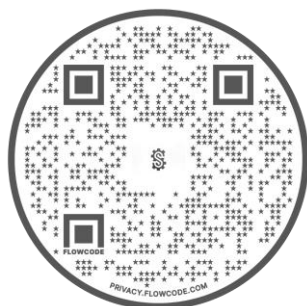




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# THE BRONZE AGE

SETH D. COULTER



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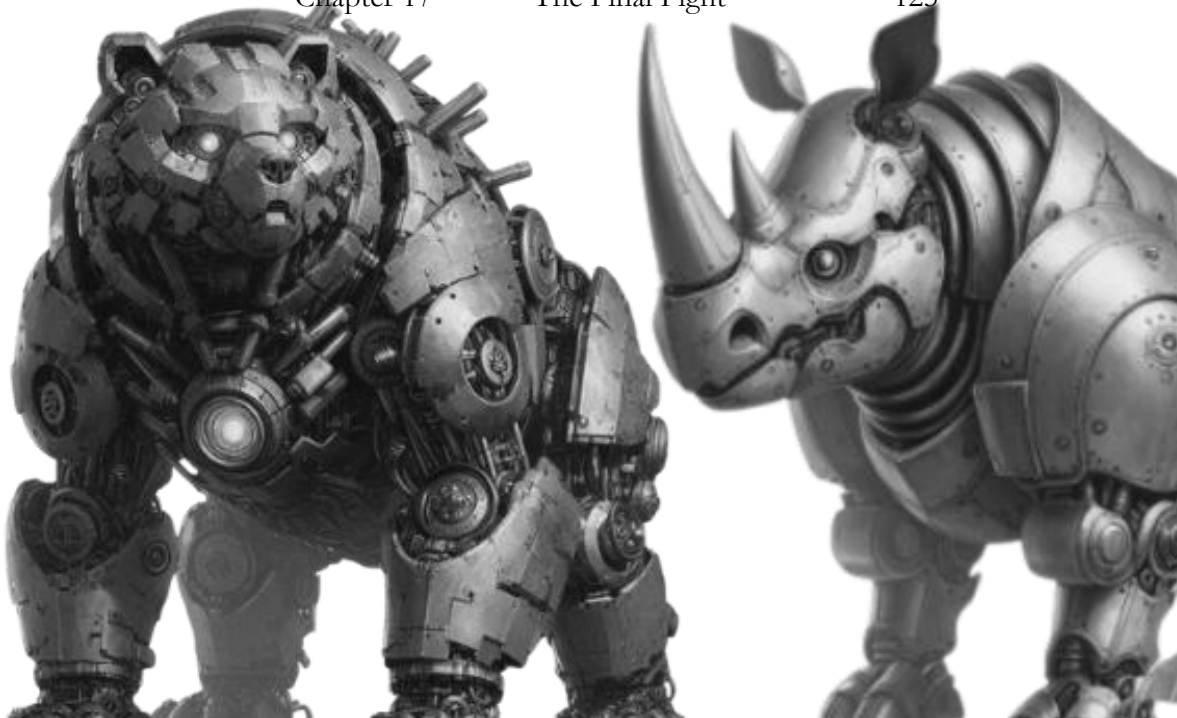
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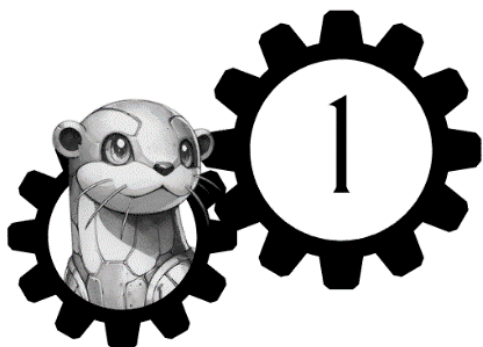
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To Kristi  
*You are the light to my bronze.*





# NIGHT FALLS

Turn the center three notches.”

Athena carefully moved the metal prongs clockwise.

“Hold it steady,” her father instructed. He flipped a magnifying lens in front of his right eye and then a second in front of that. Athena held fast to her tongs, holding her breath. Her father’s arms were that of a blacksmith, but his hands were those of a clockmaker. Both were requirements to excel in his profession. She marveled at his keen precision, paying particular attention to how he was able to attach the miniature gears to the upper chamber of the animatonn’s heart.

“One more turn, Athena. Gently now.” He hunched over the workbench, perched squat on a three-legged stool too small for a child, much less a fully grown man. Sliding the atrium panel into place, his thumb mallet tapped the punch pins until it lay flush.

Positioned on his left side, Athena squeezed herself between his elbow and the workbench. Her dark brown hair was tied back out of her eyes, allowing her to mirror her father’s concentration.

## THE BRONZE AGE

"How's this?" she asked, twisting the tongs ever so slightly. The valve spring tugged against the stem gear, trying to recoil up behind the chamber. She held fast.

"Perfect," her father whispered. Moving onto the lower chamber, he slipped another pin through the center of the smaller gears, aligning its teeth. He fiddled for a moment, then paused. A copper fox leapt down from an overhanging shelf and encircled itself around Athena's legs.

"Are you jealous, Vox? Don't worry, you're still my favorite." She gave the fox an affectionate pat with her free hand. The fox responded with a metallic growl and purr.

"How many transformations does this one have?" Athena asked, refocusing on their work.

"A few," Ren said with a sly grin. "Not to mention one or two other surprises."

Athena gave her father a quizzical look. "Like what?"

A thud sounded from the base of the workbench.

"Thad, come on out," Ren said without losing his focus.

Thaddeus rolled out from under the workbench. His skin was fairer, like that of his mother, while Athena's was darker like their father's.

Thad gave his father a toothy grin. "Can I help? Oh please-please-please!" he asked excitedly.

Athena rolled her eyes. "This isn't a game. This is serious."

"I'm very serious. I might be the most serious person I know. Seriously."

Ren smiled at his son. "Hold the legs as I finish attaching the heart."

Thad jumped up and grabbed the animatonn's feet.

Athena wiped the sweat from her brow. "Don't wiggle them, that could puncture a lubrication hose. You have to be careful."

Thad smiled. "I know, Ath." Thaddeus had called his sister Ath since he was a baby. "I'm always careful. Serious and careful."

Athena glared at him. "Funny, I would have said the opposite." Her eyes watched the legs intently. "Thad, I can see that you are shaking the feet."

"I am not."



## NIGHT FALLS

“You are!”

“Am NOT! I know how to do it.”

“Calm down, both of you.” Ren’s tone was stern as he synchronized the three balance wheels. “I will not abide fighting in my workshop.”

Athena shot Thaddeus a look of daggers.

“We’re almost finished,” their father instructed. “Easy now.” He was at the final phase of the heart’s construction. First the jewel pins, then pallets, then the escape wheels. Out of nowhere, a blue thread of liquid shot upward, dusting the workbench.

“See?” Athena shot at Thad. “Look what you did!”

“I...I didn’t—” Thad stammered, stupefied.

Without looking, Ren stuck a finger into some white paste and quickly patched the pin-sized hole. “Calm down, calm down. It’s a quick fix. Let’s not do it again.” Ren wiped his blue palm on a grease rag and placed the cover over the heart.

“What animal is it?” Thad asked eagerly.

“What do you think it is?” their father responded, closing the chest piece.

“A beaver!” said Thad.

“The tail isn’t flat enough and the body is too thin,” remarked Athena. “It’s clearly a weasel or a ferret of some kind.”

“Not quite,” said their father as he attached the forepaws.

“But all the edges are rounded. Father does that when he makes water animals.”

“Solid observation.” He placed the sapphire eyes into the sockets.

“A water weasel?” asked Thad.

“An otter!” said Athena excitedly.

“Very good! Now can you tell me who it is for?”

“It’s small, which would mean minimal defensive capabilities. That would rule out the sentry. I would guess its primary purpose is more for quality of life. That would lead me to think it’s either for a noble or high-class lady of some sort to use as a pet,” Athena surmised.

“Clever, very clever, but not all the way home yet.” Her father smiled and opened up the creature’s metal spine.

Athena shook her head. “How can I be more specific than that?”

## THE BRONZE AGE

Thaddeus ran his finger down the open vertebrae. “Not all the way home yet...it’s for Mother!”

“The highest and most noblewoman of all.” Their father grinned, sitting back and stroking his black bushy beard. “No one more beautiful, more wonderful, more voluptuous—”

“Ren, stop!” Penelope entered the workshop. She wore a coy, playful smile as she often did when her husband teased her in front of the children. Cupped in both hands she held a thin fold of black silk. She swept over and placed the silk in front of her husband, then wrapped her arms around his neck and rested her cheek on the top of his head.

Ren squeezed his wife’s hand, kissing it before gently unfolding the silk. The brilliant gleam of bronze thread lit up the room.

“No one spins light into bronze the way you do, Beloved,” Ren whispered. “Many have tried, but to this day all fall short of your skill and grace.” He clasped his wife’s hand tightly, then taking the bronze thread in both hands, laid it gently within the recesses of the metallic spine.

“Athena, will you do the honors?” Ren handed her the forceps.

Athena took them in hand and ran down the spine of the otter, pinching the hinges of the vertebrae closed. When she finished she placed the forceps back on the workbench.

“Thaddeus.” Ren motioned to the animatonnn.

Thaddeus took hold of the top of the spine with both hands and pushed down. It connected with a satisfying click. The gears inside the animatonnn began to whirl. Ren slid on the backplates. Everyone sat for a moment, including the otter. The sapphire eyes flickered to life.

“What fun, I daresay! Greetings and salutations!”

“He can talk!” Thaddeus exclaimed.

“Talk? Why of course I can talk. Is there some reason I should not be able to?”

“Animatonns typically don’t,” Thaddeus explained to the otter. “Usually you just make animal sounds, or maybe just say one word. You’ve already said...” Thaddeus began count on his fingers.

“How is this possible?” Athena looked at her father.

## NIGHT FALLS

"A new type of voice box—should allow for several hundred thousand words." Ren smiled. Standing up, he wrapped his arms around his wife.

"Revolutionary," Athena said. "Can you make one for Vox?" Athena threw a glance at the copper fox that lay curled up on the floor.

"Perhaps," Ren said. "Still not sure if it will be more helpful or irksome."

"I daresay I will do my utmost not to irk a single soul, thereby demonstrating my worth and the value which you have bestowed on me," the otter chirped. Then he reached out and grabbed Athena's hand.

Athena gave the otter a puzzled look. "What are you doing?" She pulled her hand to and fro but the otter held fast to her fingers.

"I am holding your hand."

"I see that," said Athena as she jerked her hand again, wondering why the otter did not let go. "What for?"

"Because holding hands is the greatest!" the otter said. "In fact, it is curious—why are you not all holding hands this very moment?"

"Otters hold hands to prevent themselves from drifting apart from their family," Ren said. "Perhaps I put a little too much otter into him."

"That is adorable!" said Thaddeus. "Do you want to hold my hand?"

"Of course I do," the otter squeaked. "And then you can hold your sister's hand."

Athena and Thaddeus looked at each other.

"No, I don't need to hold hands. You can let go," Athena said. "You can let go. Let go."

"What shall we name him?" Penelope asked.

"What fun, a name! I have always wanted a name. At least for the past twenty-four point three seconds. What name shall you all give me? Something sweet? Elegant, perhaps?"

"How about Socrates?" Athena said. "It conveys a sense of wisdom."

"I love it!" exclaimed the otter.

"And we can call him Socks for short," Thaddeus interjected. "That way we have Socks and Vox."

"Why, what fun! That is even more marvelous," the otter exclaimed. "Simply delightful."

"Socks is not nearly as noble as Socrates," said Athena.

## THE BRONZE AGE

"More fun to say though," Thaddeus chimed back.

"I think a well-earned supper is in order," said Penelope. "Thaddeus, will you go set the table?"

"Can Socks help?" Thaddeus asked.

"As long as he doesn't bother Argus."

"Come on, Socks. After dinner, I'm going to teach you *everything*," Thad placed his free hand flat on the workbench.

"I would very much like to learn everything." The otter climbed up Thad's hand to his shoulder, careful not to let go of the hand he was holding.

"He seems almost too chipper," Penelope said before exiting the workshop after her son.

Athena stood up to follow, but Ren stopped her. "Why don't you help me put the tools away?"

Athena smiled. She would much rather be in the workshop with her father than the kitchen with her mother. She collected her father's more intricate tools and placed them in the appropriate drawers.

Her father tossed her a grease rag. "Tell me, why'd you puncture the lubrication hose?"

"It was Thad. He was goofing around," Athena said, catching the rag out of the air.

Ren gave his daughter a knowing stare. Athena remained silent but began to wipe down the workbench. "Athena," her father placed his hands on her shoulders. "You are his older sister. It is your duty to look out for your brother. Care for him, guide him. Not sabotage him."

"He is just so frustrating."

Ren shook his head with a laugh. "You're so much like your mother." He collected his designs off the workbench and locked them in the case above his stuffed bookshelf.

"I am not!"

"That's exactly what your mother would say."

Athena bit her lip.

## NIGHT FALLS

"If you want to continue to help me in the workshop, you must act accordingly. I don't expect you to like your brother all the time, but I do expect you to put his best interests over that of your feelings."

Athena looked at her father's big brown eyes. "Okay."

"Okay. Vox, let's go to dinner." The fox sprang to his feet and licked his metal lips.

The Burlys lived in a converted silo behind Ren's workshop. Ren and Penelope moved in after their honeymoon and every year they did a project to make it feel more like a home. The first year they built a master bedroom in the top of the silo. The third year, an outside patio was added for Penelope to use her light loom for star spinning. In year five, they were going to build a grand dining room and remodel the kitchen, but that had to be postponed and instead, they built a nursery for baby Athena. After nineteen years it had become quite a cozy little house.

"Carrots. Too many carrots," Thaddeus said as he prodded the vegetables with his fork.

"They have been growing very well these past few months," Penelope said coolly, "and they're good for your eyesight."

"Rather need glasses and eat waffles," Thaddeus muttered.

"Wouldn't we all," said Ren.

A tungsten wolf paced around the dinner table. Its amber eyes flashed.

"Argus, do you want some carrots and fish?" Thaddeus asked.

"If Argus eats your food, he will also eat your dessert," Penelope said.

"But it's strawberries and cream tonight!" Thad gasped at the injustice.

"Honey, that's not really fair," said Ren. Thaddeus sighed in relief. "I want to eat Thad's strawberries and cream." He smiled at his wife.

"What?" cried Thad.

"If you want dessert, eat your carrots," Penelope repeated.

"Will the carrots help my eyesight as well?" asked Socrates.

"No, that's human food," said Penelope. "Humans like Thaddeus and Athena need to eat. Animatonns run off the light in their bronze."

"If that is true, why does Miss Athena keep feeding Vox and I the carrots off her plate?" asked Socrates.

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena's jaw dropped.

Thaddeus pointed at the guilty party. "Oh-oh-oh! No dessert."

Penelope rubbed her temple and gave her husband an exasperated look.

Ren raised his finger as though about to say something, but then to everyone's surprise broke into a big bellowing laugh. Penelope joined in with the children. "I think we have had enough carrots tonight. Strawberries and cream for everyone."

"Even me?" asked Socrates.

"No, not you," Ren said.

"But I ate the carrots," Socrates retorted. A new round of laughter burst across the table.

Then the bell tolled.

*Dong Dong Dong.*

The laughter cut instantly. Each Burly looked at one another before all eyes fell on Ren.

*Dong Dong Dong.*

He stood up from the table and walked over to the wall where his rifle hung. His fingers shook ever so slightly as he buttoned his black leather vest.

*Dong Dong Dong.*

Thaddeus's bottom lip quivered. "They—they come—they come..."

"Thaddeus, don't," Athena growled through her teeth.

Penelope sank into her chair, eyes closed, trying desperately to hold back the tears that she did not want the children to see.

## NIGHT FALLS

### *Dong Dong Dong.*

Ren slid into his metal chest piece and locked each shoulder in place. He took his rifle off the wall and snapped it magnetically to his back. Slowly, he turned to his family.

“I—”

“NO!” Athena cried. “Don’t go!”

“Athena, please,” Penelope said, not looking at her daughter. “Sit down.”

“Why does he have to go? Tell me why!” She turned to her father. “We need you here.”

Ren put his hand on Athena’s cheek. Her eyes were dark brown, almost black like his. “How can I sit at home and ask others to risk their lives to protect our family if I am unwilling to do so?”

“Why not?” Athena begged. “Other men do it.”

“I am not other men.”

### *Dong Dong Dong.*

Ren looked out the window. The church steeple rang as if in opposition to the setting sun.

“They come—they come...” Thad stammered.

“Stop it!” Athena screeched at him. “That doesn’t help anything.”

“Athena.” Her father bent forward and kissed her on the forehead. “Watch over your brother.” He then did the same to Thad. “Mind your mother and sister, Thaddeus.”

“Argus.” The tungsten wolf stepped in line with him. “Ventus.” The silver hawk swooped over from its perch and landed on his shoulder. “Lock the door behind us. Do not open it again until the bell rings.” The family stood silent.

“Irenaeus...” Penelope stood up and drew close to her husband.

“Yes, Beloved?”

“Come home to me.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

She kissed him, grabbing his beard with both hands. They pressed their foreheads together.

Ren put his fist to his chest. "I have nothing to fear. Your light keeps me safe."

And with that, he left.

Penelope closed the door behind him and locked it. She stood there for what felt like an eternity. Head bowed, both hands pressed against the door, she took a deep breath.

"Athena, shut and lock all the windows. Thaddeus—"

"They come—they come at night," he repeated.

"Not right now. Right now I need you to focus. Go into every room and douse the lights." Thaddeus nodded, though he did not look his mother in the face.

"Vox, Socrates, engage patrol mode." The fox and otter became rigid. Their eyes flashed and they began to march around the interior perimeter of the silo, making routine stops at each window.

Penelope washed the dishes and put the leftovers into the crowded icebox. The bowl of strawberries lay next to the bowl of untouched cream.

"Windows done," Athena shouted down the stairs.

"Did you pull the curtains all but an inch?"

Athena nodded.

"Good." Penelope doused the kitchen lights and lit an oil lamp with a match. "Where's Thaddeus?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?" Penelope shook the match out.

"Can't find him. The lights in his room and above are still on."

A wave of dread broke upon Penelope's face. "Vox, find Thaddeus, NOW!"

The fox darted up the stairs. Penelope followed as quickly as she could, lamp in hand.

"What do we do about the lights?" Athena asked at her mother's heels.

"First we find your brother."



## NIGHT FALLS

"But it's going to be dark soon."

"I know that!" Penelope snapped. "First we find your brother."

Vox stopped at Thaddeus's bedroom door and pointed at the light shining through the bottom. Penelope could hear her son's muffled voice.

"They come at night. They come for light. They come at night. They come for light."

She opened the door. Thaddeus rocked back and forth on his mattress, his covers drawn over his head.

Penelope walked into the room and placed the lamp on the bedside table. Athena stood at the doorway, arms crossed.

"Thaddeus..." Penelope said softly.

He froze.

"Thaddeus, take the covers off." Slowly he peeked over his blankets. His cheeks and nose were pink, eyes red and wet. He whispered,

*"They come at night. They come for light.  
They come to feed on all that's bright.  
Hide the children out of sight.  
Shut the windows; bar them tight,  
For malice is the shadow's might.  
Darkness forms in fury's bite;  
Consolation evades our plight.  
Forgone is hope, so comes the night."*

"Shhhh," hushed Penelope as she put her arms around her son and pulled him in a tight embrace.

"They come...at ni—"

"Shhh." She held him more firmly. After a moment he became silent. Penelope relaxed her grip. "Hope is not gone. Hope is never gone. Your father is out there fighting those things." She got back on her feet. "I think that is enough of the vile rhyme. I gave you a job and I need you to finish that job."

Thad shook his head. "I can't."

"You can," Penelope said, looking him square in the eyes. "Athena will help you."

## THE BRONZE AGE

"But I—" Athena began to protest, but her mother shot her a look of warning. Athena exhaled through her teeth and nodded.

"Take the lamp, turn off the lights, and then come back downstairs."

Thad slumped off his bed and took the lamp from the nightstand. As he exited the room, he turned off the lights and marched up the stairs.

Athena turned to follow him when her mother called after her.

"Athena," Penelope said. "Make sure *he* douses the lights."

Athena nodded.

When they finished, the three gathered back at the kitchen table. The oil lamp was placed in the center.

The sound of distant rifles and metallic screeches peppered the silence. Every few minutes, Vox or Socrates would scamper down the stairs, circle the kitchen and then head back up from whence they came.

Thaddeus lay curled up on his mother's lap, nestling his face into her shoulder. An untouched bowl of strawberries and cream lay in front of him.

"Eat, it's really good. Athena, step away from the window and come sit down."

Athena did as she was told. There was nothing to see anyway. The entire city was cloaked in darkness; not a single light flickered, in fear that it would draw the creatures' wrath.

Athena sat across from her mother. "What are dusklings like?"

"I don't think this is a good time."

Thad sat up. "Please, I want to know."

"Sometimes knowing what it is you are facing makes it less foreboding," Athena said.

Both children looked at their mother pleadingly.

"Very well, but I'm only telling you practical information. No monster stories."

The children nodded. "When was the last time you saw one?" Thaddeus asked.

"A living one? It would have been back when Athena was a baby. She would have been one or two."

"What did it look like?"

## NIGHT FALLS

"Large—about the size of a bear, maybe a little smaller. Black, kind of bat-like. Rounder faces, stubbier wings—then, of course, they have that orange eye."

"How many swarms have you gone through?"

"This will be my twenty-ninth and your father's thirty-third."

"What was the most frightening attack you were a part of?" Athena asked.

"All attacks are frightening," Penelope said. "I can't think of a single one where I wasn't frightened. Though the most frightening time was shortly after your father and I were married. We had three attacks in one month."

"Three attacks!" Thaddeus gasped in horror.

"That's right. The third evening the bells tolled felt dreadful indeed, but we got through it. We have always gotten through it." She gave her son's hand a squeeze. "We don't need to be afraid. Honestly, it has been well over a year since the last attack—you could almost argue we were overdue for one."

"How many has Father killed?" asked Thad.

"I don't know, and I don't ask."

"Have you seen a duskling harvest light by ripping it out of an animatonn?" asked Athena.

Thaddeus turned pale as a sheet.

Penelope paused. "We will stop there."

"What? Why?" Athena roared.

"I said no monster stories."

"I'm not asking for a monster story. It's a question."

"You know what you were asking."

"It is advised during a duskling attack that you remain as quiet as possible," Socrates chimed in.

"Thank you, Socrates," said Penelope. "Please continue patrol."

"Yes, of course; right away!"

They remained silent around the table for the next few hours. Thaddeus finally ate his strawberries and cream. Athena had two extra helpings as well. Penelope spent the time biting her thumb and staring at the window with its curtains drawn all but an inch. She couldn't eat; she couldn't lift up the spoon—

*Dong Dong Dong.*

## THE BRONZE AGE

A sigh of relief swept across the family. It was over. The battle was won.

Penelope held the lamp up to the clock. "It is only a little past midnight. That was relatively quick. Alright, I think it may be time for bed."

"Can't we stay up until Father gets home?" Athena asked.

Penelope did not want another fight. "Certainly," she said.

The family waited eagerly for Ren to return. Thaddeus fell asleep in his mother's lap. An hour passed, then two. Finally, a knock rapped against the door. Athena bolted upright, ran over to the door and unlocked it.

Ren's wolf Argus limped in. Athena turned to greet her father but instead found a member of the town sentry at the door. His navy uniform was freshly torn in several spots. He stepped inside the silo.

Penelope's eyes widened.

"My fair Mrs. Burly," began the guard.

"No!" cried Penelope.

Thaddeus woke with a start.

"No—no, no!"

"I regret to inform you..."

Athena sank to her knees in disbelief. In the guard's hands, she could see the pieces of Ventus: his right-wing and most of his head and beak.

"Your husband, Irenaeus Burly, has fallen."



## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

Penelope sat next to the windowsill. Her black veil was pinned in her burning auburn hair. All strength had vanished the second she stepped back into the house. Hours had passed since the island gathered to mourn the fallen. The governor had kissed Penelope's hand and expressed his deepest condolences. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Thaddeus retreated to his bedroom, holding hands with Socks all the way.

Athena disappeared into her father's workshop, but she could not bring herself to stay longer than the few moments it took to collect some loose tools and parts. Unlike her mother, her hands needed to move, they needed to be focused, working on something—anything. Argus lay at her feet on the veranda. She removed and replaced the primary ball joint of his right shoulder and began disassembling his forepaw. Vox circled the old wolf and stretched out in front of him before rolling playfully onto his back as if to boast.

“Um...excuse me.”

Athena looked up. A young girl slowly tiptoed up to her, stopping at the edge of the veranda's front step. Tightly clutched between her hands she cradled a heavily patched carpetbag. The girl brushed her wavy blonde hair out

of her face and behind her ear. Athena recognized her as the carpenter's daughter from down the lane. She could not remember her name.

"I—I don't mean to intrude, especially today of all days, but I was wondering if you might be able to help me." The girl's voice shook. "I—I was told the Burly's is the place to go—that you're very good—I just don't know what else to do..."

"What seems to be the problem, Miss?" Athena said, channeling her father.

The girl reached into the bag and pulled out what looked to be an old fashioned animatonn, its brass plating worn and faded. The joints were simplistic compared to what Athena's father made. Its head was missing.

"I see the dilemma," said Athena, picking up the decapitated creature for a closer examination.

A pained expression filled the young girl's face. She pulled out of the bag what clearly was meant to be a kitten's head. Cupping it in both hands, she offered it to Athena. "A buffalo stepped on her."

Vox pawed at the lifeless body. Athena picked up the head, examined it, then picked up the body and opened up the back panel. "What's your name?" she asked.

"I'm sorry. I'm Octavia Cornish, at your service." Octavia curtsied, remembering her manners. Though quite well-spoken, she could not have been any older than Thaddeus.

"Athena Burly, at yours," said Athena with a nod. "And what is the kitten's name?"

"Mitten," Octavia choked.

Athena winced. "Mitten the kitten. What a great name."

"Do you think it's possible to save her?"

"The good news, Octavia, is that the spine is still intact. It appears to be a clean break at the stem of the neck."

"How is that good news?"

"Unlike us humans who foolishly store our memories in our head, animatonnns pull their power and memory from the spine. Meaning that if the spine is still intact, all we need to do is reattach the head, add new supports around the stem of the neck and...Mitten the kitten...will be running smoother than a captain's clock."

## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

Octavia did not perk up at hearing the good news. “Do—do you know how much that will cost?” she asked in a half-whisper.

Athena looked at the ratty carpetbag, then back to Octavia. She reached into her toolbox and pulled out two metal plates, then bending them with pliers on either end, she took the head and broke off the old supports before using her awl to puncture new holes in alignment with the spine. A few screws later and the head was back on. She replaced a few connectors and the kitten opened its eyes.

“Meeyew,” it said.

“I—I can’t believe it!” Octavia scooped up the kitten in her arms. “Mitten!” she cried with delight. Then pausing, she reached back into the carpet bag, pulled out a tiny coin purse and emptied the contents onto her open palm. “This—this is all I have right now, but I can come back next week and give you more. And it’s my birthday in a few weeks; I usually get some spending money then.”

Athena took the three small coins in hand. Giving each one careful consideration she took the largest of the three and placed it back in Octavia’s hand. Then holding out the two remaining coins she said, “This should cover it.”

“Really?”

Athena nodded.

Octavia threw her arms around Athena in a tight hug before leaving the veranda, the kitten held fast against her cheek.

The evening wore on. Athena finally finished Argus’s paw when a stout, brazen-looking man in a tweed suit and smart black bowler hat came trudging up the lane toward the house.

“Evening, child,” the man said with a tip of his hat. “Is your mother at home?” he droned in a rather tiresome voice.

Argus let out a low growl.

“Like what you see there, dog?” he growled back.

“He clearly doesn’t,” said Athena.

The front door opened at once and Penelope stood in the center of the doorway. “Athena, time to come in.”

The man turned his attention abruptly to the door. “Ah, Mrs. Penelope Burly, I do hope you received my correspondence.”

“Yes, Mr. Twitch, I believe I have. But I must confess I am slightly disconcerted. Whatever might be amiss with the bank, surely it mustn’t need my attention on today of all days.”

“Time, my dear, time is unceasing. As is the bank’s business,” said Mr. Twitch. “Might I come in, so we may discuss such matters away from any prying ears?”

“As you wish.” Penelope forced a calm smile, but her eyes flashed with ferocity.

Mr. Twitch followed Athena and Penelope into the parlor. “What a sweet little home you have here.” He placed his hat on the coat rack and gave everything a quick once-over. “Quite humble.”

“Athena, why don’t you head up to your room,” Penelope instructed.

“Quite right, this is a conversation between adults.”

Athena bit her lip and marched up the stairs. As soon as she was out of sight, she took a seat on the step and listened eagerly.

“Now Mr. Twitch,” Penelope said, “what can I do for the bank? Surely we are not delinquent on any payments?”

“Delinquent? Heavens no. I am here on what you would call a... more personal matter.”

Penelope said nothing but furrowed her eyebrows.

“You see, I am a firm believer,” Mr. Twitch continued, “in what we in the banking world call first-mover advantage.”

“I’m not sure I understand what you are getting at, Mr. Twitch,” Penelope said. “What advantage are you currently seeking?”

“Why, I thought that was obvious. I am here for you.”

“For me?”

“Yes, to marry you. This is my proposal of marriage.”

“Marriage,” Penelope laughed. “Is this what passes today as romance? I’m afraid you’re falling very short.”

“Romance? Ha!” Mr. Twitch responded. “I have no desire for such trivialities. This is about a contractual relationship between two adults, plain and simple.”



## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

"I feel you undercut your argument and perhaps your understanding of what it is you are asking. Marriage is many things; 'plain and simple' do not fall into the equation."

"Oh, please," said Mr. Twitch. "I am a man of the world. A contract is a contract. Here is what I offer: I provide for you financially, to where you would want for nothing, and in turn, you would..."

"I would what?" asked Penelope firmly.

"It is well known that your late husband was a great craftsman. Perhaps the greatest of our age. But it is even more well known that the bronze that lies inside his animatons is the finest light ever spun. No spinstress on this island comes close to your skill. With your ability and my capital, we would become wealthy beyond compare."

"If that is all you seek, why not a business partnership?"

Mr. Twitch licked his lips. "Exclusivity. A monopoly on your talents is worth more than this silo stuffed to the rafters with bronze. I know I am not the only one to recognize this. Others shall swoop in on you at any moment. But I will be the one who strikes the deal."

"Ah, I see now. You *are* a romantic. I truly appreciate your time and will assuredly consider your offer." Penelope took Mr. Twitch by the arm and led him back to the door.

"Consider my offer?" Mr. Twitch repeated. "I understand that the value of my offer has a strict monetary limit, and you may be used to things that I have no interest in, like companionship, compassion and all sorts of that feelings nonsense," he said, giving her hand a pat. "That is why I feel it is necessary to include a condition, or *proviso*, if you will. One which I believe you ought to consider, as it not only affects you but also your children."

"Mr. Twitch, are you implying you wish to present yourself as a respectable father to my children? I'm touched," Penelope said with a cutting tone.

"Don't be daft. I would have the brats shipped off to boarding school at once," he said with a wave of his hand.

"It is nearly impossible to resist your charm."

"Charm is not an investment I take stock in. But if it came to pass that you chose another path, it would be...let's say...unfortunate if your children were to fall into squalor."

"I beg your pardon?" Penelope said, her voice rising for the first time.

"You may view me as the majority shareholder and chairman of the bank. But allow me to correct that misconception. I AM the bank. I own your debt, therefore I own you. This house, the workshop, every possession you have acquired over the pathetic dribble that is your life will be taken from you. With a snap of my fingers, you're homeless; with the stroke of my pen, you're penniless. If I merely wish it, your children will be destitute for the rest of their pitiful lives."

Penelope slowly nodded. "Quite a well-reasoned and compelling argument, Mr. Twitch. You have given me plenty to think about."

"That was all I set out to do, my dear. I look forward to your decision." He plucked his bowler hat back off the coat rack and trudged down the lane.

Penelope shut the door behind him and rubbed her forehead vigorously. In no time there came a resounding knock. Thinking Mr. Twitch had returned, Penelope bit her tongue and flung open the door. But it was not Mr. Twitch.

Instead of a stout banker in a tweed suit, a giant of a man took up the entrance. He had a thick gray walrus mustache and a grizzled harsh face, offset by a neatly pressed sentry captain's uniform. His shoulders spanned the breadth of the doorway. He stood resolute and firm, his hawk-like eyes fixed on Penelope.

"Captain Notch, to what do I owe the pleasure?" Penelope said, taken aback by his sudden appearance.

"Mrs. Penelope Burly." His voice was gruff, though he was clearly trying to mask it. "I am here on important sentry business. There is much I need to discuss with you. Now, if you would be so kind as to invite me in."

"Of course," said Penelope, motioning with her free arm.

The captain took three strides in and looked Penelope square in the eye.

"I have come to propose marriage," he said curtly, "and it would be in your best interest to accept."

"Please allow me to take a seat. This will be my second proposal of the evening." Penelope sat down. "And I must say I have not quite recovered from the first."

Captain Notch raised an eyebrow. "I see. Here I hoped to have beaten everyone to the punch."

## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

"First is not always best," Penelope responded.

"Too true," Captain Notch nodded.

Penelope took a deep breath and feigned a smile. "So, Captain Notch, why are you proposing marriage?"

His brow hardened. "For the sentry—what other reason is there? The loss of your husband was a terrible blow to us—the greatest tonn smith the Island of Tiber has known in the past quarter-century."

"Thank you."

"Indeed, there is no doubt that with the loss of Irenaeus, the island's most valuable asset has shifted from his animatonns to your bronze. It is well known that the greatest light spinners fall quite short of you."

"I'm flattered, yet my skills are obtainable in many other fashions rather than resorting to marriage."

"Would you deny the sentry what it needs most to combat the unending onslaught of the creatures of the night?" Captain Notch's voice began to rise. "Deny us the light we so desperately need?"

"I have never denied the sentry anything," Penelope's voice rose to match. "I have worked hand in hand with your men for years."

"And yet it was your husband who always got your best work, while the sentry lapped up the scraps. Don't you see how selfish that was?" Captain Notch asserted. "If your work had been better distributed amongst the sentry, perhaps he would still be here."

"How dare you!" Penelope stood up from her chair, fighting the urge to slap him.

"I dare, I most certainly dare," said Captain Notch. Abruptly rising from his chair, he inched his way forward, backing Penelope against the wall. "We are at war. Do not forget it. The sentry are the ones who protect you and your children. It is through our efforts you have a chance to wake up and see the new morning."

"For which we are ever most grateful," Penelope said, trying to regain some composure through her ignited hatred.

"It is not gratitude that holds the dusklings at bay," Captain Notch barked, picking a pitcher off the table. "It is the blood and toil of the sentry." He brandished the empty pitcher at her as if it were a sword. "We will no longer

tolerate your time being split on other matters. Nothing is more important than the protection of this city. NOTHING! It is either defense of the city or death to all.” With that, he slammed the pitcher on the floor and it shattered into a thousand pieces.

Penelope did not know what to say. Her breath was rapid.

Captain Notch furrowed his brow, looked at the mess, and brushed a few of the pieces with his boot. “I must be sure you understand. What I am about to say I do not say lightly, but I do for the good of all Tiber.” His voice lowered in volume but not in rage. “I am willing to sacrifice anything for the sentry to have what it needs. Anything, any animatonnn, any man, any woman, I would even sacrifice children if the need called for it.” His eyes flashed.

“I hope you are not implying what I think you are,” Penelope said, her voice shaking.

“It would be a tragedy should any harm come to your children. Boys and girls wander too close to the edge every day. One tiny slip—” With the heel of his boot, Mr. Notch crunched a large porcelain piece of the pitcher and ground it into the floor. “And they’re gone.” Removing his boot revealed nothing but white dust. “These are the types of tragedies that the sentry prevents. If you were to choose anything other than what is in the best interests of the sentry, you would be playing with your children’s very lives.”

“That is a daring thing to say,” Penelope said through clenched teeth.

“I only do what I must.”

“As will I.”

Captain Notch nodded. “Very well. I will wait expectantly for your answer.” He turned and marched out the door, shutting it firmly behind him.

Penelope took a deep breath and then screamed into her fist in rage.

“How could he say that?”

She turned abruptly. Athena had come down the stairs and was gazing at her mother in disbelief.

“Have you been listening the whole time?”

“He threatened to kill us! The fat one threatened to make us homeless,” Athena said in shock.

“I told you to go to your room!” Penelope shouted.

“You—you just stood there and let them walk all over you.”

## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

"What would you have me do? Tell them both that I think they're cowards, targeting a widow and her children not even a day after the loss of their husband and father? And what would that accomplish? Ensure the wrath of the sentry and the bank. I needed to buy us time."

"To do what?"

"I don't know yet. I have no idea. But I need time to think."

The door swung open.

"Forgive me, am I intruding?" A man clad in black stepped uninvited into the parlor. He had a pointed black mustache and a matching goatee. His eyes were black, his hat was black, and in his hand, he wielded a black cane. Everything about him was black except for his pale skin and bloodless lips.

With one hand he clasped the tip of the brim of his top hat, removed it with a flourish, and gave a formal bow. "Mrs. Burly, allow me to introduce myself. I am Mr. Scratch."

Athena and Penelope both glared at the intruder.

"You may be wondering why I am here."

"I believe I could hazard a guess," Penelope said, rapidly regaining her composure.

"I have no doubt." His eyes scanned her up and down several times, then he pursed his lips.

"You want to marry my mother," Athena snapped.

"There are many things I would like to do to your mother," Mr. Scratch said, giving Athena a sinister grin.

Athena scowled at him in disgust.

"Athena, please do as I say and head upstairs."

"Oh no, she should stay. After all, this proposition affects her as well." Mr. Scratch held up his cane, blocking her from the stairs.

"Mr. Scratch, I must insist, she is young. She ought to be in bed."

Mr. Scratch pulled back his cane. "Why of course, sweet Penelope. I live to do your bidding."

"Why do *you* want to marry her?" Athena asked.

"My dear child, who wouldn't want to marry your mother? She's smart, strong, beautiful, and no one can spin light the way she does. Why, a man who had such a magnificent woman by his side—and, let's say, the proper

imagination—would be able to rise to any station he desired, perhaps even above the governor himself.”

“You do me a great service with your compliments,” Penelope feigned.

“Compliment? Do you have coolant in your ears? He admitted he wants to use you for some stupid political power,” Athena hissed. “How is that a compliment?”

“Athena!” Penelope reprimanded.

“I see your daughter has inherited what I can only presume is your vivacious spirit. And perhaps she has also inherited your quick tongue.” Mr. Scratch gave Athena’s cheek an enthusiastic pinch. She quickly pulled her face away. “And that’s what this is all about, isn’t it? Inheritance, legacy...what we leave behind.” Mr. Scratch began to saunter around the room. “How important is reputation? It’s everything. Not just for us and for our children, but for our children’s children. After all, it is your reputation that brought me through your front door this very evening.

“Your husband was renowned for his work, and you were the one who fueled him. And he ought to be always remembered for the great things he has accomplished. And yet, how many times has a single scandal tarnished an otherwise noble reputation? Scandal causes heroes to fall to ruin and become reviled for all future generations. Could you imagine anything worse? Your husband: not forgotten, but vilified.”

“It is quite an unpleasant thought,” Penelope added.

“Isn’t it? And think of the children—*your children*—despised for the sins of their father, disgraced for all time immemorial.”

“Then we must be glad that no such scandal exists. My husband was a good man.”

“I have no doubt of Irenaeus Burly’s character. But scandal need not be true to send one into the pit. It only needs to be sensational and half-believable. People are like leeches. They will latch onto anything with a pulse and suck out the very heart and soul of what was once their hero. They simply need the right story. An affair perhaps? No, doesn’t cut deep enough. You could say he was a criminal, but people don’t really hate criminals. The best thing would be to say—”

## TWITCH, NOTCH, & SCRATCH

“Mr. Scratch,” Penelope cut in loudly. “Is this your threat? To destroy my late husband’s reputation and that of our family if I don’t marry you?”

“Madam! Only someone absolutely absent of moral fiber would ever dream of using rumors to destroy a loving family. I assure you, if you were to marry me *that* would never happen. But if you do not choose me, I cannot afford my protection of you, and have no way of knowing what a less respectable man might do.” His pale lips curled into a smile. “If you catch my meaning.”

“I think your meaning is clear as the night sky.”

“Excellent. I ask you, think of my proposal with an open mind.” Mr. Scratch’s eyes flew from Athena to Penelope, and then rested on her for a moment. “The life of a man can be here one minute and gone the next, but his reputation...reputation lasts forever.”

The room fell silent except for the patter of the fox’s feet.

“Shall I see myself out?” Mr. Scratch bowed again, and in a blink vanished out the door.

“Athena,” Penelope said, her eyes tired and voice strained. “Go to bed.”

Athena bit her lip. There were a great many things she wished to tell her mother, none of which would meet her father’s approval. Instead, she turned away and stomped up the stairs in a fit.

Penelope collapsed to the floor and began to weep. After several minutes, she picked herself up and climbed the stairs to her room. Argus was curled up at the foot of her bed. Socrates was perched on the bedside table.

“Ren—oh Ren,” she whispered to herself. “I don’t know what to do. I don’t know where to turn. I need you Ren. I need you.”

Socrates’s eyes whirled to life. “Great news!” he chirped. “I have received a message from your husband. He is indeed alive!”



## THEY COME AT NIGHT

Athena. Athena, get up.” Penelope shook her daughter awake. Athena sat up in a haze as her mother rummaged through her closet, tossing all manner of clothes onto her bed.

“Wha-what are you doing?” Athena asked.

“Get dressed,” Penelope commanded. “There is not much time to explain.”

“Is your light leaking? It’s the middle of the night.” Athena slammed her head back into her pillow.

“Athena, get out of bed now,” Penelope ordered.

“What could possibly be so important?”

“Your father is alive and I daresay your mother has hatched a plan that involves a daring rescue,” cheeped Socrates.

Athena bolted upright. “What do you mean Father’s alive?”

“I mean he is not dead. Dead men do not send messages after all, and I have just received one from him a few moments ago.”

“I need to wake up Thaddeus. Get dressed,” Penelope repeated before stealing out of the room.



## THEY COME AT NIGHT

"What was the message?" Athena asked as she fumbled with her boots.

"What message?" Socrates cocked his head.

"The one my father sent you," Athena snipped.

"Oh! That message—it was his name," Socrates said cheerfully.

"His name?"

"Yes, on loop, being played over and over and over again."

"Where is it coming from?"

"Why, the land below, I daresay."

"Right, but where precisely?" She fastened her belt.

"That I cannot tell you, for we are currently too far away from the source of the signal."

"What is your receiver's maximum range for a signal like this?"

"I do not know."

"How can you not know?"

"Your father did not make me to know."

"Well, what can you tell me?"

Socrates paused for a second. "Imagine a thousand fireflies flickering over a hill spelling out your father's name. I can tell you what direction they are coming from, but I cannot tell you precisely where they originate—that is, until we get closer."

Penelope re-entered the room with a groggy Thaddeus in tow.

"Morning bells, Ath," croaked Thaddeus. He wore a midnight blue cloak and a ruddy leather pack that belonged to their father. Penelope hoisted a second one to Athena.

"What's this?"

"Lamp, rations, a few animatonn spare parts, extra pair of shoes, change of clothes, hopefully enough provisions to last for what lies ahead." Off the top of the bed, Penelope picked up a black cloak and handed it to Athena. "This."

Athena put it on.

"Good," her mother said. "Vox!" The copper fox appeared by their side. "Run ahead to the Starboard Harbor, find a path devoid of man or bronze. Report back when the coast is clear." The fox bowed and took off down the stairs like a bolt.

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"Alright, it looks like we are ready to head out. I need you both to follow quickly and silently. Curfew is in full effect, so we must not be caught. If we are, this chance to rescue your father may be lost forever."

The children nodded.

Donning her own midnight cloak and quickly fastening it around her neck with a brass bear pin, she led the children downstairs. To everyone's surprise, Vox halted at the front door, his tail in the air to signal danger.

"What does this mean?" Athena asked.

"The house is being watched," Penelope said.

"Being watched?" Thaddeus exclaimed. "By whom?"

"Three guesses," Athena said to her mother.

Penelope gazed out the window across the fairway. The outline of a solitary figure stood facing the house. A metal chest piece glinted ever so slightly in the moonlight.

"Argus," Penelope called, and the black wolf prowled forward out of the shadows. "We have an unwelcome guest. Lead him away from the house. Go through the entertainment district to the Portside Market, and have him follow you in circles until daybreak. Then return home. Under no circumstances are you to lure him into the Arena. There is no time for that. Bloodshed must be avoided."

The tungsten wolf obediently bowed his head. Penelope opened the door a crack and Argus slipped through. He trudged forward, making just enough noise to catch the attention of the onlooker. As the wolf bounded toward Portside the shadowy figure followed.

A minute passed, and then another. When Penelope was certain the coast was clear, she turned to the fox. "Alright, Vox, you're up. Find us a clear path to Starboard Harbor. We shall be fifteen minutes behind you. I dare not delay any longer than that. Time is against us." She cracked open the door for a second time and the copper fox disappeared in a wink.

After a few minutes, Athena's curiosity got the better of her. "Are you going to tell us what the plan is?"

"Not until we get where we need to be."

"Why not just tell us now while we're waiting?" Athena asked.

"No," Penelope said as she kept an eye on the window.

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“No?” Athena shook her head. “That’s it? We can’t have any more information than that?”

“No,” Penelope repeated firmly. “You can’t. I will tell you the plan when you need to know the plan. Right now you need to do what I ask, and what I am asking you is to be silent.”

Athena crossed her arms and scowled.

After a quarter of an hour, Penelope nodded to her children to draw their cloaks. She bid them forward through the front door, closing it silently and locking it behind them.

The air was calm and quiet with the moon blazing at the tip of the sky. Other than the light from the stars and moon, the city was masked in darkness. No street lamps, not a single light in the gleaming metal high-rises dared flicker. Blackness stretched out before them. Curfew would not lift until daybreak.

Penelope’s heart pounded as they felt their way down the starlit lane. Empty street followed empty street. One bad turn and they would come face to face with a sentry or an animatonn on patrol. The alarm would sound and all would be lost. Heavy footsteps of a rhinoceros, the rattling of a lion’s metal mane—Penelope recognized each noise and each animatonn to whom it belonged, for Ren had built and designed many. Frequently she motioned for the children to halt and circumvented their trail down an alternate alleyway.

In a few short hours, the city would stir with the sunrise. The Starboard Market and harbor would be a bevy of excitement. Penelope had considered waiting till morning—perhaps have the children escape in the daily confusion of the morning sink. The traveler and merchant skyships leave the harbor in droves each morning, causing the island of Tiber to descend a few dozen feet. After all, who would notice one more ship?

*Captain Notch, that’s who*, Penelope thought. The sentry routinely patrolled the harbors. It would be beyond simple to have his guards keep watch for her.

A few streets down, the rapid patter of metal feet echoed against the cobblestones. Thaddeus gasped, but Athena and Penelope sighed in relief—they knew too well the playful gait of the approaching paws. Vox rounded the corner, spotted his owners, and bowed. Then he lifted his front leg and pointed with the tip of his nose to a side street.

## THE BRONZE AGE

For the better part of an hour, Vox twisted and darted down a maze of winding alleyways. Not once did they catch the unwelcome gaze of man or animatonn. The fox's tail whipped with excitement as they came into view of the Starboard Harbor.

The red balloons of thousands of dirigibles darkened the star-soaked sky. Airships of every size and shape hoisted the wooden perches of the harbor into an upward sloping ramp.

The Island of Tiber had often been referred to by its residents as the isle of red clouds. This came from the fact that the vast majority of the skyship's balloons were many a shade of red. Blood red, bold red, apple red, a soft shade of pink—it didn't matter so long as they were red. It was said that when Tiber left the land below, its first governor wanted to attract merchants from the other floating islands. He asked all citizens to paint the balloons of their skyships red, making the island easily identifiable. Over the decades the custom had never fallen out of practice.

Penelope led her children to a smaller skiff off the central pier.

"Your father is in the land below, and according to Socrates, he hasn't moved since he started his transmission. My guess is he is stuck, waiting for rescue. With no hawkpack, he will not be able to return on his own."

"Why don't we tell the sentry?" asked Thaddeus. "They'll go save Father; that is what they do, after all."

Athena shook her head as though she knew what her mother was about to say. "The sentry will not help us this time." Penelope placed a hand on both her children's shoulders.

"What I am about to ask of you is more than I ever have—and hopefully more than I ever will again—but the fate of all our lives rests on it. Do you understand?" Athena and Thaddeus both nodded. "The two of you will take this skiff down to the land below, find your father, and bring him home."

"The two of us, you mean—without you?" Thaddeus asked in bewilderment. "You're not coming?"

"I can't," Penelope said. "There are men here, vile men, who would stop at nothing to get what they want from me. If I were to go with you, I have no doubt they would hunt us down in a matter of hours, and should they find us

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alone in the land below,” Penelope paused, “they would take me and remove you from the equation with abject cruelty. The two of you must do this alone.”

“You’re scared,” Athena said, much louder than she ought. “I can’t believe you! You expect Thaddeus and I to be brave while you sit quietly at home?”

“Athena, please, there is more to this than you understand.”

“Oh, I understand. You cower in the corner but pretend it is for our own good. What you’re doing isn’t brave. It isn’t for us. Father would never—”

“I’m pregnant,” Penelope shouted the words, ringing across the silent wharf. She quickly realized her mistake and lowered her voice. “I was going to tell your father the night he fell. Your new brother or sister will be here in a few short months. Normally this would be a cause for celebration, but given our current circumstances, it complicates matters to no end. I *will* slow you down and I *will* draw the wrath of the men I spurned. This is the only choice. Truly, I may not be able to save myself or the baby from *them*. But this is a chance to save the two of you. I want nothing more than to go with you. It is simply not possible.”

“I want to stay with you,” Thaddeus said to Penelope.

“It’s not safe. These men will do everything in their power to destroy you if I do not comply with their wishes. They want to use you to get to me. I cannot afford them that opportunity. You both must go, find your father, and bring him home.”

Penelope pulled from her cloak a map and handed it to Thaddeus. “Be brave, be mindful, do what your sister says. She will watch after you.”

She handed Athena a compass. “Be clever, be smart. If you can, hide. If you can’t, fight. When you find your father, return to me as soon as you are able. I will be holding out for you as long as I can. If something happens, follow the map. Socrates will lead the way. Take Vox with you for protection.”

“You should keep Vox,” Athena said. “You may need him.”

“I have Argus.” Penelope looked down at the copper fox. “Vox, disguise.” Quickly the clockwork fox transformed into a copper-colored top hat that Penelope placed on Athena’s head.

Thaddeus followed. “You too, Socks, disguise.” Socrates transformed into an aviator cap that he picked up and placed on his own head.

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“I love you both more than anything. Remember, the world is a far more dangerous place than you could ever imagine, and people are capable of malevolence that you would not believe, but you are both far stronger than you know.” Penelope gave each of her children a hug and a kiss before they both boarded the skiff and launched from the pier into the star-filled night. The floating Island of Tiber disappeared into the darkness.



## THE LAND BELOW

Are we headed the right way?" Thaddeus asked for the thousandth time, peering blindly into the unyielding fog.

"Yes, for the most part," Socrates said, perched atop the bow of the skiff. "We are most certainly not going in the wrong direction."

"Can you be *any* more specific?" Athena asked from the helm, Vox laying at her feet. "Perhaps, an estimate of how far away our father's signal is?"

"Most certainly. I would approximate between thirty and fifteen hundred miles."

Athena shook her head. "Thanks for narrowing it down."

"You are quite welcome," Socrates chirped.

The skiff plunged into a wall of cloud masking the starry night from view.

"It's dark. It's too dark. I can't see anything. What would happen if we ran into a mountain or something?" asked Thaddeus.

"I daresay, it would likely result in the destruction—"

"Don't!" Athena snapped. "We are not going to run into a mountain."

"What about a bird, like a really big one—or another floating island?" Thaddeus continued.

## THE BRONZE AGE

"We are not going to run into another island or a bird or anything of the sort."

"We could. You don't know. We don't even know how high up we are! The duskling swarm might be right above us, or below us or behind us." Thaddeus paused for a long moment. The wooden planks of the skiff creaked.

"I think we should turn on a light," said Thaddeus.

Athena shook her head. "If we turn on a light every duskling within a hundred miles will know exactly where we are."

"THEY MIGHT ALREADY BE HERE. We could fly right into them."

"I'm not turning on a light because you're scared of the dark." Athena watched the outline of her brother slump off to the bow in defeat. Her tone was harsher than she intended.

"We'll use Vox," Athena sighed. "The light will stay on three seconds, no longer." She gave the copper fox a gentle nudge with her foot. "Vox, let your light shine."

The tip of the fox's tail glowed brilliant gold. It streaked through the cloud in a tube of light, revealing nothing. After a few more rotations of the fox's tail, Athena scowled. "Turn it off. It's not helping."

"But—" Thaddeus interjected.

"No buts. We tried. It didn't work. We stay the course as best we can. The fog will let up eventually."

The fog did not let up. It grew thicker and heavier, to the point where the children could not make out their own hands. Thaddeus became invisible to Athena.

"Thad," she called. "You're still on deck, right?"

"Yes, I'm still on deck."

A few more minutes passed.

"Still going in the right direction, Socrates?"

"Indubitably."

"Good. Still on deck, Thad?"

There was no reply.

"Thad!" she repeated fiercely.

"What?" Thaddeus said.

"You didn't respond. I thought you fell off the ship!"



## THE LAND BELOW

“Well, I didn’t.”

“You need to respond when I call you.”

“Fine,” said Thad.

“Fine,” said Athena.

“Quite fine,” said Socrates brightly.

A few moments passed. “You still there?” Athena asked.

“Yes...” said Thad.

A few more moments. “Still there?”

“YES!” Thad shouted.

A screeching howl pierced the wind, followed by a second shriek. Thaddeus collapsed to his hands and knees. “No-no-no-no-no—” he repeated over and over again.

“Socrates, Vox, defense mode! Thad, I’m going to try some evasive maneuvers. Everyone hold on!” Athena shouted from the helm.

The skyship zigged and zagged wildly, to and fro, rising and lowering. The clouds lightened and Athena could make out Thaddeus’s shape in the front of the bow. The stars were visible again. Thaddeus’s head craned upward.

“ATH!” he shouted. A pair of black shapes swooped out of the fog. “Dusklings!”

The beastly creatures circled the airship. Vox and Socrates stood resolute and poised, readying for a chance to attack. The dusklings separated. One dove beneath the hull, latching onto the underside like a leech. The sound of its claws reverberated up either side of the ship as the creature scuttled about upside down like an oversized cockroach. The second creature swooped up, sinking its claws into the airship’s primary balloon, poking and tearing furiously.

At once, Vox’s tail unfurled and took aim. The tail tip glowed again, brighter and full of ferocity. The black creature on the balloon howled, its glowing orange tongue shaking madly at the copper fox. There was a loud *crack*, like thunder. A bolt of blue light fired from the fox’s tail. The black creature fell from the ship to the darkness below.

The skiff rapidly descended as the hot air escaped through the gaping hole.

“We are going down!” Thad cried. “Pull up! Pull up!”

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena cranked the furnace. The more heat she added, the more rapidly the air poured out, widening the holes, hastening their descent. Athena spun the helm's wheel. The ship did not turn.

"The duskling below must have torn up the rudder. I can't do anything!" Athena called out. Thaddeus poked his head over the side of the ship. Rolling black shapes stretched out over the land below. "I think we are going to crash into the sea."

"I daresay that seems highly unlikely given the distance we have traveled," Socks chirped.

"Well then, what's that?" Thad asked, pointing downward.

A ripping howl sounded. The black, eyeless, earless snout of the duskling growled as it clung to the underside of the hull, pulling itself up on deck.

Thaddeus backed away and fell over himself. Socks jumped in front of him. "I will not let you harm this boy."

Just as Socks finished, the ship struck not water, but trees. The airship pitched as if hit by a thousand spears. Branches scraped and pierced the hull. Smaller trees uprooted. A spruce ripped the duskling away. It fell to the earth with a screech. An ancient oak shattered the port side, flipping the ship on its ear. The impact tossed Athena and Thaddeus to the mossy forest floor.

Athena lay on her back, her heart pounding beneath her ribs. Nothing felt broken. Her fingers, her toes all seemed functional. She sat up. Miraculously, the worst appeared to be a few scratches and a deep gash on her chin.

"Thad? Thad, where are you?"

"I'm here."

Athena scurried over to her brother. "Can you walk?"

"I think so." Thad pulled himself up. "Where are Socks and Vox?"

"That was a most unpleasant crash." The otter scuttled down the side of a nearby tree.

"Socks, do you know where Vox is?" Thad asked.

"Unfortunately, no."

"Vox!" Athena called.

"Ath, should you be shouting?" Thad asked.

"Vox could be hurt," Athena said sharply.

"But that duskling is out there."

## THE LAND BELOW

“Vox!” Athena shouted again, ignoring her brother’s warning.

The fox scampered out of the wreckage. It twisted its head towards Athena, its ruby eyes glowing in the dark.

“Vox,” Athena said, relieved. The copper fox darted forward and nestled itself around her feet. She picked up Vox and gave him a tight squeeze.

A howl sounded not far from their position. The children peered around the tree.

An orange orb flickered in the distance.

“Ath!” Thaddeus gasped in a half-whisper.

The hovering orb seemed to be moving toward them, first slowly, then quickly gaining speed.

Athena grabbed her brother by the scruff of the neck and pulled him behind a tree. Slowly she peered around the other side.

A black mass the size of a bear tore along the forest floor. Its jaw hung open. Short pale breaths peppered the air. A long, thick, flame-colored tongue swayed in a steady rhythm. At the tip of the tongue hung a blazing orange eye that surveyed the dark for the first sign of light.

“It’s not flying away,” Thad whispered. “Why isn’t it flying away?”

Athena held the copper fox up to her face. “Vox,” she whispered, voice cracking. “I need you to distract the duskling and lead it away. Once you lose it, come back to me.”

“You seem most upset at this parting. Why not send me instead?” Socks chirped.

“You have to take us to Father.” She gave her fox a kiss on the forehead. “Vox, let your light shine.” She tossed Vox to the ground and it darted off, its tail glowing a brilliant gold.

The duskling screeched. Its orange eye shook furiously before it dashed after the golden light.

Thaddeus and Athena took off in the opposite direction as fast as they could muster. They stumbled through the woods until both children bent over out of breath.

“I do believe that we may have lost that horrifying creature,” Socrates chirped. “Thanks to the noble sacrifice—”

## THE BRONZE AGE

"It wasn't a sacrifice," Athena snarled between breaths. "Vox knows what he is doing."

"Of course, I did not mean to imply—"

"Ath!" Thad pointed. In front of them, a second yellow ball of light appeared from behind a nearby tree. Athena grabbed Thaddeus and the two dove behind a fallen log. They listened earnestly as heavy feet crunched along the dead leaves of the forest. Thaddeus was breathing heavily, too heavily. If the creature had not caught their scent, it could surely hear him.

"Socks, weapon," Athena whispered, barely audible.

The otter, who was holding hands with Thaddeus, attached itself to his arm, encasing it in the form of a hand-mounted cannon. Socrates's eyes closed and his mouth opened, emanating a glowing blue light. Thaddeus took several nervous gulps in order to steel his wits to fire.

Athena watched her brother's insecure shaking. "We don't have time for this," she said to herself, though clearly loud enough for Thaddeus to hear. Grabbing the otter arm cannon off her brother, she pulled and reattached it to her own arm, took a deep breath, stood suddenly and took aim.

A wrinkled old man with frayed and matted gray whiskers held a gas lamp high above his head. His deep black eyes peered at the children with shock and suspicion. In his opposite hand, he cradled a long hunting rifle.

"Who are you?" Athena gasped.

The old man said nothing, but shook his head and put his finger to his lips.

Athena lowered her otter arm cannon. "My brother and I lost our way." Athena grabbed her brother by the hand and pulled him up. "We need help."

The old man nodded and with an outstretched hand motioned for the children to follow him.

"Are you going to change Socks back?" Thaddeus whispered to his sister.

Athena held the hand cannon as she watched the old man skulk forth in front of them. "Not yet."

In the distance, they heard a screech. Immediately, the old man doused his lamp, pulled his gun tight against his shoulder and took aim. After about a minute he relit the lamp and beckoned the children to follow with a curt wave of his hand.

## THE LAND BELOW

He led the children further into the woods until a small shanty cabin came into view. The old man headed to the front door. He kicked the door with his heel. Slowly it creaked open. His eyes scanned the wood, rifle at the ready. After several passes, he gave a nod to the children to enter the shack. Thaddeus gave his sister a concerned glance. Athena clutched Socrates and gave her brother a nod.

Together they entered the shack. The old man slipped in last, heaving a wooden beam that barred the door closed. Thaddeus stood behind his sister, both of them unsure what would happen next. The old man set the lamp on a hook in the center of the room and turned the light up. The wrinkles on his face hid behind his thick gray whiskers. He gave the children a once over, clicked his tongue, and placed his rifle in the corner of the shack before taking a seat in an old rocker.

“Sir,” Athena said, “I must ask, what are you planning to do with us?”

The old man lit his pipe and began to rock. “Do with you? *Do* with you?” he puffed. “Don’t seem very thankful, do you?”

“Thankful?”

“I saved you little ones from the creatures of the night. Some gratitude seems in order.”

“Thank you,” Thaddeus squeaked.

“Welcome, now why don’t you tell me where you came from and what you’re doin’ in my woods.”

“We are simply travelers passing through,” said Athena.

“Passing through! What do you take me for? The forest shook. Trees cracked. Then I find you two children *passing through*. I think you best try again, and no more mirroring the truth.”

“We are looking for our father,” Thaddeus exclaimed.

The old man gave his pipe a few puffs. “And where might you think this father of yours may be?”

“We’re not quite sure but we know he is somewhere down here,” Thaddeus responded.

“Down here.” The old man tapped his temple several times with his finger. “Down here...so yer from one of those flying rocks.”

Athena bit her bottom lip and nodded. She gripped Socrates tighter.

## THE BRONZE AGE

The old man fell back in his chair laughing. “That explains the thunder in the forest. I got meself now a pair of meteor children. What is it you call us?”

“Honestly, we didn’t know there was anyone here,” Thaddeus said. “But we call this place the land below.”

“The land below. I guess from your position that makes sense.”

“How many people live here?” Athena asked.

“Don’t rightly know. Some, maybe none. Years since I’ve played host in this here cabin.” He relaxed in his rocker. “Makes sense though, can’t pick up our homes and run like you. We cower in the dark. Hope and pray that morning comes. Like mice, we hide away in our holes.”

Athena surveyed the cabin. Everything was in a shabby state of decay. “How long have you lived here?”

“I was probably thrice your age when I found this place.”

“You’re not the original owner.”

The old man shook his head, eyes gleaming. “I think this place is older than the duskings. It would have taken too many nights to build. Or maybe that is what happened to its builder. Got caught out at night.”

“What do the duskings do if they catch you?” Thaddeus asked.

“Haul you off into the darkness, rip you apart, who knows? They just want the light from those mechanized what-cha-call-ems. Anything that gets in their way doesn’t stand a chance,” the old man crooned.

Thaddeus looked at Socrates wrapped around Athena’s arm.

“On the floating rock do you recite the vile rhyme?” the old man asked. Both children nodded. “Then no need to repeat it here. But it perfectly sums up this land we live in. Light is the curse of elders. Light is what the darkness aims to snuff out. I have survived by avoiding the light, and thereby escape the duskings’ wrath.”

An uncomfortable silence nestled in every corner. After a heavy pause, the old man cut in. “So, tell me ‘bout the flying rock you fell from.”

“What do you want to know?” asked Athena.

“Anything, everything, I’m not picky.”

“It’s called Tiber—the island, that is,” Thaddeus said. “Lots of people live there. We have farmers, bakers, carpenters, lots of people.”

## THE LAND BELOW

"Lots of people, all surviving together." The old man shook his head. "Hard to even imagine."

"Yeah, it's nice," Thaddeus continued. "Sometimes on Saturdays, our father would take us to Ebenezer's Sweet Shop and we would be able to get a piece of candy, or sometimes ice cream."

"Ice cream?"

"I have honey taffy. Packed it when my mother was yelling at Athena." Thaddeus opened his pack and dug in before triumphantly emerging with a pink wad wrapped in wax paper. He bumbled over to the old man and handed him the taffy.

The man slowly unwound the wax paper and sniffed the pink globule before tossing it into his mouth. His eyes widened and he grabbed the young lad's shoulder.

"Are you okay?" Thaddeus asked.

Tears welled up in the man's eyes. "Never in all my years have I ever tasted anything so sweet."

"Yeah, it's pretty good," Thaddeus said brightly. "I have some more flavors."

"There's more?" the old man said in amazement.

Thaddeus retreated to his pack. "Strawberry, blueberry, gooseberry...they're mostly berry flavors." Thaddeus returned to the old man, dropping a handful of wax wrapped candy into his lap.

The man gaped in disbelief as though he had been showered in gold. "Thank you. Young man—truly, thank you."

"It's fine, I can always get more once we get home," Thaddeus chimed brightly.

"But how will you get home?" The old man asked.

Athena turned away.

"We'll figure it out. First we've got to find our father. He will know how to get home," Thaddeus said confidently. "He's very smart."

"And how do you plan on finding your father?"

"Oh, that's easy," Thaddeus grinned. "We are going to follow Socks."

The old man cocked his head. "Not familiar with that expression."

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena hid the otter arm cannon behind her back. “Thad, I think that might be enough for now.”

The old man took the pipe out of his mouth. “Why? What are you hiding?”

As if to answer his question, a shuffling scratch sounded at the base of the door.

The old man bolted upright, snatched his rifle, and took aim. “A duskling! How is that possible? We should have heard it coming.”

Athena shook her head, unsure.

“You two pull the bar when I say. I’ll blast off the creature’s tongue-eye then fill its face full of lead.”

Athena and Thad walked to either side of the door and lifted the bar. The old man swung it open. In a quick flash, a copper gleam dashed into the cabin.

“What in blue blazes—”

“Vox!” Athena shouted. The copper fox leapt into her arms.

“That-that there—that’s one of them what-cha-ma-call-ems,” the old man hissed, taking aim at Athena.

“This is my animatonn Vox,” Athena said. “A duskling had us cornered and he led it away so we could escape. Vox saved our lives.”

“Not only do you bring that light-soaked beast into my home, but it had a duskling on its tail. How do we know it wasn’t followed?”

“Vox is smarter than that.”

“It doesn’t have a brain. Just light for those creatures to hone in on. I ain’t going to be ripped to shreds for the sake of a toy. The dusklings will be beatin’ down my door to sink their teeth into its hide. That machine puts us in the worst kind of danger.”

“No more than Socks,” said Thaddeus. “And he’s been here the whole time.”

The old man looked as though he was going to pop a blood vessel. “Who is Socks?”

Athena placed her weapon on the floor. “Socks, base form.” The arm cannon transformed back into an otter.

“I daresay, I don’t think I like being a gun.”

The old man shook his head fervently. “We’re doomed. We have to destroy them.” He took aim at the otter.



## THE LAND BELOW

“No! You can’t.” Athena exclaimed.

“Did I miss something?” Socks inquired. “Why does this gentleman wish to destroy me?”

“CAN’T I? You bring these machinations of evil into my home, endangering all our lives, and for what, so you can have a pet?”

“Socks knows where our father is. If you destroy him, we will never find him and we will never get home.”

The old man stared down the barrel of his rifle, terror burning in his eyes.

“Please,” Athena begged. “We need them.”

The old man lowered his gun. “You need to leave. All of you. I won’t harm you. But I ain’t dying for you.”

Athena slowly nodded. “We’ll leave. Thad, grab your sack.” She gave the old man a knowing look. “I’m sorry.”

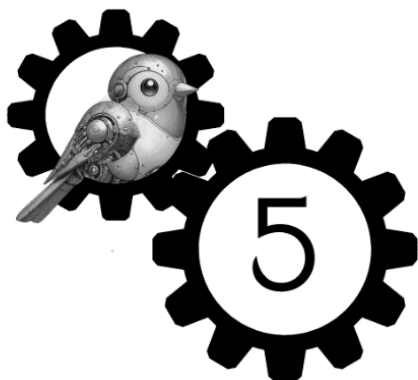
“Just leave,” he repeated.

Thaddeus grabbed his pack and Athena did likewise, placing Socrates on her shoulder.

“I wish you all the best, my good sir,” the otter chirped brightly.

Thaddeus picked up the taffy off the floor, walked over to the man and placed it in his hands. “You keep it,” he said. Then he and his sister stepped out into the darkness.

The old man sank into his rocker staring at the wax paper wrapped sweets in his hands and wept.



## FELIX & BUTTERCUP

Athena and Thaddeus followed close to Socrates through the black trees of the forest. Tensions remained high the entire night. Athena refused to let Vox or Socrates shine light, fearing any moment a duskling would swoop down on top of them and thrash them to bits. When they spotted the orange and pink sunrise through the edge of the woods, they were both filled with a profound sense of relief. Exhausted, Athena and Thaddeus stepped into the shelter of the warm sunlight. As long as there was sunlight, they were safe.

At the edge of the forest, they paused to eat a quick breakfast. Athena unpacked rations of dried fruit and cheese. Thaddeus eagerly devoured his share.

“Take it easy Thad,” Athena encouraged. “The food needs to last for who knows how long.”

Thaddeus swallowed a chunk of cheese. “Ath, how are we going to get home without a skyship?”

Athena reached into her sack and pulled out the compass and map her mother had given them. “Mother told us if anything happened, follow the map.” She unfurled the parchment. “Oh,” she said.

“What is it?” Thad asked, craning over her shoulder.

“Mother’s plan.” Underneath a bold inked X read *Landing Day: Summer’s Eve*.

## FELIX & BUTTERCUP

"Summer's Eve, that's in seven days," Thaddeus said, his mouth full.

"That means we have one week to find our father and make it to the spot on the map."

"Lake Ancora," Thaddeus read aloud. "Where is that?"

"I don't know," Athena responded, poring over the map.

"Well, where are we?"

"I don't know that either."

"You don't know very much, do you?" Thaddeus jibed playfully.

Athena gave her brother a look. "Socrates, is there any way you can figure out where we are on the map?"

"Unfortunately, I do not have knowledge of this land below," chirped the otter.

"That's what I figured," Athena sighed. She cradled the compass in her left hand. "Which direction is Father in?"

Socrates pointed to the southeast. She compared the direction with the map. "That means we could be up here." She waved her hand around the forest regions toward the top of the parchment. "But possibly down here." She moved her hand toward the forest regions toward the bottom. After examining the map for a few more moments she shook her head. "Or there, or there; either way, we will still have a lot of backtracking and may have difficulty making it to Lake Ancora by Summer's Eve." She folded the map and put it away. "But our first task remains clear. We must find Father."

For two days Thaddeus and Athena kept up a brisk pace. They marched in as straight of a line as they could manage. The second night they crowded together under a heavy brush that concealed them quite nicely, but on the third the best they could find was a thicket of barren saplings. There was just enough starlight for roaming shadows and dark shapes to play upon Thaddeus's nerves. He clutched Socrates tightly against his chest. The otter's joints rattled ever so slightly. The children refused to say a word to each other or to the animatons until the morning light crested over the rolling hills.

The relief brought by the morning light was cut short by a shower of stiff reprimands.

## THE BRONZE AGE

"I told you last night and I will tell you again, when the sun sets you cannot jostle about the way you do. Socrates and you were making far too much noise. We are going to get spotted if you can't control yourself."

"I'm sorry, Ath. The darkness feels so heavy down here. I have never been out in the open at night before. We have no shelter—no real protection. What would we do if the dusklings found us?"

"We do what Mother told us," Athena said, feeling a bit uneasy mentioning their mother. "If you are too scared to act when you need to, you are no use to anyone."

On the afternoon of the third day the children found themselves hiking through an open field heading southeast. Not a road or house or any sign of civilization had been seen since they escaped the old man's shack days earlier.

"How much farther, Socks?" Thaddeus asked as Vox dashed around them in wide circles.

"I still cannot say. However, we are most certainly closer to your father than we were yesterday,"

"One would hope so," Athena said.

Vox came dashing up to them, growling and thrashing his tail. Athena held out her hand, motioning for Thaddeus to freeze. "Someone's here."

"Hullo!" a jovial voice called. A man on a hill stood waving wildly at the children. "Hullo!" he repeated. Rapidly, he scampered down the hill toward them.

Vox growled and his tail began to unfurl.

"Vox, no," Athena said, raising her hand. "Don't fire on him... yet."

The man had a pointed face and beak-like nose. His disheveled beard matched his unruly hair. He wore a light brown duster jacket and waved a bright red handkerchief. On his back, he shouldered a hefty sack both wider and taller than he was. It bobbed up and down as he ambled toward them. An unmistakable smile was on his face.

"Well bless my soul, I didn't think I'd find anyone out here," he panted. Quickly he sized up Athena and Thaddeus.

"Why you—you're just a pair of tots!" The man shook his head as if he could not believe what he was seeing. "Is there an underground around here I'm unaware of?"

## FELIX & BUTTERCUP

“Underground?” Thaddeus looked to his sister.

“What is an underground?” Athena asked the man.

The man was clearly more puzzled than the children. “Underground village, a hidden town? How else do you avoid the duskings? Wait a minute, are you telling me you kids are not from an underground?”

Athena said nothing. Thaddeus shook his head.

“Well pickle my flowers. This is beyond perplexing. I feel downright flummoxed.”

A goldfinch dipped down from the sky and perched itself on the man’s shoulder.

“You have an annimatonn!” Athena gaped.

“Course, how do you think I found you? Buttercup here is my lookout. She flies up above, looks for something interesting and guides me to it. I must say you are the most interesting thing I found all week. But where are my manners? Felix Finch, merchant extraordinaire, at your service, and this here is my girl Buttercup.” He stroked the finch affectionately with his finger.

“I’m Athena Burly, and this is my brother, Thaddeus.” She gave the man a faint nod. “We are currently on a journey trying to find our father.”

“Trying to find him—is he missing? Hiding? Lost to the wild?”

“We don’t know,” said Thaddeus. “He fell three nights before last.”

“Fell?” Felix pondered. “Fell? What do you mean, he fell?”

Thaddeus looked to Athena, worried he might have revealed too much.

“He fell from our island.”

“You kids are from one of those floating cities! What a tremendous turn. I don’t think anything could top this!”

“I daresay, should we at the very least continue walking?” Socrates chimed in for the first time. “We do not get closer to your father’s signal by standing still, after all.”

“THAT—THAT OTTER SPOKE!” Felix shrieked in bewildered jubilation.

They ventured forth with their new companion, answering his litany of questions.

## THE BRONZE AGE

“How many live on your island? How do you get food? Do you ever meet up with other islands? How do you defend against the dusklings?”

Athena let Thaddeus answer the majority of the questions and only corrected him if he was far off the mark.

“That’s not true. Father did not construct dozens of elephants for the sentry.”

“He did! I saw them,” Thaddeus insisted.

“And I helped him build them. He made seven.”

“Still mighty impressive. I hope we find your father. Love to pick his brain, maybe trade a few things with him.”

Buttercup sharply pecked Felix’s finger.

“Ouch!” he yipped. “Course I would never trade you, Buttercup.”

The bird gave an approving tweet before flying off.

They continued for several miles, following Socrates’s lead. Felix was all too eager to explain how life operated in the land below.

“Every town is hidden in order to avoid duskling attacks. Once discovered by those beasts, the entire town will disperse within a day or two. Undergrounds sometimes pop up and are torn down in less than a month. It is an interesting life traveling between hidden towns, selling my wares. Some try to institute rules against bronze. They usually last a bit longer but when they do get discovered...” Felix shook his head. “I’ve seen it happen all too often. No defense means no survivors.”

“That is horribly tragic, I’m sure,” Socrates chirped from in front of them. “Would holding hands make you feel better?”

“How do *you* survive the night?” Thaddeus asked.

“Who, me?” Felix grimaced. “If I’m not at an underground ‘bout an hour before dusk, I’ll find a trench and hunker down under my goodies. Buttercup is usually the only thing with bronze I have on me. We hide pretty snugly under my pack.”

“How do you find these underground towns if they are always being destroyed and moving?” Athena asked.

“Ah, that is where using the old noodle comes in.”

“I fear I do not understand. How does pasta allow you to locate a hidden village?” said Socrates.

## FELIX & BUTTERCUP

"It means using your head," Thaddeus explained.

"Dusklings ain't so sharp at deciphering. So as long as we are not too obvious, we can leave signs of how to find each other."

"What kind of signs?" Athena asked, deeply interested.

Felix let out a low whistle. Buttercup buzzed around his head, chirping with exuberance. With a wave of Felix's fingers, the small bird spiraled upward into the clouds as if released by an invisible leash.

"What is she doing?" asked Thaddeus.

"Finding us a codex," Felix said gingerly.

"A what?" asked Athena.

As if to answer, Buttercup sang sweetly, sounding like a cross between a bird and a music box.

"This way," Felix motioned, following Buttercup's song.

Buttercup rustled her mechanical feathers, trilling sweetly atop a small boulder. On closer examination, the boulder was littered with markings.

"Ah, this is a good one. You see how they drew two lines that intersect at the middle? Each section gives information. This circle represents an underground town, however, notice the X struck through it. The town has already dispersed—or possibly worse."

Thaddeus and Athena both studied the boulder with curiosity.

"Triangle means food. S means scavenge. W means freshwater. The numbers give you an idea of how many hours it will take to walk there. You can find these etched in stones, trees, anything."

"What is that symbol?" Thaddeus asked. He pointed to an oval containing two slanted lines and a bulge at its base split with a scratch.

"I've never seen that before," Felix said, examining the carving. "Could be a tree, or a bush, maybe a lake for fishing?"

"Perhaps a light bulb," Thaddeus said brightly.

"What a brilliant idea," chirped Socks.

"If you ask me," said Athena, "I think it looks like a skull."

"Nahhh. I think I see a lightbulb," Felix added with a wink. "But there is a surefire way to find out."

## THE BRONZE AGE

"If the marking is right, the possible lightbulb—or perhaps skull—ought to be on our current course," Socrates added, pointing to the southeast. "I cannot wait to see what it is."

Socrates did not need to wait long. After a quarter of an hour, they came upon a cobbled road.

Felix gaped in amazement. "I can't believe what I'm seeing. Is this what I think it is?"

"I presume it is a road," Socrates said, examining the stones. "Yes, most certainly a road." Vox let out an annoyed growl.

"Are roads not common?" Thaddeus asked. "On our island we have lots of them."

"But it's out in the open. Not even an attempt to hide it." Felix turned to the bird perched on his shoulder. "Buttercup, fly up ahead and tell me what you see."

The bird chirped and took off into the air.

"Perhaps your father built this road," Socrates added, bounding down the lane. "I daresay it appears to be pointing in his general direction."

"Father wouldn't have had time to build a whole road," Thaddeus responded.

"And it would be mighty dangerous to leave it out in the open like this. Dusklings aren't daft," Felix added, still quite befuddled. "This road is an arrow pointing to something, and they sure as shooting can follow an arrow."

They made good time, no longer hiking over uneven terrain. Before long Buttercup whirled back into view, swooped down, and landed on Thaddeus's head, making him laugh.

"Did she find something?" Thaddeus asked.

Felix reached into his bag and pulled out a small notebook. "Oh yes, she found something." Buttercup chirped and Felix made several scratches in the notebook with a pencil. He gave the little bird several fervent glances then asked, "Are you sure?"

"What did she say?" Thaddeus asked.

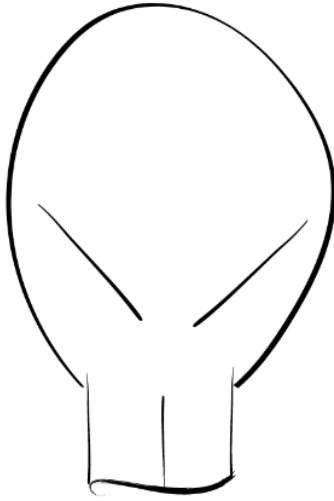
"And here I thought you lot would be the strangest thing I'd discover in my lifetime. Turns out you aren't even the strangest thing of the day."



## FELIX & BUTTERCUP

“What did she say?” Athena repeated, her curiosity getting the better of her.

Felix scratched his head. “Bout five miles down the road there is a town, just out in the open, and somehow people are living in it.”





## COVEN

Before too long they came upon a pristine collection of fine-looking houses all neatly aligned on a cobbled street. Felix looked wide-eyed at the houses all around.

“They’re not in hiding. How are they not in hiding?” he said out loud.

“Perhaps because they have nothing to hide behind?” Socrates added in an attempt to be helpful.

A tall, elegant woman, black-eyed and black-haired, was gently sweeping her porch when they caught her eye. Leaning her broom against the doorframe, she approached the travelers. She moved like a dancer: elegant, graceful, but with rigid purpose.

Felix tipped his hat to her. “G’day, ma’am, quite the place you got here.”

The woman pursed her lips together in a small tight smile. “Why, it is not every day such esteemed travelers set foot in our humble town. Allow me the honor of introduction. I am Lady Fairchild, Head of the Beautification and Social Wellness committee in the village of Coven. Please tell me, to whom do I have the honor of addressing?”

“My dear lady, I am Felix Finch, purveyor of the finest goods in the light or in the dark. Please consider me your most humble servant.”

## COVEN

“Pleasure, Mr. Finch. And who might these young companions of yours be?”

Thaddeus smiled broadly at the beautiful woman. “I’m Thaddeus Burly, and you are really pretty.” He reached out and clasped her hand. “And your hands are really soft.”

“How charming. I’m very pleased to meet you, Thaddeus.” The woman turned her head like a raven, her dark eyes piercing Athena’s. “And that leaves you, my dear?”

“I am Socrates, or Socks if you prefer,” the otter chirped, perched on Athena’s shoulder. “It is an absolute pleasure to hear that your hands are quite soft. If you would like to hold hands later I would be very much obliged, if time permits.”

The tall woman paid Socrates no heed. Her eyes remained transfixed on Athena.

“Athena Burly—I’m Thaddeus’s sister.”

“Greetings, Athena,” the woman said in a shallow breath. “And what brings such charming individuals to our humble village of Coven?”

“We are looking for our father!” exclaimed Thaddeus.

“Your father? And where might he be?”

“We don’t know,” said Athena sharply. “That is why we are looking for him.”

Lady Fairchild didn’t scowl but gave what Athena interpreted as an approving grin.

Thaddeus grabbed Athena’s arm. “Ath, look! A cow—a live cow.”

A gorgeous blonde woman with cute freckles milked a cow in a paddock attached to her house.

“You have never seen a cow before?” Felix asked, looking at the woman more than the cow.

“I’ve seen animatonn cows,” Thaddeus said. “But on our island, we only have live goats and sheep and chickens and pigs and ducks.”

Lady Fairchild graciously accompanied them down the road, giving the town’s new guests an informal tour. The houses became more frequent, clustering together into a neat little hamlet. They passed several more residents doing all manner of chores.

## THE BRONZE AGE

“That is Lady Gwendolyn, Head of the Festival Preparation and Implementation Committee.” Lady Fairchild nodded to a rather leggy brunette. “And over there is Lady Carmichael, Head of the Restoration and Wellbeing Committee.” A beautiful redhead waved at them as they passed.

“You certainly have a lot of committees,” Thaddeus said.

“You know, I never thought of it that way. That is a very interesting observation, young Thaddeus.” Lady Fairchild smiled.

Thaddeus beamed at the compliment.

“Is there a hand holding committee?” Socrates asked. “I very much would like to meet the head of that.”

They continued down the road for a little way, approaching the center of the village. A beautiful smiling woman seemed to pop out of every house as they passed. Some would wave at them, others gave playful nods.

“Does something about this place feel off?” Athena whispered to her brother.

A sly grin swept across Felix’s face. “Lady Fairchild, I must ask. I haven’t seen any men in this village.”

“We have no men,” she said calmly.

“None at all?” Felix asked, his smile broadening. “This place is getting more interesting by the minute.”

Athena rolled her eyes.

They continued down the road until they reached the center of town. A tall black obelisk sprouted out of the central square.

“My dear Lady,” Felix said as he eyed the tall black post. “What is the purpose of this magnificent structure?”

“Oh that,” Lady Fairchild said. “That is what we use to avoid attacks from the creatures of the night.”

“What?” Athena said. She darted up to the obelisk and began to examine it carefully. “You have to tell us how you use it. If this thing can keep the dusklings at bay, it could save countless lives. This discovery could save the world. Please tell us how it works.”

Lady Fairchild looked from Thaddeus and Felix, back to Athena. For a moment, she appeared to be sizing her up. Finally, she pursed her lips. “All in

good time, my dear. If we see you have what it takes, you may yet experience all Coven has to offer.”

Athena did not appreciate the vagueness of this answer. “But if this does what you claim, we need to—”

“It does nothing for those unwilling to unlearn the wrong in their heads in order to relearn the right.”

“I daresay that is quite a perplexing sentence,” Socrates chimed. “If it does nothing for those who are unwilling to unlearn the wrong, wouldn’t it, therefore, do something for those willing to learn the wrong?”

“Come along this way,” Lady Fairchild said brightly, ignoring Socrates.

They arrived at the inn, which was not very inn-like in the least. Pink doilies and miniature porcelain cat statues covered every flat surface. Wallpaper of pink and white roses were plastered around every inch of the home. It was as though they had stepped into a museum of lace and kitsch.

A bright young woman with rosy cheeks and hair pulled back in a messy bun was busy toiling away in the kitchen. When she saw the strangers enter, she threw her arms in the air and ran forward to meet them.

“Greetings, greetings, greetings,” she said excitedly. “I am Lady Lavish, Head of the Hospitality, Welcoming, and Confectionary Committees.”

“Confectionary Committee!” Lady Fairchild said. “Is that new?”

“Oh yes, the committee appointed me the new head at last Tuesday’s meeting.”

“I should notify the Head of the Knitting and Crocheting Committee to create a new sash for your honor.”

“Why Lady Fairchild, you are most considerate. Now, who have we here?” Lady Lavish turned to the guests.

“Felix Finch at your service.” He gave her a low bow and kissed her hand. Lady Lavish eyed Felix like a tiger.

“Why you are so regal and elegant!” she squealed. Felix, feeling his attention was having the desired effect, flourished and bowed again, giving her hand a few pets.

“And who are these lovely children?”

“I’m Thaddeus Burly, and this is my sister, Athena.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

"What brings three such strange creatures to our humble town?"

"Trade, my sweet," Felix boasted, his eyes fluttering. "News, gear, bronze...I am a man of profession, and my profession is trade."

"And here I would have taken you as a man who used his hands for a living," Lady Lavish squealed.

Athena thought she was going to be sick. "*We* are looking for our father." She motioned to Thaddeus and herself.

"Your father? Oh poor thing."

"Has a man passed through here? Big black beard, skin a shade darker than mine?"

Lady Lavish shook her head.

"What about Lake Ancora? Do you know where that is?" Athena asked.

Again the lady shook her head.

"Would you be able to show me where we are on a map?"

"I'm sorry, but we have no maps. We never leave Coven. It's not safe out there."

"Right you are, Lady Lavish," said Lady Fairchild. "And yet these three brave explorers risked the outside world just to honor our town with their presence. I believe in honor of our guests' arrival, a feast is in order."

"What a splendid idea!" Lady Lavish squeaked. "Why, I have so many dishes that will just fatten the two of you up." She gave Thad's cheek a pinch.

"A starlit feast," Lady Fairchild continued.

"Really?" Lady Lavish paused. "You—you think that is necessary?"

"I believe we are overdue for one. Wouldn't you agree?"

"I suppose you are right." She resumed her chipper exuberance. "A starlit feast it is then!"

"What is a starlit feast?" asked Athena.

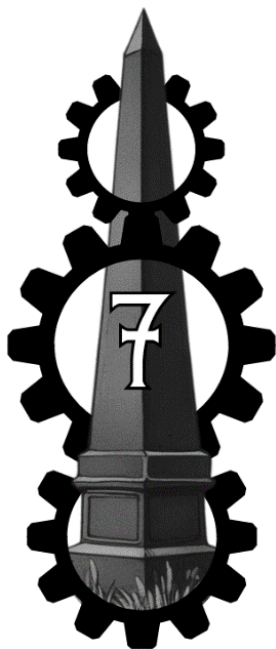
"Exactly what it sounds like. A great big feast under the stars!" Lady Lavish exclaimed.

"You mean at night? Out in the open?" Athena asked, bewildered.

"Athena Burly, did you not want to see how we defend ourselves?" Lady Fairchild grinned.

Athena nodded. "Of course."

"Then it is settled. A starlit feast it is!"



## THE STARLIT FEAST

Athena and Thaddeus were shown to a well-furnished room where they were told to rest and relax for a few hours before the feast began.

Felix was given the room next to theirs and for several extended minutes, he could be heard boasting as Lady Lavish giggled profusely.

Athena pulled out her tools and gave Socrates and Vox a once over, ensuring they both were operating at peak efficiency.

Thaddeus collapsed on the bed. “What do you think of this place? Pretty great, huh? I mean it’s weird—but pretty great.”

Athena said nothing but checked the screws in each of Socrates’s paws, the front right frequently slipping into Athena’s open palm.

“Strange how they avoid duskling attacks.”

Athena nodded.

“How do you think the black pillar thing works?”

“Don’t know.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

“Any guesses?”

Athena shook her head. “Not sure. But I don’t like it. I can’t shake the feeling that something is off here.”

“No kids,” Thaddeus said.

“What?”

“There are no kids here, just us. We are the two youngest people in Coven as far as I can tell. You didn’t notice?”

Athena shook her head, impressed. “Why wouldn’t there be kids or men? What are they hiding?”

A chorus of giggles from Felix and Lady Lavish sounded through the wall. Athena gave the wall a quick rap.

“I don’t like the idea of eating out in the dark,” said Thaddeus.

“Nor do I.”

“Do you think we are going to be in danger?”

Athena smiled at her brother. “No more than usual. Vox, Socrates, disguise mode.” Socrates transformed into an aviator hat which Athena handed to her brother. She placed the copper top hat on her head.

An array of tables were decked out with a vast assortment of confectionary delights on the back patio of the inn. Athena and Thad were amazed by decadent pastries, cream tarts, chocolate-covered berries, and pies of every imagining. Several beautiful young women were already in the midst of the feast. Lady Fairchild sat at the head of the table and beckoned the children to come and join. A few candles were lit, but nothing else.

As the children sat down, Athena looked up and down the table for Felix. Not seeing him anywhere, she caught the eye of Lady Lavish.

“Pardon, Lady Lavish, do you know where Felix is?”

“Felix,” Lady Lavish squeaked, obviously embarrassed. “Oh no, I haven’t seen him.” She quickly turned away and engaged another woman in conversation.

Thaddeus, needing no further excuse, piled his plate high with chocolate cake.

Athena turned to Lady Fairchild. She was watching her intently, slowly nursing a tall glass of red wine.



## THE STARLIT FEAST

"Tell me, dear," she said, nodding to Athena. "This search for your father, what does it mean to you?"

"I don't understand the question."

"What would happen if you didn't find him?"

"I'm going to find him."

"But what happens if you don't?"

"That's not an option."

"There is always another option." Lady Fairchild reached forward, and picking up the crystal bottle of wine, she refilled her glass.

"I need to find my father and I need to get home. Our mother is depending on us."

"And there it is—dependence. Dependence on your family, for your family. Dependence is—for a lack of a better word—weakness."

"I don't see it that way."

"Don't you? Tell me, when you learned of our strength to simply dine out under the stars, did I not feel a tinge of envy awaken within you?"

"I don't think envy would be the right word."

"Are you not curious how this is all possible?" She took a long, slow draft of wine.

"Of course I'm curious. I wish to avoid the dusklings or defeat the dusklings. I don't want to run in fear."

"What are you willing to give up to make that which you wish possible?" Lady Fairchild leaned in; a smile curled on her bright red lips.

A blood-curdling scream erupted across the blanket of stars.

"What was that?" Athena stood up. All eyes fell on her before returning to the feast. "That scream, what was it?" No one paid any attention to Athena.

"Thaddeus, get up. We need to leave."

"I think pahaps whessshhh ststayy," Thaddeus said, bobbing his head to and fro.

"Thad, what's wrong?"

"He has overindulged in the feast, something you were too clever to do. He will be fine in time. Now let me ask you again, Athena Burly of the Island of Tiber, what would you sacrifice in order to never fear the dusklings again?"

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena turned from her placidly smiling brother to Lady Fairchild, who had a look of lust in her eyes.

Then, slowly, Athena spoke. "Anything."

"Very good," smiled Lady Fairchild. "Sisters, let us begin our starlit stroll."

At once the women stood in unison. Athena followed suit, but quickly whispered something to Thaddeus's hat.

Then in a somber procession, the women circled around the inn, back to the center of town. Thaddeus stayed at the table. "Goodbye, ssiser, I luvv you."

The black obelisk stood as a pillar of emptiness against the quaint village square. They encircled the pillar and in one accord swayed in an unholy harmony. A low, sharp chant rose up among the array of beautiful women.

*"They come at night. They come for light.*

*They come to feed on all that's bright.*

*Arise in darkness. Bind our sight.*

*Teach us what is true and right.*

*Embrace the shadows. Embrace the night;*

*Darkness cleanses through evening's bite.*

*Cloak our figures within your spite;*

*Forgone is hope, so comes the night."*

"What is this?" Athena asked.

Lady Fairchild leaned in and whispered in her ear, "Have you not heard the vile rhyme?"

"Yes, many times, but the words are wrong."

"No, the words are perfected, and in perfection, we have crafted a new world. Child, you are about to witness the greatest miracle of our age."

Another blood-curdling scream tore through the air. From the inn came Felix, escorted by two women. He was bound and blindfolded and there were scratches down his face. His escorts smiled gleefully, dancing as they led him stumbling and tripping his way up to the obelisk.

Lady Fairchild's hands clasped Athena's shoulders, her long nails digging into her skin. "You said," she continued, whispering, "you would do anything to be able to stop the creatures of the night..."

## THE STARLIT FEAST

"Stop, please stop," Felix begged, his arms and legs flailing in vain. His captors paid him no heed. They escorted him over to the obelisk and tied his outstretched arms around it.

"...did you mean *anything*?" Lady Fairchild whispered.

Athena slowly lifted off her copper top hat, clutching it tightly about the brim, and nodded. She could feel Lady Fairchild's fingers digging deeper into her shoulders.

"Excellent."

Light emanated out of a corner shack as three beautiful women emerged wearing a peculiar apparatus. On each woman's back was mounted an industrial-sized spool of bronze. As the women approached, the crowd parted, making a jagged path up to the obelisk.

"Please, don't do this. I did nothing to you. Please, just let me go," Felix wailed.

Upon reaching the pillar, the three women each tossed a hook into the air that snagged on the top of the obelisk with absolute precision. Then, as if one, the women all began to walk to the left, encircling the pillar with the brilliant light strands.

"Lady Lavish," Felix called out. "Didn't—didn't you like me? Is this how you treat people you like? Please—"

Athena glanced over to Lady Lavish, who made no movement but continued the chant.

"This is not very hospitable...if this is how you treat people...NO WONDER THIS TOWN DOESN'T HAVE ANY MEN!" Felix cried out as the wires circled him again and again until he was bound so tightly his lips could no longer move, and the only sounds he uttered were incoherent moans.

Finally, a hush fell across the women.

A tall, handsome brunette stepped forward. "Sisters, we have no men. We have no need for men. It was men who caused the world to fall. Man who caused the world to fail. It is only fitting that men pay the price.

"Long ago we made a pact with the creatures of the night. To overlook our town, we would offer up—men. Many a sister challenged the pact, thinking some aspect of man was worth saving. But low and behold, after the deal was struck, we have come to see the light. Crime vanished. Violence became a thing

## THE BRONZE AGE

of the past. Petty squabbles over property became quickly resolved. Men are the cause of our world's ills."

A tall blonde carrying a birdcage approached the brunette. The brunette opened the cage and with the speed of a cat caught Buttercup and held the metal bird aloft before crushing it in her hand.

The bird let out a pathetic chirp and the light faded from its eyes.

"This is the four hundred fifty-seventh man in seventy-seven years. We were there for the first. May there never be a last."

With this final utterance, the countenance of the woman changed. Her back arched, her arms and legs lengthened, and her skin shriveled.

All the other women heaved and retched, following suit.

"Witches. You're witches," Athena said. Lady Fairchild's hands were no longer soft but seemed to scale over. Her fingernails lengthened and darkened to black.

"Call us what you will, child, but we do not hide from the darkness. We craft ourselves new in it."

A soul-searing howl split the air. Athena craned her gaze to the sky. Over the obelisk, a swarm of black shapes spun and formed a horrid vortex.

*"They come at night. They come for light.*

*They come to feed on all that's bright.*

*Arise in darkness. Bind our sight.*

*Teach us what is true and right.*

*Embrace the shadows. Embrace the might;*

*Darkness cleanses through evening's bite.*

*Cloak our figures within your spite;*

*Forgone is hope, so comes the night."*

An ink-black beast descended from above and crashed onto the roof of the inn. The creature snarled and hooted. Strands of drool dripped from its glowing orange tongue. The eye that was perched on the tip of the tongue swiveled, surveying the witches below with ravenous appetite. Then another crashed next to it, and another, and another, until all the rooves of all the village square were covered in the black beasts.

## THE STARLIT FEAST

“Creatures of the night,” Lady Fairchild sang, “we give unto you a sacrifice of light and blood for you to grant us tomorrow—”

Then without warning, the light surrounding the obelisk snapped out.

For one solid second, absolute silence filled the darkness. Felix fell to the ground, ripped off his blindfold, and screamed.

“This cannot be!” Lady Fairchild thundered. A copper fox bolted from the opposite side of the obelisk and disappeared into the darkness.

“You!” She grabbed Athena forcefully, lifting her into the air by her neck. “Where is that hat?”

Athena kicked as hard as she could, bringing her boot solidly into contact with Lady Fairchild’s nose. Black blood poured from the witch’s nostrils. Athena fell to the ground. As she did, the duskings let out a terrible raging howl.

No sacrifice meant no mercy. The creatures fell upon the witches, seizing them into the air. In the chaos Lady Fairchild groped the ground for Athena with her outstretched claws.

“You little worm. I offered you everything. I invited you into our sisterhood,” the witch spat. Knife-like black nails tore into Athena’s right arm. Blood was drawn. “I’m going to skin—”

A duskling pounced upon Lady Fairchild. Her body crumpled under its bear-like weight. Athena did not wait to watch the fate of the witch but dashed as fast as she could out of the town square. Over the fence, between the houses, Athena was mere steps away from the woods when a plump hand reached out and grabbed her by the hair. Athena fell back with a cry of pain.

Lady Lavish’s eyes flashed with fury. After the transformation into her true form, her entire face and body sagged. Chin flaps wagged back and forth. “This is all your doing, you little cretin!” A blue glow shone in the woods, and in a flash Lady Lavish fell backward, her hand to her eyes.

“Now that was a well-placed shot, I daresay.”

“Great job, Socrates,” Athena exclaimed before sprinting off into the woods.

“Miss Athena, would you care to hold hands now?” asked the otter hopefully.



## AJAX

The otter dipped and dove through bramble and brush, leading Athena farther and farther away from the hamlet. Soon the thick undergrowth gave way to wide-open coniferous forest. The shrieks and howls of the witches could be heard echoing across the pitch of night.

“Were you able to hide Thaddeus?” she asked.

“Of course, of course. Thaddeus and your packs are both very well hidden. Snug as a bug in a rug.”

“Thank you, Socrates, you did very well tonight.”

“For sure, and you did very well, as well,” the otter chirped. He led her down a slope to a small ravine, then into a grove of holly.

They were far enough away from the village that they no longer heard the screams. Athena found her brother sleeping soundly on her backpack.

She sat for a moment and stroked his hair, smiling faintly. Carefully she opened her pack so as not to disturb him and looked at her map and compass.

“Everything is here.” She heaved a sigh of relief.

“Pardon, but where is Vox?” Socrates asked.

“He should be here shortly.” No sooner had Athena said this than the copper fox came bounding into the grove, as if he had been waiting for

someone to say his name so he could make a proper entrance. Felix came stumbling after. He was a sad, sullen man.

He sat down across from Athena, face scratched, lips bloodied. He rubbed his blotchy eyes.

Athena said nothing but shook her head.

For several minutes Felix remained silent. Then finally, "I should thank you."

Athena made no response.

"My whole life I have never..." He touched his bottom lip and gazed at the blood. "In mere moments they destroyed everything I had, everything I worked for—everything I built. They would have destroyed me..." Tears rolled down his face. "Poor Buttercup."

Thaddeus sat up, his face looking as if he had just eaten a whole lemon. "What happened to Buttercup?"

Vox opened his mouth and dropped the pieces of the crushed bird in Felix's lap. Felix picked them up and cried.

"Oh, that's not good." Thaddeus then looked at Felix. "But Ath and I have fixed much worse, haven't we Ath?"

"What have you fixed that was worse than this?" Athena asked Thaddeus.

"Maybe not by myself, but I helped quite a bit."

Athena surveyed the pieces. "If the spine is intact, I might be able to fix her."

Felix craned his face up to the swaying branches of the trees that cut across the blanket of night. "I just don't understand how anyone could make a deal with such darkness."

"My father once said we have no right to ask others to sacrifice what we are not willing to sacrifice ourselves." Athena gave Felix a pat on the shoulder.

"Sounds like a very wise man," Felix responded.

"He also said we don't stick tools in our noses," Thaddeus added.

"Very solid advice, for sure," Socrates chimed.

"I didn't always listen to him the way I should have," Athena said. "I regret that now. I just hope we find him...alive. Out of everything to sacrifice, I am not ready to sacrifice him."

"A sentiment that warms you down to the boots," came a voice from above them. "If we ever meet her old man, we should tell him. Right boys?"

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena jumped to her feet. Her eyes shot upward to the trees. “Socks, Vox, defense mo—”

But before she could finish, she found herself yanked clean off her feet, up, up the side of the tree trunk. There then came hooting and hollering as a band of dark figures loomed out of the treetops of the surrounding wood. Felix cried out before he was struck across the head and fell to the ground. Cords were wrapped around his unconscious body and he disappeared up in the boughs and branches.

At dawn, Athena, Thaddeus, and Felix were unceremoniously released from the trees. A band of wild young men circled them. Most of them wore leather jackets and bandoliers with many pouches roughly sewn and strapped together. The shirts they wore—the ones who bothered to wear shirts, that is—were stretched and ragged, made of heavy wool. Athena brushed the pine needles from her hair. The men hooted and beat their chests like a pack of mad apes taunting and jeering their captives.

“Stop it! Stop this now!” Felix ordered, only for a teenage boy to rush forward from the circle and push him to the dirt. “Stop, we are travelers in need. Where is your hospitality?”

“Hospitality?” a rotund eager captor jeered. He had the pale beginnings of facial hair. “We saved you from the witches, didn’t we? If it weren’t for us, those old hags would have grabbed you and boiled you into their stew.”

“You did no such thing. We escaped the witches ourselves,” Athena cried out.

“Put me down. I daresay, this is most irregular,” Socrates chirped as one of the boys shook him upside down by his hind legs.

“‘E talks,” said the tall, skinny adolescent who was holding him.

Vox stayed curled at Athena’s feet, growling at anyone who approached.

“Ca-kaw!” the biggest one called out. “Come on, pretty, tell your fox not to bite.”

“Stay away from us!” she snapped, trying to position Thaddeus behind her.

“Come on, your brother’s a tough guy. ‘E don’t need ‘is big sister’s protection.”



"They are children," Felix cried. As he did, a pair of boys took a rope and tossed it about his arms. In a matter of seconds, Felix was yanked off his feet into the air, bobbing like a pinata.

This caused a riot of laughter among the men.

"Stop it!" Athena shot. "You're nothing but a bunch of brigands."

The boys all started cawing. The biggest stepped forward. "What did you call us?"

"I'm sorry," Athena said. "Is the word 'brigand' too complicated for you?"

"Ca-kaw," the boys shouted in gleeful unison.

The biggest put up his hand to calm the chorus. "You got a tongue in that little mouth of yours."

"What a phenomenal insight. Are you always this witty with your captives? Yes, I do have a tongue in my mouth; after all it would be hard to form words without one. But I may need to rethink that position, given that you are miraculously able to form them without a brain."

"Shouldn't smart off to people who could grind you into dust."

"What a strong man. Threatening a girl one-tenth his size. After you are done with me, maybe you could kick a puppy—everyone would be very scared of you then."

"Why you little—"

A slow single clap sounded from behind the circle. A spindly boy no older than seventeen strode to the center. He wore his straight black hair in a point, the tip of which was dyed red.

He continued to clap. The biggest man stepped aside.

"I think Sturgis just earned himself a new name." He punched the rotund man on the shoulder. "Brigand."

His eyes darted to Athena. She felt her face flush. "What's your name, chickadee?" he grinned devilishly.

"Put my friend down and I will tell you." She nodded to Felix.

"That costs much more than a name."

"I have a very expensive name," Athena said. "Trust me, you're getting the better end of the bargain."

"Indeed." He made a motion. Felix was released and fell again to the ground.

"Athena Burly, and this is my brother, Thaddeus."

## THE BRONZE AGE

“Athena Burly. While the cost was high, I believe I got my value’s worth. I am Ajax.” He clasped Athena’s hand. “I am truly pleased to make your acquaintance.”

Thaddeus charged at him in a fit of rage. “Don’t you touch my sister!”

“Whoa there, spitfire.” Ajax peeled Thaddeus off him as the young boy clawed at the elder’s face. With a nod to his men, Sturgis stepped forward and tossed Thaddeus over his shoulder.

The boy stepped back and made a motion with his arm. “We are the Mighty Tree Runners.”

“CA-KAW!” the men all shouted in unison.

“Runners,” Felix said, getting to his feet. “Runners are nothing more than bandits, stealing any light that isn’t fixed in the stars.”

“And peddlers are nothing more than charlatans, promising the world but delivering snake oil.”

“I am a noble tradesman,” Felix snorted.

“You call it your way, and I’ll do likewise.”

“What do you want from us?” said Athena.

“From you, Athena, nothing. You’re all free to go. But we need to keep your annimatonnns.”

“What? You can’t!”

“We must.”

“You can’t!”

“We still must.”

“If you do this, you doom my father...and you doom my brother and me.” Athena threw her arm wide, pointed at Thad then back to herself.

“Don’t be so dramatic.”

“Our father fell from one of those.” She pointed to a floating island in the distance.

“You’re from a loft rock?”

Athena nodded. “The otter is leading us to our father. He could be hurt or dying. If you take our annimatonnns we will never find him. We will never get home.”

Ajax clicked his tongue and shook his head. “I wish I could help you, I really do, but we need them for our army.”

## AJAX

“Army—what army?” Thaddeus asked, still hanging from Sturgis’s shoulder.

“Ca-kaw!” Ajax called, and a mechanical great horned owl swooped down from a tree and perched onto his shoulder. From the woods emerged all manner of animatons. A stag and a doe stood up from the brush. A leopard growled from a tree branch. A boar burst out of a wallow. Dozens of other beasts surrounded them in a wide circle, growling and hooting and snarling.

“The army to fight the darkness. We need every animatonn we can get.”

“You think a handful of animatons can take on the duskings?” Athena asked, bewildered.

“A year ago it was me and Odin,” Ajax nodded to the owl. “Now look at us. Twenty strong with twenty-four animatons.”

“But you have so many, why do you need ours?”

“If they can’t fight, their light and parts would be invaluable.”

“You are not scrapping my father’s work,” Athena snarled.

“I’m sorry, sweet Athena, we all do what we must.”

“My animatons are the greatest ever made.”

The men all laughed.

“Those little things!” Sturgis howled.

“These little things could beat any animatonn you have,” Athena boasted.

“You sure about that?” A grin swept across Ajax’s face.

“Positive.”

“Then let’s make this interesting. Animatonn battle—you choose your best animatonn, we set him up against ours. You win, you keep yours and be on your merry way. We win, we get the leftover parts from the one we destroyed, plus the other animatonn.” Ajax spat into his hand and held it out. “Deal?”

Athena spat into her hand, reached out and grabbed his. “Deal.”

“Animatonn battle!” The runners cheered loudly and beat their chests.

“Ca-kaw!” he said.

“Ca-kaw!” the runners repeated.

“We have an animatonn battle. Little brat girl taking on Ajax. Little brat girl—”

“Hey Brigand,” Ajax called to Sturgis. “Don’t need her to unleash another tongue-whip on you again. I think she has earned her name.”

“Fine,” said Sturgis. “Athena, who do you choose?”

## THE BRONZE AGE

“Vox,” Athena said without hesitation. The fox leapt forward and growled with pride and delight.

“And who does Ajax choose?” shouted Stugis. “Razorback, Blood Tooth—how about Annihilator?”

“The deal was her best versus my best. I choose Gilgamesh.”

“Ca-kaw!” the runners called in a flurry.

The trees rumbled like soft thunder. The groan of their trunks rose in chorus as a massive metal form flung itself from bough to bough before leaping into the clearing. The ground shook as four feet landed. Earth and pine needles scattered through the air like confetti. The creature’s chest bellowed like a train engine. The arms and legs whipped about with the ferocious weight of a wrecking ball. Athena stood agape, face to face with the titanic animatonn gorilla.



## VOX vs GILGAMESH

The chrome ape thundered his chest and let out a ferocious howl. Mighty metal fists slammed into the earth. More dust and pine needles erupted beneath him.

“Ath!” Thaddeus shouted. “You’re going to have Vox fight that?”

“I know what I’m doing, Thaddeus.”

Ajax eyed Athena. Her face was confident, undeterred by Gilgamesh’s size or viciousness. The mechanical fox positioned himself proudly in front of her. Its tail swiveled eagerly.

“No light cannons,” Ajax said. “Or any light infused weapons.”

“What?” Athena shouted.

“Atheeeenaaaa!” Thaddeus groaned.

“Quiet, Thaddeus!” Then looking to Ajax, she snapped, “You can’t change the rules moments before a battle.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

"I can, and I did. I'm not going to have my men gather up parts for three square miles. You said your animatonn is the greatest. Does that change now that you can't blast mine to smithereens?"

Athena scowled.

"We should think of something else!" Thaddeus cried out. "One hit from that thing and Vox is scrapped. This isn't what father would do."

"I know what I'm doing, Thaddeus. Just—just be quiet." Athena raised her hand. Thaddeus shook his head. "I don't need a particle beam to beat this metal mess," she said.

Ajax grinned broadly. "Very good. Let's see the bronze of your spine. Gilgamesh, crush the fox."

With no further instruction, the gorilla charged forward, the pine trees shaking with every thunderous step. Raising both arms high in the air, it clanged its fists together before bearing them down with a terrible force.

"Vox, right!" Athena spat as Gilgamesh brought its fists down.

Quick as a flicker, Vox leapt to the side and dodged the incoming strike.

Gilgamesh pulled its fists out of the soft dirt and growled.

Vox responded with what sounded like a playful purr.

The gorilla struck again and again as the forest floor coughed up dirt and pine needles.

"Use the trees and strike him from behind!"

Heeding Athena's words, the fox spiraled under the gorilla's outspread legs, glanced into the air and sprang off a tree trunk. The tail soundly clubbed the ape with all the force the fox could muster. The metal gonged, echoing through the woods. For a brief moment, Athena thought she had him. But the gorilla turned around and grinned with a snort.

"Ha! Didn't even rattle. If that is the best your fox can do, you may just want to surrender before Gilgamesh smashes him to bits," Ajax laughed.

Athena cycled through her mind trying to think of a strategy that could give Vox the advantage. As she did so, Vox weaved and whirled around, staying one whisker ahead of Gilgamesh's monstrous blows. Athena placed her palms on her forehead, struggling to invent any possible path to victory.

## VOX Vs GILGAMESH

There was another sound of clanging metal. Gilgamesh clipped Vox with the back of his hand. The fox spun like a top in the air before cascading down into the dirt.

“One more hit like that!” Ajax yelled to Gilgamesh. “That is all you need. Aim for the head—I want the bronze intact.”

The gorilla swung and swiped the air. A rain of rapid jabs followed a wild uppercut. There was no attempt to aim; the plan seemed to swing madly in the general vicinity until he shattered the fox’s frame with his steel fists. Four times Vox dipped out of the way of a blow that would have torn through him. On the fifth slap there was the resounding clang of metal striking metal. Gilgamesh had glanced the fox’s side. An indentation ran down the copper from where the steel finger struck.

Athena shut her eyes tightly and pounded her forehead.

“Ath, you must command Vox,” Thaddeus’s voice echoed as if in the distance.

Vox growled—a weakened, scared growl. The gorilla sauntered forward slowly, relishing the moment, egged on by the cheering crowd. Sturgis was leading the rest of the tree runners in “Gilga-Gilga-Gilgamesh.” Every step Gilgamesh took was a celebration.

Then Athena heard it. *Clink*.

“Vox, left kneecap now.”

The fox struck like a serpent, clubbing the tail against Gilgamesh’s knee so fast that many in the crowd failed to notice. It was a good clean hit. The runners continued to cheer as if nothing happened, and worse, Vox began to limp with his front right paw. But through the crowd’s cheering, Athena heard the *clink* again. The kneecap was weak. She was sure of it.

“Again, left kneecap,” Athena commanded.

The fox repeated the dashing strike a second, a third, and a fourth time. On the fourth hit, the runners became silent. Gilgamesh swiveled around on the loose ball joint like a door knocked off its bottom hinge.

“Vox, take him.” With a swift strike of the fox’s tail, the gorilla’s leg came clean off. Gilgamesh toppled to the earth. The giant was defeated.

The runners stared in silence. For the first time since their meeting, Ajax lost his smug grin. Thaddeus gaped in amazement.

## THE BRONZE AGE

It was Felix who was first to speak. "Athena! You great and glorious girl." He ran forward and embraced her.

"She—she destroyed our greatest animatonnn," Sturgis fumed. "She—"

"She won," Ajax interjected. "Take your animatonns and leave."

"We will," Athena said proudly.

"Athena." Thaddeus looked at his sister. "We are supposed to repair what we break."

"He was going to steal our animatonns."

"Father says we build. Not destroy."

Athena looked the gorilla up and down, half wanting to blow the thing to smithereens. "Very well," she sighed. She turned to Ajax. "I need needle nose pliers, a screwdriver, a wrench, and any spare parts you have. I will also need oil and some rags for the ball joint."

"What are you talking about?" Ajax asked, confused.

"Do you want me to fix Gilgamesh or not?"

Ajax's eyes lit up. "Get her what she wants," he shouted to his men. In moments, piles of scrap and makeshift tools were laid at Athena's feet. She began to work at once. Ajax watched feverishly over her shoulder.

"Don't you think a round pin would be a better plate fixture?" Thaddeus asked.

"Would it be?" Ajax asked, his tone that of a nervous parent.

"A bolt is more secure and practical," Athena snapped, not enjoying being second-guessed. "Am I making the repairs, or are you?"

"Sorry," said Thaddeus.

Gilgamesh gave a snort of concern.

For half an hour Athena worked, disassembling and reassembling the knee and part of the leg. Once completed, she let out a satisfied sigh. "That will do," she said, wiping her hands on a greased rag.

The gorilla hopped to his feet and spun his leg around. He banged his chest and hooted in pleasure, swinging a lap around the pine trees before landing and scooping Athena and Ajax up in a tight embrace.

"Incredible, he's as good as new. Thank you, Athena. You are the better man," said Ajax.

Athena nodded, accepting the compliment.



“Excuse me, Miss Athena.” A humbled Sturgis bowed his head. “Would you mind looking at Razorback? He’s not nearly as perky as he used to be.”

“Sure, Brigand.”

Soon a line formed, and Athena made repairs on all manner animatonn. She did the complex repairs while passing the simple fixes off to Thaddeus, who was all too eager to lend a hand. Everything seemed cared for, the best it could be. She found no rust, which surprised her. But every joint needed realignment and many-a-gear was loose from being overwound.

“Next,” Athena called after reattaching a tail to a leopard.

A small, crumpled goldfinch was gently laid on the rock she was using as a makeshift workbench. Athena turned her eyes up to Felix. “Please,” he said. “Anything you can do...”

Athena nodded.

Hours passed until they broke for a late supper of rabbit and scallion stew.

“Tonight you will stay with us,” Ajax said.

“And where will we be staying?” Athena asked between shoveling spoonfuls of stew into her mouth.

“In the trees of course. We set up hammocks that cradle the trunks. You can share my tree if you would like.”

“I’d love to!” Thaddeus exclaimed, though he wasn’t smiling. “It will be just like camping.”

“Have we not been camping this whole time?” asked Socrates.

“A restful night sounds like a nice change of pace,” Athena said with a sense of relief. “But we need to head out at morning light.”

“It will be sad to part ways, that’s for certain,” Ajax said mournfully. “You did a lot for the Mighty Tree Runners today. I would love for you to stay with us.”

“Perhaps,” she said, “there is something you can do for me.”

“Name it and it’s yours.” Ajax’s owl hooted approvingly.

Athena pulled out her map and compass. “Can you help us find out where we are?”

Ajax scanned the map carefully. “We could be here...but this river doesn’t make sense. There are no runes or markings showing any of the underground towns or paths and I don’t see any landmarks I know. What is Landing Day?”

## THE BRONZE AGE

“Our island is going to touch down in the lake to refill its water supply three days from now. It will only be down for a few hours—usually around midday. We have to find our father and make it to Lake Ancora by Summer’s Eve, otherwise, we may never make it home,” Athena said, surveying the map with Ajax.

“Never even heard of Lake Ancora before.” Ajax shook his head. “Are you sure this map is accurate?”

“No, but it’s all we have to go by.”

Ajax looked deep into Athena’s eyes. “I understand how important home can be; in one way or another every one of my Tree Runners lost theirs. I want you to know, should you ever find yourself unable to make it back, you’d be welcome here.”

Athena was taken aback, and for the first time perhaps in her life, she stared speechlessly into a young man’s eyes.

“You okay?” Thad asked his sister. “Your face is red.”

“It’s the soup,” said Athena, gulping down another spoonful. “It is very hot.”

Thad squinted his eyes toward Ajax. “I don’t think Father would want to be a tree runner, and he is still waiting for us to rescue him. Really appreciate the offer though.”

Athena glared at her brother before returning her gaze to her soup. She could still feel Ajax’s eyes on her. “Yeah.”

“The offer stands, but do what you must,” said Ajax. “Where to tomorrow?”

“Which way are we going, Socks?” Thaddeus asked.

The otter perked up and pointed with his nose. “That direction.”

“So southeast,” Athena said half-heartedly.

“How far southeast?” Ajax asked. His voice turned cold.

“I daresay, I’m not quite sure,” the otter chirped.

“More than a day’s journey?” Ajax’s voice lowered.

“Again, I cannot say.”

“Why? What’s southeast of here?” Thaddeus asked.

“Roughly a day’s journey will bring you to the Leviathan’s Grave.”

Felix coughed uncontrollably. “Ach-eh-em-em, ‘scuse me. We are that close to the Leviathan’s Grave?”

## VOX Vs GILGAMESH

“What is the Leviathan’s Grave?” Socks asked.

“A marsh so terrifying that even dusklings don’t dare enter. Rumor has it within the grave is a great snake. A creature so foul and so deadly that should you brush it with your finger you would instantly die.” Felix gulped.

“If your father is in Leviathan’s Grave there will be no saving him.” Ajax lowered his voice even more. “He’s already dead.”

“Good news! He is not dead,” Socks said as brightly as ever. “His signal has changed from R-E-N to H-E-R-E. And as he is not dead, he must not be in the Leviathan’s Grave.”

“Very well. But I beg you, Athena, Thaddeus, do not under any circumstance set foot in that marsh.”



## THE LEVIATHAN'S GRAVE

Thaddeus, Athena, and Felix set out at first light. The Tree Runners gave each of them a fond farewell. Sturgis locked Athena and Thaddeus in a great bear hug. Ajax repeated his offer for them to stay, but Athena again refused.

They journeyed throughout the morning in good cheer, but as the afternoon waned a heavy foreboding fell on the party. They had not strayed. They had not found Ren. Every step drew them closer to the Leviathan's Grave.

Athena, Thaddeus, and Felix stood at the edge of the bubbling marsh. The black murk reeked of rotten eggs and sulfur. There were no reeds, no cattails, no plant life of any kind. It was a shallow pit of festering mud that stretched out into the unseen distance.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Felix muttered, his face pale. "You are sure your father is in there?"

## THE LEVIATHAN'S GRAVE

All eyes fell on Socrates. The otter tilted his head in a quizzical fashion. "I daresay the only way forward is in that direction." Socrates pointed his nose to the heart of the swamp.

"And there ain't no way I can convince you to give this up?"

"Give up rescuing our father?" Athena shook her head.

Felix sighed. "Then this is where we must part ways."

"You're not coming with us?" Thaddeus asked, surprised.

Felix shook his head. "There is a short list of things I wouldn't do for the pair of you. Going into Leviathan's Grave, unfortunately, makes the list. I beg you both to reconsider. Like Ajax said, you set foot in there, you won't survive."

Thaddeus's heart sank.

"Goodbye, Mr. Felix Finch. You made a fine traveling companion," Athena said in a business-like tone.

Felix nodded gravely and let out a low whistle. Buttercup swooped down and perched on his shoulder. "I want to give you both something."

"You don't need to do that," said Thaddeus.

"I do," Felix replied, "for I owe you everything." He rapidly patted his jacket up and down. Out of an interior pocket, he pulled a small pocketknife. He handed it to Thad. "Every boy should have one." From his lapel, he plucked a silk rose, then sweetly tucked it behind Athena's ear. "You are the harshest, sweetest girl I have ever met. I hope more than anything that you find your father and you make it home."

"Thank you," said Athena.

With his eyes welling up, Felix turned away and began to whistle, merrily walking back the way they had come with perhaps a little less bounce in his step.

"Do you think we are going to die?" Thaddeus asked his sister.

"Everyone dies," Athena responded bleakly. "But we are going to find our father, of that I am certain."

Thaddeus nodded and together they took their first steps into the marsh.

It was slow work. The muck and murk slurped up their legs with every step. Tufts of dry earth zigzagged about the marsh, giving the children their only solid footing. They crisscrossed from tuft to tuft to avoid the marsh water and mud as much as possible. Dead trees, gnarled in bark and branches, rose

## THE BRONZE AGE

as foreboding sentinels across the marshland. As the last fleck of yellow and green from the forest's edge faded from view, they spotted what appeared to be a tall black wall in the distance.

"Why would someone build a wall in a swamp?" Thaddeus asked, perplexed.

"That does not appear to be man-made," Socrates responded from the boy's shoulder.

"But what else builds walls? Duskings don't build; they tear down and rip apart."

The answer became clearer the closer they drew. It was not a wall, but the long-dead body of a gargantuan snake. This was the Leviathan.

Dread seized the children. The carcass stood a clear six feet high. They were unable to gauge how wide it was. With the afternoon waning and sunset soon upon them, haste was of the essence.

"Socrates," Athena began. "What direction is our father's signal?"

Socrates pointed to the giant snake wall.

"But-but how?" Thaddeus cried. "How do we get past that? Ajax said don't touch the snake or we will die."

"Instantly die," Socrates corrected.

"It is a snake, right? Then we just need to walk alongside it and eventually we will find the head or tail—preferably the tail," said Athena.

Thaddeus looked to the left and then to the right. "Which way?"

Athena thought for a moment and pointed to the right.

"Why that way?"

"It seems...right." Athena smiled, hoping her joke would lighten the mood.

The children trudged alongside the snake body. The putrid odor of rotting flesh hung like a thick cloud in the air. Athena felt her stomach lurch with every step. After a good forty minutes of walking, no end appeared in sight. The trail coil stretched as far as the eye could see. And worse yet, the sun had begun to set. It was dusk.

"It's going to be dark soon," Thaddeus called to his sister.

They tried to pick up the pace, but the mud became more loose, slurping further up their legs as they plodded forward.

## THE LEVIATHAN'S GRAVE

"I feel I ought to warn you that we are traveling away from the origin of your father's signal," Socrates chirped.

"We don't have much of a choice." Athena spat mud from her mouth.

The sky turned red as the sun bled over the horizon in a foreboding farewell. Thaddeus became agitated. As Athena sped up her pace, her hands began to shake. They were racing against the darkness.

Then Athena spotted it. Pressed against the mass of the snake, a dead tree protruded out of the marsh like an uncomfortable splinter. Its branches reached up and out over the top of the opposite side.

"There!" Athena exclaimed. "We climb the tree and hop over the Leviathan. Easy as attaching a ball joint."

Thaddeus shook his head. "It's dead. No way it will support our weight."

"Sure it will," said Athena. "Besides, we can't keep walking around this snake forever."

"But what if we accidentally touch it?"

"We won't," said Athena. "All we need to do is shimmy up the trunk and cross over on that branch."

Luckily, the tree was rooted in a dry spot which allowed the children to quickly gain their footing and climb up the side of the trunk. Vox and Socrates leapt from branch to branch before vaulting over the giant snake.

Athena, not nearly as nimble as the animatons, climbed out on a low hanging branch. She wiggled a moment, inches above the snake corpse, the rancid smell unbearably thick. It seemed to attack her eyes as well as her nose. She let her feet dangle off the branch as she scooted out further and further. There was a loud creak. For a moment she was sure the branch was going to snap, but it held. Reaching a good distance away from the snake, she clung to the end and lowered herself as far as she could before dropping down to the mud below.

"Come on Thad, it's pretty easy," she called, pulling her legs out of the muck.

Nervously, Thaddeus followed his sister's lead and crawled out on the branch that was hanging over the muddy precipice. He shook with fear.

"Come on Thad, just drop down."

"It smells so bad."

"Yes it does. Now climb over and let go."

## THE BRONZE AGE

Thaddeus hung on the end of the branch, rocking back and forth. His body shivered.

“Thaddeus, let go!” Athena commanded.

There was a loud crack as the branch snapped and Thaddeus fell to the earth. The branch pierced the bloated corpse. Thaddeus bounced off the side of the coil and landed face first in the mud. He stood up as quickly as he could, shaking his arms and legs madly as if he was being bitten by invisible bugs. “I touched it! I touched it!” he shouted. He looked from his arms to his feet. He was all there. “Hey, I’m not dead.”

Athena did not look at her brother but watched in horror as the dead snake’s skin crawled and wriggled as if being poked and prodded from the inside by dozens of prongs and needles. Several tears in the side of the snake yawned open as a low gurgling sounded from deep within. Then, out of one of the tears dripped a small black snake covered in a mucousy film. Instantly it twisted toward them as if it knew they were the culprits that had broken its eternal silence. White venomous fangs flashed as the snake sprang at Thaddeus.

There was a blast of blue. The small black snake lay in a heap of ash. Socrates’ head readjusted back from defense mode. “*That* was most alarming, for sure.”

There was no time to congratulate the otter on his good shot, for as soon as the snake had been blasted to bits, hundreds more burst forth from the corpse wall, pouring down over the mud like a black river.

“Socks, Vox, defense mode!” Athena shouted. She grabbed her brother by the arm and forcefully pulled him into a run.

The bed of black serpents slithered after them. The two animatonsns worked in unison. Circling the children rapidly, they bit, blocked, and blasted any of the vile creatures that dared enter a six-foot radius.

“I think I know why we were not supposed to touch the snake,” Thaddeus said.

“Keep moving forward, Thaddeus,” Athena snapped.

Unable to catch their quarry, the snakes burrowed down into the muck. All seemed to vanish.

“Did they give up?” Athena asked.

“We won?” Thaddeus said.



## THE LEVIATHAN'S GRAVE

“It seems odd, with the volume of snakes and our slow rate of travel, the probability of them breaching our defenses was quite high. It is unlikely we would have been able to protect you from that attack for much longer,” chimed Socks.

Vox growled.

They walked for a few more moments when the ground began to bubble. First, only small air bubbles foamed up here and there. Then the mud welled up and burst as though it were boiling over.

A skeletal hand wrenched out from the unseen depths. Its arm and rib cage followed, rising out of the mud as if the skeleton gained some new will to live. But it was not alive. It had been claimed by the serpents. The leviathan snakes slithered in and out between gaps in the bones, animating the limbs up and down, forward and back. The snake skeleton lurched after the children, hissing with unbridled ferocity.

Vox unfurled his tail and let loose the crack of thunder. When the light impacted the snake corpse the bones exploded, sending shrapnel of live snakes in all directions. Before she knew what had happened, Athena had been struck.

She screamed as a terrible pain seared through her left arm. She ripped off the snake like a cancerous leech. Its teeth were still squirting venom. Her arm felt as though it were on fire, spreading up her shoulder and across her chest before going limp. Then a second bite. She collapsed to the ground and three more snakes latched onto her left leg and waist. She tried to rip them away, only to have yet another snake strike her hand. Her body twitched and seized in pain before falling face forward into the mud.

It was as though she had fallen into the middle of the ocean. She could not move. She could not breathe. Her entire body had become numb with cold. She needed to turn her head just an inch, but her neck would not listen to her brain's commands.

“Ath!” She heard from some far off place. “Get up, Ath.”

Thaddeus heaved his sister over. She gasped before spitting out mud. She looked at her leg. Thaddeus pried off several snakes with his knife, wedging the flat of the blade under the mouth. With his spare hand he gripped tightly around the neck and yanked. The black serpents hissed, squirting venom. Once he freed each snake from Athena's leg, Thad would fling them to Socrates, who made quick work of them.

## THE BRONZE AGE

"I can't move," she whispered. "And I'm so cold."

"I know—I know. Vox and Socks are doing the best they can." His left eye was swollen shut.

Hundreds of the leviathan skeletons were rising all about them, coming from all directions as far as the eye could see. Socrates and Vox circled the children rapidly, but every corpse they blasted apart with cruel, accurate lightning did not slow the army in the least. The snakes fell to the mud, burrowed down, and rose yet another corpse.

Thaddeus propped up his sister as best he could, shooting fervent glances in all directions for something—anything—they could use or possibly escape to. Athena closed her eyes, knowing it was only a matter of time before Vox and Socrates would no longer be able to keep the leviathan corpses at bay.

***BOOM!***

A sound similar to that of Vox's tail, but tenfold in magnitude, deafened the marsh.

***BOOM!***

It thundered again. A dozen corpses vaporized in brilliant light, snake, bone and all.

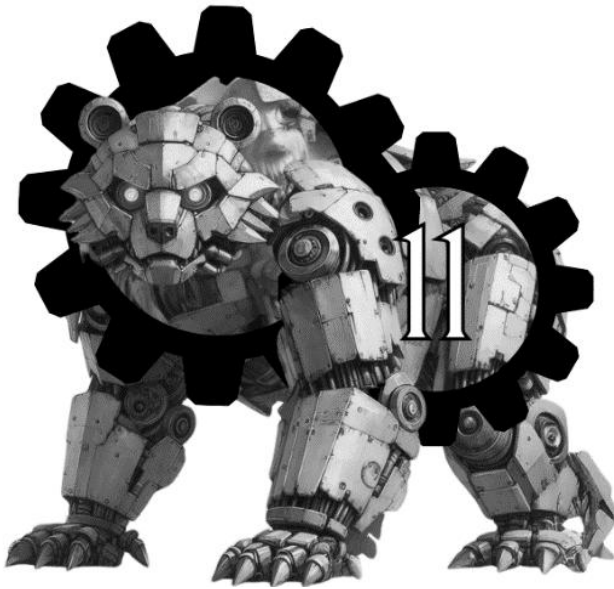
***BOOM!***

Two dozen!

***BOOM!***

It was as though a blue fire leapt about the corpses. Those that did not fall apart and scurry away fell into heaps of ash.

Athena looked about, trying to see what had defeated the snakes. There was nothing but darkness—but then she saw a hint of light. The light grew. It was drawing nearer. Then out of the darkness, a figure emerged. In shining light, her father marshaled forward, riding on an animatonn bear.



## FOUND

Ren rushed to his children and scooped them up in a tight embrace. Joyous tears streamed down his cheeks as his wide arms pinned Thaddeus and Athena against his breastplate.

“Let the stars, the sea, the sun cry out this day I found you!”

The children burrowed into their father’s shoulder and breast. Athena heaved shallow sighs of relief. Her shivers seemed to abide for the moment. Thaddeus threw both arms around his father’s neck tightly.

“How did you find us?” he asked.

“There will be time for answers, but first we must seek shelter. Night is upon us.”

“Baba,” Athena moaned weakly. “I can’t walk. I can’t move at all, Baba.”

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m here now. I will carry you,” Ren reassured his daughter.

“Thaddeus, can you ride?”

Thaddeus nodded. After kissing him on the forehead, Ren placed his son on the back of the bear and pointed to the brackets he could use for handles. The bear was not his father’s usual work. The paneling was misaligned in some

places, even missing. The back and hind quarters had been cobbled together with what looked like parts from various other animatonns. No symmetry, no artistic flourish— but it worked. Ren marched forward, carrying his daughter with one arm, leaning against his walking staff on the other. The bear followed after with a slight rattling in its chest.

They trudged on for a few miles. After about an hour, they came to a mound cap in the middle of the swamp. The earth and stone were piled high, forming a shallow cave. Ren led the bear into a hollow at the mound's center, and ducking between a pair of stones he entered a dry round area sheltered from the rest of the swamp. A faint light flickered in the back. Immediately Socrates darted up to the light and pointed.

"I daresay, we are here! We have found it," he chirped excitedly.

"Yes, Socks, he is standing right here." Thaddeus pointed to his father.

"But this—this is his signal!" The otter continued to point enthusiastically.

"Right you are," Ren said, laying Athena down on a soft patch of moss. "First thing I built after the crash. Took four hours to rewire the connectors from the bronze without a welding torch." Ren placed his hand on Athena's forehead. Her body shivered and twitched. "How many times was she bitten?"

"I-I don't know," Thaddeus stammered.

"A-a-a lo-lo-lo-lot." Athena's teeth chattered.

"Need a fire to see the bites. Vox, Socrates, defensive perimeter, a hundred-yard circumference centered on this point." The otter and fox nodded resolutely and scattered in a flash.

A fire was quickly lit, flushing the hollow with soft-embered light. At that moment Thaddeus realized that the cave wasn't made of earth, but was rather composed of debris that must have fallen during their father's last battle. Scrapped animatonns, a large portion of outer docks and a collapsed sentry tower were all stacked on top of each other, forming a high ceiling like some unholy cathedral.

"Thaddeus, I need you to listen and do exactly what I say. Do you understand?" Ren said firmly.

"I-I-I don't—"

"Thaddeus!" Ren grasped his son tightly by the shoulder. "I need you to focus. Athena needs you to focus. I know you are scared. You need to overcome

## FOUND

that now.” Ren’s eyes blazed into his son’s. Thaddeus nodded. Athena moaned through her chattering teeth.

“Hold her head up like this.” Thaddeus wrapped his arm around Athena’s head. “If she seizes against you, hold firm and tighten your grip.” Ren handed Thaddeus a stick. “This goes between her teeth so she doesn’t crack them when her jaw clenches up.”

Thaddeus clasped Athena’s head tightly against him and held the stick between her teeth.

Ren walked over to the opposite side of the hollow. Several dead snakes were strung up by their tails. Ren removed one. “Blunder,” he called.

The bear sauntered over. Ren placed the snake in its mouth. “Twenty volts.” The bear closed its mouth. A sizzle was followed by a *snap* and its mouth reopened. Ren took the snake. “Thank you. Now man the entrance.”

Ren cracked open the snake’s mouth and massaged the top of its head until the fangs were exposed.

Then with no further warning, he plunged the twin fangs into his left arm. “Yahhhhhhaa!” He shouted in pain before biting his tongue.

“What are you doing?” Thaddeus gasped.

“I have been bitten every day since the crash,” Ren growled through his teeth. “The venom paralyzes so the snakes can devour its immobile victim. It’s not fatal in small doses, and wears off after a few hours. However, from the looks of it, your sister did not have a small dose. My blood has built a fair immunity, and luckily we are the same blood type.” With his free hand, he snapped off one of the dead snake’s fangs, then placed it between his teeth for safekeeping. His left arm hung motionless at his side. Thaddeus eyed him with obvious concern.

“Ish jush numb,” Ren said with the snake fang in his mouth.

His free hand surveyed a scrap pile. He picked out a pair of pliers and a long thin cylinder containing a spring. Tipping the spring onto his lap, he ran the cylinder through the flames several times before placing it to the side. With the spring, he wrapped a bit of rubber on one end before plunging it back into the open side of the cylinder. On the opposite side, he finagled the snake tooth into a pin-sized hole. Again, he used the pliers and allowed the flames to lick

## THE BRONZE AGE

the snake tooth clean. Satisfied, Ren plucked his makeshift syringe from the fire and sank it into his arm.

With his teeth, he drew back the spring, filling the cylinder with his blood. Athena began to convulse again. Her head slammed back and forth.

“Hold her steady,” Ren instructed Thaddeus as he removed the vial from his arm.

Thaddeus gripped her tightly, wrapping his left arm around her forehead. With his right he held the stick firmly in her teeth. Ren slipped the syringe into a vein and pushed down on the spring. At once Athena’s body relaxed. Her breathing returned to normal. Ren pressed his hand to her forehead. “The worst of it should be over now.”

“Does Thad need some?” Athena whispered.

Ren surveyed his son. “Any bites?”

Thaddeus pointed to his swollen eye. “It skimmed me. I can’t really feel the side of my face.”

Ren grinned. “It sure did. I think you will be right as rain after you get some rest.” Ren clasped the back of Thaddeus’s neck with his palm and leaned in close to his son. “You see? You see what you were able to do for your sister? You are so much stronger than you know and I’m so proud of you.”

They sat there for several moments watching the fire. Athena had no more convulsions.

“How did you survive?” Thaddeus finally asked. “They brought back the pieces of your hawkpack.”

Ren pointed to a corner where a black heap lay, a metal pike planted in its head.

“What is it, Thad?” Athena asked, turning her head ever so slightly.

Thaddeus surveyed the heap. It smelled of charcoal. An orange tongue, with a great eye perched at its tip, lopped out sideways. “A duskling. Did you ride a duskling down?”

Ren nodded. “Held on for dear life. Landed in that very spot. First night was the hardest. Debris from the battle fell like cannon fire all around me. Disturbed the snakes something fierce. I thought I’d either be crushed or eaten. Survived the night, built the signal box, built Blunder over there out of scrap.

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Once he was built, I was able to deal with the snakes more effectively. Been living on a diet of them ever since.”

“You eat the snakes?” Thaddeus gasped.

“Eat or be eaten.” Ren winked at his son. “Now what I can’t figure out is why instead of a skyship flying to my rescue, I find my children marching through a snake-infested swamp. What are you two doing here?”

“Mother sent us,” said Thaddeus.

“That I surmised. I’m not understanding why.”

“Because some twisted men wanted to marry her,” Athena groaned. “After the memorial, three stopped by. Each of them threatened that if she didn’t marry them, they would destroy her—or us.”

Ren was silent for a moment. Staring at the fire, a bold clear rage formed on his countenance. “Gutless worms,” he uttered. “Threaten my wife, threaten my children the moment they think I am dead. We shall see how brave they are when we set foot back on the island. Speaking of which, how are we getting back? Do you have a skyship stowed away somewhere?”

“We were attacked by dusklings and crashed into the woods,” Thaddeus said guiltily. “Now we have to go to Lake Ancora for Landing Day. Mother gave us a map and a compass, but we can’t figure out where we are, so we don’t know where to go.”

“May I see them?”

Thaddeus opened Athena’s sack, removing the articles. Ren analyzed them closely. “Is there a reason your mother didn’t come with you?”

Thaddeus and Athena looked at each other.

“She thought the men would hunt her down and...she’s pregnant,” Athena said.

For the first time since reuniting, Ren’s face softened. “Pregnant...really, she’s pregnant?” he said, stumbling over the words. “Pregnant...I mean, I can’t believe it—that’s wonderful. She’s pregnant.” For a moment a soft smile lit up his face, but when the moment passed the smile faded and a stern resolution burned in his eyes.

“That settles it. At daybreak, we leave the swamp, locate where we are on the map, and find Lake Ancora. And even if all the stars should fall from the sky and set themselves against us, we will not miss Landing Day.”



## THE CARAVAN

Athena rode Blunder for most of the next day. Twice Ren insisted that she walk a bit in order to regain some of her strength. Their pace was slow yet steady. Ren would often stop to consult the map, compare it to the compass, then motion ever forward. After a day of walking, they buckled down for a fireless camp. Ren had the three animatonns make wide defensive perimeters in concentric circles based on where they were hidden. The animatonns were not to return until daylight unless there was trouble.

The following morning continued without incident, and for much of the early hours, they pressed onward at a brisker pace. Athena knew why. Tomorrow was Landing Day.

They stopped for lunch on a tall hill overlooking a wide grassland below.

“How do you know we are headed in the right direction?” Athena asked as she picked the bones out of her roasted snake.

“I have a few suspicions as to where we might be on the map. Lake Ancora is west of them all. Therefore, we travel west until we are the wiser.” Ren handed Thaddeus a second snake on a stick.

“I daresay, what a good idea,” Socrates chirped. “It is both logical and practical.”



## THE CARAVAN

"Thank you, Socrates," said Ren. "Perhaps I won't dismantle that voice box of yours after all."

"Indeed, was there a plan to do so? That is most surprising."

"He's teasing you, Socks," Thaddeus said, shaking his head.

"Ah, teasing, yes, very good. In that case, I shall not gouge out your eyes while you sleep."

Athena and Thaddeus stared at the otter in shock.

"Was that not appropriate teasing?"

"No, no it was not," Thaddeus said.

"What happens if we don't make it to Lake Ancora tomorrow?" asked Athena. "There is no way to know where the island is going next, and the next Landing Day may not happen for another three months."

"You are right," Ren nodded. "Therefore, we cannot afford to miss it. Hmm..." He stood up.

Down the hill, a caravan of ten covered wagons led by a mix of tired-looking mules and oxen rolled into view. Each covered wagon carried a dozen or so thin lampposts. Every few hundred feet, one of the wagons would stop and someone would hop out and plant a lamppost into the ground. Ren watched as three lampposts were planted. Then from behind a knoll to the west, a great scream of yips sounded. A gang of wild boys came into view, hooting and hollering, surrounding the caravan with an odd array of makeshift weapons that they had either stolen or cobbled together.

"They look like Ajax," Thaddeus said.

"Who is Ajax?" asked Ren.

"No one," said Athena quickly. "Not important."

One of the lead boys stepped forward, a rather uncouth young man with orange spiked hair. A sledgehammer spun over his head before bearing down on one of the recently planted lampposts. The post shattered; bits of glass flew every which way. "Drivers! Come on out, we want to bargain." The men squealed with delight.

An older man stepped out of the central wagon. He raised his hand. "Please—we are simple travelers trying to survive the wilds. We mean no harm to anyone. Please let us be."

## THE BRONZE AGE

The orange-haired man placed the sledge back on his shoulder. "Food, drink, and bronze."

"The food and drink you are welcome to share. The bit of bronze string we have is used to light our lampposts. It's not good for much more than a distraction. The creatures of the night come after the light, but when they realize how little bronze there is, they usually just leave them. You see, we are very simple folks. Distract and hide."

"If you don't have any bronze then we will take a wagon."

"Each wagon belongs to a family. Taking one would leave a family homeless."

"You should have thought of that before passing through Hammer Runner territory."

"Please, we are wanderers...that is what we do. Let us be on our way and you will never see us again."

The young man struck the old traveler across the face with the back of his hand. "You will pay the Hammer Runners our due."

"I've seen enough." Ren limped to the edge of the hill and slid down.

"What's he doing?" Thaddeus asked Athena. They quickly followed with their animatonns in hot pursuit.

"I don't know, but we don't have time for this!" Athena growled.

"Pardon me!" Ren cried out, raising his walking staff.

Both the orange-haired runner and the old man turned in surprise.

"I was passing by, and I could not help but overhear your disagreement."

"What's it to you?" spat the orange-haired man.

"To me?" Ren said, getting closer. "Nothing to me. I think the better question to ask is what is it worth to you?"

"What's what worth to me?"

Ren shrugged. "Your life? Your dignity?"

He laughed. "You see this hammer? With one swing I could—"

"You could what?" In a flash, Ren's eyes changed from jovial to deadly.

Unprepared for this, the orange-haired man stepped back.

"You—you are nothing but a resentful little child," Ren continued. "You hit things with your hammer when you don't get what you want. You lie to yourself, saying your men follow you out of loyalty and kinship, but the truth

## THE CARAVAN

is there is no kinship among cowards. And cowards you are, victimizing the old and the vulnerable. But the second someone stands up to you with an ounce of spine, you shrink back into the black pit where your kind festers. So now boy, what is it that you were planning to do with that hammer?”

The orange-haired man stood speechless. But seeing the faces of his men, his countenance hardened. He raised his hammer. “Yahhhhhhh—”

With a crack, Ren struck the young man’s hands with his walking stick. The man shrieked in pain, dropping his hammer. Blunder sprang upon him, the metal bear pinning him solidly to the ground.

“Runners, tear—”

“Be careful,” Ren whispered. “Whatever you say next, Blunder here is going to do to you.”

“Runners,” the man gulped. “We will leave them alone and not harm them in any way.” One by one the runners started to disperse.

Once they were gone, Ren helped the young man to his feet. They gave each other a solemn look before Ren said, “Grow up.” He nodded and retreated after his men.

The old man from the wagon hustled forward. “How can we ever thank you?”

“Cup of tea would be nice. Mead would be better.” Ren smiled.

The old man winked. “Follow me.”

The inside of the wagon was clean but cramped. A young man sat with his wife at the far end. The woman cradled a baby in her arms.

“Put the kettle on and take out the wine. This wonderful stranger saved us from a gang of runners. I believe, stranger, you have earned my name. I am Theodore Finigan. This is my daughter, Lenora, and my son-in-law, Percival, and little baby Madeline.”

Ren nodded politely. “At your service. I am Irenaeus Burly and this is my daughter, Athena, and my son, Thaddeus.”

“It was astonishing to say the least how you drove away those vicious runners,” Lenora said. “We are ever so grateful.”

“Theodore!” An older woman popped her head through the entrance of the wagon. “What do you think you are doing, hoggin’ the heroes of the day to yourself?”

“Calm down, Hilda, I’m doing nothing of the sort. He asked for a drink, and I’m getting him a drink. It’s called hospitality—maybe you should learn some.”

“You’re going to give him that potato wine that you’ve had stashed away in your sock drawer for the better part of thirty years,” sneered Hilda.

“This is gooseberry rhubarb, not potato. If you have forgotten what a potato looks like just look at your nose in the mirror,” said Theodore.

“If he wants a real drink, you should send him over to my wagon when he is done here,” said Hilda.

“If he is still thirsty, I will give him directions.”

“Thank you.”

“Pleasure.”

Hilda left and Theodore shook his head. “Nosey old coot. Now then, what are we having?”

Drinks were served. Tensions relaxed as everyone laughed in each other’s company. All but Athena, that is, who felt as though they were wasting precious time.

“What is your lot doing out in the wild? You’re not runners or riders, and you don’t appear mad. I would guess you are some sort of merchant—but then why travel with children, risking their lives and yours?” Theodore poured Ren a second glass of wine.

“They are both more capable than you would suspect,” said Ren.

“Little doubt, with you as their father.” Theodore smiled. “But still, it doesn’t answer the question. Why are you out in the wild?”

“Let me answer your question with another. Tell me, in your wanderings have you ever been to Lake Ancora?” Ren asked.

“Ancora, you say? Never heard of it.”

“It was an ancient city. Ancora was its name before the fall of the old age. I’d presume it’s now known by another name,” said Ren.

“You sound like you know a good deal about it.”

“I’ve spent many a younger year dabbling in history books. Athena, may I have the map?” Athena pulled it out and placed it on the table. Theodore surveyed it.

“That looks like Golding’s Hill,” Lenora chimed in, pointing to the map.

## THE CARAVAN

“Most certainly does,” Theodore agreed. “And this is where you are trying to go?” He pointed to the X on the map. Ren nodded.

“That’s got to be White Ruin’s Basin. ‘Bout a three-day hike, two and a half if you got spurs on your heels.”

“Three days! We will miss Landing Day,” Athena cried out. Thaddeus’s face fell.

“If there be need, we could ride through the night—get you there by tomorrow morning.”

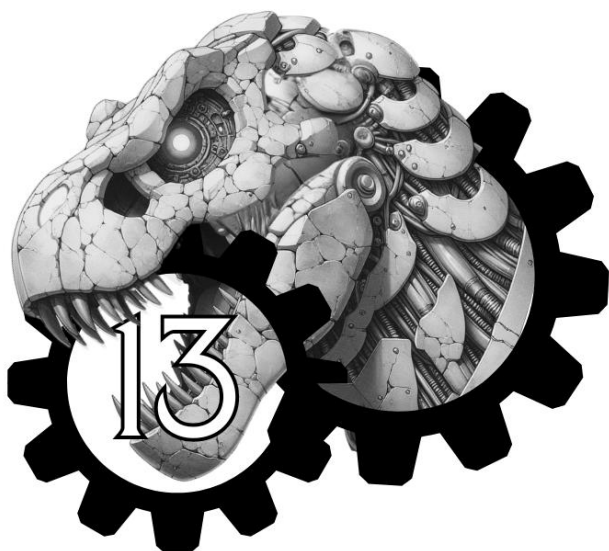
“We’d forever be in your debt,” said Ren.

“Nonsense.” Theodore smiled. “My little girl and her little girl will sleep in their beds tonight because of you. If we can make it so you sleep in yours tomorrow, then I would say at most we are even. Percival, tell the other wagons we are changing route to the White Ruins as a favor to our honored guests.”

“I cannot thank you enough,” Ren said as he shook Theodore’s hand.

“Looks like there is a lot of that going around. I will tell you this: we will take you to the White Ruins, but my people will not enter under the gateway. The ruins are said to be the home of a terrible curse.”

“My wife will be on the other side of those ruins. Curse or no, there is nothing shy of death that will stop us from getting home to her.”



## LANDING DAY

The wagons arrived at the White Ruins in the early hours of the morning. Theodore's family and many others turned out to bid the Burllys good luck on their venture. Hilda begged Ren not to enter the ruins.

"You could stay with us. Plenty of room in our wagon," she offered.

A man who Athena presumed was Hilda's husband twitched his gray mustache in reserved concern.

"You are far too kind, but my wife desires our expedient return and I know better than to keep her waiting." Ren smiled, patting the old woman on the shoulder. Final farewells were said, and the wagons rolled off to the north.

The Burllys passed under an ancient stone arch that stood as the entryway to what was once a mighty city. The age-old remnants of buildings and streets of some bygone era had been long overgrown. The main thoroughfare was barely discernible from the soft grass that blanketed the ruins.

"They said this place was cursed," Thaddeus whispered.

## LANDING DAY

“Cursed, ha!” Ren barked. “I fear no curse of the olden days. Ancient traps and defenses, on the other hand, are something entirely different. Mind your step and we shall make it through unscathed.”

“I most certainly will mind every step I take, for sure,” Socks chirped brightly.

The ruins told of a glorious past before the advent of the dusklings. It was easy to imagine the outer walls hung with battlements and banners of noble houses. A grand open market and town square unafraid of the night. Evenings not feared but celebrated. Only the skeleton of the city remained, the bones picked dry by time and dusklings.

“What do you know of Ancora?” Athena asked her father.

“It was one of the chief cities of the golden age. Capital of its province, if my memory serves me correctly.”

“How much greater is gold than bronze?” Athena asked.

“Have I not taught you the rule of noble metals?”

Both Athena and Thaddeus shook their heads.

“I daresay, I have never heard of such a rule. But I am only a few days old,” Socks added.

“The light that can be spun into a pound of bronze can be spun into an ounce of silver. The light that can be spun in a pound of silver could be spun into an ounce of gold.”

“How many ounces of bronze are in Socks?” asked Thad.

“One-fifth of an ounce and he will easily outlast our lifetimes. Think of what that means for a tonn crafted with gold in its spine.”

“Those annimatonnns would last forever,” said Thad.

Over the side of the northwestern slope, a magnificent spectacle came into view. A floating city surrounded by hundreds of red skyships descended from the cap of clouds.

“Tiber!” Athena cried out. “We made it!”

“A most welcome sight indeed.” Ren beamed. Tiber lazily drifted downward. The metal of the buildings gleamed brilliantly in the early morning sun. Lake Ancora roared and splashed as the city landed in its center.

“Make haste,” Ren ordered. “Tiber will not linger once the wells are filled. I predict it will lift off by midday or an hour after, no later.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

Athena and Thaddeus were both overjoyed. Spirits lifted, they pressed on with renewed vigor. Before long they entered the main square of Ancora. Atop the remnants of its grand entryway, wings outspread, perched a mighty stone and metal pterodactyl. Its shining wingspan glistened with no sign of rust.

Ren called the children's attention. "Athena, Thaddeus, what do you make of it?"

"Its back is curved in as if—" Athena began.

"You could ride it!" Thaddeus exclaimed excitedly.

"But it would be too heavy and far too big," said Athena.

"Look at the wings," said Ren.

"The arms are stone, some sort of polished rock. The metal parts seem to be nickel or cobalt," said Athena. "Those are giant anti-magnets?"

"Just like a hawkpack," Thaddeus chimed in.

"Very good," Ren smiled proudly. "Anti-magnets are also used as the primary lift agent in all the floating islands as well."

"The amount of light and bronze used to power that!" Athena shook her head in bewilderment.

"That is why they used gold," Ren added.

"I wish I could ride it," said Thaddeus.

"You'd be too scared," Athena jibed.

"Would not."

"I daresay, there is a large tear down the front," Socks observed.

"Someone at some point in history poached its gold," said Ren. "Come now, that is enough of a delay. We still have a lot of ground to cover."

They made their way through a forest of pillars and remnants of structures several stories high, great buildings of an age long past. They came upon a wide clearing of road. In the distance, they could see Tiber resting cozily in the heart of Ancora's basin.

"I can't believe we made it," said Athena.

Ren placed his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

"Rocket sprockets, look at this!" Thaddeus jumped up and down in uncontained excitement. A stone rex lay collapsed on the ground behind a two-storied structure. "It's huge. I've never seen an animatonn so big."



## LANDING DAY

“Thad, stop messing around,” Athena snapped at him. “Tiber’s wells will be refilled any minute.”

“I wish I could name you.” Thaddeus pet the rex affectionately on the nose.

He turned to his father and sister who both gave him a look of utter terror. Bright red light rolled over Thad as the great red panes of the rex’s eyes flickered to life. A terrible rumble of boulder scraping boulder swelled. The earth shook as it slowly rose up to its full height. The rex’s mouth opened wide and steel teeth blazed and flashed. Awake, it roared with ferocious magnitude.

Thaddeus shook, unable to move. His legs were frozen with fear as the light of the rex’s eyes fell upon him. Its massive head bent forward and chomped.

Several things happened all at once. Blunder and Ren rushed to Thaddeus’s side. Ren took up Thaddeus in his arms while Blunder intercepted the mortal bite. The rex tossed its head back, crunching down on the metal bear as if he were a play toy for a dog. Back and forth the rex shook before releasing Blunder, rocketing him off deep into the ruins.

When the rex’s eyes spun back to where Thaddeus had been, it found an empty street. A guttural growl echoed from the chamber of its stomach. It lowered its head in a hunting position and patrolled the ruins in wide methodical strides.

The Burlys breathed heavily as they slumped against a mighty stone wall, out of view of the roaming red light. Footsteps thundered as the rex changed direction toward the exit of the city. As if guessing their intention, the mighty lizard took up a position between the Burlys and Lake Ancora, where Tiber was waiting.

“What did you do?” Athena hissed at Thaddeus.

“I didn’t do anything—”

“Quiet,” hushed Ren. The rex had moved several paces away. “We need to think. How do we get home?”

“Sneak past the rex?” Thaddeus suggested.

“That is a brilliant idea,” said Socks, as encouraging as ever.

Ren shook his head. “It will outrun us in the basin. The field before the lake is far too open. Not to mention, if the sentry catches sight of that thing,

they will pull anchor and evacuate rather than risk harm to Tiber. I believe we may need to take it down.”

“How are we supposed to do that?” Athena whispered. “Vox’s light won’t scratch the stone armor. We’d be lucky to make a crack.”

“Too true,” Ren agreed. “As is often the case, we must take it down from the inside.”

“How?” Athena spat. “The mouth is too dangerous. Anything that tries to enter through there will be ground to dust.”

“Perhaps we can find another hole to the inside,” said Socks.

“I didn’t see any other cavities. But I might not have looked close enough,” said Ren. “What can you both tell me about the eyes?”

“Too big for jewels,” Thaddeus said, eager to contribute. “They must be glass, right?”

“Maybe,” Athena added, “we could somehow pry them out or thrust them back into the head.”

“Interesting plan,” Ren whispered. “The next problem is, how do we get up that high?”

A minute passed as everyone was wrapped in thought. Finally, Athena spoke up. “The building across the lane is two stories. If we could get to the second story, someone could lure the rex around past it and Vox or Socrates could then leap out a window onto the rex’s head.”

“What happens if our animatonn misses, or is out of leaping distance?” Ren asked.

“This building has a rooftop,” Thaddeus said. “Perhaps Socks and Vox attack from opposite sides.”

“That way,” Athena continued, “we double our chances of landing the attack.”

“Very good.” Ren rubbed his hands together. “Vox, cross the street and make your way up to the window. When you are there, flash your tail to show us you’re ready.” The fox nodded, peeped around the corner, and when it was all clear swept to the other side. “Thaddeus, I’m going to boost you up to that ledge. Stay low and call out when Vox is ready. Socks, you will be with Thaddeus.”

“Why is Thaddeus the lookout? It should be me,” said Athena.

## LANDING DAY

"I asked Thaddeus," Ren said firmly. "If something happens to me, you will have to call the shots."

"What is going to happen to you?" asked Thaddeus worriedly.

"Hopefully nothing," Ren grinned confidently. He gave Thad a boost and waited.

"Vox is ready!" Thad cried in a hoarse whisper.

Slowly Ren peered down the empty street. The rex was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Blunder came trotting up the lane, his disconnected front left leg held in his mouth as a dog would a bone.

Ren waved the bear over with his hand. "Athena, help me with this leg attachment. We need to make it snappy." He gave the bear a pat on the head.

Athena rummaged through her bag of tools, confirming it contained what she needed. She turned back to her father, but his palm was held out flat to her, silently commanding her not to move. Around the corner of the lane, the rex stamped into view. Its flaming red eyes met with Ren's. Again it roared, then charged, head lowered like a battering ram. The ruins trembled with each footfall.

"Blunder, armor!" Ren snapped. Blunder rose on his hindquarters and wrapped Ren in a big bear hug. Not only the bear's arm, but Blunder's entire body enveloped Ren's. The bear's chest became a breastplate, his legs sturdy greaves, and his head an intimidating helm. The only part of Ren that remained vulnerable was his bare left arm, as they had not the time to reattach Blunder's lost limb.

Just as the breastplate clicked into place the rex's teeth came bearing down. The mouth scooped Ren upward as if the rex intended to swallow him whole. Ren extended his legs and threw up his right arm, catching the rex's front tooth. He wedged himself like a vertical stick stuck in the mouth of an alligator. The roar of terrible spinning blades from the back of the rex's throat came to life. The head waved and shook trying to break Ren's stance in order to clamp down and devour him.

"Thaddeus!" Athena shouted. "Attack the rex NOW!"

"He isn't close enough!" Thaddeus shouted back nervously.

"Stand back," Ren shouted. His bear armor glowed a brilliant blue. Sizzling blots of light flew forth from every crack of his armor. Then a blinding

## THE BRONZE AGE

white and blue flash lit up the sky. The rex's stones vibrated, stunned from the blast. "Attack!" Ren shouted.

"Socks, arm cannon," Thaddeus cried. The otter wrapped itself around his arm and Thaddeus opened fire. He struck the rex several times in the face.

"Not like that!" Athena screamed. "Vox, scale and take out an eye."

The copper fox vaulted over the window ledge onto the rex's back. But the stun of Blunder's attack had worn off. The rex whipped and waved, trying to shake off Vox as one would a pestering fly. Thaddeus released Socks, who darted down the side of the building and scurried around the creature's feet to add an additional distraction. With the rex's concentration split, Vox scampered up its back onto the top of its head. The fox's tail spun like a drill. With one swift stab, the tail plunged deep into the right eye. Crimson glass shattered like confetti. Vox hopped into the skull and there was a crack of thunder and a brilliant flash of light. The creature groaned and collapsed.

The Burlys gathered around their defeated foe. Two fox ears peeked out from behind the eye socket.

"We did it," Thaddeus exclaimed. "I can't believe that worked."

They all hugged each other, laughing at their luck. Their joy, however, was short-lived, for once they finished their moment's celebration a distant call of several horns let out. The island was lifting off.



## BUILD

No, no, no,” Athena cried out. “This can’t be happening—this can’t be happening. We were so close.”

In the depths of the basin of Ancora, the island of Tiber began to rise. The ancient ruins echoed as the waves of the lake chopped wildly. Reluctantly, the waters released their grasp upon the mighty mass of the island.

“We are here! We are here!” Athena cried out, waving her arms about furiously, but it was of no avail. The island viewed her as it would any other crawling thing, insignificant. “Don’t leave us.” She scurried down the side of the hill as fast as her legs would allow. By the time she reached the edge of the water, the island was over a hundred feet above her head and still climbing. “We must do something,” she wailed. Ren and Thaddeus stumbled up behind her.

“Quick, think! There must be something we can do. We are so close,” said Athena.

Thaddeus gazed heartbroken at the island. Their father’s face remained stoic, unreadable.

“Don’t just stand there—do something.”

“What can we do?” Thaddeus asked.

“Perhaps we could send a message and ask them to land again,” Socrates chirped. “Of course, we did leave the transponder back in the swamp with the man-eating snakes.”

“We need real ideas!” Athena yelled. “This was plan B. There is no plan C. We have no idea where or when the next Landing Day will take place. If we don’t get home now, we may never!”

“But Ath, there’s nothing we can do,” Thaddeus whined remorsefully.

“Don’t you dare!” Athena snapped. “You have no right to speak. If it weren’t for you we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“That’s not fair,” Thaddeus shouted back at his sister.

“Or accurate,” Socrates added. “For it was your mother who insisted we embark on this undertaking.”

“But it was Thad who was scared and wanted to turn on the light in the airship, making us easily spotted by the dusklings,” Athena snarled, jabbing her finger into her brother’s chest.

“You don’t know that!” Thad said, smacking his sister’s hand away.

“You disturbed the Leviathan and nearly got us killed in the swamp,” Athena continued, enraged. “And you destroyed our last chance of getting home...so you could play with some stupid animatonnn!”

Tears welled up in Thaddeus’s eyes. “It’s not my fault,” he persisted.

“It is entirely your fault. We are here because you do nothing right,” Athena shouted.

“Athena,” Ren’s voice let out a low rumble.

“Because you were foolish and scared and messed with things you had no business messing with.”

“Athena,” Ren said more forcefully.

“We may never see our mother again and I hold you solely responsible.”

“ATHENA!” Ren shouted. Thaddeus collapsed to the ground in tears. Athena marched over to her father’s side. “I think you have said quite enough.”

“Enough? This *is* Thad’s fault.”

“You think he doesn’t know that?” Ren cut her off. “You think this was something he planned, something he wished for? He feels bad enough as it is. What purpose is there in dragging your brother down lower?”

## BUILD

"It makes me feel better," Athena sneered.

"You're wrong! It makes you callous. It distorts you and does worse to him."

"What do you want me to do? Be happy that he ruined our last chance to get home?"

"You are his sister. Act like it." Ren lowered his voice to a whisper. "I know you see your brother's weakness. He is a child—scared, desperately in need of growing up. But if you choose to push him into the pit of despair there will be nothing left of him."

"After all he's done, why should I care?"

"Because he is your brother. He is part of you. When he suffers, so do you. Whether you like it or not, you are responsible for each other."

"I don't want to be responsible for him. I never asked to be responsible for him," Athena yelled at her father.

"I DON'T CARE WHAT YOU WANT," Ren roared, then again lowered his voice. "I care what you *need*. What you *both* need. I want Thaddeus to be a great man! Strong, honest, brave. Not cowering in the shadows, but standing firm with a spine of bronze. I want him to be a man of virtue. I want him to be a hero. The hero he is meant to be. The hero you can bring out of him. Guide him. Strengthen him. He has much to learn from you."

The rage clawing at Athena's insides twisted. "Why does he get to be the hero? What about me? You want *him* to follow in your footsteps, but I have been following in your footsteps since I was four. I'm better with animatons, I'm faster at assembling, I pay more attention to what I am supposed to be doing. Yet you spend all this time wanting Thad to be the best. What about me? I am the best. I try the hardest, I follow your instructions to a tee, yet I get ignored."

"Ignored?" Ren placed his wide palm on his daughter's cheek. "Never. I want you to be the best, but you are different than Thad. You grow in different ways. I know you want to be me, the famous tonn smith. But that isn't what I want for you. I don't want you to be me. I know how terrible I am. I want you to be better."

"You want me to be Mother."

Ren laughed. "Your mother is the greatest person I know. So yes, I want you to be more like your mother and I want your brother to be more like your

mother. The world would be a far better place if there were more people like her in it. That's why I gave her my life and somehow was lucky enough that she returned the favor.

"You and I share a lot of similar talents. But it is not your talents that define you. It is the virtues of your heart. Your wit, your wisdom, your unwavering perseverance, and your charity are all shared in common with your mother. She is a bulwark of strength, and without her, I'd be like an animatonn without bronze. I see her light inside you. It is why I love you so dearly."

Athena found herself crying heavily in her father's shoulder. She wasn't even aware of how it happened, but Ren embraced her tightly and kissed her on the head. After a moment she released her grip.

Ren looked at his daughter tenderly. "Go make it right with your brother."

Athena wiped her face and nodded. She slunk back to Thaddeus, whose eyes were red with tears. Taking hold of one of his hands, she raised him to his feet. "I'm sorry," she said, and she hugged him, much in the way her father had hugged her. "I love you. Sometimes I hate you, but I love you," she said. Ren limped over and wrapped both children in his arms.

"Does this mean we can hold hands?" Socrates asked.

The Burlys laughed.

"If only we had a skyship," Athena said mournfully, watching Tiber slowly drift westward.

"We do!" Socrates added brightly. "It crashed back in the forest."

"A working skyship," Athena corrected.

"Ah yes, that would be preferable," the otter nodded. Vox growled.

"I wish we could just take the wings off of the pterodactyl and fuse them to the rex," Thaddeus said as he plucked strands of grass.

Slowly Ren placed his hand on Thaddeus's shoulder. A quizzical smile cracked across his face. "Why can't we?"

"The wings weigh too much. We wouldn't be able to lift them," Athena said.

"Blunder could," Ren retorted.

"Vox scrapped the automotion relay. Without it, the rex can't move."

"Move on its own," Ren corrected. "We could force the movement manually."



## BUILD

"How does that work?" Thaddeus asked. "Would one of us pilot the rex as if it were an airship?"

Ren nodded. "Something along those lines."

"But even if we could, the wings would have to have their own separate mechanism," Athena added. "The rex wasn't built to fly."

"But it wasn't built by the Burlys. After we are done with it—" Ren clapped his hands together and rubbed them intently. "You let Blunder and me worry about those wings. Take Thaddeus, Vox, and Socks and see if you can get this beast up and running."

Excitedly they darted back to the fallen animatonn. Athena and Vox crawled through the open eye socket. Thaddeus and Socrates waited outside patiently.

After a few moments, Athena turned to her brother. "It doesn't look too complex. I think we could rig up some pedals to simulate leg movement and build a steering column easily enough. The issue is I can't fit in the central core without being severely hunched over, but the animatonnns are too small to reach all the connectors."

"I could do it," Thad blurted out. "I-I can—I know I can."

"I think you are going to have to," Athena said, frowning. "Alright, let's roll up our sleeves." She crawled back into the core and began to test the various connectors. Each operated a unique function of the rex. Thaddeus stood outside the skull, shouting through the open eye socket what was activated.

"Tail—it's the tail. The tail is moving," he said as Athena tried the twentieth connector.

"Got it." She pressed her screwdriver in the next one. Suddenly the mouth of the rex opened and let out a terrible roar. The inside of the skull shook with a deafening blast. Athena placed her hands over her ringing ears.

"That one is the roar," Thaddeus chimed from outside.

Athena bit her lip. "Yep. Got it."

After a half-hour of testing, Athena was convinced she knew all the primary functions of the rex. "Time to get this pendulum swinging. Grab the rest of my tools and any scrap lying about. Hand me what I ask for." With quick precision, she rigged a system for Thaddeus to operate. Vox and Thad worked in unison, placing what tool she called out for into her open hand so she did

not need to look up from her task. Socks could not resist the temptation and in several instances slipped his paw into her outstretched palm as she was waiting for a tool.

“Will you knock that off!” Athena barked, shaking the otter after the third time. With a few final screws, she gave her work a quick once over and nodded.

“Right, primary functions are accounted for. The two pedals are the rex’s right and left foot respectively. The lever in the corner will make the rex stand and lay down and the central bar will act as a steering wheel.”

Thaddeus looked at the rigging in horror as he noticed one glaring flaw. “But Ath, it’s backwards. I’m backwards. I won’t be able to see where we are going.”

“Perhaps you simply make the rex walk backwards,” Socks added.

“It can’t walk backwards. The pedals only operate the legs one way,” Athena explained. “I rigged it the best I could with the parts we have.”

“But how can I drive it if I can’t see?”

“Athena will be your eyes,” Ren said, leading Blunder forward. Two enormous wings were clenched tightly between the bear’s teeth. “She will be in the head with you, calling out directions. Now shall you show me how it runs?”

“We need to name it!” Thaddeus added.

“Name it?” said Athena. “It has no intelligence or personality. At this point, it is merely a ship.”

“Even ships have names, and this one is legendary!” Thaddeus grinned. “I know! Achilles.”

Athena could not help but smile. Thaddeus went for the meaningful name rather than a goofy one.

Thad crawled through the eye into the core and pulled himself upright, placing his feet on the pedals. Athena hopped over the ridge of the eye. They nodded to each other.

“First the lever,” Athena instructed.

Thad pulled the lever. Instantly they rose two stories as the rex stood up.

“Alright, the crossbar acts as a steering wheel. It turns the head and the body, so easy movements.” Thad turned the bar to the right. The rex lunged sharply, so much so that Thad and Athena were thrown off their feet to the

## BUILD

opposite side of the skull. “Easy movements!” Athena yelled. Thaddeus crawled back into the core.

“The pedals walk the rex.”

“Achilles,” Thaddeus corrected. He took several steps in quick succession. The rex juttled back and forth rapidly to the point where Athena thought they were going to tip over.

“NO! NO! NO!” she screamed. “What are you doing? You can’t tiptoe about—that isn’t how the rex was designed to move!”

“Athena!” Ren bellowed from below. “Guide him.”

Athena took a deep breath. “What you do, the rex will do. Imagine you are a rex. You don’t tiptoe. You take big slow strides.”

Thaddeus nodded and slowly stomped on the pedals in a heavy rhythm. The rex strode forward.

“That’s it, that’s it,” Athena sighed. “Turn with the head, move with the steps. Slow and steady.”

They circled the town square a few times before walking back to their father. With a flip of the lever, the rex lay obediently on its belly.

“Excellent,” Ren clapped, beaming at them.

“One problem down,” Athena said, hopping out of the dinosaur’s head. “Now answer the riddle. How will the wings work if there is no core connector in the skull?”

“I will operate them manually on the back,” said Ren.

“You’re going to ride on the rex’s back?” Athena gasped.

“Achilles’s back,” Thaddeus corrected.

“You’ll fall!” Athena snapped.

“I will not. Blunder will be wrapped around me like a belt and gripping the spine with his vice-like mouth.”

“What happens if he loses his grip?”

“Then not only do I fall, but the wings fall,” Ren added.

The danger of what they were about to undertake dawned on the children. If the rex moved wildly, Blunder would lose his grip, the wings would deactivate, and they would all plummet in a stone and metal cage.

## THE BRONZE AGE

“I will not let that happen,” said Ren. He and Blunder mounted Achilles’s back and pried open a hole to gain access to the spine. Within another ten minutes, both wings were hooked up and humming.

The Burlys took their positions. Athena and Vox sat in the eye, Thad and Socks in the brain, and Ren and Blunder held the wings in place on the back.

“Now or never!” Athena cried.

Thaddeus flipped the lever. The rex stood up. Ren activated the wings, and the rex lifted off the ground, higher and higher. Then with a tilt of the wings and a slight shift of the head, they began to move forward.

Achilles, the great animatonn rex, flew off after the island of Tiber.



## THE FLIGHT OF ACHILLES

Golden sparks sprayed from the rex's spine. Blunder's paws clasped tightly to the wings, holding them steadily in place. It was late in the afternoon, based on the position of the sun. Dusk would be upon the land in a few short hours. Carefully Ren adjusted the angle of the wings, attempting to wring out a bit more speed. The island had been drifting in front of them for the past half-hour and had barely grown in size.

"Athena!" Ren shouted over the whipping winds.

Socrates's head popped up like a prairie dog. He scampered surefooted along the back of the rex and stared with his bejeweled eyes at Ren.

"Did you need something?" the otter asked.

"We need to move faster. The spine is leaking light. If dusk hits and we have not landed, every duskling within ten miles will be on us."

"Right you are," Socks chirped. "I will relay the message straight away." The otter grasped Ren's hand and gave it a quick squeeze, then he scampered back to Achilles's head. Less than a minute later he returned.

"Athena asks how would you propose we move faster?"

## THE BRONZE AGE

“Tell her we need to gain some significant altitude and then force a dive. That way we will have gravity and the wings working for us rather than against each other.”

“Excellent plan, I will tell her at once.” With another squeeze of Ren’s hand the otter ran back to the head. This time he was gone for several minutes before returning.

“I told Athena your excellent idea. She says it is foolhardy and stupid and you will most assuredly get us all killed as she does not believe Blunder will be able to hold the wings in place at that speed.” Socks gave Blunder an affectionate pat on the head.

“Blunder will be fine. I built him. I know what he is capable of,” Ren said.

“Yes, of course. I will inform Athena as quick as a wink,” Socks added brightly before clasping Ren’s hand again and scampering off.

He returned in a mere moment as happy and chipper as ever. “Athena’s reply is this: Blunder consists of scrap, cobbled together without proper tools. There is no way that heap of junk—her words not mine—would ever be able to withstand a dive with any significant speed. After all, if he is so strong, why can he not hold the wings flush against the bronze so we are not spraying light everywhere?”

“We are spraying light because we are tapping into gold, not bronze. The difference is astronomical. But that’s beside the point. Tell her our greatest risk is maintaining our current velocity. We will not make it to the island by dusk. And even if we manage, we will be out in the open with a giant animatonn bleeding light. We needed to land twenty minutes ago. Tell her that.”

“Aye, aye,” said Socks, giving Ren’s hand yet another squeeze before darting back into the head.

Several long minutes passed before Socrates returned. “Athena says if we die it’s your fault, and Thaddeus says hold on to your britches.”

Ren laughed and the otter returned to the head.

“Alright Blunder, let’s show them your bronze.” Ren placed his hands on the bear’s paws. The bear growled affectionately.

Achilles’s head lifted, and as it did the rex began to rise and rise and rise. Higher and higher it climbed. After a minute of direct ascent, the head leveled out.

## THE FLIGHT OF ACHILLES

"Is this enough?" Athena's voice thundered from the head.

"Higher!" Ren called. They rose another hundred feet.

"Higher!" Ren called again. Another hundred feet.

"Higher!" After this final ascent, the tops of all the buildings of Tiber were visible. Ren's breath had become cold and shallow.

Socrates popped his head out again. "Godspeed," said the otter.

"Godspeed," Ren replied.

For a brief moment Achilles hovered at the crest of a mighty arch of cloud before its great stone skull dipped and the entire body followed into a freefall dive. The wings folded back, yet still pushed forward with immense power. The metal brackets rattled and shook violently. Blunder growled with determination and clamped his metal claws deeper. The cold bit at Ren's face. His teeth remained clenched. He would not let the cold bother him, for Tiber grew rapidly in size. Soon they would be home.

The wings continued to rattle against Achilles's stony hide. But something was off. "We are going too fast," Ren shouted, but only Blunder could hear him over the roaring wind. "If we don't slow down, we will shatter upon landing."

But instead of slowing, Achilles's trajectory continued to steepen. "What are you doing, Athena?" Ren roared as they plummeted past the outmost pier by a wide margin. It wasn't until they dipped far below the island and arced upward that Ren understood his daughter's plan.

They ascended using the momentum of the dive.

"Genius, the girl is genius." Ren laughed at Blunder. The rattling wings joined in on his merriment. "She knew we were coming in too fast, so she dove below the island in order to use the rise to slow our falling speed."

The rattling wings unfolded and let out a full blast of energy. Achilles sloped back upward over the island. Jubilation rinsed over Ren as they crossed past the outer port.

"We made it!" Ren threw his arms in the air. Then, as if to punish his premature celebration, Blunder let out a painful roar. With a horrible crack, the left wing along with Blunder's left leg and paw snapped. Propelled only by the right wing, Achilles fell like a spinning pinwheel before crashing into a grassy bank.

## THE BRONZE AGE

The whole world spun. In a haze, Ren pulled himself up and staggered to his feet. Blunder came trotting over to him, his front left leg missing. Achilles was on its side. The right wing lay twenty yards away from him. Two jets of golden sparks continuously sprayed out of its spine.

“Athena and Thaddeus,” Ren gasped as he leaned against Blunder for support. Together they slowly hobbled back toward Achilles.

“Irenaeus Burly!” a loud, hollow voice cried out. Ren turned toward the direction of the voice to see a half dozen men in sentry uniforms marching briskly toward him.

Ren spat. His mouth was full of blood. “At your service,” he cried.

“Seize him,” the voice ordered.

Blunder leapt in front of his creator and let out a terrible roar. In response, two animatonn vultures overhead fell upon the bear. Their beaks speared and drilled into Blunder’s metal.

“Blunder, lightning storm!” Ren commanded.

A pale blue light emanated within the metal bear. Every crack and every hole sizzled and glowed. The grizzly opened its mouth as light poured out, preparing his terrible strike. Yet as Blunder was set to unleash his fury, the buzzards’ beaks fastened upon his spine. In unison they ripped the metal column out of the bear’s back, then, like a wishbone, snapped it in two. Blunder collapsed. His light faded and he moved no more.

“What is this?” Ren yelled. The buzzards swooped upon him next. “You have no right.”

“It is unfortunate that you returned. We have come too far for you to destroy what has been set in motion,” Captain Notch said. His eyes seemed lifeless. “Take him to the sentry’s keep. We shall decide what to do with him in the morning.”

“Notch, you can’t do this. You’re better than this!” Ren shouted. The remaining officers stepped forward and bound and cuffed their prisoner. “Notch! Notch.” The buzzards clasped Ren’s shoulders with their claws and dragged him off to the dungeon.





## THE GREAT PENELOPE

Thaddeus and Athena pulled themselves out from Achilles's skull. Collapsing on the soft green grass, they rolled onto their bellies. A stone's throw away they could hear Ren shouting orders to Blunder.

"Blunder, lightning storm!" their father yelled.

The children watched in horror as the vultures descended and snapped Blunder's spine in two. Thaddeus almost cried out, but Athena covered his mouth with her hand to silence him. Breathlessly they watched the sentry arrest their father and lead him away.

"What do we do?" Thaddeus exclaimed after the hostile officers and animatons were out of sight. "The sentry are bad guys now."

"Well, we are home," Socks added in his usual optimistic tone. "What would you normally do when you encounter bad guys at home?"

"Go tell the sentry!" Thaddeus said.

"Ah. I see the problem." Socks nodded.

"We have to find Mother. If she knows Father has returned, maybe she can do something," Athena said. Vox gave an approving purr.

"What an excellent idea!" Socks added. Together they darted off across the greenway. Before they had gone far, a shrill whistle sounded. One of the sentry officers had spotted the children and flew towards them at an alarming

pace. His whistle pierced sharply. Brandishing a baton, he waved it back and forth and shouted for them to halt.

“Loose sprockets,” Athena spat in anger.

The sentry officer was closing fast. “Halt! Halt I say!” he cried. “In the name of Tiber, I order you to stop.”

“Vox, distraction!” Athena commanded.

If the mechanical fox could have grinned, it would have done so at that moment. As slick as mercury, Vox looped around the side of the field and blazed an intercepting path. The sentry drew his musket but was too slow. There was a loud cry as the fox’s tail hooked around the officer’s leg, cartwheeling him into the air before he fell face first into the grass. His rifle skidded several yards away. The officer picked himself up only to witness the fox weaving around him in circles and figure eights.

“You little devil!” he cried as the fox’s tail hooked around his other leg, pulling him into a split. His face contorted with pain. Upon regaining his stance he brandished his baton like a sword. “I’m going to sever your spine in seven.”

Furiously he swiped at the fox. Vox sprang about him, easily avoiding the blows as if they were being made by an impatient toddler. Seeing Thaddeus and Athena were out of sight, Vox gave out a gleeful yip and took off like a wild flame after them, leaving the irate sentry officer blowing his small brass whistle in a fit of rage.

The streets of Tiber were empty, unusually so, as curfew would not be in effect for a few more hours. No one was pulling laundry. No animatonns patrolled the street. Every shop was closed. Street after street, Athena and Thaddeus encountered no living or mechanical soul.

“Where is everyone?” Athena asked about ten blocks away from home.

“Do you think they all died?” Thaddeus asked.

“If everyone is dead, why would the sentry bother to arrest your father?” Socks added quizzically.

After another two blocks of silence, the fear that some ill fate had befallen the island seemed more plausible.

“What if Mother isn’t home?” Thaddeus panted, pausing for a moment to catch his breath.

“Where else would she be?” Athena said. “She’s always at home.”

## THE GREAT PENELOPE

The echo of small scurrying feet rose behind them. Athena was about to yell for them to hide just as a young boy around Thaddeus's age rounded the corner. He wore a flat cap and his face was covered in freckles. When he saw Thaddeus and Athena, he froze.

"What are you two doing here?" he said.

"We live here," Thaddeus replied.

"Did my mother send you?" the boy asked. "If she sent you, you should tell."

"What are you talking about?" said Athena.

"She said I couldn't go to the Arena until after I cleaned out the chicken coop and demagnetized the icebox. I did the icebox, the chicken coop is almost done. There is probably only an hour left, so I figured I can sneak into the back and watch and then run back home and finish the chicken coop before everyone else gets home," the boy said defensively.

"Your mother did not send us," said Athena.

"Oh, well then why aren't you at the Arena? Are you sick or something? It's not over, is it? Don't tell me Penelope finally lost!"

"I'm sorry, Penelope?" Athena shook her head, taken aback by what she heard.

"The Great Penelope. This is day seven of the animatonn battles." Athena and Thaddeus looked at the boy as if he were speaking an unknown language. "You promise my mother didn't send you to check on me?"

"When you say the Great Penelope..."

"The Great Penelope, the lady with the wolf. Cheese on my knees, where have you guys been? She is going to marry whoever has an animatonn that can beat her dead husband's. This is all everyone has been talking about for the past week. She's the best. No one can defeat her."

Athena and Thaddeus looked at each other in shock, and without another word to the boy, shot off toward the Arena.

"Tell mother I will finish the chicken coop later," the boy cried after them.

The center of the entertainment district was built out around the Arena. It stood, a great ring, five stories high, modeled after colosseums of old. Deafening crowds cheered in such multitude that the very walls shook with

## THE BRONZE AGE

palpable excitement. The entire population of the island squeezed in wall to wall, raptured in the awesome battles.

Athena, Thaddeus, Vox, and Socks blazed up to the southern entrance and halted. Several sentries were posted at the gate. Though it was clear that they were meant to be monitoring the streets, each took turns craning their necks over the crowd in order to catch glimpses of the goings on inside.

“How do we get past them?” Thaddeus asked Athena in his least conspicuous voice. “We could use Vox to distract them, or have Socks—”

“We can probably just walk past them,” Athena said.

“What a brilliant idea,” Socks chirped. “And perhaps if we all held hands, we would look less suspicious.”

Athena rolled her eyes and marched forward with the animatonns in tow.

The central guard put out his hand. “What are you planning on doing with those two?” He pointed to the otter and the fox.

“We are...going to see the games,” Athena said slowly.

“You know you can’t fight with them, right? Today’s contestants have already been chosen.”

“We do not plan on fighting with them.” Athena nodded.

“Then why are you bringing them? You need to be an eligible bachelor to participate, which you both clearly are not.”

“Like I said, we do not plan on fighting. So that part doesn’t matter, does it?”

The second guard winced. “Hey, are those Burly tonns? They look a lot like Burly tonns. How did the two of you get Burly-made animatonns?”

“Our father—” Thad began.

“—Bought them for us,” Athena interjected. She glared at Thaddeus.

“You might as well let them in,” the second sentry told the first. “Burly-made animatonns are disqualified from competing anyway.”

“Very well. But remember, anything or anyone that enters the battle grounds loses all protections under the law of Tiber, and life may therefore be forfeit,” the guard recited as though he had done so countless times that very day.

## THE GREAT PENELOPE

Athena and Thaddeus entered the Arena. Socks turned back to the guards and gave a little wave. "Thank you, officers, for your kindness and diligence. May you all have the most splendid of days."

The guards gaped, stupefied. Athena snatched up the otter by the back of the neck and, grabbing her brother's hand, pulled him inside.

The crowd roared in delight. All eyes were transfixed on the battleground. The center ring was an oval pit of packed sand and earth. Dozens of animatons lay strewn about in various states of disrepair, but the focus of every onlooker in the stadium was on the prowling black wolf with golden eyes.

"Argus! Argus! Argus!" the crowd cheered. Thaddeus and Athena stood in dismay as their family pet lapped up the excitement.

"Argus's next challenger," an announcer cried out over the ceaseless roars, "fighting for Reginald Twitch, is Gor Monger!" A copper clad bull galloped into the ring.

"Oh no! Poor big brother, that beast is twice his size!" Socks chirped.

The bull rushed forward, horns lowered. Like a matador, the wolf shifted out of the way with surprising speed for such a large animatonn. But instead of galloping far past the wolf and circling back, the bull's neck cocked up, detached from its shoulders, slid along the back, and reattached at the rear with a click. It charged again immediately.

Argus was unprepared for this second attack. The bull's horn clipped the wolf's side, sparking across the metal and leaving a deep scratch. Again, the horned head detached, rolled over the top of the bull's body, and reattached to the creature's front. A third charge. Argus leapt out of the way just in time.

"After your next dodge, attack the head mid-shift. That is when it is vulnerable," called a woman's voice from the stands. "Up and over."

Gor Monger charged yet again, and again Argus was able to avoid his spear-like horns. As the bull's head detached from its shoulders, the wolf hurdled over the hulking beast. And as the head rode across its back, the wolf's tail came down like a lance. It plunged deep into Gor Monger's face, right between the eyes. With a quick snap, the bull's body collapsed. Argus gingerly shook the decapitated bull head off his tail.

## THE BRONZE AGE

The crowd hollered in delight. Argus sauntered over to the far end of the ring and bowed to the king's box. There in the box, with the same bear brooch pinned upon her breast, was their mother. She wore a long green dress and sat upon the high seat overlooking the Arena. Her hair was pulled back and her face poised. She gave a motion of her hand for Argus to continue.

"Our next contestant comes from Lucian Scratch. Ladies and gentlemen, I give you Ravenous." A mighty red and gold striped tiger stole into the ring.

"Mother and Argus are AMAZING!" Thaddeus gaped.

"I was always aware they were amazing," said Socks.

Athena shook her head. "Never in a hundred years would I ever have believed—"

"Have you seen two children with a fox?" a voice called out from behind them. "I'm looking for two children with an animatonn fox."

Athena and Thaddeus eyed each other. Slowly, without turning around, Thaddeus lifted Socrates above his head. "Who is it?" Thaddeus said in a low voice.

"Do you remember that sentry guard who Vox gave a fair lashing to a few moments after we crash landed?" Thad nodded. "Why, it is him, one and the same."

"Vox, disguise," Athena said. The copper fox transformed into a top hat which Athena placed upon her head. "We need to get to Mother *now*." They weaved through the crowd of the outer ring until they drew near the king's box where their mother was seated. It was then that Athena picked up on an eerily familiar voice.

"You told me Gor Monger would finally be able to beat that blasted wolf. That pile of scrap didn't last five minutes," Mr. Twitch shouted at a shy looking animatonn smith.

"That was the best I had sir, honest. I poured weeks of work into Gor Monger."

"Your work is clearly..." But Mr. Twitch never finished his sentence, for at that moment he caught sight of Athena. Quickly she looked away. Twitch's eyes narrowed. "Wait, I-I know her." The realization dawned on his countenance. A sinister smile spread across his face. "You—you're—Sentry! Guards! Guards!" Mr. Twitch screamed.

## THE GREAT PENELOPE

Athena and Thaddeus about-faced and hustled through the crowd back the way they had come. Mr. Twitch pushed and shoved the onlookers, crying out, "Stop those children! Stop them, I say!"

"What do we do?" Thaddeus asked.

"Quick, up the stairs to the next level." But just as Athena had spoken, a half dozen guards had descended the stairs. Hearing Mr. Twitch's outcry, they turned on the children.

"Not that way," Athena cried, making yet another course correction. They were heading back toward the entrance when sure enough, the guard who Vox had pummeled caught sight of them. "You! Halt now! I mean it!"

"Now what?" shouted Thaddeus.

Grabbing his hand, Athena did the only thing she could do. She led him down the rows and rows of seats to the guardrail that circled the battleground.

"Grab those children!" Mr. Twitch shouted. "I will double the salary of anyone who grabs those children." Two dozen guards were rapidly moving in on their position. The surrounding patrons stared dumbfounded at the scene.

Thaddeus turned from the guards to his sister, and then to the pit below. "We are going to do this, aren't we?"

Athena nodded. Hand in hand, with Socrates quickly joining in, they jumped over the guardrail into the battlegrounds.

Athena and Thaddeus landed roughly on the compact sand and dirt. Socks and Vox, the latter of whom had transformed midfall, alighted softly on their feet. Onlookers in the crowd gasped, unsure as to what was happening or what ought to be done.

"Get to Mother," Athena cried, and all four burst into a mad dash across the battleground toward the king's seat on the opposite end.

Mr. Twitch raced over to his box. "Release everything!" he screamed.

"Sir, there are children on the field," his operator said.

"The rules state anyone who steps on the field forfeits his life to the outcome of the battle. Release everything now!"

"I will not," said the operator.

"Then you're fired," shouted Mr. Twitch, and he saw to flipping the levers himself. Every remaining door of his box opened. A lion, rhinoceros, bison, crocodile, condor, and moose appeared from behind their gate doors. The

beasts tore full speed at the children, kicking up a cloud of sand and dust in their wake.

“What is going on?” the announcer called out. “Children are on the field and it appears Reginald Twitch has released every animatonn in his arsenal. Ladies and gentlemen, we may have literal bloodshed tonight.”

There was a collective gasp before an eerie silence fell across the crowd. They were about to witness murder.

Argus finished dismantling the tiger and again bowed to Penelope, but she did not wave him onward. Instead, she watched in horror as the two specks that had fallen from the stand scampered out into the center of the field.

Athena and Thaddeus ran madly toward Argus and their mother. The condor swooped above, claws prone. Without needing a command, Socrates leapt up on Thaddeus’s shoulder before backflipping off. In midair his head opened and bright blue light shone forth. A loud blue blast crackled through the air. The condor tried to spin out of the way but light struck home in its left wing. The mighty bird crashed to the ground. Transformed back into a small otter, Socks leapt upon its neck. With paw and tooth, he gnawed and scratched, and in less than a second the head of the bird came rolling off.

The other animals formed a wide circle around the children so that it would be near impossible to judge who would attack next.

From behind, the rhinoceros ripped forward. The children split, leaving a substantial space between them, but as it drew near, the horned beast circled back, feigning its attack.

The moose charged through the center of the circle straight at Athena. Vox swept in front of her, and with his tail in the form of a club, knocked the moose hard under the jaw. The head turned upward, redirecting its path a hair’s breadth away from the children. Dotting underneath the beast’s tall tree-like legs, Vox transformed his tail again, this time into a spinning blade. With a few well-placed slashes, the front legs of the moose were hewn to stumps. The hulking body collapsed under its own weight.

Penelope’s heart shrieked beneath her chest. There was no doubt these two figures braving the battlefield of the Arena were *her own* children. With fire in her eyes, she rose from the high seat and spoke. “Argus,” she commanded,



## THE GREAT PENELOPE

“save the children. Kill anything that stops you.” She turned to head down the stairs and a pair of sentry officers blocked her path. “What is this?” she asked.

“Ma’am, we have been told to keep you in the king’s box for your own safety,” one of the guards said.

“To the land below with my safety—my children are being attacked by the deadliest animatons on the island. Let me pass.”

“Ma’am, I am sorry, but we cannot. You are our top priority,” the guard replied.

“Your priorities are misaligned.” She turned back to the box but rather than return to her seat, she hiked up her gown and hopped over the guardrail, falling a full story to the arena below. With a mother bear’s ferocity, she swept forward into the deadly circle of animals. Argus wheeling around her, opening a path.

The children and mother rushed to each other, embraced quickly, then turned to face their adversaries. Argus, Vox, and Socks stood in a triangular formation around the Burlys.

“This isn’t exactly where we were expecting to find you,” Athena said to her mother. There was an unmistakable note of awe in her voice.

“Nor I you,” Penelope responded, giving her daughter’s hand a tight squeeze.

“Father is alive!” Thaddeus said. “The sentry took him to the dungeon.”

“First things first. We must get out of this mess,” Penelope said.

“This was the only thing I could think to do,” Athena said. “We had to get to you, and Mr. Twitch called the guards on us.”

“You have done well,” Penelope smiled at her daughter. “I’m proud of you.”

The rhinoceros and bison charged. Argus lunged at the bison’s neck while Socks threw himself at the rhino’s head and plunged his claws deep into the beast’s eyes.

The crocodile snapped at Thaddeus, but its teeth came down on Vox’s bladed tail. The glowing blade plunged through the roof of the creature’s mouth, cutting its snout in two. The creature roared and from the center of its mouth triggered a grappling hook. The hook shot forward, piercing the fox’s

## THE BRONZE AGE

tail. The rope rewound in an instant, dragging Vox into the lizard's maw. The croc clamped down. Vox's tail came off with a snap.

The lion prowled in the back line waiting patiently for the opportune moment. Once all three animatonns were embroiled in battle, the king of beasts streaked forward before leaping into a terrible pounce. At the last possible moment, Argus intercepted the lion's attack. The two wrestled, their metal clanging together before the lion came out on top and clamped its mouth on the old wolf's head. Argus howled in defeat.

A symphonic blast of trumpeting horns echoed the howl. The starboard gate collapsed as three bull elephants stampeded into the Arena. Riding the frontmost elephant was Ren. The back two elephants swooped around the sides grabbing, crushing, and stamping the opposing animatonns quickly underfoot. A chrome trunk wrapped itself around the lion and tossed it aside like a toy kitten. When all the enemy animatonns were successfully dispatched, the middle elephant raised its trunk, wrapped it around Ren and gently placed him amidst his family. Penelope rushed forward and kissed her husband.

The crowd who had watched in silent horror erupted in cheers and applause. The inhabitants of the island exploded with joy, for never in the history of the Arena had such a battle taken place. Men, women, and children wept with relief and jubilation.

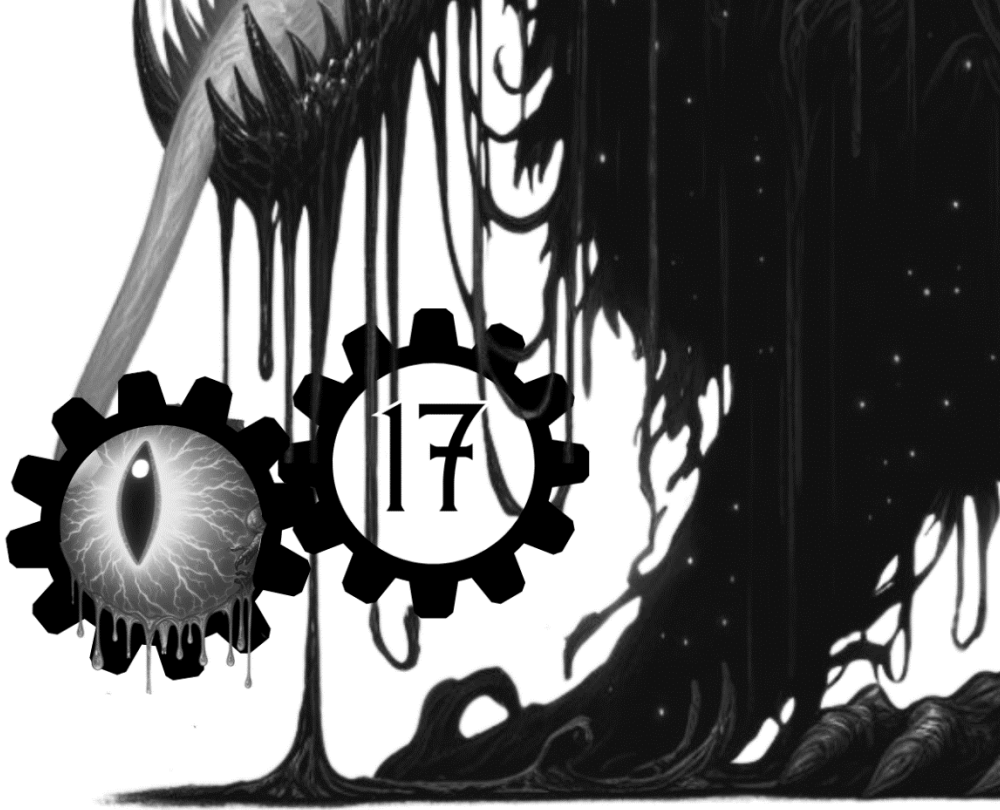
The Burlys embraced each other. There were plenty of hugs and kisses going around. They were finally together. They were finally safe.

*Dong...Dong...Dong.*

The bells rang. The warm cheering of the crowd returned to a blanket of icy silence.

*Dong...Dong...Dong!*

The warning bells let out again. The dusklings were here.



## THE FINAL FIGHT

Silence turned into panic. The warning bell continued to toll. Ren grabbed hold of the trunk of the nearest elephant. “Hannibal, magnify voice,” he commanded. Obediently the elephant spread his ears. “Attention!” Ren’s voice reverberated across the Arena. “Every able-bodied man who can carry a rifle or has an animatonn battle-ready, you are called upon. If you are a guard of this city, a member of the sentry, you are called upon. We are under attack by an enemy who wants to see our island sink into the land below. We must not let this happen. We shall not cower away from those who wish to destroy us. We stand firm with spines of bronze. We shall show them our light. To arms, to arms!”

The rally cry was heard. The sentry, guards, and volunteer militia quickly came together.

Ren turned to his family. A mournful look painted his face.

“You can’t go,” Penelope cried. “I just got you back.”

## THE BRONZE AGE

Ren placed his hand on his wife's cheek. "I have crawled my way out of the depths of the underworld to be with you again. Nothing can keep me away from your embrace. Not even death. I will return to you." His hand slid from her cheek and rested gently on her belly. His eyes flitted there, then back to his wife. "All of you." With that, the elephant Hannibal picked him up with its trunk and placed Ren on its metal back.

"Goliath, Samson," Ren called to the other elephants. They followed him out of the Arena.

Athena collapsed. "After all that has happened, why this? Why now?" Penelope knelt and embraced her daughter.

Thaddeus turned away. Dread and fear began to roll over him. His eyes darted from Vox, to his sister, to his mother.

*"They come at night. They come for light.  
They come to feed on all that's bright.  
Hide the children out of sight.  
Shut the windows; bar them tight,  
For malice is the shadow's might.  
Darkness forms in fury's bite;  
Consolation evades our plight.  
Forgone is hope, so comes the..."*

He did not say the last word. An electrical surge seemed to connect in his brain. His eyes widened. "Ath," he said, the look on his face of near excitement. "Achilles!"

Athena sat up. She too now shared her brother's expression.

"Who is Achilles?" Penelope asked.

"Mother, we have to go," Athena said.

"You most certainly will not."

"But we can stop the duskings," Thaddeus implored. Penelope stared at her son as though she had never seen him before. "Athena and I can do this together."

Athena looked her mother square in the face. "You charged me with bringing Father home. He is not home yet. Let Thaddeus and I bring him the rest of the way."

## THE FINAL FIGHT

Slowly Penelope nodded. “Go,” she said. “Take the animatonns and bring your father home.”

Vox stepped forward meek and tailless. Argus limped up to them, his head dangling. Socrates leapt upon Thad’s shoulder, the only one not worse for wear.

“Vox, Argus, protect Mother. Socrates, we are going to wake up Achilles and give him a supper of dusklings,” Athena commanded.

“What an excellent idea,” Socrates chirped.

“Now we have to get back to Achilles as quickly as possible,” Athena laid out.

“I may be able to assist with that,” said Socks. “Titan, my dear friend, Titan!” The metal rhinoceros stamped over to them.

“Socks, that animatonnn was trying to kill us,” said Thaddeus.

“Yes, but he was told to do that.”

“Didn’t you gouge out his eyes?” Athena added.

“Only the left eye,” Socrates corrected. “Since then, I daresay, we have become dear friends.”

“That was like three minutes ago!” Thaddeus exclaimed.

“Let bygones be bygones,” Socks said, shaking his head. “And rhinoceroses be rhinoceroses. Indeed, the footprint left by the elephant’s kick makes the perfect seat for the pair of you.”

“Well, we need to get there fast.” Athena shrugged. She, Thaddeus, and Socks boarded Titan and waved to their mother as they galloped out of the Arena.

“Godspeed!” Penelope called after them before placing her hand on her belly. “Little one, you have quite the family.”

Titan galloped down the cobbled streets at a breakneck pace. The battle of the dusklings seemed to be concentrated on the opposite end of the island.

They made a quick pitstop at home for Athena to restock her tools. After gathering everything she felt she needed, she put it all in a bag and again the rhino was off.

Upon reaching the outer farms they spotted the crash site. Achilles lay motionless. Two nervous sentry guards kept watch over the ancient animatonnn.

A terrible screech let out as a pair a black shapes spiraled overhead. The dusklings’ orange-eyed tongues hung from their jaws, greedily surveying the

shower of golden sparks streaming from Achilles's spine. The guards drew their rifles and fired. Like a tiger, the larger of the dusklings pounced down on the nearest guard.

At the same moment, the second duskling spotted the children. Instinctively, Athena yanked the neck of Thaddeus's shirt and pulled him off the chrome plates of Titan's back. The ground hit them hard as the pair tumbled about the grassy slope. Socrates leapt down gently after them. Titan slowed his gait, but the second Athena stopped rolling, she pointed her finger like a rifle at the duskling who had pinned the sentry guard.

"Charge!" she commanded.

The rhino burst across the field in a resounding gallop and collided with the foul beast with the force of a locomotive.

"Ath..." Thaddeus's voice shook. "This was a mistake. This was *such* a mistake. I don't think we should do this."

"Thaddeus, this was your idea. You can't back out now," Athena snapped.

Thaddeus shook his head. "We're just kids Ath, we can't—we can't—"

"Look at me." Athena grabbed her brother's hands and locked eyes. "We are not *just kids*. We are Burlys, with spines of bronze. We have faced dusklings, and witches, and snakes, and have always come out on top."

"But I—"

"You, Thaddeus, you are braver than I have ever given you credit for. You are stronger than I ever suspected. That duskling has more to be afraid of than you do. Quit thinking about yourself, your fear, your insecurity. Father needs you. Mother needs you. The city needs you." Athena let go of Thaddeus's right hand. "Socrates," she commanded.

The otter placed his paw in her free hand. "Arm cannon." The otter transformed, fitting himself to her arm. She slid off the cannon and placed it in Thaddeus's hand.

"I need you. Thaddeus Burly," Athena said, "what's your spine made of?"

The second duskling, who had been watching the children for the last few moments, stretched out its arms and glided toward them like a bat.

"YAHHHHHHHH!" Thaddeus shouted as he fired shot after shot into the beast. The heaping black mass crashed into the earth, never to move again.

## THE FINAL FIGHT

“Halt!” the terrorized guards cried. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Gentlemen, thank goodness I found you,” Athena said, channeling her mother. “You are both needed desperately on the front. As you can see, we are in the midst of a duskling attack.”

“But we were told to watch this—” one of the guards stammered.

“There is no time for that. Many good men will have already fallen. Quickly, take this rhinoceros and ride him to the front.” The men looked at each other, nodded, saddled the rhino, and in moments were off.

“Alright Thad, let’s get Achilles running as smooth as a captain’s clock,” Athena said. They worked together in unison. Athena went over the more complex parts, welding the spine so it stopped seeping light. Thad went over all the joints, repairing what he could. When both were satisfied, they crawled into the skull.

Athena sat in the eye socket with Socks. Thaddeus took his position in the core.

“Are you ready for this?” Athena asked.

Thaddeus responded the last way Athena expected.

*“They come at night. They come for light.*

*They come to feed on all that’s bright.*

*Hide the children out of sight.*

*Shut the windows; bar them tight,*

*For malice is the shadow’s might.*

*Darkness forms in fury’s bite;*

*Consolation evades our plight.*

*Forgone is hope, so comes the night...but not this night.*

*This night we stand, this night we fight.”*

“Amen, brother,” said Athena. “Let’s go show those dusklings our gold.”

“I daresay, those beasts have a good bruising coming,” Socks chirped.

Thaddeus flipped the lever. Achilles rose to its feet.

Houses shook and cobblestones trembled as Athena guided them through the center of the city. Before they knew it, they had reached the battle.

“Thad, third connector from the top left, and plug your ears,” Athena ordered.

## THE BRONZE AGE

The rex let out a soul-searing roar. For a moment the battle stopped as duskling, man, and animatonn stood in awe of this new player. A dozen of the dusklings regained their brass and swooped upon them.

“When I say ‘now,’ bite and then hit the tail,” Athena cried. “Wait for it. Wait for it. NOW!”

Achilles’s skull lunged forward in a wide awful chomp. This was quickly followed by a whip of the tail, which dispatched five dusklings in a single strike. The remaining beasts swarmed the rex, crashing upon them in a black wave. The inside of the rex’s head shook. Athena lost her footing and slipped about the skull, cursing and wishing she had a harness of some kind.

“They are going after the legs,” she called to Thad, who was trying to reposition himself back on the pedals. Dusklings clung and clawed the stone and metal, their orange eyes salivating with the hopes of harvesting the light from Achilles’s spine.

Regaining his footing, Thad stomped the pedal. Again and again he stomped. He could feel the crunch of the dusklings reverberate up the stone and metal legs. He kept going. The beasts cried out several ear-splitting howls. Seeing the attack on the side was not having an effect, the beasts detached, swooped around and flew directly at the head.

“Chomp like there is no tomorrow,” Athena yelled to her brother. Thad stabbed the connector with the screwdriver. Achilles’s mouth lunged forward. There were so many it was impossible to miss.

A pair of dusklings landed on top of the head. One was knocked off in a tail whip, the other slid down to the open gap of the eye socket. It swiped at Athena with a black outstretched claw. Socrates was there in an instant. He transformed himself into an arm cannon wrapped around Athena’s wrist. With a quick pull of the trigger, the infernal creature screeched. Its orange-eyed tongue had been blasted off its mouth. Then a second shot fired, followed by a third. The duskling fell from Achilles’s face with a cry, only to be stamped out by the foot of the rex.

“Are we doing good?” Thaddeus called to his sister.

“We’re doing good!” Athena called back. “Keep biting.”

Thaddeus did so, and yet more and more dusklings arrived, abandoning all else but Achilles. Athena saw nothing but the black cloud of creatures.



## THE FINAL FIGHT

“Fire!” shouted several voices at once.

With Achilles being the primary target, the sentry, the militia, and all the other animatons let loose a rain of light and flame. Athena dove behind the protection of the stone and metal eye socket. After the sound of cannon fire subsided, Athena lifted her head and peered out the rex’s eye. The monstrous horde lay devastated. The handful of duskings that had somehow survived the attack retreated with the last glimmer of sun. This night belonged to Tiber.

“Athena, Thaddeus!” Ren’s voice echoed from below. He thundered forward on Hannibal. Thaddeus joined his sister at the eye socket window. “Of all the insane, dangerous, foolhardy ideas—” Athena frowned, feeling the reprimand she was about to receive was unjust. “The two of you brought about the greatest victory the island has ever seen.” Every soldier and animatonn banged their metal in thunderous applause. Ren beamed at his children. “You two did the impossible. I could not be prouder.”

Back at home that evening, the Burlys gathered around the dinner table. They told each other the stories of the times they spent apart. There was laughing. There was crying. There was hugging. And much to Sock’s delight, there was even time for holding hands.





To My Readers,

WOW! You made it all the way to the author's letter! You either loved the book or you're here because you flipped to the back after getting bored. If it's the second one... let's just keep that between us, okay?

Seriously though, THANK YOU—whether you bought, borrowed, found, stole, or heroically saved this book from a burning building. However it fell into your grubby mitts, you took the time and plunged in headfirst, and that means the world to me.

*THE BRONZE AGE* (and its sequels) have been my labor of love for the past 6 years. I've spent endless hours crafting every word and then recrafting them again and again until they were just right. And now, I finally get to share this adventure with you.

Now, I've got just two small favors to ask. First, if you had even a smidgen of fun with this story, please consider leaving a review on Amazon. Reviews are the lifeblood of Indie Authors like me, and they really do make a difference.

Second, pass this book along! Maybe to someone cool who loves robot animals... and, if you hated it, give it to someone you don't like—and tell them you think they will love it. No better practical joke than that.

Better get back to writing now.

Godspeed,

Seth D. Coulter

# FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

## PREVIEW

### About the Author

**M**y dad is a big strong man. He was born from Ohio. He reads with me and plays games with me. I like it when we play video games. He makes good jokes and has cool shirts. Sometimes he kisses mom on the lips. Dad loves swimming, playing with toys with me, watching cartoons, and taking walks with our family. He is older than 20 and younger than 100. We live in Arizona. The end.

*-Charles R. Coulter (age 5½)*