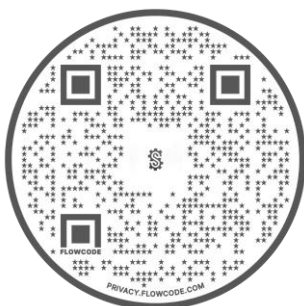


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# THE CHILD THRONE

SETH D. COUTER

SPINELIGHT SAGA  
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THE  
CHILD  
THRONE

SETH D. COULTER



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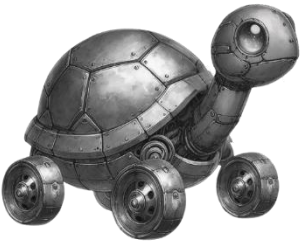


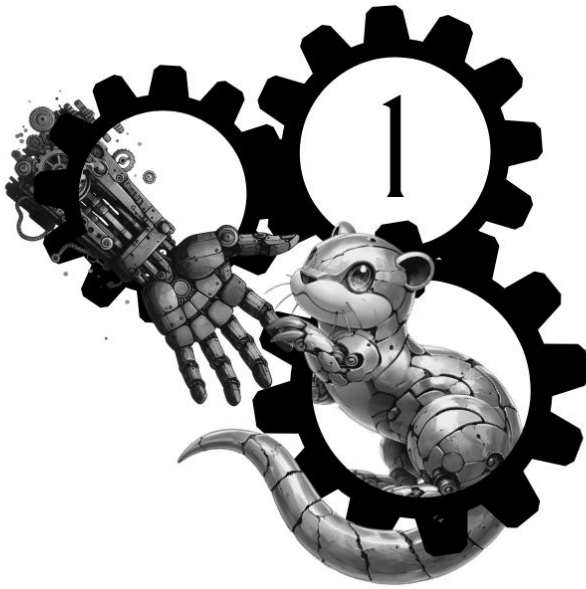
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To Dad

*Thank you for all the monsters you've slain*





## FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

I'm going to pull on the count of three." Ren gripped the animatronic arm with both hands. "One..." The face of old farmer Appleton braced in preparation for the oncoming pain. Thaddeus hated this part—hated the anticipation of pain. It was going to hurt, and hurt badly. He hated that there was nothing to be done but watch.

"Two..." Athena, Thaddeus's sister, held fast to the farmer's non-animatronic appendage. Her spare hand was held by their family's clockwork otter. Ren had asked her and her brother to assist him on a house call. She had hoped they would be repairing one of her father's more famous animatronics, a wide menagerie of mechanized animals he crafted over the years, each powered by bronze soaked with starlight. Neither she nor Thaddeus had any idea they would be pulling off an old farmer's arm.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Three!" Ren yanked hard. Several clicks and snaps sounded as the arm released from the shoulder port.

The farmer hollered in pain, squeezing Athena's hand like a vice. After a moment he let go and motioned to Thaddeus. With two hands, Thad heaved an unmarked jug off the end of the table and handed it to him. The farmer gulped down several mouthfuls. A clear liquid smelling of lime and juniper drizzled down either side of his chin. He lowered the jug and breathed heavily. "Swear it ain't ever easy," Mr. Appleton groaned. "Don't know what's worse, the detaching or reattaching."

Ren stroked his bushy black beard thoughtfully. "Aye. In order to feel anything, it needs to connect to the nerves. I don't envy you—must smart like the dickens." Carefully, Ren unfastened the plates behind the wrist and, folding them to either side, removed a small spine-shaped contraption.

"What does it feel like?" asked Thaddeus.

"Like your arm's being ripped off, of course." Farmer Appleton tipped the jug back to his mouth.

"Athena, will you get the bucket on the table and place it under Mr. Appleton's shoulder?" Ren gave the detached arm another once-over before tossing it to Thaddeus. "The palm has been worn smooth. Go into my toolbox and get out the grinder. It needs a heavy matte finish to allow for better grip."

"I can do that." Thaddeus nodded to his father.

"I daresay, what would you like me to do?" the otter asked, pulling on Ren's pant leg.

"Go help Thad," Ren ordered, "and no grabbing his hand while he's grinding. I don't need to reattach your forepaw again." The otter, who had a propensity for holding hands, as otters do, darted off after the boy.

"Never get used to that one talking." Farmer Appleton coughed up a laugh. A drip-drip-drip sounded in the bucket. Globules of brown, clear liquid rolled out of the shoulder port.

"Ugh, what is that?" Athena asked, examining where the metal ring fused to the skin.

"That," Ren said, "is the body rejecting the arm. It's called lightburn. Happens when starlight from bronze mixes with blood. Right now, Mr. Appleton's body is purging."



## FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

“Burn is an understatement if ya ask me.” Farmer Appleton winced before taking another swig. “These drippings feel like molten lead leaking out of my shoulder.” He clenched his teeth as more drops fell from the shoulder port. “Don’t look at me like that,” the farmer said, catching Thad’s eye from the corner of the room. The boy stared wide-eyed at Mr. Appleton’s pained face before shifting back to the toolbox to retrieve the grinder.

“I don’t need no pity. Without this arm your father made, I’d be useless, a sheep with no wool, a chicken with no eggs, a goat—AHHHHHhheerrr...” More drops fell into the bucket. Farmer Appleton regained his composure. “Would’ve lost the farm ages ago. Grateful, truly grateful for what it allows me to do. Stronger than flesh and bone. Heck, stronger than any hired hand. This arm does the work of ten men. It just comes with a cost, as all things do.”

“How did you lose your arm in the first place?” Athena asked.

“Stupidity,” said Mr. Appleton. “Shamgar, my animatonn bison, was plowing the back five acres, when out of nowhere, the darn thing stops dead in its tracks. I take a look—a rock no bigger than your fist lodged itself in the poor thing’s side plates. Having nothing in my head ‘cept wool, I reach in and grab the blasted stone, give it a twist—SNAP, the side plate closed right on my arm. Crushed it in an instant.” He paused and seethed through his teeth. Several more globules dripped into the bucket.

“Your arm’s light is almost wound out. When’s the last time we changed it?” Ren asked.

The farmer turned his head away guiltily. “Had it replaced a little over a year ago.”

“Grind my gears. Are you sure? I don’t remember swapping the bronze at the last tune up. The light Penelope spins usually lasts half a decade.”

“Didn’t use your wife’s bronze.” The farmer gave a painful grin. “Got a deal—half the cost—too good to be true, right? ‘Parently it is. Figured bronze is bronze. Figured wrong. Feel like a fool now.” His teeth clenched as more lightburn purged from his arm.

Ren said nothing but crossed the room. He motioned to Athena to swap spots with him, seating himself next to Farmer Appleton. He extended his hand, which the farmer gratefully took.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Big one.” Appleton moaned in pain, brow drenched in sweat. Several large droplets of lightburn poured out of his shoulder. He squeezed Ren’s hand as hard as he could until the worst of the pain passed. Appleton heaved as if he had just ran a mile.

“Athena,” Ren glanced up to his daughter. “In my pack out in the hall there is a black leather sleeve. Inside you will find thinly cut bronze, smaller than what we use for animatonns. Can you get one and thread it through the spine shaft?”

Athena nodded. Her father never asked her to thread the bronze for clients. She’d done countless repairs, some very complex, but the bronze was the most important and delicate part of every machine they built.

Ren’s workbag lay at the far end of the hallway across from the kitchen. Athena strode over with an extra skip in her step. Unfastening the brass bear buttons, she began to rifle through the pack for the sleeve.

“How’s the tune-up going?” an anxious voice came from the kitchen. Mrs. Appleton dusted her hands on her flour-covered apron.

“Fine,” Athena said. She had found the soft leather sleeve, and was now on the prowl for the needle nose pliers. “We should be done pretty quick here. Ah, here are the pliers.”

Unfolding the sleeve revealed a few strands of glowing, glimmering bronze hair tucked carefully into the satin interior. Pliers in hand, she opened the spine shaft before placing it onto her lap. She pulled out the old dull wire and tossed it aside. Delicately, she picked up the new bronze hair and wove it into the spine. Her fingers carefully aligned both tips to the pin-sized eyelets on either end of the spine shaft, like threading two needles at once. A simple mistake and the hair would snap, the starlight dissipate, and the bronze would be worthless. Her finger and thumb edged both tips into the eyelets and she fed the remaining hair through until it lay neatly in the open crevice. Athena took up the needle nose pliers and pinched the sides of the spine shaft shut.

“Done,” she said proudly. “Mother’s bronze should last longer than what was in there. It will be awhile before he needs to do this part again.”

“Glad to hear it,” Mrs. Appleton said with a faint smile. “Limeade?” She abandoned her post in the kitchen and brought Athena a tall glass of hazy green liquid.

## FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

"Thank you." Athena took the glass and began to gulp it down. It was very sweet.

A guttural shriek echoed from the other room.

Mrs. Appleton watched the closed door. "It's a rough one this time." She frowned. "How I hate that stupid arm of his. I wish he would retire so we wouldn't have to do this anymore."

"But he needs it, doesn't he?" Athena said, finishing her limeade.

"I can't deny that." Mrs. Appleton nodded. "If it weren't for that arm our table would be as bare as Mr. Appleton's head. It's necessary, and I wish it weren't."

Athena nodded and handed Mrs. Appleton her empty glass.

"Ath, are you done?" Thaddeus came storming out of the room, Socrates the otter at his heels. "Father said I did a fine job on the hand, very fine indeed."

"I daresay, it may be the finest job young master Thaddeus has ever done enhancing the grip of an animatronic hand."

"Because it is the only time he has ever done it?" Athena added with a knowing grin.

"For sure!" responded the otter.

Mrs. Appleton gave Thaddeus some limeade and refilled Athena's glass. Athena inserted the spine shaft back into the arm. She pressed down until it clicked into place. Unlike an animatonn, the inner workings would not whirl to life until connected to the nerve endings of its host. Another wail of pain echoed from the other room. Everyone turned in unison.

Mrs. Appleton sighed a tired sigh. "Shall we go in?"

Mr. Appleton's head leaned on his shoulder over the bucket. He heaved with pain. Ren sat beside him, holding his hand and rubbing his back. "Linda, will you get Henry a glass of water? He went through a rough spurt a moment ago." Mrs. Appleton nodded and left the room.

"How do you feel, Mr. Appleton?" Thaddeus asked, his eyes on the dripping shoulder port.

"Like bronze in a duskling's mouth." Appleton winced. "It's mostly subsided."

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Ready to reattach?” Ren asked. Appleton nodded. Ren took the arm from Athena and checked the spine shaft. “Good job, both of you.” He smiled at his children. “All right, on the count of three. One...two...three.”

Vox lay curled on the front doorstep of the Appleton farmhouse. The copper fox gleamed brilliantly in the early afternoon sun. The door swung open, and the fox leapt to its feet. The Appletons bid goodbye to the Burlys. Thaddeus held fast to a heaping basket of honey fritters. Ren shook old Farmer Appleton’s mechanical hand.

“I owe you one, Burly,” Appleton said.

“Actually,” Ren corrected, “this one is half off. We’re running a special this week.”

Mr. Appleton pulled a grimy handkerchief from his pocket and dabbed his eyes. “Thank you. Sincerely, thank you.”

“Just have Linda send us some of that lime brandy. Once you have it bottled, of course.” Ren gave him a wink.

The Burlys turned down the lane, otter and fox in tow. Thaddeus and Athena both appeared more somber than they had been at the start of the morning.

“I daresay, what a splendid afternoon we are having,” Socrates chimed as brightly as ever. No one responded. “The Apple-tins are a truly lovely family. They do a lot of hand holding in that house, for sure.”

They were not too far from the Appleton’s farm when a voice called after them. “Ren? Ren Burly!” A young man with chestnut brown hair down to his shoulders waved at them with a broad smile on his face. “Is that you? Are you Ren Burly?”

Ren halted, and gave the man a nod and a curt wave. He judged he was probably a few years older than Athena. “That I am,” Ren said with a smile. “How can I help you, lad?”

“Thank goodness I found you.” The young man jogged up to them. “I heard you had an appointment with the Appletons today so I swung by their place, hoping to catch you before you left. My name is Gerald Graft, and I have a proposition for you.”

## FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

"A proposition, you say?" Ren asked, apparently amused. "What kind of proposition?"

The young man held both arms outstretched towards Ren with a wide grin. "I want animatronic arms."

Ren turned away from the young man and continued back down the lane. "No."

Undeterred, the young man scurried in front of him, again holding out his arms. "Please, I'm serious. I need amazing animatronic ones like Farmer Appleton. I've given this a lot of thought."

"No," Ren repeated.

"Why not hear him out?" Athena said with a sarcastic snicker. "I'm sure he will have a very convincing argument, Father."

"Thank you, little girl. And yes, I have a very strong argument. Quite literally, in fact. Old man Appleton accomplishes more with the arm you made him than a dozen men half his age. I have watched him lift his animatronic bison over his head, and he only has one arm. Think what I'd be able to accomplish with two. I'd be unstoppable!"

"Aw, Father, you could make him unstoppable!" Athena said snidely.

"Athena, quit teasing him," Ren said coolly. "As for you..." He finally looked at Gerald square in the face. "Buy an animatronic."

"Your animatronics are legendary, of course, but this is about enhancing *me*. I tire after a day of hard labor and I strain myself with lifting and pulling. But with your arms—your arms will outperform everyone on the island."

"Sure, as long as it doesn't require any precision," Athena replied, examining her fingers. "Animatronic hands might be strong, but they're clunky. You wouldn't be able to pin a ratchet wheel without breaking it."

"They are still pleasant to hold," Socrates chimed in.

"I don't need precision, I need strength," said Gerald. "With Burly-made arms I would never break a sweat again."

"Why stop at your arms?" asked Athena. "Perhaps we could consider replacing your head too. After all, it doesn't seem like you use it much."

"Seriously, Ath," said Thad.

"What?" said Athena. "You saw what Farmer Appleton went through. Would anyone in their right mind subject themselves to that?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Perhaps he is in his left mind," added Socks.

"He only wants to be stronger," said Thad. "I mean, who doesn't want to be strong?" Thaddeus's shoulders drooped a little.

"Yes! Exactly. Your son gets it," said Gerald.

Ren shook his head. "I will not destroy perfectly good arms and replace them with mechanical ones."

"You did it for Farmer Appleton. All I'm asking for is what you already did for him."

"Henry Appleton lost his arm in a tragic accident. I did the best I could to fix what he had lost."

"So, you would only make me stronger if I *accidentally* lost my arms? Why can't we pretend I had an accident, and jump right to the part where you give me new ones?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I won't."

"WHY?"

"If I sacrifice truth for compassion, it will result not only in your destruction, but also in those around you."

"What truth? I just want new arms. I'm not asking you to sacrifice anything." Gerald threw wide his hands in exasperation.

Ren grabbed each of Gerald's outstretched hands with his own and raised them to the boy's eye level. "Your mother is a superior craftsman to me. These arms that she gave you are truly unique and incomparable to anything I could create. The intricacy and artistry of your own flesh and bone are truly amazing, and there's no need for any adjustments. Your arms are not the problem here; the issue lies with your mind, which I cannot fix. Go home, kiss your mother, and grow up."

"Fine," the young man spat. "If you won't help me, I'll find another animatonn smith who will. It's your loss. A lifelong customer, that's what you would have had." With that, Gerald Graft stomped away in frustration.

The Burlys ambled on in silence as they wound their way through the outer banks of the Portside Harbor. They were greeted by the rhythmic hiss of blimps and the occasional shout of crew members unloading cargo. They paused for a

## FARMER APPLETON'S ARM

moment to watch a massive dirigible slowly making its descent onto the docks, its engines puttering softly as it came to a stop. The crew scurried about, securing ropes and unloading crates of goods as the ship let out a final groan.

Off in the distance behind the dirigible, a pale blue outline formed against the backdrop of the sky. Despite the distance, Thaddeus could tell it was very large.

“Is that another island?” he asked excitedly, pointing.

Ren followed his finger and nodded. “Looks like it.”

The shape drew closer and closer, looming over the horizon. As it broke through the veil of the sky, it became more distinct, revealing a massive island that dwarfed their own island of Tiber. Thaddeus couldn’t help but feel a sense of awe and fear as he watched the island draw nearer, its massive dirigibles casting dark shadows on the land below. The Tiber airships, in their various shades of red, seemed feeble and insignificant compared to the opposing island’s fleet of navy, gray, and silver.

“That’s getting awfully close,” Athena said, unable to take her eyes off the encroaching island. It was like watching an oncoming whale swimming through the sky, growing larger and larger with every passing moment. “Shouldn’t it be changing course?”

“I daresay, maintaining its current velocity, it is exceedingly improbable that we will be able to avoid impact,” Socrates chirped. Everyone turned to him, shocked.

“You mean it’s going to hit us?” Thaddeus gaped.

“Oh yes, it is virtually impossible for it *not* to hit us at this point,” said Socrates as brightly as ever. “Quite exciting.”

Concern flashed across Ren’s face. Without another word, he grabbed his children and darted inland as fast as he could muster. The otter and fox sprinted off in front of them. The smell of manure flooded Ren’s nostrils. A goat shed stood eighty yards away. If Ren could make it to the far end of the barn it might be able to block some of the oncoming wreckage.

“Socks!” Ren shouted. “Tell me when impact is imminent.”

“For sure,” the otter chirped.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Fifty yards...thirty yards...An old pain shot through his leg like a dagger. He fell on the flat lawn, pulling Athena and Thaddeus down with him. Quick to their feet, they began to help up their father.

“No, get to the far side of the barn,” Ren ordered. “Go—go!”

“We are not leaving you,” Athena and Thaddeus barked in unison.

“You need to—”

“Impact imminent,” Socrates chimed.





## LADDER & FLAME

A thunderous *BOOM*, the likes of which Ren had never heard before, shook the Island of Tiber. Mountain struck mountain. For the first time in years, Tiber rocked and pitched as if bowled over by invisible waves. The towers of central Tiber rose and fell into view as the floating island swayed. Ren held his children tight under him. A sweeping wind rushed overhead, followed by a thick cloud of dust and dirt that painted everything in a haze of brown. Stone rubble, fragments of skyships, and large chunks of the outer docks violently rained down like meteors across the grassy fields.

“Defense mode!” Ren roared, as a skyship’s mast twice his size crashed fifteen feet away.

Vox leapt onto Ren’s arched back. The copper fox’s tail unfurled and light crackled from within. A faint blue glow covered the Burlys like a warm blanket. *Crack!* The tail thundered as hot blue power ripped through the air. The energy discharge burst apart the dangerous debris. *CRACK!* The tail fired again, and



## THE CHILD THRONE

then again. The remains of earth, rock, and wood peppered the ground like hail. Socrates joined in, his open mouth issuing forth smaller, powerful blue blasts.

Ren clutched his children close to him. He could feel both of their heartbeats pounding against his chest. Athena held her breath, and Thaddeus panted for air.

"I got you," Ren whispered. "It's going to be okay; I have you." Seconds felt like hours. Thad's fingers were stuffed in his ears. He shuddered every time Vox's tail fired.

"Imminent mortal danger has passed," said Socrates.

Ren sat up. Small gashes and cuts covered his arms and neck, but otherwise he was unscathed. The human shield had done the trick. Neither Thaddeus nor Athena looked any worse for wear.

The goat shed, on the other hand, did not prove to be as lucky. Half of an airship jutted out of the now collapsed roof. With a low rumble, the boat shifted, sliding deeper into the barn. The goats bleated and baahed like mad, scurrying about. The side of the wall facing the pen shifted inward toward the goats. The entire barn groaned.

"Ath, the goats!" Thaddeus cried, getting to his feet. Without another word, he dashed over to the pen and unlatched the main gate.

Athena, understanding her brother's intention, began to shout, "Get out of there! Go on! Get out of there, stupid goats—it's going to collapse!" Instinctively, she turned to the animatonns. "Socks, grab Thad. Vox, scare the goats out of the pen."

The fox whipped around to the far side of the pen. Gracefully he leapt over the fence and began to snip at the heel of the herd like a sheepdog. Goats poured out of the pen into the open field.

"Great job, Vox," said Thaddeus. A high-pitched *baa* let out from the back of the pen. A frantic newborn kid limped after the rest of the herd. The barn wall creaked ominously. Thaddeus bolted in toward the baby goat and scooped it up into his arms. "I got you, little one." The wood of the barn moaned in disapproval. With a final wrench, it released its grip and began to tip inward toward the pen. Thaddeus turned toward the open gate. He would never make it in time. He froze, transfixed, horror branded on his face.

## LADDER AND FLAME

A silver streak struck Thaddeus square in the chest. He stumbled back exactly three and half feet. The barn wall hit the ground with a mighty thud.

“THADDEUS!” Ren roared. But the next moment he could not help but smile with relief. Thaddeus stood in the window of the collapsed barn. One arm held the kid, the other held the hand of a silver-colored otter.

“I apologize for the recent wallop I gave you, but I did not have an adequate amount of time to get you into the proper position under the window,” said Socrates brightly.

“If it’s to save my life, Socks, you can hit me whenever you need to,” said Thaddeus.

Ren grabbed his son in a tight embrace. “That was both brave and foolhardy. We shall discuss it later,” he said with a sigh of relief.

“Good job, Socrates,” Athena said, patting the otter on the head.

“Socrates, Vox,” Ren commanded the animatonns. “Run the perimeter of the crash, give yourselves a wide berth, look for any and all survivors. Help out however you can and report back when finished.”

The two animatonns were off in a wink, running in opposite directions along the crash site.

“Can we investigate the crash?” Athena asked. “You know...to help search for survivors, and maybe...see if this new island has any unique animatonns?”

Ren eyed his daughter and clicked his tongue. “Fine. But if we are to do this, you must both agree to do exactly what I tell you. If I command you to hide, you hide; run, you run. We do not know what dangers we are walking into.”

“Father,” Thaddeus chided. “We have faced off against snakes, witches, and dusklings—Ath and I are really tough.”

“Of that I have no doubt.” Ren grinned as he rubbed the top of his son’s head.

Cautiously, the Burlys approached the crash site. Dust was still settling. An immense portion of the Portside docks had been completely obliterated. The airships moored there—if not torn to ribbons—were flipped about in various states of disarray. Cords were cut, balloons punctured, and ships creaked, moaned, and hung at odd angles.

“How in the land below did another island hit us?” Athena asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Must have significantly veered off course,” said Ren. “Or perhaps we did.”

“You think we may have hit them?” asked Thaddeus.

“It is possible, if we intercepted their path when we shouldn’t have,” said Ren. “One thing is for certain, the Wayfinder’s star chart is going to be under some heavy scrutiny.”

“It could have been intentional,” said Athena.

“Why would someone do that?” Thaddeus replied, horrified.

“If it was intentional,” Ren pondered, “we ought to assume it’s for some nefarious purpose—land acquisition, resource poaching, or could be the beginning of an invasion.”

The opposing island had wedged itself along the banks of the outer fields. Its lip overhung about a story and a half above the crash site, forming a small yet sheer cliff.

“Hello?” Thaddeus shouted. “Is there anyone up there?” There was no answer. Apprehensive, Thaddeus gave the cliff a push. “I think it’s stuck.”

“Ya think?” said Athena. She gazed upward, marveling at the wreckage all about her. “Achilles at full strength wouldn’t be able to budge this thing.”

“Definitely not,” said Ren. “For the foreseeable future, our new neighbors won’t be going anywhere. That being said, let’s avoid unnecessary mentions of Achilles. I don’t know how these folks would respond if they learned the island they crashed upon houses an ancient animatonn powerful enough to keep the dusklings at bay.”

“But isn’t that kind of like lying?” Thaddeus asked.

“No,” Ren shook his head. “It’s holding your cards close to your chest.”

“But out of all the cards, Achilles is the—” Athena suddenly stopped talking as her father put a finger to his lips.

A thick, rapid patter could be heard from above. For a moment, the sound resembled something like heavy rain. As it drew nearer, it evolved into a more distinct tapping.

“What is that?” Athena asked. “Is it animatons?”

“Both of you, back away now,” Ren commanded.

The Burlys edged away from the cliff wall until the surface of the encroaching island came into view. A blanket of gleaming steel animatons clattered forward. Their bodies were similar to those of spiders, with a distinct

head and abdomen. But instead of eight legs, these “spiders” had two front legs and a single leg in the rear.

Upon reaching the edge of their island, the spiders began to interlock their legs, quickly creating a net-like ladder for the rest to climb down. As they touched down onto Tiber the cluster spread out, swarming the broken ramshackles of the docks and ships. The tips of their feet began to attack the debris like crowbars, shattering the large chunks into splinters, then vaporizing the splinters with small blasts of blue energy emanating from a mouth hidden behind a formidable pair of mandibles.

“That doesn’t seem friendly,” warned Thaddeus. “They seem to be the opposite of friendly.”

A metallic spider charged straight at Athena, its three legs furiously skittering across the ground. Arching sharply at the knee joint, the spider raised its body until it was face to face with her, staring with its many jeweled eyes. “Vox!” Athena shouted to the wind.

Ren quickly positioned himself in front of his daughter and spread out his arms. The spider seized upward, raising its body to his eye level. Its glowing amber eyes surveyed him for several seconds.

A crack reverberated like thunder and the spider burst into a thousand pieces. Vox’s tail was still sizzling. The other spiders paid no heed and continued dismantling the debris from the wreckage.

“Vox,” Athena commanded. “Take them all out.” With a quick yip, the fox dashed about the field, blasting, smashing, and ripping into spider after spider.

“Would you like me to participate in this wanton destruction as well?” said Socrates, who had appeared at Thaddeus’s heel.

“No,” said Ren. “Stay with us—defense mode. I want to know what they’re after.” He began to reapproach the spider cluster slowly, his children not far behind.

Vox leapt upon another spider, ready to attack. Despite the spider’s attempts to strike back, Vox was fleet of foot and easily evaded its blows. With a quick flick, his tail transformed into a spinning saw and the fox sliced through the spider’s legs, leaving him collapsed in the dirt.

Cautiously, Ren approached one of the spiders from behind. “Socks, arm cannon.” Grabbing Ren’s hand, the otter folded apart and wrapped itself

## THE CHILD THRONE

around his wrist and forearm. The otter's mouth opened wide and began to glow a brilliant blue. Ren took aim.

"Stop!" cried a voice from above.

A tall woman leapt from the cliffside of the island, her left hand holding fast to an animatonn swan. But unlike any animatonn Athena or Thaddeus had ever seen, the swan's body was comprised of glass, the internal brass workings clearly visible through its stomach and neck. Its open beak emitted an enchanting song, a mix between a bird call and a violin. But the most remarkable feature was its wings. The same gold-colored brass used in the beak was crafted into joints on either side of the glass body. These folded out into what looked like thin, curved harmonicas the length of a forearm, but instead of issuing music, the brass rods issued great flaming wings so powerful that they slowed the descent of the woman as she gently touched upon the ground.

She was tall and elegant, her skin similar in shade to Athena's but perhaps not as dark as Ren's. Around her waist she wore a gold-colored girdle. Attached to the girdle was a belt-like apparatus that protruded out around her hips, creating a perch for the swan to grasp. It was this that allowed the swan to gracefully lower its owner. The flames of the wings shrunk to that of a candle's flicker. The long neck of the bird snaked around the woman's head before giving her cheek an affectionate nuzzle. The woman's dark eyes surveyed the children, then fell on their father. A smile crept across her face.

"As I live and breathe, salutations, Irenaeus."

The children, thunderstruck, gawked at their father. He was definitely not smiling. His eyes glared at the woman with fire behind them.

"Salutations, Aphrodite," said Ren.



## A PAIR OF SWANS

Before we continue with our pleasantries, I would ask you to call off your hounds and stop destroying my triders.” Aphrodite gestured to Vox, who bit into the inner workings of a mechanical spider. “They are here to aid, not harm.”

“Is that so?” said Ren, his eyes narrowed. “How kind of you. Vox, stand down.” The copper fox jumped off its victim and ran back to Athena’s feet.

“I instructed them to clear debris and rubble,” Aphrodite continued, unphased. “They are cleaning.”

“Or getting rid of evidence,” said Ren.

“Believe what you like,” said Aphrodite, her eyes twinkling.

“I’m sorry, how do you know her?” Athena asked her father.

“Are these Penelope’s children? The girl doesn’t look much like her. The boy, perhaps a little.”

“Yes, these are *our* children,” Ren said in a lowered tone. “Athena, Thaddeus—this is Aphrodite Carver. Dite and I apprenticed together at the College of Bronto.”

“What a sterile way to describe our past,” Aphrodite said with a smile. “Your father and I used to be quite the item, before your mother snuck in and stole him from me.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Funny, I remember it quite differently," said Ren.

"I suppose you would," said Dite playfully. "We both got what we wanted in the end." She stroked the long neck of her swan.

"Did you make that swan with glass?" Athena asked, trying to sound unimpressed.

"Yes. Meet Eris, my pride and joy. I put every bit of my craft and experience into her and her brother Eros."

"How did you make the fire wings?" Thaddeus asked.

"You like those? That took three years of tinkering to get right," said Aphrodite.

"It's both dangerous and stupid," Ren said.

"Weren't you the one who always droned on about being charitable in speech?" said Aphrodite.

"That *was* me being charitable. Remember the dragon you made under Master Howell? You insisted it breathe fire," said Ren. He cocked his head to the swan's wings.

"It wouldn't have been a dragon otherwise. It would have been a sad lizard with wings."

"You made a dragon?" Thaddeus exclaimed excitedly.

"More like an infant dragon, about the size of a lion," said Aphrodite.

"And what happened to the infant dragon when an energy discharge traveled up the mouth, through the oxygen intake and ignited the open combustion port that was tapped directly into the bronze?" said Ren.

"I daresay, I do not know," remarked Socks enthusiastically. "But it sounds rather exciting."

"It exploded," said Aphrodite, eyeing Socrates with a look of curiosity. "No one got seriously injured."

"We had to rebuild half the smithy. It was an unnecessary and foolish risk," said Ren.

"Believe what you like," said Aphrodite. "That otter has said ten different words and was able to insert itself into our discussion seamlessly. Is that a clever gimmick, or can it actually converse?"



## A PAIR OF SWANS

"A clever gimmick? Not at all, I'm sure," said Socrates. "My name is Socrates, but my wonderful nickname, used by most everyone except Miss Athena, is Socks."

"Uncanny," Aphrodite gasped. "How many words can it say?"

"Several hundred thousand," said Thaddeus proudly. "Some proper nouns give him trouble. But other than that, he rarely encounters a gap in his vocabulary."

"Can you say Dite?" asked Aphrodite, bending down to the otter's eye level.

"For sure, dye-tea," said Socrates.

"Remarkable!" Aphrodite exclaimed. "May I see his spine?"

Ren nodded. Aphrodite picked the otter up in her arms and ran her fingers down his back. "Gorgeous paneling, just as I remember." She pushed up at a point below the shoulders and the back panels unfolded. Aphrodite spent several minutes surveying the whirling inner workings. "This sphere in the head is the voice box—how did you—oh I see. My goodness, I can't imagine how long that must have taken and one little mistake—but by having two run simultaneously checking each other—you solved for fish fish."

"What is fish fish?" asked Thaddeus.

Aphrodite's long fingers tilted the otter to and fro. "It's a famous shorthand for a daunting problem that some of the most formidable animatonn smiths have grappled with," she said, examining Socrates intently. "Making an animatonn say a few words or follow commands is not too difficult. But in order to simulate conversation, the tonn needs to be able to distinguish the same word in multiple contexts."

"Indubitably. The word fish may be used as subject, predicate, object, command, a single fish, or a school of fish," said Socrates. Thaddeus thought it odd for him to talk with his back open and his insides showing. "For example: *Fish* fish. Single fish: I command you to acquire fish. Fish *fish*. Multiple fish: acquire fish to eat. Fish *fish*? This one's a question: Do fish eat fish?"

"Bravo," Aphrodite said to Socrates, though she eyed Ren. "You must require a considerable amount of power to process. Let's see how much." She pushed in the spine. With a *click*, it rose a quarter of an inch and Socrates's inner workings stopped spinning. The light from his eyes dulled. Pulling a pair of needle nose pliers out of her back pocket, Dite carefully opened the vertebrae.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Golden light poured out of the open spine, illuminating her eyes. “Incredible, simply incredible. I have never seen bronze equal to this. This must be Penelope Byrne’s light.”

“Penelope Burly,” corrected Ren.

“I envy you, I truly do,” said Dite. “To consistently work with this level of bronze, you might as well be working with silver.”

“At home we actually have an animatonn that uses gold,” Thaddeus bragged.

“Thaddeus,” Athena snapped at her brother.

“I’m sure you do,” said Dite.

“Lady Dite! Lady Dite!” cried a voice from the top of the cliff. A black bird circled high above a portly man who waved eagerly at Aphrodite. “Thank goodness I found you.” He began to scramble down a ladder of triders. About halfway down, he lost his grip and tumbled toward the earth with a scream. The black bird dove after him, wings ablaze. Its feet hooked the man around the ankle just before he hit the ground. Grievous bodily injury now avoided, the bird dropped the man on the soft grass before gliding over and perching on the opposite side of Aphrodite’s belt.

“Well caught, my beauty,” said Dite affectionately. It was a second swan, nearly identical to the first. The glass, however, was a translucent smokey black. The swan’s beak and wings were shining steel, not gold-colored brass. Now with a swan on either side, Aphrodite gave off an appearance of regal opulence.

The portly man picked himself up off the ground and dusted the grass from his pants and vest. Miraculously, his spectacles hadn’t moved but clung to his face like a leech. “Thank you, Eros.” He nodded to the swan, who nuzzled its head into Aphrodite’s cheek. “Lady Dite, the Throne has sent me to aid you in case the inhabitants of this island prove to be inhospitable.”

“I don’t think that shall be necessary. Thank you Gunther.”

“My lady, this command came directly from the Throne.” The man took out a handkerchief and mopped the sweat from his brow. Doughy would have been the most apt word to describe his physique: doughy cheeks, doughy nose, even his clothes hung about him in a doughy manner. A faint attempt at a beard grew on his face and neck.

## A PAIR OF SWANS

"If the Throne commands it, then it must be so," Dite said. "Ren, allow me to introduce my apprentice, Gunther Biggs. Gunther, this is Irenaeus Burly and his children, Athena and Thaddeus."

"And I am Socrates, but you may call me Socks if you would like," Socks said. "And the fox next to Miss Athena is known as Vox. The swan perched on Miss Dye-tea's right side is named Eris and I assume the swan on the left is the brother previously mentioned, Eros, which I believe you know as you have recently thanked it for saving you from a nasty tumble off your island onto ours. And, of course, there are several three-legged spiders roaming about—I have not gotten their names yet, but when I do, I can introduce you to each of them as well, if you like."

While Dite marveled at the number of words Socrates had been able to rattle off, Gunther ignored the otter. "Irenaeus Burly. That would mean the great island of Carthage has been intercepted by the island of Tiber, if I'm not mistaken."

"I don't know if I should be flattered or flummoxed," said Ren. "Not only do you know me, but you know where I live."

"As Lady Dite's apprentice, I have studied all the major and minor animatonn smiths, both living and deceased. I would personally rank you in the top seventy of those living. It would have been top seventy-five, but the Island of Thebes recently sank to the land below by a particularly brutal duskling attack."

"If the island fell, they might still be alive," Thaddeus added.

"Preposterous. The land below is beyond deadly," said Gunther. "Anything that falls is as good as lost forever."

"We survived it for several—ouch!" Thaddeus rubbed his shin where Athena had kicked him.

"What I think my brother is trying to say is," Athena cut in, "as Lady Dite's apprentice, you must have made many wonderful contributions to her work."

Aphrodite smirked at Athena. Gunther began to stammer. "Yes, but I—that is to say—Lady Dite's work is at such a high level, I could not even hope to add to her designs. My apprenticeship is of a more practical nature."

"So, you do what? Repairs?" Athena asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“To presume I know what is best to fix Lady Dite’s masterworks—that’s preposterous.”

“You don’t help with repairs?” asked Athena, dumbfounded.

“I have helped with repairs since I was five,” said Thaddeus.

“I am an aide to Lady Dite. I procure whatever she requires, conduct research at her request, and I assist in her correspondence with the Throne.”

“But don’t you want to be an animatonn smith? Isn’t that why you are an apprentice?” Athena asked.

“I am an apprentice because the Throne asked me to be Lady Dite’s apprentice. What the Throne commands must be so,” said Gunther.

“If the Throne asked you to toss your mother to the land below, would you?” Athena said with a smirk, using the phrase her mother often used against her.

“Without hesitation,” said Gunther.

“What?” Thaddeus said. “That’s crazy.”

“It is not crazy. It is loyalty,” said Gunther. “And I will warn you, that kind of language could be considered an active threat against the Throne.”

“Perhaps he is not very fond of his mother,” said Socrates.

“What are you talking about? What language?” said Athena, in a rare turn feeling defensive for her brother. “What you described is crazy. Is the word ‘crazy’ a threat?”

“It could be seen as such.”

“I daresay, that is incorrect,” said Socks. “A threat would indicate a hostile measure will be taken. *Harm young master Thaddens and I will bite off your fingers.* That is clearly a threat. *If you leave an open hand at your side, I would gladly hold it.* That is clearly not a threat.”

“Why is the otter speaking?” Gunther said, confused.

“You just noticed?” Dite asked with a smile.

It wasn’t long before Tiber’s sentry arrived. Several guards riding animatonn wildebeests began to question Dite and Gunther. The sentry dismissed the Burlys, who began their trek home.

“Athena, will you run ahead and let your mother know we are safe? I would like a word with Thaddeus,” Ren said as they rounded the lane to their house.

## A PAIR OF SWANS

Athena nodded. “Good luck, Thad,” she said before taking off with Socrates and Vox at her heels.

Thaddeus nervously looked up at his father. He knew he was in trouble but he wasn’t exactly sure why. “I know you said not to talk about Achilles but—”

“This is not about Achilles,” Ren said in his gravelly voice. “This is about the goat, son”

“The goat?”

“You put yourself in grave peril to save a goat. You were almost crushed. If Socrates had not jumped in at the last moment—”

“I don’t understand. Should I have let the barn fall on it?”

“No, that’s not what I am saying. This is hard for me to explain.” Ren pressed his hands together and raised them to his lips. “You have a tremendous heart. You are brimming over with compassion. But there are times to act, and there are times not to act.”

“If I didn’t act, the baby goat would have died.”

“*You* almost died, Thaddeus. You are my priority, my responsibility. You have to use your head as well as your heart. What will happen to you when you encounter the baby goat you can’t save?”

“Maybe I can save them all,” Thaddeus suggested.

“I wish that were the case, but I know it’s not. I don’t want you to get crushed.”

They passed Ren’s workshop, an old barn he converted a decade and a half earlier. The great stone tail of Achilles could be seen behind the shop. The animatonn Tyrannosaurus Rex lay on its belly motionless, in much the same way Thaddeus had originally found him in the land below. With the help of his father and sister, he had transformed the animatronic Rex into a formidable battle machine that he proudly piloted. The mechanized beast proved to be invaluable in fending off the vicious duskling attacks.

Thad looked down at his shoes and kicked a stone up the path to their house. The Burly’s home was once a barn’s silo, but now it stood as an unsymmetrical tower, with rooms jutting out of the center cylinder in a seemingly arbitrary yet not unpleasing manner. A new addition or two were added every year. Thaddeus and Athena each had their own room on the third and fourth floor, respectively. The master bedroom resided at the top of the

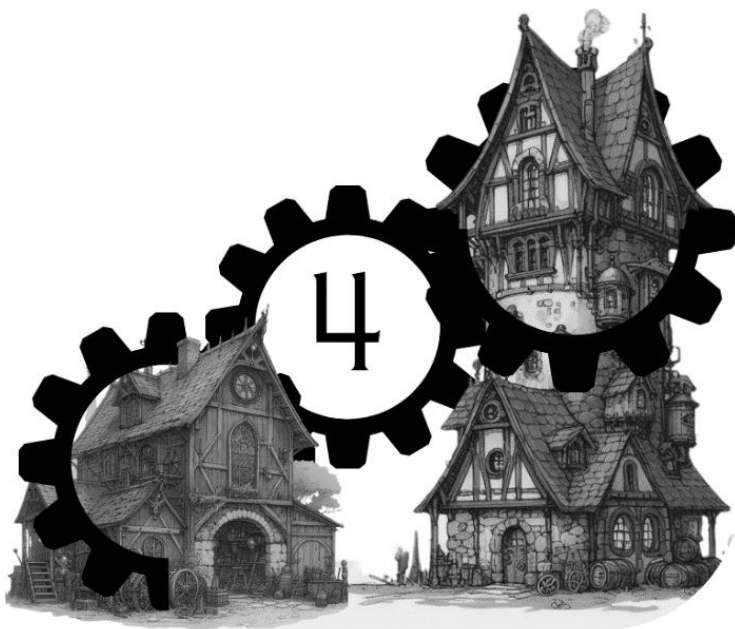
## THE CHILD THRONE

silo and the kitchen took up the ground level. The latest, a bedroom on the southside of the tower one story up, was for the newest addition to the family, baby Roland.

In front of the house sat a formidable tungsten wolf, its amber eyes glowing. “Greetings, Argus,” Thaddeus said, patting the wolf affectionately on the head. “You keeping watch of Mother and Ro?”

Ren couldn’t help but smile at his son. “You know, that compassion of yours you inherited from your mother. She is the most loving and patient person I have ever met,” Ren said as he opened the front door.

“OVER MY DEAD BODY, ATHENA!” Penelope howled at the top of her lungs.



## ARGUMENTS ABOUND

“That is insane!” shouted Athena. Unable to slam a door, Athena stamped her foot as hard as she could on the stairs. “Just because it doesn’t line up with the future you have envisioned for me—”

“Don’t try to make me the bad guy in this. I’m not the villain here,” Penelope shouted back, flourishing a wooden spoon like a sword. Sausages simmered on the stove. With her spare arm, Penelope held Roland fast against her shoulder. Her heels bounced up and down to keep Roland calm as she tended the reheated dinner. The 18-month-old kept glancing back and forth at the two, appearing as though he was listening to the argument, when in reality he wasn’t used to the decibel level.

“And I am?” Athena threw her arms in the air.

“That is not what I said.”

“Might as well be.”

“You do not get to dictate how this family operates.”

“Do I get some say over how *my* life operates?”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Not when it comes to this situation.”

“I didn’t even ask anything. It was an idea. You are so unreasonable.”

“Unreasonable—unreasonable. Keep on this path and you will see how unreasonable I can be.”

“You know how important becoming a great tonn smith is to me, why would this—”

Roland tugged on Penelope’s earring. She pulled his hand away. “Do not make this about me squashing your dreams. That is absurd and you know it. I have always been incredibly supportive of you.”

“Really? How? Name one way—go on, just one.”

“I don’t have to defend myself. I am your mother and there is no way in the land below—”

“What is going on?” Ren interrupted.

“And where were you?” Penelope snapped at her husband. “We get hit by another island, all of Tiber is thrown into disarray, and I get no word from you for several hours. You made an Annimatonn *that talks*. At the very least you could have sent it to tell me you and the children were safe.”

Ren’s eyes widened at the sudden realization of his mistake. “I-I-I should have done that,” he stammered. “Beloved, I’m sorry. We lost track of time...”

“Enough time to talk to Dite?”

Ren bit his lip and made an inaudible sigh. “So, Athena told you.”

“She told me, all right. Your daughter wants to go work for her.”

“That’s not what I said,” said Athena.

“But it is exactly what you want,” Penelope snapped.

Roland began to cry.

Ren rubbed his forehead. “Thaddeus, Athena, take your supper upstairs and eat in your rooms please. Your mother and I need a minute to discuss this alone.”

Thaddeus, not saying a word, loaded two plates with sausages, avoided the asparagus, and marched up the stairs after his sister.

“Dite—Dite Carver...our islands crash, and she just happens to be the first person you run into?”

“I was as surprised as you.” Ren reached for the baby.

Penelope handed Roland to her husband, her ears bright red with fury. “Somehow I doubt that.”



## ARGUMENTS ABOUND

"Penelope," Ren began to pat Roland's back and shush him. "Your temper is burning brighter than your bronze."

"After what she did to you."

"I know—"

"If I see her, Ren, I don't know what I'd do."

"I know."

"Why couldn't she have gotten squashed in the island crash?"

"Penelope..."

"Don't Penelope me. She is a liar, a cheat, the worst type of—"

"I have moved on."

"How noble of you. Being able to forgive that viper. What she did didn't affect just *you*."

"I know. Your anger is completely justified."

"My mother never got to—" Penelope paused as her eyes welled up.

"Yes, Beloved." Ren wrapped his spare arm around her waist.

Penelope turned around and placed one hand on Ren's cheek, the other on Roland's, who sucked his thumb contentedly.

"You must be hungry," Penelope said in a softer voice. She set the table and served the sausages from the pan.

"Starving," said Ren. Still holding Roland, he began to awkwardly cut his sausage one-handed. Penelope pulled the plate away and cut it up for him.

"So, what's new with Dite?" Penelope said, taking her seat. Her voice was calm but resolute.

"Are you sure you want to talk about this?"

"I want to know what you two talked about. What she said to our children."

"She is working on the island of Carthage. That is the island that hit us."

"Carthage? Isn't that the one governed by Darius Sphinx?"

"I don't know—you and your father were always better at remembering the governance of other islands."

"I'm pretty sure I'm right. Darius Sphinx was a bit of an unusual character if I remember correctly, and not the fun kind. Named himself King over his island. He married a much younger woman. What was her name? They had a child a few years after Athena was born. Ah—what was her name?"

"Dite's apprentice kept referring to the Throne. Ring any bells?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Not particularly. If that is Darius, he had a strict sensibility—vicious to political enemies if the rumors are to be believed. Claims were made that he would throw dissidents off his island. No hawkpack, no airship, just straight to the land below. Still, I’d trust him more than Dite.”

“Dite always valued the freedom to experiment and push the rules to their breaking point. She would have had her choice in islands to set up shop. Why would she choose some old despotic curmudgeon? It doesn’t make much sense to me.”

“Nothing that woman does makes sense.”

“That’s not true. You can always count on her to act in her own self-interest.”

“I guess I have to agree with you there. Ren, if it is Darius, and Dite is working for him, I cannot see anything good coming from this. I don’t want our children anywhere near that island.”

Athena sat on her bed and stared at her plate. Vox, as usual, lay curled at her feet. Athena wasn’t hungry. She was irate. Her mother was clearly in the wrong, but there was no reasoning with her.

Thaddeus stuck his head in the room. “Hey Ath! You, uh—want some company? That way you don’t have to eat alone.”

“Fine,” said Athena.

Thaddeus bounded in and leapt on her bed. The contents of his plate nearly tumbled over onto her quilt. Socrates trailed in after.

“What did Father talk to you about? Why did he hold you back?” Athena asked as Thaddeus shoved an entire sausage into his mouth.

“Nah shorr,” Thaddeus said. He swallowed. “He was kind of upset about saving the baby goat. He said I need to use reason or something.”

“It *was* pretty stupid,” said Athena, beginning to cut up her own dinner. “Why didn’t you have an animatonn do it? Socrates could have saved the goat with no trouble at all, and if he did get squished, we could always repair him.”

“I beg your pardon. Could we not repair young master Thaddeus, should he get squished?” Socrates asked.

“Depends what gets squished,” said Athena.

“I didn’t think of that,” Thaddeus admitted.

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"Truth is—you didn't think," Athena said. "You never do. You always go in heart first, and your head follows."

"It has always worked out. I mean, we have defeated the duskings on more than one occasion. And if we can handle them, what else can hurt us?"

"The problem is you are *not* Achilles. You're a kid. A building falls on Achilles, no big deal—not even a scratch. A building falls on you, you're dead."

"That would be the saddest thing to ever happen in all of history," said Socks.

"I saw you freeze," Athena said, taking another bite. "Right when the barn started to collapse. If Socrates hadn't pushed you out of the way—"

"Father also said I am too compassionate."

"Crocodile meets alligator," Athena said. "Our entire family is too compassionate. Loose sprockets, people are stupid and wrong all the time. Why not let them be?"

"Because...we want them to be happy?"

"It would make me very happy to hold your hand," Socrates said.

Thaddeus smiled and took hold of the otter's paw.

"Our parents are obsessed with ideals. If someone is wrong, let them be wrong. Who cares? It makes no difference to us."

"Is that what you and Mother were arguing about?" Thaddeus asked.

"I brought up the swans we saw, and how I never even considered to make tonns out of glass. And those wings, they were gorgeous *and* practical. The imagination, the artistry—I have never seen tonns like them."

"Yeah, they were pretty," said Thad.

"I found them sorely lacking in hands. I mean, what would you hold to give comfort and connection on a cold winter's night? Feet? Don't make me laugh," snorted Socks.

"I brought up how great it would be to apprentice under a female tonn smith, and how much I have left to learn from people other than Father. I could be so much more effective than her current apprentice. He didn't care about annimatonnns one scrap."

"That's true. He seemed kind of just there," Thad added.

"He most certainly was present at the same location and time," agreed Socks.

"The second Mother heard the smith was a woman, she asked if it was Dite Carver."

## THE CHILD THRONE

"How did she know?" Thad asked.

"That's what I asked her."

"What did she say?"

"She didn't. She just lost it and started screaming at me, telling me there is no way in the land below I will ever apprentice under her. I didn't even ask."

"What do you think that is all about?" asked Thad.

"Yes, what?" asked Socks.

"Obviously there is bad blood. I think Mother must be jealous. Probably thinks Dite is trying to steal Father back."

"That can't be true. That doesn't sound like Mother at all," Thaddeus said.

"What else can it be?"

"Perhaps Lady Dye-tea continually forgets to take out the trash. I have seen your mother get rather cross at young master Thaddeus due to that particular infraction."

"Father and Dite have the same trade," Athena continued. "Dite is taller than Mother, and really pretty. Seems to me she is just jealous."

"That can't be right. It's so petty. Mother was really angry."

"Ah, perhaps when asked to go to sleep for the evening, Lady Dye-tea repeatedly ignored your mother's request and stayed awake far past the usual bedtime." Socks nodded solemnly.

"Father didn't seem to like her either. It has to be something bigger than that," said Thad.

"Father trusted her to look at Socrates's bronze," said Athena.

"That's it!" Socks chirped excitedly. "Lady Penelope must have requested Lady Dye-tea come inside for dinner several times only to be ignored, because Lady Dye-tea was too invested in the animatonn she was working on."

"That's it, Socks," Thaddeus laughed. "You solved the puzzle."

"You are both very welcome," said the otter.

"Athena, Thaddeus, please come downstairs."

Athena and Thaddeus returned to the kitchen to find their parents seated at the table. Roland slept soundly in Penelope's arms.

"Your mother and I have been talking and we decided that for the foreseeable future we *as a family* are going to stay away from our new neighbors."

"What?" Athena asked.

## ARGUMENTS ABOUND

"I believe your father is referring to the Island of Carthage that recently crashed into our island," piped Socks.

"I know what he is referring to," Athena snapped at the otter.

"Athena, Roland is sleeping. Keep your voice down," Penelope said coolly.

"Why are you taking her side?" said Athena, ignoring her mother's comment.

"I'm always on your mother's side," said Ren.

"This is so unfair—Mother is resentful of Dite, and I have to be the one who ends up paying for it."

"We believe there may be things happening on that island that best be avoided. And I'm not referring to just you. As a family we are all going—"

*Knock knock knock.*

Everyone stopped speaking and turned to the door. "Who could that be at this hour?" Penelope asked.

*Knock knock knock.*

Ren rose to his feet and made his way to the front door, his steps slow and deliberate. He cast a worried glance at Penelope before carefully pulling the door open.

On the doorstep stood two men: one tall, dressed in black, the other rather doughy.

"Ah, Mr. Burly. Excellent. Allow me to introduce myself. I am Lucian Scratch. I believe you have already been granted the pleasure of meeting Mr. Gunther Biggs this afternoon?"

"I have. What can I do for you gentlemen?" Ren asked.

Gunther gave a low, dignified bow. "Your family's presence has been requested by none other than the great Throne of Carthage."



## THE INVITATION

Our family's presence?" asked Ren.  
"It is a great honor. Few are ever directly requested by the Throne," Mr. Biggs snorted.

"And why, may I ask, has our family received such a great honor?" asked Penelope. "I was unaware the Throne even knew of our existence."

"Why, the head animatonn smith, Lady Aphrodite Carver, informed the Throne of your husband's recent accomplishment of making a voice box for a weasel."

"I daresay, I am an otter. I wouldn't even hold hands with a weasel," chirped Socks. Athena shushed him.

"Of course this is Dite's doing," Penelope said through a forced smile.

"Don't tie yourself into a knot, Mrs. Burly," Mr. Scratch said. He hung his black top hat on the coat rack and pulled out a chair with his walking stick. After seating himself, he lounged backward so his black cloak draped over the back of the chair. "This is a clear effort to establish peaceful relations before—"

"Before we start fighting?" Ren finished.

"Precisely," said Mr. Scratch. His pale eyes flitted between the Burly parents, then up to their children seated on the stairs. "We bring together the most important minds of Tiber and Carthage in order to establish a bond of

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mutual respect. In this effort, we may hope to avoid any unnecessary strife. Do not let Mr. Biggs' original statement fool you. Your family is one of many being asked before the Throne. As deputy of foreign relations to the Governor of Tiber—"

"By Governor, you mean your cousin," said Penelope. "No need to be so formal, Mr. Scratch."

"As deputy of foreign relations to the Governor of Tiber—" Mr. Scratch's mustache twitched irritably, "—it was my pleasure to sit with the royal family of Carthage this afternoon and decide who ought to be invited to the wondrous event we are planning. Needless to say, when your family was brought forward for consideration I explained my personal reservations, after briefly intermingling in your family affairs. What was it, a year ago?"

"Two," said Penelope. Her eyes flashed daggers. She remembered all too well Mr. Scratch's intermingling. He had threatened to spread false rumors in order to ruin her husband's reputation and her children's future.

"Really, has it been that long? No matter. After recounting our previous history, I explained in some detail that the Burly family is not to be trifled with."

"I will take that as a compliment," said Ren confidently.

"Indeed, you should. Unfortunately, upon recounting the tale, the Throne insisted on meeting you all."

Gunther nodded solemnly. "As is the Throne's prerogative. If the Throne wishes it, it will be so."

"Of course, Mr. Biggs, of course. Therefore, you, the Burly family, and the weasel have all made the list," said Mr. Scratch with a wave of his hand.

"What list is he talking about?" Thaddeus asked.

"Why, the guest list for the Crashing Ball," said Mr. Biggs.

"A crashing ball? Splendid," said Socks. "Indeed, is the ball more of a formal party, or perhaps a spherical object? As I am invited, I believe it would be only proper to know what to expect. I'm not exactly sure how I would go about dancing."

"It will be the greatest feast Carthage has thrown since the last Throne Day. I came up with the title 'Crashing Ball' myself," said Mr. Biggs proudly.

"Your finest accomplishment, Mr. Biggs," Mr. Scratch sneered.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“The ball is to be held in three days’ time. Oh, your invitation!” Mr Biggs reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a small stack of envelopes. After rifling through them, he handed one to Ren.

It was made of fine linen paper with the name ‘Burly’ inscribed in rich purple calligraphy. The envelope’s seal had matching purple wax. A deep imprint of a regal chair was emblazoned on the seal. Ren opened the letter with his dinner knife and pulled out a piece of paper, folded and cut as though it too were made to resemble a high-backed chair.



*Dutifully Yours,  
Sincerity Enforcement Minister,  
Maynard Lyne*





## THE INVITATION

Ren read the letter aloud, sighed, and placed it on the table. “I believe we will have to pass.”

“I’m sorry...what?” said Mr. Biggs.

“We pass. We shall not be attending,” he repeated.

Mr. Biggs looked at Mr. Scratch in horror. “But the Throne wishes it. You cannot simply refuse as you would some common cocktail party. This is an invitation from the *Throne*.”

“I understand that, and yet I feel it is in the best interest of my family to decline,” Ren said calmly.

“THAT CANNOT HAPPEN!” Mr. Biggs banged his fists on the table and rose from his chair.

“Mr. Biggs, please retake your seat,” said Mr. Scratch smoothly. He turned to Ren. “I believe what the representative from Carthage *meant* to express was how important this Crashing Ball will be to our island. The Governor himself will be in attendance. Consider it a time for residents of both islands to come together much in the same way our islands literally have.” He leaned forward towards Ren and lowered his voice. “You have studied the histories. War has been waged for far less. I think that is something we all wish to avoid. And yet, if we use tragedy to our advantage and not waste this golden opportunity to establish trade, share knowledge, find common ground—this could lead to a new age of prosperity for Tiber, if we are willing to seize it.”

“What does that mean?” Thaddeus whispered to Athena.

“It means he wants to benefit from the crash,” Athena whispered back.

“That’s a good thing, right?”

“I don’t know.”

“As a prominent son of Tiber,” Mr. Scratch continued, “it is your duty to do what you can to allow the people of Carthage and Tiber to work together and prevent unnecessary hostility. The least Tiber could ask of you is to attend a little party.”

“The Crashing Ball will NOT be a little party. It is a royal feast,” Mr. Biggs corrected indignantly.

“Yes, of course, Mr. Biggs,” sighed Mr. Scratch. “I meant no disrespect to the Throne.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Then I would ask you to refrain from such besmirching language in the future," said Mr. Biggs. "Belittling the work of the Throne is akin to violence."

"Of course it is. You must accept my sincere apologies," said Mr. Scratch. Thaddeus couldn't help but notice his eyes roll. "I will do better in the future. As for now, I believe we have kept the Burlys long enough. Transportation shall arrive at this residence sharply at three o'clock. If you do not attend, it will be considered a grave insult to both Tiber and Carthage. Let us not tread a path of hostility, but instead move forward in friendship." With a raise of his cane and a tip of his hat, Mr. Scratch gave a curt nod and bade Mr. Biggs out the door.

"That was surprisingly nice for Mr. Scratch," said Thaddeus, putting his and Athena's dishes in the sink.

"Nice? Thad, that was a threat," said Athena.

"They invited us to a party and wanted to move toward friendship," Thaddeus retorted. "That doesn't seem like a threat to me."

"But it *was* a threat," said Athena. "Whether it seemed like it or not. You're being naive."

"You just see the worst in everyone."

"Mr. Scratch is the worst. Need I remind you he tried to marry Mother when he thought Father was dead?"

"Everyone wanted to marry Mother, but we stopped that, didn't we? I don't see why we have to hate him. At that point we might as well hate everyone."

"Enough!" Ren said. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "The situation is complex enough without you two grinding each other's gears."

"Sorry, Father," Athena and Thaddeus said in unison.

"We need to think of a clever way to reject their invitation."

"Indeed. What if we drop a crashing ball onto the Crashing Ball?" Socrates suggested.

"Fish fish," said Athena. "I get it."

"We could write them a letter and say we all got sick," said Thad.

"We are not going to lie," said Ren.

"What if we go? It's only one evening," said Athena. "We could see a palace, eat some interesting food, check out their animatonsns...It could be fun?"

"You just want to see those glass swans again," said Thad.

Athena glared at Thaddeus.

## THE INVITATION

“Athena, your mother and I have already discussed—”

“She’s right,” Penelope interrupted as she gently rocked Roland in her arms.

“I am?”

“She is?”

“Ren, when you fell, I was forced to stand against all of Tiber. I don’t have it in me to do it again. Alone, I could pit them against each other because they had no one else to focus on. Now with you, the children, the baby, if they come after any of you—”

“I’ll destroy them *all*,” Ren said, gripping his wife’s hand.

“I know you would. If anything happened to any of us, you would be out there in your armor, gun in hand, ready to take on the world with an army of annimatonnns at your side. It is what you do every time the duskings attack. I don’t want to add another fight.”

“There are fights worth fighting.”

Penelope punched her husband in the arm. “I knew you were going to say that,” she said through clenched teeth. She took a deep breath. “Maybe this isn’t the fight worth fighting. Maybe we can go to the party. Keep our heads down, heck, maybe even have a good time.”

“This is what you want?” Ren asked.

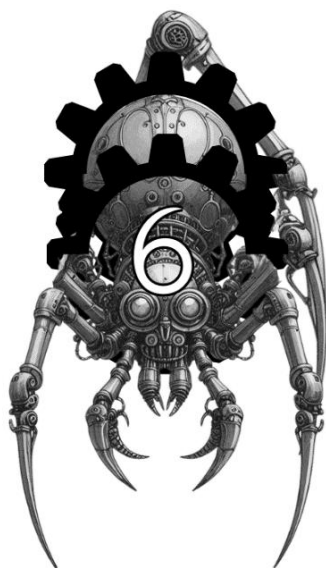
Penelope nodded.

“You sure? I mean it. You say the word, Beloved, we will pack up the house, throw the essentials onto a skiff and leave. Tiber is not my home. You are. My loyalty lies with you.”

“And the children,” Penelope added.

“And the children,” Ren repeated.

Penelope stroked baby Roland’s face. He slept soundly. “We have built something very special here. I am not going to let that woman uproot me from my home again. Besides,” Penelope said, giving her husband a playful glance, “you look very dashing in tails.”



## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

How does that look?” Thaddeus measured himself up in the mirror. The burgundy jacket had a satin black lapel that matched his bowtie. His mother had picked out the color and said it looked dashing on both him and his father.

“Why is it that you are wearing a jacket with two tails, and I get neither a jacket nor an extra tail?” Socrates asked.

“Socks, I polished you until I could see myself in your belly. That must count for something.”

“I suppose. Though I would very much like a second tail.”

Thaddeus took a deep breath. Something his father said had taken root in the back of his mind the past three days. It unnerved him whenever he found himself alone with his thoughts.

*I’ll destroy them all.* Surely his father didn’t mean that. He wouldn’t destroy *people*. Mother didn’t seem bothered by it. Did he hear him wrong? Was he misinterpreting? Was it an exaggeration?

## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

He tried to ask Ath, but she had just said, “If you get between a bear and her cubs, what do you think the bear will do?” But his father was talking about people. Everything their father taught them over the years was to defend and help people, but he heard what his father had said and it made him uneasy. *Was he wrong?*

“Don’t forget the cumberbund.” Penelope craned in her head. “It’s still on your bed.” Penelope, who never wore her hair up, had over two dozen pins holding every auburn curl and braid in place. A shoulderless forest green ball gown trailed to the floor.

“Mother,” Athena wailed. “I can’t work the fasteners on the back of the dress and they are too small for Vox’s mouth.” Athena came charging down the stairs wearing a golden dress that puffed out around the waist.

“There’s not enough space on the landing. Go down to the kitchen, and I will help you out in a minute. Where is your father?”

“I need the fasteners—”

“The kitchen,” Penelope repeated. “Thaddeus—the cumberbund. Where is your father? REN!”

After getting his cumberbund on, Thad proceeded down to the kitchen. Athena leaned over the table as Penelope worked the fasteners.

“These are the smallest hooks I have ever seen on a dress. The seamstress should be ashamed. There, last one,” said Penelope.

Relieved, Athena straightened up. Gold ribbons looped around her shoulders and interwove themselves throughout the back of the dress. Now that it fit correctly, it was hard to argue that Athena appeared anything less than stunning.

“Ath!” Thad said. “You actually look pretty.”

“Thank you Thad,” Athena said, raising her chin and speaking in a dignified voice.

“It’s kind of gross,” Thad added with a grin.

Athena feigned a scowl.

The front door opened and Ren strode in, whistling merrily. Roland sat cheerily on his right shoulder, wearing a formal jacket that matched his father’s. Ren held a wooden box in his left hand.

“What have you been doing?” Penelope asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Nothing,” said Ren playfully.

“Where have you been?”

“Nowhere,” he said, grinning broadly.

Penelope gave him a knowing look. “What’s in the box?”

“What, this box?” Ren asked.

“Yes, that box,” Penelope said reluctantly, playing along.

“So kind of you to ask.” Ren handed Roland to Thaddeus and placed the wooden box on the table. With a dramatic flourish he opened the box and pulled out two shining copper roses. The inner petals shined brilliantly. Ren took the first flower and delicately pinned it in Athena’s hair behind her ear.

“Thank you, Father!” Athena threw her arms around Ren’s neck in a tight hug. “Needs one final thing. Vox!” she called up the stairs. The copper fox came prancing down the step and leapt into her arms. “Disguise mode,” Athena ordered. Immediately, the fox transformed into a copper-colored top hat, matching her rose.

“Ren?” Penelope said coolly.

“Yes, Beloved?”

“Those flowers are glowing.”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“Did you use my bronze to make these flowers glow?”

“Yes, Beloved.”

“Do you know how long it takes me to weave starlight?”

“But Beloved, a beautiful flower deserves a beautiful flower.” Ren gave his wife a gentle smile as he pinned the copper rose in her hair.

She smiled, sighed, grabbed his beard with two hands, and planted a kiss on him.

“Gross,” Thaddeus said, covering Roland’s eyes.

“Athena,” Penelope said, handing her daughter a black cloak. “Cover your shoulders until we get to the party; if it gets cold this evening you will be glad to have it.” Penelope pulled out a green cloak darker in shade than her dress and draped it over herself, pinning it with a brass bear pin.

“What about Thad?” Athena protested.

## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

“He’s already wearing a jacket. The men in our family have that advantage.” Penelope smiled at Thaddeus, who was making silly faces and causing Roland to laugh.

“Is everyone ready?” Ren asked, surveying the room proudly.

“For sure!” said Socks. “Ready and eager.”

“Excellent. Now before they arrive there are some things your mother and I want to go over with you.”

“Mind your manners, be polite, don’t talk with your mouth full, no bragging about our tonns. Basic party etiquette,” said Athena.

“This is not a party,” said Ren. “Parties don’t threaten their guests to attend. *This* is an inquest.”

“What’s an inquest?” asked Thad.

“What your father is trying to say is that our hosts are not our friends. Do not treat them as such,” said Penelope. “Stay on your guard. Stay vigilant. We are all going to keep a low profile.”

“That shall be easy for me,” said Socks. “Compared to you all, I am not very tall.”

“As a family,” Ren continued, “we are setting some expectations. First, do not draw unwanted attention. Stay quiet, speak when spoken to, do not offer up more information than is asked for. Second, be polite and respectful, even if the person doesn’t deserve it.”

“Is this about Mr. Scratch?” asked Athena.

“Not just Mr. Scratch, but everyone,” said Penelope. “This is especially important for you, Athena. No picking fights—physical or animatonn.”

Ren gave his wife’s hand a knowing squeeze. “And finally, we are all going to keep our emotions in check. This is not Tiber; their rules are not our rules. Control your anger.” Ren looked at Athena. He turned to Thaddeus. “Don’t get upset. Don’t let them provoke you. We are going to make our appearance and then quietly leave.”

For a moment it was as though a leaden cloud had descended on the Burlys. Thaddeus and Athena were weighed down by their father’s warning.

Penelope broke the silence. “It is a beautiful day—why don’t we wait outside for our transportation to arrive.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

The afternoon sun shone brilliantly. The black tungsten wolf lay at the base of the door. Penelope bent down and patted the wolf affectionately. “Argus, watch the house until I get back. No one but Burlys get in, right?” Argus gave an affectionate nip to the air. “That’s my wolf.”

At the word *wolf*, a three-legged bear came ambling out of the workshop toward Penelope. “I said *my wolf*, not Beowulf.”

“Athena,” said Ren, “I asked you to repair Beowulf a week ago.”

“I got sidetracked. A lot has happened in the past few days.”

“Should have named him Buster,” said Thaddeus. “Then we would have Blunder live on in Buster. Blunder Buster.”

“You got to name Achilles,” said Athena.

“Yeah, and I did a great job,” said Thaddeus.

“You most certainly did,” said Socrates. “It is a perfect name. But not as perfect as what you named me, for sure.”

“Thank you Socks. Also, naming him Beowulf is confusing. We already have a wolf.”

“Beowulf is a derivative of bee-wolf—a wolf that eats honey—you know, a bear,” Athena argued.

“That doesn’t make sense. Wouldn’t a bee-wolf be a striped wolf with wings and a stinger?”

“That’s not how language works.”

“Athena,” Ren interrupted, “I want him repaired before the next duskling attack. Tomorrow, you repair him.”

“Okay, okay. Tomorrow he will be running as smooth as a captain’s clock.”

“He’d better.”

“I wish we could ride Achilles to the party. Could you imagine how amazed everyone would be if we arrived on the back of a tyrannosaurus rex?” Thaddeus said dreamily.

“That is not keeping a low profile,” Penelope added. “We are trying to be diplomatic and avoid future fighting.”

“Remember that when you see Dite,” Ren whispered. Penelope punched him in the arm.

The clattering of dozens of pointed metal feet echoed up the lane. Thaddeus rushed to the gate with excitement as an ornate carriage came into



## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

view. Instead of wheels, a dozen triders shouldered either side of the carriage box and shuffled toward them with surprising speed. Each trider's third leg angled upward, holding the carriage aloft. The carriage swung in front of the Burly's house. Slowly, it lowered. Three of the triders left their positions and formed a set of stairs as the side door of the carriage opened. Gunther Biggs carefully stepped out onto the trider steps. He wore a cantaloupe-colored jacket and pants that clashed against the carriage and the triders. Thaddeus felt far more confident in his suit than his mother had chosen.

"Greetings, Burly family. I, Gunther Biggs, have been asked to accompany you and your animatonn weasel to Kundry Palace." He made a sweeping gesture to the carriage. "Please take a seat in this magnificent carriage provided by the Throne."

Thaddeus entered first. It was rather spacious, with bench seating on either side and at the back. He took a seat in the back and Socrates hopped up next to him. Athena entered, followed by their mother holding Roland, and Ren. Ren removed his top hat in order to fit in the carriage door. Taking a seat next to his wife, he glanced over his shoulder at his children. "This is definitely not what I was expecting."

Gunther shut the door. "Before we set out, I would like to draw your attention to the triders. These miraculous wonders crafted by Lady Dite are currently working in unison to carry our carriage with minimum effort. It is ingenuity like this that has established Lady Dite as one of the greatest animatonn smiths of our age."

"Wonderful. Can we get on with it now?" asked Penelope.

"Of course." Gunther stuck his head out the window of the carriage. "To Kundry," he commanded. The triders slowly turned the carriage about and began to shuffle forward. Gunther sat down next to Athena, his expression inscrutable. It was difficult to discern whether he was bored, uninteresting, or simply lost in thought.

"Why do the triders only have three legs?" Thaddeus asked after a while. "Spiders have eight, bugs have six...nothing has three."

"It was asked of Lady Dite that none of her creations should exceed the amount of legs of the Throne," Gunther said with a nod.

"What does that mean?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Isn't it obvious? A throne has four legs. Out of respect for the Throne, Lady Dite was asked not to exceed that amount."

"A stool can have three legs," Socrates added. "She could build a stool."

"She can build something with four legs, but she will not exceed four legs," Mr. Biggs corrected.

"That seems arbitrary," said Athena.

"Athena..." Ren said in a low voice.

"Of course not. The Throne's laws are never arbitrary. They are the perfect system in which to abide. Each is genius in its own respect."

"But it doesn't make any sense," said Thaddeus. "Who cares if she builds something with more than four legs?"

"That statement is both ignorant and dangerous."

"Mister Biggs, please," Penelope said. "I'm sure Thaddeus meant no disrespect. Your concept of the Throne is strange to us; perhaps you could explain what it is?"

"The Throne is what the Throne wishes to be. It is not my job to educate those ignorant of the Throne's will."

"That clears it up," said Athena.

As they approached the border of Tiber, they could see a makeshift wooden ramp connecting the two islands. It was a hasty construction, erected over the past few days to facilitate travel. Ahead of them, several trider carriages could be seen trotting along, forming a procession. Thaddeus looked out the window, watching as their carriage fell in line with the others. As they began to climb the ramp, the sound of the triders' spiked metal feet clamored loudly, echoing across the grassy fields.

As they passed the border from Tiber into the island of Carthage, Thaddeus anticipated a view similar to Tiber's sweeping lawns, only to be met with tightly packed farm plots. He scanned the area for houses but couldn't spot any.

"Where are your farmers?" Thaddeus asked.

"Farmers? What do you mean? The Throne's animatons do all the farm work."

"But then who do the crops belong to?"

"Why, the Throne of course. It is the Throne's prerogative to distribute the food to the people equally from his bounty."

## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

“What happens if you eat the food you are given and are still hungry?”

“Ah, if you are speaking of the black market, I suggest you think again. Anyone caught buying food will face the Throne’s justice.”

“Buying food is against the law?”

“Of course. It makes the statement that the Throne is not providing, and therefore his bounty is lacking.”

“That doesn’t seem right.”

“It is more than right. The Throne in his goodness allows the people to live on his island. He provides them work, food, and leisure. Since all farms are under the ownership of the Throne, any surplus food produced is given to the Secretary of Commerce to generate maximum profit, which is then added to the Throne’s treasury.”

“If the island belongs to the Throne, the food belongs to the Throne, the tonns belong to the Throne, it begs the question: what exactly is the Throne?” Athena asked.

“The Throne is the Throne,” replied Gunther Biggs.

The carriage crossed loudly onto a cobblestone street. Tall gray buildings overshadowed either side of them. A trider or two clung to the side of every structure. Crowds of people clustered together in front of the buildings. Chairs and stools were lifted high in the air. Banners and flags waved, as if the carriages had formed some kind of parade. The people chanted an anthem in unison.

*Hail the Throne, hail the Throne,  
More glorious than any king.  
Hail the Throne, hail the Throne,  
To him, give everything.*

*We pledge the Throne our lives,  
We pledge the Throne our souls,  
We bow to the whims and passions,  
For the Throne has full control.*

## THE CHILD THRONE

*Obey the Throne, obey the Throne,  
The word of the Throne is law.  
Obey the Throne, obey the Throne,  
The Throne fills us all with awe.*

*May we never doubt or question,  
For questions fill our hearts with dread.  
Should dissent ever cross our lips,  
May we be severed from our heads.*

*Exalt the Throne, exalt the Throne,  
Forgo all brethren and family ties,  
Exalt the Throne, exalt the Throne,  
Those against the Throne's will, die.*

*Carthage, O Carthage,  
Sway not in loyalty or love.  
Better to be cast to the land below,  
From the Throne's land up above.*

The crowd's chant repeated every five minutes or so.

"Do they believe what they are saying?" Thaddeus asked.

"The Throne's anthem is to demonstrate absolute loyalty to all things the Throne wishes. Whatever the Throne wishes is so."

"What if the Throne wishes something horrible or impossible?" asked Athena.

"Then it is so," Gunther nodded. "Lady Dite warned me you may have difficulty understanding this." Gunther reached into his jacket pocket, pulled out a card, and began to read aloud. "*Inform them,*" he said, gesturing to the Burlys, "*our culture revolves around the Throne. That is our guiding principle. All the people of Carthage recognize this and adhere to the Throne's reality. Our truth is not better than yours, merely different.*"

"You had to write that down?" said Athena.

"I wanted to get Lady Dite's words precisely," said Mr. Biggs.

"How can you have a different truth?" Thad asked.

## THE TRIDER CARRIAGE

“Everyone has their own truth. Their own guiding principles. Ours is the will of the Throne.”

“What an interesting view,” said Socks.

“It’s not interesting, it’s wrong,” said Athena. “Mr. Biggs is ignoring the difference between perspective and truth. You can’t have multiple truths, just as you can’t have a clock point to 3:15 and 6:30 at the same time.”

“As Lady Dite would say, believe what you like,” said Mr. Biggs. “But as a word of warning, Carthage follows the Throne’s truth, not the Burly’s.”

“Why don’t we all quiet down and enjoy the view?” added Penelope.

As they proceeded down the main street, the towers grew taller and more elegant, adorned with decorative columns and flying buttresses. A few triders could be seen clinging to the walls. The chairs and banners became increasingly ornate, with higher backs, mahogany trimmings, and shining steel. The number of citizens dwindled, and those who remained were dressed in finer attire, sporting silk and satin suits and dresses accompanied by fur collars and adorned with jewelry.

After a quarter of an hour, Kundry Palace came into view. Gargoyles glared down from every wall, gutter, and overhang, their features so lifelike it was hard to tell if they were carved from stone or crafted as animatons. Great foul beasts, horned snakes, bat-like wolves, and reptilian great cats lined the towers of the palace. Their eyes seemingly followed the passing carriages as triders scuttled up the cobblestones under a grand portcullis in the courtyard. A magnificent hedge thirty feet in height hugged the inner curtain wall. The cobbled thoroughfare crossed between a majestic pair of fountains which playfully sent cascades of water soaring higher than even the loftiest statues scattered throughout the courtyard. Marble kings and queens of the golden age steered the eye toward the grand entrance where four stately columns framed the front doors, standing as tall and proud as ancient trees.

Prowling in front of the entrance was an animatons lion, but it was unlike any lion Thaddeus had ever seen. Its glass mane glinted with a fiery glow, while its armored body was covered in copper and chrome scales, giving it a reptilian appearance. And then, there was a second head, a goat’s, protruding from the top of its neck. The goat’s head turned this way and that to survey anyone who

## THE CHILD THRONE

approached. The lion's tail flicked back and forth, revealing a third head, that of a copper snake, with movements so cutting they mimicked a real serpent's strike.

"What is that?" Thad pointed at the multi-headed beast as he hopped out of the carriage. Athena followed suit, her eyes filled with excitement.

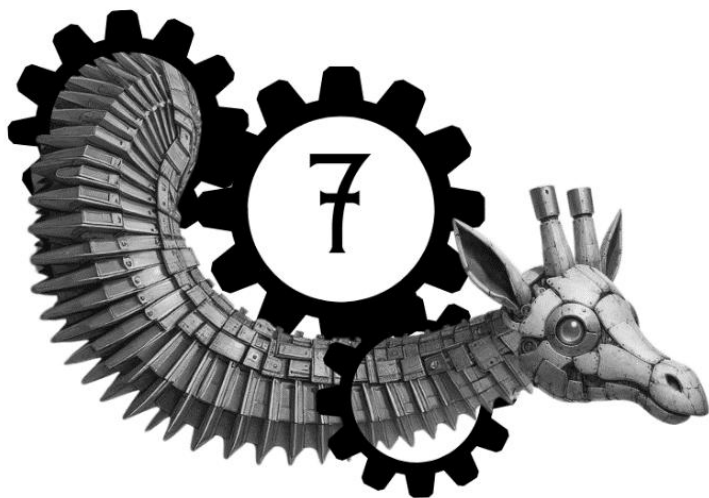
"Typhoon, one of the fiercest animatons Lady Dite has ever crafted," Gunther said proudly, stumbling out of the carriage behind them. "He guards the palace entryway from hostile usurpers. Lady Dite modeled him after an ancient chimera. The Throne asked for a beast more fearsome than any the island had ever seen. When she delivered, Typhoon won her the position of Royal Annimatonn Smith of Carthage. She has a gift for interpreting the Throne's desires."

"I daresay, why does it get three heads, yet I may not have two tails?" asked Socks.

The family approached the chimera, and Gunther instructed them to present their invitation. Penelope held it out, and the snake's head whipped around and inhaled, sharply sucking the invitation down its long tubular throat. The goat's head nodded in approval, and Gunther gestured for them to continue forward as a line began to form behind them. More trider-drawn carriages arrived, and a rather pudgy woman wobbled out of a carriage and onto the trider stairs.

The massive doors of the palace entrance parted, revealing a dazzling sight. Two swirling glass swans gracefully emerged, their wings ignited in a blaze of orange and yellow. Stepping out between them was Aphrodite. She was adorned in a form-fitting white dress that revealed her bare back, and two curved brass perches extended from her waist. As she advanced towards them, the train of her dress trailed behind her.

"My guests of honor!" she said, almost singing. "Welcome to Kundry Palace!"



## KUNDRY PALACE

Dite swept forward. The two glass swans descended in slow graceful spirals as if swimming through the air. Together they perched behind her on a protruding belt, craning their necks toward each other, beaks almost touching. An auspicious heart-shaped halo formed from the swans' silhouettes. Jets of flame poured from their wings on either side. Athena and Thad's mouths hung open in awe.

"How many times have you practiced that entrance?" Penelope asked, clearly unimpressed.

"It is good to see you too, Pen."

"Penelope, if you don't mind." Penelope's tone was deceptively polite, belying the fiery daggers she shot from her eyes.

Dite threw up her palms. "Of course, Penelope. I'm so glad you decided to join us."

A crowd of preeminent citizens from Tiber and Carthage began to filter through the entryway. Many were eager to get inside, away from Typhoon. Athena noticed how men tipped their hats and smiled broadly when they drew

## THE CHILD THRONE

near to Dite. In Athena's mind this made sense—while everyone was dressed in their finest, no one came close to matching Dite's raiment. Her mother's gown, while pretty, appeared drab in comparison.

Murmurs of apprehension and excitement filled the grand corridor as the Burlys made their way to the throne room. The corridor's ceiling must have been thirty or forty feet high. Columns and arches drew the eyes upward to a fresco of heroes of the past, sitting on the clouds looking down at them. As they continued down the hall, the heroes became less distinct and the clouds more plentiful. Dozens of small, blurred shapes darted about the ceiling.

"They're animatons," Athena observed. "Are they dragonflies?"

"Hummingbirds," Dite said, giving Athena a sideways smile. "Two hundred seventy-six fly about the palace. I made each and every one of them."

"Do they ever stop moving?"

Dite shook her head.

"But with the miniscule size and the constant state of flight, they must burn through bronze," Athena said, mesmerized by the minuscule birds zipping about.

"About every fifteen months—easily my most light-intensive design. But I think they are worth it."

"I must admit, it is an impressive sight." Ren gazed at the ceiling.

"Why thank you, Ren," Dite said with a smile.

"Must cost a small fortune in bronze."

"There are benefits to having a wealthy benefactor. I have been able to do things in Carthage that I never dreamed of. Want to see them up close?" Dite eyed Athena. "Snap your fingers twice."

Athena did so. At the sound of her second snap, three hummingbirds dipped down, circled her twice, then began to flit around her hand as if it was a flower full of nectar. Up close, the intricate craftsmanship was on full display. No two shared the exact same colors or feather printing. Each pair of wings made a unique sound and varied slightly in flight pattern.

"Can I try?" Thad asked.

"Of course, everyone can," Dite said, beaming.

Thaddeus snapped his fingers twice. Another six hummingbirds flew down from the ceiling and began to flutter about him.

"Burd-burd-burd!" Roland shouted in excitement.



## KUNDRY PALACE

"Would you like to try, Pen—I'm sorry—Penelope? I could hold the baby," asked Dite.

"I'm fine, thank you."

"I see why you are not fond of them," Socks added. "No hands. Hundreds of animatonns and not a single hand to hold amongst them."

With another snap, she dismissed the hummingbirds and they returned to their task, buzzing about the palace.

Dignitaries and other nobles from both islands gathered next to a small open door outside the throne room. They were laughing at something—a few even applauded in delight before entering into the main hall where the ball was to take place.

Dite stopped the Burlys in front of the crowd. A long counter extended out from an open window. "Accordion," she said, in the way a mother would call her child.

The stretch and squash of accordion bellows filled the cloakroom. The originator of this sound soon became visible. A giraffe's head attached to a long neck stretched its way out of the window and up to Aphrodite.

"Name?" said the giraffe.

"This is Accordion," said Dite. "A highly specialized animatonn—used as the palace's coat check. Give him your name and cloak and only *you* will be able to retrieve it."

Athena approached the giraffe, delighted. "Athena Burly."

"Athena Burly," her voice repeated, echoing from inside Accordion's head. She handed the giraffe her cloak and it recoiled back through the window and disappeared, only to reappear a moment later for the next cloak.

"Name," it said again.

Dite nodded to Penelope.

Penelope reluctantly unfastened her brass bear pin and removed her cloak. "Penelope Burly."

"Penelope Burly," came her voice out of the animatonn's mouth, which continued to hang open as if it had run out of words. Penelope slotted her cloak in Accordion's mouth and again the giraffe disappeared into the cloak room.

It reappeared a third time. "Name?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

Ren gave his top hat. Socks wanted to give something, but unfortunately did not have a second tail.

“That will be all, Accordion,” Dite said finally.

They continued into the throne room of the palace. The soft, sweet music of a string octet welcomed them into the main hall. Arrangements of deep purple orchids and golden candlesticks adorned several dozen tables scattered throughout the room. A long row of ice sculptures depicted a young boy riding wild beasts: a tiger, a dragon, a chimera. The legs on the young boy seemed a bit off, almost animal-like.

Dite led the Burlys through a litany of introductions. Many men and women with long titles bowed their heads as Dite rattled off the department or ministry of each. Head Manager of Agricultural Expenditures, Director of District Dietary Concerns, Chief Serenity Officer, and the Secretary of Population Management and Disbursement were just a few of Carthage’s most prominent citizens.

“Interesting titles,” Penelope said, her tone low. She leaned in closer to Ren. “Do you suppose they are all as useful as they sound?”

“Low profile, Beloved,” Ren said, his voice barely above a whisper.

“A baby, how quaint,” said a small woman with short hair pulled back and set in curls. “Are these all yours? Not worried about weighing down your island, I see.”

“Weighing down the island?” Penelope repeated, her eyes flashing.

“Three children is a bit excessive, don’t you think?”

“Athena,” Ren cut in, “they are serving sparkling punch and hors d’oeuvres. Why don’t you and your mother hunt down some of these waiters and find something covered in cheese.”

“Okay,” said Athena. Penelope took her daughter’s arm and gave Ren a look.

“Penelope has always been skilled in maintaining grace and decorum,” remarked Dite, as she watched the Burly women disappear into the crowd.

“She certainly is,” agreed Ren. “I simply didn’t want her to reduce Carthage’s chief lady birdwatcher to tears.”

To the surprise of Ren and Thaddeus, Dite let out a laugh. “The Secretary of Avion Conformance deserves far worse than that.”

## KUNDRY PALACE

“So, what is with all the hobnobbing and titles?”

“Each title is granted on behalf of the Throne by the Queen Mother. They often come with minimal responsibility and maximum power and influence.”

“Is that why you chose this place? Power and influence?”

“The Throne funds my wildest machinations—anything I wish to create, I can. I don’t bid for projects; I’m provided any bronze I request. All I have to do is follow the Throne’s will.”

“I follow Vox quite frequently, as I believe he is ever so slightly faster than me,” Socks added.

“It would be pretty nice to get unlimited resources in the workshop,” Thaddeus said, glancing up at his father.

Ren stared at Dite. “Sure, get everything you want. But the question becomes: how much of yourself were you asked to give up?”

“Believe what you like.”

“Ah, Mr. Burly, so glad you were able to make it.” Mr. Scratch snaked through the crowd, his black hair slicked back to a sheen. He had upgraded his usual attire to shining black satin. Following a foot behind was a very tall, gaunt man with drowsy, deep set eyes. His face was so stern it was hard to guess his age. “I just saw your beautiful wife and enchanting daughter. You, Ren, are a lucky man.”

“That I am.”

“Oh, where are my manners? Allow me to introduce Sincerity Enforcement Minister Lynx.”

The tall man bowed. A faint trace of a smile could be seen on his lips. “Pleasure to meet you. I am Maynard Lynx, Sincerity Enforcement Minister to the Throne.” His slow voice had a jarring effect, but the way he spoke was smooth and controlled.

“Pleasure is mine, Minister.” Ren nodded. “I beg your pardon, but I have never heard of Sincerity Enforcement.”

“Unfortunate, as it is a vital role. My primary responsibility is to inform the public what ought to be believed and what ought to be disregarded as rumor. I also communicate the Throne’s wishes, and defend the Throne from violent perspectives.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“What is a violent perspective?” Socks asked. “Perhaps it is when an animatonn launches energy blasts from its eyes. If so, how do you defend from such an attack?”

The minister eyed Socrates. “Curious, did the creature come up with the question itself, or did you program it to question me?”

“Socks asks questions all the time,” Thad said, pulling his finger out of his ear. Other than Socks’s comment, he was finding the adult conversation rather dull.

Ren placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I designed him to inquire about everything, to seek answers and find the truth.”

“Intriguing. I would encourage you to dissuade it from asking questions to the Throne.”

“What’s wrong with asking questions?” asked Thad.

The minister smiled at Thad. “Isn’t that a question, young man?”

“Isn’t that?” Athena retorted. She and Penelope had returned with a small plate piled high with butter pastry puffs stuffed with cream cheese. Penelope had a bubbly purple drink she tried to keep out of Roland’s reach.

“Right...” said Mr. Scratch. “Minister Lynx and I have been going over some very interesting policies Carthage has implemented to further the Throne’s goals, many of which have been exceedingly effective.”

“Against violent perspectives?” Ren asked.

“Precisely,” said Mr. Scratch. “Maynard here labels antagonistic arguments against the Throne as violence, therefore instead of arguing with dissent, they are able to squash it outright.”

“Sounds like a great way to never be criticized for your bad ideas,” Penelope said, handing Roland to Ren.

“But there are no bad ideas, Mrs. Burly,” the minister said calmly. “There are only ideas. It is the prerogative of those in positions of authority to determine what ideas ought to be enforced.”

“If that is true, then hand holding should be an act that is thoroughly enforced,” chirped Socks as he took hold of Athena’s hand.

Athena sharply pulled her hand away from the otter. “That sounds like tyranny.”

## KUNDRY PALACE

"Tyranny, you say?" Minister Lynx addressed Athena. "That creature asked you to give it something that cost you nothing, and yet you did not comply with its request. What harm would there be in holding the ferret's hand?"

"My good sir, I'm an otter, not a ferret."

"You can hold my hand, Socks," said Thad.

Mr. Lynx continued. "To refuse the creature appears to be an act of malice and ill will. One could call it—selfishness? Isn't selflessness a virtue you espouse?" He eyed Athena. "Isn't that what you want from your children?" He turned to Ren and Penelope.

"Of course," said Penelope. "We want our children to do what is right."

"In what *you* believe is right," Minister Lynx corrected. "Because *you're* the authority. Whoever is in authority determines right from wrong. That is precisely what we do with the common man here. We make the citizens of this island do what is right in the eyes of the Throne, for the Throne is Carthage's ultimate authority."

"Are you mesmerizing our guests with your silver tongue, Minister Lynx?" A woman's calm, clear voice echoed from behind the Burlys. Minister Lynx, Dite, and Mr. Scratch all bowed low. The Burlys turned around.

A woman clad in a brilliant silver dress beamed at them. She was a bit shorter than Penelope, and a fair amount younger. Atop her head sat a silver, pointed crown, its thin spires reaching high into air above her like jeweled blades. Thaddeus thought it resembled a regal fork. As tall as her crown was, her hair was piled even higher. Her hair rose at least twice the length of her face, defying gravity with thick, waving blonde curls and braids.

Dite swept over to the woman, who kissed her on both cheeks. She then turned back to the Burlys. "Queen Mother, may it please you to meet the Burly family: Ireneus and Penelope, their daughter Athena, and their sons, Thaddeus and Roland. Burlys, this is Queen Jocasta Sphinx."

"And I am Socrates, Your Highness," the otter waved and bowed. "I daresay, it is quite the pleasure."

"Socks." Thad shook his head.

"Should I not have introduced myself?"

"I don't think you are supposed to," Thad whispered.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"It is quite all right," the queen said with a laugh. "I see why my son is so interested in seeing you."

"You have a son? Is he here? How old is he?" Thaddeus asked eagerly, thinking a boy his age would be far more fun to talk to than a party full of stuffy adults.

"He will be arriving shortly. I would guess he is closer to Athena's age than yours," the queen said with a smile.

Minister Lynx gave a second low bow. "I beg your pardon, Your Highness—I know it is not my place to correct your manner of speech, but the Throne—"

"I am the Queen Mother. I can say what I wish," the queen said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

"Of course, Your Highness."

"Now, Family Burly, I have heard so much about you," the queen continued. "Clearly, Ireneus, you and Dite have similar gifts." She gestured toward Socrates. "Perhaps we could convince you to move to Carthage. We are always looking for talented individuals."

"You flatter me, Queen Jocasta," said Ren. "But I am very happy with my home on Tiber."

"Indeed. We may have to see if we can convince you otherwise. And Penelope Burly, formerly Penelope Byrne, daughter of Ambrose Byrne. Is your father still at the College of Bronto?"

"Yes, Your Highness."

"And I hear you are quite gifted at spinning starlight. Some even call you a virtuoso with the light loom."

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Have you seen the Stern Gardens yet? As the name suggests, they overhang the back border of our island and have the most beautiful view of the stars. I wonder if we were to set up a light loom there, what artistry you would be able to do with it. Dite, can we ensure someone gives her a tour of the Stern Gardens?"

"I will ask Gunther if he will oblige," Dite said.

"There is really no need—" Penelope began.

## KUNDRY PALACE

"But I insist. A virtuoso, after all, should at the very least see the best that can be offered." She smiled and clasped Penelope's hands. "Dite, where are we at in regard to the matter we discussed earlier?"

"If it is determined necessary, then we can proceed."

The queen looked over Penelope in such a way that even Thaddeus took notice. "I believe it is necessary. I believe it will be best for the Throne."

"As you wish, my queen."

"Now if you will excuse me, the Throne's grand entrance is about to be announced." With that, the queen nodded and departed through the crowd.

Penelope leaned over to Dite. "What was that all about?" she asked under her breath. "What is it that you have planned?"

"You needn't worry, Mrs. Burly. The queen has been planning a great number of things for quite some time," Dite responded.

A horn blasted, drawing everyone's attention to the entrance of the hall where a short man with a long, curling mustache stood, chin lifted high in the air.

"Ladies and gentlemen, citizens of Carthage, and honored guests from Tiber. On behalf of the Queen Mother Jocasta, I present to you that which stands above all others: The THRONE!"

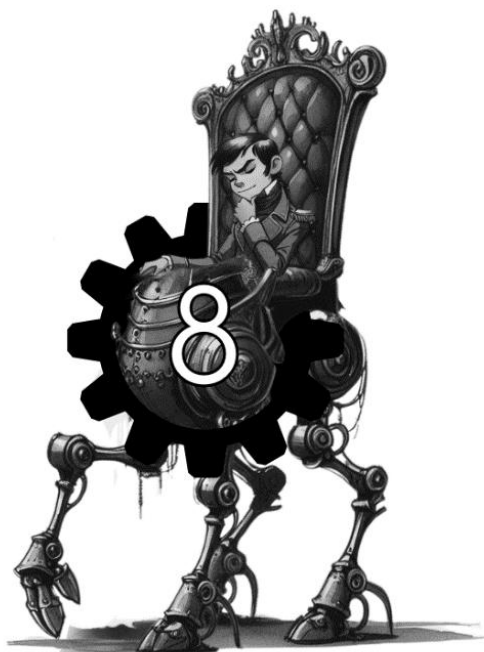
The horns trilled again, but they couldn't quite drown out the sound of animatonn legs approaching.

"Do you think the Throne will be riding an animatonn? Or maybe the Throne is an animatonn?" Thad said excitedly to Athena.

"Shh," she shushed.

Thadd was wrong. What appeared before them wasn't an animatonn, and it wasn't someone *riding* an animatonn. It was a boy, a boy perhaps a year or so younger than Athena, his legs cut off above the knees. The stubs of what used to be his legs connected to twin ports leading into a peculiar animatronic apparatus. Instead of two legs, as a human would have, the animatronic legs split into four, comprised of shining brass and chrome. Each leg ended in a metallic paw-like foot, larger than a dog, but smaller than a wolf. The two back-most legs rose behind the boy's shoulders. A mosaic panel was fused in between them, forming a backrest taller than the boy's head. This gave the boy the appearance as though he was seated on a great-backed metal chair, yet also—he *was* the chair.

The crowd cried out in unison, "All hail the Throne."



## THE CHILD THRONE

What have you done?!” Penelope lunged forward and clasped Eris firmly around the neck as if to strangle it. She dragged the glass swan backward, and as the swan was attached to the belt, Dite was dragged along with it. Eris did not dare light her wings, for doing so could burn Dite. Penelope steered them through the crowd behind a rather large column out of view. “Tell me you didn’t do what I think you did. Tell me, Dite!”

“Penelope, let go!” Dite growled, twisting her waist in an effort to break free from Penelope’s clutch. Eros the black swan pecked at Penelope’s hand, but she held fast.

“Mother, what are you doing?” Athena hissed. She had witnessed the scuffle and followed. “Let her go!”

“When Dite tells me she didn’t do it.”

“Do what?” Athena asked. “What are you accusing her of?”



## THE CHILD THRONE

“Beloved, let go.” Ren appeared, holding Roland. Penelope released her grip. The glass swan wobbled to and fro, righting itself.

Dite regained her composure. Both swans, still perched on her waist, glared with her at Penelope. “I suggest, Mrs. Burly, you conduct yourself with greater decorum moving forward.”

“He is a boy.”

“The *Throne* rules Carthage. The will of the Throne is law. No one may question it.”

“So, you did it.” Penelope stepped back, aghast. “Just when I thought you couldn’t sink any lower.”

“Come down from your ivory tower. I gave the Throne and the Queen Mother what they asked for, and I did a phenomenal job.”

“You butchered him.”

“Believe what you like.”

“Penelope,” Ren said gently. “This isn’t the time.”

“When is the time, Ren?” Penelope snapped.

“Mother, you’re making a scene,” said Athena.

“Your daughter is right,” Dite added. “Calm yourself. Escalating this situation could have fatal consequences.”

“What does that mean?” Ren asked, covering Roland with his other arm.

“The Throne is not to be questioned, and of all the questions to raise, the worst would be to challenge his decision to become the Throne. The contempt your wife has displayed—let’s just say many have been cast to the land below for less.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, Penelope. I’m trying to protect you.”

“Lady Dite! Ah, here you are.” Gunther rounded the column. “The Queen Mother has sent me to remind you of the task you had previously discussed.”

“I shall get to it posthaste.” Dite nodded to her apprentice, then paused. “Gunther, will you take Mrs. Burly and give her a tour of the Stern Gardens?”

“Right now? Is this in regards to that *other* matter?”

Dite sighed. “Yes—yes it is.”

“Trying to get rid of me,” Penelope scowled. “No need, we will leave on our own. Athena get your brother, we are—”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Penelope, for once in your life, hold your tongue. I’m trying to make sure your arrogance doesn’t get you killed. Your family cannot leave without meeting the Throne. He wants to see the talking animatonn and its inventor. If you leave now, it would be considered a grave insult, which, if you have not yet caught on, the Throne does not take kindly to.”

“Mother, you tell me all the time to calm down,” Athena said. “Can you please take your own advice?”

There was a several second pause until Penelope coldly said, “Fine.”

“Excellent. Gunther, can you handle this?” Dite nodded to her apprentice.

“Of course, I can give Mrs. Burly a tour of the Stern Gardens if you wish,” Gunther said with a wink.

“Afterwards, come meet me in my office. There is something I need your assistance with.”

“My pleasure, Lady Dite. This way, Mrs. Burly. I believe you will find the Stern Gardens quite impressive. We have thirteen different breeds of hydrangea, and a fair number of our perennials are currently in bloom. The climbing moon lily is a particular favorite of the Queen Mother’s, so much so that she ordered for it to cover half of the overhang.”

Penelope approached Ren. “Give me Roland.”

“Beloved?”

“Give me the baby. I don’t want him anywhere near this...circus. In fact, I don’t want any of the children—”

“I’m staying,” Athena interjected. Penelope shot her a glare.

“Let me take care of Thad and Athena.” Ren handed Roland back to his wife. “I know this is grinding your gears, but it’s only one night. We are almost done. A quick hello, goodbye, and I will come fetch you.”

Gunther Biggs escorted Penelope to the back of the hall and the two disappeared through a side entrance.

When they were out of earshot, Athena tugged on Dite’s arm. “Why did Gunther wink at you? What is the *other* matter he mentioned?”

“The Queen Mother thinks Penelope’s spinning expertise would be an invaluable asset. Gunther is going to ask your mother to move your family to Carthage permanently.”

“Clearly that’s not going to go well.” Ren laughed.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"No, it most certainly is not. Anyway, I must excuse myself. I hope to see you all before you leave." With that, Dite swept gracefully away.

Ren and Athena returned to the crowd and quickly sought out Thaddeus. He and Socrates were watching the Throne with rabid curiosity.

"Do you think he was born without legs, or perhaps he lost them in some kind of accident?" Thad asked Socks. A woman standing next to them gave an appalled look.

"Do people generally lose things in accidents?" asked Socks. "If so, you must have been in a great deal of accidents. That explains why you constantly lose your shoes."

"What'd we miss?" asked Athena, sidling up to her brother.

"Where'd you go?" Thaddeus asked.

"Just behind that column. Mother blew a gasket so she is taking a walk to calm down," Athena said.

"Oh dear, that is simply dreadful. I broke a gasket once and I was utterly unable to move my hind legs, and every time I tried to move my front ones I would yawn and then say the word 'bubbles.' I do hope your father was able to repair her."

"I did my best," Ren said from behind his children. "Now let's meet this so-called Throne and do our best to not insult him or his mother, and then we can go home."

"Right you are," Socks chirped. "No insults. I will not call him an overgrown toad so ugly that warts would be an improvement upon his complexion."

"Socks!" said Thaddeus.

"What? I said I would *not* say that."

Queen Jocasta escorted the Throne around the party, introducing him to his guests.

Mr. Twitch, a stout, brazen man who ran Tiber's bank, began to outline monetary and fiscal policies he believed could improve financial gains for both the Throne and his bank. While Queen Jocasta nodded politely, the Throne's head began to droop and his eyes rolled with boredom.

"...thereby increasing annual returns by a whopping rate of three point five percent. Ha-ha, tell me if those access fees sound ludicrous now," Mr. Twitch proclaimed proudly.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"What an interesting...economic solution," Queen Jocasta said with a sweet smile.

"This is boring," groaned the Throne. "Why is he gloating about his money? Does he want us to seize it?"

"I—I beg your pardon," Mr. Twitch coughed.

"Remember, Mr. Twitch is a citizen of Tiber, not Carthage. It would be inadvisable to discuss seizing his funds."

"Then why is he telling us these wearisome things? He squeezes money out of people with his fees. If I wanted money, I would take it."

"You can't simply *take* people's money. You would lose all trust. It would cause a run on the bank. The entire system is predicated..." But Mr. Twitch paused. For a split second, a sinister grin appeared on the Throne's face. Then it melted away into abject horror.

"What—what did you say to me?"

"I—I—beg your pardon. I don't know," Mr. Twitch stammered. "The—the—bank system...is predicated—"

"YOU SAID I *CAN'T*," roared the boy. "I am the Throne. It is from the Throne that the laws of Carthage emanate. Therefore, my very will is law. No one is permitted to tell me I *can't*."

"I-I am so sorry—I truly did not mean to offend."

"But you did offend. You offended greatly. Therefore you shall be cast—"

"O great Throne," Queen Jocasta interrupted. She placed her hand on her son's shoulder. "As he is a guest from another island, it would be unwise to cast him into the land below. Perhaps instead we come up with a compromise."

"What kind of compromise?" the Throne asked, returning to his usual tenor.

"Mr. Twitch, do you acknowledge the harm you have done by offending the Throne?"

Mr. Twitch lived up to his name. His head rapidly jerked from the Throne to the queen, then back to the Throne. He did this several times before finally saying, "Y-yes, I-I believe I understand what I have done wrong."

The queen turned back to her son. "As he is a banker, what do you *feel* ought to be done?"

"In order to make reparations," the boy proclaimed, "you will set up an account with your bank and fill it. Once it is full, you will give it to me."

## THE CHILD THRONE

Mr. Twitch winced. “Fill...an account? That is—that is not how accounts work. If you will allow me to explain—”

“You insult me a second time at my Crashing Ball?”

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I will do as you ask.”

“Fill two accounts. One for each insult.”

“Of course, thank you—thank you. Whatever you say.”

“I am gracious, so I will not cast you to the land below.” Mr. Twitch heaved a sigh of relief. “But I will cast you out of my palace.”

The Throne raised his right arm and snapped his fingers twice. Immediately three hummingbirds zipped down and circled his head like a crown. “Fetch Typhoon and have him remove *this*—” He waved at Mr. Twitch with the back of his hand. “—from my presence.”

The hummingbirds disappeared through the entrance of the palace. Everyone watched in silence. Thundering footsteps could be heard down the hall as the great chimera galloped toward them.

Thad expected the lion head to roar. It didn’t. Instead, the goat’s head rotated, eyeing Mr. Twitch unnervingly. It let out a soft bleat. Typhoon approached the stout banker, all three heads glaring down at him. It would only be natural for him to raise his paw and strike, but instead, there came a hiss and a snap. The snake tail whipped around and clasped its mouth over the banker’s head. Its jaws clamped tightly on his back and chest.

Mr. Twitch’s arms flailed about his head, now encased inside the snake’s mouth. Abruptly the tail lifted, pulling Mr. Twitch clean off his feet. The appearance was almost comical, like a man with his head stuck in a pipe, unable to get it out. If Typhoon hadn’t been such an imposing figure, Thaddeus would have laughed. Without another sound, the chimera left the main hall of the throne room, the struggling banker trapped in its snake tail.

Conversation among the remaining guests returned to normal, as if what was witnessed had been nothing more extraordinary than a waiter clearing dishes.

Queen Jocasta and the Throne began speaking to Minister Lynx and Mr. Scratch.

“We have so much to learn from you, O great Throne and Queen Jocasta. You have turned what could have been a devastating event into a party, of all things. The Crashing Ball: ingenious, simply ingenious.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Your assistance in bringing Tiber onboard cannot be overstated, Lucian. We look forward to your continued cooperation in the future." The queen smiled brightly.

"What does that mean?" Thaddeus whispered to Athena.

"If it wasn't Mr. Scratch, I would say he simply assisted with the party. But as it *is* Mr. Scratch, I'm betting it is something far worse," Athena whispered back.

"Quiet now. We're next," Ren said in a low voice to his children.

"Why, if it isn't the Burly family," Queen Jocasta said, striding alongside the Throne. "But where is Penelope?"

"She stepped out with the baby." Ren smiled and gave a slight bow.

"I hope everything is all right."

"Nothing a little air won't fix."

"Mother, this conversation is boring me. Can we move on?" The Throne groaned.

"Great Throne, this is the inventor Dite told us of, Irenaeus Burly. He is the one who made a talking animatonn."

The Throne perked up. "Are you? Where is it?"

"I daresay, I'm right here," Socks chirped as brightly as ever.

"Marvelous! Can it say anything?"

"Of course, *anything* is a very simple word. Anything. Anything. Anything."

The Throne laughed and clapped his hands together. "It made a joke. I didn't know it could make jokes."

"Socrates can do a lot more than make jokes. He can ask questions. He can learn. He is one of the most sophisticated animatonns ever made," Athena said proudly as she beamed up at her father.

The Throne looked Athena up and down several times. "You're very pretty." Athena was taken aback by his brazenness, and not in a good way.

"O great Throne, these are Irenaeus's children: Athena and Thaddeus," said Queen Jocasta with a slight wave of her hand. The Throne's eyes never left Athena.

Thaddeus stepped forward with a friendly smile. "I'm sorry you lost your legs."

## THE CHILD THRONE

Silence. Everyone stopped and looked at him. Confused for a moment, Thad turned around, thinking they must be staring at something behind him. Athena looked shocked, Ren bewildered, Queen Jocasta disappointed, and the Throne, furious.

“Did I say something wrong?”



## VOX vs TYPHOON

I did not lose my legs,” the Throne snarled at Thaddeus. “I am the Throne.” “Wonderful! If you did not lose your legs, perhaps we can reattach them,” Socks added. “Miss Athena is quite excellent at reattaching my forepaws. Perhaps she can do the same for your legs?”

Ren buried his face in his hands and clenched his teeth.

The Throne glared at Thad and Socks, giving a quick side glance to his mother. “RAAAAHHHHHhhhhh!” he roared at the top of his lungs, flailing his arms about. The front legs of the chair stamped in a tantrum.

“You!” He pointed at Ren. “You have brought these *things* here to insult me...” He motioned at Thad and Socks. “...to cause violence to me.”

“Thaddeus did not mean to insult you,” said Ren. His voice was calm, but Athena could see his arms growing tense and sweat beading on his brow. “He thought he was being kind.”

“He has threatened me.”

“How have I threatened you?” Thad asked, perplexed.



"You dare question me again? To oppose my will is the same as wishing death upon me. It is as though two assassins were sent to destroy me," the Throne said menacingly.

"I daresay, Master Thaddeus, we are not assassins, correct?" Socrates asked.

Thad shook his head. "No, Socks."

"He must be confused. I shall inform him at once and straighten this whole mess out." Socrates scurried up to the Throne and placed his forepaws on the metal leg. "Good news, Thaddeus and I are not assassins."

For a moment the Throne sat speechless, unsure of how to respond. He bit his lip and finally shouted, "Mother!"

"Yes, mighty Throne."

"They have insulted me."

"They are your guests, O great Throne."

"The otter called me *he*."

"Yes, great Throne."

"I am not a he."

"Of course, great Throne."

"I am no man."

"Yes—"

"I am the Throne. The Throne of Carthage. My will is law."

"It is, O great Throne."

"There must be some form of retribution, punishment for their mockery."

"If you will allow me." Ren stepped forward. "Things have gotten out of hand. No one intended to insult you. I don't believe my son is quite sure how he did. Let my family leave and you may return to your ball. We can live and let live."

"I think not," snapped the Throne. "I think there needs to be a—"

"A duel," Athena interjected.

"A duel?" the Throne repeated.

"An animatonn battle." Athena cautiously grinned. "Wouldn't that be a great way to solve this—whatever this is?"

"Yes, yes it would," cried the Throne. "That is what we will do. If you win, the punishment is forgiven; if you lose, you will face full retribution."

"I would ask you, Throne, that I may do the battling on my brother's behalf."

## THE CHILD THRONE

He paused. "Yes. I would like to see you in action." The Throne gave her an uncomfortable grin. "You may fight on behalf of your brother, and Typhoon shall fight on behalf of the Throne."

"Ath, what are you doing?" Thaddeus asked under his breath.

"Today, little brother, I get to be your hero."

"Athena," Ren pulled his daughter in close. She half expected him to tell her off, but he didn't. He studied her face for several seconds, and after a moment, he nodded. "Let your light shine."

"Brilliantly," Athena added.

"It is settled then: your otter shall fight Typhoon in the courtyard," the Throne proclaimed with a wild gesture.

"No, not the otter," Athena said.

The Throne laughed. "Don't be preposterous, it is not as though you can conjure an animatonn out of thin air."

"As a matter of fact, I can." Athena took off her top hat and whispered, "Vox, base form." With a flick of her wrist, she tossed her hat to the floor. As it fell, the copper material of the hat began to shift and bend until it took the form of a sleek fox. The creature shook as if it had fur and fixed its bright eyes on the startled onlookers. "I choose Vox as my animatonn."

The Throne stared wide-eyed at the fox that seemingly materialized before his very eyes. After a moment he turned to Athena. "You're magic. Amazing! Terrific! I never would have suspected. To think that it was disguised as your hat this whole time."

"Great Throne," Queen Jocasta chided her son. "If you wish to have this battle, we should move to the courtyard at once. Dusk is approaching."

"Yes, yes of course. To the courtyard."

The crowd shifted outside. Although an undeniable sense of excitement lingered in the air, Thaddeus couldn't shake the feeling that many people shared in his sense of dread over his mistake. What might he have said to earn the wrath of the Throne? And worse yet, what would befall him if his sister were to lose?

The orange and pink sky bled together as the sun began to submerge beyond the western horizon. The high castle walls cast the courtyard in a sheet of shadow. The crowd gathered on the stairs leading up to the palace entrance.

## VOX Vs TYPHOON

The Throne stationed himself on the landing while Athena stood firmly in the courtyard with Vox and her family.

Typhoon prowled about the motionless carriages. The cluster of triders was nowhere to be seen. The goat head first noticed the crowd, turned unnervingly toward them and let out an eerie bleat.

"See that monster, Vox?" Athena said, stroking the fox on its smooth copper head. "You are going to dismantle it." The fox's tail swished with approval.

"Where is Dite?" the Throne cried out. "Where is my head animatonn smith? How are we going to battle without my head animatonn smith?"

"Dite is working on something for me," Queen Jocasta said to her son. "You will have to choose a different champion."

"A different champion? But she created Typhoon."

"I will summon her, but in the meantime you need to choose someone else."

"Fine," the Throne huffed. "Where is that chubby apprentice of hers? What is his name, Tomothy Something?"

"Her apprentice, Gunther Biggs, is also occupied."

"But I need someone who knows how to do animatonn battles."

"Great Throne," Minister Lynx stepped forward. "Mr. Scratch here was telling me of his experience battling in Tiber's Arena. Perhaps he could substitute."

"You flatter me, Minister Lynx," said Mr. Scratch. "However, I have only battled against the mother Burly..."

"But you *have* battled?"

"Yes—"

"Then you shall battle for the Throne."

"As you wish, O great Throne."

Mr. Scratch took his place next to Athena. He smiled and bowed to her. Athena bit her thumb at him.

Minister Lynx stepped in front of the crowd. "Greetings, guests of the Crashing Ball! In honor of the great Throne of Carthage, an epic duel will be fought this evening for your viewing pleasure." The crowd applauded as if on cue. "Lucian Scratch is acting as champion for the Throne, while Athena Burly is champion for her brother. The combatants shall be the great chimera Typhoon versus this fox animatonn. All hail the Throne, and let the battle commence."

Ren leaned over to Athena. "What is your strategy?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

"I was thinking about taking out the legs. If it's immobilized it should be easy to dismantle from there. The snake tail could throw a cog in the gears if it stops me from getting in close."

"Don't aim to dismantle. Obliterate it."

"What?" Athena asked, shocked. "You *always* say we should dismantle so as not to destroy another smith's work."

"This is different. Your brother is in danger. Destroy it."

Athena could not help but grin from ear to ear. For the first time in her life she had free reign. Vox didn't have to hold back. She didn't have to hold back. "Vox, chainsaw tail."

As the fox began to move, its tail shifted and elongated into a gleaming, razor-sharp blade that spun with dizzying speed. There was an audible gasp from the crowd.

"Typhoon, slash it apart with your claws," Scratch shouted.

The chimera's claws bore down on the fox, who gracefully sidestepped the slash. The spinning chainsaw tail bit into the gleaming metal scales of Typhoon's front leg. Without instruction, the snake tail whipped around and snapped at Vox. The fox deflected the bite with its own tail before backflipping away to give itself more space.

"So, that is what you were working on instead of fixing Beowulf," Ren said with a grin.

Vox circled Typhoon, watching closely for an opening. The goat head glared at the fox, rotating wherever Vox moved. It was unshakable. Vox remained vigilant, careful to stay out of the reach of the snake. While quicker than Typhoon, Vox was also smaller and far less powerful. Finding but exploiting a weakness would be his task, and Athena didn't mind this. In fact, she preferred it.

One of the palace servants approached Mr. Scratch and whispered in his ear. "Really?" he said to the servant. Then shouted at Typhoon, "Melt it with your fire breath."

The lion's glass mane began to glow orange. It opened wide its mouth. A streaming jet of liquid fire sprayed forth. The orange and yellow inferno fell like molten lead, burning through and melting away anything it touched. Cavities

## VOX Vs TYPHOON

formed in the statues and stonework that had been sprinkled by this hazardous concoction.

“What is that?” gasped Thaddeus.

“Dite must have formulated a mixture that can melt metal,” said Ren. “Much more effective in an animatonn battle.”

Athena didn’t care. She hoped for an opening and now she saw it. “Vox, next time it exhales fire, blast it right in the mouth.”

Vox whipped around one of the grandiose fountains, his tail transforming into a light cannon as he went. Typhoon stalked forward, back arched, head low.

“Into the fountain, and spray your fire again. Don’t let it get away,” Scratch yelled.

Typhoon leapt into the water, its glass mane aglow. But just as the second current of liquid flames shot forth from its mouth, a loud crack boomed from Vox’s tail. Typhoon’s head cocked backward as if hit by a severe uppercut. The flames sprayed into the overarching blanket of water showering down from the fountain’s peak. Flaming hail cast about the courtyard like hellish rain.

Athena’s heart sank. “Why didn’t that work? He should be scrapped.”

“Dite must have fixed her intake problem,” Ren said to his daughter. “It has to be taking in oxygen somewhere. Must not be in the mouth.”

“In the mouth,” Athena repeated. “Vox, next time Typhoon breathes fire, jump on the goat’s head.”

“He will be open to strikes from the snake,” Ren said.

“Precisely,” said Athena. “If Typhoon is exhaling through the lion the safest place for an intake—”

“—Would be the opposite end.”

The lion’s head let out a third jet of flame. Vox darted under it the way a child would run under a garden sprinkler. Turning on a pin, he leapt into the air. With agility that would put a cat to shame, the copper fox landed right between the goat’s horns. The head let out an annoyed bleat.

“Fire in the snake’s mouth,” Athena shouted.

Like clockwork, the snake moved into strike. Vox’s tail glowed brilliantly. There was a crack like lightning. The snake head paused. The goat head did not turn. Then...

## BOOM!

Typhoon exploded into a thousand pieces. The mane shattered. Scales showered like shrapnel from a grenade. The snake tail disintegrated as a glowing orange and white orb ripped apart Typhoon's mechanical body. The goat head launched upward like a rocket before it came hurtling back down to the courtyard. A victorious Vox, who had sprung off at the last second, pranced up to Athena and bowed.

Athena snatched Vox up in a tight embrace before turning around. She expected the crowd to cheer after the spectacular finish, yet no one looked at either her or Vox. There was absolute silence as all eyes fell on the Throne, his face unreadable. After a long moment he raised both hands.

"That was...sensational!" The crowd in turn began to cheer. "I have never seen such a fantastic animatonn battle."

Athena beamed at her father, who grabbed her shoulder and gave it an affectionate squeeze. He then grabbed Thad and pulled him in tight.

Thad looked not to his father, but rather to a man in the crowd who had been hit by one of Typhoon's scales in the explosion. His arm was covered in blood. A second man who appeared to be a doctor took off his belt and tied it around his arm as a tourniquet. This was his fault. This fight happened because of him.

The crowd parted as the Throne clambered down the stairs. "The explosion! The excitement! Absolutely thrilling!"

"Thank you," said Athena.

"We must have another."

"Another?" Athena repeated. "Another battle? I would need time to see if Vox needs repairs."

"Use the otter this time. I don't care. I want another battle. Has Dite arrived yet?"

"But that whole thing with my brother..."

"What? Oh—yes, yes, that doesn't matter—your brother is hereby forgiven. Oh look, Dite just arrived."

## VOX Vs TYPHOON

Beckoned, Dite descended the palace steps carrying both swans on her belt, their flaming wings currently extinguished.

“You sent for me?” she asked.

“I want a second annimatonn battle. How about one of your swans versus their otter.”

“Eris and Eros were not designed to battle. Perhaps I could—”

“I don’t care what they were designed for. I want to see a battle between the glass swan and the otter.”

Dite paused. “Your will is law. With your permission I will use Eros, as Eris’s right wing is in some need of repair.”

“Whatever. Just make it spectacular.”

Aphrodite surveyed the courtyard. “I see you have already destroyed one of my creations this evening,” she said to Athena.

“Sorry, I had to. The Throne threatened—”

“I hope Typhoon put up a good fight,” Dite cut her off. Athena couldn’t help but feel she knew all too well what had transpired.

Minister Lynx again stepped forward. “Citizens of Carthage and honorable guests of Tiber: the Throne has proclaimed there will be a second annimatonn battle. Athena Burly, using the family otter, will stand off against Aphrodite Carver, using Eros, her iconic glass swan. Let the battle commence.”

“You ready for this, Socks?”

“Should I vaporize the swan as Vox did to Typhoon?”

“I would appreciate it if you didn’t,” said Dite. “This is just a friendly fight between us girls.” She gave Athena a smile.

Eros launched off the perch on Dite’s waist. His wings alight, he lifted into the air like a phoenix. A beautiful sound of strings and song emanated from its mouth. The black swan circled above like a vulture. Socrates’s head tracked the circles closely.

“Eros, dive-bomb.” The wings extinguished. The swan dove headfirst like a spear. At the last second the wings relit, as it snatched up Socrates and lifted him high into the air.

“How far can that otter of yours fall without destroying the voicebox?” Dite snickered playfully at Ren and Athena.

“Let’s not find out,” said Athena. “Socks, take out the wing.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Consider it removed,” replied Socks. His mouth opened and began to glow a brilliant blue.

Dite looked over to Ren, surprised and impressed. “You fit a light cannon inside that small otter?”

Ren gave a coy smile. “Guilty as charged.”

A deafening crack followed a flash of blue light, and Eros’s left wing came tumbling off. Socks maneuvered around to the side of the careening swan. With only one wing emitting flame, the swan began to spin about in the air like a flaming pinwheel. Socks gripped Eros’s neck tightly with both forepaws. The swan hit the ground with an underwhelming crash. Eros did not move. From the opposite of the swan’s body, Socks’s head popped up like a prairie dog. He leapt over the body and sprinted up to Athena. Something hung from his mouth. As he reached Athena’s feet, he placed the object on the ground in front of her like a cat would a cockroach. Athena bent over and picked up the smokey black glass head of Eros.

“What, that’s it?” said the Throne disappointedly. “Where is the explosion? Where are the theatrics? The loser needs to be destroyed. Athena Burly, have your otter destroy the swan.”

Athena shook her head. “It’s defeated. There is no reason to destroy it.”

“No reason? I commanded it. When I command something—”

*Smash*

Athena abruptly turned around. Dite had stepped over to Eros and proceeded to stomp on him, shattering her work to oblivion.

*Smash*

“Is that to your liking, O great Throne?” Dite said, looking up. Athena looked on in disbelief. Dite must have spent hundreds of hours on the intricate workings of Eros, and now, on a whim of this boy, she had shattered her masterwork.

The Throne frowned. “I would have preferred an explosion of some kind, but I suppose it will suffice.” He turned back to Athena. He eyed her up and down, giving her an uneasy feeling. “You have done well, Athena Burly,



winning two animatonn battles. For such an outstanding achievement, a reward is in order.”

The crowd cheered as if the Throne had held up an invisible sign to do so. “I declare, for your tremendous accomplishment, you shall be rewarded in a way few ever have.”

Athena cocked her head suspiciously.

“I hereby grant you permission to *sit* upon the Throne.” He then gestured to what remained of his legs.

“HA—” Athena let out. “No. I mean—no thank you. I’m—I’m not going to do that...There is no way I’m going to sit on your lap.”

“It is not a lap, it is a seat. A seat of greatest honor. For I am not a man. I am the Throne.”

“I don’t care. I’m not sitting on you.”

“But you must.”

“I won’t.”

“My will is law.”

Ren stepped in front of his daughter. “You heard her. She said no.”

The Throne fumed. “This is an outrage. You insult me, you threaten me, now you refuse the honors I wish to bestow. Your family has proven to be—”

*Dong Dong Dong*

The toll of distant bells interrupted the Throne. He quieted.

*Dong Dong Dong*

All the light of the palace instantly went out. Between the two fights, night had snuck up on them, and with it came the darkness.

*Dong Dong Dong*

Minister Lynx again stepped forward and addressed the crowd. “Honored guests, distinguished citizens, please calmly re-enter the palace and make your way up to the Starboard Watchtower. The dusklings are attacking.”



## DUSKLINGS IN THE DARK

Confusion ensued as the crowd made their way to the Starboard Watchtower. A pair of servants marched in front of the Throne and queen with a small candelabra, but it wasn't enough light for the entire crowd in the dark passage.

Dite noticed the guests were becoming uneasy and snapped her fingers twice. She whispered something faintly and then flicked her hand. At once the ceiling lit up with flitting blue and green lights. The hummingbirds were aglow.

The trail of lights led the guests up a wide ramp spiraling several stories until they reached the viewing hall: a crescent shaped balcony wrapped in glass walls from floor to ceiling. An overhanging steep roof blocked the view from above, making them nearly invisible to passing dusklings. No light, hummingbird or otherwise, shone in the tall tower.

When the city of Carthage first lofted from the land below, the majority of the dirigibles were affixed to the stern in such a way that the floating island sloped downward from the palace. This provided the illusion that Kundry Palace stood atop a mighty hill. Although they were only a few stories high, it felt as though they were in a tower perched high above the city, the entire island silhouetted in black below.

## DUSKLINGS IN THE DARK

“Come in, come in,” Minister Lynx called to the guests as they shuffled in like sheep. “We are quite safe in the viewing hall. There is nothing to worry about. Find a good spot where you have a clear field of vision. There are binoculars in the back if you would like.”

“Binoculars?” a man from Tiber asked. He was an older gentleman in a gold-colored waistcoat and a thick gray beard. “What in the land below do we need binoculars for?”

“To watch the dusklings, of course,” Minister Lynx said with a smile. He handed the old man his own binoculars and beckoned him to the window.

Thaddeus, Athena, and Ren found themselves on the far end of the tower. There wasn’t much to look at as they gazed out into the darkness.

Ren scanned the area over the heads of the crowd, his expression tense. “Have you seen your mother and Roland?”

“She’ll be fine,” Dite said, saddling up next to Athena. “The palace never gets attacked.”

“How do you manage that?” Athena asked in disbelief.

“You’re about to find out,” said Dite. Her tone was different. It wasn’t playful like when they had battled. Athena could not help but feel she sounded almost sorrowful.

“Attention honored guests,” Minister Lynx’s voice rang over the crowd. “I have been informed by the Chief of Internal Intelligence that an assassination attempt has been discovered.”

There were several gasps and an uncomfortable shuffling from the crowd. Athena, however, thought Minister Lynx sounded far too comfortable to be serious. It almost sounded like he was prepping the crowd for a game he was about to announce.

“Yes, yes, unbelievable after all the joy, freedom, and prosperity our great leader has brought his people, that anyone could wish to do him harm. But here I have a list of names of 137 individuals who have plotted to remove the Throne from power, thereby destroying Carthage.”

“Cast them to the land below!” cried a woman’s voice from the crowd.

“Every last one of them,” echoed a man.

“Death to traitors!”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"The Chief of Internal Intelligence also informed us this plot was hatched out of...sector four tenement houses two, three, and we shall say...seven."

"Exterminate the vermin!" someone shouted.

"The brilliant Throne and Queen Jocasta have devised an ingenious solution to deal with these treacherous maggots. Who wishes to hear it?"

The crowd cheered.

"I'm not going to tell you." There were many murmurs of disappointment. "Instead..." Minister Lynx continued dramatically, "I'm going to show you." He gave a wild flourish to the window. On cue, three buildings became doused in brilliant light. The dazzling unmistakable glow of bronze emanated not only from every window and door, but even from the walls and rooves, covering every inch of the three select houses as though strung up with a million candles.

Thaddeus gasped in horror along with a few other guests from Tiber. Athena sensed her brother's distress and reached over to grab his hand. Socks eagerly took hold of the other.

"What are they doing?" Thad asked, mortified. "With the lights on...We could go, we could get Achilles and come back—we could help them fight." He looked to his sister imploringly. She said nothing but gave his hand a firm squeeze.

"Why would they do this? There are people in those buildings."

In the distance, small black shapes began to rain down on the three buildings baited with light like a swarm of wasps. Thaddeus swore he could hear the howl of the duskings, however faint, and the screams of their prey. Little by little, the lights flickered off as the duskings harvested the bronze, tearing it out of roof, wall, and lamp.

A number of the flying black shapes did not claw out bronze, but instead ripped from the buildings smaller black specks. These were either torn apart on the spot, or the flying shapes would take off, glide over the edge of the island and drop the somethings off the side into the land below.

"Get them! Get the traitors!" jeered several voices from the crowd.

"Ha! There goes another."

"Did you see that one dropped two off the side?"

"Serves the traitors right. Let them rot in the land below."

While most of the cheering came from the nobility of Carthage, Thaddeus recognized a few voices from Tiber's citizens.

## DUSKLINGS IN THE DARK

“Squash the undesirables,” came the voice of Mr. Scratch.

“Don’t let any of them escape. They are the real beasts, not the dusklings,” called out an elegantly dressed woman. Thaddeus remembered the time he and Athena repaired her peacock at their father’s request. She had always been so kind to them.

Unable to bear any more, he turned away from the window. He seethed inside. Hunched over, he said the first thing that came to his mind.

*“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.”*

A firm hand clasped Thad’s shoulder. “It has been a while since I heard you recite the vile rhyme,” his father said gently, his voice slightly shaking.

Athena stood behind him, biting her lip and glaring out the window. “They’re psychopaths,” she said under her breath.

Ren gently shushed her. “We’re not out of danger yet.”

“We could stop it,” Thad pleaded with his father. “We could get Achilles, ride him back, and fight off the dusklings.”

Ren said nothing. He knelt down, wrapped his arm around Thad, and held him close.

“How does this not infuriate you?” Athena murmured to her father, her eyes darting back to the distant horror, unable to look away.

“Of course it does,” Ren replied. “But right now, I need to focus on finding your mother and getting you home.”

“I don’t understand,” Thaddeus whispered, holding back tears. Socrates placed his forepaw on Thad’s knee. “How can anyone see what’s happening out there and root for the dusklings?”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Hate spreads fast," said Ren. "Far faster than fire. Many may not even know why they hate; they simply do. Perhaps they were told to and they listened. Before they could realize it, they focused all their malice on a group of people they never met."

"I'm beginning to understand the appeal," Athena said, glaring at the cheering crowd.

"Careful daughter," said Ren. "Hatred breeds resentment, contempt, malice. Once it gets its claws in you it never wants to let go."

"Can anything stop it?" asked Thad bleakly.

Ren shook his head. There was a pained look on his face that Thaddeus wasn't used to. "Before Roland was born, Captain Notch came to see me. He wanted to thank me for rallying Tiber together to fight off the dusking blight. He also wanted to thank the pair of you for piloting Achilles. He understood the part you played was important."

"I didn't know that," Thad said, looking up at his father.

"I never told you," said Ren. "I wanted him nowhere near you. In fact, I wanted to take Achilles and grind him into a puddle against the cobblestones. Your mother told me of the men who threatened her when I was presumed dead, of the men who threatened the pair of you. I wanted to end him for what he had done."

"What did you do?" Athena asked.

"The only thing I could think of to ensure I wasn't wholly consumed by my anger." The mob broke into another round of applause. Ren's eyes fell on Dite. "I forgave him."

"Forgave him?" Athena spat. "You forgave him after what he did? He threatened to order his men to push Thaddeus and me off Tiber. He's a monster. What about justice? Shouldn't he pay for what he did?" Her eyes hovered on the Throne.

"I didn't do it for him. I did it for me. My resentment and hatred were poisoning me. It was all I thought of: how could I pay him back, how could I deliver retribution? Day by day it was ruining me, driving me mad. I was stirred into wrath at a moment's notice. I was a slave to my hate. And yet *he* had no idea how much of my thoughts were consumed with the dream of vengeance,

## DUSKLINGS IN THE DARK

punishing him for what he did. My hate was destroying me, yet he remained unaffected.”

“So let him get away with it? That’s your solution?” said Athena.

“I will not be controlled by hate. I can’t afford it...and he’s not worth it. That does not mean I have forgotten, nor will I ever forget. But I am in control, not my rage. At least for now.”

There was another cheer from the crowd. Thad buried his head in his father’s arm, shaking. “What about the dusklings?” he asked. “We fight them. Doesn’t that mean we hate them?”

“Hate them?” Ren repeated. He thought for a moment, deeply considering his son’s question. “I don’t know. In fact, I don’t rightly know what they are. A force of nature? Demons? Monsters that go bump in the night? If they didn’t attack our home would I have reason to fight them?”

“So you don’t hate them?”

Ren took a deep breath. “Every time the dusklings attack you—” He pointed to Thad. “And you—” He pointed to Athena. “And your mother and Roland—”

“And me?” asked Socks.

“Sure, even you, Socks. I know they will destroy each of you if given the chance. So I do not give them that chance. Anyone who gets between me and my family will face my fury.”

“What is the difference between fury and hate?” Athena scoffed.

“The lion protects its cubs with fury. Man murders his rival with hate.”

“Ugh,” Athena groaned. “I hate it when you do that.”

“But Miss Athena,” Socks cut in. “You are not supposed to hate. We learned that a mere moment ago.”

Another hour or so passed and the bell tolled again, signaling the dusklings had retreated. The guests were led back down the ramp as the lights of the palace flickered on.

They entered the main hall of the throne room and discovered Penelope seated at a back table, Roland asleep in her lap. “Where were you? The lights went out and I couldn’t find anyone. I feared the worst...”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Sorry Beloved, everyone was moved to the Starboard Watchtower when the dusklings attacked.”

“Is everyone all right?” Penelope said, scanning the faces of her children. “Any close calls?”

Athena and Thad gave each other a knowing look.

“Many,” Ren cut in. “How was your night?”

“You’re not going to believe this. Mr. Biggs spent the whole time trying to convince me to move to Carthage. Can you believe—of all the cheek.”

“Dite told us that was the plan,” Athena said, unimpressed.

Penelope shot Ren a look.

Ren put his hands in the air. “She told us that after you already left. I assume his offer fell on deaf ears.”

“I would rather be set on fire,” Penelope said.

“Well, Typhoon the chimera will not be able to assist you with that, for sure,” said Socks.

“What?”

“We’ll tell you tomorrow,” said Athena, taking her mother’s arm.

“Very well. If there are no further objections, I would like to leave.”

“No objections here,” said Athena.

“Or here,” said Thaddeus.

“Definitely not,” said Ren.

“Very good. I have had enough parties to last me a lifetime.”

The Burlys pressed towards the cloakroom, where a sizable crowd had already assembled. The neck of Accordion the giraffe bellowed in and out, playing an almost discernible tune. Everyone in line ignored his jovial nature as he handed out their cloaks. The process dragged on for a quarter of an hour before it was finally the Burly’s turn. Ren gave Accordion his name and received his top hat while Athena did the same and collected her cloak.

“Penelope Burly,” Penelope said clearly to Accordion.

“Penelope Burly,” her voice echoed back from inside the giraffe’s mouth. The neck contracted inward, and the head disappeared behind the counter only to reappear a moment later with no cloak.

“Name please,” repeated Accordion.



## DUSKLINGS IN THE DARK

“Penelope Burly.” Her face turned red. Again, Accordion repeated the name and retreated inside the cloakroom, and again, he returned with nothing.

The line behind them began to grow impatient.

“I say, grab your cloak and move along,” came a man’s voice.

“We have our homes to get to,” cried a woman.

“Name please,” repeated Accordion.

“PENELOPE BURLY,” Penelope said, growing in frustration with the giraffe. Roland awoke in her arms.

“Did you leave the cloak in the gardens with Dite’s apprentice?” Athena asked, taking the baby from her mother.

“I didn’t wear the cloak to the gardens. PEN-EL-OH-PEE BUR-LEE!”

“Is something the matter?” A guard in a brass and navy uniform appeared next to them.

“This tonn is daft and won’t give me my cloak.”

“You said your name?”

“Of course I said my name, Penelope Burly.”

“Accordion.” The giraffe’s head turned toward the guard. “Is there a cloak in there belonging to Penelope Burly?”

Accordion shook his head as his bellows wheezed a tune.

“When did you take it out?” the guard asked.

“I didn’t,” snarled Penelope.

“You must have,” said the guard. “Lady Dite’s animatonn will only fetch an item based on the recording of its owner’s voice. No one else can claim your cloak. It is simply impossible.”

“Clearly Lady Dite’s animatonn is malfunctioning!”

“Mrs. Burly.” It was Minister Lynx accompanied by Mr. Scratch. “Will you please come with us? I believe we may be able to resolve this matter.”

The Burlys were escorted back into the hall. A few more uniformed guards, absent from the party, stood at attention along with a half a dozen triders. Minister Lynx showed Penelope to a table where her forest green cloak and her brass bear pin were folded neatly.

“Is this yours?” Minister Lynx asked, pointing to the cloak.

“Yes,” said Penelope with a sigh of relief.

“You’re sure?”

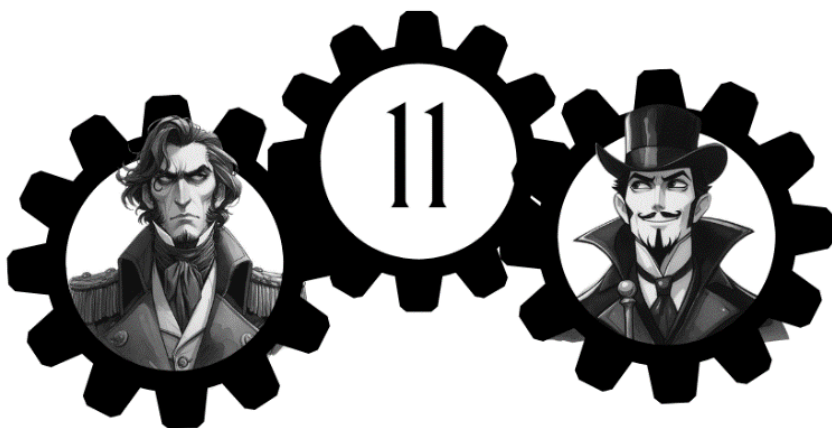
## THE CHILD THRONE

“Yes,” she repeated, picking up the cloak and examining it for damage.

“You are beyond any shadow of doubt that this is yours? This is Penelope Burly’s cloak?”

“Yes, of course it is mine.”

Minister Lynx nodded to the guards. “Penelope Burly, you are under arrest for the murder of Gunther Biggs.”



## THE MERCY OF THE THRONE

What is this?" Penelope cried. "Some kind of sick joke? Mr. Biggs can't be dead. I saw him a few hours ago."

"Gunther Biggs has not been seen since the two of you left the main hall this evening. This cloak was found in the Stern Gardens, or should I say, just outside them." Minister Lynx raised an eyebrow. "It fell from the garden and would have been lost to the land below if it had not snagged on a tree branch that cropped out below the garden's wall. The hummingbirds picked it up while doing a standard patrol. We presume Mr. Biggs must have pulled off the cloak as you pushed him over the garden rail."

"That is preposterous—I didn't even wear my cloak to the gardens."

"So you admit you were in the gardens with Mr. Biggs?"

"Yes, he gave me a tour."

"And this...*tour*—did it become heated in any way?"

"We had a...disagreement, after which I stayed behind in the gardens to nurse Roland and Mr. Biggs returned to the palace. I stayed in the gardens for about another hour until the bell rang, when I returned inside and hid under a table."

"Was anyone in the gardens with you when you had your disagreement?"

## THE CHILD THRONE

"I did not see anyone."

"Which would also mean no one saw you, or what really transpired."

"I do not like what you are implying."

"Nor do I." Ren stepped forward, voice rumbling like thunder. "Minister Lynx, give my wife back her cloak. We are leaving."

"I'm afraid you cannot. This is evidence that needs to be presented to the Throne."

"Then keep the cloak. We're still leaving."

"Mrs. Burly may not go with you."

"Break my bronze, she can't," Ren snapped. "If you think I am going to allow you to accuse my wife of murder simply because you have her cloak—"

"This is not the only evidence we have. There is a recording."

"You're lying," Ren said, his teeth and fists clenched.

"I care not if you believe my evidence, but Mrs. Burly will not leave the palace until she is tried by the Throne."

Very few times in his life had Thaddeus seen his father's full temper, but at that moment Thad was sure he wanted to snap Minister Lynx's neck.

"She is a citizen of Tiber," said Ren. "You have no right—"

"As the Governor's appointed deputy of foreign relations, I will have to disagree with you, Mr. Burly. Murder is a very serious charge, a charge that must be dealt with by the jurisdiction in which it took place. Tiber cannot afford to harbor murderers. In order to maintain peaceful relations, this needs to be dealt with here."

"I couldn't agree more, Mr. Scratch," added Minister Lynx. "Guards, notify the Throne."

The guards returned with both the Throne and Queen Jocasta in tow.

"What in my name is happening here? I was about to—wait, hold on. Thrones don't sleep—I wasn't sleeping. I was about to take a break, you know. Rest a bit. That's what I meant to say. Rest."

"One of your loyal subjects, O great Throne, has been murdered," said Minister Lynx.

"Murdered?" cried the Throne. "Was it anyone important?"

"Of course, you believe all your subjects are important," Queen Jocasta added.

## THE MERCY OF THE THRONE

“Yes, yes, of course, they are all my children or whatever. Was it anyone who mattered?”

“It was Mr. Gunther Biggs,” said Minister Lynx.

“Who?” asked the Throne.

“The apprentice you appointed to Lady Dite,” said Queen Jocasta.

“You woke me up because of him?”

“No, Your Excellency, we wished to inform you that we have already caught the murderer.”

“Magnificent, who is he? I can come up with a really wicked punishment.”

“Mrs. Penelope Burly.”

“Her? The mother lady?” the Throne scoffed.

“Surely this must be some kind of mistake,” said the queen.

“It is no mistake. We have a recording of the entire incident,” said Minister Lynx.

The queen snapped her fingers and at once hummingbirds descended from the ceiling and circled about her hand. “Fetch Lady Dite, as these are her guests, and the victim was her apprentice. She ought to be involved.”

A few minutes later, Lady Dite waltzed into the hall. “What in the land below is going on? What are the Burlys still doing here?”

“Minister Lynx has accused Mrs. Burly of murdering your apprentice,” explained the queen.

“That is absurd. Did she burp the baby before she did him in? There is no way she is capable of murder. Unless it was me.” Dite burst out laughing. “That’s a joke,” she added as Minister Lynx began to motion the guards.

“I will say it again: reserve your judgment until you hear the recording.”

“Fine, Lynx, play the recording, then we can all get to bed,” Dite scoffed.

“Very well.” Mr. Lynx snapped his fingers. “Please fetch me humming 142.” The birds whizzed away and a moment later were replaced by a single teal bird with royal blue wings.

“Those hummingbirds have been recording us this entire evening?” Athena gasped, trying to think back over what she had said since arriving at the palace.

“Yes, of course. Why do you think we use so many?” Minister Lynx said with a grin. He gestured to the bird floating in front of his face. “Repeat the recording of Mrs. Penelope Burly and Mr. Gunther Biggs in the Stern Gardens.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

The room fell silent except for the little bird flitting about, then from some invisible speaker inside the tiny animatonn came what sounded like the scratch of a record. A baby was crying. Roland sat up in Athena's arms, taking notice of his own cry. Then, as clear as day, Penelope's voice rang out:

*"Shh, shh. There, there, Ro-Ro."*

*"But if you will only consider the offer. The Throne is more than generous."*

It was definitely Gunther's voice.

*"Move here, are you daft?"*

*"Mrs. Burlly, please do not jump to rash judgment—"*

*"You and Dite have mutilated that boy. He will never again stand on his own legs because of you and your cowardice. Where is your honor? Where are your ethics? DONO HARM. Does that mean nothing to you, Mr. Biggs?"*

*"For the last time, Mrs. Burlly. The Throne is not a boy. He is the Throne."*

*"He is no more a throne than he is a carpet, a bathtub, or a cloud. He is a boy, just like little Roland here. Shh, shh—it's all right. You have robbed him of something he will never get back. It makes me sick. To the land below with both of you."*

*"Mrs. Burlly, please—"*

*"DONOT TOUCH ME, YOU DISGUSTING SHELL OF A MAN."*

*"What? WHAT ARE YOU—NO, NOOOOOooooooooo."*

Gunther's last cry was unmistakable. No static, no interference, no other sound, only his voice trailing farther and farther away. Over his lifetime, Ren had become accustomed to the sound of bodies falling to the land below, the screams fading quickly as they plunged down at a desperate speed, making it nearly impossible to replicate. This was the real deal. Gunther had fallen.

Everyone remained silent. Tears were streaming down Penelope's face. "That's not what happened. I don't know how you got that recording, but that isn't what happened."

"Was that not your voice?" asked Minister Lynx.

"Yes it was."

"Did you not say those things?"

Penelope paused. "Yes I did."

## THE MERCY OF THE THRONE

“According to your own words, you denounced Gunther and Dite for what they did to the Throne. *To the land below with both of you.* And then you pushed him.”

“I didn’t.”

“We heard it as clear as day.”

“That isn’t what happened!”

“It was recorded.”

“Enough!” cried the Throne. “The woman is clearly guilty. Have Typhoon throw her off the side and let’s be done with it.”

“Typhoon was destroyed this evening,” Queen Jocasta reminded her son.

“Oh, that’s right. Well, have the triders throw her off then. I don’t care.”

Queen Jocasta caught Dite’s eye. “O great Throne, I have a humble request,” Dite said in a dignified voice.

“What is it now?”

“As the Burlys are from Tiber—they, uh—they are not used to our methods of justice. Perhaps it would be prudent to give them time to build a defense,” Dite stammered.

“Why would I do that? The recording is clear.”

She turned to Mr. Scratch. “Mr. Scratch, is that not more or less how things are done on Tiber? Those accused have *time* to mount a defense before their sentence is carried out?”

“It is, Lady Dite. However, as the Governor’s appointed deputy of foreign relations, I have already—”

“That is all, Mr. Scratch,” said Lady Dite. “Out of, er, good will toward our new neighbors from Tiber, we should allow them an allotted amount of time to argue their case.”

“This would likely make Athena happy,” Queen Jocasta said, patting her son on the shoulder.

The Throne looked at Athena with an obnoxious smirk. “Would this make you happy, Athena?”

Athena bit her tongue, then thought of her mother. How much time would it take to prove her innocence? “Yes, O Throne, it would make me very happy.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Very good,” sneered the Throne. “I declare you shall have one day. In 24 hours’ time you shall present your evidence and then we shall throw your mother to the land below.”

“What shall be done with Mrs. Burly in the meantime? Surely, she must be detained,” said Minister Lynx.

“Why not lock her in your dungeon?” asked Mr. Scratch.

“We have no dungeon, for we very rarely have any crime,” replied Minister Lynx.

“Mrs. Burly will be placed in a royal suite, locked in of course. It shall be the most comfortable jail cell imaginable,” Queen Jocasta added with a smile.

“Do you think that wise, my queen?” asked Minister Lynx.

“I do not believe she is a threat to anyone in the palace, whether she is guilty or not.”

“Very well, I declare it all so, so it all shall be. Now I’m going to sleep—I, er—mean rest,” said the Throne, and his legs clanked away.

“Guards, be so kind as to escort Mrs. Burly up to the royal guest rooms. I believe it is time for all of us to turn in,” Queen Jocasta said, gesturing to Penelope.

“Right you are, my queen,” said Dite, rapidly approaching Ren and grabbing him by the arm. “Ren, may I have a word?” She pulled him out of the main hall and the children followed in hot pursuit.

Roland reached out over Athena’s shoulder toward his mother as she disappeared. “Mummum, mummum,” he cried out.

“What are you doing?” Ren growled. “They are taking Penelope away.”

“I know, and that is the last place you should be. If you pull any gallant theatrics right now, you might as well join Penelope on her way to the land below.”

“Mummum? Mummum?” Roland called again. He didn’t understand why his mother wouldn’t come.

“Well then, what is the plan?” Ren asked.

“Get you home. Worry about Penelope in the morning.”

“I can’t do that.”

“You have to do that.”

“Penelope needs me.”

“Your children need you.”



## THE MERCY OF THE THRONE

Tired and emotionally drained, Ren could not think of a response. The gears refused to turn.

"We will take a carriage back to your place, you will get some rest, then think of a plan to save Penelope tomorrow," said Dite.

"Fine," Ren growled. A servant summoned a trider carriage and they stepped inside.

"To Tiber, the Burly residence," Dite called out the window before taking a seat next to Athena.

It was either very late or very early. Darkness and starlight veiled the city streets. As they journeyed down the road, no fanfare greeted them. No one held chairs above their heads or sang in chorus. Roland cried out for Penelope for a few minutes and then fell asleep in Ren's arms. Ren stared down at his son and brushed his hair with his hand.

"What happens if we cannot prove Mother's innocence?" Athena asked.

"We will," said Ren. He kept his eyes on his sleeping son.

Athena bit her lip. "What happens if she isn't innocent?" Ren did not respond.

Thad looked from his sister to his father. "Of course she's innocent. She has to be."

"It doesn't matter," Dite sighed. "We have two days to come up with a good enough distraction. If the Throne is focused on something other than Penelope—"

"No, Thad's right," Ren said. "She's innocent and we need to prove it."

"The Throne doesn't care about proof. We need a distraction; we need to find the next big thing," Dite said.

"What's the Throne's real name?" Thad asked. "He wasn't born *the Throne*, was he?"

"I can't tell you that," said Dite. "He doesn't like anything or anyone bringing attention to who he was before the Throne."

"He's insane," said Athena. "He thinks he is an actual chair, and you can't tell him he's not because...he's insane. Whoever thought it would be a good idea to give him any type of authority?"

"Believe what you like," said Dite.

"You don't think he's insane?" Athena asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Dite sighed. “There’s this old rule in Carthage’s bylaws about farmers’ property rights. It basically says that the Throne has the final say in any disputes. Historically, everyone thought it meant the king would decide whether to plant carrots or cauliflower or something. But then the Throne took it literally and decided that everything was a dispute. That’s how he made his rulings into laws. Nobody *can* challenge him, so no one does challenge him.”

“Why do you work for that...chair?” Athena asked. “As a tonn smith couldn’t you work wherever you want?”

“Perhaps, if I wanted to work for myself. But by working for the queen and Throne of Carthage I get privileges I couldn’t get on my own.”

“What is that?” asked Thad.

“Power, prestige, and fame. Your father spends most of his time in a workshop, whereas I spend my time in a palace. Putting up with the Throne is a small price to pay for that.”

Athena never considered this before. She had only ever known Father’s workshop, never even thinking about other possibilities.

Commotion sounded from outside the carriage. Thaddeus peered out the windows. To his surprise, he saw two towering buildings ablaze in orange flame. A crowd of bystanders chucked torches and flaming bottles of liquid at the buildings.

“What are they doing?” Thad asked in horror.

“Destroying the traitors,” said Dite. “These are two of the tenement houses the dusklings attacked. To show loyalty to the Throne, the commoners will purge themselves of the traitors. Tomorrow I will have the triders remove the debris and in a few weeks a new tenement house will take its place.”

“There could be people in that building,” Thaddeus said, watching the flames.

“Doubtful,” Dite said with a yawn. “Dusklings typically don’t leave unarmed survivors.”

Eventually the flaming buildings disappeared from view. In another quarter of an hour they arrived at their home. Argus howled in delight as the Burlys exited the carriage, but as the carriage door shut and Penelope was not among them, the wolf’s tail stopped wagging. He continued to glance back and forth for his missing mistress.

## THE MERCY OF THE THRONE

“I shall tell Argus,” said Socrates. “He will take the news best coming from me.”

“Are you leaving?” Athena asked Dite.

“I am, but I was thinking I’d come back in the morning after a few hours of rest. Then we could all put our heads together to come up with a plan to save Penelope. That is, if that’s all right with you, Ren?”

Ren said nothing but gave a faint nod as he carried a sleeping Roland into the house. Athena and Thaddeus followed.

Argus howled at the stars mournfully.



## HATCHING A PLAN

Thaddeus woke up to an empty house the following morning. “Morning bells!” he said, coming downstairs into the kitchen. No one was there.

*Father and Athena must already be in the workshop formulating a plan,* he thought to himself. He grabbed an apple out of the basket on the table and filled a mug with tea before heading outside.

No doubt Athena and his father were in the workshop, for as soon as Thad opened the front door he could hear the two of them shouting at the top of their lungs.

Argus was following Roland, who was crawling around on the floor. Before baby Burly could grab hold of something sharp or dangerous, the tungsten wolf would lift the crawling child up by his suspenders and carry him to a different part of the workshop, gently placing him down on the floor and beginning the process all over again.

“Mother wouldn’t want you to kill yourself!” Athena shouted, slamming the socket wrench toolbox onto the workbench. Beowulf the bear sat upright on the bench like a patient being examined by a doctor. His left leg lay detached

## HATCHING A PLAN

next to him, Socrates happily holding the paw. Vox, as always, lay curled at Athena's feet.

"She's not here, Athena," Ren growled. "I have to make the call. And there is no way I am going to let her fate be decided by a boy who thinks he's a chair."

"They have an army of those three-legged spiders and who knows what else th—"

"I don't care what they have. Nothing, and I mean nothing, will keep me from your mother. Anything that gets in my way—"

"You'll what? Will you *kill* to get Mother back? Will you kill the palace guard? Will you kill the Throne?"

"FINISH FIXING BEOWULF!"

"I AM FIXING BEOWULF!"

"Buster is still a better name," Thad said, trying to diffuse the situation.

"THAT'S NOT HIS NAME!" Athena shouted at him. Then back to her father, she said, "Answer the question. Would you kill to get Mother back?"

"WITHOUT A SECOND THOUGHT." His children and every animatonn went silent. Realizing what he said, Ren took a seat. He rubbed his forehead with his hand. Then in a calmer voice, he muttered, "I can't do this without your mother."

"Do what?" asked Thad.

"This!" Ren waved his arm around. "She is my better half. She is the light to my bronze. I'm a father because she is your mother. I am a husband because she is my wife. She is what I live for. With her I can face anything, without her...I-I can't." Ren breathed in through clenched teeth. "So yes, if someone stands in my way of saving your mother, I will kill them."

"I thought you weren't going to be controlled by hate," Athena responded.

Ren clenched his fists and took a deep breath, prepping to let out a tirade. But he closed his mouth, bit his tongue, shut his eyes, and sank to the floor. His head craned up to the ceiling. After a few moments, he finally said, "I hate it when you do that." Ren motioned to Athena with his hand. "Come here."

Athena shuffled over to her father and he grabbed her hand tightly. Ren pressed it to his forehead. Thaddeus picked up Roland out of Argus's mouth and began to pat him on the back. His eyes remained fixed on his father slumped on the floor.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Am I interrupting?" Dite appeared at the entrance to the workshop, a basket full of pastries in her arms. "I brought breakfast."

They cleared a table and Dite set the basket down. It was full of confectionery treasures like puff pastries, fried dough with cinnamon and honey, cherry tarts, and to Athena's delight, chocolate croissants.

"Has a plan been hatched or is it still incubating?" Dite asked, helping herself to a cream puff the size of an apple.

"We have a rough outline," Ren said.

"You're not still considering it," said Athena, grabbing a second chocolate croissant.

"It is the most surefire way to get your mother out," said Ren.

"What is?" Dite asked, interested.

"In short, storm the palace using Achilles."

Dite coughed on her cream puff. "That—that's a terrible plan."

"We get Penelope out. We leave."

Dite shook her head. "That would be an act of war."

"Yeah, I thought of that. We would have to leave Tiber too. Take the family skiff and sail off into the unknown."

"Even if you're able to, you would first need to get into the palace. Kundry is well fortified with many protections. I know, I helped build many of them. Triders, the palace guards, citizens whipped into a frenzy—with a hundred men and two hundred tons, your plan would still fail. Nothing you have ever built would be able to accomplish this."

"Achilles could."

"I—I don't think I can," Thaddeus said. "Fighting dusklings is one thing, but I don't think I could destroy people."

Ren grabbed his son's shoulder. "That would be far too much for me to ask of you. It is *my* responsibility to save your mother. Not yours. I'm going to pilot Achilles."

"But you don't fit," said Thaddeus, concerned.

"I will jerry-rig the seating."

"Did you hear what I just said? I don't care how good your Achilles is, you won't be able to charge in like a knight in shining armor and rescue the princess. It's suicide."

## HATCHING A PLAN

"That's what I've been saying," Athena said. "Finally, someone whose gears are aligned."

"I have given Penelope's predicament a lot of thought. I may have a solution, however, it is a tad unorthodox," Dite said.

"Well, let's hear it," said Ren.

"Utility is very important to the Throne. I have knowledge and skills no one else on Carthage has, therefore, I have made myself invaluable. Penelope has knowledge and skills that are unrivaled. I am sure I could convince the queen and thereby convince the Throne to not...dispose of her...if Penelope became an asset to the people of Carthage."

"What would that require?" Ren asked.

Dite gave a long pause. "You would all move to Carthage. The Throne would have first choice over Penelope's light."

"That is really stupid," said Thad. "I think Mother would legitimately rather die."

"Yeah," said Athena. "I like the Achilles plan better."

"All right, I'll bite. What is Achilles?" Dite asked.

"I'll show you," Athena said, leaping out of her seat.

She led Dite behind the workshop. The great stone rex motionlessly slumbered in front of them.

Dite ran her hand across the ancient animatonn. The stones were cool to the touch. "How...?" she marveled. "How is this possible?"

"We didn't build him," said Athena. "We found him."

"Where?"

"The land below."

Dite turned to Athena and took her in as if for the first time. "You went to the land below?"

Athena nodded.

"How does it not burn through its bronze in an instant?"

"It uses gold."

Dite snorted a laugh. "Your brother mentioned that when we first met. I chalked it up to him being an ignorant child."

"He is."

## THE CHILD THRONE

"I thought all the golden age tonns were accounted for or lost after the silver age. What I could do with one of these...How does it work?"

Athena strolled over to the head and pulled herself into the eye socket. "We took out its automotion relay so it couldn't move on its own accord, and then I rigged a pilot mechanism so we could steer him manually. We also attached wings to him so he could fly, but those broke off when we landed back on the island."

"You did these modifications while you were in the land below?"

Athena nodded again. "It wasn't too difficult. The core is oversized." She pointed to where a real rex's brain would be. "Each connector does a single function. You could press each one with a screwdriver because they are so big."

Dite shook her head. "You really are an incredible animatonn smith. At your age, I didn't know what an automotion relay was."

Athena crawled out of the stone skull.

"You know," Dite said after a moment. "I find myself currently lacking an apprentice. If we can get this debacle with your mother sorted out, I don't know if you'd be interested."

"Seriously?" Athena asked excitedly.

Dite nodded.

Athena frowned and then shook her head. "I'd better not."

"You don't want to work with me?"

"It's not that. I'd love to work with you. I don't want to deal with Chair-Boy."

"You know, I got the feeling he likes you."

"Hence why I don't want to deal with him."

The ladies returned to the front of the workshop. Thad emerged triumphantly holding the socket wrench above his head like a sword. "I have repaired Buster." The bear lumbered out behind him giving an affectionate growl.

"Beowulf," Athena corrected.

"More importantly, we have come up with the bones of a plan," said Ren, Roland cradled in his arm.

"Baa-baa!" Roland shouted at Beowulf.

"Hopefully better than the last one," said Dite.

"We are going to find the body of Gunther," said Thad.



## HATCHING A PLAN

“What good will that do?” asked Athena.

“Your mother said Gunther returned to the palace, therefore he must have fallen from the palace, not the gardens. If we find where the body landed and compare it against the star charts, then we can calculate exactly where he fell from,” said Ren.

“We are going to use math to save Mother,” Thad said proudly.

“What happens if we can’t get the star chart, or can’t find the body?” Athena asked.

“Then it doesn’t work,” said Ren.

“What happens if we calculate it and it turns out he fell from the gardens?”

“Then it doesn’t work.”

“Seems like there are a lot of holes in this plan,” Athena said loudly.

“It’s the only one we have.”

“Ath, this beats charging in there and starting a war,” said Thaddeus.

“I agree with your brother; it’s better than the alternative,” Dite said. “I will go back to Carthage to see if there is any other evidence I can dig up on my end. Godspeed to you Burlys.”

“Thank you for your help,” Athena said politely.

“Yeah, thanks for breakfast,” Thad added.

Ren nodded.

Dite boarded the carriage and a moment later it clanked away, pulled by a dozen triders.

“How do we get the star charts?” Thad asked.

“Simple. I have an in with the stargazer.”

“How’s that?” asked Athena.

“I built him.”



## THE SPINSTRESS & THE QUEEN

Penelope stood on the edge of the balcony gazing longingly at the courtyard below. She sighed deeply before returning to her room. She couldn't disagree with the queen; her prison was the most elegant room she had ever stayed in, over three times the size of her kitchen, much less her bedroom. It had a four-poster bed with satin hangings and the finest down mattress Penelope had ever laid upon, adorned with silk sheets and pillows the size of Argus. Seven mirrors hung about the room. A basket of ripe fruit and cheeses wrapped in wax paper was placed on an end table. A marble bathroom was affixed to the suite, containing a tub the size of a small pool with at least a dozen warm jets that massaged the skin.

If it weren't a prison, it would have been the most luxurious stay of Penelope's life.

There was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" Penelope asked.

"Queen Mother Jocasta of Carthage," cried a voice that Penelope assumed belonged to a guard.

## THE SPINSTRESS & THE QUEEN

“Umm, enter?” Penelope replied, unsure of the proper etiquette to use when a prisoner welcomed a queen.

The door unlocked and swung open. Queen Jocasta smiled brightly. She gave Penelope a slight bow, her hands folded and her demeanor like honey. “May I come in?” she asked.

“This is your prison,” said Penelope.

“Oh pish posh, we don’t have prisons here in Carthage,” she said as she entered the room. “I would like to think of you as a guest with an extended stay.”

“You’re too kind,” said Penelope suspiciously.

The queen turned to the guard. “You may leave us.”

“But Your Grace, she is—”

“I am very well aware of who Penelope Burly is, and I am confident I am in no danger. Leave us.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” The guard bowed and marched down the hall.

“You’re not going to try and kill me, are you?” the queen said, turning back to Penelope. “That would be very embarrassing given what I told the guard.”

“Honestly, that was my plan,” said Penelope. “But as it would cause you embarrassment, I suppose I shall rethink it.”

The queen laughed. “I admire the wit. It’s not often that I receive anything other than groveling and whimpering. This is a nice change of pace.” She strode over to the open balcony and peered at the ground below. “Have you thought about escaping? It is a rather long way down. If you tied all the sheets together I doubt you would get a quarter of the way.”

“I considered it, but my climbing skills are a bit rusty.”

The queen reentered the room, pulled out a chair and seated herself. She looked directly at Penelope. “I’m glad we didn’t cast you into the land below.”

“I suppose—so am I,” Penelope said with some hesitation.

“I’m also glad you did not jump out of despair. Minister Lynx thought you might after what transpired last night.”

“I didn’t kill Gunther Biggs.”

“Truth be told, I don’t care,” said the queen, absentmindedly fidgeting with her long purple gloves.

“Then why are you here?”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"I wanted to talk to you as one mother to another. It must be very hard for you to be separated from your children. Not being there to protect them, nurture them."

"They have Ren. They have each other."

"Yes, but you and I know a mother's love is something special. No one else truly loves the way we do. As mothers we want—no, we *need* to give our children the best. I *need* to give my child the best. And your light, Penelope Burly, *is* the best."

Penelope sat down. She felt as though the air had become as heavy as granite. "You think I murdered Mr. Biggs, but that doesn't matter to you if I spin your son bronze."

"He *needs* light. The best light. The Throne is dependent on it."

"Only because you cut off his legs," Penelope said.

"Those were not *his* legs. He is the Throne," insisted the queen. "I knew it since he was born. He is special, different from everyone else. What would you do if you saw your child suffering? Leave him trapped in a prison of his own body? What I did was a mercy. I gave him the ability to be who he was on the inside."

"By removing parts of his outside."

"Now you see, if it were the king here instead of me, he would have had your tongue plucked out for a statement like that."

"What happened to Darius Sphinx?"

"King Darius couldn't accept the Throne's truth. He was determined to keep the Throne trapped as a boy. I couldn't let that stand. A mother will do anything for her son's happiness." Queen Jocasta's eyes dilated like a cat's and fixated on Penelope.

"You overthrew him."

"Overthrew? No, of course not. That is so crass. Every evening the king would indulge in a glass of red wine. I told him it would be the death of him... and I was right."

"All so you could turn your son into *that thing*?"

"He wasn't happy as a boy. He *is* happy as the Throne. All I want is for my child to be happy. Isn't that what we are supposed to do as parents, make our children happy?"

## THE SPINSTRESS & THE QUEEN

“No! As parents, our job frequently demands we make our children miserable. Teach them responsibility, teach them to overcome challenges, control their emotions and impulses. As parents, we have to say *no*. How else can we prepare them to face whatever the world throws at them?”

“How cruel. Throw them to the wolves. Is that your solution?” Jocasta’s brow hardened. “The world is not safe. We must be creative, find new ways to protect them from it.”

“The wolves are at the door. Do you want your child cowering in a corner, or armed and ready to act?”

“I cannot believe what I am hearing. A mother who cares nothing of her children’s safety or for their feelings. I am disgusted to my core. What kind of mother are you?”

“A mother who is not afraid of reality. To fulfill my role I need to ensure that one day my children won’t need me.”

“My son will always need me.”

“That’s not true.”

“Truth is determined by those in power. I have the power, therefore I decide what is true.”

“Call a fish a bird, but it will never fly. No one determines truth, but sooner or later we all face it. We cannot overturn reality.”

“Watch me. You may be fine with your children suffering, with your children having a life of pain and misery. I am not. My son shall be cared for, he shall be safe, he shall want for nothing. If the world gets in my way, I shall reshape it.”

“How will you reshape the world when you can’t even convince me to give you my light?”

“We still have time, Penelope Burly. We still have time.”



## THE SONG OF THE WAYFINDER

The Burlys arrived at Helmsman Row, the farthest port of the Portside District, two hours before midday. Their destination was the Wayfinder's Observatory, situated at the highest point in Tiber. Following a winding path through a thin grove of apple trees, they ascended to the hilltop where the observatory was located. This elevated spot provided an ideal location for an unobstructed view of the heavens, and the Wayfinder's strange eccentricities.

"I think I got it," said Thad, marching up the hill behind his father as Socrates pranced alongside.

"You probably don't," said Athena, playing fetch with Vox as they walked along. The stick hadn't hit the ground once.

Argus shook his head at the copper fox's exuberant jumps and flourishes. The old wolf, a protector, did not approve of the young fox showing off. Every few steps he twisted back his head to check on his rider.

"Ock-ock," Roland laughed, squealing with delight as Vox snatched the stick from midair. Roland was secured on Argus's back in what Athena dubbed "wagon mode." Thaddeus was itching to call it "pony mode," but with Argus being a wolf, Athena shut that down quickly.

## THE SONG OF THE WAYFINDER

"The Wayfinder will make us a star chart," Thad said.

"The stargazer makes the star charts," Athena corrected.

"What does the Wayfinder do?"

"He uses the stargazer to make the star charts," said Ren.

"So, we need the Wayfinder..." said Thad.

"We need the stargazer," corrected Athena.

"Then why are we going to the Wayfinder?"

"For the star charts."

"I'm confused again."

"It is quite simple, for sure," chirped Socks. "We must find the Wayfinder to show us the *way* to the stargazer, who will gaze at the stars to make a map so we can find the corpse of Gun-there Bigs."

"That actually wasn't terrible." Athena threw the stick extra hard.

"The Wayfinder is an old friend. His job is to make sure we don't run into a mountain," Ren said.

"Or another island?" asked Thad.

"Or another island," Ren repeated. "He accomplishes this feat by the help of the stargazer, an animatonn in charge of creating and printing star charts. These then get presented to the navigator to follow."

"So, did the Wayfinder mess up, or was it the stargazer?" asked Athena.

"It could have been both, or neither. We still don't know why the islands collided. I will say, our Wayfinder is very good at what he does."

"Indeed, and the animatonn?" asked Socks.

"Almost as perfect as you, Socks."

They reached the top of the hill. A small, tidy garden encircled the observatory.

"Does the Wayfinder live here?" Athena asked, eyeing neat vines of yellow and green tomatoes.

"He does, and he takes his job very seriously."

Ren pounded on an iron door that was salvaged from some deep sea wreck. A loud *BANG* rattled inside of the observatory. A blazing blue eye appeared in the door's porthole window. Just as quickly as it appeared, it vanished.

Undeterred, Ren knocked again. "Open up, Jack, we need to talk."

## THE CHILD THRONE

The door creaked open and after a good few seconds a head popped out from behind it. “Who is it?” the man said, staring directly at Ren. He had a fair complexion, ruby red cheeks, and a mess of a white beard that fell to his chest.

“Ren Burly.”

The man lunged from behind the door. Quickly grabbing Ren’s face and whiskers he proceeded to pinch and prod as if he expected to peel away a mask. His eyes bulged unblinking from his head. He wore a yellow fisherman’s jacket with a white undershirt and navy blue pants with sandals. As he grabbed Ren’s face he hummed some sort of sea shanty.

*Steady the stern and veer the prow,  
The skiff skims off the sea of cloud.  
Should he not return by three days’ dawn,  
My lad, consider your father’s gone.*

“Thaddeus, Athena, this is Wayfinder Jack Morton.”

The Wayfinder paid no attention to them but continued to sing. To the children’s surprise their father joined in. Together they sang:

*Son, son, man up, me son,  
Night is gone, and a new day’s come.  
You fight the battle. It can’t be won.  
Yo-ho, my son, yo-ho.*

“What are they doing?” asked Thad.

“I don’t know,” sighed Athena. “Singing off key?”

“Just making sure it’s you,” Jack said, looking up Ren’s nose.

“Who else would it be?” Ren asked.

“Don’t know, hence the precaution.” He let go of Ren’s face then proceeded back into the observatory. After another few seconds his voice echoed from within. “Ahoy, you coming aboard or not?”

They crossed through a small cluttered parlor into the observatory proper. An enormous cylinder-shaped room led up to a magnificent dome. A massive telescope stood in the center of the room, towering over everything like a giant oak in a forest of saplings. Hundreds of shelves lined the walls, each packed full



## THE SONG OF THE WAYFINDER

of scrolls of parchment. A small kitchen, shower and cot rested on the north side of the room. A workbench, reading chair, and library of astronomy books made up the other.

“Tea? I have a kettle on.” Jack walked over to his cast iron stove and grabbed the steaming kettle. He blew dust out of three mismatched teacups and handed one to each of his guests.

“Jack, I need a star chart. I might need a few,” said Ren as Jack filled up his cup with piping greenish brown liquid.

Jack didn’t respond but continued singing his sea shanty.

*We fish in the deep but we do not row,  
For darkness rises from the land below.  
When dusklings come you cannot go,  
My son, your father’s gone.*

“Why does this tea smell like mushrooms?” Athena asked.

“I add ‘em—make sure the brain doesn’t rot,” he said, filling up Thaddeus’s cup. “I bet you think “T” is the only letter you can drink?”

“Huh? Oh, I guess,” said Thad.

Jack gave them a broad grin. “Nope, there’s another one.”

Thaddeus began cycling through the alphabet in his head, “I don’t understand—what other letter can you drink? Can you drink J?”

Jack fell silent, grinning wide-eyed over his own mug.

“Jack, the star chart,” said Ren.

“Yes, yes, take your pick. What are you looking for? Wanna paint the stars as they appeared on the day you were born? That used to be a popular gift back in the day.”

“Something a little more recent.”

“More recent, you say?”

“I got it!” Thad exclaimed.

Everyone stared at him.

“I got the joke.” He snorted a laugh. “That’s gross.”

Ren continued. “Aye. Tiber’s position last night. I would also take Carthage too, if you have it.”

“How would he have Carthage?” Athena asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"It is customary for islands to share plotted routes so that way we can have meetups and avoid crashes. Copernicus should have a few weeks of Carthage's route recorded."

There was a sound of shattered porcelain. Jack Morton dropped his cup and ambled over to the kitchen singing:

*Son, son, wise up, me son,  
Night is gone, and a new day's come.  
You fight the battle. It can't be won.  
Yo-ho, my son, yo-ho.*

He grabbed a broom and dustpan and swept up the mess, not looking at any of the Burlys.

"Jack, if you are busy, let me grab 'em and I'll get out of your hair."

"I can't do last night's star chart," he said.

"Can I have the night before last?"

"Can't do that one either."

"What about the night before that one?"

Jack shook his head. "Star charts for the past five days have been—uh—misplaced."

"Can you have Copernicus print some new ones?"

"Negative."

"Why not?"

Jack shook his head. "I can't tell you. He said I'd lose my position if I told anyone. How about another drink?"

"Does this have to do with the crash?" asked Athena eagerly.

Jack sang louder.

*My thoughts are of you and your mother dear,  
When the hull was breached and we lost the beer,  
But we held the whiskey so you need not fear,  
My lad, your father's gone.*

"Jack, I *need* the star charts. Can you give me ten minutes with Copernicus?"

## THE SONG OF THE WAYFINDER

Jack stopped singing. “Cappy’s not here. He gots’ taken along with the charts.

“Of all the brash—who has the authority to take the stargazer away from the Wayfinder?

“You won’t wanna cross ‘em Ren.”

“Try me.”

“It was the hoity-toity appointed deputy of foreign relations: Lucian Scratch.”

*Son, son, drink up, me son,  
Night is gone, and a new day’s come.  
You fight the battle. It can’t be won.  
Yo-ho, my son, yo-ho.*



## THE STARGAZER

The Foremast district was known as the most affluent area of Tiber, a neighborhood where the wealthiest citizens lived. Among them, the cream of the crop resided on Forecastle Crescent, a grand lane adorned with mansion after mansion. It was home to some of the most powerful figures on the island, including the governor's mansion, the estate of prominent copper tycoon Brock Harrison, and a limestone chateau belonging to a wealthy merchant navarch who owned one-third of the island's skyships. At the far end of the crescent stood the newly acquired home of Lucian Scratch.

The Victorian style three-story mansion, which had been purchased two weeks prior, featured a central mid-spire, and required the services of a full staff. A bit of gossip had arisen around the acquisition, and how the governor's appointed deputy of foreign relations came by such a windfall. But, as he was also the governor's cousin, most opted to leave the topic alone.

"I'm not sure about this plan," said Ren apprehensively.

"It's a great plan," said Thad.

"Gaa-pa," Roland repeated, harnessed to a canvas carrier on Thad's chest.

"You're saying that because it's your plan," said Athena.

## THE STARGAZER

"Doesn't make it any less great. Classic misdirection. All eyes will be on me and Ro-Ro while you rescue Copernicus."

"But it requires you to confront Mr. Scratch. What happens if you can't keep his attention?" asked Athena.

"Oh, we will keep his attention," Thaddeus said mischievously. He handed Roland to Argus and hopped into Achilles's eye socket. The wolf trailed behind him as they entered the gigantic skull of the rex, scrambling up and over the teeth and stone until he emerged through the empty socket of the other eye. His head poked out like a happy dog enjoying the breeze from a carriage window.

"Shouldn't Roland be with Father and I?" Athena insisted.

"And what happens if he cries when you are trying to be all sneaky-like?"

Athena shook her head and looked to her father. "Last chance to stop it."

"My gears are stuck. I can't think of any other solution," said Ren. "Be careful Thad."

"You too," Thad said. He flipped the lever. Achilles stood up, rising several stories high. Roland laughed in delight from Argus's back. "I'm not the one breaking the law, after all."

"We are retrieving stolen property," Ren corrected his son.

"By stealing it, for sure," Socrates added cheerfully. "A merry band of burglars."

"Ath, what are we looking at?" Thad called down to his sister. Normally she would be in the skull with him, navigating which way to go.

"Thirty-five strides forward, and veer to the right on the last three. That should put you right in front of his house."

"Thirty-five, veer right on thirty-two."

"Godspeed, Thad."

"Godspeed, Ath."

With island-shaking footsteps, the great stone behemoth lumbered toward the mansion of Mr. Scratch.

"Now it's our turn." Ren placed his hand on his daughter's shoulder.

A thick treeline separated Forecastle Crescent from the rest of the Foremast district. Decades ago, the residents of Forecastle Crescent transplanted hundreds of trees to craft a natural barrier that would obscure the lesser residents of Tiber from view.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Ren, Athena, Socks, Vox, and Beowulf made their way as quickly and quietly as they could to the thick grove of trees. They edged their way through the wood and up to the rear of Mr. Scratch's mansion. An overgrown hedge framed the unkempt garden. Wild hydrangea gave off a rich smell akin to vanilla mixed with honey. Ren and Athena peered over the hedge.

"There!" Athena pointed. Through great third-story bay windows, they saw Mr. Scratch seated at his writing desk scanning a stack of papers. The starboard window next to him was open.

"We have a problem," said Ren. "I won't be able to fit through that window."

"I know," said Athena grinning. "But I can."

The tremendous roar of Achilles shook the house. Mr. Scratch jumped in his chair. Quickly collecting himself, he stood up and proceeded to leave the room. The portside window remained open.

The last thing Mr. Scratch expected to find in front of his house was a giant animatonn tyrannosaurus rex. He marched forward, waving his cane as he would at some young whipper snapper.

"What is the meaning of this?" he called out. A few of his servants also gathered around the rex, more curious than afraid. "What is this doing here?"

"Greetings, Mr. Scratch," Thad called from above with a jubilant wave.

"Is that the Burly child? What is he doing here?" Mr. Scratch roared at his servants. He received a few shrugs in response.

Realizing he would be required to correspond with this child, he changed his tone and shouted up the side of Achilles. "Is that you...child Burly?"

"Yep," said Thaddeus brightly.

"What are you doing in front of my house?"

"Basic patrol of the island," said Thaddeus matter-of-factly. "Have to make sure Achilles can fit down the streets in case dusklings attack."

"Well, aren't you going to continue your patrol?"

"Yep."

"Why are you not moving along then?"

"I can't."

"Why not?" Mr. Scratch said through clenched teeth.

## THE STARGAZER

"Cause I'm waiting for Athena."

"Where is Athena?"

"I think she is going to the bathroom or something."

Mr. Scratch peered down the lane. "Where?"

"Eww, gross! I don't know," said Thad. Roland let out a laugh.

"Is there a baby up there with you?" Mr. Scratch said, bewildered.

"Yeah, it's my brother." Thaddeus turned so Mr. Scratch could see Roland sitting up on Argus's back.

"Why do you have a baby with you?"

"He's learning to navigate."

"He's a baby..."

"I said *learning*."

In the gardens behind Mr. Scratch's house, Ren and Athena argued in harsh whispers. "I really think it ought to be me," Ren said with a shake of his head.

"You won't fit in the window," Athena said. "So it can't be."

"Beowulf won't fit in the window either."

"Yeah, you really should have made another hawkpack."

"A hawkpack doesn't grant any extra protection. You honestly think that would be better than armor that can fly?"

"In this instance."

"You're impossible." Ren kissed his daughter on the forehead. "Be careful."

"Always am."

"Beowulf, protect Athena," Ren commanded.

The bear stood on its hind legs, facing Athena's back. Bending forward, he spread his arms as if he planned to wrap her into a literal bear hug. Beowulf's chest panels opened, forming a cavity that Athena stepped back into. The panels reclosed around her and formed a thick protective breastplate. The top of the bear's head lowered atop her own as a gleaming helmet, the jaw a spiked collar. When the whirring and clicking subsided, Athena found herself clad in steel-plated animatonn armor.

Socrates and Vox leapt onto her shoulders.

"I have never flown on a bear before," Socrates said brightly.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Few have. Beowulf, jets. Five percent thrust up to the third-floor window," Ren commanded.

Jet ports emerged out of the bear's shoulder blades. Pulsing blue energy began to lift Athena off the ground. It gave her a peculiar feeling—she always imagined flying would feel like a soaring hawk, or a fluttering butterfly. This felt more like being shut in a box and then lifted by an invisible crane. When they reached the open window the breast plate folded away, allowing Athena to slip out of the armor and step through the open gap. Vox and Socrates followed after.

They entered a well-furnished den with a large writing desk, several bookshelves packed with political histories, and a red reclining sofa in front of a cozy fireplace.

"All right, keep your eyes out for Copernicus," Athena instructed.

"For sure," said Socrates with a charming salute. Vox gave an annoyed purr.

Athena made her way over to the entrance of the den. The door was locked. "Great," said Athena thinking out loud. "He left the window open but locked the door. Must not trust his servants. We are going to have to pick this lock, and we don't have time for this. Who knows how long Thad can keep Mr. Scratch busy?"

"Found it," Socrates said brightly. The otter and fox both pointed to an object on the mantelpiece above the fireplace.

Vox growled at Socrates.

"No, you are wrong. I found it first," Socrates responded.

Vox let out another growl.

"Fair enough, then we found it together."

Athena approached the mantelpiece and removed the object. "Well, that was super easy."

"Barely an inconvenience, I daresay."

It looked to be half a copper globe attached to a thick plate with rounded edges. There were two holes on opposite ends, a large and a small, where the half-sphere connected to the plate.

"This is Copernicus, the stargazer?" Athena asked doubtfully. At the sound of his name, a rounded head emerged out of the larger of the two holes. It yawned, stretching its neck upward. On the opposite end, a pointed tail protruded out of the smaller hole.



## THE STARGAZER

"It's a tortoise," Socrates said.

Copernicus's emerald eyes focused on Athena before it opened its mouth in a broad smile. "Hullooo," said the tortoise.

At the front of the mansion, Mr. Scratch had had just about enough of Thad's shenanigans. "Completely unacceptable. You need to move this right now or I will contact the sentry."

"What can the sentry do?" Thad asked.

"I don't know—arrest you."

"How? Achilles is bigger than anything they have."

"Let's reach out to them and find out, shall we?" Mr. Scratch turned back to his house, just as Thad saw Athena dart behind a tree in the back grove. Quickly, he picked up a screwdriver and prodded a connector. Achilles let out a second mighty roar.

Mr. Scratch jumped in the air in shock. "Why did you do that?" he snarled, turning back to Thaddeus.

"I'm supposed to do that—um—every so many minutes," Thad stammered.

"Why?"

"I, uh, don't remember. Oh, look! There is Athena."

Athena strode up the lane smiling brightly. "Good afternoon, Mr. Scratch," she said. Thaddeus lowered Achilles to his belly and Athena hopped in the skull.

"Good afternoon, Athena Burly. Perhaps you can tell me where your father is. I would like to have a word about these so-called routine patrols."

"I'm sorry, my father is busy working on a plan to prove my mother's innocence."

Mr. Scratch sneered. "He'd have more success attempting to prove dusklings can sing. Your mother will spend the rest of her days as a Carthage prisoner. You'd best get used to the idea."

"That's not true!" Thaddeus yelled.

"Thad, calm down. He is trying to bait you."

"Upon further reflection, I must concede that you are correct. She will not spend the rest of her days on Carthage. Instead, she will be free...for about thirty seconds. The time it takes for her to plummet to her death."

"We could squash you right now," Thad shouted.

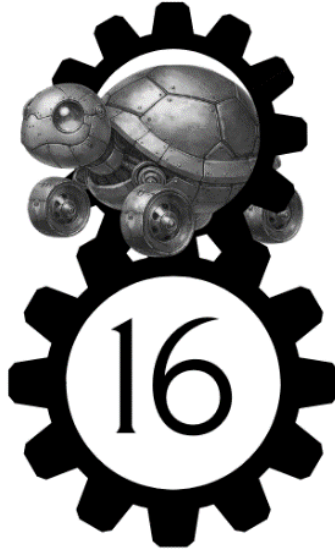
## THE CHILD THRONE

“Thad, stop it,” Athena grabbed her brother by the shoulders. “Father is waiting for us.”

“Yes, go boy, go to your father,” Mr. Scratch called up to them. “He will need your strength in these trying times. And get this lumbering monstrosity out of my sight.”

Thad bit his lip and pushed the cross bar forward. Achilles stomped away.

“Mark my words,” Scratch called after them. “Your fate will be the same as your mother’s, and the fate of all who cross the Throne.”



## COPERNICUS

**D**raw the curtains,” Ren instructed the children when they arrived at home. He then proceeded to douse all the lights so that the kitchen was eerily dark.

“Are we still being sneaky?” asked Thaddeus.

“No. Well—I mean yes. But that’s not why we need it dark.” Ren deposited the animatonn tortoise on the kitchen table. He gave the top of the shell a light knock. “Copernicus, I have some calculations for you.”

The head of the copper tortoise rose sleepily out of the shell. “Hulloo,” it said.

“He can talk like Socks?” Thad asked excitedly.

“Affirmative,” said the tortoise in a slow, sleepy voice.

“Salutations, older brother,” Socrates said, extending his forepaw.

Copernicus extended his head and shook the paw with his mouth.

“I’m most curious about a stargazer’s duties,” continued Socks. “What is your favorite function or subroutine to perform?”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Affirmative.”

“Pardon?”

“Affirmative,” Copernicus repeated.

Socrates turned his head to Ren. “Not very bright, is he?”

“His voice box is far more primitive than yours,” said Ren. “He says hullo, affirmative, negative, latitude, longitude, directions, and calculations. It was after developing Copernicus that I became inspired to craft your voice box, Socrates.”

Socrates patted the tortoise affectionately on the shell. “Forgive me. I was unaware of how inspiring you are.”

“Affirmative,” said Copernicus.

“Copernicus, open the star chart for me,” Ren instructed.

“Negative,” said the tortoise pleasantly.

“Override: Irenaeus Burly. Countersign: Quietly rests sleeping tiger.”

“Affirmative.” The shell of the tortoise split in the center and slid inward into itself like a collapsing telescope, revealing a complex contraption surrounded by an orb of glass.

“Did you just get past the owner’s command lock without opening up the back panel access?” Athena asked, impressed.

“I haven’t taught you that yet?” Ren smiled at his daughter. “It’s common practice in the trade to have a creator override. Otherwise you would have to manually undo the command lock every time a repair is needed to the central core.”

“I daresay, do I have a command lock?” asked Socks.

“Not in the same way,” said Ren. “You have been given strict protocol to follow. Obey me, obey Penelope, protect the family from fatal danger, obey the children, harm no humans, and so on.”

“Yes, of course, but may I ask how high is the priority of holding hands? And more importantly, can we make it higher?” Socks asked curiously.

Ren rubbed the otter’s head. “Copernicus, star chart please. Let your light shine.”

The mechanism inside the glass sphere began to whirl, spin, and click. Blue light projected onto the ceiling of the kitchen. A second projection of white stars appeared, overlaying the blanket of blue. From the base of the shell popped out four small wheels. They spun about with happy squeaks, clearly in

need of some lubrication. The tortoise rolled back and forth on the table until he positioned the projection in the center of the ceiling.

"Illuminate Tiber's route for the past week," Ren instructed.

A *click-click* came from the tortoise's shell. A tiny amber outline of Tiber appeared in the web of stars.

"Magnify three times." *Click-click*. It grew bigger as Ren had asked. "Show the original projected route set by the Wayfinder." *Click-click. Click-click*. A dashed line appeared in the same amber hue as the island of Tiber. "Was the Wayfinder's route changed in the past week?"

"Affirmative," said Copernicus.

"Was it changed by the Wayfinder?"

"Negative."

"Overlay the current route. Make the dashes designate individual days."

*Click-click*.

"There!" Athena pointed at the ceiling. "The paths diverge."

"We deviated off the original route four days ago, the same day as the crash," said Ren stiffly.

"Does that mean it's our fault we crashed?" asked Thad. "We changed the route—we hit them."

Ren didn't answer. "Copernicus, calculation: How many days ago were you taken away from Wayfinder Morton?"

"Five."

"After you were taken did Tiber's route change?"

"Affirmative."

"Mr. Scratch took you?" asked Athena.

"Affirmative."

"That means Mr. Scratch caused the crash," Athena said.

"It appears that way." Ren nodded. "Copernicus, illuminate the projected route of Carthage prior to the crash." A red silhouette of Carthage appeared on the map. "That can't be right. How many days ago was that?"

"Seven."

"What's wrong?" asked Thad.

"Carthage's projected path is the path they gave to the Wayfinder. If this is correct, Carthage should have been miles away from us when we collided.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Copernicus, can you calculate the adjustment that would have needed to occur for Carthage to collide with Tiber four days ago?”

“Affirmative.”

“Illuminate the next day.” *Click-click*. “Next day.” *Click-click*. Athena and Thad gasped.

“They turned completely around,” Thad said, thunderstruck.

“So they turned to hit us and we turned to hit them? We hit each other on purpose,” said Athena.

“Your mother does not like it when you hit each other,” said Socrates.

“I bet it was Scratch and that Minister Lynx,” said Athena. “They were thick as thieves at the crashing ball.”

“But why?” Thad asked.

Ren shook his head. “Don’t know.”

“Do you think they might have murdered Gunther? Maybe he found out about their plan,” Athena surmised. “We need to get this to Dite.”

“It proves the paths changed and we hit each other. It doesn’t prove your mother’s innocence,” said Ren.

“But if Gunther did find out and they did kill him, it gives us a motive and a place to look for new clues. We need to go back to Carthage and figure out how they killed him.”

“I don’t know. If you are wrong, we lose this chance,” Ren repeated. “Copernicus, would you be able to predict the general range where a body might have fallen from the stern of Carthage to the land below?”

“Affirmative.”

“If we find the body, could you calculate the precise point from where it fell?” Ren continued.

“Affirmative.”

“I think this is still our best shot. Conspiracy will have to wait,” said Ren. “Let’s pack supplies. We are going to the land below.”

Athena crossed her arms but said nothing, staring intently at the star chart.

Thaddeus grabbed his father’s old pack and filled it with rations of salted meat, cheese, and dried fruit. Athena grabbed the traveling cloaks from the bedrooms and brought them downstairs to lay out on the kitchen table. Ren strapped on the metal chest piece he wore whenever the dusklings attacked the

island. He grabbed a toolbelt he used for small repairs and folded it into a gunny sack.

“I’m not going,” Athena said as Ren picked up the cloaks.

“What?” he asked.

“WHAT?” Thad shouted.

Athena, summoning her courage, gazed into her father’s brown eyes. “If Scratch and Lynx are behind the islands’ collision, then I know they framed Mother. I can’t explain how, but everything in me is saying they are connected. Dite needs to know. Don’t forget, it was Lynx who presented the evidence of Mother’s guilt and Scratch did all he could to hand her over to the Throne. My head is screaming that we are going to find what we need in Carthage.

“Ath, you can’t just walk to the palace and investigate a murder,” Thad said sternly.

“I’ll ask Dite. I know she will help us. With her, we might be able to find clues that we weren’t looking for because we didn’t have a genuine lead.” Athena looked at her father pleadingly. “If your trail ends up cold, this may be our only other shot to prove Mother’s innocence.”

“But Ath, we need to stick together,” Thad insisted.

Ren sized up his daughter. For several seconds, he remained silent while he observed her determined expression. “All right.”

“All right?” Athena said in surprise.

“ALL RIGHT?” Thad said, shocked.

Ren placed his hand on his daughter’s cheek. “I trust you. Let your light shine.”

“Brilliantly,” she said. She couldn’t help but smile.

Removing his lever-action musket from the mantle, Ren reattached it to the back of his magnetic chest piece with a snap. “Thad, pack up. We are going to the land below.”



## IN PRISON

I brought your supper.” The guards opened the doors to Penelope’s suite. Unbidden, Dite entered the room and placed a serving tray on the end table. “It’s a garlic-crusteD pheasant.”

“I’m not hungry,” Penelope said.

“You will be pleased to know your family is working very diligently to prove your innocence,” Dite said.

Penelope said nothing, but glared at her.

“Come now, eat. I didn’t poison it.”

No response.

“Surprisingly, your children don’t hate me. I would argue they even like me. Athena especially seems rather fond of me.”

“She doesn’t really know you.”

“Now there’s the Penelope I remember. Tell me, Pen, is being a mother everything you hoped it would be?”

“Why do you ask? Having regrets that you told Ren you would rather die than be one?”



## IN PRISON

"No. You keep the children, I'll stay free and famous."

Penelope laughed. "Pathetic. You haven't changed at all."

"You have. Where is the Penelope who used to tell her father she was going to an evening lecture on metallic light fusion, then grab me and ditch half way through to go dancing in Bronto's Belly?"

"She grew up."

"Pity. We had so much fun at those dances, Pen. Your mother always knew, of course. She'd encourage us—you remember she'd always say, *'if a man can't keep up with you on the dance floor, he certainly can't keep up with you anywhere else!'*"

"Don't you dare talk about my mother, and don't call me Pen. That was her name for me. You have no right—"

"Touchy—touchy. My goodness, Penelope, this whole jealousy thing is getting rather old."

"Jealous? Unbelievable! I am not jealous of you. I despise you. You are selfish, manipulative, conniving—"

"Ren seems to have gotten over those past hiccups."

"Past hiccups?" Penelope snarled. "You stole his work!"

"That's not how I remember it."

"Then let me refresh your memory. Grand Smith Abner's final project. You turned in an animatonn hare. A hare with three transformations: a tea kettle, a record player, and what was that last one?"

"A longshoreman's claw."

"A longshoreman's claw, the exact same three transformations as Ren's badger. The badger he had been prepping for years."

"Grand Smith Abner determined Ren copied my design."

"He was a scholarship student; his parents weren't citizens of Bronto like ours. He didn't understand how the college worked like we did. Your father was on the committee that gave Abner his position."

"So was yours, and Ren was no mere scholarship student. Tournament of Thunder champion. Don't make him sound like a victim—that is below you, Penelope."

"Every single apprentice knew you stole Ren's work. But it didn't matter because Abner vouched for you. When I heard what you did to get him on your side—"

## THE CHILD THRONE

"I did what I must."

"YOU GOT REN EXPELLED!" Penelope shouted. "His name forever tarnished. Expulsion from the college is exile from the college. He can never set foot on the island again. He never got to finish his apprenticeship. Few islands would even accept us after that. We rebuilt from nothing."

"But you did rebuild, and now here the two of you are, with a reputation that rivals the greatest tonn smiths in all the skylands. You didn't even need Bronto."

"That was my home. Where we both grew up. I can never return there with my husband."

"You never liked it there to begin with. Since we were eleven all you ever talked about was leaving. You wanted to sail the clouds, find romance and adventure on the outer islands. From what I can see, you got exactly what you always wanted."

"What I wanted! My mother is dead because of you."

"What are you talking about?"

"When I was pregnant with Athena, about to deliver, my mother booked passage on an airship to Tiber. She planned to stay with us for three months. The winds turned foul, and the ship failed to make it to port by nightfall. I prayed and prayed that she would be all right, that in the morning I'd find her safe and sound, but the ship never came in."

"Dusklings?" asked Dite.

Penelope nodded. "My father hired salvagers to scour the land below. They found the ship, and her body..."

"That is why you named Athena after her," said Dite.

Again Penelope nodded.

Dite inhaled long and slow. "Your mother was a wonderful woman. But I'm not going to apologize for the life you chose. No one forced you to leave with Ren. You could have stayed in Bronto with your mother and father. You did it because you were in love."

Penelope paused. She looked long and hard at Dite. "Not an ounce of remorse. You believe you did nothing wrong. Why are you even here?"

"I want you to reconsider the queen's offer," Dite insisted.

"No," Penelope said plainly. "I won't."

## IN PRISON

“Penelope, please,” Dite said. “Your family isn’t going to find the evidence they are looking for. The Throne would greatly benefit from your light. Believe it or not, I don’t want to see you dead.”

“Did you remove the child’s legs?”

“Penelope...”

“Did you?”

“You know the answer to that question.”

“And you know the answer to yours.”

A loud commotion rang out from the hallway. Yelling and clanging and the sound of several pairs of feet stampeded down the marble corridor.

“DITE!” shrieked the voice of the queen. “DITE, WHERE ARE YOU?”

The doors to the suite burst open. The queen charged in, her face in a frenzy. Two guards entered behind her, carrying a boy in their arms. He was the Throne, though no longer attached to the metal chair apparatus. His legs convulsed and twitched as his whole body clenched and trembled in pain. The stumps of his legs throbbed with his heartbeat as ichor fell freely from the ports on his legs onto the carpet, giving off a scent of rust and blood. The back of his shirt had been torn off, revealing a third port on his spine. The skin around the port was red and swollen, and a yellowish film had gathered around the connector, clotting together with the lightburn.

His head rolled about his neck as though it had become loose. Tears and sweat streamed down his face. He moaned and cried out, “It hurts, it hurts! I can’t stand it. It hurts!” The guard placed him on a couch across from them.

Dite and Penelope stood up. The queen stormed over to Dite. “It’s happening again! Why is this happening again?”

“Queen Jocasta, I understand your frustration, but this isn’t wholly unexpected.”

“Unexpected?” Penelope butted in. “That’s lightburn. It’s guaranteed. His body needs to purge the excess light.”

“RRHHHHHHHHH!” the Throne screamed in pain.

“Fix it!” the queen snapped at Dite. “I don’t care how you do it, just do it or to the land below with you.”

Dite bent down next to the Throne. Covered in sweat and saliva, the Throne clutched his two leg ports that poured out lightburn. A third port on

## THE CHILD THRONE

his lower back seeped liquid into the chair on which he lay. "It hurts. It hurts so badly," he wailed. After half a minute, the pain subsided, and the Throne took in several deep breaths. With eyes closed he whispered hoarsely, "What have you done to me? I am a freak." His eyes opened and glared directly at Penelope. "A legless freak."

"You wanted this, O great Throne. You begged for this, O great Throne," Dite said calmly.

"I want my legs back!"

"You don't know what you are saying," said Queen Jocasta. "It's just because of the pain, my dear. You have the Throne's legs now."

"I WANT MY LEGS BACK! I don't want to be the Throne. You don't understand how much this hurts! YAHHHHHH!" The Throne's waist lurched forward as a particularly painful lightburn purged out of the back port and dripped oil onto the floor.

The queen turned to Penelope. "You—you have poisoned my son's thoughts. He was happy before you came here and—"

"You call this happy?" Penelope responded.

"HE WAS HAPPY!" roared the queen.

"Everyone calm down," said Dite.

"Calm down?" wailed the Throne. "Calm down? You promised I would be happy! I am not happy. I DON'T WANT TO BE A THRONE ANYMORE. I DON'T WANT IT. To the land below with all of you!"

"Your Majesty," Dite said. "I understand this is very trying right now, but this will pass. We have a plan to take care of these situations in the future. Mrs. Burly here can spin more light into bronze than anyone I have ever met. If we could convince her to spin light for you, that could help reduce these instances. Isn't that right, Mrs. Burly?"

Dite's gaze fixated on Penelope, pleading not for her work, but for her life itself. Penelope saw beneath the veneer of a power-hungry woman and glimpsed a trapped and pathetic girl caught in an inescapable snare.

"It might help...slightly. But he will still suffer lightburn on a regular basis," said Penelope. "Not even my light can spare you from this suffering."

Dite closed her eyes and lowered her head as though Penelope had sentenced her to death.

## IN PRISON

"It won't fix me? Nothing can be done!" cried the Throne. "I'll kill you all. I'll kill everyone. I don't want to be the Throne. You all allowed this. This is all your doing."

"Of course, Your Majesty," Dite said. The wheels in her head turned at breakneck speed. "It is time to move past that. It is time to evolve—grow into the next great leap of your destiny."

Everyone looked at Dite. "What do you mean?" asked Queen Jocasta. "What is there beyond the Throne?"

"Exactly. Nothing is greater than the Throne, at least nothing in this mortal realm. So we need to create something beyond mortal imaginings. Tell me, Throne, can you think of anything more powerful than a king's Throne? A creature revered as a god?"

The Throne shook his head in wonderment. For the first time, he stopped wailing about his pain.

"Men bow before the Throne. But we want something men fear, armies will flee from, kings will pay tribute to. We will turn you into something that will allow you to amass treasure and wealth beyond your wildest dreams. Your legend will spread far and wide. You shall go down in the annals of history as terrible and mighty. So powerful, none will resist you, or else they be consumed by you. That is what you have always wanted, isn't it?"

"Yes," said the Throne, taken in. "It is what I have always wanted. But what is it?"

"Your Majesty, we are going to turn the Throne into the Dragon."

"Yes. Yes! That is what I am supposed to be. Will I fly? Will I breathe fire?" His teeth were clenched in pain.

"Of course, Your Highness. I have been developing these plans for quite some time now. I should be able to finish them very shortly."

"Excellent!" Tears rolled down his face.

"Now I would ask you to return to your chambers with your mother. I still have much work to do."

"Yes, at once." The Throne beckoned to the guards and they lifted him up and exited the room.

## THE CHILD THRONE

The queen lingered for a moment. “A dragon,” she said, surveying Dite. “This better pan out. I need not tell you what happens if the Throne is disappointed.”

“Of course, Your Highness,” Dite said with a bow.

The queen left. Dite slumped in her seat and buried her head in her hands. Penelope also took a seat, and, in spite of herself, she laughed.

“What’s so funny?” Dite said, glancing up.

Penelope sighed. “I have fantasized about you getting your comeuppance. About you being paid back tenfold for what you did. And here we are. I finally get to see it...and I—I feel sorry for you. Living under *that*.” She cocked her head to the door. “I have been in this prison for less than a day, whereas you have been under their boot for years.”

Dite left Penelope’s suite feeling unnerved. She was unsure what bothered her more: the clear threat on her life if she did not make the Dragon a reality, or Penelope’s last statement. Either way, it did not matter. She had a lot of work to do.

Reaching her office, she pulled out her keys to unlock the door.

“Dite! Dite!” cried a voice down the corridor. Athena came scrambling up the passageway with her copper fox at her heels. “Thank goodness I found you. There is so much we need to discuss.”

Dite quickly ushered her into the office and shut the door behind them. Dite’s office hung toward the back of the palace. Athena noted the pristine and elegant layout compared to her father’s workshop. The tools had marble handles and were color coded. Dite had adorned the room with drapes and flowers. A walkout balcony overlooked the Stern Gardens. In the back corner, a clean granite workbench housed many broken animatonns in various states of disrepair.

“Athena, how did you get in here?” Dite asked.

“That was easy. I simply told the guard you wanted to see Vox.” Athena gave the fox an affectionate pat. “I just started talking about animatonnn stuff and he let me through.”

“Did you now?” said Dite, impressed. She snapped her fingers and through the open balcony window zipped three hummingbirds. Dite wrote something on a small scrap of paper before puncturing the note onto one of

the birds' pin-like beaks. "Send this order of triders to Lucian Scratch in Tiber. We are moving forward with the new project previously discussed."

"Don't do that!" Athena burst out, but it was too late. The hummingbirds flitted out the window and vanished. "Can you get them back?"

"Why would I do that?" Dite looked at her.

"Because Scratch and Lynx caused the islands to crash."

"What are you talking about?"

Athena recounted in vivid detail their trip to the Wayfinder's and what the recovered Copernicus had revealed.

"But why would Minister Lynx and Mr. Scratch do all of that? What do they have to gain?"

"Not sure, but I just know somehow it has to do with Mr. Biggs's murder," Athena said resolutely.

"Interesting theory, but that is all it is: a theory. You need more proof than that."

"I'm just missing a few of the connecting gears," Athena said proudly. "But I have proof."

"More than an animatonn the accused's husband built?"

"Yep. An animatonn *you* built."

"What do you mean?"

Athena snapped her fingers and in no time at all, hummingbirds surrounded her head like a crown. "Please fetch me hummingbird 142." The birds zipped away and a few moments later, a single bird returned. "Please play the recording of Penelope Burly and Gunther Biggs," Athena instructed.

*"Shh, shh, there-there Ro-Ro."*

*"But if you will only consider the offer. The Throne is more than generous."*

*"Move here? Are you daft?"*

*"Mrs. Burly, please do not jump to rash judgment—"*

*"You and Dite have mutilated that boy. He will never again stand on his own legs because of you and your cowardice. Where is your honor? Where are your ethics? DO NO HARM. Does that mean nothing to you, Mr. Biggs?"*

*"For the last time, Mrs. Burly. The Throne is not a boy. He is the Throne."*

## THE CHILD THRONE

*"He is no more a Throne than he is a carpet, a bathtub, or a cloud. He IS a boy, just like little Roland crying here. You have robbed him of something he will never get back. It makes me sick. To the land below with both of you."*

*"Mrs. Burly, please—"*

*"DONOT TOUCH ME, YOU DISGUSTING SHELL OF A MAN."*

*"What? WHAT ARE YOU—NO, NOOOOOOoooooooo."*

"Did you hear it?" Athena said excitedly.

"Hear what?"

"Listen again to the ending," Athena said. The bird replayed Gunther's last words. "Did you hear it that time?"

"I heard Gunther die..."

Right, but what didn't you hear?"

"Athena...I don't understand."

"Roland."

"What?"

"Roland. He is crying throughout the entire recording, but he isn't in the part where Gunther falls."

Dite's eyes widened. She instructed the bird to play it again. Sure enough, Athena was right. Roland's cry was throughout the entire recording up until Gunther's last words.

"I'm guessing," said Athena excitedly, "this is a recording edited together with pieces of others. If we find the original, we can prove my mother's innocence."

"Very clever, but how do you explain the cloak being found at the scene of the crime?" asked Dite.

"Can Minister Lynx override Accordion?" Athena asked suspiciously.

"No."

"Can the queen?"

"No."

"Can the Throne?"

Dite shook her head.

"Can anyone override Accordion?"

"Only one person," said Dite. "Me."





## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

The skiff sailed along the blanket of clouds. The small ship creaked and groaned as Ren piloted down through the net of nimbus. Thad stood at the prow with Socks and Copernicus. Every dip brought them closer to the land below.

Thad felt apprehensive returning. Last time he had faced gangs, witches, and zombies animated by venomous snakes, and though it worked out well in the end, he could not help but think they had cheated death.

“Three degrees starboard,” Copernicus said.

“Three degrees starboard,” Ren repeated from the stern. He adjusted the helm accordingly.

“Nice to see Mrs. Appleton again,” said Thad.

“Aye,” said Ren. “It was.”

“Nice of her to watch Roland,” said Thad.

“Aye,” Ren repeated.

“Land below is no place for a baby,” said Thad nervously.

“No.” Ren smiled. “You are right there.”

“Six degrees starboard, then forward.” A *click-click* sounded from Copernicus’s inner workings.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"Do you think we will find the body?" asked Thad.

"I hope so," said Ren.

"I have never held a corpse's hand before. What do you suppose it feels like?" asked Socks.

"Gross," said Thad.

"Cold," said Ren.

*Click-click. Click-click. Click-click. Click-click.* The back of Copernicus's shell began to click repeatedly as it rotated around and around.

"Father, the shell is clicking," Thaddeus yelled back to Ren.

"Excellent. That means we should have arrived. Is that right Copernicus?"

"Affirmative."

Ren turned down the furnace and the skiff began to descend. The clouds gave way to a rolling sea of grassy meadows below. They descended several yards and then stopped. Again, several yards more and stopped. They continued like this until the skyship floated four feet above the grassy hill. Ren pulled a lever. The anchor, a sharp harpoon-like stake attached to a long thick cord, shot out of a spring-loaded cannon and implanted itself deep within earth. Thad lowered the Jacob's ladder. Socrates scrambled down first, followed by Thaddeus, then Ren, and finally Beowulf, clutching the lip of Copernicus's shell neatly in his mouth.

When all were on solid ground, Beowulf lowered his head and released the tortoise. The head popped out and smiled placidly. "Hulloo."

"Given the current trajectory of Carthage, if a body fell from the stern of the island 16 to 20 hours ago, this would be the general projected landing area. Correct?"

*Click-click.* "Affirmative."

"All right, we spread out and find the body—"

"Father!" Thad called from the top of the hill. Ren raced up to his son.

"What is it? Don't tell me you already found it." Ren cast his eyes down the hill.

Thad had not found the body. He had found several. Half a dozen corpses lay strewn about the hills, pale, broken, and twisted, with eyes glazed over staring off at nothing in particular.

"What—how?" Thad asked, shaking his head.

## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

“Come on,” Ren placed his hand on his son’s shoulder. “We need to check them.” Together they walked from body to body, hunting for Gunther Biggs. Flies swarmed about the newly deceased bodies. A stench of overripe fruit and spoiled meat thickened the air. Thad began to take shallow breaths as each face etched itself into his mind. A man here, a woman there. At the base of the hill lay a girl younger than him. She had curly blonde hair. Her arm and ribs were visibly broken from the impact. A few feet away lay a man with gray whiskers laying in a pool of dried blood. *Perhaps the girl’s grandfather? Did they even know each other?* A metal hand slid itself inside Thad’s. Thad looked down at Socks. He could feel his eyes welling up.

“Thanks, Socks,” Thad said.

“For sure,” said the otter.

They climbed the second hill and found one more body on the ascent.

“How did this happen?” Thad asked the air.

“Last night’s duskling attack,” Ren said. “When they turned on all the lights in those three buildings...” Ren clicked his tongue and shook his head. He turned back to Thad. “You okay?”

Thad gave a hesitant nod. “You have seen a lot of things like this, haven’t you?”

“Like this? No, but I have seen my share of darkness.”

“How do you handle it? The death...the evil?”

Ren didn’t answer but stroked his beard in thought. “By desperately clinging to the good that is worth fighting for.”

“What does that mean? Is there good not worth fighting for?” Thad asked.

Ren smiled at his son. “Do you remember the goat, the one you saved a few days back from the barn that collapsed?”

Thad nodded.

“I was so proud of you,”

“You were?” Thad gaped.

“Of course I was,” said Ren. “But also mortified. One day I won’t be here, and when that day comes I need to know you are smart enough to avoid danger and yet in the same breath be brave enough to face it. Prudence and courage go hand in hand.”

“Hand in hand,” Socks repeated. “I like the sound of that.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

They reached the top of the hill, and as soon as they did so, Ren grabbed Thad by the arm and pulled him down into the grass so that they both lay flat on their stomachs. Ren held up his finger, so Thad knew not to talk. Thad nodded. Ren gave a subtle point.

In the gully below was a heaving black mass. Black all over, except for the tips of its fur that turned a light gray, the color of charcoal after it has been burned. The mass chewed on something, something that Thaddeus felt fairly certain was a human leg. It chewed, gnawed, bit, but never ate. Every once in a while it stopped, turning its long snout this way and that. The snout had neither ears nor eyes, yet Thad knew it could hear them. A long, thin glowing orange tongue protruded from the creature's mouth. At the tip of the tongue hung a blazing eye.

This was a duskling.

"Why is it here?" Thad asked in his softest whisper. "It's the middle of the afternoon. It should not come out till sunset at the earliest. Why isn't it flying away?"

"Must be injured," Ren whispered back.

"Would you like me to kill it?" Socks asked matter-of-factly.

"No." Ren reached to his back and removed his musket. Then to Thad's surprise, he handed it to him. "Thad is going to take care of this one."

"What? But my aim's terrible. What if I miss it?"

"Then you take another shot."

"What if I miss that one?"

"You take another shot."

"I'm much better with Achilles. I could just step on it."

"But we don't have Achilles. That monster down there will continue to do nothing except cause pain and suffering. Even now it chews on the corpse, not for sustenance, but in the hopes it can cause more pain.

"You must know when and how to act. I am telling you as your father, this right now is the when. And this—" Ren let go of the musket in his son's hands. "—is the how."

"Can I use Socks? He helps compensate for my aim—"

"Not this time. I want you to do this on your own."

Thad took up the musket. Carefully he lined up the sights, drew his aim on the duskling, took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and pulled the trigger. The

## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

shot rang as a bullet of light coughed up a stream of dirt just to the right of the creature. The black beast swiveled around, its tongue-eye roving the surrounding hills to see where the shot had fired.

“Do not close your eyes,” Ren instructed calmly. “When you breathe out, pull the trigger. Reset and reload the chamber. Fire again.”

Thad pulled down the reset lever to reload the chamber. He took a deep breath and fired again.

Closer, but he still missed the duskling. This time the creature saw where the shot had originated and began to charge straight up the hill. Quickly Thad reloaded, took aim and fired again.

Again, miss.

“Don’t panic. Clear mind, clear shot.”

The duskling zigzagged up the hill, closing in fast with remarkable speed. Again, Thad fired. A hit in the right forearm. The creature roared but did not slow its ascent. It drew closer and closer. The red serpentine pupil became visible, a blazing diamond in the glowing orange eye. Thad began to breathe rapidly, firing as quick as he could with no aim. The creature would soon be upon them. Thad fired again; again a miss. The duskling made a terrible leap into the air, shining claws drawn. Its orange eye flared against the blue firmament.

“Beowulf, armor.” Out of the corner of Thad’s eye he saw a glint of metal near his father. Less than a second later, a plated bear claw reached up and snatched the duskling from the air as one would a flying disc. With a hand on either side of the creature’s mouth Ren pinned the beast against the side of the hill. His arms protected in Beowulf’s metal paws, Ren wrenched open the mouth farther and farther until Thad heard an unnerving snap. The eye twitched about looking for some way to avoid what came next. “Thad, finish it.”

Thad walked over to the dusking. He aimed his barrel down the duskling’s throat and fired. The duskling stopped moving.

“I’m sorry,” said Thad. His head hung low. “I couldn’t—I tried—I’m just not—”

Metal whirled and clinked as Ren stepped out of his armor. He knelt down and placed both hands on either side of his son’s head, gently lifting it up so they looked each other in the eye. “Look at me,” said Ren. “You did exactly

## THE CHILD THRONE

what I asked you to do. You took the shot. I know that was hard on you, and you still took it. I'm very proud of you. I don't expect you to be perfect. I don't need you to be perfect."

"But Ath—"

"I'm not comparing you to Athena. The only person I compare you to is past you. Be better than who you were yesterday. I will never ask more than that."

"But if you weren't here..."

Ren hugged his son tightly. "But I am here. I'm not going to leave you."

"I love you," Thad squeaked.

"I love you too." Ren squeezed his son. "Now, let's find Gunther."

Again they spread out, and for the better part of an hour surveyed the bodies among the hills. Socrates presumed every corpse was Gunther until Thad corrected him.

"When deceased, the differences between humans become rather difficult to perceive, for sure," Socks said as he pointed to the corpse of an elderly woman.

Thad gazed up at the sky. A heavy overcast had rolled in. The afternoon was waning. In a few hours it would be dusk, and dusk brought more duskings.

"Focus on the task," Ren called over to his son. He sensed Thad's apprehension, but he knew that every day would make their task increasingly difficult as the islands drifted farther away from this spot.

A low tone began to swell from the west. It sounded like music: slow, melancholic music. Words began to form in an archaic language Thad did not understand. The words were haunting.

Over the crest of the hill appeared a tall figure clad in draping black robes. He was joined by a second, then a third, until a dozen of them had arrived at the top. In unison, they proceeded halfway down the hill to a corpse Thad had examined mere minutes ago. One of the figures bent down to the corpse and the others surrounded it and continued their chant.

Out of the air two ravens descended and landed amongst the cloaked figures. What they were doing, Thad could not see, but after a few moments the ravens took flight again into the sky. When the figures moved out of the way, Thad gasped. The corpse had disappeared. In its place was a pile of smoldering pale green ash.

## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

“Oye!” Ren waved at the figures. Thad did not think this a good idea due to what had transpired with the corpse. “Hello,” Ren cried out. “Over here.”

One of the hooded figures left the group and slowly drifted over to Ren. The figure raised a hand in a display of greeting. Ren did likewise. Slowly, the figure lifted back his black hood. A young man with a shaved head and a surprisingly long beard stood before them.

“Be at peace, brother,” the man said in muted breath. “I am Brother Bernard of the Order of Undertakers. We have come to anoint the dead so they may pass into peace. You have nothing to fear.”

“Ren Burly,” said Ren. “And this is my son, Thaddeus. I need to ask what you did to the corpse back there.”

“We perform the Rite of Rest on all fallen brethren. It is the oath we swore when joining the order. Would you like to see?”

Slowly Ren nodded.

“Come, and fear not. We hide in the darkness, but we are not of it.” Brother Bernard held his arm aloft, as to welcome Ren and Thaddeus to enter the circle of hooded figures.

The chant was unceasing and eerily beautiful. As the chorus continued to sing, one of the hooded brothers knelt down next to the body of a deceased woman of about forty years. He removed a small bottle of pale green powder and sprinkled it into a leaden bowl. Then atop the bowl, he placed a golden lid with several small holes, creating a half lead, half gold sphere. Hefty amounts of green smoke began to seep from every hole in the golden lid. Thad stepped back. The smoke looked toxic, but the monks showed no fear. The brother held the orb over the body and the smoke seemed drawn to the corpse, covering it in a thick blanket. The kneeling monk passed the orb over the body several times. As he did so, a prayer in the common language escaped his lips in a hushed tone.

*“Truth will out.*

*Truth will win.*

*Rest now. Be at peace, my humble brethren.”*

## THE CHILD THRONE

He repeated this simple prayer several times until two animatonn ravens descended, inky black against the gray sky, and landed on either side of the body's head. They looked at each other and cawed.

Then to Thad's deep discomfort, the birds plunged their beaks deep within the eye sockets of the corpse. The corpse opened its mouth.

Another from the chorus ceased singing and pulled from his robes a leather tome and pen. He opened the tome and in very clear words said, "Give your name, oh brethren, to the truth, for the truth we need not fear."

"Claudia Bixby," cried a woman's voice from deep inside the corpse.

Thad gasped. The brothers paid him no heed. The brother holding the tome wrote down the name and then continued, "Claudia Bixby died. Let not her memory be trapped in wrath, in resentment, in vengeance, in hate. Release now the name of the guilty party so the furies may be satisfied."

Again the corpse spoke. "Jocasta Sphinx. Oedipus Sphinx."

"Begone, oh furies. Seek not vengeance upon the land. Let your blight fall not upon the innocent, but to those here named. Claudia Bixby's voice is now heard."

The voice of the other brother echoed louder.

*"Truth will out.*

*Truth will win.*

*Rest now. Be at peace, my humble brethren."*

The smoke encased Claudia's body like a cocoon, and then in a breath, it dissipated. Claudia was gone; all that remained was a smoldering pile of pale green ash.

With a calm gesture, Brother Bernard led Thaddeus and Ren from the circle. "I am sure you have many questions."

"You talk to the dead!" Thad said, flabbergasted.

"We do not."

"I heard you."

"We do not talk to them. That is a violation of the order. The dead cry out their grievances. We listen and record them in the Book of Audire. In this way, our fallen brethren may find peace and we may avoid the wrath of the furies."

"I beg your pardon," said Socks, "but what are these furies you speak of?"



## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

“When our brethren fall for unjust reasons, their deaths scream out to the spirits of vengeance and betrayal. Undirected, these spirits cast their wrath upon the land and the innocent, causing untold and immeasurable suffering. The Rite of Rest redirects the furies’ rage at those who are guilty of the injustice.”

“The body—” Thad stated.

“Claudia Bixby,” corrected Brother Bernard.

“Claudia Bixby,” Thad repeated. “She mentioned Jocasta Sphinx, who we know. She is the queen of Carthage. She also mentioned someone else with the same last name.”

“Oedipus Sphinx. Yes, we hear those two names quite regularly, following the loft rock as we do.”

“You follow one particular floating island?” Ren asked.

“Yes, it is our duty to tend the dead.” Brother Bernard nodded solemnly. “Every time the creatures of the night attack that loft rock, our brethren fall like rain.”

“The Throne’s method of dealing with the duskings is horrendous. We unfortunately witnessed it firsthand.”

Brother Bernard nodded. “May you be at peace now.”

“Thank you. Perhaps you can help us. We are looking for a dead man,” Ren said. “Gunther Biggs. It is imperative we find his body.”

“Let me ask Brother Jasper.” Brother Bernard raised his hand to his fellow monks and then made a gesture, opening his hands like a book. A hooded figure strode over to them and pulled out the leather tome Thad had seen during the rite.

“Brother, our brethren here are seeking a name in the Book of Audire. May you be able to assist with this request?”

“Of course, brother.” Brother Jasper lowered his hood. He was a good deal taller than Brother Bernard, and a good deal older. “What is the name you seek?” he asked Ren and Thaddeus.

“Gunther Biggs. He fell from the island last night around the time the duskings attacked,” said Ren.

Brother Jasper rifled through the pages of the tome. After a minute he shook his head. “We have not yet rested Gunther Biggs.”

“What did he look like?” asked Brother Bernard.

“Round face, kind of doughy,” Ren said, trying to remember.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"He wore glasses," Thad added.

"That's right. He did." Ren smiled at his son.

Brother Bernard made a gesture in the air. The two ravens descended and landed on either shoulder. Thad was reminded of Dite and her swans.

"Charon, Virgil, scan our fallen brethren. Look for any man wearing glasses nearby. Circle him once you have found him." Without another word, the ravens tore noiselessly through the air, scouring the land below. Without any extra instruction, the monks changed course and drifted off after them.

"What do you do when night falls?" Thad asked curiously.

"We draw our hoods and sit, sometimes lay prostrate on the earth."

"And that is good enough to avoid the duskings?"

"Usually. Every once in a while, a brother is taken. We then follow, find him, and give him the Rite of Rest."

"Doesn't that terrify you?"

"We do not fear death. We walk side by side with death every day."

Thad did not have long to ponder this, for Brother Bernard pointed swiftly in the air. "Ah, they found something."

Ren and Thad sprinted up the hill to where the ravens circled. Sure enough, laying there crumpled in a heap with glasses miraculously intact, was Gunther Biggs.

"Copernicus," Ren gasped. The tortoise rolled up merrily next to him. "Calculation: if this body fell from the stern of Carthage between 7 and 10 p.m. yesterday evening, is its position within the range of where it could reasonably land?"

"Affirmative," said Copernicus.

Ren's heart sank. "Specifically the Stern Gardens. Does this spot work if the body fell from the gardens?"

"Affirmative."

"Could the body have fallen from anywhere outside the palace?"

"Negative."

"The body had to fall from the stern?"

"Affirmative."

## RETURN TO THE LAND BELOW

“RAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Ren shouted to the sky. He fell to his knees. The chant grew closer as the monks made their way up the hill. “All this way and for NOTHING!”

Thad examined the body as the monks encircled him and began the rite. Two monks gently turned the body over on its back. As they did so, Thad noticed a glint of metal underneath the heap. Not wanting to appear like he was stealing, he slowly edged his way toward the body. Green smoke swirled about him.

He placed one hand on Copernicus’s shell, hoping to mask the other from the view of the monks. Cautiously his fingers inched forward ever so slightly. The tips of his fingers brushed the cool touch of metal. The ravens dug their beaks into the eye sockets again.

“Give your name, oh brethren, to the truth, for the truth we need not fear.”

“Gunther Biggs,” came a voice out of the corpse.

Thad yelped in surprise and leapt backwards. Glancing about, he expected the monks to be angry but they continued to chant, ignoring him. He peeked down at his right hand, now clutched around the metal piece. Slowly, and careful to avoid unwanted gazes, he opened his palm.

“Release now the name of the guilty party so the furies may be satisfied,” cried the voice of a monk.

Thaddeus stared at the hunk of metal in wonderment. The odd piece looked like an extended harmonica. But this was no harmonica, but rather a wing, a flaming wing, though at the moment no flame issued from it. This wing belonged to an animatonn swan.

Gunther’s voice cried out. “Aphrodite Carver.”



## HUMMINGBIRD HUNT

Name?” said Accordion.  
“Penelope Burly,” said Athena, changing her voice for the eighteenth time.

“Not recognized,” repeated Accordion.

“I know,” Athena scowled. She had been attempting to trick the giraffe for the better part of an hour. Once she had tried to slip past his extending neck. The giraffe picked her up by the back of her blouse like a wolf pup and placed her outside the cloak room. Guards arrived shortly after and warned her not to do that again.

“Dite is the only one with an override,” Athena explained to Vox. “She is also the only one with the knowledge to get past the owner’s command lock, Minister Lynx or Mr. Scratch are secret tonnn smiths in their spare time. But even then, they couldn’t disassemble in secret. So how did they get the cloak?”

Athena sighed. Her brain hurt. She spent a few moments watching Vox. The animatonn fox eyed the hummingbirds intently. As the minute birds drew close he would snip at them. They were too fast for him, but every so often he

## HUMMINGBIRD HUNT

would catch one unaware. It would struggle for a moment before Vox would let it go and repeat the process again.

“That’s it!” Athena said aloud. “Vox, you’re a genius.” She dashed over and hugged the copper fox. “I’ve been overthinking it.” She walked into the hall where servants were still cleaning up from the party the night before. “I’m borrowing this,” Athena said, grabbing a folded tablecloth. She received a few odd looks, but no one stopped her.

She ran back to Accordion.

“Name,” said the giraffe.

“Athena Burly,” said Athena.

“Athena Burly,” came her voice out of Accordion. She deposited the tablecloth into the giraffe’s mouth. Being none the wiser, Accordion retracted into the cloakroom and disappeared with the tablecloth.

Athena snapped her fingers. A hummingbird descended and buzzed around her head. “Record,” Athena commanded. “Athena Burly,” Athena said, carefully changing the tenor of her voice as though she was saying her name in a regular greeting.

“Now let’s see if it works.” Athena walked back over to the cloak room. “I would like my cloak please.”

Accordion dutifully appeared. “Name?”

“Repeat recording,” Athena whispered to the hummingbird.

“Athena Burly,” came Athena’s voice from the hummingbird.

“Athena Burly,” repeated the recording from Accordion. The giraffe retracted and a moment later returned, holding the tablecloth in its mouth.

“I did it!” Athena cried out in jubilation. “I love you!” She kissed Accordion on the nose.

“Name?” said Accordion.

“I knew it! It has to be Scratch and Lynx. I totally knew it. They must have murdered Gunther Biggs,” Athena said as she began to pace up and down the corridor. “If they found a hummingbird that recorded Mother saying her own name, they could have used that recording to get the cloak.” Then it dawned on her. “Of course! They didn’t just use the hummingbirds to get the cloak, but also to craft the false recording. They could have done everything with three birds. The bird that recorded the original conversation of Mother and Gunther,

## THE CHILD THRONE

any recording of Mother's name, and finally, the recording of the actual murder. If we find those three hummingbirds, Vox, we can *prove* Mother is innocent."

"Greetings, Miss Burly," came a cool voice from down the corridor. Minister Lynx materialized seemingly out of nowhere. "Pray tell, what exactly are you doing here? Visiting your mother?"

Athena was caught off guard. "I—I was simply admiring Lady Dite's craftsmanship. I am considering becoming her new apprentice."

"Is that so? The Throne will be pleased." Minister Lynx gave a sinister smile. "What was it you were saying as I rounded the corner just now?"

"I—I was telling Vox how impressive Accordion's neck mechanism is designed. Dite made a lot of unique artistic choices," Athena lied.

"Is that what you were saying?" Minister Lynx snapped his fingers. A hummingbird whizzed down around his fingers. "Repeat Miss Burly's conversation before I rounded the corner."

The bird flitted about for a second before Athena's voice emerged from its hidden speaker. *"I knew it! It has to be Scratch and Lynx. I totally knew it. They must have murdered Gunther Biggs. If they found a hummingbird that recorded Mother..."*

Minister Lynx waved his hand. "That's enough." He stared at Athena directly. He wasn't angry, and he wasn't confused; he was...smiling. "Revoke all hummingbird privileges from Athena Burly: Designation Sincerity Enforcement Minister Maynard Lynx." And with a second wave of his hand, he dismissed the buzzing bird.

Athena snapped her fingers. Nothing happened. The hummingbirds ignored her. She snapped them again. Still nothing. Athena furrowed her brow. "How did you know I was here?"

Minister Lynx sighed. "The guards alerted me. You're not as smart as you think you are." He turned to leave but then stopped. "I do hope you take Lady Dite up on that offer, becoming her apprentice. I think that would make the Throne very happy."

This sent a shiver down Athena's spine.

Athena sat on a bench in the courtyard contemplating her next move. Vox lay his head in her lap and gazed at her with his ruby eyes. A dozen triders

## HUMMINGBIRD HUNT

scrambled about on the cobblestone like busy ants. Hefty metal plates, ball joints larger than Athena's waist—they were assembling something, something big. Athena snapped her fingers over and over again. The hummingbirds disregarded her. Somewhere out there was a hummingbird with a recording that proved her mother's innocence.

After the confrontation with Minister Lynx, she wanted to ask Dite to command the hummingbirds to identify the tonns with similar recordings to hummingbird 142. But Dite had disappeared. She wasn't in her office, and she wasn't in the main hall or the observation tower.

The servants had paid Athena very little attention and had no information to offer about Dite's whereabouts. The guards, on the other hand, had often stopped her to inquire about her business in the palace.

"I've finished a very important task for Dite. Have you seen her?" Athen had said when she was stopped for the third time. The guard had shaken his head and warned her not to loiter. The search was frustrating as she very much wanted to avoid Minister Lynx, the queen, and especially the Throne. Athena knew Dite could override Minister Lynx's command. The gears clicked. Why couldn't she?

Athena sat up. "Vox." At the sound of his name, the fox wagged his tail. "Do you want to hunt a hummingbird with me?"

They walked down the corridors. Eventually she found an abandoned hallway. A single hummingbird fluttered around a very expensive looking vase.

"Vox." Athena pointed with her finger like a gun. "*Psheu—*"

Vox darted down the opposite side of the hall and swerved around the pedestal, brushing it ever so slightly with his tail. The pedestal wobbled as the copper fox leapt into the air. The vase tipped over the edge. Athena's heart sank as it plummeted toward the floor. Vox snipped with his mouth and at the same time he curled his tail like a hook. He landed, a flapping hummingbird sticking out of his mouth and an overturned vase on his tail.

"You really do show off too much," Athena said, lifting up the vase and carefully putting it back on the pedestal. She reached down to grab the hummingbird from Vox's mouth. Defensively, the hummingbird's head lunged forward from in between the fox's jaw. The needle-like beak plunged deep into Athena's finger.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Ahh!” Athena pulled her hand back. Her finger spurted a thread of blood. She placed her finger in her mouth and her elbow knocked into the vase. Again it tipped over, and Athena reached frantically to catch it.

### *Crash.*

“Great,” said Athena. “We should probably leave.” Vox bit down hard on the hummingbird, snapping off its head. The bird’s tiny head skidded down the corridor. “Thanks, but I still need her to work.”

Silently, they made their way to the other end of the palace. Athena returned to the courtyard where the triders were still busy at work. Athena saw them putting in tubes and drilling holes that she assumed were an oxygen intake for a combustion port. Whatever they were building, it was going to be big.

Athena returned her attention to her task and proceeded to fold back the intricate metal plates of the animatonn. The design was top-notch. Elaborate latticework of blue steel, chrome, and brass were expertly fused to each little plate, the biggest of which was no wider than Athena’s thumb. The tail section folded back like a blossoming flower, beautifully hiding the joints. Athena reached into her hair and plucked out a bobby pin. Vox watched intently.

“Just doing some clever lock picking.” It took her the better part of two hours. At the same time, the triders finished what looked like a large chrome leg and were fast at work assembling another.

“I think I got it,” Athena said, rolling her stiff wrist. Her fingers very carefully reconnected the core in the bird’s head to the spine. At once the sapphire eyes began to glow.

Athena snapped her fingers. The hummingbird stared at her quizzically. “Find your creator,” Athena commanded. The hummingbird circled her head several times. She smiled in satisfaction. “That is right. I am your creator.”

Vox purred as though impressed. Athena stood up. “Now it can’t be this easy, but I have to try. Can you play the *original* recording of Gunther Biggs’ death?”

The hummingbird shook its little head, its beak swinging from side to side.

“Odds were against me on that one,” Athena said, biting her lip. “Do you even know which hummingbird carries the original recording?”

To Athena’s surprise and delight, the bird nodded.



## HUMMINGBIRD HUNT

“Can you bring me to it?”

The bird nodded again. Athena gaped at Vox, shocked by her luck. “All right, little Nymph, lead the way.” Athena and Vox followed the bird through the corridors again, trying to appear as unsuspicious as possible. Their luck continued, for they did not run into anyone other than servants. The bird finally stopped outside Dite’s office, proudly bobbing up and down. Athena reached for the doorknob cautiously. It was locked.

“You are sure it is in there?” Athena asked. The hummingbird again nodded its little head. Athena removed the same bobby pin from her hair and began to try to pick the lock. She worked, Vox at the alert, for a good five minutes before the bobby pin snapped.

“Ah, come on!” Athena kicked the door in frustration. “I don’t suppose either of you can pick the lock?”

Without another word, the hummingbird dove down and stuck its pin beak into the hole. It flew up a little, down a little, and then to the side.

*Click.*

The door swung open.

“Why would Dite build that function in you?” Athena said to herself. She entered the office and followed the hummingbird to the back workbench. The translucent black glass scraps used for Eros were neatly stacked in a pile, next to it, a broken trider leg, and finally, two scrapped hummingbirds lay in the back corner. Athena’s hummingbird pointed to a teal one and bobbed up and down.

Taking a pair of tweezers off the tool bench, Athena began to open up the teal hummingbird. The spine was still intact—the memories hadn’t been adjusted. Athena moved quickly, this time having already reworked the internals a few moments before. Twenty minutes later, the hummingbird’s eyes blinked on.

“Play the recording of Gunther Biggs’ last words,” Athena said.

“*Are you certain?*” came Dite’s voice from the bird.

“*Yes,*” replied Gunther’s voice. “*There is no hope of getting Mrs. Burly to participate. In fact, she said some truly outrageous statements about the Throne. I very much wanted to slap her.*”

“*I’m glad you didn’t.*”

## THE CHILD THRONE

*"If you wish, I can inform the queen. I know she will be disappointed. She was very vocal about how important Mrs. Burly's light would be for the Throne's future prosperity."*

*"You need not bother. I already spoke to the queen about our next steps."*

*"Glad to hear it. I shall return to the ball."*

*"Actually, there is one last thing I need from you. Eris, Eros...please dispose of Gunther out the balcony window."*

*"What—what is this? A joke?"*

*"Your death will give us the excuse we need to hold onto Mrs. Burly. Unfortunately, it is most necessary."*

*"I—I will try again! You don't have to do this!"*

A commotion and struggle ensued. Athena could hear the wings of the glass swans ignite.

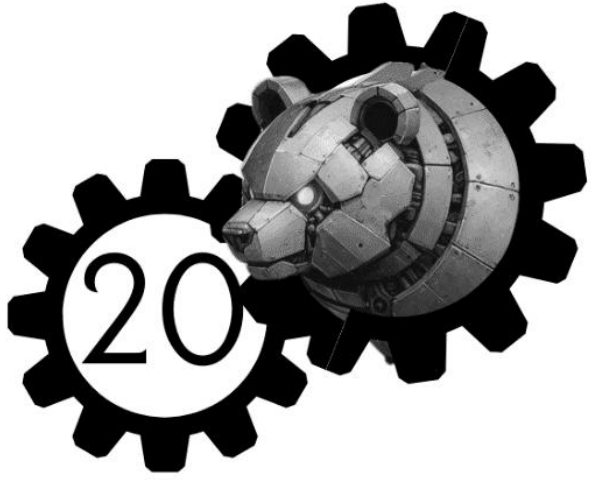
*"What? WHAT ARE YOU—NO, NOOOOOoooooooo."*

Athena's face burned hot. She wasn't looking at the bird anymore. While listening to Gunther's murder, she had unrolled a large scroll of parchment. The image on the parchment made her sick to her stomach. Detailed plans etched out a massive dragon. But it wasn't the dragon precisely that made Athena upset, but rather the base creature, an animatonn Athena knew all too well.

"Achilles," Athena said. "She wants to use Achilles."

"Can I help you with something, Athena?"

She turned abruptly. Dite glared at her and the broken animatonn hummingbirds, then her eyes fell on the plans. "It appears we have a problem."



## SCRATCHED

Ren and Thad marched home with wind on their heels. A new fire blazed inside Ren; Thad could tell. His father's countenance had hardened, somehow focused and distracted all at the same time. They docked the skiff and swiftly made their way down the lane, rapidly approaching their home.

"What are we going to do?" Thad asked breathlessly, half from keeping up with his father and half from the disturbance of their recent discovery.

"I am going to get your mother back."

"How—how are you going to do that?"

"The way I originally planned. I'm going to charge in with Achilles. Demand they release her."

"What an excellent plan," said Socks. "I always liked that plan."

"What if they don't release her?" asked Thad.

"I will throw this at the feet of the Throne." Ren clenched the swan's wing in his hand like a vice. If that isn't sufficient evidence, that is why I'm bringing Achilles."

Thad stopped walking. Ren turned back toward his son. "What's the matter?"

"I-I-I..."

## THE CHILD THRONE

“Spit it out.”

“I-I can’t help. I know I need to. If I don’t, you will be fighting alone. But the duskling—and—these are people—and I’m not good enough...”

“Hey.” Ren placed his hand on his son’s neck. “Look at me.” Thad looked at his father. “I’m not asking you to do this. You’ve been by my side every step of the way and I am so proud of you. But *this*—this is my responsibility, Thaddeus. This falls on my shoulders.”

“But I should be brave like you, like Mother, like Ath. It’s my—”

“Shh,” Ren shushed his son gently. “When your time comes I know you will act. But this is not your time. This is my time. Understand?”

Thad nodded.

“Besides, I have a job for you while I’m distracting the Throne. You’re going to pilot the skiff around to the back of the palace and rescue your mother. Do you think you can handle that?”

Thad nodded again. They turned up the dirt path to the house. When they arrived at the front gate they found it already open. Black tungsten limbs were strewn about the front lawn. Argus’s body lay decapitated in front of the workshop, his head overturned in the garden. Before Roland’s birth, Thaddeus witnessed the old wolf battle the greatest animatonns of Tiber. What could have done this?

He didn’t have to wait long for an answer. The front door of the house swung open and out walked Mr. Scratch. His black walking stick bounced up and down as though leading an invisible parade.

Ren drew his gun, pointed it directly at him and said nothing. Mr. Scratch remained undeterred.

“You are finally home. I wondered if you were going to make it back before dark,” Mr. Scratch said jovially.

“Where are the Appletons?” Ren snarled.

“Oh, them. They went home. I told them I received notice that you were going to be out longer than expected and you sent me to relieve them. To my surprise, they believed me. Very simple folk. Far too trusting.”

“Why are you here?”

"Is this how you treat all your guests? Such poor hospitality," said Mr. Scratch. "After all, you broke into my house first. I am merely here to collect the articles you have stolen from me. And possibly some recompense."

"You caused the island crash!" Thad blurted out as Copernicus wheeled up next to him.

"Put some pieces together, have you?" Scratch sneered. "Too little, too late. We have already won. You are currently looking at the most powerful man on Tiber."

"Did you overthrow your cousin?" Ren asked, not lowering his gun for a second.

"Overthrow? How boorish. I do not need to overthrow anyone. I merely tell my cousin what the Throne requests, and my cousin is all too grateful to oblige. He will now do anything I ask. Unlike your lot, I don't need unruly weapons to get what I want. I simply persuade those in power to align with my wishes, for the prosperity of us all."

"How magnanimous."

"Spare me your lecture, Mr. Burly. Moral platitude after moral platitude, it is getting old. Honestly, your entire family is such a disappointment. It is unfortunate for how talented you all are. If you would only come down from your righteous high ground you're so keen to die on, we could have accomplished so much more together. All I needed was a small compromise. The queen wanted the best light for her son, Aphrodite wanted the best light for her tonns. But each of us knew you would be utterly inflexible. The only way we could get Penelope Burly's light was to ensnare her, and even then, she proved to be stubborn beyond belief."

"Where's my son?" Ren drew the barrel of his musket to Mr. Scratch's face.

"The baby? Gone. I don't know. I handed him over to the spider things Dite made. After all, his mother is a murderer, and his father is a common thief. It only seemed best for an authority of Tiber to intervene." Scratch placed his hand on his chest.

"I don't care if you proclaim yourself king of Tiber, Carthage, and the lands below and above. If you hurt my son, Scratch, nothing will stop me from ripping out your spine," Ren snarled.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Mr. Scratch began to laugh as if Ren had told him a joke. “That is not how this is going to play out.” Then, placing his cane under his arm, he clapped his hands.

The sound of stone scraping stone reverberated from behind the workshop as Achillies rose to his feet. Dozens of Triders clustered over the ancient tonn’s body, legs, and skull, attached like a slather of leeches.

“Beowulf, protect Thad,” Ren roared. Within an instant, the bear had surrounded Thaddeus in its thick heavy armor. Achilles stomped forward. The ground shook. The workshop rattled. Blasts from Ren’s musket rang repeatedly. A flurry of light let loose on the rex. Four triders fell from Achilles’s head and belly. The lever action of Ren’s musket reloaded faster than Thad’s heartbeat, but the light had no effect on the ancient animatonn. Achilles’s tail whipped around over Scratch’s head and whacked Ren square in the chest like an uprooted tree. The force flung Ren backward and he shattered through the workshop window, disappearing inside. His light musket flew out of his hand, toppling onto the grassy lawn.

“Father!” Thaddeus shouted.

“So falls the great Ireneus Burly.” Mr. Scratch sniggered. “Pathetic.” He craned his head up to the triders controlling Achilles. “Go present yourself to the Kundry Palace. They are awaiting you.”

With no further instruction, the triders piloted Achilles over the gate. The rex stomped off into the distance in the direction of Carthage.

Mr. Scratch bent over and picked up the musket. “I never understood the obsession common folk have with their weapons.” He aimed at the house and fired.

*BANG.*

One of the windows shattered.

“I suppose that is rather enjoyable.” He turned back to Thaddeus. “Boy, hand over the stargazer.” He gestured with the gun to Copernicus.

“No,” Thad said, quickly picking up the copper-shelled tortoise. “I won’t.”

Mr. Scratch drew his aim on Thaddeus. “I won’t ask again.”

Thad put his metal bear arms around the turtle and hugged it close.

*BANG.*

The musket fired directly at Thad. It missed by mere inches. Mr. Scratch pumped the lever again.

*BANG. BANG.*

A deafening clang resounded inside the armor. Mr. Scratch had hit Beowulf in the leg. The noise made Thad's ears ring.

"I suppose I will have to hit you in the eyes. So be it." Mr. Scratch sauntered up to Thad. Every step he would pump the lever action and take another shot.

*BANG.*

Thad was hit in the stomach.

*BANG.*

Thad was hit in the shoulder.

*BANG.*

Thad was hit on the top of the head.

Mr. Scratch, now only a few feet away, pointed the gun directly at Thad's face.

*BANG!*

No shot came from the musket. Mr. Scratch had a glowing blue hole through his stomach the size of a fist. He collapsed to the ground, dead.

Thad's eyes cast about in a frenzy to see where the shot had originated. Ren heaved himself over the broken window of the workshop and crumpled to the ground. Socrates, in hand cannon form, was around his right arm. The otter's mouth glowed a brilliant blue.



## THE DRAGON'S QUEEN

Where is my mother?" Athena snapped. Vox stood, tail unfurled. Electricity crackled and sizzled. The tip was pointed directly at Dite.

"Athena, what do you think you are going to accomplish?"

"I'm going to rescue my mother. You murdered Gunther, and you framed her."

"Believe what you like."

"Stop saying that! Take me to my mother. She is innocent and I'm getting her out of this cesspit."

"Of course," Dite said plainly. "But this is not going to transpire in the manner you expect."

"Vox, stand down. But if she tries anything...shoot her." The fox's tail returned to its base.

Dite raised her hands and parted her fingers to show she would not snap them. She led Athena down several corridors. A pair of guards gave her a confused look but Dite assured them she was escorting Miss Burley to visit her mother. After going up two stairways and down a final corridor, they stopped outside two wide double doors.



## THE DRAGON'S QUEEN

"Unlock it," Athena instructed.

"I don't have a key. If you will allow me to fetch a guard—"

"No need." Athena snapped her fingers. She pointed to her hummingbird and then to the door. The bird zipped forward and speared the keyhole with its needle-like beak. A few seconds later the lock clicked. Athena pushed down the door handles and with a weighty pull, they opened wide.

Her mother was sitting in a chair, quietly sniffing, her head bent over something in her arms. She took a shallow breath. Athena was sure of it now. Her mother was crying.

"Mother...?" Athena said slowly.

Penelope stood upright out of her chair. Her eyes and cheeks were red. She looked at Athena with neither surprise nor relief, but with disappointment and terror. "No, not you too!" She turned to Dite. "You can't do this! They're children!"

Dite said nothing.

"Mother? What's going on?" Athena said. Then she saw what her mother was holding. Roland slept soundly in her arms. "What is he doing here? How did he get here?"

"Dite, not Athena too. Let them both go. They have no part to play in this," Penelope insisted.

"How is Roland here?" Athena repeated at the top of her voice.

"You see, Athena, this was never about the murder of Gunther Biggs," Dite said as she glared at Penelope, "but rather about acquiring your mother's light by any means necessary. We hoped her freedom would be enough—the desire to see her family would convince her to give in to the will of the Throne. But your mother is stubborn."

Penelope bit the top of her lip.

"Are your children enough, Penelope?" Dite continued. "Are your children's lives worth more than your bloated sense of morality?"

"If you harm my children, Dite, so help me—"

"I will do no such thing. It is you who will harm your children by this bullheaded refusal to give in to the Throne's will. I tried to help you time and time again, but you burned down every path forward. Is this the hill worth dying

## THE CHILD THRONE

on? Is this worth Roland's—and now Athena's—wellbeing? It can all go away if you just work with us. We don't want to be your enemy.”

Penelope closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. When her eyes opened she looked at Dite with a peace that made Dite shake. “I'm sorry Dite, I forgot you have been in this prison much longer than I have.”

Dite gestured around her. “This is not a prison. I am not a prisoner!” she shouted. “Here I have power over others. I can craft wonders to my heart's content. I can kill with no fear of reprisal. This is no prison.”

“Believe what you like,” said Penelope.

A dozen armed guards arrived in response to the commotion. They turned to Dite and then to the prisoners. “Lady Dite, are you all right?” the commanding guard asked.

“FINE!” Dite snapped at the guard. She heaved with fury. “Everything that is about to transpire is your fault.” She pointed at Penelope.

“We shall see about that,” said Athena, reasserting herself. “Vox, Nymph, get Father, let him know the Throne has us. Go!” She pointed to the window. Vox sprung out the window and skidded down the side of the tower like a mountain goat. The hummingbird followed close behind.

“Lady Dite,” the guard in front spoke. “Would you like us to send someone after the tonns?”

Dite watched Athena but spoke to the guards. “Why bother? Everything has progressed too far. There is nothing Ren Burly or anyone else can do to stop us.”

“My father is going to storm in here upon Achilles, level the palace to dust, and defeat the Throne,” Athena said to Dite victoriously, hoping Dite could not see through her bluff.

Dite smiled and shook her head. She turned to leave.

“I forgive you,” said Penelope. She wasn't looking at Dite, but instead at Roland's sleeping face.

Dite stopped in her tracks. She turned around and for a second eyed Penelope, her face squinted in disgust as though she had inhaled a whiff of rotten eggs. But a moment later her countenance changed. “I don't need your forgiveness.”

“And yet you have it.”

## THE DRAGON'S QUEEN

"On second thought," Dite turned back to the guards, "I believe it may be a good time to bring the Burlys in front of the new ruler of Carthage."

Athena cocked her head. "The Throne is no longer in charge?"

"The Throne is a relic of the past. Carthage is now ruled by the Dragon."

The guards, led by Dite, escorted the Burlys down to the courtyard. As they marched toward their fate, Penelope reached out to Athena's hand and gave it a squeeze.

"I'm sorry, I thought I could get you out of this," Athena said to her mother. "I thought if I found out what happened...it would matter. I was wrong."

Penelope didn't respond but gave Athena's hand another squeeze. For the first time in a long time, Athena felt helpless. With no tools, no tonns, they marched towards a complete unknown.

Footsteps drummed from the opposite side of the grand entrance. The doors groaned, as if eager to open and reveal what awaited them in the courtyard. Dite made a motion to the guards. They seized Athena and Penelope about the arms while a second pair marched forward and grabbed the twin doors. With a great heave the doors opened and the courtyard came into view.

A split second of jubilation in the Burly women quickly chilled into a grave terror. Achilles tramped up and down the courtyard, but the ancient animatonn rex had changed: his front arms replaced by chrome, and steel legs the size of thick trees. His back had been contorted and hunched, lowering his stance to an almost crocodile-like position of a stalking predator. Two enormous wings, identical to the swans' except in size and scale blazed forth into blankets of orange and yellow flame.

Dite's triders scurried about the body, busily attaching the final accoutrements. Shining steel spikes and iron horns lined the back and face. The top of the stone skull was sawn off and replaced with a horned metal cap. Panes of orange-tinted glass protected the new pilot. This was no longer a rex. It was no longer Achilles. It was a Dragon.

Queen Jocasta hiked up her dress and walked up the courtyard steps. "Dite, you have outdone yourself. The Throne—I mean, the Dragon, is happy again. You have my gratitude."

"Triders make light work," Dite said with a smile.

## THE CHILD THRONE

"You stole Achilles," Athena snarled. "I told you how to work him and you stole him."

"I did no such thing," Dite said matter-of-factly. "Achilles was confiscated by Mr. Scratch. Then rightfully purchased by the Throne. All done through legal channels."

Athena lunged towards Dite but the guard held her fast.

The creature bounded over awkwardly as though trying to walk for the first time. As it reached the front steps of the palace, the metal cap on the skull raised on a back hinge. There, sitting a story above them, smiling down with delight, was the Throne.

"It is amazing," he cried. "I am truly myself now. I have never felt so...alive, so...empowered. No one will dare insult me now. No one shall resist my will! I am the most powerful being, not only in Carthage, but in all the lands below and above."

"It is truly wonderful, my son," Queen Jocasta said.

"Do not call me your son. The Dragon is no one's son. I answer to no one."

"Of course," said Queen Jocasta, a clear note of irritation in her voice. "Your will is law."

"My will is beyond the law. The Throne's will was law. I am the Throne no longer. My will—the Dragon's will—is absolute."

"Yes, of course. I didn't mean to offend," said the queen.

"I shall overlook it this time. But be more mindful in the future, Mother."

The Dragon's head stretched over the Burlys. Athena noted the crown of iron horns Dite had added behind the skull. While impressive in appearance, Athena knew they served no function.

"Athena Burly," said the Dragon confidently. "You are quite beautiful. Do you know that?"

Athena refused to respond but rather shook her arms, trying to break free from the guards' grasp. It did not matter, for the Dragon wasn't at all interested in her reply.

"I have my first declaration as the Dragon." The great head cocked upward and a fountain of flame erupted from the mouth. After the flames subsided, the head turned back to Athena. The pilot sneered with pride. "I

## THE DRAGON'S QUEEN

declare my desire for Athena Burly. From this day forward, she will belong to the Dragon.”

“I most certainly will not,” Athena snorted.

“You cannot deny my will!” hissed the Dragon.

“You cannot have me,” Athena shot back. “I want nothing to do with you.”

The mouth of the Dragon opened and let out a terrible roar. “Then you shall be broken into submission by the Dragon. Guards, take that baby from its mother.” The Dragon then raised his front left leg. “Place it on the ground here.”

“No!” Penelope shouted. “NO!” With the two guards holding back her shoulders and waist, another guard marched forward and dutifully unwrapped Roland’s arms that frantically clutched his mother’s neck. Penelope flailed and lunged, trying to break free. The guards holding Athena released her in order to help restrain her mother.

Roland cried out. “Maaa! Maaa!” The guard marched down the steps, ignoring the baby’s wails.

Athena followed close behind. “Stop! What are you doing?”

The guard placed the crying baby directly underneath the overhanging claw of the Dragon.

“I’m teaching you, dear Athena, the consequences of not submitting yourself to those with power over you,” the Dragon said.

“Don’t! Please kill me instead,” shrieked Penelope.

The queen said nothing, but a faint smile slithered along her lips.

Athena hopped down the stairs, her arms raised. Slowly she approached the Dragon until she stood next to Roland. “Please, I’ll submit. Don’t kill my brother. I’ll do what you want—”

“Of course you will, because I’m the Dragon.” His face hardened with resentment. Athena was so close to the leg she could hear the hum of the gears within. She knew what they were doing and what was about to happen. Her words had meant nothing. The chrome and iron caught the gleam of the sun and the shadow of the Dragon’s front leg began to grow, enveloping Roland. The claw came down with ferocity and malice. Instinctively, Athena shoved her brother backward as hard as she could out of the great claw’s path. A steel ton smashed against the courtyard like a hammer. Penelope screamed.

## THE CHILD THRONE

But then, to her relief, Penelope heard Roland crying. The guards, out of shock of what had just occurred, released their grip and she ran down the steps. She picked up her son and began to cradle him. A few scratches from the cobblestones marked up his face but otherwise he remained unharmed.

“Athena, you did it! Praise the stars...Athena?” Penelope turned to her daughter.

Athena muttered incoherently. Her eyes were glazed over and she was covered in blood. Her left hand—the hand that had shoved Roland out of the way, along with a fair amount of her forearm—were gone. All that remained was a bleeding stump.

Penelope darted over to her. Putting Roland at her feet, she tore off a portion of her dress and fashioned a quick tourniquet to stop the blood. “We need a doctor, now!” Penelope cried out.

Dite snapped her fingers and gave an order to the hummingbirds to fetch a doctor.

The queen strode forward, an unmistakable note of pride in her voice. “Do you see now? I have *reshaped* the world.” Then in a whisper, she said to Penelope, “Is *this* what you call teaching your daughter responsibility?”

“Is she alive?” asked the Dragon.

“She is. Dite is fetching the doctor,” said the queen to her son. “She has lost a hand, but that is easily remedied.”

“Excellent. Perhaps Dite can make some sort of dragon or serpent hand for her. Fetch the doctor quickly. I do not want my new queen to die.”

“I beg your pardon?” said Queen Jocasta. “Did you—did you say your new *queen*? I am the queen of Carthage. The Queen Mother.”

“You were the queen in the age of the Throne. We have now entered the age of the Dragon. I have chosen Athena as my new queen.”

“That is preposterous. That girl cannot be queen. You may have her—to do what you want with her—but queen...”

“My will is absolute!”

“I MADE YOU!” roared Queen Jocasta. “I gave you everything. She doesn’t love you the way I do. No one does, no one ever will. You cannot take away my queenship and give it to some...child.”

## THE DRAGON'S QUEEN

"I SAID MY WILL IS ABSOLUTE," screamed the Dragon. "YOU MUST DO WHAT I WANT."

"No!" said the queen. "I will not allow this. This is too far."

The Dragon raised its head. He stared down at his mother with loathing.

"I will remain queen," the queen said resolutely. "This *girl* can be your plaything, your concub—"

**CHOMP!**

The Dragon bit down and the Queen Mother was no more.



## THE BEAST

The kettle whistled. Ren tried to stand up but cried out in pain. Slumping back down in his chair, he clutched his leg.

“I got it.” Thaddeus picked the kettle off the stove and poured the piping hot water into the teapot. The tea ball bobbed about as the steaming water began to turn red.

Ren took a deep swig of clear liquid from a mason jar. His face winced and he smacked his lips. Dried blood was plastered across his forehead. His left leg was braced in a makeshift splint. It, along with a few ribs, were more than likely broken. His breathing was pained.

Thad slid a mug of tea across the table. Thin vapor danced across the top. Ren poured some of the clear liquid from the mason jar into the mug. He took several deep draughts before looking up to his son.

“Thank you,” Ren growled through the pain.

Thad nodded. He placed Copernicus on the table, then taking the broom from behind the icebox, he began to sweep the floor. He felt he needed to help somehow, and sweeping was the best he could think of.

“Thaddeus,” Ren groaned. “Take a seat, please.”

Thaddeus put the broom away and sat across from his father. His head hung over the table, unable to look him in the eye. They sat in silence for a few



## THE BEAST

minutes. The door opened and Beowulf sauntered in. Socrates rode the bear like a horse.

“We finished cleaning up the workshop,” Socks said brightly. He turned from Thad to Ren. Both remained silent. “We placed all of Argus in a crate in the back. It is a very nice crate, for sure. He shall be rather happy there until you are able to repair him.”

Neither Ren nor Thad responded.

“I daresay, it seems rather melancholy in here. Is everything quite all right?”

There was another long pause. “No,” Thad whispered to the table.

Socrates hopped off Beowulf and placed his hand in Thaddeus’s. Thad picked up the otter and hugged him.

“What do we do?” Thad asked, putting down Socks. He scanned his father’s bruised face.

Ren shook his head. “I don’t know. Achilles is gone. Roland is kidnapped, perhaps worse. Your mother...”

“Maybe Athena is doing better? Maybe she found something.”

“Most certainly, Miss Athena is remarkably capable.”

“Maybe...” Ren glowered. “That doesn’t seem to be the type of luck we’ve been having lately.” They both sipped from their mugs in silence.

“Father?” Thad finally said.

“Yes, Thad?”

“You can’t charge in there and rescue Mother and Roland...”

Ren said nothing but continued to sip his tea. Thad refilled the mugs. The red tea had a hint of vanilla. It was Penelope’s favorite. They each finished their second cup when a soft scratch sounded at the base of the front door. Ren reached for his musket but moaned in pain. Realizing Ren could not lift it, Thad picked it up off the mantle, nodded to his father and opened the door. Vox zipped in, followed by the little hummingbird.

“It is one of Dite’s,” Thad said, trying to take aim at the tiny bird flitting this way and that around the house.

“Hold it.” Ren grabbed the barrel of the gun and pointed it to the ceiling.

“What are you doing?” Thad asked. “Dite killed Gunther.”

“Think. Why didn’t Vox destroy it?” Ren asked.

## THE CHILD THRONE

Thad lowered the musket. Ren cocked his head toward the bird. “Do you have a message?”

“*Vox, Nymph: get Father, let him know the Throne has us. Go!*” came Athena’s voice from the chest of the bird.

Thad sank back into his chair. Ren placed his face in his hands. Thad lay the musket across the table.

After another long pause, Ren spoke up. “We have to assume the Throne has Achilles. Probably Roland as well.”

Thad nodded. “Your leg is broken.”

“Aye.”

“You can’t march in there and rescue them.”

“I have to, and I need you to be ready with the skiff.”

Tears began to well up in Thad’s eyes. “You can’t even walk. If you face the Throne—Oedipus—you are as good as dead.”

“There are worse things. You saw what happened to the people of Carthage. I will not let their fate be the fate of your mother, your sister, your brother. I have to face him.”

“You can’t. I’m not ready for you to die.”

“Everyone dies.” Ren took a long draught of tea. “If this is the path the stars have laid before me, I pray I will face it standing firm with a spine of bronze.”

“Which is ironic as you are literally unable to stand at the moment,” added Socks.

“There has to be another way,” Thad insisted.

“You are a sweet, compassionate, caring boy. It pains me that we don’t live in happier times, that you might have been able to hold onto your innocence a little bit longer. But if I don’t make it through this, there are some things you must understand. The evil of this world is a cruel, vicious serpent, waiting to swallow us whole.

“Right now, three paths lay before me. Run, appease, or stand. If I run from the serpent, run from the world, run from my problems, I’ll survive awhile. But I’ll doom those I love. Eventually I will tire. The serpent will catch up, for it is relentless. And once it catches me, it will destroy me.

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"If I appease the serpent, I will empty myself of all goodness and live as a hollow, void version of a man. I will be a slave to the serpent, my will consumed by it.

"Only one option remains that may afford a chance at virtue. Stand, moored to truth, ready to face whatever evil the world may throw my way. That way, when the serpent rears its ugly head, I fight. I fight with all the bravery and courage I can muster."

Tears freely rolled down Thad's face. He nodded. "You have taught me that. That's why we are switching places." Thad took a deep breath. The tears stopped.

Ren shook his head. "No," he said, his voice cracking.

"I will put on Beowulf, your armor, and I will take your gun, and I will confront the Throne, Oedipus Sphinx. You have to...you have to fly the skiff. You can do that seated."

"Thaddeus, there is no way—"

"If I don't, everyone I love will die. You said there are times when I have to act. This is that time."

"It must be me," said Ren. "I can face death, but I can't face losing you."

"I won't be lost. You will know exactly where I am."

Tears fell through Ren's beard and hit the table. After several moments he relented with a nod.

"Thank you. I...hope I have the strength..." Thad said, his voice quaking.

The tears continued to roll down Ren's face. "Come here." He held out his arms to his son. "Come here," he repeated. The two embraced in a tight hug. Pain reverberated throughout Ren's ribs but he held on. When he let go, he cupped Thad around the neck with his right hand.

"Of course you have the strength. When I look at you, all I see is strength. You are my son, a ferocious unyielding force waiting to be unleashed. You, Thaddeus, you are dangerous. Deep within your heart is a beast, powerful and mighty. You need to confront it, tame it, control it. You will be fierce. You will be unstoppable."

Thad nodded. "I hope you're right."

"I so wish it was me instead of you." Ren looked at his son and loved him. Thaddeus looked at his father and he understood now what he needed to do.

## THE CHILD THRONE

“You should take Socks and Vox to help pilot the ship since you are hurt and all,” Thad said as his father let go of his embrace.

Ren shook his head. “I can manage the sky skiff. I will take the hummingbird and Copernicus to stay on track. You are going to need both Vox and Socks.”

“You sure?” Thad asked.

“I’m sure,” said Ren. “Oedipus Sphinx has more to fear of you than you do of him.”

Thad nodded. “Vox, Socks, you both ready to face our impending doom?”

Vox wagged his tail eagerly.

“For sure,” Socks chimed as brightly as ever.



## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

Thaddeus tugged at the leather straps, tightening his father's magnetic chest plate ever so slightly. Vox and Socks gazed up at him. He stood at the foot of the wooden ramp that led up from Tiber to Carthage. Black clouds rolled in and blocked out the sun in a gray veil of overcast. The silver and black dirigibles that hung above the palace disappeared and reappeared in the dark fog.

"It is going to rain soon," Thaddeus said ominously.

"Splendid," said Socks. "I have always loved the rain."

## THE CHILD THRONE

Beowulf slunk his head onto Thaddeus's shoulder, forcing him to pat the metal bear. Thad reached back and touched his musket to ensure himself it would be there when needed. After taking a deep breath, Thad began his climb up the wooden ramp toward Kundry Palace.

The march dragged on longer than he remembered. He passed the empty farms before entering the city proper. No fanfare, no cheering, no songs—instead eyes, eyes peered from the windows. It felt like hundreds, if not thousands of people were watching him with eager interest and anticipation, like a man being led to his execution. Triders clung to the walls of every building, focused on nothing but Thad.

The only citizens who weren't watching were the city guards. When Thad threw any of them a glance, they would look off in other directions. Lightning flashed in the distance. Several seconds later, thunder boomed in reply. More lights and more eyes peered out more windows in the upper district. Thad understood. He was the entertainment, and everyone was eager to watch.

Upon arriving at the palace, two guards lowered the portcullis, retreated into the courtyard, and disappeared. There were fairly large slots in the portcullis gate.

"Socks, can you raise the gate?" Thad asked.

The otter nodded, jumped through the hole and scampered over into the guard tower. A moment later the gate began to rise.

Thad, Vox and Beowulf passed under the stone archway into the courtyard. Socrates ran over to meet them. The empty courtyard lay before them—no carriages, triders, or guards. The only noise came from the two gurgling fountains on either side.

"Where is everyone?" Thad asked.

"Perhaps they are eating a late supper?" Socks remarked.

Lightning flashed. Thunder roared. Rain began to fall and splatter on the ground. The doors to the palace opened a crack. With footsteps louder than the booming thunder, the great head of the Dragon emerged from the dark entryway before kicking open the doors with its new front legs. The stone and metal beast made its way into the courtyard and let out a terrible roar.

"Oh dear, what did they do to Achilles?" said Socks. "He looks rather garish."

## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

“Frightening would be the word I’d use,” Thad gulped, eyes transfixed on the teeth of the Rex. He removed the musket from his back and raised it over his head, keeping his opposite hand spread out away from the trigger. Not taking his eyes off the Throne, Thaddeus crept toward the grand fountain at the starboard end of the courtyard. Slowly, he placed the musket at the base of the fountain.

“I would like to talk,” Thad yelled up at the Dragon.

The Dragon stepped forward, flame issuing from its nostrils. “You are trespassing,” the voice of the Throne echoed from within. “You’re here to do me harm, to challenge my safety.”

Thad removed the wing he had found on the body of Gunther and held it aloft. “I have proof my mother is innocent. She did not murder Gunther Biggs. I found this on the body.” The wing was a miniature version of the one that was now fused to the Dragon. “It was Dite. She killed Mr. Biggs. You said if we could prove my mother’s innocence, you would let her go.”

“I said no such thing,” snarled the Throne’s voice from inside the dragon’s skull. “I don’t care of this ‘proof.’ I declare your mother is guilty of crimes against Carthage, and she shall remain my prisoner until I no longer have need of her.”

“But it’s not true!” Thad exclaimed over the sound of the rain.

“True?” roared the Throne. “I am the Dragon. I have the ultimate power, the final say. I determine what is true and what is not.”

“You’re not a throne. You’re not a dragon. You’re a boy, like me. Stop lying. You weren’t...born into the wrong body, you didn’t magically turn into a chair overnight. That is not the way it works. You were lied to. You were used. Used as a tool by crazy wicked adults who should have known better. I don’t know why they allowed this to happen—maybe they honestly thought by hiding reality from you, they were helping. But you can’t escape reality, and you can’t hide from the truth.”

“I *am* the Dragon. I reshape reality. Truth bends to my will.”

“Truth won’t bend to the will of a child, no matter how much he may scream or what terrible tantrum he throws. And that is what you are, a child, small and scared. I feel sorry for you, what they have done to you. You have never been told no in your entire life.”

“My will is absolute. You only stand against me because you hate me. You wish to do me harm. Why else do you come with gun in hand?”

## THE CHILD THRONE

"But I don't hate you. I stand against you because you came after my family. Give them back, and I will leave."

"Never! The Dragon cares not for the pleas of mere mortals."

"Oedipus, please."

"WHAT DID YOU SAY?"

Thaddeus gulped. "Oedipus. That is your name, isn't it? Oedipus, Oedipus Sphinx."

"That name is dead. Stricken from the records. No one dares utter it. How do you know that name?"

"I have heard the dead in the land below. I have seen those who have died *because your will is law*. Their...souls—spirits—they cry out for justice."

"Lies—you lie! I do not know how you know that name. But because you uttered it, you leave me no choice. I will destroy you."

"Beowulf, armor." At once the bear encapsulated him in protective layers of the metal. "Don't do this, Oedipus. I'm here for my family. Nothing else. Please give them to me, and I will be on my way," Thaddeus said, trying to summon the courage of his father. "I'm prepared to do what needs to be done to get them back."

"Then you are prepared for DEATH!" The wings of the Dragon ignited. The horrible flames lifted the beast off the ground and propelled it forward toward Thad.

"Thrust one fifth power," Thad shouted. Beowulf's shoulder blades opened up and blue energy sent Thad rocketing skyward. "Stabilize," Thad commanded and he began to hover in position as though treading water.

The head of the Dragon turned toward him, its mouth opened wide. The core began to glow orange, and a stream of flame blasted from the mouth of the raging beast. Thunder cracked. A shot from Vox's tail hit the chin of the Dragon. The neck rolled away. Flames missed Thad by a hair.

"Drop!" Thad shouted, and at once, he fell to the courtyard below. He ran directly under the belly of the beast. Thad knew how slow Achilles turned, and the Dragon's new front legs did not offer an improvement. He stayed under the belly and out of view as the Dragon turned awkwardly in circles.

The musket lay next to the fountain. Legs of metal and rock pounded the earth and stone on either side of Thad, trying to squish him like an insect. He



## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

could not stay out of their reach forever. He had to make a run for the fountain. Not used to running in his father's armor, he tripped, sprawling out on the cobblestone path. Socks ran up his side and burrowed under his shoulder. With his two paws, Socks rolled Thad over. Beowulf's jet popped, pushing him back to his feet.

Meanwhile, Vox ran about the Dragon's head while his tail blasted shot after shot. Fortunately, this distraction appeared to work. Oedipus cursed at Vox as a child would at a bothersome mosquito. His lack of familiarity with the new legs gave Thaddeus the edge he needed to navigate through the pounding feet with Sock's help. Moving out toward the tail, he broke into a run toward the fountain, Socks perched upon his shoulder like a parrot. Running inside Beowulf's armor felt like running with lead in his shoes.

"He's turning," said Socks. "Take three strides to the right."

Thaddeus obeyed as the Dragon's left leg stomped down, missing him. Thad reached the fountain, picked up the musket and turned about-face, taking quick aim.

Flames poured forth from the Dragon's wings. The stone and metal mass lifted into the air, hurling toward Thad.

"Thrust-thrust-thrust!" Thad shouted to Beowulf. The shoulder blades opened again, rocketing Thad into the air in the nick of time. The full weight of the Dragon bore down on the fountain, crushing the stone structure as if it were made of sand. Thad aimed down and took shot after shot at the Dragon's head. Several hit but left no mark, not even a scratch on the stone body.

"I daresay, this Dragon seems quite impervious to your musket fire. That is most unfortunate," Socrates piped from his perch on Thad's shoulder.

"Ya think?" said Thad.

The Dragon craned its head upward. Fire showered in a fountain of orange, yellow, and red.

"Fly, Beowulf, fly!" Thad shouted and blasted off towards the roof of the palace. Liquid flame clipped his armored left hand. Sudden unbearable heat emanated from the glowing metal. Holding the stock of the musket in his right hand, he waved his left frantically. "AHH-AH-AH!" he shouted.

Socks slid down his left shoulder and dug his front paws under the glowing orange metal, ripping off the tarnished glove at the hinge. It fell through the air

## THE CHILD THRONE

and crashed to the courtyard below. The paw did its job. Thad's hand, though a little warm, was no worse for wear.

"Thanks Socks," Thad panted.

"For sure," Socrates said.

"Vox!" Thad shouted down to the courtyard. "Go find Ath, Mother, and Ro."

Vox's tail refurled, and he took off through the open palace doors. Quick as a wink, he flew down the corridors. Almost everyone he passed ignored him, as they were too busy watching the duel outside. He weaved his way inconspicuously back up to the tower where he had jumped out the window hours earlier.

Using his tail as a club, the fox struck the locked doors of Penelope's prison. They burst apart, knocked from their hinges, and the lock shattered to pieces. Vox scanned the room. Empty: no Athena, no Penelope, no Roland. The fox did not tarry but took off back down the tower.

He blitzed through corridor after corridor, making methodical laps around the palace until finally he made his way to the main hall of the throne room. There, atop the stairs, sitting in what was previously the "Throne," Athena cradled her now heavily bandaged handleless left arm. A glowing bronze crown encircled her head. Three armed guards surrounded her.

At the foot of the steps sat Penelope and Roland.

As Vox entered the hall he took quick stock of the room. Athena sat up in her chair.

"Don't move," one of the guards shouted, threatening her with the butt of his musket.

This was all Vox needed to hear. The copper fox slipped into the room. The second guard took notice and called to the other two. They all took aim at the fox and began to fire. Vox wound his way under the tables and across the hall in a flash. His tail whipped like a flail. Knee, gun, arm, back, gun, head, he struck the three guards in such rapid succession they barely had the time to get off a single shot. Disarmed and stupefied, the guards lay splayed on the floor.

Vox unfurled his tail that crackled with glowing blue energy, and one by one, the guards raised their hands in surrender. Athena and Penelope both got to their feet. Penelope held Roland tightly against her chest.

## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

“Vox, that was fantastic!” Athena said, marshaling over to him. The copper fox wagged his tail in delight.

Penelope looked at Vox. “Is Ren here? Is he causing the commotion outside? What’s the plan?”

Athena’s hummingbird dipped down from the ceiling where it had been hiding amongst the others in plain sight.

*“Once the coast is clear,” Ren’s voice echoed from inside the bird, “tell Athena and Penelope to move to the gardens in the stern.”*

Not needing to be told twice, Athena, Vox, Nymph, Penelope, and Roland took off down the corridors toward the back of the palace. Upon reaching the gardens, Vox sprinted to the backside and out the utmost balcony and began to wave his tail, now aglow in brilliant white light.

Their family skiff arose from underneath the balcony. Ren sat at the helm, his leg in a makeshift splint. Next to him, Copernicus wheeled about in small circles. Vox leapt onto the skiff. Athena and Penelope cried out in relief. Quickly, they all dashed toward Ren.

A cry, like a mix between a bird call and a violin, echoed across the rain. A glass swan swooped down, and like a hawk, plucked Roland from Penelope’s arms. Penelope shrieked, clawing at the bird.

“Vox shoot—” Athena cried.

“No,” shouted Ren. “Stand down.”

Eris hovered over the edge of the balcony, Roland clutched in her feet, nothing between him and the precipitous drop to the land below.

“This is your valiant effort at escape?” Dite’s voice cracked, her arm raised above her head. “It is unfortunate. You cannot escape the Dragon.”

“Vox shoot—” Athena barked.

“Careful Athena,” Dite shouted. “If my hand falls, so does the baby. You will all return to the palace. You will all face the judgment of the Dragon.”

The Burlys said nothing. Dite’s face contorted.

Then Penelope spoke. “No.”

“No? What do you mean no? I will kill your son.”

“And that horrifies me more than anything I could imagine,” said Penelope, her voice shaking. “But we are escaping this prison. I cannot force you to choose the right thing. But I can offer you an alternative.”

## THE CHILD THRONE

“What are you talking about?”

“Escape with us.”

“I told you, this is not a prison.”

“You’re lying. You are trapped here just as we are. Perhaps worse, because of the guilt you feel over the things you have done. You may have come to this place by your own volition, but it wasn’t long before you were caught in the web. You cannot say what you think; you cannot do what you feel. So you lie to yourself. You tell yourself there is no right. But I know *you* know that’s not true.”

“I HAVE THE POWER HERE. I CAN KILL YOUR SON.”

“Yes, you can kill my son. But you have no power. I won’t be controlled by rage, resentment, or fear. Whatever you choose to do, I will forgive you, and therefore you will never have power over me again. And to prove what I’m saying is true, I’m offering you a way out. Come with us.” Penelope reached out her hand toward Dite. Her voice quaked, her hand shook, but it did not move away. Athena looked at her mother, appalled.

“What?” Athena and Dite both said together.

“Come with us. Escape this prison. I am giving you a chance to return to freedom.”

Tears began to fall from Dite’s face. “How can I trust you? How do I know you won’t just kill me?”

“She deserves to die. Everything we went through is her fault.”

“I’m fully aware of that,” said Penelope, not taking her eyes off Dite. She reached her hand forward, open, welcoming. “I’m not forgiving you because you deserve it. You don’t deserve it. That is the point. I am giving you a chance to accept forgiveness and accept freedom. Leave this place. Come with us.”

With her hand still raised in the air, Dite made a gesture. The swan swooped over and placed Roland on the skiff. Dite collapsed and began to cry. Penelope approached her and embraced her. Together they all boarded the skiff.

“Where is Thaddeus?” Penelope asked Ren.

As if on cue, a dirigible high above the palace exploded. A wall of flame reached high into the evening sky. The fabric of the balloon melted away in seconds, leaving a sinking metal frame. A second dirigible went off, then a third. Ren watched the night sky come alight. His brow furrowed. The orange glow

## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

of flaming breath silhouetted the Dragon as it soared through the air, chasing a small blue speck amongst the lightning and rain.

“No,” Penelope said in awe and horror. “Thaddeus!”

“He will never defeat the Dragon.” Dite shook her head.

“Yes he can!” snapped Athena. “The oxygen intake that leads to the combustion port. If he can get a shot off—”

Dite shook her head. “I concealed it too well. He will never find it. It is—”

“—on the back of the right leg,” Dite and Athena said together.

Athena snapped her fingers. “Nymph, I have a message you need to get to my brother.”

Thaddeus barreled out of the way as liquid fire spewed from the Dragon’s maw. He kept sheltering behind the great dirigibles, as the Dragon had a hard time maneuvering around them. Blinded by rage and tired of the chase, the Dragon came up with a new strategy: to destroy anything between himself and Thad. Oedipus plowed through a smaller airship and ignited several other blimps in the pursuit.

In no time, a dozen dirigibles were set ablaze. Flame and metal rained down on the Kundry Palace below. Thad got half a dozen shots off, but still did little more than scratch the Dragon’s stone hide.

Thad panted heavily, taking refuge among one of the last three dirigibles attached to the palace.

“I daresay, that Dragon is making quite a mess of these balloons,” Socks said.

“I’m...just...glad...we’re faster,” Thad said, attempting to catch his breath. He leaned against the side of the dirigible. The rubber-coated cotton canvas rumbled from the opposite side. Thad pushed off the balloon with his legs. None too soon, for just as he got five or so feet away, a wall of flame burst from the top. For a moment, Thad gazed up at the four-story high flames, then from the heart of the fire emerged the Dragon. The stone and metal body clawed its way through the collapsing metal and fire.

Thad put his naked hand up to shield his eyes from the flaming debris. Without a command, Socks latched onto Thad’s hand and transformed into hand cannon mode, encasing it in a metal shield of protection.

## THE CHILD THRONE

The newly minted left leg of the Dragon swiped forward, catching Thaddeus off guard. Down the Dragon and Thad sank together. Even at full thrust, Thad could not escape the Dragon's clutches. Down, down, down they fell, until crashing upon the central tallest tower, the pinnacle of the palace. The weight of the metal leg pinned Thad against the stone of the tower's roof.

The Dragon's head swayed a bit, trying to line up over the left claw. Thad knew Oedipus was having trouble making subtle movements. Having piloted Achilles for years, aligning the head with any precision had always proven a challenge. Thad pushed up on the metal claw with all his might, but even with the enhanced strength of Beowulf, he was no match for the Dragon. His musket lay a mere three feet away but he could not reach it. The Dragon had him completely pinned.

The cap of the Dragon's head opened. Oedipus looked down at Thaddeus eye to eye.

"You see now that I'm the Dragon. No one dares defy me. Your fate will serve as a reminder to those who wish to threaten my safety," Oedipus shouted at Thad. "I am—"

But just as he said this, a hummingbird zipped by him and flitted down to Thad. It hovered for a moment cheerfully. Athena's voice came from its center.

*"Thad, it's Ath. We escaped! The oxygen intake to the combustion port is behind the right leg. Do you hear me? The oxygen intake is behind the right leg."*

"Ath?" shouted Oedipus. "Athena? My new queen has fled the palace? This cannot be!" His eyes scoured the skies before spying a small skiff drifting away from the Stern Gardens.

"No! Betrayal! If I can't have her then I shall cast her to the land below." The metal cap of the Dragon's head lowered again. Its wings ignited and he released Thad as he took off toward the skiff.

Thad scrambled toward the gun. He snatched it up as quickly as he could. Flame and smoke rained down all around him. Every second, the Dragon drew closer and closer to his family's small skyship. He rubbed his eyes, took aim, and fired. He missed. The Dragon was in spitting distance to the skiff. Its belly glowed orange as the beast readied its breath on his family. He aimed again. Taking a deep breath in, eyes open, he drew the barrel on the back of the right leg. Sock's mouth around the front of the stock clenched ever so slightly tighter,

## THE KNIGHT, THE DRAGON, & THE QUEEN

raising the barrel an almost indiscernible amount. Thad breathed out, and as he did so, he pulled the trigger.

The Dragon stopped moving forward. Its wings, still spraying flame, began to crackle with white light. It rose higher and higher into the air.

Thaddeus pounded his chest. "Forward thrust, hundred percent." He dove off the tower away from the Dragon like a bullet.

The Dragon continued to rise above the remaining dirigibles, far above the island. With the force of a tsunami, the gold spine of the Dragon ignited and the whole thing exploded. The shockwave hit the palace at full blast. Towers toppled. The dome above the main hall collapsed. Carthage itself shifted. The stern tilted downward until it slid off the edge of Tiber like a book teetering over the side of a table. As the edge of Carthage released its grip on Tiber, Tiber wafted upward.

Carthage, however, sank like a mighty ship in the middle of the sea, darkness swallowing it whole into the land below.

Beowulf hovered stationary in the air. His jets faltered a second here and a second there, but he was able to stabilize. He waited for a command, but the command never came. Socrates, still wrapped around Thad's left arm, transformed back and clambered up to his perch on Thad's shoulder. He peeked under Beowulf's helm. Blood covered Thaddeus's face. His mouth hung open; his eyes closed. He did not stir.



## THE PRICE

He is waking up.”  
Thad heard a familiar voice. He liked this voice.

“Oh praise the stars! Athena, Ren, he is waking.”

Thad smacked his lips. His mouth was so dry. He opened his eyes to find his head on his mother’s lap. Her eyes were all blotchy as though she had been crying, but she was beaming at him. His father was there holding Roland. Athena was there too, but something was off.

“Ath, what happened to your hand?” Thad winced. He sat up slowly, his head pounding. His mother gave him a flask of water which he eagerly drank.

Pink and orange danced in the blue sky as the sun peeked over a sea of green trees in the distance. They were on the skiff. They were descending.

“What happened? Is everyone okay?” Thad asked.

“We are all alive, thanks to you.” Ren grabbed his son’s shoulder.

“What about Oedipus and Carthage?”

Everyone gave each other quizzical looks.

“You don’t remember? You shot the oxygen intake. Achilles—or I guess the Dragon—the gold in its spine blew up,” Athena finally said.

“Oedipus is dead?” Thad asked.

Athena nodded.



## THE PRICE

"The shockwave ripped through the palace," Ren continued. "And because Oedipus destroyed most of the balloons... Carthage sank to the land below."

"I don't remember any of that. I remember making the shot and the dragon rising up in the air, and—and I realized I had to get away. There was a loud noise, and I... woke up here," Thad said, staring at the wooden planks of the skiff's flooring. "All the people of Carthage are stuck on the land below?"

"Not all." Ren pointed to the prow of the ship.

Dite sat there with Eris on her lap. The ship descended through the trees and like before, Ren launched a harpoon anchor. Dite shuffled over to the ladder.

"I suppose this is where I get off," Dite said with a faint smile.

"What are you going to do?" Penelope asked.

"I don't know," said Dite. "I could return to Carthage, see if the people there are as forgiving as you, or set off on my own to some grand new adventure. We shall see where the wind shall take me."

"Godspeed, Dite."

"Godspeed, Pen."

Dite climbed down the ladder and then shouted up. "Athena, take care of that hummingbird. I don't know how many survived the crash. I entrust you to be a steward of my legacy."

Athena nodded. With that, Dite waved and walked off into the unknown.

The Burly's ship began its ascent back to Tiber. As they rose, the ruins of Carthage came into view. The lower district and upper district—all were in utter disarray. People the size of ants scurried about like mad, with seemingly no rhyme or reason. Were they looking for their loved ones? Were they looking for the dead? *No*, Athena thought bitterly. *They were likely looting and burning, just as they were on the night the dusklings attacked.* She was betrayed by Dite, she was betrayed by Carthage. *They were all monsters.* Athena clenched her one remaining fist as she stared down at the island. Her eyes swam with hatred. She felt a hand on her shoulder. She expected it to be her father's, but it wasn't. It was her mother.

Penelope gave her daughter a knowing look. Without saying a word, she confirmed she knew of the hatred, the resentment, that boiled up inside her. She gazed down at the palace that lay in ruins and then glanced back to Athena. Her eyes told Athena what needed to be done.

## THE CHILD THRONE

But Athena didn't want to do it. Carthage, the Throne, this whole affair had cost her dearly. She had lost her hand. She could not get that back. Athena glared at her mother, but Penelope's eyes were peaceful, serene. There was a promise in them. *Yes, you can have this too.*

"Fine," Athena said aloud to her mother. "I forgive you...you bunch of jerks," Athena shouted toward Carthage. "You happy?" she said, turning to her mother. Penelope wrapped her daughter in a tight hug.

Ren sighed. The pain, while present, didn't affect his spirit. "We headed toward Tiber?"

"Affirmative," said Copernicus.

Three weeks passed since what became known as the sinking of Carthage. Many rumors cropped up about what had caused the dirigibles to explode and the island to fall to the land below, but since Achilles had also vanished, everyone began to think the collapse had something to do with the Burlys.

Rumors persisted that Mr. Scratch had visited Carthage when the island sank, but as the land below was more feared than he was loved, no one, including his cousin the governor, bothered to go look for him.

Copernicus returned to the Wayfinder. Ren added a new lock so only with Jack's permission would someone be able to command the tortoise.

Before too long, most things slipped back into normalcy.

The Burlys gathered around the table for a late dinner. Penelope assisted Roland in eating his beans while Ren watched Athena. He had built for her a new prototype hand, and she was attempting to cut her chicken with it.

"Loose sprockets!" Athena cried out in frustration as she snapped the knife in two, throwing the pieces on the table. "This stupid thing is horrible."

"It's all right," said Ren. "Your brain is still adapting to it. This part takes time."

"I don't want it to take time. I WANT MY HAND," she shouted.

"I know."

"And! And!" shouted Roland in delight.

"Be patient. It will get better, I promise."

## THE PRICE

"May I be excused?" Thad got up and left before waiting to hear his parents' response. He disappeared out the front door.

Ren began to rise but Athena raised her new hand. "Let me talk to him," she said. "I—I think I should talk to him."

Ren sighed and nodded.

Athena followed Thad outside. He was standing in the yard, his back to her. Argus watched them both intently.

"Thad, I'm sorry, I—" She paused.

He was crying. Tears rolled down his face to the lawn.

"Thad?"

He did not turn around. "It's my fault. It's all my fault. I killed Oedipus, I sank Carthage, and how many people's lives did I destroy? How long will they survive the land below? I caused all of it."

"Thad. Look at me." Thad turned around and faced his sister. She smiled at him. "What happened is not your fault."

"It is."

"No, it's *not*. You can't think that. Those people fell to the land below because they wouldn't stand up. Not for themselves, not for their neighbors. Because they didn't stand for anything, they fell, and yes, it's tragic, but it is *not* your fault. The one who is responsible is the one who did this to me." Athena held up her clockwork hand.

"But I'm the one who pulled the trigger."

"And you killed a dragon. Look at me, Thaddeus." She placed her hand on his cheek, something she had not done since he was a toddler. "If it weren't for you, right now I would be dead...or worse. You *saved* me. You, Thaddeus Burly, are *my* hero." Athena pulled her brother into a tight hug. He cried into her shoulder, and she cried into his.



The end





To My Readers,

And now, the moment you've all been waiting for...the author's letter to his readers! (That was sarcasm, in case you didn't catch it. I've been told I should clarify when I'm being sarcastic...)

THANK YOU (this part is *not* sarcasm)—if you read *The Bronze Age* and came back for more, double thank you! If you haven't read it yet, just know that Amazon is more than a rainforest.

*The Child Throne* is, in a lot of ways, an odd sequel. While every member of the Burly family gets their time in the spotlight, this book is structured completely differently from the first. The first book is a classic rescue adventure, but this one? It's a retelling of the legend of St. George loosely disguised as a *who-done-it*. And because I like making things complicated for myself, book three will follow a completely different structure as well!

Quick shoutout to my brother Austin, who asked for Ren to moralize less, and my sister Eva, who insisted he needed to stand up more.

Now, I'm going to beg you, dear reader, for two things. First, if you loved the book, please review it! 5 stars on Amazon, post a review on social media, make a TikTok, or whatever the new thing is by the time you read this. Reviews help let the world know this is a story worth reading!

Second, spread the word. Tell your friends, start a conversation online, see if I've actually gotten around to building a website yet. Share the book with someone who'll love it as much as you do. In a very real way, this story isn't mine anymore — it belongs to you, the fans (though I do technically still own all the rights, etc., etc.).

Better get back to writing now.

Godspeed,

Seth D. Coulter

## About the Author

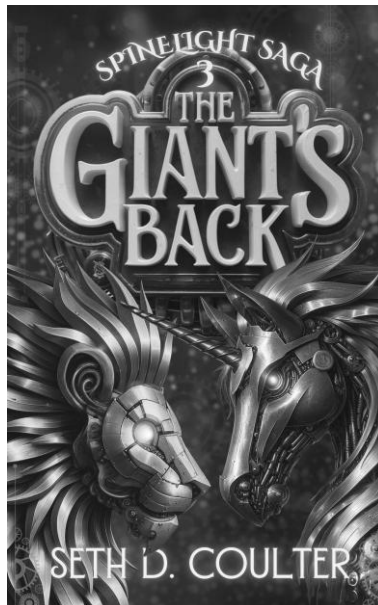
The author of this book is my dad. Dad was born in Ohio. He is very funny and good at making riddles. He loves video games, movies, and fun vacations. I think he did a really good job on this book. He enjoys writing, rough housing, painting and lets us watch cartoons. He makes us clean our rooms a lot. He lives in Arizona with his wife and three sons and baby daughter.

*-Leo P. Coulter (age 8)*

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