

# A Mirage Visits

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## Chapter One

*"Always fear the sky."*

- A common saying on Susilo ships

'Lethe Mirage!'

The words were spoken with an air of gravitas, rolling back and forth across the deck with a surge of authoratitive energy. They bounded about upon the sea of sand as everyone watched, and waited. Nobody dared to move or speak, their eyes uniformly wide and fixed upon the Mirage. Pools of water tinged purple sat just as still all around them, as if fixed in time.

The silence that followed stretched agonisingly long. The Reader glanced down again at his scrolls, a bead of sweat dropping down from his forehead onto the sacred parchment. He managed to remain composed, and intoned once more:

'Lethe Mirage!'

The being that they sought to supplicate stood impassively, coolly regarding the mounting agitation in the crowd without reaction. A bizarre divine contraption of coloured glass and gold covered his eyes, obscuring any light or emotion which might have lain within them. His shoulders slowly rose and fell, and it seemed as if it were the only movement in the entire world.

The final echoes of the words faded, and still nothing changed. Something had gone wrong. They were finished. All the years of preparation and practice had been for nothing. One of the children let out a tiny yelp, attracting a stare from his mother that was pure murder.

I closed my eyes and waited, trying to control my trembling and face the end with a little dignity.

But instead of oblivion, I heard footsteps. Lethe Mirage was pacing deliberately back and forth across the deck. As he did so, his right hand rose up until it hung above his head. I saw the Reader wince in anticipation.

Lethe Mirage snapped his fingers.

Everyone shrank back with a collective gasp, cringing away from the creature. Then he did it again, and again, stringing together a rhythmic succession of snaps and nodding his head to the impromptu tune. The piercing, sharp sounds of his fingertips were almost painful to my ears.

Was he... satisfied with the reading? The device upon his face made it impossible to tell. Perhaps this was simply the musical introduction to our final punishment. If so, all I could think was that I wanted him to be quick about it. Anything to dispel the icy tension which gripped my heart like a vice.

But it did not stop. It went on for minutes that crawled by like days, holding our rapt and terrified attention. Nobody moved, nobody spoke, and the Reader let his scrolls fall to his side. His fragments of ancient text hadn't said anything about this, and his lost expression scared me even more than Lethe Mirage himself. A dozen years ago he had been taught what to do on this day. Made to repeat the words until it was hard to think of anything else.

Rehearsal after rehearsal. Summoning everyone on the ship to their positions to go over the ceremony time after time after time. Gathering all of the correct offerings, telling them the same story over and over. All to be ready for this.

And now he didn't know what to do.

By now, only the Reader himself was old enough to remember the last coming of Lethe Mirage. Even then he had been so young that his memory of it blurred into all the others of his childhood, making it hard to fathom where it began or ended. He tried to force his disparate recollections into focus, remembering the time that he had stood with this friends and family, watching this ageless figure stare at his mentor as the words were spoken.

'Lethe Mirage!'

Had he pronounced them correctly? What if... what if his cadence and delivery has been deemed lacklustre? He had spent a lifetime moulding his voice into one that commanded respect. One that reverberated with purpose and direction. But who truly knew the standards of the being pacing before them? This strange finger-snapping walk could be the beginning of the end, and if it were then it was all his fault.

Feverish thoughts of a similar ilk were asked by each and every one of us when Lethe Mirage came visiting, and yet the ship still sailed atop the dunes. The people of Celestial Censor must never have gotten it wrong - their continued existence was testament to that.

Not yet, at least.

The snapping stopped. I felt sick.

Lethe Mirage's lips split into a wide, rictus grin that revealed brilliant white teeth. He pivoted around, facing away from us and striding away with a spring in his step. A hundred pent up breaths were released as he leapt down onto the sands, walking away from the ship.

The last we heard or saw from him was one last howl of passion just as he reached the horizon, now a mere black smudge shimmering in the heat haze. It rang across the dunes, and for years afterward folk said that when the wind blew hard you could sometimes hear it once again, carried back to us from a far away place.

The Reader passed away early that winter. Fluid filled his lungs and choked the life out of him with cold and slow surety. Nothing could be done to stop it. A curse from the Coven of Gaoth, some said. I always thought that it was nothing but bad luck and a body too spent to resist the intrusions of a lifetime facing the trials of the dunes.

Whatever the case might have been, the Reader passed at an inopportune time. He left behind a young apprentice as the only literate person on the entire ship, and even then they were far below the age that folk would usually expect someone to take up the mantle of Reader. Yet there was nobody else and the Mirage could return at any time, so they had little choice.

Luckily for everyone on the Celestial Censor, this apprentice turned out to be one of the most gifted scholars this ship has ever seen. Despite their age and inexperience they took to the scrolls with passion and dutifulness, placing the common good above their own pursuits and happiness at just seven years old. Because being able to speak the words is a matter of life and death for us all. The greatest responsibility on the ship.

My responsibility.

Ever since that day I have been the one to speak the words at our rehearsals. I've worked my way through the rest of the

scrolls, deciphering the old Reader's code and discovering what he was unable to teach on my own.

Well. Not totally alone. Occasionally one of the Readers from another ship will journey here to offer their guidance, but in truth I do not need their help. Our customs and the sacred words are emblazoned into my mind alongside the story of Lethe Mirage, the capricious guardian of our people. My shipmates call me a prodigy, but then again none of them can read at all so the bar is set rather low. All that matters is that I will be ready when the Mirage visits again, and unlike my dearly departed mentor I'm too young to succumb to a winter cold.

Eleven years have passed since then and my mind has remained sharp, although I haven't yet been needed. Lethe Mirage is unpredictable like that. Sometimes it will be weeks between visits, sometimes decades. There's always the misguided few who wait an arbitrary length of time before deciding that the Mirage will never come again, but each and every time they are proven wrong.

In the meantime, I bear two burdens. The first is to record the memories of my shipmates, keeping a book upon each of them that grows in size and detail as they accrue more years. That way whenever the Moth Queen is particularly ravenous, her victim can refer back to their book. Or rather, I can read it out for them and keep them caught up. While some of the other ships have literate shipmates outside of their Reader, Celestial Censor is not one of them... some days it seems that almost all my time is devoted to recording and regurgitating memories.

The second burden is to teach the children of this ship. There's so much they need to know about our history, and the best way to preserve it against the ravages of time is to imbed it into as many minds as possible. Which gods must be honoured? How do we chart an ingoing voyage across the sands? This knowledge and tradition defines us, and if that alone wasn't important enough (it is), I need to find a successor. A child bright enough to learn their letters and become the next in line to speak the words when the time comes. So far my search has been in vain, but I do not let it worry me too much. I'm still young, and every year another batch of candidates get produced. Sooner or later one of them will be talented enough to benefit from my tutelage.

It certainly isn't going to be any of the ones gathered in front me at the moment, though. Staring gormlessly and picking their noses seems to be just about the best this crop of youth can manage as I try to impart some basic lessons, going through the motions for the upteenth time. I try to speak of the Great Embargo only to be greeted by blank stares of incomprehension. I tell the tragic tales of the fallen champions and they seem not to care. There are hundreds of informative stories and traditions of our people, each one laced in nuance and with its own lesson to show, and yet...

The flickering torchlight and the heady aroma of incense within the hut should make of a momentous atmosphere - one in which mythic tales are whispered between learned folk and great ideas are fermented. These small children just seem to be lulled to sleep by it, which I take to be a sign from Admor. Her way of kindly highlighting to me the ones I needn't bother with.

'Scraps of literature that we still possess state that there were cities on the mainland.' I say, 'One of them was Caywake, a vibrant place of song and luxury which sheltered itself at the mouth of the Godfont river. Can anyone name another?'

Silence ensues. I take a sip of water patiently.

'Isn't Caywake the city where they throw people into the sea with rocks tied to their feet?' One of them chirps, looking up with sudden interest as I suppress a sigh. Death and suffering has a twisted way of inspiring the interest of children, in my experience. Already most of the others have woken up to listen intently.

'That wasn't the question I asked, Elzeke.' I say with a hint of admonishment, 'But yes. If rumour is to be believed the ruler of the city used that method to dispose of people he deemed to be enthralled by the Moth Queen. Of course the seas were still watery back then.'

A round of chatter breaks out as they latch onto this tragedy, revelling in the long-dead ruler and his horrendous ways. I let them have at it for a little while, fiddling with my papers as the nattering continues. A gentle shift beneath my feet suggests that the ship is changing course. We must be getting close to the island, which hasn't made cramming some knowledge into these children any easier. They're all too busy looking forward to having solid ground beneath their feet.

'I heard that he got killed by the demon in Nail Vale.' Elzeke says to his classmates, eyes alight and hands animated, 'It drags a huge broken sword behind it and has a pack of rotten hunting dogs.'



'How does it get you?' Another asks, enraptured.

'The dogs bite you and hold you down so you can't escape!'

'What's a dog?'

'A great beast! It has huge snarling teeth and walks on four legs like a-'

'That's enough!' I say. Everyone quietens down and reassumes their downcast expressions. If only all of our history was so violent. It would be so much easier to impart. Nightfall is creeping up on us, but I manage to tell them a little more about our world before it arrives.

Then I leave them with the same words as always: 'And never forget Lethe Mirage. Repeat it back to me.'

They repeat the words, no doubt eager to flee back to their homes. I'm about to dismiss them but... one voice rings strangely to me ears, discordant from the rest of the chorus. It's one of the girls. A scrawny thing jammed in at the very back of the room, mangling the words somehow when she speaks them. I stop everyone and ask her to say them again.

When she does, she makes the same mistake. One of the other children gasps.

'No! Why are you doing that?' I say incredulously. This must be nipped in the bud before it spreads. 'Haven't you heard me during our lessons? Lethe Mirage!'

She shakes a little but looks my in the eye and answers, 'But Reader, grandma says the words this way. My way. She said she was alive the last few times they were spoken, and that was the way back then.'

'Tell me. Can your grandmother read?' I ask. Coldly.

'...No.'

'And how old is she?'

She squirms and tries to escape my sight behind another student, 'Um... I don't know, teacher.'

'Too old to have a reliable memory then. Our minds shrivel as we get older, did you know that? Just like our bodies. And the Moth Queen is always looking to siphon away recollections from a vulnerable mind.'

'So she's wrong?'

'Not just wrong. She could doom us all if she met the Mirage alone some day. You'll have to teach her the proper way of saying the words, so repeat them back to me again. The right way, this time.'

I make her recite them correctly a dozen times, then send them all on their way as anger lances through my thoughts. The old folk on this vessel are another thorn in my side, or rather a thorn in the side of the entire ship. No longer able to help run the vessel, they instead cling to the idea that wisdom comes with age as opposed to a slow fall into inevitable incapability and death. With only that to look forward to, I suppose I can see why they'd do anything to try and make themselves relevant, but intentionally corrupting the sacred words and telling them to a child?

Then again it may not have been entirely intentional. Perhaps the Moth Queen has finally stripped away all of this crone's virtues to leave only spite, inaccuracy and stubbornness within her. It wouldn't be the first time that a person has lashed out as they watch themselves inevitably fade away... or maybe now that she has so few years left to live, she's decided to try and take

us all with her next time the Mirage visits. Not on my watch!

I resolve to bring the matter up at the meeting of the Readers tomorrow. If nothing else this tenebrous development is at least timely in that regard. For now though, I snuff out the candles and pack away my tools of teaching for another day. The view from my veranda should be very good this evening if recent weather is anything to go by, and I may even see the island start slipping into view before the pale sun finally surrenders to darkness.

I wander out there and take a seat, idly scribbling down some newer copies of more dilapidated books as I look over Celestial Censor. From my hut you can see more or less the entire length of the ship, which is covered by haphazard collections of dwellings interspersed with rugged farming plots. Above it all dangles the ineffable mass of ropes, sails and masts that constitute our rigging.

The Censor is huge if you rely on empirical methods alone. The only time it ever feels huge is when I have to walk all the way from my hut at the bow to the meeting hall at the prow, though. It can take a good ten minutes to get from end to end, and that's if I'm not interrupted or distracted in some manner during the trip, which I inevitably am. There's always some bit of rope that cannot be reached via mundane means, or a panicked shipmate who needs to recite their memories for posterity and will not get in line like everyone else.

The maze of buildings between the two ends of the ship are supremely ununiform in composition and layout. Buildings wrought from ancient slabs of stone dating back to our time on the mainland sit between newer wooden structures. All of it is thrown

together using a mixture of whatever we can salvage out of the sands and sparse fragments of home. To newcomers (or those badly afflicted by the Moth Queen's thirst) it is something of a nightmare to navigate, but I have always enjoyed the wonderfully labyrinthine quality to it all. You can spend one moment passing through a narrow wooden street with sand piled up in all the corners, only to burst out atop the roofs of ramshackle dwellings that have been turfed over to provide more farmland.

It can be rough to look at, but when framed by a beautiful sunset like this it's difficult for anything to look bad.

Distant sounds of song and chatter drift up to me, alongside the sweet smell of a hundred even meals being cooked. That should herald the imminent arrival of Aktos with my dinner, assuming that he hasn't been waylaid by a pretty face or a strong drink. I could keep him here for the night, but I'll need to be up early to meet with the other Readers when we reach the island. Pleasures of the flesh will have to wait for the time being.

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The seven of us meet at midday in the crumbling temple. Celestial Censor has had to sail more than a week from its usual haunts to be here, and I'm lucky enough to ply a route nearby to the island which plays host to the holy edifice. It towers a good two hundred Aevums above the sands, and probably would have been taller still in less tragic times (I am approximately the same height as twenty eight oranges stacked upon each other, for reference. So you can infer that the temple is five thousand and

six hundred oranges tall, but I find it easier to visualise two hundred Aevums myself). Even in its current form it is a beautiful blot upon the horizon that can be seen far and wide. The air so far above the dunes is cool and refreshing, carrying none of the grit and dust we are so accustomed to.

Sunlight washes over the worn white stonework whos detail has been long lost. Once upon a time, the arisen of the Gods would gather here from all corners of the land to share great philosophical communions, exchanging wonder and revelation beneath the soaring towers and tapering columns. Now it is mostly collapsed, waning alongside the world as each storm wears a little more of it away. The great sigils of each deity have been warped beyond recognition above each grand entranceway, little more than shapeless deformities in the stone. Perhaps one day the temple itself will be little more than a weatherbeaten slab of rock, all hints of its history gone forever.

That will be long after my lifetime though, and despite everything this place still reminds us of our duty. The world may change around us but the words do not, and it is our responsibility to keep our knowledge and memories alive no matter what state it is in.

And so we speak at length. At first we exchange stories from our ships, adding to our shared history and securing it in the minds of other Readers for the future. None of it is written down - not yet at least. Once the updates are complete we turn to more philosophical matters, reporting any new insights we might have into the ancient texts and scriptures as we sit in what was once the great reliquary - now the most intact room remaining. The

walls still stand tall and the great murals carved into them are well preserved compared to the faded symbols outside.

There isn't much new to say until it gets to be my turn. The other Readers are all decades my senior, and with that age seems to come an orthodoxy which dissuades them from new ideas and avenues of thought. I quickly tell them of my suspicions about older folk corrupting the words, contrasting the two styles against each other as they stare wide eyed.

When I finish silence reigns for a few moments. The gravity of the situation certainly warrants it, but it still feels good to have them keenly waiting upon my words, each of them taken aback by the problem I have presented them with.

'The old lady's words may not have been her own, Aevum. There are other, more sinister tricksters that haunt the dunes than a frail old woman. The Coven is always seeking to undermine our voyage, and perhaps they cast some sort of spell upon her weakening mind?'

It is Zhulavi who has spoken, the youngest person here barring myself. Even then he is at least twenty years my senior, and his entire frame wobbles about as he speaks. He should really take better care of his body, but his mind remains one of the sharpest among us. I suppose indulging in a little excess is permissible given his station.

'I doubt that.' I answer, 'It's true that the Coven like nothing more than to manipulate from afar and worm their way into our thoughts, but nobody else on Celestial Censor has reported strange dreams or inconsistent realities.'

'Not openly, perhaps. You know as well as I do how readily

folk keep such things to themselves, though. After all, who wants to admit that they might be in the Coven's thrall?'

There's a sharp bang on the flagstone floor as Gail whacks it with her staff, snorting derisively. She is eldest among us, and one of the only ones to have lived through more than two visits from the Mirage. Her skin twinkles with ingrained sand as a stray beam of sunlight plays over it.

'Always with the Coven, Zhulavi.' She says with a gravelly voice, 'Every single one of our problems is just another woe to be laid at their feet, eh? Is it another one of their curses that makes your chins jiggle so wildly when you speak too? Perhaps their hexes caused me to stub my toe on the climb up here this morning? The crones want us to fear them, and to blindly believe that they cause all of our hardships is to do exactly that!'

She cackles as Zhulavi blusters in search of an answer, turning to me before he can overcome it, 'Have you spoken to the lady herself, child? Why does she spread this error?'

'I have not.' I admit, 'I felt too clouded yesterday. I have instructed the child to correct her in future, and I took the time to read through her book of memories. There was nothing too suspect in there.'

She nods, 'And prayers? Perhaps Ezolile or Admor could offer you some insight.'

I don't need to pray, but that's not something she or any of the other Readers need to be privy to, so I simply shake my head.

Resting her chin atop her staff, Gail stares at me like she's searching my face for answers.

'...Talk to her yourself, I say. Find out how she's really

gotten this idea into her head. Then perhaps we can start considering the Coven, or the Moth Queen's touch.'

'I will.' I hesitate before continuing, 'Although the shipmaster may object to mine looking into this too deeply.'

'And?' Gail asks, 'It's your domain. Let her worry over her charts and plot new courses. The memories and survival of Celestial Censor are your responsibility, not Ortuck's.'

'Of course. I just worry that she doesn't respect my authority, or is just jealous.' I say, carefully picking my words so as to avoid too much controversy.

'Well then she'll need to do some introspection, won't she? The balance of power on our ships is split between two for a reason you know. Tell her that Reader Gail doesn't much care for folk that don't put the needs of the ship before their own.'

'I... shall. Thank you Gail. As for the words?'

Frastus interjects to offer his own insight, suggesting that the new pronunciation may be divine guidance from the Children of Two Worlds, subtly showing us an error which we had been hitherto unaware of. This incites a rather headed debate which continued deep into the afternoon, by which time we have worked our way through nearly all of the holy spirits that we brought up with us.

The argument is fun, but I was mostly interested in Gail and Zhulavi's thoughts on the deviation. I don't know any of the other Readers quite as well, and most of them serve on ships that I think sail routes much further away. That or they're just not as learned - complacency can come easy in a Reader's position. Eventually things settle down and everyone starts to leave, ambling back down the broken stairs toward the ships.



Left alone in the temple, I finally have time to focus on the real problem that's haunted me lately.

There's a crack in the stone floor that I remember, and I position myself so that I'm standing directly over it. Exactly the same spot that I stood after our last meeting, many months ago. It's hard not to feel a little shiver of dread as I affix my eyes on the mural decorating the opposite wall. It depicts a map of what was once our land, fed and watered by the mighty Godfont. Some of it is worn beyond recognition, blurred by time and neglect. Most of the inscriptions still remain though, depicting all of the tributaries leading into the great river as well as the settlements on its banks.

In my current position I'm just a foot or so away, and I stare at the Mainland that used to be our home, picking out individual words and markings. Scar... scra? Scrastome?

...It's gotten worse. It must have done. No matter how much I squint or strain my eyes the names and lines remain vague and indistinct, blending into other words and refusing to resolve themselves into any clarity. Whenever it seems that a word is becoming legible, it quickly retreats back into blurriness the moment I focus on it. I can fill some blanks from memory alone - Lake Glimmershade, Weary Mount, my eponymous Temple - but supposition is not the same as clarity.

The light in here is not poor. Sunlight streams in through dozens of gaps in the ceiling, and yet I can barely make out any words. Or can I make them out at all?

They seem to come and go in short bursts, but perhaps my mind is simply filling them in for me, painting illusory understanding

in place of certainty with my own stray memories and knowledge. I've seen the wall many times before, after all.

I don't remember having as much difficulty as this the last time around, but then again what if it was a brighter day? I pull out my notebook and flip back to the occasion: "bright sunlight". So my own scrawl says. And yet... how bright is bright? Is the light worse today? Perhaps it is as simple as that.

Of course if there's a possibility the light was better the last time I was here, then it might also have been worse. A clear sky is a rare thing in these times, and even when the sky is clear the Sun is faded and weak, so it was probably darker. Today could be the brightest day I ever remember seeing.

I look down at my feet to double check my position. My toes are lined up with the crack in the floor. What if I was further forward last time? I might have been. Must have been! These sandals are only a few weeks old, and are probably larger than the last pair.

A cold gust of wind makes me blink, and I wipe away accumulated moisture from my eyes as it imitates tears. I need to return home before any of my shipmates get worried. Staring at a wall as my mind unravels is a disservice to them, and I can still read my own writing to matter how blurry the mural's gotten. The Ember Moon Ceremony is looming over us and they'll be expecting help with the preparations, and the foragers will need help identifying the plants they've managed to scrounge up. I give the mural one last look before gathering my things and leaving the broken temple.

Zhulavi is waiting for me outside, sat atop a toppled column.

Behind him I can see all of our ships arrayed out over the sand, each of them a great beacon of civilisation. Lines of smaller boats float to and fro from the island, disgorging groups of foragers and children as each gets their turn setting foot on firm ground. Zhulavi looks at me, cocking his head to one side.

'You always stay behind after we meet.' He says.

'Yes, I do.' I meet his gaze with a blank stare, silently goading him to intrude further. Instead he shrugs and changes the topic, fiddling with the clasps on his pack while he talks.

'I was wondering how much progress you've made in finding an apprentice? You didn't mention it at all during the meeting.'

'Very little. The current crop of youths are... lacking - I'm going to wait until next year and pick one of the new generation.'

He shuffles about on his stony perch, dislodging bits of rock and dust, 'A year is a long time.'

'Is it?'

'Not that... ' He sighs, 'I'm not trying to patronise you. I just know that fate has dealt us worse hands before. What if the cold takes you, or a building collapses on your ship with you inside?'

'Zhulavi...'

'Maybe you sail into the Mainland by mistake? Or get involved in a freak accident? Imagine the consequences the next time the Mirage visits.'

I smile, but my fists are clenched.

'And what can I do about that?' I ask, 'Just because Mother Tractus could theoretically smite me at any time she pleases doesn't change the fact that I'm working with lazy children with

no passion for letters or tradition.'

'Those children are the tools you've been given. What's the saying about the craftsman?' He's glistening despite the cold. A fat idiot with no respect for a young upstart like myself, jealous that I have all the time in the world to pick the perfect successor.

'A poor craftsmen blames his tools.' I answer, 'So have we arrived at your point? You think that I am a bad teacher.'

'Well... you're young. Barely ten years older than the children that you're trying to teach. It's understandable that you'd find it difficult, but you're the Reader for one of the largest ships we have left. My point is that you need to pick the best of them, lazy or not, and cram out teachings into their head before something happens to you.'

I take my leave before he can spew anything else out of his quivering lips, and strike out for the ship. I was mistaken to seek out his opinion earlier. Zhulavi can only criticise and complain, and even then he can only do it more tentatively than a newborn animal exploring the outside world for the first time. I pity such a timid mind trapped in such a soft body. With any luck he'll stumble onto the Mainland himself on his next voyage, and I'll get another member of the newer generation at these meetings in his place.

The climb back down is arduous and the sun is low by the time I get back to Celestial Censor, casting long shadows back past me. Expeditions are returning from their own journeys, bringing back seeds and great sacks full of earth to refill our stores. We must pick sparingly from the island that our temple resides on, as

it's one of the few specks of land we can still walk upon safely. It will be many months before we can visit it again, giving it time to heal from the furrows gouged out by our spades and picks.

There was once a ship named Harrowed Hierach which visited the island too often and without permission. Within a few years other vessels started to notice as pickings grew slimmer while the Hierach only grew more opulent with each visit. Their people grew stronger as everyone else wasted away, until their treachery was uncovered. Harrowed Hierach is now a name that can only be spoken with contempt, and their ship was caught and burned a long time ago. It is the only time any of us wandering vessels have fought one another, and I hope it will never happen again.

My hut is one of the buildings important enough to stand alone, and it's large enough to house a gaggle of unruly children. When there aren't any for me to contend with, it can be very peaceful. I settle down to make use of the remaining daylight, determined to keep my mind clear with business. There are plenty of seeds and plants to identify, and some of my texts are getting shabby enough to need new copies made.

Zhulavi's words continue to echo, but I do my best to drown them out with the satisfying scratch of pen upon paper, letting it keep my company as night sets in.



## Chapter Two

*"The champions have failed or turned coat. Be it by incompetence or treachery the last hope of this world's redemption is dashed, and now containment is our only option. Take solace in the fact that your sacrifice allows other life to flourish, and know that you may yet rejoin us one day."*

- An opening passage of the Rharite Pact

*I'm back in the tower.*

*At least, I think it's a tower. I've always found it difficult to tell in the sheer darkness, but I always get the sense that an open space extends a long, long way above me. It just doesn't feel as claustrophobic as it would otherwise, and sometimes the faint jangle of what must be chains echo far above. The air is heavy and humid, so much so that I feel as I'm drinking it instead of breathing.*

*I don't feel the temperature in most of my dreams but I do here, and it's always too hot. Within moments I feel sticky, my hair clinging in thick strands to the moisture that builds up on my forehead.*

*I've traced around the walls on my previous visits. They seem to curve around in a way that means the tower must be circular. I once left a sandal behind and traced it all the way around, stumbling upon it once again at my feet after a lengthy walk. There are no doors. There are no windows. But the rock feels*

*textured beneath my fingers, shaped in deliberate ways that could be engraving or murals.*

*That person is still dangling in the centre, suspended just above the ground by chains and tendrils of a silky substance I have no name for. Same as always. I see nothing aside from the faint outline of their silhouette, their head slumped forward as they slowly sway to and fro. Their ragged breath tears at the air, irregular and faltering, but never ceasing.*

*Are they me? I've never been able to tell, and they've never once acknowledged me no matter how much I yell, punch or prod. If I had to guess I'd say they are a woman, but even then I only say that because their voice sounds feminine to my ears.*

*It's so dark in here. So hopeless. And all I can ever do is wait for it to end.*

*...But, as always, it eventually does. I feel the soft tickle of grass brushing my neck and the quiet lapping of water as I wake up at the lakeside. Pink mist gently swirls above me, obscuring everything beyond the middle distance. I can pick out the vague outlines of arrows shifting within it, embedded into the ground and protruding from the water. The air is light and breezy, and I smell lavender.*

*A woman sits atop a rock at the waters edge, resting her chin on one hand as she stares off into the distance. After regaining my feet, I clear my throat and step forward.*

*'Back again?' She says, turning to face me with a warm smile. She looks middle aged, maybe. Or old. Or young? Somehow all at once. She wears worn leather armour that's torn and scuffed all*



over, faded from exposure top sunlight and bearing clawmarks from all manner of presumably fearsome beasts. A battleaxe is propped up beside her, no less well used.

I bow habitually, 'Not by choice, but it's nice to see you again.'

'Any progress in the tower?'

'None.'

I sit down opposite her, picking the same stone as usual as a makeshift seat, 'And real life isn't much better. Yourself?'

'The Order is trying their best, but... well, ashes are hard to find and the world outside of your ship is a dangerous place.'

She seems upbeat nonetheless, leaning toward me with keen interest, 'Waiting for them to finish can get trying, but I get charming visitors like you! So it's alright really.'

I cannot help but be swept up by her refined positivity, 'Do you think they'll ever finish?'

'Only if they're lucky.' She replies with a smirk, 'So what's wrong with your real life then?'

'Well...' I tell her about the words and how they've been mispronounced. About the other Readers and their quiet coddling, Zhulavi's misguided attempts to coax me into impetuously picking the wrong child as my successor. It feels liberating to spew it all out without the usual worries of polite society to consider.

'I must be a leader. I'm called upon to inspire, to guide, to be a reminder of all the glory that once was. A firm bastion against the erosion of time and ignorance which constantly besets us all... and everyone else constantly threatens to strip away that with their pestering, doubt and patronising attitudes. They don't

see how much damage that does.'

She nods with understanding, taking my hand and squeezing it supportively.

'Remember that they simply don't have any experience dealing with a Reader as young as yourself. It must be an odd thing for them.'

'Odd?'

'To be regularly outdone by someone so capable of outsmarting them. Perhaps poking holes and undermining you makes it easier to deal with. If they go out of their way to find things to chide you about then they can still feel more learned and above it, at least in a small and petty way. It's a shame that they can't see how it makes you feel.'

I nod, mulling over her words until a thought occurs to me.

'Can I ask you something?'

'By all means.'

'How can someone... make their sight better?'

She frowns slightly, 'Elaborate.'

'It's like...' I gesture vaguely in search of the appropriate words, '...you know how some folk can't see things that are too close, or too far away. Especially once they get older and start breaking down. The opposite of being keen eyed.'

'Ah, so taking a person that can see poorly and making them see well?'

'Yes. Reversing all the degeneration.'

She takes a while to answer, looking away into the pink mist and scrunching up her eyebrows. I wait patiently, drinking in her visage as she ponders.

*'The divine words cannot do it.'* She answers, seeming to speak half to herself, *'To alter a creature like that would be to violate the Dancer's laws. That said, I recall more mundane solutions once being commonplace. Certain devices could be wrought which would amend a person's sight in order to mitigate its shortfalls.'*

*'Certain devices?'* I ask keenly.

*'Mhm. I know that they were once crafted in large and learned cities. A long time ago now, though. I don't know for certain whether anyone would have been able to preserve that knowledge to this day, but surely it must have been written somewhere. Even in the absence of equipment to make them, perhaps the right spell could replicate the devices.'*

*'I'm sure that knowledge like that would be well known if any of the Readers had it. We may be secretive, but a tool like that would be far too useful to hide away.'*

*'In that case there's only a few places to check, all of which would be on the Mainland.'*

*My heart flutters a little at the mention of the rotted wasteland we once fled from, 'Which places would they be?'*

*'Fobsharana, maybe. Scarstone. Plenty more through Wakerock Gate, but...'*

*'...But that isn't an option.'* I confirm, *'I know of Fobsharana though. Scraps of old histories and a mural in our temple both mention it, but it seems to be a long way away.'*

*'A really long way.'* She confirms.

*I look down and try to plot it out in my mind. There's no way I could get there and back without leaving Celestial Censor*

vulnerable to the Mirage. Even if we got lucky and he didn't visit while I was away, how would I even find the ship again? Ortuck wouldn't give up the navigational routes under any circumstances, and rightly so. I'd have an entire ocean of dunes to search through.

'Is something wrong?' She asks after a few moments of silence have passed, a hint of hesitation in her tone, 'You've never shown an interest in sight before.'

'A new chapter of the scriptures mention it. Once that I've only just stumbled across.'

She doesn't look overly convinced but lets the conversation move onto other things without pressing me. She's interested in the upcoming Ember Moon festival and wants to hear the latest gossip running the length of the ship. Who loves who, which families are feuding, how I'm getting along with Aktos, and all the other mundane troubles I have to contend with. She eagerly laps it all up, happy as always for the distraction from her usual tedium.

I wish I had the courage to ask a few things back. It never quite seems appropriate to broach the kind of topics that my mind keeps slipping to when in her presence.

As usual the wind eventually begins to pick up. The mists gradually darken to pink to mauve, swirling more vigorously around us as they signify our imminent parting. I'm close to awakening. She smiles and bids me farewell, dissolving into the mist as it draws in closer and closer. The lake disappears into fading memory as I start to fall, but I know by now not to be scared. The wind is howling by now, and it tears away at me until I'm ripped apart

*and hurled back toward my sleeping body. I see something strange through my disembodied eyes though, just as it's about to be all over.*

*A column of steel in the distance, towering endlessly upward into an empty blue sky.*

I wake up.

-

It's going to be an interesting day, I think. Tonight is the Ember Moon ceremony. If you don't know what that is (and I'm going to assume that you don't), it happens once every three years. The name is quite literal. For one night only the Moon smoulders in the night sky like the dying remnants of a great fire, bathing the world in eerie blood-like radiance. It serves as a visual reminder of ancient history on display for all to see.

Ember Moon is the reason that it is so barren and lifeless up there. The inferno wipes out any life that might manage to take root, searing it out of existence and scarring the surface black in many places. The rest is left empty, bereft of anything other than a layer of ash. The ancient texts tell us this and more.

For the Moon is our true home. Once upon a time we all lived and died there, and it was there that the Mothers of All first created us. The Goddesses of Time and Space forged us out of swirling matter so that they could nurture children that were a little less capricious than their original offspring. The Moon was verdant and plentiful, so we lived like kings. We built great cities of light and progress, lined them with wide streets wrought

from silver, and populated them with towering libraries that were the homes of exquisite works of art, poetry, and science. The wilds were vast and yet we lived alongside their denizens in mutual friendship.

It must have been beautiful back then.

Of course, the Lost ruined everything, as is their wont. They were despised and directionless gods who were cast out of some far off and unknown place in which they clearly were not wanted. When they drifted out of the void and found us they soon set about sowing misery. Jealous of our fulfilling lives and friendships, they kindled magickal flames which quickly spread in all directions beneath their malevolent tending to destroy everything in their path. Try as they might the Mothers of All could not extinguish them, but they did manage to save our ancestors from the blaze. Together they summoned a bridge which we used to flee down into this world. We descended past the Great Halo to Cildara.

Our new refuge was not as fertile or mild as the Moon had been, but we were still alive. The wild creatures here were not our friends but we learned to survive among them nonetheless. And while more disasters than I can detail were yet to come, we weathered every storm.

The Lost are callous and time hasn't reduced their cruelty. Every three years they reignite the flames, taunting us with the memory of the perfect world that they took. Unfortunately for them we are nothing if not spiteful. We honour the day with a great festival, thanking the Mother Goddesses of Time and Space for their ingenuity in saving us. Celebrating our own ability to carve out a place to live in this inhospitable new world.

They may have driven us from our old home and taken it as their own domain, but in doing so they ruined it. Now all they have to rule over is a mere pile of rocks and ash. And as they languish in the remnants of our work we build new wonders, like the ships and the spires. Even now we persist.

I recite this tale to my shipmates, clad in faded scarlet robes passed down over the centuries for this night alone. My words ripple across the crowd as others play out the story behind me, performing in colourful outfits that flicker in the carmine light. Aktos plays Attahua, the Lost Goddess of Pulchritude, wielding a burning torch and clad in a cloak of hawk feathers. He sets the world alight as the others flee across the bridge, his expression embodying Attahua's ceaseless jealousy and insecurity.

The air is warm and still, and the dull iridescence of the Moon paints everything in shades of blood. I always set it up so that I'm between the audience and the smouldering orb overhead, letting it burn behind me like a corrupted halo. It's little details like that which separate the good Readers from the regular ones, I think.

Between us and the gathered crowd stand wooden effigies of the Lost, rendered every bit as respectfully as they deserve. With one last show of contempt we light them, unleashing some flames of our own. I was eight years old the first time I had to do this, and even today a little bit of childlike awe rushes through me as the fire takes hold.

Ortuck held my hand the first time. But only the first time.

Then the children ruin everything, yammering and screaming as the adults finally let them surge forwards to prance around the

burning deities. Elzeke is poking at one of them with a stick taken from the island, but unfortunately his mother is close by. So I can't push him into the fire and solve the problem once and for all.

Of course I would never actually do that. I draw the line as mere fantasy, as any rational individual would.

Aside from the performers and myself everyone customarily wears dull grey robes. I spot one of the crowd giving me a dark look, quickly glancing away as our eyes make contact. It's the old crone that corrupted the words... well, she's certainly angry but seems harmless enough for now. I watch her hobble off to one of the tables so she can gobble down food along with a few others about her age. Decades of sandstorms make their ancient skin sparkle in the firelight, and I can't help but wonder how much the Moth Queen might have caused their minds to crumble. Young and old... everyone seems intent on causing me problems!

Aktos slides up to me, slick with sweat runs in long rivulets through the bodypaint beneath his robes.

'You did well, as usual!' He says, still breathing heavily from the throes of his dance.

'Thank you for saying so. All of this makes my wish I was young again.' I glance over at Elzeke and his friends, laughing and throwing rocks at the burning gods, 'Almost.'

'Ha! You say it as if you're old, Reader.' He grins as he replies, pressing a mug of wine into my hands.

'Aren't I?' I wipe a bead of sweat from his forehead, paint smearing onto my thumb, 'Every other word that comes out of my mouth is ancient.'



'True, but you can still walk and talk with purpose and grace. Older folk aren't usually that lucky.' He pauses to wipe sweat and running paint off his brow himself, 'If anything you've got the best of both worlds, right? Boundless knowledge housed in a youthful body.'

I reward him with a small smile, but I can still see the aged crones over his shoulder gathered around their table, '...Perhaps that isn't a good thing. A few more wrinkles might make the more venerable among us actually give a damn about what I say. Would it kill them to show a little respect?'

'Forget them. Tonight isn't about them anyway, it's about all of us hurling insults at those fuckers up there.' He throws up a pointed finger toward the Moon and yells a few just for good measure. Some of them are pretty funny.

Aktos is my servant. My friend? Attendee? I'm not sure that any title has officially been declared, but somehow he ended up being the one that brings my meals, cleans my hut and gets whatever else I need. He's about my age and we've traded memories for about as long as I can recall. He also works up in the rigging as a spotter and roper rolled into one.

Aktos cannot read but he can tie a knot more complicated and more quickly than anyone I've ever seen - and that's a huge accomplishment on this ship. Sometimes cleverness isn't just about reading books.

He's also getting increasingly drunk, and endeavour in which I decide to join him. Now that it's dark, hot and festive, I don't have to worry as much about being the Reader. Strange dreams, the words, Lethe Mirage, mine falling out with Zhulavi... all of it

can be lost in the smoke and heady atmosphere for now. I'll deal with it tomorrow.

The sky turns purple and white.

It's only for a moment but Celestial Censor is silenced. Some of my shipmates hiss in pain, dazzled by the brightness. Blurry afterimages dance over my vision, mixing their way into reality. I thought I saw something in that moment. Some kind of cloud billowing up from the horizon.

Low and scattered whispers confirm that it isn't just me. I feel Aktos's hand in mine, having taken it instinctively as he stares out over the sands. My feet are wet - I've dropped my mug on the ground, spilling the contents over both of us. It rolls lazily away across the deck.

**Boom.**

It's like thunder, but deeper. As if create chasms are opening in the world, dashing mountains and pouring sand into the abyss. Wild winds erupt out of nowhere, blowing our hair about and sending loose objects flying. Plates of food fall from feasting tables and ropes jerk violently back and forth up above us, struggling against the masts and crossbeams as the entire ship creaks.

The burning effigies of the Lost are extinguished, scattering hot ashes into the children. They scream and stumble backward, cascading over one another onto the deck and clutching their eyes. Despite the dim red light spilling down from the Ember moon, the air rushing past me is cold. Upon it is a burning smell, and then more ash.

Enough ash to coat us, sticking to our sweat and hair. White

layers of it already accumulate on the deck as my shipmates start to run, finally shaken from their reverie by their children's plight and picking them up to flee beneath the deck. Wind tears at my ceremonial robes and Aktos pulls at my arm, shouting something that's lost to me. I think he wants us to follow the others down but I stay put. A hollow feeling in my gut roots me in place.

I... I think I've read about this before. Falling ash, explosions, purple lights in the sky. It's all horribly familiar.

'Down below, quickly!' Aktos yells again, this time cutting through the wind. His eyes are wide with fear of the unknown.

'No.'

We are the only ones left on the deck now, standing alone amidst the ruins of the festival. It occurs to me that the embers might set the ship alight, but... that's far from our greatest concern at the moment. The winds is cool them quickly enough.

I shake myself free of Aktos's grip and run to the edge of the ship, leaning into the wind as it tries to hold me back. I grip tightly onto the taffrail and look out over the dunes.

The sands are seething. Great waves smash into one another, sending vast clouds of sediment into the air. In the light of the Ember Moon it almost looks like blood and gore, sloshing about as if seeping from a deep wound in the earth. But this isn't the end of the world yet.

A great groaning snap behind me tears my attention away, and it is followed by a bestial howl of pain. One of the masts has fallen, and Aktos is beneath it. The fool must have still been trying to get me to flee downwards, leaving him exposed when he should have been looking after himself.

His leg is... the red light is probably making it look worse than it is. I see jagged shards of white bone, and he isn't screaming anymore, instead staring mutely at the stricken limb as his blood mixes in with the ash.

I cannot help him. Not now. I'm a Reader, and there's something more important happening. Something that demands my attention. This event will need to be observed, written of, and studied. Eventually solved.

Because someone has gotten the words wrong.

Someone has invited the ire of Lethe Mirage.

### Chapter Three

*'The world became wrong that day, and it's still wrong.*

*Every day, every breath I take, it all reminds me of how... off... the world is. When I gaze up at the hollow remnant that is this world's sun, I remember the blood upon it. When I look upon the empty sky at night, I see the outline of where the moon used to be - that dark circle that's always present, blotting out the other stars in the sky. Whatever happened, it broke the world, and we're here scrabbling for a living upon the shattered bones of its dessicated corpse, like insects trying to grab the last morsels from a long-dead skeleton.'*

*- Vasnolu tries to remember the past*

Dawn brings with it a dire confirmation. As the winds die away, folk start to emerge from their hidey holes. Some of them help Aktos, hoisting the mast off under the instruction of Ortuck and dragging his shuddering form before our healer. I've no time to check on him further, having quickly set up a table and chair on deck so I can document what's happening.

The ash has stopped falling, although it still speckles my hair and lies in a powdery layer over most everything. As the Ember Moon is displaced by pale light creeping over the horizon, the huge cloud of smoke in the distance grows clearer and clearer.

The others do not know yet. There are hushed discussions

mentioning that this might be Tractus, smiting the unworthy in the distance with her divine powers of unmaking. But Tractus's star was nowhere near that position in the night sky, and there was no shaft of light accompanying her supposed intervention. It was all supremely obvious so long as you remembered your scripture.

Then come the theories that the Lost have finally devised some way to finish us off, and chose this night to demonstrate their power. And yet they struck at us with roiling walls of flame, not with flashes of purple light and howling winds. I want to snap at them and intervene, but writing my recollections before they grow stale is too important.

All of them are just dancing around the truth. I'm sure they know... or maybe they don't. Who aside from me has been able to read those tattered manuscripts which detail the coming of the Mirage? Those vivid depictions first written hundreds of years ago, echoing the very events we just witnessed?

It falls to me then. To tell them. I look up from my work, watching for Ortuck. She's moving between people as they belatedly clean up the remnants of our ceremony and wash out the children's eyes with cold water. Some of them escaped with mere grazes and tiny burns. Others took red clouds of ember to their eyes, and may never see again. Ortuck is comforting whomever she can, quietly sharing her strength with the others.

She took leadership of our ship the very same year I was named Reader, and we coexist well enough. Years of working in the rigging has gifted her with a taut and muscular frame, and her steely grey eye is the most astute and watchful I've ever seen. She's just about old enough to have a hint of sparkle about her

skin in direct sunlight.

She lost her other eye before I was born, and nobody has ever told me why.

She notices my gaze, and starts making her way over. I can see a flash of distaste run across her face before it's quickly smothered by something more neutral and appropriate.

'Has your note-taking helped you to glean anything about this, Reader?'

'I'm recording for posterity, not to study.' I fiddle with the corrective jewellery on my fingers as I try to formulate my thoughts into coherency, 'Ortuck, I already know what this is. Isn't it obvious that the Mirage has been misspoken to.'

'Not exactly.' She says.

I have to repress a sigh as I stand up. That would just make her angry. If only she could read like me. I point at the purple haze of smoke in the distance.

'All of this has been written of before. Almost every detail, Ortuck. This is what happens when the Mirage is displeased.'

She nods, 'Right, right. That doesn't necessarily mean that someone misspoke though, does it? A saboteur could have offended the Mirage deliberately, or the rules may have changed.'

Neither of these banal possibilities warrant consideration, especially that second one. What an outrageous suggestion... I take another moment, pretending to search through my papers as half-formed responses bounce about my mind. I buy myself enough time to select one of them.

'Only the most paranoid of Readers worry about anyone interfering with the words. The Coven and the Moth Queen plays

games with the mind, not with written word. It's more likely that one of the Readers made a mistake.'

'You met with all of them just a few days ago. Did anyone seem like they were on the verge of making an error?' She asks, focusing on me keenly. Her hands grasp the edge of the table a little too tightly for my liking. There's a dagger tucked away on her belt.

I gently take her arm and guide it away from all of my loose papers, '...No. We discussed the words and were all unanimous in our pronunciation.' Nodding over her shoulder, I direct her eye toward the old crone, 'I even brought up a potential deviation being spread, and we nipped it in the bud.'

'Yes, I heard Elle complaining about that during the festival. You should-' She stops herself, redirecting the flow of her words, '-So what now? If there is something wrong with the words but you were all in agreement, doesn't that make all of us vulnerable?'

'Probably.' I say, 'But the Readers aren't to convene for another few months at least, and until then their locations are a mystery. The words could be perfectly fine and a Reader merely stuttered upon their delivery. I've read of smaller slights being met with swift retribution.'

'Our caution comes back to bite us, it seems.' She looks to the horizon, then leans back from the table and sniffs the air. Faint traces of smoke are still carried by the breeze, '...Then we sail to the smoke plume. We owe it to whatever survivors might be there to check, and if anything remains intact then perhaps you can determine where they went wrong.'

'That makes sense.'



She nods, and turns to go. She only makes it a few steps before glancing back, '...You should check on Aktos. And speak with the crew. There will be plenty of time to write and study as we sail, and a few words of comfort could go a long way.'

'Plenty might not be enough.'

Ortuck bites her tongue and leaves. Her business is people and navigation, and that is no sin, but she knows very little about the tattered shreds of divinity that stalk our world. There aren't many words I could deliver which wouldn't inspire more panic.

But truth be told, there is not much left for me to pry from the papers. Nor any more detail to document, at least for the time being. So after a few minutes have passed, I steal down below decks to visit the healers.

Cloying smells drift through the cabins, products of the pain-dulling braziers lit around the injured. Wounded shipmates spill out from the healers deck, too numerous to all be fitted inside. Some children with burns and singed eyes, a few folk who fell and hurt themselves as they ran... but no deaths. Nobody has been stolen from us yet.

There is no crying, only quietness punctuated by the creaking of the decks up above. Endurance in the face of suffering is something we've all had to learn in the past few centuries, if they have been centuries at all. So everyone clams up and focuses on their own pain, determined not to share it with anyone else.

Aktos is in a bad way. His feathered cloak is folded up neatly beneath his head and his eyes are closed. His mind is at rest for now, drifting away as he breaths in the heavy air. As for his body, the leg as been set, but no amount of treatment will undo

that damage. His skin is torn and puckered, punctured by black stitches that are held taut by swollen flesh. White paste has been smeared between the furrows of broken tissue, holding back the blood. Red stains on the cot testify to how much there must have been, though.

He'll never be able to climb the rigging again, I'm sure of that.

I cannot help but mutter a few words beside his ear, telling him that he'll be alright. That I'll teach him letters so that he can keep himself useful.

'You left me.' His words are faint and slurred, and nothing else follows them. Perhaps he's lost in a dream. The smudge of paint from earlier is still on my thumb.

I have to get go back up top. If Ortuck is redirecting the ship toward the smoke, then I must be there to see it. Nobody else can record the intricacies of what's happening, and future Readers will be relying on my records one day. I bid Aktos a quiet farewell and leave before the heavy aroma starts to make my mind fuzzy.

It's an odd feeling. Disaster has struck, but there's nothing much to be done about it yet. People are already cleaning up the deck and repairing the masts. The wounded are being seen to. My notes documenting the event are complete, and I find myself listing.

Ortuck is busying herself with leadership, plotting courses with our navigators and making a show of being confident on deck. She stalks between each task with a gait that's almost predatory, rolling her glass eye around in an increasingly sweaty palm.

Nonetheless her outward purpose seems to bring a lot of calm to the Censor, as if she embodies Formal himself.

Formal would certainly be unhappy with me now... bereft of tasks or ideas, I'm tending to my garden. The ash might make for some excellent fertiliser, so I've gathered a few jars to mix with dirt and water. I alternate between pruning plants and stirring as a weak Sun slowly makes its way higher and higher.

I cannot seem to stop eating. A pile of nuts grows steadily smaller as I impulsively snack throughout the morning, always catching myself, yet always allowing myself one more. At this rate the ash had better work, or else I'll run out. It doesn't help that aching fingers force me to pause my work at regular intervals - they're bent in odd directions from a lifetime of scribbling and note-taking. As well as an unfortunate accident with Rikissa's hammer a few years ago.

I have to remove my brass finger braces whenever I wield my trowel, so the pain sets in quite quickly. And as I rest them, they inevitably twitch in the direction of the nuts...

A thought occurs to me as I'm digging a small hole in the dirt. A dream might be very useful right now, and I've been up all night anyway. I should be exhausted, and I cannot afford to be tired when we get to the site of the Mirage's visit. Better to sleep than waste my time gardening in a transparent effort to look busy.

So I turn in, taking a little medicinal aid to calm my anxiety. Unfortunately my slumber is dark and dreamless, enough to pass the time but nothing more.

Evening is drawing in by the time we draw close to the purple plume. I crowd alongside the others, craning forward over the side of the ship, squinting against the motes of sand stirred into the air by the breeze. The smoke has thinned somewhat during the day, granting a glimpse of the wreckage lying within.

The ship has been shattered. Reduced to a million pieces of flotam that are slowly sinking into the dunes. Scattered evidence of civilisation remains among the pile... the odd cooking pot or torn bolt of cloth in among the splinters. An acrid smell works its way into my nostrils, oddly spicy in odour. Everyone else clearly smells it to, wrinkling their noses or covering them with their sleeves.

I'd expected horror, but my shipmates seem more curious than anything else. A forboding mood certainly lingers, but something about the sheer totality of the destruction... I cannot even pick out any bodies or blood. It is almost too surreal to inspire fear. Were the people so utterly eviscerated as to leave nothing behind?

'Which ship is it?' Someone behind me asks.

Several inconclusive murmurs are the only answer they get. There's simply nothing recognisable to pick out, especially from a distance. Aside from our scheduled meetings each shipmaster plots their route independently. We don't know where any other vessels are at any given time, by design. That way we cannot be made to betray their locations should the Moth Queen or the Coven discover a ship.

Ortuck calls down to us, having assessed the situation from

the rigging, 'We don't have long until the entire thing sinks. Prepare the boats! If there are any survivors or clues, we need to-' Her words grind to a halt and she sneezes, the force of which pops her glass eye right out of it's socket. It tumbles down to the deck, rolling back and forth before coming to an eventual stop at my feet.

'-Shit! We need to find them, I was going to say. Get to it!'

The crew are shaken from their reverie and get moving. There she goes bringing purpose, clarity and even a little levity - albeit it in a slightly undignified way. The eye thing might even have been a deliberate way to clear some tension.

I look up with some trepidation and see that's spotted me picking up her eye. She's perched on a crossbeam that's a good four Aevum's above me... I clamber up return her lost eyeball as the boats are prepared beneath us. At least she's not too far up. You can get more than ten times that high if you're a good climber.

'Took your time.' She quips, giving it a quick wipe before poking it back into place, 'I thought it was lost to the sand for a second there.'

I bite back a petty response. My reticence to climb the rigging is well known. Instead I simply hold onto the mast tightly as I waver back and forth upon the crossbeam, focusing on her instead of the drop below. Generations of maintenance and usage have rendered the rigging a nightmarish mess of rope and wood that only gets worse the further up you go, all of a questionable age and reliability. I don't come up here very often.

'I should be in one of the boats.' I say.

'I agree. You might spot something that the rest of us wont notice, or wont be able to read.' She looks back at the wreckage and seems somewhat suspicious. I cannot tell whether it's directed at me, or this situation as a whole, 'It's not just ash in the air.'

'How so?'

She sneezes again, making sure to have a hand over her false eye this time. Despite that she effortlessly remains balanced with naught but her feet in a truly irksome manner, 'No matter. Sorry, here I am speculating while you're clinging on for dear life. Climb back down and grab your spellbook. Let's find out what's going on here.'

And so we launch the boats. They are diminutive bowls of salvaged driftwood swept smooth by the sands, carrying a half dozen shipmates each. Most are my senior, uniformly glittering in the faded sunlight.

Scraps of cloth and other detritus I cannot name is eddied back and forth in the air, which carries a diverse smell upon it, snatches of the people that used to be here. Hints of spices and soap hidden in among acrid smoke. I try to picture their ast moments and see only my own burry memories of the Mirage standing before mine predecessor. A being that could feel so insulted as to demolish an entire ship simply for being unable to speak his name.

Why?

I think we sailed past the former storerooms next, entering into the roughly oval ring of debris which marked where the vessel once stood. Most of it is now in splinters, and mostly submerged.

The others are quiet, occasionally leaning out to pluck

something from the sand and place it in a gradually growing pile of salvage. Shards of pots, a rare intact utensil or bolt of cloth... I tell myself that it is not callous, especially when we may be taking from sinners who misremembered the words. I leaf through my book in search of a spell that might help us discover any lingering remnants of life in the wreckage.

Eventually I happen upon one, penned by my dead tutor. Originally meant for locating livestock that may have wandered below deck and gotten lost. A few minute alterations should make it suitable here instead.

I murmur divine words of power as my crooked fingers trace across the lines of text... and nothing happens. Nothing?

I lean in closer and squint, trying to decipher this mixture of mine and my predecessor's writings from many months or years ago. A dull whine grows in my mind and I struggle to think, a bitter taste welling within my throat as I fight to suppress the tremors building within me, as if mine body is trying to shake itself apart. The words are incensed by my efforts. I notice Oci glance over at me in consternation from the prow.

Just focus.

The spidery writing grows a little clearer as I force the words into some kind of resolution, and I try again.

The page glows softly, as do mine eyes, spilling pale blue light over my shipmates. I breath deeply, sagging a little, then look up. The world is changed, and in place of the whining and shakes I feel the faintest tugging sensation in my mind. It pulls my attention to the left and I point after it, 'That way.'

We steer the boat at my direction, following the gentle trail

of instructions flowing through my thoughts. In truth casting spells terrifies me, and I'm certainly not as prone to showing off as other Readers I could mention. All manner of harm can be caused with mispronunciations or overly wreckless improvisation - just look at the situation we're in currently. I live my life with one axiom when it comes to the arcane: cast magicks little, but make sure when you do it is important.

There's a shout from the prow as Trish leans over Oci's shoulder, pointing ahead of us. She's seen something... someone. I follow her gesticulations and pick out a body, lying across a few planks of wood that yet float. She claps me on the shoulder by way of congratulations and I wince away, fighting down the urge to hit her in response.

We make for the survivor as quickly as possible. I even risk another spell, stirring up the wind to fill our little sail.

It's a man. His skin is ragged and worn from biting sand and searing ash. Small burns over his arms and he lies still, but breath still runs through his body. Trish drags him aboard, making the boat lurch alarmingly.

He looks to be in his late forties, or maybe early fifties? Enough that I already worry for his memory - she can start feasting upon them much earlier than that if you're unlucky. He is thin and gaunt, with short grey hair and a pair of fingerless red gloves over his slender hands. He has surprisingly good teeth, something that stands out to me for some reason I'm unable to fully fathom. Perfectly straight and white despite his age and ordeals.

'If this man lives, then where is everyone else?' I mutter,



seeing the question reflected upon the faces of mine shipmates.

'Well, he's alive. Just about.' Trish announces, standing up to signal the other boats, 'We'd best head back before that changes, get some food and water into him.'

And so they do, transferring my precariously onto another boat to continue the search without them. My gut tells me that we've found the most important thing already, but there are more useful trinkets out here to collect even if none of them help with the Mirage problem. More specifically we find a few scattered pages still atop the sands, left behind by a fellow Reader. Not enough for me to identify who it was, but with some more study and decryption back on the ship I might be able to figure it out.

Something about picking through all these remnants seems to be calming everyone down, I think. Or perhaps the sort of folk willing to sail out here in small boats to poke around are the most stalwart of us to begin with?

Another question for me to ask when I next dream, I suppose. By midday there isn't much left to salvage. Slowly but surely the sand claims it all, ushering it down below the dunes toward oblivion. Soon enough my nails are stinging from grains of sand embedded beneath them, and it becomes apparent that there's no more point in being out here.

Shouts are coming from Celestial Censor as we return. The man we rescued is on his feet, leaning over the guardrail to peer at us with desperate eyes.

'My daughter? Did you find her?!' He shouts, his voice coarse from being stuck under the sun all day. The fact that he's up and about so soon is amazing in and of itself, but now he's gripping

the rail with a strength that belies his age.

The answer is plain enough to see - our boat carries no new occupants. Hid head sinks down into his arms, hiding his face from the world. He stays silent as we climb back aboard, and everyone stays a fair distance away from him.

The dead don't go to any kind of paradise in Cildara. Not anymore. Whoever his daughter is, she isn't in a better place.

I should ask him who the Reader was on his ship. Finding out how they got the words wrong is the most important thing in the world right now, but... I glance over at Ortuck, who must be thinking something similar.

'This is the Celestial Censor.' She finally says, her voice hanging in the air, 'None of us can imagine your pain, but you have a home here if you want it. When you're ready, please tell us what happened.'

We wait. I want to rush forward and shake some answers out of him, but something about his silence scares me.

It seems like there's no response forthcoming, but then he straightens up, arching his neck back to stare up at the smoke-tinged sky. Then he starts to speak, relaying a little more of his tale with each ragged syllable.

His ship was celebrating the Ember Moon just as we were. They had fresh food prepared - gathered from our meeting at the island, and enough to assemble a proper feast. They still had watchers up in the rigging of course, keenly alert for any wurms or clouds drifting in from the mainland.

As night set in they saw a pinprick of purple light on the horizon. The Reader was summoned and determined that yes, the

Lethe Mirage was approaching.

Nobody panicked, he said. They gathered an appropriate offering of food and wine, retrieved the Mirage's banners to hand from the rigging, and left the Reader alone to rehearse. People trembled in anticipation and fear, but beneath it remained a sense of purpose. They had known what to do, even if few of them had lived through it before. Large parts of their lives had been devoted to preparing for it after all. They finished their preparations, prayed quietly to Formal and Admor for protection, and waited.

Soon enough they had heard the Mirage's song on the air. Punctuated by a sharp rhythmic snapping sound, before he was in their presence. The man was vague about this - did he appear in the blink of an eye? Walk up to them? I didn't interrupt to ask, he had a distant and empty expression that seemed fragile. I didn't want to throw him off course.

After a few moments, the Mirage had looked to the Reader, waiting for his name to be spoken.

'What did the Reader say?' Ortuck asks quietly.

'Lethe Mirage.' He answers.

There's a moment of taut silence before everyone looks to me. He's spoken the words correctly. The same way we all agreed at the temple not two weeks ago. Every syllable positioned correctly, and with admirable cadence despite the ragged edge to his voice.

'Lethe Mirage.' I whisper back, 'Exactly like that?'

It's enough for some of my shipmates to collapse down onto the deck or the guardrail, stricken by the awful confirmation of this truth they'd probably known all along.

Ortuck shakes her head as if trying to disperse an intrusive thought, and press for more information.

'Which was your ship? And who was your Reader? We found no hint of it in the sands.'

He opens his mouth to answer, but hesitates. He stares into the middle distance for a moment, his face wearing an expression that we all know too well, 'I... I don't know. I can see the ship, but not her name.'

Ortuck lists off the names of several vessels in rapid succession: Divine Dictator, Ethereal Engram, Ardent Archivist... her initial vexation turns to disquietude as none of them spark any hint of recognition in his eyes. Each of these vessels has a storied history dating back centuries. They are the heart and soul of our people, and he remembers not a one. The Moth Queen has eaten well.

'What of the Reader? Zhulavi, or Gail perhaps?' I ask, softly taking ahold of his shoulder and looking into his grey eyes, 'If not names, maybe you could just tell me what they looked like?'

'They... they were... I don't know the name, and the face is blank.' He takes a step back, swatting at the air beside his head, 'Every time I try to think about it, it just fades away.'

'You mentioned a daughter.' Ortuck says, 'What about her?'

'Nothing...' He replies, his voice barely a whisper. Dark realisation sinks harrowing claws into his mind. Tears brim at the edges of his eyes.

It's no use. We question further and do our utmost to inspire any other memories, but he cannot recall even his own name, let alone that of his daughter. He seems on the verge of crying, but

cannot quite grasp the reasons why he should do so. I suppose it's hard to mourn properly when you cannot envisage what you've lost. He seems empty, and his answers grow increasingly barren and monosyllabic.

Nobody on Celestial Censor knows him well enough to guess at his name. Some say they vaguely recall his face from our gathering on the island - apparently he helped to pick wild flax and other herbs - but their knowledge extends no further.

'This isn't getting us anywhere. I've never seen consumption so devastating.' Ortuck tells me.

I nod, 'A lifetime of her predations concentrated in a span of hours.'

'And no partner to exchange memories with.' She sighs, very briefly letting me see an expression equal parts weary and worried before mastering herself, 'You should get started decrypting those papers that you found.'

And with that I commence the nigh impossible task of trying to understand another Reader's hand. My mentor taught me a little about ciphers and breaking them before his untimely demise, but nothing of this magnitude. Ortuck has no idea what she's actually asking of me - the scribbles and interlocking shapes could keep their secrets for weeks before I make any progres.

I mentioned this in passing previously, but it warrants expansion upon given the situation. We write in this manner to keep ourselves safe. Secrecy is practised so that if one of us falls, none of the others can follow. The Moth Queen's champions, the Coven, the Lost... so many would see us ruined, and if they could read our words and charts we would be hunted methodically.

Lethe Mirage is supposed to be our protector, but now through our ineptitude we've turned even him into an enemy. It's a dark and twisted irony that our own paranoia now further damns us. The candles in mine hut burn low as I pour over books about lost languages and ancient codes, trying to find some link or familiar symbol.

Eventually I feel heavy, and my mind simply spins lazily in endless circles as my eyes draft between pages. They blur each line together into a single block until I'm barely thinking at all. Weariness has seeped into me and grasps my mind in its warm embrace, gently embargoing knowledge from travelling in or out. Why even try in this state? I'm barely awake.

Finally a concrete thought emerges. I'm barely awake! After everything I've seen today, surely I'll dream. The unsettled mind wanders during slumber, venturing down eerie and tenebrous paths. Often informative ones, as well.

-

*The Tower. Her desperate breaths crowd around me, pressing in on all sides with a weight that feels genuine. I turn away from her and walk slowly toward the curved wall, one hand held in front of me. I cannot help but cringe as I imagine something solid at head height, waiting for me to plough into it.*

*There wont be, of course. I've been over every inch of this place by now but you can never quite shake the feeling. My hand touches warm stone, and I run it over the engravings carved upon it. They're so tantalising but I've never been able to piece*

together a coherent image of them from touch alone. Even if I could, the Tower is so wide... I could never remember it all, much less communicate it to Aktos or sketch it accurately.

And besides, who knows how far they extend on upwards? It's certainly further than I can reach. At best I could assemble a narrow strip around the bottom.

'Any chance of some help?' I ask sardonically, glancing back over my shoulder toward the dangling figure.

Her barely tangible outline does not respond.

'I thought not. How am I supposed to help you when you don't elucidate me at all, hm?'

Still nothing. I turn back to the wall. If only I had some charcoal and a million sheets of parchment. Oh, and an infinitely tall ladder too.

Hold on. Of course I have those things. They're in my possession right now. I look down and see that my hands are full, barely visible in the darkness. Lumps of charcoal, rolls of parchment and... I nudge with my toe and feel something heavy and wooden beside me. A ladder. Naturally.

I'm sure you've had dreams before. Maybe not like these ones, but they all share a certain similarity, don't they? If you dream regularly you might have had one or two in which you become aware of what's happening. A sudden rush to clarity as you realise this is your dream, comprised of your memories and abiding by your rules.

The odd thing is, I've tried that before in here. It's never worked up until now. I don't think about that too much, not yet. Those sorts of thoughts might invite the status quo to reassert

*itself.*

*I try to possess a torch or lantern. No luck. I get both but neither are lit, and the air proves too moist to strike a flame on my own. It was too much to ask for some actual light, I suppose.*

*Instead I just get to rubbing down a copy of the inscriptions, holding the parchment up to the wall and gradually working my way up the ladder. I get about five rungs up before waking up at the Lakeside.*

*Uh oh.*

*I fall down with a short cry, thudding into the ground with a heavy whump. Sharp pain runs up my back, but its just about tolerable.*

*I lie in place for a moment, gazing up at the pink-ish sky. Pastel clouds swirl together in beautiful patterns. I wonder whether it ever rains here. If so, what falls?*

*'Oh boy.'*

*I look sideways at my companion, perched upon her rock as usual. The corner of her mouth is curled into a smile, but her eyes carry mild concern. Her hand has reached halfway toward her axe, but she relaxes and sits back.*

*'Believe it or not, that was the sound of success.' I say.*

*'That and a cracked pelvis, perhaps.'*

*'At least it wont follow me home.' I return my gaze to the sky, 'Not unless someone just crept into my hut and delivered a blow to my back with a hammer, anyway. I think I'll just stay down here for a while.'*

*She sits crossed legged beside me, softly crushing down the grass beside my head. Her armour creaks in a vaguely satisfying*



manner as the leather crinkles. We stay like that for a few moments, watching the clouds weave themselves together.

'I need your help.' I close my eyes and divulge all of the events in the real world since our last talk. The Ember Moon interrupted, Aktos's injury, the man with no memory... all of it flows out, relieving pressure from my mind as it spills into the scented air.

She holds my hand after the first few sentences, waiting patiently through it all.

'And now what do I do?' I ask belatedly, 'How can I solve this problem when I cannot even grasp it properly?'

'We, not I.' She says, 'I'm here too, for whatever small use that might be. And don't forget that everyone else on the ship wants to help too. They'd be mad not to.'

'Do they?'

'Of course they do. Well... then again, perhaps not. Didn't you say that the older ones tried to corrupt the words before? Maybe one of them helped do this.' She snapped her fingers a few times, presumably to focus her thoughts, 'You met all the other Readers at the island recently, after all.'

'It would have taken more time than that. We were all united in our pronunciation when we met at the temple, and I warned them to on the lookout for any deviancy.'

'Hm.' She doesn't appear convinced.

'The main thing is, I need access to scripture that absolutely contains the correct way to say the words.' I continue, 'We know that my own copies aren't enough, unless I find that my peers made some idiotic mistake in their own work. And the only

was to find an original manuscript would be to...'

'To go to the mainland.' She finishes my thought for me as it wavers, 'And find some intact notes there, complete with a pronunciation guide. Perhaps even a Loreway module, although its in a right state these days.'

'There was pollen on the air yesterday.'

An odd mixture of excitement and trepidation builds in my chest, making it difficult to get the words out as I sit up, 'The ship must be close.'

'Pollen? I'm surprised anything's flowering there. Either way, you'd need Ortuck to direct you to the coast, correct? She's the ship-master.'

She's right. Only Ortuck really knows where we are at any given time. Some of the more venerable of my shipmates can get a general idea by recognising landmarks - assuming the Moth Queen hasn't taken too much from them. Most of us just see more sand.

'The entire ship couldn't turn and head for land anyway. You're the only one that can read, there's no point in risking all those other lives. Plus one person would be more likely to be able to make the trip unnoticed.' She says, growing more enthusiastic.

I find myself captivated by her silvery eyes. She's close enough that I can feel her breath. Walking to the mainland alone... we don't even know what's there any more. Any surviving books we have from the time are incomplete and besides, they depict the world as it was centuries ago. To step foot there once again - I could bring back knowledge that has been lost for hundreds of years, update our maps and charts... maybe even visit Fobsharana?

Ideas fizz together in my mind, equal parts exhilarating and anxiety-inducing. It's not like there's any real point in mine presence on Celestial Censor with the words anyway. If the Mirage visits I'll be powerless to satisfy him, barring some hitherto undiscovered revelation buried in the dead Reader's notes. And that seems unlikely given how they ended up.

I could fixs this. I could come back and save everyone from the Mirage. Maybe even more than that.

'Our rules forbid going to the mainland.' I saw softly, 'The Readers will not even speak of what lies there now, to protect us all from the insidious terror.'

'Do you believe them? The words of old men and women desperate to maintain their illusions of omniscience? The same people that have quietly looked down upon you for all these years, only to fail you now when it matters most?'

'I... ' I harden my expression, 'Whether they are trustworthy or not is irrelevant. In the absence of anyone else I am the sole authority on Lethe Mirage available at the present time. And short of dumb luck, seeking out answers on the mainland is the only option. Our only hope.'

'I agree. So pick yourself up from your slumber, and get to planning.'

Almost on cue, the pink mists start to swirl around us as my dreams subside, gently pulling me away from her and casting me back down toward my sleeping form. I cannot help but smile as I fall. I'm ready to face the harshness of our world, and pluck out the knowledge we need to save it.

Your should try speaking with a Goddess sometime. It really

*sets you straight.*

## Chapter Four

*"If anyone is left in that fetid prison they will have degenerated into repulsive creatures, no longer fit to be referred to as persons. The law gives us the right to look back upon our ancestors and criticise their actions, but no matter how damning our conclusions might be, we have neither the right nor the prerequisite perspective to sever the chains that they forged."*

*- Toki Tanorumi testifying before the three Giants of*

*Aker*

I've put some serious thought into how I might leave this ship. I'll need one of the boats at the very least in order to reach the shore, not to mention provisions, supplies for sleeping outdoors... a weapon too, I suppose. Magic is all well and good, but just try finding the right page in a book and accurately reading out an incantation in the middle of a fight.

Now imagine that it's raining heavily, and that someone with a massive axe is bearing down upon you.

And besides, what few fragments of the divine language we still retain are a rather lacklustre toolbox to work with. Not to mention that mispronouncing any of them is an excellent way to accidentally summon a self-immolating firestorm or some equally unhelpful arcane phenomena. If adrenaline is running through you and you're breathing heavily from exertion, the chances of finding the correct spell and saying it right with any form of brevity is

essentially nil.

It's forbidden to kill, injure or bewitch someone directly with a spell in the first place, anyway. The Mirage made that very clear when he gifted us the words we needed to bend reality to our will. I cannot simply point to another person and make them explode, or compel them to follow mine orders. That wouldn't be fair, and concentrating that much power into anyone's hands would be a recipe for disaster. The Mirage knew this when he passed them onto the Kitan folk, who passed them onto Hutojin Tang when they fled there, who in turn passed them onto Cildara.

There are still indirect ways that you can utilise a well placed spell in a fight of course, but they're typically not quite as jaw dropping as you might like.

I have spent many, many hours explaining this to my shipmates whenever something unexpected or threatening turns up and I'm called upon to simply read at it until it goes away or blows up in spectacular fashion.

Lethe Mirage being the exception, of course.

So, a weapon.

Asking that alone of Ortuck will be difficult enough. Permission to set out alone and leave the ship without it's Reader on top of that... I seek her out when morning arrives with some trepidation. I have the mystery Reader's notes with me, which should provide a convenient way to avoid explaining the actual sources of my information. Pretending to have decoded the pages is much more mundane and believable.

I find her up in the rigging. Thankfully she's low enough that I can call up to her from the deck. The sight of me waving papers

is enough to have her scurrying down to me, nimbly dropping through the maze of rope and wood as if it were nothing. The sight of us together immediately attracts attention from everyone else nearby. They continue to do their jobs in a pantomime of activity as they listen in.

'You decrypted it?' Ortuck asks, her eyes flicking between the pages and me. She never seems able to hold my gaze for more than a few moments at a time.

'Translated would be a more accurate term, but yes. It was penned by Reader Zhulavi, of the Aged Archon.'

We shouldn't see any other ships for a few months at least. And besides, there's a small chance that I'm correct regardless. A harmless lie.

'The Archon?' She closes her eye and makes Admor's sign, 'Luckless after all, then. This could have happened to any of us.'

'And it still might. I found no difference in our understanding of the words.'

That's enough to bring an end to the facade of activity from those around us. It's replaced by whispers and panicked glances as the news ripples up and down the ship. The nameless survivor is close by too, staring intently at me. It's a little unsettling.

Ortuck breathes deeply, giving herself a moment to digest the news, 'And what do you suggest we do, Reader?'

'I must go to the mainland. Zhulavi's writing mentions several cities that may contain records of the correct pronunciation. Records dating back millenni, in al liklihood. Our own writings are clearly inaccurate, so I'll seek out those ones.'

'We do not go that way.'

It's hard to convey the magnitude of the taboo I've just broken, but I can see it in her expression. Or lack thereof.

'You know that.' She adds, her voice flat.

'We cannot. But I did not say we. I can set sail in one of the boats, and then return with the information we need.' I push onward quickly before I'm clamped down upon by their collective superstitions, 'There is little point in mine being here given the current status quo. I refuse to sit idly and wait for us to meet up with the other Readers - we know that Mirage is nearby, we know that our fellow ships are in the same predicament as us so far as the words are concerned, and most importantly: I know how to get to Fobsharana. If there's one place in all Cildara that has what I need to save us, it is that city.'

'It used to be that city. You don't know whether it is any more.' She gives an exasperated sigh then lowers her voice, 'And besides, your place on this ship isn't just as a ward against Lethe Mirage. You teach, you record our memories, you perform holy rites, and don't forget you're the only one able to use letters.'

I pick up a hint of blame attached to her last point. A quiet recognition of my failure to find a suitable apprentice... shame threatens to blossom but I crush it with spite, balling my fists and stepping up to look her directly in the eye.

'There. Is. No. Other. Way. I go to Fobsharana or the Celestial Censor gets destroyed along with every ship we have left. Every fragment of Cildara that we've managed to remember. It might be soon, or it might be generations from now. But keep me on this ship, and you'll be complicit in the destruction of that last remnants of our people.'



She meets my gaze and matches its intensity, 'We meet with the other ships within the next few months. Lethe Mirage often lets decades slip by between his visits. Why can't you wait until you're among fellow Readers to solidify this plan?'

Of course her first recourse is to resort to the other Readers, instead of the one that's served aboard her ship for years on end. I struggle to keep my response in check.

'That will not be the case this time. Even setting aside the usual risk, the scriptures suggest that after one failure the Mirage's hackles are raised. His hunger for validation drives him to seek us out all the more frequently until he is sated. Zhulavi knew this - he had made plans to journey to Fobsharana already in the event that a situation like this came to pass.'

'His notes said all this? They pointed the way to Fobsharana well enough that you're confident you could find it?' Her retort is sharp, and by now a proper crowd has gathered around us.

'Yes.' I lie. I laid eyes on the map within the temple merely weeks ago. Along with the hints in my other records it will be enough to piece together a route.

Ortuck takes a step back, looking about at our gathered shipmates. She took in their fear and uncertainty, perhaps acknowledging that despite everything she shared in it. A shouting match with the Reader on deck could erode whatever was left of their faith. Fraying the societal strings that held this ship together. Now what I'd planned, but...

'I will have to think on it.' She finally says, 'For now tending to the injured and maintaining our course is our top priority.'

There's something else in her eye now - having a false one to compare it to has always made it easier for me to tell. A pleading look, asking me not to make this any more of an issue in front of everybody.

'Fine.' I say. I try my best to show her that I will *not* be dropping this with my bearing, and continue to watch her as she ascends back into the rigging.

Muttered conversations have already begun in her absence. I swear, if the Mirage turns up while she's playing for time I'll...

There's a light tap on my shoulder.

It's the man with no memory. He nods toward my hut, 'Reader, could we talk alone?'

'Why alone?'

He stares at me with that gaunt face of his.

'...Fine.' I lead him back to my hut, away from the blazing sunshine and prying eyes.

By contrast the darkness inside is almost total, but I know the place well enough to fumble my way over to a candle. A thin, flickering light spills out across the man's features, making his eyes appear even more sunken than usual. Yet they shine with clarity and purpose, 'Can you sail a boat?'

'An odd way to commence our conversation.' I say, 'I'm versed in the basics.'

He nods, 'Any experience reading terrain?'

'...No.'

'Travelling upon solid land in general?'

'No.'

'Ever hunted a wild animal or foraged for food?'

'I'm the Reader of Celestial Censor. You know the answer to these questions already, unless memory of my role isn't one that eludes you.'

'I remember. You understand what I'm driving at, though. You're not the ideal person to undertake a trip across the mainland to dig up ancient knowledge.' He glances down at the open tomes which litter my desk, each covered in scrawled annotations, 'I get that you need to be there, even if I don't think they'll let you go. But you need someone else at the very least to keep you alive long enough to get to the old city.'

'And that's you?'

He shrugs, 'What else is there for me to do? My memories are a jumbled mess of long lost moments and blinding purple light. But I still have instincts - I can throw a harpoon, steer a raft, read the stars... plus if I'm off adventuring with you, it saves everyone else from having me around as a reminder of what might happen to them.'

Something about his tone isn't resonating with me. His ragged voice is enthusiastic, excited even. He's so animated for someone a day removed from...

'You seem excited.' I say after a few seconds of silence, 'Even after losing so much.'

'Well.' He sits down and takes some time to pick his words, 'It's difficult to be sad, you know? I know that my ship is gone, along with people that I presumably cared about. I know I've lost a daughter. I understand why I should be sad, but how? How can I mourn when I don't remember anything? At first I was in shock, mad from thirst and roasted by the sun, but now...'

He glances at the entrance, 'I've been putting on a show for the people out there, but that's all it is now. Mostly because I think they'd be more worried if I wasn't being morose.'

'That makes a lot of sense.' I admit, sitting opposite him. His teeth reflect candlelight back at me as he smiles. Perhaps he genuinely doesn't feel anything.

Or he was never aboard that ship at all, and was placed for us to find. Then again, people recognised him from the island. Albeit not well enough to recall a name.

'We should decide upon a new name for you.' I say.

'I reckon that might help, yes.'

I think back through myth and legend, hoping for inspiration to strike. It soon does.

'Melodias.'

'Melodias?'

'Most people have heard the story, but few know that name. Legends suggest that it's the true name of Antoniax Vanagloria, the lurking shadow of Arke's Spires.'

'And champion of the Moth Queen. Sounds like an ominous choice.'

'Hold on. How do you know that?'

He stops, narrowing his eyes.

'...I'm not sure. Perhaps it's something she left over.'

'Maybe you should hold onto it then. It could be auspicious.'

'Good a reason as any. Melodias it is.'

Melodias proves to be just as frustrated with Ortuck's delaying tactics as I am. I start taking down notes with his permission as we talk - technically speaking I should start a

memory log for him anyway, as our newest shipmate. It strikes me that an interview with a survivor of a visit from the Mirage has never been recorded before. The event is without precedent, so far as I know. Any notes that I can leave behind might help the other Readers, just in case we perish horribly on the mainland.

'You know that she'll never let us go willingly?' I ask.

'Eh, she might see sense eventually. But you know her better than I do, and it's risky to wait.'

'Exactly. Every moment could be the last.'

'That said... it looks like the two of you are the threads holding Celestial Censor together. I doubt Ortuck can justify letting one of those threads snap no matter what the emergency is. That and she probably doesn't trust you to get it done.'

'Why would she not?!'

I wince and look away, only realising how angry my words sound after they're spoken.

'You're younger than her, a little scrawny, quite arrogant, and all of us hear tales forbidding us from going back to the land.'

'So I should expect a facade of consideration, but resign myself to never being let loose?'

'Like I said, you know her better than I do. What do you think?'

He's right. It's hard not to hate him for it, but it's the truth. That doesn't make it any easier though. I meet him halfway and mumble something semi-coherent.

'Exactly. I think.' He presses on, drumming his hands on his knees as he leans forward, 'That's why we need to steal a boat and

escape. Tonight.'

'Steal?!'

'Of course. How else are we going to get off this ship?'

'Ortuck hasn't even made a decision yet!'

He sighs, 'No, but as we both just agreed: her decision would be to keep you right here anyway, so that's superfluous. If anything it'll be more difficult to pull off once you've been publicly rebuked.'

I need to go. One way or another. If this is the only way, then so be it.

'I'd rather not elope alongside somebody I've just met. I take your point about surviving in the wild, but you're what, fifty? Can you keep up like that?'

'Ask me again after the first day's travel. If you're still standing, that is. I limp a bit but that's all.'

'I see. And how can I trust you, Melodias?'

'Is there anyone else you could take?'

I quickly think of Aktos, but he's beneath the decks with a mangled leg. If Melodias is the only way, then so be it.

'I'll do it. We'll do it.'

'Damn right. I'll find you once I've had time to look around the launches. Pack anything you need, and find an excuse to take some food. We'll need it.'

With that he dashes out, almost as if he's worried I might change my mind if he lingers about. Or maybe he just doesn't want anyone wondering why he's spending so much time in the Reader's hut. No worries there though, they've wondered that about a lot of others before him. Aktos not least.

Some colour has returned to his skin when I slip below decks to visit. Somebody has helped him bath, washing away most of the paint, blood and encrusted sand. A marked improvement, but still... the puckered flesh around his leg looks as if it's about to burst in places, straining against black stitching.

The scent from the braziers has dulled his mind to the world by now. He manages to lift his head to acknowledge me, nodding toward a cup of water beside his cot. I press it into his hands and help him drink.

'Aktos, I should have come down more often. I've just been so busy with the other ship, and Lethe Mirage, and...' My voice peters out.

'You're the Reader.' He lies back, eyes closed but smiling, 'To command any of your time, or even to know that I've occupied one iota of your thoughts. That's more than enough.'

'More than one iota.' I whisper, holding his hand.

'So are we fucked, then?' He asks.

'We could be. But I'm going to fix this.'

'You will?'

'Yes. One hundred Readers have turned back Lethe Mirage before me, I just need to do the same. It's all written down for me, if not here then in some forgotten archive on the mainland. It doesn't matter where I have to go. I'll overturn the entire world to find the answer if I have to.'

His hand's grip grows loose, and I look down to see him

asleep. Asleep or simply lost in the aromatic haze that surrounds us. I leave him that way before it starts clouding my thoughts too. I daresay that mine mind is the most important one on the ship right now, and I cannot waste its clarity blathering on at someone who cannot talk back.

-

People have tried to steal boats before. Madmen who claim to see beautiful cities out there in the sands after spending too long in the sun, or crazed philosophers insisting that recorded history is a lie and the mainland is a paradise which in fact holds everything we need. Perhaps I'll find out if they were right.

Whether drawn out by mirages or a lack of faith, the end result is usually the same. A lifetime locked up in the darkest depths of the ship. Celestial Censor can outspeed a mere boat, so any would-be escapee is inevitably doomed unless they manage to get across the horizon before being noticed. That's a difficult thing to accomplish when there's naught but sand in every direction, only broken by a one-in-a-million island or the towering bones of some long dead leviathan.

Thankfully having an accomplice and being a Reader gives me a few more options. We also know that we're close to the shoreline, meaning there's no way that Ortuck will chase us very far inland. Strictly speaking, in the tate case of a navigational error a shipmaster is supposed to turn away at the mere sight of a large landmass.

'So.' Melodias says, taking the time to let this words roll



around in his mind before speaking them, 'If we grab the boat at night, then manage to cast off without being seen...'

'Then by the time dawn arrives, we should be close enough to dissuade anyone else from following, whether they can see us or not.' I conclude.

'Yes!'

'That still leaves stealing the boat in the first place. Your job.' I add, looking into his eyes for any hint of hesitation. I find none. He just grins.

'I have it handled. Nightfall is in a few hours. Look busy until then.'

## Chapter Five

*"And now in the midst of this third Cildaran nightmare, even you turn upon us. You who are just as much at the mercy of divine beings beyond your control. You who once invaded the heavens in defiance! Look at you now. The Jailor's perfect puppets."*

- The King of the Rharites, shortly before the creation  
of Nail Vale

Melodias is suspiciously stealthy. For someone his age with a limp, he makes barely a sound as he prowls across the deck with a harpoon he stole from storage. For my part I can only wince as the ship creaks beneath my every footstep. I half-expect the sound to have roused half the folks below deck, thinks in no small part to the lack of any other noise. The night air is warm and still, the rigging up above hands limp.

I can see three others on watch tonight. It's not unheard of for creatures to try and make their way aboard at night, especially so close to land. Consequently, keeping watch is a task reserved for the most reliable and sharp-sighted shipmates on Celestial Censor. One of them is far above, nestled in the rigging to survey the surrounding sands - usually well lit by moonlight, but inky black at the moment thanks to the clouds. Two more patrol this section of the ship, walking slowly from end to end. They carry small glowing crystals that I forged for them to light their way.

Melodias nods back at me, and I whisper a simple spell. As my words weave their way through the air, each crystal loses its lustre and the ship sinks into absolute darkness. Would-be escapees in the past probably didn't have the benefit of magicks on their side. The two patrollers hiss panicked words back and forth, and their footsteps ring out as they converge in the centre of the deck.

Their ensuing conversation allows us to creep closer to the boats, the closest of which is ready to be launched - already set up on a slope so it'll slide smoothly into the sand to save anyone who might fall overboard. All we need do is cut the rope holding it up. Smooth or not, it's still going to make some noise.

Melodias has gone up ahead and is working on the rope already. I try to catch up as carefully as possible, but I can't risk going as fast as him, especially without any light. I can feel a line of sweat trickling across my brow as I hesitantly shuffle my way through the darkness, weighted down by a heavy pack of papers and provisions. My nose starts to itch maddenly as the droplet works its way down the bridge.

I go to scratch it and my foot catches on something. I pitch over onto the deck, gasping as my shoulder rams into the wooden boards with a loud thump. Must have been some kind of stray rope...

Footsteps are approaching.

I glance over to the boat from my prone position, but cannot see Melodias's outline. He must have ducked out of sight at the noise. I could make a run for it, but there's no way to know if he's even ready to launch the boat yet. Or if he's still there,

even. He might well have bolted below decks now that I've made a racket. I sit up, holding my shoulder and looking up at the two black shapes now looming over me.

'Ouch. I think I'll be feeling that one for a while.' I say, before one of them spears me by mistake.

'Reader?' One of them asks, audibly relaxing a little. Judging by his voice, it's probably Oci, 'Why are you up on deck at this hour?'

'I felt my spells being snuffed out.' I nod toward the inert crystals, a motion that's probably wasted given the visibility right now, 'It was probably short sighted of me but I came out to check on you, fearing it might be coven magick or somesuch. Unfortunately I wasn't quite prepared for a stray rope to take my footing.'

'Ha! Well thank you for coming to help, I suppose.' He extends a hand and hauls me back to my feet.

'If there's fell magick about, we should tell Ortuck.' His companion says. Elmira or Gulnara, by the sounds of her. I've always found it difficult to tell them apart.

'She wont be much help.' I answer, perhaps a little too quickly. Both of their shadows shift about uneasily. Need to think quickly here. If they grab Ortuck then this will be difficult.

'Hand me your crystals and I'll relight them.' I add, 'Getting some light to see by is the most important thing. I wouldn't want either of you getting hurt stumbling your way to the prow in the dark.'

They hand both of their crystals to me, each still warm to the touch. Even if I wanted too, it's too dark to look up the spell I

need to ignite them again. I make a show of fumbling around with my spellbook regardless. A few moments pass before one of them finally snaps.

'Third nightmare, Oci! I'm going to get someone with a torch, this is hopeless.'

Shit. Not now. I'm so close.

I close my eyes and utter a spell from memory. Searing pain erupts in my hands and I drop the crystals with a scream. My eyelids shut out the worst of it, but blinding light still makes its way through. My brain aches and it feels like my eyes are swelling up, about to burst.

The others aren't as lucky, howling as light pours into their dilated pupils. There's a resounding crash as they drop everything to cover their faces, stumbling backward. I smell smoke as the crystals burn into the deck. The entire ship must be lit up.

It wasn't supposed to be that bright. I can't move my hands, but I remember vaguely which direction I need to go. I set off for the boat. Noises are swelling below decks, muffled voices and frantic footsteps. I can only keep going.

Then there's nothing beneath my foot. With a horrific, heart wrenching lurch I sprawl forward, hitting something large and rolling over it before falling. I open my eyes, but after-images are burned into them. I can barely make anything out in the moment I have. I see the side of the ship, and the stairs I must have missed.

Then I hit the sands back first. The air is forced out of my lungs, but I can only think of my hands as sand covers them, digging into my burned flesh. I scream again as it ingrains itself

into my very nerves, barely aware of my body being sucked beneath the dunes.

Something grabs me, hauling me out and onto something solid. Still barely able to see, it's all I can do to scabble up into a sitting position and hold my hands in front of me, desperately hoping that nothing else will touch them.

'Melodias?' I croak.

'Yes. Now keep quiet - after that trick we need to put as much distance between us and that ship as we can.'

He must have launched the boat once the racket started, and plucked me out of the sand. I'm all too happy to follow his instructions and stay silent, grinding my teeth against the constant hurt throbbing through my palms. I feel Melodias turning the boat, managing to catch a light breeze and setting a good pace. At least, it feels like a good pace, judging by the pitch and sway of the craft beneath me.

I try opening my eyes again, and soon I'm able to pick out the sail up above. The clouds have parted, a pale moonlight illuminating Melodias's slender form as he keeps the sheets taut at the back of the boat.

I turned magick upon my shipmates. Worse, I botched it. I've managed to get away with burns and blurred vision, but what about Oci and his fellow watcher? They must have had their eyes wide open when I fumbled the spell.

The crystals will keep burning without another spell to calm them down. I'm not sure for how long, given how much I clearly misspoke. I should check my book for the wording.

I brace myself, and gingerly lower a hand toward my belt where

my book hangs. It grasps at nothing. Panic rising in my chest, I glance around the boat, but its nowhere to be seen. I must have dropped it on the deck after the crystals ignited, or perhaps it slipped free in the dunes and sank. All of my spells and circles, even the ones I invented myself... all gone.

I can't help myself. A couple of tears manage to break loose and trickle down my cheeks. The agony in my hands, hurting my shipmates, leaving everyone else to strike out for land only to lose the source of mine magicks moments into the endeavour... it's all so hopeless. And now all my trust is invested in a man I met not two days ago that cannot even remember who he is.

...

No. Admor herself hold me that I could do this. I've chosen to talk down the path filled with thorns, so I can't expect it to be easy. Forcing a grim smile onto my face, I ball up my fists and bathe in the pain, shaking as it courses through me.

Untold troves of knowledge await me on the mainland. Ancient tomes and manuscripts that I will use to write another book far superior than the one I've lost, before returning to deal with Lethe Mirage.

I have to use some of our water to wash and bind my hands as dawn approaches, sparing a few glances upward to confirm that Melodias has the right heading. I needn't have bothered, he's clearly got a good sense for direction. A soft breeze ushers us along quietly, and neither of us speak. Sound carries a long way on the dunes.

My pain recedes into a dull ache that flares up every time my fingers move, prohibiting me from helping to sail. Instead I busy

myself keeping watch for any potential pursuers. Ortuck and the others will know the boat is missing, and she's the only person on the ship that could reliably tell the way toward the mainland to come after us.

Maybe we should have just... no. Leaving Celestial Censor without a Reader or Shipmaster would be tantamount to abandoning it altogether.

'It strikes me that finding our way back to the ship would be problematic.' I whisper.

A short shushing sound is my only response. Fair enough. With spells I could have found the ship the same way I found Melodias, but without them we'll have to improvise.

The horizon starts to bleed as dawn threatens to break. The rising light allows me to pick out Celestial Censor, by now far, far away. Certainly too far to pick us out easily, given our size and the waves.

'So you were saying something about getting back.' Melodias prompts.

'I was. My spellbook's gone - without it I can't hone in on the ship with magick. We could find exactly what we need but get lost in the dunes until Lethe Mirage wipes out everything else.'

He hums, leaning back to look up at the sky. I see that he's pilfered a dagger from somewhere to supplement his harpoon. It's strapped to his belt.

'The way I see it, turning back doesn't achieve anything. But it's possible there'll be something on the mainland that solves the problem for us. After your stunt on deck, I figure our chances are better stumbling upon something like that than Ortuck giving



us another chance.'

'I tend to agree. Admor rewards boldness, and Formal rewards purpose. We demonstrate neither by turning back.'

'I suppose that's true. What, did they tell you to do this or something?'

'Tsk. Never mind.'

He frowns slightly, but doesn't press me.

'You kept mentioning a daughter when we picked you up.' I say, diverting the topic away to something else, 'Do you really remember nothing about that?'

'I must've at the time, right?' He sighs, 'Not any more though. Makes me wonder if it's... progressive, you know? Bits of it unwinding over time even faster than it usually happens. Maybe it still hasn't stopped.'

'What else is there to go?'

He points up at the sails, 'Well I still know how to sail this thing. And I can talk, and...'

I shift over and touch his hand, wincing as a flash of pain rushes up my arm, 'Ow! Ah, listen. You lived through a visit from the Mirage. You're already an anomaly. A survivor. And we're going to run through everything that's happened since we picked you up each night, to make sure you can't lose anything else. Understand?'

A smile graces his gaunt face and he claps me on the shoulder, 'Understood, Reader. And thanks. Who knows, maybe the Mirage'll be so impressed that he'll give them all back when we next see him anyway.'

'You think he took them? Not the Moth Queen?'

'I've only had a close encounter with one of them, right? I get it's not his thing, but neither's leaving any survivors.'

'Perhaps. Once he's been appeased by his true name maybe he'll be feeling generous?'

He pauses for a moment before replying.

'You're well read, right?'

'Naturally. I'm a Reader.'

'Hah. Seriously though, does anyone know why the Mirage does this? Or does anyone, you know, *think* they know?'

'Not a one. I've never seen it mentioned before. Lethe Mirage isn't supposed to be understood. He's an axiom. We speak his name, and he keeps us safe. That's where it begins and ends.'

'Not supposed to be understood, huh?'

'That's why he hides his face behind that purple contraption.'

'Contraption?'

I nod, 'You haven't seen the pictures? My mentor told me about them before he died. A golden clockwork mask with purple glass that hides the Mirage's eyes.'

'That sounds ostentatious.'

Clouds are gathering overhead by now, but despite them the fragile sunlight gets a little brighter. They look dark and heavy, and only seem to get worse as I look toward the mainland.

There is it. A small black uneven smudge on the horizon. I cannot help but shiver a little as the sight - it's so much larger than any of the islands I've visited. It must stretch for for aevums than a person could fathom.

Even from here I can pick something out. Too slender to be a mountain or a hill - they taper to a point but a thick at the base

- this thing protrudes into the sky. It must be astonishingly high to be visible from here. Melodias turns the boat toward it without mine prompting. As it grows larger I can pick out sharp angles and patterns carved into the dark stone. Large symbols written in vertical lines. If they are letters, then it's not in a language I'm familiar with.

I realise that it is two separate columns placed side by side with a small gap in between them. Small in this context being close to one hundred aevums. The sands beneath the boat are clammy now, providing more resistance and slowing us down. It's no longer the fine flowing grains that we usually sail through.

Inevitably the boat grinds to a halt, too bogged down for the wind to propel us. Melodias leans out and prods the sand, 'No good. It's solid.'

'Solid enough to hold our weight?'

'It'll have to be.'

He gets up and grabs his bags. Stepping up onto the prow, he looks down and jumps. With a wet thud, his feet sink a finger's breadth into the sand, but no further. There's a dank smell on the air that's a little too sweet for my taste, but I'm not sure where it could possibly be coming from.

Seeing that he isn't sinking, I take my first tentative steps onto the mainland as well. I'm shorter than Melodias is, and barely displace any sand at all. The two towers are still a long way away, and our more immediate surroundings are a seemingly endless mottled grey beach. Melodias takes down the sail and folds it up, intending to take it with us.

It's so quiet. The ruffling of him folding it up seems like an

affront to this place's silence somehow. So much so that it puts me on edge.

Without any other obvious direction to go, we start walking toward the towers.

Melodias is still limping like he was before, but it doesn't seem to trouble him. I'm sure he'll speak up if there's a problem. The sand gets even more firm as we go, eventually getting so solid that we no longer leave footprints behind us. More like sandstone, but what's making it get so much denser? Perhaps some of the ancient libraries further inland could shed some light on it. I suppose this might explain why ships like Celestial Censor can't go close to the land, though. If a ship that large ran aground on the thicker sands, nothing could get it back out onto the dunes again. At least between the two of us, Melodias and I could probably drag our little boat back out far enough to cast off.

It quickly becomes apparent how little a shipboard life prepares you for hiking over land. My calves start to burn and sweat quickly gathers on my brow despite the cool temperature. The backpack I'm wearing feels like it's cutting into my shoulders, no doubt leaving deep red marks on my skin. My hair soon develops an annoying habit of flopping down over my face, constantly forcing me to sweep it back out of my eyes.

The uniformly flat beach all around us is grey and barren. This exploring is less glamorous than I might have hoped. At least for now. The towers are still getting larger on the horizon, and now I can pick out small irregularities on the skyline beneath them. A city, maybe? It certainly looks man made. I pause to sketch down the symbols on the sides of the towers, just in case

Melodias's leg is bothering him. Without a surface to work on my writing is terrible, spilling perilously far over the precious few pages I've been able to bring. The burns don't exactly help matters, and I give up after a little while. He draws in the sand with his dagger as I try to work, humming to himself.

Not soon after we find out first real evidence of life. Small greyish patches of moss and sallow plants cling to patches of shelter offered by cracks and stones. Melodias whistles to me as he discovers a humanoid skeleton scattered across the ground, with its ribcage mostly intact. Some of the yellowed ribs have been split apart by an old spear that's embedded into the ground, skewering the ribcage and presenting a rather obvious cause of death.

I kneel down to examine the skull as Melodias yanks the spear out of the ground. There's something growing inside it, spilling out of the eye sockets and nasal cavity. A white fluffy fungus of some kind. Some intrinsic feeling of foreboding stops me from taking a sample, a cold cringing that seeps through my body and fires up all my senses. It looks powdery and fragile, as if the slightest touch might scatter it in every direction. Very little of the plant life here is documented, and what little I do have could be centuries out of date. Best to limit myself to looking for now.

Melodias taps me on the shoulder, holding his dagger out to me, 'Here. Best that we're both armed. This spear's good for nothing but I still have the harpoon.'

'Fair.' I take it, glancing at the pommel. There's some sort of face covered in strips of cloth, in front of a stone tower. The

eyes are dark and hollow... where did he get this?

'Watch out for the fungus.' I say, nodding down at it, 'The last thing we need is a lungful of that.'

He looks down at it, shuddering slightly, 'You feel that? It feels so wrong. I feel cold and tense just looking at it.'

'Me too. Almost like some old survival instinct just reawakened.' I answer. It seems to almost twitch when I look back down at it.

'Then we should trust our guts. Trepidation like that doesn't just show up for no reason - not for me, anyway.'

'Not for you?' I start to ask, but he's already off, stalking onwards toward the two towers. I spare the infested skull one last look before scurrying after him.

Hours pass as we trek through the increasingly feature filled plain. Patches of spindly grass and small twisted trees force their way up out of the loose rock, struggling to catch what little sun manages to make it through the clouds up above. There are even low ruins, worn and battered remains of walls and doorways that now stand a mere few feet in height. All of them have smooth edges, and detail long erased over time. Either that or our ancestors just weren't very creative.

And there are more bones. Many of them are split or shattered, piled up against walls or in corners with small scraps of cloth or metal in amongst them. And more white fungus. Anywhere that there's shelter we see more of it, and each time we draw close that sense of foreboding reappears. Even the gnarled trees are not safe - on closer inspection they are covered in it too, as if they're diseased. Melodias cuts some thin strips of cloth from the

sail, handing me one to cover my mouth and nose. That's smart of him.

The sheer silence still worries me. There is no wind any more. The familiar creak of wood and ruffling of sails - the mild cacophony of the ship that's followed me all my life - it's all gone, with nothing to replace it. I had read that birdsong and the persistent hum of insects were common on the mainland, but we've yet to see a single animal or bug. It's just all so... quiet. As if the land itself is dead or slowly dying.

'So. Any idea where we are?' Melodias asks at one point.

'Not so far. There will be clues up ahead.' I point to the towers, 'These could well be something I've read about, albeit described to poorly for me to recognise straight away.'

He laughs for at that for some reason, and it sounds unnatural in this place.

Night starts to fall before we get there, and we stop for fear of losing our bearing. Because when the darkness comes, it is absolute. And inevitably as our vision goes, wariness starts to set in. I am constantly assailed by half-imagined sounds creeping through the night, phantom shuffles and crunches that keep me forever looking in all directions. Worse than those occasional noises is the continuing silence though. The hubbub of folk working on the ship, along with the gentle creaking of the Censor itself, used to annoy me. Out here though... the emptiness is scarier. At times I find myself almost wishing something would leap out of the darkness, just to prove that Melodias and I aren't the only living things left in this desolate place.

What fitful sleep I do get is not blessed by another dream. It

is accompanied by near constant throbbing from my seared palms though, occasionally supplemented by shooting sparks of pain whenever I'm careless enough to move them into contact with something. By the time that pale light starts to gradually bleed back into the world, I feel no more rested.

Perhaps we were wrong to come here after all.

-

I may have said this before, but the two towers are unfathomably tall. I stand beneath them and gaze upward, craning my back so far back that I almost stumble and fall over. They're so intricate up close! I saw the gigantic runes earlier, but in between them untold thousands of lines weave together into beautiful patterns. Faint purple light bleeds through them, as if some sleeping creature radiates body heat from within.

The land between them has been oddly flattened, and then covered by huge flagstones. On each side are the tattered remnants of great gardens and boulevards - mostly just dirt and crumbled rock now. Where once there could have been small streams and vibrant flowerbeds there are only vague echoes left. Still, with a little imagination I can imagine the utterly jaw dropping place this must once have been.

Even dead and broken, lingering majesty still pervades this place. Surrounding the towers are the worn remnants of other buildings, laid out in even grids separated by long flat stretches of stone. I've read that they're called roads, designed to cut through the hills and valleys of the land to help travellers go to



and fro without having to worry about the dangers of untamed lands. I hope I get to see a bridge at some point.

There's even some cracks in the clouds today, admitting thin beams of sunlight that help to pick out details. The only problem is...

I can't write it all down. All my hands can take are small bursts of activity, limiting my output to an infuriating little dribble every few minutes.

Melodias seems antsy, forever going on about how exposed we are out in the open. He seems to forget that we haven't laid eyes on a living creature since we got here, and besides, how could we be any less visible here than we were on the gigantic flat beach yesterday? Every drop of knowledge I can gather from this place could help Readers for centuries to come, so he'll just have to wait for now. I can't afford to placate his anxiety.

'Wakerock.' I say, and he practically jumps out of his sparkling skin.

'What?'

'Wakerock.' I repeat, pointing up at the two towers, 'These are not towers. They are - or were - doorways to another world. Sealed off during the Third Nightmare. I think the size just mislead me. There's only so many ways to convey it through the written word.'

He seems interested, despite himself. How could he not be, standing in front of this?

'Okay. So... why were they sealed?'

'Why?' I give him a look of incredulity before realising my mistake, 'Oh, of course. You don't remember, do you?'

'That's a pretty safe assumption.'

I let out a breath, unsure where to begin.

'Well... Cildara is - or was - one world of many. When the Third Nightmare began, they locked us away.'

'To keep the Moth Queen in?'

'Probably. A lot of what I've read about it seems contradictory. They seemed to help at first, but then they stopped. Because the Champions turned coat, perhaps? Maybe they thought that was the last roll of the dice, and once they failed the best they could do was sever the infected limb. I've also read that they were venomous bastards who couldn't wait for an opportunity to get rid of us, so they cut us off even though we weren't beyond help.'

'Who'd want to get rid of a whole world, though?'

'I... I'm not sure. I know the world through this gate was called Hutojin, and was full of people who hated their own gods. Perhaps they were jealous of ours? Or maybe it's much more mundane than that.'

I trail off and shrug, wishing I could tell him more. Wishing that I knew more.

'It must be frustrating.' He says, craning his neck to look up at the gate, 'Not knowing the truth, I mean. We're all locked up and we don't even remember why.'

'We might find out, on this trip.'

He looks back at me, 'So does that mean you know which way to go? We need books, and I see none here.'

'Melodias! This is an artifact that no one has laid eyes upon in hundreds of years. An intricate piece of engineering harnessing

the powers of Aevum and Tractus combined to tear holes to other worlds. When lit, it can be used to traverse the heavens in a single step! So please, permit me the time to at least make records. It's barely mid-morning, we have plenty of time.'

'Time doesn't worry me.' He replies, 'Although it might start to if you plan to spend this long gawking at every old slab of stone we run across. What worries me is staying in one place so long - we should keep moving before something notices us.'

'What could possibly notice us?' I ask, 'For all we know there's not single living thing on this whole continent. Wizened plants look to be all there is.'

He frowns, tapping his foot and scanning the horizon. No reply forthcoming, it seems. I try to speed up a little just to appease him, moving up to within a few feet of the gate so that I can properly pick out the patterns carved into the bottom. The poor light has me pressing my face right up to the stone in places, straining to get the smaller runes into focus.

Eventually I've sketched as much as my hands can take, so we make our way along the coast. Now that I've recognised Wakerock gate, I have a decent idea of our heading, 'If we follow the coastline, then we'll reach Caywake. The ringed city sat upon the mouth of the Godsfont.'

'Hm... the Godsfont was a great river, right?' He has a thoughtful look, somewhat at ease now that we're on the move again.

'Mhm.' I nod, thinking back to the murals in the temple.

'So does water flow down it, or is it just more sand?'

'Water, from what I've read. You could hardly build a city

there otherwise. Tears shed by Ezolile the Graceful fall in the mountains and then flow down toward the city.'

'She must have some massive eyes then.'

The ruins fade away into yellowish hills as we follow the road, so I go over the events that happened since we picked Melodias out of the wreckage, making sure they're still coherent in his mind. Small details differ between our recollections, but nothing significant enough to cause me concern. He was half mad from lack of water at first, I can hardly expect him to remember every little thing.

'It's a shame you can't write.' I mention in passing, 'You could note down your memories *and* take some of the burden off me.'

'It's never too late to learn, is it?' He asks, tapping the side of his head with a small smile, 'There's a lot of empty space up here right now, we might as well fill it with something.'

I think back to Elzeke and all his ignorant classmates back on the ship. Perhaps my mistake all along way trying to teach children instead of adults, 'I suppose we can try.'

## Chapter Six

*"Salvation was promised from the stars once. A long time ago. Long enough that it is time to take matters into our own hands. If they cannot descend to save us, then we shall rise up to join them of our own accord."*

- Scattered notes found in the ruin of Arke's Eyrie.

I was named after a monster, you know. Ortuck was queen of shadows and other dark places. A silent grey woman sprawled across a bone throne, her face hidden behind a goat skull. Her very presence brought with it frost and smothered passion. Or leeches it away, perhaps. My mother's stories were never particularly clear.

She was a child's nightmare incarnate, ready to drag you underground and ensure you never saw sunlight ever again. The denizens of her court were each twisted and hollow, a sad parody of the people they had once been.

Ortuck could also forge weapons. Almost every storied blade and other tool of war could be traced back to her in some capacity, meaning that she lurked behind our stories much as she did the ground beneath our feet. Back when we lived on the ground, anyway. But mark my words, any great hero with a great weapon? Ortuck's doing. Sometimes they stole it from her, or bargained for it, or struck some terrible pact. Either way it came from her.

And some say she will forge a weapon we can use to defeat the Moth Queen. I suppose that's the nature of the Third Cildaran Nightmare. It's so bad that it turns old terrors like Ortuck into

desperate opportunities. So there you go. I got named Ortuck.

Aren't you jealous?

Oci and Elmira probably wont see properly ever again. Even down below decks, the burning light that shone down between the boards was enough to make me cover my eyes. I can't imagine what it must have been like up there.

Jove says that their eyes will get better given enough time. Although to be honest he sounded doubtful enough that I half suspect he has no idea at all. The way his eyes flicked down for a split second, and the way he kept moving his hands as if he couldn't figure out what to do with them - it all screamed of ignorance. I can hardly fault him though, the last thing we all need is for our last physician left to admit that he hasn't really got a fucking clue what he's doing.

That makes two of us, unfortunately.

'And where are the crystals now?' I ask.

Liana's covered in sweat, still breathing heavily and has the beginnings of burns forming on her cheeks. Those things give off so much heat that I've had to send people down in shifts to fight the fires they've inevitably caused on each deck they've burned through. And they just wont stop shining, letting out a shrill hiss that worms its way into my eardrums, endlessly attacking them with its ceaseless racket. I hope the others haven't all got headaches as bad as mine.

'Three decks down now.' She replies between breaths, 'But Ortuck, we're spending so much water just to keep the fires under control... we might be able to scoop them up and just toss the damn things overboard if we could actually see anything!'

She's got a blindfold pushed up over her forehead. We've had to resort to covering our eyes with them whenever we go within one deck of the crystals. And she's right. We'll run out of water if we just leave it to burn through the ship until it falls through to the sands below.

I glance around at the top deck. Smoke and cinders are pouring up from the hole, threatening to ignite the sails - I've got folk up there now desperately taking them all down before something catches. The sick and the wounded - both from tonight and Ember Moon - are laid out up here too, carried up from below before the smoke and heat could finish them off. Shouts and cries cause cacophony wherever I look. Part of me wants to just throw myself over the side right now. All because of you.

'They can't burn through stone.' I say, giving Liana a snarly grin, 'Set up some rock pots on the deck beneath them, and we'll catch them long enough to throw overboard. Once they're off the Censor we can handle everything else.'

She nods, steeling herself for another trip down below, 'Yes, shipmaster!'

I turn away to look at the horizon. A little bit of light is bleeding over it, thank fuck. At least we won't be dealing with this in the dark any more. Liana kneels beside the nearest hatch, and I hear a small prayer cross her lips before she yanks it open and dives back in. I should go down there too in a moment. Just in case she can't get the job done herself.

Something catches in my nose again, tickling away until I have to sneeze. This time I keep one hand over my false eye, forcing it to stay in place. The headache gets even worse as my brain is

rattled around. Third Nightmare, I really don't need this right now.

Once the fit is over, I stumble over to the scorched hole in the deck. I see someone limping through the smoke with a crutch, holding a pail of water in his free hand. His teeth are gritted, and the cracked remnants of body paint cling to his sweat-soaked skin.

'Aktos, what the fuck are you doing?!' I shout.

'Helping.'

I grab the pail from him, emptying it into the hole before grabbing his arm as totters, threatening to fall over, 'The fuck you are! Go and lie down before Jove's forced to saw your damn leg off.'

'The Reader did this. We've got to-' His voice peters out and he sags into my arms. I can smell healing incense of his breath. Grievously injured and high. Perfect.

'We'll deal that later.' I mutter, carrying him back to a cot to lie down, 'Jove, can you please keep an eye on your patients! This one just wandered off!' I call, before stalking down below decks.

The wall of heat hits me like a slap in the face. The air itself seems to be writhing as waves of hot air run through it. Even from here it can see white light spilling between the floorboards, and the hissing sound is even more intense. I retrieve one of the largest stone pots from the stores and start hauling it down deeper into the ship, more sweat pouring out of me with each step.

Other crewmembers scramble back past me, carrying the rest of



our supplies up top. No time to talk, we're all too busy trying not to burn to death. At the very least the hole is sucking out most of the smoke.

I get down to the lower decks, past the light crystals. Liana's down there arranging various stone containers. Crackling and spitting sounds are loud up above, and the light is getting dangerously bright again. I try to yell the plan out to her but she just shakes her head, unable to hear me properly.

I point to my pot, imitate the stones falling into it, then slam the lid on. She nods, shading her eyes against the searing radiance up above as she peers at me. Then I mime picking the pot up, and throwing it overboard. If there's not enough time to get it above decks, we'll need to cut through the side of the ship to get it off, but... I'm not sure how to act that out. We'll figure that out at the time if we need to.

One of the planks up above cracks, letting a small ray of unfiltered light in. The heat gets close to unbearable and the tiny glimpse of the crystals I get before pulling the blindfold down drills into my eyes mercilessly. My neck and cheeks are burning, but I've got to keep the lid in my hands, ready to close up whatever container the stone falls into. If it misses them all... well, assuming either of us survive the heat we'll need to relocate to another deck and try again.

Those glowing fuckers better not miss.

There's a whoosh, another wave of heat and a crash. Then sizzling and the clink of rock striking rock. A new smell fills the room. It's acrid, and makes my headache even worse.

Liana and I both scramble forward. I'm able to just about make

out the vague outline of a rock pot that's shaking, light pouring out of the top. I leap for it and slam the lid down. Already the stone is hot to the touch, and I don't think it'll be getting any cooler.

After a few seconds carrying it, it's clear there's no way I'm hauling this to the top. Not if I want to arrive without my hands soldered to the thing.

'Liana! Get my blindfold off!' I yell. Thankfully she does so, and we make for the edge of the ship. Liana makes in there first and starts desperately hacking at the wooden wall with her axe.

The pot is almost throwing itself about now, it's shaking so hard. I can hear the stones rattle about inside, and I'm forced to drop it with a hiss of pain. It's too hot. Liana's taking too long.

I haul her back and grab the axe from her, ignoring her cry of protest. Then with a mad howl I smash through the wall, letting real light flow in from outside. The sands are churning down beneath us, and the cool air I let in is pure bliss.

No time to enjoy it though, I turn back and together we heave the pot over the edge. Liana cries out as her shoulder burns, but we manage it. The crystals plummet down into the sands, quickly swallowed up by them.

Breathe, Ortuck.

It's done.

We collapse to the ground, gasping for breath. Sweat covers me, but my mouth is parched. My shoulders, my arms, my cheeks... any bit of exposed skin has been burned, and I can still see flashes behind my eyes. But any pain is dulled into obscurity by

sheer weariness. I just want to sleep.

Instead I slam my fist down on the floor, jolting some awareness back into my body. I'm needed back up top. Dragging myself back to my feet, I leave Liana to rest for now. The journey back up is slow and painful, but soon I emerge back onto the deck of Celestial Censor.

My home, and my charge.

The smoke has started to lessen but it's still trailing up like some huge beacon, just inviting someone to notice us. Not to mention all the light that must have been shining last night. I find Jove, and he reckons that close to a third of the crew is injured in some way. There are one hundred and seventy eight folk aboard this ship, and nobody has died. Not yet. Not ever, so long as I put this right soon.

Strike that, one hundred and seventy six. Now that the you and her moth-touched accomplice had abandoned us. I figured I'd deal with you later.

'The rock is gone.' I call, 'We can return the sick down below.'

They spring to follow my orders. Give them half an hour and we'll be in a much less precarious situation. Then I hear shouts from up above.

One of the sails has caught alight, and the flame spread across it like a great sheet. Everything on the Censor is dry as a bone, begging to catch fire. If it's not cut down and thrown overboard soon, more and more of the rigging will catch. We've got minutes to contain it at most.

I sprint for the nearest mast, and clamber the knotted ropes

wrapped around it. Two people are already up there, sawing at the sheets holding the sail in place. Fire is encroaching upon them already.

'Clear the deck!' I yell downwards, and keep climbing. My arms and legs burn, and I feel faint as I ascend through a plume of smoke and past the swirling flames. Straddling a crossbeam above the sail, I get opposite the two working on the other end. I sway alarmingly before righting myself, teetering on the edge of a long fall. My brain lurches too, pounding against the side of my head as if it's trying to burst out. I feel heavy.

I slap myself in the face to dispel some of the grogginess, and draw my knife. Jolting myself back into a balanced position, I get cutting. Heat washes up over me, but it's nothing compared to the temperatures I endured a few minutes ago.

I see folk scurrying about down below as I work, dragging the sick and the injured out of the way. Not fast enough... it's a race between us and the flame, and we're losing. The other two finish their work, and half of the sail sags downwards, draping mere metres above the deck.

'There's no more water to douse it!' Ryn calls up, staring at the burning sail dangling over him with wide eyes and taking a step back.

'Water or no water, we're getting it off this fucking ship!' I shout back down, 'With our bare hands if needs be! Now clear the fucking deck!'

They're trying to, but it's not fast enough. The fire spreads closer and closer to my feet, threatening to lick at my boots. A few more seconds up here and the heat'll knock me unconscious or

cook me. And the flames are creeping ever closer toward the other sails, the rigging, and the rest of the great tangled oh-so-flammable mess suspended above our ship. I look down and there's just one rope left, holding the rest of the sail up here with me. Down below, the sick and the injured are being dragged clear by frantic shipmates. There's just too many. If I wait any longer the fire will spread and we'll be becalmed, left to die of thirst now that we've wasted so much water.

Unless another ship passes by then... I think back to the encoded routes I have locked in my cabin. It's no good, even if I knew the other ship's headings it will be weeks before one strays within eyesight of us. That just leaves the mainland.

Gritting my teeth and sparing one last glance at the people scrabbling below, I cut the last rope. Wonderfully cold air washes over me as the burning sail falls, gracefully collapsing over the deck and smothering those left behind. Muffled screams are piercingly emitted from rough shapes beneath the fabric, thrashing about helplessly beneath the flame.

I drag myself back to the mast and descend, half-falling as my arms threaten to give way. The rough ropes feel like they're tearing my skin off, brittle fibres aggravating their way into the blossoming burns on my palms. I fall to one knee when I hit the deck, close to collapsing. Not now.

I yell and beat my chest, forcing some life back into myself and standing up, 'Get it over the side! Over the side!'

I lead the way, grabbing a fistful of sail that isn't yet ablaze and hauling it toward the edge of the deck. Other folk join me, some crying out as they burn themselves even more. Some of the

more intuitive ones have found poles or harpoons from the reserves, using them to leverage the sail from a distance. The group of us let out a joint scream of pain and exertion, freeing those trapped beneath one by one as we move it over them. The glimpses I catch as we pass by are horrific, but I can't focus on them now. Right now there's only heat, agony and adrenaline.

With one last howl, we launch it over the side and into the sands down below. The great burning conflagration flutters down almost sedately, settling atop the dunes. More smoke pours upwards as it's slowly swallowed, sinking out of sight.

It's over.

No, it's never over.

Every single part of me wants to collapse. Everything hurts. A dull ache inhabits my body, lingering in the back of my mind but spiking to the fore with every move. The newly risen sun seems to pound at my head, as if it carries a rock to perpetually club me with. My clothes feel like rags, torn to shreds or seared away. And my mouth is dust, unable to muster any moisture at all. At least the smoke seems to have done away with the pollen.

'Get everyone below decks.' I say, my words rough and torn.

Nobody answers.

'The decks!' I shout, my voice close to breaking.

A trembling hand touches my shoulder. Liana is pointing upwards at the sky, her arm shaking. Not just from weariness. There's wordless horror in her eyes.

Small black dots fill the heavens to the North. I wink a few times - tiredness could be playing tricks on me. But they're still there, coming closer and closer. Slowly but surely focusing into

identifiable shapes. We've been seen.

We've been found.

## Chapter Seven

*"Superbia turned on us. Acedia's missing. The rest are dead or worse. How many more chances can we give them before we face reality? The Third Cildaran Nightmare will never end."*

-The final proclamation of Thelgryn the Jailor, as written by Admorites forced to bear witness.

'Seriously?! Reader, we need to move on before I die of old age.'

Melodias does his best to sound wry, but an edge of tension creeps into his voice. I wave dismissively and continue to take notes, stood atop a toppled column so I can survey the landscape more easily.

We've managed to find a bigger road. It's decrepit and I've stubbed my toe a dozen times on uneven rocks, but it's more than made up for it by kindling my confidence. The city of Caywake lies at the end of this ruined thoroughfare, and from there the Godsfont River. It's lucky I had the foresight to spend so long staring at those murals in the temple, without those memories we'd be utterly lost by now.

It's the first time I've ever really had cause to walk so far and for so long, and I have to say I'm not particularly taken by it. Going from one end of the ship to the other is one thing, but this endless plodding along wears away at you. My feet feel leaden, and the persistent ache from my hands hardly helps matters. At least we have cause to stop regularly though - every fresh mile seems to bring some long lost landscape or building



that demands recording. And when I'm in too much pain to write, I've been having Melodias draw sketches for me to keep his nerves settled. Not that it's done much good.

Most of what we sees comes close to defying description, let alone explanation. A giant stone figure, tall enough to reach the clouds, crossed our path not two hours ago. It shone with an eerie purple light, and carried a perfect stone cube almost as large as Celestial Censor. We followed it a short way, and found it piling up similar cubes into perfectly arranged piles, constantly fetching them back and forth. Why? We don't know. If it's sentient, then it's choosing to ignore us entirely. Another mystery, one that the libraries of Fobsharana can hopefully answer for us.

The footsteps it left behind have become little ponds, on of which was right in the middle of the road. We had to pick our way around it - the water was grey and opaque, so we didn't bother refilling our stores at all. We have enough for another few days left, so our hopes are pinned on the Godsfont.

When he's not ushering me to stay on the move Melodias has been asking me all about the Gods, the history of our ships, and my life. He's eager to hear all of it, and understandably so. Every story I tell seems to enrapture him, and he is probing for more information. I find myself thinking that it's a shame he's so much older than me. He'd make the perfect trainee Reader otherwise, far surpassing any of my lacklustre pupils back home.

But... in a scant few decades he'll be unable to speak his own name, let alone the words. That's assume he is alive at all.

'If you want me to finish faster, then sketch the skyline over

there.' I nod Northwards, where great dark spurs break the horizon, jutting out into the sky. More mountains, as they're called. Those in particular could be the Teeth, if we're anywhere near where I think we are.

Melodias sighs and takes my sketchbook. Rare rays of sunlight are peeking through the clouds, reflecting from the sand encrusted into his skin. He cannot remember his exact age, but I would estimate between forty and fifty.

'Why are you here, Melodias?' I ask.

His hand is dancing across the page already, capturing the horizon with considerable accuracy, if a little too much artistic flourish. He clicks his tongue, contemplating without giving me an answer.

'If this place is truly so dangerous, why come here? Not to mention the fact that by doing so you've alienated the people that fished you out of the sands in the first place.' I press.

'...To save Celestial Censor and all the other ships.' His reply is measured. Cautious.

'That's all? Not to be callous, but what attachment could you have to the Censor?'

'I don't need to be attached to anyone. But there's clearly a problem here, and I want to help fix it. There's plenty I want to do with the rest of my life, and I can hardly get it done without a civilisation to live in, can I? We've lived adrift for so long, listless in the dunes, that it seems to me that nobody has a purpose beyond clinging onto what fragments we've got leftover from better times.' He seems to be speaking as much to himself as me, following this stream of consciousness, 'But if we solve this

Lethe Mirage problem and successfully return from a visit to the mainland all in one, who knows where we could go from there? Spending your entire life on a ship is a good way to survive, but it's no way to live. Imagine what could happen if we moved on from that - built new cities on the mainland. Hell, go back up to the Moon maybe. Perhaps we can cool it down and resettle it? Our true homeland.'

'That's an impressive set of dreams.'

'Setting foot on the mainland was a dream not three days ago. Which is why it's all the more important that we stay on the move and live through this. Otherwise we'll just be a footnote in your other Reader's books until they're all blown to bits by the Mirage one by one.' He laughs quietly, shading in part of his drawing, 'At least, that's what I think. Maybe having no memory gives me a unique perspective.'

There's movement in the corner of my eye.

I turn to face it, and scream I see something looming and dark for a fraction of a second.

I throw my arms up and stumble back, dropping papers that scatter in all directions. A gut-wrenching feeling runs through me as my foot hits thin air and I topple backward off the column. The scratch of claw upon rock follows me as the thing pursues.

I hit the ground hard, stones digging into my back and driving the breath from me. Despite that I roll, pitching over sideways as taloned feet dig into the mottled earth that my prone form had just occupied.

I scabble backwards, unable to stop myself from staring at the creature as it rises from a crouch. It's taller than Melodias,

but lithe like he is. Covered in wet rot that oozes drops of foul greyish liquid as it prowls silently toward me.

And eyeless.

'Melodias!' I cry, my voice cracking.

I can't think. I can only look, pushing myself backward away from this thing.

Spell. Cast a spell!

Melodias charges over me, spear levelled. The thing moves to the side, flowing like water and letting him run right past it. The reprieve breaks my transfixion and I fumble for the dagger, yanking it out of my belt.

The blade slices into my own skin with a wet searing sensation, but it's in my hands. I stagger up as it rounds on Melodias and lashes out at him, a whirlwind of claws and teeth.

But still no sound.

He back pedals, warding it away with the harpoon. Not panicking, just snarling and spitting in defiance as it bears down upon him.

I should run up and stab it while it's back is turned. Right?

Unless it hears my steps. What if I threw the dagger instead?

No, I'd miss. Terrible idea, what are you even thinking!

Cast a spell! Which spell?!

My book is gone! Do you even remember any?

No no no, just-

'Fucking stab it, Reader!' Melodias yells.

His words cut through me, NS I stamp my foot to dispel the the paralysing noise from my mind. Clutching the dagger tight, I run forward and plunge it into the creature.

The blade slips into it with so little friction that the hilt and my hand follow, plunging through the rotten mildew and deep inside it's body. Thick sticky liquid oozes between my fingers, and my stomach turns as I wrench myself back out of it with a disgusted scream.

Greyish slop tumbles out of the hole I left behind. Little wriggling things move about in it, and with another cry I see they're all over my hand and forearm too, writhing their way over my skin and underneath the bandages on my hand. I feel them slip and slide over me, spreading their corruption.

I feel queasy.

Melodias presses his attack as I stumble back, dropping the dagger and frantically scraping the worm-creatures off my skin. He manages to land a strike of his own, impaling it through the torso.

More of that mixture spurts out, and a dank, overly ripe smell fills the air. Like rotten food and stale water all at once, permeating my senses. Globbs of it splatter over my hair, my shoulders, my mouth. I feel something wriggling on my tongue. I think I might-

My stomach lurches once again, and I feel something rising in my throat. I can't hold it back, and I throw up all over the column, bending over so far it feels like my ribs are stabbing into my pelvis.

I feel burning pain in my side as it takes advantage of my distraction, and claws at me. The blow knocks me over, and I hear ringing as my head bashes into the stone column on the way down.

Everything is swaying from side to side, and vomit still

trickles between my lips, catching in the back of my throat. I can only cough, splutter and hold my side.

At least it'll be over in a moment.

Melodias drives the spear through it's head, pinning the creature to the column and twisting sharply. He hauls it down to the ground, stamping on it with his good leg again and again until it stops twitching and grey ooze covers his boot. Through it all, the creature still didn't make a sound. The head is nothing but a pile of mould and mush.

I dry retch a little more when I turn to see it's remains - the smell is even more pervasive now. Melodias is forced to carry me away, onto the other side of the road. I press my head into his bony chest, coughing and crying all at once. All I can think of is the ooze and mould working its way into the jagged wounds in my side, insidiously flowing inside of me.

'Lie still, Reader. I need to clean your wounds and tie them up before too much of you ends up on the outside.'

He sets to work, ripping strips of cloth from the sail he took with us earlier. I can see pages scattered on the ground, being blown away by the breeze. My notes, so vulnerable out there in the open. I try to tell Melodias to get them, but I can only cough and splutter - each rasping breath feels like it's pushing at by side, threatening to burst out and tear me in two. And there are... voices. Whispers that weave tenebrous strings of words at the back of my mind. Ask me to fall asleep, let slumber overtake me so that I can escape the pain and disgust for a while. But then Melodias's words cut through, scattering them.

'I did warn you. Dozens of times!' He's washing the cuts with

water from one of our canteens, 'And every single time you ignored me so you could scribble down some more. And hey, you're the Reader. You must know what you're doing, right? Who am I to question if you think you need some time to take notes on old rocks?'

He ties strips of sail around me firmly, binding up my side. Each tug feels like a fresh laceration. 'But what do you know. Seems like you're just as clueless as the rest of us. Did it say anything in your books about silent taloned abominations? I'd like to think you'd have mentioned it once or twice if it did.' He finishes, tying off the bandage, 'There. You'll live for now.'

'...Papers.' I manage to gasp, pointing over at them.

He looks back, balling up a fist. But then he closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, then goes to gather them up without another word.

Maybe he's right. I did lead him out here without knowing enough about what we faced, and now I'm so battered that I could slow us down far more than I was merely taking notes. Not to mention the wriggling things and the ooze in my mouth and in the cuts. Worming their way through my body.

I shudder at the thought, which only aggravates the injuries even more. An off-red stain has grown along one side of my once-white robes, marred already with sand and dirt.

This can't have been a mistake. I'm the only one that can save the ships. A Reader. There was nobody else. Ortuck and others might not have seen it but our salvation was supposed to be out here. It has to be out here. Otherwise I'm just... useless.

The thought lances through me more painfully than the burns

and the gashes. I strike the ground with a balled fist, scowling and pushing myself up out of my fetal position. Waves of dizziness and nausea hit me as I start to rise, so I settle myself with sitting up against a rock for now, watching Melodias gathering up my notes.

'I can do this, you know.' I say, when he returns.

He snorts, handing the bundle of papers back to me.

'I-'

'No. When you argued with Ortuck on deck, you acted as if you knew everything. That you were in control. But she was right. Take another look at that thing and tell me it wasn't insane to come here! If we're to have a chance of surviving this - any chance at all - then I'm in charge. No more delays or pauses to take notes. Understand?'

I feel pressure building inside me as I try to think of something to say in return. Some clever collection of words to skewer him in one strike. Thoughts collide in my mind, but I'm in no state to sort them out now. Everything hurts so much. I simply nod.

And so he leads us onwards. Every step brings with it more terror its impact runs up and down by body. I feel like I might burst apart at the seams as the sails grow more and more saturated with red.

I feel my heart thudding, each rhythmic pump driving more blood out of me. A foul taste still lingers in my mouth, tempting me to gulp down more water with each passing second, but I can't. There's no telling when me might run across a fresh supply.

Melodias stalks through the decaying landscape like a feral



creature now, always alert and moving with more of a prowl than a walk. Occasionally he'll look down at his bad leg with a furious stare, especially after it dislodges a stone or throws him off balance. I try to concentrate on him and forget the swirling hurt and sickness, but it's too much.

I've read about injuries and wound tending. He might have bandaged up the wound but that's nowhere near enough to keep me alive and moving for long. I'm going to die.

'Melodias. Stop.'

He pauses mid stride, and look back at me. Still twitchy and irritated.

'You need to sew me up. And clean the wound properly.' I look up at the pale sun, by now close to the horizon. Vertigo sweeps over me and I almost fall before managing to regain myself enough to speak again, 'If you don't I'll be dead by morning, and even if we do find something I wont be around to read it.'

'Sew it?' He takes a step back, his eyes glancing between my face and my injuries, 'How?'

'With a needle and thread, the same as sewing fabric. I brought needles and we can pluck a thread out from my robes, but... I don't think I can do it myself.' I point at the sinking sun, gasping as the movement triggers another flash of pain, 'The light will fade soon - this needs to be done while you can still see.'

He looks at the horizon, biting his lip. I wonder if he remembers how to sew. Everyone on the ship learns at some point - it'd be ironic to be relying on the only person I've ever meant who can't do it.

'Okay. Okay.' He says, 'We'll find somewhere out of the open. The last thing we need is another one of those things jumping on us.'

I nod, 'If I collapse on the way, don't panic. Just carry me the rest of the way.'

'...Right.'

He finds a sheltered place, beneath a still-standing corner of some long abandoned building. The stone walls block line of sight in two directions, and most importantly there's no fungus nestled in there. I manage to stay on my feet the entire way, and despite all the pain and fogginess in my mind I'm quite proud of that.

I will not be useless.

## Chapter Eight

*"The Rharites are close to disrupting everything we worked so hard to put in place. We need a volunteer to go through and stop them - it will only be a one way journey, so think carefully before stepping forward."*

- Kineas of the Column addressing adherents of his cult, according to a tome of history Zhulavi lent me.

The needle and thread are ready. From the way Melodias tentatively grasps the small length of sharp metal I'd guess he's never sewn anything more intricate than a sail. But then I'm getting beyond the point of being able to guess anything now - cold grogginess hovers over my thoughts, pushing them in and out of focus as a small but persistent trembling takes hold over my body.

The fluttering glow of a small fire fights against the dying light, but between them he should be able to see what he's doing. I'm on my side with my robes rucked up, exposing the gashes that softly weep a little more through the bandage with every heartbeat. My adrenaline was spent when we were attacked. Now I just feel woozy and resigned.

I've pulled up my hood, obscuring any view of the operation. Melodias looks at me one last time, his expression blurred. If he's looking at me in the hopes of another way out, he's not getting it. After one last pause, he starts unwrapping the wounds so he can get at them more easily. The waft of fresh air on the feels like a tender caress, but one with sinister motives. The

touch of a lover with a knife hidden behind their back.

I could have dulled the pain with a few choice words from my spell-book. But as we know that's buried below miles and miles of dune right about now. I can almost see it in front of me, being pushed to and fro by nebulous currents of fine sand. So close I could reach out and touch it. Perhaps I could grasp it and...

A sharp twinge returns me to alertness as the needle punctures my skin for the first time, boring a hole for the rough length of thread to follow it through. There are three cuts, and I try to imagine how far along each one he is as the needle stabs through me again, and again.

The thread tugs and twists at my insides as it's drawn further and further through, wrenching my flesh together. A small whimper escapes my lips. Melodias pauses when he hears it, and I want to howl at him to keep going rather than stop for no reason and elongate this. All that stops me if the firm believe that emptying my lungs like that would split me wide open.

Second cut. A constant pressure is on the one that's sewn shut now. I'm convinced that every single shiver and twitch might burst it. Then the needle starts stabbing again. Over and over, weaving itself through me until Melodias gives it a sharp tug to anchor the stitches in place. Sweat is trickling down my nose, creating an itch that only grows and grows, but I don't want to move my arms to wipe at it.

Last cut. I try to imagine how far across he is with each stitch, willing every one of them to be the last. Inevitably my hopes are dashed time after time as the needle bores back in and out. An angry wasp stinging me again and again.

Then one last sharp pull at the thread which feels like it's crushing my flesh into itself, and Melodias sighs in relief, '...Done.'

He wraps the bandage back around. The fresh strips of cloth are one more layer keeping me from falling apart and I thrill as their embrace. Deep pulses of pain are running back and forth along my body, but it is over. I sip at some water with his assistance.

'Scratch my nose.' I say.

A moment passes in which his blurry features look at me with utter incomprehension. Then he snorts and complies, getting rid of the itch and the droplet that caused it. His eyes meet mine and looks like he about to say something, but he thinks better of it, instead turning to bat out the fire.

That night is long, and it hurts. The few snatches of sleep I managed to grasp at are incongruous, leaving my doubting whether I slept at all as pain, reality and my thoughts all dissolve together into one unfathomable mess.

We need to get to Caywake. We need to find Fobsharana. I can sort this all out. I just need to get there.

## Chapter Nine

*"Freedom first. We must free all those wretched souls from the grimy cities that serve as their prisons. And after that, revenge."*

- Words that I found scorched into Caywake's outer wall.

Caywake was a city of many marvels. They say it was so large that great golden carriages ferried people between its districts, suspended above the cityscape on slender rails. I've read that the streets radiated warmth to stave off the winter cold, keeping them clear of ice and slush no matter what time of year. Great tapering towers sprouted up above the other buildings, connected by roads and walkways so that the city existed on many levels. Graceful skyships would tether themselves into them, bringing people from far and wide to trade or even just to visit. Two walls ringed the entire place, punctured by large gateways over the rivers to allow ships to pass through.

The road we had spent the past day and a half walking would once have been host to a ceaseless procession of people and goods, flowing in and out of Wakerock Gate. Genius contraptions imported from Aker ensured that even at night, Caywake would be lit. All manner of exotic food would arrive each morning to be hawked by vendors lining the wide open streets, while up above flying ships would wind their way back and forth. Presiding over it all was Attahua the Beautiful, patron Goddess of the city. Under her watch it was written that Caywake's pulchritude would persist for evermore.

When I was younger and read about all the lost cities, I'd always thought that Caywake would be the one I'd like to live in. Had they the opportunity to see the brownish, crumbling walls and jagged skyline of the city now, my younger self might have chosen differently. Remnants of the splendour I once read about can still be picked out if you look closely. The great towers are still there, tall enough even in ruin to poke above the walls surrounding them, but they sag as if exhausted. The walkways connecting them are collapsed or severed. This city is forlorn, worn and silent.

And yet... perhaps some fragment of knowledge is buried somewhere within it. It might not be Fobsharana, but that doesn't mean it isn't worth trying.

Melodias is having none of it, keeping us low and skirting around the edges of the walls. In his mind, the crumbling ruins are merely more things to be wary of. Potential hidey holes for feral beasts and monsters.

As we make our way to the first river, an unusual sound greets us. An odd, melodic burbling that only gets louder the closer we draw to it. Cresting the top of an overturned carriage, I see the Godsfont. Clear water rushes past us, into the city and out toward the dunes. It's wide - wide enough for everything on the far bank to be naught but an indistinct blur.

'It's still made of water?' Melodias asks, sniffing the air. I carefully sit down on the edge of the carriage, glad for the pause, 'It would seem that way. I imagine the Dunes soak it all up before it gets far beyond the mainland. It looks clean, at least. I half expected the entire thing to be infested with that fungus.'

He doesn't reply. A few moments pass while he ponders and surveys our surrounds. The stitches in my side throb, seeming the strain at my skin every time I breath.

'...And where to from here?' I venture, 'Fobsharana is upriver, but there's a chance that exactly what we need hides behind those walls.'

'It's too dangerous to go in there.' He answers, 'Haven't you learned anything from last time? Quieten down for a moment.'

So now it's alright to dawdle in one place now, so that he can have a think. What a hypocrite. I squint and try to pick something out of the fuzziness on the far side of the river. It looks greyer than the mottled earth on our side. Paved, perhaps. Or covered in more mold... I look back at the crooked towers. How did something so large and beautiful fall into such ruin? What was so devastating that it brought the city to it's knees?

'We need to go into the city.' Melodias announces, 'You said Fobsharana lies upriver? It'd be much safer to go by boat, then. And seeing as ours is beached a day and a half behind us...' He points at the city with a twitchy arm that drops the moment it's finishing indicating the direction, '...there are bound to be hundreds in there.'

'You just said that it was too dangerous. And what boat-' Never mind. I shut my mouth stand up with a shrug that has me wincing afterwards at it tugs on my stitches. Perhaps he just needed to moment to realise that my idea is the only one we have, and adding a tiny bit of his own spice is his way of feeling better about it.

He leads us toward the outer walls. The gates are sealed shut



by a rusting portcullis studded with cracked coloured stones. Each and every one of them has been sundered in some manner. I recognise them from sketches in my old books when we get close - gems. Hidden treasures that you can find deep underground. I have no idea why someone would set something so valuable into a mundane portcullis. I suppose they must have had a lot of them to spare.

Melodias decides that the gate is too obvious, and instead locates a partially collapsed section of wall for us to climb through. I look at him with an exasperation, 'Really? In my condition?'

'Look, I'll climb up then throw a knotted rope down. It'll be just like the rigging.'

'Great.'

He scampers up through the broken masonry, quickly finding handholds. His foot dislodges a stone slab when he's about half-way up that tumbles down and splats into the mud next to me. I take a few more steps back.

Soon enough to rope comes down after it, knotted at regular intervals. I tentatively take hold of it and experiment, letting my hands take some of my body-weight. The scorched and battered flesh on my palms screams out at me to stop as the rough hemp rubs away at them, and I let it go with a short gasp. No good. Even if I could hold it, I can barely raise my arm above head height without aggravating the wounds in my side.

This is hopeless. I can barely walk, let alone climb.

Melodias looks down in askance, a good thirty metres above me.

I shake my head up at him.

He frowns, sitting on the edge of the wall and lapsing into

thought once again. Time for a new plan, I guess. A short time later he's scouted up and down the wall and told me to skirt back around to the gate, which he'll open from the inside. I decide not to ask him whether this wont undo all of the stealth he has been working toward, because frankly I'd rather not be left down here to starve and presumably be eaten or infested by damp fungus beasts.

With a deafening screech the portcullis starts to rise, every scrape and creak piercing the air to form a great shrill cacophony. I slip inside as soon as it's up high enough, looking around the gatehouse for a way up to him.

The portcullis slams back down behind me, splintering some of the flagstones with the impact. I imagine it's usually supposed to take more than one man to lower it.

Caywake enraptures me yet again as I witness what lies behind the walls. Wide open streets are accompanied by canals which run parallel, regularly interrupted by small stone bridges leading to whatever building or plaza lies behind. Some of them have crumbled and collapsed, but most of them retain some semblance of integrity. On every corner is a large blank sign, and crammed into every bit of available space are dead plants and withered trees. Ropey brown vines dangle from almost everything, some of them with small yellow leaves clinging tenaciously onto life. Life! There is something living in here after all. I can't help but smile at the thought.

A stone bounces off the group beside me. I look back in the direction it came from and see Melodias peering down at me from atop the gatehouse, his vibrant red gloves standing down from the

brown stone and grey sky. I beckon him, pointing down the street toward the heart of the city.

From here I can see the inner wall. Caywake was divide into two sections by them, both of which sprawled over several islands in the river delta. According to the maps I'd seen, at least. And inside that second wall were some of the libraries of the Tractites, legendary explorers and messengers of old. I can even see their spire from here! One of the larger ones in the distance.

'I couldn't see any docks from up there.' Melodias says, once he's managed to descend.

'The docks...' I point to the Tractite Spire, 'Will be there, in the city centre.'

I doubt he'll let me detour near there willingly, and who knows? Maybe I'm right. Melodias nods, and sets off toward the inner wall with harpoon in hand.

He's made it about three steps when figures slip out of the nearby buildings.

People.

They're completely covered in billowing robes that might have been colourful once, but are now stained and muted. Each of them wears a mask that covers their entire face, but other than that they look like regular folk. Two arms, two legs, regular height. I think the masks might be porcelain.

Melodias stops, watching warily as they string out into a line across the road. Many of them drop to one knee or sit cross legged once they've taken up position, watching us without word or visible emotion. All except one, who takes a step forward and levels some kind of dowel at us. It's wooden, with faded ribbons

dangling from one end.

'Um... I suppose you were wondering about the noise?' Melodias says, 'Don't worry, we're harmless. We just thought the city was empty, is all.'

No answer seems to be forthcoming, and he glances back at me. I can only shake my head silently. I've read nothing about masked survivors in the city. Maybe these are the ones that throw people into the sea with rocks tied to their feet. Elzeke would be so excited.

Melodias tries again, taking a bold step forward onto his bad leg.

'My name is Melodias. We're from the dunes. Who are you?'

The one carrying the dowel also steps forward. I think it's a man, but even that's hard to tell. He taps the end of his dowel on the road, rapping it against the mossy fractured flagstones. The others all tap their feet or hands too, in the same rhythm. Tap tap tap tap, like tiny footsteps marching in time.

Tap tap tap swipe.

He swipes the dowel across the ground instead this time, as do all the others, but then start tapping again. Then a pause. Then two taps and a swipe. Then more tapping.

Tap swipe swipe pause tap swipe tap tap pause. It's impossible to keep track of it all and it keeps going for a full minute as we watch. I notice that Melodias is subconsciously tapping his foot along with them.

They all stop. The leader nods at Melodias as if he's supposed to go next. After a moment of hesitation, he taps and swipes out a little sequence with the butt of his harpoon. The masked people

all learn forward, but let out a series of disgruntled sighs and groans as Melodias continues. Eventually the negative reaction compels him to stop.

The leader shakes his head and tuts. Evidently they can make noise then. Do they just choose not to speak? Or has all language fallen out of use in this ruinous place?

Melodias turns back to me, though not far enough to let the masked folk completely out of his sight, 'Well, we can't understand each other but they seem harmless enough. Maybe we could just take another route to the docks?'

'Assuming that doesn't offend them. For all we know that tapping was their way of telling us to piss off.'

'Maybe? It didn't seem very aggressive. I bet they're just trying to say pretty much what I've been trying to say to them.'

'Tsk... if I still had my book I could show it to them and see if they can read.' I look about for a stray stone. Finding a decently pointed one, I bend down (very painful) and retrieve it, then walk over to one of the nearby buildings, beckoning at their leader to come with me. He complies after a slight tilt of his head.

I scratch out a nice greeting on the wall for him. The language we use on the ships is more or less inherited from the mainland, so with luck it should be understandable to him. Unless the literacy rates here are similar to their level on the Dunes, in which case we're probably out of luck.

The masked man traces the letters gently with one finger after I'm done. He makes a bemused 'Hm!' sound, but seems no closer to understanding this than we were to his tapping. This is getting us

nowhere.

'We should go. They've probably regressed in the absence of civilisation, not to mention all the feasting.' I tell Melodias. I can't believe the first remnants of humanity we've encountered has been reduced to tapping dowels and wearing childish masks. Staying in a large group with them like this will only attract more unwanted attention.

'Let me try this.' Melodias takes the stone before I can object, and draws out a rough rendition of a boat with two people on it. Now who's wasting time?

'See? That's us. Ideally we'd like another one of these things.' He says.

This seems to make some kind of sense to them. The others get back to their feet and point down the street behind them as one. Their leader holds out an open hand to me, which I slowly take. Then they start leading us into the city.

Now that we're close, I can see that most of them are armed in some way. Daggers, clubs, slings... I try not to be too worried by it. After all, who wouldn't be armed in a place as dangerous as this? Melodias and I certainly are. I really should record some of their tap-swipe-pause routines if I get the chance, but for now we're being kept on the move.

They smell quite nice. Sweet and floral, but still earthy.

Now that we're in among the buildings I can see many more ramshackle constructions crammed in between them, all abandoned and falling in on themselves. I'm not sure why anyone would need to do that when there's such grandiose architecture all around them. There's no place for tiny ad-hoc dwellings like that in the

histories I've read about.

We approach the inner wall. One or two of them keep darting ahead to check around corners, keeping low and quiet. They seem to be able to move with barely a sound, and actually flinch whenever Melodias or I (usually Melodias) accidentally cause some kind of noise. I feel the grip of their leader tighten momentarily around my hand as I disturb a loose pebble and send it skittering over to one side of the road, and he jolts as I yelp at the extra pressure on my burned palms.

'Sorry.' I mutter, which only seems to agitate him even more. One of the scouts doubles back to us, producing a pair of tiny ceramic disks which they hold in one hand. With a series of clicks and swipes, they use the disks to communicate something to the leader just like the dowel. They're almost like castanets, but as well as clicking they produce other sounds. It's fascinating.

As the scout concludes their message we detour, turning right and skirting around for a while before turning back toward the wall again. Here off the main thoroughfare there are skeletal remains piled in crevices and corners, the bones smashed to splinters in most cases. Those that are still intact are scored with odd symmetrical patterns, as if someone took the time to chisel intricate symbols into them. Many of the buildings are roughly trapezoid, tapering upwards with flat roofs. Tempted to climb one of them, I gently tug on the masked leader's hand as we pass by an open doorway, but he shakes his head sharply when I nod in it's direction.

Clustered at the foot of the inner wall are a number of tents. Once vibrantly coloured but now thin and faded, just like the

masked people accompanying us. It doesn't look like a permanent dwelling though - a well worn cart stands beside it with some kind of brown witless looking animal hitched to it. That's odd. How do they drag the cart about with that thing constantly getting in their way?

The leader lets my hand go and rummages around in their tents, quickly returning with two more masks. One has an apathetic expression, and he hands it to me with a quick nod. Melodias gets the other one, which bears a wry smile. I'm not sure whether I should feel insulted or not.

Well, when in Caywake... I put the mask on. It doesn't obscure my vision too much, and has the similar scent to the one I noticed earlier. A little like lemon but with a hint of bitterness.

The others have all set about gathering up their belongings and loading up the cart.

Have we been inducted? Perhaps that boat picture has been horribly misinterpreted. If so, I can hardly spend the rest of my life as part of some nomadic masked tribe of mutes. Just on the other side of those walls could be a library or a boat. I glance at Melodias to see if he's thinking the same thing, but he has his mask on now.

There's a gatehouse not far off, set into the inner wall. I wander a little closer to it while our hosts are packing. Another portcullis blocks the way in, although this one's twisted and covered in rust. So much so we might be able to crawl underneath in some places.

I hear faint scratching behind me, and turn to see Melodias stooped over drawing out another picture in the dirt while the



leader leans over and watches. He produces a rather tasteless depiction of myself with the expressionless mask alongside himself, then places us next to the gateway and draws an arrow through it. I suppose he's decided that we're not going to make a break for it.

After studying the image, the masked leader points upwards. A wan sun is visible peeking through the air, but its light is being smothered somehow, bled dry before it can truly reach us. Having pointed it out, he then steadily brings his arm down to point at the horizon. Ah! He must mean that we're waiting until nightfall, but when why are they preparing to leave?

The brown animal suddenly starts to lumber forward, dragging the entire cart and all of their possessions alongside it. I can't help but let out a small gasp. It doesn't get in the way, it **does** the pulling itself. Do they pay it for its services somehow?

I sidle up to it as the group sets off, heading around the outskirts of the inner wall. Maybe it... talks? Actually no, none of them talk. It must understand the tap-speak then. Feeling a bit foolish, I pluck at the sleeve of the nearest nomad and point at the brown creature, wincing as the motion sends a twinge down my side. They just shrug at me as if this is all totally normal. Perhaps they pay it with food.

We reach the banks of the river again, although now that we're inside the city the water's been hemmed in by a large stone wall on either side. There is a great archway hewn into the wall to allow the water to flow through it, flanked by twin statues each carrying oars. There is no portcullis to block this one. Looking through into the inner city it I see great decrepit jetties and

yet more gargantuan buildings - and more decay. Great pillars of white-grey fungus nestle in among the buildings, and burst from windows and doorways like fluffy swollen pustules.

Is something like that be growing in me? No, I crush such thoughts. Even if it is true, all I need are a few more days to find our answer.

The others seem content to wait here until nightfall, quietly spreading out some blankets and sitting down. Now that they're stationary, I'm able to pick Melodias out by his red gloves, and slowly lower myself down beside him. I'm not sure whether we're allowed to talk, or whether he could even make out my words through the mask, so I don't try.

Night arrives, and it gets darker I'm able to detect a wan greenish light in the inner city. It spills through the archway, making everything it touches appear pale and sickly. This seems to be some kind of signal for the masked folk, who rise once again and point us to a dark shape in the water. It grows closer and I see that is a ship of sorts, about 10 aevums along and 5 wide.

Two other people in masks crew it, and it makes an odd humming noise as it moves. I can't pick out much more, even with the sickly light. They gently escort us down onto the deck, then disembark themselves, leaving just Melodias and myself aboard. The leader presents one last drawing to Melodias, who shows it to me - the little ship with us upon it heading back through the archway, followed by a skull. Alright, alright, they've made their point.

I sit down behind the wheel, finding some other odd controls and runes as well. Thankfully they seem quite intuitive, and after a couple of experimental prods the craft sets off upriver. I

glance back at the inner city one last time. All that knowledge, perhaps even our salvation, lies in there. And yet...

I turn away and guide us away from it all. Fobsharana is what the Goddess said in my dream. Fobsharana was the greatest city of them all, and perhaps it still is. The risk of losing our lives in Caywake would be too much, and these masked ones certainly seem to agree. Melodias waves back at them as we depart, but they are already shrinking back away from the riverside as if frightened of being seen.

We press onward up the Godsfont.

## Chapter Ten

*"Kita is lost to us. All of her lands, once vibrant, are smote from existence itself. The glassy ruins that remain are henceforth known as The Blight, so that you might never forget the price of defiance."*

-Cobbled together from scraps of paper I gathered when the Masked Folk were not looking.

'So, tell me what happened yesterday. Start to finish.'

Melodias leans back and looks skyward, recounting the events leading up to the acquisition of our new boat. I can't help but bristle as he says that I was prepared to abandon the Masked Folk and strike out alone but for his cunning intervention. Maybe his memory truly is falling apart.

'...So how did I do?' He finally asks, looking back down at me with a wry smile. We've agreed to take the masks off when we're on the open water, but keep them handy for when we have to disembark or if we see spores in the air.

'Your recounting of events is mostly intact. Skewed by bias, perhaps, but accurate.'

'I wasn't the one down a few pints of blood.' He retorts.

I frown at him. He's joking, but there's a hard edge to it. I'm sure he still stands by his outburst from two days ago. At least I can take notes on the various ruins and waste the draft past without hindering our pace now, so he can hardly complain.

Only in short bursts though, else the burns on my palms start

to sear. When I asked Melodias to sketch down the outline of a great spire in the distance, he refused. I didn't try asking again.

Another of many long, stilted silences fall over the boat. Only the quiet hum of the arcane mechanisms powering us and the gentle lapping of water against the bow. Thoughts and dull pain look destined to be my only companions for the time being unless I speak up and coax some kind of conversation out of him.

'Melodias.' I say, 'Why did you want us to sneak off of the ship?'

He peers back at me, '...Isn't that obvious? We'll all get erased by the Mirage otherwise.'

'But your ship is already gone. Doesn't that make it all pointless?'

'Of course not. Just because Celestial Censor isn't my ship doesn't mean it isn't crammed full of people. And those people are some of the last people we have left, right? You'd know that more than anyone.'

'I didn't know about those Masked folk.' I say, glancing back down the river, 'And I doubt they knew about us before that meeting. As enlightening as all the scripture is, things have had time to change since it was written. Seeing any life - let alone intelligent life - makes me wonder just how many of us are actually out here.'

'You're getting whimsical.' He replies, leaning forward with a small smile that's probably forced, 'Look at it from my perspective. You picked me out of the wreckage with nothing to my name apart from some scrubby clothes. Your ship was sailing about

perfectly fine without me before, and when I did ask around it's not like there were any huge holes in the crew I could plug. So when I see that you need someone that can survive on the move and handle a boat, it seemed obvious that I had to make myself useful.'

'By helping me commit a crime and defying the shipmaster? That's hardly going to endear you to the local community.' I look into his eyes, searching for a hint of something more, '...No, there's something more than that. You can climb and you're very lithe for your age,' - he raises his eyebrows at that - 'Ortuck would have been more than happy to put you to work in the rigging.'

'Well what about you then?'

'Me?'

'Yes. It's pretty apparent by now that you're just as lost out here as I am. I'd be surprised if you actually managed to get anything out of those old Reader's notes. What makes you so sure that what we're looking for is out here? Sure enough to make a break for it before Ortuck had even had time to make a proper decision about it?'

'I...'

I look away and twist my crooked fingers together. I can hardly tell him that I had a dream about it. Or let loose that my sight is- 'Look. The Mirage could wipe us all out at any moment. I can read, and no matter how slim the odds, I know that the texts we need were once somewhere out here. I'm the only one that can do this. How can I not take that risk?'

'Because there **are** other people that can do this. You have a whole herd of other ships with their own Readers, don't you? You

said the last time the Mirage visited before now was over a decade ago! What's the odds of him doing it twice within a month? That's all it would have taken before we met with another ship.'

'You're being hypocritical, aren't you?' I retort, still looking down at the murky water below, 'You knew all that before volunteering for this trip. Why bring it up now?'

'Because you asked why-' He stops abruptly mid-sentence, '-I just need to know that what I'm doing is useful.'

'Why does that matter so much? Is it because of your memory?' Something clicks in my mind, 'Melodias, you don't need to prove yourself. Nobody is expecting any miracles from a sole survivor. The miracles are my job.'

He tenses up, and for a moment looks set to spew out a torrent of words in response. But then he takes a breath, and turns to look upriver, 'We'll... talk about it later. I need to keep a lookout. Stop distracting me, alright?'

I sigh. At least we steered clear of my dreams as a topic. I could really use another one of those by the way, Admor. For all I know I could've been copying down a comprehensive map of the mainland in that tower. But oh no, not only do all my initial sketches get buried in the dunes, my dreams suddenly stop the second I step foot on the mainland so I can't re-draw them!

By this point I can see shapes on the horizon on both out left and right. More mountains clustered together into one unbroken line. They share no uniformity though, each of them is rugged and imperfect. In places the tops are even more faded where they pierce through the clouds themselves. The sheer scale is hard to even comprehend, though I do my best to convey it with words. I've

read that rivers come from mountains, but the Godfont is fed by Ezolile's tears. Maybe that's why we're running alongside the mountains instead of toward them.

I'm running out of paper - the few scraps I managed to hang on to are crammed full of notes, scribbles and sketches. I labour under the constant fear of somehow dropping them into the river and losing everything.

Melodias taps his harpoon on the deck, shaking me out of my thoughts. He's point up ahead, at some kind of blurry mass in the distance. I squint and strain, managing to pick out what look two two stone bridges, each other them almost as large and thick as Caywake's inner wall. The river forks just in front of them, one fork passing beneath each bridge.

'You see that?' Melodias says, pointing forward, 'There's buildings between the bridges, and some kind of larger one atop a hill.'

How can see see so far in his fifties? Perhaps he's just making educated guesses and hoping they'll turn out to be correct.

And yet, his words are proven as we sail in closer. Between the two bridges are sagging wooden jetties, and behind them lie the remains of what must once have been a vibrant village. The walls that still stand bear the faded remnants of bright yellow and red paint. And yet further behind that is a large hill, the top of which is occupied by a large stone tower. It's much more intact than the rest of the settlement, and is surrounded by fortifications.

Night time is drawing in, and after some pondering Melodias decides that taking shelter here would be better than simply



pulling up the boat on the riverside and spending a night out in the open. And so we disembark, creeping slowly through the empty streets.

I see a pile of iron rings stacked up in a corner, but leave them well alone. There are also hints of white fungus, but much less so than at Caywake. Perhaps it is less prevalent the further inland you go? One can hope.

In the distance, I see a spire rising up from the horizon and piercing the sky. It's impossible to tell how close it actually is. Even taller than Wakerock gate was. I vaguely remember something like that on the mural back on the island. Some base urge to clamber up it possesses me, until it's curtailed by my imaged scenrio of being atop it and looking downwards. It would be a very long fall.

Then we pass a sign, the paint on it flecked and fading. The words it bears are horribly familiar to me, 'Melodias... this is Gaoth.'

He stops.

'The Gaoth?'

'Of coven fame, yes.'

'How do you know?'

'It says it right there.'

A tense moment passes.

'We should run for the boat.' He says.

'A bit late for that, isn't it? If they're here then they've had ample time to come and get us.'

He looks about us, biting his lip. Then he blinks suddenly, 'Wait, had you mentioned that before? How do I know what Gaoth

is?'

'I don't recall mentioning it or the Coven, no.' I grab his chin and look into his eyes, 'Hm... perhaps there's still something in there.'

He steps back, escaping my grasp, 'Not now. Coven or not, we'll search the place for anything useful.'

'Right.'

We approach the walls surrounding the stone tower, and see that behind them are benches and tables. Some are tipped over or broken, but the rest are arranged neatly into lines. Some even have cups and pitches atop them. We pass through a gate in the wall and Melodias hisses, jumping back in alarm and jabbing his spear at something. A humanoid shape lies slumped against the inner side of the wall. But instead of flesh it is carved of wood, each finger intricately locked into place. The face is featureless.

I lean forward and bend one of its forefingers. They seem to have the full range of movement one might expect from the real thing, 'Perhaps this served the drinks. I know that once upon a time, soul singers would animate facsimiles of people to do their bidding.'

'So... it could get back up again, is what you're saying.' Melodias says, still keeping his distance.

'I doubt it, after all this time. We could drag it back to the boat for firewood though.'

He politely declines this idea, and heads further inside. Set above the large double doorway in the tower is a plaque that - rather refreshingly - I have no trouble reading: Bektai's. A

faintly intoxicating aroma leaks out from the doors, which are ajar.

Melodias looks up at the top, surveying the place, 'Well, if it's not infested with monsters it would be a good place to rest. The view from up top would help us gauge the lay of the land.'

'Well, in lieu of my spells there's only one way to find out what's in there.' I reply, drawing the dagger he'd gifted me. I'm not really sure where to hold it when I'm not supposed to be stabbing something, though. I feel almost a bit silly just carrying it around in my hand.

It also still hurts a lot.

We slowly open up the doors fully, and of course they let out a piercing screech as ancient hinges grind against one another. Nothing immediately leaped out to kills us though, so we cautiously head on inside. Inside is a veritable treasure trove of lost furniture and trinkets. Most of it is intact, not even knocked over or broken, just covered in thick sheets of dust. We exchange a glance, and put our masks on.

Two steps in Melodias throws out a hand in front of me and hisses. Just beneath by outstretched foot is a glowing line, barely perceptible through all the dust. It has a warm, golden lustre to it, and following it's curve all the way around I see that it forms a circle wide enough to envelope most of the room.

We fall back a little way to discuss this development, and eventually decide upon throwing a rock into the circle and seeing what happens.

There's a muted bang as the rock strikes the ground. I see the briefest flash of light before a plume of dust is thrown up into

the air. The walls shake and I feel something pushing at me, forcing me back and making me cry out as my stitches stretch out. A great wave of dust covers us both from head to toe, cascading down the hill until it finally settles, now spread almost as far back as the outer gate.

My robes were white once, you know. Peering into the tower I see remarkably little damage. Perhaps the blast was tempered somewhat by the sheer volume of dust lying over everything. Or it was designed to simply eliminate intruders while preserving as much of the tower as possible. Either way, there's no sign of the circle any more, so hopefully it was just a one-shot thing.

Melodias says something to me that's hopelessly muffled by his mask, then yanks it off and says, 'Bloody hell, who left that there?'

I take my own mask off, feeling a little surreal. If he hadn't pointed it out I could be down a leg or worse. How did I miss that?

'It could be a relic left behind by the previous owner,' I say after collecting myself, 'I've read about large panels that harvest sunlight and channel it into things like that. Gail on the Divine Dictator even has a working one.'

He looks up at the writhing grey masses of clouds and spores overhead, 'It must have a hard time catching any sunlight these days. If it's still active after this time though, then that means nobody else has ever gone inside the tower, right?'

I nod, 'That, or the current owner is still around to reset it every time it goes off.'

'Maybe we should have knocked.'

After we throw some more stones about to make sure it isn't going to go off again, we step back inside. A spiral staircase leads up, and heavy wooden hatchway reveals more stairs heading down when we haul it open. We elect to head down first, as the way is lit by luminous crystals embedded into the walls at regular intervals.

There are many casks lining the walls, as well as tables strewn with all manner of glassware and... paper! I almost jump as I see books and scrolls covered in writing and diagrams. There are even flasks and vials that line shelves and contain vividly colourful liquids, all stoppered and sealed.

Even so, Melodias insists we carefully check the floor and walls before proceeding, grabbing a lengthy wooden pole from a stand in the corner and using it to poke the ground ahead of us. We don't uncover any more circles, and soon enough I'm poring over the work of this tower-dwelling innkeeper.

His script is flowing and easy to read, and quickly identifies him as the eponymous Bektai, someone who once ran this inn as a bawdy place of feasting and merriment. Most of his studies seem to have been into brewing ever more potent magickal drinks to serve to his patrons and friends. The amount of original information is overwhelming, so much that I have nor any other Reader has ever known or read lies within these pages!

There is a dull thud upstairs, followed by prolonged skittering scratches. We both freeze and look up, Melodias reaching for his spear. We did make an awful lot of noise earlier.

And then he's off, bounding back up the stairs to investigate. I hurry and try to follow, but lag behind as the stitches in my

side cry out against the unexpected haste. I get to the bottom of the stairway and catch a blurred glimpse of him at the top. Beyond him are two of those creatures splayed unnaturally on the far wall, their twisted limbs somehow finding purchase on the stone.

I call out to him, but he kicks the hatch closed before I can get back up.

Idiot! The skittering resumes, along with footsteps and clashes from being the hatchway. Even in peak condition I'm not sure I could force it back open myself, so I turn back to the tables. I don't care how good he thinks he is, he has no chance against two at once, not to mention any others that might be on their way.

I brush my hand through a mound of parchment, scattering the pages everywhere, but my hand hits something solid. I pull it out of the pile.

"Bektai's Tome of Cildaran Spellcraft".

I dart over to one of the light-gems and open it up, displacing dirt and dust from the aged pages. The words are large and clearly legible.

It isn't in cipher. What madman would write a spellbook without a cipher?!

A crunching sound followed by the clatter of rock striking rock emanates from up above, shaking my from my reverie. I flick back to the index, hurrying to the hatchway.

Pale beams of light spill through the cracks in it, occasionally obscured as forms pass by up above. My crooked fingers pick out the word I'm looking for, and I turn back to the appropriate page. Luckily Bektai bothered to write an excellent

directory for his work.

Forcing myself to be methodical, I speak the three words slowly and clearly. The hatch flies open. Yes!

Clambering up the stairs I see Melodias badly pressed, his limp even more clearly pronounced and bleeding from two cuts on his arm. The wet mouldering creatures prowl around him, each of them making a gurgling noise interspersed with high pitched clicks.

Stonework up above. Time for a risk. It shouldn't break the laws.

Probably.

I speak out again, throwing out an arm at the walls and closing my fist. I feel a piercing whine within my head as I drag it back to my chest, but three huge stones break free of their mortar and plummet down to the ground.

Spores, viscous grey fluid and sundered claws fly in all directions as they land upon the mould things, missing Melodias by perhaps a few centimetres.

You may remember I said that spellcasting can't be used to kill. I beg you to also remember that I didn't ask it to, I just asked for a few stones to be pulled loose. I can't be held responsible for whom or what they might fall upon. Additionally, they were distracted enough to give me time to speak before ripping Melodias and I apart.

So I still stand by my previous statement that spells usually aren't too useful in a fight.

That said, holding Bektai's Tome in my hand, I feel something flow back into me that's been missing ever since I fell overboard.

I can't help but smile at Melodias as he stares at me wide eyed.  
I'm relevant again.

'So you uh, found a book?' He says.

'I did. Now sit down, I'm fairly sure I saw a medical section when I glanced through the index.'

I sit him down and comb through the book, finding some words that help me retrieve proper thread and clean cloth from Bektai's basement, drawing it upstairs through a small portal. With the aid of proper tools I'm quickly smearing a poultice over his cuts before binding them shut.

He keeps glancing over at the pile of rocks and sundered mould, as if he expects them to leap back to their feet. I suppose the caution is understandable - for all we know they might regrow themselves over time.

We clear out the rest of the tower and bar the door. I quickly locate the trap spell within the tome, and set a few of them myself to protect us overnight. And then in Bektai's basement laboratory, we finally have time to look through things properly. Melodias sniffs one of the casks, and asks me what the label says.

I tell him that it's some kind of soporific liquid that everyone used to imbibe in vast quantities before the nightmare, even though it ravaged their bodies and dulled their minds.

'I might try some.' He locates a mug and fills it. The amber liquid glows slightly.

'It seems like the previous owner liked to cross magic with brewery.' I say, 'Let me find his notes on that before you drink, Melodias. There's no telling what it might do to you.'

I can't help but notice that he's poured me a cup too as I



scan through the paperwork and ensure this substance isn't overtly dangerous. I suppose it would be impolite to let him drink alone, and besides, when I do find the notes that prove it's perfectly harmless. Albeit with some potent side effects.

I'll be the first to admit that the following series of events got rather out of hand. One cup followed another, and there were so many different brews to try! After a couple of them, I'm beset by warmth and fuzziness that lets me comfortably rationalise all this as research. After all, the effects of these concoctions must be documented. Bektai would want me to continue and more importantly enjoy his work, I am sure. And how can I turn down the desires of a fellow arcanist, dead or alive?

Everything shifts around me, acquiring a bizarre orange tint. The walls are wobbling in and out but it doesn't really bother me. On the plus side, my meandering thoughts seem unfettered somehow, and now I have more paper to work with I feel inspired to pen down some new spells in the empty pages of Bektai's tome.

I can still do this. The Mirage will be supplicated, and I shall be the one to satisfy him.

## Chapter Eleven

*"Sooner or later, you realise that even silence has a sound all it's own."*

-The last written sentence of Thutmose, slowly sinking into the sand alongside everything else.

Celestial Censor is buried on the edge of this place. This place that we call the mainland. I stand at the prow, looking out into the grey and tenebrous landscape. I keep telling myself it's to get a lay of the land and keep an eye out for threats, but in reality I just don't want to turn around and see the carnage behind me.

I said I'd keep them all alive. I made it my life's mission. Liana taps me on the shoulder, her mouth opening to say something that never properly forms. Instead she produces a nebulous noise and nothing more.

'Listen.' I say, 'I need everyone still alive and able to walk. Gather them up.'

She nods, and heads back to get them together.

The way I see it, we only have a few options now. For better or worse I brought us here. Only one thing could drive them away from the ship, and that's the mainland. They're just as repelled by it as we are. Casting off again would be impossible, Celestial Censor's just too large to move. I think we could build a new, smaller vessel out of it, if we had time. It's not like we need all that space any more.

That or we set off into the mainland and look for something

that might help us. One of the flying ships out of the legends? Some miraculous surviving city that could aid us? It's all speculation but these are desperate times, thanks to you. My hand tightens around the hilt of my dagger and a small thrill of fury rushes through me. I cling to it. If I have to stay alive in this nightmare for one reason alone, it'll be so I can show you all the ruin you've wrought in person.

With a deep breath, I turn back to face the ship. Most of the bodies have been piled up now, ready to be burned. But the injured outnumber them. Some cry ceaselessly, others lie still. A horrible part of me wishes the ones we can't save would hurry up and die already so I save on food and water. We have perhaps fifty able bodied adults left - and many more children, most of whom I've got doing one job or another. People are still numb, and I need to work them hard while that lasts, before the real feelings start coming back.

Liana eventually returns with as many folk as she can, sparing only the healers and children to hold things down. All of them have been awake for over a day. Aktos stands among them, propped up by his crutch. I don't have the energy to send him back to bed and besides, he's probably had the most sleep out of any of us combined.

These people don't have it in them to build another ship.

'Right!' I try to inject my voice with a little of Formalite purpose, 'We need materials to patch the ship, and help launching her back into the sands. The way I see it, the only place we've even got a hope of finding that is out there.' I point out across the mainland, 'I'll lead us until we find whatever it is.'

There's silence for a few moments. Nobody is looking at me.

'And leave the others here?' Liana asks.

'Only for a little while. We'll come back for them.' I say.

Aktos starts to speak, but cuts himself off.

'What?' I ask him.

'The injured will lose any hope left if they see the Shipmaster marching off into the horizon.' He says, looking about at the others before continuing, 'Not to mention all the children. If we need to search the mainland, why not send out smaller groups and cover more ground? Eight groups of five, plus ten and yourself to protect Celestial Censor.'

'No. Nobody ventures out without me. A group that small would have no chance defending itself anyway.'

'Defending itself against what?!' One of the others - Arn - blurts out, 'You're acting as if you know...' He trails off into nothing.

'Ortuck.' Liana says, 'I know that you're our leader, but you're also the only one that knows our routes and meet-up points. All the other navigators are dead or dying.'

'And so I should sit here doing nothing? Letting tiny groups wander off and get killed or worse without me to protect them?' I demand, taking a step toward her. The way things are going right now, a small group might just take their chances and abandon us if I'm not with them. It'd be just like that that Attahua incident, except this time I don't have anywhere to hide the bodies.

Liana's shrinks back rather than challenge me further, as have the others, thankfully. I round them up and start getting us ready to go. Celestial Censor has enough stores to keep us going for a

while even without anyone tending to the farms, so fresh water is first on my list. From what I remember in Reader's songs, rivers are supposed to flow out to the sea, so sticking to the coast seems to be the best bet. If you can even call this a coast - it's more like a gradual firmament of sand. Lets just hope the rivers aren't made of sand too these days.

I keep myself moving too, checking on everything. They need to see me in control, standing firm against all odds. I pass by Oci, lying silent and still out on the deck. Still alive, but still blind too. I really could have used him here but you had to go and ruin even that possibility too. With a small pang of shame I take his harpoon, whistle and a few other bits for the expedition. I'm sure he wouldn't mind if he were awake.

We eventually strike out from the ship, following the coast. I can barely make out the setting sun through thick layers of dark greenish cloud, but I chase it regardless as it creeps toward the barren horizon. Wait for something, anything, the break its perfect straight line.

Nobody else will die. I can't let them.

You excepted, of course.

## Chapter Twelve

*"So does that mean these are just the lower set, and there are even more teeth way up in the sky? What if they decide they need to chew something? Perhaps we could lure the Mirage into the middle and make them eat him!"*

-Melodias's reaction when we sighted the mountain range known as the Teeth of Death.

Fobsharana.

It sprouts from the barren dirt like bone punctured through the skin of a bad break, rending the flesh apart so it can feel sunlight for the first time. An odd thought to have when staring at the city containing our salvation, but I find myself burdened with it nonetheless. This city was once reviled by the other peoples of Cildara, somewhere to be avoided and feared.

The supremely paranoid circle of mages that ran the Fobsharana would suck all the memories from you, steal away everything you were so they could mould your husk into the perfect citizen. And in complete violation of the Dancer's rules, apparently. I've heard some less orthodox Readers speculate that the Moth Queen may have learned or stolen her craft from them, which is patently ridiculous. Even failed deities wouldn't have to stoop to such mundane methods.

That said, as I've rapidly been finding out over the course of this journey, the ancient texts and manuscripts aren't above a

little embellishment or inaccuracy. They were written by folk that probably never set foot inside the city itself, just letting superstition and local legend fuel their words as they strived to join the ranks of respected scholarship.

One thing that pervades all of the surviving sources is indisputable, though. The denizens of Fobsharana were meticulous record keepers. Perhaps that inevitably comes hand in hand with omniscience. No one mind, nor even a city of them, could hope to contain the torrent of information they had access to. So it stands to reason that something as important as Lethe Mirage's name was recorded for posterity, in more forms than just the written word.

At the city's centre is a stone hemisphere held aloft by four statues, their features blurry and indistinct. Each of them is easily a hundred times my height. The weight they must hold is unfathomable, for atop the hemisphere are temples, sprawling complexes and towers that pierces the clouds themselves. Perhaps it was all one mountain once, cut away until the stone remained in the shape of what I see now? That's more feasible than lifting all the masonry up there, although the stone titan we saw a few days ago might have managed it.

'Your mind's wandering again.'

Melodias peers at me, his face half irritated and half amused. His teeth really are perfect.

'Oh! I'm sorry, Melodias. But look at this place - how can I keep it tethered?'

'Poke your left side and you'll get a pretty stark reminder.'

He looks back at the city streets. The wall is low, letting him

see some of the layout within, 'I see movement. Not the mould things, though. Little flying things and metal men walking about.'

'Hm... probably constructed beings. Remember the titanic creature we saw piling up the rocks? They're probably akin to that, still carrying out their old orders.'

'Got it. Well then, judging by the way they're going street by street I reckon they're on patrol for something. Defending the city from intruders, maybe.'

'That or policing the streets. The old tales say they kept a stranglehold on their people's minds and bodies alike.'

'Good to know. Either way, I think we're better off not having to come face to face.'

I nod, opening up Bektai's Tome. I've had time to add one or two things of my own since we left the tower. Just reading through all the possibilities sends a little thrill up my spine.

'Let's see... I can muffle our movements and make us seem cold - a lot of arcanists have their constructs seek out heat when they're on guard duty.'

'Bektai had spells like that?'

'He had spells close enough for me to tweak, yes. From what I can gather they were for taking his concoctions from place to place without being detected.'

'Nice. I'll pick us out a path.' He looks around at me, 'Are you up to climbing? It might be easier if we can get up on the rooftops.'

'I'll manage.'

We head into the city. I should be alert and awake, but I cannot help but be swept up once more... Caywake was a broken



ruin, but this place is immaculate. The streets are clean and well lit by glowing balls of light atop metal posts. There are stalls and shop fronts that still have wares arrayed over them, and cylindrical blocks of stone at each intersection display vivid columns of images. Moving pictures of people and places, slender lines of text advertising eateries, big blocky letters warning of curfews, and more.

Some of the flickering writing on display is familiar to me, but there's also sigils that I've never seen before. My fingers twitch and want to write all of it down.

Melodias keeps me from getting too distracted by any of it, carefully observing the patterns that the metal men walk in so we can avoid their notice. I magically deaden the air around us, forbidding it from carrying too much sound. We dart from street to street, and eventually he finds a good place to climb up onto a row of buildings. It's tough, but I scramble up there despite my injuries.

One of the flying constructs whizzes past, but ignores us thanks to my magicks. Up above, the statues loom. I can make out their expressions now: hurt and tormented, as if the weight is too much to bear. How ominous. There seem to be entrances at the base of each statue, but each one is guarded by more metal men. These ones don't move.

We study them for a few moments, but know that staying in one place for too long is a risk. Melodias asks me if anything in the tome can help us.

'Nothing I've read.' I admit, leafing through pages as we perch upon the tiled rooftop, 'I copied down my wind-waking spell,

and Bektai had all sorts of utility magicks. Nothing to slip past two constructs looking directly at us, though.'

'Ah!' He perks up mid-way through my spiel, 'I have an idea. Through here.'

He opens up a skylight and we drop down into the attic of the building we were atop of.

A small spider-like construct is dusting everything, and we stare silently at it for a few moments before letting out pent breaths as it continues to work around us.

Melodias pulls the partially torn sail he took from our boat out of his pack, flattening it out over the carpeted floor.

'It doesn't have to work for long, but if you whip up a wind for us, we could drift over to the statues from the roof without needing to touch the ground or use the door.' He says.

'Alright, but we'd end up halfway up a statue, not... wait, you want me to climb again, don't you?'

'Oh yes. It's hardly sheer, and once we're up on top of a shoulder or something we can try and get inside. You made those rocks fall before, presumably you can do something similar to knock us a hole in the wall to go through?'

'Yes, I probably could. This is a terrible idea.'

He nods, and scavenges up some materials from the house, lashing it all together into a parachute of sorts. I read up on my wind-waking spell, jotting down some notes to make sure it blows in the right direction. I've only ever used it on the massive sails on Celestial Censor, getting it small and subtle enough to propel a little chute carrying two people without splatting us against the statue at the end will be a challenge. It's all in the

wording. With my own books sitting somewhere at the bottom of the sand dunes, I'm left with co-opting and tweaking phrases from Bektai's tome in an effort to make reality do what I want.

We wait and we work until night falls, and then scamper back across the rooftops beneath the blackened gaze of the moon. The clouds are thick, barely letting any of its marred light through their veil. Luckily for us Fobsharana still has power, and bright lights line the streets. I whisper quiet words to stir up the air around us, convincing it to flow according to my whim. My robes shift and flap about, confirming that it's worked.

So we board Melodias's hastily assembled chute and step off the ledge.

The central city plaza drafts by beneath us as we're bourne over the metallic men patrolling it. Over the two by the doorway, and finally with a little thump - one that only hurts my side a little bit - we gently crash into the side of a colossal statue.

We've hit it mid-way up a thigh. Not much to grab onto - thank Admor they sculpted the muscle in so much detail. I dismiss the wind with a gasp, and our chute tumbles downward. Oh no.

The weight of it has us dangling, mere moments away from falling down onto the hard stone floor below. I grab the dagger and slash at the cords binding it to us, hoping that Melodias possesses the grit to hang on for long enough.

One of the cords snaps beneath my assault. Admor, we're so high up. It didn't look this high from the rooftop.

Melodias lets out a hiss, and we slip down a few centimetres. Second cord down.

It occurs to me that dropping this thing will probably give us

away to the constructs. I continue sawing away regardless.

The last cord is severed. The chute drops, and we haul ourselves up as it billows gracefully down, drifting to and fro before settling down in an off-white pile.

Melodias helps me up past the thigh, where things get much easier. I'm struck again at how lucky we are that these statues depict such muscular specimens. The abdominals are practically a ladder just for us. It still hurts, of course, and by the time I manage to deposit myself atop one of the stoney shoulders I'm a thoroughly sweaty mess.

My companion is much less fatigued, hanging onto an ear so that he can dangle out and look down below us. The mere sight of him swinging about above the drop makes my stomach turn.

'One of the metal men has stomped up to the chute.' He reports.

'I'll take your word for it.'

'You don't want to take a look?' He has a small smile on his face that makes me seriously consider pushing him off the side. I settled instead for a very offensive gesture, the impact of which I can only imagine was greatly enhanced by my trembling hand and haggard breathing.

I pry my tome out as he keeps tabs on the constructs. Flicking to the correct page, I take a moment to steady myself, then start incanting. As per my command, the wall behind the statue shudders and rearranges itself into an archway. I have to burrow a few laterals in before revealing a gargantuan spiral stairwell contained within the stonework.

A plume of dust is released, cascading down over the

shoulders. Melodias is quick to put his mask on but I fumble with my book long enough get a lungful. Tears cloud my vision as I cough and hack in reflex, teetering on the edge of oblivion until Melodias arrests me.

My throat feels dirty and parched, all of its moisture quickly sucked away into the filth. Admor willing there's no spores mixed in there and I've simply breathed in old dust and debris.

We're both alive and the construct below doesn't seem to have a contingency in it's instructions for finding the crudely re-sewn sail, so we pass through the wall. The stairs are there so we get to climbing, winding back on ourselves over and over as we ascend through the cylindrical tower. Along the way I'm still racked by the occasional coughing fit. So much for stealth.

Thick flakes of ancient decay ebb and flow through the heavy air, accumulating on our shoulders and in our hair like overly large snowflakes. I want to reform the wall behind us, but the mask warps my words so much that I decide not to risk it.

We ascend. And ascend. And ascend.

'There's no way this staircase goes up so high.' Melodias says when we take a break - although take that with a grain of salt, I'm piecing together what I think are his words based on the noises that make it through the mask, 'We saw the big bowl at the top, we should be way beyond that by now!'

I shrug in response. Yet more dust sticks onto me as sweat soaks through my robe and coats my skin. Melodias looks like he's afflicted with stone fever, and I can't be much better off. My calves burn and my mask feels so sodden I may as well be drinking instead of breathing. We continue to climb, a pair of grey ghosts

suffering our way up through the ghost tower in this ghostly city.

Eventually we've climbed for so long that we figure it must be time to sleep. The individual steps are wide enough to accommodate a bedroll, so we each pick one and settle in. No way to run through my companion's memories this evening, unfortunately.

*The tower.*

*The chains.*

*Humid air!*

*I jump upright, finding myself drenched in that hopelessly familiar feeling of weight pressing down upon my shoulders. The dangling maybe-me swings away, but I can't worry about that. At any moment something could wake me up.*

*I summon up my ladder and get to sketching, rapidly rubbing outlines of the walls onto more and more sheets of Bektai's paper. My palms do not hurt - they just tingle in an offly distant fashion.*

*No time to wonder if Melodias can see this, I can only imagine what it must look like in the real world. If 'real world' is an applicable term at all here, which...*

*I manage to get a good portion done, although it remains frustratingly hidden by the sheer darkness of this place. I try to get myself some light with again using the ladder trick, but no luck. Perhaps conventional light has no place in this world of topless towers and jangling chains.*

*I yelp as the hanging person coughs, and writhes about. They tear at the chains as if possessed. I hear sickening pops as they*

dislocates her own limbs and rips her own flesh through the sheer force of her movements.

'Wait!' I run forward to help her, calm her or just... do something. But the next time I blink, I'm surrounded by water and pink mist at the lakeside.

The air is cool, the heat is gone, but I was so close. That person had finally done something different, could finally have explained the tower and why they hang there and whether they're me and-

'Aevum?'

I look over at Admor, and irritation must have flashed in my eyes, because she pauses and regards me cautiously.

'I'm sorry. This is not a good time.' I say.

'Busy in the tower?'

'I wanted to be, yes. The dangling person tried to escape their chains. I was going to help, or talk to them but...' I trail off and sit down at the lakeside, letting my feet slip into the water, '...it was over too soon.'

An odd feeling comes over my, prompting me to glance over at her again, sat on her rock as usual. Her expression is harsh. Angry, nostrils flared and jaw clenched. It's only for a fraction of a second, and quickly she smiles at me.

'There'll be other chances.' She says, 'Don't worry.'

'Is something wrong?'

'No. I'm fine.'

For the first time, I'm uneasy that she carries an axe. She looks taut. Like she's about to snap.

'So... I'm at Fobsharana now. Close to finding everything I

need.' I say, speaking slowly and cautiously. She seems to relax a little at this topic.

'Ah, that's good. I'm worried about your companion though.'

'Melodias? Why is that?'

'Well, let's see... no memory, kind of pushy, armed and demonstrably better in a fight than you,' She counts each point on her fingers as she goes, 'Small minded, old... you were meant to do this alone. I thought you'd set off alone at first.'

'I'd be dead if I went alone. A mould creature injured me so badly that I would have died on my own.'

'Really? Because from what I recall he marched you half to death, and it was **you** that had to prompt him to stop and actually deal with the wound. And of course, he started fighting it in the first place and drew you in, instead of running away like any sane person.'

'He was stressed. And afraid. We both were.' I reply.

'Perhaps that's forgivable in normal circumstances, but can you afford to travel with someone so fallible on the most important mission there's ever been?'

I look down at my feet, watching their outline wobble away underwater.

'You are the Reader.' She continues, 'The only one that can do this. I just don't want you to get so close only to stumble thanks to an old fool tripping you up. You nearly fell to your death from that statue thanks to him!'

'How do you know all this?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Usually I tell you about my woes. And you said that you



thought I'd set off alone "at first".'

'I **am** a goddess, you know.' There it is again. The anger or maybe more frustration. That hard edge to her words. But I suppose any divine being would probably be offended if it's abilities were questioned. Cildaran Gods have always been somewhat proud and myopic.

'You once told you that you're stuck here. Stranded at the lakeside swathed in mist after what the others did to you. And the scriptures say you were shattered by the Jailor.'

'Oof. Warn me next time before stirring up bad memories.'

'Am I?' I ask, squinting into the water, 'If you know what happened after I reached the mainland, then you must have been there. And been able to watch. And... and now you want me splitting up with Melodias, after coming to me in the first dream I've had since this whole disaster began. After I've gotten so close to actually reaching my goal.'

I hear the rustle of grass being crushed beneath boots behind me, and look back. She's gotten up from her rock, frowning at me in a way that makes me feel like I'm falling, 'I wanted to speak with you sooner. But like you said, I'm shattered. It makes a lot of things more difficult than they should be.'

'In fact you're the one that suggested this trip in the first place. The only thing I've done that you didn't tell me to is bring Melodias.'

'I never told you to do anything, Aevum. You asked where you could find a way to fix your sight, and I answered. Are you forgetting Lethe Mirage? Why are you quibbling about this with so much on the line? Only you can do this.'

*'Is that really true?' I get up and turn to face her, 'Because the last time I checked, dozens of other readers exist out there in the world. I would have been meeting most of them within a month or so had I stayed on Celestial Censor. Instead I lost all my tomes, set my own ship on fire, and subsequently spent the next few days wandering around a barren wasteland. You seem to want me on my own out there, in the most dangerous place I've ever been. Why?'*

*'Calm down, Aevum. Nobody ever said the journey wouldn't be rough, or that you wouldn't doubt yourself. I've only ever been here to listen and give advice.'* Her smile is divine.

*'I am calm. Truly. Are you?'*

*'Of course. Just a little frustrated.'*

*'What was the name of the lake you settled down beside after descending from the Teeth?' I ask.*

*'Hm? Why are you bringing that up? Is it time to share memories again?'*

*'No. It is the last thing the Moth Queen would be able to take from you. The scriptures have lost it but I spied it on a mural on Temple Island.'*

*'Aevum, that's unfair. Thelgryn tore me apart.'*

*'So you do not know?'*

*'I cannot-'*

*'Please!' I interrupt. I want to retch and my mind is aflame, 'Just prove it. I want to be speaking with Admor. With everything I am I want to be. Forgive me this one lapse of faith. Shore it up with fact.'*

*She seems to shudder, balling her fists up into tight knots*

that seem rictus enough to snap her fingers one by one. Then she relaxes, releasing a pent up breath as if it carries her very soul out with it.

'I wonder how the Censor is doing? Don't you?' She asks.

'Of course.' I say, thrown, 'What sort-'

'Ortuck beached it, you know. She had to, after the smoke you made attracted unfriendly visitors. Half the crew were already injured after Ember Moon. And guess what? Thanks to the white hot crystal burning its way through the ship, they had all of them up on deck, neatly arranged in nice little rows. Let's just say the visitors feasted well.'

'What? But-'

'And after that? The Shipmaster fled in the only direction she could: towards land. And on the way she lost more, and more, and more of her crew. Blood loss, illness, or snatched away screaming into the sky. Didn't you tell them to always fear the sky?'

'She... she would never. You're lying.'

'Ortuck curses your name now. They all do. The one that abandoned them, condemning to a slow and agonising death.'

'Stop.'

'Don't worry though. You'll never have to face them again. The Coven will see to that.' She draws her axe, stalking toward me with a predatory grin. Her eyes are black. I don't know what to do.

She raises the weapon up with a triumphant hiss, and I remember. I draw Melodias's dagger and hurl myself at her with a scream. We both fall to the ground, but I end up on top, her axe

*tangled between us.*

*I stab her. Again and again. Screaming.*

*She twitches and gurgles, but doesn't stop grinning at me.*

*So I stab her in the face.*

I'm letting loose a muffled scream as something covers my nose and mouth. Frantically I tear at it, trying to yank it off before realising. It's my mask. I'm awake.

I lower my arm and it bangs into the stair next to me. Pain shoots up my forearm as my bones rattle around in there.

On the next stair down, Melodias has awoken and bolted upright.

I want to rip the mask off and tell him what happened. That I've been strung along this whole time. That it's all my fault. Then I can take a deep breath of this toxic air and let it coax me into oblivion before I have to endure his response.

Do it, Aevum.

Come on.

Come on!

But... he stares at me questioningly.

But if I did that, then I'm condemning him too. Then he might die out here all alone, in this rotting city I dragged him to.

So I wave to him, letting him know that nothing's wrong. With everything we've been through these past few days, I'm sure he can understand why I might have a bad dream. And he does, regarding my pensively for a few moments before slowly sitting back down and rummaging in my bag for a pen.

On one of my spare scraps of paper, he draws out a rough image

of a brick wall, then a second one with a hole in it. He taps on the wall, then points at my book.

I stare non-comprehending for a moment, before my mind lurches into action and I shake my head, pointing to my mask.

He sighs, then gets up. Time to move on, I suppose. At least if I'm climbing I won't have to sit here and think. But why climb at all? What's the point?

I see that he's set off already, so I haven't really got much choice. I get up and follow.

## Chapter Fourteen

*"Take it easy. But take it!"*

-Aged graffiti that I found in a Fobsharanan apartment.

By the time we ascend to Fobsharana's upper limits and break out into open air, I'm not really sure what to tell my companion. He seems happy enough, sniffing at the breeze and declaring it's the cleanest that he's sampled since getting here. I have to agree, though the cold that comes with it is a little less welcome. The network of temples and palaces held up by the statues are connected by large stone bridges, and looking over the side of one I can see the river snaking away from us down below, back toward the coast.

I glance up at the spires of Fobsharana's legendary archives and libraries. A true speck of grandiosity preserved from our past, gleaming in the faded sunlight. I suppose they're worth at least a look before we head back to our inevitable doom.

Reflection upon my arrogance and the untold harm I caused my people can wait too, for now. If push comes to shove I can just jump from one of the archive's balconies once I'm sure Melodias can get home (if there still is one) on his own. It should be

quick enough.

Wait, no... no. Without my magicks he would probably die even if we found a map or some other dusty boon. And besides that he's what, almost fifty? Not like he'd have much life left to live anyway beyond this point.

That's really sad in a way. All of the best, most vibrant decades of his life have passed him by, and now he can't even remember them. It makes me wonder whether the Mirage might deal out fates even worse than death to those who disrespect him. Nobody can write what happens after he gets displeased - of course death is assumed because precious little is ever found of what came before, but why did we make that assumption? Death isn't looking so bleak to me, after all. It isn't a punishment for everyone.

And so went my cyclical and self-destructive thoughts as we continued toward the archive, paused only when I have to answer some inane question from Melodias every now and again.

Inane. Why am I calling them inane? He wants to learn. Isn't that something to be admired? It's exactly the opposite of those snotty little children I used to try to cram knowledge into on the ship. A question is never inane when the person asking genuinely does not know the answer, and thanks to the Mirage, Melodias barely knows anything at all.

'Melodias.'

'Yes?'

'Consider this is a fair warning. Be prepared to exert your mind once we reach the archive. I'm going to try to teach you some letters while we are there.'

'Um... alright. Why's that?'

'Because...' I have to take a breath. All the walking at this altitude is unexpectedly hard work, '...That way, you can keep a diary. I will not be around to go over recent events with you forever, and if you spend a few minutes writing down the happenings of every day, there's no way you can forget them. Even if the Mirage comes again or the Moth Queen grows ravenous, there will be a record of who you were to refer to. An journeyman's guide to Melodias.'

I'm getting a little embarrassed toward the end of my spiel, twisting my fingers together and looking away, 'So you'll always be you, no matter what comes to pass. And after all this is over, we can go back and ask the crews on the other ships. Some of them must have met you. We can piece together your former life and if you like it, keep it. If not, you can be somebody else.'

I glance back at him for a moment. He's stopped to lean on the wall the lines the bridge we're on, looking down at the sprawling cityscape below. I make sure to stay a few paces back from the edge, glad he's not trying to look me in the eyes or anything.

'A few days ago you asked my why I helped you escape from Celestial Censor.' He says.

'I did.'

'Well... the truth is, I didn't know what else to do. I didn't think your plan was a good idea, but doing anything would have been better than sitting on that ship desperately trying to remember something about myself. What even is "myself"? They said I was shouting about a daughter, right? I imagine I would've spent most of the time trying to picture her face or remember her name.



That seems like a pretty pitiful existence to me.'

'Only to be erased all over again when the Mirage next visited.' I say, half to myself.

He grunts affirmatively, 'Even if I decided past-me was dead and buried and tried to build something new, there's that time limit on it. And even if there wasn't, I'm not young. I don't know if I have the energy to do it all over again. Especially on a ship full of strangers that didn't need anything from me. That had no use for me.'

That rings some horrible bells in my mind. The fear of not being able to give. To be unable to solve problems.

'So I offered to help you.' He continues, 'Because unlike everyone else, you actually seemed like you needed help. And because if I do indeed have to build myself all over again, I'd rather do it travelling to long lost places in pursuit of something significant.'

I nod, 'Maybe you don't need a diary after all, then.'

'No no, I'll take your lessons. It's prudent, and if the Mirage ever visits me again I'll have something to work from this time.' He turns around and smiles at me, a little light shining in his eyes, 'But we should keep climbing. This archive place you keep yammering on about is close.'

'I do not yammer.' I say as we continue on upwards.

'Uh-huh. Yes you do. It's like all the knowledge crammed inside your head is desperate to escape.'

'That isn't yammering though. It's... exposition. I'm helping you understand what we're seeing. And you ask, most of the time!'

We continue thusly, and despite everything I feel a little

weight falling from my shoulders. I still feel worried that I haven't told him about the dream, the Coven, or stabbing that fucker in the face. Even when I do though, I won't have wasted his time with this trip. That feels nice. As small as it might be, someone got something out of this entire catastrophe.

Trying to convey how large the Fobsharanan Archive is with words alone is difficult. I will say it was at least twice as long and five times as tall as the ship I spent my entire childhood confined to, and it is roughly conical in shape. Spars of stone jut out horizontally at regular intervals near the top of the structure, and some of them still bear the wreckage of flying ships once used to get around in these parts.

Now I just have to hope that fucker didn't lie about the eye improving devices too.

Ah, my sketches!

As Melodias is poking around the entrance, I delve into my pack and retrieve some papers, hastily shoved into there after I woke up on the stairwell. Spidery lines of ink cover them, but they do seem to form something cohesive. Lines of text, but the language is unfamiliar. I recognise the occasional letter, and where numbers appear I can tell what they are, but that's all.

Hm. Unfortunate.

There are one or two pictures though. One depicts a person with horns, wings and a bow. Above them is a sundered arrow, the sigil of Admor.

The other one is some kind of landscape - it's lucky that I was tracing this, because in real life I couldn't even come close to being this artistic. Huge cracks run through the earth beneath

a mountain, atop which sits a tower. Not unlike the ridiculously tall one I glimpsed in the distance from Breezebrook, but according to the mural on the island there's more than one of them. An arrow points down into the deepest crevice running right into the base of the tower, and it's labelled. Frustratingly enough I can't read the label either, but this time it's because the letters are so miniscule that I can't pick out any of the words at all, let alone determine their language.

Not too useful to me now, all things considered. Maybe the dreams weren't all trickery though. The person hanging in chains could have been something more. After all, the not-Admor seemed legitimately angered when she heard they had been moving.

'Aevum! It's clear. No explosive circles or anything.'  
Melodias calls, apparently satisfied that we can proceed.

I pack the papers away a little more neatly this time, and we pass into the Archive. The interior is all one uninterrupted space, with untold numbers of catwalks and balconies allowing access to its upper reaches. It seems as if every available bit of wall space is given over to books, scrolls and other more mysterious trinkets. Most of the flat surfaces seem to be as well, I can barely see a shred of empty space on any of the tables or desks that are liberally spread about the place.

No corpses, no monsters and most refreshingly of all no fungus.

'Do you think someone's been taking care of this place?'  
Melodias asks.

'Someone? You'd need an army of scribes and cleaners to have a hope of keeping something this huge in order.'

'Let's stay alert then.'

There's a whoosh, followed by a dry thump off to our left. Up high, atop one of the balconies. We freeze and look up. A small rising plume of dust betrays some prior activity, though whether it was something moving or just a book falling over on its own is hard to say. Melodias evidently decides to assume the former, and ushers me underneath the balcony into the hypothetical blind spot of whatever might be up there.

I see a stairwell carved into the wall next to us, leading upwards. I point it out to him, and we slowly make our way up. I hold his dagger in one hand, and keep the other one free. He's grasping the spear in both hands and keeping a pace or two ahead.

We emerge onto the balcony, which is buried wait deep in a mound of old decrepit tomes. Too heavy to wade through, and far too uneven to provide stable footing when we clamber atop them.

Wonderful. I spot a smaller one entitled "*On Vorzene's Sanctuary*", and stoop down to pocket it for later.

Something flits by above me as I'm bent over, ruffling the fabric of my robes. I drop done prone onto the books, hissing as one particularly angular hardback jabs into my stomach. Imbedded into a bookshelf just behind me is something sharp, and thick liquid oozes out of it. The ancient wood of the shelf melts away entirely upon contact with the substance, causing one side to give way. The tomes slide down the now slanted shelves toward me, and I have to scrabble back to avoid being buried beneath an avalanche of literature.

'Melodias! Something shot at us!'

He dives behind the nearest shelf as another missile streaks

by. They barely make a sound.

Luckily the pile - well pile on top of the already existing pile - is blocking line of sight between me and whatever the source is. I use the reprieve to pull out my spellbook and scan the index for something useful as Melodias draws fire, throwing books and candles out to provoke more shots. Several blackened holes are burned into the book layer, each of them producing thin streams of acrid smoke as whatever the ooze is burns even deeper downward. The whole balcony could melt if this goes on too long.

I find something in Bektai's tome that could be useful with a little improvisation. Speaking the words slowly and clearly, I call up the nearby tomes and detritus into a swirling storm and place it between our balcony and this as yet unknown attacker. The thick motes of dust covering it all makes it opaque, just as planned. I don't even get any whining or pain in my head this time.

Melodias takes advantage and darts onto the network of catwalks. He gets a chance to show off his footwork as he dances over the broken stonework heedless of the long drop below, bum leg and all.

It's cut off when a brilliant prismatic shockwave blasts out from the other side of the archive, hurling my storm outward and scattering it. I take cover once again as shredded pages rain down from the ceiling. Melodias has fallen, but hooked his spear into a nook in the stonework and now dangles helplessly. I run to help, but the tome layer is hard to navigate at any decent speed and I'm constantly aware that the missiles could start flying out at any time now the storm's been cleared.

'Aevum!' He calls, 'Make me fly!'

'That's a ridiculous request!'

Another missile. Melodias somehow manages to squirm to one side, pulling himself partway up on the spear, and it misses.

I can't make him fly.

The catwalk though...

I have to speak the words quickly, and already I know something's off about my pronunciation before they've fully left my lips. I taste blood in my mouth and bright lights flash behind my eyes as the stonework holding up the catwalk cracks and twists. The entire thing turns over, placing Melodias on the topside. He lands gracefully enough considering, and manages to get to the other side before the entire thing buckles and collapses down.

Huge chunks of masonry pile up in the foyer below, smashing shelves and burying parchment. We're really committing some crimes against knowledge here... I fall down on one knee, cradling my skull as it shrieks at me for savaging the spell so much. My brain seems to flop about like a puddle in my cranium, the thoughts within watered down and too fluid to properly grasp.

I have enough sense to crawl my way behind an upturned desk though. I hear the clash of metal upon metal on the other side of the literary ravine.

With luck he'll kill it now that he's closed the distance. Maybe.

I swallow down the blood and rise, holding onto the desk for balance. No easy way over there now after my spell. Looking for any other potential egress, I see a ladder poking out of the tome pile at the edge of the balcony, probably used for scaling some of

the larger bookshelves. I stagger over and yank it free from the torn mountain of paper piled upon it.

There's another balcony up above me, and an intact network of bridges and catwalks sprouting out from it. My balance is shot, so I use the ladder as something of an unwieldy walking stick as I struggle over to the nearest wall. More clashes and the dry thwacks of falling books echo across the archive as I get it into place. Time to climb.

The throbbing in my head is receding a bit by the time I haul myself up onto the next level. You can actually see the floor on this one, and most of it is covered in a worn green carpet. I get threads stuck under my nails as I crawl across it to peek over the other side of the building, hoping my new vantage point will reveal where Melodias and our assailant are.

Got them. I can clearly see Melodias stalking about between massive bookshelves on the other side. A few shelves over is something else, something that moves fast. I try to get a fix on it but my eyes seem to slide off whenever I centre it in my vision. It seems to be humanoid, and glints in a way that suggests its maybe made of glass or metal. And yet I can't make out any one detail, no matter how much I look.

As if an aura of obscurity follows it around, misdirecting my attention. Hm.

I cross one of the bridges and get atop them, able to see them both in the veritable maze of bookshelves below and roughly follow them on the network of criss-crossing catwalks. I don't want to risk another spell if I can avoid it - another botched word could have my brain really turn to mush this time.

Instead I settle for whistling to Melodias and telling him where the enemy is, as best as I can. With luck it might not speak our tongue, and even if it does it can only help if my ally knows where his quarry is. I guide him closer in toward it, making sure to only peek out quickly in case another melting munition is sent my way. Only getting momentary glimpses seems to help me focus on the figure as well, as if the obscurity only kicks on after it's noticed I'm looking.

I've guided Melodias within one aisle of it when I blink and it's gone.

Disappeared completely.

I glance up in reaction to another movement and see it's on the very bridge I'm standing on.

Rushing toward me.

Letting out a short scream I turn to run. Need to get down. Every step seems to throw my brain around in its ossein prison, producing a spike of pain with every footfall. I can hear tiny clinks of metal on stone behind me, impossibly fast and startlingly quiet.

No way to outrun it. Got to turn and fight.

I stop and turn on my heel, ready to stab until I can stab no more. The momentary glimpse of the figure I get before the fogginess sets in is of a slender silvery construct clad in dark colours. As ludicrous as it is, I can only think how none of the other constructs we've seen have been dressed up until this point. What a waste of my last thoughts.

Wait.

'So!' I say, dropping my dagger and doing my best to smile. I



hope the blood on my teeth doesn't look too scary, 'Shall we stop fighting? I really don't want to damage the archive any more.'

The figure gets within an inch of me and stops. I wait for the blade.

Or the explosion.

Or the disembowelment.

'Excuse me. You're the one that collapsed a catwalk.' It tells me. Masculine voice, with an accent that rings very oddly to my ears. It sounds meandering but pleasant. Despite everything I feel a little indignant about the accusation.

'Me? I only acted after you melted dozens of presumably priceless tomes in which may have been contained irreplaceable knowledge!'

'Perhaps I was protecting the archive from intruders.'

'If that's the case, then your tools of the trade shouldn't include omnidestructural ooze and explosive shockwaves. Your precious archive is in ruins now.'

'Omnidestructural is not a word.'

'Sniping is not an argument. My point is that your weapons are clearly not proportional to the threat, and you didn't even know whether we are combatants or not.'

'You were both carrying weapons, weren't you?'

'A reasonable precaution in these dying lands.'

'I agree, but it also means that you can't go around claiming to be a non-combatant.'

I almost go back to stabbing again. 'Alright, fuck this. I have a splitting headache. Who are you and why are you guarding the Archive?'

It takes a step back, folding its arms. Down below, Melodias is staring up at us with an expression my vision is thankfully too poor to properly make out. I'm going to assume that it's admiration for my astute diplomatic resolution of this conflict.

'I am Antoniax, the Prince of Arke's Spires, Acting Regent of the Nephrite Halidom, Consort to the Witch-Queen and favoured apprentice of Ira. I'm here at her request trying to find a crucial tome penned by legendary paranoid maniac Brinehelm the Wide Brimmed.'

'Oh.'

'Yep. And you?'

'Aevum. Reader of the Celestial Censor. Potentially. I think my role might have been revoked at this point.'

'Well met. And what are you looking for here?'

'I...' I glance down to make sure Melodias hasn't clambered up into earshot yet, 'A couple of things. First I need something that can cure lacklustre eyesight. And then I need something to help supplicate Lethe Mirage.'

'The Goddess of Time can't handle Lethe Mirage without a special book?'

'No! You seriously looked at me and thought I was the Goddess of Time?'

'You said that you were.'

'It's just a name, Antoniax. I am a completely unremarkable person.'

'Got it. Well, the Mirage is the worst. Pretentious preposterously dressed interventionist little prick.'

I try to stare at the silver construct agape, but fail for the

most part as my eyes slide off it again. 'Can you stop that? It's hard to talk to someone when I cannot look properly.'

'Sorry. That's built in these days. I couldn't turn it off if I wanted to. So the Lethe Mirage is causing trouble?'

The way this creature says the words is horrible. Completely alien! There's no way it's gotten them right, the Mirage would snap it on the spot for that terrible attempt to say his name. Then again considering the attitude it seems to have, perhaps the disrespect is on purpose.

'The Mirage doesn't cause trouble. Not directly. He is simply doing as he was always wont to do. We just lack the true manner of speaking his name now. Possibly just an error, perhaps the coven, perhaps any number of other reasons.'

'Trust me, he's caused a lot of trouble. You mean the Coven of Gaoth?'

'I do.'

'Mhm. We have history.'

'They invade your dreams and manipulate you too?'

'Eh, not so much. It's more that they're a thorn in my boss's side, really.'

'So we're not killing eachother now?' Melodias asks, having managed to heft himself the rubble and climb up to the edge of our bridge. We help him the rest of the way up, and I notice he's lost his spear.

'I probably should.' Antoniax says.

'But you wont, because killing is wrong?' Melodias replies hopefully. I frown at him.

'I wont because it's more interesting to talk. Especially with

other people that don't like the Coven.'

'Good.' I say, 'So, in the interests of preserving what's left of this bountiful trove of lost knowledge, I propose this: we can help you find your book, and you can help us find what we're looking for. And then if you want to, we can discuss the Coven. You have artificial eyes, I'm sure they see with decent clarity?'

'...Yeah. Sure.'

We set to work. I give Melodias a piece of paper with Lethe Mirage, Brinehelm the Wide Brimmed and several other phrases clearly written out so that he can help too. There's an awful lot of ground to cover - even if we just took the tomes and scrolls still on their shelves into account there was an ocean of literature here. But as well as that, we have the piles of books covering most of the floors and several other more unusual items.

AntoniAx shows us how to operate small pedestals wrought of alloy and crystal that display illusory images when the correct storage device (he calls them 'Lore Nodules') are slotted into them. The colourful images depict significant events in the past, information on art or wildlife, intricate instructional guides and much, much more. They even have lines of text displayed alongside the pictures, but evidently decided to make them too small for me to make out properly. Awe combined with immediate irritation seems to be a recurring combination of emotions for me on this trip.

'This is fairly basic though.' He comments as Melodias and I drink in the vibrant images, 'With access to the Loreway I could bring up a lot more, but most of the roots are shivelled or infested.'

I'm too transfixed to reply, so he sighs and wanders off to

continue the search. It takes a while to rip myself away from the kaliedoscope of holography, but Lethe Mirage comes first. As amazing as this all is, I owe it to everyone to move quickly.

In time Melodias uncovers a tome bearing the Mirage's name. It's not in a good way. A good chunk has been dissolved by one of Antoniax's metal slivers, and when I catch a glimpse of the writing that remains, it's done by hand and seems so miniscule I reckon nobody could read it at all. Anything not melted or burned is rendered into a tiny, spidery blur.

I must confess that the news hit me like the prow of Celestial Censor, smashing through my decorum and patience. Moments later the ruined tome was falling down to the bottom of the archive, the entire place echoing my scream of anger as I cast it away.

Melodias surveys me in silence for a few moment. Long enough that I quickly feel embarrassed about the outburst and look away, fiddling with the jewellery and bangles on my hands.

'...Shouldn't we just show it to Antoniax, with his magic eyes?' He asks.

'Yes. We should. I apologise.'

He sighs, 'I'll go down and get it.'

After making his way up and down about a thousand stairs, he returns and shows the semi-melted book to Antoniax. It examines the intact passages closely, then retrieves some kind of circular clear object from a nearby table.

It proceeds to stare at the page once more, positioning the object between it's face and the book, 'This guy really used up every bit of space possible, didn't he? It's like I'm trying to read something from half a continent away.'

'Antoni-ax, what is that device?' I ask, trying to stay focused on it.

It looks up, 'Hm? It's a magnifying glass.'

'It magnifies?' A spark lights my gut aflame, 'I... I'd heard that folk used to be able to enhance their vision with complex devices, but I never imagined they might be handheld.'

Antoni-ax doesn't seem to know quite how to react.

'Well, you heard part right. It's literally just a concave piece of glass, though. The Archive had a stock of them for this kind of thing.'

'There's more than one?!'

It nods back toward a nearby alcove, and I run over there, darting between various piles of literature. And like he said, I find a neat little row of them on a shelf there, caked in the dust. This is it. With this I could decipher even the sloppiest and smallest writing imaginable!

I hurry over to one of the pedestals and slot in the first nodule I can find. A moving picture of a flying ship appears, and small sections of it are highlighted in turn along with words. I hold the glass up close by to them, and after a bit of fiddling I can see them. Instructions, naming each part and describing how it is operated. So this is some kind of learning tool?

A thrill runs through me. I want jump or hit something, but in a good way. The way in which you are fizzing with life and belief.

Maybe I should take as many of these Lore Nodules as possible so I can go through them in the evenings after we get home. It's not stealing. It's learning.

Sadly, Antoni-ax explains that you need one of the pedestals to

use them, and all of the ones in there are built into the floor. Time and magick could perhaps pry one free, but I doubt it would be very happy if we started doing that. And carrying one all the way home would be a nightmare regardless.

It also cannot find any reference to Lethe Mirage within the remaining pages, which quickly turns my elation back around into despair. I manage to resist the urge to snatch the tome from it's hands and throw it over the railing this time.

'Now what?' I ask nobody in particular.

'Stay calm, Reader. All the books in here have been filed away on the Loreway at some point. You could dive in and find this one.' Antoniax answers.

'I'm sorry?'

'Didn't you say that the roots were shrivelled up, or something?' Melodias asks.

'Yes, but you can still dive. It's just... weird. And dangerous. A lot of the thoughts and memories in there have festered and warped - half because so much time has passed, half because of the Moth Queen. Explaining it properly is difficult.'

'How do I go inside?' I ask.

'Hold on.' Melodias says abruptly, 'How dangerous? We need a living Reader to be able to read, you know.'

'I know, right?' It answers, affecting unity in his concern for my life, 'And I need them to help find old Brinehelm's book. Gods know you'll be no use on that front.'

'How do I go inside?' I reiterate.

'There's a diving suite in this very building. I suppose I could show you how to use it.'

He leads us down into the lower depths of this place. The light quickly fades away, and with a pang of residual guilt I light up a crystal to guide our way. I tell Melodias to shield his eyes first, but the spell goes off perfectly.

The bowels of the Archive are close and stifling. More piles of scrolls, books and shattered glass cases in every direction. Buried artefacts that I have no name for, many of which Antoniax gives a wide berth. I can only follow his example in the hopes of avoiding calamity.

He takes us to a circular chamber, twenty Aevums high and fifty across. Pale and dusty roots emerge from the floor at regular intervals, coiled about ancient machinery. Insects skitter away from my light, seeking refuge in the nooks and crannies as we step inside. Something about their presence gives me comfort.

'These are the portals you can dive through.' Antoniax says, as if they explain much of anything. I stare at the entangled devices.

'...Shall I turn it on for you?' It asks.

I nod, and it produces a book of its own. With a short incantation of words I don't recognise, it uses a spell to activate one of the portals. The roots around it light up with tracings of yellow light like veins, sprouting out of the ground and congregating around the machine, which itself lights up with blue illusions.

'Aevum.' Melodias says.

'Melodias.' I respond.

'This is the stupidest thing you've done in at least a week.'

'Celestial Censor's dead or dying, Melodias.' I reply, pausing



to arrest a shake in my voice, 'We've nothing to show for it but injuries and a couple of spellbooks.'

'Is it? They had a small fire to put out, but-'

'No. It's worse than that.'

'How do you know?'

I hesitate for a long while before answering. I'm keeping the nightmarish revelation of my dreams from him... he deserves some small truth at least.

'My sight has been getting worse.' I say.

Wrenching the words out feels like they're being dredged up from the very depths of my guts. I've barely told myself before, let alone another person.

'Because of the burning crystal, back on the Censor?'

'That might have sped up the process but no, before that. It has been happening for a long time, I think.'

His eyes widen a little, 'And you'd planned to take on a task that specifically required you to... you know, read?'

'Large letters are still-' I pause mid-way through my protestation. 'I'm sorry. That doesn't matter. You're right it's... I made a bad decision. I hoped that we would find some way to correct my sight out here, and we did!'

'I could have helped if you'd told me.'

'Told you when? After you started looking at me as a liability? Questioned my every decision? Marched me half to death with blood pouring out of my side?'

He looks down, letting out a breath.

A few moments of quiet pass, interrupted only by the dry rasp of pages turning as Antoniax looks up another spell, pretending it

can't hear us.

Melodias takes a seat on another one of the portals, drumming his fingers on the side. He doesn't look enraged. He looks like he's turning over thoughts in his mind, carefully picking and choosing which ones to keep.

'I was scared.' He says, 'Scared that I'd latched myself onto a hopeless cause dreamed up by a naïve idiot with no real idea what they were doing. Scared that I'd die out on the Mainland without having helped anyone, in a situation I couldn't control.'

'At least you can trust yourself. I wake up every morning dreading what I might not be able to see any more. What new wonder might have slipped outside of my sight? When I first started to notice it was difficult even to tell. I had to ask myself every day whether what I was seeing was worse, or whether I had simply forgotten my past clarity with time.'

I sit down on a pile of tomes, prodding at the metal bands that keep my fingers roughly in line, 'I know it's horrible for you, but sometimes I wish I had no memories, rather than trying to measure myself against what's left in my mind. I feel like I'm trying to measure smoke even as it drifts away in the wind.'

'I trust you now.'

'Why?'

'Partially because I like you, despite everything. But mostly because you're committed to this to a fault. I've never heard you complain that so much pressure and expectation has been piled onto a child. An entire shipload of people just decided that you would be responsible for their lives, and they let you live with that responsibility.'

'They had no choice. My teacher died young.'

'Bullshit. That hut is full of books. Why couldn't some other adult have tried to learn? Or spent time training with the other Readers?'

'That's... a question for another time. What's important is this: even if we find the word written down where with the best pronunciation guide known to Cildara, there's every chance I won't be able to read it by the time we return.'

'But if you hear it in some long dead arsehole's memory...'

'Precisely.'

'It's ready.' Antoniax announces.

I give Melodias one last look, then turn to face the portal, 'What do I do?'

'Place your hands on the surface, and close your eyes. Try to think about what you want to find. And whatever happens, remember this: don't make decisions while you're inside. Make up your mind now, and stick with it. Always do your decision making before you dive.'

'Okay.'

## Chapter Fifteen

*"People only think about the past right before they die. As if they suddenly realise how little impact they have had on the world, and are frantically searching for proof they were ever alive at all."*

*-An extract from On Vorzene's Sanctuary - Hunts through the Ages*

*I fell. Or perhaps I flew. All I knew was that everything I thought I knew about reality and the way it functioned was suddenly, horrifyingly, incorrect. The world was a blur of faded colours, overwhelming me in muddied water rife with partly rotten thoughts and experiences.*

*Controlled pandemonium grips the Celestial Censor. Everyone is doing something. Gathering food onto large bronze bowls, pulling in the sails so that we don't catch an unexpected breeze, herding the other children into pre-assigned positions... but there's nothing for me to do. I know I'm not supposed to be sitting with them - Ira had told me to stay put before heading off to the Reader's Hut, and I'd heard nothing from him since. A pale purple light on the horizon is growing slowly stronger, hovering above the dunes as they lazily rippled back and forth.*

*Watching them relaxes me a little even as all the adults thunder about, their footsteps fading into a blur as whack up and down on the wooden deck. Some of them murmur to themselves as they*

work, praying to Formal or Admor. Perhaps I'm supposed to be praying with them? Their jerking motions border upon panic, and one of them swears violently as their stray foot topples one of the bowls. Fresh fruit rolls out over the deck, some of it inevitably getting crushed. I scramble forward to help, but I'm quickly shouted back to my place.

The words. Soon they'll be spoken. I just need to stay put, but... the current tugs at my thoughts, dragging them away with gathering strength. I try to hold on, but I don't know how. The visions of my youth fade, washed away into the distance as I fall once more.

Bitterly cold winds sweep across the deck, stripping whatever warmth might've lingered in the cold steel. It seems to seep upward into my shoes, chilling my bones and leeching the heat from my lungs.

Yet as cold and heartless as this ship is, it's still mine. My command, and my responsibility. Seventeen other surface vessels float alongside us, dark grey obelisks set against an equally grey sky. Together we are a dreary procession that puts me in mind of a funeral march, which I suppose isn't too far from the truth.

A formally dressed man stands across from me, shivering awfully as his hands cling, vicelike, to his clipboard. I don't want to detest him, but he's the personification of a thief taking something very dear to me. A quivering manifestation of greed, heralding the start of our own century of humiliation, just as the Ceskans suffered.

In exchange for water, of all things.

I shivered and windmilled my arms, chasing some of the

numbness away from my fingers. A faint voice echoed down through the tether, threatening to lose itself amidst myriad whorls of other whispers. This isn't me.

I tried to remember who I was. What was Aevum Emiline? A goddess? A skinny pockmarked traitor? A prisoner chained within a dark humid column of endless height? Each idea leaked into the other like running dyes, swirling together into new and alien colours.

A jagged blade cut into me, catching on my edges and threatening to tear something free. I flinched and bit back a scream, but couldn't suppress the surging pulse of blood and motion. It yanked me downward, hurling me onto a coarse cot. Wooden bars loomed on all sides, constricting my vision and pressing down at the limit of my thoughts. I knew what I'd see when he looked through them, and fought to remain within my cage.

As always, the naïve desire for freedom won out. I saw the white slab, stained with viscera, adorned with a broken body that twisted and turned beneath the merciless scrutiny of sharp instruments. Cracks grew in its psyche, pushing and pushing until they broke the dam. A torrent of screams burst forth, flowing into me even as I screamed back at them. Their pitious voices merged into one, and I saw my quarry.

And then I recalled the tower. The memory dug into me like a fish-hook, distending my flesh but holding me in place. The pain concentrated me, and I felt thankful beyond measure to feel the tears and know they were mine.

Now to stand. I needed some ground. There it was, firm and unyielding. I chose wooden boards worn smooth by sandy winds. I

*picked a direction to designate as upward but had to accept that the concept spiralled out of my control beyond a certain distance.*

*I could just about swim, but I've never been good at it. Aktos had to yank me out of the shifting sands after I fell from the rigging one time. I don't I think I ever forgave him for it. So no, solid ground and nice conventional feet are the parameters for me.*

*'Aevum?' He asked.*

*I flinched, twisting away as I recognised Aktos in his ruined paint, sundered bone leering at me from where it broke through his flesh.*

*'You've um... been down here for a long time. Are you alright?'*

*'No. Go away.' Aevum said. Their voice was ragged, sounding for all the world as if someone had run a saw back and forth across their vocal chords a few times. Their eyes were wide and wild, each iris partly obscured by cloudy patches. Their fingers were bent and twisted, only held to some semblance of order by winding metal bands that adorned each of their hands.*

*Aktos couldn't begin to guess how much of them had been lost in the wash.*

*'Who are you?' Aktos asked.*

*'Aevum Emiline.' They answered.*

*It wasn't too late.*

*He felts their thoughts press up against his own, flickering visions of scuttling creatures and stitching lurking at the periphery of his senses. He clung tightly to his tether, picturing home in his mind's eye. Aevum washed over him, replete with*

*fragments of the memories he'd just passed through, intermixed with stark emptiness, creeping fear, and... yearning. The deluge cajoled him with tenebrous curiosity, tempting him to look deeper and understand.*

*But he knew that understanding was tantamount to becoming, and kept it all at bay.*

*'I'm taking you back to the surface.' He said.*

*'Not yet. I still need to find the words.' They said, nodding toward his forehead. Aevum was lying. They weren't even looking anymore.*

*He fought the urge to recoil away as his thoughts were pressed once more, bowing inward beneath the pressure of old and worn memories.*

*'Spending time alone with your own thoughts can corrupt, you know?' They continued, 'They turn in on you, and fester.'*

*'You'd change your mind quickly.' He answered shortly.*

*'I could take them off your hands, if you'd like?' They asked, 'A lifetime of servitude met only with disregard and betrayal? Who would want to remember that?'*

*'...No. We're going back up.'*

*'I will not.'*

*'You don't have much time left. We're going back up before you get too diluted.'*

*Aevum fixed him with a stare, tears brimming at the edges of their dulled eyes. They didn't have to say it, the thoughts leaked into his mind clearly enough. Aevum Emiline was here to get diluted. To get lost entirely in the wash.*

*'Why?'*



*'I don't have anything that I want to get back to. I want to be lost.'*

*'You could just end it all in any number of ways if that were the case. Why do it like this?'*

*'You think this is an end? No, it's a transformation. One that surpasses time, permanence and material. We could be unchained beings, free to flow and fluctuate without all that human ballast. You should stay, but if not then please leave me alone.'*

*'Not in Cildara. This place is diseased... it's not a refuge, for you or anyone else. Antoniax told you the golden rule: do your decision making before you dive.'*

*'I made a mistake.'*

*'You've made a lot of mistakes, including this one.'*

*He grabbed Aevum's wrist before they could reply, and took them upwards. It wasn't easy. Aevum kicked, screamed, pleaded, hurled insults and philosophy at him in equal measure. He shut it all out and thought of Celestial Censor, backtracking up the chain toward the surface.*

*They only paused once when the surface was tantalisingly close, staying put avoid the bends. By that point Aevum was subdued, cold hatred bleeding out of them in a manner that Aktos could at least distinguish from his own easily enough. Aktos didn't want to detest them, but they were the personification of a thief taking something very dear to him - time. He could have been saving anyone else, and yet he'd been stuck with someone who hadn't even wanted it.*

*I'm thrown out of the sands with one last yowl of indignance,*

clattering down upon pristine flagstones. They should shatter my bones, and they do, but they also don't.

Aktos is gone. I don't know if he was really there in the first place, and I don't explore that avenue of thought. Partly to preserve myself, but also because the thoughts are displaced by horror.

A layer of clouds hangs overhead, and they are darker than any spore-filled blight I can ever recall seeing. They churn and writh like the guts of a dying animal, spilled out across a decaying yellow sun.

And behind it all, barely distinct from the fetid mass, something moves. Something so gargantuan that I have no real words to describe it other than to say it is round, and turns. Echoed screams fill my thoughts as I set eyes on it, and I tear myself away before they can grow louder.

Back to the flagstones. Back to broken limbs and pain and other concepts I can wrap my head around. I drop my gaze and look for somewhere to go.

Frantic murmurs drift over to me, the voice ragged and choked with bile. I smell sweat and vomit, and shiver. Not there. There's nothing useful for me there.

I turn and see somebody else. Someone gaunt, with excellent teeth.

'Melodias?'

He stares at me with unfamiliar eyes, 'Yeah. Who are you?'

'Aevum. We know eachother. On the... on the outside.'

'Huh? Whatever. Have you seen a little girl around here? Her name's Cyrille, looks like me but... well actually she looks

*nothing like me.'*

*'I cannot say that I have.'*

*'Damn. I swear she was right here.'*

*'Could she be... with her mother?' I venture.*

*He looks hurt, but only mildly so. Like an old scar twinging.*

*'No, she's gone.'*

*'Oh. Well, I could help you search for her? I'm on the lookout for something myself, perhaps we could help eachother?'*

*'Might as well.'*

*We continue together, passing off the flagstones and onto wooden decks once more. I head the warm shifting of sand, and eagerly set off in pursuit of it.*

*Everything gets a little brighter, and I feel raindrops plink against my head. Purple-tinged puddles pool between loose boards, and my white robes gradually becomes stained the same colour.*

*'Cyrille! There you are, you bugger!'*

*Melodias springs from my side, dashing over to a child sitting cross-legged with a dozen or so others of similar age. The girl looks irritably up and shushes him, nodding over to the Reader standing before the assembled group.*

*Melodias blinks, nods apologetically and takes his place with the adults, almost kicking a bowl of offerings over by accident on his way there. I hurry over to join him, feeling a little exposed on my own.*

*We watch with baited breath as the Mirage approaches. The Reader stays calm and composed, statue-still as he prepares to deliver the name.*

*And he does. The words sound so wonderful, sliding over me*

*like silk. The Mirage snaps his fingers, and is satisfied.*

*Melodias turns to me with a short sigh to relief, '...So, what was this thing you were looking for?'*

*'I just found it.' I reply, somewhat dazed.*

*'Oh.' He looks confused, but swallows it in favour of good manners, 'I'm glad! So you'll be off, then?'*

*'I think so. I'm not sure where off is, honestly. I'm diving, so upwards?'*

*'I... suppose so?'*

*'I'm sorry, Melodias. This must be making very little sense.'*

*'That's true. If you want to go up, though, you just need to climb that.' He nods up at the rigging.*

*Of course. Of fucking course. I let loose the world's most long suffering sigh, and being to climb. And climb. And climb.*

-

I'm back.

My feet fail me, and I fall back from the portal with a sharp gasp. Reality painfully reasserts itself, cramming my mind back into its mould with uncaring hands.

Melodias catches me, and I promptly throw up on him. I try to apologise a little to soon, and a second bout overcomes me, continuing until there's nothing left. My mind doesn't seem to appreciate being back inside it's fleshy prison.

I apologise to Melodias, of course. He asks me if I found the words, and I speak them aloud for the first time. They taste so sweet that it almost dispels the vomit.

I find it in myself to stagger back to my feet. The room seems to lurch back and forth, but gradually gets firmer until I'm confident enough to take a step.

'That was rather overwhelming.' I say.

'Yes, yes. I assume you can still see?' Antoniax asks, seeming utterly without empathy toward my mental somersaults, 'Then lets get back to searching.'

'Please do. I'll be with you in a moment.'

It sighs dramatically and walks out, leaving Melodias and myself. We sit there in silence for a little while as I probe around my mind, trying to tell what's different and what's the same as before.

'I have the words.' I say, 'Lethe Mirage.'

'Huh.' He licks his lips as if he's tasting them, 'They sound.. odd.'

My thoughts definitely feel different. I don't know what I've left behind in the wash. Or what I might have picked up.

'Melodias?'

'Yes?'

'Can I share a memory with you?'

'I'm sorry?'

'It's on my mind. And I nearly saw someone in the wash. And.. I haven't shared stories in a while. The Moth Queen might comb them out if I don't do it now.'

'Then... go ahead. I'm listening.'

'Celestial Censor's reader. The one before me, I mean. He died when I was young. I wasn't quick or dignified. It was slow, painful and humiliating. His lungs would fill with fluid that he'd

spend all day coughing up, retching blood, mucus and bile into a pot I'd need to empty each evening.'

'I can relate.' He mutters, looking down as his puke-stained clothes. I continue heedless.

'And when I wasn't doing that, he was desperately teaching me. Forcing me to read at his side in the heat and copy down texts even as I was surrounded by disgusting smells of a dying man.' I take a swig of water from my pack, spitting it back out after I've whirled it around my mouth a few times.

'Shit, sweat, vomit... it all adds up. And I felt sorry for him at first. After all, he had saved us from Lethe Mirage, and somehow this is the reward the Gods deigned to give him for it. He was so helpless. Completely reliant on me and the few shipmates that helped us. Aktos, mostly. Days turned into weeks and I started to hate him for clinging onto life. We all knew he wouldn't recover, and yet he persisted for night after night, coughing up more of his own blood and keeping me a prisoner in that hut. I thought so many times about poisoning his food or opening up a vein when nobody was looking but...' I shrug, 'I was young. Looking back on it though, if I were him, I would have ended it myself. Better that than torture everyone else that had to endlessly look after me while enduring their silent hatred.'

'Better dead than useless?' Melodias says.

'Right. And he did die eventually, after a few months. I still wonder if Aktos helped him along the way. He was always torn up having to watch what it was doing to me. If I ever found out that he did, I think I'd thank him.'

Melodias nods thoughtfully. 'Listen, Aevum. I might be over 50 but I'm not helpless. Age chases me like a spectre but it hasn't caught up yet, and I'll die before I let it.'

'I wasn't talking about you.'

'I'm sure you weren't. Even still, trust me, at least until the Mirage is dealt with.'

I do trust him. I offer him a hand, which he shakes firmly. His red gloves alongside my tattered bandages and corrective jewellery. The burns on my palms barely deliver a hint of pain at the contact.

'Now. Time for your first reading lesson.'

## Chapter Sixteen

"*Why did you hit me? You were going to drown, you know.*"

– Aktos after pulling me from the dunes six years ago.

'I have a question.' Antoniax says.

'Yes?' I look up from what must be the five hundred thousandth book I've checked thus far - A tome named *Pantheons beyond the Glitzellan Halidom*. Antoniax had told us that some books can talk, intoning the words held within for the benefit of those without sight or who preferred to listen as they went about other activities. Such a wondrous innovation... I must find a guide to making such a talking tome at some point.

Although it does make me worry that an abundance of such things might encourage folk to neglect their studies and never bother to learn letters. Perhaps that's why the mainlanders continued to produce written books? Then again, you would at least need someone who could read the titles to make sure you could pick out the talking book you wanted.

Naturally, we hadn't found any books of that nature about Lethe Mirage, but that wasn't hugely problematic now - I'd heard all I needed to. Not that I'd have said no to a backup, though.

'Why didn't anyone on your ships just write down a pronunciation guide if his name is so important?' It asks, shaking me from my train of thought.

'All the Readers have to write in their own unique cipher. Their words aren't designed to be read by anyone else, unless they are teaching an apprentice. The only way to share knowledge and



ideas between fully fledged Readers is orally... that's part of what makes it so difficult to teach other people their letters.'

'Huh.' Antoniax peers down at me, 'What a terrible system. It's like you're asking to someone to slip up and offend the Mirage.'

I find myself getting a little hot and defensive beneath it's gaze, 'Secrecy keeps the ships safe. Our knowledge, the courses we chart... all if it can be leapt upon by the Coven, the Lost, or any number of other monsters out to kill us. And besides, we remind each other how the words are said every time we convene.'

It holds it's hands up, not pushing the point. Not that it really needs to, it's right. The system did fail. We have lost all of the souls aboard at least one ship, if not more by now. But... how many more might have been lost had the Readers been more open and blasé about sharing their knowledge?

There's no point dwelling on it now. A thought to delve into later, perhaps.

'Speaking of the Coven...' Antoniax says.

'Ah, yes. We passed through Gaoth, but did not find them there.'

'Interesting. Leaving is a risk for them, but if they're not in the village then that probably means that they're out making more mischief with someone's mind.'

'That's possible.' I say, 'But they might also have gone somewhere to treat a wound, too.'

'Hm? Why's that?'

'I stabbed one of them in the face. I think. In a dream.' I feel a little embarrassed, but Antoniax stiffens and spins to face

me.

'Stabbed them with what?' It asks.

I produce Melodias's dagger with it's odd little symbol and show him, 'In a dream, though. In case that bears repeating.'

'Ezolile. Huh.' It mutters to itself, before saying, 'Can I borrow this for a moment?'

I let him, and he disappears in that increasingly annoying fashion of his. The pair of us are forced to continue the search alone.

'How's your side?' Melodias asks.

'I feel as if the slightest movement could tear me in two and spill my innards all over the carpet.' I answer.

'Oof. Get well soon, I guess.'

'Begumhold.' Antoniax says, reappearing and placing the dagger down before me.

'What-hold?' Melodias asks.

It waves our enquiries away, 'It isn't important. I need to speak to some of my colleagues - I think we'll pay a visit to Gaoth, and if it's still empty we'll track down the Coven. Unless Ira has some brighter idea, which she usually does.'

'I see.' I say evenly, and without any sort of understanding.

'Can't say more.' It confirms apologetically, and gets back to searching.

Antoniax takes it's leave shortly afterwards, book in mechanical hand. At least I assume that's what happened, because suddenly it was just gone and I have no other explanation to fall back upon. If it is some kind of magic that makes it's form so hard to focus upon, then I do not particularly want to learn it.

Especially if there's no way to turn it off.

'So who the fuck was that, anyway?' Melodias asks, once we're left alone.

'Antoniax is a lesser known name for Vanagloria, one of the Moth Queen's champions.'

'Hang on. You named me after *that*?'

'I named you after a storied hero that just happened to be corrupted by the Moth Queen and help ignite the Third Cildaran Nightmare. And you had the chance to say no.'

'Well... I doubt it's actually him. A construct that's impossible to properly see, one of the Moth Queen's Champions? No. Probably some kind of arcanist's experiment gone wrong, I reckon.'

'I think I agree. If it truly is Vanagloria then the lore is very, very misleading. I was led to believe they did not possess minds of their own any more, let alone the compassion to leave two wanderers of the wastes alive after meeting them.'

'How reliable are your sources?'

'...Not very. If I can ever track it down again in less pressing circumstances, I think I will ask.'

'If you ever manage to actually see it, sure.' Pointless niggling delivered, he blinked and lapsed into thought. I watched his thoughts brewing, waiting patiently for the end product.

'...So if you can barely see, does that mean you missed all the skyships moored on top of the archive on the way in?' He eventually asks.

'Skyships. Skyships?!'

'Skyships. In decent nick, too.'

'I must confess that I did not.'

'Well, they're up there. Are we flying on back or not?'

'Given that they'll be centuries old and probably picked clean by scavengers at the start of the Nightmare, I think not.'

'Oh, go on. We wont know for sure unless we check them out.'

'How does one even pilot a skyship?!'

'They'll be some book or illusion that can tell us how in here, right?'

He drags me up a dozen or so flights of stairs to the docking spars. They stretch out in four directions at the Archive's apex, casting shadows over the murky cloud-layer below. The architecture is simple and elegant, but alarmingly unsafe. No guardrails, and while the air is still now I can just imagine an unexpected gust ushering an unexpecting victim over the edge to their doom. It's beautiful though, if only because your brain takes a while to quite wrap itself around the dimensions involved.

True to Melodias's word, several dilapidated vessels lie haphazardly about the place. I see one held up by a few ropes alone, otherwise dangling dangerously over the city. They look somewhat like miniature versions of the Censor, but more graceful, even in ruin.

'This is an awful idea.' I comment.

Now that he's said it though, it doesn't take much to win me over. If there's even the tiniest sliver of hope that one of these things will fly it would cut days off a return trip. And just think about the future if it made it all the way. If we could somehow replicate its inner workings and have all our ships take to the skies, it would change everything. We could go anywhere!

The ship Melodias picks is about a hundred Aevums long - he

tells me that it gives him the best vibes, and unfortunately I lack a more refined means of distinguishing between them. It is not wooden, nor is it metal. The texture when I ran a hand over the hull seems similar to a fingernail, and I can't help but wonder whether it have the capacity to grow. Traditional looking sails sprout from the top of it, and more from the back and sides, but they're supplemented by some sort of arcane device in the back that can propel it without the aid of the wind in a pinch.

The sails have fallen apart, but I have all the words of the archive available to me. As I set Melodias to work learning his letters with the aid of instructive speaking books, I remove the sliced up portions of sail wrapped about my midriff and look up the words required to fabricate more of them. Soon enough I have new sails sewing themselves into shape and hanging themselves upon the ship at my carefully phrased request.

The trick works so well that I make myself a new set of clothes too - there's enough blood and dust on my current set as to make them irreparable. Or at least, inconveniently so in comparison to some divine power.

All in all it is done within two hours, after which I start trying to understand the mechanisms within the ship. They are remarkably intact, and with the help of instructive illusions in the Archive I can ascertain the basics of piloting it quite easily. I'm sure that more complex manoeuvres will come with time.

Up here the air is clean and the sunlight soft. Both stoke my creativity, and I cannot help but wonder whether the looking glass could be made a little more convenient to use. Holding it up to everything I need to see with clarity is already proving to be a

hindrance - many of the controls seem to require two hands to operate, and while I suppose I could have Melodias follow me about holding the glass up would solve that problem after a fashion, I think a more elegant solution is required. He could be needed up on deck to manage to sails, if they work anything like the sprawling tangled mess that sits atop the Celestial Censor.

Glass is easy to find in the form of more looking glasses, but I notice that many of the Archive's windows still have shards in them that are coloured. I gather up some green bits of glass and sit myself down with Bektai's tome and Melodias's spearhead (which had snapped clean off when he fell from the catwalk, much to his chagrin). Going off some images in the lore nodules, I sculpt myself a pair of looking glasses bound within a metal frame that rests around my head. Any presumptions of mine that this might be an original idea are quickly dashed as I find these contraptions were apparently very common before the Moth Queen ruined everything. Enthusiasm buoys me on despite the disappointing news as I scurry around the airship taking great pleasure in reading all of the various labels and controls in unblemished clarity.

As I mentioned long ago, magick is often worse than useless in a fight. Outside of that barbaric arena though, if you gather up enough words and are creative enough in their application then the possibilities are near limitless. Bektai's Tome in tandem with the books and nodules on the subject I have gathered to take home with us leaves me with by far the largest collection out of any of the Readers. If Zhulavi or Gail still live it will be interesting to see how they react to my enhanced lexicon. On that thought, I reluctantly retrieve Melodias and tell him that we need to leave.

We can bring more study material with us.

'Nice looking glasses.' He says, then looks down at the snapped now-headless spear he lugged halfway across the wastes, 'So do I get a replacement for this?'

'I think I can do better than a rickety spear. What would you like?'

'Something with a hook. We seem to spend a lot of our time climbing things.'

To his great excitement, I massage and twist the wood from his broken spear together with some of the flagstone floor to create a rock-headed hammer with a curved hook jutting out of one end. Ample bludgeoning and climbing utility all rolled into one object.

He merrily hits things with it as I patiently explain how we are going to operate the skyship, which essentially involves me doing everything of note below decks while he keeps a lookout and looks after the sails up top. The entire craft thrums with energy as I ignite the starting device, and steadily drifts upward. It can generate a little forward momentum from what I understand, but the bulk of its movement is provided by the wind.

With great caution we take off, and point the prow in the direction of the coast. With such a superb vantage point and the aid of magicks, re-locating the Celestial Censor no longer seems to be such a daunting task as it once might have done.

## Chapter Seventeen

*"Do you think she will stop at our crops, cities, and lives? Once they are exhausted she will feast on less tangible but more insidious foodstuff. Our minds and memories are hers to devour."*

- An old fool claiming to channel Attahua, before I gutted him and all of his foolish followers

Sixteen abled bodies adults. Forty or so children. Perhaps thirty injured or infested that might still recover. We had to put the less fortunate out of their misery a long time ago. They consumed too much of our water, and sapped too much of our spirit.

The expeditions to and from the river are torturous, but we can't relocate closer. The skeletal remnants of our ship are all that protect us from the elements, and the survivors are in no condition to be moved. Not that there's enough of us on our feet to move them anyway. We lose one or two more with each trip as more and more mouldering things stalk us across the beaches, waiting for someone to fall or stray too far away from the group.

We hear them moving in the night too, scuttling about just beyond the range of our fires, themselves fed by bits torn from the ship. Sooner or later there won't be enough left for the Censor to be sandworthy.

Whichever way I look at it I don't see a way out.

The Moth Queen's hunger is taking its toll. No matter how many stories we share, details get steadily lost with each retelling.



None of us can read any of the notes you left behind to remind ourselves.

Perhaps a few days ago I could have struck out with the strongest and left this accursed place behind us, but naïve devotion kept me here in a doomed effort to preserve as many lives as possible. Aktos warned me. Liana begged me. The others just trudged onwards as the light slowly faded away from their eyes, following my plan to their doom. Now I don't think even the ones still on the feet could survive more than a few days of travel.

That just leaves me. I could make a life for myself out there in the wastes, perhaps. Keep on going until I find the ruins of a city or a place less desolate than the beaches. I can see twisted ruins on the horizon from here - if I gathered up food and water then struck out at night nobody would be the wiser.

The thing is, unlike you I don't leave people behind. And it seems like that belief is so strong it's even going to drag me into my drawn out, pitiful, meaningless death.

Nobody really talks any more. We just numbly wait on the deck until the water runs low enough for us to head out again. I can't remember the last time I yelled at them to share stories. It could have been a week as easily as a day.

I always thought I'd die falling from the rigging. A lot us do. A sudden heart lurching realisation as your footing gives way and you tumble down into swift oblivion. I never expected the reality of my passing to be so drawn out and... listless. I want to spring up and shout. Scream my grievances skyward, bloody my knuckles and throw such a tantrum the Gods themselves take notice and finally fucking do something about it. But I don't even have

the energy to do that. All I can do is sit and watch the Celestial Censor wither away into nothing as this despicable careless world eats us all up.

I let my head fall back against the mast, looking up at the roiling clouds through the rigging. Perhaps a prayer couldn't hurt. I've always been partial to Tusc, so I ask her if she might lend a hand.

That's when I see it. A dark shape too regular and acute to be a cloud or flying creature. It plies its way across the sky above us, just like the skyships used to. I see sails atop it, and something pulls me to my feet and over to the side of ship, if only to get a better look. The sudden movement startles many of the crew out of their stupors. It's getting closer.

We watch as it swoops downward in a manner impossibly graceful for its size. The entire craft hums to itself. It's moving very fast.

'Is it landing or?' Liana rasps, parched almost beyond speaking.

It ploughs into the rigging, getting itself caught on a hundred old sheets and tearing through one of the sails. Splinters and severed pieces of rope rain down onto the deck as it lurches about as if caught in a web, each movement constricting it more thoroughly.

I recognise your voice, and I want to kill you.

'Anyone that can still climb, grab a weapon.' I say, 'We're going up there to take that ship and kill the crew.'

## Chapter Eighteen

*"Do good recklessly."*

- Something I found scratched under the controls on our  
skyship.

Crashing in the rigging was hardly the entrance I had envisaged, but my tears robbed me of a graceful hand after I saw the state of the ship. The rigging seems to have saved us, and I saw movement down on deck as we descended. Someone must still be alive. I can still save some of them.

I come up onto the deck of the trapped skyship once I'm sure it's hopelessly stuck, calling out to Melodias beneath an overcast sky. He's peering downwards over the prow, hammer out.

'They're climbing up to us. With weapons.' He says.

'What? Why?'

'I don't want to find out. Can you launch us again?'

'No.'

'Then we'd better convince them not to kill us quickly.'

Of course. I left them with a burning ship and no Reader. They have every right to hate me, but they can't afford to kill us now.

I join Melodias and look down through the tangled mess of rope and splintered wood. At least ten folk are climbing toward us, and I recognise them all. Ortuck, Liana, Arn, Aktos... all of them look so thin and cold. Where do I even begin?

'Listen!' I call, but stumble for anything else to say. My mind is blank. All I can think is that they deserve to kill me.

I flinch as Melodias jumps, catching one of the ropes and

confronting the group before they reach the skyship. Ortuck has her dagger out. The sight of her makes me shudder. I wonder where she'll start cutting first.

'Everyone stop!' Melodias shouts, 'We have it. A way to turn back the Mirage.'

There is a pause, but nothing in their faces suggests that he's swayed them.

'Nobody cares about that any more.' Ortuck answers, 'You washed up just as everything went wrong. You don't even know your own name. Kill them both.'

No objections outside of a half-second pause from Aktos. Melodias sighs and sets off through the rigging, scrambling ahead of his pursuers. Most follow him, but Ortuck's coming for me.

I turn to run, hearing light footfalls on the deck behind me. I can't head down into the skyship, there's no other way out. I reach the far side of the deck and I'm confronted by more ropes and torn sails, swaying in the breeze.

I can't do this.

I step off the edge anyway, grabbing a rope with one hand and trying to find purchase on another with my feet. I see a flash of steel in my peripheral vision, and let go before the Ortuck's blade can bite into my hand.

I scream and I fall, landing on a thin wooden catwalk that brings all the pain of my injury right back to me. I throw my arms around it regardless as pain shoots across my ribs. Bektai's spellbook comes loose from my belt, and tumbles down toward the Censor's deck below.

I look up, and can see them following. Ortuck, Liana, Aktos,

and two others. All hateful. Probably annoyed that the fall didn't kill me.

There's a wider beam below me. I drop down onto it, swaying with a rush of fear as I struggle to stay balanced. We're far too high up for me to jump. I edge my way along the beam, away from the mast and out over the sands.

I might survive the fall on sand, but without my spells what would be the point?

Ortuck drops down behind me. I draw Melodias's dagger and she snorts with derision. Her false eye is slightly off centre. A long way behind her, I see Melodias running through the ropes, the hook on his hammer letting him swing across gaps in the rigging. He might have seen me in trouble, but I don't think he'll be fast enough to help. He has his own pursuers to worry about.

'Kill me, then.' I say to Ortuck, 'Melodias is blameless. Let him live if you have it left in your heart. Take that book to the other Readers, though. They will need it.'

I point down to it with a trembling hand.

'He remembered his name?' She asks, slowing closing the gap between us.

'No, I gave him one.'

'Cute.'

Aktos drops down onto the beam behind her, crying out and almost losing his footing as his splinted leg has to bear some weight. He looks a little better at least. Well enough to climb the rigging and kill his traitor friend. He has a small axe to do the work with.

'Ortuck, we could take them prisoner.' He mutters after he

recovers, 'Hear them out or-'

'Shut up!' Liana hisses.

The Moth Queen have have feasted on all of them. I've no way of telling how much they still remember - perhaps the details have just worn down into a murderous need for vengeance.

Ortuck gets close enough to swipe at me with her dagger. I lean back and the blade catches my glasses, tugging them from my face. They fall down into the sand as I teeter, thrown off balance by my own movement.

Then I'm falling again. I manage to catch hold of the beam, dangling below my murderous shipmaster.

She prowls closer as I swing back and forth, her own balance absolutely perfect.

Then Aktos pushes her from behind. She stumbles forward along the beam, past where I'm dangling as she struggles to stay upright, finally arresting her momentum at the very end.

Liana shouts and grabs Aktos, who yells in turn as she puts pressure on his leg. The two of them tumble over the side, saved only by Aktos chopping his axe into beam at they fall. Liana grabs onto his other arm as I take the opportunity to haul myself back up and crawl back toward the rigging.

Behind me Ortuck struggles to rebalance, giving me just enough time to get to the mast before she properly rights herself. I still have the dagger.

No time to cast anything. No book to do so!

It's started to rain. I grab a knotted rope that hangs beside the mast and start climbing downward as the wind picks up. The rope seems to lurch about with a life of its own. Perhaps even the

ship's aware of my betrayal, and wants me to fall.

I catch a glimpse of Melodias, who has left Arn behind clutching his ankle thanks to his new hammer. He's climbing down toward me, seeming intent on blocking Ortuck off. His other pursuers are more wary now and he's managed to put a lot of distance between them, having led them in a wide circle on his way back to me.

He drops down onto the beam just ahead of Ortuck, who quickly darts in to stab him. He bats her dagger away and they fight.

I try to ignore them and focus on clambering down to something more secure. Rainwater is soaking into my clothes, and everything's going to be even more perilous to stand on now that it's wet.

I can hear clashes of metal on stone from above as I reach a small platform jutting out from the mast - I find my spellbook on it - it must have ended here when it fell. I'm close enough to the deck now that a fall might just break a few bones instead of killing me outright.

I open up the tome and try to read through the index. I have to squint now that the looking glasses have gone, but I can just about make some of it out. Rain speckles the pages as I scan through them.

I could whip up a gale, but I don't want to knock anyone off the rigging. Especially Aktos and Liana, who are still haplessly hanging beneath the beam. The knotted climbing rope is flapping about enough as it is, almost knocking the tome out of my hands as it writhes about wind.

Rope.

I turn back to the pages I've been filling in myself over the past few days, take a breath, and start to read aloud.

Aktos and Liana cry out as ropes curl upward, defying gravity to tie them together and dangle them in a position decidedly more safe.

Another rope coils around Ortuck's hand as it plunges toward Melodias's neck, hauling her over to the mast and wrapping itself around it a few times. Melodias sidesteps neatly and retains his balance, of course.

The others up in the rigging are much easier to snag. Ropes are practically surrounding them, and I make them converge into a labyrinthine ball that catches each of them securely within it. I have it lower itself safely toward the deck, ignoring their shouts of anger. Some of them are hitting at it with knives and axes, but the old matted fibers are tough enough to withstand them for a long time yet.

I have lived on Celestial Censor all my life. Almost 2 decades surrounded by wood, sails and rope. The one thing I've had time to compose spells around, possibly more than anything else, is rope. There's always one that they can't reach using the mundane methods.

I should feel awful. My ribs hurt whenever I breath, I'm covered in grazes from all the falling, and the most of the people I spent my life growing up with are dead, dying or want to kill me.

Despite all of this I survey my work and feel nothing much at all. Perhaps I just don't have any room left for emotions after the last few days.



Melodias climbs down, carefully working his way around Ortuck. She is quietly working away trying to twist herself out of the ropes binding her to the mast. I can't make out her expression from here.

All the others on the deck are just sitting about listlessly. They barely even seem aware of the fighting and the skyship tangled in the ropes above them. There are deep scratches in the ship, some of them stained red with dried blood. Swathes of the deck has been torn up to burn or build with, and between the gaps here and there I see white-grey masses of fungus seeping through. It's too late for Celestial Censor.

'Aevum.'

I flinch, and look up at Melodias.

'One of them will break free sooner or later. If we start now, we might get the skyship untangled. Find another ship maybe.'

'We could... make them come with us. The survivors.'

'How? Even with rope tricks, there are dozens of them. The ones that can move at all want us dead and the rest...' He looks around at them helplessly.

Thunder rolls across the ship as two clouds above us collide. The rain thickens, pouring in thick sheets that soak us through. I look up at the roiling sky and I see it tinged with purple. The sight stirs up old memories that bring with them tension and cold dread, dispelling my apathy in a single stroke that runs through me like a whip.

'The Mirage is here.'

## Chapter Eighteen

### *"Lethe Mirage."*

– Every Reader since the ships first fled.

He came walking across sands that should have swallowed him whole, but bore him aloft as if he weighed nothing at all. The rain and the wind that tore at our hair and clothes did not bother him. While we were soaked he stayed dry, not having aged a day since I first saw him. Lightning flashed up above, reflecting in the purple device that covered his eyes.

I feel my spellbook in my hand, and the quiet presence of Melodias behind me. I climb down onto the deck to meet Lethe Mirage as everyone watches with rapt attention. The folk on the deck are listless no longer, back on the feet and gathering behind me. Putting the Reader between themselves and Lethe Mirage.

Ortuck frees herself. Despite everything I feel a thrill of fear as she drops down to watch the Mirage approach, as if even now she might slip her dagger between my ribs. As if I needed any more distracting.

The Mirage vaults atop the prow of what remains of Celestial Censor. He looks back and forth across the ship impassively, taking in the destruction. Finally he nods and snaps his fingers. The rain stops. The wind dies. All of sudden we can hear his every step as he makes his way up the ship toward us. Each of them a warning of our upcoming judgement.

I don't have my looking glasses.

I can't remember the words. I'd written them down in my book

just in case, but I don't have my looking glasses.

The Mirage stops in front of me, and crosses his arms. He is almost twice my height.

I open Bektai's tome of Cildaran Spellcraft. I have the appropriate page bookmarked. The words are tiny. Miniscule scrawling on a page already stained by rainwater, blurred beyond comprehension by my failing eyesight.

I cannot make them out. No matter how I strain and try to force them into resolution, they remain just outside my grasp. The words might as well not be there at all.

The memory of hearing them flits at the back of my mind, obscured by desperation and the Moth Queen's hunger. I try to recall what it sounded like to speak them in the Archive, but the memory is faint. Muffled and surrounded by the pressing panic that overwhelms me as I stand before a god, expected to save everyone.

Everyone that managed to survive my betrayal.

Perhaps the Moth Queen really does gorge herself upon our thoughts. Not content with just our lives and our homes. The fabric our minds too, slowly pulled apart to sate her unending appetite. Maybe that is the real Cildaran Nightmare.

I wonder if that's why Lethe Mirage needs to be told his name over and over. It might never have been a matter of respect or supplication. What if he just doesn't want to forget?

I look up at him. Waiting for me. I see my reflection looking back. Bedraggled, plain, haunted. All alone.

It has to be me that saves everyone. That's always what I told myself, ever since the old Reader died so pathetically. It has to be me. I have to do it all myself. Admor told me so.

But that wasn't Admor. It might never have been. And I haven't been doing it all alone. Melodias was with me all the way. He sewed me back up when I was dying, had the wit to trust the masked folk when I wanted to run, and crossed Fobsharana with me.

Circumstance forced his aid upon me, and with it I journeyed back and forth across the mainland, complaining to myself about him the entire time.

I find myself regretting how I treated Zhulavi. He just wanted to help. Maybe if I'd let him I would have an apprentice reader and none of this would have been necessary. I hope he isn't dead.

Perhaps I should put my faith in someone else for once.

I take a step toward the Mirage. Everyone else gasps and backs off, while the Mirage's eyebrow ticks upward. He arms remain crossed.

'Can I borrow your looking glasses?' I ask.

I can only imagine the looks of abject horror on display behind me. But I keep my eyes fixed upon him.

'That's what they are, isn't it? I need them too. My eyesight has been slipping for years, but I think staring into a superheated crystal is what really pushed it over the edge. So if you want your name read, I'll need to borrow yours.'

I hold out my hand expectantly. If he wants to blow us all into oblivion something so petty, so be it. Pretentious little prick.

Lethe Mirage takes his glasses off and places them in my hand. They're heavy thanks to all the ostentatious metal binding them together. He has brown eyes.

I slip them on and everything swims back into clarity. I see the world as the Mirage must, painted purple and criss crossed with shining lights that depict writing and lines that I do not understand. I do understand the words in the book though, crystal clear.

'Lethe Mirage.' I say. Then hand his looking glasses back to him.

He sniffs, holding them at arms length as if he's checking for any blemish I might have left. Then he puts them back on and snaps his fingers in a sharp rhythm, breaking out into a smile. He is satisfied.

A dozen pent up breaths rush out of the crew behind me, and everything starts to move again. The wind returns, but is now reduced to a mere breeze, and the rain peters away into nothing. The Mirage looks over my shoulder, and beckons someone forward with a single curled finger. Melodias. They step a few paces away and exchange a few words.

Melodias blinks, and looks down at the deck. A few moments later he looks back up with a purposeful expression on his gaunt face. The Mirage nods, then turns to leave. Wandering away across the sands with the same spring to his step that I saw eleven years ago.

-

Nobody really knows what to do now. Lethe Mirage is gone and the rain's gone with him. Water makes it's way down from the rigging, slapping at the deck in large droplets or trickling down the

masts, stained a light lilac. I eventually close the tome with a wet thump that seems to shock everyone out of their reverie.

Deciding to get one thing out of the way as soon as possible, I turn to Ortuck. Her dagger is back in its sheath.

'Are you going to pick up where you left off?' I ask.

She locks eyes with me, 'I want to. I should. You definitely deserve it.'

I wait as she grinds her boot heel into the ground and balls her fists. Then she takes a step back, dropping her gaze.

'...but I wont.' She says, 'I don't know where the responsibility for this starts and where it ends. Oh sure, it's reassuring to tell myself that you caused all of it. Every terrible fucking thing this ship has gone through since you ran off... but the Mirage just visited, and I know we would have failed his test if you stayed aboard the ship. So I wont take the easy way out and blame you. I took the Censor to the mainland, and it's crew died on my watch.'

'I'm sorry.' It's all I can think to say. She sighs wearily in response, and all of the tension flows out of her.

'The ship up above flies. I'm sure you noticed. You can use it to find the others, and pass on the words. And from there... who knows?'

'You wont be joining us then?'

'Would you?'

'...No, I wouldn't.' She looks up at the skyship, 'Where did you find that?'

'Fobsharana.'

'So everything you said was true then. The cities, the Archives, and Zhulavi's notes.' She says. Her words are quiet and emotionless.

'Ortuck...' I want to tell her that the Coven was whispering in my ear the entire time. That I don't really know whether Zhulavi is dead. In this moment none of it seems worth saying, 'Would you have let me go?'

'After taking some time to think about it? Yes, I think I would. Not that it matters. If I had held you back a day while I deliberated, the Mirage would have visited too soon.'

'We know that now. We didn't then. And like you said, usually decades pass between each visit. I should have waited for you.'

'Yeah. We both should have done a lot of things.'

I think it's probably best to leave her alone for a while.

-

Aktos has managed to get himself back down to the deck, and sits cradling his splinted leg. He hasn't noticed me, so I decide to blurt it out before I can overthink things.

'I'm sorry for ignoring you. On the night of the Ember Moon.' I twist my fingers together as he jumps and looks up at me, 'I think I've spent most of my life being an asshole.'

'That's a new revelation to you?' He asks.

'It's just... scary being a Reader, you know? You helped me through all of it, and your reward was getting your leg crushed while I gawped off into the distance. You deserved better than I gave.'

'I know. I think I have a habit of letting pity run wild.' He replies.

'That's all it was?'

'I'm not sure. When you know someone long enough you stop thinking about what you are to each other, I think.' He looks around at the remnants of Celestial Censor, 'Until something disrupts your life so much that you suddenly have the perspective to see what it used to be for the first time.'

I hand him Bektai's Tome, 'One last favour? Take this to another Reader for me. I think the skyship can carry all of you once I untangle it.'

He seems to want to reply, but can't find the words, and neither can I. So I walk away, leaving an open wound behind. Which seems about right.

Everyone gets to work sawing through the ropes that bind the skyship as I free anyone still tangled up by my spells. Ortuck supervises as we rig up a wooden platform on a pulley so we can lift the injured up to rigging. One by one every survivor of Celestial Censor is hauled up to the new ship, followed by all the supplies that are left. Eventually all that's left is a glorified pile of wood and stray rope. The end of the ship we all called home.

There's some talk of burning it. Letting fire consume the traumatic memories of the past few days. When it comes to the act itself though, nobody has the heart to do it. The remnants of the Censor will sit on the shoreline for evermore, perhaps inviting study and confusion from anyone that might stumble upon it in future. It isn't the first ruin to litter the mainland, and I very



much doubt it will be the last.

I get Ortuck to give me an account of what transpired while I was gone, and record it as best as I can. I need to know every detail, and commit it all to paper in case memory fails me. She is clinical in her descriptions, which detail horrors the likes of which shake me to my core. The names of everyone that has passed away - she remembers them all. I have to spend a little while alone after we're finished.

I manage to catch Melodias on his own for a moment, and ask him what the Mirage said to him.

'He asked me if I wanted my memory back.' He says.

'And?'

'I said no.'

'No?'

He shrugs with a wry smile, 'I think I like the clean slate. He confirmed that nothing more would be slipping away, at least not by his hand. That's all that had really worried me before. Now I can make myself useful without having the prospect looming over me.'

'I'm glad. You'll be a real asset to the crew.'

He nods in thanks, 'So you're leaving?'

'Yes. I'm sorry we couldn't finish your education. Speak to Gail when Ortuck guides you back to the other ships. I'm sure she'll be able to finish off where I started.'

'Fair enough.' He nods over my shoulder at the grey expanse of the mainland, 'I know it's bleak out there, but try to have fun while you're wandering.'

'I will. And... well, I suppose you may not want to know,

given your response to the Mirage. But I overheard your daughter's name while I was diving. I can tell you, if you'd like.'

I dislike putting him through the ringer again, and judging by his expression that's exactly what's happening as he considers my offer.

'...Alright. I'll keep one little thing.' He says, eventually.

I tell Melodias that his daughter was named Freya, and write it down for him. I should say more, but I've never been good at finding the right words in situations like this. He doesn't seem to mind, clapping me on the shoulder and wishing me luck. I don't think he'll have any trouble building himself a new life.

With our aid the crew acquaints themselves with the skyship's inner workings. It thrums into life and slowly extricates itself from the rigging. Ortuck takes the helm, and I watch from the sands as it smoothly comes about to a new heading and sweeps away toward the horizon, leaving me alone on the shoreline.

I still have my mask... I think I will return to the folk in Caywake first. As I told Aktos, I never managed to get into the centre of the city. I still remember that pale light seeping from within. Who knows what lies in there?

I leave Celestial Censor behind and set off along the coast. I've learned from Melodias not to dawdle. If I am quick I can make it to the city before nightfall. I will keep a log of all I learn from that point onward, wherever it leads.

Perhaps I'll save Cildara.

A lost epilogue, penned by an unknown hand

'Curse the Reader's mouldering insides! I hope they throw them all up and choke on them. Oh, what to do? What to do? Clarity locks their mind and snivelling thoughts away from us.'

'Calm yourself. Hundreds are dead, and those that live do so with torn hearts and scattered thoughts. They will be vulnerable. Let them fly away to the other ships... there will be another to twist in time.'

'Oh yes, we achieved much. And worry not about the insult they dealt you, we will take both their eyes to replace the one you lost.'

Their voices echoed through sunken fortress of Begumhold, chased by wisps of half-murmured thought that lingered around the edges of each word. The darkness did not obscure their vision, and the shattered shards of bone strewn across the hallways did not worry them. They were divine, after all. Superfluous beings balanced upon the precipice between reality and dreams.

One of them continued to claw at its empty bleeding eye socket, 'Yes, all alone on the coast! We shall seep her journey in fear, gently peeling away the layers of sanity they think they've built around themselves. Strip it all away to expose the roiling mass of fetid corruption beneath.'

'All of those lies pouring out onto the sands.'

'Picked clean by the twisted.'

'Mocked for all eternity in the void beyond.'

'Trapped in the agony of being known.'

A clash in the distance halted their ethereal chatter. Metal striking rock over and over as it tumbled into one of the many crevices cutting through this place.

'...Where did you lose the Reader?'

'The stairway, in the mind city.'

'And where did you find them again?'

'The ship. I was plucking away at the Shipmaster's strings when they returned.'

Another sound. Stone grinding upon stone, like a giant mill hidden in the shadows. The ground trembled slightly, and thin streams of dust were displaced from the ceiling.

'The mind city is dead.'

'Yes, of course. Not a soul left behind in that cold prison.'

'Oh, I don't know. It still gets the odd visitor.'

They shrieked and tried to bolt, but Begumhold lit up with searing light. Shrieks turned to screams as it tore through them, blinding and unrelenting. Ira covered her eyes with an irritated sigh, before walking up and putting each of them out of their misery with a few muttered words and a snap of her fingers.

Those that managed to flee her spells did not get far. The sprawling caverns of Begumhold became Vanagloria's hunting ground, from which there was no respite and no escape. One by one, Ira and Vanagloria culled them all, leaving not a single letter or mote.

'Any interesting words?' Vanagloria asked in the aftermath.

'Nothing I did not already possess. There's so little variety left in this prison.'

'You know, I met someone interesting.'

'You met someone interesting.'

'I did.'

A few seconds of silence lingered in the corpse-ridden caverns.

'...And why were they interesting, you asswipe?'

'One of them could use words in the archive, as good as the day they were written.'

This caught her attention. She fixed Vanagloria with a steely look and waited for him to continue. Her eyes weren't deceived by his magicks.

'I think they might be our way out.'

'Be careful who you say that around.'

'I am being.'

'Do we want to let her out?'

'I never said we'd let her out.'

'Neither of us can promise that anymore.'

'That's not necessarily a problem, though. All we have to do is... maliciously comply. Help, but not as much as we might otherwise. Superbia will be with us.'

'But none of the other four.'

'Avarita could turn.'

'Avarita is both too much an opportunist, and not enough of one.'

'Everyone's a critic.'

'I saved you from oblivion once already, and if I learned one thing from the experience, it was not to trust your sense of judgement. You'll have to show me this interesting person's work. I'll decide for myself.'

The Moth Queen's champions returned home. Their work was done,  
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for now.