddenly being struck by lightning, his polearm launched to the far side of the room, his bowels explosively evacuated, his consciousness snuffed.

All 3 guards were struck, all laid on the polished black stone floor, smoke rising from their unconscious bodies. Just behind the 3 fallen guards stood a tall pale thin man wearing an especially well-crafted suit, the gray man impressed, and a little girl with adult curves wearing a fashion forward pink pantsuit, her own long black hair crackling with electricity.

“If he had killed you,” said Ekko. “We could not have gained entry, correct?”

“Quite correct,” said the gray man.

“My name is Ekko,” he said. “This is my associate, Trina Terrible the Lightning Queen.”

Trinia frowned.

“I am Mr. Smith,” said the little gray man.

“May we enter Mr. Smith,” asked Ekko.

“Please sign in,” said Mr. Smith. He recovered his sign-in book from a drawer in one of the broken halves of his desk.

Ekko and Trinia signed as Mr. Smith held it open in his two hands.

“And turn over any weapons please,” said Mr. Smith.

“We are unarmed,” said Ekko.

“But you may search us,” said Trinia, caressing her hips with her hands.

Mr. Smith blushed, his face turning bright pink, the Kraizan a traditionally prudish people.

“That will not be necessary,” said Mr. Smith. He could see that Trinia’s pink pantsuit had no pockets or folds to hide weaponry, and Ekko’s suit was so perfectly fitted and tailored that a folded handkerchief in an inside pocket could not be disguised.

The elevator doors opened, and the two entered.

*Prisons and abattoirs differ in one key aspect, a well-designed slaughterhouse is compassionate, a well-crafted prison cruel.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Yeoman Meerly arrived at a large circular reception chamber. The luminous-ceiling producing a flat shadowless light, the walls painted azure, the floor buffed steel. To her left and right were large pressure doors, the kind she saw in submarines, the elevator door closing behind her. On the opposite side of the room was another little gray man wearing a suit and bowler hat sitting behind an old metal desk painted an odd shade of sickly pale green. He stood as she entered.

“Animal or People?” asked Mr. Smith.

“What?” asked Yeoman Meerly.

“Ahh,” said Mr. Smith. “Just there to your left please, indicating the large pressure door to his right.”

She moved toward the door, about to unlock the door by the large central wheel, when the elevator door opened behind her. She saw Ekko and Trinia enter.

“My darling kitten,” said Ekko. “So good to have caught up to you.”

She imagined jumping him right now, tearing his suit off like a scratching post. She shook her head suddenly, shivering down to her furry feet.

“Mr. Smith, I presume?” asked Ekko. He wasn’t sure, but half the little gray people he had ever met were named Mr. Smith, the other half, being women, but physically indistinguishable, were named Miss or Misses Smith. He felt lucky.

“Yes, Mr. Smith, I am the receptionist,” said the little gray man.

Ekko smiled. The little gray people were an odd sort of post-humankind, their minds unusually lingual, able to speak and understand most any language they hear with the same

fluency as it is spoken to them. A talent that also made them resistant to suggestion and mnemonic manipulations. “Miss Trinia here would like a word.”

Trinia looked confused, but stepped toward Mr. Smith, “We are with Yeoman Meerly here, we would like to tour the prison.”

“Animal or People?” asked Mr. Smith.

“We are people you daft twit,” said Trinia. “Who asks an animal if it is an animal?”

“Just so,” said Mr. Smith. “To your right.”

Ekko and Trinia moved to the right door, the yeoman abandoning the left door and moving to join the 2 apprentices. “This door should lead to the guard’s overlook,” said Trinia. “According to Master Sanguine, when designing a prison, guards are people, the imprisoned animals, and never the two shall share space.”

Ekko twisted the center wheel and pushed the heavy pressure door inward. This led to a long passage with another pressure door, a door that cannot be opened until the one behind is closed.

“This is what Master Sanguine calls a killing jar,” said Trinia. “If the guards want us dead, well, we will be.”

“I am Yeoman Meerly representing Major Song Vree,” she said. “I demand to be given a tour of the prison.” She looked at Ekko and Trinia, both looked calm, as if taking a stroll in a park, though she was not sure why.

“I knew I was not going to like this plan,” said Trinia.

They moved to the door ahead of them, and they were still alive, no poison, water, freeze, fire, or any other inventive awfulness.

Ekko spun the center wheel and pulled the heavy pressure door inward. This led to a largish chamber with the same azure painted walls, flickering lumen panel ceiling, and polished steel floor. But here there was the strong stench of sulfur and blood splashed everywhere. There were no bodies, but enough shredded flesh to suggest that many had died gruesome dismembering deaths.

Yeoman Meerly had never killed anyone, had never thought to harm anyone. She knew stories of battle, death, violence, they were the stuff of military school and adventure movies, but always safely sanitized by dispassionate analysis and the glee of a voyeur's perspective. She wretched.

Ekko touched her on the shoulder, "it only proves you are still alive, feel no shame."

They moved from chamber to chamber, doors open or destroyed as if rent by great strength. Signs of wicked violence were splashed everywhere, the lumen panel ceilings broken and flickering. And everywhere the same acrid scent of brimstone and bile.

Meerly was embarrassed that she continued to vomit, even when there was nothing left, only dry heaving as tears ran down her furry face. She was not embarrassed about being sick to her stomach, she was embarrassed that she cared, that what Ekko thought of her mattered. That in these chambers of horror she still imagined fucking his brains out. She shook it off, focused on her naked feet slipping in the dread.

The guards were gone. As were the prisoners. Doors ripped open, a pattern of drag marks began to emerge, the bodies all making their way toward the lowest level of the prison, to large storage rooms, kitchen, laundry, trash compactors, and finally a loading dock.

It was the better part of a day that led them here, Meerly fell; exhausted.

Ekko ran to where she lay, “are you ok? What’s wrong?” He lifted her into his arms, checking for injury, concerned.

“She is tired,” said Trinia. “The Veiled sleep.”

Ekko felt the fool, of course they do, how could he have been so insensitive? “I’m sorry little kitten, let’s find you a place to rest.” He then began looking for a cot or blankets or something that would do.

Nyx slipped out of the shadows, “you can be such an idiot sometimes Ekko.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, I do not keep pets,” said Ekko. “You two could have said something along the way.”

“We were busy sorting this mess,” said Nyx. “Little girl kitten is your responsibility. Do not forget to feed her.”

Ekko frowned.

“Over here,” said Trinia, she was standing next to a large steel loading dock door that had been split apart as if by battering ram from the inside.

Nyx arrived to look out into a wide dark cavern where a canal ran. Sitting on a wooden deck chair on the Vignette sitting on the pier was Mona.

“How did that front door thing work out?” asked Mona.



“It was the yeoman’s plan,” said Trinia, her face grimaced, blinking nervously.

“Well at least tell me you learned something,” said Mona.

“There was an attack no more than a day ago,” said Nyx, explaining the bloody scene.

“Who were they fighting?” asked Mona.

“Only signs of Min’Zirai and Kin’Rhi,” said Nyx. “Probably a Min’Zirai liberation force.”

“Why take the bodies?” asked Mona. “How many railgun shards did you find in the walls?”

“None,” said Nyx.

Ekko arrived with Meerly in tow.

Mona reached out for Meerly, touching her shoulder, “are you ok kitten.” And while speaking, Mona coiled green mists from herself through Meerly, the exhausted woman felt a wave of energy surge through her body, suddenly rested and invigorated.

“I...feel...better,” said Meerly.

“Eat,” said Mona, handing Meerly a large chocolate chip cookie that appeared in her hand.

*The real world is a construct of time, crafted to create walls of sanity. But beyond is the Pale, a timeless place illuminated by the e’Mral mists. Beware architectural discussions, they tend toward the insane.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Not far from the loading dock, near the prison stores and kitchen, Nyx found an area of recent construction that revealed a dark floor below. "I think that whatever took these people came up from this hole."

"Digging where they ought not to have been digging?" said Ekko.

Nyx nodded. "This loading dock is where Master Sanguine brought me a few years ago. He did build a prison, but not this one we just tracked through. One below, that these folks used as the foundation for this bloody place. There were nightmares, violence, killing. The dreams of what Sanguine had sealed away below. Sanguine dragged me along, reinforced the cell to prevent further nightmares leaking out and advised the Kin'Rhi to abandon their prison. Looks like they did not listen and apparently found Sanguine's prison below their own."

"What was imprisoned?" asked Trinia.

"No idea," said Nyx. "I was bored and not paying much attention. I do recall Sanguine being very angry."

"Whatever came up also dragged everyone down there with it," said Ekko. "If we want to help the little kitten get her prisoners back, down we go."

"I was not interested when Sanguine dragged me here," said Nyx. "I am less interested now." He waved his hand indicating all the bloody trails that led toward the gaping hole in the kitchen floor.

"Do you need to follow Yeoman Meerly?" asked Mona.

Meerly nodded.

“That is not fair,” said Nyx. “She is genetically engineered sans-fear. Ekko, do your time dance shit. At least tell us if there is anyone left alive to save before we walk willingly into an abattoir.”

“That would be fucking good to know,” said Mona. “Pretty fucking please,” she said looking at Ekko.

“Fuck you all,” said Ekko. He closed his eyes and took a long slow breath. He coiled the yellow-orange e’Mral mists about himself, focused his senses, opened his red and blue eyes, and could see the world as it was, truly, and then looked further. And the world, as Ekko knew, was a composite of that which was real and tangible, as seen by physical sight of the Veiled, his e’Mral sight, but there was also that which Was, the Pale, the past, as seen by the dead. Together they formed a view of the world that included everything that is and had been. The world is haunted, Ekko knew, and that which can be seen is real and can see and touch him back, this was the power and curse of his e’Mral talents. He understood that all minds, e’Mral and Veiled, were shielded from sight of the Pale, an evolutionary advantage that, more than not, bolstered sanity. Ekko bared his soul, naked, and looked beyond the walls of time.

Ekko could see. The sane world rendered in rainbow colors suddenly popped to be truly real, as a flat paint-by-numbers rendering suddenly made an immersive environment. He saw sounds as reds and blue and touched orange and yellow. He felt emotions as hot and cold and heard the smell of coffee and doughnuts. His mind reeled at the sudden flood of information. The world was like vibrating layers of colored glass, nothing hidden, only obscured by distance.

Before him the dark of earth was like translucent gray glass, illuminated by coiling strands of gravity that cast heavy shadows of red. The canals were filled with the barges of today and ships and men that stretched back thousands, millions of years. Huge prowling jungle creatures moved through a nearby doughnut shop, sharing the same space, but divided by eons. But one of these titanic beasts looked at Ekko, confused by the sudden appearance of the little pale man in his primordial jungle. “Who are you tiny biped with a tiny brain?” asked the reptilian titan.

Ekko knew better than to talk to an old-god, but he did anyway, such is insanity, “I am Ekko of the yet to come, I seek a villain of violence, murder, that eludes me, have you seen anyone pass this way?”

The beast leaned down toward Ekko, the mere shifting of its weight threatening to swallow him into the ground. “Are you a creature of time?” asked the old-god.

“I am, great world-maker,” said Ekko. He began to sing. His song was one of joy followed by loss and longing, of a love lost, a concept entirely foreign to the beast that listened. When at last he finished, the old-god, Ekko thought, smiled.

“That which you seek is near, travel downward,” said the titan, its voice seeming to Ekko as a deep earthquake.

Ekko bowed and closed his eyes. He was suddenly, and painfully, back in the paint-by-numbers universe, two dimensional, boring.

While Ekko set to look, the others noticed him wander about aimlessly, babble incoherently, sing a discordant tune of babbling nonsense that could not be properly named music, and then come back to himself, angry and on edge.

“What did you see?” asked Mona.

Mona seemed to Ekko as a sock puppet, the words irrelevant, a pantomime that did not entertain. “We need to blue back to the toaster,” said Ekko. He moved back toward the rent opening in the floor and jumped down into the dark. Others were talking, some he thought might be talking to him, but they were like paper, their sounds as a hot green breeze. Ekko said, “there a flat no tiger, but yellow into the water.”

Trinia was convinced that Ekko was brain damaged, there was no other rational explanation. But she understood that there were some that might yet be saved.

Mona sat cross legged on the kitchen floor near the hole where Ekko had just jumped, among the blood trails and bile and grime. All the others looking at her like she had joined Ekko’s insanity.

“Gross,” said Trinia.

But then a carpet of grass and flowers began to spiral outward from where Mona sat, vines crawled up walls and across the ceiling, lily pads emerged from the oily water, luminescent molds and mushrooms streaked through the greenery as colored strokes of a paint brush. All were struck by the beauty and wonder of the kitchen, stores, and loading dock cavern, the air clean, the water clear, the light other worldly. Colorful frogs, crickets, and snakes could be seen within the tangle of green.

“Beautiful,” said Trinia.

And what they could hear but not see, was that Mona continued to sit cross legged in her swirling grove of green, and the blood-soaked prison through which the others had come, was swallowed by vine and flower and mold, erased, and replaced by caves of living color.

Ekko called from below, "I will roof terrace the purple."

"Do we follow?" asked Trinia.

"I am so confused," said the yeoman. The prison around her had bloomed into a green grotto of fantasy imagination, and Ekko was babbling in riddles before jumping into darkness.

"What is happening?"

Nyx said, "looks like we follow."

Her mind suddenly turned to skinny dipping with Ekko on some tropical beach, where they rolled naked in the surf making love. She shook her head, her body shivering, and sneezed, trying to clear her head.

"You ok?" asked Trinia.

"Allergies," said the yeoman.

Nyx laughed, "that is funny, because most everyone is allergic to you kitty cats."

"Yea, funny," she said with a grimace.

Ekko called from below, "there is a dishwasher, 20-feet orange, it leads to a bratwurst with clouds."

"Is he ok?" asked the yeoman. "He does not seem right."

"He is fine," said Nyx. "Sometimes it takes him a few minutes to slip back into the flow of time."

"What?" asked yeoman Meerly.

“Moving in and out of time can shuffle the brain,” said Nyx. “But he will be good, not to worry; too much.” He winked.

The yeoman almost said; ‘what’, again, but held her tongue. Nothing made sense. She considered she was still asleep back in her bunk at the barracks. It seemed likely.

The hole, once dark, was now illuminated by green vines that reached downward. Yeoman Meerly felt dizzy.

They climbed down and dropped with a splash into a large waterfilled cavern, 50-yards across and domed 10-yards over head illuminated by Mona’s hanging vines. On the far wall was an algae slick stair leading up to an ancient looking alter and behind that, a collapsed ancient stonework wall. They moved to the stair, up and out of the water. Ekko’s suit and Trinia’s pink pantsuit were shimmer-silk, thin and delicate but near frictionless, shedding dirt and water. Meerly on the other hand looked like a drowned cat, her tabard hanging soaked over her drenched fur. Trinia’s hair moved as independent tentacles of twined hair, each shaking itself dry as she stepped out of the water.

It was then that Mona moved up from the water, not having swam, but having walked along the bottom, breathing the water as if air, green e’Mral mists swirling about her body that Meerly could not see.

Meerly, wrung out her military issue tabard and considered the 5-years salary it would cost her to have a shimmer-silk tabard crafted, and here and now, this seemed a reasonable expense.

“Take your time,” said Ekko to Mona. “I am sure the murderous psychopaths we track will wait for you.”

“Fuck my rainbow,” said Mona, not at all pleased as to where this little adventure had led. She shook her bright red hair.

Nyx investigated the chamber beyond the broken wall. It was dark, but the e’Mral mists were visible, flowing over surfaces, giving form to objects and patterns of air movement. Of them, only yeoman Meerly needed light to see in the dark.

The room was large, the walls carved with old looking pictographs and runes, most Nyx could see dealt with the binding of a demon. “Bad news my dearest friends,” said Nyx, “looks like Sanguine had crafted a demon binding chamber and the nobs upstairs set the resident infernal free to wander about for snacks.”

“Fuck me,” said Mona.

Yeoman Meerly flicked open a lighter from her holster belt, which held a dozen rounds of ammunition and several small straps that held such other useful field items as a compass, first aid supplies, sewing kit, and a pen and small booklet of graph paper. She wondered why a small flashlight was not standard military issue, but she had to admit, after 12-years in the service, she had never needed a flashlight, until now, but neither had she ever used the compass. She also realized she was thinking hard on the usefulness of sewing kits and flashlights because her mind could not reconcile Nyx’s words, that a demon was wandering around. Like magic, people did not believe in demons, not really. The holy texts spoke of Demon Princes, but this was religious superstition, metaphor to explain good and evil to children, not actual, eat your face in a lake of fire, demons. And upon hearing the others around her casually discuss a demon on walk-about, it was to her, non-sequitur, it made no sense, her mind turned to more important matters, such as how long the flame of the lighter in hand will endure and would it scare a demon.



“I think yeoman Meerly might be broken,” said Trinia. “She seems stuck staring at her lighter.”

Ekko walked over to where yeoman Meerly stood and placed his face behind the flame she held. He smiled at her, his bright blue and red eyes reflecting the light of the flame.

Yeoman Meerly suddenly screamed, shook her head violently and began to sneeze in quick succession.

“She will be ok,” said Ekko.

“You know if you keep fucking with her like that,” said Mona. “She will snap, she could barely hold her life together as a yeoman.”

“I am not sure you know what you are talking about,” said Ekko.

“I am absolutely fucking sure you do not,” said Mona.

Ekko’s grin faded, he moved away from Meerly, or at least out of reach of Mona.

Mona came up behind Meerly and touched her gently on the shoulder, “pay them no mind my dear, they blather to no useful purpose. You are fine, I need you to take a deep breath and calm your mind. You are right, there are no demons and no such thing as magic, we are tricksters, musicians and architects, expert in loading docks and canals, skilled in pyrotechnics and special effects, you are right, the world makes sense, take a deep breath.”

“Lies, solid plan,” said Ekko.

Meerly was hyperventilating, had fallen to the ground unable to breathe, to catch her breath. She fainted.

*Demons are not magical whimsical creatures such as e'Mral bending invisible rainbow mists to make fanciful places, no, demons are much worse, demons are real.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

When yeoman Meerly came too, Mona was over her, singing some nursery rhyme melody she did not recognize.

“I am sorry little pretty,” said Mona. “These 3 fuck stains do not spend much time around the Veiled. How do you feel?”

Meerly sat up, she was breathing, calm, “well, I think, what happened? The Veiled?”

“Too much too fast,” said Mona. “I am going to say some things, with each, I am going to be holding your hand, this will not hurt, but you may feel lightheaded, this is normal.” Mona began to Lace green e'Mral mist through Meerly's body.

The yeoman felt suddenly warm and dry, static electricity causing her hair to stand up as someone frightened, a sensation she did not recognize.

“As a feline,” said Mona. “You do not feel fear. You rely on your intellect to sort your reactions.”

Meerly nodded, she suspected that the statement of the obvious was to gently lead her someplace.

“But sometimes,” said Mona. “If the world changes too quickly, the threat to life so sudden, your little feline spliced brain cannot keep up, and you short out, your body falls to unconsciousness until the mind can sort the world.”

“I have never heard of that,” said the yeoman.

“It is the reason your kind is so keen on martial order,” said Mona. “So possessed of ritual and tradition, fastidious, things that are predictable, measurable. It is also why you have such a heightened awareness of higher emotions such as love, hate, anger, and compassion, why your kind are such brilliant artists and craftspeople.”

Meerly nodded; all of this she understood.

“So,” said Mona. “When you learn that chaos such as magic and demons may be real, your mind rebels, these are things that do not fit into your natural world, they threaten your life.” Mona squeezed the yeoman’s hands.

Meerly felt warmth flow through her, felt strong, she breathed deeply. And though panic threatened to rise within her, the warmth washed it away. “What must I do?” asked Meerly.

“Time is the cure, you are not so fragile,” said Mona. “It was the other 3 fucking about, especially that motherfucker Ekko, that sent your mind to the edge. They have been instructed to behave.”

“So?” asked Meerly. “Magic and demons are not real?”

“No,” said Mona. “They are not real. But people like Ekko like to mess with people like you, rational, uptight, make them think sorcery is real, but it is trickery, sleight of hand, illusion. And demon is just the name we all give bad people.”

Meerly felt good, the warmth running through her bolstered her mind, the world made sense, she was ready to proceed, to help those prisoners that might still be helped. “Thank you,” she said.

“You are welcome child,” said Mona. “Shall we get moving?”

Meerly got herself up and straightened her tabard.

Mona moved to Trinia who sat in an especially dark shadow, her softly illuminated skin as that of a full moon.

“How long will that last?” asked Trinia.

“If Ekko keeps his fucking lust to himself and does not talk to any more fucking old-gods,” said Mona. “She will be fine, her mind will catch up.”

“A big IF,” said Trinia.

“Indeed,” said Mona. “And if you can, keep your hair, looking like hair, that would also be helpful.”

Trinia nodded, her long black hair coiled into an elegant series of buns atop her head, with delicate wisps falling to dance on her shoulders.

Mona winked.

*Shimmer-silk is a near two-dimensional fabric that clings to skin with the appearance of a silken coat of paint, rare, expensive, immodest, and eternally clean.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

After the pause to get yeoman Meerly back on her feet, Ekko and Trinia moved into the dark chamber. Mona handed the yeoman a torch she had crafted and moved behind the yeoman, bringing up the rear.

“Where is Nyx?” asked Meerly.

“He moves ahead or behind, in the shadows, scouting,” said Mona.

Meerly nodded. When she moved through the broken wall, her torchlight illuminated the chamber beyond. It was 5-yards wide and stretched 30-yards ahead of them. The walls and arched ceiling were carved with pictographs that looked to Meerly as the work of ancient primitive people that would be studied by archaeologists. The walls and carved stone floor were wet, the place ice-cold. She noticed that Ekko and Trinia had taken to talking in a language she did not understand.

“Hey,” said yeoman Meerly. “I cannot understand what you are saying.”

They looked at her, but then moved ahead, continuing to discuss what they saw in the same foreign dialect.

“Pay them no mind,” said Mona. “They are being childish little pricks.”

“Why is it so cold in here?” asked Meerly of no one in particular.

No one answered, they only continued forward.

Toward the end of the long chamber, Meerly could see the wall similarly broken, large blocks tossed aside, leading to a long deep downward rift. She could see signs of blood on the narrow rift walls.

Trinia moved into the rift, followed by Ekko, Meerly, and Mona.

Still Trinia and Ekko talked in their cryptic cadence.

The passage downward was steep and treacherous. Meerly's tunic became quickly cut and torn, her skin bleeding and bruised by the sharp wicked rock walls of the recent split in the earth, her full body fur protecting her from worse. She noticed that Trinia's bright pink shimmer-silk pantsuit was unbothered by the sharp passage and that Ekko's shimmer-silk suit similarly slipped past the sharp rocks uncut. Worth the money, Meerly thought to herself, if she ever took up spelunking. Meerly looked back at Mona, seeing the giant woman not at all pleased in the jagged confines, the remnants of her tiny dress torn, her skin cut and bleeding.

Meerly began to think again, began to wonder what she was doing delving into a cave deep under the City.

"Focus," said Mona. "Do not let your mind wander, focus on where you are, what you are doing." Mona wanted to reshape the jagged passage, create a stair of flowers, but Meerly was on the edge of a nervous breakdown, and any more overt shows of 'magic' may break the little kitty cat. So, Mona continued down the cutting passage naked.

Meerly focused, each cut, a reminder of where she was, what she was doing.

The rend in the earth opened into the side of huge pipe, 20-yards across, emerging 10-yards up on one side, a small stream of water meandered through piles of debris along the bottom of the enormous clay pipe. The air was thick, like an early fog, that stank of hot metal and methedrine, illuminated by the dim amber hue of sodium lighting strung in a line at the high apex of the great pipe. They could see 100-yards in either direction before the haze obscured the distance.

Below them were a pair of Xanthos, each with a large tank strapped to their crooked backs, a hose led from the tank to a long metal nozzle held by two hands. Great gouts of flame erupted from each nozzle directed at an especially aggressive yellow spotted violet ooze that sloshed through the debris toward the two amphibian figures.

“Shall we go down and say hello?” asked Ekko of Meerly.

The two started to climb their way down a steep section of pipe to a nearby pile of refuse that led down to the bottom of the pipe. “What do you know of Xanthos?” asked Ekko.

She began a bit of rote from school, “Xanthos are a post-human race of anthropomorphized frogs, that claim to be the children of Father Dragon, whatever that means. Their language is a combination psionic projection and aquatic hypersonic squealing that is incomprehensible to humans, but they can understand human speech. They will do as asked and if left alone, maintain the plumbing of the City. I have never met one, only occasionally seen them repairing a toilet.”

“Priceless,” said Ekko. “What is the City?”

“The City,” she said. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“And who made the City?” asked Ekko.

“Gods, dragons, the accidental swirling of cosmic debris into a planet and solar system,” said Meerly. “Who knows for sure? I for one lean toward a fairy wish.”

Ekko was about to explain the creation of the City, the universe, the very meaning of life and everything, but instead burst into laughter. “I hope you are right,” he said. “That is much more fun than the truth.”

She looked at him oddly.

Ekko and Meerly approached the 2 Xanthos as they finished off the especially aggressive ooze.

“Greetings, I am Ekko, and this is Yeoman Meerly of the Vree Command speaking on behalf of Major Song Vree.”

The two amphibians were hunched but still stood more than 5-feet tall, they had no necks, their head simply an extension of their bodies like a frog, with large hemispherical eyes on the sides of their heads that as a pair, provided 360-degree vision. They had wide slits for mouths, again, like a frog, and famously prehensile tongues that split into 3 at their tip and could reach some dozen yards. Most had, as these two, slick bright yellow skin with spots, the spots varying greatly from one to another Xanthos in color, shape, and pattern. Here the left one had large blue spots, the right one red mottling.

Blue spot opened his mouth and a loud hiss expelled, followed by a loud croak that smelled of rotten fish. Meerly felt sick to her stomach and her ears twitched involuntarily.

But what Ekko heard and saw in his mind’s eye was, “I am *Gorfund of the Deep Wide Trench of the Sunset Sea on a Far Hollow Night where the Stars cannot Reach*. And this is my associate *Blorka Kor of the Vastness Sea of Jubilant Coral Reach far beyond the Clam of One Sight*.”

“I am pleased to have crossed both of your paths,” said Ekko. “The great current has graced us this day.”

Meerly looked at Ekko like he was crazy.



Blue spot spoke further, Meerly had to cover her ears, as the hypersonic screeching caused her a fair amount of pain. He said, “We saw many of the very mean cat-man-hybrid critters be dragged from where you came, and with them many of the super stinky kill-kill hairy men with evil eyes dragged with them. They went that way, 20-hours ago.” The blue spotted Xanthos pointed downstream.

“Glory be to the Vast Horizon,” said Ekko. “We seek to follow the mean and stinky ones and free them of their bonds. Can you say what dragged them?”

Holding her ears, Meerly was saying, “la, la, la, la...” but it did not make the Xanthos speech seem any less like nails-on-chalkboard.

“We are not sure what it was,” said Blue. “It was like a giant blob.”

“Gelatinous,” said Red. “But not an ooze.”

“And certainly not an algae or fungus,” said Blue.

“No,” agreed Red. “Not a fungus, it had globular tentacles that it moved on the ground like a many-legged bug.”

“But more globby tentacles,” said Red. “That had each man swallowed within its translucent ickiness.”

“A demon perhaps?” asked Ekko.

“Anything unique may perhaps be a demon,” said Red. “No two are the same.”

“But not enough information to be sure,” said Blue. “Maybe a monster, the pet of a demon, no two are the same as well, but its intelligence we could not see.”

“Kind you are oh great and wondrous world engineers,” said Ekko. “May your waters always run cold and clear.”

The two Xanthos bowed and moved upstream to continue their ooze clearing work.

Ekko relayed his exchange and the group moved downstream.

“A monster or a demon,” said Meerly. “What is the difference?”

“Monsters are demonic corruptions of animals,” said Trinia. “Demons are corruptions of men.”

Meerly had so many questions, curious now, her mind having adjusted to her sudden upside-down reality. “Where do they come from? How is one here? How do we fight it? How do we kill it?” and on and on she prattled asking.

“Stop,” said Mona. “Slow down, breathe, think on where you are now, this moment. Look around you.”

She looked around, this huge pipe they were moving through was old, the piles of sediment and debris around them were fantastic. Meerly identified parts of ships, vehicles, buildings, and items common and alien, all of it old, very old. And a surprising amount of it seemed valuable. Gems, jewelry, metal coins, gold and silver sculptures and flatware were abundant. She picked up an especially ornate black onyx toaster encrusted with rubies and sapphires.

“If you had some bread,” said Ekko. “We could make toast. It probably still works.”

“Where are we?” asked Meerly.

“Within the Lyr sublevels,” said Trinia. “Inside the Big Machine.”

“The what? Lyr?” asked Meerly.

“Nothing,” said Mona, smacking Trinia on the back of his head. “We are in a pipe under the City is all. Pay the little sad girl no attention, she babbles nonsense when she should be looking ahead.”

Trinia frowned.

*Robots, servitors, androids, and similar logic-engine clockwork servants are common throughout the City, some new, most old, or ancient but maintained in operating condition. So ubiquitous they go unmentioned and unnoticed. Look around you, they are everywhere.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The group continued along the downstream pipe for hours, until it opened into a vast chamber that stretched out before them, an underground valley formed not by mountains, but machines of mountainous dimension left and right of where the stream ran. And above, slowly roiling smoke hid the cavernous ceiling. Ahead visibility was limited by a heavy fog, irregular lights within the various titanic machines cast an eerie glow in the fog shrouded chamber.

Meerly was in awe, “the scale,” she said. “Who could build such a machine? And to what purpose?”

Trinia began to speak, Mona slapping her on the back of his head.

“Ruins of a mysterious time,” said Mona. “Of Giants that no longer roam. They are no more wonderous than the City above with its miles high spires and forest of high-rise towers, just old and buried.”

Trinia and Ekko looked at each other and grimaced.

“Come little snowflake,” said Trinia. “We go into the valley of machines.”

Mona looked hard at Trinia, she shrugged.

About a mile down slope from where the pipe entered the valley, they moved along the banks of a toxic river, swirling oily colors, appearing more as paint than water, the banks piled with mechanical debris and trash deposited over eons. Yet still, along the banks, grew huge phosphorescent mushrooms, algae, oozes, and trees that appeared more as coral than wood, all of which were of a scale to make Meerly feel like an insect in a world of giants. She felt insignificant, like every insect she had ever swatted absent mindedly, looking about to see if she might suddenly be stepped on by something so large that it might never notice she had been.

“The trail leads up this way,” said Trinia.

They followed up the 30-degree slope of a machine, a ground of metal plates and glowing glass, vents of steam and smoke irregularly scattered around them as they moved.

It was then that Meerly saw a hundred-foot figure emerge into view through the fog, a naked woman with skin of shimmering golden scales carrying a golden hammer. And instead of hair, flame crowned her head and fell down her back. She picked up a building-size plate of twisted metal and moved to a large flat area where a 50-foot-high anvil stood, Meerly had mistaken it for an oddly shaped 4-story building.

Trinia began to say something but was smacked in the back of the head by Mona. “It is best we keep quiet,” said Mona. “No need to disturb the work of the golden giantess. Do not think on her Meerly, she will pay us no mind if we ignore her.”

“Hellooooo,” yelled Ekko. “Dear gilded giantess of the golden hammer, we salute you.”

Mona rolled her eyes.

The golden giantess was beautiful, she turned and moved toward the group with surprising grace, delicate despite her titanic size. She knelt as she neared, lowering her face to look at the five little humans. She said, “4 little ‘arkitek’ wizards and a mortal, do you need help little mortal? Do these wizards torment you?”

The flaming hair of the giantess was as an open blast furnace, Meerly’s fur singed, and her tattered tabard caught fire. Meerly ripped the flaming fabric from her body and tried to compose herself.

“No, golden one,” said Meerly, “these 4 are my guides to rescue others of my people.”

“I think they lie to you mortal,” said the giantess, her breath the scent of hot metal. “I do not think they seek to aid you, they are tricksters, villains of chaos.”

“We are charged to see the little white cat home,” said Ekko. “We track a demon that absconded with her kin, have you seen such a creature?”

“Four wizards seeking a demon,” said the giantess. “Always it is violence with your kind, always pain and suffering.”

“Please,” said Meerly. “We seek to rescue, not kill.”

From the fog appeared a second figure, male, its skin of thick scales of cold iron, the edges jagged, broken. He is 20-feet taller than the giantess, broader, with a chiseled musculature and a hoarfrost beard. “What do you play with Laminia?” asked the Giant.

“Travelers on a quest to rescue their kin,” said the Laminia, “but I think the wizards deceive, and the little mortal will be devoured. It seems nefarious and fun.”

“Leave them to their travails,” said the giant. “We have work.”

“Beware pretty little cat,” said the giantess. “They will disappoint you before they eat you.”

The giantess stood and turned, moving back to her work at the huge anvil, her hammering as thunder rolling through the great valley of machines.

Mona walked over to Ekko, “you fucking jackass.” She slapped him across the face.

Mona continued up the path they had been following.

Ekko smiled.

“That was really stupid,” said Trinia to Ekko. “Fun, but really stupid,” and she too continued up the path.

“How many times do you have a chance to meet a fire giantess?” asked Ekko. “And you just wanted to skulk by like rats? You have all got to be kidding me right now. Seriously?”

“I thought she was wonderful,” said Meerly.

“Finally,” said Ekko. “One of you not afraid of a little adventure.”

“Meerly is not afraid of anything, biologically,” said Trinia. “She does not count.”

“Don’t you dare listen to her kitten,” said Ekko. “I think you count.”

Trinia frowned.

*Beware the deep places of the City, for all sewers lead to hell.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

The path up the side of the mountain-scale machine led to a 20-yard pipe, or perhaps an exhaust port. As no one knew the purpose of the machine on what they walked, it appeared to each of them as a large metal cave, beaten, rusty, and scored. The trail led in, and the cave soon turned downward.

Echoing in the distance they could hear singing, loud and jocular, as a talentless man might sing when alone and not sure of all the words. Nyx only ever partly present, most of his form lost in deep shadows, no matter the light source, was suddenly gone, consumed by darkness that vanished after him. Trinia took the lead, followed by Ekko, and Meerly. Mona brought up the rear. Light from ahead was now visible, the flickering orange and yellow of a large fire. The singing continued to reverberate from ahead.

The metal cave led to a large circular metal room that had once been painted sage green, pink, baby blue, gray, and white at various times in the past as evidenced by the heavy flakes of layered peeling paint on the walls. The floor was a white poured stone speckled with multicolored glass, cracked and dirty with the age of centuries. At the center of the room was a roaring bonfire with flames reaching up 20-feet. Around the fire, along the perimeter of the

room, were arranged the bodies of a 10 Kin'Rhi having recently been stripped naked of their loose-fitting leather pants and chain shirts and 30 Min'Zirai, naked but for their filth matted full body fur. All appeared alive but unconscious, their wounds minor. Near the fire, inspecting one of the Min'Zirai was a translucent gelatinous horror, a dozen oozing tentacles holding up a heavy misshapen body of sagging blubber, inside of which could be seen the digesting parts and bones of dozens of Min'Zira and Kin'Rhi and at the center, a single large eye. A dozen other longer and more slender tentacles manipulated the unconscious Min'Zirai. A single large, ragged cut of a mouth was the source of the off-key singing.

But Meerly, upon viewing all of this, was most struck by the smell, that of bile and sulfur and the rot of flesh, so strong, that she dry-heaved.

“40 still alive,” said Ekko. “Promising.”

“That is a very big demon,” said Trinia. “Challenging.”

The eye at the center of the demon floated amongst its digesting victims, turned suddenly, and swam near the outer gelatinous ichor of its body, looking at the entry where Trinia, Ekko, and Meerly could be seen standing. The singing stopped.

“Brothers,” said the demon, “I see you brought your own snack. But these 40 are mine, do not get airs about them being all up for grabs or some other nonsense, that will just lead to violence. And I hate violence.”

“We saw your work at the prison,” said Ekko. “Impressive.”

“A prison,” said the demon. “Is that what that was, I thought it food stash. Good, no need to worry about the owner then.”



“I am the owner,” said Meerly. “And you will return these people to me and leave this place.”

Trinia considered the fearlessness of feline kind, and how it was often the demise of their young, like this was about to be. “Certainly, we can negotiate,” said Trinia. “Let not your escape from a long entrapment in a block of ice, and the resulting ignorance of your current situation, be met with violence and your likely destruction. Certainly, we can speak before we dance.”

“What do you know of my situation?” asked the demon.

“We tracked you here,” said Trinia. “It was an easy matter to see your prison had been opened by scavengers skulking about the undercity for loot, that they released you, were devoured, and that you then sought further sustenance and, to again, begin your collection.”

The demon looked disappointed that his story was so banal. “I am the great and powerful Grungle’thuud, you will bow before my magnificence.” The demon’s dozen long arms swirled stretched high, meaning to intimidate onlookers, but appeared more curious, as a large upside-down jelly fish.

“I yield to your magnificence,” said Trinia. “But here you are, crawling around the squalor and the forgotten like vermin, not very magnificent you must admit.”

“I admit nothing,” said Grungle’thuud. “Bow, now.”

Trinia gave the demon a curtsy.

By this time, Ekko had pulled the yellow-orange e’Mral mists to him, swept them into his eyes and looked deep into the Pale. The world came into sudden focus, the world previous, a blur of black and white, but now sharp, rendered in all 33 colors of reality. He saw the strained

weakness of the demon's body, tasted its fear, saw also this chamber as it was and is, timeless, dozens of Xanthos operating controls on the various walls, the room clean and at its center, where the bonfire burned, a small platform, and upon the platform half-a-dozen Xanthos stood, the surrounding machine teleporting the group on the platform away, straight downward.

The demon was confused, looked at Ekko, "What are you doing?"

Ekko began to wander about in the chamber, talking to people not there, in a language no one understood. This way and that he talked and wandered.

"What trickery is this?" asked the demon, "what deception?"

"I am sorry," said Trinia addressing the demon, "but my sad pale friend is a bit odd in the head, sometimes he forgets where he is or what he does. But I think, if I may continue, our discussion, that you might be willing to trade us these mortals for something more immediately useful given your recent thawing."

Ekko continued his discussions with the ancient Xanthos that shared the space within the chamber, fascinated by their work, they were excited to share the wonders of their new machine. Ekko began to push buttons on various walls, hidden by eons of grime, the walls began to flicker and glow with steady and flashing lights.

Meerly looked at Ekko and was stunned to silence. Ekko moved about the room talking, and as if receiving information from unseen peoples around him, pushed buttons in sequences so complex that they must be random, he was insane, she thought. But lights continued to engage, the room began to hum.

"What are you doing?" the demon's attention back on Ekko.

“Trade,” said Trinia. “I think we were talking about trade.” Trinia plucked the yellow and orange e’Mral mists around her as harpist might give life to a tune. The demon suddenly compelled to focus on Trinia.

“Yes,” said the demon. “Trade, I demand passage from this place, and your protection. Bring a ship that we may travel, take me where I wish, and I shall trade you these trifles.” The demon’s many arms stretching out to indicate the men lying unconscious in the room.

Ekko began to sing, a loud bawdy tune in a language that neither the demon nor Meerly could understand.

Trinia said, “we agree, we have a ship near, we can take you to where you may collect that which you desire.”

The demon smiled, fascinated by the shifting black hair of Trinia, his own large eye that floated within its body hypnotized.

Nyx appeared from a deep shadow; Mona jumped 30-yards across the room toward the demon.

Trinia stepped backward, a face of shock and disbelief at her colleague’s actions.

The demon, realizing betrayal, was too quick for either Nyx or Mona, dodging suddenly left then back but smashing into the central bonfire, flaming wooden debris exploded across the room toward Trinia, she screamed and jumped back, surprised, and injured. The demon exalted in his own cleverness.

“You are pathetic and weak,” said the demon. “Unworthy of collection, I will simply eat you.”

But as the demon was now mostly standing on the small center platform where it had made the bonfire, Ekko pulled 3 levers, and the humming machine jumped to life. A gout of crackling lightning struck downward from the domed roof to the platform at the center. The demon exploded outward into a hot, wet, gelatinous goo that coated everyone and everything in the room. The lightning gone as quickly as it appeared, the lights of the machine dimmed off, the humming stopped, and even the flaming bits of tossed bonfire extinguished by globs of steaming demonic bile. The room dark.

Everyone screamed.

“What the fucking hell?” said Mona. Her nakedness thickly coated by the demon’s remains.

“I am covered in steaming snot,” howled Trinia. “Disgusting.” Her black hair was coated, wringing, and flipping wildly of its own accord, trying to rid itself of the heavy dripping mucus. But unlike Mona, her form fitting pink pantsuit, shedding most of the bile from her body, her hands, face, and hair catching the worst of it.

Ekko was sitting on the floor, legs stretched out in a V before him. He sat under what looked like a dump truck load of demonic slime. He held the large demon’s eye like a beachball in his outstretched arms, talking to it, “sorry about that Grungle’thuud, but it appears the teleporter no longer works, perhaps a bit of recalibration.”

Meerly was standing, naked but for her military shorn full body feline fur, the only thing she wore being her holster and sidearm. Like Mona, huge globs of the demon’s steaming gelatinous body sluffing down her body. She stood in the dark, not moving, then began to scream.

*...so advanced the City's medical arts, death is more often an inconvenience than an end, may your body be found and delivered to hospital; enjoy.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Some hours later, Mona had all the Min'Zirai prisoners and Kin'Rhi prison guards out of the chamber and tended, only thin layers of the demon's caustic bile remaining, all of them shaved clean by straight razor, all alive and breathing, but still too weak to do much more than sleep.

Meerly sat for the first time in her life, truly naked. Her thin white fur shaved, her skin red and angry with small cuts and chemical burns. She wore a loose white robe given to her by Mona, but the robe had no weight and was so thin as to seem without thickness, it covered her shaved form, but offered no comfort. She shivered despite not being cold.

Ekko approached her, "you did well kitten," he said. "I was certain that you and those you sought would not survive."

She looked at him with hatred.

"Not that you are not brave," said Ekko. "Rather that most mortals do not survive demons."

"Demons do not exist," she said. "What was that thing?"

"Semantics aside," said Ekko. "Demons are not magical creatures or anything fanciful or related to the afterlife, they are the product of demonic technomancy. They were each of them

once human, gifted, or corrupted or cursed, depending on circumstance or your point of view, with self-determined evolution, to remake themselves as any living form they can imagine for themselves, even changing with time as their own attitudes or aesthetics might change, no longer a prisoner of the environment that evolved their natural ancestors. They tend to be detached from morality, immortal, and regenerate harm; evil and very hard to kill.”

Meerly was angry, and though not scared, uncertain of the world she lived in, uncertain she was still sane, she focused on what was in front of her, now, “you called it a collector?”

Ekko made himself comfortable sitting cross legged in front of Meerly, “each demon is unique,” said Ekko. “As unique as the individual imagines their own physical evolution. But there is a hunger, a compulsion, that accompanies personal evolution, and it tends to fall into one of seven categories, what the holy texts call the seven sins of wickedness. Greed, or what we call collectors, is one of those seven types of demon.”

“Why was I not told any of this?” asked Meerly. “Why do we live oblivious to such horrors. No one believes in demons or magic. How is this possible?”

“I am not sure,” said Ekko. “I suspect that it is a question of rarity. Demons are rare, magic rare, and in honesty, most people live their entire lives never seeing either, after a few generations, I imagine they just forget, the outlier, the one that claims demons and magic are real, labeled and dismissed. What parent wants to tell their children that monsters are real? And why? Can parents protect you from either, can they protect themselves?”

“It is not right,” said Meerly. “To hide the truth, to be unprepared for real danger.”

“I agree,” said Ekko. “But a week ago you would have dismissed any of this talk as crazy, and nothing I said would have convinced you otherwise. So, who is really to blame? The teacher or the student?”

“Spare me your blithering double talk,” said Meerly.

“Very well,” said Ekko, he got up and left her alone.

Meerly stared at his back as he walked away, a killing hatred made her shaved tail quiver. Who is really to blame, she thought, who?

*Law within the City is a patchwork of Great Houses, irregular and self-serving, but magic by any name is illegal.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

A few days later, at dawn, Major Song, recently recovered from having his brains blown out by Master Sanguine, arrived at Studio Sanguine with 16 Vignettes, each carrying 16 shock troops. They hung in the air surrounding the warehouse structure, awaiting the word to breach.

Major Song ordered his own Vignette to land on the wooden promenade at the front door. He strode forward with a new yeoman at his side. He burst through the front door and screamed, “I order Master Sanguine to present himself for summary execution, or I will kill everyone on site and burn this place to ash.”

The receptionist, Dorris, looked startled, “ah, Major Song Vree, ah... Master Sanguine is expecting you, this way please.” She got up and walked back into the Studio.

Major Song yelled after the receptionist, “get back her you worm, I will not follow you, you will come to me, surrender yourself, beg for mercy to no avail. You will suffer.”

Dorris poked her head around the corner looking back at where Major Vree stood at the front door, “this way please, Master Sanguine is waiting in the main hall.”

“You will deliver him to me,” raged the Major, but her head vanished.

“Quickly please,” came the voice of Dorris out of sight. “We do not want to keep Master Sanguine waiting.”

The Major stammered and stomped, walked in a circle, wanting to murder everyone in the building, now. He followed after Dorris, not because he capitulated, but because he wanted to see Master Sanguine die. The new yeoman followed.

The Major entered the large skylit central studio, desks and drawing tables empty of workers.

Ahead of the Major stood an array of persons. Master Sanguine was front and center, but to his right was Yeoman Meerly, she did not look good, she wore her yeoman’s tabard, but her fur gone, red blotched raw skin made her look weak and wounded, the Major did not recognize Meerly, only her tabard. She saluted as he approached.

The Major saluted on reflex. “What is the meaning of this Yeoman Meerly, I am here to kill Master Sanguine and anyone that would seek to aid him. I have a force of 16 times 16 waiting for my order to breach.”



“Maybe sir,” said yeoman Meerly. “We could evacuate the 30 prisoners that I rescued on your orders. And perhaps as well the 10 Kin’Rhi that guarded them in their prison, held here as my prisoners in your name. Sir.”

Major Song had not immediately recognized the Min’Zirai and Kin’Rhi that stood behind her and Master Sanguine, for each was shorn of hair, their skin red with cuts and chemical burns, each wearing a thin paper robe as a hospital patient.

“What are they doing here?” asked Major Song, he turned to his new yeoman. “Get medical teams in here now, get these heroes taken care of and the prisoners taken to holding.”

Soldiers entered from the front and rear, hundreds, but weapons away carrying litters and medical supplies. The studio quickly turned into a triage center, though it soon became obvious all were well, only in need of rest.

“None of this changes anything,” said Major Song.

“I disagree, respectfully,” said Master Sanguine. “I think it changes everything. Your yeoman here, acting of her own initiative, set to complete your mission, your last order, before your sudden incapacity this past week. She found the prison, without my aid, rescued the prisoners, and even managed to capture 10 of the guards that I am certain will make your next bargaining meeting with House Kin a profitable affair. No, Major Song, I think this changes everything, you have no need to be here or ever see me again. Dorris will show you to the door.”

“Why you little shit,” spat the Major. “You think that shooting me in the head...”

“Should be forgotten?” said Master Sanguine. “Yes, it should, as it only makes you look weak and impotent, I should think this would be obvious.”

The Major quick drew his pistol, putting it tight up against Sanguine's forehead and fired five shots through his head. But the first shot ricocheted off Master Sanguine's bald head, knocking the gun back and up, the other 4 shots firing up and through the skylight as Major Song's arm was broken by the sudden knockback. His pistol dropping to the ground.

Master Sanguine moved to vanish yet another sacred star-pistol.

"You bastard," said Song, holding his broken arm.

"Maybe," said Master Sanguine. "But your mission here is ended, go, celebrate your victory, reunite your freed prisoners with their families, revel in the adoration of your family for being such a gifted military leader, do not despoil it with mention of me."

"This is not over," said Major Song, his teeth cliche. "What of my star-pistol?"

"Goodbye," said Sanguine.

Within the hour, Major Song, accompanied by yeoman Meerly, his new yeoman, and all the prisoners and guards and soldiers were gone. Dorris returned to her reception desk. Master Sanguine was alone in the large Studio, the mortal workers would be back tomorrow, having been given the day off. Nyx emerged from a deep shadow.

"He is dangerous," said Nyx.

"Song?" said Sanguine. "He is an idiot. But I need you and Mona to follow, he will kill Meerly."

"Are you sure?" asked Nyx.

"Yes," he said. "She may already be dead; he will dump her body in the deep water in flight back to his base."

“Why?” asked Nyx.

“Because he is an idiot,” said Sanguine.

## Part III: Something of Rebirth

*Magic may be cured, and if magic may be cured, it must be considered a disease.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Ona and Lya were post-human, a kind that appeared as anthropomorphized cats, fur covered, tall and slender with long counterbalancing tails, large expressive eyes, and long horizontally projecting ears. The two were each born to a long line of impoverished hard-working artisans, proud to serve their military overlords.

They lived in a quiet bucolic village, a place of humble houses, workshops, and inns surrounded by the overgrown ruins of the war.

To Ona and Lya was born a little girl, and both were overjoyed. When the child turned one, there was a celebration in the little village, the child's naming ceremony, her name Meerly.

The whole village was on hand to play music, dance, gossip, and eat sweet cake. But the child's fur was electric blue, and more, she walked and ran as a child many years older. Odd, but perhaps gifted, not enough to spoil the mood of the day. But the undercurrent of discord came to the fore when Meerly spoke, not the cooing of a year-old baby, but full coherent sentences, asking questions of things they could not see and describing colors she heard, scents she saw,

and sounds she tasted and touched. The poor little child was joyous but obviously broken. The mood of the day turned to tragedy and talk of curse. The parents were commiserated instead of congratulated, their joy dragged down to doubt by the weight of their friend's heavy concern.

But one friend, an overproud man whose son served in the navy, offered to bring medical aid to the little girl, "she is young, maybe she can be saved from the darkness that threatens her mind, maybe she can be made right and normal."

Some weeks later, a lieutenant Song Vree arrived at the village with 3 medical technicians (one of the medical techs the son of their family friend) to look at the girl. The child was happy, running, bouncing, and playing. She was eager to talk and describe the wonderous magical things she saw. More she told of spirits that befriended her, of things she could do, magical things.

"I can promise nothing," said Song. "But we can install her with a chrome-heart, this may stabilize her mind, and with time, cure her insanity. This is expensive and reserved only for those that serve in the military. I will have to take her and if she is cured, she will be granted the honor of naval service."

Ona, the father, was stoic, but stood tall and proud. Honored that his beloved Navy would save his crippled daughter and offer her the honor of service, he was grateful, "you do me and my family a great honor, thank you."

Lya was not so enamored the idea of her beloved little Meerly being hauled away by the military, and less certain she was damaged as everyone seemed to insist, her strange blue hair aside. "You will not take my little girl; I will not see her joy crushed by you and your kind."

Lya held her little girl tight. Lya was not afraid, that was an emotion that did not afflict her feline kind, but she loved her child so deeply that she felt her love as physical pain.

Ona slapped Lya, the first time he had ever struck his beloved wife, “do not embarrass me, our family.” He regretted the strike as soon as it landed. “Give the child over, if she is saved, she will bring honor upon us.”

“She does not need saving except from you and your wicked faith in military overlords,” Lya said. She hugged Meerly more tightly.

“Give her over.” Ona struck Lya a second time, sending her hard to the floor, ripping his daughter from her grasp and handing her over to Song.

“She will be well cared for,” said Song, passing the now crying child to his medical team. They packed up to leave.

Lya ran at Song with a murderous anger that caught everyone by surprise, she leaped onto Song with her claws, hands and feet, bared, slashing his face chest and groin, digging deep with repeated strikes, shredding his flesh to reveal his ribcage, and through it, his own chrome heart, biting at the mechanical horror before Ona and the 3 techs could pull Lya off the lieutenant, one of the medics sedating the her with an injection of a pale pink liquid.

Various combat drugs automatically injected into Song, negating the pain and shock of his rent open chest, missing left eye, and torn genitals. He quick drew his star-pistol and pointed it at Lya, intent on shooting her in the head, for tradition dictated, he could not draw his ceremonial sidearm without firing to kill.

But Ona leaped and landed on his unconscious wife, covering her, “please great warrior, do not take both my wife and daughter, please no, please, I am loyal, my family has always been

loyal, we are of service, do not punish the ravings of a grieving woman with death, please no, please.”

Song nearly fired; the green glowing meteorite slug of his family star-pistol would core through both bodies unimpeded. But he stayed his trigger finger and holstered his gun, against tradition, having not fired to kill. Later he would decide that the heavy dose of combat meds had clouded his mind, and that had he been in his right mind, he would have fired through them both without hesitation, his later regret being that he had not killed them both when he had the chance.

Song and his 3 techs left with Meerly, Ona crying, still lying over the body of unconscious wife.

When Meerly had turned 13 she was formally accepted into the Great House naval academy, a ceremony to which her parents were formally invited as a matter of tradition. Ona and Lya had not seen their child since Song had taken her.

The air between Ona and Lya was cold, never warming since Meerly’s taking. They stayed together because honor dictated it. Neither recognized Meerly. The little 13-year-old wore a student’s tabard, her white fur shorn to military standard, but was splotchy, with patches of naked pink skin. She looked anorexic, unhealthy, skinny, her eyes pink as an albino. When she moved, she looked weak, tired, and inelegant.

“My beautiful little blue girl,” wept Lya. She hugged Meerly, but gently, the frail form in her arms seemed as it might crack. She could hear the clockwork sounds of the chrome-heart within her daughter’s hollow chest. Never had she felt so sad as this moment.

Ona stood proud, “it is good to see you daughter, you honor our family your commitment. Never has any of our family been afforded the honor to serve.”

Lya looked at Ona, and if looks could kill, he would be dead.

It became obvious to the two that Meerly had been regularly and severely beaten, the marks of her last beating not quite healed. She spoke only when spoken too, her answers timid, uncertain. There was nothing of this child either parent recognized of their joyful toddler. If not for her tabard describing her name and ignoble family history, they would never know this was their daughter. And Lya, despite herself, wished she had never met this pale little girl.

This was the last time that Ona and Lya saw their daughter before her funeral.

*The e'Mral sighted suffer harm by accident, disease, or violence as any mortal, but being not quite real can seem otherwise.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Meerly awoke to sun streaming in from a high stained-glass window, the dream of a blue furred child shrinking from her mind. She was in a huge gilded 4-poster bed that looked small in an even larger palatial room fitted with white feather chairs with large swooping arms as the wings of a swan taking flight, carpets with scenes of pastoral life decorated with horses embroidered with gold thread and dogs with silver. Tables, benches, and bureaus crafted of exotic woods and inlaid with fantastic beasts of ebony, ivory, and glittering heartwood of blue, purple, and yellow.

She tried to sit up but failed. Tried again, struggling through pain and stiffness to sit against a pile of adjacent pillows. She looked across the room and out a tall pair of open doors

that led out to a small balcony with a table and a pair of comfortable-looking chairs. The view out was easterly, sunrise, looking out from a high hillside overlooking the vastness of the City stretching out below, her many waterways reflecting yellow, orange, and blue. She took a deep breath, it was beautiful.

She forced her way out of bed and made her way to the balcony and sat in one of the silk-cushioned ornately wrought chairs. She was undressed, but did not care, the pain of movement such that if she stopped, she might not get started again. She sat and closed her eyes letting the sun seep into her skin. She noticed that she had a ragged scar across her chest and a headache that would not yield. She was uncertain of who she was and had no sense of where she was. She could feel but not quite see a fine layer of fur beginning to grow from her skin. Thinking hurt, she let the morning breeze move over her tingling skin. It was cold, a clear fall day, but she felt alive.

The memory came back to her with a sudden shock, Major Song in the Vignette, “you are a credit to your disgraced family,” he had said, and then shot her. She touched the scar across her chest, then her head, whereas she fell to the Vignette floor, Major Song, shot her in the head, blackness consuming her, then the sense of cold water and drowning. Her chrome heart, a clockwork contrivance that replaced her own frail living heart, as earned by vowing a life of military service, tried but failed to maintain her life. She remembered, very clearly, dying. She touched again the scar over her chest and noticed she could not hear its subtle clockwork whirring.



She awoke to the sun being behind her, the balcony in the shadow of the villa's late afternoon sun. She noticed that she was covered by a thin blanket decorated with dancing hippogriffs.

"It is good to see you up and about," said Mona. "We had thought you beyond saving those first few days."

The voice came from behind her, Meerly moved to turn but her head responded with a sharp pain that threatened unconsciousness.

Mona moved into the chair next to her on the balcony. She wore a short low-cut backless dress of white silk embroidered with red flowers.

"Why? Why did he kill me? I completed the mission; I should have been a hero."

"You are a hero," said Mona. "But to Major Song you were an inconvenient truth. You military types in general, and Major Song especially, are not big on truth."

"But honor is truth," said Meerly, but knew how foolish she sounded as soon as she said it. "My head hurts."

"That is your regrown brain trying to fit inside your skull," said Mona. "There is not much to do but avoid sudden movement, the pain will lessen with each day."

"My heart?" asked Meerly,

"I am afraid your chrome-heart repels the e'Mral mists," said Mona. "For me to save you, I had to remove it, restoring your original living heart."

"But disease," said Meerly. "I will suffer illness and old age."

"Yes," said Mona. "You are alive."

Meerly did not know how to feel, happy at being alive or hurt that her beloved military family had betrayed her, killed her, and left her once again doomed to frailty. “It might have been better to have been left dead,” she said.

“The fact that a fuck stain like Major Song wanted it so,” said Mona. “Is enough to deny him.”

Meerly’s head hurt.

*Architects see the world differently, seeing as real that which does not yet exist.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Meerly awoke again in the big 4-poster bed, not knowing how she got here. Mona had told her there might be gaps in her memory, new brains were tricky she had said, or she thought she might have said, she was not sure. She had been in this room for weeks, the weather had turned to rain then snow. She got up from bed, opened the doors to the balcony, dusted snow from one of the chairs and sat looking at a low crescent moon. It was cold and clear, but she felt invigorated. Her fur had grown quickly, a full coat of luxuriant blue fur covered her nakedness.

And something else had begun to happen. The world appeared more colorful, brighter. No matter the darkness, she could see a playfully painted world, though the colors were often other than they should be. The ground and items of earth, metal, and stone were rendered in pinks and reds, the winds and waters were painted in flowing spirals of azure and blue, and people, men, and women, were not the color of their skin, but painted in colors of yellow and

orange that changed with their emotions. Animals and plants and trees, all things that make a living natural world, were rendered in colors of celadon and green, a mix of the yellows of emotion and the blues of water. And then there was darkness, shadow, ever it was a swirling of red ground and blue wind, purple and violet where the real and unreal seemed to coexist. She saw ghosts in the purple shadows, this unnerved her.

Mona arrived; she wore a backless dress. Her preference was for dresses that were too small, too short, and low-cut decorated by prints of flowers and hummingbirds, her goal seemingly to appear more naked than naked. Tonight, the dress was yellow with blue flowers. She sat with Meerly out on the balcony, the night dark and clear, but especially cold. The lights of the city rolled out below them, and the lights of stars and the galactic sweep stretched out above them.

“I see the world brightly painted in strange colors,” Meerly said. “Objects appear as stained glass, I can see through them, and colored mists swirl and dance and illuminate.”

“Excellent,” said Mona. “I had hoped you might recover, but I was not sure.”

“Excellent?” What are you talking about?” asked Meerly. “I think I am going insane, this new brain defective.”

“It is not your brain, but your heart,” said Mona. “Your heart is again alive, again your own, your soul unchained, your sight of the e’Mral mists is coming back to you.”

“What?” asked Meerly. “Restored, what are you babbling on about, I never saw any e’Mral mists.”

“You did,” said Mona. “You were born e’Mral. Those that raised me, the Sisters of Mercy, seek e’Mral children, rescue them, teach them. But they are opposed by those that would

see an end to magic, that do not believe in magic, that see e'Mral children as a curse to be slain or a disease to be cured. In your case, you were cured, installed with a chrome-heart as a child, upgraded over the years as you grew. The chrome-heart repels the e'Mral mists, imprisons the soul, your growth slowed and stunted, your vitality arrested, your sight blinded to the colors of magic. You were cured, becoming no more or less than any normal, Veiled, what we call non-e'Mral."

"But the chrome-heart," said Meerly. "It prevents disease, prevents aging, I might live centuries."

"Yes," said Mona. "The chrome-heart promises a long disease-free life, but in exchange you surrender your soul."

"A small price to pay for enduring health and vitality," said Meerly. "Who needs a soul when you can live a youthful life measured in centuries."

"Word for word," said Mona. "Exactly as the sales brochure of the chrome heart states. And mostly true, but was your life worth living for centuries?"

"None of this matters," said Meerly. "Magic is not real, souls are not real, once I have convalesced, I can get a new chrome-heart. Be as I was."

"Yes, you can," said Mona. "But I hope you choose to live."

"And what about this pain in my joints?" asked Meerly. "Everything hurts, some more than when I first arrived. And why is my fur blue?"

"The chrome-heart gone, your e'Mral vitality restores your body," said Mona. "In this case reversing years of stunted growth. You were a scrawny 5-foot woman, you are now over 6-

feet and still growing. I think you will be near 7-foot tall by the end of the week, your body as it should have been if not crippled by cure. As for your fur being blue, that is a question to you; the color is as you choose. Why do you choose blue?”

“Choose?” asked Meerly. “That is ridiculous, hair is hair, inherited, what choice is there?”

“You are e’Mral,” said Mona. “Your appearance is your own, that is magic, that is faith.”

“That is insane,” said Meerly. “How can such nonsense be true?”

“You are in a difficult circumstance,” said Mona. “There are years of learning you never had, you were raised to disbelieve magic, to be predicable, safe, and obedient. But this is not you, nor is the world that people like you pretend it to be. But the choice is yours, to embrace yourself and the world as it is, revel in it, live, or retreat to the safety of your colorless reality, safe, secure, predictable with a good health plan.”

“You mock me,” said Meerly.

“I do,” said Mona. “I mock your faith in what others tell you, your desire for the world to make sense, for others to give to you, I mock your petulant stupidity and your groaning self-pity. Your desire to follow fucking bores me and makes me wonder if you are savable as Nyx insists, or a lost cause best left with a chrome-heart as Ekko argues.”

Meerly glowered.

“There is no one but you going to make the decision,” said Mona.

“So, what happens next?” asked Meerly.

“Sanguine has agreed to take you on as an apprentice,” said Mona. “He is a miserable motherfucker raised during the war that lacks any people skills, you will learn to hate him, but he can guide you.”

“And if I do not want to learn witchcraft?” asked Meerly.

“Return to your kind,” said Mona. “Get yourself a new machine health plan. It will all go away, the sight, the oddness, normalcy will be restored. All of this will soon be a bad dream. But I suggest you take on a new identity, away from Major Song. Your new height and stronger appearance should endure as they are simply repairing the damage done to you as child. But your increased strength, speed, and intelligence will be lost, but as you never had them, you won’t miss them.”

“Wait, what?” asked Meerly. “I am stronger, faster, and smarter?”

“You are,” said Mona. “But convalescing in a room does not make such changes immediately obvious. But you notice we sit in the freezing cold barely clothed, unbothered; we sit in the dark seeing clearly, you barely begin to realize the life robbed from you by parents that wanted nothing for you but to be normal, and they succeeded.”

“My parents loved me,” said Meerly.

“Of course, they did,” said Mona. “They suffered debt and hardship to get you the best medical care that you could receive, curing you of colorful sight, gifting you a long healthy life rendered in black and white.”

“You mock me and my parents now,” said Meerly.

“Was their ignorance a choice?” asked Mona. “Were those that raised you, beat the defiance from you, forced you to conform, were they choosing to cause your suffering or were they saving you? Or as they often thought, were they doing both? The pain being for your own good. Of course, I mock you and them, they were weak and small minded, followers, determined to act against their own best interest. Fuck you and your crippled high horse.”

“How dare you,” said Meerly. “You know nothing.”

“On that we agree,” said Mona. “But here is the deal, in a week you will be back to full health, stronger and quicker, and despite your fucking moronic attitude, smarter than you ever were. Trinia wants to come see you, this is her house by the way, I suggest you thank her.”

Mona got up to leave.

“Will I see you again?” asked Meerly.

“That is your choice,” said Mona. “But beware, there is a right and wrong choice.”

*Architecture is magic.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

A week later, Meerly did not feel much stronger, quicker, or smarter, but she was a solid 7-foot tall as Mona had promised but also much more curvaceous, her body unmistakably woman, her skinny 5-foot flat-chested body a fading memory. Her face was dramatically different as well, her eyes much larger, nose sharper, and ears more sculpted. She was beautiful

as few of her kind were, a spectacular beauty at home in the company of elite models and leading actors. Meerly did not yet recognize herself in the mirror.

She had taken to wearing loose fitting sundresses, with a slit up the right side so that her holster could tie to her right thigh. She had been exploring the villa where she stayed, a hundred-acre private estate high on the hills overlooking the City. The servants were mostly men, beautiful, muscular, and, as Meerly soon learned, very willing and sexually proficient.

It was 3am, Meerly was outside lounging by a garden swimming pool, which had frozen over in the winter cold. The moon was overhead, and the stars seemed to stretch forever.

“Hello, my darling,” said Trinia approaching from a garden path.

Meerly sat up, “Hello Trinia, I am told I have you to thank for the accommodations, thank you.”

“You are most welcome,” said Trinia. “You are looking well.”

“I feel well,” said Meerly. “But I do not recognize this body.”

“It suits you,” said Trinia. “Though I can sense you do not yet believe it.”

Meerly did not answer.

“I think it is time for you to start making your own decisions,” said Trinia, she sat in a lounge near Meerly, put her hands behind her head, and stared up at the night sky.

“Mona said I could get my chrome-heart back,” said Meerly.

“No,” said Trinia. “You can choose to do whatever you want to do.”

“Isn’t that the same thing?” asked Meerly.



“No,” said Trinia.

Meerly stared up at the starfield overhead.

“I know what Mona said to you,” said Trinia. “And I made certain that Sanguine was not allowed to see you because if you talked to him, we would certainly lose you.”

“Lose me?” asked Meerly.

“E’Mral, the e’Mral mists, magic, all of it is rare and nearly vanished,” said Trinia. “With the war, prevalence of chrome-hearts, wyght-cores, and demons, the e’Mral sighted are circling the drain, magic is about to end.”

“That all seems rather melodramatic,” said Meerly. “I do not see the world ending anytime soon.”

“I will tell you a truth that Mona will have forgotten,” said Trinia. “A truth so profound that we E’Mral take it for granted. Magic, the e’Mral mists, are subtle and creative, never destructive. E’Mral are all trained as architects for a reason, our magical gift, our way of seeing the world, is always creative, and architecture is an education and a craft that is cooperative, constructive, and artistic, never destructive.”

“That sounds like a load of crap,” said Meerly. “You tell me I have been lied to my whole life by those that loved and raised me, now I am supposed to believe cotton-candy fairy dust crap about magic and creative artistry. To paraphrase Mona; fuck you and the unicorn you rode in on.”

Trinia did not reply.

“What can I do, really?” said Meerly.

“Almost anything you want,” said Trinia. “The almost part being that Yeoman Meerly is dead, so rejoining your old life serving Major Song is out. What parents and family you have were told of your demise in the rescue of prisoners in a heroic assault led by Major Song, your scribal effort, up to the end, noted in your service record. And in any event, now that you are looking like a kitty-cat-sex-goddess, I do not suppose anyone would believe you were yeoman Meerly anyway.”

“I have no money, no place to go,” said Meerly.

“Stay here as long as you like,” said Trinia. “Your name, until you decide otherwise, is Vyanna Valorin’tania.”

“Vya?” asked Meerly.

“As you like,” said Trinia.

Trinia got up to leave, “oh, I almost forgot.” She reached into the deep shadow to her left and retrieved a holster that held a long ornately carved pistol that seemed crafted of a dark translucent stone, a star-pistol. “A gift from Major Song by way of Master Sanguine, whatever you decide.” She handed the sacred firearm to Vya.

“But I have no noble family,” said Vya. “I am unworthy of such an honor.”

“Mona was right on one point,” said Trinia. “You have the self-confidence of an oft beaten dog. You are noble, you are E’Mral, and you, even as mundane yeoman Meerly, are far more worthy of this honor than its previous owner, Major Asswipe. Take it, and know you deserve it.”

She did not believe it, she stood up and she took the star-pistol. She replaced her holster and gun with her new sidearm. And as tradition, she fired her first round, a glowing green meteorite slug, at the moon, where legend says, the slug will impact when she dies.

*Architecture creates, war destroys, mutually exclusive, for even a fortress is built only to resist attack for a short time.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

A few days later, Vya donned a loose fitting white sundress ornamented with bright yellow flowers and left the villa, walking some miles downslope to the nearest train station. She stood out among the throngs of veiled people, post-humans, most of which were between 5-and 6-feet tall wearing heavy winter coats and galoshes against the cold and snow that blanketed the City. But for her short dress, Vya was covered only by her electric-blue cat's fur. And being 7-feet tall, she towered over the crowd. And something else, people, wherever she went, stared at her, struck by her statuesque beauty, a wonder to behold, exuding sexuality and strength that both frightened and allured.

Children and the elderly especially wanted to see and talk to Vya. And once on the train she was a captive audience to the people in her train car, she seemed a celebrity, they wanted to know who she was, where she was going, how tall? Children were fascinated by her sidearm, a star-pistol, the stuff of action movies and legends, not trains and regular people.

Vya did her best to ignore them but was more confused than bothered. In her mind she was still "little mouse," Meerly, veiled herself until a few weeks ago, ignored everywhere she

traveled. There had to be something else going on here, something more than physical appearance. Or, she thought, maybe not, maybe her appearance was enough to send a wave of excitement through mundane lives, she knew how she responded to large and powerful looking people like Major Song, she deferred. No, she decided, it was not that, these folks were not deferring, they were excited, fascinated, as though she had a glamour about her person.

She arrived near Spire Zirai 5-hours later, the train car calming after a time, and Vya telling stories of demons and hammer wielding 100-foot-tall golden women to an audience of children and a gaggle of elderly women. The old ladies nodded as Vya told her story. They knew the giantesses roamed and worked far below the city, they were benevolent makers, a blessing to have met one. They mocked their own children for dismissing the old ways, for no longer believing in anything larger than their own lives. Vya hugged all the children and the old ladies as she exited the train. One of the oldest of the women, Gluna, said, “I still believe young sorceress, we have not all forgotten, please do not forget us.” She smiled. Vya smiled back but did not understand.

Vya made her way through the city streets, snow fell, it was bitter cold and late evening. Those few that shared the streets with her were bound up in layers of waterproof fur lined cloaks and boots. Vya in her thin short summer dress, more naked fur than clothed with bare feet, was viewed with confusion, seeming as mad. Even the saurians, reptilian post-humans, more adaptable to heat and cold than humans, were still freezing under layers of heavy clothing. Vya felt only a brisk chill that made her feel alive.

The high rises and lower buildings that made up this part of the City were crafted of timber, sheeted in glass that mimicked the appearance of rice paper, and glowed with a warm

comforting light, every building a lantern of surpassing beauty and craft. The lowliest buildings representations of elegance and simplicity, the largest and most heroic spires of hope filled light, the promise of heaven within. As Meerly, Vya, had walked through these streets a hundred times, but always quickly, her head down against the weather or notice of others. But here tonight, painted by the e'Mral mists, rendered as illuminated stained-glass, head held high, Vya saw a city so beautiful it made her weep. How could she have been so blind, so many years wasted, so willfully blind to the world around her.

She walked miles through the city, mostly left to the reverie of solitude as she moved through the dark snow-covered streets of 3am. It was then a group of a dozen saurians emerged from alleys ahead and behind her along a climbing narrow street.

“Hello princess,” said the lead saurian, as his comrades, he wore several layers of fur lined clothing, goggles, and a mask over his reptilian snout, not she thought to disguise, but to protect his face from frostbite. “Hand over the pretty dress and that bit of iron on your leg and we promise not to hurt you too badly.” The dress she wore was unmistakably shimmer-silk, an impossibly thin, rare, and expensive extravagance.

Vya's first thought was Meerly's first thought, to comply, to escape. She had been attacked in her youth, bullied for being small and sickly. And later, in the military academy, raped repeatedly by men that expected her compliance, and if she refused or did not show the proper enthusiasm, suffered withering beatings to remind her of her place. She was not afraid, her feline kind were not capable of such primal emotions, but the wash of memories, of compliance and defiance and consequence, gave her pause, resistance was pain, compliance shame, she felt as she always had; trapped. But the painted e'Mral colors of the dozen men

revealed to her a truth, these dozen saurians, these thugs this winter night, they were afraid; of her. She did not understand.

“Hurry along you stupid bitch,” said the leader, made a motion to his men to move in on their victim.

The dozen men moved in to grab her dress and sidearm, their gloved pawing mitts clumsy and wet with snow. She quick drew her star-pistol and leveled it against the leader, firing, the glowing green slug missing as men jumped on her back, kicked at her legs, grabbed her arms. She fell to the snowy ground under the weight of 6 thugs, the other six began kicking and hitting her. But to Vya’s eye, her face pressed to the ground being kicked, she tasted blood in her mouth, she saw the red e’Mral mists welling from the ground, moving through her, she could taste the mists as iron, feel them as magnetic, gravity, the weight in her body changed, and flowed into the men on and around her. She was about to lose consciousness, the beating intense, when suddenly she heard yells from the men on and around her, the weight of them was gone, their yells fading as moving suddenly away.

Vya stood, bloody, stunned, she looked around but saw no men around her. She saw her star-pistol on the ground ahead of her, she fell to her knees next to it and picked it up and holstered it. She was breathing heavily, eyes closed. When she again heard distant screaming, this time approaching. She staggered up and drew her pistol, spinning, looking for the approaching men. Then one hit the ground with an explosive wet thud, its screaming suddenly halted. Then another, and another, and all around her the dozen saurians fell screaming from the sky in freefall, exploding at 120-miles per hour into the frozen ground. When finally, they laid around her, sacks of burst dead flesh, she holstered her star-pistol.

She did not exactly know what had happened, but she did, could feel it in her soul, she had shifted gravity, the e'Mral mists responding to her need, her will. "Be afraid you motherfuckers," said Vya to the broken corpses that laid on the ground around her, "Meerly is dead."

She continued her path until dawn, reaching a small outskirt village of low wooden apartment buildings in a decidedly poor part of town. Trash was evident everywhere, abandoned vehicles in the streets. As she walked, she noticed, that while her fur was still stained with blood, the wounds had closed, mostly healed. Mona was right it seemed; she did quickly heal harm, green e'Mral mists swirling around her like a swarm of bees.

She found a local hotel and entered to seek a room. The little man at the reception was eating a bowl of hot fish soup.

"I need a room," said Vya.

He looked up from his soup and his eyes went wide, the blue 7-foot amazon in a flower dress towered over him like a goddess. He nearly spilled his soup standing up, straightening himself to his fat 5-foot height. The little man wore a tabard tied with a silk rope, the embroidery indicating him belonging to a long family line of innkeepers.

"Please sign the register." He indicated the open book in front of him.

"I have no money," said Vya, realizing she had not had any need for cash since long before her death. The military provided everything she had needed and what little money she was paid she saved because refusing the money would have been rude.

The little man's face twisted.

“I have come for the funeral of Yeoman Meerly,” said Vya. “Can you direct me?”

The little man bowed, offered her a room for an hour that she might clean the blood from her fur and gave her directions to the ancestral garden.

When she left, she handed him a glowing green meteorite slug from her gun. The glass slug was warm to the touch, far too heavy for its size. The little man fell to his knees holding the slug in both hands, head bowed, “impossible, I cannot accept such wealth for such a pittance. Honor forbids it.”

“Your generosity is honor enough for much more,” said Vya. “I wish I had more to give.”

The little man wept, never had he been so honored.

*The City is vast, her places deep, her memories long.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The ancestral garden was on the cold dark side of a hill, a place for generations of the poor and forgotten. Vya stood higher on the hill looking down toward a small group of older people standing close together at a columbarium overgrown by bramble, all trying not to freeze in the heavy snow. The ceremony was simple, spare, but Vya thought; lovely. As it ended, and the little group moved back to battered ground vehicles parked along a nearby road, Vya walked down the hill toward her parents and sister.



The 3 of them stopped stunned as the blue furred woman walked toward them in the snow, her flower dress whipping in the cold wind, a star-pistol on her right thigh. The 3 bowed as she neared. Vya bowed.

“Did you know my daughter Meerly,” said her mother.

“Yeoman Meerly,” her father said proudly, standing up straighter as if at attention.

“I did,” said Vya. “I did not love her, but in the end, I understood her, and she served well. You should be proud.”

“Do you know how she died?” asked her sister. “They tell us nothing.”

“You should not ask such,” said her father. “Is it not enough she died in service?”

“No, it is not,” said her sister. “They obfuscate, never do they say the truth, why is that father, why do they never say the truth?”

“Silence,” said her father. “None of your nonsense today, please.”

Her sister crossed her arms in frustration, as an old argument that comes and goes like a storm.

“I know how she died,” said Vya. “But I wonder what peace you might gain by knowing. She loved you, all of you, with her dying breath, I think that is what she would wish you remember this day.” A tear froze along Vya’s eye.

“We have a memory cake and hot plum punch at the house,” said her mother. “Will you join us?”

Vya hugged each of them in turn and walked away up the hill in the snow.

“She will freeze to death,” said mother.

“Let us get out of the cold before we do,” said father.

The 3 went home.

*Violence is never magical, only ever real.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

At the top of the ancestral hill, Vya could see across the snow-covered city, the beautiful, curved roofs, and white blanketed gardens, on ground and hanging from great cantilevers on high lantern towers.

From behind her she heard the march of men. She turned to see a half-dozen men approaching, all wearing white porcelain steel breastplates and carrying long guns. Their tabards marked them as family Vree.

The leader of the six said, “Come along quietly, or the men I have following Yeoman Meerly's family will see they do not make it home.”

“You have no honor,” said Vya.

“I follow orders,” said the leader. “Of course, I act honorably, how dare you say otherwise.”

“Taking hostages, killing civilians, that is honor?” asked Vya.

“My honor is to follow orders,” said the leader. “If there is any dishonor it lies with the one giving the orders, not me.”

Vya understood, until Major Song had shot her in the heart and head, she had believed the same way, the dishonor was his.

“That is a coward’s answer,” said Nyx, stepping from a shadow behind Vya to stand next to her. “And you know it, which makes your duplicity worse.”

The men leveled their long guns toward Nyx and Vya.

From behind the six men came the sound of a saxophone playing, from down the back side of hill came Trinia, playing, she walked and skipped her way toward the top of the hill.

The men moved, 2 aimed at Trinia, 2 at Nyx, 2 at Vya.

“I am ordered take anyone that showed up to Meerly’s funeral into custody for questioning,” said the leader. “By any means necessary. You will all surrender. Now.”

“You are about to die,” said Nyx to the men. “For a Major that has ordered you to hold a loyal family hostage. We are not coming quietly. Are you going to murder them, as ordered?”

The leader stood up straight and fired a flare into the air, “they are dead,” said the leader with a smug smile. “Kill them all,” ordered the captain.

The soldiers opened fire.

Nyx was not exactly where he appeared, the initial volley of shots missing his shadowy form.

A whirlwind of dead leaves and snow gently swirled around Trinia as she played her saxophone, the volley of shots aimed at her missed as she vanished with a ‘pop.’ And as suddenly as she vanished, she appeared with a simultaneous ‘pop’ in front of Vya, the razor gun

shards deflected away from their target by the soft breeze of leaves and snow that swirled around Trinia, Vya safely behind her.

Mona landed into the center of the 6 firing soldiers, leaping from out of sight some several dozen yards away. The soldiers knocked hard to the ground, scattered.

Trinia's long black hair coiled with a life of its own, dozens of wound tendrils suddenly glowed with crackling electricity, and as quickly a storm of lightning bolts danced through the air and struck the six men before her, each spasming in the now steaming snow, unconscious.

"Is my family truly dead?" asked Vya.

"Not if Ekko did his job," said Nyx.

Vya blinked suddenly, "Ekko?"

"Of course," said Mona. "We would not leave your family unprotected."

"But, how?" said Vya.

"We were going to tell you, Sanguine suggested we attend your funeral," said Nyx. "But when we found the street thugs, we figured you were wanting some ME time."

"Leave you to your thoughts," said Trinia.

"You just zapped these men with lighting from your hair," said Vya.

Trinia bowed with a smile, her hair gesturing with its own flurry.

"I thought all this e'Mral magic stuff was creative, subtle," Vya said. "That was not very creative or subtle."

“A hammer is made to create,” said Trinia. “But it is still a hammer. And besides, my hair kind of does whatever it wants sometimes.”

“What does that mean?” asked Vya.

“Tools of creation may be misused,” said Nyx.

“And it hurts when they are,” said Trinia.

Vya was overwhelmed, thugs falling from the sky, soldiers left steaming heaps in the snow, her parents under threat, rebellious magic, and where did all these E'Mral come from, too much, too fast. “Where are my parents and sister?” she asked, everything else can wait.

The four of them moved down the hill to where the funeral cars had been parked, Ekko stood next to a tree, all the cars now gone.

“Where are my parents?” asked Vya.

“Just fine,” said Ekko. “The good lieutenant escorted them home, I should imagine he is enjoying warm plum wine by now in their living room.”

“What? How? Never mind,” said Vya. “I am going to see.”

“We will wait here,” said Nyx.

Vya ran the several miles back to town, striding with the ease and elegance of a gazelle, she noticed she did not tire, green e'Mral mists flowing through her as she moved. She had also noticed that she no longer slept, even as she laid down out of habit to rest, she had no need, nor could she, awake, always since recovering. Life it seemed, was now a waking dream, not quite real.

She arrived at her parents' house and went in. Her mother, near, jumped up and greeted her.

“I am so glad you changed your mind,” said her mother. “Come, sit.”

The lieutenant was also there, talking with guests as an old friend of Meerly, recounting her heroics and tragic demise.

Vya was stunned, confused, but sat and waited for some hours until the gathering ended, and everyone departed. Vya again hugged her mother, father, and sister and following the lieutenant out of the house.

“What game are you playing?” Vya asked the lieutenant.

“Game?” asked the lieutenant.

Ekko came from across the street. “He does not know what you are talking about,” said Ekko. “He is here to honor a hero of the City, and if need be, protect her family from harm.”

The lieutenant saluted Ekko.

“Dismissed lieutenant, see your way back to base,” said Ekko.

The lieutenant saluted again and departed.

“How?” asked Vya, but she thought she knew.

“The yellow-orange mists of Fyre are those of emotion,” said Ekko. “And can motivate.”

“Mind control?” asked Vya.

“No,” said Ekko. “That is the domain of psionics, not magic, no, I simply alter inhibitions, emotions, give folks permission to act on what they want to do, I cannot make them do something they do not want to do, mostly.”

“Sounds pretty vague,” said Vya.

“Magic is vague. Take our lieutenant,” said Ekko. “Ordered to kill your family, he is a good cat, he did not want to kill your family, he would have, but I gave him permission to act as he wanted, to help and protect his people.”

“Tricksy,” said Vya. “And a pretty thin thread to hang the lives of my family.”

“Not so thin as you think,” said Ekko. “And not deceptive, revelatory.”

“Sounds like bullshit to me,” said Vya. “You ever mess with me that way?”

“No,” said Ekko.

“Would you tell me if you did?” asked Vya.

“No,” said Ekko.

She looked at the tall thin man with pale skin, his eyes, one bright blue, the other bright red, deciding if she should kill him now. “You did fuck with me, all that bullshit about wanting to fuck your brains out when we first met.”

“Not at all,” said Ekko. “I just lowered your inhibitions, you thought what you thought, I changed nothing.”

She punched him in the face, her new 7-foot frame was strong, her feet firmly planted, red e’Mral mists rising through her from the ground.

Ekko looked into Vya's large eyes, then deeper, beyond, into the Pale, time slowed, and as Vya's hand was about to strike Ekko, time stopped. Ekko could see the murder in her eyes, the future, his head snapped back, his neck broken, his skull caved in, his body flew tumbling across the street behind him, saw it as the past in this timeless place. Dead.

Time began to slip forward, in slow motion, Ekko slipping sideways as time edged slowly forward. Vya's fist glancing his cheek, Lacing yellow-orange e'Mral mists where they touched, the sensation of her impacting him, breaking his neck, caving his skull, and his body tumbling away swept through Vya as real, as having happened, time resumed, Vya's eyes in shock that Ekko laid dead a dozen yards across the street. She did not see Ekko standing behind her, unharmed, so focused on the corpse ahead of her.

Mona jumped down from the roof of her parent's house where she had been watching.

"Did I kill him?" asked Vya, seeing Mona land in front of her.

"No," said Mona. "But he definitely deserved it if you had."

"What?" asked Vya, shocked at what she had done, at her strength.

Mona shrugged, pointing behind her.

As she turned, the vision of the possible future of Ekko lying dead in the street vanished from her peripheral vision, turning, she saw Ekko standing behind her. Shock and anger surged for attention, sorrow for what she had just done, or not done, her mother put at risk, soldiers and thugs hurt or dead, she felt suddenly exhausted, her emotions stretched thin.

"Fuck you," said Vya

Ekko turned to leave.



They met up with the others a few miles down the road where their graffiti covered, and battered Vignette was landed and flew back to Studio Sanguine.

*The Museum of Pan-Galactic Curiosities is from an age when sorcery opened doors across the cosmos, proof that magic was once real, and long since closed for renovation.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Balira wore a robotic body crafted in the appearance of a beautiful life-size antique doll of carved ivory, ebony, and silver inlay over which she wore a silken gown that exaggerated the dancer's elegance and feminine curves of her marionette.

She entered a titanic chamber, a hundred yards across and half that high, a barrel vault that stretched a mile into the vanishing distance deep in the earth, filled with stacked boxes, shelving, and all manner of dust covered shapes arranged and piled.

Next to her walked Major Song Vree, the most recent clone of her long-ago lover, a token of personal indulgence. The Major had no knowledge of his clone lineage, only that Admiral Balira was his commanding officer.

"There are 839 storage chambers such as this," said Balira. "The collected trinkets of the first thousand worlds opened to the City's strange doorways."

"Hrumf," said Song

"Do you understand what I am saying?" asked Balira.

"No mistress," clipped Song.

Balira led Song along a labyrinthian path through the crates and shapes that piled high around them. At length, they reached a wide circular clearing, and at the center of the clearing stood an irregularly cut luminous blue crystal 10-stories tall, and within, the suspended form of a lovely woman, her form twisting as if caught in the motion of dance, but herself made small by the sweeping swirling butterfly wings that stretched frozen behind her. Song realized that the strange blue light that filled the whole of the chamber emanated from the wings of the amber-trapped goddess.

“Before the coming of the Demon Princes and the Calibahn Age, when artifact humankind first opened doors to worlds across the cosmos, she was Empress at the height of human ambition and dreams,” said Balira. “She and all that surrounds you is proof that magic was once real.”

Song listened, hoping there would soon be a point to this time-wasting nonsense.

Balira looked at Song, a long-exasperated sigh escaped her mechanical lungs and voice-box. She considered explaining, but realized there was no point. Like all that remained of the world around her, the past and the future were irrelevant. Paradise had been achieved, an age of abundance, and Song’s only job was to ensure it continued unchanged, a job better performed by a robot.

“Report on Yeoman Meerly’s funeral,” ordered Balira.

“I sent a team of observers to question any unexpected guests,” began Major Song. “They reported that several apprentices of Master Sanguine attended and were questioned.”

“Did they say why they attended?” asked Balira.

“No,” said Song.

“Speculation,” requested Balira.

“None,” lied Song.

“And yet you still wish to kill this architect, Master Sanguine, why?” asked Balira. “A civilian, a nobody.”

“No mistress, I will kill him as my personal time permits,” said Song.

Balira looked up into the bright blue eyes of the crystal-entrapped empress.

“May I know who tipped us to Sanguine’s prison and his irritating apprentices? I am feeling led about by the nose,” said Song.

“Do you believe in magic?” asked Balira.

Song’s cat-like face crinkled, his whiskers and ears twitched, “No mistress, I am not a child.”

“What of your Yeoman Meerly?” asked Balira.

“An insanity cured as a child,” said Song. “Though she was never quite right despite our best efforts to educate her. It was a mercy she perished in service. What does this do with Sanguine?”

“You are right about being led about the nose,” said Balira. “A rival of Sanguine’s, a Master Zosa is the source of our information. But I think a more direct approach is required. Plan to collect this Master Sanguine. Be discrete, take him to my private cloning facility, the one you first delivered Meerly for cure. It has been abandoned for decades.”

“Mistress?” queried Song.

“You need not understand,” said Balira. “Go.”

Song looked up at the blue-butterfly-empress and saw nothing relevant. The entire morning wasted receiving a simple order. He began to wonder about the increasing eccentricities of his mistress.

Balira sat beside the titanic crystal, her chrome and crystal encapsulated immortal brain wept.

*The Empress is imprisoned, the blue muse of the e'Mral trapped in amber, revered as sacred or dismissed as a remnant like the petrified bones of a vanished titan beast. What you believe is true.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

It was 3am when Vya arrived at Sanguine Studio, the mortal staff not expected in for another 6-hours. Mona and the others had dropped her off on their way to someplace she did not know.

The studio was dark, though moon and star light streamed from the huge skylight over the central atrium, giving the place a quiet other worldly presence. All the signs of life and work, but all of it as if abandoned, forgotten. She made her way up a large central stair to the top mezzanine floor surrounding the atrium, to the only source of light in the huge, converted warehouse, to Master Sanguine's glass walled office.

Sanguine was a short but large man, a bit over 5-feet, with a bald head and wore a blue bespoke woolen suit, handmade leather shoes, and a red felt cape that snapped crisply when he

turned. He sat behind a large drawing desk, another smaller desk stacked with carefully arranged correspondence sat on a desk behind him. Sanguine was fastidious and ritually organized, his clutter all in place.

There were 2 smallish stools as she entered, Sanguine waved his arm indicating she sit. He got up, turned, his cape snapping, and grabbed a carafe of a golden hued alcohol, and poured 2 drinks, handing her one of them. He then drank. She held her drink, confused, angry. He went back to sit in his large, cushioned chair behind his drawing board.

“The problem, I think you have gathered,” said Sanguine. “Is that the e’Mral sighted are found and trained as children, raised knowing the basics of the e’Mral mists before they can kill a dozen men by accident. But more and more, children such as yourself, are unfound, cured before we can reach them. Most we never find, they live out tortured lives of desperation, feeling there is something more, but trapped in a chrome-heart prison.” Master Sanguine poured himself another drink. He continued, “most of my fellow masters have in their dubious wisdom and compassionless reason, decided that such as you, the cured, are irredeemable, and that the most humane thing we can do is to kill you, painlessly of course, or leave you with your chrome-heart, never the wiser. This being the consequence of a few spectacular failures in reversing the harm of years trapped as a mortal, and I do mean spectacular.” He smiled and drank again.

“But I am not dead, and my chrome-heart gone,” said Vya.

Sanguine nodded, taking a drink, “the Empress, however, believes otherwise, she has asked that I be your Master, that I guide you. But you must ask to be my apprentice, the choice is only yours to ask, mine to accept, that is the form of our tradition. We must agree, that is the way of e’Mral, of architects, cooperation, always master and apprentice, since the first of us.”

Vya felt that last bit was formal, practiced, as if he were reciting some ancient litany.

“Empress?”

“Not important,” said Sanguine. “My dilemma is that you, as an adult, having spent 26 years trapped as a mortal, as Veiled, you know everything already, there is no room for the truth or the mess of the world. As a Master I would need to teach you, but your mind is crystalized, repels truth, resists knowledge.”

“I see no dilemma,” she said. “You are babbling nonsense, repel truth, resist knowledge, what crap is that?”

“You make my point; eloquently,” he said, pouring himself another drink.

She was infuriated, she drained her drink in one gulp. He got up and refilled her glass, she swallowed it down.

The two sat quietly for some time, drinking.

Finally, she said, “I am not going to ask to be your apprentice, so we can cross that off the list of things to do.”

“Excellent,” said Sanguine. “I am relieved, teaching damaged rejects like you is a joyless endeavor, the Empress tortures me with pathetic apprentices that no other Master will accept, you have met Ekko, Trinia, Nyx, and Mona, fuck me four times, have you ever met such an absurd collection of losers, honestly, I wonder how the Empress finds them, another lost puppy on my doorstep.” He took a long drink, “I whole heartedly endorse your decision, be well, do whatever somewhere else, see yourself out.” He turned his attention to his drawing table.

She sat there for a while, watching him draw, red e'Mral mists moving through each graphite line and curve, his lead holder twisting gently in his hand as it moved along the straight edge. He was lost in thought, as if some ancient crafter of spells preparing a summoning spell of plan, section, and elevation.

She put down her glass on his drawing board, he paid it and her no attention. She left, walked down the large stair overlooking the huge moonlit atrium and when she came to the bottom there was a child sitting on the floor cross-legged playing jacks in the moonlight, a little girl in a white dress. She looked like her, Meerly, as maybe 5 or 6 years old, but not quite, the eyes of the child were as pools of bright blue moonlight, a trick, she thought, of the darkness and the moon seen through the large skylight.

“Would you like to play?” asked the little girl.

“Who are you? What are you doing here? Do your parents know where you are? Are you ok? Are you hurt?” Vya rattled off in quick succession.

“No silly,” said the little girl dropping the bouncing ball and picking up 3 jacks, she giggled.

“We need to get you home, where are your parents?” asked Vya.

“Dead,” said the little girl sadly, sweeping her hand trying for 4 jacks but failing, she giggled.”

“Who are you?” said Vya.

“I am your Empress silly,” said the little girl.

“Sanguine drugged me,” said Vya. “I will kill him.”

“You do not want to play?” asked the child.

“With a drug induced hallucination?” Vya asked. “No.” She began back up the stair, to the top and back into Sanguine’s office, to punch him in the face, but the office was empty, his light out. “Where are you,” she screamed. “You bastard.”

“Afraid of nothing, angry at everything,” said the little girl in the white dress standing at the office door. “You cat-people are so predictable, so boring.”

Vya spun around, “what is happening here?” asked Vya. “Who are you?”

“Master Sanguine told you, I told you, Nyx, Ekko, Trinia, and Mona told you in their own playful ways,” said the little girl. “But you keep asking the same question as if expecting a different answer. You are being silly. If you want to play a guessing game, ask a different question.”

“I do not want to play a game at all,” said Vya. “I do not want to be an apprentice, talk to little girls, or ever see Ekko and his crazy friends ever again. I do not want to be here or ever see or think of Major Song and the military ever again.”

“That is a lot of NOTS,” giggled the little girl. “What do you want?”

“I don’t fucking know,” said Vya. “Only that it is not here talking to a drug induced hallucination.” She ran. Down the stairs, across the atrium work floor of drawing desks, out the front door, to the promenade and away, she ran, for hours she ran, to parts of the city she had never been. She wanted to be lost, and quickly found her way.



*To believers, the Empress is a muse that visits as child, sister, lover, mother, or crone.*

*But never is she kind.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Master Sanguine sat at his drawing desk. The little girl entered and climbed up to sit on one of the stools in front of his drawing board. Sanguine ignored the little girl, hoping she would go away. The little girl sat and stared at him draw.

“I cannot force her to be my apprentice,” said Sanguine. “It must be her choice, and if I might observe, it must also be MY choice.”

“Whining does not become you,” said the little girl.

“No,” said Sanguine. “Maybe not, but sometimes it feels good. But seriously, why do you torment me with apprentices like Vya and Ekko, they cannot even pretend to want to learn anything, at least Nyx and Mona pretend, incapable, but at least they occasionally feign desire. Why? Do you hate me? Am I your least? Am I so bad that I must be punished, is that it, I am being punished?”

“You my darling are my most beloved,” said the little girl. “The most talented of Masters, as great as those that crafted the Mistress Angelic Spires. Teaching those that want to learn is easy, a task for lesser Masters, teaching those that do not know, that struggle, that resist, that requires rare skill.”

“Patronizing bullshit does not become you,” said Sanguine.

“No,” said the little girl, “but sometimes it feels good.”

“To him fortune fancies most, the lamest goat is born,” said Sanguine as if reciting some remembered fragment of a forgotten poem.

The little girl smiled.

“I hate you,” said Sanguine. “I hate you so much my hair hurts.”

“I love you too,” said the little girl. “Please do not give up on her.”

Sanguine poured himself a drink and downed it in one swallow.

The little girl left his office and skipped down the stairs and disappeared, giggling, into the moonlight.

“Fuck me,” said Sanguine, slamming his head onto his drawing board.

*The Adrena'Chrome is a part of the City ruled by the Reptile House, famed makers of chrome-hearts, the fusion of man and machine, evolution by technomancy. Beware the city of machines, for blood is but a commodity and compassion long forgotten.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Vya found herself, several days later, in a part of the City called the Limelight, famous for its endless nightclubs, bars, theaters, and adult entertainments, families and children unwelcome. The Limelight was a realm of modern technomancy, high glass and steel towers, narrow streets, a maze of alleys, the darkness of a perpetual rain and fog that glows with endless neon signs and luminous movie billboards, day and night.

Vya had no money, and soon sold her shimmer-silk, the proceeds paying for a half-dozen new black silk dresses and a month in a small walkup apartment over a noodle shop on the corner of 2 unnamed alleys. Within a few days she found herself at a small alley-side bar, stepping in to get out of an especially bad rain. She had not even noticed the name. Within were a dozen customers, most were young university kids being intentionally drunk and stupid, going out of their way to harass the waitress and barkeep, the husband-wife team that owned the bar. When the boys started getting handsy with the wife, the barkeep moved to intervene and as quickly beaten senseless by the boys, who proceeded to rip the dress from the waitress and toss her from groping mocking boy to boy.

Vya was about to leave; the heavy rain must have stopped by now. But something stopped her at the door, maybe the mocking, maybe the violence, she had endured more than her share at the hands of her military superiors, beaten, raped, put in her place. It was never about lust or even sex, it was about power, resistance is pain, compliance shame. And here, now, Vya did not feel powerless. She felt as if these boys should learn something of her pain.

“Maybe you boys have had enough fun for the evening,” said Vya. “Or at least as much fun as you are going to have here.”

The boys, 8 of them, did not hear her, or pay her much attention, playing with the waitress as a cat plays with a mouse.

One of the boys, “you better be on your way you big ugly cat monster thing, unless you want in on the fun.” He grabbed his crotch and laughed. A few of the others laughed, the waitress screaming as she was tossed naked from boy to groping boy.

Anger raged within Vya, “Come on big boy, show me the goods.”

The boy whipped out his dick and laughed hysterically, “come on bitch, time to play.” He and a few of his laughing buddies turned toward Vya.

With a speed more sudden, and a strength more powerful than Vya had expected, she kicked the approaching open pants boy in the balls, so hard that they exploded, her foot driving through his pelvis and into his stomach, at which point he flew into the ceiling with a wet thud, bones breaking, his guts trailing behind, finally falling very dead into the middle of the remaining 7 boys. The naked waitress running behind the bar, dragging her unconscious husband with her, the boys suddenly realizing, singularly, that Vya stood between them and the door.

“You bitch,” said the lead boy. “How dare you, my father will have your guts for breakfast. Do you know who I am?”

“You are privileged,” said Vya. “That much is obvious.”

“We are going to carve you up freak,” said another of the boys, they all pulled small knives, grinning, expecting the freakishly tall cat-looking woman to comply.

“You know I have a gun,” said Vya. “And quick drew her star-pistol, hidden as it was by her loose black skirt slit up the right side where her holster was tied to her thigh.

The boys looked suddenly foolish holding their small knives.

“Take a moment,” said Vya. “Put your knives away and get your guns out, I’ll wait.”

The boys looked at each other, put their knives away, and put their hand up.

“What the fuck,” yelled Vya. “No guns? That is your big plan, pocketknives and get shot?”

“My father...” began the lead boy.

She put the gun against the boy’s head. He stopped talking.

“Any of you other motherfuckers want to tell me about their fathers?” asked Vya.

“You bitch,” said another boy. “You don’t know...”

She moved so fast none of the boys saw, suddenly the other boy had the gun pressed into his eye. He stopped talking.

“Any of you other fuck stains want to tell me what I don’t know?” asked Vya.

“No ma’am,” said one of the boys.

“Undress, all of you,” said Vya. “You all like ripping the clothes off women and getting all handsy, then let’s party, now, undress.”

The boys complied, slowly.

When finally, they were all undressed, she said, “ok, now, amuse me, start sucking each other’s cocks, now.”

The boys all looked around, no one wanting to act, all looking foolish and angry. The leader boy stepped forward, “you bitch, my father will eat you for fucking breakfast, you will...”

She shot the lead by boy through his rich privileged chrome-heart, the clockwork contrivance sputtered and clicked and sparked as the boy was lifted off his feet and flew backward to the floor, dead.

“Come on boys, get yourselves hard for me,” said Vya. “I want to see some action, I heard you with the waitress, I know you know what to do, let’s get going here.”

Some of the boys started to cry, others tried to rub their cocks but were so scared they remained flaccid.

“Really?” asked Vya. “Nothing, you fucks are no fun at all. Leave your clothes and take your friends, and get the fuck out, NOW.”

They complied, six young naked men gathered up their 2 dead friends and exited the bar into the alley. She watched them run a block south where they piled into a waiting rental limousine and lifted into the air, disappearing into the rain. It was 3am.

Vya knew the little rich kids would be back up after a week in hospital. If they were smart, they would forget Vya and this little bar, but she figured they were probably not that bright, and that their vaunted parents were probably also knobs.

Back in the bar, the husband-and-wife owners of the bar, Mr. and Mrs. Crowley were effuse with gratitude, though very concerned about when these boys came back.

“We will pay you, come visit us a few times a night,” said Mr. Crowley. “And make sure we are ok, watch out for us.”

“I am not a protection racket,” said Vya.

“I know,” said Mr. Crowley. “You are the real deal, not a racket at all, we need protection.”

Word of the early morning events spread through the nearby Limelight alleys, of Vya running off troublemakers, of the Crowley Bar paying her a bit of coin to stop by a few times a night. The owners of dozens of bars, noodle shops, and nightclubs asked for the same evening

patrol, stop in a few times a night, make sure they were ok. Needing a bit of cash and enjoying an evening stroll, Vya agreed.

In the next few weeks, Vya learned a lot about non-military life and selective paradise. She had been raised in a military academy, and thought she understood the world, but realized with each passing day that she knew next to nothing. The world was a hot and ugly mess of prostitutes, drugs, sex, violence, and those rich enough to float as flotsam above it, to escape or control.

She had never thought on politics before, it had never occurred to her. The Great Houses, she did not understand how it all worked and why such awfulness, such suffering was left to play out. She was born after the war and gave it no thought. And the e'Mral sighted, where did they fit in, where did she fit in, once mortal, now somehow not. She often plumbed the darkness of her thoughts at the Crowley Bar, alone.

And as she wondered, the bar door slammed open hard, and six rough and tumble street thugs bounced into the bar breaking everything they touched. Each of the six wore fluorescent colored silk shorts and sleeveless tunics. This allowed their mirror metal legs and arms to be seen, cybernetic and clockwork machine appendages that replaced whatever arms and legs they had been born with, making them, Vya presumed, faster, stronger, and more dangerous. She had only recently become aware of the prevalence of cybernetics, in the Limelight, in the Adrena'Chrome, people spent most of what they earned on body-mods, upgrading parts of their bodies. And as these 6 showed, it was especially popular with street gangs.

“We are looking for some bitch called Vya,” said the lead thug, his body from the neck down seemed robotic, painted with what Vya thought were tribal symbols. Like those with

chrome-hearts, Vya could see the e'Mral mists repelled by the mechanical arms and legs, rendered in black & white to Vya's eyes in an otherwise hyper-vibrant colored world. Vya felt a sudden swell of pity for the six street thugs.

Vya stood up, "you found her." She stood in a straddle, that her naked right thigh with the star-pistol holster was visible through the slit in her short black skirt.

"We are the Basin Ballers," said the lead thug. "And this is our territory, we are the protection here, not you." Several of the six were pushing Mr. and Mrs. Crowley around, breaking bottles behind the bar, tossing chairs, drinking shots. The few other patrons ran out the door leaving only Vya, the Crowleys, and the 6 thugs.

If they were impressed by her star-pistol, the thugs gave no indication. Vya said, "you seem to be doing a piss-poor job."

"We are here to remind the Crowleys who they pay and why," said the lead thug. "And to kill you and drag you through our streets to remind the others, you understand, it is just business, nothing personal."

Before he finished talking, the six of them moved with a sudden bolt of speed toward where she stood, their mechanized arms and legs just as suddenly unfolding into mirror shiny blades and guns.

Their speed caught Vya by surprise, she quick drew her pistol but before she could level the ancient weapon, the six were on her, slashing, stabbing, and shooting, her gun and severed right arm flying across the room. Her stomach and chest were cut deep, she fell backward, the weight of 6 mechanized beasts heavy on her chest, remaining arm, and legs. She could not move and was dying.



“Bye-bye uppity kitty,” said the lead thug, putting a forearm mounted shotgun to her face.

“I would not do that,” said Master Sanguine standing at the entry door.

The lead thug turned to see a the barrel chested man entering the bar wearing a blue suit and red cape, unarmed.

“Beat it little man,” said the lead thug. “Unless you want the same.” He sneered.

“As much as I would love to see you shoot her in the face and rid me of my responsibility,” said Sanguine. “I am obligated to intervene.”

“Too bad for you,” said the lead thug. “Don’t move or I’ll shoot her.” Two of the thugs lifted off her legs, the other 4 keeping Vya pinned.

“Agreed,” said Sanguine. “But self-pity and recrimination serve no actionable purpose.”

The two thugs approached Sanguine, looked at each other, and sprang together with such speed as to be a blur. But both were pulled downward by a sudden intense gravity, the floor below them pulled with them, as suddenly as they moved, they were on the bedrock floor 3 sublevel basements down, their chrome parts crushed flat as tinfoil, their remaining biologic parts splashed to mist. Master Sanguine coiled the red e’Mral mists up and along the floor, reaching out for the arm of the leader with the gun pointed at Vya’s head.

“We have an artifact man with us boys,” said the lead thug. “We have killed your kind before old man.” He fired his shotgun into Vya, but Sanguine pinched the steel barrel, the slug exploding the barrel of the gun.

The four stood up, turned toward Sanguine. The lead looked at his exploded shotgun arm attachment. “Tricks are not going to save you old man, we are going to...”

The lead thug suddenly stopped talking, gurgled. Nyx stepped from a deep shadow and slipping a stiletto up the base of his skull and into his living brain.

The other 3 sprang suddenly toward Sanguine, but the ceiling above came suddenly crashing down on them, smashing the floor below, the 3 went tumbling to the basement below.

“My Vignette is out front,” said Sanguine to Nyx. “Get Vya to Mona, and do not forget her arm.”

Nyx collected Vya, her arm, and star-pistol and left in Sanguine’s Vignette.

Master Sanguine sat at the bar, asked the hiding Mrs. Crowley for 40-year-old whisky, neat.

A few minutes later, the 3 thugs that fell into the basement had climbed their way out, were about to attack Sanguine.

“You saw your flattened tin-can buddies down there?” he asked. “Take a hint and get the fuck out while you can.”

The 3 looked at each other, grabbed up their fallen leader, and exited the bar.

“Lessons,” said Master Sanguine, and took a swallow of not-40-year-old whisky, he sighed, setting the drink down.

“You destroyed our bar,” said Mr. Crowley.

“And they will be back,” said Mrs. Crowley. “A dozen or more, they will kill us, and you.”

“Violence only works when it is overwhelming,” said Sanguine. “When hope is crushed, utterly, otherwise it only makes a situation worse.”

“Well, that is all very philosophical and sounds stupid,” said Mr. Crowley. “But we are all of us properly fucked, here and now.”

Master Sanguine wanted to be shocked at Mr. Crowley’s stupidity, but he was old, he was far beyond being shocked by the descending spiral of stupid that surrounded his life.

The Crowley’s continued to whine and cry, but Sanguine ignored them as one ignores a noisy bird.

He waited, one hour, two hours. The Crowley’s were trying to sweep and pick up. But the holes in the ceiling, open to their apartment above, and holes down to the 3 subbasements, made anything they did seem pointless. Their little bar was a demolition site.

It was then, around 3am, that the door was shot through by heavy automatic gun fire, Mr. and Mrs. Crowley jumping for cover behind the bar. Master Sanguine coiled the red e’Mral mists around his body, creating a shimmering shield invisible to any but the e’Mral sighted. He also jumped behind the bar.

The door was destroyed, 8 young men with heavy, and new, automatic weapons smashed through the perforated door and entered. They were each wearing expensive golf shirts and pants and sport shoes, the guns they wielded seeming out of place in their hands, they were not sure how to use them, but fired none the less, shooting everything, walls, bar, ceiling, floor, then clumsily reloading, and raining random gunfire again, until the boys had no more ammunition to fire, tossing their guns aside and laughing hysterically, all were clearly dosed up on Stims.

Master Sanguine stood behind the bar, the Crowley's still hiding pressed to the floor, but so far unharmed.

"Hey old man," said the lead boy. "How about a drink?" All the boys laughed as if it was the funniest thing they had ever heard, the bar destroyed, not a single bottle on the wall having survived.

"Vengeance is yours," said Sanguine. "Time to go home to your daddies and mommies."

"Damn straight vengeance is ours," said one of the boys. "We are bad ass motherfuckers."

"Yes, you are," said Sanguine. "But really, please go."

"Who the fuck are you old man?" said another of university boys. "We are in charge here."

"Where is that waitress," said another. "She still owes me some one-on-one time." He thrust his pelvis as if dry humping the air, the other laughed again.

As the boy was gyrating, a dozen men and women with various chrome limbs wearing brightly colored shorts and sleeveless shirts poured into the bar.

The fight between the 8 university boys and the 12 Basin Ballers was sudden, violent, and brief, the university boys cut to ribbons by the bladed arms and legs of the Ballers.

Sanguine watched the slaughter but stayed standing, unmoving, behind the bar. "I did tell them to leave," he said.

"Your turn old man," said the lead Baller. "Stabbing me in the back of the head and killing 2 of my boys will be the last mistake you ever make."

“Respect,” said Master Sanguine. “I am a teacher, this violence and destruction sickens me, I am a maker, is there not a way we might respect each other?”

The lead Baller paused, “words have no value here in the alleys, kill or be killed,” he smiled. “Time to die.”

The leader’s 11 soldiers bounded over the bar at Master Sanguine, their plan to grapple him to the ground, but as they moved, gravity within the little bar vanished, all the street soldiers drifting through the air, falling into walls, ceiling, and floor, each holding on as best they could when they came near a surface.

“More trickery,” said the leader.

“You say you have killed magic before,” said Sanguine. “But I think you know stories, I do not think you have ever met an actual, living artifact architect.”

“More words,” said the lead Baller floating in the middle of the room where gravity failed. “Shoot him.”

All of them had railguns that were attached or unfolded from their forearms, and fired, a hail of glass-shards aimed at Master Sanguine, all of it orbiting his body in swirling eccentric patterns and flying back at each attacker, impacting them in the head, chest, and some back up the barrel of the gun that fired. Screams rang out in the little bar, half of the Ballers drifting suddenly dead, spinning in the air impacted by their own gunfire. The other 5 badly wounded, chrome arms and legs shattered, all of them spinning trying to hold onto something. The leader, the only one that had not fired, unharmed, a glob of zero gravity blood splashing into his face.

“Words matter,” said Master Sanguine. “If you learn that lesson today, it will have been worth it.”

“More tricks, more words,” said the lead Baller. “I am going to tear you limb from limb.”

Master Sanguine sighed heavily.

The lead Baller pushed off from the far wall and launched himself at Master Sanguine. The gravity suddenly reversed, the leader falling upward and sliding along the ceiling over Sanguine’s head, slamming hard into the destroyed backwall of the bar. Gravity returned to normal, the leader, all the dead and wounded falling 20-feet to the floor from the ceiling. The leader on the ground behind the bar, Master Sanguine leaning next to him, his hand on the leader’s mechanical chest.

“I implore,” said Master Sanguine. “Take your fallen and go, do not come back, please.” A tear appeared in his eye. “Please.”

“You motherfucker, I am going to eat your face,” said the leader. He twitched, his bladed arms beginning to move.

Sanguine Laced his red e’Mral mists through the metal workings of the man’s robotic body, collapsing magnetics around his chrome heart, his metal body folding into a ball of metal and oozing hydraulics, his living spine crushed, his living head falling loose to the floor, dead.

Master Sanguine stood from behind the bar, the wounded crawling and limping, the dead scattered. “Please go,” said Sanguine.

The wounded Basin Ballers collected their dead and departed.

The bar that was in ruins, a pile of debris, destroyed. Mr. and Mrs. Crowley in shock, but unharmed.

Master Sanguine thought they might be talking to him, but paid them no attention, he found a single overturned chair at the center of the bar and sat, lighting a new cigar.

Not long after, police arrived, first local, and within moments, the Great House investigators. Then fire, emergency, hospital, and everyone else that claimed jurisdiction. The 8 dead boys were victims, whisked off to private hospitals with elite rejuvenation facilities, and despite having been butchered, would all be up and planning their next revenge in a week or two. Sanguine shook his head.

Mr. and Mrs. Crowley chattered on to anyone that would listen, their every word parsed and recorded by the various investigators.

Sanguine thought that a lot of them were also talking to him, but he ignored them, smoking his cigar while the flurry of law and faux compassion swirled around him, always reactive, never preventative, he thought.

There was an argument, various parties wanted to arrest him, jurisdiction the issue. That is when parents of the 8 boys started showing up. Important people, cadres of lawyers and fixers and private investigators. All of them claiming authority. The full bureaucracy of the City was landing hard on Master Sanguine as he sat in a broken wooden chair smoking his cigar. But still no one touched him, there were more people in the little collapsing bar than the shattered structure could bear. Master Sanguine let his red e'Mral mists flow through the floor and into the straining central column, and with the smallest flicker of thought, the whole of the bar collapsed inward into the third subbasement. Dozens of parents, police, investigators, lawyers, fixers, parents, firefighters, and the Crowleys, collapsed with it.

More emergency services were called, the rescue operations lasted for days, reported by various news outlets, as the building debris was cleared, victims recovered, and sent to nearby hospitals. But never did they recover the body of Master Sanguine.

The investigation turned to the Basin Ballers, they were rounded up, the manhunt earning front page entertainment for weeks, each paraded through local and Great House courts, the poor 8 victims of their savage butchery, saints of innocence, each a paragon of community service in the wrong place at the wrong time. Soon nobody was looking for Sanguine or remembered hearing about Vya. The City moved on.

*There was a time when architects and magic ruled the City, a time of wonder and strange doorways the stories say, a time finally ended by those afraid.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The garden stretched out for miles in all directions, empty, winter, the ground covered by a recent blanket of snow, the coldest day so far this year. But on a bench under a large hibernating tree sat 2 figures, a bald man in a blue suit and red cape and a blue furred 7-foot statuesque woman in a loose black dress, her naked furry feet playing with piles of snow. It was 3am.

“How is the arm?” asked Master Sanguine.

She said nothing, lifted her right arm, looked at it, and put it back by her side. “Mona has a gift.”



“Yes, she does, if only I could get her to use it, then again, maybe you can,” mused Sanguine.

“What do you mean?” asked Vya.

“Our beautiful City has a hole in her heart,” said Master Sanguine. “Do you know what I mean when I say that?”

Vya shook her head.

“A sin of our fathers brought you to me,” said Sanguine. “We artifact humans ruled the City for eons before the war. We used chrome-hearts, like the one that we pulled out of you, to cage our most wicked sorcerous villains, a fate worse than death. But when e’Mral began to be born to post-human children, our leaders failed, gifting this clockwork horror to the Outworld Great Houses that they may cure their e’Mral afflicted children. A betrayal.” Sanguine’s face strained to maintain composure, his naked anger barely contained. “This rang as a clarion bell throughout the empire, magic was a disease to be cured, and in hindsight, the beginning of the war and the end of magic.”

“Ancient history,” said Vya staring out across the wide expanse of fresh snow.

“The present is haunted by the past,” said Sanguine. “Your suffering and murder by your Major were decided a thousand years ago by people long since dead, but no less real to you, here and now.”

“So what?” asked Vya.

“A few of us seek to atone for the sins of our dead Masters,” said Sanguine. “That is why you are here; I could not turn away.”

“Noble if true,” said Vya. “But I do not believe you.”

A sharp wind caused the snow to rise and twist before them, the sky clear, the moon bright upon the two, shadows of the tree above them painted in hues of violet on the snow around them.

Master Sanguine’s face crinkled. “So, since your little walk-a-bout, since killing the leader of the frat boys, the death of him a second time and his buddies at the hands of the Basin Ballers, the death of so many Ballers, tell me, this moment, how many of them are still dead?”

“None,” said Vya.

“So, what was the point of it all?” asked Sanguine.

“That sounds like a false question,” said Vya.

“It sounds like you do not want to say something you know,” said Sanguine.

“The hospitals of the City are a miracle, so what?” asked Vya.

Both sat quietly for some minutes, Vya continued to play with shapes in the snow with her naked blue furred feet.

“Thank you,” said Vya. “I did not want to be shot in the face: again.”

“You are welcome,” said Sanguine. “It seemed a teachable moment.”

“The frat boys,” said Vya. “The idea they could assault, could rape, and face no consequence, is infuriating.”

“That you were so many times assaulted, raped, beaten,” said Sanguine. “By your superiors, the ones supposed to be looking out for you, never a care for consequence.”

“How do you know?” asked Vya. “I never told anyone.”

“I know about the Great House militaries,” said Sanguine. “I fought in the war. Evil racist fascist fucks, all of them, honor, tradition, loyalty, maybe among some few peers that recall the old ways, but to their fodder, to you, only violence and obedience, and discarded with no more thought than a blood-stained uniform.

“So, they get away with it?” asked Vya.

“They have been getting away with it since time began,” said Sanguine. “They call it tradition.”

“But why?” asked Vya.

“The City has a hole in her heart,” said Master Sanguine. “I fought in the war, not on any of its dozen sides, I and a few like me fought to save our Empress.”

“Did you succeed?” asked Vya.

“Of a sort,” said Sanguine. “Though not as any of us might have hoped or expected.”

They sat for a long time in silence, only the sound of the wind through the tree above them.

“The City is hell,” said Vya.

“Some have called it that,” said Master Sanguine. “Others call it paradise.”

“But not you?” asked Vya.

“No,” said Sanguine.

“What do you call it,” said Vya.

“My home,” said Sanguine.

Again, they sat in silence.

“Is there a plan?” asked Vya.

“The City is the ass end of the universe,” said Master Sanguine. “A junction, the loading dock, from which goods are delivered and refuse collected, where the dirty work of a million worlds gets done.”

“An architectural metaphor?” asked Vya. “I thought you were going to say the City is the heart of the universe, the center of worlds scattered through the cosmos.”

“All e’Mral sighted were once trained as architects,” said Sanguine. “It is how we learn, how we understand the world. Or at least those we find as children, or we find later but still want to learn. Architecture is creative and cooperative, the e’Mral mists are similarly creative and cooperative, to learn one is to learn the other.”

“I want to learn,” said Vya.

“I accept,” said Master Sanguine. “I promise you will exceed me.”

Vya smiled. The more she thought about it, the more she began to understand. The City had a hole in her heart, her own chrome-heart, her soul imprisoned, the imprisoned empress, the war, all of it connected, even if Vya could not see how or why.

But Vya began to think more of Sanguine, of his home, of her home, and the fact that the Empress may be real, that some few e’Mral sighted, no matter how troubled, remained. She imagined there might be a purpose, that magic and the City are not yet lost. Hope flashed through her mind, not quite tangible, but here, now, it was enough.

Snow began to fall. “Come with me,” said Master Sanguine.

The two stood up from the frozen bench and set to walk through the snowy park.

*Backwards time travel is impossible, by technomancy, by magic. You can never go back except to remember.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Master Sanguine walked with Vya through the cold neon lit alleys of the Limelight, to the collapsed building that was the Crowley Bar. Various colors of police tape still surrounded the tiny corner lot.

Snow was falling, a cold wind cut through the alley, no one was out in the bitter cold, the heavy fog sapping the life of any that dared. But in this early morning, walked Master Sanguine in his bespoke suit and leather shoes and Vya in a loose fitting tiny black dress that exaggerated her feminine curves, her naked furry feet easily pushing through the ice and snow that blanketed the alley, the ugly place, Vya thought, made clean.

“I have said,” began Master Sanguine. “That the e’Mral mists are creative, not destructive. But all you have seen to date, all you have done, has been to destroy. You have done so as a carpenter might misuse a hammer to break or kill, when the right tool, say a prybar or a sword, is not at hand. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” said Vya.

“But if directed, focused,” said Sanguine. “With the flow of the e’Mral mists, not opposing, they naturally create. Like cutting with the grain of wood. Sit with me in front of the ruin.”

Master Sanguine folded his legs up from the ground, sitting cross legged floating 3 feet in the air.

Vya lifted both her legs as her Master had but fell into the snow and rolled.

“Our dominion, our affinity,” said Master Sanguine. “Are the red e’Mral mists, Iron mists, what you see as reds and pinks of stone, metal, magnetics, and gravity, they are a part of you as your arms and legs, expect them to act as you expect your arm to move without conscious thought, as when absentmindedly picking up your morning coffee to drink, unthinking.”

Vya imagined the morning, of her cup of coffee, of pulling out a chair and sitting, all of it thinking on something else, automatic, and lifted her legs into the air, and sat cross legged in the air next to her master.

“That is what we mean when we say, moving with the flow of the e’Mral mists,” said Sanguine. “They want to create, to make, let them and you will find your way easy, hurt them, torture them, as I did when I killed the Ballers, and they will resist, cause you pain, your every thought required to not be burned to death.”

She nodded.

“The Iron mists,” began Sanguine. “Are lawful, ordered, and if you understand them, anti-entropic. Do you know what those words mean?”

“I think I do,” said Vya. “Entropy is the tendency of all things to naturally decay over time.”

“You have a keen mind,” said Sanguine. “So, what we are going to do, is draw the Iron mists within the ruin before us, through our mind, our memory of the bar, the building, loosely we will remember our time there, our impressions, and most important, the emotions she elicited.”

“This little building was a HE,” said Vya.

“Excellent,” said Sanguine. “Do you play a musical instrument, sing maybe?”

“No,” said Vya.

“Learn,” said Sanguine. “It is not required, but the e’Mral mists are played as music, and respond willingly to music. This will always be helpful, especially when learning.”

Master Sanguine drew a long flute from the folds of his jacket, far larger than could have fit in any pocket.

“I have seen this before,” said Vya. “Nyx and the others, pulling objects from nothing.”

“While you are adept of Iron,” said Sanguine. “You see all mists; Iron, Fyre, Grace, Lyfe, and Shade. The shadows around your body may be used to store items, think of them as dimensional pockets. Small items, something in hand, maybe as large as a musical instrument, and maybe as many as a dozen items, maybe more if you are aligned of Shade like Nyx. As you did to sit beside me, take an item in hand, and absentmindedly place it in a pocket.”

“I do not have a pocket,” she said.

“You are thinking too much,” said Sanguine.

She pulled a replacement slug from her holster belt, held in hand, imagined sitting at breakfast, coffee in her other hand, absentmindedly slipping a slug she picked up from the table into a pocket as she thought on the view out the window. The slug was gone from her hand.

“And you get it back the same way,” said Sanguine. “Go with the flow, feel the direction the shadows move.”

And as suddenly, the slug was back in her hand.

“You are a natural,” said Sanguine. “Ekko has yet to recover anything he has vanished, and Mona can only vanish items that are pink or made of sugar.”

“That seems oddly specific,” said Vya.

“Indeed,” said Sanguine. “Not a rabbit hole you want to go down.”

Sanguine began to play his flute. Vya watched as the red and pink and dark browns of the e'Mral mists responded, extensions of his playing. His delicate music reaching out through the silent snow-covered alleys, lights coming on, people looking out their windows. Still, he played, at first the tune was melancholy, almost in sorrow at the loss, the destruction of the little building. But the tune flared with moments of joy, moments of heartache, moments of compassion, as if he were playing the lived experiences of the people that visited, worked, and played in the little building back through the centuries. People, bound in a dozen layers of clothing, coats, cloaks, and blankets emerged into the bitter cold of the alley, mesmerized by what they heard, curious.

Still, he played back through the history of the little building, when the debris of the fallen building began to stir, move, and lift floating into the air, swirling, dancing to the music, broken wood, stone, metal, spiraling into the air. And still he played, his flute's tune dancing



through her mind and those others that heard. The broken beams reformed, split stones collected, pieces found their whole, walls began to form, windows found their place, doors closed, beautiful blue ceramic tiles interlaced upon a gently curving roof. And too soon, with tear in eye, Sanguine stopped his playing. And before Vya, before the small crowd, was the most beautiful little 3 story building with a fanciful blue roof, white walls, ornately carved wooden windows, and a beautiful bright blue lacquer front door, a small sign in script more than 1,000 years ancient: Hiroto Noodle House.

“The building as first crafted,” said Sanguine. “By those that loved her.”

“She is beautiful,” said Vya. “And definitely a SHE.”

Master Sanguine smiled, dropping his feet back to the ground.

Vya followed his lead but fell suddenly into the snow before her legs could unfold. She stood quickly and brushed snow from her electric blue fur, her long tail whipping about, sticking snow flicking off in all directions.

Sanguine began to leave, walking back the way they had come.

“Where are you going?” asked Vya.

“Back to the Studio,” he said.

“What about the little noodle shop?” asked Vya.

“I expect these assembled vultures will strip her for parts,” said Sanguine. “The Ballers will use it as a clubhouse, and that she will probably be back to the decrepit state we first found her, as a flower risen from the crack in a sea of asphalt pavement.”

“Poetic but no,” said Vya.

“No?” asked Sanguine.

“I need a house,” said Vya. “This is it.”

“Were you not paying attention the first time around?” asked Sanguine. “Gangs and guns and frat boys, they and their like will tear you down, again.”

“No,” said Vya. “Enough, maybe the City has a hole in her heart, but I will not let his place be destroyed.”

Sanguine smiled, he looked at Vya, the tall woman with a dancer’s body, too beautiful, too elegant, but appearing in this moment, small, as a child throwing a tantrum in the snow, standing, refusing to move, defiance in her eyes. Wanting a puppy. “She is all yours, after all, it was your family that first crafted her.”

“My family?” asked Vya, thinking Sanguine was making a joke.

“Hiroto is your old family name,” said Master Sanguine, “Before your family was disgraced and their name erased from history. The City is haunted, and our ghosts have a way of finding us.”

Sanguine left her standing in the snow, her little black dress fluttering in the bitter cold, the sun about to rise.

*It requires eight years to become a master. There are no shortcuts to hard work.*

*...The Handbook of Strange Doorways*

The next few weeks, Sanguine did not see Vya. He asked Nyx to check in on her from time to time, but he expected no real trouble. Vya was smart, and despite what he said, he figured she had learned from her first experience with such as the frat boys and Ballers, killing is not the solution, not when life can be so easily restored, cost is the solution. Chrome-hearts, chrome limbs, these are expensive, if you want to be left alone, you make it cost more than you are worth. Even the frat boys, rapists all, humiliation or death solves nothing, but make them pay, make their parents pay, and they will soon leave you be, cost, thought Master Sanguine, that is the rotting dark heart of the wealthy and the criminal. That is how you deal with them; a lesson Vya had learned.

It was then that Sanguine went into the alleys of the Limelight and found the Hiroto Noodle House. The night was cold, but the lights of the little building were bright and welcoming. Upon entry, he saw the dining hall was filled with patrons, the bar full, a few people awaiting seats. The smell of the place wonderful, of noodles and spiced broth and fresh fish, warm and humid. Mrs. Crowley approached him, we have a spot at the end of the bar if you like, she pointed down the bar. He nodded and moved to the wall, taking the last seat at the bar.

Mr. Crowley met him with a smile, “what can I get you?”

“House noodles,” said Sanguine, “and whatever rice wine you recommend.”

Crowley nodded and moved to other customers. Neither of the Crowley’s remembered him. The restored building having forgotten its demise.

He could see behind printed fabric hangings, a bustling kitchen behind the bar, a staff of Xanthos cooks and servers. Sanguine laughed.

The man sitting next to Sanguine said, “what is so funny?”

“Sometimes they learn so fast,” said Sanguine. “It feels good to not be disappointed. I had almost forgotten the feeling.”

“What feeling?” asked the man, looking at Sanguine as if he may be insane.

“Pride,” said Sanguine.

“Pride is good,” said the man. “There is damn little to be happy about these days.”

“Just so,” said Sanguine.

Master Sanguine enjoyed his noodles and wine, paid with a handful of paper money, and made his way to a stairway up, leading to the second-floor dining room, a place filled with families and larger circular table gatherings. He laughed again. Children, it made him happy.

He climbed a private stair to the third floor where a red lacquer door was closed, he knocked. Vya opened the door and invited him in.

The apartment was spacious and sparsely furnished, but for his shorter stature, it was oddly disconcerting as the chairs, bed, countertops, ablution fittings, all were designed around Vya’s 7-foot frame. Sanguine felt himself suddenly as a child in a living room built for adults. He climbed up onto a settee, his feet swinging free.

“I noticed on my walk over a surprising number of shop renovations, new coffee shops, bars, even a fresh fish market,” said Sanguine.

“It is as you said but I did not believe,” said Vya. “It seems the e’Mral mists are both subtle and creative.” She sat in a large chair opposite her Master.

“You were born e’Mral, but your architectural training, the skill to use your e’Mral talents, that is an 8-year endeavor as apprentice under a Master,” said Sanguine.

“And at the end?” asked Vya.

“You become a Master,” said Sanguine. “Trained sufficiently to mentor your own apprentices. But most fail, not for lack of talent, but for lack of will, being a Master is not for everyone, not even for most. Rather most of those we train take up professions in the arts or other creative endeavors, some become explorers, adventurers, our training will prepare you for wherever your passions lie.”

“So, 8-years of training, and I am a Master or some few years less than 8 and off to some other grand adventure,” said Vya.

“Just so,” said Sanguine.

“I have been thinking on my past, my adventure with Ekko and your other apprentices,” said Vya.

“Ask,” said Master Sanguine. “May I?” he held up a cigar.

She nodded, he lit his cigar and settled back into the couch made for giantess.

“Ekko and the others were talking in a strange language I did not understand,” said Vya.

“Eldritch Song,” said Sanguine. “It is a musical language that requires emotion and perception of the e’Mral mists, another reason I need you to take up an instrument, I will teach it to you in our time together.”

“Does that mean...” Vya began to ask.

Sanguine raised his hand to stop her, “keep to your questions, these rabbit holes are deep and long and often lead to unpleasantness that will discourage you learning what you need to know, you will have plenty of time to know other things.”

She took a deep breath, “this railgun,” she held up her star-pistol. “I did some research, it is the Hiroto family weapon, before the Hiroto name was stricken.”

“Ghosts,” said Sanguine. “And a chatty Empress that talks to ghosts.”

“What does that mean?” asked Vya.

“That is a big question for another time,” said Sanguine. “What you want to know is this, the Empress resides both here and, in a place called the Pale, a place ghosts reside in our same space but divided by time, playing. She uses these ghosts, as she has said to me: to bend coincidence. Hence you just happening to serve the fucker that carried your ancient family weapon, and that circumstance would have it in your hands, now, in a building crafted by your ancestors. That is our Empress, that is bending coincidence, subtle, creative.”

“And Ekko’s insane babbling and wandering?” asked Vya. “His talking to old-gods.”

“You are a smart one,” said Sanguine. “He can look deep into the Pale, able to talk to that which was. The difference is that it drives such and Ekko, insane, while our Empress seems to be a creature of the Pale that looks into our reality, and maybe the creatures of the Pale consider her insane. I suspect but I do not know.”

“Suspect our Empress is insane?” asked Vya.

“No,” said Sanguine. “She is definitely insane, but I only suspect those of her kind may consider her to be insane.”

“That makes no sense,” said Vya. “Her kind?”

“Rabbit holes,” said Sanguine. “Do not go down this one, few come back sane, and those that do are changed, and not for the better.”

“But?” began Vya.

“But continue with your questions,” said Sanguine.

“What about love?” asked Vya. “How long do I live? Am I that different than I was?”

“You will live as long as you live,” said Sanguine. “But old age will not likely be your end. You are not so different as the Veiled, you can have children, though they are likely to be Veiled. You may love who you choose, Veiled or e’Mral makes no difference, most e’Mral, despite your experience so far, do not complete their training, go off to other professions or the arts, live among the Veiled, quietly, incognito, doing as they like; some become villains, some heroes, some adventurers, or explorers. The only physical consideration is that you do not sleep while the Veiled do, easily hidden if needed, and certainly no barrier to love.”

“Am I immortal?” asked Vya.

“No one is immortal, not even the fucks with chrome-hearts or the Chromatica with their Wyght-Core brains,” said Sanguine. “But the green mists will keep you young, heal you from harm or even death, but you will die when you decide.”

“Vague,” said Vya.

“E’Mral mists, magic, is vague,” said Sanguine. “There are no rules to how it works, it would not be magic otherwise, each person is unique. But if you want to live for eons on some epic sweep-of-time quest, you likely will.”

“Why architecture?” asked Vya.

“Because it is vague,” said Sanguine. “Most professions teach rules, that which is not possible, or simply attempt to reveal or record what already exists. Architecture is different, it teaches the possible, that which does not yet exist. It teaches magic.”

“Isn’t that most any creative profession?” asked Vya.

“No,” said Sanguine. “Most creative professions are private, selfish, architecture is physical, it requires people, occupancy, use to exist or have meaning. By its very being, it changes the world, just as your manipulation of the e’Mral mists, change the world.”

Vya nodded, not understanding, but she quietly considered all she had heard.

Vya looked at the gun, “was my family like the Vree, like all of my feline kind, cruel, heartless?” She recalled the beatings, the repeated rape, the violence she thought was normal.

“No,” said Sanguine. “The Hiroto were a noble family, as most were when they first came to the City, your feline ancestors were champions of justice, paladins revered for their strength and fairness.”

“What happened?” asked Vya.

“Exactly what you think happened,” said Sanguine. “War, and the good guys lost. Paladins were replaced by Overlords, justice with violence, compassion with cruelty.”

“How?” asked Vya.

“Like all great falls,” said Sanguine. “Betrayal. Your forebearers were betrayed by a love affair between Song Hiroto and Lady Balira Vree. Song opened the gates of Hiroto Castle to the Vree.”



“What happened to them, Song and Lady Balira?” asked Vya. She wanted to know more about the name Song but held her tongue.

“Lady Balira killed Song,” said Sanguine. “Song was a tool tricked to love. But she preserved his body and created a line of Song clones as her personal guard and servant officers. Maybe she really loved him in some twisted way, or maybe she likes to order Song around. Either way, Lady Balira is now the Grand Admiral of the Vree family, leader of your own Great House.

“Wait, what?” asked Vya.

“Rabbit holes and ghosts,” said Sanguine. “It is best not to think too hard on such things, knowing the past does not change the present.”

“Major Song Vree is a clone of Song Hiroto, the betrayer of my ancestral family?” Vya mused not really noticing she was speaking out loud. “And this is his star pistol.” She looked again at the honor bound gun in her hands.

“There are a few things to discuss,” said Sanguine ignoring Vya. “Not the meaning of life things, but quality of life things.”

Vya leaned back, she nodded, her mind swimming.

“Your visit to Meerly’s funeral has Major Song Vree, and by extension, Grand Admiral Lady Balira Vree, wondering who you are,” said Sanguine. “And as my apprentices were there as well, they likely suspect you are a new apprentice of mine, and he is wondering why I had you all there.”

“Why would an Architect be sending his apprentices to the funeral of his Yeoman that died heroically at his side while liberating soldiers from a prison the Architect supposedly designed?” asked Vya.

“What would you do in Song’s place?” asked Sanguine.

“Ask you,” said Vya.

“My thought as well, I expect to be taken, soon” said Sanguine. “It is important you do not try to find me.”

“Why would I try to find you?” asked Vya distracted by her own thoughts.

Sanguine smiled.

*Fate is the lie we tell ourselves when we choose not to choose.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

For the next several weeks, Vya spent her days at Studio Sanguine, when it was filled with the hundred or so Veiled drafters and designers that support the work of Master Sanguine and his apprentices. Per Sanguine’s instructions, Vya took to wearing a business casual loose white blouse and loose knee length gray woolen skirt and keeping her gun and holster vanished. Veiled, she was told, are exceedingly prudish and conservative and that to get along, earn their respect, Vya needed to pretend to be Veiled. But unlike Ekko and the others that struggled on this front, Vya had been raised Veiled, crippled by a chrome-heart to cure her e’Mral sight, so pretending to be Veiled was as easy as remembering her former mousy self, her towering 7-foot

frame and leading lady feline femininity made her a favorite, a natural leader, among the Veiled. That she was vulnerable, and needed them to learn, made her beloved.

Nyx stood with Master Sanguine on the second mezzanine overlooking the large skylit studio floor where the Veiled worked, Vya moving among them with a grace and elegance that belied her size. “They love her you know,” said Nyx.

“She is a natural,” said Sanguine. “So sad that she suffered the cure for so long, she could have been great.”

“She still can be,” said Nyx.

Sanguine was silent. He could feel the storm coming, could begin to see its shape as he watched Vya move among the Studio’s staff.

## **Part IV: Of Magic and Fear**

*Killing is easy, living, less so.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

*The Scimitar Sun’s Fate*, was commanded by Major Song Vree. Aboard he had summoned a dozen soldiers from the various stockades under his command. Song stood before the assembled soldiers, all of them disgraced or in some way paying penance for dishonorable dealings, expendable. “I have a mission suitable only for the dishonored,” said Major Song. “Quietly, we are going to find a little balding fuck named Master Sanguine.” He activated a

holographic image of the little round man in a blue woolen suit and red felt cape. Details are in your briefing papers.

One of the soldiers asked, “quietly? Sir.”

“It is bad form to be seen abducting civilians,” said Major Song. “We want him to simply become a missing person with no trail back to us. Clear?”

“Clear, sir,” said the soldier. He had looked over the briefing papers, this Sanguine fellow looked like nobody, he smiled.

“What are you smiling about soldier?” asked Major Song.

“I find it amusing that a dozen marines of a Great House navy are being sent out as a taxi service,” said the soldier. “He is one man, a pencil pusher, obsolete, unarmed.”

“Then you will love this,” said Song. “We are going to dishonorably tear him down, this will not be a contest or a duel or involve a pithy conversation, not like in the movies or in stories, because the truth of war, of true violence, is too awful to hear. The pilot will bring down the ship, aim for him, drive him back. He will evade, jumping, rolling, then you others are going to rush him, not with weapons, but grapple him, grab his feet, legs, arms, torso, head, you will sit on him, break his fingers, smash his knees and elbows, dislocate his hips and shoulders, tear off his balls, gouge out his eyes, break his neck, smash his skull and if possible, twist his fucking head off. This is how you kill a hero, any motherfucking hero.”

“Sounds easy,” said the first soldier.

“It is easy,” said Song, “but he will see you coming, 2 of you are going to die on approach. While you grapple and get hold of him, 2 more are going to die if he has any skill at

all, more if he is formidable. And as he loses consciousness or dies, I expect this fucker will take most of you with him. But a few of you will survive, I will survive, and we will take those you who die to hospital, extoling your honor and heroism and I will deliver Sanguine. As you say, easy.”

“He is a hero?” asked the second soldier.

Said another soldier, “I think it will be easy, no one is going to die, the Major is just spinning us up.”

“No,” said Major Song, “I am being honest, most of you will die, but not before we drag him down and break every bone in his body and tear him limb from limb.”

“Why don’t they teach us this shit if it so fucking effective?” asked another soldier.

“Because you are soldiers,” said the Major. “They do not want to be sacrificing blood for one man, not in war, and because they do not want you to know how much power you really have. All of it, the ritual, tradition, honor, these are all tools to prevent a half a dozen muscle bound thugs tearing down a noble, someone far better than any of us fodder. But this Sanguine is a hero, and I am telling you straight up, this is how you take down him down.

“We are with you boss,” said one of the soldiers.

“We will break him,” said another.

Major Song smiled; honor was overrated.

*The City is a spiral of endless wonder, take care to not be hit by a bus while gazing to the horizon.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Master Sanguine liked to wander the alleys of the City in the early hours before dawn, buildings alive with deliveries and trash pulls, workers of every sort, cooks, bakers, builders, porters, preparing for the day, never, he thought, was the City more optimistic.

This morning he walked with his old friend, Avril Hunt, a tall slender figure dressed in a bespoke black suit, polished black shoes, black silk shirt finished with a red silk tie and a black fedora. His head and face were as a desiccated corpse, but his skull carved with runes inlaid with silver, stretched over with a tight translucent velum like skin, his nose absent, void as a skull, his lips peeled back to reveal naked teeth, each tooth similarly carved and inlaid with silver runes. And beneath his suit, hidden, all the bones of his body stretched over by a husk of translucent skin, all his bones carved and inlaid with silver, his gold runed e'Mral heart glowing, visible through his naked ribcage, Lichborne.

“Your decision to save Vya has sent a shockwave through our Order,” said Avril.  
“Master Zosa is working on new ways to make you suffer. He has spies in your Studio.”

“You worry too much,” said Sanguine, “Zosa is a worm, spineless.”

“You play a dangerous game,” said Avril. “Do you want a fight?”

Sanguine smiled.

It was then that the Vignette dropped from the air onto the two men walking in the alley.

Avril slipped sideways into a nearby shadow and vanished.

Sanguine rolled to his right, but not quick enough, and was crushed by the landing Vignette.

A dozen soldiers equipped with grav-harnesses flew from the Vignette, at speed, as if charging something, but soon realized they had lost their quarry, scouted, ranged, but soon realized their good luck, lifted the Vignette a few feet off the ground, scraped up what remained of the little man in a blue suit, and departed.

Major Song smiled, Lady Balira was wrong, Sanguine was no hero.

*The City is haunted, you are never truly alone.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

A few hours before dawn, Avril Hunt arrived at Sanguine Studio, he made his way to the empty central work hall and called out, "Master Sanguine has been taken."

Master Sanguine's apprentices, Ekko, Nyx, Mona, Trinia, and Vya came from various of the upper mezzanines surrounding the skylit central hall, where a moonlight illuminated the assembled group.

Avril explained the attack, the blacked-out Vignette, the armored soldiers, all blacked out, no markings, but all of them of the feline persuasion.

"Min'Zirai, are you sure?" asked Ekko. "That does not sound very honorable."

"I am coming to realize that honor among my kind is a marketing campaign," said Vya.

Avril continued, “Sanguine called on me because he wanted information on the Vree family, we had only just met, so I had not passed on the information.”

“So why take Sanguine?” asked Trinia.

“Sanguine said he may be taken,” said Vya. “He feared Song would want to know why we were at Meerly’s funeral. Attacking his men. We need to go save him.”

Ekko, Trinia, and Mona looked at each other, “yea, but do we really,” said Ekko. “He is a Master after all, he can take care of himself.”

“He is our Master,” said Vya. “He has been nothing but kind and supportive.”

“Kind and supportive,” said Ekko. “Are we talking about the same Master fucking Sanguine?”

“You must forgive them,” said Mona. “They really are the worst sort of apprentices; talentless, selfish, unappreciative, they really are dregs of e’Mral. That and they are idiots, all of them.”

“Who is talentless?” asked Ekko.

Nyx fumed.

“I object to the idiot reference,” said Trinia. “But Mona is pretty much right, we really do not much care. I have a shopping center that needs a new food court, Ekko here is working on a new chain of restaurants that opens next month, and Mona has a new pediatric wing that begins construction in a few days, our calendars are full. As for Nyx, who knows what slaughterhouse he is working on, but you, Vya, have that chain of shoe stores that has a major client presentation in a couple of days, you do not want to let your team down?”



Vya was stunned to silence.

“Hard to believe,” said Mona. “I know.”

Vya sputtered, spit, her jaw moved, but no words came, her face twisted.

“I need to be getting back to work,” said Ekko. He and Trinia, and Mona turned to leave.

“Freeze, none of you move,” screamed Vya, she quick-drew her star-pistol and leveled it on Ekko’s head. Ekko, Trinia, and Mona did not move. All of them knew that a star-pistol in the hands of the e’Mral sighted could not miss, and would core a big hole even through Mona, real-dead if Vya aimed for the heart.

“Really?” said Ekko. “Violence, Master Sanguine, this is the ditch you want to die in. And I thought that using a sacred star-pistol to brandish about was dishonorable, to threaten dishonorable, that it only be drawn to be fired, or maybe you do not deserve that hunk of metal, maybe you are the lesser child of lesser sires, disgraced, yeoman Meerly.”

Vya could feel Ekko’s works cut her as a blade, the doubts tearing at her psyche, rending, twisting her emotions, the yellow-orange e’Mral mists burning her.

Nyx appeared behind Ekko, his silver straight razor against his throat, “stop it now Ekko, or you die as soon as she does.”

Mona started to move.

“Stop,” said Nyx. “The slightest twitch and your lover dies.”

Trinia stood watching; she had no dog in this fight.

Avril backed to a nearby wall.

Time stood still for a few long seconds. But finally, Ekko yielded, “fine, I’ll help you save Sanguine,” he said.

Vya blinked, realizing suddenly that tears pooled in her eyes, her gun was pointed at her own head. She dropped the gun, fell to her knees. “You motherfucker,” said Vya.

Nyx vanished into a shadow; the edge of his blade gone from Ekko’s neck.

“Never point a gun at me,” said Ekko, his voice uncharacteristically dark, menacing, Vya could hear the death in it, realized he could kill with a word. She came to realize how close she came to shooting herself, of the raw emotions of doubt and failure that Ekko had raked up, exposed, Vya wept.

“You know,” said Avril. “When Master Sanguine told me about his apprentices, I suspected hyperbole, exaggeration, no way are people that interesting, I would say, but here you are, you make me smile.”

The Lichborne’s smile was a wicked crooked thing, his sharpened silver inlaid teeth glinting in the moonlight, an expression of madness that promised pain.

“Thank you for your concern for Master Sanguine,” Trinia finally said. “Have a nice rest of your morning.”

Avril Hunt lifted his hat with a slight bow and departed Sanguine Studio.

*Illusion can seem as real so long as you are willing.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Vya, for most of her life as Yeoman Meerly, lived, trained, and served in the Vree family navy, the largest and most powerful military of the Great Houses. But unlike the other Great House militaries that maintained ancient fleets of Drift Ships that hung over the City as floating citadels, the Min'Zirai Fleet was mobile and submarine, operating below the surface of the City's deep rivers, canals, and subterranean waterways, and if you believe legend, plying the waters of the Underground Sea. Meerly, even now as Vya, did not believe legend, but it made for a good story. The Scimitar Sun's Fate was the ship commanded by Major Song Vree, where Sanguine would have likely been taken.

It was just after midnight, the next day, Vya, Nyx, Ekko, Mona, and Trinia sat among the pillows, fabric walls, and shag carpet of their own Vignette: Abandoned.

"Sanguine was squashed," said Mona. "If he were taken someplace, it could take months to heal that kind of damage."

"So, we have time," said Vya. "To find him and rescue him."

"But not save him," said Ekko.

"Song commands thousands of trained soldiers," said Nyx.

"There is nothing to stop him grabbing him again," said Vya.

Ekko nodded.

"The more I think on it," said Trinia. "The more I think Sanguine is not aboard Song's ship."

"But that is where Major Song is," said Vya.

“Taking Sanguine is personal,” said Trinia. “Dragging him around in front of his soldiers does him no good, it only reminds them of his failure.”

“Are you suggesting some sort of secret lair?” asked Vya. “That’s nonsense.”

They all looked at her.

“Soldiers own nothing,” said Vya. “I was assigned a bunk, provided food, a tabard, and tools for doing my job. Everything I needed was provided. I went where I was ordered. We were afforded no privacy.”

“But you were not an officer,” said Trinia. “A major in command of a capital ship, one of the most powerful people in the City.”

“And we know he is an egomaniacal narcissist,” said Ekko. “Rules are for others.”

“The Shadowlands,” said Vya, looking off in the distance as if just remembering something important. “He traveled there often, a secret base he said, always alone, but I know the where, in case an emergency message needed to find him.”

“Not what I expected,” said Ekko.

“Shadowlands,” said Trinia. “I hate the Sabine.”

“More with the racism,” said Mona.

“I can forgive her this one,” said Nyx. “The Sabine are a kind of illusionists and obfuscators, there is not much to like.”

“I have not been to the Shadowlands,” said Vya. “What sort of place is it?”

“It is a part of the City where real and illusion coexist, real streets lead to illusionary streets, real people mingle with illusionary people, where it is always dark, always 3am, always fog shrouded, a labyrinth, deadly dangerous.”

“You are telling it all wrong,” said Ekko. “The Shadowlands is the most spectacular place in the City, a place of endless night clubs, music, theaters, casinos, and entertainments of every prudish and sexual imagining, where heroes and villains prowl from club to club and you can have sex with a dream and get lost for years. It is glorious, with the thrill of being deadly dangerous.”

“I will not be going,” said Trinia. “But we could do with more information on what is going on with the Song, looking at his financials could be telling.”

“How?” began Vya.

“An excellent idea,” said Nyx, he winked at Trinia. “I will go with you, maybe we can track where they took Sanguine with a more traditional investigation, Mona, Ekko, and Vya can go see if the Shadowlands can reveal Sanguine.”

*...Some is good, more is better, too much is just enough...*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Nyx and Trinia departed. Ekko flew the Vignette with himself, Mona, and Vya to the Shadowlands. Landing on one of the many commercial landing platforms set up on piers along

the Shadowland's coastline, where Vya recalled her old commander, Major Vree, parked his submersible skiff.

The docklands were cold, covered by a recent heavy snow, it was 2am and mostly deserted. But on shore, Vya saw the skyline of tall elegant and decidedly sensual buildings standing among a lower skyline of large blocky muscular buildings. The effect, Vya decided, was an exaggeration of the male and female, vanishing a mile beyond the coast into a heavy fog that sparked with thin spidery charges of occasional lightning, briefly illuminating even more erotic high-rise building shapes as hidden by a gaussian veil.

"Why don't we fly in?" asked Vya.

"Ships that fly into the fog tend to be eaten," said Mona.

"Seriously?" asked Vya. "As in lunch, dinner, eaten?"

"The architecture here can get hungry," said Ekko. "And not all buildings are buildings."

Vya looked at Mona and Ekko as if they were idiots but rolled her eyes and followed. At the edge of the Shadowlands was a line of long black cars.

"Be careful," said Ekko. "Not all of the cars are cars and most everything is hungry."

"How is any of what you just said helpful?" asked Vya.

Ekko found an especially old looking long low black car, the black lacquer paint polished to a mirror finish adorned with large chrome bumpers and an especially angry looking front grill. Vya thought maybe this car could eat her. From the car emerged tall shapely woman wearing tuxedo.

Vya was immediately attracted to the woman, sexually, powerfully, and though she had never been with a woman, the thought of bedding this driver suddenly filled her mind. She had heard of Sabrine, succubus and incubus, that they appeared differently to anyone that looked upon them, looked like some personal sexual fantasy. She never really believed the stories, but now, looking at the tuxedo dressed driver, she knew the stories were pale imitations of the truth. Vya had never been so aroused, it took all of her will to be cool, to chill, to pretend otherwise. She wondered what Ekko saw, what Mona saw, and knowing her reaction, decided she did not want to know, never wanted to know.

“This is Davanell,” said Ekko. “A friend, she will drive us, be our guide.”

Davanell opened the back door and guided Ekko and Mona into the car. As Vya followed, Davanell said, “well aren’t you the most beautiful tall drink of water,” her hand touched Vya, she felt herself near ecstasy, breathing heavily. “I am sorry, am I making you uncomfortable?” And with that, the sex-bomb that was the driver was gone, replaced by Vya’s mother wearing the same tuxedo. Vya blushed and jumped into the back of the car, the door closing behind her.

“What the flying fuck is happening here?” asked Vya, laying half over the laps of Ekko and Mona.

“Sabrine, as a people, can take some getting used to,” said Ekko.

Vya straightened herself out in a seat in the back of the limousine, looking across at Mona and Ekko.

“They can appear as one of 5 forms,” said Mona. “Depending on your mood and theirs: child, sibling, lover, parent, or wizened. So, my advice is to concentrate on them being your parent or sibling, most are courteous and will accommodate.”

“Courteous?” asked Vya.

“You have met a Sabrina before,” said Ekko. “Sanguine told us about your encounter with the Empress.”

“The little girl?” asked Vya.

“The Empress maintains a cadre of High Priestesses,” said Mona. “All female Sabrina, all e’Mral sighted, all share their mind and perceptions with the Empress, she can even speak and act through them, if you believe the stories.”

“Meaning the Empress,” said Ekko. “Can be in a thousand places at the same time, in a thousand different Sabrina bodies.”

“So...?” asked Vya.

“So, every Sabrina you meet, might be the Empress,” said Ekko. “So be very careful.”

“A thousand...?” Vya mumbled.

“No one knows how many,” said Mona. “People have taken to say a thousand to mean more than one, the legend probably exaggerated.”

“How can any of this be true?” asked Vya. “I still do not believe that little girl was real, thousands, it makes no sense, why?”

“Stop babbling and take a deep breath,” said Ekko. “The truth is it may all be an elaborate hoax, even just a silly story, so do not overthink it.”



“The Empress wandering around as a thousand Sabrina,” said Vya. “Be careful, but in the same breath, it may all be a hoax, do not worry. Are you fucking with me?”

“The City, the Empress, the Sabrina,” said Ekko. “They are fucking with all of us. I am just passing on what I know.”

“Which is nothing,” said Mona. “Ignore him Vya, you are much smarter than Ekko, you will make up your own mind.”

“What about you?” asked Vya of Mona. “What do you believe?”

“I believe in the Empress,” said Mona. “And that she uses Sabrina to wander about, keep an eye on things, and talk to folks she wants to talk to, seems perfectly normal to me.”

Vya looked at Mona as if for the first time, truly alien, her blue-green skin, as faded acid washed copper, her bright red hair as a halo framing her painfully beautiful face, her tight pink silk dress so short and low-cut and thin as to appear as painted on, making her appear more naked than if she were simply naked, here, now, sitting across from her, a vibrant sexual being, a goddess of allure. “I believe you,” said Vya.

Mona smiled.

“It still could be a silly story,” said Ekko.

“And you are a creature of deceit,” said Vya to Ekko.

Ekko sat back and smiled.

*The purpose of illusion is to deceive, it is easy to believe otherwise.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The black car raced through the streets of the Shaowlands, sliding in and out of traffic with a practiced grace. Several times they were chased, attacked, but Davanell too quick, too sly to be the victim of roadway predators, demons guised as vehicles.

“We approach your address,” said Davanell. “We have left the real, we are miles into some very old illusionary streets. I have never been here.”

The black car pulled up in front of a large row house on a street of large ancient stone houses, all decorated with elaborately carved gargoyles and demons, and angels, high gothic windows, and twisting baroque columns, the whole effect one of a child’s haunted nightmare, as the buildings appeared to be leaning over the street, menacing, grimacing, as Vya, Ekko, and Mona exited the vehicle.

“I’ll stay parked here,” said Davanell, Vya’s mom.

Again, Vya wondered what Mona and Ekko saw when they looked at Davanell and pushed the thought from her mind.

The street was empty, a few abandoned looking cars the only sign that anyone once lived here. The manor before them had a wide stone stair that led from the sidewalk to a huge green lacquer front door carved with demons engaged in a sexual carnal combat, a melee that disturbed Vya, as when she looked upon the door, the figures moved and shifted, devouring, killing, fucking, the scene carved onto the door making her sick. She focused on the windows, the surrounding facade, the house number 44, and noticed stairs down from the sidewalk leading below the formal stairs to a servant’s entrance.

Mona was also disturbed by the front door and was moving down to the servant's entry ahead of Vya. Ekko seeming amused by the dancing green door but followed on after Vya.

The gap between the sidewalk and house was overarched by the grand stair to the front door, below the front door, under the stair, was the servant's entry sided by several large windows protected by heavy iron wrought grating finished with spikes and jagged barbs, Vya noting the outward and inward facing sharpness crafted as much to keep intruders out as servants in.

The servant's door was a simple panel door painted black.

"May I?" asked Vya.

Mona stepped aside from the servant's door. "Remember, feel the purpose of the door, the maker, sympathize, with the façade."

Vya had been working with Sanguine for weeks, learning the basics of how to see and alter the e'Mral mists, had taken up learning the String'Laz, a seven-string electric guitar, as it felt most natural. All that Mona just said, she knew the words, but she was still learning, could not feel it, know it, unable to see the nuisance, the craft, of what she did, her work thus far that of a finger-painting child. Vya touched the servant's door, the Iron mists flowed over it, through it, coiling around the hinges, the knob, the lock, she could see the pinks and reds laced through the whole of the façade, the oxblood red reaching up from the earth below, and subtle, the Lyfe mists of green, the wood of the door, ancient oak, stronger than steel. She let her mind drift with the mists, the door, the wall, the ground and suddenly, the door vanished, replaced by the stone wall that wanted to be, that always existed but for the door.

"Oops," said Ekko. "Kind of the opposite of open."

Mona hit Ekko, “shut up. Vya, focus on imagining a door, your door, of the same oak that was there, but your size, your shape, keyed to you, sympathetic to you.”

Vya could still see, feel, the green e’Mral mists of the ancient oak, coiled them, moved them, she began to sing a nursery rhyme that Sanguine taught her, a tune to calm the mind of children, “sing song somebody says something of doors that maybe are and maybe not, maybe open, maybe closed, sing song somebody says something of doors.” And as she let her mind drift into the wall, a bright yellow door appeared where the black door had been. Vya turned the silver handle, it was unlocked.

“Yellow, seriously,” said Ekko.

Mona hit Ekko, hard. “That was brilliant,” said Mona to Vya. “You are learning quickly.”

“We were doing doors before we were out of diapers,” said Ekko. “I do not see the need for effuse praise, Vya’s a big girl, a very big girl, she knows she is a retarded cripple.”

Mona punched Ekko in the face, blood splashing from his broken nose.

“And there is the truth of it,” said Ekko, smiling slyly, blood running from his nose to his chin.

“Fuck you,” said Mona.

Ekko moved through the open door, leading the way down a long central corridor with closed doors on either side. “The thing to know about being e’Mral sighted,” said Ekko, with a wicked smile, “is that as architects, no door is closed to our passage, no window covered to our view, no wall we cannot fenestrate or seal.” Ekko reached for the doorknob on the first door on

the right, it tuned, he pushed the door open revealing an empty room, years of dust caking the black and white checkered tile floor.

Vya came to realize that all the doors were locked, but Ekko opened each as if they were unlocked, she could see small coils of blue e'Mral mists drifting around his hand and into the door. "The blue mists do not abide bars or locks," said Ekko. "You are a thief and a spy and perverted voyeur."

Mona rolled her eyes with a grimace, "you are an idiot," Mona said to Ekko.

Ekko smiled, opening another door, and after having revealed a half-dozen empty rooms, he was surprised to see a much larger chamber than the others, 20-yards square, filled with the technomancy of a medical cloning facility. The 3 stood at the door looking in. The equipment was covered with years of dust, all of it composed from parts of ancient machinery cobbled together, makeshift, but looking sturdy and functional despite years of disuse, like someone turned out the lights on the way out, and never came back.

The 3 moved into the room, exploring, Mona found birthing pods, the mummified remains of lobotomized young women, a tangle of tubes and wires reaching into their desiccated flesh, binding them within deactivated life support capsules, cruel, she felt sick at the sight of the abused and abandoned girls, wondered who they had been before they were stolen and plugged into the horrific machine as no more than fleshy incubators.

Mona closed her eyes, and touched one of the mummified women, let the e'Mral mists flow through her, the house, above, below, felt for life but found none, no insect, mouse, or mold spore, nothing, the place was not real, the only thing real, that this was a place of death, and that a great many had died here.

“This place is a horror show,” said Vya, “they, oh...”

Ekko and Mona heard Vya retch.

“Animals, women, children,” said Vya. “They were making monsters. They were...”

Vya ran from the room back to the corridor, where she began to cry. Vya recalled nightmares of her childhood, violence, suffering, as flashes half remembered.

Mona suddenly felt warm, a wave of heat pressing against her. She looked to see Ekko, holding the skull of a child, flame erupting from his body, swirling about him as a dust devil. Mona ran to join Vya in the hall, closing the door behind her.

And no sooner had she closed the door than she heard an explosive rush of air from behind the door, heat radiating through the door, the walls. And as quickly, it was ended. Moments later Ekko opened the door to rejoin Mona and Vya in the hall. Vya could see everything in the room was charred black, melted, broken to ash, blown back from a central point where Ekko had stood, most everything in the room a smokey black stain on the surrounding walls. But Ekko was unharmed, and his shimmer-silk black suit showed no signs of being damaged.

“Some clues might have been useful,” said Mona. “You really need to learn to control that anger of yours.”

“There was nothing useful in that room,” said Ekko. “Only cruelty.”

“I have been here before,” said Vya, tears in her eyes.

“When? How?” asked Mona.

“I do not know,” said Vya. “I do not remember it, more like DeJa’Vu, it is all too familiar.”

The 3 continued to explore the mansion, finding a stair at the end of the hall that went both up and down. Down revealed a subbasement where the remains of dozens of failed experiments were cataloged and stored, some mummified on tables and shelves, others in glass jars, all of them the tortured combination of cloned animal and man.

“Looks like your old Major was playing godling,” said Mona. “Trying to make better people and smarter pets.”

“To what end?” asked Vya.

“Unsanctioned,” said Mona. “A personal project.”

“And if you are cloning,” said Ekko. “There is always the desire to tinker, make them better. How do you think men came to be spliced with cats in the first place?”

“But I was born,” said Vya.

“Lucky you,” said Ekko. “Clones are soulless, as demons and animals are soulless, if you were a clone you could not be e’Mral sighted, magic requires a soul.”

“I am confused,” said Vya. “Souls are real? Wait, you two are babbling and none of this metaphysical nonsense matters, we need to find Sanguine, focus. The world is not ending, magic is not dead, immortality is not real. Screw your heads on strait and let’s go.”

“You are right, of course,” said Mona.

“You are not,” said Ekko.

“Fuck me,” said Vya.

The 3 moved upstairs.

On the first floor they found a nursery, dust covered as everywhere so far searched, but standing motionless at the end of room lined with abandoned nursery cribs, stood a motionless multi-armed robot with 6 plump fleshy plastic breasts, a matron for the care and feeding of infants. Upon entry, the robot spun up, lights winked on, it shuttered and moved in a series of motions that looked like a boot sequence, dust sliding from her moving limbs.

“I am Dora,” said the matron machine.

“Hello Dora,” said Ekko. “How long have you been sleeping?”

“19 years,” said Dora. “That is when the last baby in my nursery outgrew my care.”

“How many children did you care for?” asked Mona.

“20 over the course of 4.2 years, though only 4 survived,” said Dora, her feminine mechanical voice seeming sad, “they were all so sickly, so broken.”

Having seen the remnants of the lower floors, that was easy for Vya and the others to understand.

“Where are those 4 now?” asked Mona.

“3 were adopted by a large fat man,” said the robotic matron, “the last, designated F5ve, she was taken away when all the men left.”

“Nobody is here now?” asked Vya.

“No children requiring my care,” said Dora. “Though I can detect that Bora on the fourth floor is keeping an eye on a naughty child in the time-out room.”



The 3 made their way up the stairs, bypassing the second and third floors to reach the fourth floor, the stair leading to a room 20-yards cube, the walls padded and white, the floor wood, the ceiling luminous, casting a flat cold shadowless light throughout the chamber. At the center of the room was the broken body of a bald man, Master Sanguine, the e'Mral mists within the room weak, failing, preventing his healing. Next to Sanguine's unmoving body stood a multi-armed robot like the nursery matron, but without the plastic breasts, her various arms equipped with blades and tools designed to cause pain and suffering upon the living. As the 3 approached the center of the room, they could see Sanguine's body had been cut, burned, frozen, and beaten by the various arms of the robotic matron of punishment, Bora.

They could also see that this room appeared solid, not as the luminous stained glass of e'Mral sight, but rendered as mortal sight, the e'Mral mists weak, vague strands of pale pink, the walls behind the padding, under the wood, above the luminous ceiling, lead lined. The room was designed to negate magic, to blind e'Mral. The "why" of such a room frightened Ekko.

"Do not approach too close," said Bora. "This is a very bad boy."

"Release him," commanded Mona.

"The master has ordered him to stay in timeout until he returns," said the matron of punishment.

"Destroy this abomination," said Mona.

"Do not disobey," said Bora to Mona. "Be a good girl, I do not wish to punish you."

Vya quick-drew her star-pistol and fired at the wicked robot, five shots, each coring a hole straight through its metal body, but hitting nothing vital, nothing that slowed the thing as it moved toward Vya.

“Bad girl,” said Bora. “I will teach you manners.”

The door slammed shut, locked.

“Do something,” said Vya.

“Like what,” said Ekko. “It is a fucking robot, should I make her feel sad, maybe compassionate, maybe be my fucking friend? It’s a motherfucking logic engine.”

“Blast her with fire,” said Mona.

“I thought we wanted to save Sanguine,” said Ekko. “Not vaporize him and everything in the room, including you, there are surprisingly few places that burning everything to a cinder is useful.”

“You idiot,” said Mona.

“Use your healing magic,” said Ekko. “Oh, wait, it’s a fucking robot.”

“You can be such a dick,” said Mona.

Vya was not paying attention to Mona or Ekko; she holstered her pistol and dodged the approaching Bora. The robot’s arms were long and articulated such that they unfolded, spun, twisted, and moved with machine speed and efficiency. Vya was slashed, burned, and her tail frozen numb as she rolled to avoid being grabbed by Bora.

“Come now little girl,” said Bora. “Running only makes the punishment worse.”

Mona ran hard at the robotic torturer, with such speed that her dress shredded from her frame, ribbons where she was, slamming hard into the robot knocking it hard into the far wall, fragments of porcelain steel, crystal, and mechanical liquids scattering in its wake, Mona

impaled by one of the robots bladed arms. Falling to one knee, pulling the broken blade from her gut with a scream.

The robot spun from the wall and leaped at Vya. “Come here little girl,” Vya dodged but was grabbed by 2 arms, Bora’s other 10 arms beginning to cut and burn into her flesh, delicately, precisely, to cause the most pain with the least actual damage. Vya screamed.

Mona stood, staggered, her intestines making an escape attempt.

“Command recognition,” screamed Ekko. “Yeoman Meerly Vree, emergency communication from Major Song Vree.”

The robot froze, released Vya, and scanned the 3 of them with a flickering light. “Yeoman Meerly recognized, welcome, what are your orders.”

“Stand down,” said Vya, falling wounded to her knees.

Bora, the matron of pain, shut herself to standby.

“What is a room like that doing here?” asked Ekko.

Vya and Mona left the room while Ekko dragged Sanguine out of the dread room. Mona began to heal her own and the other’s wounds.

“Sanguine is dead,” said Mona, looking confused, almost panicked. “His blood and heart made ash, sand, I have never seen such a thing.”

“You mean real-dead?” asked Ekko. “Not magical almost dead?”

“Real dead,” said Mona sitting back.

“No,” said Vya.

“No?” said Mona.

“No,” said Vya. “Resurrection is possible, life from death, real magic, Sanguine spoke of it once, said it was rare, impossible, but he thought you could do it Mona, said only your own fear prevented you believing.”

Mona looked scared. Ekko had never seen Mona look scared, which made Ekko scared.

“What are we talking about here?” asked Ekko. “And should I go wait several hundred miles away?”

“Resurrection is a 3-part task,” said Mona. “Mind, body, and soul. I can restore the body, but you, Vya, will need to reorganize his mind, his memories. And you, Ekko, will need to find his soul and lead it back to his body.”

Ekko groaned.

“How do I organize his mind?” asked Vya.

“Same as Sanguine showed you reorganizing your noodle house,” said Mona. “The past is fixed, unalterable, you just need to reorganize the present to be as it was. Concentrate on Sanguine, on how you felt about him, your conversations, everything you can recall, focus on how he was when alive and draw your red e’Mral mists through his and your mind.”

Mona looked at Ekko, “I am going,” he said, “I am going...” Ekko let his vision slip beyond the shimmering stained-glass sight of the e’Mral mists and then deeper into the haunted Pale of ghosts. Time slowed and stopped, and before him was the Metropolis of the Dead, a vastness city of everything that ever was, in its place, at the same time, frozen, indistinct but real as a dream. Ekko stood at the center of a long boulevard that ran through where he had been,

and next to him the vague shadows of Mona and Vya. But more to his surprise, floating just ahead of him, cross legged a few feet above the Pale street, was Master Sanguine.

“What took you so long?” said Master Sanguine.

“You let yourself be taken?” asked Ekko.

“It seemed the best way to see who has been pulling the strings,” said Sanguine.

“But it killed you,” said Ekko. “Real dead, was that part of your plan?”

“Are you all working together?” asked Sanguine.

Ekko frowned. “Total bullshit, no way you died just to get us working in the same direction, you died, and you got lucky we showed up before it was too late.”

At this point a very large shadow in the distance crossed the road, menacing, slavering, the size of a building.

“The Pale may be timeless, but I have lingered too long, hungry things are being drawn to my presence,” said Sanguine. “Can we move this along?”

Ekko took the hand of Master Sanguine and closed his eyes, suddenly and disturbingly back outside the lead lined prison with Mona and Vya. Ekko took the hand of Master Sanguine’s corpse. “Now or never you two.”

Vya had her hands on Sanguine’s head, e’Mral mists Laced through her mind and into the corpse of Master Sanguine, her eyes closed, near exhaustion.

It was then that Mona finished her own ritual, Lacing her own body’s life force into and through the corpse of Sanguine. Restoring the destroyed heart and blood, animating the flesh, making the body again as it was when alive.

And like a combination lock having been opened, Master Sanguine's eyes opened, he sat up like a bolt, and took a long deep breath.

Mona collapsed; her own body weakened to near death itself.

Vya slipped into a coma, her own mind near unraveling.

And Ekko escaped the Pale just as a very hungry old-god nearly swallowed his own soul, collapsing to the ground in happy exhaustion. Lucky, he thought, very lucky.

Ekko awoke some hours later. Sitting up, he saw Sanguine and Vya lying next to him and Mona sitting up propped against a wall.

"They will both be fine," said Mona, sounding exhausted. "As will you."

"Good news," said Ekko, falling back to lay flat on the ground. "I am so very hungry."

"I am not surprised," said Mona. "Being dead can be exhausting."

After a long several hours, Vya, Mona, and Ekko were tired but ambulatory, carrying Master Sanguine out of the mansion of horrors.

"How long before Sanguine comes too?" asked Vya.

"He is a tough motherfucker," said Mona. "A few days, maybe less."

"Does he have a home?" asked Vya.

"Not that I know," said Ekko.

"Me either," said Mona. "Honestly I know nothing about the man."

Vya realized that she knew nothing about Sanguine, not really, who he was, his family, history, friends, nothing. "Let's get him to the Studio," said Vya. She then realized that she

knew next to nothing of Mona or Ekko, and less of Nyx or Trinia. And she suspected that none of them knew much about each other. Such were the inane conversations about nothing that filled an ordinary architectural workday. Here she was, nearly dying with people she did not know in a place that was not real.

*The Light of Illuria is a holy text, but to understand, you must want to grow.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Ekko flew the Vignette over Sanguine Studio, the beautiful little warehouse building reduced to ash, destroyed, embers still aglow under a light dusting of recent snow.

“Song,” said Ekko. “I’d guess what any home we have are in similar repair.”

“Vengeance,” said Vya.

“Or leaving you no ground to hide,” said Mona looking at Vya. “Take us to the Hospital of the Blessed Sisters of Mercy.”

Ekko looked at Mona with distain. “Pancake house first, we are all starving.”

“Seriously?” asked Mona.

“Seriously,” said Ekko.

Ekko banked the “abandoned” and headed to a pancake house located a dozen miles from the still smoldering ruins of Sanguine Studio.

The Vignette landed on the promenade overlooking a canal and the City beyond, Ekko, Mona, and Vya sat at a large circular table in the center of a brightly lit diner eating large stacks of pancakes. Singularly, the greatest meal any of them had ever eaten, before or since.

“Will Master Sanguine be all right?” asked Vya.

“Remember your recovery from near death?” asked Mona. “He was real dead, I’m guessing his recovery will take some time. Truth is, resurrection is only mentioned in ancient holy texts, performed by Saints, I did not know it was possible.”

“Lucky,” said Ekko, smiling as he savored the syrup chewing a large mouthful of pancakes.

“Maybe,” said Mona, smiling as she took a large mouthful of pancakes.

It was then that a half-dozen soldiers entered the diner, taking up tables at the end of the room, ordering coffee and breakfast. Apparently pleased to have recently leveled Studio Sanguine with a missile barrage. Laughing and joking at the success of their work. Their tabards marked them as soldiers under Major Song Vree.

Vya stood up, her hand falling to touch her star-pistol.

“There are six of them,” said Ekko, raising an eyebrow.

Mona closed her eyes, letting the green e’Mral mists coil through her feet, tendrils dancing across the floor and to their table to touch each of the 6 soldiers.

“What are you doing?” asked Vya.

And then each of the six soldiers fell into an enchanted sleep.



“Killing them as they sleep, or standing against you,” said Mona. “It is still murder. Shoot away.”

Ekko smiled; he could see Vya thinking hard to bend morality to shoot 6 sleeping men.

“It would have been an honorable duel,” said Vya. “Fair.”

“Fair?” said Mona. “You have a star-pistol, you lace e’Mral, you cannot miss.”

“Shoot them now,” said Ekko. “They deserve it.”

“Maybe they do,” said Mona. “But do you deserve to judge them?”

Vya sat down.

“I do,” said Ekko.

Mona frowned.

“We, all of us, nearly died to save a life,” said Mona. “Let’s not ruin the mood by taking a life because we are feeling righteous.”

Ekko smiled.

Mona frowned.

“So where are we going?” asked Vya. “To these Sisters of Mercy?”

“No,” said Ekko, cutting off Mona. “I know a place we can lay low and collect our thoughts, and maybe get the Studio back up and running.”

They finished their pancakes and left the diner about the time the waitress was starting to become concerned about the 6 sleeping soldiers.

*Architecture requires emotion, that the architect care, buildings do not.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

The small beachside motel was a long low two-story slab that had a dimly lit kidney shaped pool in the fore overlooking a wide sandy beach and cold black waters. The wind blew cold, it was 3am, a frozen but clear winter night.

Vya and Mona sat naked at the edge of the pool, their legs dangling in the warm iridescent water. Ekko lounged in a beach chair looking up into the dark starlit sky.

Upon arriving, Ekko sent a messenger to Nyx and Trinia, letting them know to come find them at the Paradise Hotel. A centuries old place along a mostly abandoned coastline, once beautiful before the war. Far from where anyone might be looking for them. Sanguine was secure in a second-floor room, recovering from the trauma of his recent resurrection.

Nyx and Trinia arrived.

Mona, Ekko, and Vya told the tale of their rescue of Master Sanguine, and of a cloned child named F5ve from 19 years ago, and of Vya remembering having been there as a child.

Nyx and Trinia told of their research, of delving the financial records of the Vree family generally and of Major Song Vree specifically. Of finding several references to F5ve, which Nyx had thought a code word for where Sanguine might be hidden but then found it stretched back to addresses of the past 19 years.

It was clear to all that the cloned baby, F5ve, not only survived, but has been shuffled around the City by Major Song for the last 19 years.

“Where is F5ve now?” asked Vya.

“The Yelten Cement Facility,” said Trinia.

Nyx pulled a large many-thousand-page soft cover book from the fold of his trench coat, placing it between his legs on the lounge chair where he sat.

The *Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockwork Cosmopolis*, subtitled: *Everywhere Anyone would Choose to Visit*, is the best travel guide in the City. Nyx flipped it open ignoring the first third of the book, the page read; *Appendix One: And Everywhere No One would ever Choose to Visit*. Since the ending of the war and Great House rule, the Guide was ever shrinking, though Appendix One continued to grow larger each year.

“So, let’s see where this F5ve is...the *Yeltan Cement Facility*,” Nyx was reading to anyone that cared to listen, “is in Rabbit Run City Under the Sun.”

“Of course, it is,” lamented Vya, her head falling backward to look into the night sky.

Mona made a low guttural groan and slipped into the water so as not hear any more.

Ekko was not paying attention, his imagination dancing through the stars as some long dead god of children’s play.

Trinia had by now stopped listening.

“According to this,” Nyx continued. “It has been abandoned since before the ending of the war and is currently home to an ad hock marketplace that specializes in spiced street meats, cabbage soups, and warm sticky treats.”

Vya let herself fall into the pool, not hearing would be better.

Nyx continued, “the gray matter sticky bun is a savory favorite not to be missed by the adventurous traveler.”

Vya surfaced.

“I thought cats did not like the water,” Trinia said.

“I am not a cat and anyway cat’s love the water,” said Vya in reflexive rote, only realizing she had spoken afterward. She sighed and let herself sink under the surface.

“So where are we heading?” Trinia asked Nyx.

“Rabbit Run,” he said.

“An industrial wasteland,” she said. “Of course, what would be the point in hiding in a beautiful five-star hotel in the glittering heart of the Dreaming Spires? Makes perfect sense.” She frowned.

Mona was laying on the bottom of the pool looking up at the night sky, green e’Mral mists coiling gently around herself that she had no need to breathe. Vya she noticed above her swam with the same preternatural grace that she ran and danced. And even naked below the water, she wore her star-pistol holster held loosely by the most delicate silver chains around her waist and her leg just above her right knee.

Nyx turned to Trinia and saw she was wandering down the beach, had buds in her ears and her eyes closed swaying to music only she could hear, no doubt listening to some very dark and loud plaintive wailing that detailed various forms of loneliness and suicide. Rich girls, he thought to himself.

As dawn approached, Trinia had not returned to the pool. Ekko, Mona, Vya, and Nyx sat loosely around a table by the pool enjoying the hotel's free breakfast of coffee, fish sticks, eggs, and beans.

Mona squirted a glob of ketchup onto her fish stick from a little single serve packet. "So, are we really thinking of going to Rabbit Run and looking for a clone experiment named F5ve?" Mona asked.

"I am" said Vya using one of her razor-sharp nails to slice open a packet of ketchup.

"I am not," said Ekko.

"I will help you," said Mona. She was wearing a bikini in case any other guests came to the pool as a matter of decorum, but the long binding stings and patches of fabric did not seem purposed to cover anything that ought to be covered, rather she seemed to have been tied up by someone using hundreds of shoelaces.

Trinia approached the group wearing a high neck full length long sleeve black dress, high heel black boots, and carrying a plate of fruit. "I am walking through the old cement facility," Trinia said eating a slice of fresh melon.

"Now?" asked Ekko.

"Of course, now," said Mona slapping Ekko. "That is what she just said, go down and play on the beach for a while, you said you were not going anyway."

Ekko got up and left the table, heading down toward the wide beach as the sun continued to rise. He dreamed as he often did. He let his soul drift into the e'Mral mists that swirled over and through him and everything and everyone around him. He moved across the beach his arms

spread wide, spinning as a laughing drunk dancer looking toward the sky. His long black hair blew back from his face despite there being no wind. He could see backward through the centuries, he could see this place as it was, a shining pearlescent sand beach bordered by a beautiful azure pool surrounded by a limestone deck that revealed the impressions of sea creatures made millions of years earlier. He could see the ugly gray slab hotel as it had been new, a rippling white serpentine roof now covered by a mansard roof as a potato sack worn by the beautiful. The hotel was aglow with life and light, a shimmering jewel of glass mosaic tiles and murals of sea horses and turtles and brightly colored fish, only a few that resembled the real. The palm trees and ferns and flowers filled the grounds with green, and color, and the scent of plumeria.

Ekko began to spin faster, could feel the loves and lives of those that stayed here at the little hotel over the centuries. He could see he was now dancing through the ghosts of beach goers, children playing in the pool, and lovers barely hidden in her rooms behind fluttering white curtains. Ekko was filled with joy and sorrow and his soul began to break, he laughed and cried and still he spun until he finally fell upon the sand in exhaustion.

Meanwhile, Nyx, Mona, and Vya were still listening to Trinia describe the abandoned cement factory at the pool when they were suddenly distracted by a bright yellow-orange light from the beach. Trinia thought at first someone had set a large bonfire.

“Motherfucker,” said Mona. She began to run toward the beach.

Vya not knowing what was happening ran after Mona on instinct.

Nyx sighed, “not again, we are going to have to put a leash on that boy.” He did what he could to pull the Shade e’Mral mists around himself like a cloak, but he could already feel reality

bending around him. He slipped sideways into the shadows, vanishing. Trinia left alone at the pool closed her eyes, she hated this part, and she reaffirmed that she hated Ekko.

A sheet of fire swept out from the sleeping Ekko, hitting Mona first and then Vya, moved outward, a searing flame of pain and sorrow and death. Vya and Mona were each thrown backward to the beach, flame incinerating clothing, skin, and flesh. The flame spread over the pool sweeping Trinia away as hot ash. The ground and weeds and hotel were all consumed in flame, whatever few guests there were in the hotel ran screaming in flame and horror and were themselves wept away. The flames spun as a tornado high into the air and were as suddenly gone.

And in the fire's wake, the hotel, grounds, and people were covered in a light layer of shimmering ash. Vya, Mona, and Trinia stood from where they had been blown, the thought of boiling flesh and being incinerated fading from their minds. They shook off a dusting of ash and saw they were each dressed in crisp white swimwear of a style hundreds of years past. The pool glimmered new. The hotel floated over the rise from the beach like a dream in white shimmering glass. The grounds were lush with tropical plants and the air sweet with plumeria.

Vya whispered to herself, "it's beautiful."

Mona stood looking at the little hotel she had so easily dismissed as a ruin and her eyes began to well. "Ekko," she said, "I take it all back, you dream any dream you want to dream and say any obvious thing you want to say."

Ekko now stood near Vya and Mona looking at Trinia standing on the sparkling pool deck. "It was obvious," he said. And he walked up to join Trinia in a beautiful poolside cabana.

The owner and few other guests were running about the hotel and grounds giddy with joy and wordless wonder, each dressed in the bright white fashion of long ago. And later they would learn, cleansed of addictions and self-destructive loathing, they were each of them renewed as a phoenix from the ashes. Each was keenly aware that this was the first day of the rest of their lives, and their lives could be good if they so choose.

Even Trinia felt optimistic and invigorated, her long drug addiction burned from her veins and the shadows of suicide that ever clawed at her mind sent far away.

Some hours later Nyx appeared from nowhere and stepped back onto the pool deck, looked around at the beautiful little paradise made new again, and rolled his eyes. Nyx gave it day before the needy of the surrounding neighborhood picked the bones of the little paradise clean of anything not nailed down before they started breaking off the parts that were nailed down. Nyx did not see a beautiful wonder of renewal and joy, he saw a beast ready for slaughter, and it would not be painless and would not be necessary, and this made him sad.

Master Sanguine awoke in a large white bed wearing a beautifully tailored white linen tropical suit, his feet bare. He sat up but fell back flat as his head threatened to split open. Ekko, he thought, only Ekko. He smiled.

*Ownership is possession.*

*...Dynasi Law*



The day was spent at the pool and on the beach. But Nyx spent a fair amount of time wandering the grounds and hotel watching as hundreds of neighbors and local news reporters, and less savory people from under nearby rocks explored the sudden shining miracle in their dreary little neighborhood of petty criminals and drug addled citizenry.

There was some talk of miracles and e'Mral, but no one really believed in magic. They decided it was likely a blessing from the Empress, a gift to be accepted graciously and with the wonder with which it was granted.

Nyx hated the Empress, even as she has nothing to do with nothing, she gathers the credit of miracles to herself like a thief in the night.

Sometime later as the sun began to set, people in the neighborhood started to chatter with concern, as a surprising number, dozens, of drug dealers and gang members were found dead in the streets immediately surrounding the paradise hotel. Maybe a gang war, maybe bad blood, most by seeming natural causes, they just keeled over, but whatever the case, the neighborhood enjoyed a surprising joy and peace for some many months that followed.

“What have you been doing all day,” asked Trinia as Nyx approached the cabana where they dined on fresh fish and fruit.

“Just getting some air,” said Nyx. “Paradise is too sweet for my taste.”

Vya nodded and smiled.

“We think we know where F5ve is hiding,” said Mona. “There is an old furnace building near the center of the complex, one way in, recently repaired iron doors, poorly disguised soldiers patrolling the approach. Obvious.”

“Only one way in?” asked Nyx.

“Well 3 if we count you and Trinia,” said Mona. “More if we do not care to hide our approach.”

“Let’s go,” said Nyx.

As they prepared to leave the newly remodeled Paradise Hotel, Trinia was approached by a tall bipedal insect with an overlarge head that mirrored the shape of his enormous, bisected brain, ‘butt’ocular’ Trinia liked to think. The big mandible quivering bug with dinnerplate sized dead faceted eyes wore a red sash marking him as a member of the Psionica Messenger Service. It approached and handed her a thin stainless tube and departed as quickly as it appeared. Eigarians made Trinia queasy, but that was normal for anyone with an active survival instinct. And while Vya was not bothered by such animal instincts, she had the good sense to shoot first and consider the threat afterward, and they had learned to not deliver anything to Vya.

Trinia opened the cylinder and smiled.

Nyx and the other looked at Trinia.

“What news?” asked Nyx.

“I bought her,” said Trinia. “Our Studio was burned down, and we needed a new one. Our people will be moving in. I also bought a half-dozen adjacent buildings and will begin clearing them this week.”

“The owner wanted to sell?” asked Nyx.

“The owner sold it the first day for a truck load of drugs and hookers,” she said. “The new owner was disinterested in saving the hotel or entertaining my offer. He arranged to have it disassembled and sold for scrap.”

“But you own it now?” Nyx asked.

“I do,” Trinia said. “Don’t fret, they will never find the body.”

Mona frowned.

Nyx had no doubt she had a valid Grezurian Deed for the Paradise Hotel as well as dominion over most of the surrounding beach community. He smiled.

“Good news,” said Ekko. “We should definitely postpone this F5ve nonsense and take care of our own first.”

Vya fumed.

*Teleportation is real, rare, and exceedingly dangerous, always requiring clear sight of your destination.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Not long after, Vya went looking for Ekko, only to find he had left the Paradise Hotel. The moon was full, the air clear and bitter cold, a wicked winter storm these past several days had layered the City in high snow drifts and ice.

Vya rode a drift-cycle, flying through the night, her dress of yellow patterned with blue flowers shredded from her blue-furred body as her speed increased past a hundred miles per

hour, she screamed with joy, flying faster and faster over the dark waters. She could see the blue e'Mral mists in the air, like the flow of water in a river or sea, eddies, currents, the faster she traveled, the more the e'Mral mists resisted, e'Mral friction, the technomancers called it, her speed absorbed, the harder she pushed the drift-cycles magnetic turbines, the more slight, incremental her speed increased, a logarithmic scale, speed increasingly turbulent, resisted, the speed of light in the City slow and not quite fixed. Still, she pushed her cycle, screaming with joy, screaming in frustration, still she pushed the machine. She felt the blue e'Mral mists upon her skin, directed them, slipped between the currents, avoided eddies, 140, 150, 160 miles per hour, parts of her cycle began to vanish, teleported elsewhere, the blue e'Mral mists, the friction, beginning to tear her cycle apart. She made a wild flip, turned into the current of a fast-moving e'Mral wind, 170 miles per hour, she stood up from her seat, gripping the handlebars tight, she screamed at the moon, larger parts of her cycle vanished, the porcelain steel frame cracked, metals parts began to melt, 177 miles per hour. Vya used all of her concentration to bend the e'Mral mists to her will, the Grace mists Laced to flow with her, the Iron mists Laced to hold her cycle together, the Lyfe mists Laced to prevent her body being stripped to the bone, she screamed and howled, and then it happened, the turbulence ended, the heat, the pain, all of it was suddenly gone as she rode the wave of reflected moonlight, herself, moving at the speed of light, and if Trinia was to be believed, she skipped along the edge of the horizon of the Pale, in teleport, time for her stopped, but time in the City moving normally. Her skin tingled, cold. She focused on Ekko, on her hatred of him, of her desire to murder him in dozens of successively unpleasant ways. She let her hatred, her anger, free upon the e'Mral mists of Fyre. And as suddenly, she slipped back into the real, to her it was moments, but she had traveled several hundred miles and several hours had passed.

Ekko sat on a beach that stretched in either direction for some miles, surf crashing just offshore, a small bonfire before him, naked but for a pair of board shorts, frying up a filet of fresh fish, squeezing half a fresh lemon. When there was loud explosion of air opposite his fire, the huge smoking hunk of metal that was once a drift-cycle appeared, and straddling the steaming and hissing machine was Vya, naked but for her long full body of blue fur.

“Fuck that felt good,” screamed Vya.

“Been talking to Trinia I see,” said Ekko. He could see the cycle catch fire as one of the turbines fell off the destroyed machine.

Vya stamped out the burgeoning fire with her naked feet.

“Trinia had been talking about tripping the Pale Horizon,” said Vya. “Finding you seemed a good excuse to try it.”

“You have the gift,” said Ekko. “No denying that. There are not many that can do what you just did.”

“It seemed natural,” said Vya.

“And that is the gift,” said Ekko. “To most, magic, the e’Mral mists, are never natural.”

“How is that possible?” asked Vya. She finished putting out the fire and moved toward Ekko, her Lace of Iron e’Mral mists within the cycle unraveled, faded, and the cycle fell to its component parts with a loud crash, tumbling across the sand.

“It is possible because most e’Mral sighted do not believe, they resist themselves, they think rocks are heavy, that walls are solid, that lions are dangerous, that guns kill, and all of the other baggage that says the world is the way it is.”

Vya sat across the fire, Ekko finished preparing 2 plates of fish and rice, handing one to her. He poured them each a glass of sparkling pink liquid, “Penelope Punch, you’ll like it, it tickles the nose and prevents you lying, or at least that is what the bottle says.” He set the bottle next to Vya in the sand.

He lifted his glass in a toast, they both drank.

“You like drinking this?” Vya said looking at the bottle.

“I do not lie,” said Ekko. “So, it has no effect on me but to taste good. But I have never put much stock in promises or labels, I find experience the only real measure of a thing.”

“You never lie?” asked Vya.

“No.” said Ekko.

“Why?” asked Vya.

“Everyone lies,” asked Ekko. “It’s boring.”

Vya was quiet, she began to enjoy the fish, perfectly cooked with a light lemon sauce with pepper. She smiled despite herself.

“Why are you here? Or maybe more forward in my mind, why have you not shot me through the head?”

“It is my first thought,” said Vya. “But putting aside that our last encounter proved to me you can kill, or worse, with a whisper. But if I’m honest, if I get the chance, I will shoot you.”

“I’ll do you the courtesy of not giving you the chance,” said Ekko. “It is the least I can do.”

Vya nodded, taking a drink. She decided this pink Penelope stuff tasted better with each swallow. “Can you save us both time and tell me what your major brain damage is?”

“I can,” said Ekko. “But you need to ask the question.”

Vya sighed, “Master Sanguine says that shit a lot too, you must ask the question, when he knows the question, when he knows the answer, why the tangle of bullshit, why not just tell me?”

“Ok,” said Ekko. “I will tell you. The answer to your question is that we are apprentices, 8 years we are apprentices, and in that time, most, will abandon their training or die in the process, as you very nearly died arriving to see me,” he pointed to the destroyed machine parts piled and scattered on the sand.

“Trinia is only 2 years in, and ready to check out for good. She has a wealthy family, mother, grandmother, great grandmother, and a vast estate, which she can more than manage spectacularly with what she already knows. The only thing preventing her quitting outright is that she would have to admit that those around her were right, that she is a failure.”

“Nyx is the most talented architect I have ever met; he makes me and the others seem as monkeys flinging shit. He has been with Sanguine for 3 years and learned next to nothing and 5 more years is likely to teach him the rest of nothing.”

“Mona is 5 years into her 8 but is already one of the most gifted healers the City has ever seen, 3 more years of training under Sanguine will do nothing to improve the fucked-up attitude that put her under Sanguine’s tutelage in the first place. Her gift is landscapes, parks, the outside environment but she insists on designing hospitals, to please the matron mothers of the Sisters of Mercy that raised her. Eschewing her gifts to please others.”

“And me I have 2 years remaining, with no desire to risk dying to stupid before I complete my training. Only 1 in 5 make it, I am going to make it, and I will not let your heroic tendencies dissuade me.”

“And what if you make it, what is the prize at the end?” asked Vya.

“I’d be a Master, with the knowledge and power of a Master, meaning I can do whatever the fuck I want, pure unadulterated freewill,” said Ekko. “Villain, or hero, or neither. Going after someone like Song or F5ve or whoever, with less than a year’s training, with a bunch of apprentices wanting to check out to better lives, is stupid and selfish.”

Vya thought on what he said. “Villain or hero or neither?” she asked.

“That is what you took from that?” said Ekko. “Sure, why not, the Empress wants to save magic, the good, the bad, and the ugly, to her it is not a moral issue, but an existential one.”

“But why save evil motherfuckers?” asked Vya.

“Because the alternative is a world made by the blind,” said Ekko, a gray world of war and toil followed by a comfortable retirement with a good health care plan. The world may as well have ended, just no one having yet noticed.”

Vya did not like the answer, her nose and whiskers flicked nervously.

“I know, it sucks, right?” asked Ekko. “I will tell you a truth: WE are the villains in this story,” said Ekko. “You were cured, we undid that, now you threaten vengeance against your former master, the one that raised you, saved you from a life of evil. You are the bad guy in his story, you are the wicked witch.”



Vya closed her eyes and thought on what Ekko said. Finally, she said, “my beautiful noodle shop, the people, the neighborhood, that is not the work of a villain.”

“They will never thank you for it,” said Ekko. “They will turn on you as soon as it causes a problem, makes trouble, whatever. And magic, the e’Mral mists, always causes trouble, even if you do not see it right away, be good, do good, bravo, but do not expect any thanks, you will be disappointed. Do what you do because you want to do it. The City is full of wonders crafted by artifact architects through the ages, the 37 Mistress Spires are just a few of hundreds, thousands, of such wonders. Glorious to behold, if that is your goal, I will celebrate you. If Mona, Nyx, or Trinia would simply do as they wanted, free of guilt or the expectations of others, they would walk through the City as gods of old. But they, as you, are chained, believing you are the hero of your story, when you are not, you are wicked.”

Vya again fell to silence, the waves crashing offshore, hoarfrost forming on the bottle of pink punch.

Ekko, his pale skin glowing under the moonlight, got up and refilled their drinks, the slightest swirl e’Mral Lace to prevent them freezing.

“So, if I understand,” said Vya. “Your objection is timing, that sticking it to Song, doing the right thing, helping F5ve, is something I must wait 8 years to do, and do myself?”

Ekko rolled his eyes, nodded, taking another drink. “You did not hear a single thing I just said.”

“And if I do not wait?” asked Vya.

Ekko again pointed to the slagged drift-cycle. “It will be a shit show, people will die, maybe real dead, maybe people I care about. The resurrection of Master Sanguine was biblical

shit, that is not normal, has not happened since the e'Mral architects opened the first Strange Doorway. Do not count on it happening again, ever."

Vya looked perturbed.

Ekko laid back, staring into the night sky and began to speak, *"Once upon a time there was a beautiful little girl with golden skin and diamond eyes. Her parents pitied her, for her golden skin made her the ridicule of the village, she was bullied and regularly beaten by the other children, but always she smiled and laughed. When no one would talk to her, she found friends among the animals and her diamond eyes could see the spirits of the forest and ghosts that lingered, and with them she smiled and laughed. Until one day, an especially wicked little girl, who never smiled and despised laughter, accused the little golden girl of being a witch. "What is a witch?" asked the golden girl. "You consort with ghosts, you talk to animals, to the trees you make jokes, unnatural, you are a witch." The little golden girl smiled and laughed, "well of course, silly, when you say it like that, I am a witch, I am sorry you are not, how dull your life must be." This enraged the wicked little girl, who ran to the village to tell her parents and the priests that the little golden girl was a witch. The elders of the town gathered to consider the little girl, "are you a witch?" they asked. "Well of course, silly, I see the whole of the world and it is joyous," she smiled and laughed, and spirits only she could see and animals only she could talk to, also smiled, and laughed, for the world was wide and wonderful. "Insane," said the elders, "evil," said the priests, a 'villain' they all said, and so she was tied to a pillar at the center of town and set aflame, and finally, the wicked little girl, smiled and laughed."*

Vya sat, stunned, silent, finally she said, “that is a terrible story, what was the fucking point of that?”

“Good wins, magic dies,” said Ekko. “And the world is made less.”

“A metaphor for the war and the empress?” asked Vya.

“Our lives,” said Ekko. “And it is not a metaphor.”

The two sat in silence for the next several hours and watched the sun rise.

Later, as the dawn swell arrived, Ekko led to Vya to several wynd-boards, jumped on one and lifted into the air, as surfboard in size and shape, but capable of flight. Vya laid flat on her board and followed Ekko out to the swell, dropping down into the waves from the air. For the next few hours, Ekko taught Vya how to surf. A tall thin albino figure in board shorts and a 7-foot drowned-looking blue cat with exaggerated feminine curves, catching clean but wicked waves at dawn, in the bitter cold of winter. Morning in the City.

*Slavery is a crime against nature, the dominion of men.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Vya had left Ekko and decided he was a wicked liar and arrived at Rabbit Run sometime after midnight, to the old Yeltan Cement Factory, to find and save F5ve from 19 years of captivity at the hands of Major Song. She arrived at a squat stone building 10-storys tall supported by heavy overwrought columns. Rabbit Run was a part of the City that was ruined in

the early days of the war, now lightly populated, most of the industrial buildings still standing were abandoned or occupied by those looking to disappear.

The building was heavily ornamented with symbols of cement manufacture, the old management office building, articulated with deep windows and ornate ledges, and would be easy to climb for one as strong and long limbed as Vya. But instead, she Laced red e'Mral mists into the huge cast-stone wall, shifted the gravity along the surface, and sprinted vertically up the wall, as if the wall were ground, up 200 feet to the roof. On the roof, she could see a small snow-covered forested garden surrounding a large penthouse at the center, the windows lit by dim lights within, casting a pale warm light on the nearby snow.

Vya was naked but for her star-pistol holster strapped to her right thigh, her long blue fur giving her the appearance of a silhouette against the snow in the darkness of the new moon.

She watched through various windows, seeing 2 large men, a post-humankind of animal shape changers such as bear, tiger, and wolf, their hair and facial features suggesting these 2 men were clan wolf, standing guard at the elevator entrance to the penthouse.

And in the kitchen, preparing tea, was a stooped 7-foot woman, thin and sickly, hollow as if near starving, her cat's fur white thin with large patches of bare pink skin, wearing a loose-fitting silk robe that hung upon her naked frame as draped on a skeleton. Her eyes pale pink, her claws translucent white, her tail thin and without fur, limp upon the floor. And yet, Vya recognized the woman, her gaunt facial features familiar, her nose, mouth, the shape of her eyes, she realized it was her, some sort of emaciated albino twin sister. The clone facility recalled to her mind, the horrors she saw, her reaction, she felt as if she had been there, they had been trying

to clone her, Meerly, as a child she had been there. She realized this must be F5ve, a clone of herself. Vya felt suddenly sick.

Vya moved to the door nearest the two guards, kicked the door so hard that it exploded inward off its hinges, glass shattering into the lobby. Her star-pistol drawn, she fired at the first guard before he could react, the green slug coring a hole cleanly through his head. The second guard, turned to protect himself from flying glass, moved to draw his own railgun, but Vya shot him in the back, coring a clean hole through his chrome-heart, it sputtered and clicked and failed, the guard collapsing dead onto the marble floor.

Vya moved quickly to the kitchen; her star-pistol holstered. She found F5ve standing next to her spilt tea, a smallish kitchen knife held tightly in her two clinched skeletal hands, the strain of physical exertion clear on her face.

“My name is Vya,” she said, holding her 2 empty hands up. “I would like to take you from this place that we might talk. I am not going to hurt you. What is your name?”

The albino woman looked frantically left and right and behind her, desperate for the means to flee, but not panicked, not afraid, she was still feline, fear did not touch her. “I am F5ve,” she finally said. “And those were the only 2 guards, no one will be by to relieve them until dawn.”

“Are you lying to me,” asked Vya.

F5ve dropped the knife, her arms falling to her sides as if holding them up had exhausted her, “no, I am at your mercy.” She righted her teacup and began to remake her tea, head down, not looking at Vya.

Vya stood opposite her, the kitchen island between them. “I have so many questions,” began Vya, “But I barely know how to begin, or even why I am here.”

“Acting without thinking,” said F5ve. “That will get you killed sooner rather than later.” She steeped her tea, not looking up at Vya. “When you are me, everything requires forethought, a careful plan, death waits eagerly at my shoulder, with each cut, trip, or stumble.”

“It must be hard,” said Vya.

“It is life,” said F5ve. “And if you broke in here and shot Roblis, and Gundar just to patronize me, I wish you would just leave or kill me outright.”

“I did not mean...” began Vya.

“They had families you know,” said F5ve. “Roblis was excited for a few days off starting tomorrow, his wife had just given birth, he did not believe in chrome-hearts. Gundar too had 3 children, he and his wife only taking their chrome-hearts a year ago after their last little girl was born.”

“I thought...” began Vya.

“Nothing,” said F5ve. “It is clear you do not think, you murdered my friends, and you insult me by pretending to somehow care, to not mean; what?” She took a sip of tea.

“I only...” began Vya.

“Wanted something for yourself,” said F5ve. “Wanted to find or know something important enough to murder, to lie, so important that you justify your villainy as necessary. Saying to yourself, if only the world were not so cruel, you could be better, nicer, that it is not your fault. Did they make you powerless, take from you, hurt you, rape you? I do not diminish your pain, but I mock your reaction. Is that about it, is that what you ONLY wanted?”

Vya was shamed to silence.

“Tea?” asked F5ve.

Vya nodded.

F5ve poured a second teacup. “You should not be surprised or upset, I am you after all, it only surprises me that you do not know these simple truths, that some version of myself, my source, could be so especially stupid and mean.” She pushed the teacup toward Vya.

“How do you know...” Vya began.

“That I am your clone?” finished F5ve. “If you are going to continue to be thick as a cord of wood, this is going to be a very long conversation.” She sipped her tea.

“But I was Meerly, I was...” began Vya.

“This is getting old,” said F5ve. “None of this chattering like a squirrel is getting you what you want, can we dispense with the idiocy, standing this long is exhausting.” She began to move to a nearby chair at the dining table, sitting, her tea, cupped in her two hands, warming.

Vya was about to speak but stopped herself. Sipped her tea.

F5ve sipped her tea. “Bethiny, that is the name of Roblis’s new daughter, pretty name.”

Vya looked back toward the entry hall, blood pooling on the marble floor toward the living room.

“What game are you playing?” asked Vya.

“I was making tea,” said F5ve. “Roblis was telling Gundar about his planned vacation, the question is to you, the villain, why?”

Vya was becoming angry, frustrated, “I am no villain, I am...”

F5ve interrupted her, “the hero? In the right? Justified? Do tell.”

“Stop interrupting me,” said Vya.

“I apologize,” said F5ve. “Tell me something I do not know.” She sat quietly and sipped her tea, her head down, still not looking at Vya.

Vya moved to the dining table, sitting opposite F5ve. “Are you ok? Does Song hurt you? Why does he keep you here?”

“I am ok,” said F5ve. “I am no victim, and this is my home, no one keeps me. All you could have learned by knocking, politely, and asking, kindly, but I suppose that is too much to ask of a sorceress, always so full of yourselves, your glorious magic giving you the right to lord your will over anyone, anytime, for any reason. You make me sick.”

“Then why make you?” asked Vya.

“I am beginning to think you are tetched in the head,” said F5ve. “To make and control magic of course, to take unearned, what you so freely abuse and misuse.”

“Did they succeed?” asked Vya.

“Seriously?” said F5ve. “You said you saw the cloning facility, you see me here, and you ask this without humor or understanding? Do you just like to hear yourself talk? Or are you one of those annoying people that must talk to think? Do your lips move when you read?”

“Enough,” yelled Vya, throwing her teacup to smash on the wall behind F5ve.

“I have no power here,” said F5ve. “I do not know what you are angry about. If you cannot say it, I cannot know it.”



“I came here to free you,” said Vya. “To save you, do you not understand. To make things right.”

“Thank you,” said F5ve. She sipped her tea, “are you done yet? Saving me that is?”

“What the hell is happening here,” screamed Vya, standing up suddenly, the wooden dining room chair tossed behind her breaking as it tumbled.

“Only what you want to happen,” said F5ve. “Would you like more tea?”

“Shut up,” said Vya.

F5ve did not look up, sipping her tea.

“But he made you,” said Vya. “Cloned you in the womb of stolen girls, spliced animals, cut babies, I saw the horrors, the chimera, all of it, you, must demand justice, none of this is right.”

“You do not need my permission to kill Song,” said F5ve glancing toward who 2 dead friends. “So, if that is what you came for, I am sorry you wasted your time.”

A soft, growling purr came from behind Vya, she spun around, back to the table where F5ve sat. Before here were two large wolves, man-sized, the weight of the two men she shot when she entered, silver claws and fangs glinting under the dim kitchen light.

“Your star-pistol is a wonder,” said F5ve. “An artifact yet to be duplicated in the modern world, but it is not silver.”

Vya quick drew her star-pistol into her right hand, and at the same time felt the delicate bony touch of F5ve upon her right shoulder, biting burning cold shot through Vya’s right arm and right breast, she dropped her star-pistol, screamed in pain. Vya sought to jump, but the grip

on her shoulder was now as a vice, she screamed in pain as the cold moved through her body, paralyzed, her mind fuzzy, sight and senses dulled, felt herself fall helpless to the floor, sensed her life being drawn out of her with her warmth. Vya realized she was dying. She sought to draw the e'Mral mists to her, to Lace them around her, to protect her, but they too were drawn off. Finally, Vya laid on her back on the floor, F5ve sitting on her, straddling her stomach, hands on Vya's two shoulders, numb, paralyzed, but she could see F5ve, fully alive, luxuriant white fur, buxom, curvy, beautiful, Vya's white furred twin. And Vya felt her body's pain, her anorexic form, patchy blue fur, failing pink eyesight, knew that somehow F5ve had taken her vitality, and trapped her within a crippled body.

“Thank you, sister,” said F5ve. Roblis and Gundar will take good care of you.

Vya closed her eyes, heard the wolves growl, their hot breath on her face, she lost consciousness.

*Immortality looks like a living brain placed within a Wyght Core, plugging themselves into an array of robotic bodies, vehicles, or buildings as need or amusement may require. And though they may recall having once been human, they are but soulless thinking machines, only the memory of emotion haunting their thoughts.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Major Song Vree entered the palatial hall, 20-yards wide and 400-hundred yards long and covered over by a series of high pointed vaults that reached 50-yards into the air, shimmering with gold and silks, and populated with heroic paintings and sculptures depicting battlefields and

demons and angels. Song moved from east to west along the hall's length, the floor polished black stone mined from the side of an ancient volcano, reflecting as black glass, his footsteps echoing through the vast chamber. He glanced to his right and saw his reflection in a succession of gilded mirror walls, and to his left a processional of baroque gold frame doors and high arched windows leading out to a southern expanse of vibrant green grass and seemingly endless gardens beyond, the sky and moons of an alien world. As he walked his sense of loneliness and vulnerability became heightened, as he suspected was the architect's original intention. He was to feel small and irrelevant and despite knowing these manipulations, he felt every bit as prey when he finally approached Lady Balira.

Standing upon a dais at the north end of the room was an eight-legged mechanical titan, an arachnid inspired war machine designed to incite terror as much by its form as for its array of killing technomancy, and somewhere under layers of armor protected by guns and missiles and blades was a Wyght Core containing the still living cat-spliced brain of Lady Balira Vree. She had many such bodies, some smaller and more resembling human form, others even larger as to be considered vehicles or buildings instead of mere bodies, but all of them designed to elicit the specific thought of being devoured by a hungry monster born of mechanical nightmares.

Song stood, unafraid as was his own catlike nature, but clearly aware his life was in immediate danger.

From behind the titanic mechanical spider emerged a tall buxom woman with exaggerated curves wearing a translucent silk dress, classically human, but more so, she was perfect as an artist sculpture of personified beauty and sexual desire. Lady Balira Vree, her

Wyght Core instead residing within a proto-type pleasure model. The giant spider battle-bot unmoving as a set of unworn clothing.

“What do you think of my new body?” asked Lady Balira.

“Lovely as ever witch,” said Major Song. He knew Lady Balira, there was no more cruel mistress, his memories of their time together: pain.

Lady Balira moved down the steps of the dais and moved around Song. “Report.”

“Master Sanguine is dead,” said Song. “I had the body deposited at your private clone facility as ordered.”

“I thought we were capturing him for questioning?” asked Balira.

“The kinetics of battle are not always predictable,” said Major Song. “He was not so quick as we had planned. I ordered his studio and homes of his apprentices destroyed as standard protocol.”

Balira walked slowly around Song, her finger dragged suggestively across the back of his neck. The pheromones and drug laced sweat of her pleasure-bot body causing his mind intoxication, his manhood to energe. “Would it interest you to discover that this nobody, this practitioner of an obsolete profession living in the ruins of an obsolete world, is alive, and more to the point, not in my facility?”

Song stood in formal attention trying to focus his fuzzed mind.

“I do not...” began Song.

“...have anything to say,” finished Balira.

Song stilled himself, silent. He could feel he was about to die.

“But it seems fate is with you,” said Balira. “Mona, the red headed apprentice, seems to have resurrected your fuck-up. And more interesting perhaps, Yeoman Meerly, despite having been reported dead by you; Major Song fucking-Vree, wandered into a family reunion, very much alive. Do you understand what death is? How to recognize it?”

“Yes mistress,” answered Song.

Balira moved around him in a slow seductive motion. She slipped her hand around his hardness, looked deep into his eyes, and with her other hand caressed his chest, and with a movement so quick, snatched his still beating chrome-heart into her hand, blood splashing her face as she stared into his eyes as he died, slumping to the ground at her feet.

“Enter,” she called out, the sound echoing as a scream through the titanic hall.

Captain Song Vree entered the great hall from a mirror door near Balira. He saw the twin of himself on the floor, a hole in his chest, Balira, blood drenched standing over the body, a bloody chrome-heart and cock in each hand. “Hold out your two hands,” ordered Lady Balira.

Captain Song stood at attention, holding out his two hands as ordered. She stepped forward, looked deep into his beautiful cat’s eyes and place his clone’s chrome-heart into one hand and his cock into his other. “This is what death looks like,” she said with a hissing anger. “Do you understand...Major?”

“Yes mistress,” said the new Major song Vree standing at attention still holding the articles of his promotion in-hand.

“I have decided to meet this green monster ‘Mona’, performer of resurrection miracles, myself,” said Balira. “Make plans to kill the rest.”

“Yes Mistress,” said the new Major.

“Go,” said Balira sounding tired.

The major departed, not knowing what to do with what he carried, he took them with him.”

*Killing is easy, killing magic even easier.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

The next day, the sun was setting on Paradise Hotel pool deck, Mona, Nyx, Ekko, and Trinia sat enjoying a meal of fresh shellfish and steamed rice, a light cold breeze moved through the garden, exotic winter blooming roses scented the air, the moon was rising. The lights of the City across the water began to glow more brightly as dusk moved over the skyline. Mona felt in this moment, a singular joy as she looked at her 3 companions, smiling and laughing as inconsequential conversations were more important than anything else.

Trinia spoke excitedly, “little Bartholomew just took his first step. My sister’s little boy, I am babysitting while she travels.”

“How do they not hear you talk?” asked Ekko.

“I am talking to you, not Bartholomew,” said Trinia as she took a bite of fish.

“You can carry on two conversations at the same time?” asked Ekko.

She looked at Ekko like she had just landed from another planet, “Three.”

“I guess I never really thought about it,” said Ekko, “it bends my mind to think on, two, three bodies but one consciousness. I only ever see the one of you. You can carry on two conversations at the same time, not just twins having 2 conversations, I mean, like, one person in 2 bodies carrying on 2 conversations at the same time?”

“Of course,” said Trinia.

“Your brain must be spectacular,” said Ekko.

“It is,” said Trinia, “you have no idea just how spectacular.”

Nyx smiled.

Mona laughed.

Sanguine joined them, dressed in his white linen suit and bare feet, “let’s talk about Vya.”

“We do not even know she is missing,” said Ekko. “We were surfing only a few days ago, I am sure she just needed some time to think.”

Sanguine ignored Ekko and said, “Mona and Nyx, go to the Steel Dragon. Trinia tells me that Lady Balira spends a fair amount of time clubbing there, see what you can learn. And Trinia, do me a favor a follow them, quiet like.”

“The Grand Admiral Lady Balira Vree, head of a Great House Zirai, slums in the clubs of the Steel Dragon?” asked Ekko, looking from Trinia to Sanguine. “And we know this...seriously?”

Trinia frowned.

Sanguine continued, “Trinia, take Ekko with you and go visit our *Grand Master the Exalted Zosa’fandia Lavatura Goor e’Grezuria*. See if he can offer any aid as to where Vya may have gone missing.”

Trinia looked as she were considering suicide, or perhaps what to have for lunch, Sanguine could not tell.

“How will that help us find Vya?” asked Ekko.

“Zosa is behind our troubles. He revealed my prison to the Vree, he sent the Vree to Meerly’s funeral. He is why I was taken. And I suspect that his 3 apprentices, the so-called Heroes of Destiny, are the other 3 surviving children you mentioned from your investigation of the old clone facility. He may know where to find F5ve, which could lead us to Vya.”

“None of that makes sense,” said Ekko. “We are nothing to Zosa, why would he bother?”

“Ask him while you are there,” said Sanguine.

Trinia was not paying attention.

“Go,” said Sanguine. He had expected a great deal more discussion, questions, about how Lady Balira fit into the mix, the mysterious F5ve, but to his surprise and eternal disappointment, none of his apprentices cared enough to ask: not even if or how Vya might have been kidnapped. When it seemed she may be missing a few days ago, most assumed that Ekko had finally killed her, but Ekko denied any involvement despite being the last to see her, which was telling, because if he had killed her, he would likely have announced it over the hotel’s public-address speakers. As his apprentices left the pool, Master Sanguine sat alone, head in his hands, feeling the full weight of his failure.



Sanguine did not raise his head, but was aware he was no longer alone, Avirl Hunt had joined him. “You cannot blame yourself, master and apprentice, both must participate.”

“I can do without the patronizing bullshit,” said Sanguine.

“Then you will love this,” said Avril. “Trinia is spying for your beloved Master Zosa, her sister, Ovella, held as collateral for her cooperation.”

“I had suspected Trinia for some time,” said Sanguine. “But not that Zosa would stoop to kidnapping.”

“Worse,” said Avril. “He has a house full of slaves, where he keeps both Ovella moiety.”

Sanguine’s world was crumbling around him. He had no love for Master Zosa, he had made his choices, the man was a pig, but slavery, e’Mral betraying freewill, betraying his own, he was beset on all sides, enemies of machine and enemies of magic. “Tell me how bad this really is, I can hear the hesitation in your dusty old voice.”

“Zosa has been seen with Lady Balira, his apprentices, the Heroes of Destiny,” said Avril.

“Then it is really true,” said Sanguine. “They have gone and warped e’Mral children into weapons.” Sanguine knew of Zosa’s experiments during the war, a failed program to create cloned e’Mral warriors. But the process cruel, the effect horrific, a cautionary tale for a great many all-bad reasons.

“A painful process,” said Avril.

“Torture,” said Sanguine.

“Lightning Boy, Tiger Claw, and Brightness Lightness,” said Avril. “Sociopaths all.”

“Clown names,” Sanguine.

“Harmless and approachable,” said Avril.

Sanguine frowned, “no doubt the product of focus groups.”

“No doubt,” said Avril.

“What the fuck,” said Sanguine. “What am I supposed to do with this, these apprentices of mine are willfully clueless.”

“What are we going to do?” asked Avril.

“Save Vya,” said Sanguine. “One thing at a time.”

*Magic saved humanity from extinction, as reward, humanity destroyed magic.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Nyx and Mona had changed clothing on their way out from the Paradise Hotel. Nyx wore his matt black silk suit under his oiled-leather trench coat and a pair of similarly black 3-inch heel boots.

Mona wore a bright yellow sun dress that more resembled some contrived torture device for her breasts, with a wide breezy skirt that was so short it made Nyx blush if the wind caught it just so.

The two decided to make their way by water-taxi to the canals surrounding the Steel Dragon. No need to make the work of anyone following them easy.

Nyx asked, “Mona, an idle thought, why do you not wear a supportive foundation, or undergarments of any sort, or something with some calculable structural value to support your generous form? Or why wear clothing at all, isn’t the custom of your people to wander about sans-clothing as a matter of decorum?”

He expected to be hit but was genuinely curious.

“I am the runt of my family,” she began not looking at him, talking to some unseen horizon. “The smallest and most disappointing of my brothers and sisters, my birth, I am told, killing my mother, and my father resenting my survival at her expense. When the Sisters of Mercy asked to take me into their care, a rare and precious wonder they said, an e’Mral birth they gushed, but to my father the quick end to the reminder of my mother’s passing. The Sisters taught me to dress as a proper girl and woman. I have no idea what you are asking.”

Nyx had long understood Mona’s ability to speak the truth so simply as to make you feel stupid, was well earned. But he realized just now that he had needed a reminder and felt the fool.

“Very proper,” said Nyx. Mona wore her clothing in rebellion, a poke in the eye to her Sister matrons that cringed at her failure and a reminder to herself and her naked kin that she did not belong among them.

Nyx changed the subject, “Is it true that your kind are extraordinary geniuses, so smart that their famed silence is due to their inability to communicate meaningfully with people like me that have the comparative intellect of a duck?”

“True,” she said. “But I have had more interesting conversations with waterfowl, they do not have fucking idle thoughts.”

Nyx laughed.

The water-taxi moved through the labyrinthian canals that wove through The City toward the Steel Dragon.

The Steel Dragon is the remnant of the early days of e'Mral rule, when the world froze, and humankind failed. But as remnants go, the Steel Dragon deserved the moniker epic. A low flat dome that stretched 3-miles across and nearly a mile high at a large central oculus, crafted of titan scale serpentine dragons of rust aged steel woven into lattice patterns that allowed dappled light and scatterings of rain to filter to the vast alien buildings, twisting streets, and eldritch gardens that sat protected under the mother dome. The draconic forms that composed the dome danced lightly at the edges, touching the ground with frozen swoops, and leaping claws that opened the perimeter of the dome to more traditional streets and high-rise towers of the City.

Nyx considered, 3-miles across meant an area of 7-square miles under the dome. And all they knew was that Lady Balira comes here, nothing specific. This is a search that could take years.

Mona and Nyx disembarked the taxi and made their way into the ancient alien streets. As architects, sorcerous or otherwise, Nyx and Mona were fascinated by the wonders of the Steel Dragon and the alien twisting liquid forms of her streets and buildings, the whole seemed a fantasy land of dreams made real by playful gods. Their own modern work seemed pale and stiff in comparison, driven by economy and “good design” only when it added value. The two imagined themselves great architects, and they were by any honest opinion, but walking through these primordial streets, they each realized how truly bereft of talent they must seem to the giants that raised such a place.

The Steel Dragon as a district, was large and thus known for many things, but especially its myriad hotels, entertainments, and nightlife, a famed meeting place for heroes, adventurers, explorers, and mercenaries of every imagining. The latest, greatest, and best could always be found lost somewhere in the tangled streets and high alien towers of the Steel Dragon. And if Lady Balira were here, she would probably be feeling safe and out having a good time. At least that is what Mona thought.

Trinia was supposedly following them, but neither had seen any sight of her since leaving the Paradise Hotel. Mona figured she was ahead of them keeping tabs on their approach, too skilled to let herself be seen. Nyx figured she had left the Paradise to take care of her grocery shopping and was by now enjoying a meal with friends at some very high-end restaurant with no thought of where they were or what they were doing. Neither liked Trinia, she was an effete snob, born into great wealth, she enjoyed a vast extended family and was seemingly friendly with everyone that mattered, and unfriendly to everyone else. Whatever she did wrong to be tossed from the elite clientele of the Spire Studios and landed her designing shopping centers and chain stores under Master Sanguine was unknown. Trinia did not say, and no one cared enough to ask, but she was a brilliant keyboardist.

Mona led the way through the twisting streets, Nyx figured they had circled themselves, but Mona continued to move with long purposeful strides, her sundress skirt spending more time flipped up around her waist than providing any fluttering pretense of modesty.

She moved from street to alley to park to alley in a pattern that left Nyx lost and rushing to keep up for fear he would never find his way back out.

They arrived at a small, dilapidated shopfront, the window displaying dusty old maps and out-of-date travel guides, the alley otherwise quiet and empty. Mona read the sign over the door, “the goblin mapworks.” Nyx saw only a derelict sign long washed of any text by age and grime.

Mona bent in half and entered the small door, Nyx followed.

The shop smelled of the dust and mold of old paper, the bookshelf walls crammed with ancient volumes and coiled map scrolls. Toward the back of the shop was a low counter and behind, the wet slouching form of a Xanthos sitting on a stool.

Nyx was not happy and decided to stay near the front door, planning his escape. He had heard a great many stories about the Xanthos, but none suggested a positive outcome of their meeting.

The Xanthos were a post-humankind that scholars liken to cockroaches, a primordial throwback of odd durability. As the name suggests, they have a sickly mottled yellow-brown skin, smooth, and slime-slick. They have the general appearance of an anthropomorphized frog with wide shoulders and arms topped by a neckless head split halfway around by a wide mouth and a tongue that can lick its own ass from across the room. The eyes are similarly amphibian, large orbs set upon swaying stalks that have the distracting habit of looking in two directions at the same time. And between their eyes a long slender stalk that on its end glowed with light, as one of those ancient ocean fish that live in the depths where the sun cannot reach. One unlikely story famously says that a Xanthos can swallow a man whole, or at least an especially naughty child.

Mona leaned forward over the counter, Nyx spinning about in a sudden jerk to look out through the dirty storefront glass into the alley.

Mona and the Xanthos spoke in a low incomprehensible cadence that ended with her placing several bright coins into the 3-fingered claw of *Ghor'bushkin'vloorp of the Very Deep Sea of Vast Underworld Oceans in shades of Pink and Red, and Violet.*

“Time to go,” said Mona sweeping past Nyx still considering the empty alleyway.

Nyx trailed behind Mona navigating the maze of streets as if following some remembered map.

“Ghorby says we may find what we are looking for at a nearby nightclub, the Principled Prick,” she said.

“Wait, Xanthos have names?” he asked. “They can speak?”

“Don’t choose to be fucking moron,” she said. “There is no upside.”

“Humor?” he said.

“Sadness,” she replied as they moved through the streets of the Steel Dragon.

Nyx was forced to agree.

They soon approached a wide curving street filled with hundreds of club goers drifting into and out of a collection of tall oddly erotic street facing buildings. One had a slender vertical sign of flashing neon representing a top hatted tuxedo dressed man with a spinning cane. They moved into the Principled Prick.

*Architecture is a patron art. Those architects with important and wealthy clients produce sacred architecture, serious capital “A” architecture. Architects with less important clients, profit minded clients, are relegated to produce corporate architecture, big, important, but*

*ultimately economical. And still others, so lowly among their peers as to be derided, create the profane: the places we all know and love, places of magic.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Meanwhile, Ekko and Trinia had also changed clothing on their way out of the Paradise Hotel.

Ekko wore a bespoke black suit, crisp white shirt, and black tie, the only curiosity an arrangement of dozens of perfectly tailored suit-coat pockets each containing a different brightly colored silk pocket square.

Trinia took the opportunity to attire herself in an especially boring business casual kit, knee length gray woolen skirt, white blouse, sensible shoes, the effect to disguise her feminine curves, her long hair pulled back in a severe bun, nothing to offend the human-resource police, nothing that would mark her as a sexual being of any sort.

Ekko and Trinia decided to be picked up by a black-car service, a large comfortable flying car designed to deliver as many as half a dozen suit-wearing executives with expense accounts anyplace they may need to go in The City. They would draw no attention flying into to the middle reaches of the Spire. The two were quiet as they flew across the sea of lights that was the City below. Neither much liked the other, and the reasons were so plainly obvious, that neither laid blame upon the other, they simply had nothing in common, and that was nobody's fault.

Ekko was raised by artists and musicians, a man of emotional depth and arguably the most powerful e'Mral child of his generation. The matrons of his upbringing seriously



considered killing him as a child on more than one occasion, the only thing stopping them perhaps the love they had for Ekko, or more likely the hold Ekko had over their emotions even as a toddler.

Trinia on the other hand was reputedly the daughter of a storied merchant family, one of extraordinary generational wealth earned during the war, an elitist socialite of the worst sort, determined that her life is curse despite everyone that met her seeing only innumerable blessings and a pouting child. Ekko and Trinia can never make each other laugh. So, silence is where they meet when necessary.

But what they did have in common was a hatred of the elite Spire Studios that banished their promising careers to Sanguine Studio. Each had in their early career been a rising star, and each as quickly discarded as a poison apple for no reason either understood. And as neither spoke of their disgrace, neither knew that neither knew. Such was the dance of co-workers.

The flying car approached the *Spire Empire the Dragon Heart Broken by Kind*, a place that before the war was home to the *Pen'de'shal*, the ancient spiritual and religious leaders of the City, the seat of the Empress, where once e'Mral sighted children are trained in their sorcerous architectural arts and the best and brightest hoped to apprentice under the Masters of the various Spire Studios.

Spire Empire is a construct that tricks the mind and ensorcells the soul, it is too big and too real to be real, a living spiraling coil of stone, metal, glass, and light reaching miles into the haze of the night sky, unsupported by apparent gravity or other physical law, magic made manifest. This was the kind of place where only those that mattered could be found.

Ekko and Trinia alighted to a vast cantilevered garden that led up a series of delicately hanging platforms to the golden halls of Studio Zosa, the premier architectural Studio of the Spires, their clientele includes the rich and powerful of the Great Houses as well as titanic Combines such as Gray Industries and Cynergen. This is where the kings and queens and their descendants came to see their monuments to self and business crafted by the best talent money can buy. Magic made servant to those that mattered.

The approach and doors are churchlike, designed to make anyone that ascends feel unworthy and any that enter feel insignificant. Ekko and Trinia moved through the great portal as heretics, unimpressed and underwhelmed by the weaponized grandeur. They moved into the vast white stone lobby reflected in gold shimmering light from artfully crafted unseen sources and approached the receptionist sitting behind a desk so long and slender as to resemble an aircraft wing.

“We are here to see Grand Master Zosa,” Ekko proclaimed.

The receptionist began to laugh but suddenly stopped when she looked up into Ekko’s beautiful face, his long black hair drifted behind him by some divine breeze. When he smiled, she smiled, and said, “of course, but he is very busy, unavailable really, such a tragedy.”

“May we wait for him in his office,” said Ekko. “We are good friends just hoping to catch up for a few minutes.”

“Of course, of course, it is the least we can do, of course,” said the receptionist. She called over several large black suited security guards that were about to intervene and directed the two be escorted to wait in the Grand Master’s private office. The security guards looked confused but complied.

Ekko and Trinia were escorted through a series of high cathedral halls that supported hundreds of masters and apprentices working on the design and organizing the construction of the City's most important works. All catching a glance at Ekko and Trinia but careful not to stare as the rich and powerful do not much care for eye contact with the help.

The office of Grand Master Zosa was opulent, showing no signs of actual work or drawing tools, but a museum like display of building renderings and models, each one an expression of a client's ego made stone, metal, and glass. Ekko considered the work as he moved around the empty office, drivel, the worst kind derivative slop that lessens the value of all design and tarnishes the reputations of artists. Ekko tamped down his rising anger, he was glad Trinia was with him, his own passions are not what were needed right now.

Trinia ignored the ridiculous architectural pictures framed as if pretending to be art in some esteemed portrait gallery. She instead sat in an overstuffed leather chair in front of a titanic desk, as if some castle fortress from which Zosa could negotiate with pillaging knights that would see him as a stooge to their will. She noticed however, no chair behind the ridiculous desk.

The door burst open and in ran a harried woman, perhaps a man, wearing a poorly tailored gray suit with especially large polished but scuffed black shoes. Her dappled gray skin and fine features and overlarge expressionless jet eyes set Ekko on edge. Trinia hated the gray people on general principle and considered killing the beast before it could speak. She was glad Ekko was here, she controlled her reflex to strike first, they were here to talk.

Ekko quickly moved between Trinia and the gray suited intruder.

“Thank you for seeing us so quickly,” Ekko said before Zosa’s personal assistant could launch into whatever tirade was about to vomit out of her unthinking mind.

“What?” she stopped in her tracks looking about like a trapped animal.

“We should like to know when your charge is scheduled to return,” said Ekko. He could see the frail e’Mral mists dancing around the frazzled assistant, could see her consider screaming for security, but be fired as quickly for doing the right thing, could see her think on her hatred boss Zosa and how her children needed her, could see the mists coil as she needed these two fuck-stains out of here before she was dragged down to security and made responsible for the breach. Ekko saw it all as her confused mind bounced around inside her head. It never failed to amaze Ekko, the willful desire of most people to act against their own best interest, be it politics, religion, business, family, it really did not matter, folks seem to seek out the worst outcome for themselves despite knowing better. Baffling, but always useful. Ekko touched and shifted the e’Mral mists that swirled about the little assistant, organized them, prioritized them, nothing invasive, no mind control, no infringement of freewill, just a calming emotional understanding that swept over the little gray woman.

“He is on his way,” she said. “May I offer you a drink while you wait?”

“No thank you,” said Ekko.

The frazzled assistant ran from the room.

Some minutes later, the little assistant appeared again, “the Grand Master will see you now, follow me.”

She touched the wall near a large rendering of an especially phallic looking high-rise tower which opened as a hidden door.

The little gray assistant announced Trinia and Ekko, the two of them moved into Zosa's private chamber, the assistant closing the door behind them.

The chamber was opulent. Retail architects have a saying: *some is good, more is better, too much is just enough*. This apartment was exactly that, a screaming over the top exuberance of wealth and tacky gold-leaf design. The room was large, enormous even, but crammed with furniture, art, sculpture, and knick-knacks of every conceivable size and imaging. It seemed to Trinia, more storage facility than office or living quarters, no surface unadorned, no tabletop visible.

Zosa lounged on a floating settee, a huge fat man that looked incapable of standing, perhaps as you might imagine a ball standing, his bloated naked feet being oiled and massaged by a small woman of Trinia's kind wearing a very short nurse's outfit and hat.

"It has been a long time since I have seen you little mouse," said Zosa. "Have you forgotten your manners." He raised his eyebrows and indicated his right foot.

Trinia moved forward, around his bulbous right big toe was a bejeweled ring, she closed her eyes and kissed the ring.

"I can guess your business," said Zosa. "No need to bother speaking. You have brought me a new plaything, you want to trade him for your worthless sister, but you are a pathetic creature little mouse, you will continue to do as you are told."

Trinia's mind raced, as it always did when in the presence of her old master. Killing him was always her first thought, it made her heart race. "Genius," said Trinia rolling her eyes. "Your brilliant mind blinds me. But you promised..."

"Nothing," said Zosa. "Because your mind is too small and simple to see the larger truth."

“And what truth would that be, oh, great lord of retail outlets?” asked Trinia.

“I just said your mind is too small to comprehend,” said Zosa.

“But you, Ekko, why are you here?” said Zosa. “Trinia is a trivial thing, a travail to us that matter, you, Trinia tells me you are self-absorbed, cruel, and heartless, are you here to beg as all who come before me beg?”

Ekko thought on Zosa; he had heard of the man, risen through the Order as the designer of shopping centers, the largest and most spectacular throughout the City, each a cash machine that made his clients rich and saw his own rise to Grand Master. Retail was like life, *...too much was just enough*. Why did this matter he wondered, something in his mind began to turn.

“I have a vision,” said Ekko. “I want to open a chain of t-shirt shops, sell foolishness rendered in black and silver to children that want to rebel against their parents, maybe even a chain of dark and scary restaurants and night clubs, you know, something the parents can protest, but still safe.”

The little nurse massaging Zosa upraised bloated right foot moved to his left. Zosa groaned in release; a sound Ekko wished he had never heard.

“Yes,” said Zosa. “I share your vision; I think we can become great friends.”

Ekko bowed with a flourish, “at your service eminence.”

“Your mind is truly magnificent,” said Trinia.

“You, my idiot child, would not know magnificence if it sat before you, as it does,” said Zosa. “But it amuses me when you try to say the words, my pet.”

Trinia rolled her eyes, “welcome to my hell,” she whispered to Ekko.

“Power becomes you,” said Ekko.

“Power must be wielded with a firm hand, I am hard,” said Zosa, balling his giant meaty hand into a fist. But he suddenly winced and giggled having been tickled by his foot nurse.

Ekko could not believe what he was hearing, seeing, or any of his life that brought him to Zosa. Ekko decided Zosa was an idiot, maybe dangerous, but an idiot. “But more immediately, we are here seeking Vya, she has gone missing.”

“For the best,” said Zosa. “I told your dim Master to leave her dead, his disrespect interminable. She was irredeemable.”

“I could not agree more,” said Ekko. “But she is not dead, but perhaps kidnapped.”

“Do not concern yourself with Meerly,” said Zosa. “She is in good hands.”

Ekko saw it suddenly, the e’Mral mists revealing the emotions that link all people, all souls, all dreams. Trinia a spy, her sister Ovella hostage, e’Mral children tortured and remade weapons, the Heroes of Destiny, Vya taken and tortured by her own clone named F5ve, Lady Balira on the hunt for Mona, Major Song Balira’s cloned lover. The spiderweb that stretched from Zosa horrific: violence, terror, and fear. Ekko saw it all in a flash of clarity that stunned him to silence. But something else he saw, shadowy, not quite real, something that made Zosa seem small and foolish, he saw himself, Trinia, Mona, and Nyx at the edges, as planets orbiting a great star, Master Sanguine loomed, and Ekko felt suddenly afraid. Zosa hated Sanguine, deeply, personally, abandoned by...father.

Trinia took the hand of Ekko, his sight returning to the room, the grotesqueness of Zosa again filled his sight. “We should go, our great and powerful and brilliant Grand Master has a world to rule.”

“Well said little mouse,” said Zosa. “Begone.”

“Zosa,” whispered Ekko, still confused by the rush of emotion that washed through him.

“Your father, Sanguine is your father, such hatred...”

“He abandoned us...ME,” Zosa raged, the little woman massaging his foot suddenly knocked from his drifting chaise. “And he will abandon you too BROTHER. It is good you join me now to complete your training, before he can sacrifice you as he sacrificed us all.”

Ekko fell to one knee, still not fully sensing where he was, confused, the voice of Zosa sounding as a howling wind in his mind, ‘brother.’

Trinia led the dazed Ekko out of Zosa’s office.

*The thing to know about magic and the e’Mral sighted that wield it, is that these children are few, and known to few, and as such, few in the City know or even believe in magic, and it is not like the e’Mral sighted wear signs identifying themselves as sorcerers, most keeping their power hidden from the ordinary as a simple matter of convenience and courtesy. The wise traveler is advised, that just because you do not believe in magic: magic is no less real.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Meanwhile, Nyx and Mona were drinking and dancing, moving from nightclub to nightclub with the ebbing and flowing crowds of young partygoers, overworked business suits, and deserving criminal underworld soldiers. Mona was the star about which the dance floor



orbited like a swirling solar system of writhing sweaty bodies. Nyx orbited the outer fringes of the dance floor like a distant comet.

For several hours they had been drinking and dancing with the bodyguards of Lady Balira Vree. They spoke freely of their hatred of the Lady Balira. They were paid for protection, not to care.

There were a great many things that made no sense to Mona. That Lady Balira was slumming about in a dance club. That these boneheads were not bound to any sort of loyalty or secrecy was strange, they were not military. None of it made much sense. But Mona had learned a lot living among these primitive humans, they are stupid, very stupid, and if she thinks too hard on such matters, she gives them too much credit. She is the smartest one in this room but does not believe it and must remind herself on occasion that stupid is probably the answer.

Lady Balira is probably slumming because she is bored. These knobs are as talkative because they have no fear of Lady Balira. And Lady Balira uses them because they are expendable. There was no criminal mastermind at work here, just a bunch of tools being used. Lady Balira was probably sufficiently arrogant to not care who knew, relishing any recognition she might achieve outside the shadow of her station, and, Mona decided, she was probably right.

Sometime later as the light of dawn began to dapple the twisting alien city under the Steel Dragon dome, Mona was sitting with Lady Balira, who was wearing her prototype seductress sex-bot body adorned with a tiny red dress.

Mona spoke about the abandonment of her family, Lady Balira about the death of her mother at her birth. Mona of her being raised by matron mothers, the Sisters of Mercy and Balina of her being raised by robotic nannies and tutors. Mona of missing her friend Vya who

recently disappeared, Lady Balira of knowing Major Song, and maybe knowing where Vya might have gone or be held. Lady Balira agreed to help Mona in her quest for her friend Vya. It was then that Mona let the drugs of Lady Balira's body overtake her, as Master Sanguine had often said, 'moving with the flow will get you down river faster than not.' And Mona needed to know what game Lady Balira was playing.

Some hours later, Nyx and Trinia found each other, both having lost track of Mona, both very drunk, looking sheepishly at each other.

*All compasses point to the City, and within the City, to the nearest Strange Doorway.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Mona awoke, she was lying stretched on a long low lounge chair, naked in the sun. She sat in the center a field of wildflowers that stretched out as far as she could see, bees occasionally buzzing near. Next to Mona laid what appeared to be a beautiful young woman, naked as well, toasting blissfully under the sun. The subtle shuttering of gently moving wildflowers and the occasional buzzing of bees were the only sounds. The place was otherworldly. Mona was uncertain she was awake, coiling the e'Mral mists around her to clear her body of toxins, her mind suddenly sharp.

"There is no one for thousands of miles in any direction," said the woman, not opening her eyes. "I am Lady Balira, this is a new prototype servitor body, courtesan model, I had it fitted with my Wyght Core as a test. We met at the dance club last night, do you remember?"

Mona looked at the glistening sweat that formed and rolled from the young tan body. She had bright blond hair and a classily beautiful face, high cheekbones, almond eyes, and gravity defying breasts, its chest rising and falling to mimic breathing. But the e'Mral mists rebelled, the sickly-sweet pink of a Wyght Core the only sign of life within the construct. Mona feigned her head hurt, feeling weak, sick.

“It is our ambition,” said Lady Balira. “To create a servitor so lifelike as to eliminate the need for women as sex slaves within the City, just as our first lines of servitors eliminated the need for slaves to perform menial labor. Once we can satisfy the base needs of the perverted and lecherous with robots, women will be free to rise and excel.”

“Why not just eliminate the lecherous and perverted?” asked Mona, feigning stupidity.

“You may as well eliminate all men,” said Lady Balira. “And that has not worked out so well for the Wynsha, now bereft of sons, has it? Nor do I think the Spider Queen’s solution much better, enslaving their sons. No, an elaborate means of masturbation should prove the trick, our tests thus far have exceeded our most optimistic projections, some falling in love with their constructed lovers. We just need to work out the economies of scale. We are also having some eccentricities with the logic engines; the e'Mral mists are creating an unacceptable variation of personalities. But we will sort it.”

“You believe in the e'Mral mists?” asked Mona. She did not know where she was or how she got here. She closed her eyes.

“Of course,” said Lady Balira. “They are science, invisible as gravity, but their effects measurable and more predictable than not.”

“Except that your most holy Great Machine, Ceye, cannot predict the e’Mral mists,” Mona said. “There is no math, e’Mral is division by zero, both infinite and nothing at the same time.”

“A philosopher as well,” said Lady Balira. “You intrigue me Monavantia.”

Mona was tired.

“The explorer that found this place discovered a single creature; one so beautiful he could scarcely think it real. The creature had endured for eons only to be cut down in a sharp moment by a clueless yahoo with the comparative lifespan of a gnat.”

“Priceless,” said Mona. “As the axman that felled the tree of life, he made from it a lovely home in a forest, a paradise that soon turned desert without the tree.”

Mona felt the sun reach deep into her skin, her vision swirling with reds and yellows behind her closed lids. “Where are we?” she asked.

“This beautiful place is a valley that stretches for thousands of miles. A paradise yet discovered except by me, and now you. I keep it secret that it survives but a little longer before the coming locusts of the City.”

“I will keep your secret,” said Mona.

“Every great civilization is built with slaves,” said Lady Balira. “This is fact, we seek that machines should serve, and that men and beasts be free.”

“Noble,” said Mona. “Except for your soul killing chrome hearts and dream spires and great machines that mock life and purpose.”

The two sat quietly for hours among the wildflowers, until the sun set, and the stars stretched out overhead as a blanket of pinhole wonder. They sat atop a Vignette, the interior fitted out as a luxurious suite of silk, wood, and gold, refreshment, and creature comforts casually available and abundant.

“And what of F5ve?” asked Mona.

“F5ve was a failure that did not have the courtesy to die,” said Lady Balira. “But you have changed that. You are the key I have been looking for. Zosa has told me about you. How you resurrected Meerly from Song’s idiocy. And then how you resurrected Master Sanguine from my ice box. You are a miracle so divine that such knobs as Zosa, Sanguine and that wretched corpse Avril Hunt cannot comprehend. You are the answer I was looking for when we tried cloning e’Mral children like Meerly. You are life immortal. F5ve is death, the best our primitive technomancy could achieve.”

“And Vya?” asked Mona.

“Vya was touched by your magic, raised from the dead,” said Lady Balira. “I am dissecting her to see what secrets of your magic might be revealed. But you are the real secret. You are what I need. Join me and I will make your every material dream come true, every charity or hospital you cherish a light of hope on a million worlds. I will make you a living goddess.”

Mona sighed. These games, she thought, were exhausting. Mona considered her situation, the reason for this meeting, Lady Balira’s bullshit. Her mind moved through the machinations of Lady Balira’s intent, her agenda, her reasons. The game she played and the deceptions she perpetrated. But despite Lady Balira’s brain being immortal within a Wyght Core

and slotted into a robotic body, Lady Balira was just a woman, Veiled. And despite her age, she was still a little girl torturing her pets. And she was not very bright, a tool. Mona fell into a trap that she often did, overthinking, and giving too much credit to the rationale of others, like Lady Balira. Mona decided that Lady Balira was toying with her, as a cat with a mouse. She began to consider the psychosis of such a creature but decided she did not care and was again overthinking her situation. Mona's post-humankind had 2 advantages gifted them by their Demon Prince engineers, their genius intellect, that Mona did not believe, and super strength, the trait most associated with her, able leap dozens of yards and bend steel as paper, and though Mona was the runt of her family, physically weak compared to her siblings, she was still strong. Mona decided on a more direct course of action.

Mona opened her eyes and looked lovingly at Lady Balira lying next to her under the night sky. Kissed her. The two moved into an embrace. Their limbs entwined, Mona could sense the pheromones and hyperactive drugs being emitted by Lady Balira's robot skin, a factory of ecstasy. And as Lady Balira surrendered to the moment, Mona began to squeeze, her grip, her hug, her entwined limbs became a vice. Lady Balira's robotic form screamed alarms into her brain, hydraulic fluids were crushed from the robot, the porcelain steel skeleton bent and broke. Lady Balira expelled toxins, blades hidden under her skin, bit, scratched. But none to any avail, Mona crushed the courtesan body, splitting it in half, then ripping Lady Balira's Wyght Core from her robot body, a crystal case that glowed pink, within a gray mass, her ancient brain, the last living bit of Lady Balira Vree, set onto a shiny chrome tray attached to 33 chrome vertebrae now hanging free in Mona's hand.

"I am a living goddess, bitch," whispered Mona.

*Life can only be survived.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Back at the Paradise Hotel, the new Studio Sanguine, on the pool deck under a gently fluttering cabana, Nyx, Ekko, Mona, and Trinia were eating a meal of fresh fish and fancy fruity chilled drinks as the sun was setting. Most of the Veiled were leaving for the night, their workday ended. Mona wondered what it was like for these Veiled that needed to sleep, a biologic ritual alien to her body; the e'Mral sighted do not sleep.

Lady Balira Vree's brain laid at the bottom of the pool which Nyx had taken the liberty to freeze solid. The warmly glowing pool lights dancing across the thin fog rising off the icy surface.

Mona described how she came by Lady Balira's brain-in-a-can and how Vya was being dissected by F5ve to plumb the secrets of her resurrection.

Trinia told of her sister Ovella, held as hostage and slave by Zosa, and of her spying for Zosa this past year. And how she cared for Ovella's son, little Bartholomew, after Zosa killed the little boy's father as a "motivating lesson."

Ekko elaborated on his vision of Grand Master Zosa, of the web of violence, of the Heroes of Destiny he glimpsed, of e'Mral children, clones, remade weapons. Of Zosa being Sanguine's son, of Zosa claiming that Ekko was Sanguine's son.

The four sat in silence now, each wondering how architects trained to create were now tangled in Balira's intrigues and Zosa's hatred of Master Sanguine. Each felt alone and helpless.

"Do you think it true," asked Mona. "That Sanguine is your father?"

"I think it may be true that we four are all his children," said Ekko. "It would explain a great many things."

The four sighed in unison.

"Fuck that," said Trinia. "Maybe you Ekko, you and Sanguine and that motherfucker Zosa deserve each other, but leave the rest of out of your family horror show."

"I do not think it is true," said Nyx. "Zosa wants to wind you up, turn you into another knife to cut Master Sanguine. Don't be a tool."

Ekko nodded.

They waited, Master Sanguine had sent word to Major Song Vree to arrange a prisoner exchange: Vya for Lady Balira.

Come 3am, Major Song Vree approached down through the hotel, through the verdant grounds to the pool deck that overlooked a shimmering beach under a full moon.

Song stood and bowed, he was tall and powerfully built, muscled as a stone mason, with gray-white patterned fur shorn to military standard, his face stern, his eyes cold. He had never met Master Sanguine or his apprentices, having only recently been promoted to Major. But Song was on guard for treachery, trickery, and violence, as he stood before the cabana. 'Four of the deadliest and most dangerous sorcerers in the City,' Lady Balira had once said. But standing here, he could simply not believe it.



Mona's size dominated the cabana, a 7-foot blue-green skinned woman of exaggerated curve and proportion, so real and present as to make the world around her seem like a faded childhood photograph. She wore a series of spiraling strings and fabric shreds that bit deep into her soft flesh, perhaps a swimsuit, perhaps not, he was uncertain but realized he did not care, his manhood began to stir, and he forced himself to focus on the others that surrounded the red-haired fertility goddess.

His eyes shifted to a tall thin pale skin man with hypnotic eyes, one bright red, the other bright blue, naked but for a pair of swim trunks decorated with dolphins.

Sitting at the left was a little girl with pale skin so white as to seem luminous as a glowing moon. She wore a one-piece swimsuit of shimmering black silk cut both low and high as to remove any doubt you were viewing a sexually alluring, if diminutive, woman. His first thought as he approached that she was a child was erased as his face flushed. He averted his gaze again.

Sitting to the right was a small man of maybe 5 and a half-foot, hairless but for a carefully manicured beard, he looked thin, emaciated even. He wore an oversize pair of brightly colored shorts, his tiny naked feet protruding from the oversize pant legs. Larger still was his ridiculous white shirt emblazoned with words; 'I fell in love at the Paradise Hotel.' His eyes were deep set, hollow, and jet black and made Song turn away so as not to be noticed by Death's glance.

"Thank you for the courtesy of your presence," said Trinia standing up, her tall shiny black stiletto heels adding nearly a foot to her four-foot height, the movement of her breasts making him flush again, but decorum prevented his turning away. He tried to think of his

courtesan trained wife, his carefully curated children, but as she approached his knees began to weaken and his manhood stir. Not knowing what to do, he sat down, right there, on the pool deck in front of the cabana. Trinia's physical beauty now towering before him as some ancient marble statue of Lust. This he thought, was a woman that did not do what she was told. His manhood straining for attention.

She sat cross-legged facing him on the pool deck, the high cut of her silk swimwear made him dizzy. He focused on her eyes, beautifully exaggerated by generous application of black makeup and paired with gloss black lipstick. Sorcery, he thought, this must be what they meant, trickery. It was then that merciful distraction saved him.

Master Sanguine approached from the Paradise Hotel.

Major Song looked at the approaching man wearing a crisp white linen suit, his feet bare, but could not reconcile the stories that his predecessor had been shot dead by the short man.

"Where is Vya?" asked Sanguine.

"Where is Lady Balira?" Song asked standing up.

Sanguine indicated the frozen pool.

Major Song indicated the sky, where a Vignette could be seen far above. It moved downward and set down on the beach.

The pool became again liquid and Mona dove in, retrieving Lady Balira's Wyght Core.

They moved from the pool deck down to the beach where the Vignette that circled above had now landed.

Major Song moved into the Vignette and collected Vya, her hands bound with heavy links of lead chain, her body staggering and stiff, having been repeatedly harvested of blood and organs. Vya stepped from the Vignette, where she fell face first into the sand.

Mona tossed Lady Balira's Wyght Core to Song.

Song's Vignette lifted away from the beach, Lady Balira's Wyght Core in his hands. His face twisted in malice, looking at the glowing pink brain of Lady Balira. "What are we going to do with you my pretty, all so very very helpless."

The Wyght Core was in his hands, a tray and crystal capsule that revealed the pink glow of Lady Balira's still living brain, and from it hung 33 mirror shiny metal vertebrae, which like a whip, were no longer hanging free but were wrapped around his neck, constricting his throat, Song unable to breathe or speak. And then a telepathic voice entered his brain, like a hot spike, a migraine headache beginning to swell in his mind. Lady Balira said, "you will learn your place my pet."

Spitting choking sounds exited his mouth as she allowed Song some small breath, "yes mistress," Song gasped.

As Song's Vignette vanished, 6 other Vignettes circled above the Paradise Hotel, and descended in turn. One landed on the beach, another hitting hard on the pool deck, splitting the beautiful limestone tiles, and cracking the pool that began to drain into the ground. Three more landed among the lush gardens, smashing tree and flower with intentional disregard. The last landed on the roof of the long delicate hotel, swooping slightly up as it approached and dropping suddenly to smash 10-yards of the second floor to rubble as the Vignette came to rest. From each Vignette emerged a standard 16-man assault team, each wearing Vree military tabards. The

96 soldiers secured the perimeter, captured, and held what few janitorial staff were still on the premises.

Nyx stepped sideways into a shadow. Trinia vanished with a pop of vacuum where she was, so quickly that her black swimsuit was left behind and falling where she was. Master Sanguine, Ekko, Vya, and Mona were surrounded.

The security forces opened fire.

Master Sanguine fell on the still wounded Vya and laced red mists over himself, crafting a shield that deflected the incoming railgun shards as harmless.

Ekko swirled the e'Mral mists of orange and yellow about himself, turned his mind toward his attackers, and as quickly, was seen as an ally by the soldiers, but an enemy to his friends. One problem at a time he thought. The soldiers sought to avoid hitting Ekko.

Mona leaped, hurling her body dozens of yards up and away landing in the dark water far offshore. Hundreds of railgun shards finding their mark as she arced through the air. She splashed and disappeared under water.

Master Sanguine coiled red mists into the sand, which then began to give way, Sanguine, Ekko, and Vya tumbling into the sand as it opened beneath them. The nearest Vignette also began to sink into the sand, falling out of sight followed by a plume of sand that exploded into the air as it vanished.

Soldiers screamed orders, status, and curses, but to no avail. As a rain of sand fell around them, there was no target remaining to fire upon. Shovels were distributed to seek Vya and Sanguine and the missing Vignette. Another Vignette was sent to request back-up.

Meanwhile, Ekko and Sanguine helped Vya, the 3 slipped forward under the sand, Sanguine at the fore, Ekko in the wake, the sand moving as water around them as they “swam” toward the sunken Vignette. The 3 gained access to the subterranean craft, found the panicked pilot trying to figure how to escape being buried alive.

“Excellent to find you,” said Ekko to the pilot. “Would you do us the courtesy of lifting off.”

The pilot’s first thought was that the ship was trapped, the first thing he tried was to lift off. He then thought, “hey, these are the guys we are supposed to bag and tag, I should shoot them, that would be good.” But then he thought that this guy talking to him looked like his grandfather, he loved his grandfather, he trusted his grandfather, how nice he had met his grandfather again. He thought suddenly that his grandfather was dead, but here he was, wanting him to drive, so nice, so warm, he smiled saying, “yes pop-pop, can we get some ice-cream?”

Sanguine directed the red mists through the ship, the sands surrounding became as water, the Vignette lifting into the air. The elite forces of Song looked up confused as the Vignette headed out over the water.

The Vignette moved toward the City skyline to the South.

“We are being followed,” said Sanguine.

Ekko closed his eyes, touched the hull of the Vignette, felt the souls of those on board, and cast his sight into the Pale, out of time, and dragged the Vignette and all those aboard with him. Sanguine screamed, as did Vya, and the pilot, as each felt the raking of nightmare claws dragging over the ridges of their naked brains. And suddenly, it was as it had been, the pain

vanished, Ekko opened his eyes pulling back from the Pale, focusing on the present, the here and now.

The pilot dead. Ekko took over the Vignette controls.

“The Vignettes following have vanished,” said Vya. “And...the time of day...it is sunset. What did you do?”

“Skipped us forward a few dozen hours,” said Ekko.

“I warned you about doing that,” said Sanguine. “That is more dangerous that you realize.” Sanguine’s head felt as if it contained a swarm or angry bees.

“More dangerous than dealing with half a dozen pursuing missile laden Vignettes?” asked Ekko.

“Hrumph,” said Sanguine, but meaning yes.

## **Part V: Running in the City**

*Slaves were once common in the City, one or another Great House with dominion over another. A shame made obsolete by an abundance of logic-engines and robots crafted to perform menial labor. A shame not quite obsolete among women who serve under hungry men.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Over the next couple days, Nyx got word to the others of a safe place they might gather, a hotel called *The White Wyvern* in an especially unpleasant quarter of the Chemical Fields. The owner of the Hotel was an old client of Nyx, an Ozo'Dhar by the name of Gruuel.

Nyx had arranged for rooms by the time Master Sanguine, Ekko, and Vya arrived in a Vignette they parked on the roof. Trinia was the next to arrive, though no one knew this, the first any were aware of her arrival being when she exited her room the next morning. Mona was the last to arrive, she wore a long plastic-looking trench coat that was oversized, even for Mona, and stiff as having the appearance of a walking tent with her head sticking through the roof.

“The motherfucking Chemical Fields,” she yelled as she burst through the front doors of the hotel, dislodging them from their frame, one of the double doors flying inward to imbed itself into wall behind the reception counter, the receptionist being a short 4-foot tall was spared decapitation. “I am only here to press Nyx into a ball, swallow him, and shit him out for bringing us to the motherfucking Chemical Fields.”

Nyx wrapped the Shade mists around himself and sidestepped into the shadows.

“I am glad you are OK,” said Vya, her long frame awkwardly stretched out on an all-too-small couch in the Lobby near the front door. She looked ragged; her body marked by numerous recent scars.

“I am not OK,” Mona said. “I have been picking railgun shards out of my fucking ass for 3 motherfucking days. Fuck, it still hurts to sit down. It is good to see you in one piece though, are you well, did they hurt you?”

Vya nodded, pouring a drink from a bottle on the table to her right and offering it to Mona.

Mona nodded with thanks, took the bottle from Vya, and drained it. Mona hugged Vya, green e'Mral mists swirling, Vya felt vitality, physical strength seep into her. Mona was life, Vya began to understand, a force of nature more than a person. The opposite of F5ve, whose very touch drained life, had kept her near dead.

Mona threw the bottle at the receptionist. "Do you need to see any identification?"

"Room 3," said the receptionist. "Just here on the main floor," she indicated to her left.

Master Sanguine descended the stair from the second floor, seeing Mona, "I thought I heard someone knocking at the front door." He glanced at the door imbedded into the wall.

"And you. You motherfucking cocksucker," she yelled at Sanguine. "Half a dozen motherfucking gun ships and a fucking hundred railgun wielding fucks, you might have had the courtesy to mention their invite, I would have worn a different outfit you shit head."

"Uninvited," said Sanguine.

"You knew you fuck stain," said Mona. "And poor Vya, cut and tortured and who knows what. You knew this would happen. You fucking knew."

"Breakfast in a few hours," said Sanguine. "Nyx has us in the rooftop greenhouse, go clean up."

"Now I am dirty?" asked Mona.

"Of course, you are," said Sanguine. He went back up to his room.

*The history of the City is written in her places, tragic and joyous.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*



The sun rose over the Chemical Fields, a forest of smokestacks rose into the air belching multi-colored smoke into the air, all twisting to form a mud-colored fog that laid among her streets as a wet blanket that offered only weight, but no warmth. The brown filtered sun streamed through the yellow stained and streaked rooftop greenhouse. Within sat Master Sanguine at the head of a long and battered table, used in some long-ago time for potting roses. Mona and Vya were also sitting at the table, though each sitting sideways on long benches to accommodate their tall bodies. Master Sanguine wore his signature blue woolen suit and scarlet cape. Vya wore a heavy rubberized trench coat covering whatever might be worn under, her normally naked silk-furred feet covered over by large rubberized yellow galoshes that stretched up to her knees. Mona wore a billowing full body suit of thin mirrored mylar, only her head exposed to the outside air of the greenhouse, and beside her on the table sat a huge glass globe as if waiting for use as a child's aquarium, her helmet should she need to travel outside the hotel.

Breakfast had been laid out by the hotel staff and the others, eating, when Trinia arrived naked but for a plush pink bathrobe and large pink slippers with bunny ears that flopped as she walked to sit next to Mona.

Nyx spoke, "good morning."

Everyone jumped, suddenly aware of his presence sitting next to Vya eating his plate of eggs and fruit. Vya let her hand slip from her holstered railgun, her star-pistol gone, worn again by Major Song. Confirming for all that F5ve, Song, and Lady Balira were in league.

"What have we said about doing that," said Mona. "It is going to get you killed. By me."

Nyx wore his oiled leather trench coat.

Entering the far end of the ancient greenhouse was a large vaguely human form, a naked mound of layered fat greenish flesh, sickly and putrid, covered with a thick greenish-yellow slime that occasionally dripped to the ground with a slight hiss and burning the floor with wisp of acid smoke. Naked and obviously male he moved into the room with a splashing gurgle. “Welcome,” said Gruuel. “His wide smiling mouth stretched halfway around his head, his huge bulbous nose glistened with ooze in the brown morning light, his deep-set eyes black and featureless, though his many folded-face expressive of happiness.

“Your former client is a Slime Troll?” asked Vya.

“Sometimes you can be such a racist,” Nyx said to Vya. He turned and greeted Gruuel, “thank you my dear friend for hosting us in our time of need.”

“My dear Nyx,” the deep burbling voice of Gruuel spit. “Stay as long as you like, tourist season has ended and I have no need of the hotel, call it your home, this pleases me.”

“This place has a tourist season?” Vya asked genuinely curious.

“Will you sit and dine with us?” asked Nyx, his arm sweeping over the table.

A large gob of viscous ooze fell heavily to the floor from Gruuel’s pendulous scrotum, splashing heavily on the floor, it immediately began to crawl along the floor and was reabsorbed into his right foot.

Mona was going to be sick.

Trinia was throwing up the first bites her breakfast with a violent wretch.

“Would that I could,” said Gruuel. “But business obligations prevent my pleasures this day.”

“A shame,” said Nyx. “Be well and prosperous.”

“And you,” said Gruuel. “Be safe.”

Gruuel turned to leave, perhaps too quickly, as a heavy glob of ooze whipped from his nose splashed onto the greenhouse glass wall. For the next several hours it would slowly crawl down the glass to the floor.

“Of all the fucking places we could gather ourselves,” said Mona. “You chose the Hotel of a Slime Troll in the Chemical Fields?”

“The finest hotel,” said Nyx.

Mona looked at the ooze from Gruuel slowly making its way down the glass and put on her large globe helmet, a loud hiss as her suit pressurized filling as a shiny silver balloon.

“All right, now that Vya is back with us,” said Master Sanguine. “We need to talk. We are in trouble; our Grand Master Zosa has sent his own managers into our Studio. He has ordered that I surrender myself and answer questions regarding Vya and all your other various activities. I told them to go fuck themselves.”

At this Mona smiled, Vya frowned, Nyx hung his head into his hands, and Trinia wiped vomit from her hair. It was then that Ekko arrived wearing jeans and a t-shirt with the motto: Strangeways are never Parallel.

Sanguine continued, “Trinia has betrayed our current location to Zosa and...” Sanguine looked at Ekko, nodded toward Trinia.

“3am,” Ekko said making himself a plate of breakfast.

“This morning at 3am,” continued Sanguine. “I expect the Heroes of Destiny will be joining us to help us against Major Song and his pursuit.”

“Help us how?” asked Nyx.

“And what about Vya?” asked Mona. “Kidnapped, tortured, cut apart, healed, and cut apart again, what the flying fuck are you all going on about?”

Vya looked unhappy. “They took me to some secret cloning facility, not military, private, F5ve was there, a clone of me, and Lady Balira was there, checking in, I was not often conscious, time was lost to me, it seemed an eternity, tortured by a creature that looked like me, too weak to move. Her touch drained my life, drew away the e’Mral mists, she was as death.”

“But you remembered what I showed you about magnetics and compass finding?” asked Sanguine.

Vya nodded, “I can lead us to where I was kept.” And though feline-kind, Vya had no fear, but she had no desire to ever go back or to ever see F5ve, her clone, again.

Sanguine nodded. Everyone else looked uncomfortable.

“What about little Bartholomew?” asked Nyx.

“Trinia is working for us?” said Mona, looking at Trinia “a double agent.”

“Putting the safety of Ovella in our hands,” said Sanguine.

Nyx looked especially unhappy.

“Meet back here at 3am, we will have guests,” said Sanguine.

Mona, Trinia, Nyx, and Vya left the former greenhouse, the glob of Gruuel still making its way slowly down the glass wall. Ekko staying to finish his breakfast, having arrived late.

“This is very dangerous,” said Ekko. “There are so many ways this can go wrong.”

“Alchemy,” said Sanguine.

“Boom,” said Ekko, looking especially unhappy.

“Go find Avril,” said Sanguine. “Tell him what is happening, I do not want you around.”

“Why?” asked Ekko, but he knew why as soon as he said it. “Never mind, fine. But before I go, I need to ask, Zosa is your son, am I? Are the others your children as well? Is this your grand plan to save magic, making e’Mral sighted babies?”

Sanguine took a long deep breath. “Despite what you might think, there is no simple answer to your question. If I say ‘no’ you are still an orphan abandoned by your parents, with all the pain but worse as hope now lost that it may have all been a terrible mistake. If I say ‘yes’ the pain is twice again, having been abandoned twice. The question you ask can only result in more pain. I wish to not cause you pain Ekko.”

“Bullshit,” said Ekko. “It is a simple binary fact, you ‘are’ or you ‘are not’, anything else is your own selfish fucking ego.”

“Unconditional love is like an invisible sun,” said Sanguine. “Providing warmth and light to the aware and unaware alike. Knowing serves no purpose. As an adept of emotion, I should think you would understand this most basic truth.”

“Motherfucker, you are really not going to tell me,” said Ekko.

Sanguine let out a long sigh. “No, I am not your father.”

“Liar,” said Ekko, and left the room.

Sanguine sat alone, putting his head into his hands.

*Meat is murder, Fish is life.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Nyx and Trinia went wandering the streets of the Chemical Fields, leading eventually to a leeward slope of a hill that led down to a large dock complex. At the base of the hillside was a beautiful complex of large, curved wall buildings. Warm and soft, the buildings were sensuous, wanting to be touched. Nyx led Trinia toward the abattoir and a large pair of ornate doors that opened into an empty coral. Nyx laced the doors with violet mists, and they opened slowly revealing a bright blue sky and a far rolling grasslands being grazed by great herds of huge ox-like creatures, some as large as 30-feet at the shoulders.

“This place is beautiful,” said Trinia.

They walked through the large coral gates down through the roaming herds, small packs of children running and playing among the gentle titanic beasts, giggling sounds of hide and seek coming from the tall grass.

“You did all this?” she asked.

“Do not sound so surprised,” said Nyx. “It won an honorable mention for Abattoir of the Year a couple ceremonies back.”

“No, but...what I mean,” she said. “How does a place like this not win?”

“Sometimes the best is too good,” he said. “Sometimes it threatens people with more money and power than honesty.”

“Not just sometimes,” she said walking through the tall grass, her long black dress now damp from the dew that clung to the grass, the chill of her dress clinging to her skin made her feel alive.

Nyx nodded.

“The strange doorway...is this another world...did you make it...how?” asked Trinia.

“Master Sanguine taught me, and yes, this is a paradise world,” said Nyx.

Trinia smiled, unable to contain her joy, “I thought the making of strange doorways lost, most destroyed during the war.”

“As did I,” said Nyx. “But it seems no one told Master Sanguine.”

They moved toward one of the herds, but they did not scatter or move. Instead, several of the titanic bovine moved toward them, lowering their heads that Nyx might touch and rub their snouts.

“You know these creatures?” Trinia asked.

“No,” said Nyx. “But they trust me.”

“It seems they adore you, if such a thing is possible,” she said.

“Come,” he said. “Say hello.”

Trinia stroked the fur between the great beast’s expressive eyes. Should the creature but twitch she imagined she would be crushed underfoot as a dry twig. Its mass was palpable, its power intoxicating. “They are here to be slaughtered, meat?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Nyx.

“That seems cruel,” she said.

“It can be,” said Nyx. “But it does not have to be, that is where I come in. Animals are better than people, and I see they are treated better than people, that their end is painless and unseen, no more alarming than drifting off to dream.”

“Sounds nice, but they are still dead,” she said.

“These are not wild creatures, they were born and raised and will soon be slain that their bodies may be used,” he said. “If we did not butcher their bodies, we would never have bred them in the first place, none of these creatures would exist. But we do use them, and in that reality, we can choose to be cruel or compassionate, thankful of their bounty or disrespectful. I have made my choice.”

Trinia began to have a new respect for the meat she so absently purchased at her local butcher, but also an odd growing respect for Nyx. These creatures saw him as one of their own, a merciful god.

The two walked the afternoon away, picnicking among the gentle creatures as the sun began to set. One especially large bovine settling down to lay in the grass next to Nyx, its deep soft breaths causing the concordant sounds of the City to vanish from memory. Nyx was at peace here. Trinia had always hated nature, despised the rain and the outdoors, but here in the tall grass listening to the literal breath of life, she laid down looking up at the sky and considered she may have been wrong. Maybe.

*Shopping is aspirational, that is its allure.*



*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Mona moved through the broad curving shopping streets of the Chemical Fields protected by her inflated mirror suit, her spray of long red hair pressed into her huge clear globe helmet, reaching outward with an almost visible force that threatened to explode her helmet outward. Vya walked next to her, nearly as tall but slender as a willow, her own form shrouded by a bright yellow rubberized trench coat and knee-high galoshes. Her head exposed to the damp smoke filled air looked like a drowned cat, her long horizontal ears draped downward onto her shoulders, her normally fluffy blue fur drenched against her feline skull.

The two moved through the busy shops purchasing various rare oils, perfumes, and medical elixirs, ointments, and unguents. The two drew no unusual attention to themselves. The streets of the Chemical Fields hosted the exotic and unusual from across the City. Here demons may walk openly, the undead sit at the corner café to enjoy tea and scones, and the things more often called monsters trade the unusual for the rare. Here such as Gruuel, are a common sight, here such as Mona and Vya casual tourists.

But perhaps more supportive, the Chemical Fields are a place of vibrant e'Mral mists. Here technomancy corrodes, sputters, and fails. Explosives detonate randomly and chrome body parts pit and seize. Machines find no purchase here. Mona just wished the sun could be made welcome, and Vya, that the heavy perfumed fog that shrouded the streets were not quite so wet.

A slender 8-foot humanoid figure approached the two, its skin was charcoal grey, willowy but tightly muscled, stretched long and tall, his 4-arms and two legs those of an athlete. Upon his long body and narrow upper set of shoulders, stretched a long delicate neck to a tall

slender head with expressive eyes, a sharp narrow nose, and a slight lipless mouth, his ears a slight fold of skin.

He raised his 4 arms wide in the middle of the street and screamed with a smile, “Monavantia, as I live and breathe.” He moved through the crowd, he was naked, but his body showed no sign of manhood, his 4-arms marked him as male of his kind, the females having 6-arms.

“Syndar,” Mona said, stretching out her silver balloon arms for a hug. The two embraced, his four arms wrapped around her voluminous silver suit like grabbing a large balloon, he picked her up and spun her huge form full circle, her legs flying loose as a rag doll.

“When did you get into town?” he asked.

“Just today,” Mona said. “This is Vya.” She moved her arm toward the sad cat with very large plaintive eyes.

Syndar stretched out his lower right hand from his embrace of Mona and shook Vya’s hand. “So very nice to meet another friend of Monavantia the Beloved.”

Despite Mona’s mottled green-blue skin akin to that of an acid copper patina, she blushed. His firm embraced threatened to burst her silver suit.

Vya had never met a Myrddin Wizard. She heard the stories as a child, of post-humankind returning to the City from some dying future. She did not believe the stories, no one really did. The teachers liked to mess with the minds of their children, liked to declare that backward time travel was impossible, even with magic, yet spun tales of the Myrddin Wizards that moving back in time to save the future, or maybe they moved forward to save the next future? The teachers used to love that shit. She remembered how such classroom lessons bored

and confused her. But now, seeing this alien being hugging Mona as some long-lost friend, she wondered on Ekko, he was just the kind of weird that saw no contradictions in such tales. Ekko believed in magic, not in the e'Mral mists as real or their manipulations, he believed in something from nothing, he believed that the mutually exclusive existed together. She really disliked him.

The three found a lovely tree filled courtyard restaurant under a beautifully ornate shimmer-dome. Mona removed her helmet, her suit deflating. Vya shook her head as a cat coming in from the rain. Syndar entered, a long sparkling green robe appeared draped over his 4-armed form, his legs hidden, he appeared to float, so graceful his movements. The effect was mesmerizing, magical, tiny green butterflies appeared in his wake, taking to flutter about the courtyard's many ancient trees.

The 3 spoke easily and casually for some hours. Vya wanted to know a great many things about the Myrddin but spared their conversations about nothing, her curiosity. She, as much as Mona, was happy to enjoy a meaningless afternoon.

Syndar offered the two to visit his estate on a beautiful stretch of coastline. He could take them today, but he had a 3am meeting later.

“What sort of meeting,” asked Vya.

“I am meeting with a pack of deadweight e'Mral apprentices,” Syndar said. “Real zero-force-members if you recall your structures classes.” He chuckled.

“Why would someone as powerful as yourself be interested in such detritus,” asked Vya. “That seems below someone of your obvious station.”

“Oh, it is,” he said. “But do not take that as boast, these poor fucks are being set up to die spectacularly and horribly, for the greater good, do not get me wrong, their sacrifice is required. Zosa himself asked that I say a few encouraging words before we send them off for slaughter.”

“And they volunteered for sacrifice to the greater good?” asked Mona.

“It is really a mercy, if they had the wit to understand,” Syndar said. “I am sure they would agree. But let’s be honest, I am told these poor lumps of gray matter are so dim, it is a wonder they have thus far survived the challenges of the City. Better to use them while we can before they die of stupid.” Syndar laughed.

Vya stood with the suddenness of a cat finally pouncing on long watched prey, her chair flew out of the way behind, her railgun out and raised level to Syndar’s head in a single fluid motion so graceful that Syndar was still laughing. Vya exhaled; the first shard entered his skull between the eyes. The second shard went through his nose, the third his mouth, the fourth pierced his neck severing his spine, the fifth pierced his heart, his green robe exploding to thousands of tiny green butterflies, her last shot she left unused as was tradition, she reloaded without thinking, his body moving in slow motion backward toward the floor. She fired five more shots at his neck, his head rolling free when the body finally hit the floor. She reloaded again without thought, firing 5 more shots into his chest, leaving a clean hole where his heart had been. She reloaded again unthinking and holstered her railgun. Mona realized she was screaming. A lifetime of rage flooding her mind. She inhaled a long slow deep breath.

“Feel better?” asked Mona.

“Some,” said Vya. “Sorry about your friend.”

“He was a prick,” said Mona. She smiled, picked up Syndar’s head and the two walked out of the restaurant.

*Architecture is the art of divination, of knowing the future and planning accordingly.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Come 3am in the hotel’s rooftop greenhouse, Mona and Vya were already at the long table where earlier they had breakfasted. In the center of the table was the head of a Myrddin Wizard under Mona’s large globe helmet. A centerpiece surrounded by fresh flowers.

Nyx arrived. He saw Mona first, a survival instinct, but then saw the centerpiece on the table. He walked back out of the greenhouse, sliding into shadow.

Trinia arrived wearing a bath towel wrapped around her body drying her hair with a second smaller towel, she moved down the length of the table and sat near Vya without thought or noticing the room except as someone moves through a crowd while their mind wanders elsewhere.

Master Sanguine entered with 3 guests, he was pleased to see most already assembled as he entered, but stopped suddenly, the blood drained from his face as he focused on the centerpiece.

“What did you do?” whispered Master Sanguine.

The 3 guests that followed Sanguine into the room were resplendent. These were the wealthy, beautiful, and most glorious of the City, the golden children of Grand Master Zosa, the

Heroes of Destiny. Each dressed and stood with the bearing of a hero, no, a superhero, thought Trinia. They were all in the presence of godlings. Each wore not mere clothing, but a costume that exalted their wonderfulness. Trinia, in contrast, sat on the long bench near Vya wearing her pink bunny slippers and towel wrapped around her still wet body, her dripping hair coiled in a second towel that sat on her head, just having exited the bath.

The 3 Heroes stopped in turn, stumbling behind Master Sanguine, each looking at the centerpiece. Then around the room.

Mona sat at the end of the table, she wore her business casual white blouse and gray skirt. She took a breath, the top button of her blouse flying to hit the first tall muscular man in the chest, where his consume was emblazoned with a cartoonish looking lightning bolt.

Vya sat to her left; she wore a loose fitting bright yellow sundress patterned with large painted flowers. “Sadly,” she said. “Syndar, while attending our little meeting, has nothing of value to contribute.”

“What?” whispered Sanguine, he fainted, falling to the floor.

The lead Hero with the silly yellow lightning bolt on his skintight blue onesie began, “I do not know who you are, but there will be hell to pay for this injustice, we are going too...”

“Nothing,” yelled Mona, standing, and throwing the large table up and toward the 3 Heroes. “You are going to do exactly nothing.” The old wooden table splintered, the broken pieces hitting each Hero so hard it knocked them back toward the door, each beginning to draw coiling e’Mral mists to action as Syndar’s head and the remaining buttons of Mona’s blouse came to rest in the debris at their feet.

Vya was now standing, as was Trinia, who had pulled the towel from her hair and was vigorously drying her head.

“There is no glory here,” said Mona. “If you win, you beat up the fucking cripple kids, disproportionate violence, you lose. If you draw, same thing, you lose. If you *lose*, and I assure you it is possible, despite what you think you know, then you become us. You will do nothing. Take your talkative friend there,” she pointed at Syndar’s head. “And get the flying fuck out of here.”

The Hero at the back, nearest the door, wearing a shiny tiger skin patterned onesie, said, “you bitch, who do you think...” He gurgled a bit, and became suddenly stiff, but smiled, Nyx revealed standing behind as he fell face first to the floor.

“The lady asked nicely,” said Nyx, his silver straight-razor in his right hand stood in the door.

Mona smiled, “I had hoped you would choose to stay.”

The Hero with the blue onesie gathered the e’Mral mists around him, electricity began to crackle in the room. Trinia was also coiling e’Mral mists, disrupting little blue boy’s e’Mral flow. As he tried to bring his devastating lighting to bear, Trinia thwarted him, frustrated him, strong winds began to swirl through the room tossing furniture and pieces of the broken table into the air. Trinia’s towel unwrapped from her body and flew coiling around the room as if alive and smothered the head of the blue Hero. He stopped his efforts to throw lightning, grabbing at the towel that was squeezing his head, choking his throat. It was then that Vya put railgun shard through his brain. He fell.

The last Hero stood defensively looking around the room, Lighting Boy and Tiger Claw unmoving at her feet. “And what do you call yourself?” asked Mona.

“Brightness Lightness,” said the last Hero.

“Collect your friends,” Mona said.

Mona and the others left Brightness alone in the greenhouse, Mona picking up Master Sanguine along the way.

*Help is not so often appreciated as you might imagine.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Brightness Lightness entered the opulent hall of the *Exalted Zosa'fandia Lavatura Goore'Grezauria*. Zosa was obese, a huge mountain of layered flesh slowly being devoured by gravity. He sat in a large, curved couch that was filled as a mere chair by his girth, affixed to a drift-sled on which he floated as a comfortably beached whale. He wore layers of silk robes upon which hung endless chains of gold, silver, and jewels. He sat reclined, his huge bloated naked feet sitting proudly on a large silk pillow that stretched out before him.

Brightness knelt before her master.

“Come my dear apprentice, sit and rub my feet,” said Zosa.

Brightness moved to sit on the large pillow where Zosa's feet rested. Bile and humiliation rising in her throat, Brightness gripped the bloated flesh of her master's feet and began to knead.



Brightness believed Zosa to be the single most powerful man in the City, the holy eminence of all e'Mral, she both hated and loved the huge gluttonous man.

Zosa looked over a few sheaves of hand scrawled paper. "So, I see here that Lighting Boy is unconscious but healing, being shot through the head, lost memories unclear yet. I also see Tiger Claw is also unconscious, healing a severed spine, cut so cleanly that detection of the wound required several hours. And poor Mr. Syndar, his head returned in a fishbowl. And you, Brightness, unmolested. Can you add any clarity to these seemingly impossible results?"

Brightness took a deep breath, her white satin super-suit bore a child's representation of the sun at the center of her flat chest, her bright yellow cape hung down to her waist. "I am as confused as you," she said, her voice as weak and timid as you may imagine a mouse would whisper.

"But you were there," said Zosa. "Regale me with your observations."

"Before arriving, Master Sanguine apprised us of the situation," Brightness began. "A simple meet and greet. Rouse the troops, inspire confidence, that sort of thing. But it was a lie, we were ambushed. When we arrived, Mr. Syndar was already dead, his head in the fishbowl at the center of a table."

"And seeing he was dead, what was your first action?" asked Zosa.

"We all 3 began to draw e'Mral mists to defense," she said.

He nodded, making a note on various papers laid out before him.

"Then a big blue-green woman screamed at us and threw a table at us," she said.

"So, you were attacked," said Zosa.

“Yes,” said Brightness.

“And your coiled e’Mral mists, they were no aid against the sudden onslaught of furniture?” he asked.

“Yes of course,” she said. “We were uninjured.”

“So as the three most powerful e’Mral apprentices of the City, trained as magical weapons, what was your response to your greeting?”

“Restraint, the situation was unclear, we did not yet know who we were facing, mortal, e’Mral, or chromatica,” said Brightness.

“And why did you not know?” asked Zosa. “You were given detailed dossiers on the degenerates of Sanguine Studio, had detailed reports from our spy, why the indecision?”

Brightness took a long slow breath. “We did not read the briefings, nor talk to Master Sanguine except to order he lead the way,” she said.

“Why?” asked Zosa. He waited patiently, smiling down on Brightness. She continued kneading his foot.

“Sir?” she asked.

When he said nothing, she continued. “Because it was Sanguine Studio, everyone knows that is where e’Mral failure is sent to die. We were there to lift their spirits before sending them on a suicide mission, a mercy Syndar had said, we arrived feeling sorry we had to be there, sorry we had to bother, sorry the fucks did not have the courtesy and courage to die honorably without us having to visit a shit hole like the Chemical Fields.”

“And the attack?” asked Zosa.

“Tiger Claw died to a little man with a straight razor,” she said. “He was surprised from behind.”

“The purpose of the flying table?” he asked.

She nodded, “Lightning Boy had his head swallowed by the bath towel of a little naked girl with pink bunny slippers. As he struggled to free himself, he was shot by the blue furred amazon.”

“And you?” ask Zosa.

“I was about to unleash my solar rays,” she said. “When I realized I was the last, I paused, and they walked out of the room.”

“Did they say anything?” asked Zosa.

“No,” said Brightness.

“What of Master Sanguine?” said Zosa. “Surely he played some important role in your demise.”

“He fainted when he saw the head of Syndar on the table,” she said.

“Did he now?” said Zosa. “One of the most powerful e’Mral Masters to call our City home, veteran of the Psychic Wars, recipient of the Chthonic Cross, personal fucking favorite of our dear frozen Empress, that Master Sanguine, fainted?”

Lightness Brightness wished she had done her reading. “Why would such a man be Master over the least of us?”

“He asked,” said Zosa. “As a hero of the Empress, he can do whatever the fuck he wants.”

Brightness frowned.

Zosa lounged back; arms folded over his protruding belly. “If you had read your fucking briefing,” Zosa said. “You might have not been defeated by an airborne table and a vivacious towel.

Brightness left Zosa’s office, she felt as she always did, ashamed and afraid.

*Betrayal is always justified, always for the good, says the betrayer.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

A few days later, Zosa stood before his Heroes of Destiny: Lighting Boy, Tiger Claw, and Brightness Lightness, each adorned in brightly colored spandex onesies and satin shiny capes. Lighting Boy and Tiger Claw fully healed from their recent introduction to Sanguine Studio.

“Have we all looked at the reading material this time,” said Zosa.

“Yes Master,” said Lighting Boy, the other nodded. “But why do we care about these losers, they are architects of the worst sort, shoe stores and chain restaurants.”

“All right you motherfucking pricks,” began Zosa. “Let’s get something clear, this is the big leagues, you are the best of the best, I need you to stop whining like children NOW.” He floated in his settee silently glaring at each of them, his feet being kneaded by a pair of women wearing matching nurse outfits. “I need you to do your fucking jobs and kill some shit. Oh, the e’Mral mists are so creative, so beautiful,” he mocked. “But not yours, you were each trained by

years of torture and pain to bend the e'Mral mists to violence and terror. You are motherfucking killing machines, demons save me, start acting like it. These Sanguine fuck stains kicked in your teeth. Fucking act like it. Get angry.”

“Yes master,” said Brightness.

“Yes master,” mocked Zosa. “Yes master, is that what you call angry.”

“Technically, I do not recall the attack,” said Lighting. “A rather large chunk of my brain and accompanying memories were lost.”

“And Technically, neither do I,” said Tiger Claw. “The killing blow so exquisite as to leave no lasting effect or stress of death, so the healer said”

“Are you three motherfuckers shitting me right now?” howled Zosa.

“No, not at all,” said Lighting. “It’s just hard to get worked up over folks we do not remember meeting or having, apparently, killed us. And they are nothing, nobody.”

Zosa hung his head, he had known that selecting only stupid candidates was a risk, but the protocols required it, the warping of the e'Mral mists to violence only worked if the e'Mral children were a sociopath and not too bright, as the smart ones tended to kill themselves.

“Find them, follow them,” said Zosa. “Then kill the Sanguine fuck-stains, kill them all.”

“Great plan,” said Lighting. “I like it.”

“Me too,” said Tiger Claw. “But where are they?”

“You are the deadliest hunter in the City,” said Zosa. “Go where they were, and track them, it is what you are good at.”

“Another great plan,” said Tiger Claw.

When the three finally left his office, Zosa put his head into his hands and wept.

*The object of desire is best never acquired.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Some weeks after their encounter with Syndar and the Heroes of Destiny, Mona, Nyx, Trinia, Ekko, and Vya found themselves in the Limelight, a part of the Adrena'Chrome famed for its theaters and endless night life diversions. The four sat in the luxury suite that was the 98<sup>th</sup> floor of the Kalexi Hotel. They sat around the large indoor pool that overlooked the neon rendered skyline of the neighborhood, snow falling hard.

They were bored. Mona sat cross legged on the pool deck, wearing the white hotel robe that was so small that it could not be closed, or even tied. Trina wore the same robe, so long and big she looked like a child wearing mommy's robe. Vya floated in the saltwater pool, staring up at the high domed ceiling above the pool, mosaics of naked men and women in acts of sexual ecstasy filled her view. Nyx sat in the far lounge chair wearing a pair of white knee length shorts and a far-too-large white shirt with painted grass skirt women dancing around his torso. Ekko stood at the bar fixing a drink, wearing a pair of jeans and a t-shirt that read: Paradise is a Charm of Hummingbirds.

"I am pretty sure that after 14 fucking hotels," said Mona. "That we can safely say we are not being followed."

“I hope so,” said Vya, considering the unusual sexual positions of half a dozen mosaic figures above where she floated.

“Trinia paid no attention, staring into the neon night that surrounded the suite, floor to ceiling glass, revealing thousands of towers as far as her eyes could see, each revealing and reflecting light. Beautiful, she thought.

Nyx said, “safe, maybe, but we still need to decide what to do. Twice we have been attacked.”

Mona groaned.

Vya looked at another illustration of sexual congress she did not recognize.

Trinia went to the kitchen, tripping over the length of the hotel robe. She had been drinking most of the day, made herself another drink and pulled some toasted fried potatoes from the oven.

“I have been thinking,” said Ekko. “That architecture has lost its allure.”

Nyx hung his head between his knees.

Trinia downed her drink in one slug, following it with a piece of fried potato. She did not hear Ekko.

“That may be,” said Mona. “It is time we focus our ambitions on our music.”

“Start up the band,” said Nyx. “Travel where the music takes us, instead of where knobs that call themselves Masters say we should go.”

Vya nodded as she drifted in the pool. She would never again design a retail shoe store.

It was then that Master Sanguine and Avril Hunt arrived to join them. They each took up lounge chairs by the pool.

There was silence for a time, Avirl looked confused. Then he said, “we come with news.” No one stirred, no one gave any indication he was even in the room. Master Sanguine lit a cigar, sat back and relaxed.

“The three colorfully attired Zosa apprentices you met, are named the Heroes of Destiny,” began Sanguine. “And were trained in secret by Zosa, Syndar being his personal liaison with Balira Vree. They were trained by way of torture, pain, and technomancy to use the e’Mral mists as a weapon, intentionally, purposefully, to cause harm, a corruption of everything we know and believe. When Avril told me of their existence I went to Zosa, was convincingly penitent, and told him that my studio was on the run, being hunted by Balira’s bloodhound, Major Song Vree. He agreed to send his Heroes to meet you, offer inspiration for your coming travails. I did this because I wanted you to meet evil. It seemed a teachable moment, that is my job after all as your Master.”

“You have to be motherfucking shitting me,” said Mona.

“So now what?” asked Nyx.

“So now we know more than we did,” said Sanguine. “That the 3 corrupted e’Mral apprentices exist, and that Zosa is in league with Balira and her lapdog Major Song. Right now, Song is hunting you, and is knocking on every door he can find, everyplace any of you have ever been, and we think F5ve is with him. Song is also being followed by the Heroes of Destiny, also seeking you but deciding to let someone else to the hard work of finding you.”



“So, Song with F5ve and a cadre of soldiers,” said Ekko. “Followed on by 3 e’Mral warlocks with a penchant for murderous magic are all looking to what? A sit down for tea? Why the desire to kill us? What did we do, really?”

“You should tell them,” said Avril Hunt.

“No,” said Sanguine. “It would do no good.”

“Tell us what?” said Vya, looking at a particular scene on the pool’s mosaic ceiling that seemed physically impossible.

“Tell you about the Empress,” said Sanguine. “The war.”

Avril sat back in his lounge, he looked unhappy, but no one noticed, his stretched velum skin that tightly wrapped his rune carved skull always made him look like he was grinning at someone’s misfortune. “Obfuscation, even with truth, is still dishonest.”

Sanguine looking hard at Avril.

“More secrets old man?” asked Ekko.

Avril now looked hard at Sanguine, “they deserve to know, if you do not tell them, I will.”

Sanguine looked uncomfortable, puffing on his cigar. All were now listening except Trinia, who downed another drink and turned up the music in her ear.

“I have said this one way or another to each of you,” said Sanguine. “To focus on your task at hand, that to know the answer to certain questions might cause you to become distracted, preventing you learning what you need to know. Avril speaks of such a truth. It is not quite so ominous or important as Avril’s creaking undeath might make it sound, but I tell you that

knowing will be no aid to you and can only harm you in the here and now. I want you to trust me, that I have your best interest at heart by swearing Avril to silence.”

“Not buying it,” said Vya.

“Fuck you,” said Mona.

“We are not children,” said Ekko.

“We need to know why they are coming for us,” said Nyx. “Ready or not.”

Trinia was humming to music nobody else could hear.

Sanguine groaned.

“Out with-it old man,” said Ekko.

“Grand Master Zosa hates me and would kill you to hurt me,” said Sanguine.

“Also, said Avirl, “Each of you carries your father’s unique power, Zosa cannot abide that the power of Master Sanguine, the kind of power that built this City and opened the strange doorways to the paradise worlds of the cosmos, the kind of power the war sought to eradicate. And he most certainly cannot abide that power being born into post-humankind. In his mind, your existence begins the war anew.”

“This babbling serves no useful purpose,” said Sanguine, puffing on his cigar. “You are not my children.”

“And Zosa is not alone,” said Avril ignoring Sanguine. “Balira Vree and the other leaders of the Great Houses worship at the altar of the great machine, Ceye. An artificial intelligence that cannot see or predict the actions of the e’Mral sighted. This is why they ‘cure’ children like Vya. This is why they made their war, why they hunt those still loyal to the

empire. Especially veterans of the war like Sanguine. They do not want his knowledge passed on to his children.”

“Why not just kill you?” asked Ekko of Sanguine.

Avril moved to answer.

“No,” said Sanguine. “Enough, you are not my children.”

“Liar,” said Ekko.

Sanguine rolled his eyes, sitting back puffing on his cigar.

“The truth does not matter,” said Avril. “It is enough that it might be possible, and people like Zosa and Balira cannot abide even the possibility.”

“I can understand the hatred of Balira and the Veiled,” said Mona. “But Zosa is one of us, e’Mral sighted. Ekko says he is even Sanguine’s son, our brother if what you say is true.” said Mona. “Why betray family?”

“Control,” said Avril. “Our once most holy esteemed leaders, sworn to uphold the individual above any system, artists, architects all, feared most what they exalted, saying the words but instead meaning the mediocrity of men, not man. Architects like Sanguine opened the cosmos to humanity, a pedestrian space opera, too vast, too complex to be controlled.”

Sanguine rolled his eyes puffing on his cigar. “Seriously, not helpful. Exposition and doubt is not going to save us.”

“Also, you are all post-humans,” said Avril. “A fact that lays bare the racist sins of the war. That a child such as Meerly could be saved from her chrome-heart prison, reveals the sand

on which their lies stand, that those cured of e'Mral sight are forever blinded. Vya proves that those like her can be saved, a very inconvenient truth.”

“Even less helpful,” grumbled Sanguine. “Listen, can we please focus on the here and now. Avril’s dusty histories and foolish speculations only cloud the issue. We need to stop reacting and need to plan to act.”

“If they really knew who Sanguine was,” said Avril, a rasp of dust expelling. “They would send a war ships and atomics; we are so far lucky.’

“Avril, for the love of fuck,” said Sanguine. “Not helpful. Shut it.”

Mona groaned.

Vya let herself sink under the water, laid on the bottom of the pool and closed her eyes.

Ekko smiled.

Nyx held his head in his hands.

Trinia was dancing naked in the kitchen to music only she could hear.

“You are not alone,” said Sanguine, “You have each other, I am here, Avril is here, and our most beloved blue butterfly Empress is here.” A small fluttering butterfly drifted before his face finally landing atop his bald head. Sanguine rolled his bright blue eyes.

Vya saw from the bottom of the pool a little girl’s feet dangling in the pool, she rose her head above the water to see the same little girl she saw playing jacks at the Studio, same white dress, sitting on the edge of the pool with a bright smile, splashing her feet in the water.

“Anyone else see her?” asked Vya.

“Not helpful,” said Nyx.

Ekko considered killing himself, if for no other reason to speed the story along.

“We all see her,” said Sanguine.

Avril got to his knees and bowed his head to the little girl, “my Empress.”

Master Sanguine groaned.

“Do any of you want to play?” asked the little girl.

“We need to find another planet,” said Master Sanguine, looking at Nyx.

Nyx looked suddenly nervous as the little girl laughed, her feet splashing in the pool.

*Do not judge lest ye be judged, such is often said but as often misunderstood, for it is not an admonition to judge, only the promise of consequence.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

Nyx had been bored out of his mind. He decided that Grand Master Zosa was the least interesting person in the City. When he first started following the man, he quickly discovered that he kept dozens of residences in the City and that all of his homes were tended by Dymirra women, their uniform to be naked but for a small black lace apron. Pervert or paranoid, Nyx first thought the man might be interesting. But Nyx soon learned that even the apron-wearing naked slave girls that tended his houses were nothing to him. He was passionless, caring for nothing. He spent his days organizing the affairs of others, especially the affairs of those that needed no aid. He floated on his settee among the wealthy and their parties without joy or interest. Huge commissions be brought into his Zosa Studio, only to ensure that any design be

crushed to award winning mediocrity. Nyx considered, seriously, simply killing the man, his brother he is now told. The world, he thought, would be much better off.

Sanguine had sent Nyx looking for signs of Trinia's sister Ovella and an opportunity for rescue. There was something here, a thread that needed to be pulled, but he could not quite see it, and this bothered him. Nyx spent the next several days surveilling a particular penthouse of Grand Master Zosa. The roof of the centuries old 40-story tower was built into the form of rectangular terraced gardens surrounding a long and narrow high vaulted church-like penthouse glazed on all 4 sides containing dozens of doors, a large formal set of doors were on the narrow west wall fronted by a Vignette landing platform, no doors on the opposite east wall.

Each day, Zosa would ritually arrive in his private Vignette and enter through the east door. Six grey industry security guards patrolled the rooftop gardens. Two always accompanied him in his Vignette and walked him to the door, but then remained to guard the door and Vignette. His days on overwatch gave him a clear understanding of the routine changing of guards. But something was not quite right. The large, glazed hall on the roof seemed like no more than a party pavilion, a reception hall to some larger complex. But he saw no indication that the lower floors of the tower were occupied by Zosa.

On this night, Nyx had made his move, slipped past the rooftop garden patrols and into the glazed hall via one of the many long-wall garden access doors. The hall was high and elegant, gothic in line and proportion with a polished stone floor. On the east wall was another large pair of doors and another pair of Gray Industries rent-a-guards. But these doors were modern stainless, odd, and out of place within this elegant old lady of a building, set within a wall of plain white plaster.

Nyx waited. About an hour later, the stainless doors slid open with a whoosh, a young 4-foot tall Dymirran girl wearing only a small black lace apron carried a silver tray with a cocktail glass in one hand and moved to the main door to the west, the two guards on either side of the stainless doors stood at formal attention. The girl stood at the west door not moving, holding the tray. Nyx could see the girl was cold, her naked feet on the chill stone floor, the cold winter air unconditioned within the high drafty hall. Her silver tray was shaking slightly, but she gave no ground to her discomfort.

Moments later, the west doors boomed open and Grand Master Zosa floated in as a king of old. The doors closed with a loud bang behind him, he took the drink from the silver tray without a glance at the apron clad girl, her eyes affixed to the stone floor. He drifted toward the open stainless doors, the little servant girl running to keep up in his wake. Nyx slipped sideways from shadow to shadow, finally reaching Zosa's own shadow, a whisp, unseen in his wake.

The stainless doors closed. And then a second set of doors slid open 20-feet to the west, revealing an ancient stone wall inset with an irregularly shaped wooden door painted green, a silver doorknob at the center. The little servant girl running to the circular door, she turned the knob with both hands and pulled the ancient green door open. They moved through the door frame into another long high chamber, this one of more modern gothic style, red carpeted with large leather seating groups of couch, settee, and chair arranged across the room's length. The right wall was shelved with thousands of leather-bound books, ladders on rails to reach books far above. The left wall was of modern glass looking out across the skyline of the City from the hundredth floor of different high rise, a hundred miles from the penthouse where he entered.

The green door, Nyx realized, was a Strange Doorway, a Strangeway, an ancient e'Mral contrivance to allow passage between 2 faraway places, traditionally built into heavy stone walls to protect the fragile doorframes and marked by colorful wooden doors painted bright colors with silver doorknobs at the center, a warning, thought Nyx, that you are about to take a strange step a long way away.

Private Strange Doorways are rare and obscenely expensive. But Nyx began to realize as he looked about the elegant library hall, there were more oddly shaped doors with brightly colored wooden doors set into the bookshelf wall. He was in a Strangeway House. Nyx looked at Zosa with a newfound respect.

Strangeway Houses were extraordinary, limited only by the number of Strange Doorways you might have and the imagination of the architect, each Doorway leading to a room *somewhere else*. He has heard of Strangeway Houses with rooms leading to dozens of high-rise towers across the City, leading to a room in country houses built in a paradise garden, and some leading to a room in a guest house located on a far distant planet, a fragment of a vast pedestrian space opera shattered during the war. Nyx had little respect for money, less for real wealth and those that wielded it as spoiled children, but if he were to ever be truly rich, a house with doors leading to dozens of alien worlds would be a worthy extravagance. Nyx smiled to himself, thinking about his own recent training under Master Sanguine to craft such doors new.

The house being arranged with Strange Doorways, scattered over many locations, maybe even on other worlds, might seem daunting. But getting out was not the problem. Nyx, like all e'Mral sighted, was trained first as an architect, to skills of creation. And he recalled the second rule of architecture from his preschool primer; all buildings have an asshole, a place where the



dirty work of living is done, where sweaty ass-crack plumbers gain access and discarded banana peels, and eggshells are discarded. This would also be where all these ubiquitous little naked Dymirra women with lace aprons would get in and out. All he had to find was Trinia's sister, Orvella, she would know the way out.

Nyx left Zosa floating in the library, two apron clad women rubbing his fat sausage-like toes. Nyx slipping from shadow to shadow, folding himself into a two-dimensional silhouette, bending himself through cracks, door sills, and keyholes, anywhere light or air could pass, his darkness could follow. He traveled to rooms in far distant towers scattered across the City.

He eventually found his way to a wide terraced garden cantilevered from a cliff face, a cleft of stone overlooking a far hot desert valley of red sand dunes and ancient eroded rock threaded by a thin silver river, the source a waterfall from a spring just below the terrace. Nyx paused, stepped onto a wide beautiful terrace planted with colorful gardens, his breath taken away by sweet intoxicating scents of alien flowers. The sky was a fading orange. But more, the gravity was different, the stars foreign, and several moons moved across the sky. A beautiful dog with bright orange hair trotted from the garden, happy, her tail wagging, but tentative, as if expecting pain. Nyx sat upon the terrace for several hours, sipping a 40-year-old liqueur seeming to have been crafted from the alien botanicals of this wonderous alien world. The dog, after a time, laid next to where he sat, Nyx rubbing the orange dog, gently, feeling the stress melt from the frightened animal. Nyx found little joy in life, but here, now, un-alone, he was happy, and he let the moment stretch out before him.

He stood up to leave, the orange dog suddenly looking frightened. Nyx knelt to the beast, seeing a collar, he read the silver tag: Empress. The orange dog wagged her tail and ran fast into the terrace garden. Nyx laughed.

Nyx searched a few other more mundane locations, before locating the kitchen, where he found Orvella scrubbing pots that were already clean, alone in her task. Nyx revealed himself, she was startled but recognized him. “We need to get going,” said Nyx.

“I can go nowhere,” said Orvella. “I am locked in a cage in a very dark and slimy basement.”

And the obvious swept over him, a crush of stupid, he felt the idiot. “Of course, you are,” said Nyx, grinding his teeth. Nyx had slipped into the trap that the twin bodies of a Dymirra are somehow separate, distinct, and not the two bodies of a single mind. But even if that were not true, even if they were mere twins as Zosa and his security minions probably thought, one moiety was still a hostage for the other. But he forgave himself, if only slightly. Nyx despised slavery on general principal and on specific religious principal, he lined up slavers with pedophiles and animal torturers for a special kind of eternal damnation. It had never occurred to Nyx, never crossed his tiny cynical mind, that Grand Master Zosa, his newfound brother, would own another person as a slave. And the poor Dymirra with their diminutive stature and twin births were always easy prey for slavers, history had been unkind. Yet here he was, in the modern world, and before him, Orvella was owned, a prisoner of violence should she seek to choose anything but obedience. Nyx struggled to calm his mind, settle his feelings.

“Do you know where you are?” asked Nyx.

Ovella had wondered about that herself and once tricked her overseer to allow her to deliver the daily gruel to the hostage vault. She told Nyx the way.

“How many others?” asked Nyx.

“120,” said Ovella. “We are guarded by machine, a cutter, it hurts anyone that disobeys.”

“Be ready, pass on the word, we will be out of here within the hour,” said Nyx.

Ovella nodded. She slipped out of the kitchen.

Nyx slipped into the shadows, traveled the long corridor and stairs as Ovella had instructed, stepping from shadow to shadow. He was not altogether sure where the kitchen structure was, as it contained no windows. But he was able to sort that it was a long low structure with several basements, one of which would probably lead to a loading dock, which it did, the way out guarded by 2 Gray Industry rent-a-guards. Nyx took this opportunity to slip his silver straight razor into his hand and, standing between the two guards, flick his wrist so quickly, that both guards fell, decapitated to the floor. He unlocked the doors and went outside. Deception was Zosa’s architectural strategy, avoiding trouble by not being seen, which made his loading docks surrounded by high walls, down a ramp, and far from prying eyes. It was 3am.

Nyx made his way back in and followed the stairs down past various storage halls. And at the bottom of the stairs, a set of heavy iron doors, he slipped his silhouette between a gap in the astragal. He was suddenly struck by the smell of filth. Within the large wet chamber, water pooled on the floor, weeping in from earthen walls, and around were more than a hundred haphazardly stacked 4-foot cube cages, 120 of which contained a naked Dymirra woman, their skin stained with cold muddy grime. But that was not the worst of it, as many of the women were absent body parts, mostly fingers, toes, hands, and feet, but some few missing arms or legs.

Nyx was horrified by what he saw. Not in the sense of blood and limbs, he was after all a master of abattoir and butchery craft, but in the deliberate torture and suffering of the women. No animal he would allow to suffer so, yet here before him, women were made to suffer worse, at the hands of another, on purpose. Nyx felt sick...then angry.

Nyx felt his well-practiced cynicism stripped away, a fraud, a liar that feigned being a cynic to pretend not to care. At the center of the stacked cages stood a tall cylindrical bipedal robot and from it stretched dozens of mechanical arms ended in blades, scissors, knives, and all manner of rusty blood caked cutting implements, all ragged, all designed to cause pain and invoke fear. Nyx felt sick all over again, not for the gore, but for a machine holding dominion over these women, a violation of compassion, of life, of magic, of everything he believed. Before Nyx stood the machine god of suffering.

Silver straight razors fell into both of his hands, the robot whirring to life, saws spinning, blades flashing, scissors snipping at the air. Nyx screamed with rage, not recognizing his own voice, and slipped sideways into the shadows and appeared near the robotic cutter, his silver straight razors, laced with violet e'Mral mists, flashed, a pair of mechanical limbs falling impotently to the ground. Nyx was slashed but vanished, appearing unexpectedly again, slashing away two more mechanical arms, again he was slashed, cut deep, but again vanished. Nyx felt himself a demon, cutting away mechanical limb after limb from the heartless construct and being cut in turn. But the logic engine of the robot, no matter how sophisticated, thought in straight lines, could not predict Nyx's movements, not defend against any attack, random, the metal mind could only react, and it was always too late. Finally, the robot was armless, and Nyx moved in toward the body and carved its metal carapace open as a can of tuna, cutting away mechanical

guts until finding a sharp metal cube the size of his fist, the logic engine, ripping it free, the robot made a pile of inanimate scrap.

Nyx realized the women were screaming, yelling, cheering. He vanished the logic engine and his straight razors and began to open the cages, though he soon realized none of them was locked. The variously amputated women followed him out to the loading dock, where the other halves of the Dymirran women met themselves and escaped into the cold night.

“Hurry,” said Ovella. “Guards are in pursuit, and Zosa aware.”

“Come,” said Nyx. “Let’s find your sister and hug your child.” Nyx vanished the loading dock doors behind him leaving only stone wall. Nyx ran into the night with both bodies of Ovella.

Some hours later the 3 arrived in a bucolic suburb in front of a low-slung wooden house under a large apricot tree. Trinia opened the door, little Bartholomew in her arms. Her sister Ovella screamed with joy, hugging Trinia and taking her child into her arms.

Nyx slipped sideways into the shadows.

*Facts impart knowledge, emotion understanding. People, however, always seem to believe that knowledge imparts understanding, they are twice wrong.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

When Nyx arrived back at the penthouse, Trinia met him at the door and hugged him so tightly that he felt the dizziness of unconsciousness threaten.

In the days since he had been gone, the group had crafted a plan to maroon the Heroes of Destiny on another planet. Nyx informed them of Zosa's Strangeway House and the private desert world with a garden terrace and friendly orange dog.

The plan was a simple one, Avril would set a bread crumb path for Song to follow, leading him, whatever army he had with him, F5ve, and the Heroes of Destiny to a place of their choosing, an abattoir.

The Empress, while playing jacks, offered her blessing, and though no one was clear what that meant, they said thank you.

Nyx, an expert architect of abattoirs, set the path, to see that their guests found their way, stressless, unaware of their coming demise.

Trinia knew Zosa and shopping, intimately. She was the one that put the milk on the back wall, through the sweet treats of the smell of the bakery, wine, and appetizing prepared meals, and made sure the quickest way back out of the store was to move through candy, ice cream, and chips. Your milk checkout rung up as a dozen items. Trinia oversaw lures, impulse, and deception.

Vya had in her training become an expert in shoe stores, understood the aspiration of shopping, that shoes always fit no matter how a body might grow, always made you feel good because they did not judge your appearance. Shoes are functional jewelry. Vya oversaw quest design, responsible for the invaders finding their way, but never quite achieving their goal, but not quite being discouraged, but comforted by their aspiration. Cat and mouse, the irony not lost on Vya.

Mona was not a fan of this plan, or any plan that saw them killing. Mona, of all those around her, was good and could be counted on to do the right thing, no matter the consequence. And sadly, the right thing seemed to be likely killing folks before they killed her. But she did not buy it, would not accept that death was the only answer to their problem. And as it turns out, neither did the Empress. Mona and the Empress whispered and giggled quite a bit during the planning, a secret game. Mona was responsible for saving those that could be saved.

Ekko hated the plan, he was bait. He did not quite know when or where this plan came to being, or when or if he had agreed, but he was definitely, absolutely, very unhappy, and said so, repeatedly, to anyone that would listen. Everyone ignored his whining.

*The City has always been, but tomorrow unpromised.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Legend says that the 37 Mistress Spires descended from the heavens. Each a shard some many-miles long, as a sword wielded by god struck into the earth, heat and friction driving the wedge miles into the cracked, broken, and molten ground, still reaching a mile or more cantilevered vertically into the air as a tower, a Spire. Each of the 37-Spires unique, each home to travelers, the Mistress Angelic, progenitors of demons and post-humankind.

Avril often thought on such legends, myths, wondered which fragments of fantasy were reflections of truth. In this case, he fancied that the e'Mral sighted were descended from the Mistress Angelic, that the angels of holy texts were arrived from the stars.

He understood also that the City had been occupied by a vast hard-science civilization, imprisoned on a single world ruled by the robots of Ceye, the Great Machine. But with the coming of the Mistress Angelic so came the e'Mral mists, and the machines had failed, and the old world ended. The e'Mral mists, Avril knew, were uncertainty, destroyed reliability and thus technology, the modern technomancy of the City but an artful workaround, applying the failed rules of uncertain physics to some semblance of reliable purpose.

And with that, he knew where to lead Song and his merry band of hunters.

*The City is haunted by the sins of men.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Major Song Vree sat in the command chair on the bridge of his ship, the Scimitar Sun's Fate. The Major was not happy, for standing on his bridge was a frail 7-foot albino woman that smelled of decay and called herself F5ve, wearing a loose-fitting silk robe that hung from her anorexic form as if from a corpse, sent by Grand Admiral Lady Balira, to aid his search for the fugitives of Sanguine Studio. He needed no aid, he thought.

But worse, there were now 3 more 'allies' on his bridge, 3 ridiculous characters that looked as if dressed for a children's clown show, brightly colored spandex with silly names; Lighting Boy, Tiger Claw, and Brightness Lightness, collectively the Heroes of Destiny, here by insistence of F5ve, 'it takes e'Mral sight to track e'Mral,' she had said. Song did not believe her, but he was desperate. Major Song and his warship had been pulled out of a Kin'Rhi warfront to hunt down a handful of civilians. Song was infuriated, desperate to get back into the real fight, a



fight he knew would be short and spectacular and glorious, a fight he might miss on account of a few rats hiding in a sewer. Song was furious.

The Scimitar Sun's Fate was an old and storied ship, looking like a large metal hulled battleship bristling with large turrets on her many decks, but running down her keel, a titanic mass-driver, like the smaller star-pistols his nobility wore as ritual sidearms, an artifact of a bygone age that has yet to be replicated by modern technomancy. The ship was first built as an oceangoing vessel, but later retrofits gave it the capacity for flight and operation as submarine, the need to continue to expand around the mass-driver having kept it in service for 1200 years, the last surviving ship of the Hiroto fleet.

"We have word from a messenger," said First.

"Relay," ordered Song.

Monitors lit up on the bridge, a video, showing a high rocky cliff overlooking a storming coast, on these rocks the ruin of a castle, and among the ruins a thin pale man wearing black jeans and a t-shirt imprinted with a stylized white rabbit and the words: Rabbit says Fuck You.

"This was recorded 12 hours ago," said the First, "at Betrayers' Rock."

"Set a course," said Song.

"Course set," said the First, "Arrival in 2 hours, 12 minutes." The ship jerked forward to flank speed.

Song looked at F5ve and the Heroes of Destiny. "Why here?"

"We have a secret facility under the ruins of that castle," said F5ve. "Our cloning facility, it is where we took Meerly, aka Vya, and disassembled her for parts," F5ve smiled as if

remembering something especially pleasant. “But there is no access to the facility from the rock, the access is by underground train, the station 12 miles away, heavily fortified, unbreachable and very secret.”

“What about the ruins?” asked Song.

The First said, “records show it was a Hiroto stronghold, destroyed by our own illustrious Vree family during the war. Most everything regarding the Hiroto was purged from the history texts after Vree ascension, so I have no details.”

Song understood, the history of the conquered is irrelevant.

“And what about you 3 circus clowns?” asked Song. “Any thoughts why Ekko is standing on a rock daring us to go grab him?”

The 3 Heroes of Destiny looked at each other confused, “obviously,” said Brightness. “They must know about your secret facility and are looking for a way in.” Lightning Boy and Tiger Claw nodded in agreement.

“They will not find the entrance,” said F5ve. “As I said, it is 12 miles away, hidden, guarded, accessed by train.”

Song’s fists clinched in barely controlled rage, his First standing at his side awaiting orders. The idea that a handful of architects evaded him, taunted him, was absurd, facts his brilliant mind could not accept. ‘The Ceye is blind,’ Balira had told him, ‘beware.’

And here, now, he had idiots around him telling him things he knew could not be true. That architects might somehow know of the location of a secret cloning base but not how to enter sounded foolish. That Ekko was standing on a stormy rock wanting to be seen, miles away

from the entrance to the base, he was obvious bait, nothing to do with the base below. Song decided that the little band of Studio Sanguine architects had prepared a trap for him, and as he sat on the bridge of the most powerful warship ever built, he decided to spring the trap, kill them all quickly, and get back to his dreamed-for war.

“We approach,” said the First.

“Prepare to fire the mass-driver,” ordered Song.

The First looked momentarily confused, wanting to question, but deciding against, and began preparations to fire the ship’s ancient weapon. Nothing of Betraye’s Rock would remain, nor the cloning facility beneath. The First decided, that his Major was going to kill 2 birds with a single high velocity meteorite.

F5ve smiled, “I knew I was going to like you Major.” But F5ve understood nothing of the ship or the weapon’s destructive power. Not understanding that her cloning facility would be reduced to gravel.

“What do you want us to do?” asked Lighting Boy.

“What can you do?” asked Song.

“We are the deadly trinity,” said Lighting Boy. “Of lighting, light, and sudden demise.”

First rolled his eyes, Song almost spoke but stopped, not believing what he was hearing. He ignored them.

*Everyone has a plan, until reality bites back.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society’s Guide to the Clockworks*

A few minutes later, the Scimitar Sun's Fate came to within a mile of the coast when the ship lost all power, wires caught fire, the thousands of power-nodes that produced decentralized electricity exploded like grenades throughout the ship, killing, maiming, damaging. And worse, the explosive ordinance of its turrets and missiles began to randomly detonate, emergency blast doors failed, the ship dropped from the air and splashed into icy waters that began to flood the cracked hull. The crew were however expert, and despite having been upgraded over the centuries, the ship was still analog, everything could still be manually operated. And after several hours of heroic effort, the crew sealed the bulkhead doors, and were manually pumping water, preventing the huge ship sinking, though she listed to port.

Song, like most of his remaining crew, was exhausted but pushed on.

"Explanation?" asked Song.

"None," said the First. "No one has ever seen anything like this, a new weapon, we are crippled. I have ordered several lifeboats to be rowed to shore, to seek aid. No other ships are near, but we have sent up distress flares, it will not be long before we are found.

Song looked at F5ve, "is this something to do with the secret base?"

"No," said F5ve. "It is a cloning facility, not a weapons lab."

"And you three?" asked Song to the Heroes of Destiny. "Any insight?"

"There is an e'Mral storm," said Brightness, struggling to speak. "We can all see it, feel it, it is like a hurricane, it is...painful, blinding, I cannot explain it, have never known such a thing."

“It is centered ahead,” said Lightning Boy. “At the ruins of the castle.”

“Are you telling me it is fucking magic?” yelled Song.

“Yes,” said Brightness.

Song considered shooting them all on general principal.

The ship drifted toward shore as the winter sun began to rise.

In the haze of the dawn light, snow was falling. Song and the others exited to a high cantilevered deck on the starboard side of the bridge, from this outside vantage they could more clearly see Betrayer’s Rock, and where the ruins were supposed to be, stood a tall, terraced castle with pagoda like stacked roofs that stretched hundreds of feet into the dawn sky. Hiroto castle stood both formidable and elegant, a masterwork of fortress architecture. Song could barely contain his joy at seeing something so wondrous. Something deep in his clone memory was stirred, the castle of his birth, the castle where he had betrayed his family for love, the castle where he swung wide the doors to his beloved Balira and her Vree invaders, things he remembered doing, but that he, as a clone, had not done, memories that were not his.

“How is this possible?” asked Song. “Hiroto castle was destroyed, it looks...new...as if just completed.”

“Sanguine Studio,” said F5ve. “Motherfucking architects.”

“You mean that Hiroto Castle is real...again,” said the First.

“And what do you have to say?” said Song to the Heroes or Destiny. “You are supposed to see magic, explain.”

“It is beautiful,” said Brightness. “That is what magic is supposed to be.”

“Not to worry,” said Lighting Boy. “We can burn it down for you.”

“Pyromancy is our specialty,” said Tiger Claw with a grin.

Song gave orders to what soldiers could be spared damage control, make way to landing boats. “We are going ashore and kill them ourselves.” Song left his First in command.

*Allies are but selfish enemies, plan accordingly.*

*...Min’Ziari Proverb*

Major Song Vree, led a dozen boats to be rowed to the rocky shore, their motors, like the ship, burned and destroyed. From there he led his group up a narrow zigzagging path of carved steps up the cliff face that led to a small rocky path that led around to a larger path that approached Hiroto Castle from opposite the shoreline. Song noted that at any point along their climb, or as they rounded the low rocks on which the castle was rooted, they were easy prey to anyone with a bow or gun or even rocks tossed from high above. Song liked this place, it was unassailable. Only treachery from within could bring such a place to fall. He was impressed.

Song approached the front gate, a large portal infilled with an ironwood gate 20-foot wide and 60-foot high carved with the family history of the Hiroto clan reaching back hundreds of generations. No modern clan could claim such lineage, heroes, and paladins through the ages. All of it erased with their defeat, as if their dynasty had never been.

Song was followed by F5ve, who wheezed, struggling to keep up, the 3 Heroes of Destiny, and 3 dozen marines.

Standing before the huge portal stood the thin pale man wearing jeans and a t-shirt emblazoned with pink hippopotamus, saying: Hungry is a Feeling. “Welcome,” said Ekko. “I have been authorized to discuss terms.”

“The terms are,” said Song. “That you, Sanguine, and the others of your motley crew stand forth and surrender for summary execution as answer for your crimes.”

Lighting Boy stepped forward, no more than a dozen yards from Ekko, Laced the tortured and groaning e’Mral mists through his pain wracked body and loosed a lightning bolt that struck through where Ekko stood, Ekko falling backward, landing hard on the ground, rolling in pain. A large black crackling char marked the gate. Song smirked.

Ekko began to laugh. Stood up, seeming no worse for wear, showing no signs of harm. “Was that convincing? Not too dramatic, was I?” said Ekko.

“How?” said Lighting Boy gritting through his teeth.

“I can see you are going to be the easy one,” said Ekko. “You do not think I am standing here, dear no, I am safely behind the gate. Now here is how things are going to go. First, Vya, the one you know as Meerly, would like a ritual duel with her former master, Major Song, no interference, tradition, one on one, the whole honorable bullshit. She is prepared to step out here right now and take care of that bit of housekeeping. And before we move on, are you agreed?”

“I am agreed,” growled Song, his hand falling to his star pistol.

With that, Ekko’s illusionary image disappeared and the huge gate lowered downward, a drawbridge, that easily created a path over a 40-foot split in the rock path leading to the castle.

Vya emerged onto the drawbridge, walked across and down to within 20-yards of Major Song Vree. “I claim vengeance as the rightful heir of House Hiroto, against you Song, simulacrum of the betrayer, Prince Song Hiroto. You are without honor.”

Song had no idea if what she was babbling was true, it simply did not matter, he did not care, “die Witch.”

F5ve had by then moved to the back, safely behind the wall of marines bringing up the rear.

The Heroes of Destiny were not feline or military, had no interest in this one-on-one honorable nonsense, rather it was all an opportunity to kill Vya outright, no mess, no fuss. And with that the three looked at each other, winked, and coiled e’Mral mists about themselves and laced it through their hate filled minds and let loose a torrent of destruction. Brightness Lightness created a sphere of sunlight that expanded out from her, enveloping everyone in its burning halo, armor melted, clothing burned, skin charred and cracked. The marines screamed and began to incinerate. Song fell to his knees, his fur on fire. And as soon as the light burned, Lightning Boy let loose chains of lighting that struck everyone in the area, jumping through each marine and then Song. And on cue, Tiger Claw stepped to appear behind Vya, slashing her upward the length of her spine with his silver metal claws. But Vya was not there, nor the gate open, Vya vanished, the gate still closed behind. Tiger Claw screamed.

And as quickly, the lighting was gone, only the hollow sound of thunder echoing off in the distance, the light vanished. Song and his marines were on the ground, eyes burned out of their heads, ears bleeding, their bodies paralyzed, cat’s fur on fire, their skin crisping. They all



of them screamed but could not hear themselves. Each of the soldier's extensive suite of combat drugs began their programmed sequence.

But F5ve, who stood apart, was unharmed, the e'Mral mists swirling to avoid her. And Vya was not there, the drawbridge having never been lowered.

Auto-docs delivered combat drugs to the soldiers and Song. Stim, and healing drugs injected into each, a cocktail of rage and euphoria. Sight and hearing returned in part, amplified by their combat drugs. Their chrome-hearts whirring in quick-time to keep each of them alive.

"As I had to explain to Vya, who most assuredly wanted to come out and be all honorable and such," said Ekko. "You are not honorable folk, you have not been since you betrayed your former masters, the Hiroto, to the scum-sucking slugs of family Vree. Vya had the good sense to let me play a game with you, a test of honorable intentions, and there you are, thank you very much, you are welcome."

"How dare you interfere," said Song, barely able to stand even with his chrome-heart and drug fueled blood.

Ekko was about to respond, thinking Song was talking to him, but Song was looking at Lighting Boy.

"How dare you profane our sacred ways," said Song.

"You profaned your righteous ways a long time ago," said Tiger Claw. "Blaming us now ain't cutting no ice."

"Rawrrrr..." growled Song, quick drawing his star-pistol, firing at Lighting Boy.

Brightness let loose another solar orb, swallowing Song and his marines, each exploding to ash as the sphere's wavefront hit each in turn. Lighting Boy and Tiger Claw unaffected, F5ve, way over away now, outside the Brightness Lightness's solar radiance.

"You served your purpose," said Lighting Boy to the falling ash where Song was.

Ekko thought Lighting Boy was a moron.

Tiger Claw moved as a blur, appearing next to F5ve. "Not so fast my corpselike friend, we are not done with you."

F5ve held out her hand, as if for Tiger Claw to help her over the rocky terrain. Tiger touched F5ve's hand and burning cold seared through his arm and right side, his right leg collapsing under him. His body began to wither, shrivel, he screamed but it was without air, a wisp of realization, F5ve's grip now as iron, she touched his head with her other hand, and he felt the life within him drawn away, the e'Mral mists drawn from him, swirling as a vortex around her.

Meanwhile, Ekko was mocking the fashion sense of Lighting Boy and Brightness Lightness. When he said, "what the fuck," and vanished.

Lighting Boy, saying "come back her you little shit, we are coming for you, that little fantasy castle will not protect you."

Brightness screamed.

Lighting Boy saw F5ve running toward Brightness, she was not bent nor emaciated, no longer afraid that any sudden jolt or slip might break bone, she was a full 7-foot tall, her fur bright white but full and luxuriant, no sign of it having been patchy or her pink skin raw. Her

large feral pink eyes turning to Lighting Boy, she leaped as a gazelle the final few yards toward him, biting deep into Lighting Boy's neck, her claws no longer translucent and slight, but long and sharp as made of metal. She raked at Lighting Boy with hands and feet and bite, tearing him limb from limb as Brightness watched frozen in terror. The pieces of Lighting Boy withering as dry leaves, his body desiccated.

F5ve stood slowly erect from the mangled corpse of Lighting Boy, her white fur covered in Lighting Boys splashed blood. F5ve smiled, looking at Brightness. "You my little sunshine girl are going to help me, we are going to kill my sister and all of her little playmates, and if you serve me well, I will devour you last."

*Animals are domesticated, Beasts wild, and Monsters unique. Monsters are real, be glad they come only one at a time.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Ekko came running up to the throne room's overlook where Sanguine, Vya, Mona, and Trinia had just watched Song and his marines turned to ash by the Heroes of Destiny and F5ve transform into a blood-soaked ghost of death.

"What the motherfucking shit was that?" said Mona. "Fuck me, shit-balls, holy fucking crap I feel fucking sick."

"Thank you for using your words," said Ekko.

“Plan B,” said Sanguine, “we are no longer going to be luring these folks into tricky little traps and try to save as many lives as possible. There are only 2 lives left, and neither seems to me especially demanding of our mercy. We need to get to Nyx’s desert world.”

Trinia popped, vanishing.

“I do not blame her,” said Ekko. “I am thinking the same thing, scatter, live to fight another day.”

Trinia popped back, standing next to Ekko holding heavy in her 2 hands Song’s star-pistol, handing it to Vya. Trinia smiled. Vya bowed her head and took the gun with both hands, tossed her modern railgun, and holstered her Hiroto family star-pistol.

Ekko felt the fool. “Fine, so, hide & seek you say?”

“I can see you, way up in the cheap seats,” yelled F5ve. “You will not hide for long. I am going to tear you each limb from limb and devour your souls. Be afraid little e’Mral cursed children, your sorcery has no effect on me, you are but prey, RUN.” F5ve laughed. It was an odd sort of scene, as no one, including Vya, had ever seen a feline kind laugh. Laughter was a fear reaction, and Min’Zirai were biologically incapable of fear.

“Funny story,” said Sanguine yelling down to F5ve. “Your little dungeon of horrors under our castle, we can get to it once we put the castle back. And like your ship and all their technomancy, it all turned off.”

Sanguine watched F5ve’s face turn from laughter to realization and rage.

“That’s right,” said Sanguine. “All of your little chimera children, I do not think they are going to make it. And all your sages and scientists, it seems all the cages opened, oops, we

probably should have been more careful, it was quite the feeding frenzy. An ugly way to die, my condolences.”

F5ve screamed like a feral animal, rage, anger, she spit blood. “Death is too good for you, old man, you will suffer, I am going to kill them all, FIRST and make you watch.”

“Thanks for that,” said Ekko to Master Sanguine.

“You’re welcome,” Sanguine smiled.

F5ve turned to Brightness, “open the gate my pet.”

Brightness, who was always afraid, focused her tortured e’Mral mists through her terror, a beam of light emerged from her eyes, coring a six-foot hole of flame and ash through the ironwood gate. F5ve stepped through, followed by Brightness.

Sanguine and his apprentices made their way into the ancient-made-new Hiroto audience hall. The chamber was large and illuminated by soft glowing paper walls, the floor a mirror polished wood. And on the far wall, Nyx was busy crafting an oval shaped door of wood and silver, violet mists coiling around him and into the wall in patterns so intricate as to cause Sanguine and the others vertigo as they approached.

Standing next to Nyx was Trinia, who also approached with Sanguine and the others, having just retrieved Vya’s star pistol.

“Our time is shorter than we had planned,” said Sanguine as he approached Nyx.

“The door is nearly complete,” said the Trinia next to Nyx.

Nyx did not hear them, his mind disconnected from his body, his consciousness drifting in 2 places at the same time, here in Hiroto Castle, and in the old high-rise penthouse that was

the entrance to Zosa's strangeway house, where Trinia was also standing, adding her blue e'Mral Lace to Nyx's violet patterns.

Nyx then collapsed into Trinia's arms, unconscious from exhaustion. Trinia then opened the newly crafted Strange Doorway from the penthouse side, looking at herself holding Nyx and herself standing next to Vya and the others.

"Hurry," said Sanguine leading them all through the Strange Doorway. The sound of F5ve rushing upwards through the castle not far behind.

*Much is spoken of other worlds, of the City of Strange Doorways at the center of a vast pedestrian space opera, but today more is forgotten than known.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Sanguine and his apprentices were gathered within the ancient, glazed church atop the old high-rise tower far from the newly reformed Hiroto Castle. Mona was tending Nyx, effusing him with green e'Mral mists, restoring his vitality.

"How far to the strangeway to this orange doggie desert world of yours," asked Ekko.

"Half a dozen doorways," said Nyx. "I will lead." He raised himself, kissing Mona on the cheek. She smiled at the little man.

One of Trinia's moiety vanished; the air rushed to fill where she was with a pop, then a second, leaving only one Trinia with Sanguine and the others.

It was then that Nyx's newly made strange doorway was thrown open, F5ve rushing through from the Hiroto Castle audience hall, Brightness Lightness following in her wake.

"Your trixie bullshit will not affect me," said F5ve. "I am made to kill you sorcerous fucks, there is nowhere you can run."

All could see F5ve's true form with their e'Mral sight, as a void, a silhouette of black within a brightly illuminated world, the absence of life, that which she touched, drained of life, negative.

Vya quick-drew her star-pistol, firing two shots at head and heart, the glowing glass meteorite slugs both missing, not even close. Vya's eyes were wide with surprise, she had never missed with her star-pistol, ever. Yet here she missed twice.

Sanguine touched his hands to the floor, Laced the red e'Mral mists of gravity into the beams and slabs of the high-rise tower, and while these mists could not touch F5ve, they could touch the structure on which she stood, which increased in weight, collapsing under where she stood, F5ve and the northwest corner of the building collapsing 300-feet to the street below.

"Your star-pistol is an e'Mral weapon," said Sanguine. "Magic in the hands of a the e'Mral sighted, you cannot miss, but our friend as she is so fond of saying, is unbothered by our sorcery."

"But?" asked Vya.

"It still works as a railgun," said Sanguine. "As it worked for Song, but you need to aim the same as when the Veiled use it. For now, it is just another gun."

Vya frowned and holstered her gun. "Now you tell me this?"

“Sorry,” said Sanguine. “I thought it was obvious, or did you just think you were so good that you never missed?”

“Maybe,” said Vya.

The group made their way through what remained of the penthouse, inside the ornate hall to the sliding steel doors at the far end.

“Trinia,” said Sanguine. “If you please.”

Trinia stepped up to the steel doors and Laced her blue mists through the doors, which slid open.

“Is there any place you cannot go?” asked Mona.

Trinia winked at her.

Beyond was a circular door of brightly painted wood with a silver door handle at its center. Opened, it led the group to the library, a vast hall with bookcases and several circular doors to the right and a long glass wall overlooking the City to the left. And within, at the center of the room, was Grand Master Zosa, lounging in his drifting settee, but no women were massaging his bloated feet extended on a large pile of silk pillows, he seemed perturbed.

“Master Sanguine,” said Zosa. “Uninvited as the plague.”

“Grand Master Zosa,” bowed Sanguine. “Where are your feet slaves?”

“A labor dispute,” said Zosa.

“One of your heroes has gone rogue,” said Sanguine. “Yellow spandex, child’s representation of the sun on her chest.”



“Smiley face in the sun?” asked Zosa. “Yes, my dear Brightness Lightness, what about her.”

“She is not far behind us,” said Sanguine. “And she is not alone, she is with a chimera clone that kills e’Mral with a touch.”

“Yes, I have heard of this creature called F5ve,” said Zosa. “They were supposed to have killed you by now, I suppose that explains them not checking in.”

“Best laid plans motherfucker,” said Mona. “F5ve killed your Lighting Boy and Tiger Claw.”

“And you came here?” asked Zosa. “Some sort of poetic justice?”

“We do not have much time,” said Sanguine. “It is not too late to do the right thing. Help us.”

Zosa laughed; a long rumbling belly laugh as if he had just been told the most spectacular joke.

“That seems a no,” said Ekko to Sanguine.

Winds swirled around Zosa, lifting his obese form to float in the air, lightning crackled around his fatness, striking out randomly, books exploded, furniture split and burned, ragged lines cut across floor and ceiling, the glass wall overlooking the City shattered.

Mona, Vya, and Ekko were each struck by ragged blasts of plasma that cut across their bodies, burning clothing and skin, knocking each back to land hard into bookcases. Stunned, paralyzed.

Trinia vanished with a pop, appearing on the roof of a building she glanced through the shattering glass wall.

Nyx slipped sideways into Ekko's falling shadow.

Sanguine coiled the red e'Mral mists up from the structure of the high-rise tower, held up his hand, and grounded the lightning storm, sending it harmlessly into the buildings structure to the foundation.

"This is beneath even you," said Sanguine. "There is nothing noble in what you do here, why?"

"I am the most talented, the best, the greatest," said Zosa. "Even if a few freaks such as yourselves need to be stepped on to make it so. I was content to let you and your studio be, wallowing in obscurity, underfoot, but here you are in my house, refusing to be ignored. I am the Master here, not you. What is a Master to do if he cannot teach."

Zosa let loose a single lightning bolt toward Sanguine, so powerful it knocked Sanguine backward, but he remained standing, sending the force of the blast into the structure of the tower, the beams and columns cracked, split, structural steel melted, and the tower began to fail, the floor below them shaking, the structural frame wracking.

While so focused, Zosa did not see Nyx appear from his shadow, the flash of his silver straight razor cutting across his chest. And at the same time, Trinia appeared on Zosa's huge round shoulders, sliding a stiletto into his eye. The lighting stopped, the huge, bloated form of Zosa falling to the ground as a whale dropped from height. Nyx stood upon Zosa's chest, carved out his heart and stuffed a metal cube, the logic engine from Zosa punishment robot, in its place.

Trinia put her stiletto through Zosa's still beating e'Mral heart, flashing suddenly to bright flame, and falling from Nyx's outstretched hand as ash. Real dead.

It was then that F5ve came through the circular door followed by Brightness Lightness.

The scene before the 2 was of destruction, they entered the 100<sup>th</sup> floor of a tower that was failing, the library on fire, Zosa dead, Sanguine standing 10 yards ahead, his blue woolen suit charred and smoldering, his hand made leather shoes as if rooted. Vya, Ekko, and Mona scattered on the ground, their clothing and flesh gouged by still smoking electrical burns. Each dazed, though Ekko was unmoving.

F5ve smiled.

Brightness looked back at the circular door where they came from, afraid. But her eyes soon fixed on Zosa. And her fear became mixed with anger and relief.

Sanguine fell to his hands and knees, his eyes closed, paying no attention to what was behind him or on the demise of Zosa, instead he was focused on the tower, shifting gravity, and altering weight through the structure, stabilizing the damage, trying to save the thousands of people that lived in the tower from being killed by its collapse.

F5ve stalked slowly toward Sanguine, reveling in anticipation.

Vya, laying awkwardly under a pile of burning books, drew her star-pistol and began to fire at F5ve, missing, one, two, three, four, five shots but getting F5ve's attention. Her sixth and last shot she did not fire, as tradition, this bullet was reserved for herself, at the end of all things.

"You sister," said F5ve. "Should be standing with me. You are Meerly, not this Vya they made you, come with me and I will see you cured again, we can be a family, you and I."

“I am not your sister,” said Vya. “Nor your mother or any other relation, you are me.” And Vya fired her final star-pistol shot, striking F5ve between her breasts, the glowing green glass slug coring a hole clean through her heart.

F5ve laughed, “you have discovered my secret, I have but a hole where my heart should be.”

It was then that Mona pulled her smoldering body from the wreckage of the bookshelves, grabbed hold of Brightness, and threw her across the room hitting F5ve, the two tumbling a dozen yards further into the burning library to where Zosa’s corpse laid.

Nyx grabbed Trinia’s hand and they ran to one of the circular doors on the bookshelf wall and opened it, “come quickly, we need to move.”

Mona grabbed the still dazed Ekko and leaped across the room to the circular door and moved through. Vya pulled herself up and staggered to the door.

Sanguine screamed, “go, I will catch up, I cannot let this building fall.” The strain, e’Mral burn, evident as only the force of his will was now keeping the tower from collapse.

Nyx closed the door, leaving Sanguine alone with F5ve and Brightness, who pulled themselves up from their tumble, Brightness’s arm appearing broken. She screamed.

“Stop your whining,” said F5ve. “Every bone in my body has broken many times, steel yourself, it will grow back stronger.”

“Touch me and we all die,” said Sanguine. “I am the only thing keeping this tower from collapsing to ruin. There will be nothing of any of us but dust, nothing to find or heal.”

F5ve said, “I do not believe you freak.”

“It is true,” said Brightness. “He binds the building whole; without him we will be crushed.”

“Just as well,” said F5ve. “I did promise to kill you last, what would I be if I did not honor my word?”

“The same murderous creation of lesser men you are now,” said Sanguine. “A monster that kills for pleasure.”

“No fooling you,” said F5ve.

Sanguine considered letting the building fall, saving his apprentices, but the other thousands in the building, Veiled yes, but lives worth saving, he hoped. Lives he would save if he could.

F5ve sneered at Sanguine and moved to the circular door the others had passed through. Brightness following her.

“Stay with me Brightness,” said Master Sanguine. “I can help you, save you if you let me. I was once like you. Please.”

F5ve laughed. “You are one talkative motherfucker. Shut it.” She opened the door and moved through.

Brightness looked at Sanguine, confused, wanting to take help, but not understanding how, her life had been fear and torture, suffering and humiliation at the likes of Zosa, fear had governed her life, and it gave her purpose now, she followed F5ve through the door. Closing it behind her, leaving Sanguine alone in a building about to fall.

*When the end comes, have the wit to see it.*

*...The Goblin Azimuth Society's Guide to the Clockworks*

Nyx ran through a series of hallways and 2 more brightly painted circular doors holding hands with Trinia, followed closely by Vya and Mona, who carried Ekko. The house empty, signs of a recent sudden evacuation and the occasional dead security guard, slashed as if by a straight razor.

They finally moved through a circular door that led to a high cantilevered terraced garden suspended over a waterfall, overlooking a long wide river valley of sand and ancient crumbled rock and an orange sky filled with too many moons and alien constellations. The long lazy river reflecting pink and orange light as a thread of mirror, beautiful, thought Mona, though she saw the valley as it was or might be.

“I do not know where this place is,” said Nyx. “But I think we can trap F5ve here, lure her in, escape back, and shatter the Doorway.”

“I will lure her,” said Vya. “She is a version of me after all, if anyone has responsibility it is me, go, all of you escape back once they are through, destroy the Doorway.”

Mona grabbed Vya by the arm, her grip nearly breaking bone. “We failed you once, kitten, we are not going to fail you again, not to the same fucking tormentor.”

Nyx rolled his eyes, not happy with arguments of self-sacrifice. He stepped sideways into the shadow. Trinia vanished with a ‘pop’ of air where she was.

Ekko asked, lifting himself to a sitting position where Mona had laid him, “Is no one concerned about dropping off the *Ghost of Heartless Death* and the *Little Girl of Luminous Disintegration* on an unsuspecting paradise?”

“We cannot trap something like F5ve in an unsuspecting world,” said Mona. “Pushing our problems onto others is not right, F5ve must be stopped, even if that means killing her.”

Ekko could barely move, his body burned and partly paralyzed, he saw that Mona and Vya were also charred by the same lighting that struck him, their movements uncertain. His own clothes burned, falling from his pale burned frame. The pain was debilitating. He did not see Nyx or Trinia. “Where is F5ve?”

The circular door swung open wide, “I am right here,” said F5ve, moving onto the long wide garden terrace, followed closely by Brightness.

Mona moved to the fore, putting Ekko and Vya behind her, “you cannot kill us all.”

“I do not have to,” said F5ve. “Brightness, be a dear.”

Brightness coiled her tortured frightened e’Mral mists around her as a cloak, she wanted to be alone, to have all her enemies dead, and as quickly light began to radiate from her form, expanding outward as a spherical wave of light. Wanting that her light would also kill F5ve, but knowing she would be unaffected.

But at the same moment Nyx slipped from Brightness’s own shadow, a silver straight razor slipping into each hand, and with a crossing flurry, decapitated Brightness as the light wave swept through him, causing his own body to disintegrate to ash. The wave of light arrested, fading, as Brightness’s head impacted the terrace, finally unafraid.

Trinia screamed from somewhere in the garden.

Mona jumped the 10-yards that separated her from F5ve. Vya at the same time charging with preternatural speed, elegant as a cheetah. Trinia vanished, a pop of air where she had been hiding in the garden.

Ekko closed his eyes, steeled himself against the burns that afflicted his body, and time slowed down, he forced his sight into the Pale, outside of time, between moments, he could see Mona halfway in her leaping arc toward F5ve, but could see that F5ve was already moving left, Vya approaching from F5ve's right, the two would miss her, F5ve would but turn and touch them both. They were going to die. And Trinia, Ekko could see the blue e'Mral mists, the blur of her teleport, could see the image where she was and would be, she had guessed correctly that Vya would force F5ve left, she would appear in F5ve's path, tripping F5ve, but dying in the effort, but perhaps giving Mona and Vya their chance, a sacrificial distraction. Maybe thought Ekko, but more likely Trinia died first followed quickly on by Mona and Vya. Leaving only himself.

Ekko stayed in the moment, thinking on what was going on around him, caught between the moments of everyone he 'maybe' cared about being murdered by a man-made soulless monster. This is how magic dies, he thought.

But he saw then, something else, something obvious that he had missed, He had seen, as they all had, that F5ve was as death, her life somehow negative, absent, but he saw now that Mona, her life was more real than real, the two, should they touch, would annihilate...what, each other, all of them, a cosmic boom? Life meets death, the immovable object meets the unstoppable force.



And with that Ekko leaped up from where he was sitting, bolting between F5ve and Trina, and as he moved, the world began to again move in slow motion, accelerating to real-time by the time Ekko was in front of F5ve, grabbing Trina around with his arms as she emerged from teleport, his full weight pushing her back as time resumed, the two tumbling away from F5ve, Mona, and Vya.

F5ve turned, dodging Vya and Mona, catching each from behind, a wicked smile on her face. But Mona moved suddenly sideways, slamming hard into Vya, knocking her yards away, tumbling to the ground, caught by surprise, but rolling up to her feet.

What Ekko had just seen, Mona had known, that this creature named F5ve was her opposite, killing what she touched as Mona gifted life to what she touched. Mona recalled having accidentally pulled the e'Mral mists from her sister, almost killing her, and had since been afraid to use her power. But Mona was no longer afraid. And this creature before her had never been alive.

F5ve gripped Mona's left arm as a vice, Mona's arm and side going numb, cold burning through her body. F5ve smiling, her eyes wide with frantic joy, stolen strength moving into her, more than she had known possible, she began to feel like a goddess, intoxicated by the power that flowed into her. But Mona's right hand gripped F5ve's neck, F5ve's smile turning to an expression of terror. Cold swept through Mona's body, paralysis, pain. But fire began to sweep through F5ve, incinerating, suffering. F5ve let go of Mona's arm, grabbed Mona's grip of her neck. F5ve's claws, hands & feet, raked at Mona, scratching, tearing at Mona's increasingly cold desiccated flesh. F5ve felt as if she were touching the sun, her white fur igniting to flame, held firm by Mona's unflinching grip. Mona coiled her own life force, her very soul, the source

of e'Mral mists and pushed it into F5ve, filling the void where her heart should have been, and as suddenly, flame consumed the whole of F5ve in explosive screaming fury. Mona's own body now as ice, shattered as glass by the exploding F5ve.

The explosion of F5ve and Mona created a halo wave of fire that sped outward into the far valley of sand and rock, at the fore of the fire wave, dust and rock tossed as by storm, and in the fire storm's wake, vines began to emerge from the broken ground, slither from the sand. Sprouts of grass and tree and bush began to grow, as far as any of them could see.

Vya sped back toward Mona, singed by the fading flames and hot ash of F5ve as her screams faded. But where the 2 had stood, only ash and pieces of scattered stained glass remained. Vya screaming in grief, falling to her knees, weeping where Mona had been.

Ekko and Trinia sat looking on, sadness overtaking them, realizing that the world around them was suddenly less real, less colorful, and less alive.

For some hours, the three survivors, Ekko, Trinia, and Vya sat quietly overlooking the valley as a verdant forest took form, trees with green-blue leaves as acid corroded copper grew to titanic height, as a forest made for the wandering of giants, and then blooming with bright white flowers, as several moons moved across the sky and the sun begin to rise, on the horizon.

Beautiful thought Ekko.

Creative, though less than subtle, thought Vya.

Pointless thought Trinia.

Sanguine arrived as the sun was rising on the alien world, "Nyx?" he asked, "Mona?"

"Dead," said Ekko, flat as if distracted, lost in thought.

“I am glad to see you 3 alive,” said Sanguine.

“Where were you, old man?” asked Vya. “Where were you when we needed you most, when Mona needed you most?”

Sanguine did not answer, he had saved the tower, saved thousands of lives that none of them knew or would ever know, but all that mattered was that he was not here.

“I was a fool,” said Ekko, tears in his eyes.

“Recriminations are for fools,” said Master Sanguine. “Feel no guilt for having survived, live that Nyx and Mona would be proud. Remember them always.”

Trinia cried.

Ekko nodded, but the guilt of his actions haunted him, of saving Trinia instead of Mona. He reminded himself, he was the villain after all, but the thought did not comfort him.

Vya sat quietly, not hearing anything said.

“This should not have happened,” said Sanguine. “None of it, it is not your fault, any of you. I am proud of you.”

The four sat quietly for hours more, watching the sun rise on an alien world.

All then returned to the City except Trinia, who stayed.

Alone on the terrace, Trinia collected a handful of Nyx’s ashes, looked down to the river, and with a sudden ‘pop’, vanished from the terrace and appeared at the edge of the river, letting Nyx’s ashes fall through her fingers into the water. “I love you,” she said, tears in her eyes, falling to her knees, “how could I have never known?”

## Epilogue

*Memories fade, what and when and why, but how they made you feel, this we recall,  
always.*

*...The Light of Illuria*

On the little hilltop stood an ancient dead oak tree surrounded by overgrown ruins and wide parklands gone fallow. It was nearing sunset.

Assembled was Mr. & Mrs. Ordinia, the sausage king and queen of the lower highlands, their eyes red at the loss of Nyx, a man they considered like a son. The finest abattoir architect the City has ever known. They mourned as much for themselves as for the animals that might never benefit from his work.

Hawthorn Mudlery, the owner of the Jace & Lace restaurant chain was in attendance with his wife and daughter. Friends of Ekko, the 3 truly loved Mona; considered her as family. Their young daughter was in tears. Mona always made her laugh, her favorite babysitter.

Next to Trinia stood her sister, Ovella, Ovella's son little Bartholomew, and her dog, Clancy, that was inconsolably sad, Clancy had adored Nyx, loved him on their first meeting. Nyx had saved Ovella from a life in bondage and had no way to ever thank him.

Vya stood alone. That Mona gave her life that she and the others might live only made her angry. And as for Nyx, this was a man that cared more for animals than people, and though Vya did not like the little man, she respected him, and as Nyx had died to save her, she again felt anger. Her mind raged, Major Song Vree, the source of her long suffering, beatings, and rape

finally dead, F5ve, the wicked clone of herself, her own torturer and villainy made manifest, destroyed. She was free of her past, but at what cost? A cost not worth paying, and this made her angry yet again. Sanguine had told her, the space between is the craft, not the object. And here she finally understood, vengeance was but an object, the space between the consequences, the lives of two people that did not deserve to die for her, ever.

Master Sanguine stood next to Avril Hunt, the two men, heads bowed in silence.

“It was worth it,” whispered Avril Hunt with a dusty rasp. “You know.”

“It was not,” said Sanguine, looking at the dead oak canopy that stretched above them “we were wrong, we have robbed ourselves of a future to save the present, a present made of shit, we failed. The world Mona and Nyx would have made was beautiful, and now that is lost.”

Sanguine, seeing Avril’s corpse face, cringed, a shiver running down his spine.

“This is the dance,” said Avril.

“Right now,” said Sanguine. “That quiet retirement with a good health plan promised by people with machines for hearts sounds pretty good.”

Avril frowned. “And Balira?”

“One thing at a time,” said Sanguine. “Today we celebrate what was and mourn what could have been.”

And though Trinia stood next to her sister Ovella, she felt profoundly alone. She hated Ekko and Vya, always had, they were pompous, arrogant, and self-righteous, nothing she understood nor cared to know. Nyx was her friend, and Mona, a clumsy giant ever trying not to crush those around her, was odd like her, forever misunderstood by the world. And the band,

what about the band? Nyx was their drummer, Mona the bassist, the soul of any good band. What kind of band was Keys, Vocal, and String-Laz without a soul? A silly band. Bullshit she thought to herself. And for what, to stop a few evil motherfuckers running around, fuck them, Trinia thought, fuck them all to hell. Trinia broke down and cried.

Clancy, her dog that loved Nyx before she did, came and lay at Trinia's feet.

Trinia sat on the cold ground and rubbed Clancy behind the ears, its head now in her lap, she felt un-alone, she felt close to Nyx, she smiled, her black eye-makeup streaked down her moonlit cheeks.

It was then that the ancient dead oak under which the mourners stood burst into flame, its winter chilled boughs then alive with spring leaves of blue green as acid etched copper and blooming white flowers. And far-far away on another world of giant blue leaf trees, an orange dog with a silver collar laid her head on the chest of a thin little man washed up on the shore of a slow winding river under pink and orange moons, Nyx opened his eyes.

## **Coda**

*Sometimes the end is the beginning.*

*...Tales of the Tribe*

Sometime later Master Sanguine invited two people he had met many years before, Torg and Morra, Mona's parents. The two did not recognize Sanguine, his guise as one of the Sisters of Mercy when he saved Mona had been their only meeting.

The three walked through the forest of giant blue leaf trees under a pink sky. “This place is for you,” said Sanguine. “An inheritance from your daughter, Monavantia, also the name of this paradise world.”

“I do not understand,” said Torg.

“Bring your kind here, start new,” said Sanguine. “There are no machines here, no Ceye, no aid, only what you make with your wit and sweat. Leave the Strangeway intact, bury it for later, or destroy it as so many did during the war. The choice is yours.”

Torg was silent. He turned it over in his mind looking for the catch, the cost, the trick.

Sensing Torg’s silence, Sanguine said, “Mona has paid the cost, it is yours and your peoples.”

Morra touched one of the larger trees. A song, a nursery rhyme she sang to Mona came to mind. She wept, she understood. “We are home Torg, and Mona is again with us.”

The two embraced.

End